Ephemeral identities, blurred geographies, and social media in twenty-first-century French fiction: a reading of *Licorne* by Nora Sandor and *Un amour d'espion* by Clément Bénech

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Abstract

While digital tools and platforms have become part of our everyday life, authors of fictional narratives voice the emerging hopes and fears resulting from interactive digital media. In this paper, I analyze two recently-published French novels, namely *Un amour d'espion* by Clément Bénech (2017) and *Licorne* by Nora Sandor (2019), in terms of how social networks affect in new ways the processes whereby identity is built and negotiated. Both novels focus on characters whose development as human beings is prevented by the contrasting illusions of ephemerality and digital hypermnesia. I show that the way characters use social media entails a sense of virtual disembodiment that shapes their perception of their physical bodies and surrounding spaces. I also argue that their online activity as represented in the novels invites reflections on the archival values of images and on social networks as fragmentary repositories of the self. In conclusion, I discuss how issues of ephemerality and disembodiment affect narrative choices in both novels.

> *Non omnis moriar.*
> *Horace*

Introduction

"Comme souvent de nos jours, tout avait commencé sur Facebook". These words open the first chapter of *Un amour d'espion*, a novel written by Clément Bénech and published by Flammarion in 2017 (p. 13). The action takes place in 2012. That year,

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Facebook reached the impressive milestone of one billion monthly active users, a number that has since kept growing and reached 2.7 billion at the end of 2020, with almost 30 million users in France only.[1] Just like screens, computers, and digital technology in general, social networks do not surprise us anymore, but are part of our everyday environment (Negroponte, 1998; Tinworth, 2012).

Social networks now play a central role in the construction, problematization, and deconstruction of individual and collective identities, to the point that some commentators consider them as "an autonomous social structure in which to construct an identity" (Gündüz, 2017, p. 86). The investigation of the role of social networks in everyday activities, cognitive paths, and identity construction processes invests disciplines as varied as psychology and psychoanalysis (Gozlan, 2014), sociology (Pasquier, 2020), media and communication studies (Mell, 2015), and narratology (Pignagnoli, 2019). What all these different approaches seem to have in common is that they acknowledge the tension between permanence and ephemerality as one of the issues underlying all aspects of life. As Renée Bourassa puts it, digital devices encourage a phenomenological reflection on the "éphèmere contemporain" (2015, p. 159) because they affect our perception of the world and our existence, with consequences on the mental processes involved in the construction and perception of the self.

Fiction writers have also shown an interest in the ways that "selves and societies are constructed and deconstructed through rhetorical practices" (Brown, 1994, p. 234) in the digital era. On the one hand, the development of the collaborative internet has provided authors with various blogging and microblogging platforms to experiment with new languages and poetics, showcase their art, interact with their readers, and carefully shape their public persona (see Faria, 2009; Thérenty, 2010; Bonnet, 2017). On the other hand, fictional stories published in the traditional book form are written to voice the new hopes and fears that the new interactive digital media bring about. A recent example is *L'Anomalie* by Hervé Le Tellier, the 2020 winner of the Goncourt prize, whose plot revolves around a group of people who find themselves suddenly confronted with their doubles. The novel tackles issues related to time, space and identity in such a way that some critics have read it as a metaphor for the identity fragmentation that we experience on social media (Boyer, 2020). Other prominent authors have chosen to deal with the role of the digital in our understanding of the world in an overt way. For example, in the acclaimed novel *Celle que vous croyez* (2016; adapted by Safy Nebbou into a film starring Juliette Binoche in 2019), Camille Laurens investigates the life of a woman whose romantic life and sense of the self become slippery after she creates a fake Facebook profile. One may also take the 2021 book selection of the Festival du Premier Roman de Chambéry, which presents the most worthwhile debut novels of the year, as offering a glimpse into the wave of interest enjoyed by the digital. This year's selection includes at least three novels whose title, cover design, and synopsis explicitly signal that their plots revolve around identity-building and traumatic events derived

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[1] https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/; https://www.statista.com/statistics/1072913/number-users-facebook-la-france/. Accessed 08/05/2021.

from, or facilitated by, the use of digital platforms—namely, Éric L'Helgoualc'h's *La Déconnexion* (2020); Loïc Hecht's *Le Syndrome de Palo Alto* (2020); Francesca Serra's *Elle a menti pour les ailes* (2020), the latter being the recipient of the prestigious Prix Le Monde too.

In this paper I investigate how processes of identity construction and negotiation mediated by social networks are represented in two recently-published French novels, *Un amour d'espion* by Clément Bénech (2017) and *Licorne* by Nora Sandor (2019), whose main characters are respectively an anonymous young man helping a woman retrace the past of Dragan, her mysterious lover; and Maëla, a young woman determined to have a career as a beauty influencer. Besides focusing on characters who experience ambiguity about their identity due to the use of social networks, the two novels share at least three more features that will prove significant to my enquiry. First, both novels deal with characters that are in their university years, or have just started to work. Not only do these characters stand on the evanescent threshold between late adolescence and adulthood (see Anselmo-Sequeira, 2013 and Dupont & Paris, 2013, both of which focus on women characters), but their development as human beings takes place within a dichotomy between digital hypermnesia and the illusion that their online persona is ephemeral in nature (Eichhorn, 2019). Second, the characters' use of social media shapes their perception of time and, especially, space, making them experience both a deep awareness of their physical bodies and a sense of virtual disembodiment. Third, their online activity entails a reflection on the opposite illusions of permanence and ephemerality provided by digital images.

