

La France c'est Michel Houellebecq ? **French Identity and Cultural Myth in *La carte et le territoire*, *Soumission* and *Sérotonine***

*Michel Houellebecq n'en était pas moins un symptôme ambulante, le plus exact reflet d'une certaine société française déboussolée par la crise et les nouveaux temps, exaltée par la technologie et confortée dans une sexualité médiocre.
Le Zeitgeist fait homme¹.*

- 1 As Pierre Assouline's entry in the *Nouvelles mythologies* demonstrates, the name Michel Houellebecq has, to a certain extent, become synonymous with contemporary France. Recently awarded the prestigious *Légion d'Honneur* by French President Emmanuel Macron, the author has appeared across all corners of the French sociocultural sphere : from his political commentary on the public television channel *France 2*, to his 2016 exhibition at the *Palais de Tokyo* and his somewhat dubious appearance in *Monsieur* magazine as a style icon². For better or worse, Houellebecq's presence in French culture cannot be ignored.
- 2 Likewise, French culture occupies a central role in Houellebecq's writing. From his first mention of "[les] Nouvelles Galeries" in *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994)³, to his descriptions of the Normandy countryside in *Sérotonine* (2019), we find the reality of contemporary France woven into the fabric of his novels. As journalist Marc Weitzmann stated following the publication of Houellebecq's 2001 novel *Plateforme*, "[son œuvre] est la seule à s'inscrire dans le paysage mental et sociologique de la France contemporaine majoritaire, dont il exprime la mentalité mieux que quiconque – et dont l'implacable pouvoir de description fait toute la force de ses livres"⁴.
- 3 Over recent years the release of Houellebecq's novels has been accompanied by a somewhat uncanny alignment of his fictional worlds with reality. His 2015 novel *Soumission*, for example, whose narrative recounts the Islamisation of France in 2022, was published on the same day as the infamous attack at the left-wing newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* ; likewise, his most recent novel, *Sérotonine*, has been framed as a precursor to the *Gilets Jaunes* movement⁵. Although subject to debate, the proximity of this alignment is uncomfortable for some of Houellebecq's public. Following *Soumission*'s release, French prime minister at the time, Manuel Valls, found it necessary to declare : "La France ça n'est pas la soumission, ça n'est pas Michel Houellebecq. Ça n'est pas l'intolérance, la haine, la peur"⁶. Despite its attempt to sever ties between the notorious novelist and his nation, this quote offers an important insight into the complexity of Houellebecq's relationship with France. While denouncing the bleak vision of social life found in his novels, Valls' comment inadvertently draws attention to the importance of contemporary France and French identity in Houellebecq's writing.
- 4 This topic has not gone unacknowledged in Houellebecquian scholarship. Indeed, Russell Williams and Carole Sweeney's 2018 edition of *Modern and Contemporary France* takes Valls' quote as its title⁷. Furthermore, Martin Crowley's article, "Houellebecq's France", considers Houellebecq's novels published from 2010 onwards as "a turn towards the specific question of the condition of France"⁸. These studies bear testament to Houellebecq's status as a "perhaps reluctant representative of a national atmosphere or

disposition”⁹, to borrow the words of Williams and Sweeney. This description highlights both the significance of France in Houellebecq’s writing and the author’s paradoxical association with his subject matter. To grasp the complexity of this relationship, it is thus necessary to explore how these works foreground the representation of French cultural identity, while constituting cultural products themselves. As Crowley states at the conclusion of his article, we must begin by understanding the ways in which “the body of work [that the name Michel Houellebecq] represents – is and is not ‘la France’”¹⁰.

- 5 Before addressing the duality of Houellebecq’s cultural representation, one question we need to ask is which France he is representing. In light of Valls’ quote, it is unsurprising that the depiction of “la haine, l’intolérance [et] la peur” has seen Houellebecq’s vision of France aligned with that of the political far right. However, such an interpretation also underlines the permeability of these works, in which the portrayal of hatred, intolerance and fear can equally be seen as an attempt to provoke not only the far left but also the moderates into action. This latent sense of ambiguity captures Houellebecq’s ability to trouble both ends of the political spectrum simultaneously. In October 2018, the conservative journal *Valeurs actuelles* published the speech Houellebecq gave at his acceptance of the Oswald Spengler award, in which he declared himself in favour of a “Frexit”¹¹. Yet, despite this expression of right-wing nationalism, Nelly Kapriélian of the left-wing magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* reminds us that in 1997 Houellebecq made the same anti-European remarks during an interview where he criticised institutional politics and instead advocated for a form of populism¹². We may thus argue that one reason for Houellebecq’s problematic representation of political ideology could in fact be his desire to draw attention to the problems facing French society.
- 6 In the field of scholarly criticism there has been much debate surrounding the interpretation of ideology and politics in Houellebecq’s novels, which portray a troublingly uncertain view of the author’s political stance wherein his avid critique of liberal capitalism collides with right-wing, xenophobic and sexist commentary. What these texts bear witness to is a collapse of the concrete ideological division of earlier periods. This is well articulated by Bruno Viard, who states of Houellebecq’s France : “on est arrivé à ce paradoxe que la gauche antilibérale en économie depuis 1830 est devenue libérale en morale tandis que la droite libérale en économie s’est retrouvée antilibérale en morale”¹³. Giving form to this increasingly ambiguous landscape, Houellebecq appears to borrow non-discriminately from both ends of the ideological spectrum : as we see in *Les Particules*, where the author finds a paradoxical solution to an individualised and dehumanised society through a turn to eugenics.
- 7 As Benoît Denis explains, this blurring of political boundaries reveals the author’s ability “de compromettre le lecteur”, through the use of rhetorical techniques¹⁴. The ambiguity of Houellebecq’s rhetoric becomes particularly evident in light of the scholarly responses to what many consider to be most overtly political novel, *Soumission*. In her review of the text Agathe Novak-Lechevalier demonstrates how the style of Houellebecq’s writing renders this work “un roman délibérément piégé, qui exige une lecture critique et attentive parce qu’il repose sur un processus constant de réversibilité”¹⁵. Although Novak-Lechevalier’s reading sees Houellebecq’s novel as an attempt to engage the reader in a form of resistance, Russell Williams’ recent article shows how an analysis of *Soumission*’s rhetoric may likewise reveal a reinforcement of right-wing ideology¹⁶. Louis Betty, on the other hand, criticises rhetorical approaches to Houellebecq’s depiction of the French socio-political climate as “an over-literary muddle riddled with irony, satire, and ‘undecidability’ from which no positive themes and theses are permitted to be drawn”,

