Fiction that wakes up sleeping consciousnesses

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What sorts of games or instruments of power exist in our societies? To what extent do systems of various kinds control us or determine the actions we perform? Does such a system carry with it an inherent potential for abuse, and where might that lead us? Through reading fiction, we are sometimes led to imagine horrible futures, in an effort to avoid them - even if they happen to be imagined as something we can't avoid. From Foucault to Deleuze, passing by way of Burroughs, Orwell and Garfinkel, and in considering Bye Bye Belgium, Frédéric Claisse analyses the philosophy of control, and has something to say about the influence of catastrophic or dystopian (fictional) narratives on our way of apprehending the world. Such narratives create a particular mode of knowledge, they deploy capabilities for an analysis of the real, and thus they are to be taken seriously. The author characterises dystopian visions as “future anterior”.

Frédéric Claisse, a sociologist and political scientist in the Department of Political Science at the University of Liège, has just defended a doctoral dissertation concerning accounts of contemporary events and fictional narratives. Their connection is that both accounts exaggerate the events of the present in order to constitute a plausible dystopian future; these narratives induce the readers to call into question the very basis of their social and political environment. Their task is to present a horrible and menacing world in order to provoke action to change the conditions that might bring it about in reality. Dystopias can be seen as “detours into the future for the purpose of talking about the present.” In this research, a narrative becomes an object as much as an “analyser” of politics. It centres upon the question of power. The power of narrative, and power as a narrative.

Two aspects of the relationship between power and narrative

Following Yves Citton, Frédéric Claisse adopts a narrative approach to power, using the metaphor of narrative codes. These terms are used by Claisse in two ways. First the 'power of the narrative', which justifies the importance of fiction as a field of investigation. As a mode of knowledge, the narrative is an analyzing tool for political situations; the reader may be mobilised, his behaviour may be influenced. Claisse shows how this process functions for some kinds of narratives in the 'future anterior' mode (a verb tense in French, equivalent to the future perfect tense in English) - the events of tomorrow recounted as if they had already happened.

Secondly, 'power as a narrative': "if 'acting upon the possible actions of others' [to quote Foucault's definition of power], or influencing that person in favour of doing something he would not have done without that influence is sufficient to characterise a relation of power, it should also suffice, according to Citton, to characterise a narrative in the minimal sense," the researcher writes. "Controlling, setting up an intrigue, putting someone’s actions into a scenario, these are almost the same thing: it is all about getting that person to adopt a different narrative line, to construct a world for him or her and to get him or her to live in it." (1) It thus involves imagining for an individual the whole set of all possible trajectories for a life, and to subject him or her to it. This is power as a narrative, as putting someone into a scenario. But in order to get away from such total and immanent control it is possible to develop counter-narratives. The rest of this article presents what the future anterior and
simulacra are for Claisse, two kinds of counter-narratives that use fiction in order to offer us a new point of view on the world around us.

**Future anterior - tomorrow's events in a narrative past**

"Future anterior" is a characterisation of anticipative fiction which through **metalepsis** makes readers experience another narrative level, in 'another' narration than that of the world in which the reader lives. It can be defined as a dystopia, an "enlightened catastrophe" (the expression comes from French philosopher Jean-Pierre Dupuy) which visualises the worst in order to prevent it from happening, in order to forestall it. "These fictions act on two levels," the author explains. "They work as fiction, but also as simulation, as representations of the real world, even if we are talking about a world in the future." If these worlds are not presented together with a sort of minimum of realistic effects, the reader will not be able to relate them rationally to his own experiences. In order for the fiction to resonate with the reader, the reader must be able to immerse himself in them. "Immersion is what is frightening. The reader is afraid to dive so deeply into a story that he never returns to the surface. That is the force of fiction."