The end of forgetting. Growing up between (illusions of) ephemerality and digital hypermnesia

Drawing on the assumption that childhood is a social construct that has evolved in close relation to the development of media technologies, in *The end of forgetting* Kate Eichhorn (2019) questions the effects that the pervasive presence of social networks may have on the development of young digital natives. Growing up implies leaving one's childhood behind, both individually and socially. Neuroscience and psychoanalysis have demonstrated that our brains are programmed to erase or alter the memories of our youth, and that this process plays a crucial role in the stabilization of our adult identity. Moreover, social sciences and ethnography have demonstrated the value of adolescence as a time of "psychosocial 'moratorium'", in effect a "time of risk-free experimentation" which serves the "specific societal purpose" of allowing individuals to engage in otherwise problematic activities, knowing that these will have no consequences on their adult lives (Eichhorn, 2019, pp. 61–62).

Because storing images in the perpetual archive of social media has become an ingrained habit, so much so that minors often have unsupervised access to new and powerful means of self-representation, and that even parents tend to upload and share pictures of their children, digital natives are in a sense unable to leave their adolescence behind. Eichhorn's argument challenges the assumption, which is common among detractors of the use of social networks by children and adolescents,

that unrestricted online interactions and exposure to digital contents may result in a premature loss of innocence. "The potential danger is no longer childhood's disappearance", Eichhorn argues, "but rather the possibility of a perpetual childhood. The real crisis of the digital age is not the disappearance of childhood, but the specter of a childhood that can never be forgotten" (p. 12). Numerous questions arise from this claim, the main one being: "Can one ever transcend one's youth if it remains perpetually present?" (p. 3). In other words, how can individuals become adults knowing that memories from their youth may resurface at any time in the form of images and voices stored in the immense, unruly memory of social media?

In her analysis, Eichhorn focuses on two situations that are particularly problematic, and that have a bearing on *Un amour d'espion* and *Licorne*. The first refers to people who, for whatever personal reason, need to make a clean break with their past by putting distance between themselves and the society they grew up in. While in the past letters and phone calls allowed people to have some control on who they chose to keep in touch with, or even disappear altogether if they so wished, moving to a different location may not be enough to get to a fresh start in the digital age. Tagged photos, metadata and facial recognition technologies make it impossible for people to leave their past behind and craft a new identity elsewhere. Being forced to deal with people and memories from the past while trying to integrate into a new environment often proves too heavy of a burden.

This very situation is portrayed in Bénech's *Un amour d'espion*. Dragan, Augusta's ex-boyfriend, is an adult man and a renowned art journalist in New York who regularly publishes articles on an online art magazine. His life begins to crumble when a mysterious internet user, who hides behind the nickname "Cap Charlie", starts leaving unsettling comments under Dragan's online articles: "'asasin' [...] 'salaud' […] 'tu finiras par payer'" (Bénech, 2017, p. 27). This relatively small hint is enough for Augusta to leave Dragan without even giving him a proper explanation. Despite receiving "mille messages par heure" (p. 29) from a desperate Dragan, Augusta refuses to discuss the issue directly with him, rather opting to ask a friend of hers—a stranger to Dragan—to investigate the past of her now-former boyfriend. By doing so, Augusta undermines the efforts Dragan had put over the years to craft an identity for his adult self that best allowed him to fit in his New York life: "Dragan avait perdu toute trace d'accent roumain. [...] En Amérique en effet, il n'avait pas seulement appris une langue mais un nouveau caractère, plus sanguin, plus franc, plus direct" (p. 119). These efforts include a calculated balance between transparency and concealment: transparency in that Dragan aspires to reach "transparence en toutes choses", an ideal reinforced by the reference to the surrealist image of the glass house: "le fantasme n'était pas tant de vivre dans une maison de verre que *d'être lui-même* maison de verre" (p. 38); concealment in that Dragan is reticent about his childhood and adolescence, and is wary of engaging in new friendships. In Augusta's own words, "Il veut bien parler de sa petite enfance / mais à dose homéopathique, comme s'il avançait en terrain miné / son adolescence c'est le black-out total / et puis il faut voir sa vie ici, il n'a aucun ami, alors que par son métier il devrait être le mondain par excellence" (p. 28). After discovering that he had been subjected to a painstaking investigation, Dragan finally accepts to recall a painful part of his past life that he had strived to erase, and shares it with Augusta.

Moved almost to tears, Dragan records a video in which he tells a tragic story of dictatorship in Romania, one made up of violence and surveillance, betrayals and death, and which culminates in the suicide of his cousin Tiberiu due to Dragan's revelation that the former had worked for Ceaușescu's Securitate (pp. 256-263). It is only after watching this confession that Augusta, who now feels guilty for inflicting pain on Dragan, accepts to see him again.