and instead argues for Houellebecq to be categorised as “a novelist of ideas”¹⁷. What such a view threatens to overlook, however, is not only the decidedly literary nature of Houellebecq’s novels, nor the enjoyment to be derived from his style and distinctive humour, but rather the inescapable fact that his ideas are inseparable from the act of cultural representation.

- 8 In line with this issue’s topic of “Fictions ‘françaises’”, this article explores Houellebecq’s representation of France and French culture within the context of an increasingly globalised world. Focussing on *La carte et le territoire*, *Soumission* and *Sérotonine*, it engages with the studies mentioned above by concentrating on the rhetorical mechanisms at work in these representations, which it will use as a means to further the understanding of ideological critique in these texts. To do so, it draws on semiotic theory of cultural codes and, in particular, Roland Barthes’ concept of cultural myth to examine the significance of cultural references in these novels. In this way, it considers how these texts question the mythification of contemporary French identity through the use of reflexive rhetorical devices such as irony, parody and intertextuality. This article will thus argue that Houellebecq’s novels engage in an ambivalent process of cultural mythification, through which we find that ‘la France’, as shown in these works, is and is not ‘la France’.
- 9 Taking up Crowley’s suggestion that we focus on the duality of Houellebecq’s cultural representation, this article begins by examining the significance of mapping as an ambivalent practice of both deconstructing and constructing cultural signs, before analysing key examples of cultural myth through the portrayal of popular culture and French cuisine in his novels. It will then consider the transformation of French culture seen across each of these texts, whereby French identity is shown to be shifting, transnational and a source of nostalgia for Houellebecq’s protagonists. As such, this article suggests that Houellebecq’s novels portray France in the throes of a crisis of representation, thereby questioning the nation’s future in a global climate.

Mapping the French territory

- 10 To begin analysing Houellebecq’s portrayal of France and French cultural identity, we must first consider the ambivalent nature of the perspective his works offer on the French territory, and how this framing influences the reading of Houellebecquian cultural representation. In the epilogue of *La carte*, Houellebecq’s protagonist, the artist Jed Martin, explains that his life’s ambition is to offer an accurate representation of the world around him. As he declares : “Je veux rendre compte du monde... Je veux simplement *rendre compte du monde*”¹⁸. This desire finds parallels with that of the realist novel, whose portrayal seeks to hold a mirror up to the reader’s reality. The relation between Houellebecq’s depiction of French society and realism has been noted by a number of scholars, who find links between his writing and that of 19th century authors Émile Zola and Honoré de Balzac¹⁹. However, the repetition of Jed’s wish “[de] *rendre compte du monde*”, along with the use of italics here, prompts us to question the extent to which such a task might be possible. As we shall see in the following analysis, the description of Houellebecq’s artist in *La carte* undermines the notion of realist representation, whereby the representation of French society is framed at once as a focal point and an impossibility in the novel.

Houellebecq’s texts also reveal an ambivalent affiliation between their protagonists and French society and culture. In *Soumission*, the narrator, François, is a University

professor at the Sorbonne Nouvelle, a paragon of French intellectualism founded following the May 68 student riots. Both anonymising and homogenising, his name casts the protagonist in the role of the average Frenchman ; however, as Novak-Lechevalier remarks, this rather dull character can be seen as an indicator of the very lack of French identity in the text. As she observes : “ce François, qui semblerait devoir incarner l'être français, n'a plus aucun contour : c'est que le territoire s'avère être une fiction, et en rien le signe d'une appartenance”²⁰. Likewise, in *Sérotonine* we find a similarly detached narrator with Florent-Claude who, despite his occupation as an agronomist, remains an outsider to the *terroir* he inhabits. This dual sense of proximity and distance incarnated by Houellebecq's characters is important for our reading of French identity, as all protagonists travel across France, undertaking a journey that shapes the trajectory of each of the novels.

