**ÉMILE ZOLA AND MICHEL HOUELLEBECQ:**

**WRITING AT TIPPING POINTS IN CAPITALISM**

**BY**

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**ABSTRACT**

Émile Zola and Michel Houellebecq are writing at points of exponential capitalist change in France. The vernacular phrase ‘tipping point’, as described by Malcolm Gladwell,[[1]](#footnote-1) attempts to capture the idea of sudden change within society. However, the concept of the tipping point offered in this thesis is more complex and analogous to the working of capitalism and literature. This thesis proposes an original extra-textual metaphor reflecting how change is composed of plural, evolving phenomena, involving intersecting contributors, contingency and reversals. Like the literature it seeks to illuminate, this theory of the tipping point offers a purchase on the process of fiction as it attempts to represent change within the context of capitalism. This thesis pairs Zola and Houellebecq who are both writing at key points in capitalism’s evolution. The growth of capitalism has been linked to that of the novel and follows similar diverging, evolving trajectories to that outlined in the critical figure of the tipping point in this thesis. In attempting to represent such rapid, non-linear change, both authors exceed their extra-textual theories. Through close reading of their novels this will reveal to varying degrees the impossibility of predicting change or offering conclusions, characteristics also pertaining to capitalism. This is illustrated through a pairing of three selected works from each writer on capitalism’s relationship with sex, science and excess. The comparisons, when read through the lens of the tipping point, reveal how novels necessarily fail to represent the changes to which they attempt to bear witness. The concept of the tipping point reveals the multiple contributors to change in capitalism and the co-implication of fiction in the market, along with its potential agency in attempting to capture those changes.

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**ABBREVIATIONS OF WORKS CITED**

The three Michel Houellebecq novels studied are abbreviated as follows:

EDL Michel Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (Paris: Maurice Nadeau, 1997)

PE -----, *Les Particules élémentaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998)

CT -----, *La Carte et le territoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010)

Other abbreviated Houellebecq works:

I -----, *Interventions* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998)

I2 -----, *Interventions 2* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009)

The three Émile Zola novels studied are abbreviated along with the volume and page in Henri Mitterand, ed. *Les Rougon-Macquart* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1960-67) as follows:

(A, II, 375-796) Émile Zola, *L’Assommoir* (Paris: Chapentier, 1877).

(AB, III, 389-803) -----, *Au Bonheur des dames* (Paris: Chapentier, 1883).

(G, III, 1133-1591) -----, *Germinal* (Paris: Chapentier, 1885).

Other abbreviated Zola work:

RE -----, *Le Roman expérimental* (Paris: Charpentier, 1902).

The Malcolm Gladwell work studied is abbreviated as follows:

TP Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make A Big Difference* (London: Abacus, 2001)

# INTRODUCTION

Émile Zola and Michel Houellebecq are writing at times of rapid capitalist change. For Zola’s France, this is manifested in industrialization, mass migration from the provinces to the cities and the transformation of Paris. For Houellebecq, change is manifested in globalization and neoliberalism. The vernacular phrase ‘Tipping Point’,[[2]](#footnote-2) latterly popularised by Malcolm Gladwell, attempts to capture the idea of such rapidly developing phenomena. Gladwell attributes the causes of seemingly contagious change, to that of influential individuals rather than recognising the innumerable factors contributing to the event. By contrast, this thesis proposes a more productive, flexible notion of the tipping point which reflects the multiple intersecting, diverging components as well as the reversibility of change, while intersecting with postmodernist views as to the ability of fiction to deliver conclusions. The concept of change offered is more complex and nuanced than that of Gladwell and, in its representation of the lack of linearity in change, is argued to be analogous to - and able to illuminate - the ways in which capitalism and literature are always in process.

Gladwell’s definition of Tipping Point focuses firstly, on the potentially contagious nature of factors he sees as influencing change. Secondly, Gladwell relates how ‘little causes can have big effects[[3]](#footnote-3) and, thirdly, he emphasises the possible epidemic nature of an event. declaring:

Of the three, the third trait – the idea that epidemics can rise or fall in one dramatic moment - is the most important because it is the principle that makes sense of the first two […]. The name given to that one dramatic moment in an epidemic when everything can change all at one is the Tipping Point.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Gladwell’s Tipping Point therefore attempts to describe a process triggering sudden change. The examples with which he illustrates his work will be argued in Chapter One to lack the provisional, complex causality of change identified in this thesis. Gladwell’s theory focuses upon human agents acting as conscious or unconscious catalysts provoking change. His work concludes with a call to consider how future developments can be achieved in daily existence with the minimum of effort on the part of potential human agents.

In the vernacular, reference to Tipping Points are commonly made when reporting on economic or environmental issues where it is perceived that an action or inaction might create or provoke a momentum of rapid, definitive change. The phrase is often found in scientific articles on climate change, with typical titles being: ‘Tipping Points: Critical Thresholds for Climate Change’[[5]](#footnote-5) or ‘Many developed countries are getting close to a tipping point in their attitude to the environment’.[[6]](#footnote-6) There is an implied certainty of result in the latter examples which is absent from the theory of the tipping point in this thesis.

THE TIPPING POINT AS A CRITICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THINKING ABOUT LITERATURE AND CAPITALISM

The concept of the tipping point developed in this thesis differs significantly from the application of the phrase in the vernacular. It does so in recognising that change is composed of multiple, elusive contributors, contingencies and trajectories. As used here, the term tipping point refers, in common with literature, to a language which is always already *in process*, always evolving, reflecting multiple elements of change whilst also reflecting how those processes are not always linear. This understanding of the tipping point comprises multiple intersecting and diverging components, agents and contingent contributors to change (as well as the consequences flowing from it, not all of which can be recognised or understood). The term tipping point in this study embraces the ambivalent nature of change and how it may also, as in the sense of the ‘point de bascule’,[[7]](#footnote-7) not be inexorable and may indeed be reversible. Here, the concept involves multiple contributors and ingredients. The inherent slipperiness of the phrase will be seen in the possibility of tipping points being capable of tipping back as well as forward. Thus, what appears to be a phrase defining a definitive moment is, in the sense used in this thesis, an uncertain but productive combination of intersecting elements.

Furthermore, the theory of the tipping point in this thesis is distinct in that it reflects how change is represented in fiction, aiding an understanding of the potential and limits of literature. This thesis proposes the tipping point as an extra-textual metaphor, one which assists the apprehension of a writer’s representation of change. The metaphor may be applied to any fiction concerned with describing change, in allowing the reader a reference point from which to assess the degree to which the writer has attempted to predict an outcome, based upon a proposed sequence of events. The metaphor of the tipping point helps reveal the impossibility of fictional grand narratives and linear trajectories leading to definitive conclusions. The tipping point assists in the identification of the writer’s representation of change while reminding the reader that the writer will always fail to represent all the possible factors contributing to that change. The characteristics of the metaphor will be exemplified in this thesis in the processes of change within capitalism and in fictional representations of their impact upon aspects of life under that economic system.

The understanding of the tipping point in this thesis will be illustrated in the processes of capitalism represented in selected works of Émile Zola (1840-1902) and Michel Houellebecq (1956-). Both are writing at times of rapid change in capitalism. The growth of capitalism has been linked to that of the novel and both capitalism and the novel follow trajectories which the notion of the tipping point would suggest have no foreseeable destination. In attempting to make sense of such non-linear change, both Zola and Houellebecq exceed their extra-textual theories. Through close reading, their fiction is shown here to reveal, via varying degrees of self-reflexivity, the impossibility of predicting change or coming to clear conclusions, and of identifying these same elements in capitalism. This is illustrated through a pairing of three novels by each writer which are addressed in terms of their representation of sex, science and excess. Through pairing the novels, the texts are implicitly brought into dialogue with one another, affording a wider understanding of the nature of literature, of capitalism, and their relationship. Their pairing illustrates how each writer apprehends the process of change when set in the contexts of its impact upon the everyday lives of their characters, whether in their sexual relationships or their working environments. The sequential close reading of the novels evidences the application of each writer’s extra-textual theories to rapid change and the extent to which they are consequently undermined. The comparisons, when read with reference to this understanding of the tipping point, reveal how fiction necessarily fails to represent the process of change with its multiple contributors and potential for forward and backward movement which the novels may seek to reflect or to which they may attempt to bear witness.

The novel, a form which has developed in parallel with capitalism, an economic system in which and of which Zola and Houellebecq are writing in their attempts to represent the resulting society, remains a preoccupation of both. Reference to the productive complexity and flexibility of the tipping point metaphor will help locate the similarities between capitalism and fiction and the impossibility of fiction delivering grand narratives. Different aspects of the tipping point, its underscoring of the inevitable imprecision of representation in literature and the non-linearity in the process of change, will be revealed in selected novels by each writer. Through the figure of the tipping point in this thesis the various responses of Émile Zola and Michel Houellebecq to the dominant forms of capitalism in their societies are examined. Capitalism is revealed not to be a grand narrative promising an answer but an economic system in process. Like language, the tipping point is an imperfect tool, a conceptual theory which, in common with capitalism and fictional representations of reality, does not deliver clear and definitive conclusions.

Close readings of Zola’s *Germinal* (1885)[[8]](#footnote-8) *Au Bonheur des dames* (1883)[[9]](#footnote-9) and *L’Assommoir* (1877)[[10]](#footnote-10) and Houellebecq’s *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994)[[11]](#footnote-11) *Les Particules élémentaires* (1998)[[12]](#footnote-12) and *La Carte et le territoire* (2010)[[13]](#footnote-13) will illustrate the responses of each author to the conditions resulting from capitalism. This thesis will also show that neither author may fully represent their society at periods of exponential economic change. Instead the tipping point emerges as a microcosm of how fiction, a genre always failing, is nonetheless in constant creation. Thus, literature and the understanding of the tipping point in this thesis are necessarily provisional attempts at sense making.

Zola and Houellebecq are writing at key periods in the transformation of capitalism. During the Second Empire (1852-1870), capitalism in France is marked by industrialization and an accelerated migration from rural areas to the cities, especially Paris.[[14]](#footnote-14) The structural and financial reforms instigated under Napoleon III, including the generation of vast speculative investments, result in the transformation of Paris from a medieval city to one of boulevards and avenues, along with a revolution in the city’s sewerage system and the living conditions of many. Less obvious changes would operate to the detriment of the poor of Paris, such as the removal of the right to welfare support enjoyed by the destitute and the marginalisation of the working class to the outskirts of the city. Houellebecq is responding to the period during and after *Les Trente Glorieuses* of 1946 – 1975,[[15]](#footnote-15) that ushered in a neoliberal ideology characterized by global economics, supporting infrastructures of information technology, ease of travel, consumerism,[[16]](#footnote-16) material benefits and social change.[[17]](#footnote-17) For Zola and Houellebecq, the rapid social and economic evolutions of their respective eras are of intense interest. For the first time, the two writers will be shown, through the optic of the tipping point, to intersect in questions of determinism and free-will[[18]](#footnote-18).

The fictions of Zola and Houellebecq coincide with ‘capitalism’, ‘neoliberalism’ and ‘late capitalism’. Capitalism is defined as ‘an economic and political system in which a country's trade and industry are controlled by private owners for profit, rather than by the state.’ Late capitalism is defined as: ‘the latest or current stage in the development of capitalism, especially capitalism since the end of the Second World War. It is seen as characterized by the dominance of multinational corporations, globalization, consumerism, and as having permeated all areas of social and cultural life’.[[19]](#footnote-19) Neoliberalism is described as ‘A modified form of liberalism tending to favour free-market capitalism’.[[20]](#footnote-20) The definitions of each of these economic systems will be developed below.[[21]](#footnote-21)

This study will explore the differing responses of the two authors to contemporary capitalism by pairing three texts from each, with a chapter dedicated to each novel. All the texts represent case studies demonstrating the writer’s attempts at representing change brought about by capitalism. The degree to which the writers consciously and unconsciously undermine overarching narratives which offer to describe or explain change, will also be addressed. The novels are read to reveal aspects of the impact of capitalism in its infiltration of every-day existence, its interaction with scientific development and the excesses identified by each author, whether manifested in children pushing coal wagons deep underground or the commodification of sexual relations. The analyses also reveal the degree to which each writer may be seen to be appropriated by a capitalist market and the extent, if at all, to which each responds to the possibility of what this means for their fiction. The close readings demonstrate evolutionary principles are at work in capitalism, full of contradictions but responding to multiple contributors and ingredients.

Following an exploration of the concept and potential of the tipping point in Chapter One, the paired second and third chapters will examine each writer’s representation of capitalism’s impact on working, loving and writing through the perspective of Zola’s *Germinal* (1885) and Houellebecq’s *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994). Both titles appear to refer to Marxist revolution, however, few critics of *Germinal* have chosen to consider itvia the optics of the totalizing narratives of Marxism and Darwinism, nonetheless prominent in the novel.

Chapter Two exposes the extent to which Zola undermines the grand narratives of Marxism and Darwinism in *Germinal*. The nineteenth-century French theory of a trajectory of evolution towards perfection, one attempting to reconcile evolution theory and Christianity and adopted by the French establishment and arguably by Zola, is revealed to be incapable of responding to both the complexity of the mining community and its economy. In *Germinal*, Darwinism is not an evolution towards perfection for the human species, but one which is just as likely to result in reversal and extinction. The analysis shows that the factors influencing that evolution cannot be contained in a fictional work. Marxist revolution in *Germinal*, in common with any narrative promising conclusion, inevitably fails, the tipping point suggesting the theory to be unable to encompass the unforeseeable tensions and eventual fractures involved in capitalism.

The chapter on *Extension* addresses Houellebecq’s questioning of the ability of the writer to convey a theory or narrative resolution in late capitalism. The anonymous protagonist is at once involved in and marginal to the late capitalist economies (material and sexual). Houellebecq offers no solutions to the impact of late capitalism, but there is an implicit questioning of the role of fiction. The chapter will explore the presentation of theories, particularly that expounded by the narrator of *Extension* and that laid out by Houellebecq in an essay in the roughly contemporary *Interventions*.[[22]](#footnote-22) These describe a new, Darwinian, struggle in late capitalism in addition to that for economic and material success: the individual’s striving to succeed in a parallel sexual market. While a similar theory is provided by the narrator of *Extension,* neither the novel nor *Interventions* envisages any possibility of effectively countering this change. The theoretical rationale and connotations of the word ‘lutte’ of the title will be addressed.

The reading of *Extension* through the lens of the tipping point - a process of composite, contingent change and possible reversal - assists comprehension of how Houellebecq at once raises the question of and undermines the notion that the processes of late capitalism might be challenged. The narrator of *Extension* declares that: ‘nous vivons des moments sans précédent’ (EDL, 148). In response to such change, Houellebecq’s narrative reveals both capitalism’s complexity and ongoing adaptation, the representation of which extends to other literary forms and tropes of definitive change such as love stories and fables. Houellebecq questions the part fiction may play in the struggle, revealing the contingencies inherent in language, as well as the discourses of late capitalism which promise change but deliver a continuum of renewed and unfulfilled desire. *Extension*’s ambiguitystages the writer’s and reader’s statuses as creators and consumers of fiction in a capitalist system from which there is no escape.

The second pairing, in chapters four and five, focuses on writing science in the mode of failure in *Au Bonheur des dames* and *Les Particules élémentaires*. These chapters address the epistemological basis of science. Zola’s theory of naturalism, employing scientific method in fiction, will be seen to fail as a grand narrative, one promising an objective representation of reality and the process of change. *Au Bonheur* proposes Zola’s own response to changes in the material and sexual economies of late-nineteenth-century capitalism.

Science is also closely linked to capitalism in its capacity as a motor of innovation, speculation and productivity. The idea of ‘consumer science’ developed in this thesis refers to the manipulation of consumer behaviour and its intersection - at the time of Zola’s writing – with psychology, physiology and sociology. It is proposed in this thesis that these fields coalesce as consumer science on the basis of their inductive scientific method, the repeatability of their experiments and mathematical demonstrability. These elements are discussed in Chapter Four in relation to the application of the pure sciences and Zola’s theory of naturalism in *Au Bonheur*.

This notion of consumer science in operation is identified via Zola’s representation of Mouret’s methods, for example, in marketing, sales and a physiological approach to the positioning of goods and store design in *Au Bonheur*. However, consistent with the processes of change reflected in the tipping point, the origins of consumer science are not unrelated to retail practices traceable to the opening decades of the nineteenth century. *Au Bonheur* represents the first wide-ranging exposition of applied consumer science, based upon Zola’s research of contemporary retail practices and his own experience whilst head of publicity at Hachette.

In *Au Bonheur* the department store serves not only as a symbol of a burgeoning, organized capitalism but also as a laboratory in which to study the effects of those changes, and the processes and contingencies involved in them. For Zola, the department store is a place where the writer can ostensibly observe women seeking solace in the material, their frantic purchases the symbol of sexual and capitalist appetite. In this thesis, Zola’s ‘scientific’ examination is argued to create and then undermine the department store as represented in *Au Bonheur*. The undermining occurs through the intervention of love, worker’s rights, Zola’s own manipulation of his research into contemporary retail practice and by his own possible allusion to the impossibility of containing his experiment within the confines of the novel.

Zola’s naturalism is intended as a means of reproducing reality in his narratives, of creating a conclusive result to his experiment. In *Au Bonheur* this takes the form of the application of economics and psychology by Mouret to produce a million-franc turnover department store in Paris, fuelled by an incipient consumer science.[[23]](#footnote-23) Such a deterministic narrative is challenged when read through the lens of the tipping point which reveals how the components of contingency, divergence and reversal are all present in *Au Bonheur*. Here, it is proposed, the plot rather than any scientific conclusion takes precedence, with Zola sacrificing his naturalist ideals to delivering a narrative that will satisfy his reader. However, anticipating postmodern views as to the ability of fiction to represent conclusions, Zola may recognise the limitations of fiction when he states with reference to the genre of the novel: ‘Il s’arrêtera quand j’aurai fini. Mais il pourrait continuer encore’.[[24]](#footnote-24)

Unlike the scientific approach adopted by Zola, for Houellebecq it is the multiple processes of neoliberalism that are represented as a dangerous experiment, expressed in tropes of science fiction[[25]](#footnote-25) and ostensibly eugenic conclusions. Houellebecq uses such devices to describe a scientific development in a neoliberal world, in which the potential of science has been perverted and imposed upon a human race intellectually incapable of resistance.[[26]](#footnote-26) In applying such an outcome, *Les Particules* will be argued to undermine Houellebecq’s foregrounding of the various sciences reflected in the title’s scientific reference, one that may raise expectations of a high degree of determinism in his novel. Houellebecq, like Zola, affects an objective perspective and appears to reject totalizing theories, whether of neoliberalism or those who oppose it whilst attracting accusations of applying grand narratives of his own. Whilst Houellebecq draws upon contemporary genetics in *Les Particules*[[27]](#footnote-27) to create one such theory – that of the cloned race - the soft sciences such as psychotherapy, psychology, as well as ‘New Age’pseudo sciences are derided and identified as facets of neoliberalism.

This performance of scorn for totalizing theories, yet paradoxical recourse to them may serve to undermine, possibly self-reflexively, Houellebecq’s own theory in *Extension* on the parallel material and sexual economies. The scientific resolution of the myriad factors contributing to the ills of humanity in *Les Particules* also invites question inthe unconvincing sandwiching of the novel in a science fiction themed prologue and epilogue. This failure in *Les Particules* underscores Zola’s unwitting admission in *Au Bonheur* of the futility of attempting scientifically demonstrated change in fiction when the ingredients of change are beyond the apprehension of the writer.

The final pairing, in chapters six and seven, of *L’Assommoir* and *La Carte et le territoire* focus upon the excesses of capitalism with the implication that excess is an agent precipitating unforeseen change and the possibility of a clear turning point. However, excesses are shown to be re-appropriated by capitalism’s ability to re-form, frustrating all attempts to predict its demise on the part of its critics. The representation of capitalist excess[[28]](#footnote-28) at the onset of Haussmann’s Paris in *L’Assommoir* reveals, as in *Germinal*,no overt political polemic but an attempt at scientific observation in a typically delimited physical space. Excess is represented in the overwhelming poverty and prevalence of alcohol in the Goutte d’Or, a district and population seemingly abandoned to rot by Napoleon III’s regime and its investors. The Macquart family’s hereditary psychological weakness or ‘tare héréditaire’is suggested ascontributing to Gervaise’s apparently pre-determined fate,[[29]](#footnote-29) yet Zola will be argued to unconsciously undermine this theory in presenting her fate as brought through circumstance, isolation and a society founded upon a struggle for survival or riches, in a quickly transforming Paris of capitalist opportunity.[[30]](#footnote-30) In the aspects of the tipping point at play in the fate of Gervaise, in the contingencies and reversals that will overwhelm her, Zola’s writing will once more be shown to reveal (if unknowingly) the fallibility of fiction attempting to describe definitive change via scientific or other theories.

