DISTORTED HISTORICAL FICTIONS OF THE HOLOCAUST, THE CHILEAN DICTATORSHIP, AND THE ALGERIAN WAR OF INDEPENDENCE

by

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ABSTRACT
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The desire and need for historical representation in postmodernism are coupled with the self-reflexive acknowledgement of our inability to faithfully represent the past. This dissertation examines the ways in which certain historical events are represented in postmodern fiction. More specifically, it introduces the term ‘distortion’ to designate various ways that postmodern authors have attempted to convey traumatic and violent histories through intentional permutations of historical facts.

In this study, I analyse six texts, representative works that present the multi-faceted nature of what I call ‘distorted’ historical fiction. Each text is devoted to one of three historical events: the Holocaust in Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow* and Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*; the Chilean dictatorship in Diamela Eltit’s *Lumpérica* and Isabel Allende’s *La Casa de los espíritus*; and finally, the Algerian War of Independence in Kateb Yacine’s *Nedjma* and Mohammed Dib’s *Qui se souvient de la mer*. The analyses of each text are guided by three main questions: How is the depicted history distorted in the narrative? Why is the
historical reality distorted? And lastly, what are the hermeneutical effects for the reader of engaging with the distorted historical text?

I contend that these historical fictions apply various modes of distortion to create a specific and often peculiar effect on the reader. These include distortions of narrative form and voice, as well as distortions of temporality and space. I argue that the reader’s encounter with distorted historical fiction creates a peculiar hermeneutical effect of ‘defamiliarisation,’ which has affinities with Viktor Shklovsky’s use of the term and Bertolt Brecht’s ‘V-effekt.’ The sense of defamiliarisation creates a conflict in readers, in which their foreknowledge of a past event clashes with the event's distorted depiction. This conflict demands that the reader be responsible, implying that the reader should not be ‘swept away’ by the distorted narrative. Instead the responsible reader is encouraged to interact with the text, apply previous historical knowledge to correct said distortions, and through this interaction gain a greater intimacy with the past.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Strange whim of the people! They demand their history from the hand of the poet and not from the hand of the historian. They demand not a faithful report of bare facts, but those facts dissolved back into the original poetry from whence they came. (Heine, qtd. in Lukács, Historical 56)

[C]uando un lector que me conoce lee mis cuentos fantásticos, sabe que no estoy tratando de arrancarlo de la historia y anestesiarlo con una literatura de evasión y de renuncia; si me sigue en mis caminos más irreales y más experimentales, es porque sabe que jamás he tratado de engañarlo, de alejarlo de su propia responsabilidad histórica (Cortázar 206-7)

When readers who know my work read my fantastic stories, they know that I am not trying to take them away from history and anaesthetize them with a literature of evasion and renunciation; if they follow me on these most unreal and most experimental paths, it’s because they know that I have never tried to trick them, to remove them from their own historical responsibility. (my translation)\(^1\)

There is something peculiar going on in the fictional-historical texts I analyse in this dissertation: despite what some readers might expect, or desire, these narratives do not attempt to present realistic, nor naturalistic, accounts of the traumatic historical events they depict. I explore three particularly traumatic historical events of the twentieth century: the Holocaust, the Chilean dictatorship (1973-1990), and the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962). In the Holocaust fiction, one text, Martin Amis’s Time’s Arrow, presents the Holocaust in reversed time – consequently presenting, literally, historical developments backwards. In Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel, Maus, the non-realistic approach takes the form of comic-book drawings where animal figures come to personify the historical actors of the Holocaust. The two texts on the Chilean dictatorship which I analyse reveal a
substantial contrast in their authors’ commitments to realist aesthetics, and in turn, the ethics surrounding mimesis. These works are Isabel Allende’s *La Casa de los espíritus* and Diamela Eltit’s *Lumpérica*. Finally, I discuss the Algerian War of Independence by analysing two novels that were written during, or just before the end of the war: Kateb Yacine’s *Nedjma*, and Mohammed Dib’s *Qui se souvient de la mer*. Both authors do not attempt to faithfully recreate their historical world within a realistic narrative. Instead, through their highly symbolic fiction, they convey the energies (aggression and violence) that accumulated in Algeria over centuries, finally exploding into war.

While some of these texts may appear to fall into literary genres such as magical realism, the fantastic, surrealism and experimental literature, they cannot all be categorized neatly under any one of those labels alone. In fact, as I will argue, some of these texts seem to escape the conventions of the genre with which they may be most closely associated (i.e., *Maus* and comic books; or *La Casa de los espíritus* and magical realism). There seems to be, however, a common authorial intention at work here that supersedes the categories of genre. To describe this, I use the formula ‘distorted historical fiction’ to designate an author’s anti-realistic style and technique, and to point to the hermeneutical effects of this type of narrative upon the reader.

What is constant throughout the reading of all of these narratives is a profound sense of what Viktor Shklovsky calls ‘defamiliarisation.’ This phenomenon also has affinities to Bertolt Brecht’s theorisation of the ‘V-effekt.’ The result is that in the hermeneutical act of reading, the readers’ known reality (notably including their fore-
knowledge of history) is momentarily destabilized. In this dissertation, my main purpose is to argue that readers are intentionally put in this particular position by the author in order for the readers themselves to decode or correct what I suggest in these texts is distortion. Thus, the reader then has a responsibility toward the distorted historical referent.

On Allegory

In directing their readers to a known historical reality, the texts I study in my dissertation are all, to varying degrees, allegorical. In his seminal study of the approaches to literary criticism, Northrop Frye suggests: “A writer is being allegorical whenever it is clear that he is saying ‘by this I also (allos) mean that’” (90). M. H. Abrams defines allegory as “a narrative in which the agents and action, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived both to make coherent sense on the ‘literal,’ or primary level of signification, and also to signify a second, correlated order of agents, concepts and events” (4). Based on the above definitions, all of the works analysed in my dissertation are allegorical. Whether thinly veiled, or more obscure, they all refer at a secondary level to past historical events that they expect the reader to recognize. My use of the term ‘distortion’ encompasses the various literary devices employed to create such allegories – from personifications, to time reversals, to symbolic microcosms. In each instance, the distance created between the allegories and the referents varies – this is what could be referred to as degrees of distortion – from a light distortion to distortion overload (where the actual referent appears to be lost).

As allegories that direct readers toward known historical realities, the texts in my dissertation do not share the religious sense of allegory which seeks to instruct individuals ‘reader’ for the sake of gender inclusivity.
on proper conduct, and point them toward the right path. J. A. Cuddon speaks of the origins of allegory focussing upon this moral and religious significance. He argues that etymologically ‘allegory’ derives from the Greek *all'goria* meaning ‘speaking otherwise’ (24) and “its fundamental origins are religious” (25). Cuddon proceeds to describe numerous instances of allegorical use over the past millennia; however, modern allegorical literature appears as a list of items offered in rapid succession at the end of his entry on ‘allegory’ and is really given about as much attention as a footnote (curiously of the last hundred years, only C.S. Lewis’s *Pilgrim Regress* [1933] and George Orwell’s *1984* [1945] are listed). From Cuddon’s account, it would appear that allegory had all but disappeared once the modern world switched onto a more secular path. Similarly, allegory also appears as a lost art in John Macqueen’s *Allegory*. In beginning a chapter titled “Allegory and Individual,” he argues:

> Myth and ritual in mystery religions, the philosophic allegory of Plato or Apuleius, the tropological level of scriptural interpretation – all those have one thing in common. This primary relevance is for the individual, whether as initiate, student or Christian. The proper conduct of life and the final destination of the soul may depend on a full understanding of text or ritual. (59)

For Macqueen ‘allegory’ is what can be interpreted and analysed in more than one way. However, what is important in this interpretation and analysis is the self – ultimately the betterment (whether philosophical, moral or religious) of the individual. Macqueen’s further expansion of his definition of ‘allegory’ only further focuses on the individual, and
with scant exceptions, his examples predate the modern, more secular world. Indeed he begins his work: “The origins of allegory are philosophic and theological rather than literary. Most of all perhaps they are religious. From the beginning, however, allegory has been closely associated with narrative” (1). In rhetorical terms, it is curious that he use the word ‘however’ to introduce allegory’s relationship to narrative. What predominates in these opening lines is the association between allegory and religion, and allegory’s relation to narrative is to be seen within that light.

In Macqueen’s Allegory, his analysis seems to operate within a Protestant consciousness whereby the book (and it should be the Bible, or at least refer to the Bible, or like the Bible, have a moral purpose) speaks directly to the individual, and the individual interprets the book as a comment upon his/her moral path and destiny. Within this type of consciousness, a past event referred to by an historical allegory is to be considered ‘necessary’ within a prophetic consciousness that points toward the future. Subsequently, the allegorical historical reference is seen as commenting upon the individual’s present and, perhaps at the same time, prophetically referring to Judgement Day and beyond. Macqueen writes: “It is this overwhelming concern with the divinely operated movement of history which, more than anything else, distinguished biblical from classical allegory, and which made it so potent an instrument for the later European literatures” (29). This is entirely distinct from the secular historical allegories I examine in this dissertation which do not comment upon any individual’s moral path, role or destiny within the divine universe, but point to past events that have affected a collective. These secular historical allegories do not
contain the notion of ‘historical necessity.’ As such, they cannot be used as a justification to better understand ourselves as individuals within the divine plan.

In Allegories of Transgression and Transformation: Experimental Fiction by Women Writing Under Dictatorship, Mary Beth Tierney-Tello provides an understanding of allegory that has more bearing on collective histories rather than the concerns of an individual. The type of allegories that she analyses are those where “one story is being used to tell another, [where] the narrative bears traces of an/other story that relates to the unspeakable socio-political context or to a referent that somehow eludes or defies representation” (17). For Tierney-Tello, allegory appears especially in times of political strife (18), and it has a “duplicitous relationship to authority: it tells one thing to say another, continually deferring its meaning [. . .]. It manages to tell its truth, ‘but tell it in slant’” (21). The telling of its truth “in slant” is a form of allegory that I relate to distortion, akin to the way physical waveforms are altered in the distortion of a sound signal. The signal is there, but it is changed. Therefore the original signal can be perceived as being simultaneously present and absent in its transformation. The relationship to truth is also central to allegory’s contradictory nature. Truth must be simultaneously present and absent from allegory in order for it to work as such. This argument is put forth by Bernard Cowan in a re-evaluation of Walter Benjamin’s theory of allegory:

The affirmation of the existence of truth, then, is the first precondition for allegory: the second is the recognition of its absence. Allegory could not exist if truth were accessible: as a mode of expression it arises in perpetual
response to the human condition of being exiled from the truth that it would embrace. (qtd. in Tierney-Tello 21)

Tierney-Tello goes on to argue: “In this way, through its own structure as a re-presentation of something that is never and cannot be present, allegory can virtually set forth the existence of a meaning that is difficult to glimpse, only imperfectly representable, and practically impossible to fix. It is thus perhaps an ideal mode for working in a crisis of representation” (21). As the focus of Tierney-Tello’s study is on experimental fiction by women writing under dictatorships, her definition of allegory alludes to the idea that the use of allegory may not be a choice, but instead the only means by which to write under such oppression. Nonetheless, her concept of allegory is akin to how I have come to understand the use of distortion, with the exception being that the allegorical texts I analyse were not all written during times of oppression. Therefore, the author’s intention to purposely distort the truth through allegory, out of free choice, is an important distinction to be made.

Tierney-Tello also sees the reader’s relationship with allegory as an ethical one. She argues that it is allegory’s relationship to ethics which is most obvious in the moral values put forth by simpler forms of allegory such as fables. But the ethics of allegory become more confusing once we look at more complex, less overt allegories. Tierney-Tello states that it is “in the realm of meaning that allegory’s ethical dimension lies.” Furthermore, she suggests that “allegory demands some degree of ideological compliance from the reader; that is, allegorical modes propose to hold out their own version as somehow true, or at least more true than other versions” (20). In other words, for Tierney-Tello, if an allegory is to work it must challenge, and even seek to replace, the reader’s notion of truth regarding the
allegory’s initial referent. However, while they challenge notions of truth, I will show in the subsequent chapters how distortions can paradoxically reinforce previously acquired historical knowledge. And in order to maintain a notion of truth while engaged with the allegorical text, the reader must have a sense of responsibility towards that truth, particularly if the text distorts a traumatic historical event that is familiar to the reader.

**Defining ‘Distortion’**

‘Distortion’ is understood in my dissertation as a technique, something intentionally done by an author in his/her anti-realist depiction of a verifiable historical reality. ‘Distortion’ also has a receptive dimension in the strangeness experienced by the reader. As will be discussed in greater detail, ‘distortion’ can be likened to the ‘V-effekt’ which simultaneously refers to what is produced by the artists of Brecht’s theatre of alienation, and also what is experienced (alienation) by the audience.

It is true that in all forms of representation there will always be an element of distortion, however unintentional. Nonetheless, in the historical fiction I examine, the presence of ‘distortion’ is largely deliberate. The authors’ hands in manipulating these historical realities are then, to varying degrees, quite evident. I use this umbrella term, ‘distortion,’ to designate the deliberate permutations that the representations of reality undergo in these texts. The shared and principal characteristics of these texts are the

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2 More frequently then not, in my literary analyses I will use single quotation marks when I refer to the term distortion. These markers are meant to remind the reader of my particular understanding of distortion, which is outlined over the course of the Introduction, especially in the following four subsections, but more specifically in this subsection titled “Defining Distortion.” I hope that the constant theoretical reminder produced by these single quotation marks will outweigh their distracting potential.
authors’ deliberate and provocative use of ambiguity, indeterminacy, and a heightened use of allegory and metaphor to depict/convey the historical event in question.

‘Distortion’ is present in various levels of communication. It is present at the onset of communication through the author’s distorting of a conventional narrative form and voice. It is present in the depiction and experience of a distorted naturalistic world. Finally, the readers’ hermeneutical experience may also be distorted in that it combines – then differentiates, and ultimately decodes/corrects – an anti-realist historical representation with their own foreknowledge of historical reality. In all cases, a conventional, realistic, imagining (by both author and reader) of the historical world has undergone certain manipulations that I will consider as ‘distorted.’

The verb ‘to distort’ comes from distorquère, which meant ‘to twist completely.’ Today, ‘distortion’ still retains much of its original meaning, but is now generally understood in two ways: 1) as something that has literally been pulled or twisted out of shape, and/or 2) as statements or facts that have been deliberately misrepresented, resulting in a notion of truth that has been perverted and twisted (“Distort”). Whereas the first literal definition of ‘distortion’ might induce neutral feelings, that of misrepresentation – in the second definition – generally has negative implications for the pursuit of knowledge, connoting a perversion of truth or someone's intention to manipulate another. While the texts that I examine provoke the reader to make sense of the distorted (twisted) historical world presented, the author's intentions are never to manipulate the reader in this negative sense, even if what is presented is indeed a deliberate, albeit artistic, misrepresentation. Instead, by placing the reader in the position of having to make sense of the text, the author
gives particular agency to the reader in recreating the historical event. The deliberate
misrepresentation of reality, I argue, is therefore not always negative. Indeed, the negative
connotations commonly associated with the ‘dis’ suffix, and the term ‘distortion’ itself, can
be seen as productively informing the discomfort that these texts may produce in the reader.
In other words, there is something transgressive about these works, and this has even
resulted in critics taking offence at the authors' treatment of traumatic historical events.
Therefore, my use of the term ‘distortion’ goes beyond its appropriateness as a common
descriptor of these works. By its negative associations, ‘distortion’ acknowledges the
transgressive aspect of the authors' literary projects, as well as the unease which their texts
can provoke.

A use of the term ‘distortion’ in literary studies that has affinities to my own is that
of Albert J. Guerard. He begins his essay, “The Illuminating Distortion,” with the following
exclamation: “Distortion that illuminates! The formula may cause distress” (101). Thus,
Guerard cheekily highlights a conventional understanding of distortion that would
contradict his subsequent use of the term. Rather than ultimately having a detrimental effect
on one’s understanding of reality, distortion for Guerard can be positive. By ‘illuminating
distortion,’ Guerard refers to “the oddity, the anomaly, the moment of strangeness” (101).
“In brief,” Guerard suggests that ‘illuminating distortion’ is “everything that seems ‘out of
place’ . . . or, at last, everything that unaccountably stirs us” (ellipsis in original). These
dislocations include “distortions of syntax and imagery [and] distortions of incident and
plot” (103). Elsewhere, Guerard describes his ‘illuminating distortion’ formula as referring
to “the heightening or selective distortion of ‘real reality.’” This causes that “strangeness” which may be reinforced by the author’s style and technique (Triumph 13).

My use of ‘distortion’ is similar to Guerard’s understanding of the term. Where my conception differs, however, is in regard to Guerard’s formulation of distortion’s purpose, or in his own terms, what it ‘illuminates.’ After briefly giving some textual examples of illuminating distortions, he posits: “What is illuminated by such altogether abnormal moments of conflict and stress is simply, our human nature” (Triumph 13). And, if not a means to the revelation of human nature, distortion “may reveal a scene’s or even a book’s larger meaning, and the source of its creative energy and dynamic power over us” (“Illuminating” 101). The purpose of the ‘distortions’ in the historical fiction that I discuss may indeed be to inform readers of a so-called ‘human nature,’ and other (non)diegetic general themes and preoccupations. Nonetheless, their more specific purpose is for the reader to identify and interact (hermeneutically) with an historical event. Thus, while Guerard correctly posits that the reader’s interaction with distortion may be “unintended or unconscious” (“Illuminating” 102), I would emphasise that sometimes this interaction is intended, for instance when the reader becomes fascinated by the ‘distorting’ techniques themselves. Furthermore, in the texts I study, it is certainly the author’s intention that the reader interact with ‘distortion.’ This interaction will largely depend on how the reader interprets the ‘distortion’ of what Guerard calls “‘real reality.’”

Distortion and the Concept of Truth

The representation of historical events and figures present in these narratives is often not perfectly compatible with what is generally known about these histories; in these
narratives, the authors have indeed deliberately ‘distorted’ a commonly accepted truth. In the case of the literary ‘distortions’ I consider in this dissertation, ‘distortion’ acts as a veil beneath which an historical reality may still be visible. This implies, of course, that such a truth, or norm, can be agreed upon. The act of ‘distorting’ (and the act of its reception as such) necessarily involves a tacit agreement upon commonly accepted truths or norms. For instance there must be a basic agreement that the historical events which are depicted did indeed occur, and thus their existence and historical reality can be accepted as a truth.

“[H]istory is made of truths,” Bernard Williams says (243). Yet Williams cautions that “the truths in any history are at the very least a selection, and indeed that is an under-statement, since they are not simply waiting to be selected.” Moreover, there is also the matter of “what is added,” and “what is inferred.” The question then becomes “what story is being told” (243)? Making sense of the past is then a matter of interpretation, but in doing so the intent must be truthful:

The question is not whether historical stories involve interpretation—of course they do. It is not the question whether there are truths about the past—there are only too many. The question is the extent to which the formation of a story can be governed by considerations that have anything to do with truth and truthfulness. (246).

Williams gives as an example the question of whether or not Caesar crossed the Rubicon with his army. It is indeed true that Caesar led his army across the Rubicon. In this sense, for Williams, the truth is equated with a true answer to that question. “This does not mean,” says Williams, “that there is such a thing as the truth about Caesar or, come to that, about
the Rubicon;” there are of course many truths about them (257). What is important to highlight is that Williams does not believe in a monolithic, single, ‘truth’ about the historical past; there are only many truths. He posits: “There would be such a thing as ‘the truth about the past’ only if there were one most basic question about the past that was the concern of those inquiring into it, and there is no such question” (257). Thus, what I consider the historical truth that has been ‘distorted’ in the fiction I examine is not ‘the truth about the past,’ as explained by Williams, but verifiable, agreed upon facts and realities that have been manipulated and altered.

In literature, the successful presentation of a ‘distortion’ presupposes the existence of an undistorted norm. As Georg Lukács argues, “literature must have a concept of the normal if it is to ‘place’ distortion correctly, that is to say, to see it as distortion” (Contemporary 33). If we agree with Lukács regarding the concept of an undistorted norm, then it is unlikely that an author’s intention in ‘distorting’ historical truth is to further limit the reader’s accessibility to that truth. In fact, the reader’s identification and subsequent correction of the ‘distortion’ itself create a means by which the reader is encouraged to access the truth.

**A Conventional Understanding of ‘Distortion’: A Discussion on Holocaust Denial**

The type of ‘distortion’ I identify in this dissertation needs to be differentiated from other cases. In a deliberate misrepresentation during a dictatorship, for instance, distortion may take the form of a literal rewriting of history. Such is the case in a Spanish Larousse dictionary I own that was bought in Chile during the dictatorship. This dictionary was published and printed outside of Chile. Prior to making it available in Chile, the Chilean
government authorities ordered the alteration of certain parts of the dictionary that dealt
with Chilean history, particularly facts concerning the socialist presidency of Salvador
Allende and the subsequent military coup that ousted him from power (see under “Chile” in
my “Works Consulted”). Having already been printed elsewhere, the only way to alter
these pages was to literally paste another version of history onto the page – effectively a
‘cover up’ of the historical version not approved by the government. This example of
historical rewriting reveals a conscious effort by a dictatorship to control the content of
historical knowledge and the way it is disseminated. The distorted truth in such an instance
is presented as the only truth, and it can be literally applied over what is considered to be a
false account of an historical event. This form of distortion, a form of censorship, is not to
be confused with my use of the term throughout my dissertation.

The intention to deceive and pervert the truth, as seen in the Spanish Larousse
dictionary, is akin to the work of Holocaust deniers. Holocaust deniers often meticulously
present an alternative historical narrative whose end goal is to persuade people into
believing that the Holocaust did not occur, or at least to convince people that the manner by
which the Holocaust might have occurred has been widely exaggerated. For instance, in
1985 a Holocaust denier on trial in Canada acknowledged that Jews were incarcerated in
Auschwitz, but he said that in Auschwitz Jews had “all the luxuries of a country club,”
including a dance hall, swimming pool, and recreational facilities (qtd. in Lipstadt 23).
While Holocaust deniers believe that they perform historical ‘revisionism,’ what they in
fact are doing is attempting to deceive the public by perverting and disproving all historical
facts and evidence that point to the contrary. In turn they espouse conspiracy-like theories
that are largely born of anti-Semitic sentiment (Lipstadt 24). Deborah Lipstadt posits: "The deniers' selection of the name *revisionist* to describe themselves is indicative of their basic strategy of deceit and distortion and of their attempt to portray themselves as legitimate historians engaged in the traditional practice of illuminating the past" (20). Lipstadt characterises the deniers’ strategies and modes of distortion in the following manner:

> Truth is mixed with absolute lies, confusing readers who are unfamiliar with the tactics of the deniers. Half-truths and story segments, which conveniently avoid critical information, leave the listener with a distorted impression of what really happened. The abundance of documents and testimonies that confirm the Holocaust are dismissed as contrived, coerced, or forgeries and falsehoods. (2)

Due to this strategy of deceit and distortion, Lipstadt cannot categorize the work of Holocaust deniers as that of legitimate historians. The practice of “responsible historiography” (1), as Lipstadt calls it, is “to maintain some fidelity to the notion of the truth” (3). This does not mean that the accumulation of historical knowledge around a subject of the past could ever become an uncontested, monolithic Truth. A central task of historians, if not the central one, is to reinterpret historical facts and revise historical interpretation, in order to then gain a better understanding of the present. Yet the Holocaust deniers neither ‘revise,’ nor do they ‘reinterpret,’ for they begin their version of the process of reinterpretation and revision precisely with, and solely based upon, a distortion of historical evidence. The question subsequently becomes one of responsible historiography.

This sentiment is evident in the declaration written in 1979 by some of France’s leading
historians in their efforts to protest the efforts of Robert Faurisson, a well known Holocaust denier:

Everyone is free to interpret a phenomenon like the Hitlerite genocide according to his own philosophy. Everyone is free to compare it with other enterprises of murder committed earlier, at the same time, later. Everyone is free to offer such or such kinds of explanations; everyone is free, to the limit, to imagine or to dream that these monstrous deeds did not take place. Unfortunately, they did take place and no one can deny their existence without committing an outrage on the truth. (qtd. in Lipstadt 17)

Despite such declarations, by 1993 (when Lipstadt’s book was published) Holocaust denial had made concerning inroads in mainstream international media and academic circles worldwide. Promoting itself as a legitimate and scholarly pursuit, Holocaust denial was able to make these inroads because of what Lipstadt argues was the dominance of “intellectual currents,” such as poststructuralism and postmodernism, that emerged in the late 1960s: “The reader’s interpretation, not the author’s intention, determined meaning” (18). The idea of an objective truth to be found in a text, a legal concept, or an event, was highly scrutinized. In academia, “some scholars spoke of relative truths, rejecting the notion that there was one version of the world that was necessarily right while another was wrong” (18).³ The danger of such thinking is that all points of views, and all ideologies,

³ Williams argues against the coupling of the terms ‘relativity’ and ‘truth.’ “Manifestly, there is a relativity–what makes sense to some people is contrasted with what makes sense to others. But it is not a relativity of truth. There is no way in which the king’s death could have happened ‘for’ the Anglo-Saxon chronicler and not happened ‘for’ us [. . .]. [I]f the king was murdered, someone killed him, period. [. . .] The distinctive claim of
risk becoming equally valid. What is created is an atmosphere of permissiveness where the meaning of any historical event could be questioned, and no topic is off limits to scrutiny. At its most extreme, this intellectual climate produces what Lipstadt claims a “debasing of history”: “No fact, no event, and no aspect of history has any fixed meaning or content. Any truth can be retold. Any fact can be recast. There is no ultimate historical reality” (19).

An example of the prevalence of these “intellectual currents,” even outside of academia, is exemplified in Lipstadt’s refusal to participate in a televised debate with a Holocaust denier. The purpose of the debate was to question the existence of the Holocaust. Lipstadt repeatedly declined the host’s invitation, unwilling to tacitly endorse, through her own participation, the denial of the Holocaust as just another point of view. As a last attempt to convince her, the host asked Lipstadt the following question: “I certainly don’t agree with them [Holocaust deniers], but don’t you think our viewers should hear the other side?” (1). Lipstadt’s study on Holocaust denial strongly argues against the legitimacy of any such “other side,” and she exposes the dangers of giving deniers public forums through which they can express their beliefs. She is also aware that the publication of her very book could be seen as a double-edged sword, giving limelight to Holocaust deniers in the very process of rebuking them.

the ‘relativist’ about historical interpretation is that one party can differ from another about what makes sense of the past without necessarily thinking that the other party’s interpretation is false” (258-59). Therefore, while Williams does not agree with the term ‘relativist truth,’ he does believe in relativism, in terms of how to ‘make sense’ of the past, which he says “does its work when it looks like there is a conflict,” but if there is no conflict, such as verifiable truth, there is no work to be done. Relativism is then “many compatible stories, told from different perspectives, with different emphases, on different scales of detail,” but it is not to be equated with a relativization of truth itself (259).
The forms of distortion present in Holocaust denial are to be differed from the forms of ‘distortion’ I present in my literary examples. Yet, there are also some parallels. We should first distinguish the role of the literary author versus that of the historian. Lipsatdt argues that responsible historians uncover historical reality, but do not create it (25). The process of creation is what Holocaust deniers do, in the sense that they fabricate other historical realities. Yet, the process of creation is, in essence, the underpinning and determinant of fiction. This would also include historical fiction. This parallel is certainly not meant to equate Holocaust denial with historical fiction. What differentiates the two is significant: in particular, the author’s intention along with the reader’s interpretation of that intention. When Holocaust deniers present themselves as historians, their intention is to deceive their audience who have come to expect certain ethical and scholarly standards from historiography. Authors of fiction, of course, are expected to and assumed to add fictive elements to their historical narratives.

Whereas Lipstadt refers to forms of historical distortion as a “debasing of history,” the authors I analyse in my dissertation never intend to falsify evidence, deceive the reader, or ultimately debase the memory of the historical event in question. In this sense, the forms of ‘distortion’ that I identify as the unifying element in these fictions are not the conventional, and negative, forms of distortion more commonly associated with historical texts, such as the works of Holocaust deniers. ‘Distortion,’ as I use the term in my dissertation, may be further understood in relation to its significance in other art forms.
Distortion in Modern Music and the Visual Arts

Contemporary popular music is a perfect example of the positive connotations now commonly associated with distortion. Nevertheless, it was not until 1993 that the Oxford English Dictionary added a definition of distortion as it pertains to the alteration of sound, even though musicians and sound engineers had been in the practice of distorting sound for decades. To distort in this sense is "to change the form of (a signal or waveform) during transmission, amplification, or the like in such a way as to misrepresent it" ("Distort," def. 2c). Misrepresentation in the case of a sound signal has largely neutral or even positive connotations. For instance, the notion of distortion in rock music refers almost exclusively to the use of electric instruments whose signals are amplified and then sent to speakers. This is most evident with the advent of the electric guitar in the thirties. In its beginnings, the musician who played an electric guitar amplified the instrument’s signal through a very small amplifier. When the musician placed a large demand for volume on such a weak amplifier the result was a natural form of distortion. At first, the sound of a distorted guitar must have seemed hideous to the musical sensibilities of the time. Gradually though, musicians and audiences alike began to develop a taste for the distorted sound. In the early sixties, guitarists would deliberately distort their signals by experimenting with the amplifier’s settings, voltage, etc. Soon there was an entire industry dedicated to marketing pedals with names like ‘overdrive’ and ‘distortion.’ Today, in addition to pedals that simulate the overloading of an amplifier, there is a plethora of effects designed to distort
what is called the ‘clean’ signal of the electric guitar. Among these effects, there is fuzz, designed to mimic the sound of a blown-out speaker; tremolo, designed to ‘chop-up’ a continuous signal in intermittent units; and delay, designed to repeat (with or without signal decay) the original signal. Distortion in music has been embraced by many for its positive qualities and is not always criticized for its obvious alteration, or even misrepresentation, of the original signal.

Keeping in mind the traumatic texts that I will examine, and the transgressive nature of the authors' form, I want to emphasise by way of analogy that the distorted guitar has been described as a "metonymy of 'abrasiveness,' of something torn, shattered, and decomposed [and can express] physical, emotional and mental instability" (Sangild sec. 4.2). The distorted guitar alters a clean signal to produce a unique sound which affects the reception of what is, more often than not, still-discernable notes. In the historical fiction I analyse in my dissertation, the literary ‘distortions’ have a similar function to this distortion on the electric guitar, that is, to express physical and psychological trauma through distortion, for a clean signal may not create such a powerful effect. As we will see in my discussion on noise, however, a truly ‘clean’ signal only exists in theory. What we can consider ‘clean’ is a signal that has been transmitted in such a way as to try and prevent all forms of communicative noise, and where the signal has not been purposefully affected or manipulated in any way. Therefore, in the case of historical fiction, the ‘cleaner’ the signal, the closer the narrative gets to one that is realist and naturalistic.

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4 The word ‘fuzz’ also has a connection to the music of Anton Webern. Wayne Alpern writes that Webern intended to instil in his compositions “greater ambiguity rather than order through the distortion or ‘fuzzification’ of a logical scheme” (par. 39).
Torben Sangild has dedicated much of his research to the study of noise in music, and interestingly, claims that "to a certain extent noise has replaced dissonance as the aesthetic means of creating roughness and tension in music" (sec. 4.4.4). He suggests that noise adds "specific meanings to the gesture in which it partakes – disorder, chaos, blurriness and fuzziness" (sec. 4.1). Of the three forms of noise he examines – acoustic, communicative and subjective – his analysis of communicative noise best illuminates my unorthodox application of this idea of distorted musical signals to the study of literature.

Sangild states:

In communication theory, noise is that which distorts the signal on its way from transmitter to recipient. There will always be an element of distortion, either externally or internally, coming from the medium itself. In music noise is often originally a malfunction in the instruments or electronics (a disturbance of the clear signal), which is then reversed into a positive effect. (4.1 emphasis mine)

Listeners will have differing tastes regarding the amount of distortion they prefer in their music. For the great majority of listeners, what is important is that the original signal,

5 'Dissonance' might also be used to describe what occurs in some of the texts I examine in my dissertation. While it is useful, especially in a text like Maus that uneasily brings together various voices, time periods, genres, etc., one of the problems with the application of the term is that it would seem to presuppose an idea of 'harmony' in historical representation. From the perspective of music, this applied idea of ‘harmony’ in historical representation would be to create a “pleasing,” or “sweet,” combination or arrangement of different historical elements (“Harmony”). While there are exceptions, historical representations of violent and traumatic events are normally not “pleasing” or “sweet.”

6 See also Jacques Attali’s Noise for an historical parallel between the structuring of noise into music and the structuring of society.
However distorted, still contains musical notes that are perceivable. That is, the signal coupled with the communicative noise must still communicate something. If the musical notes of the distorted signal cannot be perceived, I argue that this is a case of ‘distortion overload.’ Such an example commonly occurs in the use of fuzz. If the settings of the fuzz gain are too high, different musical notes become virtually indistinguishable, and any possibility of harmony among notes is lost.

As a concept, distortion marks a deviation from an accepted standard of representation. This concept seems simple, as long as there is an agreement as to what that standard is, which is not so easy. Similar to Sangild’s definition of distortion through communicative noise, there is always an element of distortion in the transmission of an historical account. Hayden White argues that any representation of fact is already distorted, and inevitably gives birth to further distortions: “On analysis, every mimesis can be shown to be distorted and can serve, therefore, as an occasion for yet another description of the same phenomenon, one claiming to be more realistic, more ‘faithful to the facts’” (Tropics 3). Thus, just as distortion is present in all forms of music, distortion can be revealed in every form of historical representation, no matter how faithful one wants to be to the reality represented. The work of historians then is partly to sort through such communicative noise, so that the transmission of an historical signal can reach the present as clean, and as free of distortion, as possible. Some of these forms of distortions that historians will encounter may be unintentional (for instance, the presence of a typographical error in an

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7 Dominik LaCapra similarly states that within historiography “documents are texts that supplement or rework ‘reality’ and not mere sources that divulge facts about ‘reality’” (History 11).
historical document or an historical narrative that has been based on the faulty memory of one or more witnesses). Historians will also find intentional forms of distortion (such as that of the Chilean dictionary altered by Pinochet’s regime, or the case of Holocaust denial). In contrast to the work of historiography, the presence of distortion in music, the visual arts, literature, and other arts, is not necessarily something to be expunged; rather it serves an artistic purpose that like the effect of the electric guitar, can create powerful emotive qualities.

Just like music listeners’ differing tastes regarding the presence of distortion, literary forms of ‘distortion’ will likely not be embraced by all readers, and for all types of narratives. Some readers might deem it inappropriate, unethical, or too ‘strange’ and confusing, while others may feel that the ‘distortion’ contributes something unique to their understanding/experience of the historical event. Indeed, some readers might not even comprehend what is being distorted, and will only perceive the ‘distortion’ itself. The reader would then miss the allegory in the distorted referent. The notion of a ‘distortion overload’ – where musical notes can no longer be perceived and harmony is lost, as discussed in the example of fuzz – has analogies in the study of literature, such as when a represented historical event becomes unrecognisable due to the overuse of ‘distortion.’

Conversely, Sangild uses the term "maelstrom of noise" to describe the positive effects when the tune and rhythm of gesture "break off into a whirl of noise, gradually intensifying tempo and volume, with a potential response of absorbing the listener into its ecstatic black hole. This chaotic vortex is in opposition to the structural, formal elements of the song, exceeding the boundaries of the senses, although still controlled on a higher level. The maelstrom is simultaneously an explosion of energy and an implosion of meaning, turning away from the distinct and semantic into the sublime and ecstatic. On another level, however, this expression of a chaotic vortex is precisely the meaning. Whenever noise challenges meaning, the challenge will become part of another semantics." (sec 4.2.1).
This ‘distortion overload’ has political and ethical repercussions, which I examine in particular detail in my discussion of Diamela Eltit’s Lumpérica.

Outside of music, the concept of distortion implies a particular, altered representation of an object and yet the ability to recognize that object. In the visual arts, for instance, Hans-Georg Gadamer maintains that in order to ‘read’ a picture, we must ‘recognize’ what is being represented. In the attempt to recognize it, we try different ways of “organizing what we see or hesitating between them” (91). Gadamer calls the trick picture “the artificial perpetuation of this hesitation, the ‘agony’ of seeing” (91). Gadamer explains that the attempt to recognise a representation is a manifestation of how we try to understand a given artwork, whether it be the language of a text, or even music (91). A distortion overload, however, will perpetuate the hesitation of understanding to the point when the subject of the artwork is inevitably lost upon the reader/viewer/listener.

In the visual arts, rarely if ever is a landscape painting mistaken for the landscape itself. The veracity of the representation can only be judged once the represented subject and its representation are side by side. However, in most cases, reality and its representation are not present at the same time and place. Consequently, the only comparison that can be made is between the representation and the concept of an accepted standard of truth that the representation itself evokes. One can imagine this scenario in the case of paintings. Imagine a painting of a bowl of apples. When you observe the painting, say in an art gallery, the represented bowl of apples is not present. What one does is compare the representation of the apples with some standard previous knowledge of what apples look like: their size, their form, their colour, how light reflects off their skin, etc.
B. Deregowski argues that it is precisely because of this extra knowledge that we identify representations with their referents in realist paintings:

[The] comparison which can be made is that between the picture and the concept of a standard which the picture itself evokes. It is a somewhat incestuous paradigm but not entirely so because the observer always has additional information acquired from some other sources to that presented in the picture. This must be so, otherwise recognition of the depicted object would not be logically possible, although entirely abstract and meaningless patterns could, of course, still be matched to each other. When a picture does evoke a precept it provides an initial nucleus which is blended with the other information available both concurrently from the environment and from the observer’s memory of past experiences. Thus the precept evoked by a picture becomes modified in the course of perception. (5)

The perception of any representation will depend on various factors that have to do with the individual’s personal and cultural history and current milieu. Within the visual arts, Deregowski has identified a number of factors that may affect our perception of a painting. He suggests that cultural differences account for the accentuation of certain characteristics, their foregrounding and their ability to flourish. Yet, these same characteristics may be thwarted or forced to atrophy in representations stemming from another culture. Similarly, the reception of a distorted representation also depends on culture, as it will be judged by

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9 The specificity of perception and experience will depend on what Donna Haraway refers to as a person’s “limited location and situated knowledge” (583).
the degree that distortion (as a concept) is familiar to the individual. To a person who is unfamiliar with the concept of distortion, the representation may seem disturbing or incomprehensible.

Nonetheless, artists often deliberately use distortion to provoke particular forms of perception and experience in their audience. In the visual arts, Deregowski believes that this is done by “trading some aspect of visual reality for an emotive or evocative signal” (11). He gives the example of a painting which exaggerates the stature of a small man who is considered heroic. Deregowski argues that the exaggeration may be recognized as such by the observers familiar with the man. The exaggeration then compensates for a loss of reality in representation: “It is possible to describe the perceptual process as follows: the portrait of our hero is less real than he is and being less real, the hero is less heroic; this sad loss of charisma can however be compensated by enlargement of his stature in the portrait” (11). Whether this distortion will be recognized by those unfamiliar with the man is, of course, related to the degree of exaggeration itself. If the exaggeration seems to place the stature of the man outside of common experience, then the observer will surely recognize the distortion, and will perhaps even see the painting as a work of fantasy.

Although Deregowski discusses the visual arts, the part of his theory that can be applied to the study of literature is the role of deliberate distortion: to produce an effect on an audience that already has some familiarity with the subject. What is apparent in the example of the short-statured man is that any representation loses truth-value in terms of the original represented subject. As a form of self-reflexivity, distortion can function to compensate for that loss, paradoxically by calling attention to it.
Responsibility in Representation and Reception

From an ontological perspective, Gadamer argues that a representation does not necessarily indicate a ‘loss’ of the original. He believes that the fact that a representation “is a picture – and not the original itself – does not mean anything negative, any mere diminution of being, but rather an autonomous reality” (140). In fact, Gadamer argues that a representation is an ontological event in itself, and belongs to the same ontological level as the subject that is represented. Therefore, one cannot speak of the presentation’s diminished level of existence. In effect, it is quite the opposite: “By being presented [the subject] experiences, as it were, an increase in being. The content of the picture itself is ontologically defined as an emanation of the original” (140). The emanation is understood as an outflow, and consequently “if the original One is not diminished by the outflow of the many from it, this means that being increases” (140). Gadamer points to an important phenomenon concerning the effects and consequences of representation. One can, for example, contextualize his argument in terms of representations of cities in art. Our ideas of cities such as New York and Paris have been influenced by these cities’ enormous presence in film, photography, literature and other arts. As such, these cities have experienced an increase in being – becoming larger conceptually than in the tangible world.10

The representation of traumatic historical events, however, does not necessarily produce an increase in being. For example, how does Gadamer’s theory of an increase in

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10 In this respect it is curious to consider Toronto’s role in the film industry as a city that often acts as a stand-in for other cities, for instance, New York. Thereby, Toronto ‘plays the part of’ or ‘represents’ these other cities. Consequently, instead of a filmed representation of Toronto – which would provide an increase in Toronto’s profile within a global consciousness – the city itself becomes, rather ironically, part of New York’s increase in being.
being relate to an event like the Holocaust? Does the Holocaust become ‘bigger’ with each representation? Is this even desired? Norman G. Finkelstein, author of *The Holocaust Industry*, would argue that certain parties do attempt to increase the ‘being’ of the Holocaust. In contrast, other scholars contend that no matter what effort is made, representations of the Holocaust could never become bigger than the actual event itself, and, in fact, all attempts to represent it actually decrease its ontological status.

Considering the ethics involved, how then does one (re)present an event as horrific as the Holocaust? Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, in an extremely self-conscious manner, attempts to do just that. The graphic novel was generally met with high praise when it was published in 1991. Nonetheless, several traditional Holocaust commentators argued the depicted events were inevitably trivialized by Spiegelman’s choice to use a comic book format, and to substitute humans with animals – i.e., the Nazis appear as cats, and the Jews as mice (Geiss 5). At the centre of this controversy is the author’s responsibility towards history, and I would add the responsibility of the reader. What are the responsibilities of the reader when confronted with a ‘distorted’ representation of a traumatic historical event?

Subjectivity, of course, is involved in all interpretation. But perhaps this becomes more accentuated when texts, such as those studied in my dissertation, refer to historical events. Readers may have distinct knowledge about these histories, and differ ideologically. Additionally, readers might have varying degrees of political inclination; their politics themselves may be more concentrated on the individual rather than the collective (or vice versa). Furthermore, readers may have different appreciations of traditional art, experimental art, comic books, and the written word itself. Therefore, there is an entire
gamut of variables that severely limit the ability to theorise a concept such as reader responsibility in the abstract. Considering these difficulties, my own readings of these texts serve as particular performances of reader responsibility. It is thus important to signal that my notion of responsibility towards the historical events in question undoubtedly comes from my own situatedness as a leftist, male, Chilean-Canadian, graduate student of literature living in Toronto, Canada at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Significantly, my sense of responsibility towards the historical events depicted in these texts – and the responsibility I demand from the authors – inevitably is influenced by my own family history and cultural identification. My parents were forced to flee Chile at the time of Pinochet’s coup, and I therefore have personal connections to the dictatorship. My Jewish heritage influences my conceptualization and sentiment regarding the Holocaust. In comparison to my links to the Chilean dictatorship and the Holocaust, I do not feel the same degree of identification with Algerian culture and history. My process of identification with Algeria began more in an abstract, political sense, considering the significance of the Algerian War of Independence alongside other revolutions such as the Cuban Revolution (1959). Nonetheless, as can be expected, my identification with the particulars of Algerian culture and history grew throughout my research on the subject. Yet, that degree of identification is still not as intense as it is with the cases of Chile and the Holocaust. I explain my identification with these historical events to partially account for the perspectives I have chosen to take in my analyses. For example, my reading of the Chilean dictatorship will undoubtedly be affected a priori by different factors than my reading of the Algerian War of Independence.
Reading Stories: Between Strangeness and Familiarity

Whether depictions of historical events come to us through fiction or by way of historiography, there is always a sense in which the event itself becomes a *story*, one that is narrated in specific, if not conventional, ways. White speaks of “the mythic element” in all historical narration, which “indicates ‘formally, the appropriate gravity and respect’ to be accorded by the reader to the species of facts reported in the narrative” (*Tropics* 59).¹¹ The mythic element comes as a consequence of the specific form of narration that has been employed to narrate an historical event. Most importantly, due to the *form* of narration that is employed, White’s ‘mythic element’ speaks to the content that is “endowed with meanings of a specifically fictive kind” (58). White argues that the historical event is narrated in such a way that it becomes a “*kind of story,*” to be identified with certain fictive genres: comedy, tragedy, romance, satire, etc. (59). Therefore the “appropriate gravity and respect” is that which the reader grants the *story*, according to what is expected of its genre. The historian, in turn, operates according to “well known, if frequently violated, literary conventions [. . .]. There are, then, ‘rules,’ if not ‘laws’ of historical narration” (59). The cases of ‘distorted’ historical fiction that I analyse in this dissertation often violate the conventions of the historical novel and of historiography. The content itself of the texts makes the authors’ choices of representation into ethical choices. Consequently, the authors of these texts take a quintessentially postmodern position that both challenges the notion of faithful historical representation, while resisting the urge to outright reject forms of

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¹¹ The mythic element described here has little to do with how I utilise the term ‘myth’ proper in the rest of my dissertation.
historical narration; and, therefore, they feel a need to somehow, with the appropriate seriousness, represent history.

When dealing with narratives that ‘distort’ an historical event, how is White’s notion of the mythic element affected? I contend that it is precisely the presence of these ‘distortions’ which further puts the onus on the reader to give the gravity and respect required of the past event in question. These ‘distortions’ certainly do not frame the story in the same manner that occurs, as White argues, in all historical narration. It would be hard to situate any of these texts within the usual classifications of genre, such as comedy, romance, tragedy, etc. However, the historical events in question have already been framed within our own minds as certain types of stories, in large part due to the texts and first-hand accounts we may previously have been exposed to. Therefore, in an allegorical manner, these ‘distorted’ texts work with the mythic element in that they recall our fore-knowledge of the events in question and our emotive disposition toward them. This extra demand upon readers is a responsibility that they must assume if they are to make proper sense of the distorted historical narration.

In these fictive historical narratives, a hesitation occurs when the reader’s understanding of the fictionalized narrative challenges the reader’s fore-knowledge of the depicted historical event. The presence of intentional historical ‘distortion’ then poses a particular hermeneutical problem for the reader. This problem accentuates the very essence of hermeneutics. Gadamer describes the hermeneutic effect upon the reader of any text as a “play” between the text’s “strangeness and familiarity.” “The true locus of hermeneutics,” says Gadamer, “is this in-between” (295) between strangeness and familiarity.
‘Strangeness’ as we may recall, is the hermeneutical result of what Guerard calls the technique of “illuminating distortion.” The texts that I examine thus take this play between strangeness and familiarity to a greater level of intensity.

The conflict in the reader occurs when his/her previous knowledge of a past event clashes with the event's ‘distorted’ depiction in the fiction. This conflict demands that readers take responsibility for their known history. The responsible reader refuses to be swept away by the ‘distorted’ narrative, and imposes previous historical knowledge to correct the ‘distortion.’ Thus, the responsible reader rectifies the ‘distortions’ and, consequently, does not passively absorb erroneous historical information, but is active in an imagined reconstruction of the past. The phenomenon of reader responsibility, therefore, results in a more interactive form of reading, and greater intimacy of understanding between the individual and the past.

The hermeneutical effect I explore in these ‘distorted’ historical fictions is akin to that of defamiliarisation (ostranenie), as theorised by the Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky. The purpose of defamiliarisation is to see familiar, common objects, in a strange or unfamiliar way. Shklovsky believes that defamiliarisation is “found almost everywhere form is found” (723). In particular, he refers to art. “The technique of art is to make objects ‘unfamiliar,’” he says, “to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object: the object is not important” (720). In art, what matters is that “a work is created ‘artistically’ so that its
perception is impeded and the greatest possible effect is produced through the slowness of the perception. [. . .] [P]oetic language must appear strange and wonderful” (725).

Shklovsky’s conception of defamiliarisation – with its focus on aesthetic experience – is later adapted by Bertolt Brecht in his theorisation of the Verfremdungseffekt (V-effekt). Often translated as ‘alienation effect’, or ‘defamiliarisation,’ the ‘V-effekt’ seeks to create in a theatre audience a new level of critical engagement. “True, their eyes are open,” says Brecht of a passive audience, “but they stare rather than see, just as they listen rather than hear. They look at the stage as if in a trance” (“Short” 187). In order to combat the passivity of conventional theatre, the ‘V-effekt’ attempts to defamiliarize the audience and lead them to become critical observers (“Alienation” 93, 98). The V-effekt operates by no set means, but may include: encouraging interruptions on the part of the audience, set changes that disturb scenes in progress, props visibly given by stage helpers to the actors already on stage, etc. (“Alienation” 95). Its aims are the opposite of creating a ‘suspension of disbelief’ in the audience. Brecht’s theatre of alienation excludes “the engendering of illusion” (“Street” 122); the ‘V-effekt’ highlights art’s status as artifice. The ramifications for Brecht, a Marxist thinker, is that the ‘V-effekt’ is applicable to “revolutionary theatre” (“Alienation” 95). The audience will begin to perceive the work of art no longer as a self-contained construction, but a specific ideological, aesthetic and economical construct. The conceptual ‘fourth wall’ of the theatre (“Alienation” 91), that separates the stage from the audience, is then figuratively brought down.

Brecht considers the way that contemporaneous (bourgeois) theatre has not adapted to “a new way of thinking, the historical way” (“Alienation” 97). He says that “bourgeois
theatre” emphasizes the “timelessness of its objects,” its representations “bound by the alleged ‘eternally human’” (“Alienation” 96). In other words, what are presented in bourgeois theatre are “universal situations that allow Man with a capital M to express himself: man of every period and colour” (“Alienation” 96-7). Thus, bourgeois theatre is not critical of historical and political realities. Its notion of history is “unhistorical” (“Alienation” 97). On the contrary, Brecht’s conception of theatre involves bringing out the play’s “historical character” (“Alienation” 98).

It is through Brecht’s attention to historical representation, and the activity granted to the audience, that he encourages the audience to pay heed to “the demands of a changing epoch; the necessity and the possibility of remodelling society” (“Alienation” 98). While the texts I look at in this thesis do not have such revolutionary goals, with the exception of *Qui se souvient de la mer*, they too create discomfort in the reader, and draw attention to their artificiality. In these works of ‘distorted’ historical fiction, the ‘distortions’ are similarly meant to be recognized by the reader as they play with and alter historical facts. Thus, the reader’s recognition of ‘distortion’ in these texts is akin to the spectator’s recognition of artificiality in Brecht’s theatre. The recognition of artificiality must assume a common norm of what is considered ‘not artificial.’ Thus, the ‘non-artificial’ is what can be agreed upon as ‘natural,’ ‘real,’ or ‘authentic.’ These are undeniably all problematic terms. As was argued with respect to the cultural differences in recognizing distortion in works of visual arts, the ‘V-effekt’ is equally dependent on ever-changing conventions, and on the diversity of the readers’/spectators’ own shifting subjectivities.
As with Brecht’s ‘V-effekt,’ the intention of the authors of these ‘distorted’ historical fictions is to intensify the readers’ engagement in constructing the narrative. In the case of the ‘distorted’ historical works, the readers’ engagement assumes a reconstruction of the readers’ known historical narrative (fore-knowledge) of a specific historical event.

**On History and Literature**

As readers who understand the conventions of fiction, we are accustomed to distinguishing what we consider to be a work of literature that depicts an historical event from a historiographical work proper. But what are the parameters by which we make the distinction between historical narration and fiction, or more broadly, ‘history’ and ‘literature’? The distinction may be difficult to make by formal elements alone: they may both be works of prose narrative that resemble each other in terms of sentence structure and style. A work of literature, such as Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, may be similar in narrative form to a work of prose that we would generally consider to fall under the category of an historical document, for example Jules Michelet’s *L’Histoire de la révolution française*. While both treat the French Revolution, *A Tale of Two Cities* blends a fictional world of imagined characters with the real world, whereas Michelet attempts to stay true to the historical evidence. If they are similar at the formal level, then, what distinguishes Dickens’s historical novel from Michelet’s historical account is at the level of content and intention. The fiction author’s propensity to insert fictional elements creates the boundary that traditionally separates a historiographical work from historical literature. It must be noted that in fiction the intentional insertion of fictional elements needs to be
differentiated from an author’s subjective understanding of a particular historical event. In other words, authors who intentionally insert fictive elements into an historical narration are themselves aware of the fiction they are creating.

The main purpose of traditional historiography, stemming from the nineteenth century, is to provide the reader with knowledge and understanding of the past. As an example, in numerous passages from *L’Histoire de la révolution française* it is clear that Michelet’s attention to detail is an attempt to create an accurate depiction of the French Revolution. Take for instance his description of La Bastille:

La Bastille, pour être une vieille fortresse, n’en était pas moins imprenable, à moins d’y mettre plusieurs jours, et beaucoup d’artillerie. Le peuple n’avait, en cette crise, ni le temps, ni les moyens de faire un siège régulier. L’eût-il fait, la Bastille n’avait pas à craindre, ayant assez de vivres pour attendre un secours si proche, et d’immenses munitions de guerre. Ses murs de dix pieds d’épaisseur au sommet des tours, de trente ou quarante à la base, pouvaient rire longtemps des boulets, et ses batteries, à elle, dont le feu plongeait sur Paris, auraient pu, en attendant, démolir tout le Marais, tout le faubourg Saint-Antoine. Ses tours, percées d’étroites croisées et de meurtrières, avec doubles et triples grilles, permettaient à la garnison de faire en toute sûreté un affreux carnage des assaillants. (145)

The Bastille, though an old fortress, was nevertheless impregnable, unless besieged for several days and with an abundance of artillery. The people had, in that crisis, neither the time nor the means to make a regular siege.
Had they done so, the Bastille had no cause for fear, having enough provisions to wait for succour so near at hand, and an immense supply of ammunition. Its walls, ten feet thick at the top of the towers, and thirty or forty at the base, might long laugh at cannon-balls; and its batteries firing down upon Paris, could in the meantime, demolish the whole of the Marais and the Faubourg Saint-Antoine. Its towers pierced with windows and loopholes, protected by double and triple gratings, enabled the garrison, in full security, to make a dreadful carnage of its assailants. (161-62)

Michelet’s detailed account of the thickness of the walls and of the construction of the fort’s windows and gratings certainly amplifies our historical knowledge and assists us to better understand the significance of its siege. However, Michelet’s description is undoubtedly fuelled by his subjective opinion – his approval of la Bastille’s eventual siege. Hayden White points out that nineteenth-century historians “did not realize that the facts do not speak for themselves, but that the historian speaks for them, speaks on their behalf, and fashions the fragments of the past into a whole whose integrity is – in its representation – a purely discursive one” (Tropics 125). Beyond the dissemination of knowledge, therefore, Michelet’s intention could also be to highlight the heroism of the revolutionaries who defied such odds. His intention is in part revealed by the language in his descriptions. The fact that the garrison could create a “dreadful carnage of its assailants” or that the fortress’s walls might “long laugh at cannon-balls” suggests how daunting any attempt to attack la Bastille would be – thus, placing the facts in a romantic and heroic light. While Michelet’s subjective opinions may steer his narration in a certain direction, he still attempts,
nonetheless, to stay true to what is considered factual. The literary work, on the other hand, may not even feel obliged to stay true to the facts. Certainly, the literary work may have as one of its aims to provide factual information; however, this is never its sole purpose. This distinction raises certain questions about the role of a literary work that depicts historical events. If the literary work does not have as its unique purpose the dissemination of knowledge, then why does a literary author choose to treat an historical event in the first place? More precisely, what can the literary author contribute to our relationship with history? Part of the answer to these questions lies in the literary relationships among fact, fiction, truth and reality.