- 11 In *La carte*, Jed is on his way to his grandmother's funeral, travelling along “l'autoroute A20”, which he describes as “une des plus belles autoroutes de France”, when he comes across “une carte routière ‘Michelin Départements’ de la Creuse, Haute-Vienne” (*LC* 51) at a service station. This seemingly banal setting quickly becomes sublimated into a scene of aesthetic transcendence, as we learn that :

C'est là, en dépliant sa carte, à deux pas des sandwiches pain de mie sous cellophane, qu'il connut sa seconde grande révélation esthétique. Cette carte était sublime ; bouleversé, il se mit à trembler devant le présentoir. Jamais il n'avait contemplé d'objet aussi magnifique, aussi riche, d'émotion et de sens que cette carte Michelin au 1/150 000 de la Creuse, Haute-Vienne. (*LC* 51-52)

- 12 Houellebecq's fascination with the map, expressed by his protagonist, can be traced back to his very first novel *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, in which the narrator's journey reaches a point of revelation when he buys “la carte Michelin numéro 80 (*Rodez-Albi-Nîmes*)” (*EDL* 129). This representation of the French landscape inspires the narrator to embark on a voyage to Saint-Cirgue-en-Montagne ; however, his expedition ends in disappointment as he arrives to find that “tout [le paysage] ... se ressemble” (*EDL* 156). Similarly, in *La carte*, despite the supposed gravity of the moment described above, the flurry of sensations experienced by Jed appears incongruous with such a commonplace object as the Michelin map. Furthermore, the repetitious and fastidious nature of Houellebecq's depiction of the map, and its exact scale, produces an abrupt juxtaposition to the earlier portrayal of Jed's emotional exhilaration.

- 13 Jed's appreciation of the map is attributed to its ability to capture “l'essence de la modernité, de l'appréhension scientifique et technique du monde, [qui] s'y trouvait mêlée avec l'essence de la vie animale”, all of which is communicated “d'une clarté absolue, n'utilisant qu'un code restreint de couleurs” (*LC* 52). Through this reductionist code, each line on the map forms a signifier for one of the villages, or hamlets dotted across the territory, which are hierarchically represented “suivant leur importance” (*LC* 52). This system of signs allows the map to evoke not only specific towns and topographies, but also their inhabitants : “de dizaines de vies humaines, de dizaines ou de centaines d'âmes – les unes promises à la damnation, les autres à la vie éternelle” (*LC* 52). Houellebecq's ironic narration, however, contrasting melodrama with mundane detail, once again undermines the veracity of the map's perspective. As the title of the novel reminds us, what Houellebecq's portrayal of the French territory brings to our attention is the problem of representation itself.

- 14 *La carte's* title is a reference to Jorge Luis Borges' mythological fable *On Exactitude in*

Science, as well as to “*Le Guide Bleu*” from Barthes’ *Mythologies*. In both texts the representational map is created to such a point of perceived perfection that a discrepancy forms between the map and the territory it seeks to signify²¹. The supposed one-to-one relationship of the map and the territory, or the signifier and the signified, to frame this semiotically, is revealed as false. What the map represents, rather, is the production of a mythological second-order system, whereby the relational sign of the map becomes implicated in a broader conceptual discourse²². According to Barthes, myths are the primary means by which culture gives meaning to the world around it ; however, this is achieved by distorting that of the original sign. As he explains : “le rapport qui unit le concept du mythe au sens est essentiellement un rapport de *déformation*”²³. The danger of such a system is that it removes images and objects from their real context, thereby allowing dominant cultural ideologies to be propagated unquestioned. As Barthes states “cette parole interpellative est en même temps une parole figée : au moment de m’atteindre, elle se suspend, tourne sur elle-même et *ratrape* une généralité : elle se transit, elle se blanchit, elle s’innocente”²⁴.

- 15 This sense of distortion is illustrated by Jed’s exhibition seen later in the novel, in which he displays a satellite photo of “Guebwiller” sided by side with the Michelin map of the region. Unsurprisingly, “le contraste était frappant” (LC 80). Next to the Michelin map, the photograph appears as “une soupe de verts plus ou moins uniformes parsemée de vagues taches bleues” (LC 80). This alimentary metaphor evokes the photo as a bland scene of monotonous colours that pales in comparison to extreme and varied geographical zones shown on the map, as we learn that “la carte développait un fascinant lacinis de départementales, de routes pittoresques, de *points de vue*, de forêts de lacs et de cols” (LC 80). As if to emphasise this contrast, we are informed that the exhibition has been titled : “LA CARTE EST PLUS INTÉRESSANTE QUE LE TERRITOIRE” (LC 80). Houellebecq’s novel thus foregrounds the representational systems at play in his text, bringing to our attention the means by which the map attempts to create meaning from the French territory. This process of mythification provides an important means to understand the portrayal of French culture in Houellebecq’s novels, as across each text France appears as a domain saturated by myth.