*La Carte et le territoire* represents Houellebecq’s perception of the impact of late capitalism upon contemporary France. In the final chapters, he depicts neoliberal global economic change projected as a mid-twenty-first century future. For the artist and protagonist Jed, the excess which is a feature of this ideology is manifested not only in the prices his works fetch on the art market but also in the degree to which neoliberalism has colonised all aspects of life, and death, in the Global North. Alienation, excess in consumption and the exploitation inherent in globalisation are constants throughout the novel. Elements of the tipping point in the intervention of unforeseeable components are recognizably in play and prompt the reader to question any attempt at representing change, and it is argued that Houellebecq implicitly suggests that the reader extends that questioning beyond fiction, to all totalizing narratives, including late capitalism.

In *La Carte*,Houellebecq demonstrates the impossibility of the protagonist’s lifelong attempt to represent the world in his work. For the principal characters, life within a late capitalist society of excess results in their attempting their own forms of escaping the all-pervasive publicity and marketing described in *Interventions*. The chapter argues that fiction and art are not necessarily agents of change in their depiction of neoliberal excess for, as in previous Houellebecq novels, neoliberalism is seen to appropriate the writer who seeks to represent it. Just as Jed’s map artworks cannot capture a landscape which is in constant change, so fiction necessarily fails to anticipate the infinite detail contributing to the society the writer seeks to depict.

Zola and Houellebecq are both writers for whom the role of fiction in describing rapid change within their respective societies is a principal concern, and one of the major agents of change is capitalism in its various manifestations. Through the lens of the tipping point, each writer will be shown to recognise, with varying degrees of consciousness, the limitations of fiction in capturing the haphazard nature of change and its infinite components. Through pairings of texts, each responding to a similar aspect of capitalism, the similarities between the processes of fiction and capitalism will be elucidated.

# CHAPTER ONE TIPPING POINTS: POTENTIAL FOR LITERARY CRITICISM

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the etymology of the phrase ‘tipping point’, the contemporary interest in it and the study of the term by writer and journalist Malcolm Gladwell in 2000. The critical potential of the concept as understood and deployed in this study will be further revealed in its productive complexity. The tipping point in this thesis intersects with and complements certain postmodern theories, resonating, for the purposes of this thesis, with the exponential rate of change in capitalism and Fredric Jameson’s discussion of late capitalism as the ‘logic’ underlying postmodernism.[[31]](#footnote-31)Postmodern thought undermines grand narratives, binary oppositions, causation, and instead explores the provisional, the composite, the uncertain and the ongoing. However, the tipping point is the first conceptual theory to propose a purchase on the composition of change and its representation in fiction, the complexity of the tipping point being analogous to that of the workings of capitalism and literature.While modernism challenges the ability of fiction to make sense or deliver a message, modernists believed literature to be capable of representing the chaos of the world. Postmodern writers recognise that to be impossible, and indeed, exploit and explore that impossibility. As elucidated here, the theory of the tipping point provides a way of exploring and mobilizing some of the ideas bound up with postmodernism as they relate to the phenomenon of change and the inevitable failure of fiction to capture the contingency and consequences of change*.* There is a close link between the notion of the tipping point and the way literature and language operate in that there can never be a precise moment of change in language or literature because (from a poststructuralist point of view at least) all signifiers are part of an arbitrary chain, part of an infinite textual weave. Isolating a single moment, a single transcendental meaning, is therefore impossible.

This thesis identifies the multiple interpretive possibilities of the tipping point in comparing Zola and Houellebecq, each writer having an ostensibly critical interest in times of exponential change and in what may be argued to be capitalism’s ‘Tipping Points’.[[32]](#footnote-32) In the phrase ‘Writing *at* Tipping Points in Capitalism’ may be identified not only the possible agency of literature but also the impossibility of encapsulating definitive change. Houellebecq portrays events supposedly constituting such change, which may be labelled ‘Tipping Points’ in the vernacular but which do not bear scrutiny. The unimpressive post human clones of *Les Particules* or the Elohimite cult which is unable to deliver on its promise of eternal lifein *La Possibilité d’une île*, are examples.[[33]](#footnote-33) In doing so, he consciously undermines his own attempt to describe change. In the latter novel, Houellebecq also describes the apocalypse which was supposedly to condemn *Homo sapiens* to extinction, but which has not done so. Both writers seek to capture in their writing major processes of change and fundamental shifts, while recognising to a greater or lesser extent the elusiveness and complexity of the task.[[34]](#footnote-34)

This complexity results in both Zola and Houellebecq undermining their own attempts at representation. In and through their novels, determinism, like the totalizing narrative, will succumb to the contingencies incorporated into fiction and fail to deliver an unambiguous message or outcome. Economic and social change, like literature, is not linear. It does not follow a simple uninterrupted trajectory and has no definable beginning and ending, with writers no better qualified to provide a definitive account of contemporary reality than is an economist of the economy. This thesis will show that the phrase Tipping Point’, although commonly used and whose meaning the user may believe they know to designate a certain moment with certitude is, within a literary context, much more elusive in its definition. The evolution and potential of this phrase has recently attracted significant academic funding from the Leverhulme foundation.[[35]](#footnote-35) However, the scope of work of that programme does not duplicate this thesis in its consideration of how the tipping point may help understand the process of literature and capitalism.

Capitalism ushered in a transition in France from a nation of peasant farmers to one of rapid industrialisation, with the organization of labour challenging material inequalities, science disputing religion’s ontological domination, the eventual uncontested establishment of the Republic, the birth of retail and consumerism, the Haussmannization of Paris and its marginalization of the working class of that city. Colonialism maintained its momentum, whilst women made their mark in the Commune and found employment in the new department stores and factories, or as servants in the homes of a growing middle-class.[[36]](#footnote-36)

For Houellebecq, late capitalism is the phenomenon creating the dual sexual and material economies, undermining the old perceived solidarities founded upon religion, communism and republicanism. The service sector has burgeoned to be the industry sustaining the consumer society. Two areas which are the preserve of Houellebecq and his era are global terrorism and climate catastrophe, addressed in two works by Houellebecq.[[37]](#footnote-37) A third area of rapid change originates in the early nineteenth-century optimism for the potential of science. In Houellebecq’s lifetime this optimism had morphed into largely unchallenged scientific development, closely associated with neoliberalism.

## WEIGHING UP THE TIPPING POINT: SLIPPERY ETYMOLOGY

Before progressing to consider how what seems to be a simple idea is, in common with language and literature, complex, nebulous and plural, it may be useful to consider how this ambiguity is locatable in its association with the tipping of the scales of fate or judgement. This concept is traceable to Greco-Egyptian mythology and further developed in medieval Christianity. The tipping of the scales referred to in myth evokes a physical reality, but the term itself proves to be much less definitive and hence offers far more interpretive potential. The mythological origins of the phrase relate to Psychostasy, the weighing of souls by the Greek Gods during combat in which the combatant with the lighter soul was slain.[[38]](#footnote-38) Such divine determinism extended from the *Iliad* to Christian theology by which point the process had been modified to condemn those whose sins weighed sufficiently heavy to cast them to Hell. The action of ‘tipping’ has therefore been seen from earliest times to be a definitive moment; an association it has carried through to the vernacular of today. The negative associations of Tipping Points help distinguish it from the phrase ‘turning point’.[[39]](#footnote-39) The first twentieth-century use of a similar term has been located in 1958, when ‘tip-point’ was coined by Morton M. Grodzins to describe the point at which the ingress of non-white Americans into a neighbourhood would suddenly trigger an exodus of white-American residents: ‘White residents who will tolerate a few Negroes as neighbours […] begin to move out when the proportion of Negroes in the neighbourhood or apartment building passes a certain critical point. This ‘tip point’ varies from city to city and from neighbourhood to neighbourhood’.[[40]](#footnote-40) The ‘tip point’ was the result of retrospective percentage measurements enabling the theoretical point of change to be located.[[41]](#footnote-41) A precision that, as this thesis will show, the notion of the ‘tipping point’, does not offer. In 1969, Thomas Schelling built upon Grodzin’s theory, applying it to the same subject of white flight and produced a general theory of ‘tipping points’, showing that cycles once commenced take on a self-sustaining momentum.[[42]](#footnote-42)

As revealed below, dictionary definitions of the phrase ‘Tipping Point’ proliferate, reflecting the multivalent nature of the term.[[43]](#footnote-43) There have even been attempts to locate a Tipping Point’ for the rate of usage of the phrase Tipping Point’.[[44]](#footnote-44) The phrase ‘turning point’ carries none of the apocalyptic connotations of a Tipping Point’, such as: ‘A point at which a decisive change of any kind takes place; a critical point, crisis’.[[45]](#footnote-45) The online *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a ‘Tipping Point’ as: ‘the prevalence of a social phenomenon sufficient to set in motion a process of rapid change; the moment when such a change begins to occur’.[[46]](#footnote-46) It is noteworthy that the definition is both limited to social phenomena and offers no possibility of counter-tipping in the way that its earlier incarnations do, where the weighing of souls might tip as easily against as in favour of a person. The following wider definition makes evident the struggle of language to capture the new and elusive concept of the tipping point: ‘The point at which a series of small changes or incidents becomes serious enough to cause a large, more important, change’.[[47]](#footnote-47) This introduces more subjectivity as to how ‘small’ ‘large’ and ‘important’ are defined while the definition still omits the possibility of a reverse movement.

However, a French equivalent phrase ‘point de bascule’, deriving from the Middle French noun ‘bascule’ and describing a seesaw,[[48]](#footnote-48) does carry the implication that a tipping point is not final, inferring the future possibility of reversal. This may be argued in the definition given to ‘Basculer’in *Le Grand Robert de La Langue Française*: ‘Passer brusquement (dans une situation nouvelle, à une autre position): ‘L’électorat rural a basculé dans l’opposition’.[[49]](#footnote-49) This definition, leaving open the possibility of further movement, together with the uncertainty surrounding the definition, further suggests the interpretive potential of the term. Indeed, for ‘Basculer’ *Le Petit Robert* offers: ‘(mil.XXe) FIG. Passer brusquement d’un état à un autre de façon irréversible. Basculer dans l’opposition. Si ces industries recevaient des moyens financiers, l’économie basculerait dans la voie de progrès.’

Here then, in this twentieth century usage is noted: ‘de façon irréversible’, ruling out further movement. Yet ‘Passer brusquement’ implies a rapidity which once again invites an attempt to isolate a single key event that precipitates the movement. Not only is the determining factor implicitly a single event but more significantly, the movement involved is not necessarily forward but may also be a tipping backwards, or at any other angle.

However, rapid changes in society or in the economy rarely present such recognisable single contributors. Whilst discussion of the phenomenon of the tipping point is predominantly centred in Anglo-American culture, the phrase has reached France where, in a *Le Monde* blog of August 2011, one can read an article entitled ‘Tendances et points d’inflexion (tipping points)’ which commences: ‘Ma façon à moi de céder […] au rite annueldes prédictions c’est d’essayer de répérer les points d’inflexion (ou de bascule)’.[[50]](#footnote-50) The very fact that in a few lines the blogger uses three phrases denoting change: ‘tendances’, ‘points d’inflexion’ and ‘points de ‘bascule’, in an attempt to define change demonstrates that ‘tipping point’ has been adopted to an extent, in this instance in the context of an IT article, a well-trodden path for English words to enter into French usage, either directly translated into French such as ‘une souris’ for a mouse but also untranslated such as ‘un Web’, ‘un Blog’, ‘un Wifi’, ‘un Modem’.[[51]](#footnote-51)

‘Points d’inflexion’ is a mathematical term describing the ‘point où la courbe traverse sa tangent, c’est à dire où la concavité change de direction’.[[52]](#footnote-52) There is nothing irreversible here save that, once again, interpretations open up and the phrase ‘tipping point’ further multiplies – in French, with ‘bascule’ and ‘inflexion’. This rapid development in language is therefore creating terms and interpretations of phrases such as ‘point de bascule’ and ‘points d’inflexion’, allowing their application to a broader range of change scenarios. There is a mirroring here of the development of language, of a phrase, of a struggle to capture meaning and that of literature to represent change.

In the Leverhulme Programme on Tipping Points,[[53]](#footnote-53) the phrase ‘tipping point’ is studied within several disciplines. The first discipline is physics: where the example is the position of a physical object, such as the [angle of repose](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angle_of_repose), governing for instance, the maximum angle of a stable slope of granular materials. It is also used in sociological contexts relating to a previously uncommon phenomenon becoming rapidly and dramatically more common. Applications describing climate change Tipping Points, such as the consequences of living beyond stable-state boundaries and thus threatening planetary habitability; have passed into the modern global consciousness. The robustness of data maintaining the issue in the public consciousness is consequently critical, as was revealed in ‘Climategate’[[54]](#footnote-54) and which also invites the question of who decides what the Tipping Point event is and when it is reached. The media response surrounding this event and the relative lack of interest shown in the vindication of the climatologists illustrate the potential for events being manufactured to support vested commercial interests or environmental lobbies and reported in the expectation that they may well tip an argument. Such diverging and intersecting uses of the concept of change represented in the tipping point further demonstrate the argument of this thesis: that the interpretive potential and plurality of the term and the multiple ways in which it is appropriated by different kinds of discourses[[55]](#footnote-55) present the reader with a critical framework for analyzing fiction. Furthermore, the ways in which fiction may share aspects of the notion of the ‘tipping point’ reveal itself to be a device particularly suited to the expression and the assessment (such as it is possible) of change.

## GLADWELL’S BEST-SELLER – JUST A GOOD READ?

The term Tipping Point received considerable publicity in Gladwell’s best seller .Its publication was preceded by an article by Gladwell, also entitled ‘Tipping Points’, in the arts and culture magazine *The New Yorker* in 1996.[[56]](#footnote-56) This article likened the spread of an idea to an epidemic, addressing the apparently counter-intuitive proposition that the amount of effort expended on cutting an epidemic from, for example, a hundred thousand cases to fifty thousand may not necessarily produce a definitive change in the fight against the disease:

Improvement does not correspond directly to effort. All that matters is the tipping point, and because fifty thousand is still above that point, all these heroics will come to naught. The epidemic would still rise. This is the fundamental lesson of nonlinearity. When it comes to fighting epidemics, small changes-like bringing new infections down to thirty thousand from forty thousand-can have huge effects. And large changes like reducing new infections to fifty thousand from a hundred thousand can have small effects. It all depends on when and how the changes are made. The reason this seems surprising is that human beings prefer to think in linear terms.[[57]](#footnote-57)

Gladwell identifies the three common theoretical ingredients which he argues contribute to what he perceives as the constituents of a Tipping Point: the ‘Law of the Few’, the ‘Stickiness Factor’ and the ‘Power of Context’. Gladwell therefore recognises, to a certain extent, that the Tipping Point has a composite and complex nature, involving a number of different factors, agents and processes. In these labels operate several human agents who Gladwell perceives may cause a situation to tip. The Law of the Few refers to the potential power wielded by a few people. So-called ‘Mavens’ are those who store and pass on knowledge, ‘who control word-of-mouth epidemics’.[[58]](#footnote-58) ‘Connectors’ are those rare people who have a network of contacts allied to a ‘natural ability’ to influence.[[59]](#footnote-59) ‘Salesmen’ are those compelled to convince others of a product or idea, even when not to their own material gain.[[60]](#footnote-60) ‘The Stickiness Factor’ is that which helps maintain the idea in the minds of the receiver.[[61]](#footnote-61)

Locating a proposed point of definitive change retrospectively gives way to speculation and unsubstantiated claims as to the precise moment and reason it occurred. This is the case even in the most banal examples such as the exponential rise in sales of Hush Puppies shoes.[[62]](#footnote-62) The Hush Puppies ‘Tipping Point’ is described in Gladwell as: ‘those kids simply wore the shoes when they went to clubs or cafes or walked the streets of downtown New York, and in so doing exposed other people to their fashion sense. They infected them with their Hush Puppies “virus”’.[[63]](#footnote-63) Yet, such an account is lacking a great deal of information such as the reason why the original wearers were attracted to the shoe, the significance of the timing, the social categories involved, the impact of price and availability. However, should the missing information be provided it would almost certainly give rise to other questions and increasingly complex contributors. This example reveals the limitations of Gladwell’s Tipping Point and the multiplicity of contributors contributing to change. As shown in the Hush Puppy case, these ingredients and contributors to change are plural, interlinking, elusive and inseparable.

Gladwell’s Mavens and Salesmen are, by virtue perhaps of their commercial talents, drawn from socially powerful strata and intrinsically linked to capitalism. In some contexts there is therefore a question of power relations bound up with the notion of the Tipping Point in Gladwell that is not replicated in the concept developed in this thesis. Finally, the most abstract of the three categories, the ‘Power of Context’, relates to the receptiveness of the public, the degree to which they are willing to consider a message, when governed by their environment. Gladwell illustrated this with the murder of Kitty Genovese in 1964 (TP, 27-8). Despite the large number of witnesses, none came forward. The numbers involved were considered to have caused a diffusion of personal responsibility. From this it may be concluded that what may appear to be an event of magnitude does not necessarily set in motion the consequences that are expected. Other, unforeseen contingencies operate to disrupt an assumed linearity of change.

Given the ambivalence and multiple interpretive potential already identified, it is not surprising that Gladwell’s findings have been challenged. Levitt and Dubner,[[64]](#footnote-64) argue that Gladwell has drawn fallacious conclusions regarding the efficacy of zero tolerance policing. For example, they argue that the fall in crime rate Gladwell attributes to zero tolerance in New York City was mirrored in other cities which did not pursue the same policies. Gladwell’s zero tolerance argument, is further indirectly undermined by research conducted by Donohue and Levitt.[[65]](#footnote-65) They argue that legalized abortion has contributed to at least a fifty per-cent reduction in crime rates. Their statistical evidence is compelling, indicating that those states which had legalized abortion earlier than others saw their crime rates fall earlier. But all falls in crime rates commenced around eighteen years after the legalization occurred, due to the absence of the ‘cohort’ of those most likely to be at the peak of their criminal activity at 18-20 years old. Reductions in crime were proportionate in high and low abortion states. Whilst their research was in turn exposed,[[66]](#footnote-66) Levitt and Donohue maintained their conclusion still held. However, until the creation of the Leverhulme Programme there has been little evidence of scholarly discussion of or interest in Gladwell’s work on tipping points.[[67]](#footnote-67)

The best-seller status of *The Tipping Point* and that of Gladwell as a journalist purveying a supposedly scientific theory also attracted dismissive newspaper articles but few of substance. One exception is the review of Gladwell’s *Tipping Point* in an article by Debra Jones Ringold in 2006.[[68]](#footnote-68) In addition to considering the work superficial and incomplete, Ringold questions Gladwell’s theory and argues that whilst an idea can be learned and remembered, he neglects to stress the value of the information without which the information of itself is not sufficient for its diffusion and positive impact. She also challenges Gladwell’s assertion that ‘By simply tinkering with the information, we can significantly improve its stickiness’ (TP, 259). Ringold further argues Gladwell’s book to be a follow up to Everett Rogers’ ‘Diffusion of Innovations’.[[69]](#footnote-69) She argues that in his concern with ‘packaging’, Gladwell omits to include Rogers’ postructuralist emphasis upon ‘advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability and absorbability’ which affect diffusion. Whilst Ringold’s ability to examine the theory of Gladwell’s book is severely constrained within a book review, it does reveal the differing views of Tipping Points. Of great relevance to this thesis, her critique reveals the key issue that whilst Gladwell has attempted an analysis of what creates a Tipping Point, he has omitted those nuances that contribute to change that Rogers noted in his study. This thesis therefore returns to the potential of fiction to better fill that gap and, in its performance, demonstrate the impossibility of doing so.

Gladwell takes the point at which a series of small changes or incidents becomes serious enough to cause a large, more important change. This approach gives little indication of the possibility of events tipping back in the opposite direction or, more likely, taking an unforeseen direction. Yet, as this thesis has noted, the phrase ‘point de bascule’ does suggest such a possibility as well as that of forward movement. Gladwell does recognise that whilst the occurrence of a Tipping Point cannot be undone, the results can eventually be reversed. Gladwell illustrates this possibility with the case of the Nike Airwalk trainers product losing its niche market appeal through over-popularity (TP, 213-14). Such results appear to be treated by Gladwell as distinct from the Tipping Point and not, as argued in this thesis, part of the nature of change in which reversals are a contributing, non-linear factor.