The second question raised by Eichhorn concerns people who suddenly gain immense popularity on social media during their youth, "often as a result of private rather than public activities", at times quite unintentionally (Eichhorn, 2019, p. 72). Can these people become full-fledged adults or are they bound to be stuck in the moment that has made them popular? This is the question that resonates in Sandor's *Licorne*. Maëla is a middling university student with no clear sense of purpose other than becoming a beauty influencer. She attends classes exclusively because her mother wants her to, lives in a student apartment with a roommate she has little to share with, and has recently been left by her boyfriend Kilian with a laconic message on Snapchat. The mixture of ephemerality and playfulness in Kilian's message seems to amplify the violence of the break up: "il l'avait quittée par un snap laconique, dans lequel il portait un filtre oreilles de lapin tout à fait déplacé, masquant en partie sa barbe naissante. 'Le couple ça me met la pression, j'ai besoin de ma liberté', avait-il déclaré, et ce message éphémère s'était autodétruit en quelques secondes" (Sandor, 2019, p. 42; for an analysis of the *gamification* of communication on Snapchat, see Bruna, 2020). Despite sharing a few makeup tutorials and pictures on Youtube, Facebook, and Instagram, Maëla has not gained any followers, nor does she seem to have any possibility of actually becoming popular. Her lack of success is partly due to the fact that her efforts to find a place in the virtual world are clumsy imitations of successful Instagram models. Maëla's life changes abruptly when Mowgli, her favorite rap singer, reposts one of her pictures—a rather ordinary shot of a bowl of cereal—accompanied with a cryptic message suggesting that he may record his next music video in Larmor, close to where Maëla's family house is located. Maëla's popularity thus comes unexpectedly and is immediately accompanied by hate comments—which she promptly proceeds to delete as part of the shaping of her online persona—and by the anxiety to live up to the expectations of her newly gained followers. Most importantly, her abrupt fame comes without any substantial support from her family who, as is sometimes the case, know very little about their daughter's online activities (on the lack of knowledge by the parents of social media stars, see Eichhorn, 2019, p. 80). This results in serious financial problems, as Maëla runs into debt to pay for new clothes, equipment, and travels. More tragically still, Maëla gets sexually assaulted, a dramatic event she is not fully equipped to recognize as such.

In her essay, Eichhorn claims that "the young online "celebrities" who are most at risk are not personalities [...] who have carefully crafted a persona and have received considerable recognition from both fans and promoters. They are children and teens who have acquired celebrity without intention or consent" (Eichhorn, 2019, p. 80). Maëla is both things: she has been longing for popularity for a long time, but has not yet managed to craft a digital persona that she can distinguish from her "real" self, a problem compounded by the fact that her notoriety does neither come gradually nor

in the form she would have expected. Maëla is unable to dissociate herself from her virtual persona, as she is constantly torn between two pulsions. One is the fear of not being recognized as an individual. After failing to be noticed by her loathed French professor at a bar, for example, she speculates that: "Elle l'avait vue, et elle continuait à faire semblant de ne pas la voir, en fixant un point à travers elle, comme si le corps de Maëla était dépourvu de toute consistance. Lui voulait-elle, se demanda Maëla, de l'avoir surprise au Pam Pam, hâve et esseulée, ou ne la reconnaissait-elle même pas en dehors de la salle de classe, comme si son existence au-delà de la fac n'était plus assurée?" (Sandor, 2019, p. 82).

The other pulsion is that of disappearing completely. In this respect, Maëla's online and offline identity building process follows a model which is exemplified by Baloo, the Carpatian bear that accompanies the rap singer Mowgli in his tours and videos, whom Maëla mimics (by wearing a T-shirt with its portrait on and by using bear ears filters on Snapchat) and finally meets, although only in a sort of drug-induced lucid dream occurred during the Parisian party that sanctions her official entrance in the pantheon of social media stars. One of the reasons why Maëla loves to follow Mowgli on Instagram is the homogeneity of the contents posted by the singer: he almost exclusively shares pictures of Baloo and bear-shaped emoticons alongside hashtags alluding to his supremacy in the world of rap music. This uniformity feels profoundly reassuring to Maëla: "Certes Mowgli était très suivi, mais Maëla savait qu'en actualisant sa page, elle n'y découvrirait aucun contenu nouveau – seulement la stabilité rassurante des mêmes images de Mowgli, et de Baloo à ses côtés" (p. 27). The singer's digital persona seems to transgress one of the essential traits of self-representation on social media, which is that "l'identité personnelle y apparaît comme un processus davantage qu'un état, une activité plutôt qu'un statut" (Cardon, 2008, p. 100). However, this does not make it any less ephemeral. Suddenly, Maëla discovers that all content has disappeared from Mowgli's Instagram page. This radical choice, as well as the public clamor—"Sur Google, plusieurs articles apparaissaient déjà ('Le rappeur Mowgli retire toutes ses photos d'Instagram')" (p. 32)—is for Maëla the definitive confirmation of his success. "Si Mowgli avait percé de nulle part, créant la surprise, sans que l'on puisse expliquer son succès, il pouvait tout aussi bien revenir au néant virtuel" (p. 33). When, at the end of the novel, Maëla, exasperated with debts and performative pressure, attempts to kill herself while broadcasting her suicide live on Snapchat, she does so with a carefully crafted ritual including a filter that simulates a crown of flowers on her head. Her gesture has a two-fold value: first, that of an all-too-real imitation of Mowgli's virtual disappearance; second, a desperate attempt to reach Baloo in the "néant virtuel" and identify with him: "elle se métamorphoserait en Baloo plutôt, abandonnant son corps humain pour revêtir une peu d'ours" (p. 198). But Maëla's attempt to disengage herself from the burden of her virtual identity fails once her roommate, who is in the same house but follows her via Snapchat, sees her live suicide video and calls an ambulance.

Following this episode, television broadcasts and magazines want Maëla as they had never done before, paradoxically launching to stardom the girl who "a mis sa vie en danger pour YouTube" (p. 204). The attempt to disappear results in even greater visibility, which Maëla does not fail to exploit. She readily becomes a new

kind of influencer, one who preaches a healthier approach to social networks while posting her videos on the very social networks she criticizes (videos entitled, for instance, "My journey to stop Instagram", "Detox réseaux"), and subtitles her videos in English with the aim of reaching a broader audience (p. 208). Maëla's success is so momentous that it leads her to publish two self-help books and hold coaching sessions, thus earning her a substantial amount of money. While this development in the story seems to suggest a conclusion in line with that of a *Buildungsroman*, one in which the hero finally becomes a fully developed adult who is satisfied with his or her place within society (Moretti, 1999), in the epilogue to *Licorne* Maëla resumes recording her videos "dans sa chambre d'enfant" (p. 204) while still feeling empty and lost ("une coquille vide," p. 211). Her journey on and off social media has not only failed to help her become a well-balanced adult, but it has stifled all effort to grow up altogether. Just like Dragan is forced to confess the traumas of his youth, Maëla is compelled to quit her student apartment in Lorient to return to Hennebont with her mother. The hypermnesia of the digital has made it impossible for both characters to forget about their past, with the result of making adolescence in the social media age a perennial stage rather than an ephemeral one.