Extension du domaine de la mythologie

- 16 As Barthes demonstrates in *Mythologies*, myths can include any number of cultural objects or practices : from “l’iconographie de l’abbé Pierre”, the celebrated Catholic Priest, to the traditional French meal of “Le bifteck et les frites” and the must-have new product of the national car industry “La nouvelle Citroën”²⁵. What brings these signs together is their ability to maintain a dominant ideology of the cultural world to which they are ascribed. In Houellebecq’s portrayal of France we find an intricate framework of myth built up through a vast series of references and intertextual cues that borrow non-discriminately from TV game shows, such as *Questions pour un champion*, and enlightenment theorists, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The countless examples of cultural references may at first glance appear to be merely superficial interjections ; however, they provide an important key to the understanding of Houellebecq’s ambivalent use of mythical discourse.
- 17 In *La carte*, Jed’s series of photos was commissioned by Michelin’s head of communication, Olga Sheremoyova, in a bid to boost France’s ailing tourist market. Similar to Barthes’ *Le Guide Bleu*, the aim of Houellebecq’s Michelin guide is to propagate

an ideal of French culture through the mythological association of cultural products and a perceived notion of identity. As we discover : “Olga faisait partie de ces Russes attachants qui ont appris au cours de leurs années de formation à admirer une certaine image de la France – galanterie, gastronomie, littérature et ainsi de suite – et se désolent ensuite régulièrement de ce que le pays réel corresponde si mal à leurs attentes” (LC 69). However, as with Jed’s artwork, such myths of cultural identity remain far from the reality they seek to signify.

- 18 One of the most noticeable examples of Houellebecq’s use of cultural myth can be seen through the interjection of brand names found throughout his œuvre : from the mention of the women’s clothing brand “Jennyfer”²⁶ in *Soumission* to the description of Jed’s “blouson C&A en Sympatex” (LC 230) in *La carte* and the “Zadig & Voltaire”²⁷ luggage bought by the protagonist’s girlfriend Yuzu in *Sérotonine*. Drawing on the reader’s knowledge of French fashion, the integration of these brands allows the author to directly communicate ideas of class, taste and socio-economic status by borrowing signs taken directly from the reader’s reality. In *Soumission*, the disappearance of “Jennyfer” shops is used in reference to the de-sexualisation of women’s clothing following the arrival of Sharia law in Houellebecq’s France, in *La Carte*, Jed’s mass-produced jacket leaves him feeling “underdressed” when arriving at a new year’s eve party, and in *Sérotonine*, Yuzu’s luggage is in fact a symbol of her social status, as we learn, “c’étaient des bagages chic, leur exclusivité était renforcée du fait qu’ils n’étaient pas équipés de roulettes, contrairement à de vulgaires *Samsonite* pour cadres moyens” (*Séro* 25-26). Houellebecq’s narration thus highlights the use of brand names as a form of mythical discourse, which acts as a value system used to distinguish between high and low culture. However, as *Sérotonine*’s narrator Florent-Claude’s description of the Zadig & Voltaire luggage illustrates, such myths are in danger of distancing the consumer from reality. As he observes :

[C]’était une marque célèbre que j’avais oubliée, Zadig et Voltaire ou bien Pascal et Blaise, le concept quoi qu’il en soit avait été de reproduire sur le tissu une de ces cartes géographiques de la Renaissance où le monde terrestre était représenté sous une forme très approximative, mais avec des légendes vintage du genre : ‘Icy, il doit y avoir des tygres’... (*Séro* 25)

- 19 In addition to Houellebecq’s ironic reference to 17th-century philosopher Blaise Pascal, his description of the Renaissance map painted across the suitcase underlines the arbitrary nature of representation incarnated by mythical objects. As Michel Foucault demonstrated in *Les mots et les choses*, the Renaissance’s representation of the world created not a mirror image, but rather a series of signs that the real world was mapped onto²⁸. In this sense, the Zadig & Voltaire luggage is indicative not only of the appropriation of philosophers’ names, but moreover of society’s use of mythical discourse, which although imbedded in popular culture, is increasingly cut off from any direct relation with the world. As Florent-Claude concludes : “De tels bagages, qu’ils soient siglés Zadig et Voltaire ou bien Pascal et Blaise, n’avaient de sens que dans une société où existait encore la fonction de *porteur*”²⁹.
- 20 Houellebecq’s use of cultural myth extends to the names of public figures, including TV celebrities to France’s politicians. This form of literary name-dropping has seen the addition of Novak-Lechevalier’s “Petit Who’s Who houellebecquien”³⁰, to the 2016 edition of *La carte*. For a reader unfamiliar with French celebrity culture, such a catalogue would be indispensable when it comes to Houellebecq’s fictional portrayal of news presenter Jean-Pierre Pernaut’s New Year’s Eve party. The significance of Pernaut, known for his

segments on local French customs, in this chapter is twofold, as Houellebecq portrays the host as not only a mythical figure, but also a facilitator of cultural myth. When Jed wanders through the party, he finds that the serving staff have been carefully chosen to represent France's regional specialties : from “[les] deux serveuses alsaciennes en coiffe, vêtues d’un tablier blanc et rouge noué autour de la taille, qui circulaient avec leurs plateaux entre les invités” (LC 231), to “un groupe fameux de polyphonie corse [...] vêtus de pantalons et de sarraus noirs, coiffés de bérets” (LC 237).