The ‘stickiness’ of the Tipping Point refers to the propensity of a factor to infect others and accelerate the speed of change. This may be applied to the sticking point phrase itself and is illustrated in how the chain of popular uprisings in 2011-12, labelled ‘The Arab Spring’, were viewed. What had been portrayed in the media as a chain of North African countries overthrowing their dictators and the spread of democracy has proved, ultimately, not to be quite so definitive. The unambiguous domino series of events often depicted, has been contradicted by factionalism, immovable power bases and counter-revolutionary pressures, all challenging a simplistic reading of cause and effect. Similarly, the financial crash of 2008, the commencement of which was arbitrarily marked by the collapse of Lehman Brothers, has been considered the worst since 1929. However, to date, whilst economically catastrophic for several Eurozone states, other countries have seen huge economic prosperity and this crisis has therefore not yet proved decisive for capitalism. The social and political ramifications of what are perceived as moments of irreversible change can be huge but may equally go almost unseen. Such events illustrate the need to understand the term and its multivalent nature. The phrase has become increasingly popular in a globalized media in which the market seeks digestible political and economic logic, and through which media the phrase has taken on its own apparent meaning, hiding its slipperiness and plurality. While the value of Gladwell’s work lies in its exploration of the interlinking ingredients, contributors to and characteristics of rapid change resulting in clear, if temporary, conclusions, this thesis is proposing to examine how times of exponential change are represented in fiction. This will be illustrated through writers whose work engages with the ambivalence and plurality of times of change.

The final sentences of *The Tipping Point* are revelatory in that Gladwell reverts to first and second person imperatives. After acknowledging that ‘change is so volatile and so often inexplicable’, he adds:

But if there is difficulty and volatility in the world of the Tipping Point, there is a large measure of hopefulness as well. Merely by manipulating the size of the group, we can dramatically improve its receptivity to new ideas, by tinkering with the presentation of information, we can significantly improve its stickiness […] In the end, Tipping Points are a reaffirmation of the potential for change and the power of intelligent action. Look at the world around you. It may seem like an immovable, implacable place. It is not. With the slightest push – in just the right place – it can be tipped (TP, 49).

Gladwell is not specifically referring to literature here. He is instead seeking to convince his readers to accept and apply his theory and to provoke change, an ambition that postmodernism and the concept of change in this thesis reject on the basis of the impossibility of fiction defining meaning and proposing solutions.

## TIPPING POINTS AND ACADEMIC RESEARCH: MULTIPLE INTERPRETATIVE POTENTIAL

The multivalent nature of the phrase Tipping Point, attracted academic research in the Leverhulme project. As suggested by the full title of that project: ‘Tipping Points – Mathematics, metaphors and meanings’,[[70]](#footnote-70) it is an inter-disciplinary programme, the aims of which are, firstly: ‘assessing, through quantitative and qualitative analysis, the extent to which the tipping point analogy is truly a property of the world in which we live’; secondly: ‘exploring how “tipping points” become assigned metaphorically, sometimes evolving to the point that they themselves gain agency’ and thirdly: ‘considering what this understanding means for how we live in a tipping point world given its potentially profound implications for anticipatory knowledge’.[[71]](#footnote-71) The scope of the Leverhulme project demonstrates the applications of the tipping point whilst intersecting with this thesis in terms of the degree to which science is associated with capitalism.

TheTipping Points project, whilst not expressly encompassing literary representations and intersections of capitalism, literature and science, does have for its third aim a work package entitled ‘From Metaphor to Agency: Exploring the metaphorical use of the term to understand how this and similar labels become assigned to events, articulated and visualised; how they gain agency, even catalysing the very behaviour they intended to describe’.[[72]](#footnote-72) In a discussion entitled ‘The tipping point of the tipping point metaphor’ the project presents the following assessment of the potential of the phrase: ‘The term tipping point possesses such embedded interpretative viability or pragmatic ambiguity which allows the metaphor to transcend its original meaning and gain a widespread usage’.[[73]](#footnote-73) Whilst of great relevance to this thesis in its focus upon the multiple potential and agency of the phrase, the Tipping Points project has no work package regarding fiction and envisages neither the possibility of a reverse motion nor the validity of identifying the Tipping Point with permanent change. The Tipping Point project stops short of seeking to understand literary contexts, making this thesis all the more valuable in revealing the potential of the phrase in literary criticism. That the Tipping Point project has not sought to address fiction may be indicative of its having applied Gladwell’s theory less critically than this thesis with respect to its understanding of contributors to change and the possibility of reversal. The home page of the Tipping Point project contains a quotation from the above final lines of *The Tipping Point* in which Gladwell declares: ‘Tipping points are a re-affirmation of the potential for change and the power of intelligent action’ (TP, 259). This implies that the project sees the Tipping Point as a tool for change rather than a means of appraising the process of change itself.

## LOCATING TIPPING POINTS IN CAPITALISM: *‘*WHY IT’S KICKING OFF EVERYWHERE’[[74]](#footnote-74) FOR ZOLA AND HOUELLEBECQ

Zola wrote the bulk of his work in the final quarter of the nineteenth century. In the years preceding the publication of his first novels, the notion of precipitate change, turning points, revolutionary or otherwise, had already been the stimulus for many writers, including Balzac and Flaubert. Nineteenth-century France witnessed several crises culminating in the fall of the Second Empire in 1870 under Napoleon III and the Paris Commune of 1870-1, occurring not long after Zola had commenced his twenty-novel cycle of the two families entitled the *Rougon-Macquart* (1871-1893). The fortune of the eponymous families follows, to an extent, that of the Second Empire. But the progress of the family is evolutionary, not revolutionary, illustrating deterministic, hereditary, scientifically verifiable defects rather than heralding wider revolution, a reservation Lukács saw as symptomatic both of Zola’s naturalist fiction and his bourgeois instincts.[[75]](#footnote-75)

Causality is confronted by the Marxist historian David Harvey in addressing the definition of modernity.[[76]](#footnote-76) His opening lines consider the assumption that revolutionary events constitute such a change that they can be ‘inscribed without reference to the past’, with no reference to its having been obliterated via ‘creative destruction’ along the way. This consideration is central to the understanding of the tipping point process, whether socio-economic or literary in that the concept may be described as cyclical, without a beginning or an end. Harvey continues:

It is often difficult to decide if the radical break is in the style of the doing or representing things in different arenas such as literature and the arts, urban planning and industrial organization, politics, lifestyle, or whatever, or whether shifts in all such arenas *cluster in some crucially important places and times* from whence the aggregate forces of modernity diffuse outward to engulf the rest of the world.[[77]](#footnote-77)

This statement appears to contain a contradiction in simultaneously contemplating, ‘radical break’ and ‘diffusion’. The idea of a radical break suggests a definitive conclusion whilst diffusion implies a slower, evolutionary process of change. Harvey exposes a similar contradiction in Marxist theory: that Marx, whilst emphasising revolutionary change had also recognised that this was predicated upon latent changes in the ‘existing condition’. Marx’s theory advocated revolution yet denied the existence of a radical break.

Radical breaks often follow or precipitate crises and, as mentioned, the economic imperatives in the competitive media market rely upon a constant diet of crises and the anticipation of its possible outcomes to sell airtime and print space. Unlike the tipping point, a media crisis can be given a narrative with a resolution. It is good for circulation, viewing figures and hits as long as it is not going to take too long to mature and bore those readers and viewers for whom, in the words of Pierre Bourdieu: ‘des produits moins exigeants et plus vendables’[[78]](#footnote-78) are the order of the day. This pressure is passed down the supply chain, demanding the necessary material from its producers, journalists and writers. It might be argued therefore that crises being presented as irreversible, as simple dramatic beginnings and ends, satisfying the need for simple plotlines, are a ‘product’ of post-Fordist discourses and manifested not only by the media but in fiction. Both the media and capitalism are predicated on precipitating or exploiting such crises. It is perhaps significant that not only is Gladwell a successful journalist but one who is writing at a time of successive economic crises. It is arguable that in being appropriated within the late capitalist market he applies the media’s perception of crises in his analysis of his Tipping Points, providing identifiable narratives that are not overly complex and which provide conclusions.

Zola and Houellebecq are writing at periods of profound change in capitalism and the extent to which the writers’ careers coincide with phases or major changes in capitalism is demonstrated below. Both have explored the impact and evolution of the contemporary economic creed or ideology evident in daily life. Clear historic shifts in capitalism are evidenced below in the national and global economic contexts in which Zola and Houellebecq are writing. The immense energy and wealth generated in both eras, 1860-1900 and 1945 to the present day, by the respective contemporary phases of capitalism, constitutes rich material for the writer of fiction. Zola imbues his novels with a sense of impending momentous change be it financial collapse, industrial revolt or war. This is all the more notable given the deterministic element of Zola’s novels, for Zola is writing with the benefit of hindsight. The time span of the *Rougon-Macquart* narrativeis bounded by the Second Empire, which collapsed shortly before publication of the first novels of the *Rougon-Macquart*. Whilst Houellebecq also benefits from hindsight in terms of the post war years and post 1968 protests, unlike Zola, he projects these changes to the near and far future. Both authors therefore exploit, and undermine, the drama and the agency that the examples of past and future definitive change possess.

For Zola, capitalism manifested itself through industrialization feeding the onset of early mass consumerism or ‘cultures of consumption’, meeting the demand, if not the needs, of a growing middle class. Zola interests himself in questions of capital. This is evidenced in the mines, the development of department stores and the Haussmannization of Paris, that figure within the three *Rougon-Macquart* novels in this thesis. This is particularly significant in occurring at a time of change which, while the term ‘capitalism’ was not yet in general currency, coincides with a rapid development of the economic system and the growth of consumerism. In attempting his series Zola sought to produce a record of his own society, at all levels. This was not, Hemmings argues, as was the case with Balzac, to be a representation in a ‘specific historic setting’[[79]](#footnote-79) but one presenting successive generations and their fortunes, interwoven with those of the Second Empire.

Brian Nelson states that Zola is the quintessential novelist of modernity, understood in terms of ‘an overwhelming sense of tumultuous change’[[80]](#footnote-80) and in making the reader aware ‘of society’s impact on the individuals within it memorably depicts what it means to be a human being living in the modern world’.[[81]](#footnote-81) This quotation refers the reader once more to the question of Zola’s fixing his gaze upon society whilst employing the narrative necessities of recent actual and imminent crises. Yet Zola did not remain the passive observer. His ‘histoire naturelle et sociale’[[82]](#footnote-82) may also be seen as a series of experiments concerning the reaction derived from certain personalities placed in certain physical and economic environments, delivering an outcome, as Zola would have it, dispassionately and objectively observed. The outcomes of these experiments would not provide the scientific resolution Zola desired but would instead resemble the in-process phenomenon of the tipping point.

Houellebecq is concerned with representing late capitalist France. Jameson discusses the origin of late capitalism and its meaning. [[83]](#footnote-83) He considers that it differs from the original concept of capitalism due to its internationalization in the form of Finance and the flight of labour from the Global North to the Global South.[[84]](#footnote-84) Jameson proceeds to discuss whether there was continuity or rupture between ‘original’ and late capitalism and at what point change occurs:

It is necessary to distinguish between the gradual setting in place of the various (often unrelated pre-conditions for the new structure and the ‘‘moment’’ (not exactly chronological) when they all jell and combine into a new system. This moment is itself less a matter of chronology than it is of a well-nigh Freudian Nachträglichkeit, or retroactivity: people become aware of the dynamics of some new system (deduced itself intermittently in a fragmentary way from various unrelated crisis symptoms).[[85]](#footnote-85)

Thus, late capitalism resulted from a process of change, occurring over the period from the end of the Second World War and continuing today but poses the same questions as capitalism regarding how that change is recognized and, by implication, who will point it out. In short, like tipping points, ‘late capitalism’ is a difficult concept with the potential for ideological manipulation. Late capitalism may be viewed as the pinnacle of capitalist power, exploiting the low cost nations of the Global South, often at the expense of sections of the economies of the Global North, whilst harnessing instant global communications networks in order to trade, to transfer capital and to accumulate consumer data. Late capitalism is the current manifestation of the evolution of capitalism. Certain characteristics of nineteenth-century capitalism: hungry workforces, inhuman working conditions, the birth of Marxism, all constituted apparent threats to the continuity of the economic system. These factors, aided by two world wars and other unforeseen contributors, contributed not to the end of capitalism but to its further evolution.

Houellebecq’s representation of late capitalism, as noted, is the economy of a post-war France, propelled by the Marshall Plan followed by the importation of Anglo-American economic philosophies and methods. These methods resulted in a population so saturated by advertising that by the millennium, Frédéric Beigbeder, previously an advertising copy writer and latterly a writer of fiction, has his protagonist claim ‘que entre sa naissance et l’âge de 18 ans, toute personne était exposée en moyenne à 350 000 publicités’.[[86]](#footnote-86) For Houellebecq, the notable developments of this period are firstly, the gradual absorption of the French population into wide-scale consumer economics in the so-called *Trente glorieuses*.[[87]](#footnote-87) Secondly, the extension of neoliberal economic processes from the material economy to the sexual economy has formed, in Houellebecq’s opinion, a dual sexual and material economy.

In the post-war period occurred de-colonisation, soaring living standards, some individual and sexual liberalism, and the adoption by France of aspects of Anglo-American neoliberalism.[[88]](#footnote-88) These decades arguably also witnessed, following the protests of May 1968, a challenging of the passive relationship of the consumer in the market economy. The sum of the *Trente glorieuses* may be seen in broader historical terms as containing pivotal change for aspects of French society and its economy, elements of which change were both challenged and embraced. One of the earliest organized challenges came from Poujadisme, after Pierre Poujade, who, in the 1950s led the Union de Défense des Commerçants et Artisans against the spread of supermarkets and large retailers such as those of Leclerc founded a few years previously, despite a boycott of his first stores in Brittany.[[89]](#footnote-89) Such outlets threatened the small retailer. Yet such protests were short-lived, unable to halt, let alone reverse, the momentum of new, imported developments in capitalism. As Bourdieu commented ironically: ‘il n’y a rien à opposer à la vision néo-libérale, qu’elle parvient à se présenter comme évidente, comme dépourvue de toute alternative’[[90]](#footnote-90)

This momentum was maintained via the white-collar organizations or ‘cadres’ of management and engineers who, distinct from the trade unions and owners, embraced the economic and organizational processes arriving from the United States. John Horne remarks in relation to the word ‘cadre’: ‘The word also suggested a more relaxed, egalitarian lifestyle that subverted conventional bourgeois status and was fuelled by soaring living standards. It described the goal of high consumption that became characteristic of the 1960s, with a combination of democratic elitism and hedonism epitomized by holidays with the Club Méditerranée’.[[91]](#footnote-91) With access to becoming a *cadre* regulated by professional examination, a wider cross-section of society, including women, was permitted. Despite the unprecedented growth in standards of living and student and industrial action of 1968, the France of the 1960s and 1970s was still one where the bulk of the nation’s wealth resided with the propertied classes.[[92]](#footnote-92) Clearly, if the *Trente glorieuses* represented a definitive change it is one that was unevenly apportioned and, as the name suggests, occurred over a period of decades.

Approaching the third millennium, late capitalism saw the convergence of several further processes of change. The Dot.com boom and bust of the final years of the second millennium had been preceded by the world economic crisis of the early 1990’s. The ‘Western’ or Global North[[93]](#footnote-93) economic powers emerged weakened from these two crises and witnessed the emergence or accelerated growth of several new global powers amongst the ‘developing’ nations such as China and India. The economic and environmental impact of globalization became a profound concern of, and was addressed from differing perspectives by writers such as Harvey,[[94]](#footnote-94) Lovelock[[95]](#footnote-95) and Bourdieu. The positives of globalization, such as the lifting of tens of millions in China, Brazil and India out of poverty, are less commonly heard save by such as Jerry Varsava.[[96]](#footnote-96) Globalization is a tipping point, challenging definition, without a beginning or foreseeable end and, like capitalism, composed of plural, in-process phenomena.

Globalization’s link to the tipping point is extended in the different influences in play in globalized communication networks permitting a democratization of protest, with blogs, phone calls and photographs providing the catalysts for change, rather than traditional journalism and commentators. News is twenty-four hours and sound bites, a practice picked up from the advertising industry, have become political influencing techniques to help lodge an idea in the mind of the potential voter. One of the more notorious examples being Bill Clinton’s campaign slogan: ‘The economy, stupid’[[97]](#footnote-97). Such pithy phrases were intended to invoke turning points in people’s perceptions. Yet, it was not just the economy, for this phrase became part of a wider anticipated change, combining Clinton’s youth and caustic humour, suggesting that an alternative resolution was on offer. The ‘temporally specific return to the trope of the turning point’ to an apocalyptic near future, has come to dominate public discourse and literature. [[98]](#footnote-98) This thesis is offering something different in that its concept of the tipping point undermines attempted simplification of the processes of change to pithy slogans, labels or representations.

In ‘*Why It’s Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions*’, Paul Mason, the former BBC Newsnight economics editor refers to the role played by social media in these events but stresses the still not fully understood power of this tool, which is already being used in social and economic protest. In short, Mason argues that a global movement is underway, where Twitter will replace pamphlets and the works of commentators. Intriguingly, Mason described the 2007 economic crisis and social upheaval as an ‘1871 moment’ alluding to the failed Commune which served as a rehearsal upon which to deliver the successful Russian revolutions of the following decades. Mason’s example endorses the concept of the process of change in this thesis in questioning the representation of definitive change in favour of intersecting and diverging components. Mason’s reference to a series of ‘successful’ Russian revolutions is an oxymoron further supporting the tipping point’s undermining of apparently definitive moments.

For post-Marxist thinker Bourdieu, those who would, in Gladwell’s terminology, become the ‘Mavens’ and ‘Salesmen’ of positive social change, who might loosen the neoliberal hold, setting in motion their own conclusive change , are writers and artists. While Bourdieu never specifies whether writers of fiction are included, that he classes writers and artists together, allows us to consider Houellebecq’s work contributing to the counter-neoliberal actions envisaged by Bourdieu who, after listing how neoliberalism is undermining French culture, writes:

Si je rappelle maintenant que les chances d’arrêter cette machine infernale reposent sur tous ceux et celles qui, tenant quelque pouvoir sur les choses de culture, d’art et de littérature, peuvent, chacun à leur place et à leur façon et, pour leur part, si minime soit-elle, jeter leur grain de sable dans le jeu bien huilé des complicités résignées […] on dira peut-être, pour une fois, que je suis désespérément optimiste.[[99]](#footnote-99)

For Bourdieu, this is a fight with casualties, for he sees that the potential agents of change are co-implicated by the very media and markets they seek to influence. He does not identify a definitive change, seeing capitalism as an intellectual creation which has no end. He refers to several people in positions of influence each, consistent with the tipping point, bringing their own approach and understanding of what - if anything - can be done.

## CONCLUSION

Not only does Gladwell’s concept of the Tipping Point concern itself with a narrow set of elements contributing to change, but his theory is further limited in that, while many of his examples and agents of change are set within a capitalist context, there is no explicit recognition of the common characteristics of his concept and those of capitalism, nor the related issue of power relations. Furthermore, the originality of *The Tipping Point* and the cases and narratives he cites have been challenged, questioning the basis of his theory.

In contrast, the notion of the tipping point established, explored and deployed in this thesis is a concept, a metaphor and a convergence of phenomena in process. It evades definition yet chimes with fictional writing when it attempts to make sense of change. The working definition of the tipping point metaphor, the idea of a language always in process, reflecting a lack of linearity in the processes of change, its multiple intersecting contingencies and contributors, its uncertainty and indefinability, when brought to bear upon Zola and Houellebecq, may further reveal not only the processes of change in their respective eras but also how representations of change function, and necessarily fail. The examination of the representation of change as understood here through the pairing of case studies in novels by Zola and Houellebecq will reflect the conditions of production of fiction and thereby also, the contemporary exponential changes in capitalism.[[100]](#footnote-100)

The tipping point as extra-textual metaphor proposed in this thesis will be applied in the next chapter to assess the grand narratives of Marxism and Darwinism as represented in *Germinal*, the first novel in the pairing of Zola and Houellebecq. The tipping point as a metaphor for the contingency and divergence of change will be shown to assist in recognising how Zola manipulates the conclusions he proposes. In parallel, Zola concedes that the process of change described may continue beyond the pages of his novel, beyond his control. Zola will therefore be argued to recognise the limitations of fiction in its capacity to represent the process of change whilst emulating the processes proposed in the tipping point.