Erich Auerbach, in *Mimesis*, explains that until the onset of modernity, representations of the past in the Western Judeo-Christian world had always contained elements of both fact and fiction. Thus, in historical narratives of the past, the distinction between a work of literature and historiography is ambiguous. Historians of antiquity wrote of the past with the insertion of fictive elements, often making “concessions to the technique of legend” (Auerbach 20). Similarly, the biblical narrators did not try to produce realism, but Truth. Auerbach argues that the Bible does not attempt to flatter or enchant the reader; since the biblical story is dark and incomplete, the reader must always interpret the text. Consequently, “interpretations reached such proportions that the real vanished” (Auerbach 14-15). The Bible ultimately does not want us to forget our past and ignore our present reality, but wants to “overcome our reality: we are to fit our own life into its world.” We are to feel ourselves within a universal history which “becomes increasingly
difficult the further our historical environment is removed from that of the Biblical books” (Auerbach 15).

Historians in the first millennium after Christ’s death used an “overrefined and exaggeratedly sensory” style of writing that avoided realistic representation (Auerbach 59). The avoidance of true realism in writing within the Christian world continued throughout the Middle Ages in which historical events were directly linked with God’s plan (60, 156). Nonetheless, the Renaissance and the discovery of America unsettled the common belief that the Bible could explain everything, including history. It was the upheavals of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century which ultimately created a modern historical consciousness in the Western world. “It was the French Revolution, the revolutionary wars, and the rise and fall of Napoleon,” Lukács argues, “which for the first time made history a mass experience” (Historical 23). According to Lukács, each nation of Europe underwent more upheavals between 1789 and 1814 than they had previously experienced in centuries: “the quick succession of these upheavals gives them a qualitatively distinct character, it makes their historical character far more visible than would be the case in isolated, individual instances; the masses no longer have the impression of a ‘natural occurrence.’” The numerous upheavals strengthened “the feeling that there is such a thing as history, that it is an uninterrupted process of changes and finally that it has a direct effect upon the life of the individual” (Historical 23).

The relationship between narrative and historiography was further differentiated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century with the birth of both realism and narrative history. “Prior to the French Revolution,” says White, “historiography was conventionally
regarded as a literary art. More specifically, it was regarded as a branch of rhetoric and its ‘fictive’ nature generally recognised.” White elaborates that the distinction here was between ‘truth’ and ‘error,’ rather than between fact and fancy, “with it being understood that many kinds of truth, even in history, could be presented to the reader only by means of fictional techniques of representation.” With the rise of positivism, historians of the early nineteenth century began to identify truth with fact; and fiction became truth’s opposite, and “a hindrance to the understanding of reality” (Tropics 123). With the separation of fiction and ‘truth,’ both historiography and the realist novel could flourish independently. According to Allan Englekirk, what made realism a unique form of literary representation “was the spirit, the quest for ‘truth,’ which motivated the artists who chose to approach art from this perspective.” Englekirk continues:

Plot, characterization, language, and narrative technique in the Realist novel were all developed with the goal of objectivity as a fundamental concern. Sentimental, idealistic or fantastic distortion were generally eliminated by a writer dedicated to visualizing the exact appearance of character and ambience, for it was only through the most faithful portrayal of life that truth could be revealed. A ‘slice of life’ was exposed to the reader, and the indiscriminate eye of a narrator attempted to present as thorough a portrait of life as had supposedly ever been depicted by art. (97)

Therefore, at their core, both the realist novel and historiography comprise many similar attributes. Both “share a desire to select, construct, and render self-sufficient and closed a narrative world that would be representational but still separate from changing experience
and historical process” (Hutcheon, Poetics 109). This self-sufficiency can be clearly seen in one of the most popular forms of the realist novel of the nineteenth century – the historical novel.

Lukács argues that the historical novel arises at about the time of Napoleon’s collapse, which is when Western Europe began to develop a mass historical consciousness, and historiography could develop as a discipline (Historical 19). The development in the same period of both the historical novel and historiography is a profound manifestation of modernity’s desire to separate fiction from reality. This severance of fiction from reality was a significant shift in how people had come to understand their present world, and that of the past.

The rise of the historical novel provides insights into how our relationship with the past was modernised. Since this period, we turn to historiography for facts, but expect something more poetic, sensory and experiential from historical literature. In modernity, the author of the historical novel sees our relationship with history in a different light than the historiographer. For Lukács, the author of an historical novel seeks to offer the reader both a cognitive and sensory experience:

[What matters] is not the retelling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should reexperience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality. [. . .] The historical novel therefore has to demonstrate by artistic means that historical
circumstances and characters existed in precisely such and such a way.

(Historical 42-43)

Walter Scott, one of the most celebrated authors of historical novels of the early nineteenth century, meticulously describes his characters in a manner that is as historically faithful as possible. The characters’ motives, values and customs are depicted in such a careful manner that Scott’s historical novel not only resurrects the physicality of history - through the descriptions of cities, wars, etc. - but also the spirit of a given historical period. Consequently, his lengthy descriptions of towns, habitats and objects of the era give the reader an historical sense of life in the depicted period, and, more importantly, help the reader connect with the novel’s characters and shed light on their interiority, which had been shaped by the historical period in which they were living (Lukács, Historical 189).

The early nineteenth century saw a common (and united) effort on the part of art, philosophy, and history to comprehend the past, in particular the French Revolution. However, by the middle of the nineteenth century, “historians, for whatever reason, had become locked into conceptions of art and science which both artists and scientists had progressively to abandon if they were to understand the changing world of internal and external perceptions offered to them by the historical process itself” (White, Tropics 42). It is precisely toward the end of the nineteenth century that the use and purpose of detailed descriptions in historical novels shift towards aims that are more positivistic. In a letter to

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A distinction should be made here between fiction in general and historical fiction. Compared with fiction in general, the sub-genre of historical fiction was perhaps more greatly influenced by the positivistic nature of the scientific disciplines that were consolidating themselves in the nineteenth century. According to Wolfgang Iser, fiction at this time “was deemed to be of functional importance, for it balanced the deficiencies
a friend, Flaubert expresses his concerns about what it is exactly that historical literature should provide to the reader and about the value of historical accuracy in fiction. Flaubert wrote the letter while working on his novel, *Salammbô*:

> I am now full of doubts about the whole, about the general plan; I think there are too many soldiers. That is History, I know quite well. But if a novel is as tedious as a scientific potboiler, then Good Night, there’s an end to Art . . . I am beginning the siege of Carthage now. I am lost among the machines of war, the ballista and the scorpions, and I understand nothing of it, neither I nor anyone else. (qtd. in Lukács, *Historical* 187).

Flaubert’s concerns are an example of what Lukács describes as a significant change in the historical novel of the nineteenth century, the turning point being the upheavals of 1848:

> [A]ll that remains for the artists of this period is a pictorial and decorative grandeur, History becomes a collection of exotic anecdotes [. . .]. [T]he severance of the present from history creates an historical novel which drops to the level of light entertainment. Its themes are indiscriminate and unrelated and it is full of an adventurous or emptily antiquarian, an exciting or mythical exoticism. (*Historical* 182- 83)

resulting from systems which all claimed universal validity. In contrast to previous eras, when there had been a more or less stable hierarchy of thought systems, the nineteenth century was lacking in any such stability, owing to the increasing complexity and number of such systems and the resultant clashes between them. These conflicting systems, ranging from theological to scientific, continually encroached on one another’s claim to validity, and the importance of fiction as a counterbalance grew in proportion to the deficiencies arising from such conflicts” (6-7).
The bourgeois readers of this period long to escape the triviality of modern bourgeois life (Lukács, *Historical* 192), and use narrations of the past to avoid the problems of their present (White, *Tropics* 33). Therefore, while reading, they become engulfed in a sort of atemporal limbo, a condition referred to by Wolfgang Iser as “presentness.” This condition has hermeneutical significance:

> “Presentness” means being lifted out of time—the past is without influence, and the future is unimaginable. A present that has slipped out of its temporal context takes on the character of an event for the person caught up in it. But to be truly caught up in such a present involves forgetting oneself. And from this condition derives the impression readers have of experiencing a transformation in reading. Such an impression is long established and well documented. In the early days of the novel, during the seventeenth century, such reading was regarded as a form of madness, because it meant becoming someone else. Two hundred years later, Henry James described this same transformation as the wonderful experience of having lived another life for a short while. (156)

For “presentness” to be effective, it must allow readers to escape their current reality and submerse themselves in the world presented by the text. Yet, the text must also paradoxically contain sufficient modern elements that allow for its readers to readily submerse themselves in the story without much critical thought. The writers of the nineteenth-century novel indulge their bourgeois readers by producing historical novels set in exotic lands and distant ages. However, these novels, while attempting to be historically
accurate, simply recount past events in a way that enables the bourgeois readers to relate back to themselves in a non-critical manner. This type of historical novel “becomes a world of historically exact costumes and decorations, no more than a pictorial frame within which a purely modern story is unfolded” (Lukács, Historical 189). Therefore, stories of the late nineteenth century were designed to reinforce a perceived continuum of bourgeois culture, values, and beliefs, while paradoxically being escapist at the most superficial level. The escapism brought on by these historical novels was triggered by the reader’s submersion in the narrative of distant lands and ages. This submersion more readily occurs if the reader can identify with the novel’s characters, their values and beliefs. As a result, while the historical novel of this period was injected with aspects of modernity, it was not done in a critical manner which would readily allow the readers to question themselves or their society.

With modernism, the early twentieth century saw a backlash against the idea of a (faithful) representation of reality, whether past or present. Representations within both the arts and sciences were contested, along with the representation of history. According to White, it was the First World War that was largely responsible for destroying “what remained of history’s prestige among both artists and social scientists,” and historians for their part were unable to make sense of the War (Tropics 36).13

Both the nineteenth-century desire and need for historical representation reappear in postmodernism. However, not unproblematically. While acknowledging the past,

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13 The modernists saw the flaws of the nineteenth century in its attempts to represent the past faithfully, and consequently modernists often tried to distance themselves from any connection to an historical continuum.
postmodernists challenge the possibilities of faithful representation. Feeling the need to situate themselves self-reflexively within history, authors of postmodern fiction turn to fragmentation, unreliable narrators, and other tropes of ‘distortion’ to present history. The ‘distortion’ of history in postmodern literature then fills a need for the fragmented, postmodern subject: to interact with the past, and situate him or herself within an historical continuum. Yet, in keeping with the legacy of modernism, postmodern historical fiction also paradoxically acknowledges our inability to faithfully represent history.14

While neither modernism nor postmodernism attempts to offer a faithful recreation of historical events, the manner in which they refuse to do so differs greatly. Brian McHale distinguishes between epistemological and ontological motives. He argues that modernist fiction asks epistemological questions, such as the following:

How can I interpret this world of which I am a part? And what am I in it? [. . .] What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?; What are the limits of the knowable? And so on. (9)

Post-modernist fiction, on the other hand, asks questions that are ontological in nature:

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14 A recent study of the contemporary relationships between history, postmodern fiction and historiography is Amy Elias’s Sublime Desire: History and Post 1960s Fiction. Elias looks at the “postmodern crisis in history,” paralleling historiography’s post 1950s concerns with historical recording and representation with similar concerns in post 1960s fiction (xx).
Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it? […] What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of worlds are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured? And so on. (10).

While McHale has distinguished between the types of questions typical in a modernist text from those asked by a postmodernist text, as many have pointed out, there is no reason why each type of text can not ask both epistemological and ontological questions. McHale qualifies his distinction between the two by arguing that while both epistemological and ontological questions may be simultaneously addressed, it is how they are attended to that distinguishes modernist from postmodernist fiction. He argues that in postmodern texts, “epistemology is backrounded, as the price for foregrounding ontology” (11).

The epistemological and ontological concerns of both modernism and postmodernism point to overarching questions of truth and reality. From an epistemological perspective, the question is how do we know what is true and what is real. Within ontology, these same concerns evolve into metaconcerns, where questions of truth and reality become relativized. That is, the ontological concerns of postmodernism relativize epistemological concerns. In postmodern literature, therefore, our relationship to history is not based solely upon discerning between notions of truth and fiction; truth becomes more relative – more personal. What Linda Hutcheon calls “historiographic metafiction” is indeed a literary form
that distances itself from notions of a single Truth, while acknowledging the existence of truths (however inaccessible) of the past. She argues that “historiographic metafiction suggests that truth and falsity may indeed not be the right terms in which to discuss fiction” (Poetics 109). Thus, Hutcheon points out that postmodern authors assert that there exist “only truths in the plural, and never one Truth; and there is rarely falseness per se, just others’ truths” (Poetics 109).

Unlike the nineteenth-century historical novel, the post-modern historical novels I analyse in my dissertation go beyond attempts to recreate milieus and ‘psychologise’ the peoples of the past. By addressing epistemological problems while foregrounding ontological ones, on the one hand, these texts highlight the relative nature of subjective truths (in particular by employing multi-voiced narratives, by ‘distorting’ time and space, and by writing self-reflexively). On the other hand, by relying on the reader to distinguish and resolve the ‘distorted’ historical event, the authors must paradoxically point toward a common truth that is shared between both the reader and author.

While acknowledging the belief that the truth is relative, I agree with Gerald Graff that it is imperative to maintain a distinction between fiction and reality:

Something has been happening to the concept of ‘fiction,’ both in critical discourse and elsewhere. For a long time, this concept operated under commonly understood restrictions. It was used to refer (1) to a certain genre of literature; (2) to a certain aspect of literature in general – the element of plot, action, or fable, including such constituents as character, setting, scene, and so on; (3) to any narrative or story containing a large element of
invention. But recently, the concept of ‘fiction’ has undergone an expansion. Though still used to refer to the action or plot of literary works, it has come to be applied to something more: to the ideas, themes, and beliefs that are embodied in the action or plot. It is not only the events in literature that are regarded as fictive but the ‘message’ or ‘world view’ conveyed in the presentation of the events as well. And this is not the end of the matter.

Going a step farther, critics now sometimes suggest, by a kind of tautology, that literary meanings are fictions because all meanings are fictions, even those of nonliterary language, including the language of criticism. In its most extreme flights, this critical view asserts that ‘life’ and ‘reality’ are themselves fictions. (151)

Within this mindset (which Graff has presented in its most extreme consequences where everything becomes fictional), an historical event can never be presented, experienced or discussed as a shared common truth. To accept this verdict would be a calamity. ¹⁵ Indeed, as has been already discussed, Holocaust denial could only exist in an intellectual atmosphere that champions relative truths. What then becomes important is maintaining a

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¹⁵ To reveal the dangers of relativism, Gerald Graff draws on Hannah Arendt: “She observes that there exists a ‘silent agreement’ among modern political and social scientists that everything can eventually be called anything else, and that distinctions are meaningful only to the extent that each of us has the right ‘to define his terms.’ Yet does not this curious right, Arendt asks, ‘already indicate that such terms as ‘tyranny’, ‘authority’, ‘totalitarianism’ have simply lost their common meaning, or that we have ceased to live in a common world where the words we have in common possess an unquestionable meaningfulness, so that, short of being condemned to live verbally in an altogether meaningless world, we grant each other the right to retreat into our own worlds of meaning, and demand only that each of us remain consistent with his own private terminology?’” (Graff 190).
sense of fact, especially when discussing traumatic historical events such as the Holocaust, the Chilean dictatorship and the Algerian War of Independence. The postmodern texts that I will examine paradoxically reveal the relativity of subjective historical truths, while challenging the reader to maintain a stable sense of historical fact. The apparent contradiction that this presents indicates perhaps yet another step in the evolution of historical literature.

*On Interaction and Experience: From Museums to Texts*

There exists between the reader and the text a specific relationship which hinges upon the reader’s degree of interaction with it. As Iser affirms, the act of reading is a process of interaction, and it is limiting for critics to focus exclusively on either the author’s stylistic techniques, or the psychology of the implied reader (21). In the twentieth century, the interaction between the reader and text was intensified when more demands were placed upon readers of modern and then postmodern fiction (including postmodern historical fiction). Iser has referred to these demands as “instructions” which are central to a form of interaction that he refers to as “re-creative dialectics”: “The fact that [the reader] must carry out the instructions shows implicitly that the meaning of the text is something that he has to assemble” (x). Postmodern literature not only demands that the reader assemble the text’s meaning at the level of coherent content, thanks to innovations in writing styles, but also makes ethical demands on the reader regarding how to interact with that content once it becomes coherent. Because the literary experiencing of the past necessitates a heightened interaction between reader and text, the stylistic and formal evolutions in twentieth-century
fiction consequently placed complex new demands upon readers of (post)modern historical fiction.

Iser’s notion of a reader’s interaction with the text implies an experiential component. Therefore, is it possible not only to interact with a work of historical fiction at the level of constructing meaning, but to interact with it to the extent that its content (in this case ‘history’) is ‘experienced’? In my previous discussion of distorted visual art, I point out that Dereęowski is concerned with how art can compensate for a loss of truth-content. Equally important is how experiences may shape our conceptions of the truth. In my dissertation, experience itself affects a reader’s perception and understanding of an historical event. To examine the category of experience, however, I wish to consider not only literature but also paintings and museums.

Gadamer believes that what we experience aesthetically in a work of art is what we believe to be the truth (79-81). He argues that the fundamental difference between the physical sciences and the humanities is that the physical sciences are predicated upon the assumption that experiences can be repeated (347-52). Hence, the experience of a scientific experiment that has taken place under controlled conditions will at least be judged repeatable by others within the scientific community before it is accepted as truth. This type of repeatable-experience model does not, of course, exist within the humanities, and often not even in the social sciences. The rhetorical question surrounding historical study then becomes: how can we know an historical event without being able to repeat it under controlled conditions such as those associated with experiments run in the physical
sciences? In historiography, an historical event cannot be repeated in such a way, but there are often attempts to explain it and faithfully ‘recreate’ it as a textual representation.

Historical ‘recreations’ come in many forms, including historiography, the documentary film, and the historical novel. In addition, museums also attempt to recreate the past for visitors. For Susan Sontag, “[t]he primary function [of the museum] is entertainment and education in various mixes, and the marketing of experiences, tastes, and simulacra” (121). The Imperial War Museum in London, England, for example, serves as a testament to our desire to reconnect with the past. Upon entering the museum (in the summer of 2005), I was immediately confronted with displays of ‘out of commission’ military vehicles and arms including: jeeps, tanks, missile launchers, machine guns, and hanging on steel cables, war aeroplanes. The museum invited the visitor to connect with these historical items in a direct, tactile way. Below a tank, for example, was information on where and when the tank was used, and what this model’s significance was for particular forms of combat. Without any rope or restricting line whatsoever to limit the area between the visitor and the artefact, the visitor was able to touch these war relics, producing a material link with the past.

From this main lobby, I moved to the permanent exhibits: starting with World War I, and later moving to World War II. This part of the museum also contains relics (letters, insignias, uniforms, guns, etc.), yet unlike the main lobby, they are all protected by glass, thus separating the visitor from having a similar interaction as with the larger mechanized relics. The World War II exhibit has a special section called “The Blitzkrieg Experience.” This is designed to be a simulation of what it would feel like to be in a bomb shelter in
London at the time of German air raids. Visitors sit on benches in a dark room, and when the ‘bombing’ begins, the benches begin to shake amid the noise of bombs exploding and buildings crumbling. After having experienced the bomb shelter simulation, the visitors walk through a simulation of the destruction, where decimated shops and houses stand. The curious aspect about this section of the World War II exhibit is that in comparison to other sections of the museum, it is constantly crowded. As a simple observation, it would seem that in this particular museum, and on this specific day, the simulated experience of war had greater appeal than the acquisition of a less sensory, more factual-oriented form of knowledge.\footnote{Another example of the popularity of a recreated experience is the “Bat Cave” at the Royal Ontario Museum.}

The Imperial War Museum also has a large exhibit dedicated to the Holocaust which examines chronologically the rise of anti-Semitism in twentieth-century Germany, the creation of the ghettos, and finally the concentration camps. Throughout this section, there are numerous historical artefacts, along with videotaped testimonies of Holocaust survivors. There is also a large-scale model of the concentration camp at Auschwitz, flanked on one side by a display containing thousands of shoes recovered at the site. What the exhibit does not attempt to do, however, is to try and recreate a ‘concentration camp experience’ for the visitor.

Clearly no one would have wanted a simulated ‘concentration camp experience’; any simulation of the Holocaust would appear abhorrent in our eyes. But, what exactly lies at the heart of this automatic response? Why can we accept a ‘Blitzkrieg Experience’ and
not an ‘Auschwitz Experience’? While both are comparable to the extent that they are frightening and involve violent death, the relationship that each of these experiences has to the individual’s body and psyche is markedly different. Although the bombing of London was devastating for individual people, individual bodies and individual psyches were not the target, but rather the city and its general population. In other words, the attack was in a sense, arbitrary, against England in general, without the bombers ever seeing the faces of their victims. The experience of Auschwitz – involving torture, rape, horrid working and living conditions, and ultimately, for many, execution – was also experienced collectively, but the individual prisoner in Auschwitz was far more targeted than the victim of an air raid. In the concentration camp, the perpetrator often saw the victim’s face, and perhaps even knew the victim’s name. Concentration camps are often designed to make prisoners feel helpless, victimized, and dehumanized. Given such plans to have prisoners feel a certain way, the concentration camp is already a deliberately produced experience that has specific designs for a particular segment of the population. Perhaps this knowledge, that the concentration camp was already and originally a produced experience, makes the attempt to recreate it in a museum-like setting much more objectionable than the recreation of an air raid.¹⁷

Dominick LaCapra argues that the reality of the Holocaust is beyond our imagination; hence the problems in representation (Representing 220). These problems in

¹⁷ The term ‘casualties of war’ could also help mark the difference between the victims of a concentration camp like Auschwitz and the victims of a London air raid. However problematic the term, the victims of bombings are considered casualties of war because of the arbitrary nature of their deaths. In this sense, the victims of Nazi concentration camps are certainly not ‘casualties.’
representation would particularly be true for something like a simulated experience. To make this uneasy contrast between the bombing of a general population and the experience of the concentration camp, I am unapologetically pointing to the uniqueness of the German concentration camps during World War II. Eberhard Jäckel explains this uniqueness:

The Nazi extermination of the Jews was unique because never before had a state, under the responsible authority of its leader, decided and announced that a specific group of human beings, including the old, the women, the children, and the infants, would be killed to the very last one, and implemented this decision with all the means at its disposal. (qtd in LaCapra, Representing 49)

Most certainly the actual physical recreation of the experience of Auschwitz is not accepted because of its uniqueness. Also such a recreation is not accepted because Auschwitz stands for a form of victimization intended to dehumanize and kill the subjects who experience it.

Yet, how and why are novels and films that depict the Holocaust accepted? Both of these media go beyond an attempt to disseminate knowledge about the historical past; often they want you to ‘experience’ the past: feel frightened, hopeless, sad, and a whole gamut of

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18 While LaCapra argues that the Holocaust is unique, he argues that an important issue is “how the concepts of uniqueness (or better: distinctiveness) and comparability may be taken from an absolute status and combined or mediated without giving way either to an extreme historicist particularism (that would relegate the Shoah exclusively to Jewish or German history) or to universalism (that would identify the Holocaust with history or modernity) – both of which would border on denial” (Representing 99). There is a fine balance that must be maintained when speaking about the Holocaust. As much as I have tried, it has been difficult to compare traumatic histories without falling into either particularism or universalism. Even if some specific examples may be weighed more toward a particular or universal perspective, I hope that my dissertation overall comes across as balanced as possible regarding the problematic that LaCapra has signalled.
other emotions. Why are these mediated experiences accepted? The answer may lie precisely in our relationship with fiction.

Our traditional relationship with the novel is of special interest for my dissertation. On the one hand, the novel is described as providing revelations to readers about their own world. Lionel Trilling points to this when he states that the novel’s “greatness and its practical usefulness lay in its unremitting work of involving the reader himself in the moral life, inviting him to put his own motives under examination, suggesting that reality is not as his conventional education has led him to see it” (qtd. in LaCapra, *History* 116). On the other hand, the novel has been described in escapist terms, with readers who get ‘lost’ in the book. Indeed, phenomenologist Georges Poulet argues that the reader’s own sense of self is to a certain degree replaced by the ‘consciousness’ of the text:

[A] work of literature becomes (at the expense of the reader whose own life it suspends) a sort of human being, [. . .] a mind conscious of itself and constituting itself in me as the subject of its own objects. [. . .] The work lives its own life within me; in a certain sense, it thinks itself, and it even gives itself a meaning within me. [. . .] I am a consciousness astonished by an existence which is not mine, but which I experience as though it were mine. (“Phenomenology” 59-60)

The texts I will examine in my thesis are not traditional in the above sense of what a novel is expected to provide for a reader. Readers are not encouraged to get lost in the text, but instead are expected to have their feet firmly planted in their present reality and knowledge of the past. Therefore, the other traditional purpose of the novel – that it suggests to the
reader that “reality is not as conventional education has led him to see it” – is also contested by the historical fictions I will examine.\textsuperscript{19} In order to correct the intentional ‘distortions’ provided by the authors of the texts I analyse, readers must apply (albeit critically) the “conventional education” that they have received. 

Gadamer states that all art “presents man with himself” (48).\textsuperscript{20} I argue that ‘distorted’ historical literature presents readers with something quite unlike what they have come to know about their world, and hence themselves. However, this form of literature ultimately directs the readers back to their known reality and themselves.

My relationship and particular fascination with distortion goes back as long as I can remember. I have always been interested in kaleidoscopes, in music that uses an ample supply of distorting effects, in distorted images in photography by means of filters, and in the photographic manipulation of perceived time by an alteration of the camera’s shutter speed. I have also enjoyed being able to examine objects under microscopes using a particular dye. Of course, by colouring the object, the dye distorts the object’s natural colour. However, the dye also allows for the viewer to see things which would be otherwise invisible to the naked eye. Here is a case of distortion serving the purpose of amplifying reality.

The questions that have always arisen in my encounters with what I am calling ‘distortion’ in art have always revolved around the questions of “how” and “why.” How did

\textsuperscript{19} Of course, to the extent that the authors are in accord with the type of historical information provided in a “conventional education.”

\textsuperscript{20} This includes non-human representations such as landscapes and still lives. Gadamer says that this is so because all art, no matter its subject, expresses a moral value.
the artist achieve this distortion? (In this song, what effects were used? In this photograph, how long must the shutter have been open?) Why did the artist decide to distort? (Does this photograph, taken with an extremely slow shutter speed, comment upon our notion of time? Does this song alter our concepts of what a guitar should sound like? What an electric guitar should sound like? What music should sound like?) Accordingly, several main questions will guide my analysis of the primary texts in this dissertation. First, how are the depicted histories ‘distorted’? Second, why are these historical events ‘distorted’? And lastly, what are the hermeneutical effects of engaging with ‘distorted’ historical fiction?
CHAPTER 2

CHALLENGING THE REPRESENTABILITY OF THE HOLOCAUST AND ITS RECEPTION: MARTIN AMIS’S TIME’S ARROW AND ART SPIEGELMAN’S MAUS

“There is no such thing as a literature of the Holocaust, nor can there be” (Wiesel 314). In the immediate aftermath of WWII, numerous artists and intellectuals echoed these words by Elie Wiesel. The call for silence is still powerful; yet, today we can hear testimonials from survivors, read historical accounts, and watch numerous documentaries on this horrific collective event. We can even read fictionalised stories in novels and watch films that use the Holocaust as their backdrop. These representations are for the most part created in the sincere hope that the Holocaust will not be forgotten, and that such an event will never be repeated. In part, any narration of the Holocaust must share this sense of responsibility. However, are the responsibilities different for an author who is a generation removed from the Holocaust? And how about the responsibilities of the reader? The reader may have no personal memory of the Holocaust, but only know of it through the various stories and accounts that comprise History.

In this chapter, I will analyse Martin Amis’s Time’s Arrow and Art Spiegelman’s graphic novel Maus as two examples of postmodern texts that reveal through techniques of ‘distortion’ the inherent difficulty of narrating and comprehending the Holocaust. Jean-François Lyotard likens the inability to make sense of the Holocaust to the aftermath of an earthquake, where this natural disaster “destroys not only lives, buildings, objects but also the instruments used to measure the earthquakes directly and indirectly. The impossibility of quantitatively measuring it does not prohibit, but rather inspires in the mind of the
survivors the idea of a great seismic force” (56). I shall argue that *Time’s Arrow* and *Maus* respect those who have argued against representation of this “seismic” event. In these texts, much of the responsibility for figuratively ‘measuring’ the disaster and ‘reconstructing’ a sense of history falls on the readers’ shoulders.

Both texts are quintessentially postmodern in that they share a desire to represent and to impart knowledge, yet paradoxically also to question whether such representation is possible, or even desirable. These texts are also both deeply ironic, if irony is considered as a “strange mode of discourse where you say something you don’t actually mean and expect people to understand not only what you actually do mean but also your attitude toward it” (Hutcheon, *Irony* 2). For instance, in *Maus*, readers are not expected to come away with any conventional ‘cat-and-mouse’ tale (especially one about the Holocaust). Nor in *Time’s Arrow* – given its time-reversed narrative – is it hoped that the reader will passively enjoy a story about a German doctor bringing Jews *to life* in Auschwitz through injection, incineration, and other ghastly methods that we have come to know as typical of the Holocaust. Despite what we might call historical ‘distortions’ – cartoonish characters and time inversions amongst them – it is assumed that readers recognize the text’s general historical referents. Readers of these narratives will, thus, have a unique hermeneutical experience, involving a heightened sense of responsibility toward the historical event in question, allowing them (indeed, obliging them) to correct said ‘distortions.’

Apart from this mode of irony – where the reader understands what the authors ultimately allude to, and their attitude toward it – another form of irony that pervades narratives of the Holocaust is caused by the reader’s own fore-knowledge of the event. In
his discussion of Holocaust testimonials, Robert Eaglestone argues: “In most realist fiction, the readers echo the characters in not knowing what is going to happen: the reader and the character experience the events at the same time. In Holocaust testimonies, of course, the reader knows the events—at least in broad outline—and knows also that the narrator survives them” (Holocaust 46). While I would not agree with the claim that the reader necessarily knows that the narrator survives the events (The Diary of Anne Frank being an apt example), the difference highlighted by Eaglestone between reading realist fiction versus reading a testimony is significant. The fore-knowledge of the event creates what Eaglestone calls a “horrid irony.” He cites as an example the following excerpt from Olga Lenygel’s testimony, Five Chimneys:

We tramped past a charming forest on the outskirts of which stood a red brick building. Great flames belched from the chimney, and the strange sickening sweetish odour which had greeted us upon arrival, attacked us even more powerfully now [. . .]. We asked one of the guides, an old inmate, about this structure. ‘It is a camp “bakery” she replied’. We absorbed that without the slightest suspicion. Had she revealed the truth we would not have believed her. (qtd. in Eaglestone, Holocaust 46)

This form of “horrid irony” permeates not only Holocaust testimonials, but also other forms of Holocaust literature, including Maus and Time’s Arrow. In Maus, such instances of “horrid irony” are often interrupted by (or made to relate to) the world of the narrator in the present. In Time’s Arrow, its instances have a peculiar twist. What is normally considered a
foreshadowing of familiar historical events, must in this text be considered a
‘backshadowing’ given its reversed-time narrative technique.

The role of the reader in these texts is markedly more pronounced if we consider the
central role that identification plays in the reading process. Identification, suggests
Eaglestone, could be seen as “the central power and vital moral moment at the heart of the
literary” (Holocaust 5). Eaglestone contends that the question of identification is central in
our interactions with any historical ‘text,’ be it a museum, testimony or novel:

Identification is simultaneously personal and communal: one identifies or
fails to identify oneself both as a person and through or with a national and
communal identity. It is simultaneously both imposed from without and
developed from within. It is simultaneously performed by us with conscious
and unconscious agency, and, in many different ways, taught to us or
enacted on us by outside forces. It is central not only in aesthetics but also
politics. The process of identification, too, is part of the metaphysics of
comprehension, delimiting and identifying [. . .]. Postmodernism is
concerned with identifying who and how we are in the West, and, after the
Holocaust, with questioning that process. (Holocaust 5-6)

In this discussion, Eaglestone refers to a conference on Holocaust museums that he
attended in 2001. He notes that on the contentious issue of identity and the visitors’ process
of identification, “[t]hree eminent historians disagreed: one insisted that a particular
museum made the visitors identify too much with the victims, the second that it made them
identify too much with the perpetrators, and a third suggested that the museum led the
visitors to identify themselves with bystanders during the Holocaust” (*Holocaust* 5). As much as the process of identification is significant for the visitors of memorials and museums, it also plays a central role in the experience of literature; and the same issues signalled by these eminent historians could be raised regarding the analyses of Holocaust narratives.

The subject of reader (and author) identification is one that pervades the thematics of the texts I examine in this chapter. In *Times’s Arrow*, the process of identification is especially significant and operates by way of a first-person narrative. To grasp its significance, we can consider Georges Poulet’s phenomenological thoughts on the identification of the reader with the narrator: “Whenever I read, I mentally pronounce an I, and yet the I which I pronounce is not myself” ("Phenomenology" 56).¹ Considering the hermeneutical acrobatics demanded in *Time’s Arrow*, Poulet’s statement takes on a certain irony of its own. Such an identification with the narrator in *Time’s Arrow* becomes an ethical predicament for readers when their “I” becomes Odilo Unverdorben, a Nazi doctor who euthanized and experimented on prisoners in Auschwitz.

The process of identification is perhaps more blatantly complicated in *Maus*. In order for Spiegelman to write his father’s testimony, and draw the actual images that are conjured in his imagination, he must first identify with his father and his father’s experiences. This difficulty of identification, Eaglestone contends, is characteristic of survivors’ children:

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¹ Despite his use of the pronoun, ‘I,’ when referring to the reading process, for Poulet this identification between narrator and reader occurs in all texts (and is not limited to those written in the first person).
If the testimony texts we read or hear are encounters with otherness—texts that resist identification and cannot be easily comprehended or normalized—this adds a level of difficulty. Perhaps this difficulty—the need for identification, the impossibility of identification—is most acutely felt by the children of survivors. (Holocaust 73).

Paralleling the author’s complicated identification process with his father, given his dual roles of son and testimony writer, the reader is also pulled to identify in two directions: a) with Art who attempts to narrate his father’s Holocaust experience, and b) with the father himself and his testimony.

What must be emphasised here is that the issue of difficult identification is not exclusive to the children of survivors, but may be intensified in such conditions.

Identification could be seen within what Marianne Hirsch refers to as “postmemory,” which is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation. This is not to say that memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. Postmemory characterises the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded

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2 When speaking of Spiegelman’s presence as a character within the text, I will refer to him as Art. Otherwise, when discussing his role as the author and artist, I will refer to him as Spiegelman. As we will see, such a neat separation can get messy (indeed it is one of the strengths of the text). However, I hope that my explanations will make these distinctions as clear as possible.
their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. (22)

The interaction with the past, through narratives handed down by previous generations, is in itself a mediated experience. In fact, most people’s conceptualization of the Holocaust today has already been mediated, if not exclusively mediated. Eaglestone states: “We who come after the Holocaust and know about it only through representations are frequently and with authority told that it is incomprehensible. However, the representations seem to demand us to do exactly that, to comprehend it, to grasp the experiences, to imagine the suffering, through identifying with those who suffered” (Holocaust 19). Therefore, despite Wiesel and other intellectuals (i.e., Adorno) who call for a non-aestheticizing – if not silent – approach to the Holocaust, representations are abundant, and identification naturally results from engaging with this already-mediated historical event. The narrative techniques used by Amis and Spiegelman may challenge the entire idea of reader identification. Through processes of ‘distortion,’ the very phenomenon of identification, amongst others related to the ethics of Holocaust representation, is brought to the fore.

**Martin Amis’s Time’s Arrow**

“Style [. . .] is intrinsic to perception. [. . .] And style is morality. Style judges. [. . .] Things are not merely described but registered, measured and assessed for the weight with which they bear on your soul.” (Amis, “Chicago” 126)
In his article, “The Black Hole of Auschwitz,” Primo Levi argues that the concentration camps of the Holocaust were “‘black holes’ destined for men, women and children guilty only of being Jews, where people arrived by train only to go straight into the gas chambers, from which no one ever came out alive” (92). Levi’s analogy speaks to a horror that was felt to be virtually inescapable. Yet, the analogy may also refer to our inability to rationally comprehend the Holocaust. From laymen to established intellectuals in the academy and to Holocaust survivors themselves, the overriding sentiment regarding this event is one of overwhelming incomprehension. The ensuing dilemma is then how to rationally write and think about the Holocaust. A theorisation of the Holocaust, on the analogy of the black hole, would pull in all (theory) that surrounds it. Within astrophysics, this would even imply that light is sucked in, resulting in a distortion of time.

It is fundamentally with regard to our experience of time, and our inability to logically comprehend the Holocaust, that the responsibility of the reader takes a different form in Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow* from what is involved in *Maus*. In *Maus*, the reader has to piece together a fragmented text, and keep in mind (simple as it may be) the fact that the animal figures function as direct references to actual historical actors. The reader’s participation in *Time’s Arrow* is more intense. Amis’s text presents the life of a doctor, Odilo Unverdorben, told backwards: beginning with his ‘awakening’ from death, and ending with his entrance into the womb. Despite the significance of his name (“Unverdorben” is German for “unspoiled,” “unsophisticated” or “innocent), what makes this man’s story particular is that he has a haunting past. As a doctor, he once worked at Auschwitz where he routinely experimented on prisoners with various substances and
drugs, often to the point of killing them (136-137, 142-144); he forced female prisoners to have sexual relations with him (131, 134); he was responsible for placing lethal pills of zykon B in gas chambers (129); and he later extracted gold from the corpses’ teeth (129-30). Given his haunting past, Odilo changes his name several times throughout his life to escape prosecution, beginning with his escape from Auschwitz to Lisbon, where he changes his name to Hamilton de Souza. Odilo then flees to the US where he adopts the name John Young, which is about as commonplace a name as possible in the US (again with connotations of innocence and youth). But the authorities seem to be catching up to him, so he switches his name again, this time to Tod T. Friendly. In German, “Tod” means ‘death,’ and he keeps this name until he dies – ironically, surrounded by doctors.³

By way of the time reversal, the form of the narrative itself is as particular as the man it describes. The backward narrative is not reversed in terms of segments (e.g., chapters) placed in reverse chronological order, each one moving forward in time. In Time’s Arrow the whole of the narrative is reversed: “the film is running backwards,” remarks the narrator (16). A consequence of this time reversal is that morality is turned on its head with the inversion of cause-and-effect relationships. Therefore, destruction is transformed into creation, and killing becomes the act of giving birth. The cruelest acts are at the very least benign when reversed, and are often celebrated by the narrator as beneficial and good. Therefore, as Brian Finney argues, the reader undergoes a particular

³ Throughout my interpretation, I have chosen to refer to the protagonist as Tod instead of any other name, including his birth name, Odilo. Since Tod is the name that the reader first encounters, this choice seems to be a logical one, especially since the name does not change until roughly halfway through the text. I am, however, aware of the political and
hermeneutical experience, on the one hand, taking pleasure in Amis’s formal innovations, but on the other, keeping in mind their ethical implications: “Readers are made to vacillate between enjoying the conceits produced by history’s reversal and remembering with horror the disasters that –ironically– the narrator perceives in inverted and therefore celebratory form” (112). Thus, given the particularly sensitive subject matter, the time-reversal places particular ethical demands upon the reader, who has to maintain a sense of historical responsibility while reading *Time’s Arrow*. According to Lubomir Doležel, when the reader “crosses from the natural into the nonnatural world, his or her encyclopedia has to be modified. The visitor has to learn the encyclopedia of the alien world” (179). In *Time’s Arrow*, it is precisely this modification of the encyclopedia that engenders resistance in the reader.

In his review, M. John Harrison describes the reader’s role in this novel as one of ‘unpacking’ its historical content: “This gleeful reversal has such a long ironic reach that it seems less funny than eerie – even rather beautiful – until you unpack it and find the dead baby inside” (21). The power of Amis’s text is that this horrific image of a “dead baby” (to continue Harrison’s metaphor for the Holocaust) is produced by the readers themselves. Amis would agree with Harrison’s assessment of the reader’s role, having said of his unique presentation of the Holocaust: “You present it as a miracle, but the reader is supplying all the tragedy [. . .]. It was that kind of double-edged effect that I wanted” (qtd. in DeCurtis 146).

ethical ramifications of this decision, given the fact that I am naming the perpetrator by his chosen name, a name which masks his past.
Apart from the inversion in time, the text also defamiliarises the reader through a first-person narrator who seems to have a split personality of sorts: the narrator is both the doctor himself and, simultaneously, an entity that resides within the doctor, watching and narrating the doctor’s actions. Of course, during his life, Tod commits some of the cruellest acts imaginable against other human beings. However, the way that this entity narrates Tod’s actions is confounding in its detachment and lack of emotion. This detachment allows for readers to bring the emotional charge to the novel for themselves—what Amis likely refers to when he speaks of “the tragedy.” James Diedrick remarks that in *Time’s Arrow* “the narrator never registers horror at the systematic human cruelty occurring around him – which increases the reader’s horror” (163). Thus, the narrative perspective is ambiguous, as it is seemingly Tod’s conscience that narrates *Time’s Arrow*, yet this conscience is emotionally detached, which raises certain questions pertaining to his supposed innocence.

The next section will move to concentrate on ‘distortion’ at the level of narrative form (through the inversion of time) and ‘distortion’ at the level of narrative perspective (the splitting of the narrator’s voice). I shall then look at how it is the responsibility of the reader to “unpack” the “horror” in a narrative that at first glance presents the Holocaust as a “miracle.”

**The Double Narrator**

Tod’s psychology, including his values and fantasies, is exposed to the reader through a narrator who, as we have seen, is paradoxically both Tod himself and an entity that can speak of Tod in the third person. This entity appears at the moment of Tod’s birth (his
death in forward time) and stays with him until his death (his birth). Literary critics have referred to the narrator’s voice as a “passenger” in Tod’s head (Harrison 21), Tod’s “soul” (Updike 88), Tod’s “conscience” (Dern 126), or “ghost consciousness” (Harris 489) – all implying that the narrator judges Tod’s actions. Amis would agree, having said that the narrator is “the soul he [Tod] should have had” (qtd. in DeCurtis 146). Therefore, on the surface, what the reader encounters is a fictional biography – in reverse – of a Nazi doctor whose actions are described and judged by his own conscience.

However, upon closer reading, the conscience of the narrator must be questioned for its alleged innocence in the crimes of Tod’s past. He is remarkably unemotional when speaking of Tod’s crimes, and goes to great lengths to convince the reader of his own innocence, lack of free will, and differing values from Tod’s. The same narrator, however, often has difficulty distinguishing between himself and the criminal body he occupies.

Naming
A central theme in this novel is how seemingly ordinary people may be capable of doing the most extraordinary things. Arguably, this was the case in Germany during World War II. Robert Jay Lifton has studied this phenomenon in his research on Nazi doctors, and posits: “No individual self is inherently evil, murderous, genocidal. Yet under certain conditions, virtually any self is capable of becoming all of these” (497). Similarly, after witnessing Tod’s life in reverse, the narrator comments towards the end of the novel: “I’ve come to the conclusion that Odilo Unverdorben, as a moral being, is absolutely

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4 Lifton’s The Nazi Doctors had a tremendous influence on Amis. In his afterword to Time’s Arrow he acknowledges the influence of Lifton’s book, saying that his novel “would not and could not have been written without it” (175).
unexceptional, liable to do what everybody else does, good or bad, with no limit, once under the cover of numbers” (164-5). As previously mentioned, two of Tod’s names throughout his life refer to his innocence: “Unverdorben” and “John Young.” Odilo will later settle for the seemingly paradoxical name of Tod (death) T. Friendly. However, within the ironical world of reversed time, birth equals death, and consequently death can be ‘friendly.’

Tod’s double identity is perhaps best encapsulated in his original last name, Unverdorben. Specifically, “unverdorben” is the opposite of “verdorben,” which in German means “tainted,” “rotten,” “depraved,” and “corrupt.” Diedrich claims that the surname Unverdorben encapsulates the doubling phenomenon of Tod’s psyche as it “contains both himself and his double,” referring to the word ‘verborden’ remaining in a state of tension with its ‘un’ prefix (167-68).

Psychological Doubling

The duality of the narrator parallels a specific psychological phenomenon common to Nazi doctors, which is referred to by Lifton: “the key to understanding how Nazi doctors came to do the work of Auschwitz is the psychological principle I call ‘doubling’: the division of the self into two functioning wholes, so that a part-self acts as an entire self” (418). Lifton explains this phenomenon saying that a portion of the self splits off and “ceases to respond to the environment ([. . .] ‘psychic numbing’) or else is in some way at odds with the remainder of the self” (419). This split is seen to be so absolute that Lifton argues that “the double is evil in that it represents one’s own death” (421). Of course, such “psychic numbing” can be beneficial, even “life enhancing” (420), for someone abused or tortured.
Yet, just as a person may have the capacity to form an “opposing self” for beneficial reasons, Lifton argues that a person may form an “opposing self” “to embrace evil with an extreme lack of restraint” (420):

The way in which doubling allowed Nazi doctors to avoid guilt was not by elimination of conscience but by what can be called the transfer of conscience. The requirements of conscience were transferred to the Auschwitz self, which placed it within its own criteria for good (duty, loyalty to group [. . .], etc.), thereby freeing the original self from responsibility for actions there. (421)

Even before the narrator arrives in Auschwitz, he can accept on some rational level how violence may be seen as necessary, how violence may be “good.” “I’m taking on the question of violence, this most difficult question,” explains the narrator. “Intellectually I can just about accept that violence is salutary, that violence is good” (34). Greg Harris correctly affirms (495) that once the narrator is confronted with the “ugliness” of committing violent acts – no longer just a theorization – the narrator resists, remarking: “But I can find nothing in me that assents to its ugliness” (Amis, *Time’s Arrow* 34). The narrator then differentiates himself from the narrator saying: “anything [violent] made me flinch and veer. But the body I live and move in, Tod’s body, feels nothing” (34). Harris argues that it is here, “at the point of violent activity that Tod’s conscience splits off and a mind/body barrier forms” (495).
The Split Between Narrator and Protagonist

The phenomenon of doubling, as introduced and theorized by Lifton, is central to ‘understanding’ the actions of Nazi doctors. As we will soon see in the section pertaining to Tod’s role in Auschwitz, the phenomenon of doubling is of particular importance in Time’s Arrow. Yet, even ‘before’ Auschwitz, when Tod lives in the US, doubling plays an important role in the tension between himself and the narrator. The narrator constantly attempts to distance himself from Tod. As Lifton describes the phenomenon:

In doubling, one part of the self “disavows” another part. [. . .] One level of disavowal, then, was the Auschwitz self’s altering of the meaning of murder; and on another, the repudiation by the original self of anything done by the Auschwitz self. From the moment of its formation, the Auschwitz self so violated the Nazi doctor’s previous self-concept as to require more or less permanent disavowal. (422)

The disavowal becomes permanent ‘before’ Auschwitz, once Tod is able to live a relatively tranquil live in the US. His repressed memories do come back to haunt him, however, in his nightmares (18). Curiously, these dreams are in German, and the narrator can understand the language (15). Otherwise, according to how the narrator initially presents himself, this doubling between the two is absolute.

John A. Dern uses the image of the “chasm” to describe the divide between the two selves. Because of the narrator’s “lack of comprehension of reverse-time, the anti-logic occurring around him,” Dern argues that “the narrator peers at events in Time’s Arrow as if viewing them from the far side of a chasm, and the breadth of that chasm makes it nearly impossible for him to correctly interpret events” (125). Dern believes that a consequence of
the narrator’s particular voice is that “[i]n the backwards world, the narrator’s value judgments are ironically the same as the reader’s” (125). Similarly, Slater suggests that the narrator “has a decent moral code [. . .]. [T]he narrator sees life as we do, and enlists our sympathy as we observe him reacting as we might do to a reversed world” (143). Therefore, in certain passages, such as when Tod takes toys from children (gives the children toys in forward time), the narrator reveals his disgust for Tod’s actions. The consequence of the narrator’s judgement is that he appears to share the same moral compass as his intended readers, despite his immersion in a world of reversed time.5

The sharing of the moral compass appears to be a conscious effort on the part of the narrator who “seems aware” of his audience and wants “to make himself clearly understood by his forward-living readers” (Slater 143, 145). Perhaps more than simply wanting to be “understood,” the narrator, through the tone he adopts, even hints at a side of him that is manipulative. For instance, in one passage he reveals to the reader: “Originally I was going to adopt a distant and defeated tone” (87), highlighting the effect that he knows his tone might produce on his audience. Considering how aware the narrator is of his readers and the possibility that he even attempts to manipulate them, the idea that the narrator and reader share the same moral compass must be questioned. On these same grounds, I would partially disagree with Diedrick’s own assessment of the narrator. Diedrick makes reference to the split between Tod and narrator by qualifying their differing levels of maturity and innocence. He sees the narrator as “a childlike innocent who relives [Tod’s] life – in reverse” (162). Considering the narrator’s hyper-awareness of his readership, and

5 Despite the pitfalls of generalizing the readership of Time’s Arrow, I think it is
considering his attempts to manipulate the reader to feel certain emotions, Diedrick’s “childlike innocent” qualifier is problematic. Slater points to this as problematic, disagreeing with Diedrick: “Strictly speaking, the Narrator is not dealing honestly with us,” Slater suggests; “sometimes he is a sophisticated observer who knows his situation, while at other times he plays the uncomprehending innocent” (146). 6

The degree to which the split between the narrator and Tod exists is crucial to the reader’s interpretation of the novel. This split causes defamiliarization in the reader who expects a stable narrative voice. Nonetheless, it seems that too often the split is presented as far too absolute, a product of the narrator’s ability and desire to claim innocence, and then to be believed by the reader. The absolute “mind/body barrier” referred to by Harris and others, in different terms (i.e., soul vs. body), is also substantiated by Slater in her reading: “despite his lack of a physical body the Narrator has to be given a distinctive personality. He comes into existence fully mature, with his perceptions clear [. . .]. He has firm opinions and a sense of humour” (143). Considering Tod’s past, the reader would likely hope that the narrator is at odds with Tod, and differs from him morally. However, the reader must question the degree to which this difference is highlighted by the narrator himself. As Finney has argued, the novel instructs its readers to position themselves in relation to both incarnations of Tod – the body and his soul. He too sees the narrator as “innocent” and “naive” (112). However, by virtue of Tod’s body being associated with Nazism, any entity would appear innocent in comparison. In relation to Tod, it is therefore easier for readers to safe to assume that the intended readers of Amis’s are not Nazi sympathizers.

6 Slater, however, does rightfully concede that “this failing in his character enables Amis to include more vividly meticulous descriptions of processes in reverse” (146).
sympathize with the narrator who, on the surface, acts as a naive and innocent guide, giving some sense and morality to the world in reversed time.

John Updike similarly sees an absolute split between the narrator and Tod, but is critical of it. He posits that the narrator is actually a stand-in of sorts for the author himself. While I do not agree with Updike’s equation of the narrator with the author, Updike raises some interesting points to consider. He argues that the conflict between narrator and Tod “sounds like a hectoring author scolding one of his characters,” claiming that the novel appears to make a simplistic split between what is human (the narrator/Amis) and what is “subhuman” (Tod) (88). He claims that the splitting of the narrative voice makes Time’s Arrow feel “a bit like an old-fashioned inquisitor’s device, designed to extract, under torture, a saving confession from a lost soul” (88). Despite his praise for the innovative aspects of the novel, Updike is concerned about how we are to comprehend the perpetrators of the Holocaust, and thus, the Holocaust itself. “To comprehend the perpetrators of Auschwitz as fellow human beings is a step toward Auschwitz’s not being repeated,” contends Updike; “Devil theories do no good, in politics or in psychiatry” (88). Updike’s concerns point to an important analysis of the narrator that is too often missing from other readings (Slater’s article being an exception). As we have seen thus far, critics often propose that there exists an absolute split between the narrator and Tod, and Updike points to the dangers for our understanding of the Holocaust in creating such a separation. By claiming that the narrator is a stand-in for Amis, Updike, perhaps unaware, summons the reader to imagine the narrator as someone more human, a complex entity with moral and ethical flaws.
The Use of Pronouns

Upon closer reading, the narrator is not so much separated from Tod as an integral part of him. If it is true that the narrator is Tod’s conscience, it is still a conscience that conveniently avoids portraying itself as a villain. It is also a conscience that frequently will look upon the most horrendous acts with little emotion. The phenomenon of doubling, of course, directly influences and theoretically grounds the split between the narrator and Tod in Amis’s novel. Nonetheless, this splitting phenomenon is inconsistent throughout the novel. A case in point is that the narrator does not seem adequately able to distinguish himself from Tod, often slipping into a use of the “we” or “I” pronouns rather than “he” when describing Tod’s actions. The narrator depicts himself as being separate from Tod’s consciousness, and to only “share” his body (despite his lack of control over its actions): “Into Tod’s mind, of course, I cannot see. But I am the hidden sharer of his body” (64). Tod’s actions are therefore presented to the reader as his own actions, not the narrator’s. Referring to Tod’s bad habits and vices, the narrator states: “Tod sins singly” (22). And concerning Tod’s nightmares, conceivably induced by Auschwitz: “I’m always awake when the dream happens. And I am innocent” (54). The narrator further separates himself from Tod by telling the reader of his uneasiness when it comes to seeing blood: “Tod isn’t squeamish. I’m squeamish. I’m the squeamish one” (33).