- 21 As Novak-Lechevalier notes in her analysis of the chapter, Houellebecq's portrayal of these characters sees their cultural identity appropriated as décor³¹. This representation echoes Barthes description of the *Guide bleu*, for which “les hommes n'existent que comme ‘types’ [... ce qui] sert à masquer le spectacle réel des conditions, des classes et des métiers”³². Reduced to a set of regional stereotypes, Pernaut's wait staff thus highlight the media's role in the mythification of French identity.
- 22 This influence is shown through not only the portrayal of France's regional cultures, but also its political landscape. As we see in *Soumission*, the televised coverage of the presidential debate for Houellebecq's fictional 2022 campaign is comparable to a World Cup final (Sou 74). The irony of this association becomes clear as the novel's protagonist observes that the combination of various experts, cheering supporters and excited politicians give the viewer “cette impression si rare, si précieuse, si télégénique, de vivre un moment historique en direct” (Sou 74). Through this somewhat bathetic gradation, Houellebecq's narration thus reduces politics to a spectator sport, wherein the very notion of democracy is a mythical “sentiment au moins formel de démocratie” (Sou 201).
- 23 Another notable example of France's mythification can be found with Houellebecq's description of French food. As Ruth Cruickshank's recent article notes, the *repas gastronomique des Français*, or traditional French meal, was added to UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2010, the same year as *La carte*'s publication. This event's significance for the interpretation of Houellebecq's novel is well demonstrated by Cruickshank, who argues that in *La carte*, Houellebecq “invites intertextual readings, such as that which follows of a potentially cautionary tale about instrumentalising cultural heritage to geopolitical and global-economic ends”³³. Cruickshank's reading thus highlights the cultural significance of food in Houellebecq's writing, which appears as both a symbol of French tradition and deeply embedded in neoliberal consumer culture.
- 24 This form of alimentary mythification is exemplified in *Sérotonine*, when the protagonist, Florent-Claude, meets with his ex-lover Claire at the “Bistrot du Parisien” (Séro 120). After examining the menu, knowingly described as “plaisamment bistroti[er]”, Houellebecq's protagonist chooses “une cassolette d'escargot de Bourgogne (6) au beurre d'ail, à suivre des noix de Saint-Jacques poêlées à l'huile d'olive et leurs tagliatelles” (Séro 120). Taking a recipe from the landlocked region of Burgundy before moving to the North coast of France, the narrator's meal appears as a veritable clash of flavours and traditions. Furthermore, we learn that the primary reason for this choice is that it allows him to enjoy consumption removed from the limits of cultural propriety, as he explains : “Je souhaitais ainsi dépasser le traditionnel dilemme terre/mer (vin rouge vs vin blanc) en optant pour un choix qui nous permettrait de prendre une bouteille de chaque” (Séro 120-121). In Houellebecq's novels we find an appropriation of French cuisine, wherein the addition of the region of origin to each dish, appears as a hollow signifier, removed from all context. What is consumed is no longer synonymous with *terroir*, but is in fact a mythical idea used to project a certain image of France.

- 25 This is further demonstrated during Jed and Olga's visit to the bistro *Chez Anthony et Georges* in *La carte*. Upon entering the restaurant, Jed is offered "le poulet aux écrevisses", which has just arrived from Limousin. This dish, which as Cruickshank notes "can simultaneously be branded as heritage and light-touch haute cuisine"³⁴, is described by Houellebecq as a much sought after object of culinary marketing that itself has lost meaning. As Jed observes : "C'est typique. Enfin on a l'impression que c'est typique, mais on ne sait pas très bien de quoi. C'est dans le guide ?" To which Olga replies : "Pas encore. On va le rajouter dans l'édition de l'an prochain..." (LC 65). In Houellebecq's novel, the notion of a typical French meal has been constructed according to the tastes of the Michelin clientele, who are in search of "une expérience gastronomique vintage voire hardcore" (LC 95). As the interjection of English words, used here to explain what is supposedly a uniquely French phenomenon, reminds us, the reality of France's cultural palate is far from traditional. Following Brillat-Savarin's aphorism : "dis-moi ce que tu manges... je te dirai qui tu es"³⁵, what we see in Houellebecq's novels is not only the transformation of humanity into consumers, but also of France into an increasingly mythical and globalised culture.

France deterritorialised

- 26 In charting the cultural myths of French society, Houellebecq's novels thus highlight the systems and signs through which cultural identity takes form, giving the reader the chance to comprehend, through fiction, the mechanisms of the real world around them. As Novak-Lechevalier writes of Houellebecq's writing : "Ce qui se manifeste ici, ce n'est pas l'identification traditionnelle à l'un ou à l'autre des personnages ; c'est une forme de révélation beaucoup plus globale et abstraite qui touche à la représentation du monde contemporain et à la matière dont on peut, à travers un livre, s'y retrouver"³⁶. However, through the very process of representing reality, we may further argue that the remarkable nature of Houellebecq's writing comes from his ability to demonstrate the fact that we can no longer recognise the world around us. Through the ambivalent integration of mythical discourse, Houellebecq's portrayal of French culture underscores the problem of cultural representation. As the following section explores, Houellebecq's mythification of French culture inevitably leads to the deterritorialisation of France.
- 27 In *Sérotonine*, this deterritorialisation is staged through Houellebecq's portrayal of France's failing agricultural industry, the desperate nature of which is incarnated by Florent-Claude's fellow agronomist Aymeric. Having completed his studies, Aymeric decides to follow in the footsteps of his ancestors by becoming a farmer. However, his inability to compete with mass production companies, such as Monsanto, leaves him the only option of selling his lands to the highest bidder. As Aymeric explains :
- On possédait à peu près toute la région entre Carentan et Carteret. Enfin je dis 'on', ça appartient toujours à mon père, mais depuis que j'ai monté l'exploitation il a décidé de me laisser le produit des fermages, et même avec ça je suis souvent obligé de mettre une parcelle en vente. Le pire c'est que je vends même pas à des agriculteurs du coin, mais à des investisseurs étrangers. [...] L'an dernier j'ai vendu cinquante hectares à un conglomérat chinois, ils étaient prêts à en acheter dix fois plus, et à payer deux fois le prix du marché. (*Séro* 146)
- 28 Through this passage, Houellebecq's character recounts a veritable redistribution of the French territory, wherein the land itself is reduced to purely economic terms. This description thus sees a dislocation between the French people and their country as