# CHAPTER TWO MARX, DARWIN AND THE TIPPING POINT IN *GERMINAL*

## INTRODUCTION

The Introduction and Chapter One demonstrate how the concept of change explored in this thesis reflects composite, contingent and multiple processes of change, and may supplement the conventional understanding of fictional narratives which engage with times of significant development in capitalism. In the light of these understandings, this chapter reads *Germinal*, highlighting how its structure and the dominant influences of Marxism, capitalism and Darwinism reveal conflicting demands of plot, production of meaning and the representation of change. The resulting tensions between Zola’s highly structured, deterministic intentions and their relationship with the opposing teleological bases of these theories will demonstrate how both Zola’s literary theory and the grand narratives of Darwin and Marx are undermined by innumerable and indefinable elements of change which refuse to be contained. Whilst postmodernism has argued the inability of fiction to deliver solutions, it is proposed in this thesis that Zola is aware of this limitation and that this is particularly apparent in the context of writing at a period of rapidly evolving capitalism.

This chapter explores how Zola’s *Germinal* can be read to comprehend change linked to capitalism. In terms of social development, this chapter will show that there is no actual or even promised change in the condition of the worker at the close of *Germinal* and that Zola not only recognises this but implicitly questions both any ultimate goal and the path to attaining it. Marxism, despite its dialectic is not taken up by the miners, who are in turn jettisoned by Étienne. He embarks instead upon an uncertain path: ‘il se voyait à la tribune, triomphant avec le peuple, si le peuple ne dévorait pas’ (G, III, 1589).The mining industry around Montsou has undergone and absorbed change at the close of *Germinal*. It is this constant evolution of capitalism that will be examined. It is witnessed in the reported, continuing influence of unseen shareholders who decide the fate of the mines, their bourgeois managers – and their workforces. Following a plot summary, a brief literature review is given from the perspective of the theory of change proposed in this thesis, before going on to separately consider the over-arching narratives of Marx and Darwin within *Germinal*.

## ‘L’APPRENTISSAGE DE LA RÉVOLTE OUVRIÈRE’[[101]](#footnote-101) AND GLOBAL CAPITALISM

The novel opens with the arrival of the protagonist Étienne,[[102]](#footnote-102) in the bleak mining landscape around Montsou, the mining community central to the narrative. Happening upon Bonnemort, the elder of the Maheu family, Étienne, who seeks work, hears of the power structures in the local area, one dominated by a capitalist imperative: the maximisation of shareholder returns. With the exception of Deneulin’s ‘Jean Bart’ operation, the mines are owned by shareholders, people who, according to Bonnemort, live elsewhere in a distant unknown place. This remoteness introduces a sense of unforeseeability and disconnection from the outset. Étienne obtains employment in the mine and lodges with the Maheu, a family as poverty stricken as the rest of the community of miners; a family whose members are disabled or prematurely aged by toil and starvation. Amongst the children are Jeanlin, a stunted boy of eleven and Catherine, a girl of sixteen whom, due to extreme poverty has not reached puberty; all of whom work in ‘le Voreux’, the local coal mine. The mother, ‘la Maheude’, exhausted, nurses her seventh child. Other workers are introduced: Souvarine, the Russian anarchist exile, Chaval, a brutalised young miner, Lydie, a child with doll-like arms who pushes the coal carts along the mine shafts and la Mouqette, a young woman who consorts freely with the men in the mine. Zola devotes the first four books to his characters, including the mine managers Hennebeau, Négrel and Deneulin.

Schemes are imposed which require the workers to bid for the right to work new coal seams. In a constant response to shareholder pressure, money is also deducted from their earnings for claimed safety measures. The sole representatives in the community of these otherwise mysterious shareholders are the Grégoires, the descendants of the first mining speculators in Montsou. The Grégoires, whose income depends directly upon the toil of the miners, struggle to understand the workers, attempting to be charitable to a class the condition of which they are convinced is one of humble satisfaction. The pressure upon the miner’s wages results in a strike, with Étienne leading them. Their meagre strike fund is quickly exhausted and hunger grips the community. Strike breakers work neighbouring mines, amongst who is Chaval, violent and with little feeling of solidarity for the strikers. Souvarine is contemptuous of the strike. He reads the anarchist paper *Combat* and believes that only the erasement of society will permit a new society to be built.

The mines of Montsou are struggling to survive. French capitalism has witnessed a boom period but has slumped again and the consequent falling industrial output requires less coal. Early global market economics are manifesting themselves as the Americans build their own furnaces and use their own coal. These factors feature in a conversation structured around the various courses of a sumptuous meal, attended by all the bourgeoisie of the mining community. Food in its abundance dominates several bourgeois gatherings, and its lack dominates that of the miners. During the strike the mining community is driven to frenzy by hunger. Alzire, the daughter of the Maheu with an undefined disability, dies of a hunger induced fever. The people march through the mining district in revolt. They sabotage mines and, in vengeance for the grocer Maigrat’s routine sexual exploitation of his female customers in return for credit, rip the genitals off his corpse following his fatal fall during the siege of his shop.

With a limited reading of Marx and the ineffectual involvement of Pluchart from the fledgling worker’s movement, the Internationale,Étienne cannot deliver victory to the miners. According to Souvarine, the narratives of Marx promise only economic improvement and not the removal of the cause of the miner’s misery: a capitalist society. The lack of clarity of purpose on all sides is revealed in several references to one of the mine managers, Hennebeau, coveting Deneulin’s mine. Despite his sorrow over his disastrous marriage, Hennebeau is still capable of calculating advantage from the possible destruction of his rival’s mine. However, his ambition will also be frustrated as the precarious mining economy is undermined by a strike which is assumed to end, like all past actions, in simple failure.

After the murder of a young, amiable soldier by Jeanlin, the troops kill protesting miners, including Maheu and La Mouquette. The news of the strike reaches Paris and the entire political class is shaken. The strike is soon broken and the miners return to work. However it is a pyric victory as the mining industry has been weakened and with it, temporarily at least, capitalism. Souvarine sabotages le Voreux before quietly walking off into a future he believes will be determined by anarchism. This sabotage, as terrible in its impact as Souvarine desired, traps and kills many miners. Among the trapped are Étienne, Chaval and Catherine. Étienne is provoked by and kills Chaval whilst trapped in the stricken mine. Étienne and Catherine, now alone underground, declare their feelings for each other and make love. However Catherine dies before Négrel heroically rescues Étienne, who he embraces, both of them weeping. Continuing the chaotic, intersecting factors of the narrative, in the aftermath of the strike Bonnemort is visited by the Grégoires and their daughter, whilst making their charitable rounds. Bonnemort takes advantage of the momentary absence of the parents to realise his long held impulse to kill their daughter, this white, plump being, so opposite to himself.

On a sunny day, contrasting with the bitter cold of his arrival, in the ‘revolutionary’ month of ‘Germinal’, the rescued Étienne takes his leave of *le* *coron* and la Maheude, who is now working in a nearby mine to feed her remaining children. The workforce is defeated; ashamed and, angered at its surrender is ready for future rebellion. Étienne, invited by Pluchart to Paris, walks towards his destiny, full of confidence in the trajectory that he believes his life and that of the worker’s movement will now take.

HARMONY AND REALITY IN *GERMINAL* – A CRITICAL RESPONSE

In reviewing critical works on *Germinal*, this thesis notes that none has recognised the novel as representing a process, and few have viewed the novel through the optics of both Marxism and Darwinism. As Chantal Pierre Gnassounou argues, Zola appears to propose that literature ‘must assume the unfinished quality of lived experience itself’[[103]](#footnote-103) and that in *Germinal* the reader is witnessing ‘the slow erosion of the plot’.[[104]](#footnote-104) This suggests that despite the writer’s meticulous planning and research, there are departures from the classic plot pattern which appear to coincide with the essence of the tipping point. The following chapter supplements several reviews of the structure and content of Zola’s work, particularly those of Georg Lukács, David Baguley, Philip Walker, Sandy Petrey, and Brian Nelson.[[105]](#footnote-105)

In his *Studies in European Realism*, Lukács asserts that Zola’s love of harmony, nature and society and of balancing scenes in his novel, betrays a bourgeois conservatism, ‘an ‘undialectic conception’ of society. But it is Lukács’ remark on Zola’s greatness as a writer being attributable to his inability to adhere to his own naturalist programme[[106]](#footnote-106) that appears most relevant to this thesis and supports the contention that what is identified here as aspects of the tipping point in Zola’s fiction, was often not that which he had intended to describe. The tipping point, in being in-constant evolution, eludes authorial intention. Despite Lukács labelling Zola a bourgeois, David Baguley, in ‘Germinal: The Gathering Storm’ quotes Zola’s claim that *Germinal* is a ‘socialist novel’. Baguley cites the miners chanting “Germinal! Germinal!” at his funeral as proof of his humanitarian principles and their impact. In ‘Zola and the Art of Containing the Uncontainable’, Philip Walker argues that within Zola’s writing the ‘incoherences, contradictions and ambiguities mirror Zola’s’.[[107]](#footnote-107) That Zola’s desire for harmony, unity and simplicity could not be reconciled with his ideal that the novel could combine every literary form and be bound by none, nor with his desire to project himself into his novels, with his omniscience in portraying the whole of reality - ‘L’oeuvre d’art […] doit embrasser l’horizon entire’[[108]](#footnote-108) - nor with attempting such a truth which Zola recognised ‘n’est point universelle, absolue.’[[109]](#footnote-109) Nor, finally, could Zola’s desire for harmony be reconciled with his relaying all the chaos of ‘philosophical and religious intuitions, hypotheses, reveries, nightmares […] competing for predominance in his head’.[[110]](#footnote-110) Additionally, Henri Mitterand’s presentation of Zola’s *Carnet d’Enquêtes*[[111]](#footnote-111) is of interest for the almost total absence in Zola’s *ébauches* of any remarks referring to the social significance in the strike hit Anzin area of the French coalfields.

There is certainly no shortage of dramatic events in *Germinal*: starvation, adultery, bankruptcy, proletarian revolt, massacre, heroic labour and rescue, yet all occur without precipitating radical change. For Baguley, such a multitude of events do not make ‘for credible history but produce compelling fiction’.[[112]](#footnote-112) Petrey disagrees, yet offers similar factors to those that Baguley lists as creating compelling fiction.[[113]](#footnote-113) For him it is the “intensity of illusion” as Henry James called it, which Zola successfully creates in *Germinal*.[[114]](#footnote-114) He does this not only by representing the life and environment of miners in northern France, but also by harnessing a perception, a fear, especially in the bourgeoisie, that a terrible event, an irreversible change, a revolution, was again at hand. However, the theory of change in this thesis as plural, diverging and contingent with its implications of both progress and reversal contradicts such a conclusive outcome. Moreover, Zola will be seen below to question not only the possibility of revolution in the context of *Germinal* but also its lack of purpose and finality. The multitude of contingencies, including the adaptability of capitalism, chance, love or the life force of individuals, derail any linear, ideological trajectory.

## MARXISM AND THE TIPPING POINT

*‘(Marx) also delineated the endlessly inchoate, incessantly restless and unfinished character of modern capitalism*’.[[115]](#footnote-115)

Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* (1848) laid the idea of the foundation of a mobilised proletariat. This over-arching narrative took several decades to gather momentum. Marxism promised a socialist state conditional upon the removal of the bourgeoisie.[[116]](#footnote-116) Engels and Marx saw society as evolving and whilst conceding that the bourgeoisie had ‘accomplished miracles far surpassing Egyptian pyramids, Roman aqueducts, and Gothic cathedrals’, the end was to come.[[117]](#footnote-117) Marx writes in *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*: ‘The fall of the bourgeoisie and the victory of the proletariat “are equally inevitable.”[[118]](#footnote-118)

Zola attended lectures by Marxists such as Jules Guesde and Paul Lafargue and Charles Longuet, Karl Marx’s sons-in-law.[[119]](#footnote-119) Zola studied mining, the diseases associated with coal dust and the other dangers and conflicts of the industry. Zola even descended a mine, facilitating an extensive impression of the environment, the mining community and the working conditions, relayed either by Bonnemort to the newly arrived Étienne, via style indirect libre or in the narration. To give further verisimilitude to the mass of detail with which both the character Étienne and the reader of *Germinal* are faced in the first two chapters, Zola has assembled incidents dating from the 1860s and those of the mid 1880s, particularly relating to the growing political status of those such as the above named radicals. Factionalism amongst French socialists[[120]](#footnote-120) is referenced in *Germinal* in the characters Rasseneur, Souveraine and Lantier, respectively described by Zola as a ‘possibilist’, an ‘authoritarian collectivist’ and an ‘anarchist’.[[121]](#footnote-121) André-Marc Vial describes the resulting work as Zola’s attempt at a ‘syncretic vision’ of the worker’s movement.[[122]](#footnote-122) However, such divergence of ideology, the fragile alliance of the strikers, with some breaking ranks in desperation and other mines continuing to function, undermine any syncretic vision.

The bourgeoisie is described by Marx as ‘like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world who he has called up by his spells’.[[123]](#footnote-123) This image of the unforeseeability of events that are supposedly within the control of those who seek to create a narrative is repeated in *Germinal*. The bourgeoisie of Montsou look on, incredulous, at the rampaging, now starving, miners, those who they had always considered to have rendered docile by the wages that barely sustained an ambition extending beyond the next pay day. M. Grégoire comments with unintended irony: ‘Sans doute, ils n’ont pas de malice au fond. Lorsqu’ils auront bien crié, ils iront souper avec plus d’appétit’ (G, III, 1443). He is of course, in common with the other bourgeois characters, wrong on all counts. Shortly afterwards, Maigrat, the sexually predatory grocer, dies in a fall, attempting to escape the vengeful women of *le* *coron* and has his genitalia wrenched off by la Brulé (G, III, 1452). This is also ironic, as hitherto it was the bourgeoisie in *Germinal* who had considered the miner’s an economically neutered group, one upon whose women Maigrat could freely prey. The event most feared of all, relates the narrator, voicing the onlooker’s thoughts: ‘C’était la vision rouge de la revolution qui les emporterait tous, fatalement par une soirée sanglante de cette fin de siècle. Oui, un soir, le peuple lâché, débridé, galoperait ainsi sur les chemins, et ils ruisselerait du sang des bourgeois’ (G, III, 1436-7). This nightmare *soirée sanglante*, where the previously obedient servants, once conjured so complacently by the bourgeois magician, take their revenge, is linked by Zola to the image of a vengeful, germinating army in the closing lines.

Marxist theory sought to produce communists ‘clearly understanding the line of march, the conditions, and the ultimate general results of the proletarian movement.’[[124]](#footnote-124) Having supposedly embraced these principles, Étienne marches off into the future, with only the haziest idea of any of these same elements, of which he had failed to convince the miners of Montsou. However, it may be argued that Étienne is no more a failure than Saccard in Zola’s *L’Argent*[[125]](#footnote-125) for success and failure are not absolutes in Zola’s works. For Zola, it is a more nebulous entity, that of the life force, the ambition of the character that attracts, that helps drive progress, albeit haltingly, and not a list of completed, auditable accomplishments. If this was not the case, it would be Gundermann, the victorious, conservative banker and not Saccard, who would have been the hero of *L’Argent*. It is this engagement of Zola with the most ‘picturesque’ aspects of society which Lukács argues ‘results from the direct, mechanical mirroring of the humdrum reality of capitalism’.[[126]](#footnote-126)

Unlike Marxism, capitalism is seen to adapt and survive. In his depiction of differing aspects of Marxism in Étienne’s, Souvarine’s and Rassaneur’s lack of any coherent strategy and inability to sufficiently relate to the miners, Zola implicitly criticises the Marxist dialectic, and possibly anticipates its failure in the miner’s defeat. The Marxist dialectic requires the overthrow of the bourgeoisie and excludes the possibility that worker and bourgeois are interdependent. Marxism did not anticipate that instead of radical change, the improvement of the proletariat’s condition would take place as a fitful process of reforms, often derived from unforeseen contingencies such as the pay and conditions conceded to workers during the First World War, or from other parties un-aligned to Marxism. In *Germinal* Zola appears to recognise that social harmony is unachievable by the working class acting alone and that an awakened bourgeoisie must play its role in tempering the excesses of capitalism. This is evidenced in the positive portrayal of the bourgeois characters Deneulin and Négrel. Étienne is rescued by Négrel in a scene encapsulating Zola’s vision of social accord ‘l’ouvrier révolté, le chef sceptique, se jetèrent au cou l’un de l’autre, sanglotèrent à gros sanglots, dans le bouleversement profond de toute l’humanité qui était en eux, la misère des générations, l’excès de douleur où peut tomber la vie’ (G, III, 1580).

*Germinal* presents other aspects that make difficult the location of any single point of change. For example, both sides in the conflict aspire to wealth and comfort,[[127]](#footnote-127) the miners applying capitalist values in their campaign through their attempt to outlast the adversary by creating their strike fund. Étienne appears respectful of bourgeois values and intends to respect property and avoid violence: ‘il marchait dans un rève, il assistait à la régénération radicale des peuples, sans que cela dût coûter une vitrée cassée ni une goutte de sang’ (G, III, 1257). All sides share values to differing extents, are worked upon by contingencies and interests as individuals, as families, as groups. That these elements may constantly change is signalled in the concluding pages as Étienne’s departure is announced. His departure marks his decision to remove himself from a difficult, indefinable narrative. Following his failure to bring victory to the miners, Étienne composes his own, new narrative, one that the reader may perceive will be as fraught and unpredictable as that of the preceding pages:

La joie de rejoindre Pluchart, d’être comme Pluchart un chef écouté, lui soufflait des discours, dont il arrangeait les phrases. Il méditait d’élargir son programme, l’affinement bourgeois qui l’avait haussé au-dessous de sa classe le jetait à une haine plus grande de la bourgeoisie. Ces ouvriers dont l’odeur de misère le gênait maintenant, il éprouvait le besoin de les mettre dans une gloire, il les montrerait comme les seuls grands, les seuls impeccables, comme l’unique noblesse et l’unique force où l’humanité pût se retremper (G, III, 1588).

This delirious discourse serves to build what Étienne believes to be imminent revolution whilst succeeding only in revealing how his pride and prejudice are further unquantifiable components contributing to the process of change. Étienne never completely assimilates himself into the mining community, ‘*le coron*’. He is the outsider whose message helps precipitate change in the form of an unsuccessful strike and who despairs at his comrade’s material imperatives, such as their desire to feed their families.

Zola presents an example of adaptation through failure in the collapse of the strike, elucidating the possibility of backward as well as forward movement in change. The mob of miners, the forerunner of the Commune, of which Zola shared the same distaste and fear possessing most of the bourgeoisie, strikes out in its impotence, destroying its own sources of employment. This latent bourgeois dread of revolution is the product of several factors: worsening social conditions for the worker, the suppression of democracy under the Second Empire, anarchist outrages throughout Europe and growing proletariat mobilisation.[[128]](#footnote-128) The very title ‘*Germinal’*, for André Wurmser, ‘le plus révolutionnaire qu’un roman ait jamais porté’[[129]](#footnote-129) reflects this context in its association with the 1793 revolutionary violence, representing the seventh month of the short-lived revolutionary calendar. This chapter will argue that Zola’s *Germinal* is ambiguous as to representing itself as a description of a continuing revolutionary process.

The miner’s violent march instantly dissolves at the shout that the gendarmes are coming. So, on the cusp of what the bourgeois of Montsou fear most, a proletariat uprising, declared as necessary in Marx’s *Manifesto* of 1848, the threat is dissipated by exhaustion, satiation and lack of direction. In this event is witnessed, once again, contingent, multiple strands, lacking resolution. Whilst this failure may provide comfort to his contemporary bourgeois readers, Zola is adding the footnote that a step has nevertheless been taken which will not easily be undone. The momentum may have swung back, in favour of the status quo for a short while but shifts have occurred, ‘le coup d’épaule donné à la société, qui craque un instant’.[[130]](#footnote-130) Newspapers in Paris will note the riot and murder, the occurrence will register in the minds of distant bourgeois and workers. The miners have also found strength in their numbers and this is a marked change which Zola implies will not be erased by their defeat. No matter Étienne’s ruminations in the final pages, no matter how ineffective the Internationale, *Germinal* declares that the workers have found their voice.