In order to facilitate the immersion, a number of conventions are established. In general, the narrative concerns events that are said to have already happened. There is no exit door for this fictional world, and its beginnings already exist in our current society. It is one of our futures, presented as already having happened, as already past. "Everything, paradoxically, is shown as if it is already too late," Claisse observes. "And that is when
awareness can grasp something, and clues to getting out of the predicament may appear.” The rhetoric of menace and alert are omnipresent.

In addition, all these narratives are at work making themselves obsolescent. They present a future scenario in the hopes it will be never actually take place. They are created in order not to come true, in order to be considered and avoided. They offer the reader a purchase on the world, an element of knowledge that allows them to observe it from a different angle, and to act. These narratives do not have all the canonical features supposed to belong to the novel of anticipation. Some create realistic effects for themselves that go as far as public pretense, by the means of channels of communication and information that are usually authoritative and dependable. An example known to many Belgians is the program *Bye Bye Belgium*, a phony documentary aired by the RTBF on December 13, 2006, which announced that Flanders had just voted to approve its own unilateral declaration of independence from Belgium.

"Bye Bye Belgium is a paradigmatic example of this 'future as past,'" says Claisse, marvelling. "And from an individual point of view, many Belgian citizens reacted strongly to the false documentary. I don't think it would have had such an effect if it had not been set up to pretend to be real." Through realistic effects, Belgian viewers were effectively inserted into a false narrative history. The effectiveness of the immersion was due to the simulation of reality. Arming itself with simulated reality, irony passes by way of pretense, in order to gain the support of the viewer, who realizes in retrospect what was expected of him.

![Image of Bye Bye Belgium program](https://reflexions.ulg.ac.be/)

**Uchronic precedent**

In his examples of the 'future anterior' Claisse sees a sort of contrast between George Orwell and Simson Garfinkel. In 1949, George Orwell published 1984. His famous piece of anticipative fiction featured a protagonist, Winston Smith, who tried to stand up to the totalitarian society in which he found himself, a centralised society, in which no one escaped the control of Big Brother. In 2000, Simson Garfinkel published *Database Nation*, in which he investigates all kinds of threats against personal privacy represented by new technologies. There is no more totalitarian, all-seeing power, but rather a whole group of intrusive, data-gathering corporations who qualify as "kid Brothers". Claisse shows how Garfinkel discards the importance of Orwell, who is treated as a mere anti-Communist. Whereas Orwell saw the State as absolute evil, today
governments in Garfinkel's view could be decisive parts of a solution to the excesses of private multinational corporations. Today, the form in which 'control' threatens us is more "discreet and pervasive". But still, each one of us is supposed to be participating each day in his or her own enslavement, subjecting himself or herself to 'control' by using new technologies.

By beginning in this way, Garfinkel indicates that the world of Orwell is no longer a major threat. Today, the direction from which harm may come involves a world controlled by the people behind the surveillance camera and, in general, by all those who manage our personal information. The discredit attached to Orwell's anticipation works as part of the process of legitimation for Garfinkel's work, still keeping to the rhetoric of menace. In Claisse's words, Garfinkel uses Orwell as a negative target, a preceding anticipation, uchronic in the sense that it could have happened but did not.

Frédéric Claisse correlates all this with the theoretical heritage of Michel Foucault, and also the novelist William Burroughs, assimilated and extended by certain writings of Gilles Deleuze. In his book Discipline and Punish, published in 1975, Michel Foucault discussed the emergence of "societies of discipline", which come after "societies of sovereignty." These began to develop in the 18th century, and reached their height in the 20th century. These "societies of discipline" were characterised by the institution of "places of confinement", that is, the family, the school, the military barracks, the factory, the hospital, the asylum, and the prison. These are institutions that are pervasive within society, normalise individuals, and tell them how to behave and what they must do. However, all these institutions undergo crises and reforms, and that has happened a number of times in recent decades.