If readers are to believe the narrator, he is not only an entirely different conscience from Tod, but he is also totally lacking in free will: “This body I’m in won’t take orders from this will of mine” (13). Elsewhere he states: “You’d think it might be quite relaxing,

7 Interestingly, Tod’s nightmares of the Holocaust appear to run in forward time since they disturb him.
having (effectively) no will, and no body anyway through which to exercise it. Many administrative and executive matters, it’s true, are taken right out of your hands” (49). Despite his apparent lack of free will, he paradoxically seems to feel that his presence might have a positive influence on Tod’s actions: “If I died, would he stop? If I am his soul, and there were soul-loss or soul-death, would that stop him? Or would it make him even freer?” (96). These questions are rhetorical, and are therefore left unanswered. Yet, the narrator leaves open the possibility that he knowingly has some power over Tod, which conflicts with his apparent lack of free will.

The question of free will is central to how we are to judge the narrator. In order for us to trust that the narrator lacks free will, he should not be held responsible for Tod’s physical actions, and in fact, he should be deemed incapable of them. Yet, while the narrator generally refers to himself as “I” and Tod as “he,” there are numerous instances where the narrator will describe an action being taken by both himself and Tod. These shared actions are described as being performed by “we”:

We went into the living-room and seized the brass clock which has always adorned the shelf above our fireplace (oh, what strong hands he has), and violently enclosed it in the festive wrapping paper he found in the trash. Tod stood there for a moment, staring at the clock’s face, and then the mirror’s face, with a sallow smile. (31)

The use of “we” in *Time’s Arrow* is confounding. At times, it emerges when it is least expected, often in the middle of describing one of Tod’s actions. In the opening sentence of this passage, the subject of the sentence appears to be “we.” The subject of the sentence
then shifts, aided by the reference to Tod (“he”) in the parenthesis, to finally creating a scenario by which the reader is uncertain which subject(s) has (have) enclosed the clock in the wrapping paper. The reader wonders whether this act is performed by the previous “we,” or might it now be solely Tod’s doing?

One could surmise that the reason why the use of the pronoun “we” seems to be a slip on the narrator’s part is that he does not want to associate himself with Tod’s harrowing past. Conveniently perhaps, the narrator uses the first-person plural pronoun when it comes to highlighting activities that would leave him in good standing with his readers. The narrator tries to make it clear to his readers that he believes in peace, utilizing, for instance, the “we” pronoun when describing Tod’s participation in an anti-war demonstration: “we protest the Vietnam War” (58), rather than saying “he,” or Tod, protested the war. When Tod arrives in Europe, the narrator’s usage of pronouns changes dramatically.

We get a hint of the narrator’s awareness of this change in nomination when Tod sets sail for Europe (flees for the US in forward time): “We set sail for Europe in the summer of 1948 – for Europe, and for war. Well, I say we, but by now John Young [Tod] was pretty much on his own out there. Some sort of bifurcation had occurred, in about 1960, or maybe even earlier” (107). In keeping with Lifton’s theorization of the split that occurred after Auschwitz in Nazi doctors, the narrator here suggests that the ‘personality split’ occurred after the War. Yet, this ‘separate’ entity seems to already have an idea about what will occur in Auschwitz. “He is travelling towards his secret,” the narrator says of Tod: “Parasite or passenger, I am travelling there with him. It will be bad. It will be bad,
and not intelligible” (72). The ‘future’ appears as Tod’s secret, but the narrator appears to suggest that he has knowledge of it. So much so that the repetition of the phrase “It will be bad” comes across almost as a warning to the reader of a stark reality that the narrator knows quite well.

The narrator and Tod become fused in Auschwitz. This fusion is due to what Lifton calls the “promise of unity, oneness” (499) with Nazism. Lifton uses the term “biological soldier” (30) to speak of the doctors’ role in Auschwitz. The doctor-cum-soldier is depicted in Amis’s novel as Tod rides his motorbike ‘into’ Auschwitz (out of Auschwitz in forward time):

Was there a secret passenger on the back seat of the bike, or in some imaginary sidecar? No. I was one. I was also in full uniform [. . .], emotionally don[ning] the black boots, the white coat, the fleece-lined jacket, the peaked cap, the pistol. [. . .] Now I straddled this heavy machine and revved with jerked gauntlet. [. . .] I was one now, fused for a preternatural purpose. (124)

Here we have the disappearance of the “secret passenger,” the entity of conscience (the soul). Tod’s former two selves have apparently fused together, and he has likewise become fused with technology (the bike) and Nazism. Yet, the disappearance of the “secret passenger” – who one presumes is the narrator – does not result in a description of Tod in the third person. Technically, the disappearance of this conscience in Auschwitz should consequently bring to a sudden halt the entire narrative, unless there is a switch in the narrative voice. Instead, the narrator’s voice inexplicably persists and describes Tod’s
actions with the personal pronoun, “I,” giving the impression that the same “I” that exists in Auschwitz is that which later (in forward time) exists in the US. In fact, the use of personal pronouns, and overall identification with Nazism, is increased and accentuated once Tod arrives in Auschwitz: “I, Odilo Unverdorben, arrived at Auschwitz” (124). Later in speaking of the cremation process: “I or a doctor of equivalent rank was present at every stage in the sequence” (128); and when speaking of his role at the gas chambers: “It was I, Odilo Unverdorben, who personally removed the pellets of Zyklon B” (129). Neither does the narrator separate himself from Tod when describing his allegiance to Uncle Pepi: “I was moreover privileged [. . .] to assist ‘Uncle Pepi’ in Room 1 on Block 20” (136) or his experimentation of injecting various dangerous substances into prisoners: “I now extract benzene, gasoline, kerosene and air” (145). The accumulation of gold extracted from the mouths of the dead bodies is similarly described by the narrator as his own action: “All those years I amassed it, and polished it with my mind: for the Jews’ teeth” (130). It is unclear whether the “I” that narrated the previous section is the same narrator who uses “I” in Auschwitz, although one would have to think so, given the consistency in language and tone. The implications of such a possible discrepancy are also not entirely clear, aside from demonstrating what is likely a necessary inconsistency on Amis’s part if he wanted Tod’s time in Auschwitz to be narrated.

‘After’ Auschwitz, once “the world has stopped making sense again” (157), the narrator returns to a usage of pronouns that appears identical to how the narrator described Tod’s life in the US, ‘before’ Nazi Germany. If Amis adequately depicts the phenomenon

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8 The character of Uncle Pepi refers to the historical Dr. Mengele, “whom the
of doubling in the sections set in Auschwitz (fusion) and the US (splitting), it is not clear why the narrator oscillates between various pronouns (again) at the end of the novel, which in forward time is the period of Tod’s infancy and youth. Inexplicably, it appears as if the narrator is again split at the end of the novel, just as he was in the US. Nonetheless, this incongruity might make sense for the goals of Amis’s narrative in order to again judge Tod, this time in ‘retrospect.’ The narrator now speaks with the knowledge of the ‘miracle’ of a reversed-Auschwitz behind him. He again imparts to the reader his innocence, claiming that he likes Jews, that he is “one of nature’s philo-Semites.” Significantly, he claims “the Jews are my children” (160, emphasis mine), and speaks of them as the “people I had helped to dream down from the heavens” (163). And just as he does ‘before’ the war, the narrator attempts to distance himself from Tod and his past (the phenomenon of splitting). He claims that Tod “forgets. I remember” (162). Curiously then, despite Lifton’s theorization on the subject (and its influence on Amis), there is little discernable difference in Tod’s psychological make-up before and after Auschwitz. This incongruity might be intentional on Amis’s part, designed to disappoint the reader who desires to see a substantial impact on Tod’s character that is directly attributable to the reality of Auschwitz.

The ‘distortion’ of a stable narrating voice, oscillating between "he,” "we," and "I," has a significant hermeneutical effect on the reader. As Poulet has formulated, even when the protagonist of the novel is presented in the third person, there still occurs in the reader a mental pronunciation of the pronoun ‘I.’ “It all happens,” says Poulet, “as though reading were the act by which a thought managed to bestow itself within me with a subject not

Gypsy children in the camps called ‘Uncle Mengele’” (Diedrick 166).
Therefore, any narrative forces a process of identification between reader and narrator. This process of identification is no less than a “take-over of [the reader’s] innermost subjective being” (“Phenomenology” 57). The increased and accentuated use of the “I” pronoun in the Auschwitz section may take Poulet’s formulation to its ethical limit. The “I” of the perpetrator replaces here the voice of the victim, to which readers may be more accustomed in “Holocaust narratives,” such as survivor testimonials. Furthermore, the time reversal superficially negates the perpetrator’s cruelty. Therefore, to identify with the "I" in Time’s Arrow is to identify with a benevolent doctor, rather than with what the reader knows was the historical reality.

By using a Nazi doctor as his protagonist, Amis avoids charges of speaking for the victims of the Holocaust. The “act of imaginative ventriloquism” (Bernstein, Five Portraits 104), where the author speaks for the dead, is replaced by an ironic narrative that voices, in reverse, the actions and moral consequences of the dead’s murderers. Amis’s novel, therefore, does not attempt to speak for the victims, who could be considered “offstage” in this novel (Parry). The ‘distortion’ at the level of the narrative voice then must be corrected by the reader who has the responsibility to resist any identification with the narrator, and must constantly correct the order of the narrator’s actions and the moral implications of his language.

In the act of reading, readers will ‘consume’ the text of Time’s Arrow, but, paradoxically, must simultaneously reject it. Without extending the theoretical implications

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9 Bernstein argues: “Nowhere is the force of the prohibition against imaginative mimesis more strikingly apparent than in the mistrust, often shading into direct censure, of
too far, we could say that Amis’s text, in its very moment of processing, could be seen as abject (Kristeva) to its readers – momentarily a part of them, but something that is rejected as foreign. By rejection, what I mean is that what is presented in the novel – in particular its historical component – is not accepted by its readers based solely on their foreknowledge of the Holocaust, but also because of their mode of viewing the world with a set of values that seems to run contrary to what appears as ‘natural’ in the text. Harris suggests that the reader of *Time’s Arrow* undergoes a particular hermeneutical phenomenon at a moral level when confronting Nazism in reversed time: “In attempting to interpret Nazi mentality from a non-Fascist conceptual framework, one would seemingly have to jolt into reversal one’s own moral assumptions, and thereby metaphorically screen the historical moment through ‘film [that] is running backward’” (494).

*Time Inversion: Its Implications for Historical Enquiry and Experience*  

**Causation and Historical Narration**

A second aspect of *Time’s Arrow* also undergoes ‘distortion’ – the form of the narrative itself. The reversal of time in the novel alters all cause and effect relationships. It is useful then to first briefly examine the theoretical implications of time reversal when it comes to historical enquiry.

Causation, naturally, has a central role in historical enquiry due to the narrative form that history takes as we make sense of it. An early definition of causation was given any fictional work, irrespective of the medium, that presumes to represent ‘first-hand’ the experiences of a concentration camp prisoner” (“Victims” 640).

Exceptions can, of course, be found in the plastic arts, which often have a unique relationship to time, hence causation.
by David Hume, who wrote: “We may define a cause to be an object followed by another, and where all the objects, similar to the first, are followed by objects similar to the second. Or, in other words, where if the first object had not been, the second never had existed (53). What Hume points toward is a sequential form of causality (A, then B, then C), which would later be challenged in sociology, geography, and historiography amongst other disciplines. Hume’s thoughts on causation have been contested by thinkers such as Thomas Carlyle who complicates attempts to explain how and why an historical event has occurred. Carlyle declares in his essay “On History”:

The most gifted man can observe, still more can record, only the series of his own impressions, his observation, therefore, [...] must be successive, while the things done were often simultaneous [...]. It is not acted, as it is written in History: actual events are nowise so simply related to each other as parent and offspring are; every single event is the offspring not of one, but of all other events, prior or contemporaneous, and will in its turn combine with all others to give birth to new: it is an ever-living, ever working Chaos of Being wherein shape after shape bodies itself forth from innumerable elements. And this Chaos [...] is what the historian will depict, and scientifically gauge, we may say, by threading it with single lines of a few ells in length! (221)

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11 Genealogy (Foucault) and Actor Network Theory (Latour), for instance, are prominent theories that have challenged sequential forms of causality, and have had an impact in multiple disciplines.
What Carlyle points to is the artificiality inherent to all historical narration. Whether the narration is sequential (as is overwhelmingly the case) or not, an historical account will never be able to inform us of all the cause and effect relationships involved in how even a single event came to pass. What causes are deemed important to explain an historical event – and then the mode by which the event is later narrated as a particular type of story (see Hayden White) – point to the subjectivity of all historical narration, and its inability to provide a true, let alone total, account of the past.

*Time’s Arrow* does not necessarily complicate the idea that history flows in a linear fashion. However, by virtue of the time-reversed narrative, Amis highlights in extreme fashion the artificial manner by which historical events become manipulated in, *and through*, forms of narration. Amis reveals that an author or historian’s very choice of words is altered due to the choice of narrative form. The consequence is that even morality can be skewed when choosing how to narrate the past. In a postmodern world, narratives thus appear far too much as human constructs to claim objectivity.

Hutcheon notes: “narrative has come to be acknowledged as, above all, a human-made structure – never as ‘natural’ or given.” She contends that current theory challenges the notion that narrative can approach a mode of “‘totalizing’ representation” (*Politics* 62). Accordingly, postmodern art attempts to reveal and thus question the “conventionality and unacknowledged ideology” present in historical narratives. Postmodern art, therefore, contests the “assumption of seamlessness” of the narrative and “asks its readers to question the processes by which we represent our selves and our world to ourselves and to become aware of the means by which we make sense of and *construct* order out of experience in our
particular culture” (Hutcheon, Politics 53-4). Readers of Time’s Arrow are likewise asked to question the construction of not only Time’s Arrow, but any Holocaust narrative. Readers encounter a quintessentially postmodern text that simultaneously ‘distorts’ a known historical reality while giving readers the tools to correct said ‘distortions’. In his reading of Amis’s novel, Finney (via Lyotard’s thoughts on postmodernism) argues that “postmodern art seeks the experience of freedom by staging a permanent crisis in representation.” To create this freedom, and to stage such a crisis, Finney posits that postmodern art distinguishes itself “by its ‘invention of new rules,’ [making] ‘allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented’” (103). Therefore, in Time’s Arrow, the invention of “new rules” is obvious to the reader, and, as we will see, the reader is conditioned to adapt to them.

By employing a time reversal in Time’s Arrow, according to Finney, Amis contests forms of narrative structure that inevitably neutralize the initial violence of the historical event. Therefore, Amis critiques the possibility and ethics of representing the Holocaust, paradoxically, through his own radical postmodern Holocaust narrative. Amis’s ‘distortion’ of time, which radically alters causality and thus morality, is a radical departure for those of us interested in ‘learning’ about the Holocaust. In reversed time, criminals become altruists, and what is amoral becomes moral. Those two consequences alone are enough to disconcert anyone who even has a slight knowledge of the horrors that befell the Jews and other peoples during the Third Reich.\(^\text{12}\)

\(^{12}\) As can be probably expected, Amis has been attacked by some critics for what they perceive as postmodern ‘trickery’ in Time’s Arrow, suggesting that his concern with
Influences from Literary and Scientific Sources

There are several antecedents to Amis’s stylistic experiment of reversing the arrow of time. These include: J. G. Ballard’s “Mr F is Mr F”; Brian Aldiss’s *An Age*; and Philip K. Dick’s *Counter-Clock World*. In his afterword, Amis states that a certain paragraph of Kurt Vonnegut’s *Slaughterhouse-Five* was in the back of his mind while he wrote *Time’s Arrow* (175). Very likely he refers to the following sequence which describes the *un*bombing of Dresden:

The formation flew backwards over a German city that was in flames. The bombers opened their bomb bay doors, exerted a miraculous magnetism which shrunk the fires, gathered them into cylindrical containers, and lifted the containers into the bellies of the planes. The containers were stored neatly in racks. The Germans below had miraculous devices of their own, which were long steel tubes. They used them to suck more fragments from the crewmen and planes. (Vonnegut 74)

Vonnegut’s style is later mirrored by Amis. Not only does Amis use a time reversal, but he also changes the very words used to customarily describe certain actions, causing defamiliarisation in the reader. For instance, Vonnegut writes: “The bombers *opened* their bomb bay door”; the fires were “*gathered* into cylindrical containers” and “*lifted* […] into the bellies of the planes.” And finally, in perhaps the strongest example of defamiliarisation in this sequence, the Germans, use those “miraculous devices of their own, which were long steel tubes” to “*suck* more fragments from the crewmen and planes.” Just as the bombs aesthetics is an affront to the memory of those murdered. As examples, see Koenig and Buchan.
oddly help the citizens of Dresden, an anti-aircraft weapon seems strange and miraculous. The defamiliarisation works by making uncanny the operation and purpose of military weapons; hence warfare in itself is made to appear odd, if not absurd. The engineering and technological feat that is a bomb or anti-aircraft weapon (“miraculous devices”) is thus turned on its head for the reader. The narrator ironically asks the reader to be in awe of the wonders of these ‘beneficial’ and ‘constructive’ weapons. In correcting the reversed narrative, readers will come to their own conclusions about the weapons’ benefits, and ultimately the benefits of warfare.

Apart from Vonnegut’s influence, Amis’s time reversal is based on scientific theories that attempt to understand what will happen if and when the universe ceases to expand. Scientists have already concluded that the rate of the universe’s expansion is slowing down. They also believe that Time, as we experience it, is dependent on this expansion. However, they speculate that after the universe has reached its limit of expansion, a phase of contraction will begin. The universe would then contract to such an extent that it would be “a black hole of destruction, no more than $10^{-23}$ cm across” (Fraser 273). The question that arises is: how would we experience time in a contracting universe? In a chapter entitled “The Arrow of Time,” from his celebrated study A Brief History of Time, Stephen Hawking asks this precise question:

> What would happen if and when the universe stopped expanding and began to contract? Would the thermodynamic arrow reverse and disorder begin to decrease with time? This would lead to all sorts of science-
fictionlike possibilities for people who survived from the expanding to the contracting phase. (149)

The consequences of such a time reversal was already theorised by Amis in his short story: “Bujak and the Strong Force or God’s Dice.” Here the title character describes himself as an “Oscillationist, claiming that the Big Bang will forever alternate with the Big Crunch.” Bujak remarks, at the moment of the Big Crunch, that “with the cosmos turning on its hinges, light would begin to travel backward, received by the stars and pouring from our human eyes” (49).

It is important to note that, similar to how Amis has described a reversed flow of time in “Bujak and the Strong Force or God’s Dice,” the manner by which time’s reversal is depicted in Time’s Arrow is a total reversal of time, not merely a reversal of the order of events. An example of how the two can be easily confused is eminent scientist Carl Sagan’s own explanation of a reversal of time’s arrow:

First the ripples spread from a point on the water’s surface, then I throw a stone into the pond. First the torch bursts into flame and then I light it. We cannot pretend to understand what such causality inversion means. Will people at such a time be born in the grave and die in the womb? (260)

Although Sagan provides a general framework for imagining the experience of a time reversal, on closer inspection he still maintains cause-and-effect relations which are wholly within our usual experience and conception of time: “First the ripples spread from a point on the water’s surface, then I throw a stone into the pond.” A true time reversal – with its implications for causation – would have described the ripples moving inward toward a
single point on the water’s surface; and from this point, a stone would be *projected* out of the water. The stone would then be *caught*, rather than thrown. In comparison to the time reversals I have described, Sagan’s description seems like a sequence of time segments (or slices) that have been ordered backwards, yet the direction within each segment maintains the forward arrow of time.\(^1\)

**Reading in Reverse**

As events are reversed in *Time’s Arrow*, this complicates the reader’s ability to comprehend the order of events in the text. For instance, the narrator cheekily remarks about a budding love affair: “One thing led to another – actually it was more like the other way around” (56). While I have already identified certain contradictions in Sagan’s description of reversed time, one may find similar problems in *Time’s Arrow*. Some of these problems deal with the physical text itself. The sentences flow as we are accustomed to seeing them. The exception occurs at the beginning of the novel:

> “Dug. Dug,” says the lady in the pharmacy.
>
> “Dug,” I join in. “Oo y’rrah?”
>
> “Aid ut oo y’rrah?” (14)

Mercifully for the reader, Amis gives his narrator the ability to “translate this human warble” so that the reader will be able to make sense of the narrative (14).\(^2\) In the

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\(^1\) As an added note, when Sagan predicts that in reversed time people will be “born in the grave,” this would necessarily imply that these people in forward-time were buried alive. Sagan appears to have unintentionally integrated Hawking’s “science-fiction like possibilities” with horror.

\(^2\) At first glance, the dialogue should be translated as: “How are you today?” “Good, how are you?” “Good, Good.” The reader might note, however, that there appears
dialogues that follow, the order of sentences remains within a time reversal, despite the narrator ‘translating’ the “warble” of reversed words. For instance, Tod’s telephone conversation with Irene:

“Goodbye, Tod.”

“Wait. Don’t do anything.”

“Who cares? It’s all shit anyway.”

“Irene,” he said.

“Yes I am, Tod, I’m just this terrible old lady now. How’d it happen?”

“No you’re not.”

“No I’m not. I’m going to kill myself.”

“No you’re not.”

“I’m going to call the New York Times”

“Irene,” he said, with a new heat in his voice. And a new heat all over his body.

“I know you changed your name. How about that! I know you ran.”

“You know nothing.”

“I’m going to tell on you.”

“Oh yes?”

“You say it in the night. In your sleep.”

“Irene.”

to be a slight mistake in Amis’s rendering of this conversation in reverse. Given the structure of the dialogue, it would appear to make more sense if the second interjection
“I know your secret.”

“What is it?”

“I want you to know something.”

“Irene, you’re drunk.”

“Piece of shit.”

“Yes?” said Tod boredly – and hung up on her. He put the phone down and listened to its ringing – its machine persistence. And then its silence. (28-29)

In order to make proper sense of the dialogues in *Time’s Arrow*, the reader quickly learns to read the interjections in backward order. One of the effects of the reversed narrative, and the heightened involvement of the reader, is that the reader constantly searches for moments where the author may have made a mistake, as was the case in my reading of the dialogue where the words themselves are reversed. Slater notes that this type of reading is comparable to how “we watch a magician to try to discover the secret behind his tricks” (149).

The hermeneutic work involved in making sense of the dialogues is less challenging than what is required to make sense of the actions when reversed. What demands even more participation from the reader is that the language employed by the narrator in describing actions reflects changes in cause-and-effect relationships. Consequently, often value judgements are turned on their head. The narrator describes in meticulous detail how the reversed world works, yet everyday activities appear strange. An example is eating, which here seems odd, and even grotesque:

were to say “Oo y’rrah?” and then “Dug.” Translated in reverse, this would create the
First I stack the clean plates in the dishwasher, [. . .] then you select a soiled dish, collect some scraps from the garbage, and settle down for a short wait. Various items get gulped up into my mouth, and after skilful massage with tongue and teeth I transfer them to the plate for additional sculpture with knife and fork and spoon. [. . .] Next you face the laborious business of cooling, of reassembly, of storage, before the return of these foodstuffs to the Superette, where, admittedly, I am promptly and generously reimbursed for my pains. (19)

Maya Slater calls the language in this passage “abnormally precise, detailed and scientific” (144). She suggests that the language that Amis uses throughout the text to convey the reality of life in reverse “is idiosyncratic, over-technical, obsessional, the language of a madman” (145). Slater, however, admits that a reversed narrative may impose this sort of language: “If one imagines a more ordinary account of eating, and reverses it, the result would be virtually incomprehensible” (145). Her example of an incomprehensible narrative is the following, first narrated in forward time then in reverse: “‘I cooked myself a scrambled egg, washed up and had a cup of coffee’. In reverse, this could be: ‘I brought up a cup of coffee, dirtied up, unscrambled an egg and made it raw.’” For Slater, if Time’s Arrow were written in this way it would be “unreadable” (145). Therefore, the reversed narrative technique undoubtedly produces an effect on the reader of strangeness and desired order of words: “Good, how are you?”

15 While Slater does not connect the narrator’s particular language with Nazism, her analysis seems to further make a case that the narrator is not just an “innocent” soul, but should in fact be further linked to Tod’s disturbing past.
unfamiliarity. Despite this effect of estrangement, when coupled with the ‘mad’ language employed by Amis, the overall effect of the narrative is surprisingly not one of incomprehensibility.

At the same time that this ‘mad’ language provides greater comprehensibility to the narrative, it also has significant ethical ramifications. Due to reversed cause-and-effect relationships affecting the verbs and adjectives chosen in this ‘mad’ language, the reader is presented with a value judgement (the narrator’s) which is inevitably skewed. Amis has said: “Almost any deed, any action, has its morality reversed, if you turn time’s arrow around” (qtd. in DeCurtis 147). For instance, abused women who seek refuge in shelters are depicted in the following manner:

The women at the crisis centres and the refuges are all hiding from their redeemers. The crisis centre is not called a crisis centre for nothing. If you want a crisis, just check in. The welts, the abrasions and the black eyes get

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16 The narrator’s ‘mad language’ also foreshadows the language used by the Nazis in their extermination camps. The narrator describes the ironic ‘appropriateness’ of the language used: “The main Ovenroom is called Heavenblock, its main approach road Heavenstreet. Chamber and Sprinkleroom are known, most mordantly, as the central hospital. Sommerfrische is our name for a tour of duty here, in any season: summer air, suggesting a perennial vacation” (133). (These terms are historically accurate. “Heavenblock,” “the central hospital,” and Sommerfrische are found in Lifton’s study [373, 244, 400]; and Heavenstreet, Himmelstrasse in German, was a term used in the Nazi extermination camps of Belzec, Sobibór, and Treblinka [“Judgment in the Trial of Adolf Eichmann”]). Within a time reversal, even the infamous phrase “Arbeit macht frei” at the entrance of the concentration camp takes on a different meaning. As the narrator correctly assesses, after the Jews have been “created” they “work for their freedom” (131). This phrase is foreshadowed by the narrator earlier in the novel when he describes work in the US: “Work liberates: Friday evenings, as they move off towards it, how they laugh and shout and roll their shoulders” (57).
starker, more livid, until it is time for the women to return, in an ecstasy of
distress, to the men who suddenly heal them. (39)
Here the skewed values attached to abusive men (“redeemers”), the crisis centre (the
creators of crises), and the abused women themselves (wanting to be abused) is evident.
Just as in the ‘eating’ passage, here the action is reversed and the language changes
accordingly. However, the ethical ramifications are vastly different between eating and
physical/sexual abuse in reversed time. Therefore, it seems that Amis first trains the reader
to read his novel through passages that describe in reversed time everyday actions such as
eating. Only then does Amis introduce reversed-narrative sequences that have greater
ethical implications; thus, setting the stage stylistically and ethically for what the reader
will later encounter, when the setting of the novel turns to Auschwitz.

Power Over Bodies

The description of the women’s fate in the crisis centre, and their abuse at the hands of
men, foreshadows another significant theme in the novel: the power over other people’s
bodies, which, Diedrick writes, “assumed monstrous proportions under the Nazi regime”
(170). A significant aspect of the crisis centre passage is that it reveals how the abuse of
power over other people’s bodies “persists in ‘free’ societies as well. Nor is it confined to
those invested with institutional authority – as the continuing scourge of sexual violence
attests” (Diedrick 170). Another function of this passage, then, is to reveal how ordinary
people may be capable of violence. Parallels can then be drawn between the perpetrators of
these crimes against women and those crimes committed by ‘ordinary’ Germans during the
Third Reich. While I am certainly not fully equating domestic/sexual abuse with Nazi
crimes, both perpetrators of acts of violence against women and perpetrators of acts of violence in Nazi Germany are, it has been argued, likely to be ‘ordinary,’ ‘commonplace’ individuals (see Arendt).

The crisis centre passage is just one instance that reveals the narrator’s feelings about power, foreshadowing his own feeling of power in Auschwitz. The narrator, for instance, describes hospitals in the US as “erotic,” being constituted by “[b]lood and bodies and death and power” (87). The power relations between doctor and patient are also revealed when the narrator describes some of Tod’s duties (again, curiously using the “I” pronoun) as a doctor in the US:

You want to know what I do? All right. Some guy comes in with a bandage around his head. We don’t mess about. We’ll soon have that off. He’s got a hole in his head. So what do we do. We stick a nail in it. Get the nail – a good rusty one – from the trash or wherever. And lead him out to the Waiting Room where he’s allowed to linger and holler for a while before we ferry him back to the night. (85)

Of course, the irony is that when narrated in reverse time, the ‘ordinary’ act of a doctor taking a nail out of someone’s head appears far more sadistic then some of the Nazi’s actions similarly told in reverse.

What is particularly interesting is that the power dynamics in Time’s Arrow do not change, despite the reversal. Whether time goes forward or backward, abusive men still have both the power to hurt or to “heal” women. Similarly, doctors have the power to either stick a rusty nail into someone’s head or, as Tod did in Auschwitz, “rectify” an inflamed
eyeball with a single injection (143). In this last example, regardless of the direction of
time, it is the doctors who have power over their patients/prisoners to either heal or harm
them, and this power is neither diminished nor negated by a reversal of time. While
causation and morality are reversed in Amis’s narrative, power relations seem to be
independent of time’s arrow and are curiously impervious to change.

**Loss of Hope in Reversed Time**

Another consequence of the ‘distorted’ form of Amis’s narrative is that hope becomes
impossible in a world where time is reversed. The lack of hope in *Time’s Arrow* has as
much to do with Amis’s choice of a protagonist as it does with presenting “the emotionless
world of reversed time, in which hope, anxiety and desire are by definition impossible”
(Slater 150). The world is literally turned inside out in *Time’s Arrow*, and its narrative form
parallels the upheaval of World War II, and specifically the Holocaust. The lack of hope in
such a catastrophic world is also referred to by Terrence Des Pres, who speaks of the
“extremity” of the Holocaust in a manner that parallels what Amis has done stylistically
and conceptually in *Time’s Arrow*:

> In extremity, the form of time dissolves, the rhythms of change and motion are lost. Days pass, seasons, years, and [there is] no idea how long this ordeal will go on [. . .]. The death of time destroys the sense of growth and purpose, and thereby undermines faith in the possibility that any good can come from merely staying alive. (*The Survivor* 12)

The prisoner’s loss of hope, as expressed by Des Pres, cannot be felt in any comparable
way by the reader of a Holocaust survivor’s testimonial. Despite the bleakness expressed
by Des Pres, in the back of the reader’s mind, there is often hope. This, of course, makes a great deal of sense, since the reader is reading the testimony of a Holocaust *survivor*, not that of an individual who was murdered in the camps. As has already been mentioned, the *Diary of Anne Frank* is a prime example of how the opposite occurs. The reader knows that Anne’s life will end far too early. Yet, even in the case of Anne Frank’s diary, the reader is immersed in a world that is, of course, narrated, a fact which, at some level of consciousness, may allow for the reader to imagine alternative outcomes. As is the case with all narratives, the reader, in hermeneutical terms, projects into the future, anticipating and imagining variants on the text’s meaning. Therefore, even if the narrative form is a survivor testimonial, this may not entirely dissuade the reader from maintaining some sense of hope, if only at an imagined level.

Levi eloquently describes the chasm that exists between Holocaust survivors and those who have either read or heard their testimonials. He describes an episode where he was invited to a fifth-grade classroom to speak with students about Auschwitz and the Holocaust. A schoolboy asked him: “‘But how come you didn’t escape?’” (157). Levi explained to the boy in some detail how the prisoners had no real power to attempt a successful escape. The boy was not convinced with Levi’s explanation. After studying Levi’s sketch of the camp, which included the locations of the watch towers, gates, barbed wire, and power stations, the boy presented a plan:

[H]ere, at night, cut the throat of the sentinel; then, put on his clothes; immediately after this, run over there to the power station and cut off the electricity, so the search lights would go out and the high tension fence
would be deactivated; after that I [Levi] could leave without any trouble.

(Drowned 157)

The boy then told Levi, quite seriously: “If it should happen to you again, do as I told you. You’ll see that you’ll be able to do it” (Drowned 157). What is striking about this episode is how it speaks to an inability of the general public, not just children, to understand the reality of Auschwitz. Just as in the case with adults, the young boy’s imagination of Auschwitz has been “fed by approximative books, films, and myths” (Drowned 157). A difference between the behaviour of the boy and the expected behaviour of adults is that adults would likely self-censor themselves from even asking such a question of a survivor. Furthermore, adults have often heard from survivors such as Levi that the reality of Auschwitz cannot be related to other experiences (Drowned 158). What the boy does is effectively compare Levi’s reality with another, relating an escape from Auschwitz with the escape from an ordinary place of confinement. Levi suggests that these types of comparisons are indicative of how survivors’ lived experiences have become more distant from listeners and readers. Yet, the significance of the boy’s question has much to do with how we, as adults, approach narratives, not just those that deal with the Holocaust. The boy imagines the reality of Auschwitz the way he does that of any other escape narrative (a genre which is usually successful in the end). His feeling that there is always hope is tangible in his exchange with Levi. The extraordinary story of Auschwitz is processed in a similar way to how the boy might imagine a Hollywood film – where the “good guy” outsmarts the “bad guys,” and always comes out on top.
The significance of Amis’s choice in narrative form and narrative voice is that hope is lost in a world running in reversed time, and the protagonist of the novel is certainly not a ‘good guy’ that one could even responsibly hope will come out on top. Therefore, the lack of hope in *Time’s Arrow* seems intentional on Amis’s part, and may significantly comment upon: 1) the readers’ troublesome process of identification with the historical actors of the Holocaust; and 2) the underlying, perhaps subconscious, desire for Holocaust narratives to have favourable endings, despite rational knowledge to the contrary.

The lack of hope in Amis’s text relates, albeit purposefully ironically, to what Michael André Bernstein has called backshadowing, which “endows the past with the coherence of an inevitable and linear unfolding” (“Victims” 626). He argues that backshadowing “works by a kind of retroactive foreshadowing in which the shared knowledge of the outcome of a series of events by narrator and listener is used to judge the participants in those events as though they too should have known what was to come” (“Victims” 626). Of course, the irony is that the narrative’s unfolding in *Time’s Arrow* cannot help but be inevitable and linear due to its time reversal.

Bernstein argues that Holocaust narratives often have presented the near-annihilation of European Jewry as something predetermined and inevitable (“Victims” 626). He asks how, indeed whether, “it is possible to represent Jews at all, except by regarding them as ‘proto-victims of the Holocaust’” (“Victims” 631). He posits that affective identification by the reader or viewer (of film) increases because of what he refers to as the depicted Jews’ “highlighted vulnerability” (“Victims” 633). Since *Time’s Arrow* centres around a perpetrator, and not his victims, Amis has either side-stepped the issue of
how to represent Jews during the Holocaust, or has shown that a fictional presentation of the Holocaust is both possible and ethical as long as one does not try to portray its victims.\(^{17}\) In Amis’s text, the “highlighted vulnerability” of “protovictims” is replaced by the highlighted violent capability of their ‘protoperpetrators.’

**The Natural and Unnatural, the Logical and Illogical**

Because the Holocaust to some degree has to be considered both ‘unnatural’ and ‘unthinkable,’ Amis’s reversed time narrative is a compelling way for readers to engage with this particularly horrifying event. One of the paradoxes of Nazi Germany was its vision of logic and progress versus its destructive power. With regard to Amis’s novel, Harris suggests:

> By progressing backwards, the narrative style in and of itself comments on the Nazi’s paradoxical version of “progress” [. . .]. For Nazi “rationality,” as Amis points out time and time again, blurred the lines between creation and destruction, as destruction was often rationalized as a means to create. Such “logic” underlies the notion that genocidal mass murder will lead to racial (Aryan) revival as well as the idea that violence is the way to understand renewal—e.g., rebuilding the German nation via militarism. (489)

In *Time’s Arrow*, death, destruction and disorder are replaced by birth, creation and order.\(^{18}\) The actions against the Jews seem almost benevolent or, as Amis says “philanthropic” (qtd.  

\(^{17}\) As we have seen, the use of the time reversal either clears him of all similar charges or introduces much more serious ones.  

\(^{18}\) I have used “disorder” here to describe the Holocaust by considering the millions of people (of numerous nations, races, religions, and political beliefs) who were victims
in Reynolds and Noakes 21). In this world of reversed time, the Jews are not systematically slaughtered, they are created:

Creation is easy. Also ugly. [. . .] Here there is no why. Here there is no when, no how, no where. Our preternatural purpose? To dream a race. To make people from the weather. From thunder and from lightning. With gas, with electricity, with shit, with fire. (128)

As a stated influence in Amis’s afterword, Levi’s If This Is a Man seems to be referenced in the above passage. After Levi is reprimanded by a guard for trying to quench his thirst with an icicle, he asks the guard “why?” Similar to how Amis describes the (il)logic of Auschwitz above, the guard replies “There is no why here” (Man 35). In the illogic of Amis’s depicted Auschwitz, after being “created” in the incineration chambers, the Jews will eventually be shoved into trains and “freshly sprayed with trash and shit – for the journey home” (132), which arrives at a ghetto. Once they return home, the narrator still has further duties involving the Jews: “At this point the Jews were being deconcentrated, were being channelled back into society, and it fell to us to help dismantle and disperse the ghettos” (149). The situation for the Jews continues to get better: they will begin wearing armbands, they are then “allowed to keep pets,” and are afterwards “permitted to buy meat, cheese and eggs.” They are then “empowered to have friendly relations with Aryans”; later during the Nazi period: those killed at the concentration camps, the survivors of the camps, and those who were affected in ghettos, displaced, lost their jobs, etc. However, if one were to solely focus on the Nazis’ predilection for precision and order, “disorder” may not seem like an appropriate way to describe the reality of the Holocaust; yet, ironically, it would be absolutely appropriate. Time’s Arrow is a novel that brings attention to the implications of such a term and reverses the Holocaust’s (dis)order.
their curfew is lifted, and “[t]he designation Unbeliever ceases to be mandatory for the Jews” (164).

The narrator’s description of the Nazis’ purpose as “preternatural” is fitting since the narrator attempts to cast Nazi ideology and practice in a benevolent light. What is preternatural is beyond what is considered natural, and may involve supernatural forces, giving a sort of transcendent spirituality to the entire Nazi enterprise, justifying it in miraculous terms. Another meaning of the word “preternatural” is that which exceeds the limits of what is thought natural or possible. Indeed, what continues to disturb us today is that the Holocaust was possible (politically, ethically, and technically), but it still may well exceed the limits of what is considered natural for human behaviour. This much is implied when Elie Wiesel comments that “at Auschwitz not only man died, but also the idea of man” (qtd. in Finney 102). Therefore, the Holocaust forces modernity to question what is considered natural for a liberal-humanist idea of humanity. The “preternatural” then can be seen as an uneasy convergence between the Nazis’ justification of their actions and our own condemnation, lack of understanding, and horror when trying to imagine these crimes.

The paradoxical version of Nazi progress – in particular the scientific, industrial nature of Auschwitz – has been identified as a disastrous culmination point for Western modernity, one whose consequences and questions modernity still grapples with in the present. For Finney, the systematic genocide of millions of innocent civilians was “an act of the highest irrationality,” yet it “relied on rational means for its implementation” (102). More poignantly, Zygmunt Bauman exposes this paradox, saying that far from “an antithesis of modern civilization and everything [...] it stands for, [...] the Holocaust
could merely have uncovered another face of the same society whose other, so familiar, face we so admire” (qtd. in Finney 102). In analysing the significance of Amis’s *Time’s Arrow* within Holocaust literature, Finney correctly argues that “this crucial event in modern history is a paradox that requires the use of paradoxical techniques on the part of any novelist attempting to evoke it” (102).

In this context, Amis’s choice to present this paradoxical vision of progress through the character of a doctor is significant. Just as Western modernity tends to trace its roots back to Ancient Greece, so can doctors likewise trace the ethical code that they pledge to adhere to, the Hippocratic oath. While modern ideas of progress and logic can be scrutinized, it is only with perhaps an undue degree of cynicism that one can scrutinize the aims of the Hippocratic oath. In *Time’s Arrow*, Tod appears to be aware of his betrayal of this oath when he throws his medical certificate – with the inscribed oath – into the garbage (hence in reversed time, the certificate is taken out of the trash). While the narrator states that “Tod always reads [. . .] backwards,” it seems that Tod cannot twist the ethical logic of the oath, which reads: “In whatsoever houses I enter, I will enter to help the sick, and I will abstain from all intentional wrongdoing and harm.” At this stage in his life, Tod has long ago left the physical world of Auschwitz during WWII, but, the narrator says that inside Tod is “a world of pain” (32). The Hippocratic oath surfaces as a tangible and haunting reminder of Tod’s past. In essence, the oath is a promise to his discipline (that cannot be reversed), but in the reader’s reality, the oath is a moral and ethical contract with humanity. Tod is unable to reconcile reality and that promise over the course of his life – from before WWII, to Auschwitz, to his life in the US. Lifton argues that this is typical of doctors after
the war: “[W]hat was involved psychologically for Nazi doctors was their intense effort to reconnect with the Hippocratic sphere as a way of claiming they had never left it” (456). Of course, in the real tangible world without time reversals, once such an oath has been broken it cannot be restored.

*Time, Humanity and History*

While I previously linked the phrase “time’s arrow” to astronomy, it is A.S. Eddington, a physicist and science writer, who speaks of the relation between physics and time, introducing as well a more nuanced conception of how time affects human consciousness. His coining of “time’s arrow” was meant to “denote the directionality of time that follows from the second law of thermodynamics, which describes the inescapable increase in entropy in closed physical systems” (qtd. in Menke 961). Menke quotes Eddington’s explanation of the phrase:

> I shall use the phrase “time’s arrow” to express this one-way property of time which has no analogue in space. It is a singularly interesting property from a philosophical standpoint. We must note that –(1) It is vividly recognised by consciousness. (2) It is equally insisted upon by our reasoning faculty, which tells us that a reversal of the arrow would render the external world nonsensical. (3) It makes no appearance in physical science except in the study of organisation of a number of individuals [that is, individual molecules, objects, or pieces]. (971)

The properties of time’s arrow, as defined by Eddington, have striking similarities to what is centrally explored in *Time’s Arrow*. The idea that “consciousness” recognises time’s
arrow is encapsulated by the narrator of Amis’s novel, who often is confused by the direction in which time is flowing. Furthermore, the degree to which the world is made “nonsensical” by reversing time’s arrow is certainly apparent as everything in the world of Time’s Arrow, from buying groceries to hailing cabs, becomes comical in its incongruity in comparison to what’s expected in forward time. The significance of presenting a world that has become “nonsensical” is that when Amis depicts Auschwitz in reverse, it strangely starts “making sense” (Time’s Arrow 124) on many levels. Doctors treat patients, and the camp is designed to treat the sick, famished and dying. By running the film backward, Auschwitz appears to exist for the good of life, not death. Therefore, what is highlighted in Time’s Arrow is how the Holocaust in forward time was perverse and “nonsensical.”

J.T. Fraser argues that the consciousness of time is unique to the human species. This exclusively human dimension allows us to have a sense of history, from which we acquire knowledge from the past and impart it to the future (3). The latter is also affirmed in Time’s Arrow when Amis writes: “Time, the human dimension, which makes us everything we are” (76). If time is what allows us to have a sense of history and of ourselves, if time is indeed what makes us human, then Amis’s text could be seen to present the Holocaust in a manner that is outside of time and thus outside of humanity. There is a significant moment when time falsely stands still in Time’s Arrow. During his journey of ‘departure’ from Auschwitz, Tod looks at a clock at the Treblinka railway station and notices that it reads 4:00. Tod is confused; he knows it is actually 1:27. He passes the clock again on another occasion, and it still reads 4:00. The hands have not moved. “How could they move?” he asks. “They were painted, and would never move to
an earlier time. Beneath the clock was an enormous arrow, on which was printed: Change Here for Eastern Trains. But time had no arrow, not here.” The narrator then significantly describes Treblinka as a “place without time” (151). Parry argues that this passage reveals the “extraterritorial” nature of the crimes of the Holocaust, occurring outside of time and place. Parry argues that the “perverted morality” revealed by the reversed narrative of Time’s Arrow “suddenly coheres” in this image of the false clock. Its power, she argues, is that it is “an image of the metaphysical emptiness, the ‘zero moment’ at the heart of the contemporary.”

The conceptualization of the “zero moment” also appears at the end of the novel, where time reverses back on itself, allowing for the tragedy of history to unfold once again, and so forth, as long as time keeps reversing itself. The reversal of time’s arrow occurs just as Tod ‘dies.’: “When Odilo closes his eyes I see an arrow fly – but wrongly. Point-first” (173). Parry claims that this ending is a warning of the possibility of the Holocaust’s recurrence. The narrator appears to again be helpless. Yet, at the very end of the novel, he expresses his impossible desire to have done something in the past, or do something in the future: “And I within, who came at the wrong time – either too soon, or after it was all too late” (173). The reversal of the arrow at the end, coupled with the narrator’s final statement, seems to prolong the world of the novel. Finney argues that the narrative rejects closure because the Holocaust “should never be forgotten, only endlessly retold. Far from releasing readers in the final paragraph, the narrative condemns them to share with the narrator an endless oscillation between past and present” (111).
ART SPIEGELMAN’S MAUS

As in *Time’s Arrow*, the theme of closure is also central to Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*. Yet, *Maus* is a work that investigates the possibility of personal closures: the artist’s father’s and his own. At once biography, autobiography, comic book (with animals replacing humans), *Maus* is a work that eclipses categories of genre. The difficulty in its categorization (and its consequences) was evident when it appeared as a work of ‘fiction’ in the bestseller lists of *The New York Times*. Spiegelman consequently wrote a letter to the editor contesting what he considered to be the newspaper’s improper categorization of his book (Miller 48). On the one hand, seen as a work of nonfiction, *Maus* narrates the Holocaust and its intergenerational traumatic consequences in a manner that appears to be factual. However, on the other hand within the category of ‘fiction,’ *Maus* could be seen to purposefully ‘distort’ a factual imagining of the Holocaust by substituting human historical players for animals and conflating historical time and space with the present. Ultimately, the categories of ‘fiction’ and ‘nonfiction’ do not seem to be useful ways to approach the text, as it seems to resist such clear demarcations. What everyone can agree upon is that *Maus* takes an indirect approach to relating the Holocaust. To come to a common understanding between how Spiegelman’s text can be approached, I suggest that *Maus* is a work of ‘distorted’ life-writing. For instance, in this section, I analyse how Spiegelman utilizes animal metaphors to refer to the human players in the Holocaust. Spiegelman’s formal innovations of the

19 To extrapolate on Poulet’s theory, the worlds contained in books already exist outside of time as “their fate depends on a human intervention” (53).
comic book form will also be discussed, in particular his depictions of conflated time. It is these instances of intentional anti-realism that create particular demands upon readers of Maus.

The disorientation effect on the reader is a paradox given the seemingly straightforward ‘Survivor’s Tale’ (this is Maus’s rather ironic subtitle) narrated in comic-book, or ‘graphic novel,’ form. Maus is a text that highlights its own moral and aesthetic choices, and in turn forces readers to examine their own reception of them: “Maus implicates the reader in an ongoing act of bearing witness. It positions such a seemingly innocent bystander as a supplementary witness, as one delegated the task of coming to terms with the very unbound energies of the text” (Levine 98-99). The unbound energies in Maus take on the shape of unbound temporalities (past and present), unbound genres (biography, autobiography, testimony, novel, comic book, historical account), unbound pictorial frames (images that extend beyond the panel’s frame), unbound lexicons (Vladek’s English), unbound protagonists (is it Vladek’s story, or the story of Art telling his father’s story?), amongst other forms of unbound energies that all attest to the difficulties in narrating the Holocaust – an event that seems to defy any attempt to tie it up neatly, frame it, define it, or ultimately even understand it.

One of the more striking features of this “Holocaust comic” – a genre formulation which is shocking in itself – is that humans are drawn as animals: the Jews are mice; the Germans are cats; the Poles are pigs; the French are frogs; and those from the US are
dogs. Daniel R. Schwarz observes: “As Spiegelman depicts the mice in bed or at dinner, we become accustomed to them as illuminating distortions who speak as humans” (288).

Schwarz frequently uses this formula, ‘illuminating distortion,’ to describe the presence in Holocaust fiction of incongruity, fantasy, hyperbole, and other formal techniques that I have already defined as forms of ‘distortion.’ For Schwarz, the presence of these distorting elements in Holocaust fiction lies in contrast to what he refers to as the realism “we have become somewhat anaesthetized to,” what he calls “concentration camp realism.” This form of Holocaust narration, Schwarz argues, “has become slightly clichéd” (36).

Through these allegorical substitutions, there has been an intentional, and obvious, ‘distortion’ of historical players on the part of the author. It is a form of ‘distortion’ that the reader may become accustomed to, at some level, albeit with a constant sense of defamiliarization. Des Pres likens Spiegelman’s intentions in Maus, and subsequently the

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20 The reader could take offence at Spiegelman’s use of pigs as a metaphor for Poles, for instance. Indeed, an online search using the terms “Maus” “pigs” and “Poles” comes up with numerous lay reviews of Maus that take offence at this portrayal (the first pertinent entry is found on Wikipedia under “Maus”). However, David Mikics makes the interesting observation that “not only did the Nazis sometimes use the image of the pig for the Poles, just as they referred to Jews as vermin, but that Jewish prohibition of pork has traditionally been explained in anti-Semitic lore by identifying Jews, too, as pigs, who are reluctant to eat their own kin. [. . .] [Furthermore,] Nazi doctrine privileged Poles over Jews, but the Poles’ purpose, like that of pigs in pork-loving Germany, was to feed the Reich” (21-2).

21 It is significant to note that Schwarz’s use of the “illuminating distortion” formula does not appear to reference (at least not directly) Guerard’s earlier use of it. In contrast to Guerard’s conception of “illumination” (which sheds light on ‘human nature’), however, Schwarz argues specifically for the responsibility of the reader toward his or her historical past when reading and making sense of historical fiction. He begins his book, Imagining the Holocaust, by stating: “when we write–and read–about the Holocaust, we do so to arouse ourselves, to awaken our conscience, to keep our obligations to those who were lost, those who survived, and those of future generations” (3).
reader’s experience of it, to Brecht’s ‘V-effekt’: “It seems clear that the cat-and-mouse fable, together with its comic book format, work in a Brechtian manner to alienate, provoke, and compel new attention to an old story” (“Holocaust Laughter?” 229). He uses the term ‘displacement’ to describe the hermeneutical effects upon readers who must maintain their foreknowledge of the event while simultaneously imagining the event’s altered depiction: “Our knowledge of history is not denied but displaced, and we discover the capacity to go forward with, so to speak, a foot in both worlds” (“Holocaust Laughter?” 221).

This “commix” (as Spiegelman calls his form) ties together the various stories of the family – that of the author’s father, Vladek Spiegelman, who survived the Holocaust, being the primary one. Therefore the text acts both as a biography and a second-hand testimony to his memory. Seen as a testimony, Maus places particular demands on the reader:

Many forms of prose writing encourage identification and while testimony cannot but do this, it at the same time aims to prohibit identification, on epistemological grounds (a reader really cannot become, or become identified, with the narrator of a testimony: any such identification is an illusion) and on ethical grounds (a reader should not become identified with a narrator of a testimony, as it reduces and ‘normalizes’ or consumes the otherness of narrator’s experience and the illusion that such an identification creates is possibly pernicious). (Eaglestone, Holocaust 42-3)
Eaglestone refers to this hermeneutical phenomenon as a “doubleness,” where the reader is both encouraged and dissuaded from identifying with the subject of the testimony. Testimonies “lead to identification and away from it simultaneously” (Holocaust 43). On a superficial level it might appear that Spiegelman’s use of the animal metaphors may lead to readers’ distancing themselves from identifying with the victims of the Holocaust. However, as I will argue, the animal metaphors may also, simultaneously, create a more direct mode of comprehension, which may enhance the process of identification, or at least make it ‘safer.’

Apart from being a Holocaust testimony/biography, Maus is also the story of Art Spiegelman, his inheritance of trauma from his parents (post-memory), his difficult relationship with his father, and his difficulties telling/showing his father’s story. There is also the looming absence of Anja – Vladek’s wife and Art’s mother. Maus is as much a story of her life, survival and trauma as it is Vladek’s. While there are many other ‘stories’ in Maus – including that of Vladek’s current marriage to Mala and the tragic story of Vladek’s friend Mandelbaum who died in Auschwitz – the real power of Maus is that, ultimately, it is the ‘story’ of the (im)possibility of its own telling.

As such, Maus falls within the characteristics of postmodern representations of history. It reveals a complicity yet also a contentious relationship with the notion of historical truth. Hutcheon claims that the paradox of postmodernism is that in confronting the establishment of grounded historical truths, “it does so by first installing and then critically confronting both that grounding process and those grounds themselves” (Poetics 92). Maus is an example of a postmodern narrative that paradoxically acknowledges the
veracity of History, yet, at the same time, attempts to contextualize History’s truth claims. In one scene, Art confesses to Françoise, his girlfriend, that he finds the writing of Maus rather presumptuous. He admits: “I can’t even make any sense out of my relationship with my father... How am I supposed to make any sense out of Auschwitz? ... of the Holocaust?” (II: 14, ellipses in original). Art later adds: “There’s so much I’ll never be able to understand or visualize. I mean, reality is too complex for comics… So much has to be left out or distorted.” Françoise remarks: “Just keep it honest, honey” – to which Art replies: “See what I mean... In real life you’d never have let me talk this long without interrupting” (II: 16, ellipses in original).

**Language and Metaphors**

In Maus, the responsibility of the reader is established by way of constant and multiple forms of translation of and in the text. The most conventional conceptualization of translation – that of a movement between languages – occurs on the book’s cover with its title, Maus: A Survivor’s Tale. “Maus,” a German word, is a cognate of the English term “mouse.” However, as Michael G. Levine points out, “it is precisely the seeming transparency of this translation that the text calls into question”:

For only in a particular historical and ideological context, one shaped by the visual media of posters, caricatures, and Nazi propaganda [. . .] does Maus begin to mean not just “mouse” but “Jew,” and not just “Jewish mouse” but “plague-infested vermin.” As such, a Jew is not a human being who is murdered but a disease-ridden rodent that is “exterminated,” and exterminated not just with poison gas but with the pesticide Zyklon-B. (68)
The move through these levels of cultural as well as literal translation, especially considering the historical and ideological contexts, is immediately assisted by the presence of a swastika on the front cover underneath the “Maus” title. And once the book has been opened, the reader is confronted with the Hitler citation: “The Jews are undoubtedly a race, but they are not human” (I: 4). 22

The readers of Maus will suddenly find themselves in a disconcerting space where the narrative is that of the Holocaust, but the central actors have been replaced by animals. A peculiar hermeneutical phenomenon will occur for the reader in terms of responsibility. The reader will not be able to read the narrative as if it were a fictional account of animals in the midst of World War II. To ignore the obvious referents of these animal metaphors would be to also ignore a potential interaction with history. Without the responsibility that goes with the recognition of the allegory, Maus would be no different than a Disney comic book where the characters are put in warlike situations. It is important, then, that from the title page to Hitler’s quotation, onward, the presence of mice in Maus is always, and exclusively, to be translated as the presence of Jews.