As a primary industry, mining involves and enables multiple processes to be resolved in other industries, one part of a complex of factors. The community who supported that primary element of the economy belonged to a hitherto largely unrepresented sector of French society: the proletariat. Unrepresented both in public life under the Second Empire and in literature. Baguley cites Zola’s statement that there is no place for the people in Balzac but that the reader can however hear in the distance, ‘la voix du grand absent … la sourde poussée du peuple qui va jaillir à la vie politique, à la souveraineté’.[[131]](#footnote-131) Baguley further observes that *L’Assommoir* partly fills this gap yet contains no overt reference to working class political aspirations or potential. 1789 had failed to improve the lot of other than the bourgeoisie save that the lower orders were, as Rasseneur, Étienne and Souvarine agree, ‘libre de crever de faim’ (G, III, 1256). In the same discussion, Étienne, ploddingly recites the ideals, including the organizational philosophy of the International Working Men’s Association, formed in London in 1864, of which Marx was the secretary. Souvarine, the Russian anarchist responds, arguing that the ills of society are too ingrained for such an association, whose end appeared to merely amount to ‘les hausses des salaires’ and would never overcome the deep inequalities: ‘Fichez-moi donc la paix, avec votre évolution! Allumez le feu aux quatre coins des villes, fauchez les peuples, rasez tout, et quand il ne restera plus rien de ce monde pourri, peut-être en repoussera-t-il un meilleur’ (G, III, 1255).

Anarchism was not to prevail as an instrument of revolution. Instead, a groping adaptation is often evidenced in *Germinal* in a series of factors which are rendered less consequential in their being isolated in nature or juxtaposed with contradictory indications. The embrace of the bourgeoisie and proletariat following Négrel’s rescue of Étienne is one rare instance of the possibility of change in *Germinal* and consequently, this thesis suggests, representative of a faltering, composite process. The strike is transformed by Zola into a mortal combat, with numerous dramatic and violent confrontations maintaining the action through to the catastrophic *dénouement* following which not much has changed and some things have deteriorated for the miners. As mentioned in the introduction, for Baguley, the great frequency of the violent and tragic events makes for compelling fiction. Such strength of interest responds in part to the removal from the mine owners and radicals of their previously assumed ability to control events. Instead, there is the emergence of a powerful, un-orchestrated, popular will, one that represents the contingency that thwarts, for this strike at least, the efforts of their leaders. Zola is similarly constrained in reconciling the reality of a fractured community with anything but a problematic outcome.

As will be discussed, Zola makes an ambiguous reference to a future generation of miners who would continue the struggle, describing the germination of a future harvest of miners who will carry on the battle, ‘qui germait lentement dans les sillons, grandissant pour les récoltes du siècle futur, et dont la germination allait faire bientôt éclater la terre’ (G, III, 1591). Yet, when this epic symbolism is read against the thoughts of the humane mine owner Deneulin, who surveys his ruined mine whilst pitying his persecutors, the reader finds a stripping away of the mythical, diffuse impact of the germination image and a focus upon the infinite contributors at play in the confrontation of bourgeois and proletariat. Deneulin considers his situation: ‘Et dans cette certitude de son désastre, il n’avait plus de haine contre les brigands de Montsou, il sentait la complicité de tous, une faute générale, séculaire. Des brutes sans doute, mais des brutes qui ne savaient pas lire et qui crevaient de faim’ (G, III, 1416). Deneulin’s recognition of the complicity of all society emphasises the composite nature of change. Germinating seeds may indeed symbolise potential but the resulting crops are to be scythed down, harvested and will be consumed by the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, germination requires other elements, such as light, water, heat, and is a gradual transformative process and -- like the coal from the mine -- those crops will be consumed by others. Crops are subject to all the vagaries of nature with numerous factors contributing to their success or failure. This image of germination links this passage to the title of the novel, encapsulating the process of change within capitalism. Significantly, there remains the need for a farmer to tend the crops, another allusion perhaps to Zola’s conviction that the salvation of the working class lies not in their own ranks, but with a leader to be recruited from the bourgeoisie as evidenced in the positive portrayal of the the characters Deneulin and Négrel. Zola’s own desire for harmony suggests that he may see himself in the role of the ‘farmer’.

*Germinal* presents a complex association of factors representing the energy and benefits that speculation, capitalism, and all their inherent risks, bring to the economy. The founders of the mines in Montsou and its environs took huge risks in sinking the original mines, uncertain whether they would see a return on their investments and at best having to wait decades for them to do so. In the following quotation the reference to war concerns the struggle of the mining companies to obtain a return from their investments rather than that of the classes: ‘La guerre continuait sans trêve […] c’était un duel au dernier sang’ (G, III, 1202). In the long struggles entailed in creating a profitable mine we are presented with another process fraught with contingencies. The competition does bankrupt some men, not all of whom are faceless Parisian investors, and there is no obvious irony in Zola’s use of such metaphors as bloodshed and capitalism found throughout *Germinal*. Indeed, ‘La guerre continuait’ serves well as a metaphor for the combat of the bourgeoisie and proletariat in the capitalism depicted in *Germinal*.

The vulnerability of the bourgeoisie investor in this struggle is the subject of conversation between Deneulin and his friend M. Grégoire, a *rentier* who rejoices in having lived all his life on income derived from the efforts and speculation of his ancestors. Deneulin recognises his vulnerability in this changing economy of distant speculators: ‘Oui, oui, je les connais, ces marquis et ces ducs, ces généraux et ces ministres! Des brigands qui vous enlèveraient jusqu’à votre chemise’ (G, III, 1202). Grégoire shares Deneulin’s unease at the power of the financial élite, revealing his conservative, cautious, *rentier* distrust of economic change which Zola would caricature in *Travail* (1901) in the form of the Mazelle family. The existence of the *rentiers* also inserts another tier of influence in *le* *coron* beyond that of owner and worker. The combatants do not, therefore, represent the binary configuration of the Marxist struggle but are both, bourgeois and worker, complex and composite. Furthermore, in presenting these conflicting forces and their respective energies and vulnerabilities, which, in the cases of Chaval, Étienne and M. Hennebeau, takes the form of sexual torment, such a tangle of attributes necessarily undermines any attempted depiction of linearity of events and their causes.

Whilst Marx does not believe revolution results from one person’s efforts, Étienne’s inability to deliver a resolution for the miners does undermine Marxist dialectic. The grand narrative of Marxism is seen to founder on unforeseen contingencies. Given the prominence Zola gives to Marxism, Étienne’s failure to have Marxism accepted by the mining community – the embodiment of the proletariat - may be considered a deliberate criticism by Zola, possibly revealing him as ‘an apologist for the *bourgeois* social order’ as Lukács alleges[[132]](#footnote-132) but also marking a departure from his own theory of naturalist objectivity and representation of change.

In a rare and apparently unambiguous ideological intervention by the narrator, the reader is introduced to L’abbéRanvier, a vaguely sketched character but one who the narrator asserts: ‘exploitait la grève, cette misère affreuse […] pour la gloire de sa religion’ (G, III, 1472). This statement alone reveals Zola’s untenable claim to scientific objectivity. Ranvier invokes God as Étienne invokes socialism and is ignored by the miners. The priest, newly arrived in Montsou in the course of the strike, having caught the now desperate Maheu family, in their home, concludes his lengthy speech to them with ‘Dieu pourvoira à tout!’ (G, III, 1473) Thus the priest attempts, as do Marxists, and as does Étienne, to create a grand narrative, a trajectory along which his imagined followers would ‘chasserait les maîtres indignes [...] chacun récompensé selon ses mérites, la loi du travail réglant le bonheur universel’ (G, III, 1473). Ranvier’s rhetoric does not bring relief to the starving miners: ‘Il n’a pas besoin de tant de paroles, grogna Maheu, vous auriez mieux fait de commencer par nous apporter un pain’ (G, III, 1473). Therein lies the problem for the outsiders who seek to achieve radical change. They are interlopers[[133]](#footnote-133) who can neither fully comprehend the contributing factors nor employ their terminology to the real situation. The miner’s needs are material and desperate. They do not want to enrol in the Internationale – although Pluchart ignores their inability to afford the subscriptions and enlists them en bloc, thereby increasing the divergence between those who seek to impose ill-fitting definitions in the novel and those who suffer the immediacy of their existences. The gulf between Pluchart and the miners is a clear indication that the struggle is not binary, not simply bourgeois versus worker, and that other factors are in play. Contrary to its dialectic, Marxism, despite its promise of a path to revolution and justice, is not an ideology which will experience a linear, inexorable progression, but will be challenged and ultimately defeated as a global political narrative. Zola’s fiction therefore presages the evolutionary rather than revolutionary course of the worker’s struggle. By incorporating significant elements of a still evolving Marxism and representing its inability to respond to a complex, reality-defying, simplistic ideological representation, Zola implicitly questions the possibility of any grand narrative or *roman à thèse*.

Zola declares in *Gil Blas* his intention to address ‘cette question terrible du travail et du capital qui est la menace de cette fin de siècle …tout défile, emporté à la catastrophe finale.’[[134]](#footnote-134) Consistent with his bourgeois concern for the avoidance of revolution, Zola also appears to caution ‘les Maîtres’ to be just if they were to avoid a catastrophe: ‘la terre s’ouvrira et les nations s’engloutiront dans un des plus effroyables bouleversements de l’histoire’.[[135]](#footnote-135) *Germinal* does not provide any such finality in the complexity of processes, the composite nature and contingencies constituting capitalism and everyday life. Unlike Houellebecq, Zola does not deliberately address the problematic of fiction’s representation of reality but unconsciously reveals it within his inconsistent adherence to his naturalist theory.

## DARWIN AND THE REPRESENTATION OF A CHANGING REALITY

Zola foregrounds Darwin through reference to Étienne’s reading of an abridged edition of *On the Origin of the Species*,[[136]](#footnote-136) to the struggle for survival within the community but also through allusions to an evolving generation of miners occurring at several key points in the novel. Zola’s understanding of Darwin’s theory of evolution reveals an interpretation close to that in the following statement by S. S. Schweber, who summarises Darwin’s theory of natural selection as presented in *On the Origin of Species*:

Darwin had a unitary evolutionary view of everything around him: the planetary system, our own planet, its geology, its climate, its living organisms, and their social organizations. Most importantly, he had convinced himself that the mechanism of this evolutionary process was accounted for by the invariable laws of physics and chemistry and the principle of natural selection, without the necessity of divine intervention at any stage or level. Darwin’s mechanism entailed a rejection of final causes and any concepts of inherent progress. It implied a commitment to a materialistic explanation, which denied to living organisms an ontological status different from inanimate objects. [[137]](#footnote-137)

Darwin’s theory of evolution, in its ‘rejection of final causes and any concepts of inherent progress’ is reflected in some of the images of change occurring in *Germinal*. The reader witnesses the generational development from Bonnemort to the Maheud couple and even Chaval, who pursues his personal interests with ferocity, through to the future, imagined, more powerful species, patiently awaiting their time to germinate, who will rise from the ground and seek vengeance.

The idea that this germinating generation would be better equipped to achieve the results that had eluded the preceding mining communities might be argued to show Zola as consistent, in a secular sense at least, with that of some of his contemporary French scientists in adopting the idea of a perfecting evolution. However, Zola provides no justification for this approach. On the contrary, Zola portrays the physical exhaustion of the defeated miners, their congenital afflictions reversing any revolutionary trajectory. Zola thus undermines the interpretation of many French scientists of Darwin’s theory. Darwin’s work was not well received by some scientists in mid-nineteenth-century France. The Darwinian notion of evolutionary change over vast periods of time was defined by mid-nineteenth-century French scientists according to the contemporary political and religious groupings to which they associated themselves. The most popular form of evolutionary theory in France at that time, ‘*L’évolution’*,[[138]](#footnote-138) describes change occurring in a linear fashion towards perfection, reflecting God’s ultimate aim. This ‘theoscientific’[[139]](#footnote-139) approach differed from Darwinian ‘evolution’ as it is interpreted today, with all its dead ends, reversals, and extinctions.[[140]](#footnote-140) The evolution that the miners undergo in *Germinal* is complex, combining reversal in the form of the strike with an awakened consciousness.

Étienne’s limited comprehension of the factors at play within the mining community might, on the one hand, suggest a certain self-reflexivity on the part of Zola, reflecting his own recognition of the impossibility of writing a true representation of all the possible factors playing upon the unfolding events. On the other, this is more likely to be an irony of which Zola is unaware. Étienne encounters political theory, science and philosophy yet, whilst sustained by such things, it attracts Zola’s pity:

Étienne, maintenant, en était à Darwin. Il en avait lu des fragments, résumés et vulgarisés dans un volume à cinq sous; et, de cette lecture mal comprise, il se faisait une idée révolutionnaire du combat pour l’existence, les maigres mangeant les gras, le peuple fort dévorant la blême bourgeoisie (G, III, 1524).

The Darwinian evolutionary process is over-simplified in Étienne’s misreading, producing a linear, revolutionary path. Furthermore, Étienne has overlooked the possibility that Darwin might, in Souvarine’s words be ‘cet apôtre de l’inégalité scientifique’ (G, III, 1524). Such scientific determinism is unsustainable as evolution, like the tipping point, maintains the un-predictability of factors contributing to an outcome. For Jeanlin may be seen as one of the strong, a survivor, and the Gregoires the weak and doomed.

Emphasising the numerous factors at play, the mining communities are served by a surrounding network of factories producing mining equipment and by the shops and bars upon which the communities depend. This world of hierarchies, symbiosis, interconnectedness, the growing influence of scientism, the physical network of the constituent parts of the industry, anarchy, all evoke multiple agents. One may also summarise this as describing the evolutionary order of which Darwin had sought to make sense. Darwin’s theories, as directly and indirectly presented in *Germinal*, converge not as a simplistic fight for survival resulting in a steady evolutionary progression, but as Darwin intended: a complex path of extinction and development similar in fact to capitalism. Darwin is directly referenced several times in *Germinal* and is another intersecting concept givingfurther weight to that of the tipping point in this thesis. Darwin figures sufficiently large on the French radical horizon to be required reading for such as Étienne. However, his knowledge appears similar to elements of the tipping point, in that his knowledge does not constitute a linear narrative but is a partial, fragmentary process, an accretion of Marxism and Darwinism.

Étienne’s reading of Darwin also has implications for the relationship between literature and determinism. Darwin’s theory of natural selection had been appropriated by many to justify their reactionary ‘survival of the fittest’ philosophy. However, this phrase was not Darwin’s but Herbert Spencer’s.[[141]](#footnote-141) Nevertheless, its appropriation coloured the reception of Darwin’s theory as suggested in *Germinal*: ‘Souvarine s’emporta, se répandit sur la bêtise des socialistes qui acceptent Darwin, […] dont la fameuse sélection n’était bonne que pour des philosophes aristocrats’ (G, III, 1523-4). Finally, in the last three pages of *Germinal*, Étienne ponders the broader issues of evolutionary struggle:

Darwin, avait-il donc raison, le monde ne serait-il qu’une bataille, les forts mangeant les faibles, pour la beauté et la continuité de l’espèce? Cette question le troublait, bien qu’il tranchât, en homme content de sa science. Mais une idée dissipa ses doutes, l’enchanta, celle de reprendre son explication ancienne de la théorie […] S’il fallait qu’une classe fût mangée, n’était-ce pas le peuple vivace, neuf encore, qui mangerait la bourgeoisie épuisée de jouissance? Du sang nouveau ferait la société nouvelle’ (G, III, 1589).

The approaches of Souvarine and Étienne are antithetical. Souvarine dismisses Darwinism as fit only for academics and implicitly a theory that cannot rationalise the anarchic act, whilst Étienne is troubled momentarily to discover that his socialist beliefs are no different to those of Darwin; that the strong will triumph over the weak. Both quotations implicitly suggest Zola’s acknowledgement of the irrelevance of attempting to impose any pre-determined plan on existence. Life will constantly renew and those with the life force to make their way in it may, or may not, succeed, recalling once again the possibility of regression as well as precipitate change, denying any pre-determination in a reality which is impossible to capture.

Thus, unlike Zola’s *Le Ventre de Paris*,[[142]](#footnote-142) where the one-sided struggle takes place between the fat and the thin, *Germinal* is far more complex, with the rich devouring the less rich and the thin pursuing their individual struggles for survival. Whilst Zola has not described it as such, the struggle of the mining community applies – to a qualified extent - Darwinian evolution to capitalism. Deneulin, the sympathetically-portrayed mine owner, who despairs at the precariousness of the miner’s lives as well as his own, sees his mine damaged beyond repair by the same miners he had hitherto treated as fairly as he could afford to. Rather unconvincingly, M. Hennebeau, as mentioned earlier, seemingly distraught at his wife’s affair, immediately discovers reserves of strength to pursue the acquisition of Deneulin’s mine.

Jeanlin is the most anomalous character in relation to the theoscientific interpretation preferred by many of Zola’s French scientist contemporaries.[[143]](#footnote-143) In Darwinian terms, he is a paradox, the demonic runt of the family yet possessing a strong survival instinct. He is described as monkey-like in his features and possessing a wretched physique. The reference to his being monkey-like being particularly familiar to Zola’s readers, given Darwin’s assertion that humans had descended from monkeys. In the early scene in which the Maheu family are intimately described waking and readying themselves to leave for work, Jeanlin, resisting Catherine’s attempts to get him out of bed, simply bites her breast. He appears beyond redemption and in the process of reverting to the status of beast. His rejection of the communal instincts of the miners and his predatory behaviour is emphasised by Zola giving him a lair deep in the disused Réquillart mine. It can be no coincidence that shortly after describing this den, Zola has Étienne make the first of the two references to the title of the novel: ‘Une armée poussait des profondeurs des fosses, une moisson de citoyens dont la semence germait et ferait éclater la terre, un jour de grand soleil’(G, III, 1383). That army might therefore consist of Jeanlins and not heroic, Marxist miners, subverting the narrative Étienne constructs.

Zola has raised sufficient doubt, at this point of the novel, as to Étienne’s ability to read events, that the resulting nature of the avenging army is in question. An army of Jeanlins is implied by Souvarine, which will lead ‘A la commune primitive et sans forme, à un monde nouveau, au recommencement de tout […] Le brigand est le vrai héros, le vengeur populaire, le révolutionnaire en action, sans phrases puisées dans les livres’(G, III, 1343). This aligns with Brian Nelson’s view that for Zola, ‘Progress […] cannot be imagined without a form of barely contained primitive regression’.[[144]](#footnote-144) Furthermore, the idea of ‘barely contained’ movement appears to assume that events will conform to some formula delivering progress. There are few grounds for optimism in *Germinal*.

An instinctive struggle for survival occurs throughout the Montsou community. The brutish instincts of Jeanlin are little different to those of the competing mine owners and the capitalist instincts of the owners are seen to be acquired in a perverted form by Jeanlin in his Réquillart hoard of stolen or extorted goods. Souvarine’s ‘brigand’ is clearly to be found in all classes, and Souvarine’s schematic for radical change is, in its simplistic linearity, its conventional narrative, as un-nuanced and doomed as that of Marxism. Until the improved welfare of the miners is in the interests of such as Hennebeau’s employers, there appears little room for optimism, with the process of change remaining in an evolutionary cul de sac.

Most telling, in evolutionary terms, is Jeanlin’s indifference to the fate of his starving family in failing to bring back dandelion leaves or use the money he forces from his child accomplices, Bébert and Lydie. This transgression of social order results in the death of his angelic, handicapped sister, Alzire, in a brutal application of Darwin’s natural order of selection. Yet, loyalty to one’s family in *le coron* is a supposed given. However, the level of adultery amongst the miners matches that of the bourgeoisie and exposes here another divergence from the idea of the miners as a uniform mass that will find their collective compromise between the competing forces of capitalism and Marxism, neither of which provide for them. Jeanlin is a microcosm, an example of the free agent who will always operate to divert any preconceived trajectory of change. Jeanlin acts, not as a positive, disinterested force for change, but one of disruption and self-interest.