Prophetic precedent

Deleuze comes after Foucault somewhat as Garfinkel after Orwell (although Foucault did give evidence of the changes Deleuze will focus on). Deleuze stands in greater historical continuity with Foucault, but observes that we are no longer living in a "society of discipline" but in a "society of control." Reforms have changed
the places of confinement, but according to Deleuze have only served to manage their death throes. "We have entered into societies of control, which no longer operate using confinement, by which utilise continuous control and instantaneous communication." (2) There is a strong analogy here between Orwell and Garfinkel, a common feeling of urgency: "It is happening now." We pass from a State that is powerful and centralised, which maintains institutions for confinement, to a situation where 'control' is distributed, spread out, continuous, instantaneous. Orwell and Foucault thus become foils, propping up the critiques of Garfinkel or Deleuze. And these two authors desire to activate the responsibility of the reader. "There is no need to fear or hope, but only to look for new weapons" (Deleuze, 1990) (3).

The contribution made by William Burroughs to the thought of Deleuze has to do precisely with the notion of control. The control is total and immanent. Initially, Burroughs did not openly analyse the mechanisms of society. He used the notion of control to advance work on his relation with his heroin addiction ('Junky'). But this dependence was seen by the most pessimistic and deterministic philosophers and sociologists as a total metaphor for capitalist society. Burroughs himself uses his addiction to engage in a determined reflection on the emergence of new information technologies and communication, making language the mode of Control par excellence for generations to come. Claisse characterises Burroughs as a prophetic precedent, a pioneer invoked in the reflections of Deleuze.

Control argument and false freedom

Another guiding idea of the thesis, therefore, is the notion of control. It is important to understand that this control is linked to an idea of freedom, or of the illusion of freedom, held by the person being controlled. It is not coercive, but "has a feel of the free outdoors to it". "Control is always more powerful when it is based on the freely given consent of a person," the researcher says. Control does not mean that one person pulls the strings, and everybody else is a puppet. It is more abstract than that. It has to do with every one of us, it is inside us, throughout us, and constant, in our acceptance of a system, a 'machine' of which we are the agents, the vectors toward other individuals. So, it is a form of voluntary servitude. The interiorisation of such constraints by means of control, with an illusion of freedom, rules and reduces the field of its actions to possibilities that have already been previewed or put into a scenario.
This 'control argument' thus leads to a very deterministic vision of the world. Everything that free individuals do according to their own desires is in reality nothing but the accomplishment of a desire that someone else, or the system, gave them. Desire becomes a fiction created by an entity which is not us. ‘Power as a narrative.’ Whatever individuals do, it has already been foreseen, and put into the context of a scenario by the society of control. Whatever individuals choose, a scenario is already there. The system is always several steps ahead of the individual parts. In describing capitalism in these terms, Boltanski and Chiapello wrote that “everything is always already ‘recuperated’ by the ‘system.’”(4) Even resistance and revolutions are foreseen and definitely serve the controlling system, which ‘recuperates’ them, that is, re-incorporates them into the system itself, and neutralises their ability to pose a threat. Freedom and autonomy are constitutive parts of this idea of control, but they are also illusory. Such a vision runs counter to conspiracy theories because the persons who ‘pull the strings’ also adopt a field of action that conforms to what the system expects from them. In some ways they are the persons over whom the most stringent control is exercised. Another important point is that this control, though it foresees resistance to itself, is total, and there is no way to get outside the control in order to escape it.

We can see easily enough, in the context of this control, how the analogy to an addiction to heroin could be worked out. The product does not have to appeal to the consumer in order to be consumed. The addict needs it, and so enters into a sort of acquiescence with his own instrument of control. Burroughs is “sensitive to all the processes that make us accomplices in our own enslavement,”(5) Claisse writes. Of course, drugs
are still a metaphor for society. By pushing his reflection beyond his addiction Burroughs, like Deleuze after him along with other philosophers having dealt with the question, all see in the emergence of technologies of communication and information ideal instruments of control. For the writer, language is the most effective form of control. "The word is a virus," he says. For Burroughs, "we have been poisoned by instructions that colonize our consciousness and use us as carriers to move from one body to another," Claisse explains. "It has become impossible to think without a word. Silence is impossible. Imagination itself is impossible without words." Although this vision of the world appears to be desperately deterministic, although our freedom is only a fiction about someone else, already written for us, Burroughs offers points of attachment, points at which exteriority may be grasped in an effort to pull oneself free from the control, to be able to face it standing up. For this to happen, one must use and re-purpose the instruments it uses in order to unplug the scenarios already prepared for us.