Arlene Fish Wilner points to the significance of Spiegelman’s decision to use these animal metaphors by pointing out how this technique “points to the grim moral underpinnings of the fable tradition, in which might makes right, the strong exploit the weak, and any chance for survival depends upon a combination of luck, foresight, cynicism and resourcefulness” (108). The cats’ (Germans’) strength over of the mice (Jews), and

22 For more on languages and translation in Maus, see Levine (68-71) and Rosen (122-134).
Vladek’s survival due to those character traits referred to by Wilner, all fall within the fable tradition. Furthermore, the physical drawing of the metaphors is done in such a non-detailed and simple manner that this actually allows for a ‘humanization’ of the animals themselves.

In an interview, Spiegelman explains his decision to draw animals instead of humans:

I don’t know exactly what a German looked like who was in a specific small town doing a specific thing. My notions are born of a few score of photographs and a couple of movies. I’m bound to do something inauthentic. Also, I’m afraid that if I did it with people, it would be very corny. It would come out as some kind of odd plea for sympathy or “Remember the Six Million,” and that wasn’t my point exactly, either. To use these ciphers, the cats and mice, is actually a way to allow you past the cipher at the people who are experiencing it. So it’s really a much more direct way of dealing with the material. (qtd. in Huyssen, Present 130.)

The ‘distortion’ of the historical actors’ appearance is a way for Spiegelman to avoid representing the historical event in a way that could be accused of being inaccurate. This formal treatment also prevents the reader from needlessly judging his drawings of human faces and forms, perhaps accusing Spiegelman of drawing a German prison guard as ‘too diabolical,’ a concentration camp victim as ‘too emaciated,’ etc. With simple drawings, of subtle expression, Spiegelman allows for a history (albeit complicated) of the event to come through, instead of the distraction of an overly sentimental focus on its players.
The desire to stay away from such ‘accurate’ representation (and the judgements that may ensue) is also seen in his original drawings for *Maus*. Spiegelman had begun to draw *Maus* using a woodcut style that contained more details. He later rejected this method, as he explains in an interview with Joey Cavalieri:

First of all, it banalizes the information by giving too much information and giving too much wrong information. It becomes like a political cartoon . . . the cat, as seen by a mouse, is big, brutal, almost twice the size of the mouse creatures, who are all drawn as these pathetic furry little creatures. It tells you how to feel, it tells you how to think, in a way that I would rather not push. (116, ellipsis in original)

However, the aspect of animal figuration in *Maus* does, in a way, tell readers how to think and feel. It is not as forced (“pushed”) as in the rejected woodcut style. But simply by virtue of juxtaposing victim (Jew) and victimizer (German) – seen through the scope of a mouse (prey) and cat (predator) – it would be disingenuous to claim that even the final version of *Maus* does not ask its readers to think or feel in a particular way. Nevertheless, Scott McCloud argues precisely that the simpler the image, the less information and detail it possesses, and, perhaps surprisingly this simplicity can provoke a stronger response in the reader/viewer.\(^2\) What McCloud argues for essentially is the unique power of comics versus more conventionally realistic forms of representation. Rhetorically, he asks: “Why would

\(^2\) McCloud’s book, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, is in itself a comic book that theorises the art, purpose and reading of comics. My textual citations of McCloud unfortunately cannot capture how he has so skillfully managed to theorise comics *pictorially*. 
anyone respond to a cartoon as much or more than a realistic image?” (30). McCloud argues: “When we abstract an image through cartooning we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential ‘meaning’ an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t” (30). In this regard, we can understand better Spiegelman’s earlier claim that he used simply-drawn animal figures to provide a more direct way of relating to the material. Spiegelman successfully ‘amplifies’ the victimization, dehumanization and constant fear experienced by Jews during the Holocaust by portraying them as simply drawn mice.

Another consequence of the simple drawing style is that it can create identification in the reader at a formal level. McCloud argues that the primary cause of a child’s fascination with comics is the child’s identification with the cartoon subject, be it a person, superhero or animal. He argues that the simple manner by which the comics are normally drawn facilitate this process of identification. McCloud posits: “The cartoon is a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled […] an empty shell that we inhabit which enables us to travel in another realm. We don’t just observe the cartoon, we become it!” (36). McCloud’s explanation of the process of identification in comics echoes Spiegelman’s description of how his simply drawn animal figures encourage a “direct way of dealing with the material.” McCloud’s language itself, in particular his use of the terms “empty shell” and “vacuum,” also may recall Spiegelman’s enigmatic use of the word “cipher” to describe the power of the comic drawings in Maus.

Young correctly identifies other technical aspects that add to the complexities in Maus, including Spiegelman’s drawing of the panels in a 1:1 ratio, meaning that he chose
not to draw on large panels and later shrink them down to fit on the page. The effect of this method is significant as the drawings do not hide the shakiness of the hand that drew them, nor the thickness of the pencil line. The small drawing surface also limits the miniaturisation effect that Spiegelman attempts to create through the reduction of the principal actors in the war to different animals. Because the 1:1 ratio of the panels limits the artist’s ability to include details, the drawings become more ambiguous, thus highlighting the artist’s formative presence in the narrative. “This would be the equivalent of the historian’s voice,” argues Young, “not as it interrupts the narrative, however, but as it constitutes it” (“Restoring” 3).

**Sorting Through the Layers of the Past (and the Present)**

Apart from his use of animals instead of humans, Spiegelman invites the present to interact and interrupt the narrative of the past, and vice-versa. In one such instance of what may be considered a temporal ‘distortion,’ there are two panels that show prisoners of Auschwitz as they are taken to perform forced labour outside the camp’s gates. In the top panel there is a soldier guarding the prisoners as they walk past the gate, and in the background the reader sees a small orchestra playing as the prisoners march by. Below this panel, one sees the same prisoners and the same guard, but the orchestra has disappeared. The discrepancy between these two panels is revealed in the two panels adjacent to the former two, where Art contends that it is well documented that there was indeed an orchestra that played as the prisoners went outside the gate. His father, one of these prisoners who was required to do forced labour, adamantly denies that there was any such orchestra. Such an example reveals, first, how Art’s drawings are based not only on his
father’s impressions, but also on how Art himself has visualized the Holocaust through what is considered to be historical evidence. It puts in conflict the personal account of the survivor and the version that has become somehow standardized through historical evidence. Despite presenting both versions of the same reality, these panels also reveal the authority of the author, who still includes in his father’s version a barely perceptible image of the orchestra (that can be distinguished above the heads of the marching prisoners). The inclusion of the orchestra even in Vladek’s version suggests that the orchestra indeed was at the gates (a notion for Spiegelman backed by historical evidence) but his father never noticed it, forgot it, or neglects to tell him about it for some other reason.

In an interview with Lawrence Weschler, Spiegelman states that what concerned him in *Maus* was the multiplicity of stories that constitute historical realities: “not so much whether my father was telling the truth, but rather, just what had he actually lived through – what did he understand of what he experienced, what did he tell of what he understood, what did I understand of what he told, and what do I tell?” (Weschler 56). There is therefore also ‘distortion’ at the level of the narrative voice. What Spiegelman does is alert readers that the narrative may not be true, and is even factually in conflict with itself (consider again the conflict between Vladek’s and Art’s historical view of the orchestra in Auschwitz). It is, thus, ‘distorted’ intentionally (that is, by the animal metaphors, as well as the conflation of time, as we will see) and unintentionally, by the possibility of flawed historical accounts. Spiegelman’s text therefore has an effect on the reader akin to that which occurs when one is on the receiving end in a game of ‘broken telephone.’ The message one receives at the end of the chain has already been altered many times over
(whether intentionally or not). The sequence is as follows: Spiegelman draws/writes a graphic novel about (the impossibility of his writing of) the Holocaust. The narrative is in comic-book form, and depicts all humans as various animals according to their nationality, ethnicity or culture. This Holocaust narrative includes himself as a character as he interviews his father. Vladek tells Art of his past during World War II. Vladek’s narrative includes also the stories of others, most prominently his deceased wife and Art’s mother, Anja. Vladek’s accounts of Anja while they were separated during the Holocaust often come from second-hand sources. The consequence is that if we can imagine a verifiable reality for any of these historical actors, it is likely refigured, manipulated, and transmuted, as it is told and retold through various sources and generations. Therefore, as was discussed in the Introduction, communicative noise will always be present in any transmission of a message/signal. The presence and significance of this noise is highlighted by the author. Spiegelman speaks for himself (Art), who speaks for Vladek, who speaks for others, who speak for Anja. As we will see, Anja is significantly silent in this sequence. Spiegelman, thus, reveals how the very act of narration, and giving testimony for others, can be experienced as a puzzle of diverging pieces (perspectives) summing up (with difficulty) an emerging vision – one that is not entirely clear – of what happened.

“The layers begin to multiply like pane upon pane of glass,” Spiegelman explains (Weschler 56). Apart from the game of broken telephone, I cannot help also associating this imagery of the ‘pane upon pane of glass’ with a well known Canadian television advertisement by Mothers Against Drinking and Driving (M.A.D.D.). The commercial takes place from the point of view of a driver of a car, and begins with a clear and focussed
vision of the road. However, pint-glasses are slowly introduced in front of the camera, one by one, until the viewer’s vision becomes so impaired that the viewer cannot see anything clearly, and the commercial ends with the viewing driver involved in an accident.

Spiegelman’s analogy of the ‘pane upon pane of glass’ in historical (and for him, personal) inquiry, resonates with the out-of-focus effects seen in this commercial against impaired driving. The main difference, of course, is that responsible drivers would not purposefully impair their vision before they drive. In contrast, Spiegelman feels he must figuratively place panes upon panes of glass in front of him to maintain a sense of historical responsibility.

The layers in *Maus* are, obviously, not homogenous like the pint glasses in the commercial. They are varied and multiple. These semi-transparent panes allow for readers to see various layers at the same time, such as past and present in the same panel. There is an instance where ‘photographs’ (albeit in ‘mouse’ form) of family members, and distant relatives, are literally layered on top of a narrative which tells of their fortunes (II: 114-15). In this instance, layers of ‘reality’ converge, obscuring and interrupting the reader’s perception. The presence of these photographs make difficult the reading of those words caught in the layer below. Finally, the page becomes overwhelmed by photographs as they fall entirely out of the frame, pile up at the bottom, and suggest that there are a great many more photographs that could not be placed within the confines of the physical book. The photographs are so numerous that they overflow, and spill out of the text, indicating that numerous stories of relatives remain untold, numerous photographs that due to constraint and restraint could not all be connected to this text. Therefore, it reveals the present’s
inability to connect to the past in any way that would be total, or even sufficiently inclusive. Like all historical narratives, *Maus* is thus based on, and determined by, its choice of material and perspective.

In another instance of layering, Vladek is telling Art of his life in Sosnowiec in 1943, when the Jews there were forced to leave the city (1:105). Rather than draw scenes from Sosnowiec, Spiegelman chooses to draw the story’s ‘telling’ that is, how his father narrates the story as they walk from Vladek’s house to the bank. The past and the present merge as the imagery of their walk to the bank is superimposed on the image of a cat-guarded gate, viewed from outside, suggesting that Vladek and Art are now, presently, leaving Sosnowiec.

The back and forth movement in *Maus* between the past and the present is indicative of the authorial self-questioning that occurs in the postmodern narrative. It also attempts to expose the author’s methods of historical inquiry, while challenging the notion that survivors must give testimonies with a clear and sequential order. Indeed Vladek’s memories are not entirely clear or even sequential. In one instance, Art exposes a discrepancy in the number of months Vladek remembers working in various workshops in Auschwitz. When Art adds it all up he exclaims: “But *wait!* That would be 12 months. You said you were there a total of 10!” – to which Vladek replies: “So? [. . .] In Auschwitz we didn’t wear watches” (II: 68). Here again is an instance where Spiegelman allows for the reader to make sense of this discrepancy. The importance of determining the factual truth here – how long Vladek was in Auschwitz – may be minimal. By inserting this passage in
Maus, Spiegelman reveals how he self-reflexively comes to realize the over-importance he sometimes gives to dates in an attempt to construct a verifiable historical account.

The sequential, chronological order of the Holocaust gets interrupted by the tale of Richieu, Vladek and Anja’s first son, who died during the war. While relating his life in Sosnowiec, during 1941, Vladek mentions Richieu’s name and gets understandably sidetracked, wanting to tell the story of what occurred to his son, who was later cared for by Tosha: “When we were in the ghetto, in 1943, Tosha took all the children to-” And Art interrupts: “Wait! Please dad. If you don’t keep your story chronological, I’ll never get it straight ... Tell me more about 1941 and 1942” (I: 82, ellipsis in original). It is clear that a particular narration is at work here, wanting to be set in a particular order, with a certain level of clarity. Nonetheless, what Spiegelman wants is not what he can necessarily obtain. Prisoners didn’t wear watches in Auschwitz, and Vladek’s Holocaust story is necessarily interrupted by his separation, and subsequent loss, of his son. Spiegelman’s inclusion of these instances where he presses his father for more clarity or chronological order reveal perhaps the author’s own subjective reactions and contradictions when entering into his historical enquiry.

According to Young, Vladek’s testimonial narrative “is constantly interrupted by – and integrative of – life itself, with all its dislocations, association, and paralyzing self reflections. It is a narrative echoing with the ambient noise and issues surrounding its telling” (“Restoring” 3). In this way, Maus is a telling of past events while also revealing the creative process of its telling in the present. It is interesting that for Young the present seems to echo back onto the past. This is a fascinating word choice, not merely for its
reversing of the cause and effect relationship of an echo, but also for its suggesting the Benjaminian notion of the dialectics that are at play in historical inquiry: the past is as much a part of the present as the present is a part of the past (or our imagination of it).

“History” for Walter Benjamin, “is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now” (Illuminations 261).

The notion of “time filled by the presence of the now” is interesting to consider in relation to Maus, and the act of its reading. Maus constantly conflates the past and present worlds, especially by formal means, including elements of each within the same panel. Thus, as I will demonstrate, there is a particular treatment, or ‘distortion,’ of temporality which may discomfort readers who would like to maintain a sense of temporal ‘stability.’ Benjamin’s theorisation of the ‘dialectical image’ allows us to bridge the past and present. Thus the reader of a text like Maus experiences the past (and hence its horrors) as not so distant, but haunting the present.

The Dialectical Image

It is in Convolute N of The Arcades Project where Benjamin fleshes out his concept of the dialectical image – a concept that Susan Buck-Morss considers to have a logic so rich that it has few rivals in terms of its philosophical implications (67). Similar to his aspirations for The Arcades Project as a whole, whose underlying theory “is intimately related to that of montage” (Arcades 458), the concept of the dialectical image itself is akin to a montage, that is, a piecing together of historical fragments from the past and the present. Benjamin posits:
It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. [...] The image that is read – which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability – bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded. (Arcades 463)

It is evident that in order for the dialectical image to flash before us, it requires a hermeneutical exercise on our part. We must catch ourselves in the moment of reading, piecing together the past and the present, creating a montage or solving a puzzle whose pieces come from various epochs. This hermeneutical exercise is nothing less than an interaction with the past. While this interaction certainly has cognitive components, Gerhard Richter postulates that one of Benjamin’s main concerns throughout all his work revolved around not only that of historical inquiry but also the larger category of non-cognitive experience (12). Apart from its cognitive dimensions, the category of experience then would also involve non-cognitive aspects: sensation, feeling, aesthetic appreciation, subconscious processing and unconscious association. The dialectical image allows for one to conceive of how such an interaction or experience may be possible, because it presents an experience of the past in the “now of its recognizability.”

Young’s discussion of the photographer, Shimon Attie, offers a useful and concrete example of the dialectical image at work. Attie uses photography to literally project images of the past onto the present. In this manner, his art forces these historical images to interact and blend with our present world. In 1991, Attie moved to Berlin where he was struck by
the absence of the murdered and deported Jews of WWII – an absence that seemed to haunt
the city and him personally: “Walking the streets of the city that summer, I felt myself
asking over and over again, Where are all the missing people? What has become of the
Jewish culture and community which had once been at home here? I felt the presence of
this lost community very strongly, even though so few visible traces of it remained” (qtd. in
Young, “Restoring” 6). After several weeks of research in the Berlin archives, Attie found
dozens of photographs from the 1920s and 1930s of the Scheunenviertel district – an area
of the city that was heavily populated by Jews before the war. He realised that he could
pinpoint the exact location for roughly one quarter of the photographs. He soon began to
project slides of these images onto the facades of the buildings he could identify. These
buildings bore no trace of their Jewish past, and, thus, Young refers to them as “amnesiac
sites of history” (qtd. in “Restoring” 2). Attie explains that by projecting images of the past
onto the facades of the present, he wanted “to peel back the wallpaper of today and reveal
the history buried underneath” (qtd. in “Restoring” 7). His artistic project certainly has an
ephemeral and haunting quality to it. Young remarks: “these archival images seem less the
reflections of light than illuminations of figures emerging from the shadows” (“Restoring”
7).

Young’s description of Attie’s project as one that creates figures that come from the
shadows is reminiscent of Benjamin’s pedagogic goal of The Arcades Project. Borrowing
words from Rudolf Borchardt, Benjamin stated his goal was to “educate the image-making
medium within us, raising it to stereoscopic and dimensional seeing into the depths of
historical shadows” (Arcades 458). The dialectical image, therefore, unites in a powerful
way the past and the present, where they otherwise might be considered separate—hermetically sealed from each other. It is only by hermeneutically performing this interaction as readers that we can observe past events in a different light, and see what has historically been outside of our accustomed field of vision—what for Benjamin has resided in historical shadows. Attie’s project reveals for us a concretization of the dialectical image: a true projection of the past onto the present, where they both interact and produce for the viewer a (single) new meaning or truth. Thus, for the spectator of Attie’s project, the unique experience of time (and historicity) is made possible by the apparent contradiction of two temporalities (akin to the Hegelian notion of ‘thesis/antithesis’). This contradiction of temporalities is reconciled, at least experientially, by their fusion in the same space (akin to the Hegelian notion of ‘synthesis’). Attie’s project allows us to observe how the past can be resurrected in a morped image of its former self, revealing its own immortality.

**Maus and the Dialectical Image**

This dialectical conflation of time is also seen in *Maus*. However, to understand *Maus*’s mixing of temporal realities, its characteristic as a ‘mixed’ genre needs to be considered. As earlier stated, the medium Spiegelman uses for *Maus* is what he calls “commix,” a term that brings together the genre of ‘comics’ and the act of mixing. Spiegelman argues: “I prefer the word commix, to mix together, because to talk about comics is to talk about mixing together words and pictures to tell a story.” Furthermore, Spiegelman states: “The strength of commix lies in [its] synthetic ability to approximate a ‘mental language’ that is closer to actual human thought than either words or pictures alone” (qtd. in Young, “Restoring” 3). In his essay, “Those Dirty Little Comics,” Spiegelman claims that commix have a
“subversive knack for lodging memorably in the deepest crevices of the psyche.”
Spiegelman explains: “Cartoons have a way of crawling past our critical radar and getting right into the id. It might be that their reductive diagrammatic qualities echo the way the brain sorts information.” In this way, the formal elements of the commix medium may facilitate the experience of history in a new and original fashion. He states that comics are “a gutter medium; that is, it’s what takes place in the gutters between the panels that activates the medium.” What Spiegelman points out is related to what has been called the hermeneutical circle, as the whole cannot be understood without its constituent parts, and vice versa.

For Levine, what constitutes the “true unit of ‘historiographic’ analysis” here is not the panels themselves, but what occurs between the panels. In cinematic terms, he sees the panels acting as frames, and describes Spiegelman’s art as a “slow-motion picture.” He argues that in Spiegelman’s text, the panels “are no longer read primarily as positive meaningful units but rather as links in a chain of signifiers – which is to say that each panel itself becomes a kind of gutter, an interspace, a self-different image whose relative value is determined only through its relation to other ‘inter-images’” (72). McCloud refers to the gutter as what is invisible, and the panels as the visible: “The comics creator asks us to join in a silent dance of the seen and unseen. The visible and the invisible. This dance is unique to comics” (92).

The gutters, or interspaces, present in *Maus* provide a unique hermeneutical experience for the reader. Compared to the reader of prose, the reader of commix has a special independence, which also brings with it certain demands and responsibilities. In
prose, the order of information retrieval and processing is sequential and linear. The reader follows the words that constitute a sentence, the sentences that constitute a paragraph, and so on. On the other hand, in commix the reader must decide which panel to ‘read’ first. Then the reader must choose to look at one of various items that appear in the selected panel: the comment box, the dialogue blurb, or the drawing on the page. In the latter case, the reader must also choose which item to look at first among often several drawn subjects within the same panel. The author’s authority to direct the reader and create the desired effect upon the reader, is therefore not as predetermined in commix as it is in prose.

Consequently, much like the pedagogical side of the dialectical image, the significance of this type of medium may not lie in the mere acquiring of historical knowledge as much as it is in the personal experiencing of historicity on the part of the reader.

The conflation of past and present, through text and image, is made clear in chapter two of Maus’s second volume, titled “Auschwitz (Time Flies).” The seeming distantiation and fleeting nature of time are evoked by the artist with the “time flies” expression. The first panel refers to two events that the artist has experienced: first, the death of Vladek, and second, the summer when Françoise and Art stayed with Vladek in the Catskills. These seemingly unrelated events are only linked by the fact that they both occurred in August, thus, in simple terms, revealing that no two Augusts are the same. The second panel refers to the spring of 1944 when Vladek began to work as a tinman at Auschwitz and, secondly, how Art started to work on “this page” in February 1987. Here the parallel that is being made is one that exists between conceptions of ‘work.’ On the one hand, Vladek is doing forced labour in a concentration camp; on the other hand his son writes a ‘comic book’
(about that experience) in the comfort of his own home. The guilt he feels for leading a relatively comfortable life in comparison with that of his father is also the premise of the third panel, where the artist writes that Françoise and he are expecting a baby in May, 1987. Just below this statement, Spiegelman has written: “Between May 16, 1944, and May 24, 1944 over 100,000 Hungarian Jews were gassed in Auschwitz” (II: 41). This last panel contrasts the expected joy of parenthood with genocide. The thrill of expecting a child must be measured by the presence of a monstrous past. Therefore, the three panels discussed here reveal the interactions of the past, the present, and even the future. The unison between these three time frames is perhaps best seen in the last panel of this page. Here Spiegelman refers to the offers to make his book into a TV movie or special (the future); he also refers in this panel to his mother’s death in May 1968 (the past). The last sentence is a confession of the artist who says: “Lately, I’ve been feeling depressed” (in the present). Equally as powerful as the words contained in the text, there is an impressive play between the images of a haunting past and the present. While the artist slouches over his worktable, drawing parallels between historical and personal events, we can observe how these events invade the actual space of the panel itself. His drawing table rests upon a pile of corpses of those who have been exterminated in the concentration camps. And we can observe a concentration camp guard tower just outside the artist’s apartment window – in New York

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24 The juxtaposition between having a child and feeling like a child is also made apparent in the subsequent six pages (II: 42-7), where Spiegelman depicts himself as a shrinking figure, growing increasingly more helpless and overwhelmed by the world – and the past – that surrounds him. David Mikics says that these pages demonstrate Spiegelman’s “characteristic use of distorted size to convey his autobiographical hero’s jagged state of mind” (18).
City. Art’s drawing of parallels between these dates occurs in the diegetic present of the text, but where can the reader temporally situate the guard tower and the pile of corpses?

What is perhaps most significant about the title of this chapter is that “time flies” is not used by Spiegelman only as a verbal expression, but the very sense of this phrase is embodied and literalized by the insects themselves, special ‘flies of time.’ These insects fly around the artist’s head as he draws. Their harassment of the artist is ever present. These time flies are, therefore, past irritants of the present – needing the present to tell their story. Alternatively, as we observe the flies in the larger panel, they buzz around the heap of bodies giving the impression that these flies are not only symbolic of the past but are also simultaneously representative of a present which must feed off the decomposing body of the past. Consequently, the fly symbol is the continuing manifestation of a pestering past, yet, and at the same time, the parasitic present that feeds off the decomposing corpse of history.

The pestering time flies are also observed later in Maus in a scene where Françoise, Art’s wife, comments to Art: “It’s so peaceful here at night. It’s almost impossible to believe Auschwitz ever happened.” Meanwhile, as Art is being harassed by flies, he only manages to respond in a disinterested manner: “Uh-huh. Ouch!” And in the next panel he states: “But these damn bugs are eating me alive!” while he sprays them with insecticide. The irony here is that only a few pages earlier, Vladek had given Art a detailed description of the operation of the gas chambers and crematoria. A parallel can, thus, be discerned here between the extermination of flies and the extermination of Jews during the Holocaust.
Insecticide is used to kill flies, yet some flies may survive. Similarly, some Jews like Vladek survived to tell the Nazis’ use of Zyklon-B.

Aware of the “horrid irony” of applying insecticide at this moment, Art feels an uncomfortable ‘chill.’ He suggests to Françoise that they go inside, saying “it’s getting kinda chilly out anyway” (II: 74), indicating a relationship between his application of insecticide to kill the (time) flies and his telling of how Zyklon-B was used to kill humans. A parallel can also be drawn here between Art’s management of personal, inherited, trauma and Art’s need to retreat indoors. Art’s desire to go indoors reflects a need to withdraw into a sphere that is private and safe, away from the haunting, pestered bugs of the past.

This last panel fittingly concludes the “Time Flies” chapter. Yet, on close observation, the reader can perceive a time-fly that is flying just outside of the last panel. It is flying downwards, perhaps suggesting that it is headed toward what lies textually ‘below’ – that is the rest of Maus. The presence of this time fly, therefore, suggests that the “time flies” motif (or what it represents at the very least) will persist throughout the narrative, pestering Art, and perhaps the reader, now that it has escaped the panel. If it wasn’t clear to the reader earlier, this chapter in Maus forces readers to reconsider their distance from the past, and hence, from history.

The ‘time flies’ motif in Maus comments on how survivors (and their children) deal with their trauma (or that which they’ve inherited). Despite the fact that time ‘flies,’ memories and images will continue to haunt survivors and their children, especially after detailed tellings of their traumatic personal histories.
While there could be danger in extrapolating too much from the figure of the fly, from the standpoint of historical inquiry, the fly represents an interesting and different point of view. In fact, it is the quasi-infinite points of view which are contained within the fly’s thousands of eyes that are of interest here. The utilisation of the fly as a symbol for the difficulties in seeing, and consequently revealing, historical truth also appears in Tomás Eloy Martínez’s novel La Novela de Perón, which deals with the life of the title’s historical Argentinean figure. In this novel, Perón says of the fly: “Vean esos ojos. Ocupan casi toda la cabeza. Son ojos muy extraños, de cuatro mil facetas. Cada uno de esos ojos ve cuatro mil pedazos diferentes de realidad [. . .]. ¿Qué ve una mosca? ¿Ve cuatro mil verdades, o una verdad partida en cuatro mil pedazos?” (214) (“See those eyes. They take-up almost the entire head. They are very strange eyes, of four thousand facets. Each one of those eyes sees four thousand different pieces of reality. What does a fly see? Does it see four thousand versions of truth, or one truth divided in four thousand pieces?” [my translation]).

The fly has a dialectical relation to truth in that its viewpoint is comprised of separate and multiple images, yet they amalgamate to form one image. Because of its thousands of eyes, it represents a constellation of viewpoints which will ultimately amalgamate, through interpretation, to become one image. In Maus, the reader’s active amalgamation of these viewpoints, the piecing together of the puzzle, is central to the work’s understanding. It is ultimately this amalgamation of viewpoints – falling into such categories evaluated and determined by the reader as the historically factual, the historically ‘distorted’, and the historically undetermined – and the ‘distortion’ of stable temporality that create the sense of defamiliarisation in the reader.
A version of what I have referred to as the dialectical image in *Maus*, as a way of interacting and experiencing history, can be found in Michael G. Levine’s “Necessary Stains: Art Spiegelman’s *Maus* and the Bleeding of History.” Levine concentrates on the dissolution of boundaries. He argues that *Maus* exemplifies how the “‘cataclysmic world event’ of the Shoa [. . .] overflowed its apparent end—namely, as a dissolution of boundaries, as ripple effects seeping through the pages of the daily press, as the spilling over of unbearable suffering, as ongoing cycles of victimization” (70). Levine calls this phenomenon a ‘bleeding of history,’ and connects it to the subtitle of *Maus*’s first volume: “My Father Bleeds History.” The ‘overflowing’ of the Holocaust (and its “dissolution of boundaries”) is strongly represented in Spiegelman’s first depiction of Auschwitz in *Maus*. Here Auschwitz is conveyed at the same time that its unrepresentability, its exceeding of any telling, is revealed. The appearance of such an ‘overflow’ here is especially significant if we agree with Martin Broszat, in his debate with Saul Friedlander, that Auschwitz “has in retrospect rightfully been felt again and again indeed to be the central event of the Nazi period” (102). Therefore, as the “central event,” it is at this point where representation for Spiegelman attempts to go beyond its usual scope, and overflows outside of the page, indicating that there is much here that has not, and perhaps cannot, be represented. Here the enormous image has no frame, and seems to go outside of the physical book’s capacity to ‘capture’ it. It represents a “bleeding of history” in that the reality has bled off the page, indeed it keeps bleeding, and conceptually has never been contained.

While Levine’s “bleeding of history” is indeed a metaphor, Levine astutely makes a direct link to the haemorrhaging of Vladek’s left eye, “an eye, the text suggests, that cannot
come to terms with what it has seen, that is physically wounded by what it is forced to see over and over again in flashbacks and recurrent nightmares, so wounded in fact that it must eventually be removed by a surgeon and replaced by a glass facsimile” (71). Thus, Vladek’s removal of his eye is not only a necessary medical procedure, but can also be seen as a figurative form of (self)amputation for him to cope with his traumatic past. Looking at the text as a whole, considering its visual dimensions, Levine makes a connection with the “spectral presence of an unassimilated past, this bleeding of the past into the present through the very medium of vision” (71). Levine states that such moments of ‘historical bleeding’ suggest that the reader must pay close attention “to the body of the text itself, to a body composed not only of multiple narrative layers but of ones that repeatedly bleed into and through one another. The question raised by the text’s enigmatic subtitle is thus the following: how is one to read this internal bleeding of history, this palimpsest of interpenetrating narrative layers?” (71). The significance of Levine’s question is that it already assumes that the reader will perceive a “bleeding of history,” and just as importantly, will force a reading that is responsible enough to make sense of it.

Levine also points to images that literally break out of their frames (i.e., I: 30) calling this occurrence a “hemorrhaging” (71). One such instance is when Vladek is describing the operation of the gas chambers in Auschwitz (II: 69). The potent imagery here is that of a smokestack on the bottom-right panel which bursts out of its frame and enters the space of the frame directly above it. The smokestack enters the frame where Vladek is telling Art of this experience, while Art smokes a cigarette. Levine observes that this moment of ‘hemorrhaging’ reflects a form of compression of the present and the past.
He posits that here “the smoke is drawn in such a way as to appear quite literally to pour out of the past–out of a smokestack which itself appears to rise up out of its own frame and into the one above–into the present where it mingles with and loses itself in the smoke trailing out of [Art’s cigarette]” (92). The materiality of the sign, thus, pervades both narratives: Art’s self-reflexive narrative and Vladek’s historical testimony.

One of Levine’s more cogent examples of how the past can “bleed” on to the present is precisely his analysis of Art’s smoking habits. He examines the significance of its visual presentation and the smoke as a substance to be both inhaled and exhaled. The connection Levine makes between Art’s smoking and his experience of this ‘passed-down’ traumatic past is first introduced by way of an interview Spiegelman gave shortly after the publication of the second volume of *Maus*. In this interview, Spiegelman describes the difficult and painful work involved in writing *Maus* as something he became attached to: “Somehow I got used to this large carcinogenic growth attached to my body and I feel sad that it’s been cut away” (qtd. in Levine 89). Having established a ‘carcinogenic’ relation between Art and his work, and Art and his nicotine habit, Levine turns his attention to the text itself – or better, the paratext. He looks at the rear inner flap of the first volume of *Maus* which is where Spiegelman’s biographical information appears, alongside a self-portrait of the artist. Here Art is shown working at his drawing table, with a cigarette in his hand, staring at the page (presumably) in front of him. On a small shelf, alongside his pens, ink and other artistic tools, there is a full ashtray, and beside it a pack of cigarettes. The brand of cigarettes would appear at first glance to be Camels. However a closer look reveals that the brand is “Cremo Lights;” with the hump of the camel being replaced by two
fuming smokestacks. Similar to the visual imagery found in the opening to the “Time Flies” chapter, here one can also see through the closed window of Art’s studio, a barbed-wire fence, a patrol tower with a cat-soldier on guard, and a fuming crematorium chimney. What this imagery suggests is that

with each pull on his cigarette Art in effect draws in a breath of Auschwitz.

In other words, every drag seems to draw together inside and out, present and past, the inflamed airways of the living and the airborne remains of the dead. With each inhaling moment of concentration Art draws in the scattered ashes of the incinerated bodies of Auschwitz and buries them within himself, only to witness their immediate disinterment and redispersion as he exhales. Each drag thus has the symbolic value of a burning desire fleetingly realized, a desire to draw two radically heterogeneous worlds together, to draw the one in with the other, and, moreover, to keep the contract of that double drawing safely encrypted within himself. While the ensuing moment of exhalation may be said to vent the crypt, to atomize all that had just come together, and, in doing so, to frustrate Art’s desire just as it was being realized, it also at the same time guarantees through its very opposition the insistence of that impossible wish. In short, the cigarettes Art smokes do not so much satisfy his desire as exasperate it. Or rather they satisfy it in its very impossibility by frustrating and intensifying it. (Levine 91)
Spiegelman’s interaction with the past, something he inhales and exhales, is something that he feels is necessary, and indeed is addicted to. Levine’s reading thus provides an interesting perspective for imagining, at least symbolically, a corporeal experience of history. Beyond its inhalation in the lungs, the smoke passes to the bloodstream, and becomes, physically, a part of Spiegelman. Therefore, the past here is physically internalized, with Art partially *embodying* the trauma of his parents. Again, as with the dialectical image, there is here a conflation of time that ‘distorts’ the reader’s notion of stable temporality. However, rather than two images of different temporal realities together, Spiegelman simply has one symbolic image of the past (the cigarette) being literally consumed by the present.

*The Absent Image of Anja*

*Maus* is a montage of the past and the present, of Vladek’s and Art’s lives, of images and language. The narration of this historical event is therefore to be found in pieces, fragmented. The dialectical image in *Maus* can thus be seen by considering these fragments as a constellation where lies the possibility of making connections between them, creating a narrative structure. This is similar to how Max Pensky sees Benjamin’s construction of the dialectical image as akin to the assembling of a jigsaw puzzle:

> image fragments, presented to the subject by the destructive moment, are refigured and are transformed from “mere” fragments into puzzle pieces.

> […] The puzzler seizes these pieces at random. The originary memory of the puzzle’s solution is withheld; the brooder has forgotten the Great Solution. But this solution is visible through its absence. (224)
When one views Spiegelman as Pensky’s brooder, one realizes how the artist has tried to assemble these different fragments into a structure of some kind. The obvious disparities, insecurities, interruptions and contradictions are all exposed in *Maus*, giving the overall narrative a fragmentary nature. Spiegelman, the brooder, is also aware of an absence that would assist (for him at least) his understanding of the Holocaust. For Art, perhaps the “solution” (or at least a clue) lies in reading the memoirs that his mother, Anja, wrote during the war. Many years after WWII, Anja committed suicide and Vladek, in an attempt to rid himself of this painful past, burned these memoirs. He says to Art: “After Anja died I had to make an order with everything… These papers had too many memories. So I burned them” (I: 159, ellipsis in original). As Young has noted in his essay dedicated specifically to *Maus*, it is the absence of Anja and her story which paradoxically may inform all of *Maus*’s narrative:

> [Spiegelman’s] entire project may itself be premised on the destruction of his mother’s memoirs, their displacement and violation. […] As a void at the heart of *Maus*, the mother’s lost story may be *Maus*’s negative center of gravity, the invisible planet around which both the father’s telling and Spiegelman’s recovery of it revolve. (“Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*” 686)

The paradox here is that there is a dialectical relation at work, as it is by way of Anja’s absence that her presence is most felt. Her absent presence is to be seen throughout the narrative, in fact, figuratively book-ending it. At the beginning of the first volume, Art tells his father: “I still want to draw that book about you.” His father replies: “No one wants to hear such stories” – to which Art answers “I want to hear it.” He then asks his father to
begin the story, in effect, with his own origins: “Start with Mom... tell me how you met” (I: 12, ellipsis in original). The book-ending is completed at the end of the second volume. Here the entire narrative of Maus literally ends with Vladek telling of his joyful reunion with Anja, after both of them have been freed from the concentration camps.

The first volume also ends with an evocation of Anja. Here Vladek admits to his son that not only has he destroyed Anja’s memoirs but he had left them unread. The last panel shows Art muttering with indignation: “Murderer.” This comment is disturbing in its irony. Art labels his father a “murderer,” a man who has survived Auschwitz. This comments upon, and complicates, the distinction between murderers and victims during the Holocaust. Vladek, through this comment, is also associated by his son with the Nazi’s practice of book burning, and is therefore a murderer of Anja’s historical voice. He has ‘killed’ a possibility to remember her (by material facts). However, despite its significance, Vladek has only been partially responsible in creating Anja’s absence. The burning of Anja’s memoirs could indicate a “legacy of violence” reproduced in some survivors. Furthermore, Anja’s own suicide could indicate the “unassimilable damage” she suffered during the Holocaust; and the destruction of her original diaries was also due to Nazi violence (Rothberg, “We Were Talking Jewish” 148). Therefore, all three reasons for Anja’s absence could have their origins in the violence and trauma endured by not only Anja, but also Vladek, at the hands of the Nazis.
While Benjamin’s dialectical image is present in the interactions between past and present, this maternal absence also looms in *Maus*. In this manner, *Maus* seems to even go beyond Benjamin’s original conception of the dialectical image as here it also includes a missing image. As Rothberg argues, Anja’s story “constitutes the primary wound around which the story turns” (“We Were Talking Jewish” 147-48). The images of which Benjamin speaks in his conceptualization begin with the premise that these images are present in the object of study, be it a poem, painting or edifice. Anja’s absent presence in *Maus*, I would suggest, adds another important element to Benjamin’s historical thinking. Anja appears as an absent image, paradoxically present, and influencing the alignment of Benjamin’s constellation.

Like *Time’s Arrow*, that uniquely narrates what is often considered the unrepresentable reality of the Holocaust through a reversed narrative, *Maus* is self-reflexive and explicit with regard to the emotional and philosophical difficulties that the author faced in the process of its composition. I have argued that ‘distortion’ occurs in *Maus* in two particular ways: 1) Spiegelman’s choice to replace the human actors of the Holocaust with animal metaphors, and 2) spatio-temporal ‘distortions’ within the comic-book medium. *Maus* is also characterised by a self-reflexive rendering of a multiplicity of narrations and narratological levels that will ultimately disorient the reader away from any easily comprehensible narration of the Holocaust. Its very form, the ‘commix,’ grants the reader a

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25 The absent image of Anja is also present in *Maus* by way of Spiegelman’s inclusion in the text of his formerly published “Prisoner on Hell Planet” – which tells Art’s experience of his mother’s suicide. Rothberg argues that this insertion “not only presents an expressionist stylistic rupture with the rest of the work, but reopens the wound of the mother’s suicide by documenting the ‘raw’ desperation of the twenty-year-old Art” (150).
special independence to make sense of and give order to the montage that is created of images and words. Furthermore, the various interpretations of the past in the present, and vice-versa, allow for the reader to experience a particular form of ‘distorted’ historical narration that refuses to privilege or highlight a particular level of historical voice. Similar to the reader’s experience of ‘distortions’ of temporality and narrative voice in *Time’s Arrow*, in *Maus* it is the sense of responsibility in the reader which will determine how the text has affected his or her sense of history.
Chapter 3

Distortion Overload and (Magical) Realism: Diamelita Eltit’s Lumpérica and Isabel Allende’s La Casa de los espíritus

Desde el primer día de la dictadura, fueron muchos los escritores que hicieron correr sus plumas para dejar un registro del horror que se vivía. Ese registro, publicado en revistas marginales, libros autoeditados y hojas mimeografiadas que circulaban de mano en mano, fue fruto del trabajo de escritores que, dentro y fuera de Chile, comprendieron que una de sus tareas fundamentales era testimoniar el tiempo de horror que se vivía, y que a pesar de las restricciones no era tiempo de callar, de guardar silencios cómplices o refugiarse en la ambigüedad de una metáfora. (Díaz and Muñoz, back jacket to Cuentos en Dictadura)

From the very first day of the dictatorship, many writers put their pens to paper to give a record of the horrors that were being lived. That record, published in marginal magazines, books that were self-edited and mimeographed sheets of paper that were circulated from person to person, was due to the work of writers who, within and outside of Chile, understood that one of their fundamental responsibilities was to give witness to the time of horror in which they were living, and despite the restrictions it was not the time to be silent, to maintain complicit silences or conceal oneself in the ambiguity of a metaphor. (my translation)

Ramón Díaz and Diego Muñoz’s Cuentos en Dictadura is a collection of short stories that deal with the dictatorship endured by Chile from 1973 to 1990. In the back cover of this book, the editors signal what they consider to be two important facets of Chilean writers during this time: 1) that Chilean authors understood their responsibility in being witnesses to the political moment in which they lived; and 2) that in witnessing, the writers did not conceal themselves “in the ambiguity of a metaphor.” Therefore, Díaz and Muñoz admire those authors who chose to stay as close to a realist narrative as possible, and avoided literary tropes such as allegory and metaphor. However, considering even a sample of
recent literary movements – modernismo, real maravilloso (marvellous real) and the boom of magical realism – what Díaz and Muñoz advocate has never had much success in Latin America. Nevertheless, what Díaz and Muñoz point toward is the question of how to both aesthetically and ethically depict the dictatorship.

The type of ‘realist’ narrative that I refer to is not to be equated with the ‘realist novel’ (considered here as a nineteenth-century literary genre that principally aspired to objectivity, a category within which can be found the historical novel). Today our conception is a little more flexible than that of the nineteenth century in defining the principle characteristics of a ‘realist’ text. Englekirk describes the evolution of the term ‘realism,’ from its origins in the nineteenth century to how it has come to be understood in the present:

Realism as it had come to be known in the pages of nineteenth-century fiction vanished into a fictional narrative in which recognizable objects, people, and situations, were no longer necessary parts of the total construct. In the fictional world of many contemporary novelists or short story writers, ‘realism’ is now a term whose nature is determined by the subjective rendition or interpretation of life emerging from the intellect of an imaginative artist. (98)

Englekirk’s definition of what ‘realism’ means today is still quite general; therefore I would add that a ‘realist’ narrative today presents plausible worlds, characters and situations. In its
style, the realist narrative suppresses a plethora of metaphors in favour of descriptive verisimilitude.¹

For Díaz and Muñoz, verisimilitude is important in order not to distance the reader from the tangible reality of this historical event. Naturally, the short stories that they chose for their collection are in keeping with their aims. With few exceptions, they are all written in a realist mode.² The significance of this collection of short stories (which is made explicit on the jacket) is that the editors have taken a position with regard to the degree of non-realism that they find acceptable in an historical-fictional work about the Chilean dictatorship. However, not all Chilean authors wrote about the dictatorship in a mode that would have been praised by Díaz and Muñoz.

To these ends, Isabel Allende’s La Casa de los espíritus and Diamela Eltit’s Lumpérica will be compared with regard to their particular departures from a realist narrative. This chapter explores the potential balance between what could be considered two extreme forms of historical narration: 1) a realist mode which perhaps makes history appear too ‘easily accessible’ to the reader, and 2) an anti-realist form of writing that ‘distorts’ the historical subject to such an extent that it is nearly unidentifiable – what I refer to as a ‘distortion overload.’ The dilemma then becomes how to represent the

¹ It is important to note that in the twentieth century, modernists questioned reality’s very meaning. In doing so, they asked whether art could capture ‘reality,’ and if this was even desirable. With such a tenuous relationship to the notion of reality and descriptive verisimilitude, the line between the unreal and the real became blurred (surrealism is an apt example).

² The exceptions being stories like Diego Muñoz Valenzuela’s “Auschwitz” and Hernán Rivera Letelier’s “Réquiem para un perseguidor-r” [sic] which are slightly allegorical.
unrepresentable – for example the reality of torture – in a manner that does not seek to faithfully represent it, but is still intelligible as such? In essence, how much ‘distortion’ is acceptable/desirable in the depiction of a historical traumatic event?

In 1982, Isabel Allende published La Casa de los espíritus, her first novel. Within the work, she embeds a significant shift in tone and imagery. Allende’s novel takes the reader through the lives of Esteban Trueba and three generations of women in the Trueba family: Esteban’s wife Clara, their daughter Blanca, and Alba, their grand-daughter. The story spans the historical period in Chile from the beginning of the twentieth century to 1973, the year when the democratic government was violently replaced by a military dictatorship led by General Augusto Pinochet. In the early stages of the novel, the style could be considered a form of magical realism normally associated with Gabriel García Márquez – where the ordinary seems magical and the fantastic appears commonplace. The novel, however, moves to stark realism when Allende depicts the years leading up to the coup of 1973.

A year after La Casa de los espíritus was published, Diamela Eltit, another Chilean writer, published her first novel, Lumpérica. Eltit’s novel focuses on a life in the midst of the dictatorship. In lieu of a recognizable plot, it could be said that Lumpérica consists of a series of nocturnal scenes in Santiago, Chile. The city’s streets are empty, except for the military, whose presence is needed to enforce the curfew. The narrative is often set in a public square where there is a woman – L Iluminada – and the ‘pale people.’ The only light that enters the square comes from an advertisement sign.
Allende and Eltit are committed to what could be considered almost opposing forms of aesthetic representation. On the one hand, Allende seeks to represent and entertain. In her own words, Allende has said: “Soy un lector simple que busca entretenere con lo que lee. Me parece una falta de respeto aburrir al lector” (qtd. in Hart, “Magic” 5) (“I’m a simple reader, who seeks entertainment when I read. I think it’s a lack of respect to bore the reader” [my translation]). On the other hand, Eltit wants to challenge the reader, and tries to convey the sensations and feelings of oppression. She makes no claims to factual representation; and as Eltit points out in her own introduction to the novel, she purposefully attempts to make reading a difficult task for the reader, saying “literature, more than being an entertainment, is a generator of conflict. It ought to be serious work for the reader” (E. Luminata 8). Elsewhere, Eltit has remarked: “I sense the reader as an accomplice of the text, as a performer of the task of unravelling; that is, I can only imagine the act of reading as an adventure in which the most important thing is venturing and in venturing to be venturesome” (qtd. in Christ 220). The ethical implications of each style will be considered in so far as they concern the two novels’ interaction with this tumultuous period of Chile’s past, and the interaction that is granted to the reader.

**ELTIT’S LUMPÉRICA**

Referring to the difficulties in narrating Pinochet’s dictatorship (1973-1990), Diemela Eltit asks: “¿cómo no hacer de todo eso un ‘cuento’, entre comillas, sino producir en algún

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3 These introductory remarks are only available in the edition translated into English.
espacio el cúmulo de sensaciones a los que nos vimos enfrentados? Y pensé que el
fragmento, la torsión, el corte, el silencio, la oscuridad, oscurecer ciertos textos, podía
señalar un poco esa historia” (qtd. in Lazzara 20) (“How can one not make a ‘story’ of it, in
quotation marks, and instead produce in some space the accumulation of sensations that we
were confronted with? And I thought that the fragment, the twisting, the cut, the silence, the
darkness, to obscure certain texts, could signal in part that history” [my translation]).

Through a technique and style of fragmentation, twisting, and obscurantism (all previously
discussed forms of ‘distortion’), Eltit’s goal in Lumpérica is to convey the feeling of living
under a dictatorship, rather than to create a conventional narrative that attempts to represent
military oppression. This feeling of oppression is produced through a variety of
defamiliarising techniques, described by Gisela Norat as “technical ploys including mixed
genres, neologisms, wordplay, multimedia codes, distorted syntax, fragmented narrative,
and a lack of a conventional plot” (15). Thus, Eltit’s use of such literary devices is done to
further obscure a recognizable historical reality in order to paradoxically shed light upon
(“signal”) it.

Lumpérica’s narrative is non-linear; it also moves across various genres from prose
to poetry, while also utilizing photographs. As we will see, the narrative techniques
employed by Eltit are influenced by modernist literature, the avant-garde, as well as the
more local, Latin American, modernistas. Yet, Eltit is a postmodern author who attempts to
further develop modernism’s project. Sharing modernist art’s epistemological concerns,
Eltit similarly reveals a distrust of totalizing narratives and questions how knowledge is
produced, transmitted and controlled. Nonetheless, through a self-reflexive process which
includes mixed genres and multimedia codes – which question the very mode of the text’s existence – Eltit reveals the ontological concerns that are the hallmark of postmodernism.\(^4\)

Through these narrative techniques, Eltit may be revealing how reality, in her opinion, is always subjective, depending on the various prisms through which it is experienced. Thus the ‘reality’ of a racehorse, for instance, will be altered in photographs taken of the animal, its descriptions in the newspaper, a painting, etc. To recall, Hayden White argues that “every mimesis can be shown to be distorted” (Tropics 3). Similarly Eltit seems aware of the epistemological issues involved in any form of representation. Yet, there is a significant difference between unintentional distortions (which were described earlier as a form of ‘communicative noise’) and intentional ones that are designed to manipulate reality. The degree to which one can accept deliberate forms of ‘distortion’ will be the focus of this section.

The cognitive difficulty brought about by Eltit’s formal devices is compounded by the novel’s publication during the Chilean dictatorship; in other words, the depicted political realities had to be sufficiently ambiguous to pass the censors. Nonetheless, despite the ambiguity under which the political historical references appear, Norat maintains “no reading of Eltit’s work can escape reference to Chile’s political reality” (49). One might expect then that critics identify the references that comment upon (and originate from) Chile and the dictatorship. Instead, much of the literary criticism of Lumpérica focuses on

\(^4\) The distinction between epistemological and ontological concerns was developed in more detail in the Introduction.
its aesthetic merit (or its ‘literariness’) or how the text comments on realities that are more universal, for instance, the overarching theme of power: patriarchal power; the power of the rich over the poor; the power of advertising over the consumer; the power of cultural traditions (including canonical literature and the formation and use of language); and the power of the image (the cinematic image and the photograph). In the literary criticism of this text, what often differentiates one critique from another is the form of power on which the critic focuses. Numerous critics have “rigorously and correctly interpreted [Eltit’s] texts as polyvalent narrative deconstructions of hegemonic power,” writes Robert Neustadt (32). Nevertheless, Neustadt finds problematic the way critics have tended to focus on certain isolated themes in Eltit’s narrative at the expense of others. At times, he says, critics have not properly addressed the crucial theme of “the repression of the Pinochet regime” in their study of Eltit’s work (32).

It is Lumpérica itself which facilitates the glossing over of the particular political-historical referent of Chile during the dictatorship. Consequently, the readers’ ability to clearly perceive the referent is severely compromised. This effect is seen in the manner in which critics’ interpretations have in turn buried the reference to the dictatorship, or, when dealing with it, have produced criticism with a problematic politics of its own.

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5 To concentrate on literariness is to focus on the specific organization and the structural devices of poetic and fictional works, which are considered different than other forms of discourse. A simple way of defining literariness is that it differentiates poetic from practical language. The concept itself can be traced as far back as Aristotle (and beyond); however, I am here referring to the concept of literariness as further developed by the Russian Formalists, most notably Shklovsky, who said that art had the role of ostranenie (i.e., "making strange," or defamiliarization). In this sense, Eltit’s work has been praised for ‘making strange’ patriarchal language and the manner by which learned ‘truths’ are conventionally expressed in cultural forms.
In this section, I first consider the ambiguous and contradictory politics of Eltit as a writer, and how these politics are similarly present in Lumpérica. Secondly, I look at some of the literary criticism of her novel, and through that, illustrate just how Lumpérica does indeed point readers to the particular reality of the Chilean dictatorship, while simultaneously leading them in more general, universal directions. A consequence of the intentional ‘obscuriing’ of the historical referent is that the particular reality and politics of the dictatorship get lost in themes and political preoccupations that are far more universal, if not ambiguous. The result is necessarily a symbolically rich text, as one might expect, but a politically problematic one. While there is clearly no ‘proper’ or ‘right’ way of reading Lumpérica, I want to ask whether there can be a politically responsible reading of the text without contradictions, and what such a reading would look like.

The Politics of Lumpérica and Diamela Eltit

To recall, Lumpérica consists of a number of scenes in a public square of Santiago, where a woman, L Iluminada, and the ‘pale people’ are situated. There is also a light that enters the square, coming from an advertisement sign. These three motifs (Santiago, the ‘pale people,’ and light) are signaled more generally by the title of the text itself, Lumpérica, which evokes ‘América,’ ‘lumpen,’ and ‘lumen’ (i.e., light). While the setting of the ‘novel’ is Chile’s capital city, the references to it in Lumpérica are so fragmented, twisted and obscured that at times the formal challenges seem to have gone too far, creating a ‘distortion overload’ in which any reference to a tangible reality is almost unrecognizable within the text. The “Ensayo General” chapter serves as an apt example to illustrate the text’s stylistic complexities, especially at the level of syntax. For instance, the entire first
subsection of this chapter consists of: “Muge/ta/apa y su mano se nutre final-mente el verde
des-ata y maya se erige y vac/a-nal su forma” (162) (“She moo/s/hears and her hand feeds
mind-fully the green disentangles and maya she erects herself sha/m-an and vac/a-nal her
shape” (150). And the full citation of the second subsection is: “Anal’iza la trama=dura de
la piel: la mano prende y la fobia d es/garra” (163) (She anal-izes the plot = thickens the
skin: the hand catches = fire and the phobia d is/members” (151). While I have only
highlighted two passages, the accumulation of such formal difficulties over the course of
the novel may gradually (if not immediately) begin to disorient the reader – to the point that
the overall intelligibility of the text’s content is at risk. Jeffrey DeShell admits as much
when he writes in his review of the novel: “I also had some problems making the
connections the text requires: I must confess that I left the novel feeling it just eluded my
grasp” (254).