This failure of competing ideologies extends to that of the radicals for Étienne is as lost as Souvarine. Just as the anarchist’s ‘il fallait que l’homme disparut’ (G, III, 1524) is incomprehensible, the reader does not recognise a homogenised, pliant proletariat, ready to deliver Étienne’s textbook *dénouement*. An aberrant army of Jeanlins, whose interests and actions could certainly not be contained and directed, would not further the interests of the miners. Neither Souvarine nor Étienne are able to convey a sufficiently clear and authoritative message that would qualify them as agents of change. Zola is possibly once again subtly juxtaposing opposing images to avoid a simplistic conclusion, demonstrating the folly of an undeliverable political theory which is incapable of embracing the totality of competing components driving change. To accentuate the susceptibility of such theories to diversion, Jeanlin’s animal-like features emphasise his indifference to any idea other than his own survival. He has ‘son masque de singe blafard et crépu, troué de ses yeux verts’ (G, III, 1145) or, as Étienne watches with horror as Jeanlin stalks and murders the solitary sentry guarding le Voreux: ‘son échine de fouine, longue et désossée’ (G, III, 1491). Zola is contemporaneous with physiognomists for whom Jeanlin’s face would hold further significance. His undeveloped body is wasted with hardship and malnutrition; his limbs have ‘des articulations énormes, grossies par des scrofules’ (G, III, 1145). Whilst partly inherited, his physique is also the product of other contributing factors. For E. D. Mackerness,[[145]](#footnote-145) Jeanlin represents a physical regression, one combined with acute survival instincts and energy. This combined reversion and advancement also strongly supports the idea of change in this thesis.

*Germinal* suggests that it is not the proletariat that would lift itself out of the inequalities and alienation that had been aggravated by the excesses of the Second Empire. It is significant in this respect that it is Négrel and not Zacharie who succeeds in rescuing Étienne. The leadership Zola looked to were paternalistic figures such as Octave Mouret of *Au Bonheur des dames*, Luc Froment whose eerily benevolent dictatorship in *Travail* transforms the world or even the son of the eponymous doctor in *Le Docteur Pascal*: the ‘messie que le prochain siècle attendait’.[[146]](#footnote-146) This imagined élite, technocratic government, one based upon such far from unequivocally positive role models would espouse the ‘Naturalist spirit’,[[147]](#footnote-147) applying scientific method. André Wurmser[[148]](#footnote-148)challenges Zola’s declarations on scientific naturalism and method selecting statements by Zola such as: ‘La science seule est révolutionnaire’, ‘Voir c’est savoir’ and ‘Je dis ce que je vois, je verbalise simplement’,[[149]](#footnote-149) implying instead that the organisation of society is the root of inequalities and not heredity, alcoholism, or tuberculosis. That ‘l’opposition des actionnaires à la Grégoire et des ouvriers à la Maheu demeure, identique et plutôt aggravé, et les crises économiques demeurent, assurément aggravés, et dont les Maheu continuent de faire les frais’.[[150]](#footnote-150) The energy that Zola so clearly admires, even in the creative destruction of such as Saccard in *L’Argent*,reveals a liberal interpretation of Darwin’s theory in its application to capitalism. This is evidenced at the end of that novel in the review of the negative and positive impacts of Saccard’s enterprises. The dead and ruined investors resulting from Saccard’s speculation are set off against the vast, industrious regions that have been created. In his admiration for the destructive energy of Saccard, Zola contradictorily recognises the far from linear trajectory of evolution whilst also appearing to accept its perfecting destiny.

The received, linear interpretation of Darwin, prevalent amongst some French scientists,[[151]](#footnote-151) and involving the eventual achievement of God’s perfected Man, is therefore ambiguously applied by Zola in his recognition of backward movement alternating with progress. The energy Zola admires in certain characters is expressed within a capitalist context. Yet *Germinal* witnesses the almost abusive, unfettered operation of capitalism. In *Germinal* it is the issue of the balance between the life force and humanity rather than competing theories that implicitly threatens future civil strife. Marxism, in theorising a violent path to revolution, does not anticipate the convergence of this energy and moderating humanity. There is no possibility of regression in the Marxist grand narrative. However, in *Germinal* the fallibility of the Marxist trajectory when subjected to the intervention of individuals and contingency is revealed.

The course of change within *Germinal* is complex. Zola’s use of *style indirect libre* contributes to this in rendering the narrative voice elusive. In the final pages of the novel, Étienne’s musing that ‘Son education était finie’ (G, III, 1588)[[152]](#footnote-152) is unjustified in its misplaced self-assurance, and refers the reader to Étienne’s partial understanding of his texts on Darwin and Marx. Étienne’s education is unfinished for ‘Sa raison mûrisait’ (G, III, 1590). Grand narratives, whether fully learnt or not, whether religious or political, are shown to be irrelevant to the struggle for survival of the miners.

Survival linked to the theme of consumption runs throughout the novel. At one point Étienne ponders the imbalance in this struggle, on learning of the company forcing Deneulin to sell his mine to them, he feels the ‘repris de découragement devant la puissance invincible des gros capitaux, si forts dans la bataille, qu’ils s’engraissaient de la défaite en mangeant les cadavres des petits, tombés à leur côté’ (G, III, 1464). Continuing the image of a consuming capitalism, the miners are frequently described as *bête, bêtail*, or meat[[153]](#footnote-153) and are visited by curious bourgeois and scrutinised as beasts in a farm. They represent so much food, rather than the germinating ‘armée noire’ (G, III, 1591). At best, they are condescended to by the likes of the Grégoire, as simple people, who need to be protected from themselves ‘Ainsi, ils ne donnaient jamais d’argent, jamais! pas dix sous, car c’était un fait connu, dès qu’un pauvre avait deux sous, il les buvait’ (G, III, 1210). The solidarity that provides the miners with the opportunity to shake the owners is soon dissipated. They are composite and vacillating. Workers imperil hundreds of fellow workers in cutting the cables in Deneulin’s mine, Jeanlin murders the young Breton soldier and, in the final act of fratricide, Souvarine sabotages le Voreux. The impulse to survive provokes acts of destruction diverging to differing degrees from the binary struggle of owner and worker, and to which all parties must respond and adapt.

These elements of chance, survival and evolution recur in the absorption of Deneulin’s pit by the *Compagnie*. Continuing the theme of the devouring of the weak, the reader may see an example in the strange connection Zola establishes between Bonnemort and the Grégoire’s daughter, Cécile. The same awakening from a lifelong resignation ‘d’un demi siècle’ (G, III, 1447), startles Bonnemort, deranged with hunger, into an attempt upon Cécile’s life when she is momentarily caught up in the rampaging mob of miners. The crossing of these seeming opposites refers the reader not only to the operation of contingency but also to both characters representing victims of a capitalist system that requires resignation in both Bonnemort to his servitude and in bourgeois daughters to their being matched to eligible men. Zola presents implicit parallels of the impact of capitalism within a changing reality in which all characters are subject to too many intersecting components of capitalism to be designated as simply exploiter and exploited.

Zola’s re-assessment of victim and predator in Darwin’s struggle serves, as does Jeanlin, to unsettle and disrupt. As with Souvarine, there is an unpredictability which undermines the progress of events towards any supposed definitive change. However, capitalism shares that characteristic with literature in the ability to constantly re-invent itself. Steadman Jones states that in relation to capitalism, Marx:

emphasized its inherent tendency to invent new needs and the means to satisfy them, its subversion of all inherited cultural practices and beliefs, its disregard of all boundaries, whether sacred or secular, its destabilization of every hallowed hierarchy, whether of ruler and ruled, man and woman or parent and child, its turning of everything into an object for sale.[[154]](#footnote-154)

Yet Zola’s representation of these aspects of capitalism is harnessed to his humanitarian instincts and the recognition that those who make possible a return on the capitalist’s investment might also soon bring the whole system down upon the heads of all. This is implied in his suggestion in *Germinal* of the consequences if the bourgeoisie do not recognise their own part in the exploitation of their fellow citizens. Zola’s vengeful germinating army of the final lines of the novel, whilst problematic, appears to encapsulate this warning. However, Zola does not attempt to answer Deneulin’s dilemma as to how to better reward his workers whilst remaining competitive. The inference is that there is no answer and that Deneulin must lose his mine and his workers their livelihoods. Capitalism and Darwinism are seen, once again, to be closely related with the writer struggling to objectively represent the resulting complexity within exponential economic change.

## CONCLUSION

The theories of Darwin and Marx in *Germinal* are approached by Zola in a manner consistent with the tipping point metaphor set out in this thesis. Both grand narratives address change via evolution and revolution respectively. *Germinal* demonstrates that it is unlikely that Marxist dialectic can deliver an imprecisely defined class to an equally imprecise goal within a movement which Zola views to already ‘se diviser, s’émietter dans des querelles intérieures’ (G, III, 1589). *Germinal* reveals an instinctive mistrust for simplistic dénouements such as those promised by Marxism.

Zola’s approach to Darwin is complex. Whilst seemingly adopting his contemporaries’ appropriation of Darwin into their theoscientific idea of an ordained linear route to perfection with the coming generations of miners evolving into a victorious race, Zola recognises that evolution has its own, multiple trajectory that may even regress. Capitalism, the unseen protagonist in *Germinal*, is linked to both evolution and revolution. Marx recognised characteristics in capitalism similar to those constituting change explored in this thesis and Zola similarly identifies in it a powerful, inchoate, impersonal process, with no defined end, contributing to unforeseeable, unrecognized evolving factors, producing conditions favourable to fundamental change. Zola recognises the limitations of fiction in its capacity to represent the process of change in emulating the processes proposed in the tipping point.

The next chapter explores the second work of the first pairing, a work which discusses the limits of fictional representation. If *Germinal* explores the theories of Darwinism and Marxism, the apparent reference to Marxist struggle in the title to *Extension du domaine de la lutte* instead appears to refer to a Darwinian fight for survival. This play on Marxist theory is a foretaste of the umdermining in *Extension* of the ability of fiction to deliver grand narratives. Houellebecq’s *Extension* relates the experience of work and sexual relationships in a neoliberal society and examines fictional representation of that society in a period of rapid development. The narrator will propose his own theory as to the impact of neoliberalism on an individual’s sex life, while undermining that theory. In the narrator’s search for a conclusivity which is ultimately lacking, Houellebecq may refer to a further struggle: a yearning for fiction to produce conclusions and a perceived failure to do so.

# CHAPTER THREE THE TIPPING POINT: *EXTENSION DU DOMAINE DE LA LUTTE* AND LATE CAPITALISM IN PROCESS, WORKING, LOVING AND WRITING

## INTRODUCTION

Some of Houellebecq’s novels have attracted accusations that he is a writer of ‘romans à thèse’.[[155]](#footnote-155) The Marxist resonances of the title to *Extension* might encourage such an assumption. Yet *Extension*, which has escaped the same degree of criticism as, for example, *Les Particules*, is the one novel in which the unreliable narrator explicitly proposes a theory, or ‘système de différenciation’ (EDL, 100).[[156]](#footnote-156) This ‘system’, presented in full below, proposes that sexual capital is as real and distinguishing as that of material and that, in effect, these dual economies, founded on similar principles, now dominate society. In *Interventions*, Houellebecq’s collection of essays, interviews and poetry which followed *Extension*, a similar theory is offered. In *Interventions* Houellebecq argues that literature, which ‘s’arrange de tout, s’accomode de tout, fouille parmi l’ordures, lèche les plaies du malheur’ (I, 79-80) provides a means of escape, albeit brief, from today’s tide of marketing material (I, 80). Love and hope are similar qualifications to the theory articulated in *Extension* and will be seen to constitute contingencies and components within Houellebecq’s depiction of the evolution of late capitalism.

This chapter will address how *Extension* highlights dominant influences of late capitalism which share characteristics of the tipping point. In doing so, *Extension* will be shown to describe elements of change whilst also reflecting the lack of linearity with which it may unfold, comprising multiple intersecting and diverging components and contributors, as well as the possibility of both progress and regression. A further factor that complicates any understanding of the theory Houellebecq stages in *Extension* is the tension between its apparent determinism and the irony with which it may be framed. This chapter will therefore examine how, in having the narrator propose a theory, Houellebecq may be viewed as both putting forward a totalizing theory suggesting a point of irreversible change, whilst simultaneously demonstrating the impossibility of doing so within fiction. Such an alignment of apparently contradictory elements invites interpretation through a close reading of *Extension* and the comprehension of a trajectory of change as a contingent, ambiguous process.

Following a plot summary and literary review, the chapter will first examine the theory of the parallel sexual and material economies. The second section will examine the significance of the ‘lutte’ in the title, specifically its Marxist resonances as the novel examines what are represented as the struggles endemic in late capitalism. However, the ‘lutte’ will be revealed to be an ironic reference to Marxist struggle in that the struggle described in the narrator’s central theory is Darwinian in nature, pitting individual against individual in the pursuit of sex. The chapter will then concentrate upon the narrator-writer’s *fictions animalières*[[157]](#footnote-157) and what they may say on the role of fiction, concluding with a review of the agency of the writer and the challenges facing the reader.

## THE FACTS ACCORDING TO THE NARRATOR

Unusually for a novel, the nameless protagonist of *Extension* is a middle manager in an IT[[158]](#footnote-158) company servicing a government department. The narrator is also a writer of animal fictions and presents a number of these stories within the narrative. Unlike their traditional predecessors, these provide no moral. The fictions occur at three points in the novel presenting situations in which contingencies operate and which serve to convey the action in one of many possible directions. Writing proves ineffective for the narrator as an antedote to the ills he implicitly associates with neoliberalism, amongst which are the promise of desires which are never realised, the emergence of a sexual market that has assumed the principal economic characteristics of the material economy and a consequent breakdown in the ability to form loving relationships. The middle-aged, middle-class narrator relates his mental deterioration which he attributes in part to a traumatic end to a relationship. Work relationships rarely amount to more than banalities exchanged around the drinks machine.

The narrator goes on a business trip with a colleague named Tisserand who is physically unattractive and sexually charmless yet driven by an unfulfilled desire for a relationship with a woman. The narrator, who claims to have a similar lack of success with women, falls seriously ill during the assignment, is hospitalised, and is touched by Tisserand’s attentiveness which serves to draw the narrator and Tisserand closer. Over the course of two conversations, Tisserand confides to the narrator that he has never had a sexual relationship and despairs at ever doing so. The protagonist ponders his colleague’s fate and determination to find a sexual relationship ‘*et en plus avec de l’amour*’, as Tisserand had confided (EDL, 99). Shortly after this revelation the narrator considers the fate of those such as Tisserand and delivers his theory as to the extension of the financial economy into the sexual, creating dual economies, following the ‘loi du marché’ (EDL, 100). The narrator is apparently no longer in the sexual ‘lutte’ and shows little evidence of participating in that of the material having ‘une certaine lassitude à l’égard des voitures, et des choses de ce monde (EDL, 8). Earlier in the novel he shows little concern at having mislayed his car, which he apparently never finds.

After another predictable failure at a nightclub, Tisserand is persuaded by the inebriated narrator that, despite his hopeless position in the sexual market, he still possesses the ability to take the lives of the women who reject him. With the vague intention of carrying out this advice, Tisserand follows an attractive couple who have just met and who have left the club, apparently to have sex. Racism is also an implied motivation as the man is black. This venture also ends, without violence, in miserable failure for Tisserand. On returning to work the narrator learns of Tisserand’s death in a car accident the night after the nightclub débâcle.

After Tisserand’s death, the narrator’s own mental decline appears to accelerate. He leaves his job and accepts psychotherapy. He rails at the junk status of psychoanalysis, compounded, it is inferred, by the profession having been subsumed into the sexual economy, evidenced in its seeking to restore him to the sexual market. He leaves the clinic and journeys to a remote region, proclaiming that he is seeking a definitive change.

The novel ends with the narrator in a remote rural region attempting to find some sort of resolution: ‘La richesse de ce qui va mourir en moi est absolument prodigieuse, je n’ai pas à rougir de moi-même; j’aurai essayé’ (EDL, 155) and believes he is to join a ghost of himself who inhabits a theoretical paradise in a parallel universe, only to conclude that the sublime fusion will not take place. The narrator recognises the absence of the possibility of change. The only certainty, contained in the very last words of the novel, occurs when the narrator advises the reader of the time of day and yet it is momentary, arbitrary and never ending in its circularity. For the second time in the novel, a chapter’s final words record the time.[[159]](#footnote-159)

## DETERMINISM AMBIGUITY AND CRITICISM

This thesis has sought to examine critics who address Houellebecq’s representation of change and its apprehension.Ruth Cruickshank addresses Houellebecq’s manipulation of crises.[[160]](#footnote-160) Cruickshank emphasises the prominence of unfulfilled desire driven by advertising and marketing in *Extension* and that as part of that market the pseudo-science of psychology fails to restore late capitalism’s casualties. The narrator’s claims of truth in *Extension*, Cruickshank asserts, ‘emphasize[s] the contingency of meaning and the fallibility of representational practice, immediately undermining its own sense-making claims’.[[161]](#footnote-161) Guillaume Bridet considers Houellebecq to render ambiguous a seemingly reactionary ideology,[[162]](#footnote-162) a view shared by Robert Dion and Elizabeth Haghebaert.[[163]](#footnote-163) Douglas Morrey argues Houellebecq takes a detached, anthropological view of society.[[164]](#footnote-164) However, this thesis considers that a scientific approach assumes the repeatability and measurability of experiments and this does not appear to be supported by the confluence of multiple intersecting and diverging components within *Extension*.

Sandrine Schianno-Bennis draws parallels between Houellebecq and Zola.[[165]](#footnote-165) She refers to Houellebecq’s adoption of Schopenhauer’s intense pessimism and paraphrases Zola’s opinion that to do so was ‘vouloir se cantonner à nier toute certitude’.[[166]](#footnote-166) Such a lack of certainty implicitly calls into question the narrator’s theory of the dual sexual and material economies. Schianno-Bennis also refers to the belief of Zola and other nineteenth-century intellectuals that, in the absence of religion, humanity would devote itself ‘à l’assouvisement exclusif de ses ambitions et de ses appétits’.[[167]](#footnote-167)

In addressing the theory of the dual economies in *Extension*,Carole Sweeney discusses how ‘under neoliberal capitalism, the dynamics of reification penetrate more fully into the interiority of the subject so that all human life becomes incorporated into the incalculable field of rationalization and totalization’.[[168]](#footnote-168) She refers to Slavoj Žižek’s argument that:

Unlike liberalism’s more clearly demarcated division between the public and the private, work and leisure, self and state, the sphere of activity of neoliberal capitalism has no such obviously defined beginnings and ends […] its topography […] emerges out of the ‘imploded borders’ of the formerly liberal world and is made up of ‘blurred boundaries that fold into one another’ in a psycho-economic landscape in which ‘…time accelerates, space collapses’.[[169]](#footnote-169)

This passage accords closely with the theory of the dual economies in *Extension*,discussed below,in proposing the inseperability of neoliberalism and the individual’s existence. The reference to a lack of beginnings and ends is a characteristic of the concept in this thesis. Sweeney does not however refer to the irony within the title *Extension* *du domaine de la lutte* in that the extended struggle does not seek to overthrow the bourgeoisie, has no other revolutionary purpose and recognises that Marxism has indeed failed to prevent the extention of capitalism to the sexual existence of everyone.

Mads Anders Baggesgaard[[170]](#footnote-170) explores what he terms the honesty of Houellebecq’s fiction and alleged deliberate sewing of ambiguity. Baggesgaard sees this exemplified in the use of ‘en fait’ in the opening scene of *Extension*, in which the protagonist eavesdrops on the conversation of two female colleagues at a party. Intersecting with the contingency inherent in the understanding of the tipping point in this thesis, Baggesgaard describes Houellebecq’s fiction as an attempt at honesty which demonstrates that ‘no discourse has priority on the truth’.[[171]](#footnote-171) Baggesgaard also anticipates a key statement in *La Carte et le territoire*[[172]](#footnote-172)in arguing that in *Extension* Houellebecq ‘creates complex linguistic structures through the mere juxtaposition of basic, simplistic descriptions’.[[173]](#footnote-173) One such simplistic description relates to ‘l’extension du domaine de la lutte’ (EDL, 100), which will be examined next.

## THE THEORY OF THE DUAL ECONOMIES

The theory of the dual economies in *Extension* (1994) intersects with that articulated in the subsequent collection of essays and poems, *Interventions* (1998),in that individuals have a ‘valeur d’échange’ in both the economic and sexual markets (I, 65). In *Interventions*,the theory is proposed slightly differently in the 1997 essay ‘Approches du Désarroi’ (I, 57-80). The essay is dedicated to both art and literature and how the writer struggles to represent a world subject to ‘La logique du supermarché’ where ‘la représentation a perdu toute innocence’ (I, 72) faced with the encroachment of neoliberalism upon our ability for independent thought. The article asserts that consumers within the late capitalist market have been rendered incapable of exercising their will in the pursuit of a single desire. The ‘déterminations externes - nous dirons *publicitaires* au sens large’ (I, 72), are produced by the marketing and advertising machines of late capitalism in their infinite adaptability of:

Niant toute notion d’éternité, se définissant elle-même comme processus de renouvellement permanent, la publicité vise à vaporiser le sujet pour le transformer en fantôme obéisant du devenir. Et cette participation épidermique, superficielle à la vie du monde est supposée prendre la place du désir d’être’ (I, 76).