- Aymeric is left with no choice but to liquidate his ancestral land, thereby enacting a literal deterritorialisation of the French landscape. Furthermore, the territorial redistribution of this increasingly globalised France is mirrored in its language, as we learn that the sought after labels of *appellation d'origine contrôlée*, or “AOC françaises”, once used to assure the origin of certain regional products have now been replaced by the *appellation d'origine protégée*, or “AOP européennes” (Séro 147). In this rapidly changing world, all that remains of the relationship between French culture and *terroir* is nothing but a mythical discourse, as French produce will soon be grown on lands owned by “des Belges et des Hollandais, et de plus en plus souvent des Chinois” (Séro 146).
- 29 This geographical deterritorialisation also extends to Aymeric’s cultural heritage, as in addition to selling his lands, Houellebecq’s character converts his family home into a hotel (Séro 144). This turn to tourism draws parallels with the future projection found in the epilogue of *La carte*, where we learn that all of French culture that has resisted Europe’s economic turbulence has been “des hôtels de charme, des parfums et des rillettes – ce qu’on appelle un *art de vivre*” (LC 401). These narratives thus reveal the increasing mythification of France in the wake of globalisation, whereby the neoliberal market has reduced the country to the status of a resort.
- 30 Houellebecq himself has commented on the real possibility of such an outcome as the perfect solution for France to survive in its shifting economic climate. As he states in *Ennemis publics*³⁷ :
- Les ‘nouveaux pays émergents’ veulent gagner de l’argent, grand bien leur fasse ; nous avons les moyens de le leur faire dépenser. Disons les choses plus crûment : est-ce que j’ai envie de voir transformer la France en un pays muséifié, mort ? en une sorte de *bordel à touristes* ? [...] Sans hésiter, je réponds : OUI. Mine de rien, je viens quand même, en quelques lignes, de sauver l’économie française...
- 31 However, the irony of any optimism conveyed by this quote is well illustrated in *Sérotonine*, as Houellebecq’s protagonist moves into a Mercure hotel in the 13th arrondissement of Paris in an attempt to cut ties with the responsibilities of his life, a choice that underscores the deterritorialisation of not only French cultural heritage, but also the protagonist’s sense of belonging.
- 32 For Florent-Claude’s friend Aymeric, the escalating costs of converting his chateau into a hotel lead him to the more economical solution of adding prefabricated bungalows to his home. The historical importance of this site, which according to Houellebecq’s character featured in Barbey d’Aurevilly’s 19th century novel *Une histoire sans nom* (Séro 144), is thus juxtaposed with the addition of a uniform series of “blocs rectangulaires, quasi cubiques recouverts de lattes de pin verni” (Séro 197). The appearance of these new and anonymous structures accordingly highlights the transformation of Aymeric’s familial home into a *non-lieu*, thereby evoking a dual sense of spatial and cultural displacement.
- 33 As Novak-Lechevalier observes, *Sérotonine*’s narrative offers the portrayal of the *déracinement*, or rootlessness, felt by French citizens in response to the country’s progressive deterritorialisation³⁸. This feeling finds its most developed dramatization in *Soumission*, as Houellebecq portrays the inauguration of a new cultural identity in France following the rise of a Muslim political party in the lead up to the 2022 election. The win of Mohammed Ben Abbas’ “Fraternité musulmane”, sees the return of conservative religious values to French society : women are forced to stay at home and are no longer allowed in the workforce, a move that simultaneously solves employment rates while boosting the economy (Sou 199). Furthermore, the integration of Muslim countries into the