Physical bodies in digital spaces—the ephemeral self between digital disembodiment and virtual mobility

"La neige était tombée sur la ville, et Maëla pensait que l'océan avait gelé peut-être. [...] Elle s'était levée à six heures à cause de la neige. Dehors ses Nike Free s'enfonçaient à chaque pas, c'était comme de l'écume molle et froide, qui lui mouillait les pieds; elle n'avait pas prévu de mettre de meilleures chaussures, car c'étaient les plus jolies" (Sandor, 2019, pp. 11–12). These are the first lines of *Licorne*, in which the reader is introduced to the protagonist, Maëla. The snow is falling heavily on Lorient, which makes her walk to her student job extremely unpleasant. Similarly, when the reader first encounters the protagonist of *Un amour d'espion*, they see him subjected to a comparable discomfort, although one opposite in kind: "Il faisait particulièrement chaud à Paris. La nuit, les fenêtres restaient ouvertes à la crémone, on aspergeait le trottoir devant chez soi pour le rafraîchir. Le jour, tous les chauffeurs de bus étaient en bras de chemise et, quand ils se penchaient en avant pour vérifier leur angle mort, l'habit réglementaire laissait apparaître la trace de chaque vertèbre. Les enfants couraient dans les parcs en slip, et s'aspergeaient d'eau à la fontaine publique, qui coulait à flot ininterrompu" (Bénech, 2017, p. 13).

For both main characters, technology represents a way to escape, at least mentally, from feelings of physical discomfort, if not to transcend their bodily identity altogether. Maëla listens to the music of her favorite artists on her iPhone to find protection from the cold, in a way that almost hints at her wrapping herself up in some imaginary blanket made up of lyrics ("Les paroles connues par coeur la protégeaient du froid", Sandor, 2019, p. 12). To resist the heatwave, Bénech's unnamed amateur detective, who also acts as the narrator of the story, spends his nights in front of his computer screen streaming American basketball matches, something which gives him the feeling of living "en léger différé" (p. 14): that is to say, in a

different time (despite living in Paris, he organizes his life according to the American time zones) and space (the United States, where the basketball matches take place). Eventually, he seeks solace from the heat by using Facebook, and ends up contacting his friend Augusta, who lives in New York but is within instantaneous reach thanks to the Internet, which enables a sort of immaterial ubiquity: "Ce soir, elle était encore à ma portée, à un clic de moi, signalée par un point vert à côté de son nom. Le jour se levait dans ma ville, il se couchait dans la sienne; nous étions tête-bêche dans le temps" (p. 16).

These escapes point to the "désynchronisation des temps sociaux et l'éclatement des espaces" (Beaudouin, 2009) that characterize our globalized and hypermobile society—so much so that some scholars now talk of "mobility turn" as a new paradigm in the social sciences (Faist, 2013). In this sense, "virtual mobility" may be deemed as one of the main categories of mobility alongside terrestrial and aerial ones (Aguiléra & Rallet, 2016; Kellerman, 2011, 2016). The intensification of mobility over longer distances work to make physical bonds ephemeral and in-person encounters rare; social networks, by contrast, tend to establish, and normalize, new forms of sociability based on written, and often asynchronous, communication. As in the case of Augusta and his friend in *Un amour d'espion*, online chats counter the digitally-induced sense of dematerialization and disembodiment by emphasizing the permanence of the written word (Beaudouin, 2009). On top of that, online chats prompt us to think that the other person is always available, thus producing the impression of a potentially continuous encounter (Adoue, 2016, p. 92). The unnamed narrator finds this comforting, a fact in stark contrast with the position of Augusta and Dragan in the same novel. In the first stage of their relationship, the latter learnt to fight the feeling of being always in contact because they want to keep the desire alive. They do so by deferring their responses and making their online persona more ephemeral "pour compenser la possibilité vertigineuse de contact perpétuel" (p. 142). The green symbol that signals that Augusta is online, and which ideally locates her in the virtual space and makes her available for conversation, blurs all distinctions between presence and absence, embodiment and disembodiment, distance and proximity, physical displacement and virtual mobility, permanence and ephemerality. The definition of Facebook as a "virtual meeting place" proves particularly effective in this context, particularly as, in this respect, Zuckerberg's platform follows in the footsteps of Second Life, a virtual-reality environment in which "the overlap between real life and virtual life was realized within a space clearly recognizable as a physical environment" (Lughi, 2013, p. 5).

In the novel, the conversations between Augusta and her unnamed friend in charge of investigating on Dragan's past are graphically rendered in a way that resembles the layout of a Facebook chat window, including timestamps that indicate the exact moment a message is sent. Significantly, their discussion soon turns to travelling in the social media age. According to the unnamed narrator, travelling has turned into something of a farce, a pale imitation of a "real activity" ("il y a quelque chose de factice dans le voyage contemporain / on dirait l'imitation d'une activité réelle", he argues, p. 18), and the onus is on social networks. Platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and TripAdvisor, he claims, encourage scripted itineraries and conventional activities, and only allow tourists to have ephemeral and inauthentic

relationships with the locations they visit and the people they meet: "ils postent sur Facebook des vidéos d'eux en train de bourlinguer dans le désert de sable ou de sel juchés sur des engins à moteur, avec une musique entraînante par-dessus" (p. 19). The only way they are able to explore a city or a region, he continues, is to "cocher sur un document Excel les monuments recommandés par TripAdvisor" (p. 20).