The result of this is that: ‘La publicité échoue, les dépressions se multiplient, le déssaroi s’accentue’ (I, 76). The narrator suggests that permanent fulfilment within neoliberalism does not exist.

Houellebecq’s statements in *Interventions* are frequently as provocative, contradictory and unclear as those in *Extension*. At times, his address is direct: ‘il faudrait dès maintenant en prendre conscience sur un plan affectif. En tout cas, tant que nous resterons dans une vision mécaniste et individualiste du monde, nous mourrons’ (I, 48). This vague suggestion of a possible counter to the media led market occurs on the final page of ‘Approches du désarroi’. For Houellebecq, the students of 1968, who were in the vanguard of the wider movement for social reform, failed to separate desire from consumerism. It is this perceived interiorisation of the combined destructiveness of sexual and economic liberalism that Houellebecq represents in *Extension* and which places the struggle not within a Marxist ‘lutte’, one of class struggle, but to that between individuals within parallel material and sexual markets. A struggle closer to Darwinism rather than Marxism, exposing a further irony in Houellebecq’s allusion to Marxist ‘lutte’ within the title of *Extension*.

In *Extension,* the narrator suggests that ‘dans un système économique où le licenciement est prohibé, chacun réussit plus ou moins à trouver sa place’ (EDL, 100). In a society in which sexual freedom was restricted by religion and community: ‘chacun réussit plus ou moins à trouver son compagnon de lit’ (EDL, 100). However, he argues that late-capitalist sex lives have become subject to the same commercial rules of competition existing in the material economy, and that these rules have served to deprive the majority of any possibility of obtaining access to the sexual market. The narrator proceeds to deliver his theory which, given its importance within the novel, is presented here at length:

Décidément, me disais-je, dans nos sociétés, le sexe représente bel et bien un second système de différenciation, tout à fait indépendant de l’argent; et il se comporte comme un système de différenciation au moins aussi impitoyable.

Les effets de ces deux systèmes sont d’ailleurs strictement équivalents. Tout comme le libéralisme économique sans frein, et pour des raisons analogues, le libéralisme sexuel produit des phénomènes de *paupérisation absolue.* […] En système économique parfaitement libéral, certains accumulent des fortunes considérables; d’autres croupissent dans le chômage et la misère. En système sexuel parfaitement libéral, certains ont une vie érotique variée et excitante; d’autres sont réduits à la masturbation et la solitude. Le libéralisme économique, c’est l’extension du domaine de la lutte, son extension à tous les âges de la vie et à toutes les classes de la société. De même le libéralisme sexuel, c’est l’extension du domaine de la lutte, son extension à tous les âges de la vie et toutes les classes de la société […] le trouble et l’agitation sont considérables (EDL, 100).

The theory is delivered without the irony or undermining comments with which the narrator’s opinions are associated. Only the concluding, bathetic phrase ‘le trouble et l’agitaion sont considérables’ (EDL, 101) reminds the reader that this is a fiction.

*Extension* differs from *Interventions* in offering no suggested ‘pas de côté’ (I, 80) a brief moment during which the individual removes themselves from all advertising and marketing ‘de marquer un temps d’arrêt’ ‘une sorte de revolution froide’ (I, 80). Unlike *Interventions*, which proclaims that ‘La littérature s’arrange de tout, s’accomomode de tout, fouille parmi les ordures, lèche les plaies du malheur’ (I, 79), in *Extension* the narrator states that ‘L’écriture ne soulage guère. Elle retrace, elle délimite. Elle introduit un soupçon de cohérence, l’idée d’un réalisme’ (EDL, 14). He goes on to qualify this in a way that resonates strikingly with the notion of the tipping point in this thesis: ‘On patauge toujours dans un brouillard sanglant, mais il y a quelques repères. Le chaos n’est plus qu’à quelques mètres. Faible succès, en vérité’ (EDL, 14). The contingencies which occur, the lack of linearity and coherence in change, the unforeseeability of events all combine to frustrate a clear conclusion.

Houellebecq deliberately undermines the reliability of the narrator. Statements such as ‘Croyez-moi, je connais la vie’ (EDL, 42) are contradicted or brought into question by conflicting evidence such as his behaviour at the disco, which indirectly leads to the death of his colleague, Tisserand. The narrator is a casualty of the sexual struggle, one embittered by at least one traumatic past relationship. The narrator vomits as he lies behind a couch at a party, he is unable to form any connection with his colleagues and his apparent position as a loser in the sexual struggle suggests a narrative voice which is untrustworthy.

The narrator’s credibility is challenged via other techniques, such as his animal fictions which carry no clear message and a refusal to acknowledge any expectation that literature can change the world. Secondly, whilst the reader may have their doubts as to the narrator, the theory upon which *Extension* is based does appear consistent with late capitalist methodology and invites consideration. The assertion that the Global North exists in a dual material and sexual economy, where both are dominated by the laws of supply, demand and competition, is itself undermined. Grand narratives such as the narrator’s theory founder upon the impossibility of comprehending all the components acting upon the reality they attempt to summarise. Such a component is the possible agency of love which contains so many unquantifiable components and which exists outside the sexual struggle, contradicting the narrator’s theory.

*Extension*  contains few examples of the possibility of love. For instance, the middle-aged, working class couple at the hospital appear untouched by any dual material and sexual economy. Of the wife, the narrator remarks:‘elle avait l’air gentille; ils en étaient même touchants, de s’aimer comme ça, à cinquante ans passés’ (EDL, 78). However, for the narrator she appears to represent an anachronism in her fidelity and support, a relic which may have been eroded by post-war economic and sexual liberalism and therefore may not represent a factor undermining the theory of the dual econonmy. Other possible exceptions to the theory exist. Tisserand, whilst conscious of his losing battle in the sexual economy, refuses to abandon his search for someone with whom he can enjoy a sexual, even loving, relationship. The narrator is traumatised by the end of his troubled relationship with his girlfriend Véronique (EDL, 104-5). The narrator recognises the existence of love after having delivered a short story: ‘j’ai subrepticement introduit le concept d’*amour*,[[174]](#footnote-174)alors que mon argumentation se fondait jusqu’à présent sur la sexualité pure, Contradiction ? Incohérence ? Ha, ha ha !’ (EDL, 93). Shortly after this outburst the narrator states with an element of irony: ‘*Quoi qu’il en soit l’amour existe, puisqu’on peut observer les effets*. Voilà une phrase digne de Claude Bernard […] O savant inattaquable*’* (EDL, 94).[[175]](#footnote-175) Love and hope are therefore ambiguously acknowledged as components in late capitalist society. Their possible significance is not developed.

Houellebecq implies the existence of a pathology in the Global North, one which may be associated with the theory of the dual economies and that suggests a growing stagnation from the resulting lack of regeneration. Children are absent in *Extension* and death, suicide and illness dominate, suggesting a terminal decline. In an example of *Extension*’s microcosms, one suicide, that of Gérard Leverrier, combines the sexual and material economies in the narrator’s recounting of Leverrier’s contemplation, over several months, that the purchase of a single bed had served to confirm his failure in the sexual market, compelling him to end his life (EDL, 101-3). Leverrier removes himself from the material and sexual economies. Tisserand is implied to have killed himself in his car crash.

Houellebecq is provocative in presenting a theory which is undermined by the unreliability of the narrator. Similarly, as discussed below, the title of the novel is unreliable in ironically implying that it relates to an extension of the Marxist materialist struggle when the ‘lutte’ described in the narrator’s theory is one of Darwinian competition, in this case, for erotic success in the sexual economy. Furthermore, as also discussed below, not only are the aims of Marxism seen to fail in *Extension* but its failure is accentuated in neoliberal ideology being extended to the sexual lives of the individual. The following section will examine what further contradictions will emerge from that supposed Marxist context while examining how Houellebecq is staging the contingency of fiction under late capitalism.

## MARXISM AS A TOTALIZING THEORY: ALIENATION AND STRUGGLE

The ironic Marxist reference in the title *Extension* *du domaine de la lutte*, with its implicit reference to class struggle, extend into the novel’s neoliberal, post-Marxist content and are evident, in particular in the reference to *la lutte*.[[176]](#footnote-176) The title of *Extension* suggests that an objective is still being pursued. Yet, the narrator’s struggle as exposed in *Extension*,lacks the thesis, antithesis and synthesis of Marxist polemical writing such as that contained in the *The Communist Manifesto*:

A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism […] Where is the party in opposition that has not been decried as Communistic by its opponents in power? […] Two things result from this fact: I. Communism is already acknowledged by all European Powers to be itself a Power. II. It is high time that Communists should openly, in the face of the whole world, publish their views, their aims.[[177]](#footnote-177)

Jonathan Sperber sets out three types of alienation defined by Marx: Firstly, that the worker’s activity belongs to his employer not himself. Secondly, that the worker empties themselves into their products, thus the more products the worker produces, the less he can possess and the more he comes under the domination of the product of capitalism. Thirdly, that in working to survive and meet his own needs, his labour alienates man from his species, from society.[[178]](#footnote-178) However, Houellebecq explores forms of alienation differing from Marxist definitions such as his portrayal of the infiltration of neoliberalism into every aspect of life represented in the theory of the extension of the struggle.

*Extension* may be argued to depart even further from Marx in the ironic reference to the extention of the ‘lutte’, defined by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto* as ‘the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie’[[179]](#footnote-179) and ‘the antagonism of capital and wage labour’.[[180]](#footnote-180) While Houellebecq is concerned with the individual’s relationship with and possible resistance to neoliberalism, the irony in the title of *Extension* is attributable to its reference, not to economic class struggle, but to a Darwinian contest between individuals for sexual success, as encapsulated in the author’s theory of the dual economies. Houellebecq’s theory corresponds to the interpretation of a central aspect of Darwinian theory: the ‘survival of the fittest’ and its implication of individual competition.[[181]](#footnote-181) However, in a recent article in which Houellebecq asserts the decline of both European civilisation and that of the individual, he proposes that the Darwinian struggle may have evolved:

Je suis resté marqué par certaines idées qui diffèrent assez nettement de l’idée qu’on se fait généralement du darwinisme. Premièrement, la lutte pour la vie, le célèbre “*struggle for life*”, n’a pas l’importance qu’on lui accorde habituellement. Ce qui est réellement important, c’est la lutte pour la reproduction. Ce qui détermine la valeur génétique d’un individu, c’est un paramètre […]: le nombre de descendants qu’il produit.[[182]](#footnote-182)

While the struggle for sex and that for reproduction are of course similar, in the same article Houellebecq extends the interpretation of Darwin still further from the struggle of individuals to that of species:

Il y a par contre un troisième point, à mon avis le plus important, où la génétique des populations s’écarte complètement du darwinisme. C’est celui qui concerne non plus la compétition entre individus à l’intérieur d’une même espèce, mais la competition entre espèces.[[183]](#footnote-183)

Houellebecq’s central theory in *Extension* of the dual material and sexual economiesisbasedunambiguously upon the struggle between individuals. Therefore, in considering that the wider Darwinian struggle may take the form of competition between species, Houellebecq is undermining, possibly unintentionally, the grand narrative in *Extension*. The re-emphasising of the instability of theories proposed in fictions also references the characteristics of the tipping point in its constant divergence and reformation.

Houellebecq is not alone in questioning elements of Darwin’s theory. French philosophers and biologists continue to debate the epistemological lesson of his theory. Claude Debru aligns broadly with Houellebecq in asking whether the struggle is not one of individuals but of species.[[184]](#footnote-184) Debru refers to Alfred Wallace,[[185]](#footnote-185) who independently conceived the theory of evolution yet differed from Darwin’s concentration upon a struggle for survival between individual creatures, suggesting that it was one between populations. Furthermore, Debru cites the theory that the struggle is not that of variations preserving the dominant features of the ‘fittest’ but may entail regression towards a conglomeration of advantages to produce an average form.[[186]](#footnote-186) Debru refers to the work of Jean Gayon, who argues: ‘Darwin, en effet, a considéré une masse considerable de faits et les a interprétés dans le cadre d’une théorie causale où la causalité est conjecturée sans être déterminée’.[[187]](#footnote-187) Debru concludes that ‘la selection naturelle ‘n’est pas une “loi-source” mais plutôt le statut d’une “loi-conséquence”,[[188]](#footnote-188) meaning that Darwin constructed the tree of evolution but did not establish why there are variations to the theory and why there is no other explanation.

While a Darwinian sexual struggle is central to *Extension*, there remains a post-Marxist struggle to exist within a neoliberal society. In Houellebecq’s late capitalist society, workers in the new tertiary industries are well educated and well fed yet they experience alienation both in their employment and in their personal lives. They are pitched against each other in a sexual and material competition akin to Darwinian struggle, in its lacking any ideological reference and trajectory. Whilst Houellebecq does not use the image of individual atoms in *Extension* as he will in *Les Particules*, the lack of connection between the characters suggests the idea of an isolation of each individual, one that serves the advertising and marketing industries in late capitalism. The strugglein *Extension* is no longer characterisic of Marxist struggle. The ‘lutte’ which would have previously referred to that of the proletariat for social justice, now encapsulates a world in which neoliberal economic development has ‘freed’ sections of the Global North from the protection of the State. Reduced State economic interference has often resulted in increased material insecurity. Capitalism under which a form of sexual egalitarianism survived, has given way to neoliberalism and the parallel material and sexual economies. Unlike Marxism with its intended overthrow of the bourgeoisie, *Extension* is not confined to a single clear struggle with a defined end. Other, interlinked, unresolved issues emerge, such as the place of religion, marketing, and love (and will re-appear in various forms in Houellebecq’s subsequent novels). In terms of representing life within a neoliberal society, *Extension* refers not to Marxist revolution but to ongoing post-Marxist oppression. Whilst the title of *Extension* refers to a totalizing theory advocating a revolutionary end, the novel does not do likewise.

The agency of the writer is in question by the (postmodern) time of Houellebecq’s writing. *Extension* signals the erosion of human relations via their appropriation by market forces.[[189]](#footnote-189) This is evidenced, again with some irony, in the chapter entitled ‘Chaque jour est un nouveau jour’ which portrays late capitalism as a constant cycle of renewal and obsolesence as the dead consumer at the narrator’s local supermarket is packaged awaiting removal (EDL, 66-7).The ‘lutte’ within the material economy manifests itself in ‘une certaine dépression de vouloir chez l’homme contemporain (I, 72) in architecture, and in religious and family decline. The narrator describes the anonymous modern buildings along the promenade at a dreary Sables-d’Olonne. He imagines a family returning to their ‘Résidence des Boucaniers’ holiday apartment ‘avant d’aller bouffer leur escalope sauce pirate et que leur plus jeune fille aille se faire sauter dans une boîte du style « Au vieux cap-hornier »’, before concluding: ‘ça devenait un peu agaçant; mais je n’y pouvais rien’ (EDL, 108).

As is expected of a late twentieth-century writer, Houellebecq questions the role of literature as the vehicle of solutions. He challenges the possibility of successful revolution in presenting several apparent failures. For example, the narrator includes references to the execution of Robespierre, presents the death of the gorilla following its delivery of a ‘revolutionary’ speech (EDL, 126) and the failure of the 1968 student riots. Furthermore, in the narrator’s use of animals there is an implied reference to George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*[[190]](#footnote-190)in which any prospect of revolutionary salvation for many of the animals terminates in betrayal by their pig leaders.

Houellebecq portrays the neoliberal struggle as Darwinian, as a part of the fabric of the everyday, a role to which he appears to suggest fiction is suited. Rather than exploitation of the workforce, there is a sexual market and consequent struggle of the individual which has flourished in a hyper-mediatised society. Evidence of the ongoing process of the sexual struggle is revealed in the narrator’s observations of colleagues. There are occasions where the narrator admires, albeit with possible irony, Tisserand’s striving for something more than just sex. For example, when the narrator suggests he hire a prostitute, Tisserand responds: ‘Je sais que certains hommes peuvent avoir la même chose gratuitement, *et en plus avec de l’amour*. Je préfère essayer; pour l’instant, je préfère encore essayer’ (EDL, 99).[[191]](#footnote-191) In refusing to accept the expectations of the narrator and attempt to use his material wealth to obtain sex, Tisserand is perhaps demonstrating the ability of the individual to resist when confronted by the parallel economies. However, given Tisserand’s possible suicide soon afterwards in the wake of further sexual frustration, the likelihood of prolonged resistance appears to be low. Tisserand, his colleagues and the priest Jean-Pierre Buvet are left without bearings in an accelerating social evolution and a society in which, according to the narrator, all are experiencing unprecedented change (EDL, 148) but change which appears to be leading nowhere.

Houellebecq describes the impact of the commodication of society in the reducing significance of religion as a source of resistance. Sweeney’s ‘accelaration of the cognitive and affective reach of capitalism in its neoliberal form’[[192]](#footnote-192) is evidenced in the impact on Western religion. Both Houellebecq[[193]](#footnote-193) and Marx,[[194]](#footnote-194) she argues, regret the vulnerability of religion in the face of capitalism’s immediacy and materiality. Sweeney contends that whilst the promise of redemption has ceased to have an impact, the spirituality and social cohesion of religion is now missed. In the struggle at times of exponential change, the traditional sanctuaries of religion and family no longer offer support.

The narrator’s priest friend, Jean-Pierre Buvet confides that he has had a relationship with a nurse who had come to confess having administered a euthanasia injection to an elderly parishioner. The patient had been likely to occupy a bed for months at the nurse’s hospital. Such killings are described as routine by the nurse. The priest despairs at his own lack of spiritual strength declaring ‘Je ne sens plus la présence’ to which the narrator replies ‘Quelle présence ?’ (EDL, 140). Earlier in the novel, Houellebecq has the fallen priest paraphrase Marxist dialectics when speaking of the sexualisation of life through advertising and the wider media ‘Notre civilisation, dit-il, souffre d’épuisement vital […] nous avons besoin de nous répéter que la vie est merveilleuse et excitante ; et c’est bien entendu que nous en doutons un peu’ (EDL, 32). The priests solution is for the narrator to find God, ‘ou entamer une psychanalyse’ (EDL, 32).

In using the priest as the mouthpiece of both a materialist ideology (as discussed, psychology is seen by the narrator as a pillar of the duel economies) as well as of a failing religious totalizing narrative, Houellebecq implicitly accentuates the lack of success of such movements when based upon uncompromising narratives and promised clarity of resolution. The narrator of *Extension* remains incapable of achieving any transcendence. In his flight in the final pages of *Extension* to Saint-Cirgues he declares: ‘Je ressens ma peau comme une frontière, et le monde extérieur comme un écrasement. L’impression de séparation est totale; je suis désormais prisonnier en moi-même’ (EDL, 156). The narrator does not experience the turning point of religious redemption and is left with no grand narrative upon which to rely in his struggle.

Sweeney sees no optimism in *Extension*, recognising instead ‘an overwhelming lack of an outside, of any kind of elsewhere’.[[195]](#footnote-195) ‘Elsewhere’ here may refer to the sense of the possibility of change. Ultimately, any certainty is suggested to be as ephemeral as the time. The narrator’s statement in the final paragraph that he is now trapped (EDL, 156), accords with Sweeney’s view that Houellebecq’s novels ‘articulate the sense of entrapment in an infernal circuit of individualism and materialism, one that denies any possibility of an outside to the logic of neoliberal cultures’.[[196]](#footnote-196) The sense of there being no escape, which the narrator recognises in the final pages, confirms the earlier discussion in this chapter that Houellebecq’s ‘work narrates the futility of culture to offer anything other than a self-conscious reminder of the state of things.’[[197]](#footnote-197) *Extension* recognises the inability of fiction to comprehend or influence contingent contributors to the ongoing struggle.

The contemporary material and psycholgical state of the Global North is suggested by one of the narrator’s animal fictions, the *Dialogues d’une vache et d’une pouliche* (EDL, 9-11), which may be read as representing the material mollification of an otherwise commodifed populace, one defining itself by the brands it buys, one that obtains solace following the commandments of neoliberalism. Such people are described by the narrator during a visit to Rouen. He concludes his description of the shoppers in Rouen with a statement implicitly suggesting that whilst he believes himself to be different from them he admits that he has more in common with the commodified lives of these people than he can as yet express:

J’observe ensuite que tous ces gens semblent satisfaits d’eux-mêmes et de l’univers; c’est étonnant, voire un peu effrayant. Ils déambulent sobrement, arborant qui un sourire narquois, qui un air abruti […] essentiellement dévolu à la consommation, et par là même de contribuer au raffirmissement de leur être.