While Eltit’s text as a whole may be “virtually indecipherable” (Pratt 30), among
the most easily readable sections of the novel are the interrogation scenes where police (or
military) officers question a man who was caught on camera trying to prevent L Iluminada
from falling to the ground. However, the readability of these scenes (or even the presence
of a plot-line) is seen to be deceptive within the framework of Lumpérica. It is shown that
the interrogators cannot piece together a coherent story from the man they are interrogating.
As they want a coherent story, they repeat the interrogation sessions, each time asking the
very same questions. Nonetheless, the more information they receive, the less coherent the

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6 All translations of Lumpérica are from Christ’s translation of the text, appearing in
the “Works Consulted” as E. Luminata.
story becomes. It seems irrelevant to the interrogators whether the story they receive is true or false; what matters is that the story finally make sense. Dianna C. Niebylski claims:

By the end of the second interrogation, the reader senses that a serious political agenda underlies the novel’s insistence on foregrounding the failure of communication in these scenes: without a comprehensible superscript to accompany flashes of broken images, the vigilante forces who question the subject will find it impossible to create an “argument” for interpreting the presumed culprits’ “unlawful” poses. In these scenes, the authorities are shown to have lost an epistemological battle of vital importance. (246, emphasis mine)

In this section I would like to focus on Niebylski’s claim that the reader can sense a “serious political agenda” in Eltit’s highlighting of the failure of communication. Niebylski does not specify what this serious political agenda may be. Is it that the political ‘truth’ is relative or unknown? As was discussed in the section on Holocaust denial in the Introduction, such relativist thinking brought to an extreme can foster a climate where ideological agendas based on ignorance and hate can find a theoretical safe haven. The ‘epistemological battle’ that is ‘won’ by the prisoner, in a more general sense may then reveal a larger political battle that is lost. If politics is centred around beliefs, the celebration of uncertainty and relativism appears quite apolitical. While there is indeed a commendable ethical stance to be highlighted in the questioning of how (why and when) we have come to acquire and organise (particular) knowledge, at the base of this ethical position there must undoubtedly be a sense of certainty. That is, the ethical principles that
guide relativist thinking must be based on something that is not relative. This sense of certainty must, to some extent, hinge upon the acceptance of certain truths and knowledge. I will continue questioning, over the course of this section, how a “failure of communication” in Eltit represents a “serious political agenda.”

As in the interrogation scene above, repetition is one of Eltit’s various stylistic devices that she uses throughout Lumpérica. It has the purposefully contradictory roles of either further illuminating the action for the reader, or, on the contrary, further confusing matters. Thus instead of clarifying the diegetic world for the reader, the often already-ambiguous images figuratively pile-up on each other, defamiliarising the reader’s foreknowledge of a historical reality. To a great extent, Lumpérica itself parallels what occurs in the interrogation room. The more information the reader receives, the less clear the story becomes. The first act of repetition occurs within the first few pages:

Para decirlo nuevamente:

La luz del luminoso, que está instalado sobre el edificio cae en la plaza. Es una proposición de insania para recubrir a los pálidos de Santiago que se han agrupado en torno a L. Iluminada nada más que como complemento visual para sus formas.

Porque este luminoso que se enciende de noche está construyendo su mensaje para ellos, que sólo a esa hora alcanzan su plenitud, cuando se desplazan en sus recorridos previstos. (11)

To say it again:
Light from the neon sign, which is installed atop the building, falls into the square. It’s a lunatic plan for covering the pale people of Santiago who have clustered around E. Luminata merely as a visual complement to her forms. Because this sign that lights up at night is constructing his message for them, who reach their full complement only at this hour when they follow their predictable paths. (16)

It is important to reiterate that the above description of this opening scene in the plaza is a summary of what the narrator has already described over the previous three pages. Despite the difficulty that the reader may have in understanding the narrative style, or making sense of the content, this paragraph is far more comprehensible then what has been laid out previously. Following this paragraph, more details of the scene are brought forth, and the reader begins to get a hint of the political dimensions that the text may have: “en la plaza se conjugan dos tipos de engranajes eléctricos: por una parte el asignado al cuadrante y por otra, el que se desliza del luminoso; esa luz que se vende” (11) (“in the square two kinds of electrical systems are coupled: one allotted to the quadrangle, the other sliding down from the illuminated sign – the light that sells itself” 16). The reader can notice here an oppressive and tangible force (“el asignado al cuadrante”) that seems like a thinly veiled allegorical reference to the dictatorship. As well, there exists an equally oppressive, yet ephemeral, force, that points to consumerism: “el que se desliza del luminoso: esa luz que se vende.” The simultaneous vague reference to oppression under the Chilean dictatorship and the need to consume in a capitalist state is not in itself a cause for confusion. What causes confusion is the manner in which they are presented. What is ‘el cuadrante’ exactly?
This abstract reference might suggest that it is a place that can be neatly divided, administered and controlled by an exterior force.\textsuperscript{7} The force of the light that shines upon the square comes from “el lumninoso.” Who, or what, is this entity? And what is the ‘light’ that is being sold? From the beginning, Eltit’s narrative forces the reader to interpret the abstract imagery. As we shall see, the alerted reader can detect that the dictatorial world of Santiago, Chile is being somehow conveyed through this imagery. However, this theme is convoluted, mixed with other themes, creating a thematic and imagistic ‘distortion’ in which the reader’s attempts to perceive the historical reality of the Chilean dictatorship are significantly impeded.

Nonetheless, \textit{Lumpérica} is a novel that cannot be read in isolation from its moment of production. The formal techniques Eltit uses to represent/convey this traumatic epoch of Chile’s recent past may well, themselves, have been affected by the political situation in which the author found herself. She wrote \textit{Lumpérica} within Chile, in 1983 – an especially difficult year for the opposition to Pinochet’s regime. Therefore, even if the text is barely comprehensible, one must keep in mind that perhaps only a difficult narration of this type could pass the censors. Norat’s research on the writing of \textit{Lumpérica} points out Eltit’s conflicting accounts on the effect that state censorship had on the novel’s production:

Somewhat contradictory, Eltit maintains that \textit{E. Luminata} would have been written the same way with or without a dictatorship, yet she admits that the

\textsuperscript{7} In the English translation, we have the idea that “the square” that is described could be both the plaza and the designated space that is being referred to. However the Spanish word “cuadrante” does not make the reference to the plaza as explicit, and most likely only refers to a designated space within the plaza.
censor’s bureau, which controlled publications at the time, kept creeping up in her mind while writing the novel. (29)

Therefore, whether or not the formal complexities in *Lumpérica* were imposed by the possibility of censorship, its mere threat may have made critics more open to her formal experimentation.

In her foreword to the novel, Eltit describes her mode of experimental writing as a “dispersion,” a style that allows her to work with “bits of materials, scraps of voices, exploring vaguely [. . .] genres, masquerades, simulacra and verbalized emotion” (*E. Luminata* 7). The consequence of dispersing the reality of Chile’s dictatorship is that it is difficult to point out many explicit references to the dictatorship in the text. However, allusions to this referent are there to be grasped (some stronger than others), and should be referred to in any politically responsible, historically sensitive reading of *Lumpérica*.

Amongst the strongest references are those from the beginning of the novel. As previously mentioned, the reader is presented with a city, explicitly referred to as Santiago (10, tr. 15), whose streets are empty except for the presence of the military needed to enforce the curfew.⁸ As I discussed, there are also interrogation scenes (chapters II and VII) where police (or military) officers question a man who was caught on camera doing a seemingly benign act (he tried to prevent L. Iluminada from falling to the ground). Norat has also pointed to the motif of graffiti in *Lumpérica* as informing “the political subtext of a novel

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⁸ In an interview with Lazarra, Eltit describes the fear of living ten years in a country with a curfew each night, and claims that *Lumpérica* “es una novela del toque de queda. Si tuvieras que decirte, es la novela del toque de queda” (30-1) (“it is a novel of the curfew. If I had to tell you, it is the novel of the curfew” [my translation]).
written in a repressive state where graffiti was surely a popular vehicle for venting public dissatisfaction” (47).

Perhaps, the most noticeable reference to the political historical reality of the dictatorship is the scene of L. Iluminada’s torture. Here the reader is not given descriptions of torture in a linear, highly representational form. Instead, the reader encounters torture in a manner that demands more interpretation to make sense of the narrative:

Pero sigue amarrada a la cama y ante cada movimiento espasmódico se aprietan los cinturones que le rodean. Sus piernas se levantan en movimientos convulsivos/ la acomodan/ sus sueños afloran por movimientos de labios. La sangre de la cabeza tiñe los trapos.

Cambian a trapos albos y retumba.

Pero le van a ordenar los pensamientos, porque los golpes eléctricos sólo la dejaban – antes – orinando y pestañeano bajo la luz del patio cuando le asignaban cama/ le asignaban ficha.

–Fue trasladada a la desesperada cuando ya no se podía más con ella.

Arriba seguía profiriendo los mismos desatinos que ya no impactaban a los observadores.

Cayó en pleno desde la plaza al medio del patio y esperó que la llamaran, que la hurgaran, esperó cualquier cosa en realidad.

Estuvo con las manos caídas lacias a sus costados. Fue la imagen del relajamiento.
Quedó irreconcebible en el terror a la electricidad manifestado en gestos primarios –cómo decirlo– apenas pestañeaba en la sala cuando se disponían a acomodarla. Olvidó todo. Hasta la mujer que le cerró las piernas y de nuevo al patio, donde sobre el mesón se dejaba caer un rayo de sol y los desatinados insistían en la contemplación a nivel de centímetros.

Eso era antes.

Sigue extendida por cirugía/ las radiografías están contra la luz demostrando la falla.

Tal vez por eso le asignaron cama, le asignaron ficha. Luminica, lo que deja disponible es su cabeza colgante. Para este amanecer aterida en la plaza como un lugar más, metidos de lleno en Santiago. (87-8)

But she remains bound to the bed and at each spasmodic movement the straps around her are tightened. Her legs rise in convulsive movements/ they settle her down/ her dreams surface through lip movements. Blood from her head tints the rags.

They change to snow-white rags and it booms.

But they are going to put her thoughts in order, because the strokes of electricity only left her – before – urinating and blinking beneath the glare from the light shaft when they assigned her a bed/ assigned her a chart.

– She was transferred to the terminal ward when nothing more could be done with her.
Upstairs she kept on uttering the same gibberish which no longer had any impact on the observers.

She fell entirely out of the square and into the middle of the light shaft and hoped they would call her, poke her, hoped anything at all really. She lay with her hands fallen limp at her sides. She was the image of relaxation.

She remained unrecognizable in her terror of electricity expressed by elemental gestures – how to say it – scarcely blinked in the room when they were getting ready to make her comfortable. She forgot everything. Even the woman who closed her legs and back to the light shaft again, where a sunbeam fell on the big table and the fools insisted on contemplation at a scale of centimeters.

That was before.

She remains stretched out from the surgery/ the x-rays are against the light showing the defect.

Maybe that’s why they assigned her a bed, assigned her a chart. Lumenical, what she leaves available is her hanging head. She frozen senseless for the sake of this dawn in the square like just any other place, they totally immersed in Santiago. (81-82)

In Niebylski’s reading of this passage, she argues that “in Eltit’s view, there is no credible mimetic representation of torture. In its place, Lumpérica confronts the shattering gaze of the writer with the resistant gaze of the reader: one ‘fails’ to bear adequate witness to the
experience ‘as a whole;’ the other would prefer to be shielded from so many raw details” (247). In these scenes, no palpable knowledge is gained about the act of torture itself. We cannot be sure what exactly has been done, as signalled by Eltit who delicately embeds the question: “cómo decirlo [?]” within the passage. Readers can only try to imagine the act and the pain based on their foreknowledge of torture methods – specifically the application of electricity to prisoners’ genitalia. This is one of the few passages in Lumpèrica that effectively draws upon the reader’s historical foreknowledge of the event. While not conventionally realist, the woman’s torture (in what appears to be a hospital?) is allegorical of that same form of torture that was used so frequently in Chile at the time of the coup. Despite the consistent use of literary techniques that are meant to obscure meaning, the allegorical referent of the Chilean dictatorship is much more clear in this section.9

Ambiguity occupies a deliberate and central role in Eltit’s text. It is ambiguity that does not allow readers to coherently ‘make sense’ of the text’s content. Yet, it is also ambiguity which defines Eltit’s own politics and her literary relationship to social realities. While Eltit claims that her writing is indeed related to political-historical realities, she articulates this relationship and her politics uneasily, guarding herself with ambiguity and contradiction:

Si comprendo que trabajo con una palabra social, palabra que me es ajena y propia, ya heredada y siempre ambigua, multiforme y petrificada a la vez, estoy sumergida en el centro de un paisaje incompleto, inmersa en un trabajo

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9 The reference to state-run torture is so apparent here that I am perplexed that it passed the Chilean censors.
Eltit’s ambiguous politics are not clarified by the above statement. After all, how do we differentiate what she calls her literary politics from her non-literary political intentions; and how do they interact with each other? Jean Franco believes that they do not interact in Eltit’s work, describing Eltit as an author who is “obliged to separate the political from the aesthetic” (70). While Eltit sees the language that she uses as being part of her society, Eltit admits only to seeking to satisfy her obsession with the written word, a desire which appears rather solipsistic. How that has any implications outside of her own writing – in solidarity with others – is not clear. But perhaps (in ethical terms) it should be clear, since what she writes about is neither wholly autobiographical nor is it remote from the tangible...
or historical world. A significant aspect of her fiction is its concern with the Chilean dictatorship, and thus, the reader may rightfully expect her to address the politics of it.

In Hernán Vidal’s discussion of the Revista de Crítica Cultural – of which Eltit is a significant contributor (and her work an important source of analysis) – he classifies this group of intellectuals and artists as “post-political.”¹⁰ Rather than separating political concerns from aesthetic ones, Vidal suggests that the two concerns become “fused” in the work of a writer like Eltit. The consequence is that when fused to an extreme, aesthetic concerns replace traditional political ones:

The strategies suggested by the Revista are post-political in the sense that they fuse the political and the aesthetic to the extreme that the latter completely replaces the former in its traditional sense – that is, as some form of organized pressure in the face of institutionalized hegemonic power according to a clearly defined agenda. (299)

¹⁰ The Revista de Crítica Cultural is published three times a year in Santiago, Chile under the editorship of Nelly Richard since May of 1990. Generally, the aim of this multi-disciplinary journal is to act as a space to debate contemporary cultural criticism. Like Eltit’s own work, the journal has postmodern epistemological and ontological concerns that are largely revealed through its aesthetic inclination toward indeterminacy and fragmentation. Vidal’s study explores the political rift that occurred in Chile between various left-wing factions of intellectuals and artists during and after the dictatorship. He focuses on the political aspirations and contributions of the Revista. Ultimately, Vidal argues that the journal’s group of intellectuals and artists tend to isolate themselves ideologically and aesthetically from the traditional left and the masses whom they hope to liberate.

Interestingly, Vidal, a professor at the University of Minnesota, received a published response from Richard entitled “Reply to Vidal (from Chile).” If it is not already obvious in the title, Richard highlights Vidal’s geographical distance from Chile as a significant factor in his not understanding/appreciating the work of the Revista (309). Ironically, however, one of the Revista’s most celebrated authors is Eltit – a writer who is
David Miralles identifies the negative repercussions of Eltit’s fusion of aesthetics and politics. He convincingly makes the argument that Eltit’s form of experimental prose is inadvertently complicit with conservative political interests (112). Miralles argues that the very form of writing employed by Eltit and other experimental Chilean authors coincided with the country’s economic boom of 1982, and the renewed interest in certain sectors to sponsor the arts. In contrast to Norat’s claim that Eltit’s work resists bourgeois convention (26), Miralles argues:

[P]arece, más que una crítica o una oposición al sistema político vigente, un intento, menos épico y un tanto más pragmático, por redefenir y sofisticar la producción artística para el consumo de quienes se encontraban suficientemente capacitados para acceder a dichos productos. Probablemente una burguesía progresista o de izquierda (105)

More than a critique or an opposition to the actual political system, it seems to be an attempt, less epic and slightly more pragmatic, to redefine and sophisticate artistic production for the consumption of those who found themselves in a sufficiently comfortable position to be able to obtain those products. Probably a progressive or leftist bourgeoisie. (my translation)\(^\text{11}\)

\(^\text{11}\) Vidal suggests that the aesthetic nature of Chilean experimental literature is, ironically, itself linked to capitalism: “the ‘rhetorical alloys’ and ‘new gestures’ of postmodernism are nothing more than an imitation of the social destabilizations caused by the effects of transnational finance capital, installed under the auspices of state terror and neoliberal ideology in Chile” (296). This linking of aesthetics with the socio-economical effects of capitalism would suggest that Eltit’s work is as much (or more) a product of capitalism than are other, more easily “consumable” forms of literature.
Thus Miralles concludes:

En este punto, parece inútil que se intente señalar que la neovanguardia fue un intento por destabilizar el lenguaje autoritario. Aunque este haya sido el sueño o la fantasía de sus gestores no se puede sostener seriamente que se luchó contra un régimen político desde las cripticas trincheras del arte de avanzada. Y si este fuera de todas maneras el caso, los hechos han demostrado que no se hubiera podido concebir una manera más equivocada e inocua de lucha política. (105)

On this point, it seems useless to point out that the neoavant-guard was an attempt to destabilize authoritarian language. Although this may have been the dream or fantasy of its creators, it can’t be seriously argued that the political regime was fought against from the cryptic trenches of experimental art. And even if this was the case, it has been shown that there could not have been a method more faulty or innocuous to engage in political struggle. (my translation)

The problem Miralles signals lies in what Georg Lukács has described as the ‘static’ nature of much of modernist literature. Speaking from within a Marxist discourse, Lukács describes modernist texts as “perpetually oscillating patterns of sense- and memory-data [with] powerfully charged – but aimless and directionless – fields of force” (Contemporary 18), For Lukács these characteristics give rise to “an epic structure which is static,

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12 While Lukács concentrates on modernist writing, his criticism of this form of literature is apt for our discussion of Eltit’s experimental work, since she sees herself heavily influenced by writers such as Joyce and Woolf.
reflecting a belief in the basically static character of events” (Contemporary 18). Lukács claims that “even those modernist writers who are less extreme in their rejection of history tend to present social and historical phenomena as static” (Contemporary 35). The static presentation of history thus reflects a desire, or at least a tacit acceptance, of the status quo. It negates the understanding of living within an historical continuum, and implicitly rejects the possibility of political change. Akin to Lukács’s views concerning modernist literature, Vidal similarly questions the political efficacy of the postmodern cultural group surrounding the Revista. In his essay “Postmodernism, Postleftism, and Neo-Avant-Gardism,” Vidal questions the revolutionary potential of Chilean neo-avant-garde artists and intellectuals. Vidal argues that their abandonment of “the great narratives of human redemption [. . .] implies a retreat caused by terror: a desire to ignore the reality of the violence in order to make peace with the power that inflicted it” (305).

13 The modernist writer referred to by Lukács, who has affinities with Eltit, is generally of European or North American origin, and therefore is slightly different from the Latin American modernista writer. John Beverley claims that “[i]n general terms, the ideology of the modernista writers—and they were the founders of modern Latin American literature—involved the opposition of the aesthetic as such—seen as the essence of Latin American identity itself—to the activities and scientific and pedagogic discourses (positivism, naturalism, utilitarianism, behaviorism, Taylorism, etc.) of modernity” (10). In this sense, the modernistas share a formal and ideological affinity to the modernists of Europe and North America. Nonetheless, Beverley contends that modernista writers are represented by authors such as Darío and Martí (10), whose ideological content comes through far more transparently.

14 Vidal summarizes the Revista’s distrust of the “great narratives”: “With its repudiation of party politics, its enmity to all bureaucratic centralism, its rejection of all the epics of the conquest of state power, and its distrust of the discourses of the scientific totalization of the social process, the politics furnished by the postmodernist avant-garde is marked by the uncertainty of knowing that it must deploy itself in absolutely unknown territories and forms of activity, legitimized at most by the assumption of the good faith of the individuals involved” (296).
Due to the status quo that it implicitly promotes, the particular kind of
defamiliarisation felt by the reader in *Lumpérica* is decidedly different than that which
Brecht attempts to create in his theatre of alienation. Yet, Idelber Avelar makes the link
between Eltit’s work and Brecht’s V-effekt, giving as an example the action in chapter 1:

The first chapter’s scenic dimensions include stage directions and later
critiques of each take, producing a Brechtian effect whereby identification
with the bodies of lumpen (*Lumpe-*) and woman (*-érica*) is precluded by
carefully placed metafilmic interruptions. The reader is *shown* a scene, and
shown also that he or she is watching. (217)

In the sense of revealing its fictive nature, *Lumpérica* does indeed share some limited
characteristics with Brecht’s ‘V-effekt.’ These are predominantly, as Avelar indicates, in
the text’s presentation of itself as an artifice. However, in Brecht’s conceptualization, the
‘V-effekt’ should *affect* the audience politically, forcing them to see themselves within an
historical continuum, with the ability to change their social political world. In many
respects, *Lumpérica*, in its contradictory nature and often universal politics, could be
accused of being ahistorical and apolitical, which is exactly the form of art that Brecht
contests.

Furthermore, another difference from Brecht is in terms of how the text may
‘alienate.’ The ability to access *Lumpérica*’s significance is solely within the power of the
cultural elite, which Vidal would find paradoxical given the Chilean neo-avant-garde’s
“ambition to attain some degree of mass credibility” (300). Playing ironically with a
concept related to alienation, that of marginalization, Miralles criticizes the *exclusive*
marginality of Eltit’s text: “resulta marginal sólo para aquellos individuos (la mayoría) carentes de la información y la sofisticación intelectual para decodificarla. Para decirlo, con una frase, esta marginalidad es una marginalidad artificial” (125) (“it becomes marginal only for those individuals (the majority) who do not have the information or the intellectual sophistication to decode it. To say it, with one phrase, this marginality is an artificial marginality” [my translation]). As opposed to Brecht, whose theory of alienation was meant to politically perturb the audience member, and whose theatre was thought out for both the cultured and lay person, Eltit’s marginalization is elitist in the sense that it can only be properly read and experienced by those who can appreciate its cultural significance. And Lumpérica appears to be directed towards this elite. Far from being a revolutionary political project of any sort, Eltit’s text maintains the status-quo by excluding the masses who would be necessary in provoking significant political change.

Lukács’s description of the modernist text as essentially static is relevant for postmodern writers such as Eltit. Her mode of writing and politics has obvious affinities with what Lukács refers to as the formal innovations and ideologies of modernism. Eltit also has, as we have seen, aesthetic and ideological links to modernismo, the avant-garde, the vanguardia, and postmodernism. In other words, the formal experimentation present in Lumpérica firmly places it outside of the tradition of the nineteenth-century historical novel, or even much of twentieth-century historical fiction (which often still has some

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15 Raymond Williams’s “Modernist Continuities: The Desire to be Modern in Twentieth-century Spanish American Fiction” is a detailed account of these various movements/practices, and how they have influenced Latin American culture. In his paper, Williams refuses to neatly categorize various Latin American writers, including Eltit, and
resemblance to realist/naturalist narratives). Part of the reason for her departure from the conventions of a realist narrative is that she has epistemological concerns surrounding issues of representation and the creation/dissemination of knowledge accepted as truth. These concerns are apparent in the manner in which she attempts to narrate (and significantly, not narrate) the Chilean dictatorship: “The condition [of living in a dictatorship] is something so delicate, in some ways so unnarratable, that I am hard pressed to refer to it without falling into commonplaces. How can one define the effects of negative, sordid, prying power?” (E. Luminata 4). Instead, by postmodern stylistic means, Eltit tries to challenge the reader to consider the value of alternative (i.e., nonrepresentational) forms of historical narration. On the one hand, a realist mode might make history appear too easily accessible; however, on the other hand, the form of narration present in Lumpérica ‘distorts’ the historical subject to such an extent that it is nearly unidentifiable.

Since Eltit purposefully thwarts the reader’s ability to gain an intelligible understanding of the text’s content, it might be expected that the writer provide the content’s experiential component. Gerald Graff would find this intention problematic, as can be seen in his discussion of the main tradition of modern aesthetics, which includes instead prefers to reveal the particular affinities each writer has with various artistic movements.

16 Miralles argues that often avant-garde writing promotes itself against a form of writing that is assumed to be a simpler, less intellectually challenging form of art. Often this type of artistic practice goes against what he calls monologic or official discourses which are ill-defined by many artists (98).

17 She expresses these concerns in the introduction to the English edition of the novel.
such figures as Eliot, Langer, Jung, Frye, Jakobson and Ingarden. Graff claims that a number of these theorists “define art as the experiential complement of understanding without its content – as does Langer in her theory of art as ‘virtual experience’ or Eliot in his view that poetry does not assert beliefs but dramatizes ‘what it feels like’ to have them – again as if experience and ideas ‘about’ experience were incompatible” (48). The danger with such a belief is that art then does not offer itself as a means of understanding, and thus, it is not accountable to any reality external to the art work itself. In the context of Eltit’s work, which as we have seen is strongly influenced by modernist literature, we could indeed praise the author for concentrating on the conveyance of bodily and emotional experience. Nonetheless, what is signalled by Graff is his concern that authors like Eltit rarely propose anything about the experiences themselves. Undoubtedly, at the heart of Graff’s argument is his concern with the very purpose of literary production. To refine his claim, he cites the critic, Leonard B. Meyer, who makes what Graff believes to be an inaccurate distinction between art and science: “There is a profound and basic difference between scientific theories, which are propositional, and works of art, which are presentational” (48). Graff problematizes Meyer’s claim, stating: “as if it were necessary to choose between the propositional and the presentational, as if a work of art could not be both at the same time” (48). A counterargument to Graff’s claim might be that art has a variety of roles, and therefore the expectation that art be both propositional and presentational is unreasonable if applied across the board. This much is certainly true, especially when speaking of art in general. Nonetheless, the propositional purpose of art becomes a serious ethical matter in a case like Lumpérica which references a traumatic
historical event. In short, the ethical question becomes whether an event such as the
Chilean dictatorship should be presented in such an extremely ambiguous form, without the
accompaniment of a propositional stance.

Nelly Richard argues that the merit of Eltit’s text is precisely because it is
“uncertain.”18 Within an argument of its political historical significance, Richard argues
that Lumpérica’s “uncertain” quality offers readers a plethora of alternative historical plots,
and therefore asks readers to collaborate in history’s process of construction and
reconstruction. She claims that what Eltit ultimately achieves is a form of resistance against
“programmed truths” (“Tres funciones” 39). Miralles, however, believes that there is a
contradiction in what Richard identifies as the elusive, fragmented nature of Eltit’s text
being a narrative imbued with political significance for the reader to bring to light. For
Miralles, if the narrative strategy consists of fragmentation to reveal the elusive nature of
reality, then Eltit must allow, and indeed hope, for readers to apply these same narrative
strategies in their own readings of the text. Since the text resists a unified political
interpretation, by its very form, it also facilitates and encourages readers to interpret its
politics as fragmented, contradictory and pluralized (102).19 What Miralles argues for is

18 To recall, Richard is the editor of the Revista de Crítica Cultural.
19 Miralles’s objections would probably coincide with Gerald Graff’s own
frustrations with experimental literature:

Modern experimental texts [. . .], having renounced story and narrative,
depend much more heavily on the reader’s ability to locate thematic
propositions capable of giving their disjunctive, fragmentary, and refractory
details some exemplary meaning and coherence. Lacking a continuous story
(or argument), images and motifs can have little unity or relevance to one
another apart from the abstract concepts they illustrate. (Graff 164-65)
epistemological consistency between the notions of writing and reading (if they are to be framed as similar activities by Richard). If the writer wants to destabilize truth, then naturally it should not be expected that the reader gain a stable sense of truth from the text. Therefore, with uncertainty being the underlying principle, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to engage in a constructive process of (re)construction. What is not clear is how readers can ‘(re)construct’ history if they are simultaneously asked to deconstruct it.

What is also uncertain about Richard’s claim is how readers might ‘(re)construct’ history, if they are not provided with, or do not share, the same ‘materials’ and ‘building blocks’ to begin with. Despite the scarcity of tangible referents, Richard argues that readers would still identify and focus on the political-historical angle of Lumpérica in order to perform its ‘reconstruction.’ This premise presupposes not only a common familiarity with the historical event, but also a similar, if not shared, interpretation of it. Despite the problematic nature of this logic (surely not all readers would be equally familiar with the Chilean dictatorship), it would be necessary for readers of Lumpérica to have (or be provided with) some knowledge of the that dictatorship, if Eltit’s goal is to provide its experiential component. This assumption is what Graff identifies as a contradiction in much of experimental literature. “The problem,” as Graff puts it, “is to explain how art can provide the experiential complement of an understanding of reality without actually saying anything about reality” (70). The key word here is ‘complement,’ for if experiential art does not assume the role of depicting reality, then it assumes a complementary role to a reality

The formal challenges of Lumpérica indeed force the reader to make sense of its themes and politics. Ultimately, to use Graff’s perspective, the motifs and themes in Eltit’s narrative can have little unity in interpretation.
that is generally shared by both the author and reader. The assumption that this could be a shared reality, without its actually being presented as such, is problematic.

By favouring the experiential component of literature – what could perhaps be deemed more intrinsically human, and non-categorizable – Eltit could be seen as rejecting what Williams refers to as a “positivistic, materialistic, and pragmatic” form of discourse (373).\(^{20}\) However, the total rejection of all things related to positivism may not be an effective way to communicate the reality of what is essentially ‘human.’ Graff writes:

> Proceeding from the valid insight that something has happened to the sense of reality and that modern technological reality is in some profound sense unreal, many writers and critics leap to the conclusion that literature must for this reason abandon its pretensions to represent external reality and become either a self-contained reality unto itself or a disintegrated, dispersed process. It is as if we were to decide that, in a world where reality has become fantastic, only pure fantasy, unhinged from liability to anything but itself, has a chance to get at the truth. (9, emphasis mine)

Through her own self-described process of “dispersion,” Eltit questions the endeavour of establishing truths and attempts to demystify or demythologize reality and the methods by which we have attempted to know it (7). Nonetheless, as Graff argues, a writer who rejects mimesis must be coming from a point of view where reality is in fact already known:

\(^{20}\) Williams outlines how the modernistas, whose literature has had a great influence on Eltit, similarly rejected this type of discourse which was in vogue at the turn of the twentieth century (373).
The concept of demystification or demythologizing becomes meaningless unless there is a norm of reality against which to demystify and demythologize. If we want to talk about literature as a means of understanding, we have to suppose there is something external to literature that it can understand, even if we are always wrong about whatever it is. If we reject the mimetic model, we leave unclear the position from which we are offering the rejection. How can we know that mimesis is a myth unless we can view from outside, mimetically? (170-71).

Therefore, an author’s rejection of mimesis paradoxically validates, and certainly presupposes, a belief in a reality outside of the text shared with the reader. But what complicates matters is the allowance for certain realities that one may ethically come to understand as beyond reasonable representation, such as the Holocaust or other violent traumatic histories, including that of Chile. Here then, an author like Eltit could partially agree with Graff. She would perhaps admit that there are indeed realities that can be represented mimetically; however, she would argue that there are others (e.g., torture) that for ethical reasons, cannot be treated in the same manner. The ethical dimension regarding Eltit’s experimental mode of depicting the Chilean dictatorship is, of course, complicated by the presence of state censorship at the time of her writing, as we have seen, and, years later, by her contradictory account of its (non)influence on her literary style. Yet, it is clear from her own statements that her choice of a non-mimetic narrative is at least partially an
I have argued that this stance, when examined through the lens of a more concrete politics, is ambiguous and may inadvertently be complicit with conservative interests that she opposes. Furthermore, the experimental mode of narration may place unreasonable expectations on the reader to share the reality that the experiential component of her narrative refers to. To get at these cases, let us now look more closely at how Eltit’s ambiguous text has been interpreted by various literary critics, and how its depicted history has been ‘(re)constructed’ – if at all.

**Lumpérica and Its Criticism**

Many critics have lauded Eltit for her formal technique, and consequently have focussed on that aspect of her narrative. For instance, Avelar suggests that Eltit’s work is the “most innovative, risk-taking fiction of recent years in Chile” (211) and that she “submits language to a de-anecdotalization that defies paraphrase” (219). An interesting angle from which to examine the manner in which *Lumpérica* has been celebrated at this formal level is to revisit the passage in the novel that makes reference to torture. As has already been shown, Niebylski’s and my own readings of this passage see in it an unmistakable reference

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21 Miguel Dalmaroni suggests that Eltit has contradicted herself when her subject is that of human rights. He gives as an example the text “Pactos e impactos” (1995) which Eltit wrote on the occasion of the trial of General Manuel Contreras, one of Chile’s most powerful men during the dictatorship. Dalmaroni says that despite what one might come to expect from Eltit, in this text there is an ordered argument, and it is “una prosa notablemente *comunicativa* y grammatical” (967) (“a prose that is notably *communicative* and grammatical” [my translation]). Dalmaroni suggests that Eltit appears to have softened her stance on the need for opacity in her writing. He also cites another example where Eltit strayed from her fragmented and dispersed, experimental writing, when she wrote of Pinochet’s surprising arrest in London, England (969). What makes these aesthetic exceptions on Eltit’s part even more noteworthy is that they were both published in the *Revista de crítica cultural*. Dalmaroni sees this as a contradiction of the aims of the journal itself (967).
to the ‘real world’ torture (inflicted upon human beings) that was taking place in Pinochet’s
dictatorship. Nonetheless, other critics have taken a different interpretive angle. Kate
Jenckes views Lumpérica “as an example of how the figuration of community is
represented not as an object distinct from language, but precisely in and through writing
itself” (68). Working with theorists such as Paul de Man and Jean-Luc Nancy, Jenckes
seeks to empower the reader when she claims that literature “cannot define anything per se,
and in this sense is much more related to writing than to literature understood as a finished
and self-enclosed work” (69), and that “literature is not the static product of writing, but is
writing itself” (70). Regarding the torture scene, Jenckes highlights the literariness of the
text. Rather than concentrating on how this depiction relates to the violence that was
experienced by Chilean political prisoners, her analysis focuses on how the act of torture
and the tortured body speak of literature itself:

In a scene of torture, she is pierced with light, her interior completely
revealed by an x-ray, whose light also reflects on everyone around her. She
is completely knowable, a narrative possession, whether the narrative be a
form of disciplinary submission or of literary production—which, it seems to
be suggested, are mutually implicated activities. The protagonist is presented
as living death, contained in a frame (the frame of the image or book):
entirely knowable, pure representation. Literature thus accomplished—the
personification of a people’s sufferings in the figure of a single person—
closes itself off to history. To the past, as secrets that lie out of reach of the
x-ray that penetrates her interiority and projects it onto the world around her;
and to the future, also a secret, but one which cannot even figuratively be
attributed to an interior, one that always lies outside of every single body,
every metaphor of individuality. The future of all ‘images in literature’—all

choes littéraires—is to ‘forget the future like a tombstone’” (77).

From within even an analysis that focuses upon the pure literariness of the passage, some
questions come to mind: If the tortured body is a metaphor for a tortured text, who then are
the torturers? (The readers?) How is the body completely “knowable”? This claim seems
ideologically contrary to Eltit’s overall project of contesting the ability to
represent/convey/access the truth. Similarly, considering Eltit’s epistemological concerns,
how can one person be “the personification of a people’s sufferings”?

When critics disregard the significance of the political historical referent, they also
tend not to consider Eltit’s formal techniques as a mode of production that was both
voluntary and perhaps necessary (due to political-historical circumstances). Instead, the text
is praised on broader aesthetic terms, as, for example, intrinsically contesting the traditional
underpinnings of literary production and reception. Olga T. Uribe claims that with
Lumpérica, Eltit: “[deja] de lado la novela tradicional” and “apunta a una nueva práctica y
visión de la relación entre el sujeto y los modos de producción textual” (24) (“leaves behind
the traditional novel” and “signals a new practice and vision of the relation between the
subject and the modes of literary production” [my translation]). Yet her analysis of these
textual modes of production hardly refers to their relation to Eltit writing from within, and
commenting on, the dictatorship. Explained in ambiguous terms, Uribe argues that 

**Lumpérica** is a text where the female subject is both writer and reader (24):

> Las estrategias y técnicas textuales, sí, construyen los términos, las condiciones de posibilidad para las mujeres lectoras de interrogarlas y de interrogarse aún cuando, simultáneamente, niegan la certeza de una respuesta. Al desconstruir el espacio narrativo, el texto intenta la construcción de un espacio único, en el que se dirige al lector como mujer. Tener en cuenta un receptor femenino, un lector femenino, significa que toda mujer tendrá algún nivel de identificación con las representaciones del texto. (23)

Yes, the textual strategies and techniques construct the terms, the possible conditions for female readers to interrogate them and themselves even if, simultaneously, they negate the certainty of an answer. In deconstructing the narrative space, the text attempts the construction of a unique space, where it directs itself to a reader as a woman. Being aware of a female receptor, a female reader, signifies that all women will have some level of identification with the representations in the text. (my translation)

Uribe’s analysis is interesting in that it opens up the possibility for imagining an exclusively feminine text at the level of production and reception. Yet the problem with the analysis, apart from its dehistoricization, is that it essentializes the differences between a male and female reader. In what is an otherwise praiseworthy reading of **Lumpérica**, Norat could also be seen as guilty of such essentializing when she claims: “Eltit purposefully
contrives an ambiguous language to inscribe both a female consciousness and to subvert
cconventional patriarchal language” (31). Apart from problematically equating ambiguity
with female consciousness, it is not clear how language for Norat is patriarchal. Such a
claim would seem to historically place women as passive subjects in the formation of
language, which, indeed, a whole strand of feminist criticism has argued. Briefly, these
critics suggest that because we live in a patriarchal world, governed by patriarchal rules,
that our language is also patriarchal. And language is perhaps the most significant means
through which we order, make sense of, and classify our world. This leads to an inevitable
dilemma for many feminist writers. As Helena Michie posits: “Feminist writers necessarily
live and write at the center of a paradox; they are using patriarchal language to destroy
patriarchy and the language it produces” (130). Yet, an alternative “ambiguous language,”
as Norat celebrates in Eltit’s work, may not be a necessary or productive counter to
patriarchal language. Clive Bush similarly argues this point in his discussion of
“nonlinear” language’s ability to contest patriarchal power: “It is possible to have non-
patriarchal linear modes (the prose of feminist criticism) and non-linear patriarchal modes”
(345). Furthermore, some Latin American feminists would contest the notion of language
being inherently patriarchal. Sara Castro-Klarén refers to Chile’s most famous female poet,
Gabriela Mistral, who argued that the “mother tongue” that we first learn has a strong
matriarchal component: “Inverting the relationship of God to Adam in the primal biblical

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22 Bush argues that, more generally, experimental art could sometimes be seen as simultaneously having radical and conservative thrusts: “What we perceive as 'ordered' does not depend merely on essentialist grounds of 'experimental' and 'non-experimental'. It is possible, for example, to see both Schoenberg and Stravinsky (in revolt against 'cultural hegemony') as innovators in radical and conservative modes” (345).
scene in which God confers upon man his greatest gift – the power to name all the objects in his freshly minted universe – Mistral posits the mother as the source of language” (9). For Mistral, all “consciousness comes from the mother’s language, from the cadences of her voice, from the tangible shapes of her body” (9).23

Apart from being read as a text that subverts patriarchal language, Lumpérica has frequently been seen as a work that aesthetically performs simultaneous feminist theories. For instance, María Inés Lagos equates the protagonist’s pleasure with (and power over) her own body with Hélène Cixous’s idea of “writing the body” (124). Lagos also offers Judith Butler’s notion of performativity as another way in which to analyse the sexualized, eroticized, fragmented and unstable nature of the characters in Eltit’s work (129-30). Similarly, Neustadt believes that the protagonist’s eroticism and her condition of physical decadence recall Julia Kristeva’s notion of the “abject” (46).

To extrapolate from Neustadt’s analysis of Eltit as a writer with postmodern concerns and aesthetics, I would agree that Lumpérica can be considered a cultural effort “toward mapping a position from which to articulate a [feminist] critique” (xviii-xix). In this sense, Lumpérica certainly reveals feminist concerns surrounding language, gender, sexuality, etc., as I have discussed. However, “mapping a position from which to articulate a critique” is different than making a critique. Neustadt’s less than active rhetoric seems to stem from a small concession articulated by Fredric Jameson, that “postmodernism connotes a world gone mapless” (xviii).

23 Furthermore, Castro-Klarén writes: “The power to name, the mind’s faculty to conceive, differentiate, organize, and create, are all taught to the poet by the mother’s language as system and as speech act” (10).
What is of interest to me is whether the reader contextualizes the broader focussed readings (such as subverting patriarchal language) within the framework of the Chilean dictatorship. This would demand that the reader place these other concerns of Lumpérica within the context of the political-historical circumstances of the novel’s production and the novel’s own admittedly obscured political-historical themes.

The problem is that such a contextualization might create interpretive contradictions. The text seems to resist such unifying political interpretations, precisely because of its experimental style, its multi-thematic nature, and its refusal to remain rooted in a discernable plot. Djelal Kadir, for instance, does a fascinating reading of Lumpérica, in which he states: “In this undertaking, I shall trace the steps of a particular woman, Diamela Eltit, a writer who makes ‘a woman’s place’ the problematic locus of her writing” (179). While the essay’s focus is on “a woman’s place,” Kadir rightly does not ignore the text’s historical moment of production and the theme of the dictatorship and, thus, unites the novel’s gender politics with the political-historical referent of the dictatorship. For instance, he shows interest in the various ways that L. Illuminada’s body has been acted upon (by herself and others), and in particular a passage where she cuts her hair: “[t]he coarse shearing of her hair becomes the climactic act that reiterates the ignominy of national self-mutilation under the aegis of one of the bloodiest military dictatorships in Chile’s history” (192). What is at stake here is how the sign of L. Iluminada can maintain political strength if it can simultaneously signify various matters of political significance. In Kadir’s example, we must question how the female figure of L. Iluminada can represent “a woman’s place” while simultaneously representing the realities of the military dictatorship
experienced by both men and women. The issue of “self-mutilation” might be seen as problematic if it were to imply Chile’s own responsibility for bringing about the dictatorship.\(^\text{24}\) Even disregarding the role that other countries played in bringing about and supporting Pinochet’s rule (mainly the US), the parallel made between L. Iluminada’s self-mutilation and Chile’s dictatorship implies that L. Iluminada is not just a marginal and oppressed figure, but she is also simultaneously, and paradoxically, considerably implicated in her own oppression. Therefore, while the responsible critic, like Kadir, might make the case that the text contains various political stances, an exposition of these stances might end up weakening the force of their individual political strength.\(^\text{25}\) Nevertheless, as seen in Jenckes’s analysis, the solution is not to highlight the formal elements, while disregarding how the text makes significant references to a documentable reality like Pinochet’s dictatorship.

\(^{24}\) While celebrating the merits of Eltit’s work, Kadir also reveals some more serious political contradictions. One such contradiction is Eltit’s second novel, *Por la Patria*, written under the patronage of the Guggenheim Foundation, “founded, of course, on the fortunes of the Guggenheim family, made in good measure through the operations of its Anaconda Mining Company in Chile” (181). Kadir goes on to say that the company had some involvement in the atrocities committed during the military rule, suggesting “Anaconda has extracted more than copper from the terrain and human geography of Diamela Eltit’s baneful ‘Fatherland’” (181). He refers to Eltit’s situation as the “paradoxical predicament as a ‘Third-World’ woman writer under the patriarchy of a military dictatorship and the patronage of a foundation built with the lifeblood of her people” (182).

\(^{25}\) Polyvalent symbolism is also prevalent in the two novels that I will examine in the chapter on the Algerian War of Independence, particularly Kateb Yacine’s *Nedjma*. Nonetheless, the diegetic worlds in these novels more openly make reference to the contemporaneous political-historical world of Algeria, compared to the ambiguity with which Eltit conveys the Chilean dictatorship. Therefore, in comparison to *Lumpérica*, the polyvalent symbolism to be found in the texts of the Algerian war appears more rooted in realities that exist outside the texts themselves.
Indeed, Lukács implies as much when he claims that authors are not the only ones responsible for the exultation of formal elements at the expense of content. He states that literary critics are also to blame for perpetuating this phenomenon, reflecting a lack of social commitment on their part: “By concentrating on formal criteria, by isolating technique from content and exaggerating its importance, these critics refrain from judgement on the social or artistic significance of subject-matter” (Meaning 34). He too criticizes the ambiguous, and often undecipherable, political intentions of modernist literature (which are similarly present in Eltit’s postmodern text). If the author’s politics are ambiguous, then this will be reflected in the text’s style: “content determines form” (Realism 19). To extrapolate from Lukács’s claim, I would like to suggest that in a postmodern text such as Lumpérica, content determines form which determines interpretation. Given the scarcity of realistic content, interpretation in Lumpérica is based almost exclusively on the formal elements of the narrative. Thus, in privileging form, the artist risks the possibility that readers may ignore instances of significant (albeit deliberately vague) political content.

For the reader, let alone the author, any depiction of the Chilean dictatorship presents an ethical dilemma. The reader might favour a comprehensible representation – one that clearly points in the direction of a specific historical past and makes a ‘story’ of it. Or perhaps the reader favours a non-representational version of this same historical past that focuses more on the sensations that relate to living in such a period. This dilemma becomes much greater when we question the purpose of literature and critical study. I personally side with Graff who argues: “One of the most useful functions that literature and
the humanities could serve right now would be to shore up the sense of reality, to preserve
the distinction between the real and the fictive, and to help us resist those influences, both
material and intellectual, that would turn lying into a universal principle” (12). As I
understand his use of the term, ‘lying’ for Graff is not necessarily malicious. Neither does it
include the ‘white lie.’ Lying is simply an avoidance of saying what one believes to be true,
and saying something else in turn. This could be for various reasons, including a
postmodern mentality that Graff believes champions relativity over certainty to the point
that political stances and even knowledge lose validity. Certainly, Graff would be critical of
*Lumpérica* for its inability to preserve, and develop, our understanding of concrete reality.

Admittedly, however, I have found myself in a quintessentially postmodern position
when interacting with this text. I have oscillated between wanting the text to give me more
knowledge of the Chilean dictatorship and feeling that there are certain events that are
impossible to *know*. This issue would seem to be contained within a debate of content
versus form. What ultimately matters to the reader interested in the political-historical angle
of a text such as *Lumpérica* is whether – despite its privileging of form over content – the
text can still help our understanding of (or our relationship to) this violent historical subject.
This implies responsibility on the part of the author, as well as the reader. Referring to the
responsibilities inherent in the fantasy genre, Graff maintains: “Whether fantasy makes us
more critical or merely more solipsistic and self-indulgent depends finally on whether it is
accountable to something that is not fantasy” (100). Similarly, I wonder whether *Lumpérica*
is accountable to anything but its formal challenges. While in certain passages the formal
techniques may help readers gain an affective understanding of the dictatorial past, the
abundance of technical ploys ultimately seems to disorient the reader to such an extent that what can only be perceived are the formal mechanisms of ‘distortion.’ In other words, Lumpérica asks the reader to turn away from concentrating on the historical matter and focus instead on the literariness of the text itself. The consequence is that readers (including literary critics) run the risk of losing their grasp on the historical commentary, or making contradictory statements if they do attempt to deal with it. In the end, this is not surprising. Eltit is an author with ambiguous politics, and writes in kind. If literary critics cannot then discern, or choose to ignore, references to the Chilean dictatorship, it is partially due to what she puts forth, and has privileged, as an author. It is therefore to be expected that politically-minded critics of Lumpérica produce somewhat problematic interpretations, even when they attempt to be historically sensitive and inclusive of the various ways that the text may ‘speak’ politically. Ultimately I would suggest that Lumpérica may well feel ‘political,’ but due to the lack of cohesive meaning and the confusing politics that ensue, readers may fail to receive a stable political message, and will likely produce an interpretation that reflects that confusion. The ‘distortion overload’ in Lumpérica is what causes such extreme defamiliarisation in the reader, to the point where the reader’s known reality is not only ‘made strange,’ but is nearly lost.

ISABEL ALLENDE’S LA CASA DE LOS ESPÍRITUS

With regard to its use of realism to convey the reality of the Chilean dictatorship, Allende’s novel, La Casa de los espíritus, stands in significant contrast to Diamela Eltit’s novel.
Considering that Allende’s novel has frequently been labeled as “magical realist,” naturally one could be skeptical of such a statement. One of the defining characteristics of magical realism is its paradoxical treatment of the ordinary and the extraordinary. What is mundane is often described with wonder and amazement; yet, what seems extraordinary or otherworldly is described as a matter of fact. In La Casa de los espíritus, Allende often describes what is mundane as magical. Nonetheless, she refuses to depict in a magical-realist mode the brutal political realities of Chile’s dictatorial present. Therefore, when the violent and traumatic realities of Chile enter the narrative, magical realism is pushed aside in favour of a mode of storytelling that is realist. La Casa de los espíritus then is an important (negative) example in considering when and why an author decides to ‘distort’ the reality of a traumatic historical event for the reader.

My examination of Allende’s deliberate (non)use of ‘distortion’ will first attempt to understand the ‘distorting’ potential inherent to magical realism, and why Allende moves away from this literary mode. I argue that the magical realist section of the novel is not a ‘distortion’ in itself; however the historical section of the novel would be had Allende continued with the mode of magical realism. After this discussion of the modes of realism and magical realism, and the play of ‘distortion,’ I will examine the character of Pedro Tercero García. He holds a particular place in the novel, being the only nonfactual representation of an historical actor. He seemingly bridges the worlds of legend and the factually real.

In his study on Postmodernist Fiction, Brian McHale claims that the reaction to the fantastic and the real in Gabriel García Márquez is inverted: the fantastic becomes banal,
and the banal becomes fantastic (77). At first glance, such a comment seems to hold true when thinking about García Márquez's work, and perhaps even more broadly, when discussing the genre of magical realism. But, when reading Cien años de soledad, what are we to make of the narrator's description of the massacre of the thousands of workers of the banana company? It is surely narrated in a fantastic mode – the memory of that event being later literally washed away by endless rain. Nonetheless, a massacre is certainly not banal.

If we follow McHale's argument, there are many banalities that become fantastic in magical realist narratives, but surely there are some instances, such as the massacre, that do not fall into such neat categorizations.

In La Casa de los espíritus, a novel that has often been compared to Cien años de soledad, Isabel Allende also describes the banal as magical, especially at the beginning of the text. However, certainly towards the end of the novel, there is nothing ‘magical’ about the narrative. One could speculate that for Allende the treatment of a violent, traumatic history should not be aggrandised or reduced (however you want to see it) by way of magic. Therefore, her depiction of this known past is done with extreme caution as she shies away from ‘distorting’ this brutal truth. When Allende makes the transition, in the novel, from a magical realist style to one that is more traditionally realist, perhaps she is commenting upon more than how to properly represent the reality of Chile's traumatic past. Her refusal to depict this violent historical period in a magical realist style may also serve

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26 Whether an historical reality undergoes a reduction or an increase in ‘being’ through modes of ‘distorted’ representation was discussed in greater detail in my Introduction.
to comment upon the expectations and limitations of what has come to be known as magical realism.

Wendy B. Faris suggests a list of five primary characteristics to define magical realism: 1) "the text contains an ‘irreducible element’ of magic" (167). 2) "Descriptions detail a strong presence of the phenomenal world – this is the realism in magical realism, distinguishing it from much fantasy and allegory" (169). 3) The reader will hesitate between two contradictory understandings of events. While the degree of hesitation will likely depend on the reader's cultural background, Faris states that "the reader's primary doubt in most cases is between understanding an event as a character's hallucination or as a miracle" (171). 4) "We experience the closeness or near-merging of two realms, two worlds,” for instance the coming together of the worlds of the living and the dead (172). And finally 5) "[t]hese fictions question ideas about time, space and identity" (173).

Furthermore, as we have seen, magical realism has to do with how the fantastic and banal are presented by the narrator. In magical realism, say Zamora and Faris, "the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism" (3). For Zamora and Faris, magic here has a "normative and normalizing” (3) function, and what is already normal, ordinary or banal becomes magical. Angel Flores's seminal essay also points to magical realism's "naturalistic notation of a fantastic universe" (112). García Márquez himself says that he learned his own tone of storytelling from his grandmother "who told utterly fantastic stories with a 'brick' face" (qtd. in Antoni 20). It would seem then that in magical realism what is unusual (supernatural or fantastic) is presented as
usual; and what is usual (ordinary, mundane) is presented as unusual. It is, as Salmon Rushdie puts it, a "conmingling of the improbable and mundane" (qtd. in Faris 174).

The magical realism found in Allende’s novel also allows for the commingling of the improbable and mundane. However, the violent military coup that is depicted in this text is something that is neither mundane nor improbable. Therefore, Allende shifts to a narrative mode that is more realistic. To compare the narrative modes that Allende employs – magical realist and realist – let us examine a couple of passages: the first, a magical-realist passage from the beginning of the novel, and the second, a realist passage from the end, when the military coup is being described. In the first passage, the Trueba family's maid has already prepared breakfast and is taking it to Rosa's bedroom:

Frente a la puerta de Rosa vaciló, golpeada por la fuerza del presentimiento. Entró sin anunciarse a la habitación, como era su costumbre, y al punto notó que olía a rosas, a pesar de que no era la época de esas flores. Entonces la Nana supo que había ocurrido una desgracia irreparable. Depositó con cuidado la bandeja en la mesa de noche y caminó lentamente hasta la ventana. Abrió las pesadas cortinas y el pálido sol de la mañana entró en el cuarto. Se volvió acongojada y no le sorprendió ver sobre la cama a Rosa muerta, más bella que nunca, con el pelo definitivamente verde, la piel del tono del marfil nuevo y sus ojos amarillos como la miel, abiertos. (36-37)

When she came to Rosa’s door, she stopped, gripped by a premonition. She entered without knocking, as she always did, and immediately noticed the scent of roses, even though they were not in season. This was how Nana
understood that an inescapable disaster had occurred. She set the tray down carefully beside the bed and walked slowly to the window. She opened the heavy drapes and let the pale morning sun into the room. Grief-stricken, she turned around and was not at all surprised to see Rosa lying dead upon the bed, more beautiful than ever, her hair strikingly green, her skin the tone of new ivory, and her honey-gold eyes wide open, staring at the ceiling. (24)

This passage is found in the opening chapter, titled "Rosa the Beautiful," and depicts a green-haired girl of unparalleled beauty. Her sister Clara, who is clairvoyant and had dreamed this death, kneels beside her. The reader can observe the maid's premonition of Rosa's death stemming from her association of the scent of roses (out of season) and disaster. While there are other passages at the beginning of the novel that are more spectacularly magical – for example, Clara moving a saltshaker through her powers of telekinesis (18, tr. 8) – the above passage is an apt example of a magical realist style, as it touches upon the realm of the fantastic, but does not enter it wholeheartedly. It is important to reiterate that magical realism as a mode of narration is not a form of ‘distortion’ by default, or at the least it is not a very strong one. The depiction of Rosa’s corpse, as magical as it is, does not in fact ‘distort’ the reality of the diegetic world that is represented, as it is magical in itself. Consequently, within the reality of this diegetic world, the depiction of Rosa’s world is not a ‘distortion’ of anything at all. There is no particular historical event being represented, and therefore, none that has undergone changes through its presentation.