An even harsher, because highly ironic, discourse on the most recent evolutions of travelling unfolds in *Licorne*, and especially in a passage where the omniscient narrator, who often adopts Maëla's point of view, wonders: "Elle se voyait déjà au milieu d'une Google Image, assise sur les chaises vertes des Tuileries [...]. Elle connaissait la pyramide du Louvre, la Cour carrée illuminée la nuit – avait-elle vraiment besoin de voir le monde dans la vie réelle, s'il palpitait vrai et détaillé sur internet?" (Sandor, 2019, p. 113). During her short stay in Paris, Maëla behaves exactly like the tourists made fun of in *Un amour d'espion*. Equipped with a list of all the locations and monuments that she wants to take pictures of "pour Instagram" (p. 137), she never mentions actually wanting to *visit* them. While crossing the city, most of her time is spent gazing at her smartphone screen.

The attitude of both Maëla and the tourists mocked in *Un amour d'espion* hyperbolize the three relations that, according to geography scholar Aharon Kellerman, may exist between virtual and physical mobility: complementarity, additivity, and substitution (Kellerman, 2016, pp. 4–5). Maëla and the tourists use digital tools to plan their journey (what Kellerman calls complementarity) in a way that instead of helping them live an intense experience away from home, actually limits their ability to learn and discover. During their journey, smartphones are used not solely to find useful information online (additivity), but also to share pictures and comments with online friends and followers while away, thus further distancing themselves from the place they are visiting (additivity that fades into substitution). The result, at least as it appears in *Licorne*, is that travel loses its meaning as a crucial part of one's development—a shift that seems once again to be due to the blurring of the distinction between the ephemeral and the perennial entailed by the virtual.

In this sense, *Licorne* and *Un amour d'espion* raise a pivotal question. If we are able to access any place at any time via our smartphones, and the act of travelling is less an ephemeral parenthesis than an ordinary activity based on virtual mobility, what symbolic aura can we still bestow on physical displacement? This question is addressed by exploring how ephemerality informs the distinction between physical and virtual displacement. In *Un amour d'espion*, both the narrator and Augusta make a point of clarifying that they are not involved in any social network-mediated travelling practices. However, Augusta's person is presented as way more ephemeral when the two meet in person than when she is online. In New York, she lives in a dark flat hidden behind a thick wooden barrier. She is not allowed to make noise as her roommate, who performs mysterious healing rituals on Australian people over the Internet, ought not to be disturbed. Augusta does not take part in the investigation on Dragan either. Her role is limited to occasional interactions with the narrator—in fact, she is too absorbed in a new job, about which she refuses to share any information, and carefully avoids all physical contact (pp. 189–190): "Je dormais chez Augusta. Chaque matin, elle se levait aux alentours de sept heures, prenait garde de me laisser rendormir (nous dormions chacun à une extrémité du lit, sans

jamais laisser nos pieds se toucher). Elle allait faire ses ablutions, avalait un café et disparaissait pour aller travailler. […] Je ne savais pas vraiment ce que fomentait Augusta au journal, et toutes mes tentatives d'en savoir plus se heurtaient à une ironie systématique et passablement désagréable" (pp. 189–190).

Augusta's ephemerality in the diegetic space is paired with her equally rarified presence in the structure of the text. When the narrator says: "Augusta commença alors son récit au premier jour où ils s'étaient croisés sur l'application mobile. […] Elle parla à voix basse jusqu'au soir, et une partie de la nuit" (p. 38), he seems to imply that the next pages would illustrate the development of Augusta's relationship with Dragan from her own point of view, and possibly with her own voice. However, this is not the case. It is the male unnamed narrator that once again takes the floor to engage in a lengthy narrative insert written in the third person, in which he tells *his own* version of Augusta's and Dragan's story based on the woman's words and other sources: "J'ai dit que le récit d'Augusta était quasiment complet. Et puis il lui restait quelques photos envoyées par Dragan. Ce qui manquait, je l'ai reconstitué moi-même, à l'aide d'images trouvées sur Internet, d'entretiens accordés par Dragan sans la presse écrite et web [...], de ceux menés par lui, où il se dévoile parfois plus que de l'autre côté du micro, mais aussi de ses articles dans le magazine *Gimmick Art*, et en dernier recours de mon imagination—pour dessiner les contours d'un homme avec lequel je me sentais peu d'atomes crochus" (p. 39).

Despite being the one who has set the whole plot in motion, Augusta thus seems to vanish from the text, leaving the action and the narrative to her "espion" friend almost entirely. Her presence is confined to short commentaries and flashbacks. For both the narrator and the reader it is easier to perceive Augusta's bodily self as she moves across the virtual space than actually get in touch with her in her New York flat. Paradoxically, her very existence in the novel seems much more ephemeral in real life than in the virtual space.