"In Burroughs's view, Control is thus inseparable from language (...). Control is 'biopolitics' in the strong sense of the term. A universal biological substrate whose project is to colonize the totality of the body politic by means of images and words. That which one holds to be reality consists in complex interweaving patterns of 'word lines'."(6) Burroughs imagines the world as pre-recorded, like a film on a spool or a reel of magnetic audio tape. "Control is a kind of pre-written script that continuously plays out in our consciousness." (7) One means of attaining exteriority once again, or subjectivation, is cutting up texts. Cut-up means cutting an existing text into pieces and then rearranging the pieces in a recomposition. For example, if I number the lines on a page and then change the order of the lines. Or I might split a text into four and lay out the blocks differently. Cutting the associations of words in order to generate new ones - leaving the world or, to extend the metaphor, the movie theatre, in order to enter the editing booth. For the writer, "the only thing that is not pre-recorded in a pre-recorded universe is the pre-recording itself." (8) In this way, by touching the script of reality, of control, one may exercise a metaleptic leap in narration, and write something else, turning the weapon of Control against itself, thus escaping the control of the scenarios prepared for us. Another means of escaping the immanence of the controlled world is via the simulacrum. "(Control through language is) a control of consciousness (...) through the interiorisation of injunctions which the subject will take to be his or her own desires, freely formulated. In such a universe ruled by a principle of voluntary servitude, the only possibility of getting free would come, according to Burroughs, from reappropriation, for diametrically opposed ends, of techniques of oppression and manipulation. By speaking the language of the target, by
reproducing its functioning, by turning its own weapons against it, we can reconquer a form of autonomy. (...) Mimetism and simulations play such a fundamental role here, in fictional constructs that are so original, that it has seemed appropriate to us to give them a particular name, that of simulacrum." (9) By analogy, Burroughs managed to get free from heroin by using a substitute, apomorphine, which was supposed to be chemically similar to heroin but without the effects. So he used a simulacrum, "an agent that resembles the agent that is doing harm in order to get out of its control," as Claisse explains. In a certain way, if cut up helps one get out of language in order to take it all back, hitting it with its own pre-recorded codes, managing to get outside the sphere of its control, this is already a form of the simulacrum (plural simulacra) in the sense of Burroughs. A "future past" of the Bye Bye Belgium type has points in common with the simulacrum. A simulacrum of codes of information and a simulacrum of a future we would like to ignore, but which is shown to us so we will be forced to take a position. This offers us a new degree of knowledge about the world by fighting the system with its own weapons.

The simulacrum and the ‘future anterior’ explore possibilities through fiction in order to offer a new set of reading categories to individuals, to shatter their cognitive inertia with regard to their place within society and its codes. That these considerations depict a fantasmatic vision of power, or an over-deterministic vision, is not the problem, at the end of the day. What is at stake in this fiction is creating another angle of vision, another level, another field of vision in order to dispel our relegation to servitude, to provide new ideas for stealing a march on the system once again. "Simulacra and future anterior intensify cognitive and pragmatic properties that are present in kernel form in every fictional arrangement. Both represent modalities of the capacity that fiction has to empower the reader and configure his or her representations , (the faculty of stimulating the action of awakening to consciousness and the reaction of a reader). That a great number of actors use such strategies in order to influence their political and social environment is nothing surprising in itself." (10)


(2) Ibid, p. 158.
(3) Ibid, p. 159.


(6) Ibid, p. 201.
(7) Ibid, p. 201.
(8) Ibid, p. 165.
(10) Ibid, p. 15.