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27 All translations of La Casa de los espíritus are from Magda Bogin’s translation of the text, appearing in the “Works Consulted” as The House of the Spirits.
within a magical-realist world. Therefore, there is no ‘distortion’ at the level of an historical referent nor in the readers’ perception of one. The magical-real world at the beginning of Allende’s novel is, in its own reality, as ‘real’ as it is presented. The realist presentation of a magical world, characteristic of magical realism, lies in direct contrast to the ‘distorted’ presentation of a historical reality that we find in ‘distorted’ historical fiction.

Therefore, it is interesting to consider the stylistic changes that the novel undergoes once it begins to depict a verifiable historical reality that is close to Allende. The referent here is no longer predominantly imagined, as is the magical real world of before. Here it is without a doubt the Chilean dictatorship. Had Allende continued to use magical realism, then this section would certainly cause more defamiliarisation in the reader. In order to depict this world in a manner that is magically real, she would have had to alter what is known of this verifiable and tangible world.

Let us contrast the style of writing that Allende employs to describe Rosa's death with a passage in the aptly titled chapter "The Hour of Truth," near the end of the novel. Here Alba has been taken prisoner by the military at the time of the coup:

En el pequeño cubo solitario de su prisión trató de aclarar sus ideas, pero estaba atormentada por el dolor de la paliza, la sed, la venda apretada en las sienes, el ruido aronador de la radio, el terror de las pisadas que se

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28 Alejo Carpentier’s ‘marvelous real’ (precursor to ‘magical realism’) novel, El Reino de este mundo, ‘distorts’ our known reality when depicting the Haitian Revolution. He emphasises the strength and importance of what is supernatural in Haiti (and the Americas in general). His intention, like many of the Latin American authors of the ‘50s and ‘60s (i.e., Cortázar and Borges) was to question our very perception of reality, and its limits. Nonetheless, as I demonstrate below, Allende problematizes the mixture of history with the supernatural, as well as the loss of a stable, sense of reality.
acercaban y el alivio cuando se alejaban, los gritos y las órdenes. Se encogió como un feto en el suelo y se abandonó a sus múltiples sufrimientos. Así estuvo varias horas, tal vez días. Dos veces fue un hombre a sacarla y la guió a una letrina fétida, donde no pudo lavarse, porque no había agua. Le daba un minuto de tiempo y la ponía sentada en el excusado con otra persona silenciosa y torpe como ella. No podía adivinar si era otra mujer o un hombre. Al principio lloró, lamentando que su tío Nicolás no le hubiera dado un entrenamiento especial para soportar la humillación, que le parecía peor que el dolor, pero al fin se resignó a su propia inmundicia y dejó de pensar en la insoportable necesidad de lavarse. Le dieron de comer maíz tierno, un pequeño trozo de pollo y un poco de helado, que ella adivinó por el sabor, el olor, la temperatura, y devoró apresuradamente con la mano, extrañada de aquella cena de lujo, inesperada en aquel lugar. (428)
In the tiny, solitary cube where she was being held, she tried to clarify her thoughts, but she was tortured by the pain of her beating, her thirst, the bandage pressing on her temples, the drone of the radio, the terror of approaching footsteps and her relief when they moved away, the shouts and the orders. She curled up like a fetus on the floor and surrendered to her pain. She remained in that position for hours, perhaps days. A man came twice to take her to the bathroom. He led her to a fetid lavatory where she was unable to wash because there was no water. He allowed her a minute, placing her on the toilet seat next to another person as silent and sluggish as
herself. She could not tell if it was a woman or a man. At first she wept, wishing her Uncle Nicolás had given her a special course in how to withstand humiliation, which she found worse than pain, but she finally resigned herself to her own filth and stopped thinking about her unbearable need to wash. They gave her boiled corn, a small piece of chicken, and a bit of ice cream, which she identified by their taste, smell, and temperature, and which she wolfed down with her hands, astonished to be given such luxurious food, unexpected in a place like that. (346-47)

This passage from the "Hour of Truth" is more grounded in sordid, historical reality than the one from "Rosa the Beautiful." Alba's extreme discomfort and her surroundings are described in great detail: from inside and outside the cell, to the sounds of approaching footsteps and the radio, to the food she is given and how she eats it. There is no sense that magic could be found in Alba’s prison cell, or in the traumatic historical reality that is depicted.

The lack of magic at the end of the novel is also related to the development of a political consciousness in the female characters of the novel. Therefore, the transition from a magical realist mode of narration to one that is realist may also be a comment upon political questions that are even beyond the borders of Chilean national history. Magical realism, says P. Gabrielle Foreman, "presumes that the individual requires a bond with the traditions and the faith of the community, that s/he is historically constructed and connected" (286). In the magical realist section, the traditional role of women is within a patriarchal society. Thus, magic appears in La Casa de los espíritus mainly in domestic
spaces (i.e., Rosa’s bedroom). Patricia Hart even suggests that there is a "continuous campaign during this novel [...] to place magical realism in trivial settings" (Narrative 39). Later, as the novel progresses, magic (and hence the more domestic sphere) is displaced by a political historical reality that takes place in universities, prisons, and on the streets. This transition is attested to by Alba who says that Clara's notebooks describe "un mundo mágico que se acabó" (94) (“a magic world that no longer exists” 72). It is significant that Alba make this observation. Clara, her grandmother, stayed generally within the domestic sphere; she was clairvoyant, and was surrounded by magic, yet she never actively contested political injustices, or injuries against herself brought on by Esteban.

In one passage, Esteban hits Clara, and her response is literally to never talk to him again. Clara’s continued silence maybe a form of wielding power, but it is not a forceful one. I would not suggest that Clara’s character is altogether passive, but there definitely is an increase in political action by the female characters as the novel progresses, and this increase in political action occurs at the same time (and seems dependent upon) a decrease in magic.

Foreman states that “the magic in Allende's world is swept away by the political cataclysm she describes" (295). And she suggests that in this manner, Allende seems aware of what readers and critics have come to expect of Latin American novels, that is, "a family chronicle in a magical world," which is what some reviewers have unfortunately focused on (296).

Allende’s awareness of what readers may expect of a magical realist novel also comes through if one reads the novel as a parody of the genre. While critics have seen
Allende as being overly influenced, or even plagiarizing García Márquez's Cien años de Soledad, the shift in her novel from the magically real to realism is a strong argument against these charges. Antoni makes the convincing case that what Allende does in La Casa de la espíritus is, in fact, to write a parody of García Márquez's novel. And as Cien años de soledad is widely considered to be the seminal text of magical realism, we can extend Antoni’s argument to suggest that Allende may also be performing a parody of the genre itself. She uses some of the same stylistic techniques, the same type of language ("the language of magical realism," as Antoni points out [17]). She even utilizes similar characters: Rosa is based on Remedios, and, to a lesser extent Clara on Ursula, Esteban on José Arcadio, and Blanca on Amaranta (19-20). The characterization of Tío Marcos quite clearly originates from García Márquez's character, Melquíades. Both are "adventurers, world travelers, conveyors of great inventions, bearers of magical books; both are alchemists, astronomers, entrepreneurs. They are even similar in appearance: Melquíades with his 'untamed' beard and 'flashing' smile, Tío Marcos with his 'pirate's' mustache and 'sharklike' smile" (19). In fact, the similarity between the names Tío Marcos and Márquez may make this connection more obvious. But there is a self-conscious parody of Cien años de soledad to be discerned, the most obvious moment coming when Clara insists that names should not be repeated in the family because “los nombres repetidos crean confusión en los cuadernos de anotar la vida” (127) ("repeating the same name just caused confusion in her notebooks that bore witness to life" 99) – a reference to the incessant repetition of names in García Márquez’s novel.
Significantly, at the end of the novel, just before Alba is taken prisoner, Coronel García builds a bonfire in the family's courtyard. He burns "magic" books that used to belong to Tío Marcos and had been stored in the Trueba's basement. Antoni observes that it is from these magical books that the principal female characters in the novel have learned to read. Antoni adds that the significance is that Clara's magical notebooks later survive, while Tio Marcos's books are destroyed. Therefore, Antoni makes a parallel between Tio Marcos's magical books and the magical books of García Márquez (25).

The burning of these books by Coronel García (i.e., the military) may signify more than the clear historical reference to the book burnings that the Chilean military performed at the time of the coup. The destruction of books may also suggest that the teachings and influence of intellectuals and artists, such as García Márquez, will persist and remain in the minds of their readers, who in turn may be future intellectuals or artists, like Allende. Perhaps more importantly for this discussion, the burning of Tio Marcos's books could be seen as a moment of artistic and intellectual renewal, imposed violently by the traumatic situation of living under a dictatorship. Therefore Allende's need to denounce the dictatorship and her need to represent it are observed in her reluctance to use magic to accomplish her goals.

Although, at the beginning, it is Clara's notebooks which are being narrated, they are in fact being read by Alba. Therefore, while La Casa de los espíritus begins with Clara's voice (magically real) through her notebooks, it ends with Alba's voice (politically real). Significantly, an earthquake occurs in the last of Clara's chapters. The earthquake could be seen as a figurative demarcation, revealing the end of the magical realist mode in the novel:
"El terremoto marcó un cambio tan importante en la vida de la familia Trueba, que a partir de entonces dividieron los acontecimientos en antes y después de esa fecha" (176) (“The earthquake signaled such an important change in the life of the Trueba family that from then on they divided all events into before and after that date” 139). Curiously the phenomenon of an earthquake is in itself rather larger than life – hence almost supernatural, and relating to the magically real. However, the earthquake described is also a clear historical reference, especially for Chileans, to the largest earthquake worldwide that has ever been recorded (a magnitude of 9.5) which occurred on May 22, 1960. Therefore, the presence of this fictional-historical earthquake figuratively and literally straddles the line between a reality that is almost supernatural (e.g., magically real) and a tangible historical reality.

**Between Fact and Legend**

Allende’s treatment of the first period of the Chilean dictatorship is done with extreme caution; she is careful not to ‘distort’ this brutal truth. She writes:

Gracias a mi trabajo de periodista supe exactamente lo que sucedía en mi patria, lo viví de cerca y esos muertos, torturados, viudas, y huérfanos, dejaron huellas imborrables en mi memoria. Los últimos capítulos de *La Casa de los espíritus* relatan esos acontecimientos. Me basé en lo que vieron mis ojos y en los testimonios directos de quienes vivieron la brutal experiencia de la represión. (“Los libros” 18)

Thanks to my work as a journalist, I found out exactly what was happening in my country. I experienced it up close. The dead, the tortured, the widows,
and orphans, left non-erasable imprints on my memory. The last chapters of The House of the Spirits tell those events. I based myself on what I saw with my own eyes and on the direct testimonies of those who lived the brutal experience of repression. (my translation)

While there are some exceptions, her portrayal of this period is devoid of explicit references to specific events or historical actors. Nonetheless, it is easy to deduce which signs act as referents to historical people, places and events in the tangible world outside of the novel. The readers may discern, for example, that the unnamed country the narrator speaks of is Chile. The narration then reads like the creation of a pseudo-fictitious world occurring within a real historical past. Some of the historical references are almost explicit and undoubtedly point to three legendary figures of this period. The first is Salvador Allende who appears in La Casa de los espíritus first as “el Candidato,” and later as “el Presidente.” 29 This character’s depiction in the novel, from his physical appearance to the beleaguered government that he led, offers strong references to Allende himself. There is also the poet, Pablo Neruda, who appears in the novel simply as “el Poeta.” He too is depicted in such a manner that there is no factual discrepancy with Neruda’s own past. This includes the fact that Neruda died only days after the coup.

I will concentrate here on the third figure, one whose identity is more veiled. He is the historical Victor Jara, the legendary singer-songwriter whose lyrics were concerned with the working class and who was the country’s most popular singer before the coup. In

29 The historical Salvador Allende was the democratically elected socialist president who reportedly committed suicide in the presidential palace on the day of the coup, before being captured by the military. He was also Isabel Allende’s uncle.
La Casa de los espíritus, Jara appears as Pedro Tercero García. As I will argue, the impossibility of confirming the details surrounding Jara’s death plays an important role in how Allende inevitably must alter her depiction of Victor Jara through the character of Pedro Tercero García. More than just giving Jara a different name, Allende also changes a number of details of Jara’s life. For instance, Jara was born in a slum of Santiago, while the character of Pedro Tercero García was born on a farm. The most significant difference between Jara and the characterization of Pedro is what occurs at the end of the novel, where Pedro escapes to Canada with Blanca, and they go on to lead a peaceful and content life in exile. This is far different from what is known about the historical Victor Jara.

When the military took over, Jara was sequestered and taken to a concentration camp. During this time, he was tortured, and it is reported that some of his fingers were chopped off. He was later executed. Allende also has the character of Pedro lose some fingers, but instead of Pedro losing his fingers during the coup, it is Esteban Trueba who chops them off because he is angry that his daughter, Blanca, is having a relationship with the songwriter – a man of a lower socio-economic class.

The presence of Pedro’s character falls outside of the realism vs. magical realism dichotomy that the division of the novel’s sections falls under. Pedro stands apart toward the end of the novel, where Allende uses realism as her preferred mode of narration to direct the reader toward perceiving more naturalistically and faithfully the beginnings of Chile’s dictatorship. He is a veiled allegory of a known historical actor in a section of the novel where magic has been withdrawn and the allegories are so transparent that they hardly produce any defamiliarisation in the reader. Indeed the character of Pedro produces a
greater sense of defamiliarisation in the reader when compared, for instance, with the reader’s reaction to the characters of El Presidente or El Poeta. The reasons why the character of Pedro is an anomaly in this regard may be because of what is both known and speculated about surrounding Jara’s death at the hands of the military. As well, Jara’s status in the consciousness of left-wing Chileans was almost legendary before his death, and became accentuated after he was killed.

The entire truth behind Victor Jara’s capture, subsequent torture and execution is impossible to verify. All that is known are the eyewitness accounts of fellow prisoners. But these accounts differ considerably from one another. What differs most in their telling is the extent to which he was tortured and the resistance he offered. Joan Jara’s account is as close to the bare facts that one may hope to get. She was able to recuperate her husband’s body after it was dumped in a vacant lot, describing it in the following way:

> His eyes were open and they seemed to still look ahead with intensity and defiance, in spite of a wound on his head and terrible bruises on his cheek. His clothes were torn, [. . .] his chest riddled with holes and a gaping wound in his abdomen. His hands seemed to be hanging from his arms at a strange angle as though his wrists were broken (qtd. in Hart, Narrative 102).

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30 As will be seen, critics have referred to Jara using the words ‘myth’ and ‘legend.’ I have opted to use the term ‘legend’ to connote Jara’s enormous popularity and stature within Chile’s politics and culture before he died. But, even more importantly, the term also refers to the unreliable, likely exaggerated, accounts of the circumstances surrounding his death.
Jara’s dead body acts as a sort of text for Joan, who can read from the wounds and bruises the atrocious violence that was committed on her husband. From eyewitness accounts she heard that he had been publicly abused and beaten by an officer who shouted at Jara:

[“Canta ahora, huevón, si puedes”] “Sing now, if you can, you bastard!” and Victor’s voice raised in the stadium after those four days of suffering to sing a verse of “Venceremos” [a popular revolutionary song]. Then he was beaten down and dragged away for the last phase of his agony. (Hart, Narrative 103)

Patricia Hart points out that even though this story is full of drama, enough perhaps for the death of any hero, the story has further evolved, gained epic proportions, and has now become a legend. Much of the legend has to do with what was done to Jara’s hands, which is significant as he was a guitarist. Some accounts say that his fingers were cut off, others that his hands were crushed, and still others that his hands were entirely cut off. The common elements of all the stories that one hears are that he was told by an officer “Canta ahora, huevón, si puedes,” and that something terrible was done to his hands.

With regard to Jara’s last days, Hart says that what is truth and what is legend is not so crucial. She writes: “[If those] who tell the story of Victor Jara’s death [say], ‘they cut off his fingers, but he kept on singing, they cut off his hands, but he kept on singing ...’ [they] are not really sensationalising history; they are using a myth to convey the deepest truth of their feelings about Jara in terms that can be grasped” (Narrative 106). Yet, like many others (including White), I would argue that the sensationalisation of history is always deeply rooted in emotions and feelings toward a subject. What is important about
Hart’s argument is that the accounts of Jara’s death form part of a history that cannot be agreed upon. The sensationalizing of history and the creation of legend in part depend upon (differing) historical narratives that cannot be verified or agreed upon. Therefore, in the absence of verifiable historical facts, the legendary version of Jara’s death is a version that at one point people chose to believe. Hart says that in the exaggeration of his death, Jara becomes a symbol, where he is considered the “spirit of Chilean resistance, or resistance to injustice in general, indomitable, in spite of repression and terror” (Narrative 107).

Therefore, in Allende’s novel, a wish-fulfilling ‘distortion’ of the events surrounding Jara’s death (Pedro instead flees to Canada) is chosen in the face of objective uncertainty.

These circumstances are then an interesting point to consider for the novelist who wants to write of this period. Similar to the situation of writers of the Holocaust who cannot always rely on official Nazi records, how does one represent Jara’s death factually if there are no official records of the circumstances of his death? Besides, the mere facts would never reveal the impact of his death, and the symbolic and legendary status that his death has acquired. Perhaps in La Casa de los espíritus, a more hyperbolic telling of his death would have fitted better with the earlier, more magical part of the novel. But it would seem out of place at the end of La Casa de los espíritus when the novel has already made its transition into realism. Hart believes that in telling Jara’s death in a way that would have been more faithful to what has been speculated, Allende would have been in a no-win situation: “If she had chosen realism, there would have been little pleasure for readers in hearing one of their most cherished myths debunked. On the other hand, a mythical, hyperbolic telling would have opened her to the charge of historical inaccuracy” (Narrative
Relating Jara’s final days and the details of his death forces any author to tread carefully the fine line between fact and legend. And the responsibility to hold that line was perhaps the reason that Allende chose not to include Jara’s story in a more explicit manner in the text. Therefore, Allende avoids the direct allegorical reference to Jara altogether. Instead of referring to him in abstract, yet easily identifiable terms, as “el cantante” for example (in keeping with her use of “el presidente” and “el poeta”), he instead appears as Pedro Tercero García – a character that does not quite stand in for the legendary figure of Jara, but sufficiently reminds us of him.31

The character of Pedro, thus, creates an interesting focal point for an analysis of Allende’s novel. Pedro’s allegorical reference is to a legendary figure whose death is shrouded with myth – a version of history that Allende perhaps does not want to discard so easily. On the other hand, Pedro’s appearance in the novel comes at a time when Allende has already shifted away from magic, towards a mode of storytelling that is more realist. The intertwining of legend and realism in the characterization of Victor Jara is significant in a novel that clearly attempts to separate depictions of the magically real and the naturalistic real.

The character of Pedro Tercero García will cause defamiliarisation in the readers of La Casa de los espíritus who are familiar with Victor Jara. McHale points out that:

“Integration of the historical and the fantastic [. . .] exacerbates the ontological hesitation [. . .].”

31 Interestingly, if Allende is “El Presidente,” and Neruda is “El Poeta,” the third historical character who was greatly influential in the socialist politics and culture in Chile of the late 1960s and early 1970s was precisely Victor Jara – Pedro (petra or rock) Tercero (third) García.
for here the hesitation is not between the supernatural and the realistic but between the supernatural and the historically real” (95). As was discussed in the Introduction, hesitation for Gadamer occurs in the viewer’s understanding of a trick picture. The reader’s hesitation in recognising Pedro’s allegorical referent similarly conforms to what Gadamer calls “the agony of seeing” in the trick picture. Victor Jara is both there and not there. He will, however, be recognized because of the responsibility felt by the reader to the memory of Victor Jara, and more generally to the events surrounding the Chilean coup. It is this feeling of hesitation that best describes the transition in the novel from the magically real to the realistic. Hesitation is not as present when readers know they are being confronted with fantasy; nor is its presence strongly felt when readers are presented with a world that conforms to their known reality. Hesitation occurs when readers are forced to relate the fantastical, fictive elements of the text with their foreknowledge of tangible reality and history. Therefore, characters such as the green-haired Rosa and El Presidente do not cause much hesitation as a conflict of recognition does not readily occur in the reader – the reader recognizes the fantastical in the characterisation of Rosa, and the realistic representation of Salvador Allende through El Presidente. Hesitation does occur, however, in the character of Pedro because he is a ‘distorted’ representation of Victor Jara.

To conclude, I would like to briefly discuss Frye’s notion of the “mode of romance” in relation to Allende’s novel. This mode “presents an idealized world: in romance heroes are brave, heroines beautiful, villains villainous, and the frustrations, ambiguities, and embarrassments of ordinary life are made little of. Hence its imagery presents a human counterpart of the apocalyptic world which we may call the analogy of innocence” (151). In
La Casa de los espíritus, the magical-realist section of the novel could be seen as falling within Frye’s definition of a romantic text. The past in Allende’s novel is superficially presented as idyllic, in its abundance of magic, supernaturally beautiful women and the lack of major shifts in politics that might disturb the Trueba family. Most important is the fact that this section “presents a human counterpart of the apocalyptic world which we may call the analogy of innocence.” The magical-realist section presents a country that is ‘innocent,’ a population that is perhaps even naive about “the apocalyptic world” that awaits. Therefore, the section provides a counterpart to the horror that will follow. In this sense, the innocence that Chile lost in the dictatorship is depicted romantically by Allende. And once her description of the dictatorship commences, the romantic narration is brought to an end.

In comparing Allende with Eltit, the former ultimately contests literary techniques that would destabilize a reader’s sense of historical fact when depicting the Chilean dictatorship. Eltit, nonetheless, would argue that the reality of the Chilean dictatorship cannot be properly represented, and thus what can only be conveyed is its feeling of oppression. The ideological and ethical contrast that I have examined between the aims of both authors is indicative of the postmodern dilemmas concerning historical representation. Are realist/naturalistic narratives necessary to represent certain historical realities? Is there a point when the abundant use of experimental literary techniques may override a text’s ability to reference the non-diegetic world, and thus create a ‘distortion overload’?
CHAPTER 4

MICROCOSMS AND REVOLUTIONARY ENERGIES: KATEB YACINE’S NEDJMA AND MOHAMMED DIB’S QUI SE SOUVIENT DE LA MER

Thus far in my thesis, I have concentrated on texts that provide retrospective accounts of traumatic historical events. In this chapter, I will turn my attention to two Algerian novels that were written before the conclusion of the country’s War of Independence (1954-1962), Kateb Yacine’s *Nedjma* (1956) and Mohammed Dib’s *Qui se souvient de la mer* (1962).¹

The particularity of these authors’ perspectives is that they have no certainty as to the outcome of the mounting tension and violence that they convey. What is of special interest to my analysis of these novels is what Franz Fanon views as the process of “decolonization” (35),² by which mounting tensions between the colonized and colonizer create a situation where an atmosphere of violence turns into violence in action. Put another way, he wonders: “Qu’est-ce qui fait exploser la marmite?” (54) (“What makes the lid blow off?” 71).³

As I will argue, *Nedjma* reveals the energies, accumulated over centuries of oppression, that will ultimately ‘make the lid blow off.’ In other words, the novel sheds light on the atmosphere of violence and growing revolutionary sentiment that will

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¹ *Qui se souvient de la mer* was published in 1962, just before the end of the war (Tremaine, “Dib” 284).

² Fanon’s *Les damnés de la terre*, from which the above citation is taken, was first published in 1961, so he too could not have known the outcome of the war at the time of its writing.

³ All translations of *Les damnés de la terre* are from Constance Farrington’s translation of the text, appearing in the “Works Consulted” as *The Wretched of the Earth*. 207
ultimately become the Algerian War of Independence. If *Nedjma* sheds light on the manner in which these energies may cause an explosion of violence, Mohammed Dib’s novel, *Qui se souvient de la mer* is an examination of the explosion itself. Both novels present within a symbolical microcosm their present-day Algeria. ‘Distortions’ of temporality, narrative form and narrative voice will be analysed as they create, and act upon, the texts’ symbolic microcosms.

**Kateb Yacine’s *Nedjma***

Charles Bonn remarks in his book-length study on Kateb Yacine’s *Nedjma* that readers unfamiliar with the Maghreb will attempt to find in Algerian fiction documents about a society of which they know little (*Kateb 5*). Bonn suggests that readers of *Nedjma* may expect the text to provide a testimony of the War of Independence, and that reading it as a testimony, readers may anticipate a linear and chronological narrative, with descriptions that are “savoureuses ou cruelles, mais réalistes” (*Kateb 5*) (“savoury or cruel, but realistic” [my translation]). Yet, *Nedjma* makes Bonn’s hypothetical reader “déconcerté” (*Kateb 5*) (“confounded”), creating defamiliarisation in readers with respect to the historical reality that they might expect or hope to easily discern. The process of defamiliarisation in the reader arises from a layering of ‘distorting’ techniques. As I will argue in my analysis of the novel, the first defamiliarizing layer is that the central characters in the narrative should

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4 The Maghreb refers to the countries of Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria.

5 All translations of Bonn are my own.
be interpreted as allegories/personifications of the more significant historical players and forces of this period. The readers’ ability to discern this symbolic microcosm of Algeria in the mid 1950s is hampered by, first, temporal ‘distortions’: there are conflations of the past and the present in the same temporal space (as we earlier saw in Maus), and the overall structure of the novel is non-chronological. Furthermore the reader’s comprehension will be hindered by ‘distortions’ at the level of narrative form (syntax and style) and narrative voice: a multi-voiced narration that makes it difficult for the reader to discern who is actually narrating a certain passage, or even who are the speakers in the dialogues, along with deciding on the effects on the narrator’s consciousness of narcotics and dreams.

Furthermore, these defamiliarizing techniques formally speak to the contemporaneous uncertainty regarding Algeria’s future. The text’s intelligibility, and subsequent meaning, Bonn argues, “est à trouver par un lecteur actif” (Kateb 36) (“is to be found by an active reader”). It is specifically the active reader who is familiar with Algerian history who will most accurately perceive in Nedjma the tensions of this period, and interpret its historical and political meaning.6

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6 Despite the fact that the themes and characters explored in Nedjma are present in Kateb’s novels, poetry and plays before and after Nedjma was published, I have decided to concentrate exclusively on Nedjma here for many reasons, not the least of which is to maintain consistency when referring to symbolic meanings, characterizations, etc. that may have been altered over time. Kateb could be said to have reworked over his entire life the themes and characters present in Nedjma. He states: “Je crois bien, en effet, que je suis l’homme d’un seul livre” (qtd. in Dejéux, Littérature maghrébine 210) (“I believe, in fact, that I am a man of one sole book” [my translation]). Hédi Abdel-Jaouad says Kateb could be seen within the aesthetic tradition of the avant-garde where “to write is to rewrite what has already been written—to write the same original text which will remain forever in ‘gestation’” (“Kateb” 12). In subsequent works, or ‘rewrites,’ the characteristics of the protagonists change. For instance, says Aresu: “Nedjma’s elusive female protagonist, who is in turn sister, cousin, wife, lover and yet remains an essentially abstract and poetic
As already mentioned, *Nedjma* is not necessarily a testimony to the War of Independence, even under the conditions of an active reading. Rather, Kateb uncovers the energies that underlie the contemporaneous and historical struggle for independence, and reveals the socio-historic trajectories of those energies.\(^7\) As Marc Gontard\(^8\) explains:

“*Nedjma* est l’une des toutes premières œuvres profondément engagées dans le *processus* révolutionnaire qui aboutira à l’indépendance de l’Algérie” (16, emphasis mine) (“*Nedjma* is one of the very first works profoundly engaged in the revolutionary *process* which would bring about the independence of Algeria”).\(^9\) These energies and tensions have accumulated throughout Algeria’s colonial and pre-colonial past (not only under the French, but also the Romans, Arabs, and Turks). The process of how they will culminate in the War of Independence is what Kateb conveys in his novel.

The text challenges readers to find meanings that reflect the political and historical realities under whose influence the novel was written. Yet, while the revolutionary *process* is ever-present in *Nedjma*, Kateb could not foresee with any certainty Algeria’s eventual construct, evolves outside the novel [when taken to the theatre stage] into a still symbolic but saliently delineated revolutionary character” (97).

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\(^7\) Kateb is his patronymic, and Yacine is his given name. The author refers to himself as Kateb Yacine as a reference to the way that students were identified in school (Dejéux, *Littérature maghrébine* 209).

\(^8\) Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Gontard are to his book-length study on *Nedjma* (1985). All translations of Gontard are my own.

\(^9\) The journal *Al-Cha’ab* criticized Kateb, claiming that his work is distanced from the revolution and that he cuts himself off from the Algerian people (Dejéux, *Littérature maghrébine* 209). For more negative criticism of Kateb’s work, see Dejéux (*Littérature maghrébine* 209-10).
victory in achieving independence. Thus, Kateb was not able to conclusively frame or
represent a struggle that had not yet been concluded.\(^\text{10}\)

The inability to know the result of the conflict plays into the text’s meaning.
Nedjma, the character from whom the novel take its title, is symbolically representative of
Algeria. She shares its past, its present, and reveals its uncertain future. Kateb says of this
symbolic character: “Nedjma (comme l’Algérie) est une femme qui se cherche, que l’on
cherche. Actuellement, la recherche n’est pas encore finie” (qtd. in Gontard 110) (“Nedjma
[like Algeria] is a woman in search of herself, who is being sought. Presently, the search is
not yet over”). Like the title character, the novel itself also has uncertain symbolic
meanings, which stem from the historical realities under which it was written. Gontard
says: “Le sens le plus authentique de Nedjma est d’être lui-même incomplet, inachevé,
incertain... Pouvait-il en être autrement dans l’Algérie des années 50?” (110, ellipsis in
original) (“The most authentic sense of Nedjma is that it is itself incomplete, unfinished,
uncertain…. Could it be otherwise in Algeria in the 1950s?”).

The polyvalent nature of Nedjma, coupled with the period when it was written, may
complicate the reader’s ability to perceive how the text is in dialogue with the war. I say
‘dialogue’ because what is clear is that the text does not make direct references to the war,
but is more than engaged with it at the level of exploring what has made this conflict
culminate in the War of Independence. Jacqueline Arnaud, however, highlights its lack of
engagement with the war, claiming that Nedjma was written between 1946 and 1955,

\(^\text{10}\) A consequence of not knowing the outcome of historical events as they are taking
place is that they cannot be narrated/framed – in Hayden White’s terms – according to its
end result.
before the war began: “Nedjma est un roman d’avant le 1er novembre 1954 et le déclenchement de l’insurrection, puisque des passages importantes sont déjà publiés en 1953” (qtd. in Bonn, Kateb 5) (“Nedjma is a novel from before November 1, 1954 and the beginning of the insurrection since important passages were already published in 1953”). This much is true, yet Kateb structured the text as a whole between 1954 and 1956, and one might imagine with much plausibility that some more detailed editing was also occurring at the same time. In fact, and I believe this may be a small leap of faith, Bonn wonders whether Kateb’s organization of the text into nine series of twelve chapters may be read as an allusion to the nine years that separate May 8, 1945, “autour duquel les récits du roman se développent, de sa renaissance le 1er novembre 1954” (Kateb. 51) (“around which the stories of the novel develop, from its [Algeria’s] rebirth on November 1, 1954”). Bonn’s theory is strengthened, as we will see, by the fact that Kateb was imprisoned during the demonstrations of Sétif, and it is here that Bonn suggests he became a revolutionary writer (Kateb 56). Whether or not what Bonn states is plausible, he points to the importance of the structure of Nedjma. Therefore, even if the novel were written before the war began, and does not directly reference the war, this period of structuration that took place during the war is significant. The ‘revolutionary’ nature of Nedjma can in part be seen in its structure, especially, as I argue below, in its temporal and formal ‘distortions,’ blending the past with the present.

**Nedjma’s Obscure Plot**

As was the case in Eltit’s Lumpérica, the plot in Nedjma is not easy to delineate. Kateb has purposefully created a text that is obscure and difficult to read. Any attempt to outline the
plot, and make intelligible sense of the text, would therefore, appear to be in conflict with the goals of the author, committed to abstract representation and ambiguous, polyvalent meanings. Nonetheless, in order to make reference to various passages in the text and provide proper orientation, I feel a plot summary of sorts is necessary.

In *Nedjma*, the title character affects the lives of the four principal characters: Mourad, Mustapha, Lakhdar and Rachid. These four young men are both friends and related by blood. They also share a desire for Nedjma, the wife of Kamel, a desire which emerges in several different forms: lust, possession, near reverence, and, perhaps paradoxically, bitterness, because they feel she is inaccessible.

Nedjma herself is silent throughout the text, except for one very brief interior monologue. Mystery surrounds her origins. What is made clear is that Nedjma is the daughter of a Jewish French woman, but was adopted at an early age by Lella Fatma. While her biological father is unknown, it is revealed that Nedjma was conceived in a cave during a night spent by the Frenchwoman with two men – Rachid’s father and Si Mokhtar. During this night, Rachid’s father was killed, and his body was found the next day. Rachid wants to learn the truth behind the night of his father’s death, and therefore makes the acquaintance of Si Mokhtar. For Rachid, this mystery is also related to the truth of Nedjma’s origins, for, as he later finds out, she might be his sister.

While it is unknown to others, Si Mokhtar knows he is Kamel’s father, yet keeps this information secret as it would reveal the possibility that Kamel might have married his own sister (if Nedjma is, in fact, Si Mokhtar’s daughter). This secret is later revealed to Rachid when the two go on a pilgrimage to Mecca. The two men decide to sequester
Nedjma, effectively removing her from a possibly incestuous marriage, and take her to the Nadhor, a remote region of Algeria where the last remnants of the ancient and legendary tribe, the Keblout, still live.\textsuperscript{11} The Keblout are Rachid and Si Mokhtar’s own ancestors. However, their fathers had abandoned the Keblout, but they believe that by taking Nedjma there, she will be reunited with her (and their) true destiny.

It is understood, despite the novel’s achronological description of events, that the four young men have had problems with the French authorities and institutions in Algeria. For instance, Lakhdar strikes their employer, Monsieur Ernst, a French settler. He is arrested, but later escapes. Mourad, in turn, kills Monsieur Ricard for abusing, Suzy, M. Ernst’s daughter. Mourad is taken to prison, and the three remaining friends decide to leave the village. Rachid is later arrested for stabbing someone (presumably French) after a brief altercation on the street, and will join Mourad in prison.

Gontard has devised a complex table to summarise both the actual and possible relationships between the characters (40). Revealing the confusion surrounding their relationships, Gontard explains in an earlier passage in his study: “Nedjma est donc la fille de Si Mokhtar (ou celle du père de Rachid…). Cousine de Lakhdar et de Mourad (mais Sidi Ahmed a été lui aussi l’amant de la Française…), elle peut être la soeur de Rachid, à moins qu’elle ne soit mariée, comme c’est du reste probable, à son propre frère, Kamel” (27, ellipses in original) (“Nedjma is thus the daughter of Si Mokhtar [or of Rachid’s father…]. She is the cousin of Lakhdar and Mourad [yet Sidi Ahmed was also himself the lover of the Frenchwoman…], she might be the sister of Rachid, unless she is not married as it is likely,

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{11} The Keblout is both the name used to designate the founding member of the tribe
with her own brother, Kamel”). To look at the significance of these relationships, I will first introduce the symbolic microcosm that is set up by Kateb.

The Symbolic Microcosm

In the symbolic microcosm of the novel, certain characters come to represent historical players and forces in Kateb’s contemporaneous Algeria. The complexities of the tangible historical world of Algeria are thus distilled in this fictional universe. The four young men – Mustapha, Rachid, Lakhdar, and Mourad – represent the various parties who sought independence for Algeria, yet were vying for power, often violently, amongst themselves in the mid 1950s; the figure of Kamel stands for an un-evolving form of tradition; Si Mokhtar signifies Algeria’s mythical past; Monsieur Ricard and Monsieur Ernst allegorize the French colonial presence in Algeria; and the title character of Nedjma is the most complex symbol of all, symbolising Algeria’s ‘adulterated’ past and Algeria’s hope for a radically different, independent future.  

In his oft-cited review of Nedjma, Maurice Nadeau describes how the characters in the novel constitute an astral universe of their own: “Kateb Yacine a construit, [. . .] un univers stellaire. En son centre, il a déposé un soleil: Nedjma, autour duquel gravitent un certain nombre d’étoiles grands et petites ” (qtd. in Gontard 90) (“Kateb Yacine built a stellar universe. In its center, he placed a sun: Nedjma, around which revolve a certain number of stars large and small”). Nadeau conceptually likens the diegetic universe of and the tribe itself.

12 Notably, there is no strong, single allegory in Nedjma for organized religion as a significant force during this period.
Nedjma to that of an astronomical universe. What is important to highlight is the central position given to the character of Nedjma. The behaviour of every character of significance is influenced by her presence in the novel. The promise of the War of Independence figuratively is dependent on how Nadeau’s stars align themselves. The revolution of the heavens thus becomes the image of political revolution. Dejéux implies this when he says: “La révolution est inscrite dans les étoiles qui tournent” (Littérature maghrébine 220) (“The revolution is written in the spinning stars” [my translation]).

While the autobiographical evidence suggests that Kateb named Nedjma after a cousin he had fallen in love with, it is also perhaps not coincidental that the word nedjma means ‘star’ in Arabic. And along with the crescent moon, the star was the symbol on the flags of the Étoile Nord-Africaine, a fore-runner of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN).

The potential liberating nature of these young men’s figurative ‘revolution’ around Nedjma, however, is juxtaposed to the colonial institutions and forms of oppression that seem to surround them. Various colonial institutions leave their marks (psychologically and physically) on the young men, including the school, the prison, and the workplace. The importance of highlighting these institutions is that Kateb gives a sociological/psychological framework for readers to begin to understand the young men’s anger and sympathize with them. “Kateb’s characters,” Bernard Aresu posits, “show substantial anchoring in a revolutionary tradition that views individuals as sociopolitical products” (95). Bonn also shares this view of the actors of a revolution, and thus the revolution itself;

13 All subsequent translations of Dejéux will be my own.
as products of oppression and imprisonment. He relates the various forms of imprisonment, by force (the prison cell) or by choice (the fadouk where drugs are consumed), to the notion that it is precisely in this state of imprisonment that revolutionary ideas might come forth. This much is true, says Bonn, even in the case of Kateb himself: “N’est-ce pas en prison que Kateb se découvrit écrivain révolutionnaire après le 8 mai 1945?” (Kateb 56) (‘Isn't it in prison that Kateb found himself as a revolutionary writer after May 8, 1945?’). It is then through the experience of certain forms of oppression that revolutionary ideas may be born.

**Narrative Voice**

Earlier, I provided an outline of sorts to help readers understand the manner in which the diegetic world of *Nedjma* references the historical reality of Kateb’s contemporaneous Algeria. I also introduced the notion that the central characters in the novel constitute a microcosm of that world. The symbolism of each of these characters is the topic of this section, where I also discuss the significance of the narrative voice of the novel, arguing that the narrative voice can further ‘distort’ our understanding of this microcosm.

The narration of the novel is performed by an anonymous narrator and by the characters themselves, and includes passages of stream of consciousness. The result is a

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14 The FLN would later maintain the flag, making it, with few changes, the flag of Algeria after independence.

15 John D. Erickson reveals how the very outset of the novel creates a space by which a reader can “‘orient’ himself [sic].” The beginning of the novel is set in the work yard, and the end of the first chapter is set in a prison. This space reveals colonial Algeria as “closed in, literally and narratively, by hard labor, poverty, repression and imprisonment” (33). Yet even if the space is clearly colonial Algeria, the symbolic complexity of the characters who inhabit that space creates an effect of defamiliarisation in the reader.
polyphonic narrative voice that replaces what Bonn calls “the traditional narrator” (Kateb 27). Sentences are often extremely long, some taking two or three pages before reaching their end (i.e., 79-80, 105-106, 151-152). The comprehension of these long sentences is facilitated somewhat by the ample use of colons that often seem to substitute for periods. The progression of the text itself does not follow the chronological order of events, going back and forth between events, sometimes with repetition. An example of repetition is when Mourad, one of the novel’s main characters and one that the reader is already quite familiar with, is described as “un jeune homme nommé Mourad” (71) (“a young man called Mourad” 94), as if he is being presented to the reader for the first time.

What is at first striking to the reader is that the text is narrated through multiple viewpoints that are not clearly differentiated. As explained by Aresu: “events are simultaneously scattered and filtered through the multiple consciousness of several narrators” (9). Intertwined are the voices of an anonymous narrator, along with those of

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16 As I argue in the section on Eltit, the labeling of a genre, style or author as “(non)traditional” is problematic. The “traditional” modes of narration that Kateb appears to relinquish—naturalistic representation, discernable plot, chronological sequence— are comparable to those that Eltit rejects, and which have been discussed in more detail in the section devoted to her novel.

17 For a visual chart that accurately represents the complexity in the novel’s chronological progressions, regressions and digressions, see Gontard 38.

18 All translations of Nedjma are from Richard Howard’s translation of the text.

19 Kateb refers to his work as an “autobiographie au pluriel” (qtd. in Salhi 21) “autobiography in the plural”). What Kateb admits to is that Nedjma is based on someone he had fallen in love with, as we have seen. It is no coincidence that her name was Nedjma, that she was married, and that she was a cousin of his. This information, along with other biographical details, has led critics to conclude that the male characters in Nedjma symbolically stand for Kateb’s personal voice, while trying to channel the voice of Algeria’s struggle. At a conference in Algiers in 1967, Kateb said: “Nedjma n’est pas une
the four principal characters, Mustapha, Rachid, Lakhdar, and Mourad. Rather than having
the omniscient or first-person narrator of the realist novel tradition, Kateb’s fiction is what
Bonn calls (in French) “fiction objective” because the narrative is told through these
multiple characters. The importance of “fiction objective,” says Bonn, is that it forces the
reader to be active. The reader must sort through and synthesize the various points of view.
However, as Bonn rightfully points out, in Kateb’s novel, it is difficult to identify the
speakers when engaging with the multiple characters’ narratives (Kateb 37-8).

The loss of individual identities on the part of the narrators in Nedjma may have
political significance. In the process of decolonization, says Fanon, the collective takes
precedence and what disappears first is “l’individualisme” (37) (“individualism” 47). Of
interest here is how Fanon’s statement reflects the process of decolonization that is present
in Nedjma. There is no single individual voice of the specific characters that is privileged,
or even made clear. Often the narrative form does not allow the reader to properly
distinguish between speakers. For instance, once could consider a passage in a bar where it
is apparent that there are at least four people involved in a conversation: Mourad,
Mustapha, Ameziane (a minor character), and the owner of the bar. Ameziane begins to tell
a story about how his friend Larbi and he used to work in a bathhouse. They knew a boy
from the Sahara who would come to sell water. He remarks that the boy came with a box

création de l’esprit; c’est une femme qui a bel et bien existé. Il s’agissait d’un amour
impossible. C’est une femme qui était déjà mariée”; and “Par la suite, cette femme
impossible, au fur et à mesure que je travaillais, s’est identifiée à l’Algérie et c’est là qu’il
faut comprendre le sens du symbole” (qtd. in Gontard 10-11) (“Nedjma is not a fantasy; she
is a woman who truly existed. It was an impossible love. She was a married woman”; and
“Afterwards, this impossible woman, while I was working, became identified with Algeria
and that is how the symbol should be understood”).
that is now in his possession, and Ameziane shows it to the group. What ensues is fifteen
different interlocutions that all elapse before a speaker is clearly identified (21-2, tr. 29).
Despite the fact that half of these interlocutions are Ameziane’s, because he is answering
questions about the box, the speakers who ask him questions and make remarks are not at
all distinctive, and could be any of the three other people involved in the conversation.

Apart from the confusion of the narrative voice, there is also uncertainty as to the
mental state of the characters, even when their identities can be discerned. There exist
numerous passages (such as the Nadhor scene)²⁰ which may be dream sequences, or others
which may be narrated under the influence of narcotics, as we shall see. Thus, this
combined with the uncertainty regarding the identification of the characters’ voices produce
a hermeneutical phenomenon where the distinctions between the characters begins to
matter less, and dialogues are interpreted as forming a collective voice. This collective
voice could also be considered a multiple consciousness.

Yet, as Kamal Salhi notes, the reader’s difficulty in distinguishing the voices has
political significance, since the voices are perceived to merge into one. This phenomenon is
thus evidence of the development of a group consciousness: “This merging of voices
universalises their meaning as they come to represent all Algerians. Unlike the French
settlers, who argue amongst themselves constantly, the four friends do not air their

²⁰ The questioning of whether the Nadhor sequence is a dream or not has garnered
much attention, especially stemming from Arnaud’s study (listed as La Littérature
maghrébine de langue française [1986] in my “Works Consulted,” but originally published
as a thesis in 1978) that contends that the return to the Keblout is not representative of an
actual return to the mythical past, but rather a dream. And as such, the sequence represents
the impossibility of returning to a mythical past. For more on this sequence, see Gontard’s
essay, “A Propos de la séquence du Nadhor” which is entirely devoted to its examination.
disagreements in public and argue only when there are no Europeans present” (44). (Salhi gives examples of Europeans arguing amongst themselves [Kateb, Nedjma 14] in contrast to the Algerians who only disagree amongst themselves when no Europeans are present [Kateb, Nedjma 11-12].) The cousins put aside their individual identities to act as one. They are always ready to support each other when faced with oppression from ‘foreign’ powers (12).

On the other hand, there is a certain naïveté associated with making the claim that there is, in fact, a single unifying voice in pre-Independence Algeria. In reality, there were various factions vying for power, even within the Independence movement. Indeed, in Nedjma the four young men have a long history of fighting and come to symbolize these various factions. Since childhood, their fight is “leur bagarre interminable” (165) (“[their] interminable fight” 220), with all of them “prêts à se prendre à la gorge si la moindre occasion se présentait” (166) (“ready to spring at each others’ throats if there was the slightest excuse for it” 220). The conflict amongst factions appears, Fanon argues, in the process of decolonization. Violence is first expressed toward fellow men and women rather than the oppressor: “Cette agressivité sédimentée dans ses muscles, le colonisé va la manifester d’abord contre les siens” (40) (“The colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people” 52). This could also be true on the political front, before the specific goals and methods of the revolution are consolidated from amongst the opinions of various factions. Gontard thus sees the rivalry between the young men in Nedjma as symbolic of the conflicts between the political parties vying for power at the time: “la rivalité des quatre cousins pour sa
possession [de Nedjma] représente celle des partis nationalistes engagés dans la même lutte tout en se combattant sur les principes” (11) (“the rivalry among the four cousins for her [Nedjma’s] possession represents the nationalist parties engaged in the same fight all the while fighting each other about the principles”). Likewise, Dejéux sees the four cousins as symbolizing “différentes manières d’aimer l’Algérie” (“different ways of loving Algeria”). He sees them as “‘frères ennemis’” (“enemy brothers”) and “à l’image” (“as a picture”) of the nationalist politics before 1954 with all its inner conflicts (Littérature maghrébine 241). Aresu interestingly makes note of the significance of the knife in Nedjma, giving special attention to the passage when Rachid stabs Mourad in prison (154-55). The knife first appears to be a stolen object. It is initially sold by Mourad, then purchased by an outsider, Si Salah, then retrieved by the young men, and finally borrowed by Rachid (11-12, 31-32; tr. 15-6, 42-43). Through this loss and gain (circularity?) of the weapon, Aresu interprets the symbol of the knife as a literal gaining or losing of power, speaking of the knife as underlining “a reification of power institutionally denied and clandestinely acquired, and an agent simultaneously of unity and division” (154).

As we have seen, Kateb reveals the four young men privately in rivalry with each other from the time they are just children to later as adults in their shared desire for Nedjma. In destabilizing any semblance of a consistent narrative voice, he obliterates the distinctiveness between the young men in a dialogue. The loss of individual voices in the name of a collective voice could point to what is necessary for Algeria to come successfully out of a revolutionary struggle. It might describe a reality where very different personalities from the same society, or metaphoric ‘family,’ share common goals in the struggle. The
obliteration of distinct voices may then signal a hope for consolidation amongst the different parties into a single revolutionary movement to topple colonial oppression.

The conflicts amongst the young men, however, are so great that the symbolic affiliation between Nedjma and the star is referenced in a manner that connotes the complexity and hardships of a revolutionary movement that is born out of worthy ideals but inevitably causes a great deal of pain. The initial illuminating, righteous and powerful star of the Algerian Independence movement appears to have become tainted and corrupted through Nedjma’s character. Far from having positive connotations, she is referred to as “ma mauvaise étoile” (176) (“my evil star” 235) by Rachid. He describes Nedjma as “un vain espoir d’évasion. Je ne pouvais ni me résigner à la lumière du jour, ni retrouver mon étoile, car elle avait perdu son éclat virginal” (177) (“a vain hope of escape. I could neither resign myself to the light of day, nor recover my star, for it had lost its virginal luster” 235).

Similar to Rachid’s desire for Nedjma, the initial attraction of revolutionary struggle is mitigated by the pain encountered along the way. Furthermore, the many factions have different views on what the outcome of the struggle should be, creating a situation where momentarily the rival groups are inhibiting the process of decolonization: “Je ne connais personne qui l’ait approchée sans la perdre, et c’est ainsi que se multiplièrent les rivaux” (177) (“I know no one who has approached her without losing her, and that is how the rivals multiplied” 236). Déjeux observes of the multiple factions: “chacun se faisant une certaine idée de l’Algérie indépendante et chacun entendant être seul à la révéler à elle-même” (Littérature maghrébine 241) (“Each one had his own concept of an independent Algeria and each one thought himself to be the one to reveal it to her”). And while the four
young men represent rivaling factions vying for power in Algeria, it is Nedjma who represents Algeria itself. Yet she is silent. “Pendant ce temps,” says Dejéux, “Nedjma reste silencieuse comme l’Algérie colonisée de cette époque. Récupérer Nedjma c’est récupérer la patrie, le fondamental” (Littérature maghrébine 241) (“During that time, Nedjma stays silent like the colonized Algeria of that period. To restore Nedjma is to restore the nation, that which is fundamental”).

Nedjma’s silence is another trope in this discussion of Kateb’s treatment of the narrative voice and how it comments on the allegorical microcosm he sets up in his novel. The silencing of Nedjma in this microcosm also comments on Kateb’s contemporaneous Algeria. During this period, the Algerian Independence movement did not have a single spokesperson. Independent Algeria was an object of desire, a dream. Yet, if the four young men’s attraction to Nedjma is interpreted as symbolic of competing political groups in early-fifties Algeria, it is curious that women are symbolically excluded from making decisions about Algeria’s future. This is the case in the Nadhor scene when Rachid and Si Mokhtar deliberate on whether to leave Nedjma with the Keblout. Nedjma does not give her opinion regarding where and with whom she would like to live; nor does it seem that her opinion would be welcome (148, tr. 195). Apart from the connotation of attracting men, and having them in turn fight over her (the object of sexual desire or lust), the woman as the symbol of the nation may also connote motherly protection, comfort and love. The woman as a symbol for the nation suggests the possibility of renewal, and the possibility of a new born. The silence of Nedjma, however, may have as much to do with her symbolic status of a nation that has not yet become a nation as it does with her gender. Algeria,
before independence, symbolically would not yet have had a voice of its own. This notion of a silent Algeria is made apparent in the image of Si Mokhtar walking through the city alone, after the massacre of May 8 in Sétif. He has inserted a gag in his own mouth, and he carries a sign with the slogans: “Vive la France / Les Arabes silence!” (156; the translation leaves it in the original French 206).

Like the massacre of Sétif, which predates the war itself, the signs of actual warfare in *Nedjma* are only alluded to, and therefore, the process of Algeria *becoming* independent is revealed only in its earliest stages.²¹ Becoming, in the case of Independence, relies on a struggle. Therefore the becoming of Algeria is also its own creation. Fanon posits that decolonization is nothing less than the creation of “nouveaux hommes [ . . . ] la ‘chose’ colonisée devient homme dans le processus même par lequel elle se libère” (30, emphasis mine) (“new men [. . .] the ‘thing’ which has been colonized becomes man during the same process by which it frees itself” 36-7, emphasis mine). Salhi, indeed, argues that the dominant theme in Kateb Yacine’s oeuvre is “the creation, and indeed the re-creation, of the Algerian nation” (xiii). “[C]e pays n’est pas encore venu au monde” (183) (“this country has not yet come into the world” 245), writes Kateb. Bonn too emphasizes the manner that *Nedjma*’s significance as historical fiction lies in its symbolism for an unknown (yet hopeful) future: “Les combattants pour l’Indépendance sont absents de *Nedjma*, même si le roman appelle cet engagement par sa structure plus que par sa signification explicite, et si le personnage de Nedjma peut être lu entre autres significations

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²¹ One of the most overt signs of the novel’s ties with the Independence movement is Lakhdar’s carving of “Indépendance de l’Algérie” (27) (“Independence for Algeria” 303) on desks and chairs before the demonstrations of May 8 that result in the massacre.
comme le symbole de la patrie à venir” (Kateb 7) (“The independence fighters are absent in Nedjma, even if the novel encourages this engagement through its structure rather than through explicit signification, and if the character of Nedjma can be read as, among other things, the symbol of the nation to come”). Thus, for Bonn, Nedjma could be read as a country that has not yet arrived. The psychological ramifications of decolonization are similarly observed by Gontard in the very form of Kateb’s novel. He states that, “[e]n effet, l’intrusion permanente, dans le présent, du temps négatif de la mémoire, dénote une certaine ‘impossibilité d’être,’ de sorte que l’actualité invivable, se trouve fragmentée, concassée, par ces recours constants au passé, qui révèlent à la fois une fuite et une quête” (79) (“[a]ctually, the permanent intrusion in the present of the negative time of memory denotes a certain ‘impossibility of being,’ so that the unliveable present is fragmented, crushed, by its constant recourses to the past, that reveal simultaneously a flight and a quest”). The ‘distortion’ of stable temporality, which we will focus on later, certainly accentuates an “impossibilité d’être.” In a novel that loops back upon itself, notions of naturalistic time are compromised. Hence the possibility of coming into being will also be affected.

The title character’s impossibility of being is initially signaled by how she first appears in the novel; not as a real woman of flesh and blood, but as an apparition (64, tr. 85). The apparation reveals uncertainty on the part of the observor (or at least

22 Elsewhere, Bonn writes: “l’opacité même du texte de Nedjma développe un foisonnement sémantique à travers lequel le roman est à la fois lecture et réalisation de grilles mythiques seules capables de donner forme à une Histoire toujours en gestation” (Kateb 74) (“The opaque nature of the text of Nedjma develops a semantic abundance
unverifiability for others). As Nedjma embodies the concept of a new Algeria that has yet to be born, this political symbolism may partially account for her lack of voice. She does have a very brief interior monologue, but she is otherwise silent throughout. In this monologue, she speaks of her power over the four young men, and says: “Puisqu’ils m’aident, je les garde dans ma prison... A la longue, c’est la prisonnière qui décide” (67, ellipsis in original) (“Since they love me, I keep them in my prison... In the long run, it’s the prisoner who makes the decisions” 89-90, ellipsis in original). While the superficial meaning of what Nedjma says of the young men may appear somewhat malevolent, as has already been argued, the state of imprisonment is what can lead to revolutionary ideas. This could be implied when Nedjma says that “in the long run,” it’s the prisoner who makes the decisions. Therefore, her ‘imprisonment’ of the young men may lead to the freedom they will eventually gain. However, interestingly, it is the feminine, la prisonnière, who makes the decision, implying that she is also a prisoner. Whether Nedjma speaks of herself, or whether her symbolic status as the motherland of Algeria is referred to here, this statement could imply that the task of ‘freeing’ Algeria is larger than what any of the young men is capable of, and that Algeria must free herself.