Ephemerality is an equally relevant notion to describe Maëla's feeling of her self. Indeed, Maëla's identity building process amounts to a process of disembodiment. The whole novel follows the young woman's struggles to transcend her physicality and "les contours trop coupants du réel" (Sandor, 2019, p. 44) to enter a virtual space populated by people so perfect that their very identity feels chimeric: "Elle avait envisagé que Vanessa puisse n'être qu'une chimère, malgré ce que Mowgli affirmait dans les interviews. [...] 'T'imagines si Vanessa n'existait pas', dit Maëla en buvant une gorgée de cidre brut, 'si c'était juste genre virtuel!'" (pp. 43–44). Her ambitions to detach herself from her bodily existence even translates into a short period of extreme dieting to fit in a fancy dress, a moment that symbolically sanctions her belonging to the category of the *instagrammeuses*. However, Maëla's ambitions are at odds with the very structure of the empirical world—that is, the impossibility of not being physically human and escaping all manner of contact with fellow human beings. Notably, her reminiscences of her previous student job at McDonald's trigger the unpleasant feeling that she too is a human being made of flesh and bones: "elle craignait d'être devenue de la viande sombre et sanguinolente [...] La nuit elle rêvait encore de sundaes fondus, qui se substituaient à son sang. [...] Elle avait renoncé à manger de la viande" (pp. 18-19). In multiple scenes, she is portrayed as being disgusted by

body odor ("prise dans des odeurs de transpiration masculines," p. 148) or by the idea of physical contact altogether, be it sexual or otherwise. Her repulsion for human bodies seems to have been overcome once she starts dating a young fitness influencer who she only addresses as BodyMax ("Les lumières même *vrillaient* dans ses yeux d'une manière nouvelle, et son corps, délié, avait résorbé la faim, sa peau picotait un peu à la surface, comme si elle était devenue plus sensible. Elle aurait voulu toucher BodyMax, s'assurer de la consistence de son torse, de ses bras, de son visage," p. 125), but her disillusionment returns once more when she is physically assaulted by him.

Her attitude finds its counterpart in her roommate Marilou, a somehow carnavalesque, even pantagruelic character who spends her days binging on junk food, tv series, and sex: "Elle lassait les miettes de ses biscuits partout dans l'appartement, des taches de chocolat, et parfois même des culottes ou des chaussettes, jetées dans un coin du salon avec nonchalance. Elle était tellement répandue dans l'appartement que même dans sa chambre Maëla la sentait encore, comme un dérangement invisible. Marilou était négligente jusqu'aux garçons qu'elle rencontrait parfois, et qu'elle amenait à l'appartement au milieu de la nuit—alors que Maëla était embarrassée à la seule imagination de ces corps suintants, de ces odeurs inconnues" (p. 22). While Marilou does not hesitate to occupy space in the apartment and leave tangible traces of her physical existence, Maëla is irretrievably oppressed with the feeling that she is not made of the same substance as people around her. Her very existence in the real world feels like some kind of mistake in the creation of the world. "Engoncée dans le canapé, l'ordinateur brûlant sur ses genoux, la sensation lui revenait que le monde n'était pas fait pour elle, à sa juste mesure, comme si son existence entière, jusqu'à son corps trop lourd, relevaient d'un surplus que rien ne parvenait à justifier" (p. 154).

For Maëla, it is the online persona that legitimizes the identity of herself as a physical person. For example, when she notices that her former boyfriend does not follow her on Instagram, she feels at odds with her own body and unable to perform the most basic gestures, as if uncertain of her own physical dimension. "Elle se sentait empêtrée dans son corps; chacun de ses gestes, et jusqu'à son immobilité devant le restaurant, avait perdu de son évidence" (p. 74). This point is best understood in terms of Dominique Cardon's "cartography" of social media. Maëla's presence on social networks is an example of the "clair obscur" model; although the users might tinker with their online identity, "le réseau social apporte réalisme et fiabilité à l'information identitaire en rendant beaucoup plus difficiles la dissimulation et le travestissement" (Cardon, 2008, p. 108). Maëla's Instagram nickname, miss_Maëla98, refers to her actual name, and she shares pictures of a slightly embellished version of her everyday life. Her friends are among her followers, and she expects everyone to consult her Instagram account regularly in order to keep up-to-date on her life. In this sense, Maëla turns Cardon's model on its head. If, according to Cardon's cartography model, the online network of real life friends and acquaintances serves to vouchsafe that a given virtual persona is indeed "authentic", in Maëla's case it is the virtual persona that anchors her physical existence.

Sage comme une image—of maps and pictures, or archiving the ephemeral self

In different ways, both *Licorne* and *Un amour d'espion* portray characters for whom "l'imbrication du monde réel et du monde virtuel est si forte que les deux univers n'ont guère de raison d'être isolés" (Cardon, 2008, p. 126). Such overlapping allows the characters to engage in virtual mobility practices and conceive of their own subjectivity within a complex network of places and relationships. On the other hand, the conflation of the virtual and the physical also encourages feelings of disembodiment, and ultimately of disconnection, from the physical world, with the result that the very sense of one's self is undermined. As I show in this section, in both novels the relationship of the individuals with their geographical setting plays a crucial role in shaping the characters' ephemeral identities.

Interestingly, both narrators describe the feelings of bewilderment in their characters by using expressions referring to the sea, especially metaphorical ones. "Face au flot tumultueux du réel, tenter de faire pièce aux remous. Contre mauvaise fortune bunker", says the narrator of *Un amour d'espion* while commenting on Dragan's tendency to follow routines to make up for the lack of order in his life (Bénech, 2017, p. 194). Similarly, in *Licorne* Maëla is shown standing on the beach and dreaming to absorb some of the tenacity that she sees in the sea waves. "À la fin des cours, elle prit sa voiture pour aller regarder la mer à Lomener, comme tous les jeudis. Elle s'y asseyait sur un banc et elle attendait. Les vagues se cassaient sur la jetée. Sur l'iPhone les vagues étaient petites et dérisoires. Il aurait fallu être comme les vagues, se rendre capable d'une même opiniâtreté impersonnelle" (Sandor, 2019, p. 31).