- EU such as Turkey and Morocco, sees Ben Abbas' attempt to reconstruct a model of the Roman Empire, with France becoming a global power (*Sou* 198).
- 34 *Soumission's* projection of an Islamicised France has been interpreted as a capitalisation on the religious tensions in secular France by a number of critics. According to Williams, the text can be considered something of "dog whistle" novel, which "cynically lead[s]" the reader by establishing links between the fictional paradigm and reactionary political agenda, as it plays upon "dormant fears present in French society, or at least its political right, about the dissolution of French identity in the face of immigration"³⁹. This sense of cultural panic would thus provide the context for a nationalistic reading of the novel, in line with Renaud Camus' antagonistic critique of what he describes as the apparent "déculturation" of contemporary France⁴⁰. However, Houellebecq's portrayal of a failing French culture is hardly shown as a preferable alternative. When François's Jewish girlfriend Myriam leaves France to join her family in Israel, she struggles to defend her identity, as she rather feebly declares: "Mon pays c'est la France. [...] J'aime la France ! [...] j'aime, je sais pas... j'aime le fromage !" (*Sou* 104). Finding her only point of reference in a product of both export and consumption, Myriam's comment highlights the mythological status of France under neo-liberalism, which has led to the very crisis of cultural representation the country now faces. François' parting words, "Il n'y a pas d'Israël pour moi" (*Sou* 112), further illustrates the deterritorialising effects of liberalism on the French territory, which can no longer provide its people with a stable identity.
- 35 In this sense, the cultural transformation described in *Soumission* could be interpreted as a positive occurrence; however, as the novel's narration reveals, the Islam of Houellebecq's France remains linked to the same neoliberal foundations and mythical structures as its secular counterpart. The descriptions of the country's ideological shift are primarily communicated through changes in its cuisine and female fashion. Following the election, François observes: "Je ne découvris en réalité d'autre signe de transformation visible que la disparition du rayon casher du Géant Casino" (*Sou* 176), before noting that "l'habillement féminin s'était transformé, je le ressentis immédiatement sans parvenir à analyser cette transformation [...]: toutes les femmes étaient en pantalon" (*Sou* 177).
- 36 François' own knowledge of Islam is superficial at best, as the literature professor gleans his information from the crudely titled book "*Dix questions sur l'islam*," which he notes has been mass published "dans une collection de poche" (*Sou* 259). The conversion portrayed at the end of Houellebecq's novel is similarly simulacrum. Narrated in the conditional tense, the novel's final chapter offers more detail on the décor of the mosque than the supposed spiritual transcendence undergone by the novel's protagonist, as the narrator imagines "de[s] longs couloirs aux colonnades surmontées d'arches, aux murs ornés de mosaïques d'une finesse extrême" (*Sou* 297). Moreover, the narrator observes that he will have learnt the vow in which he professes himself to Islam phonetically (*Sou* 298), further highlighting the mythical status of religion as portrayed in the text.
- 37 In Houellebecq's novels, questions of ideology and cultural representation remain inseparable. Through his social projections, Houellebecq's writing achieves not only the reproduction of France's cultural world, but also the exposé of the representational crisis bound within its cultural discourse. This in mind, it is no surprise that *La carte* ends with the description of an artist desperately trying to capture the ever-changing landscape of the world around him.
- 38 Jed's final artwork is a series of films that document the progressive decline of industrial

civilisation. Through the narration of these films, the remaining vestiges of the region's factories are evoked as “[les] colosses industriels [...] maintenant rouillés, à demi effondrés” and the surrounding plants “une densité menaçante des forêts qui [...] colonisaient les anciens ateliers [et] s’insinuaient entre les ruines qu’elles recouvraient peu à peu d’une jungle impénétrable” (LC 413). In these works, we find the dissolution of the signs and myths of contemporary society, which are being eclipsed by growing vegetation as the territory appears to be regaining ground over the map. However, it is important to recall that these images are in fact the product of Jed’s own artistic perception. As such, *La carte*’s narration achieves one final *mise en abyme*, whereby the portrayal of vegetation’s triumph over humanity can thus be read as a reflexive commentary on the transitory nature of representation and interpretation. Through the description of this changing geographical landscape, we find a palimpsest of the text itself evoked by “les représentations des êtres humains qui avaient accompagné Jed Martin au cours de sa vie terrestre [qui] se délitent sous l’effet des intempéries, puis se décomposent et partent en lambeaux” (LC 413). This ending therefore reveals the deterritorialisation of not only Houellebecq’s French territory, but also the uncertainty of its representation.

- 39 Through his representation of contemporary France, Houellebecq thus confronts the reader with their own inability to conceive of a wholly new vision of national identity, removed from the mythical structures of its neoliberal reality. In this sense, the uncertainty evoked at the end of *La carte* may in fact provide the most accurate portrayal of Houellebecq’s France, as by exposing the mythification of French culture, his novels prompt the reader to question the nation’s future in an increasingly global climate as they reflect upon the myths of their present.