*Explosive Violence: “What Makes the Lid Blow Off?”*

The microcosm in *Nedjma* distils and ‘distorts’ the atmosphere of tension and violence lived by Algeria during Kateb’s time of writing. Ultimately, these energies are deemed necessary for the War of Independence to be born. In *Les damnés de la terre*, we recall, through which the novel is simultaneously a reading and a realization of mythic webs that are the only ones capable of giving shape to a History that is still in formation”).
Fanon asks: “comment passons-nous de l’atmosphère de violence à la violence en action? Qu’est-ce qui fait exploser la marmite?” (54) (“how do we pass from the atmosphere of violence to violence in action? What makes the lid blow off?” 71). In an unrelated statement, Jacques Berque seemingly provides a partial answer to Fanon’s question, presenting Kateb and his work as being the ultimate answers to this question:

“L’indépendance est [. . .] un jaillissement des énergies cachées. Ces énergies, où dormaient-elles pendant la longue nuit? Il appartenait à un poète algérien de suggérer, presque à son insu, cette intériorité explosive” (qtd. in Dejéux, Littérature maghrébine 235-36) (“Independence is [. . .] a bursting forth of hidden energies. These energies, where were they sleeping during the long night? It was the task of an Algerian poet to suggest, almost without his knowledge, this explosive interiority”).

The energies present are twofold. The first are in reaction to oppressive institutions. The most noteworthy of these are the police and army, who in Nedjma come to personify the oppression lived by the colonized Algerians. In Nedjma there is always “le même gendarme” (28) (“the same policeman” 38). The soldier is the other and most obvious and visible sign (and force) of oppression. As Fanon argues: “Aux colonies, l’interlocuteur valable et institutionnel du colonisé, le porte-parole du colon et du régime d’oppression est le gendarme ou le soldat” (31) (“In the colonies it is the policeman and the soldier who are the official, instituted go-betweens, the spokesmen of the settler and his rule of oppression” 38). Other institutions, such as the courts of justice (46, tr. 61) and the school system, are also revealed as oppressing forces on the Algerian population in Nedjma. For instance, keeping in mind how Nedjma is symbolic of Algeria, this character is described as once
being free, and later oppressed by the educational system: “La vraie Nedjma était farouche; et ses éducateurs convinrent peu à peu de lever devant elle tous les obstacles” (185) (“The true Nedjma was wild; and her educators gradually agreed to raise all barriers before her” 248). All these institutions fail the Algerians, to the point that their attitude toward the ruling class evolves into violence: “la timidité s’était muée en abattement, puis en furie sportive, enfin en combativité pure et simple” (157) (“timidity became despondency, then playful savagery, finally hostility pure and simple” 208). On correcting this unfair oppression, Mustapha asks the rhetorical question: “N’y a-t-il que le crime pour assassiner l’injustice?” (83) (“Can crime alone assassinate injustice?” 110), after he has lived through the massacre of Sétif.

Apart from these institutions, the colonized also experience oppression on a more constant basis at their place of work. Lakhdar’s strike against M. Ernst at the workplace is an example of resistance through violence, which according to Fanon is the only viable option: “L’homme colonisé se libère dans et par la violence” (64) (“The colonized man finds his freedom in and through violence” 86).

The moment ‘when the lid blows off’ occurs, Fanon argues, when the colonized acts within spaces of the colonizer: “La violence qui a présidé à l’arrangement du monde colonial [...] sera revendiquée et assumée par le colonisé au moment où, décidant d’être l’histoire en actes, la masse colonisée s’engouffrera dans les villes interdites” (33) (“That violence which has ruled over the ordering of the colonial world [...] will be claimed and taken over by the native at the moment when, deciding to embody history in his own person, he surges into the forbidden quarters” 40). This act of violence within forbidden
quarters is seen in a passage in *Nedjma*. Here it is Mourad who will figuratively “embody history.” Mourad experiences unrequited desire for Suzy, M. Ernst’s daughter. The “forbidden quarters” in Mourad’s mind is in fact an entirely forbidden world. He knows that he and Suzy will “jamais nous trouver dans le même monde, autrement que par la bagarre et le viol” (19) (“never be in the same world together, except because of violence or rape” 26). Shortly after Mourad has revealed his affection for Suzy, she gets married to M. Ricard. The wedding occurs in M. Ricard’s home. The night of the wedding, Suzy is abused by her new husband. It is at this moment that Mourad enters these “forbidden quarters.” He attacks M. Ricard and ends up killing him. The wielding of power of colonizer and colonized is reversed: “et Mourad à son tour s’acharna, ne put retenir ses coups” (28) (“now it was Mourad’s turn to wield the crop—he was unable to restrain his blows” 37).

The ‘lid blows off’ as well when the colonized cease to see themselves as inferior to the colonizer. For example, in *Nedjma*, Lakhdar responds to an officer’s belittling of Muslim prayer methods, by saying: “Qu’est-ce que vous avez tous, en France, à considérer l’Algérie comme un zoo?” (62) (“Why does everyone in France treat Algeria like a zoo?” 82). Fanon suggests that the animalization of the colonized takes away his ability to see himself as equal: “Car il sait qu’il n’est pas un animal. Et précisément, dans le même temps qu’il découvre son humanité, il commence à fourbir ses armes pour la faire triompher” (34) (“For he knows that he is not an animal; and it is precisely at the moment he realizes his

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23 The treatment of Algerians as something other than human is made most apparent in the torture methods used on prisoners (57-60, tr. 76-81) and by the very description of the tortured as looking and behaving like animals which have been broken (73, tr. 98).
humanity that he begins to sharpen the weapons with which he will secure its victory” 43). Fanon’s statement may also remind us of the ‘becoming’ and ‘creation’ of Algeria. Its individuals must first see themselves as human before they begin to construct a new society. Mourad and Lakhdar’s violence and protestation, respectively, against their oppressors further inform the microcosm that Kateb sets up.

Yet the prospects of rectifying injustices solely through actions of revenge are not fruitful in the long run. As Fanon argues: “Le racisme, la haine, le ressentiment, [. . .] ne peuvent alimenter une guerre de libération. [. . .] [C]ette grande passion des premières heures se disloque si elle entend se nourrir de sa propre substance” (104) (“Racialism and hatred and resentment [. . .] cannot sustain a war of liberation. [. . .] [T]hat intense emotion of the first few hours falls to pieces if it is left to feed on its own substance” (139). What is so significant about Nedjma is that it signals the violence and energies felt in these “first few hours.” Long term prospects are created when a greater number of people recognise what is at stake, perceive the potential of liberation and are willing to join the struggle. The demonstration and subsequent massacre at Sétif signal such a crucial moment in the Independence movement. This event serves as a gravitational centre to the text. The historical demonstration in Sétif began with a celebration of Germany’s surrender in World War II, and then became a demand by the Algerians for independence.24 Kateb describes the scene with minimal details, but enough to provide sensations: “Ouvriers agricoles, ouvriers, commerçants. Soleil. Beaucoup de monde. L’Allemagne a capitulé / Couples.

24 These demonstrations were partially brought about by the less than satisfactory gratitude shown by the French government toward the sacrifices made by Algerian soldiers
Brasseries bondées. / Les cloches. / Cérémonie officielle; monument aux morts. / La police se tient à distance. / Contre-manifestation populaire. Assez de promesses. 1870. 1918. 1945. / Aujourd’hui, 8 mai, est-ce vraiment la victoire?” (227) (“Field workers, factory workers, businessmen. Sun. A big crowd. Germany has surrendered. Couples. Bars crowded. / The bells. Official ceremony: monument to the dead. / The police keep their distance. / Popular counter-demonstration. / Enough promises. 1870. 1918. 1945. / Today, May 8, is it victory this time?” 304). Fanon sees the situation of Sétif as the precursor to organized and violent resistance on the part of the colonized. He argues that in such tense situations, conflicts and violence may erupt. It is under these conditions that guns may begin going off: “Un incident banal et le mitraille commence: c’est Sétif en Algérie [. . .].” (54) (“A single commonplace incident is enough to start the machine-gunning: Sétif in Algeria [. . .].” 71-2). He continues by speaking of a tragedy such as Sétif as unfortunately being the trigger to an accelerated development of national consciousness: “Aux colonies, les hétacombes, à partir d’un certain stade de développement embryonnaire de la conscience [nationale], renforcent cette conscience” (54) (“Mass slaughter in the colonies at a certain stage of the embryonic development of [national] consciousness increases that consciousness” 72). 25 Salhi rightfully argues that it is significant that it is precisely after the massacre of Sétif that the four young men meet Nedjma as a group. If Nedjma represents both the past and future of Algeria, then the attraction they all feel for her symbolically for France in the front lines of World War II. Even these soldiers who fought for France were not given the same rights as the ‘pieds noirs,’ French citizens in Algeria.

25 Fanon cites 45,000 dead in the massacre on May 8, 1945 in Sétif. These victims are today called “the martyrs of Algerian Nationalism” (Salhi 46).
represents a significant increase in their national consciousness. Therefore within the microcosm of Algeria set up earlier, Nedjma is only seen as something to be collectively desired, and fought for, after the massacre of Sétif. Her appearance as an object of desire coincides with their desire at this moment for change. As earlier cited: “Enough promises. 1870. 1918. 1945. / Today, May 8, is it victory this time?” (304).

Thus, the violence on both sides begins. In his discussion of the violence in *Nedjma*, Louis Tremaine argues that those characters “who flee may escape a particular eruption of violence, but they cannot escape violence itself, for they carry it within themselves” (31). Ultimately, what I have attempted to demonstrate is that the violence which each young man carries may be directed against a friend, relative or institutional figure. The repression of violence is such that it may lie dormant within a person, and later, escaping at an inopportune time, trapping groups within cycles of ‘unproductive’ violence. Of course, the liberating aspect of violence is that it has the potential to be used as a form of resistance. After facing horrific violence against them in Sétif, the four young men are inspired by Nedjma, who is described as being capable “d’electriser la rumeur publique” (84) (“of electrifying public opinion” 112) and three of them (Rachid, Lakhdar and Mourad) will later commit acts of violence against the French.

‘Distortion’ of Narrative Form

As an overall formal structure to the narrative, temporality in *Nedjma* appears as a circle – starting and ending at the same moment in chronological time. As we will see, this overall circular structure is particularly evident when we compare the opening and closing sequences of the novel. Within this larger circular structure, the narrative also goes back
and forth in time. The overall effect is that of experiencing smaller temporal ‘loops,’ all occurring within a larger temporal loop. Apart from these defamiliarising formal techniques, there exists within the diegetic world of *Nedjma* the presence of a mythical past which conflates with the present. These temporal ‘distortions’ – time loops and time conflations – may hinder the reader’s ability to make further sense of the symbolic microcosm of Algeria, especially seen in terms of understanding *Nedjma*’s achronological plot as it allegorically refers to Algeria’s chronological historical developments, which, of course, happened in linear time. The ‘linearity’ of time does not exclude recurrence, but only in the sense of a recurrence of daybreak, nightfall, the position of the moon, stars, etc (revolutions of the cosmos); or such as in the recurrence of human-produced temporal demarcations such as 10:06pm, Monday, June, Canada Day, etc. There are, of course, various ways of ordering, understanding and interpreting time (see Pomian). Yet, the recurrence of such demarcations (whether of the ‘natural’ world or human-made) is not to be equated with the actual possibility of a circular experience of time and history. Reinhart Koselleck argues that when we speak of historical events, “even seemingly general patterns of explanation inevitably refer to chronological succession, without which every history would be not only meaningless but impossible.” Koselleck says that even explanations grounded in what he calls “supertemporal achronic permanence,” such as some psychological, psychoanalytical or anthropological models, “always contain the inescapable indicator of a before and an after” (109). Thus, when I speak of ‘distorted’ temporality in *Nedjma*, I refer to an alteration of what, in our natural world, is chronologised and/or experienced as “a before and after.”
Weaving of Mythical and Present Worlds

The coming together of the mythical (before) and diegetic present worlds is often associated in *Nedjima* with a conflation of time. The contemplation of ruins and the experience of the mythic past (whether narcotically or dream induced) reveal how common experiences of temporality in the tangible world are challenged in the text. Our experience of temporality in the physical world (outside of dreams, narcotic states, or other factors that influence rationality and perception) is such that it is perceived as forward-moving, at a more or less consistent pace. In the physical world, the experience of temporality is also stable; we do not experience ourselves outside of our spatio-temporally bound worlds. Only conceptually may we experience other temporalities, for instance the memories of our childhood in our imagination (while we experience the present in its physicality). In *Nedjima*, the conflating presence of the mythical world occurs conceptually, as seen with Mourad’s description of ruins, and through the influence of narcotics on Rachid’s perception of temporality. I will also examine the character in *Nedjima* who most personifies the mythic world, Si Mokhtar. Through the conflation of the mythical world with that of the present, Kateb reveals the importance of both the past and myth to the advancement of revolutionary causes.

At the end of the opening chapter of *Nedjima* the reader is confronted immediately with a ‘distortion’ of temporality due to the conflation of mythical and real historical worlds. It begins with references to the Roman occupation of Algeria. Mourad is sentenced to perform manual labour in a penitentiary located in the modern village of Tazoult, next to the ruins of Lambèse which was once a prosperous Roman city. His present oppression under the French is compared with that of the Romans: “Me voilà dans les murs de
Lambèse, mais les Romains sont remplacés par les Corses; tous Corses, tous gardiens de
prison, et nous prenons la succession des esclaves, dans le même bagne, près de la fosse
aux lions, et les fils des Romains patrouillent l’arme à la bretelle” (41) (“Here I am inside
the walls of Lambèse, but it’s Corsicans instead of Romans now; all Corsicans, all prison
guards, and we play the slaves’ roles, in the same prison, near the lion pit, and the sons of
the Romans do guard duty with rifles on their shoulders” 56). Mourad feels that history is
repeating itself, in this same space. Again, it is the Algerian who “plays the role” of the
slave. The French, in turn (Corsicans), are referred to as “les fils des Romains,” indicating a
continuity of oppression from a long bloodline of Western European peoples. This phrase
also sets up a separation between himself as native Algerian and the repetition of foreign
oppression over his people.

Similar to the conflation of time seen in Mourad’s thoughts on the ruins of
Lambèse, Rachid, while in a narcotic state, explains that the Constantine ruins pertain just
as much to the present as to the past. These observations are presented by Kateb as
occurring ‘mid-thought’ in Rachid’s consciousness:

Pas les restes des Romains. Pas ce genre de ruine où l’âme des multitudes
n’a eu que le temps de se morfondre, en gravant leur adieu dans le roc, mais
les ruines en filigrane de tous les temps, celles que baigne le sang dans nos
veines, celles que nous portons en secret sans jamais trouver le lieu ni
l’instant qui conviendrait pour les voir: les inestimables décombres du
présent [. . .]; ainsi la gloire et la déchéance auront fondé l’éternité des
ruines sur les bonds des villes nouvelles, plus vivantes mais coupées de leur histoire (174-75).

Not the remains of the Romans. Not that kind of ruins, where the soul of the multitudes has only time to waste away, engraving their farewell in the rock, but the ruins watermarked from all time, the ruins steeped in blood of our veins, the ruins we carry in secret, without ever finding the place or the time suitable for seeing them: the inestimable ruins of the present [. . .] glory and defeat have founded the eternity of ruins upon the growth of new cities, more alive yet severed from their history (232-33).

Thus, the ruins transported into the present must somehow become visible. Figuratively then, a mythical Algeria must be recuperated; effort must be made to experience these ruins as holders of the past within the present.

In another passage, Rachid has the sensation that he is ‘tripping,’ having “la vieille impression d’avoir voyagé sous terre, ou peut-être plus loin, à travers les savanes de plénitude et d’inconscience” (166) (“Rachid felt again as if he were traveling underground, or perhaps across prairies of plenitude and unconsciousness” 221). Apart from Rachid’s “underground” sensation (which may indicate the clandestine operations of the FLN, or a rival group), his relation with the past becomes more intense, viewing it in mythical, over-romanticized terms, within an ‘explosion’ of time: “De son enfance, il n’avait jamais pu saisir que des bribes de plus en plus minces, disparates, intenses: éclairs du paradis ravagé par la déflagration des heures (166) (“Since childhood, he had been able to catch only increasingly fragmentary snatches–disparate, intense: flashes of the paradise ravaged by the
combustion of the hours” 221). Hashish gives Rachid an increased perception of historicity, allowing the past and the present to fuse together in a manner that can be detected in Kateb’s language:

Constantine [. . .]: rocher surpris par l’invasion de fer, d’asphalte, de béton, de spectres aux liens tendus jusqu’aux cimes du silence, encerclé entre les quatre ponts et les deux gares, sillonné par l’énorme ascenseur entre le gouffre et la piscine, assailli à la lisière de la forêt, battu en brèche, terrassé jusqu’à l’esplanade où se détache la perspective des Hauts Plateaux, –cité d’attente et de menace, toujours tentée par la décadence, secouée de transes millénaires, –lieu de séisme et de discorde ouvert aux quatre vents par où la terre tremble et se présente le conquérant et s’éternise la résistance. (152-53)

Constantine [. . .]: a rock surprised by the invasion of iron, asphalt and concrete, spectres linked to the peaks of silence, encircled by four bridges and two railroad stations, furrowed by the huge elevator between the gulf and the pool, assailed at the forest’s edge, forced back, thrown down to the esplanade where the High Plateau is outlined – citadel of expectation and threat, forever tempted by decadence, shaken by age-old seizures – a site of earthquake and discord, open to the four winds, where the ground shudders and shows itself the master, making its own residence eternal. (202)

26 Richard Howard’s translation of “s’éternise la résistance” as “making its own residence eternal” does not carry quite the same revolutionary/mythical sentiment as the original.
Aresu illuminates the symbolism of this passage. “[B]attu en brèche,” he notes, refers to the French siege of the city, and the naming of the city’s centre as “Place de la Brèche.”

“[T]ranses millénaires” and “séisme,” continues Aresu, point to “the earthquake-proneness of the rock on which Constantine stands and to the long record of invasions and conquests the city endured” (92). Rachid’s experience on narcotics, as elucidated by Aresu, approximates the reader’s experience of reading the ‘distorted’ text itself, at once reading the text literally with all its temporal and narrative forms of defamiliarisation, and, yet, at the same time, keeping in mind the way it provides commentary on a verifiable, perhaps familiar, historical reality. The text, or at least Rachid’s consciousness, seems to occupy two temporal worlds that have momentarily been conflated.

Bonn suggests that history in Kateb’s work cannot be experienced without a mingling of the mythic elements: “Poursuivant une inscription historique dans l’inconfort d’un présent toujours fuyant, Kateb Yacine n’écrit, ainsi, qu’au point de rupture entre un ‘pas encore’ et un ‘déjà plus’, où l’Histoire ne peut être appréhendée qu’à travers une grille mythique” (Kateb 73) (“Following an historical inscription in an uncomfortable, always fleeing present, Kateb Yacine writes in this way, showing the point of rupture between a ‘not yet’ and an ‘already done,’ where History can only be understood through a mythic web”). This mythical world demands to be taken into account in the diegetic world of Nedjma. This occurs figuratively in one instance of Kateb’s novel. Before his trial, Rachid is in his prison cell, and dreams (or has a narcotically induced vision) that the Keblout appears before him. He realises that “le tribunal qu’il redoutait n’était ni celui de Dieu ni celui des Français” (134) (“the tribunal he feared was neither God’s nor that of the French”
but the judgment of Keblout. The importance of this passage lies in the fact that Rachid is solely concerned with his relationship to the legendary Keblout – his ancestral tribe’s founding figure. By continuing the struggle against oppression that his ancestors, like Keblout, had fought on his behalf, Rachid feels that he honours his past. He feels a duty towards the mythical Algeria that appears before him; which could be seen, figuratively, as another way of ‘writing history.’

This sense of duty is caused by an altered state of consciousness, where the mythic world is conflated with the present. Rachid’s sense of duty to Algeria’s mythic past is further emphasised when he hears the voice of Si Mokhtar while in another dream or state of narcotic intoxication. The older man advises him: “Tu dois songer à la destinée de ce pays d’où nous venons, qui n’est pas une province française, et qui n’a ni bey ni sultan; tu penses peut-être à l’Algérie toujours envahie, à son inextricable passé, car nous ne sommes pas une nation, pas encore, sache-le: nous ne sommes que des tribus décimées” (128) (“You should remember the destiny of this country we come from; it is not a French province, and has neither bey nor sultan; perhaps you are thinking of Algeria, still invaded, of its inextricable past, for we are not a nation, not yet, you know that: we are only decimated tribes” 170-71). The voice of Si Mokhtar emphasizes to Rachid that Algeria should not be under a colonial power and that the “true,” unadulterated, Algerian nation does not yet exist. His statement seems to imply a strengthening and unification of sorts amongst the remaining tribes.

Si Mokhtar comes to personify the mythical past of Algeria and its potential in shaping its future. Bonn argues that the eventual death of Si Mokhtar at the Nadhor comes
to symbolize the necessary end of one world which allows another to begin: “C’est par l’impossibilité même de réalisation du mythe du retour des origines qu’il représente, que cet épisode du Nadhor obligé en quelque sorte, [...] à inventer la nation” (Kateb 52) (“It is by the impossibility of the realization of the myth of a return to one’s origins that it represents that this episode of Nadhor obliges to some extent [...] one to invent the nation”). The presence of a mythical past in *Nedjima*, embodied by a figure such as Si Mokhtar, is considered necessary for a revolution to commence. It is as if moving forward, and abandoning the oppressive state of the present, requires a more critical view of a romanticized past. The impossibility of a return to origins, thus, opens the path to the future, as it forces the creation of new origins – the Algerian nation born out of the struggle for independence.

Just as time conflates (as with the Keblout’s imagined appearance before Rachid), the mythic world represented by Si Mokhtar is seen to influence the present. Fanon clarifies:

Les grandes figures du peuple colonisé sont toujours celles qui ont dirigé la résistance nationale à l’invasion. Béhanzin, Soundiata, Samory, Abdel-Kader, revivent avec une particulière intensité dans la période qui précède l’action. C’est la preuve que le peuple s’apprête à se remettre en marche, à interrompre le temps mort introduit par le colonialisme, à faire l’Histoire (52-53).

The great figures of the colonized people are always those who led the national resistance to invasion. Behanzin, Soundiata, Samory, Abdel Kader
all spring again to life with peculiar intensity in the period which comes
directly before action. This is the proof that the people are getting ready to
begin to go forward again, to put an end to the static period begun by
colonization, and to make history (69).

“History,” if we are in accord with Fanon, has thus not yet been made in Nedjma. “History”
in Nedjma is in the process of being made and requires the help of legendary figures, here
symbolised by the presence of Si Mokhtar.

The symbolism of Rachid’s experience of time along with the figure of Si Mokhtar
emphasise “Kateb’s synchronous vision and the mythical synthesis of fiction, history, and
legend it purports to achieve” (Aresu 85).27 The synthesis of fiction and history was already
related earlier in the formulation that Nedjma’s central characters all encapsulate a
symbolic microcosm of Algeria from the mid 1920s to the mid 1950s. Especially with these
narcotic experiences, but symbolically also with Si Mokhtar, an older period of history gets
synthesized, or layered in. This older history completes Aresu’s synthesis of fiction, history
and legend.

The consequence is that the reader’s historical understanding of this period is
enriched by the (non-naturalistic) presence of the past occupying the same space as the
present. For instance, the ‘distortion’ of a naturalistic temporal experience, seen in the
passages where Rachid’s consciousness is affected by hashish, allows for the reader to
imagine the past invading the present historical world. The reader must then look beyond
Rachid’s experiences as mere hallucinations, devoid of significant, coherent content. As an

27 For more on hashish in Nedjma, see Aresu, especially 171, 183-184, 188-89.
allegory for those in Algeria who want to create an independent nation, Rachid’s narcotically induced experience of the past, along with the personification of the mythic world seen in the character of Si Mokhtar, comes to signify the importance that Algeria must give to its own history as it struggles to establish independence from France.

A consequence of the manner in which time is presented is that diegetic moments of violence and aggression appear to transcend their spatio-temporal limits, and accentuate the tense atmosphere of violence between colonizer and colonized. Paradoxically, this violent atmosphere appears initially to be set in achronological terms, trapping the colonized within an historical world that seems to offer no hope of revolutionary change. The omnipresence of this mythical past, however, in the end plays a significant role in offering some hope for the future.

**Formal Temporal ‘Distortion’**

Intimately connected to this thematic temporal treatment in the diegetic world of *Nedjma* (appearing as temporal conflations) is the formal treatment of time. As earlier outlined, these formal ‘distortions’ appear to the reader as the narrative goes back and forth in what the reader deciphers as the chronological order of the plot. Outside of these temporal movements within the plot, the novel itself is framed by a circular temporal structure, starting and ending at the same temporal moment.

Referring to the idea of time in Kateb’s novel, critics often cite a controversial passage from the original preface written by the French editors of the first publication. These editors wrote that “[l]e rythme et la construction du récit, s’ils doivent quelque chose à certaines expériences romanesques occidentales – ce que nous ne contestons pas –
résultent surtout d’une attitude purement arabe de l’homme face au temps” (6) (“[t]he narrative’s rhythm and construction, if they indisputably owe something to certain Western experiments in fiction, result in chief from a purely Arab notion of man in time” ix).

Undoubtedly much has changed in literary studies since 1956, and today such a statement may appear to “orientalize” (Said), exoticize and essentialize Kateb, his work, and his Algerian heritage.28 As can be expected, many modern critics take issue with such a statement. Salhi, for example, suggests that the original editors’ view of Nedjma “negates the work’s universal appeal by presenting it as exotic literature” (23). In his refutation of the editors’ claims, Mohammed Aziz Lahbabi posits that the conception of time in Nedjma “est en contradiction totale avec les conceptions islamiques relatives au temps” (qtd. in Dejéux, Littérature maghrébine 223) (“is in total contradiction with Islamic conceptions of time”). Indeed, Kateb himself has made similar statements. During a conference in Paris, the writer explained that he did not have a peculiar notion of time in mind, and that the way time works in Nedjma was an outcome of the nature of the work and the condition of its production (qtd. in Dejéux, Littérature maghrébine 223).

Rather than enter the contentious territory of referring to aspects of Kateb’s writing as “Arab,” or of refuting the possibility of specific cultural influences that are of significance to Nedjma, I turn instead to the link between Islamic art and modern art, which is a useful way to discuss multiple and related cultural influences on Kateb’s work, without

28 For a review of the historical impact of the editors’ comments on subsequent literary criticism of Nedjma, see Dejéux, “Réception” 112-113.
privileging or essentializing any aspects in Kateb’s writing that may be (or have been) referred to as “Arab.”

Nedjma’s presentation of the relationship between the notion of progress and moving forward is always done in relation to maintaining a sense of historicity. Therefore, just as times are conflated in the text’s very content, at the level of formal temporal ‘distortions’, the past and the present also appear to conflate for the reader who has difficulties making sense of the chronological structure of the novel. The conflation of times may give the reader a sense that the world present in Nedjma is atemporal, and thus perhaps ahistorical. However, just as in Rachid’s narcotic experiences, the conflation of times here seems to indicate the importance of a moment for action. This moment, full of energies as discussed earlier, is informed and depends upon what has come before it, and will determine what follows.

The mirroring at a formal level of what is revealed in the text’s content speaks to the importance Kateb gives to questioning the idea that progress can be made without a consideration of the past. In a significant passage to consider, the anonymous narrator remarks: “l’absence d’itinéraire abolit la notion du temps” (33) (“the absence of any itinerary abolishes the notion of time” 44). Two important notions of time and history in

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29 For more on the link between Islamic art and modern art, see Aresu (105). For more criticism surrounding the link between Kateb and Arabic/Islamic forms of cultural expression, see Aresu’s discussion of the “arabesque” (105) and the polygonic mosaic (107-8 and 116-17), which he links to the formal aspects of Nedjma.

30 This phrase has an intertextual relationship with Stéphane Mallarmé’s conception of the abolition of time, especially in “Igitur.” Regarding the conception of time explored in Mallarmé’s work, Rosette Lamont explains: “Time and timelessness are the basic preoccupations of Igitur [the protagonist], more specifically the horror of disintegration as he watches the work of time in the mirror. Only at midnight, at the precise moment when
Nedjma appear to be present in such a statement. The first implies the historical situation of Algeria at the time, where the future is uncertain and therefore without a clear “itinerary” to follow. The second may refer to an itinerary as a ‘plan of action.’ Thus, within a revolutionary struggle, “the notion of time” (i.e., progress and social history) is “abolished” if no revolutionary action is taken or continued; it would be abolished because the socio-political reality would stay the same without action. Fanon alludes to a notion of “abolished time” through causality in his statement: “La cause est conséquence: on est riche parce que blanc, on est blanc parce que riche” (32) (“The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich” 40). Cause and effect relationships appear predetermined and eternal in the realities of colonizer and colonized. Therefore, with static and permanent power relations, it appears as if time was abolished, and nothing can change. The absence of any itinerary, in an historical revolutionary sense, is a significant way to imagine the experience of temporality in Nedjma, where definable and chronological time is ‘distorted’ both in the overall structure of the novel and by the characters themselves. The uncertainty of the moment when Kateb writes and publishes his work may add to the lack of a temporal structure that points toward the future, but it is instead caught in a circular loop (with numerous movements back and forth within). This too points to the repetition (circularity) of past invasions and colonisations.

the hands of the clock are fused (with the future and past potentially the same on each side of those hands), can one feel that time is abolished” (89). Georges Poulet similarly explains that in “Igitur”: “[p]ast and future are re-absorbed into a unique moment, their end and their negation” (Interior 264).
As mentioned earlier, the circular notion of time is also made present in the overall structure of the novel. As bookends to this circular structure, the beginning of the novel and its end are almost exactly alike. The opening passage of the novel reads:

Lakhdar s’est échappé de sa cellule.

A l’aurore, sa silhouette apparaît sur le palier; chacun relève la tête, sans grande émotion.

Mourad dévisage le fugitif.

– Rien d’extraordinaire, Tu seras repris.

– Ils savent ton nom.

– J’ai pas de carte d’indentité.

– Ils viendront te choper ici.

– Fermez-la, ne me décoquez pas.

Plus question de dormir, Lakhdar aperçoit la bouteille vide.

– Vous avez bu?

– Grâce au Barbu. Il sort d’ici. (11)

Lakhdar has escaped from his cell.

At dawn, his shadow appears on the landing; everyone looks up indifferently.

Mourad stares at the fugitive. “So what? They’ll get you later.”

“They know your name."

“I don’t have any papers.”

“They’ll look for you here.”
“Shut up. Don’t nag.”

No question of sleep now. Lakhdar notices the empty bottle.

“How did you get that?”

“It’s Beaver’s. He’s leaving.” (15)

The beginning of the second last chapter is almost identical, except notably for one sentence whose verb tense changes: “A l’aurore, lorsque sa silhouette est apparue sur le palier; chacun a relevé la tête, sans grande émotion” (255, emphasis mine). (In the translation it reads “At dawn, when his shadow appears [the literal translation would be “appeared”] on the landing, everyone looks [the literal translation would be “looked”] up indifferently” 343). The verb tenses at the beginning of the novel situate the action in the present, while the almost identical passage at the end of the novel places this action in the past. Significantly, the verb tense used in this passage at the end of *Nedjma* is the passé composé (also called the past indefinite). The passé composé can be complicated, at once situating an action in the past but often allowing for the past to extend into the present. Thus, even within the verb tenses in *Nedjma*’s narrative there is further temporal indeterminacy.

It is important to differentiate here between what Gontard refers to as “temps réel” (the novel as it is develops in the ‘real’ time of the reader) and “temps romanesque” (the novel’s diegetic chronological order). The “temps romanesque” extends from the early 1920s to 1956 (38). With regard to the cited passages from the beginning and end of the book (“temps réel”), they are in fact in the middle of the “temps romanesque,” the year
The implication for the reader, given the circularity of the beginning and end of the novel, and given that these passages are from the middle of its “temps romanesque,” is that the novel’s action appears to turn back upon itself. The reader who has now reached the end of the “temps réel” of the novel, feels further defamiliarisation, and is left oscillating in the ‘middle’ of the overall temporal treatment of the narrative.

The affective qualities of the repeated section differ with its positioning because at the end of the novel the readers have a greater sense of the diegetic world, compared with their lack of knowledge when the reading process begins. By the end of the novel, readers know where Lakhdar has been before he arrives. Readers know what he has done and what will later happen to the group. Thus, a difference between these sections occurs in the readers’ interior, at a hermeneutical, experiential level. The readers’ experience of seeing an action/story repeat itself has symbolic parallels to the clichéd notion that history repeats itself. Thus, the hermeneutics of a story looping back upon itself appears to signal Algeria’s centuries of repeated struggle against colonial rule. I note in the plot summary above that Lakhdar strikes his colonial oppressor, then frees himself, and later in the narration might appear to do the same again. The implication for the reader is that Lakhdar will go through this sequence interminably, caught in what seems to be an endless loop of oppression and resistance. This apparently interminable reality at the hands of oppressive forces is given a face (literally) in *Nedjma*. Lakhdar’s face, after receiving a beating, is described as “un visage anachronique” (74) (“the face [. . .] shows only an anachronistic mark” 98). Again, the anachronistic aspects of the novel are brought about by the temporal ‘distortions’ within

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31 The last sentence in the translated passage also changes: “From Beaver. He just
the diegetic world (conflation), and within its formal structure and style. The significance of this temporal treatment is that it simultaneously reinforces the theme of oppression in the novel’s microcosm (and hence Algeria), as well as speaking to the uncertainty of Algeria’s future.

**Ambiguity and Disorder (Revolution)**

Nedjma’s status as the symbolic star around which the four young men turn (the revolution is energised by her) is juxtaposed with her lack of real voice in the novel. In a text that is already ambiguous, and could be accused of lacking distinctive characters, Nedjma is shrouded in even more mystery than the other characters. However, if she is to represent Algeria, then at the time of the text’s writing this reality was also in flux. Intentional ‘distortions’ of meaning that affect the reader’s cognitive understanding of the text, thus, simultaneously point to the uncertainty of this historical period in Algeria.

Reflecting the ambiguity of her character, Gontard describes Nedjma as “[à] la fois proche et lointaine, envoûtante et hostile, convoitée et inaccessible, elle tire son prestige de la brisure qui institue au centre de son être, son principe même : l’ambiguïté” (9) (“At once near and far, seductive and hostile, coveted and inaccessible, she gains her prestige from the fracture that constitutes the centre of her being, her principle: ambiguity”). Yet, this ambiguity is defended by Kateb, whom Gontard cites at a conference speaking of the symbolic value of Nedjma’s character: “Il ne faut pas trop creuser un symbole; il ne faut pas vouloir en faire une vérité pure et simple, parce qu’à ce moment-là, il n’est plus left” (343).
symbole” (12) (“One should not over-interpret a symbol to excess; one should not want to make a pure and simple truth of it, because at that moment, it is no longer a symbol”).

A passage in *Nedjma* appears to make an intratextual reference to its own ambiguity, its dislocations in time and the difficulties of understanding it forces on the reader. Mourad attempts to piece together Rachid’s story:

Au bout de quelques jours, j’avais à peu près reconstitué le récit que Rachid ne me fit jamais jusqu’au bout; à peine fit-il allusion à la chose, mais de plus en plus fréquemment, se taisant ou se reprenant dès qu’il me sentait particulièrement attentif, comme s’il voulait à la fois se confier et s’assurer que je ne prenais pas à cœur ses épanchements. (95)

In a few days, I more or less reconstituted the story Rachid never told me to the end; he referred only vaguely to the thing, but more and more frequently, shutting up or starting in again when he felt I was particularly attentive, as if he wished both to confide in me and to make sure I would never take his outpourings to heart (125).

The story that is referred to here is Rachid’s own encounter with Nedjma:

Il affectait d’ignorer son nom, ne pouvant cependant s’empêcher de la décrire, tout en la rendant méconnaissable, parlant avec une raideur, un trouble qui me rappelaient à mon propre tourment... A plusieurs reprises, d’après ses contradictions, et à d’autres indices, je le vis tenter une diversion, m’égayer sur une piste sans issue. (96, ellipsis in original)
He claimed not to know her name, but he couldn’t keep from describing her, making her completely unrecognizable, speaking with a suddenness, a perplexity that reminded me of my own torments . . . Several times, judging from his contradictions and from other signs, I knew he was trying to divert my attention, to put me on a false trail. (126, ellipsis in original)

The reader would likely also feel that Kateb has “referred only vaguely” to the plot of the story, let alone the Algerian historical moment. In times of frustration, the reader might likewise also believe that the author’s defamiliarising treatment of Nedjma (e.g., Algeria) makes it appear as if “he couldn’t keep from describing her, making her completely unrecognizable.” In an interview, Kateb has discussed the significance of his ‘obscur’ style. He states: “Si vous voulez aller jusqu’au bout de ce que vous dites [. . .] vous êtes à un certain moment abstrait, obscur. [. . .] Si j’avais écrit des choses simples je n’aurais jamais écrit ce qu’il y a de profond en moi” (qtd. in Dejéux, *Littérature maghrébine* 218) (“If you want to arrive at the endpoint of what you want to say [. . .] you are at a certain moment abstract, obscure [. . .]. If I had written simple things I would never have written what there was that was profound in me”). In the same interview, Kateb says of the “vrai poète” (“true poet”): “Il fait sa révolution à l’intérieur de la révolution politique. Il est au sein de la perturbation l’éternel perturbateur” (qtd. in Dejéux, *Littérature maghrébine* 220) (“He makes his revolution inside the political revolution. He is within the disturbance the eternal disturber”). Thus for Kateb, the very ‘distorted’ narrative form of his novel (temporal and at the level of form, including the purposeful use of ambiguity) relates to the revolutionary process of decolonization, which Fanon calls “un programme de désordre
Decolonization, says Fanon, “est un processus historique: c’est-à-dire qu’elle ne peut être comprise, qu’elle ne trouve son intelligibilité, ne devient translucide à elle-même que dans l’exacte mesure où l’on discerne le mouvement historicisant qui lui donne forme et contenu” (29) (“is an historical process: that is to say that it cannot be understood, it cannot become intelligible nor clear to itself except in the exact measure that we can discern the movements which give it historical form and content” 36). It is with regard to the political potential of these formal disorders, and relating it to the historical world to which it refers, that Gontard says: “Ainsi, par ses ambiguïtés, ses incertitudes, par son inachèvement même, *Nedjma* est un roman qui appelle la révolution” (111) (“Hence, by its ambiguities, its uncertainties, by the very fact that it is unfinished, *Nedjma* is a novel that calls for revolution”).

Because of the immediate cognitive difficulties experienced in reading this text, readers may well attempt to comprehend it symbolically. For instance, when the order of events quickly cycles back into the past, or substantially forward into the future, the very form of the novel seems to point toward one of its main themes: the impossibility of escaping the past. As previously discussed, examples of such passages would include Rachid’s narcotically-induced experiences of time, where the past and the present are conflated.

The presence of the past in the present does not suggest that what the past represents is entirely ideal. The dangers of languishing in time are developed in Kateb’s discussion of religion and the character of Nedjma’s husband, Kamel. The latter is described by Kateb as being stuck in the past: “Kamel lit les journaux, mais reste fidèle aux traditions du défunt,
qui n’a jamais fumé, n’est jamais entré dans un bar ni dans un cinéma” (68) (“Kamel reads the papers but remains faithful to the traditions of the deceased, who never smoked, never entered a bar or a movie theater” 90). Later it is revealed that Kamel does not have a bright future – his “caractère ferme et le terne passé dissimulent la ruine prochaine” (83) (“his firm character and lacklustre past conceal his imminent ruin” 110). Accordingly, if Nedjma stays with her husband, she will also lack a bright future. Kamel, thus, symbolises in Nedjma a negative side of tradition, one that holds no future (revolutionary) potential for Nedjma/Algeria. While Kateb desires progress, he desires a progress that includes history and considers origins.

**Choice of Language**

It is with regard to Nedjma’s complex relationship between ideas of progress and tradition that the reader might scrutinize Kateb’s decision to write the novel in French, rather than in the Berber or Arab languages. However, given that Kateb’s schooling was conducted primarily in French, and his connection with the written word was mainly with Francophone texts, it is not surprising that he chose to write in this language. “Que connaissait Kateb de la grande tradition de la littérature arabe en langue arabe?” Dejéux asks; “Sans doute pas grande chose, à part des versets coraniques appris par coeur, ‘versets incompris’, comme il l’a dit” (“Réception” 112) (“What did Kateb know of the great tradition of Arab literature in Arabic? Surely not much, apart from some verses of the Koran learned by heart, ‘verses misunderstood,’ as he says”). In an interview, Kateb defends his reasons not to write Nedjma in Arabic, stating that he is not against arabisation, but rather he supports bilingualism and trilingualism (Arabic, Berber, and French) (Dejéux,
Littérature maghrébine 225). Furthermore, Kateb intended *Nedjma* to be a novel for francophones, especially the French who held control over his own country. Yet, as Kateb reveals in his novel, he is well aware of the power relations that are inherent in the choice of language: “[Nedjma] m’a parlé en français,” says Mustapha in a daydream sequence: “Désir de couper les ponts en me traitant non seulement comme un commissionnaire, mais comme un mécréant, à qui l’on signifie qu’on n’a rien de commun avec lui, évitant de lui parler dans la langue maternelle” (72) (“[Nedjma] spoke to me in French. Trying to cut off all communication by treating me not only as a porter, but as a criminal she could have nothing in common with, avoiding conversation in the mother tongue” 96). It is clear for Mustapha, at least in his dream, that Nedjma will not accept him, and to show him her disapproval she will create a linguistic barrier between them. This barrier consisting of the French language will connote class, education and race. Perhaps as a symbol of what the ideal Algeria would be like, Nedjma can speak both Arabic and French without difficulty.

Apart from Kateb’s concerns with his use of language – reflecting an artistic preoccupation with origins and tradition – readers may link Kateb’s techniques of ‘distortion’ with the traditions of Islamic art. Aresu, for instance, argues that in Islamic art there is a strong tendency toward visual abstraction, stylisation and profuse ornamentation. Furthermore, one might argue that Islamic art may be considered purposefully defamiliarising due to the prohibition of figurative representation of religious figures. This creates a “process of stylization, schematization, deformation, which, starting from a natural figure, culminates into [sic] a form in which it is very often difficult and even impossible to identify the initial object” (qtd. in Aresu 102). Aresu contends that these
aesthetic concerns (albeit tied intimately with religious ones) parallel one of Kateb’s main influences – (Western) modern art: “In its rhetoric of indirection, in its preclusion of direct representation, Kateb’s refractive procedure undermines mimesis, fictionally duplicates a process of nonfiguration that [. . .] mirrors many of the fundamental preoccupations of modern art” (105).

Before Kateb, there was already a strong literary tradition of francophone writers from the Maghreb, including prominent names such as Mohammed Dib and Mouloud Mammeri. However, Kateb wanted to separate himself stylistically (albeit not politically) from these writers. Bonn argues that *Nedjma* shares characteristics with what will later be called the *nouveau roman* in rejecting many of the established features of the novel to date, mainly the focus on plot, chronological narratives, and character development. Abdel-Jaouad’s article, “Kateb Yacine’s Modernity: Rewriting Surrealism,” positions Kateb’s writing within the aesthetics of surrealism, the avant-garde and ultimately postmodernism. Yet, Kateb also appears to be breaking new ground within francophone literature of the Maghreb. Gontard makes this clear: “Alors que le roman maghrébin d’expression française, héritier de toute une tradition littéraire, s’inscrit dans une technique strictement réaliste, sans innovations d’aucune sorte [. . .], Kateb Yacine, par la structure de son récit, rejoint ce qu’on appelle déjà en France le ´Nouveau Roman´” (15) ("Whereas the Maghrebian novel of French expression, inheriter of a whole literary tradition, falls under a strictly realistic technique, without innovations of any kind [. . .], Kateb Yacine, by the structure of his story, joined what is called already in France the `Nouveau Roman'"). Gontard points out
that *Nedjma*’s influence on North African literature of French expression has been nothing less than to initiate the beginning of what he refers to as the “Nouveau Roman maghrébin.”

Ironically, as I will discuss in greater detail later on in this chapter, one of the authors who was cited by Gontard as ‘traditional,’ Mohammed Dib, became a central figure in the ‘Nouveau Roman maghrébin’ with the publication of *Qui se souvient de la mer* (113).

The question of language is significant in terms of how to properly narrate Kateb’s contemporaneous Algeria, especially considering the lack of a unifying language for the country and the impossibility of foreseeing the outcome of the war. Bonn argues:

> L’Algérie est privée doublement de la possibilité de se raconter, à l’époque de la rédaction de *Nedjma*. Les récits identitaires traditionnels, islamiques ou tribaux, sont en ruines, et le langage de la nation qui pourrait répondre à la présence de la nation française n’existe pas encore: le 8 mai 1945 a été réprimé, et le 1er novembre 1954 n’est pas encore advenu avec sa moisson de faits guerriers à raconter aux générations futures. (Kateb 58)

At the time when *Nedjma* was written, Algeria is doubly deprived of the possibility of narrating itself. The traditional narratives of identity, Muslim or tribal, are in ruins, and the language of the nation that could answer to the presence of the French nation does not yet exist: the eighth of May, 1945 was suppressed, and the first of November 1954 has not yet occurred with its harvest of acts of war to tell to future generations.

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32 For a detailed discussion of other influences on Kateb, Faulkner for example, see Aresu, especially 38-54.
This difficulty of a nation telling its own history is alluded to symbolically in Kateb’s text. Indeed, as has been discussed, there is strong evidence to suggest that the character of Nedjma may symbolically represent Algeria. The issue of language also affects how we view Nedjma’s silence in the text. Bonn makes the connection between the historical/cultural circumstances at the time when Nedjma was written and the title character’s lack of voice: “Comme la nation algérienne qui ne maîtrise pas encore le langage qui la dit ou qui la nie, Nedjma est dite. Elle ne dit pas” (Kateb 58) (“Like the Algerian nation that has not yet mastered the language that tells it or that denies it, Nedjma is said. She does not say”). What is at stake is a nation that is in the process of becoming, and in this process it also begins to find a unified voice. The lack of voice in Nedjma’s character is symbolic of a lack of a unified voice in Kateb’s Algeria. Fanon has argued that the process of decolonization “introduit dans l’être un rythme propre, apporté par les nouveaux hommes, un nouveau langage, une nouvelle humanité” (30) (“brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men, and with it a new language and a new humanity” 36). Kateb’s novel appears to express this belief, associating the creation of a nation with a revolution in language.

I would like to conclude by referring to a comment made in the editors’ preface of Nedjma. Here they describe the text as “le produit d’un acte poétique, d’une co-naisance” (6) (“the product of a poetic act” 33 viii). Aresu rightfully sees in this phrase a possible reference to the act of reading, translating the concept of a “co-naisance” as a “co-prehension” (10-11). However the translation loses some of the vitality and playfulness of
the original. As a ‘co-birth,’ the term signals that the reader must go through the pangs of
delivery to bring understanding (i.e., *connaissance*) to light. It implies activity on the part
of the reader, a personal relationship with the text, and a responsibility to ‘give life’ to the
text. Furthermore, I believe there are political and further hermeneutical implications in the
editors’ remarks. “The product of a poetic act” could be: 1) simply, the text that Kateb has
written – a world created by the poet (*poïesis*); 2) the text as produced by the imagination
of the reader; and 3) the text as a production in the midst of a revolutionary struggle.34
Given Kateb’s narrative techniques, the demands he places on his readers, and the manner
in which the text appears to reveal the underlying tension of the revolution to come, I
would say that these editors’ comments reveal the complexity that occurs with the reader at
a hermeneutical level when reading the novel, and the responsibility of the reader to give
life and historical/political meaning to the text.

*Nedjma* is a novel that reveals ‘distortions’ at the levels of narrative form and
narrative voice. The related temporal ‘distortions,’ in particular those that allude to a return
to the mythical past of Algeria, are a reflection of the presence of the past in a moment
when the nation searches for a new beginning. The polyphonic narrative voice can
paradoxically be seen both as a unified collective voice (necessary for a revolution) and as
the conflicting voices of different groups vying for power (something that will also occur
before a revolution). There are tensions amongst friends (symbolically interpreted as

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33 The description that follows – a “co-naissance” – was not translated by Richard Howard.

34 Despite the chronology of Kateb’s writing of the novel, the editors may very well have wanted to exploit the booming interest in Algeria when the novel was published in 1956.
political groups that want power). There are, of course, also tensions amongst the colonizers and colonized. We can speak of these tensions as predictable, even necessary, pre-revolutionary tensions.

**Mohammed Dib’s *Qui se souvient de la mer***

Published just before the War of Independence had concluded, Mohammed Dib’s *Qui se souvient de la mer* conveys the violence and tensions of Algeria in the midst of a revolution, depicting a world that is both fantastical and monstrous. It is a non-realistic account of living the horrors of war. The novel’s main goal is not to represent the war itself, but to convey the energies, the intense horror, of living not only the Algerian War, but any war. Tremaine posits that “Francophone Algerian fiction has nowhere captured the Algerian revolution with as much intensity or immediacy as it has in Mohammed Dib’s *Qui se souvient de la mer*” (“Psychic” 283). The manner by which Dib captures this horror is unique and will cause defamiliarisation in the reader. “[T]he words ‘Algeria’ and ‘revolution’ are conspicuously absent from the text,” says Tremaine, “as is in fact any specific historical reference to colonialism or the struggle for independence in North Africa” (283). Therefore, unlike *Nedjma*, there is no overt grounding of the diegetic world in Algeria’s history. What is similar to *Nedjma* is that the Algerian War appears in *Qui se souvient de la mer* in a symbolic microcosm; yet as we will see, the allegorical link to the historical players and forces to which they refer are not as stable as in Kateb’s novel.

35 All references to Tremaine are to “Psychic Deformity in Mohammed Dib's *Qui se souvient de la mer*” unless otherwise stated.
Unlike the microcosm in Kateb’s novel, the one which we find in Dib’s is a much more ambiguous historical reference. Indeed, one of the only strong allegorical figures is the symbolic representation of the FLN. It appears as the ‘underground,’ and is a network of people who literally live underneath the city. Other allegorical interpretations that critics have offered, include Nafissa as symbol of the spirit of the Algerian people; the minotaurs as the French army; the ‘spyrovirs’ (a word invented by Dib) as the French air force; the new constructions as the French Secret Army Organization, and so on.

What critics have offered through these direct relational meanings is a way of approaching the text to unpack its symbolic meaning. However, as Tremaine and especially El Nouty (147) have argued, reading such specific and direct allegorical references is sometimes problematic in this novel. Aside from the ‘underground’ symbol, many of the figures (i.e., minotaurs, spyrovirs, and iriace) cannot easily represent specific institutions of oppression. Yet, the lack of direct allegorical references does not imply that the general allegorical link to the Algerian War cannot be made. I posit that despite their unstable direct meanings, these monster-like symbols refer to the horrors of the war, as experienced from the ground (minotaurs), or the air (iriace and spyrovirs), and the resistance that comes from the underground FLN.

The ‘distortions’ to the representation of this historical event are numerous and, once again, include defamiliarising techniques at the levels of the narrative form and narrative voice. These forms of ‘distortion’ are similar to that which we have seen in the novels I have analysed thus far: time is non-chronological, and the narrative voice appears fractured. Regarding the temporal treatment in the novel, Naget Khadda explains: ‘Les
distortions of the duration and the transgressions of the chronological order, by permitting
the emancipation of narrative temporality, incite an active reading that solicits the reader to
engage himself/herself in a quest that is parallel with that of the hero’s”). The text
requires, indeed demands, the participation of an active reader who will be challenged to
make sense of both the diegetic world and how it relates to the historical world to which it
refers. This challenge is referred to in these terms by Bonn: “L’absence du référent,
pourtant désigné, se trouve aussi dans le déchiffrement, le décodage que doit entreprendre
le lecteur qui veut absolument décrire le contenu historique” (“Chapitre 1”) (“The absence
of the referent, nonetheless indicated, finds itself also in the deciphering, the decoding that
the reader must undertake if she/he absolutely wants to describe the historic content”). In
addition to the ‘distortions’ of the narrative form and temporality, which cause historical-
referential and diegetic defamiliarisation for the reader, the predominant form of
‘distortion’ in Dib’s novel is the ‘distortion’ of space.

Joan Phyllis Monego correctly asserts that in Dib’s novel, “spatiotemporal
relationships are distorted and the physical laws that govern matter are deliberately
transgressed” (54). Yet Dib’s ‘distortion’ of space has an impact far beyond the diegetic
world of the novel. What is unique about Qui se souvient de la mer, in comparison to the

36 Unless otherwise indicated, all references to Khadda are to Mohammed Dib:
Cette intempestive voix recluse.

37 All translations of Khadda are my own.
other texts studied in my dissertation, is how it encourages readers not only to interpret the
diegetic space as a reference to Algeria and the Algerian War of Independence, but to go
beyond national boundaries and consider the phenomenon of revolution in an international
(socialist) context.

Before *Qui se souvient de la mer*, Dib was already a well known Algerian writer,
famous for what critics refer to as his “Algeria trilogy”: *La Grande Maison* (1952),
*L'Incendie* (1954) and *Le Métier à tisser* (1957). However, this trilogy has always been
considered predominantly realist. At the time when Dib published the last novel of the
trilogy, Kateb and Dib were both writers for the same left-wing newspaper. The latter’s
subsequent departure from realism seems to coincide with the impact of *Nedjma* on the
Algerian literary landscape.\(^{38}\) Like *Nedjma*, the plot in *Qui se souvient de la mer* is not easy

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\(^{38}\) In fact, Dib’s novel could be seen to make an intertextual reference to Kateb’s
master work. For instance, the character of Nafissa has parallels to Nedjma. Like Nedjma,
Nafissa (whose name in Arabic means ‘breath,’ ‘soul’ or ‘source of life’) appears to
embody the Algerian struggle within a mythical historical context: “Une immense épée est
en train de naitre en elle” (117) (“An immense epic is in the throes of being born in her” 73),
claims the narrator. He explains that the name Nafissa is said to designate “notre lignée et
l’enseignement qui nous est légué” (128) (“our line of descent, and the learning that has
been passed on to us” 80). Nafissa is also symbolically associated with a rose and, like
*Nedjma*, a star (173, tr. 111).