Maëla's proximity with the beloved sea, and more in general with Brittany, her native region, is foundational to the building of her identity. At different times in the novel, the girl compares features of her body with elements that belong to the aquatic. For example, she describes her hair as akin to seaweed (p. 25). When the hairdresser shaves her head completely, she feels as if a part of her body had just melted along with the snow in the streets of Lorient: "La coiffeuse lui avait enlevé tout ce qui la protégeait encore un peu du monde; elle était exposée désormais, et au fond de la classe, sa nuque se couvrit de plaques rouges. Mais, d'une façon incertaine, il lui semblait que la disparition de ses cheveux était liée à la fonte de la neige" (Sandor, 2019, p. 26). That the bond between Maëla and her territory is charged with a deep sense of belonging is overtly suggested in two passages where she deals with people showing little or no appreciation for her native region. On these occasions, her sense of self becomes particularly slippery. In the first occurrence, Maëla is puzzled by BodyMax's lack of interest for the ocean. She interprets this as a lack of desire for herself: "Peut-être que BodyMax n'avait pour elle, comme pour l'océan, aucun désir; c'était comme si elle se trouvait menacée de perdre toute substance, se diluant dans les jets d'eau vigoureux qui massaient ses jambes, ses pieds, sa nuque, ses bras" (Sandor, 2019, p. 172). In a second instance, she feels offended when Kilian, her former boyfriend, complains about the town of Lorient—"Par Lorient, Maëla se sentit dénigrée"

(p. 92). In these scenes, a direct correlation is established between the girl, the geographic location, and the aquatic element. Indeed, to Maëla the three seem to merge into one hybrid, changeable identity. At one point, Maëla strives to "save the snow" by taking pictures of it before it melts away, saying that: "La neige disparut en quelques jours. Il ne restait plus que de la boue, et parfois quelques couches intactes sur les voitures. Heureusement que Maëla avait eu le temps de mettre des photos sur Instagram! *La neige était sauvée*" (Sandor, 2019, p. 24). On another occasion, she voices her disappointment for not having enough of a good camera to immortalize the exact colors of the sunset on the surface of the sea: "Elle était venue filmer cette heure où la lumière finissait par mourir, avant que le soleil ne se couche, se répandant sur l'eau en traînées fuchsia, mais sur son iPhone le monde était réduit à des couleurs inexactes, et elle s'en sentait quelque peu trompée" (pp. 58–59). Both instances can be read as indirect definitions of the archival function that Maëla attributes to pictures on social media, though the point is not primarily the landscape but her self-image. In addition to using social media as platforms for crafting and displaying her persona, Maëla appears to think of them as archives of the self—that is to say, tools that allow her to fence off her ephemerality as a human being by focusing on the allegedly perennial nature of the digital space.

The tension between presence and disembodiment felt by Maëla hearkens back to Angélique Gozlan's concept (via psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi) of "sentiment océanique", meant as the absolute form of interconnection with the others offered by the virtual space which engenders a super-human forgetfulness of "sa propre finitude" (Gozlan, 2014, pp. 61–62). Maëla's attempt to save the snow by taking pictures and archiving them in the supposedly limitless memory of the web ultimately stands for a projection to the digital world, the hope being that of surviving death and, with it, oblivion. To put it with Gozlan, the virtual double created by Maëla "met au travail l'image de soi, de son corps, mais surtout de son idéal, ce vers quoi [elle] aspire, tout en éloignant la représentation de la mort" (Gozlan, 2014, p. 52).

A similar, though less tragic, effect of intertwining the human and the geographical is presented in a passage of *Un amour d'espion* where the narrator recalls a romantic encounter between Dragan and Augusta. "Mais sa caresse était trop rapide, suspecte. Croyait-il que le câlin fût un sport de vitesse? Elle eut alors cette impression glaçante: sous couvert de la caresser, il désirait en fait la *recenser*, faire un relevé topographique" (Bénech, 2017, p. 145). Perhaps unwittingly, Dragan draws the topography of Augusta's body with his hands as they lie in bed together. This moment is the end result of Dragan's quest for Augusta, whom he had noticed on Tinder. With the help of a paper map of Brooklyn and the few scattered hints about her habits that he had retrieved from her social network profiles, Dragan engages in a kind of "woman topography" by browsing the city in search of her. The map, which is reproduced in the book (p. 103) in a version that also includes the circles drawn by Dragan to delimitate the areas of his search, works as a metonymic portrait of Augusta. It is based on a conflation between the places she habitually goes to, mapping her online activity onto the paper map in what amounts to a real-life translation of the woman's digital persona. By this latter expression, we may now mean the complex network of fixed and ephemeral features which results from the interaction

of different elements: the internal structure and layout of the social network, the description that the users provide of themselves, and their "réseau relationnel" (Cardon, 2008, p. 100), which includes contacts, friends, likes and activities. Moreover, Augusta's use of social networks often requires location tracking, a feature that, in Cardon's words, links "le territoire au réseau social d'une manière qui rappelle les plateformes relationnelles du web" (ibid., p. 120), thus allowing Dragan to investigate Augusta's identity online and offline at the same time.

Un amour d'espion suggests that the blurred and ephemeral notion of identity may be visually rendered as a "map of the self", one that includes locations, encounters, and activities, and expands like a rhizome. The map eschews the linearity of the verbal description and the fixed layout of a Tinder or Facebook profile, allowing for the visualization of even the most fragmentary and ephemeral traits of one's identity. In so doing, it invites the exploration of a person's traits through multiple, random paths. *Un amour d'espion* incorportates this mechanism in its structure, particularly the central chapters of the text. The narrator engages in the task to "replacer [Dragan] sur une fresque dotée d'une direction" (Bénech, 2017, p. 39). He does so by haphazardly assembling elements of Dragan's identity and personal history from various sources, such as Augusta's narrative of her relationship with Dragan alongside details of his life; pictures found on the Internet; and articles and interviews published in both paper and online magazines; and the narrator's imagination, which enriches the whole tale. In these pages, all sources and voices that contribute to mapping Dragan's elusive personality are intertwined in such a way that the reader is unable to identify the source of each piece of information. The result is a narrative that enacts the modes of circulation, quotation, and even falsification of knowledge within the digital space. A glaring example is the chapter entitled "Instantanés de Dragan", which is divided into twenty-four episodes. Some of these prove relevant to the plot, while others don't. This makes for a significant narrative choice, as the reader discovers things about Dragan as if they were browsing their social network profile—that is, by skimming through different content with no logical order in mind.