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NOTES

- ¹ Pierre Assouline, “Michel Houellebecq”, in Jérôme Garcin (ed.), *Nouvelles mythologies*, Paris, Seuil, 2007, p. 18.
- ² Janis Burton, “Et si le dernier snobisme était de s’habiller comme un sac?”, *Monsieur*, URL : <https://www.monsieur.fr/la-possibilite-du-laid/>
- ³ Michel Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, Paris, Éditions Maurice Nadeau, 1994, p. 66 ; henceforth *EDL*.
- ⁴ Marc Weitzmann, “Michel Houellebecq, aspects de la France”, *Le Monde*, 7 September 2001.
- ⁵ “Le Clash Culture : dans Sérotonine, Houellebecq a-t-il anticipé la colère des ‘gilets jaunes’?”, *Le Figaro*, URL : <http://www.lefigaro.fr/culture/2019/01/10/03004-20190110ARTFIG00015--le-clash-culture-dans-serotonine-houellebecq-a-t-il-anticipe-la-colere-des-gilets-jaunes.php>
- ⁶ “Valls : la France ça n’est pas la soumission, ce n’est pas Houellebecq”, *BFMTV*, URL : <https://www.bfmtv.com/politique/charlie-hebdo-valls-annonceplusieurs-interpellations-856310.html>
- ⁷ Russell Williams, Carole Sweeney (eds), “La France ça n’est pas Michel Houellebecq”, *Modern and Contemporary France*, vol. 27, n° 1, 2019.
- ⁸ Martin Crowley, “Houellebecq’s France”, *Australian Journal of French Studies*, vol. 56, n° 1, 2019, p. 26.
- ⁹ Russell Williams, Carole Sweeney (eds), *op. cit.*, p. 4.
- ¹⁰ Martin Crowley, *op. cit.*, p. 36.
- ¹¹ “Houellebecq recevant le prix Oswald Spengler : ‘L’Occident est dans un état de déclin très avancé’”, *Valeurs actuelles*, URL : <https://www.valeursactuelles.com/chubvaleurs/culture/houellebecq-recevant-le-prix-oswald-spengler-occident-est-dans-un-etat-de-declin-tres-avance-100202>
- ¹² Nelly Kapriélian, “L’amour n’était pas (non plus) dans le pré”, *Les inrockuptibles 2 : hors série*, January 2019, p. 11.
- ¹³ Bruno Viard, *Les Tiroirs de Michel Houellebecq*, Paris, PUF, 2013, p. 46.
- ¹⁴ Benoît Denis, “L’ironie et l’idéologie”, *CONTEXTES*, 2007, URL : <https://journals.openedition.org/contextes/180>
- ¹⁵ Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, “Soumission’, La littérature comme résistance”, *Libération*, 01/03/2015,

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- URL : http://next.liberation.fr/culture/2015/03/01/soumission-la-litteraturecomme-resistance_1212088
- ¹⁶ Russell Williams, "Uncomfortable proximity. Literary technique, authorial provocations and dog whistles in Michel Houellebecq's fiction", *Modern and Contemporary France*, vol. 27, n° 1, 2019, p. 61-76.
- ¹⁷ Louis Betty, "Who's Afraid of Michel Houellebecq? The Answer : Almost Everyone", *Australian Journal of French Studies*, vol. 56, n° 1, 2019, p. 38, p. 37.
- ¹⁸ Michel Houellebecq, *La carte et le territoire*, Paris, Flammarion, <J'ai lu>, 2010, p. 406, henceforth *LC*.
- ¹⁹ Sandrine Schianno-Bennis, "Relents dix-neuviémistes dans l'œuvre de Michel Houellebecq" in Gavin Bowd (ed.), *Le monde de Houellebecq*, Glasgow, University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 2006, p. 129-142 ; Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, *Houellebecq, l'art de la consolation*, Paris, Stock, 2018, p. 157-159, p. 164.
- ²⁰ Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, "'Soumission', La littérature comme résistance", *op. cit.*
- ²¹ Jorge Luis Borges, *Collected Fictions*, Andrew Hurley (trd.), London, Penguin, 1999 ; Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, Paris, Seuil, 1957.
- ²² Roland Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 187.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p. 195.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 198.
- ²⁵ Roland Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 51, p. 72, p. 140.
- ²⁶ Michel Houellebecq, *Soumission*, Paris, Flammarion, 2015, p. 91 ; henceforth *Sou*.
- ²⁷ Michel Houellebecq, *Sérotonine*, Paris, Flammarion, 2019, p. 25 ; henceforth *Séro*.
- ²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, Paris, Gallimard, 1966, p. 19-30.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- ³⁰ Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, "Petit Who's Who houellebecquien", in Michel Houellebecq, *La carte et le territoire*, Édition avec dossier d'Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, Paris, Flammarion, 2016, p. 417-443.
- ³¹ As Novak-Lechevalier explains : "Paysans corses ou vendéens, serveuses alsaciennes, qu'importe : ils ne sont là que pour le décor et pour porter les plateaux". Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, *Houellebecq, l'art de la consolation*, *op. cit.*, p. 163.
- ³² Roland Barthes, *op. cit.*, p. 114.
- ³³ Ruth Cruickshank, "Intertextual geopolitics and *La carte et le territoire* : a cautionary tale for UNESCO and the *repas gastronomique des Français* ?", *Modern and Contemporary France*, vol. 27, n°1, 2019, p. 96.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 103.
- ³⁵ J.A. Brillat-Savarin, *Physiologie du goût*, Paris, Flammarion, 1993 [1928].
- ³⁶ Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, *Houellebecq, l'art de la consolation*, *op. cit.*, p. 158.
- ³⁷ Michel Houellebecq, Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Ennemis publics*, Paris, Flammarion/Grasset & Fasquelle, 2008, p. 125.
- ³⁸ Antoine Lagadec, "Il y a chez Houellebecq un désir d'envol qui caractérise toute la littérature romantique", Interview with Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, *Revue des deux Mondes*, 11/01/2019, URL : <https://www.revedesdeuxmondes.fr/il-y-a-chez-houellebecq-un-desir-denvol-qui-caracterise-toute-la-litterature-romantique>
- ³⁹ Russell Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 69.
- ⁴⁰ Renaud Camus, *La grande déculturation*, Paris : Fayard, 2008.