The opening sequence of *Qui se souvient de la mer* also appears to allude to the
opening and closing sequence of *Nedjma*, thus suggesting a continuation of what Kateb
explores in his novel. Let us recall this passage in *Nedjima*: “Lakhdar s’est échappé de sa
cellule. / A l’aurore, sa silhouette apparaît sur le palier” (Lakhdar has escaped from his cell.
/ At dawn, his shadow appears on the landing”). The opening sequence in *Qui se souvient de la mer* is similar in some ways: “– Soyez en paix; bon appétit. / L’homme se carrait dans
l’encadrement de la porte” (9) (“Peace, my friends; eat hearty. / The man stood framed in
the doorway”). Both openings begin with a man on the threshold, entering a space with
the intention of joining his friends. This space appears to give refuge against the strife that
exists outside, and appears in both cases as a closed community (a group of friends in
*Nedjima*, and a group of regular patrons of the *metabkha* [small restaurant/diner] in *Qui se
souvient de la mer*).
to delineate in such a way as to give a true sense of the text’s impact. In fact, some critics have taken issue with the difficulty in reading the novel. Pierre-Henri Simon both celebrates and criticizes Dib’s work: “Vertigo is too strong in Dib. His book reveals a great talent, a writer’s vigor which is at times admirable; but one would have to enter into a trance to read him well” (qtd. in Monego 56). The evidence of the difficulty in understanding the work is clear in the manner that Tremaine summarizes the novel in his introduction of the translated edition. He says that what readers get is:

a bewildering vision of life in a strange and hostile city whose inhabitants are ruled by minotaurs and mummies, deafened by the explosive raising of ‘new constructions’ in their midst, chased and trapped by serpentine walls, transformed into stone statues, mocked by bird-like creatures called ‘spyrovirs’ and ‘iriace’ (words invented by Dib), and abandoned by a once maternal sea now gone deep underground. (vii-viii)

Tremaine’s description is more impressionistic than useful for providing an intelligible plot. One might add to his brief summary that the main characters are the narrator (the protagonist), Nafissa (his wife), and El Hadj (a friend of the protagonist). The action of the novel’s diegetic present takes place in a bi-level city: the city above – “la ville de l’air” (112-3) (“the city of the air” 69) – and the underground.39 The latter is the site for launching attacks against the ‘new constructions,’ and can be seen to represent the home of the FLN. The underground and their actions are described in the following manner: “Ceux

39 All translations of Qui se souvient de la mer are from Louis Tremaine’s translation of the text, appearing in the “Works Consulted” as Who Remembers the Sea.
des nôtres qui se sont réfugiés au fond des souterrains forés dans les assises mêmes de la ville lancent chaque nuit, maintenant, des attaques-surprises contre les bâtiments et se retirent aussitôt leur coup porté” (79) (“Those of our people who have taken refuge in the underground caves dug into the very foundations of the city now launch surprise attacks each night against the buildings and pull back as soon as their blow has been struck” 48).

The ‘plot’ of the novel is surprisingly simple. “Set in the midst of the war of independence, Qui se souvient de la mer is, on a literal level, the story of a man, his wife, and a city torn by war” (Monego 54). Monego summarises: “symbolically and metaphorically, it is the story of the Algerian people and their struggle to emerge from the bonds of colonialism.

The novel is difficult to decipher” (54). Indeed, how the reader deciphers the novel is key. I agree to an extent with Monego’s interpretation of the symbolic metaphorical significance of Dib’s novel. It is true that the diegetic world is allegorical of the horrors lived during the Algerian War of Independence. However, I feel that her interpretation fails to view the novel’s political relevance in a larger, international context, as I will later discuss.

Critics (i.e., Khadda 52, Monego 54) have affiliated Qui se souvient de la mer with the genres of the fantastic and science fiction. Nonetheless, these assertions are usually not followed by definitions of what the critics understand by these terms. The closest approximation is that of Dejéux, who asserts that Dib considers his novel like The Thousand and One Nights – a work, Dejéux asserts, that approximates science fiction in that it transports the reader through space and time (Littérature maghrébine 152). El Nouty
compares Dib’s work with The War of the Worlds, claiming that the attacks and counter-attacks remind him of Wells’s canonical science-fiction novel.40

These assertions may stem in part from Dib’s closing statements in his postface, where he asserts that the style of Qui se souvient de la mer may resemble that found in science fiction. Yet, if there is a resemblance at all, it seems accidental, as he also asserts: “je n’avais jamais lu avant des livres de science fiction” (191) (“I had never before read a book of science fiction” 122). Therefore, when writing Qui se souvient de la mer, it is clear that Dib was not consciously, at least, engaging in the traditions of the genre.

Referring to other categories and thematic preoccupations to discuss the work, Trifu sees it within the context of the aims of the surrealists to create “un mythe collectif” (30) (a “collective myth”); Tremaine argues that the work is “expressionistic” (283), and Monego posits that in Qui se souvient de la mer, “Dib combines symbolism, surrealism, elements of psychoanalysis, science fiction, the theme of the labyrinth, and the new novelists’ preoccupation with time and space” (54). Furthermore, the importance of ‘magic’ in Dib’s novel is also discussed by Khadda in relation to Dib’s secular schooling versus the popular culture that surrounded him as child (61).

40 It is my belief that Qui se souvient de la mer should not be classified as ‘science fiction.’ However, as Adam Roberts characterizes the main features of the genre, it might initially appear that it could be a work of science fiction: it has a fantastic premise; there are encounters with creatures. More generally, there is also a clear distinction in Qui se souvient de la mer between the fictional world it presents and the world in which we actually live (1). Yet, Roberts rightly argues that many of these characteristics of science fiction do not distinguish it from other genres, in particular, surrealism and magical realism (2). By distinguishing a work such as Kafka’s Metamorphosis from science fiction, Roberts suggests that “the premise of an SF novel requires material, physical rationalisation, rather than a supernatural or arbitrary one” (5). By this definition, it would appear that Qui se
How Dib’s novel fits specifically within the various genres mentioned above is not of primary concern for my present study. What is important, however, is how other critics have interpreted in various ways Dib’s turn from a realist mode of writing. All these critics, by placing Dib within various genres, have in turn highlighted not only his move away from realism but, in the process, the many narrative modes that could be used to describe how Dib ‘distorts’ historical reality.

In his postface to *Qui se souvient de la mer*, Dib preemptively provides some answers for readers who may wonder “pourquoi [. . .] le drame algérien m’a poussé B prendre pareil ton et B mettre ces grandes années de malheur dans un cadre terrible et légendaire” (189) (“why [. . .] has the Algerian drama led me [Dib] to adopt such a tone and to present those great years of misfortune within this terrible and legendary framework” 121). He answers this question with one of his own: “Pourquoi Picasso a-t-il peint *Guernica* comme il l’a fait, et non comme une reconstitution historique?” (189) (“Why did Picasso paint *Guernica* as he did, and not as a historical reconstruction?” 121). Dib explains that he did not want the horror of Algeria to become a “spectacle plus désespérément terne” (“[a desperately] dull spectacle”) consisting of “[u]n peu de sang répandu, un peu de chair broyée” (189) (“a little spilled blood, a little mangled flesh” 121). It would become dull, because horror repeats itself throughout history. Dib’s worry is that the horror of Algeria would seem ordinary when compared to other horrific events of the mid twentieth century:

`souvient de la mer` is not a work of science fiction, since there is no attempt to rationalise its fantastic world.
Ainsi, ce qui devait arriver en Algérie avait-il été *B l’avance* effacé, limé; les exterminations de la dernière guerre, la monstruosité des camps de concentration, l’abomination de la bombe atomique, n’ont pas fini de hanter les nuits des hommes. Comment parler de l’Algérie après Auschwitz, le ghetto de Varsovie et Hiroshima? (190)

Thus, what was to happen in Algeria has been *in advance* erased, scratched out; the exterminations of the last war, the monstrosity that was the concentration camps, the abomination that was the atomic bomb, still haunt men’s nights. How can one speak of Algeria after Auschwitz, the Warsaw ghetto, and Hiroshima? (121).

Dib knows that these horrific events act as the ‘barometers’ of human suffering (Trifu 29). Yet, he does not want to enter into the exercise of comparison. Nor does he want to represent realistically the suffering of Algeria (which would more readily allow the reader to compare). Dib returns to his discussion of Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica*, saying that in this painting there is not “un élément réaliste dans ce tableau – ni sang, ni cadavres – et cependant il n’y a rien qui exprime autant l’horreur” (190) (“a single realistic element in the whole painting–neither blood nor dead bodies–and yet there is nothing that expresses so strongly the horror” 122). Relating the art of painting to that of literature, Dib says that he could not express the horrors of Algeria “avec l’écriture romanesque en usage” (191) (“by

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41 Interestingly, as I have discussed in Chapter 1, writers like Spiegelman and Amis are in fact concerned with the ‘dullification’ of the horror of Auschwitz itself. I imagine that in 1962, Dib did not think that the ‘dullification’ of Auschwitz was even possible – at least not by then, when only decades had elapsed since the end of the war.
means of the customary techniques of the novel” (122). If what is meant by “customary techniques” is a form of writing that is realist or naturalistic, then Dib’s writing certainly does not fit that mold. Through what I have called ‘distortion,’ Dib eschews these conventions, which would include the use of a stable narrative voice, a stable chronological structure, along with the presentation of time as a naturalistic temporal experience, and a naturalistic presentation of space.

_Narrative Voice_

The historical demands made upon the reader come into conflict with pure aesthetic appreciation in Dib’s novel. Episodes – for instance, where the sea sings, the narrator walks through walls, or a mole runs below the city (apparently planting bombs) – can be appreciated aesthetically just at a literal level, or simply as a pure fancy of the imagination. Nonetheless, responsible readers will balance their aesthetic and imaginative experience with their foreknowledge of Algeria’s War of Independence (or to a lesser extent, war in general).

Often the reader will experience confusion because of an inability to properly identify a sole, distinctive consciousness as the narrator. As in Rachid’s hashish-induced visions in _Nedjma_, the consciousness of the narrator in _Qui se souvient de la mer_ also can appear to be affected by narcotics: “Depuis un moment, je respirais des odeurs dont la torride amertume râpait l’air, je rAvais B des figuiers dispersant leur semence au loin. Oublieux de tout, je glissai alors dans une invincible somnolence. Jamais encore je n’avais

42 Like Kateb’s, it appears that Dib’s literary influences were for the most part Western, including Faulkner, Steinbeck, Hemingway, Joyce and Woolf (Khadda 51).
connu un tel détachement; je n’éprouvais plus rien, la souffrance, apaisée” (32) (“I had been inhaling smells whose torrid bitterness grated the air, dreaming of fig trees scattering their seeds far and wide. Forgetting everything, I slipped into an irresistible drowsiness. I had never before known such detachment; I felt nothing; my suffering, appeased” 17-18).

In this state, the narrator remarks: “Je repensai B l’explosion, au type, aux hommes et aux femmes qui fuyaient, aux spyrovirs. Avaient-ils réellement existé? (34) (“I thought back to the explosion, to the guy in the metabkha, to the fleeing men and women, to the spyrovirs. Had they really existed?”19). The effects of the hashish have caused him to question his own experiences. Now that his suffering is appeased by the drug, he begins to question the horror that he had witnessed at the *metabkha*, and now wonders if it had actually happened.43 The narrator’s questioning of his own experiences is analysed in depth by Tremaine. One of my points of contention with his analysis is that, rather than consider the effects of hashish as what causes doubt on the narrator’s part in the above passage,

Tremaine analyses it from the perspective that his entire perception of a fantastical reality may be based on “images of experience” of a particular consciousness (e.g., a product of the imagination) that has been affected by the war (287). Therefore these experiences may *never* have happened to the narrator at all. Tremaine insists that no other character, other than the narrator, of course, refers directly or indirectly to the fantastic creatures and

43 As was seen in the passages of *Nedjma* describing Rachid’s experience with hashish, the drugged narrator of *Qui se souvient de la mer* also begins to feel a sense of connection with the past: “La voix de Nafissa me couvrit de son eau, me berça” (34) (“Nafissa’s voice covered me with its water, cradled me” 19). As we shall see, in *Qui se souvient de la mer*, a connection to a mythical Algeria is made through the image of Nafissa and the sea.
conditions. He concedes that neither does the text provide evidence that these elements are strictly “imaginary.” What he contends is that: “[t]his narrative apportionment points to the psychic pressure exerted on the narrator by his experience of social violence and chaos and to the corresponding deformation of his consciousness” (298). Such a reading is attractive in that it adequately exposes the complexities of the narrative voice. It also reflects the unrepresentable aspect of horrific violence that psychologically, traumatically, affects individuals such as the narrator, as well as the collective (Algeria). However, despite Tremaine’s assertion that no other character refers to the fantastic world as perceived by the protagonist, first-person narratives often do not confirm for the reader diegetic realities outside of the narrator’s own perception and experience of them. To question the ‘reality’ of the diegetic world presented by the narrator of Qui se souvient de la mer is in turn to question the very core of Dib’s stated intentions. If Dib’s novel aligns itself aesthetically and ethically with Guernica, one might similarly ask of Picasso’s painting: Is the world presented in Guernica a world as seen by a traumatised psyche? Or is the world in Guernica itself traumatised (i.e., mad, or in disorder)? The ramifications of this answer are of course of primary hermeneutical significance. I have read Qui se souvient de la mer with the latter possibility more closely on my mind, considering the diegetic world of the novel as a ‘representation’ of a world in disorder. As the narrator says after seeing Nafissa leave and return (from planting bombs), “plus que moi, c’est le monde qui a changé” (143) (“more than I, it’s the world that has changed” 91). Although I find Tremaine’s reading of the protagonist’s perception as a traumatised psyche quite fascinating, I find that the reading of the novel’s world as one in disorder offers richer readings overall, especially from a
political historical perspective. The way to properly reflect this world in disorder is through ‘distortion’ itself, thereby forcing the reader to experience its disarray and confusion. In turn, this allows for the reader to take an active role in imagining, reconstructing and ultimately giving some order to the historical narrative.

This disorder takes many forms. Episodes of the narrator’s childhood frequently interrupt the present of the novel. These occur at five points in the text (35-36, 50-51, 72-78, 88-96, 122-27) and in their idyllic presentation appear to counter the traumatised world of the present. As we shall see, in the narrator’s childhood his home, the ‘palace’ (89, tr. 54) is remembered as comforting and is juxtaposed to the space that surrounds it. Thinking of the way his mother comforted him while he was ill, he asks himself: “Que n’accepterais-je de subir pour me retrouver sous cette patiente, cette bienveillante influence?” (93) (“What wouldn’t I agree to undergo in order to feel once again that kind, patient influence?” 57). His childhood world, where he was protected by others, appears to be lost and irrecoverable. Yet memories and photographs of the narrator’s mother still provide, posthumously, comfort and a connection to the past: “Deux yeux noirs immenses éclairent mes nuits, et le reste est brouillé. Le matin, je reprends ces photos: aucune n’a le moindre air de ressemblance avec l’image qui dort en moi. Je ne retrouve pas ces yeux ouverts dans mon imagination comme des fenêtres sur un horizon qui n’appartient assurément pas à ce monde” (52-3) (“Two immense black eyes light up my nights, and the rest is blurred. In the morning, I take out her photographs: none bears the least resemblance to the image that sleeps inside me. I can no longer find those eyes which in my imagination open like windows onto a horizon which surely does not belong to this world” 30). Akin to the
experience that Roland Barthes theorises in *Camera Lucida* – of searching for the image that encapsulates his memory of his deceased mother – the narrator here cannot find an image that resembles his own mother. However, what is implied is not just a matter of the medium of photography not being able to encapsulate her image. More importantly the narrator says that her eyes open a “horizon which does not belong to this world.” Therefore, the narrator’s childhood, to which the memory of his mother pertains, is seen as so vastly distinct from the disorder of the present that his mother’s image and person (representing comfort and protection) only become conceivable at night, in his dreams.

Tremaine argues that these sections that revert to or reminisce about childhood have little narrative continuity amongst themselves or with the narrator’s experience in the diegetic present. The hermeneutical consequence is that the reader must be constantly aware of the diegetic time in the novel. Tremain claims that there exists a significant disparity between the child and adult worlds of the narrator:

What is remarkable about these childhood sequences in the context of the novel, in fact, is precisely that they are unremarkable–that they are, relative to the narrator’s experience as an adult, perfectly banal. It is the adult’s world that is full of ‘monsters’–iriace, spyrovirs, minotaurs, mummies, and so on–not the child’s. It is in the adult’s perception that walls slither like snakes, people turn to stone, stars explode, and the sea sings lullabies, not that of the child. (286-87)

Tremaine is right to point out the seemingly contradictory nature of what one might expect from these two worlds. However, rather than this shift representing the protagonist’s
traumatised psyche turned ‘child-like,’ this disparity in perception may mark a loss of innocence on the part of the narrator. It may symbolically also indicate a loss of innocence on the part of Algeria as well. Bonn refers to the historical moment in these sections that describe the narrator’s childhood as the “temps anciens” (“Chapitre 1”) (“ancient times”), which is indicative of the mythical quality attributed to Algeria’s past in *Qui se souvient de la mer*.

Returning to an examination of Tremaine’s claim that the narrator’s perception as an adult is indicative of a traumatised psyche, it is useful to remember that the narrator grew up in comfort and was protected from the outside world. In fact, his first venture outside of his home to the city was marked (literally) by his stepping on glass and cutting his foot. His foot subsequently became infected, and he was bed-ridden for some time. Therefore, the reader’s understanding of his perception of a world turned upside down should take into account the sheltered environment from which he came. More than anything, the reader’s perception of the world in disorder reflects an historical reality – one that has in fact become ‘monstrous’ and offers good reasons to feel fear. Therefore, differing with Tremaine, I suggest that the fantastical world present in *Qui se souvient de la mer* is not indicative of the perception of a single traumatised psyche, but indicative of Dib’s efforts to reveal an historical world that has become almost unrecognizable, fearsome, and in complete disorder.

The Algerian War is ‘monstrous’ in comparison to the reality of the protagonist’s childhood. Yet, as one might surmise from Dib’s statements in the postface, it is a questionable enterprise to begin comparing horrific historical events, to determine which
one is more monstrous than the other. In light of Dib’s statements, the protagonist of Qui se souvient de la mer says something that inevitably stands out for the reader. He makes a statement where he compares the present horror with past tragic events:

De mémoire d’homme ou de femme, notre population n’a entendu vacarme aussi terrifiant, jamais spectacle plus monstreux ne lui a été offert. Parfois des explosions en partent qui tordent les bases de la ville; l’Histoire ne donne pas d’exemple, même approximatif, de ce qui se passe là, sous nos yeux. (79)

Never in the memory of man or of woman has our population heard such a terrifying din, never has it been presented a more monstrous spectacle. Explosions go off that twist the foundations of the city; History offers no example even close to what’s happening there in front of our eyes. (48)

The protagonist assesses his plight within an historical continuum, and decides that the horror he faces is the worst that anyone (in his population) has ever experienced. The significance of such an assessment is that it reveals the subjectivity of living through horror. Whether or not the horrors of Algeria were the “most monstrous spectacle” ever for Algeria, in the moment, the protagonist feels they are. By stating that History does not offer an example that is “even close” to what occurs before the protagonist’s eyes, the narrator suggests a comparative perspective. He also cannot contextualize what is happening in a rational or articulated sense. The reader is put in a position where it is difficult to contextualize the war as described in Dib’s novel. The fantastical world portrayed is full of figures and forces that escape our known (and comparable) reality. Through the monstrous
world portrayed, Dib’s novel problematizes our desire to contextualize and compare
tragedy and human suffering. This includes the Algerian War of Independence itself. Dib
thus conveys the horror of the war by ‘distorting’ the historical referent, and thus prevents
it from being properly contextualized – which Dib feels would mean “erased” and
“scratched out” – within an historical continuum of human suffering.

The inability to properly contextualize or even represent such violence is central to
Dib’s aesthetic and ethical concerns. Indeed, the inability to rationalise violence is
demonstrated by various passages that describe the characters’ reactions upon witnessing
horrific events. For instance, when Lkarmoni attempts to report some tragic news, the only
words he can say are: “Ils les ont tués [. . .]. Ils les ont tués, ils les ont tués, répétait-il B
travers ses sanglots, incapable d’émettre d’autres sons” (22) (“They’ve killed them. [. . .].
They’ve killed them, they’ve killed them,’ he sobbed, incapable of any other sound” 11).
The people of his community try to induce him to speak, wanting “qu’il apprit B dire de
nouveaux mots” (“him to learn to say new words”) – as if only new words could account
for this new horror. However, it is to no avail: “Etranglé, Lkarmoni demeurait toutefois
hors d’état de former une phrase, d’expliquer. Ce n’était en tout cas plus la peine en ce qui
nous concernait” (22) (“Choking, Lkarmoni was still unable to form a sentence, to explain.
There was, in any case, no need as far as we were concerned” 11). In keeping with the
ideological and aesthetic spirit of Dib’s novel, a rational explanation is deemed unnecessary
in Lkarmoni’s case. Likewise, the privileging of language as a rational faculty is considered
useless for revolutionary means in Qui se souvient de la mer. After the protagonist begins
to physically feel the violence and aggression on the part of his oppressors, after the
shifting walls take their effect on the population, the protagonist states: “La voix devenant un sens inutile, certains d’entre nous, lorsqu’ils l’eurent constaté, tremblèrent de rage, serrèrent les mâchoires et connurent l’impuissance” (19) (“The voice became a useless faculty. Some among us, when they realized this, trembled with rage, clenched their jaws, and felt their powerlessness” 9). The narrator earlier remarks: “les mots renoncent B âtre des paroles et se changèrent en certaines choses qui ressemblaient B des galets” (18) (“words renounced their status as speech and changed into certain things resembling pebbles” 9). The result is that people begin to “vomir un torrent de pierres” (“vomit a torrent of stones”), or as described in other words, they “explosaient et délivraient le cri qu’ils renfermaient” (19) (begin “exploding and releasing the cry closed up inside of them” 9). This image of words turning into stones that one can project in a “mitraillade” (19) (“burst of firing” 9) is symbolically significant. It recalls how Fanon has described the moment when “the lid blows off,” that moment when violence becomes the only option for the colonized. Improvised weapons, stones of protest and revolt become some of the first demonstrations of violence on the part of the oppressed. Outside of the organized resistance, more powerful weapons are not so readily available to the general population. Dib’s depiction of a population that begins to revolt violently by shooting stones from their mouths, conveys the moment when it is clear to the oppressed that further conversation and negotiation with their oppressors will not grant them freedom, but action must now be taken. It is these actions of revolt, along with the symbolic figure of the sea, which will ultimately give the oppressed their freedom.
The Sea

The sea is a polyvalent symbol that has been shared and developed amongst most (I hesitate to say all) cultures. It has symbolized the coming into being of earth, life and even the gods. Monsters also have been thought to lie in its depths, and, thus, the sea represents “an image of the unconscious which has currents of its own which may be either lethal or regenerative” (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 837). In a divine-like attribution, the sea is also capable of giving and taking life. Thus, there is a recurring theme of potentiality in the sea’s symbolism. This tremendous potentiality, coupled with uncertainty, is what the sea begins to represent in Qui se souvient de la mer where Algeria is in the midst of a revolution. Chevalier and Gheerbrant highlight the potential that the sea holds to destroy and regenerate:

   The sea is a symbol of the dynamism of life. Everything comes from the sea and everything returns to it. It is a place of birth, transformation and rebirth. With its tides, the sea symbolizes a transitory condition between shapeless potentiality and formal reality, an ambivalent situation of uncertainty, doubt and indecision which can end well or ill. Hence the sea is an image simultaneously of death and life (837).

The sea appears in Dib’s novel as a ‘force,’ an overwhelming potentiality, rather than an entity or institution, such as we have seen in the monstrous world of war that includes mummies, minotaurs, iriaice and spyrovirs. The sea represents the forces of a mythical past. This symbolic meaning of the sea is also intimately connected to the figure of the mother.44

44 Like Dib's Qui se souvient de la mer, Driss Chraïbi’s La Civilisation, ma mère! makes similar connections between the sea (mer), the mother (mère), and the potential of
The past is ever-present through the metaphor of the sea. As in *Nedjma*, we will see that in Dib’s novel this mythical past also holds hope for bringing about change. But first the people must feel connected to their past. Thus, as was also seen in *Nedjma*, the country’s mythical past has a large role in the promise of a future revolution.

The connection with the role of the mother can be surmised by the novel’s title, *Qui se souvient de la mer*, where *mer* can also be heard as *mère*. Apart from the narrator’s real mother, both Nafissa and the sea are portrayed as protecting, motherly figures. The narrator likens the sea to women in general in one passage, remarking: “Sans la mer, sans les femmes, nous serions restés définitivement des orphelins” (20-21) (“Without the sea, without women, we would remain orphans definitively” 10). The relationship between the narrator and the sea/Nafissa is that of a child who seeks protection. As earlier discussed, it is apparent, in his nostalgic reminiscing of childhood, that the constant protection of his mother is missing from his life (93, tr. 57).

In the diegetic present, the narrator seeks protection and comfort. He finds comfort and protection from the dangerous world around him by singing lullabies from his childhood (63, tr. 37). This singing has parallels to what the narrator refers to as the “chant de la mer” (64) (“singing of the sea” 37). Therefore, lullabies are recalled and nostalgically

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45 Like the character of Nedjma in Kateb’s novel, Nafissa provides the links between past, present, and future. However, Nafissa’s link to the past appears mainly via her association with the sea. For instance, the narrator associates the action of Nafissa sitting down beside the narrator with the sea opening up at its deepest depths, and she
brought forth from the past as a mode by which the narrator can counter the horrors of the present. Lullabies are also sung by the sea, which we will see is also a symbol of Algeria’s collective past. The origins (as represented by the sea’s song) are thus conjured in the struggle for a future. The related figures of mer/mère, through song, provide assurances that hardships will pass, and it will seemingly protect the individual (the narrator) and the collective (Algeria) from danger. The sea, says Monego, “is a source of wisdom and energy, a protective nourishing refuge” (55). Coupling the motherly characteristics with its revolutionary potential, the sea says Monego, “is the womb from which new life will issue forth to invade and topple the foreign city” (55).

The sea seems ageless (22, tr. 11), and appears to make the distance between the past and the present vanish (52, tr. 29). Until the near end of the narrative, the sea had receded and taken refuge in a cave. However, this was not always the case. The narrator knows of its past, and the sea is imagined in mythical terms: “Je me ressouviens de l’époque ancienne où nous continuions à l’avoir à nos pieds, où elle changeait toutes les rumeurs en fabuleuse chronique et nous parlait d’innocence. On nous eφt dit alors qu’elle fuirait un jour, nous ne l’aurions pas cru” (114-15)” (“I thought back to the old days when we still had it at our feet, when it transformed all sounds into a fabulous tale and spoke to us of innocence. Had you told us then that it would one day leave us, we wouldn’t have believed it” 71). The sea appears innocent, like the narrator’s nostalgic perception of his childhood

“absorbait, de proche en proche, la création entière” (120) (“[was] absorbing, little by little, all of creation” (75).
which was discussed earlier. Likewise, the sea’s innocence could be seen as juxtaposed to a
world that is in disarray.

The sea is mostly absent from the lives of the city’s population. However the
reminder of its presence is constant. This is paralleled at a formal level in the novel. Like
waves intermittently crashing against the shore, the presence of the sea is constantly
evoked, to the point where it often interrupts the narrative with little or no association
between the interruptions and the passages they interrupt (i.e., 20-23, tr. 10-11). Therefore
the formal insertion of this theme momentarily disrupts the flow of the narrative, and forces
the reader to remember the sea, in keeping with the very title of the novel.

With the sea mostly absent, some lose faith in its power. Yet others still have faith
in the renewal that the sea holds out as a possibility (161, tr. 103). This renewal is nothing
short of a revolution. In showing its anguish over the violence suffered by its people, the
sea will give out a cry when explosions are set off (26, tr. 14). Yet, the sea encourages
people’s faith, and urges them to press on, as it will join them soon: “Je vais venir, je vais
venir” (176) (“I will come, I will come” 113), it says. It appears, nonetheless, that the sea
will only make its appearance if humans make an effort on their part. The narrator says: “Je
l’attends et me demande si le monde sera assez beau pour l’accueillir. Faut-il cependant
l’attendre ici, et non pas plutôt dans la ville du sous-sol? Sortira-t-elle tant que je n’y serai
pas descendu?” (176) (“I wait for it and wonder whether the world will be beautiful enough
to welcome it. But should I wait for it here, rather, than in the underground city? Will it
emerge without my having made the descent?” 113). 46 Continuing the revolutionary symbolism, the sea begins to prepare “la venue d’un autre monde” (166) ("the coming of another world” 106). It then begins by beating slowly against the city walls (169, tr. 108), finally destroying them and taking over the city (182, tr.117). Without knowing the outcome of the war, Dib could not have portrayed in any realistic sense Algeria gaining independence on November 1, 1962. Yet, a realist portrayal was not his intention. The triumph of the sea at the end of the novel reveals the not necessarily unthinkable, but quasi-miraculous status that the revolution holds for the oppressed of Algeria. As I discussed in the Introduction, ‘distortion’ often acts to compensate for a reality that may lose truth value were it represented. Similar to Dib’s project with the microcosm he sets up in the novel, the symbolic value of the sea is a compensation for a reality that might lose value if represented naturalistically. In its triumph, the sea then comes to represent that overexuberance of emotion, the overflow of revolutionary energies, and the disappearance of colonial power. As we have seen, the sea also comes to signify the power of the past and the comfort taken by the population in immersing themselves in a mythical force that is timeless and seemingly alive.

46 The narrator’s comment seems to question a teleological view of history: that is, whether the revolution can exist with or without the inspiration/action of humankind. Contrarily, a comment by the narrator’s friend, Hadj, to the narrator seems to indicate Hadj’s own teleological beliefs: “Ce qui compte, ce n’est pas tant ce qu’on fait aujourd’hui” (182) (“What counts is not so much what you do today” 117). The narrator then asks him: “Qu’est-ce qui compte donc?” (“What counts then?”), to which Hadj responds: “La vie chante dans les siècles” (182) (“Life sings in the centuries” 117). The implication here is that there is a force that underlies humanity’s progression through the centuries. In this context, according to Hadj, the individual cannot provoke much change. Naturally, there is also a connection here with the ‘motherly,’ assuring aspect of the sea.
Temporality

Temporality appears ‘distorted’ in the diegetic world of *Qui se souvient de la mer*. Apart from the ageless sea, the narrator’s past is also thought of as mythical and timeless. When the narrator thinks back to his childhood, he describes how “les jours alors n’en faisaient qu’un, prolongé, bu indéfiniment” (12) (“the days back then flowed together into one, extended, drunk in endlessly” 5). He wonders if, since then, “le temps s’est affolé” (12) (“time has gone mad” 5).47 As earlier discussed, the memory of the narrator’s childhood takes on a certain innocence and is juxtaposed to the ‘madness’ that will ensue. In contrast to a nostalgic, quasi-mythical memory of childhood, the madness of the present historical moment is reflected in the alteration of the flow of narrative time itself. Appropriately, at the outset of the novel, when the conflict between the protagonist’s community and the authorities escalates into violence, the narrator briefly mentions the use of “la machine à tuer le temps” (30) (“the time-killing machine” 16) in the explosion at the metabkha.48 This time-killing machine is not mentioned again in the novel, and is only passed over quickly in this passage. It would appear then that the “time-killing” machine was presumably set just

Her lullabies sooth people, like Hadj, into believing that the revolution will come ‘naturally’ and eventually.

47 The narrator, as a child, seems to already have a sense that the future will be much different than the present. He describes how in his childhood he lived “dans la crainte inavouée que le monde ne se retournât sens devant derrière” (72) (“in the unacknowledged fear that the world was spinning backwards” 43).

48 The same machine might have been alluded to earlier in the novel when the narrator describes an engineer in the metabkha: “il venait d’ajuster toutes les pièces de la machine qui tournait avec la superbe aisance d’un cyclotron” (25), (“he had adjusted all the parts of the machine that ran with the superb ease of a cyclotron” 13).
as the violence broke out. It is not clear whether it caused the violence, or, inversely, if it was a consequence of the outbreak of violence.

The ‘killing’ of time is made apparent when the narrator imagines what it would be like if the walled city – the source of oppression – were to be destroyed, and ‘turned over’ (a revolution): “Il n’est plus temps, il n’est plus temps [. . .], quand la ville tombe, quand la ville tourne, quand la ville n’est plus qu’un vent perpétuel, il n’est plus temps; il n’est plus temps quand la ville dresse au-dessus des eaux une main de naufragé, quand elle pousse des chants de coq!” (135) (“The time is past, the time is past [. . .] when the city falls down, when the city turns over, when the city is nothing but an endless wind, the time is past; the time is past when the city stretches a drowning hand above the waters, when it crows like a cock” 85). Instead of the revolution being in the future, it paradoxically appears to be situated in the past, thereby further revealing a dependency on the past to bring about what could only happen in the future.

**Space**

The spaces in *Qui se souvient de la mer* are varied and are explicitly related to their symbolic significance within the temporal sequence of the novel. The ‘distortion’ of space comes to represent a world falling into chaos and disorder. Khadda explains how spaces change in the novel as the narrator describes his life from childhood to the diegetic present:

[L’]espace se dessine au gré des déambulations du narrateur dont la trajectoire va du château en ruine de l’enfance situé dans la campagne environnante et aboutit B la ville du sous-sol en passant par le labyrinthe où vieille cité et nouvelles constructions s’interpénètent et se combattent.
Espace de configuration complexe qui, pas plus que le temps, n’autorise la reconnaissance du référent mais sugère des analogies (54).

Space takes shape along with the ambulations of the narrator whose trajectory goes from the castle in ruins of childhood, located in the surrounding countryside, and then comes to the underground city passing by the labyrinth, where the old city and new constructions coexist and are in combat with each other. It is a complex space configuration which, more often than not, does not allow the recognition of the referent but suggests analogies.

Symbolically indicating the lack of socio-political ‘activity’ surrounding him as a child, the narrator likens his non-political childhood to empty space. Akin to the symbolic value of the sea, this empty space is indicative of nature, possibility, and freedom, a time when the narrator’s life was seemingly unaffected by colonial powers.49 He says that he was “captivé par le vide qui m’entourait” (72) (“captivated by the emptiness that surrounded me” 43).

The narrator’s protected childhood is described as occurring within an enormous house, a haven that overlooks “des vallées noires, tout un large pays dont l’accès m’était défendu, où la ville demeurait enfouie derrière une ligne de collines vertes” (73) (“dark valleys, a whole expanse of country to which I was forbidden access, where the city lay buried behind a line of green hills” 44). The spaces of childhood are distinct; for instance, he recalls the road of *Kaissaria*, “cette rue qui ne ressemble B nulle autre” (151) (“this street that is like

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49 The disparity between the narrator’s existence in a castle and the existence of dark valleys which lie before the city suggests that the freedom felt by the narrator was not similarly felt by others in Algeria during the narrator’s childhood.
This is juxtaposed to the city streets of the protagonist’s future. These streets in the city morph according to the movement of the walls and lose a sense of distinct identity. The city, significantly, has no name. The city is generic, according to Trifu, who argues that this may indicate that “pour l’auteur algérien la guerre est coma temporel et spatial” (34) (for the Algerian author the war is a temporal and spatial coma”). Conversely, the moving walls, says Dejéux, are part of Dib’s intention to portray a revolution at every level of society: “Aucun objet n’est parfaitement immobile; tout est en révolution” (Littérature maghrébine 152) (“No object is perfectly motionless; all is in revolution”).

The psychological, temporal and spatial distance is enormous between the narrator’s memories of his childhood and his present life in the city. Where there was once “emptiness,” the narrator lives in a city called a “labyrinth” (19, tr. 9), and (appropriately) is not only inhabited by Minotaurs, but also by other fantastical and mythical creatures. Here the walls move and close in on people. In its continual movements, as the narrator

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50 Trifu calls the symbol of the minotaur in Qui se souvient de la mer “l’humain devenu bête féroce” (32). Regarding the mythological connotations of this symbolic figure, Trifu connects the characteristics of Nafissa with those of Ariadne. Both of them inspire and guide the narrator and Theseus, respectively, through the labyrinth to combat the Minotaur (34). Another symbolic way to read the presence of minotaurs in Qui se souvient de la mer is by their presence in Guernica. A brief allusion to this connection appears in El Nouty (145). Yet another possible Greek mythological allusion may be that of Orpheus (the narrator) descending into the Underworld (underground) to take Eurydice (Nafissa) back to earth with him.

51 Inexplicably, the narrator describes in one passage how the walls become enveloped in mist and he can pass directly through them (102, tr. 62). Perhaps the mist, having supernatural properties coming from the sea, allows for the narrator to do this. However, this does not appear to be plausible at any other point in the text, and there is no narrative indication that these actions are contained within a dream or narcotic-induced hallucination. In fact, he is described as going to sleep after passing through the walls (102, tr. 63).
remarks, “l’espace se déformait” (147) (“space distorted itself” 93). As we have seen, the city is referred to as “the city of the air,” and is juxtaposed to the underground city. Interpreting Dib’s presentation in his postface of these two cities, El Nouty suggests that the dichotomy presented by Dib between the underground and the city above reverses traditional perspectives: “L’enfer est en haut et le paradis en bas” (148) (“hell is above and heaven is below” [my translation]). The city underneath is representative of Algeria’s past: it is ‘purer’ than what lies above; it is closer to the ‘core’ of Algeria. In the underground, therefore, there is a return to an original, mythical past, a “retour au langage des pierres” (110) (“return to the language of the rocks” 68).

National and International Revolutions
Dib’s novel reveals the energies of this struggle through symbolism and other narrative strategies. However, apart from the ‘distortion’ of the obvious historical referent – the Algerian War of Independence – the novel also presents a larger historical referent, with much relevance to Dib’s own internationalist politics, which is the struggle for revolutionary socialism on a world scale. The consequence for the reader is that the text appears to convey the horrors of a national struggle, and its gaining of freedom, but it also reveals the effects of living under capitalism and the hope for the triumph of a new international political model. A look at how violence symbolically explodes in the national revolution allows us to conceive of how the revolution can also be extended to an international level.

When the war begins, everything is in revolution. Even the children want to participate. They come out of the mines of the underground, eager to do their part (49, tr.
For instance, a little girl says to Hadj: “Donne-moi deux détonateurs” (49) (“Give me two detonators” 27). Despite the destructive consequences of the child’s intentions, the presence of the child revolutionary further gives the movement a sense of purity. It also suggests universal camaraderie. The presence and participation of a child reveal the degree to which everyone in the community is implicated, and perhaps also the vast support of the movement (men, women, boys and girls). As has been mentioned (in discussing the narrator’s childhood, and the sea) Algeria’s mythical past is also associated with innocence, and thus has the power to carry the revolution forward. Therefore, also symbolically embodied here within the child is the innocence associated with a pure conception of Algeria, and, at the same time, the youth and vitality which allow for growth, development – in short, the promise of a future.

As more and more people begin to participate in the revolution, and as buildings start to topple, and conversely, as friends and neighbours go missing, the mounting tension is undeniable. The narrator says that he’s sure “que la ville finira par exploser sous ces pressions simultanées et contradictoires” (67) (“that the city will end up exploding under these simultaneous and contradictory pressures” 39). Elsewhere the revolutionary energies are described as the result of suffering: “Toute la souffrance que les habitants ont accumulée se déverse, tout ce qui est noué explose” (131) (“All the suffering the people have accumulated pours out, everything that’s tied in a knot explodes” 82). Therefore, without a doubt, Fanon’s figurative image of the ‘lid’ here ‘blows off.’ The explosion, and its effects, appear to be indiscriminate. As long as it destroys the oppressors, the destruction is desired: “Nous sommes encore en mesure de nous défendre pourtant si nous le voulons,
il n’est pas trop tard. Comment? Nous savons maintenant qu’il est possible de les supprimer, mais B une condition: dynamiter toute la ville, nous dynamiter nous-mâmes” (132) (“We are still, however, in a position to defend ourselves if we want to, it’s not too late. How? We know that it’s possible to get rid of them, but on one condition: dynamite the whole city, dynamite ourselves” 83). He believes that each person should “consacre ses énergies” (176) (“devote his energies” 114) to joining the underground city. In other words, all the pent-up aggression and suffering should be taken advantage of within a revolutionary struggle.

*International Revolution: Sinking Roots into the World*

Dib’s novel encourages multiple interpretations of its symbols. The referent of an international revolution is not separate from the reference to the Algerian War of Independence, but extends it. For instance, the underground can be read not just as the FLN but as underground socialist, revolutionary movements writ large.

Despite the fact that some of the novel’s creatures are associated with ancient civilisations (mummies) and mythology (minotaurs), it is clear that the city is something entirely new and modern: “La nouvelle cité abomination de ce temps qui ne ressemble B nulle autre, est déjà partie de nous-mâmes. Nous n’avons plus le courage de le reconnaître” (133) (“The new city, an abomination of our time unlike any other, is already a part of us. We no longer have the courage to recognize it” 83-84). Considering not only the national, but also the international, scope of Dib’s novel, this “abomination” that is “a part of us” could well be capitalism itself. Despite the suffering of many, living under capitalism also creates apathy. Its physical manifestations are also seen within a capitalist
light. (Could not the “air city” also be a reference to the push of skyscrapers to the heavens?) For instance, when the narrator describes the glitter of the new constructions, the very buildings that the underground movement is trying to destroy, he remarks: “Plus vous regardez ces fortresses, plus vous vous laissez pénétrer par le rayonnement qui émane d’elles, et tous vos tourments semblent s’évanouir” (97) (“The longer you stare at these fortresses, the more you let yourself be penetrated by the glow they give off, and all your torments seem to fade” 59). The comforts of capitalism are so attractive that the narrator describes a scene in which he cannot even hear the message being sent from the underground: “Nous sommes si bien dans cette chaleur [. . .] qu’aucun de nous ne se résout B entendre les signaux qui nous sont adressés B travers le plancher” (138) (“We’re so comfortable in this warmth [. . .] that none of us stops to hear the signals being addressed to us through the floor” 88). The apathy and stupor in which this current system of power has left its inhabitants can, however, be changed. The ‘emergence’ of the underground can slowly inspire people to think differently. “Je sens les couloirs et les passages souterrains qui me parcouruent l’intérieur du crâne” (23) (“I feel the corridors and underground passages that crisscross the inside of my head” 12), 52 says the narrator, thereby symbolically revealing the psychological impact of the underground movement.

52 The underground implies “secret forces at work,” says Monego. “It also corresponds to the dark hidden recesses of man’s psyche, living repository of the country’s heritage” (55). Her statement appears to correspond to what we have already seen in Nedjma. As a depository of the past, residing in the subconscious of our minds, the ‘underground’ connects (whether consciously, subconsciously, or by dreams/narcotics) us with the past, our heritage, in the process of revolution.
Referring to an imbalance of power between one individual and several patrons of the café, the narrator calls it a “game.” This globalized “game,” like capitalism, appears to have the same rules everywhere: “[c]e jeu se jouait au mÅme moment dans le metabkha [. . .], et B travers le monde, l’endroit était sans importance” (13) (“his game was being played at the same moment in the metabkha [. . .] and all over the world, the location was unimportant” 5). In what is perhaps a reference to Fanon’s Les damnés de la terre, the narrator says: “je compris combien nous vivons les uns et les autres dans un monde condamné” (179) (“I understood then how true it was that we were all living in a condemned world” 115). The world of the “condemned” appears to be expanded here beyond Fanon’s reference to the colonized. For Dib, the revolution is certainly a national one, to decolonise Algeria, but he hopes it also has greater implications, to ‘decapitalize’ the world at large.

The process of ‘decapitalization’ occurs all at once in Qui se souvient de la mer. It is a natural element, the sea – the keeper of the past, tradition and purity – that destroys the buildings of the new and modern city. Once the sea has taken over the city, and the underground movement is victorious, the narrator studies the structure of the underground. It appears to him that it promises “nouvelles conditions de vie” (185) (“new conditions of life” 119). His reflections on the structures of the underground lead him to remark: “les fondements mèmes de ce second état de l’existence y soient écrits” (185) (“the very foundations of this second state of existence lie inscribed in those structures” 119), a possible allusion to the Marxist dialectic of base and superstructure. Of the new structure within a political-historical context, Khatibi argues: “la guerre que nous décrit Dib
constitue justement le passage d’une structure dépassée (la structure coloniale) à une structure porteuse d’une nouvelle humanité” (qtd. in Dejéux, *Littérature maghrébine* 153) (“The war that Dib describes constitutes precisely the passing of an outdated structure [the colonial structure] to a structure that embodies a new humanity”). Finally, the internationalist perspective of the end of the novel is made even more explicit for the underground city “connaît pas de limites” (“knows no limits”). The narrator explains: “selon moi, elle plonge ses racines non pas dans le sol, au sens restreint du terme, mais d’une façon générale, dans le monde” (185) (“I believe, it sinks its roots not just into the ground, in the narrow sense of the term, but more generally speaking, into the world” 119).

The internationalist scope of Dib’s novel is one of the ways that this work differentiates itself from Kateb’s *Nedjma*. However, this has much to do with the widespread international support that the Algerian Independence movement was receiving in the period just before the conclusion of the war. There were also significant contemporaneous socialist revolutions and anticolonialist movements occurring worldwide (i.e., the Cuban Revolution, and the First Indochina War). These revolutions help contextualize the Algerian War of Independence in a global context, with political consequences that it was hoped would exceed its national borders.

As we have seen in my analyses of *Nedjma* and *Qui se souvient de la mer*, rather than attempt a naturalistic representation of this difficult historical period, both Kateb and Dib attempt to convey the underlying energies in Algeria that would later explode and become the war itself. Kateb conveys the uncertainty and mounting tension, while Dib conveys the violence and horror once these energies explode. It is important to distinguish
Kateb and Dib’s conveyance of the Algerian reality from Eltit’s similar intentions with regard to the Chilean dictatorship. I earlier described Lumpérica as offering a ‘distortion overload’ for the reader, leading to an inability to properly perceive the historical referent. In the case of Nedjma and Qui se souvient de la mer, no such overload exists. What differentiates the Algerian novels from that of Eltit is the presence of an allegorical microcosm which allows for the reader to maintain or create throughout these works at least a semblance of the historical referential reality, despite the defamiliarising effects of various modes of ‘distortion.’
CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I have examined six texts which I consider ‘distorted’ historical fictions. My main argument is that the presence of ‘distortion’ in these texts was intentional on the part of the author, with the aim of causing defamiliarisation in the reader. As a result, in the interpretation of the text, the reader is required to engage with and decode often multiple forms of ‘distortion.’

Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow* provides the most straightforward example (as it is the most extreme) through which to understand this concept of ‘distortion.’ Ironically, *Time’s Arrow* tells the story of the Holocaust backwards. The reversal of ‘time’s arrow’ is a clear ‘distortion’ of cause and effect relationships, which subsequently also reverses morality. The implication is that the horrifyingly cruel event of the Holocaust can be seen in a benevolent light. *Time’s Arrow* is also an example of ‘distortion’ at the level of the narrative voice. The narrator is revealed as both ‘doubled’ and ‘split,’ according to Lifton’s psychological definitions of these terms. The narrator is both a Nazi doctor who worked at Auschwitz and an entity that resides within him, his conscience. In addition to the use of a double narrator, the use of the first-person ‘I’ in the narrative creates another level of defamiliarisation in the reader who must ethically reject any process of identification with the narrator.

In Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*, the reader encounters the substitution of the human actors of the Holocaust with animal figures. This substitution operates at a simple allegorical level. However, there are also ‘distortions’ at the level of the narrative form,
especially with regard to the conflation of time in the graphic novel’s panels, a conflation comparable in effect to Benjamin’s conception of the dialectical image. Spiegelman portrays certain subjects as conceptually, and emotionally, too ‘big’ to fit within one page, let alone a single panel (e.g., the panel that depicts the entrance to Auschwitz). Maus is of particular interest for my thesis for two reasons. First, it is a comic-book, and as such its visual content makes unique demands on the reader. Secondly, similar to several of the other texts, it can be classified within various genres: Maus has been considered a comic-book, a novel, an autobiography, a biography, a testimony, etc. Referring to the text in any way as ‘fiction,’ however, is admittedly unnerving. While the animal figures clearly provide a fictive element to the entire text, the spirit of Maus is never that of fiction. Therefore, I have analysed Maus considering it, paradoxically, as a work of ‘distorted’ non-fiction.

The pairing of Diamela Eltit’s Lumpérica and Isabel Allende’s La Casa de los espíritus was done with the purpose of juxtaposing two forms of authorial intentions regarding realism and ‘distortion.’ Eltit’s novel, I argued, is extremely obscure and creates a ’distortion overload.’ The referent of the Chilean dictatorship is nearly lost. Certainly, the fact that she wrote the novel within Chile at the time of the dictatorship is likely a factor in how she might portray the event. Nevertheless, her subsequent descriptions of her own poetics and politics suggest that the lack of clarity in Lumpérica is intentional on a personal level, and not driven (entirely) by censorship. Through ‘distortions’ at the level of style and syntax, the use of multiple genres, and a non-chronological narrative, Eltit purposefully attempts not to represent the dictatorship but to instead convey the feeling of living under
dictatorial oppression. The consequence, however, is that the reader’s interpretations of the novel (seen through its criticism) is often vague and problematic.

Allende’s novel is a drastic contrast to Eltit’s. La Casa de los espíritus commences in the literary mode of magical realism. By the end of the novel, when the Chilean dictatorship enters the plot, the magical realism is set aside in favour of a mode of writing that is naturalistic and realist. I have argued that the mode of magical realism is not a ‘distortion’ in itself. However, had Allende maintained this style in her depiction of the Chilean dictatorship, she would have had to ‘distort’ the historical referent, making the dictatorship ‘magical.’ The contribution of this analysis to my overall examination of ‘distortion’ is that I examine it here in a negative sense, from the perspective of an author who midway through her text changes the literary mode to avoid ‘distorting’ the historical referent. This stylistic change allows readers to understand as naturally as possible this historical reality.

Kateb Yacine’s Nedjma and Mohammed Dib’s Qui se souvient de la mer are two novels that convey, rather than fully represent, the energies and tensions that existed before and during the Algerian War of Independence. Significantly, both works were published before the war had concluded, and its outcome was thus not certain. These texts provide a symbolic or allegorical microcosm of Algeria. It is the presence of this microcosm which prevents these texts from being categorized as a ‘distortion overload’ as in the case of Lumpérica. This microcosm is also obviously what allows the reader to maintain a better sense of the historical referent.
The ‘distortions’ in *Nedjma* operate by complicating the microcosm, and hence the reader’s understanding of its historical referent. The different historical players and forces that make up Algeria in the years before the War of Independence are allegorised through various characters in the text, the most important of which is the title character who comes to represent Algeria’s past and Algeria’s future. Temporal ‘distortions’ are prevalent at a formal level, but also within the diegetic world, as the present is conflated with the past. There are also ‘distortions’ of the narrative voice, which appear to conflate the distinctiveness of the characters personalities, creating what often appears to be a single collective voice.

In comparison, Mohammed Dib’s *Qui se souvient de la mer* has a more ambiguous microcosm, inhabited by fantastical figures and spaces. Apart from ‘distortions’ at the level of chronology and narrative form, the most significant feature of Dib’s novel is its treatment of space. The ‘distortion’ of space and the appearance of the fantastical figures appear as the war commences. The disorder of the present world is brought about by the war, and is juxtaposed to the relative innocence of the narrator’s childhood (told naturalistically). The end of the novel appears to signal that the ‘space’ of the diegetic world could extend itself over the entire world. The extended referent of the Algerian revolutionary struggle for Independence at the end of the novel can then be read as referring to a global socialist struggle.

The responsibility of the reader in all these texts is to decode, or reconstruct, the ‘distorted’ historical referents. Naturally, the ability to decode an historical ‘distortion’ will depend on a couple of factors. The first is the degree of ‘distortion.’ A reader with some
knowledge of the Chilean dictatorship, for instance, will have more difficulty engaging with the historical referent in Lumpérica than in La Casa de los espíritus since the former has a greater degree of ‘distortion.’ A second important factor is the reader’s familiarity, or fore-knowledge, of the event in question. Earlier in the process of my research I had divided the potential readers of these ‘distorted’ historical fictions into three levels, according to their familiarity with the historical event: 1) readers with virtually no familiarity; 2) readers with some, general familiarity; and 3) readers with great familiarity. It became clear very early that to embark on a project that would adequately consider all three types of readers would be not only impossible, given my time limitations, but was also quite problematic. Not to privilege any type of reader, I would have had to have done three separate readings of the texts according to various levels of familiarity. The possibility of examining a text in detail would have been compromised. However, equally problematic is that my own levels of familiarity (my own ‘situatedness’) with the historical events would not honestly permit me to predict the hermeneutical effects of these texts upon another reader. Ultimately, my own readings of these ‘distorted’ texts had to be in a sense a performance of reader responsibility on my part. My readings were influenced by my own varying degrees of familiarity with the historical events in question. As I stated in the Introduction, I am most familiar with the Chilean dictatorship, followed by the Holocaust and the Algerian War of Independence. The theorisation of how degrees of historical familiarity affects readers’ recognition of ‘distortion,’ and thus their ability to engage and decode it, is an avenue for future research.
Notwithstanding these varying degrees of historical familiarity, readers of these ‘distorted’ texts will all experience defamiliarisation. This particular hermeneutical experience is intentional, on the part of the authors, to incite a more active reading and, thus, a more interactive experience with history. ‘Distorted’ historical fiction then does not ask readers to suspend disbelief. The hermeneutical experience is quite the opposite. Readers are encouraged to read responsibly, according to their foreknowledge of the past. The result is that the readers will be given the responsibility to identify and decode the ‘distorted’ historical referent.

The experience of reading ‘distorted’ historical fiction may begin with an appreciation of its aesthetic techniques. As Kateb writes: “Alors, lecteur, tu marches dans la combine. Tu me laisses brouiller la piste” (Kateb, qtd. in Dejéux, Littérature maghrébine 238) (“Now, reader, you take part in this game. You allow me to blur the path” [my translation]). Yet, as occurs in Kateb’s Nedjma, the “blurred” aesthetic path still directs the reader toward a recognizable historical reality. The unique hermeneutical experience of ‘distorted’ historical fiction, thus, involves an appreciation for the author’s creation of a “blurred” path that, paradoxically, summons readers to recognize a familiar historical event. These historical events are violent and traumatic, and are often considered unrepresentable in any faithful, naturalistic manner. The need to represent and convey these events on the part of authors, along with the need to interact with history on the part of readers, is facilitated through what is respectively the techniques and experience of ‘distorted’ historical fiction.
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