Besides maps, *Un amour d'espion* integrates numerous other pictures within the text. These include an old photo of Marisha (Dragan's girlfriend before Augusta) that Dragan found online; a few Tinder accounts screenshots, including Dragan's; some posts taken from Augusta's Instagram account; pictures of places, objects, and other details mentioned in the novel; an old photo of Dragan's friend John DuBarry from Google Images; little handmade drawings; a few snapshots of Ilinca, the interpreter who will help the narrator in his investigation; and screenshots from Dragan's video-confession. Adding pictures to the novel is relevant in that it adds a layer of multimodality to mimic the intertwining of writing and visual media typical of present-day social networks. Most importantly, perhaps, images are instrumental to Bénech's project of a "roman bicameral". In his essay *Une essentielle fragilité. Le roman à l'ère de l'image* (2019), the author conceives of his novel *Un amour d'espion* as having two chambers: "la chambre de l'écrivain, et la chambre noire de l'appareil-photo" (p. 125). The underlying assumption of this concept is that words and images are two distinct modes of capturing and representing reality (p. 120). When both are used in a narrative, one is not ancillary to the other. Rather, they are

complementary and equally contribute to the global sense of the novel. Photographs are particularly relevant due to their threefold function. They represent pauses in the flux of the verbal storytelling; serve as testimonies that the story is "réelle et non purement inventée" (p. 128), especially when they look amateurish; and add to the meaning of the text in ways that would be unachievable when using words only.

The concept of "roman bicameral" offers a rationale for the pictures that the reader finds in *Un amour d'espion*. These images are presented as having been retrieved from well-known social networks and websites. The fact that they come from renowned sources makes these images look like evidence that the people mentioned in the novels and shown in the pictures indeed exist in real life—an astute narrative strategy that plays on the idea that a virtual persona may warrant the existence of a real individual, rather than the other way around. Some of the pictures, however, are more dubious and challenge the reader's credulity. The moment when Dragan takes a strange snapshot of the feet of his friend DuBarry (shown on p. 80) is never mentioned in the narrator's account, and the picture of Ilinca trying to pick a lock (on p. 249) is puzzling, as there is no mention of the narrator using a camera in the text. Instead of reinforcing the "effet de réel" (Barthes, 1968) produced by the others, these photos spur readers to question their relationship with images in the digital world. Being embedded in the structure of the narrative, these images prompt reflections on questions related to reliability and falsification, testimony and fiction, masquerade and authenticity that are characteristic of the digital age.

Conclusion

Novels, William B. Warner writes, have always had "an intricate symbiotic relationship with the information technologies of their epoch" (Warner, 2010, p. 169). In our society the borders between the virtual and the physical are fuzzy, and, as Bénech himself observes, "on peut, grâce à la technologie, être à la fois ici et là-bas, [...] on peut faire vieillir artificiellement un vin de plusieurs années en l'espace d'une minute" (Bénech, 2017, p. 39). The unsettling result is that the notion of identity is constantly called into question, manipulated, and adapted as new technologies emerge.

The two novels I analyzed in this paper voice the fears and hopes that circulate in the public discourse as well as in various domains of academic studies, and which the Covid-19 pandemic has been amplifying in unexpected ways. In *Un amour d'espion* and *Licorne*, the dialogical dimension of the novel as a genre and its permeability to other modes of representing reality prove crucial as a means to allow the authors to present different angles on (indeed, different attitudes toward) the effects that the pervasiveness of the digital may have in our lives. This is especially true not only for digital natives—that elusive demographic that may perhaps be best defined as those who "do not need to familiarize themselves with the technology by comparing it to something else" (Dingli & Seychell, 2015, p. 9)—but also for those who were born in the late 1980s to early 1990s, at a time when digital technologies would start to reshape our lives (see Eichhorn, 2019, p. 3), but prior to critical discourses broaching the topic of growing up with the digital.

In *Un amour d'espion* and *Licorne*, the online presence of Dragan and Maëla, joined with the hypermnesia of the digital, underlie their failure to develop into full-fledged adults, or at least have control over those past events that they wish to assimilate into their adult subjectivity, in turn undermining their public persona. Both novels depict their characters as they try to deal with the effects of disembodiment brought about by the digital, but each pursues a different path. Maëla seeks a return to the local as opposed to the "sense of global" that permeates the digital (Massey, 1994). She does so through a relationship with the urban or natural landscape so intense that it becomes central to her identity construction. Still, it is only by projecting her relationship with the local environment that she attempts to escape the ephemerality inherent in human existence. By contrast, Dragan's story as told by the unnamed narrator of *Un amour d'espion* questions the documentary value of images, especially those produced in the digital age. Roland Barthes famously theorized that a picture refers to both the absence of the object and the fact that said object had indeed formerly existed (1980). But in the digital world, the value of the picture as token of something (or someone) that had once existed is at constant risk of being altered by technology, either through falsification or recontextualization. Significantly, in both novels characters turn to images, especially digital ones. Eventually, what they search is a kind of ontological stability that always seems to escape them, and images related to places that were significant for their individual development—be they photographs or maps—are what help them counter their aching feeling of existential ephemerality.

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