J’observe enfin que je me sens différent d’eux, sans pour autant pouvoir préciser la nature de cette différence (EDL, 69-70).

The narrator’s observation that he feels different may refer to his status as a writer. Yet a writer who is unable to describe how he might differ from the people he observes may be questioned as to his authority to represent other aspects of life, including a theory of the dual economies. The concluding sentence above is also an updating of the third class of Marxist alienation,[[198]](#footnote-198) which relates to work alienating the worker from his species and society whereby the ‘productive life appears only as a means for the satisfaction of needs, the need for the preservation of physical existence.’[[199]](#footnote-199) This alienation of the individual is manifested in the undercurrents of apathy and violence in Rouen’s shopping district, summed up in the ‘‘Fuck and destroy’’ T-shirts sported by young people (EDL, 70).

There is a post-Marxist theme throughout *Extension* suggesting that the pursuit of material status is unlikely to deliver a turning point in a person’s life: ‘l’intérêt que notre société feint d’éprouver pour l’érotisme (à travers la publicité, les magazines, les médias en général) est tout à fait factice’ (EDL, 31). The promised but systematically unattainable turning point to which the consumer vainly aspires, and which will supposedly deliver the advertised perfection upon the next ever recurring purchase or partner, provides no fulfilment. ‘La lutte continuait’ (EDL, 79).

The nature of unrealisable desire in a commodified existence is related in a short chapter in which the narrator witnesses the last minutes of a customer who has collapsed in a supermarket. The narrator vacillates between feigned distraction and close interest in what is taking place. He has sufficient composure to continue shopping, which he describes with some humour: ‘Mais j’hésitai quelque temps entre les bouteilles de vin, très diverses, offertes à la convoitise du public […] Par ailleurs, je n’aime pas le vin’ (EDL, 66). He then returns to his immediate context, dwelling upon the contingencies of life and death emphasised by the ironic supermarket jingle, reminding the reader of the ceaseless struggle: ‘‘*Nouvelles Galeries, aujourd’huiii…Chaque jour est un nouveau jour…*’’ (EDL, 66-7). One may therefore escape the struggle via death but the market continues inexorably to promise satisfaction and to encourage the individual to struggle to further their own material and sexual interests. The inevitable disappointment dictated by market cycles of replacement and upgrading leaves a contemporary mental state summarised by the narrator as ‘l’amertume’ (EDL, 148).

## CAN AN ‘EVERYMAN’ SPEAK FOR EVERYONE?

One form that Houellebecq’s implicit questioning of consumerism and the dual economies takes, within and beyond the workplace, is to have his narrator emulate the thoughts of a putative late-capitalist ‘everyman’, with an unexceptional occupation in which he earns an average amount. However, the narrator undermines his own theory through irony, juxtaposition; and microcosms illustrating the plight of colleagues. One such technique is the disputed extent to which Houellebecq may use framing of misogynistic and racist utterances by his characters.[[200]](#footnote-200)

The narrator’s fictions bring into question sense-making narratives, both ideological and scientific. The scenarios played out are those of the sexual and material economy. The equating of the gorilla with a couple who may or may not also be gorillas (EDL, 93-4), is reminiscent of modernist literature in the form of Kafka’s *Metamorphosis*[[201]](#footnote-201)and Orwell’s allegory, *Animal Farm*,[[202]](#footnote-202) in the latter’s use of animal figures representing *homo sapiens* traits. Unlike those writers, Houellebecq is not seeking to illuminate political oppression but the operation of the dual economies or political allegory such as in *Dialogues d’un chimpanzee et d’une cigogne* (EDL, 124-6). The fictions invite question via their quasi-scientific intertextual references. These serve to reveal the lack of sense-making in the narrator’s ‘fictions’ whilst evoking the intellectual and scientific inadequacy of the challenge to the impact of the dual economies. Unlike the fables of La Fontaine[[203]](#footnote-203) to which they gesture, his fables result in no conclusion, no meaning.

The first animal fiction features a cow and a filly,entitled ‘*Dialogues d’une vache et d’une pouliche*’. The narrator relates only ‘un extrait significatif’ (EDL, 9) of the story hinting that this is not fiction but an extract from a wider analysis. That this is only a partial representation invites question. It is not explained why the selected element was chosen.That it is presented in the guise of a fiction normally carrying a moral meaning refers us to the impossibility of fictional sense making based – inevitably - upon a selection of facts. The offered interest and possible meaning is not forthcoming. The blissfully simple existence of the Breton cow, normally devoted to grazing, is seasonally interrupted by the instinct to reproduce. This is satisfied, as the narrator ironically phrases it ‘au prix de certaines complications émotionelles’ (EDL, 10) via the syringe of artificial insemination, after which she returns to her original state of ‘méditation attentive’ (EDL, 10) The cow’s story, in which no dialogue actually take place, is concluded with the delivery of ‘un ravissant petit veau. Ce qui est, soit dit en passant, tout bénéfice pour l’éleveur’ (EDL, 10). The narrator confirms ‘Naturellement, l’éleveur symbolisait Dieu’ (EDL, 11). The sexual desire of the cow is unfulfilled. Her material contribution to the market is completed. No God is present and there is no moral to the fiction.

The filly of the fiction’s title receives the briefest mention. In an unusual piece of self-reflexivity the narrator directly promises her ‘dès le chapitre suivant la jouissance éternelle de nombreux étalons’ (EDL, 11). This contrasts with the sexual future of the cow whose fate is shared by ‘une délégation de brébis, formée en solidarité (EDL, 11). The ironic use of Marxist terminology to denote the struggle of animals within their sexual and material economy suggests that a human being should expect the same lack of satisfaction in their own commodified existence.

Whilst this ‘fiction’ contains references to neoliberalism and the sexual economy, the concluding sentence ‘Le Dieu mis en scène dans cette fiction brève n’était pas, on le voit, un Dieu de miséricorde’ (EDL, 11) raises the question of the writer-narrator in terms of trustworthiness, legitimacy and agency, recalling the novel’s opening scene of the narrator’s drunken ramblings at the office party. Via this introduction, the reader is forearmed to treat any theories offered thereafter with scepticism. The narrator will subsequently proceed to deliver the central theory of *Extension* in the knowledge that, ‘le pouvoir absolu, miraculeux, de la lecture’ (EDL, 14) will be in stark contrast to the near chaos and ineffectuality of writing. There will be no resolution, just as the resolution that the traditional fable offers is illusory.

The next animal fiction, entitled *Dialogues d’un teckel et d’un caniche* (EDL, 84-96)is narrated by one of the dogs reading from the notes found in their young master’s desk and, following a short anecdote relating to the awakening of adolescent desire, commences with the announcement that on the subject of desire ‘ma conviction s’est maintenant formée et il est temps de tout dire’ (EDL, 87). The narration then provides two examples. ‘Example numéro 1’, that of Françoise et François, an analysis showing the percentage of time the teenage couple show affection to each other in private and in the company of their schoolfriends and ‘Example numéro 2’ that of ‘Brigitte Bardot’ (EDL, 87) an ugly young woman upon whom the dog’s owner takes pity and befriends for a brief period. The Bardot fiction makes little pretence at the scientific objectivity suggested in her being assigned a case number. Brigitte will never find her ‘compagnon de lit’ the fiction concludes (EDL, 100). These examples of supposedly analytical writing fails to instruct, save to confirm the predictable failure of Brigitte in the dual economies. The conclusion of the two examples is declared to be that “*La sexualité est un système de hiérarchie sociale”* (EDL, 93). Houellebecq uses these ‘fictions’ to illustrate his theory whilst reminding the reader that his theory is itself part of a fiction and is to be treated with as much caution as any morality tale.

The third and final animal story, *Dialogues d’un chimpanzé et d’une cigogne*, is once more not a dialogue but a post-Marxist monologue from the mouth of a chimpanzee, the implication of which is to mock the notion of the delivery of any clear moral by any writer. It is a fiction ‘qui constituait en fait un pamphlet politique d’une rare violence’ referring us to the Marxist struggle (EDL, 124). It relates the fate of a chimpanzee captured by a group of storks. The chief stork receives the unsolicited discourse of the chimpanzee. The chimpanzee relates examples of deviation from those trajectories which might have been considered givens: the sperm which deviates from its path to the uterus; the migrating stork and Robespierre’s execution. The chimpanzee is relating the agony of Robespierre on the block of the guillotine when the narrator intervenes with : ‘Généralement, à ce stade, les chroniquers ajoutent: ‘‘La Révolution était finie.’’ C’est rigoureusement exact’ (EDL, 126). This statement is particularly relevant to this thesis, for there is not one sperm, stork, or revolutionary as this third fiction suggests, but millions, taking different trajectories and responding to their own compulsions and contingencies.

The chimpanzee’s speech refers to capitalism and by implication the Darwinian principles governing that economic system: ‘De tous les systèmes économiques et sociaux, le capitalisme est sans conteste le plus naturel. Ceci suffit déjà à indiquer qu’il devra être le pire’ (EDL, 124-5). Such theories, when spoken by animals, assume the moral simplicity of a fable. However, Houellebecq reminds the reader that all fiction is part of the neoliberal world. A world of competition in which both reader and writer are appropriated and in which moral simplicity has no place. Houellebecq takes the model of the fable and intersects with and diverges from it both to frustrate any preconceptions that the genre might create whilst challenging the reader to read carefully and question the sense-making claims of the fables and by extension, all fiction. Sense-making narratives are constantly undermined. The struggle of the novel’s title is recalled. The dominant theme of the animal fictions within *Extension* is one of rejection of sense making. The continuation of the struggle refered to in the title is that of finding a role for fiction.

## THE STRUGGLES OF THE WRITER AND READER

The narrator raises the question of the challenge the writer faces in portraying a world where, he argues, the novel is unsuited to a prevailing ‘indifférence’ and ‘néant’ (EDL, 42). This increasingly restricted subject matter available to the writer is explicitly stated in Chapter 3 where the narrator speaks fatalistically of his being a writer, that he would have preferred a life of reading but that such an existence had not been granted. He declares that to attain his philosophical end ‘il me faudra élaguer. Simplifier. Détruire un par un une foule de détails’ (EDL, 16).

The narrator sees the new media technologies developing: ‘Sous nos yeux, le monde s’uniformise; les moyens de télécommunication progressent; l’intérieur des appartements s’enrichit de nouveaux équipements. Les relations humaines deviennent progressivement impossibles, ce qui réduit d’autant la quantité d’anecdotes dont se compose une vie’ (EDL, 16). The implication that writing, aided by ‘le simple jeu du mouvement historique’ (EDL, 16) must become equally spare, suggests that the role of the writer is appropriated within and modified by the late capitalist system they seek to represent.

The narrator describes the individualism, the atomisation that surrounds him, all of which render unattainable the description that had been possible in the Romantic style of *Wuthering Heights*:[[204]](#footnote-204)

Cet effacement progressif des relations humaines n’est pas sans poser certains problèmes au roman. Comment en effet entreprendrait-on la narration de ces passions fougueuses, s’étalant sur plusieurs années, faisant parfois sentir leurs effets sur plusieurs générations? Nous sommes loin des *Hauts de Hurlevent*, c’est le moins qu’on puisse dire. La forme romanesque n’est pas conçue pour peindre l’indifférence, ni le néant; il faudrait inventer une articulation plus plate, plus concise et plus morne (EDL, 42).

Diminishing modern human relations described in ‘Cet effacement progressif’ are compared to ‘ces passions fougueuses, s’étalant sur plusieurs années’ of the Romantic novel, re-emphasising the implication of the writer in the society whose development they represent.

The writer has a further struggle; that of language. The narrator describes how, in writing, he has had to ‘élaguer’ ‘simplifier’ and ‘détruire’ (EDL, 16) to accomodate the changing nature of human relations in a world which is becoming uniform and where ‘Les relations humaines deviennent progressivement impossibles, ce qui réduit d’autant la quantité d’anecdotes dont se compose la vie’ (EDL, 16). Whilst the narrator never refers to economic systems, it is neoliberalism which is implicitly producing the globalization and uniformity to which he refers. The compromises forced upon the writer to accomodate the changing affective and cognitive qualities of the reader may be summarised, in short, as the demands of the market.

The narrator’s regularly offered certainty of opinion is consistently rendered doubtful by his own analysis. The structure of the novel is built upon a succession of microcosms of contemporary life and unbelieveable animal fictions which, leave the reader struggling to comprehend a message. This shifting meaning is apparently confirmed by the narrator on the final page, the first sentence representing a ‘point de bascule’:

En même temps je ressens, avec une impressionante violence, la possibilité de la joie. Depuis des années je marche aux côtés d’un phantom qui me ressemble, et qui vit dans un paradis théorique, en relation étroite avec le monde. J’ai longtemps cru qu’il m’appartenait de le rejoindre. C’est fini (EDL, 156).

What had been anticipated as a resolution ends in regression.

The final two pages of *Extension* provide a succession of contradictory statements by the narrator. Only a few lines before his declaration ‘C’est fini’ (EDL, 156) he states: ‘On a l’impression d’être au point de départ’ (EDL, 155). And a few lines later: ‘Et maintenant j’ai mal’ (EDL, 155-6). These abrupt statements in conjunction with interpretive multiplicity, frustrate any sense of conclusion: ‘Elle n’aura pas lieu, la fusion sublime; le but de la vie est manqué (EDL, 156). The narrator’s desire to escape his own self echoes the romantic ideal of transcendence, of passing beyond and is possibly another ironic, self-reflexive perspective on literary potential: that transcendence through writing is impossible.

Such contradictions notwithstanding, the reader discerns the theory of the extension of the struggle fuelling the novel. The various narrative techniques show an attempt at sense making and represent the operation of the ‘point de bascule’, the possibility of a trajectory reversing. This reversal may occur for, throughout all the apparent mistrust that the narrator breeds in undermining his own opinions, there is always stark, often physical evidence supporting his opinions which survive, be it the erection experienced by a colleague (EDL, 6) or the description of shoppers in Rouen. That particular city carries an intertextual self-reflexive reference to one of Houellebecq’s influences, Flaubert. In *Madame Bovary*,[[205]](#footnote-205) Flaubert staged the scene in which the heroine has a long carriage ride through Rouen in a curtained coach as she has sex with her lover.[[206]](#footnote-206) This hoped-for romantic encounter is shown by Flaubert, in his realist depiction, including swaying coach, to be tawdry and banal, the reality of the extension of the struggle. However, the reader may suspect the narrator in *Extension* to be untrustworthy and Houellebecq, in offering intertextual comparisons, to be bringing fiction into question.

In challenging both the role and fitness of fiction as a vehicle for totalizing theories, *Extension* dismisses other forms of totalizing theory, in particular, psychoanalysis. One of the narrator’s psychologists hears the narrator’s tirade about individualism, only to respond to the narrator with a question as to when he last had sexual relations. The psychologist’s confident response to the narrator’s admission that it was over two years ago, shows that she fails, as does the sexual economy, to differentiate between love and sex: ‘Ah! s’exclama-t-elle presque avec triomphe, vous voyez bien! Dans ces conditions, comment est-ce que vous voulez aimer la vie?’ (EDL, 148-9). The suggestion is that once returned to the sexual economy, the momentum of consumption will distract him. In another intertextual reference, the narrator, disgusted with this theory, dismisses the psychologist’s comments as coming either from Freud or Disney’s *Mickey-Parade*,[[207]](#footnote-207) but once again immediately undermines his stance by proposing the masculine-feminine cliché of Mars and Venus[[208]](#footnote-208) to describe the relationship of the sexes. In this manner, the narrator repeatedly attempts to divert the reader from a complex issue by bounding it with a throw away, ironic remark or distracting action, be it throwing up or losing his car. In doing so he sews ambiguity whilst once again challenging his reader to read more closely.

## CONCLUSION

*Extension* is part of a market, part of the late capitalist process which Houellebecq seeks to exploit. The theory expounded by the narrator of *Extension* and that laid out by Houellebecq in *Interventions*, whilst containing inconsistencies, intersect. Houellebecq may be viewed as putting forward a totalizing theory in *Extension* in the form of the dual economies. Houellebecq raises the question of the agency of the writer, whilst also showing the impossibility of definitive change. Such a convergence of apparently opposing trajectories brings into focus the understanding of the tipping point as a contingent, ambiguous process.

The evolution of neoliberalism is similarly recognized as an ongoing process with no foreseeable conclusion. The narrator rejects those narratives offering cures such as Marxism, religion and psychoanalysis. However, whilst the narrator’s theory may be frequently undermined by his own assertions, this does not result in its complete rejection. The pseudo-Marxist title of *Extension* is supported in part by the novel that follows in that whilst Marxism has been defeated by late capitalism there is a new struggle, albeit one without end. The narrator travels to remote countryside in the final lines of the novel seeking possible transcendence. No such conclusion is reached and he goes on to write his novel. Houellebecq implies that, in common with the narrator’s impotent gesture and as implacable as time, the ‘lutte’ will change nothing, and will continue in all its multiplicity and unforeseeability.

Having thus examined in this first pairing the responses of Zola and Houellebecq from both Marxist and Darwinist perspectives to the changes wrought by capitalism on sex, work and the appropriation of the writer, this thesis will now discuss how each novelist approaches the role of pure science, both as a possible model for fiction and as a constituent of capitalism. The first of this pairing is Zola’s *Au Bonheur* which, in its relating Mouret’s ‘grand magasin’ experiment, and the rational functioning of that establishment, reflects the objectivity central to Zola’s theory of naturalism, as defined in *Le Roman expérimental*.[[209]](#footnote-209)Despite Zola’s evident admiration for the efficiency of Mouret’s retail machine, Zola will be argued to recognise the limits of scientific rationality to respond to all the contingencies it confronts and, by extension and consistent with the tipping point, that of naturalist fiction to propose grand narratives.

# CHAPTER FOUR *AU BONHEUR DES DAMES*: WRITING SCIENCE IN THE MODE OF FAILURE

## INTRODUCTION

Consumerism and its impact has been the central theme of several studies[[210]](#footnote-210) of *Au Bonheur des dames*.[[211]](#footnote-211) However, it is Zola’s application of scientific principle and the apprehension and representation of change in *Au Bonheur* in the guise of naturalism that will be considered in this chapter. At first sight, the development of a department store in 1860s’Paris appears counter-intuitive to the consideration of science in fiction.[[212]](#footnote-212) Yet the novel will be seen to reveal a significant seam of Darwinism, along with arguable scientific method in the form of naturalism[[213]](#footnote-213) and proto-sciences, particularly that which will eventually be termed consumer science. This chapter will show these scientific elements to provide an insight into the nature and extent of Zola’s desire to both treat his novel as a laboratory and retain a high degree of control in the outcome of the experiment. This desire to dominate will be seen to parallel that of the proprietor of ‘Au Bonheur des dames’, Mouret, to conquer the Parisian market for ‘nouveautés’. These bids for dominance will be examined, for while Mouret’s formula of always staking his entire capital on the next sale is effective in the novel, historically it appears exaggerated. Such distortion of the plot in order to attempt the delivery of a pre-determined outcome is one of several elements that will contribute to undermining Zola’s representation of reality. Mouret’s own inability to control every aspect of the lives of his employees will be seen to parallel the limitations of Zola’s application of naturalism.

The optic of the tipping point in this thesis in all its contingency, plurality, forward and backward movement, elucidates patterns of commerce and consumption at the point in capitalism described in *Au Bonheur*. In the constant change in Mouret’s store of goods, sales and psychological strategies to lure and retain the customer, will figure aspects of consumerism. As will be witnessed in *Les Particlues*, consumerism offers but ultimately denies definitive conclusion. In *Au Bonheur*,Zola monitors the material and sexual responses to consumerism of a selection of characters. His observations foresee behaviours presaging the colonization of sexual existence in the consumerism of twentieth-century late capitalist society.[[214]](#footnote-214)

This chapter will consist of a plot summary followed by a literature review exploring Zola’s naturalism. An examination of *Le* *Roman expérimental* will follow, judging *Au Bonheur* against Zola’s own criteria and why science and scientific method had so influenced Zola. The chapter then proceeds to review the science contemporary to and in *Au Bonheur*, in particular Darwinism, recognising how it may be applied to consumerism whilst revealing a non-perfecting trajectory. The chapter will then address how Zola is describing the creation of what is here identified as the ‘proto-science’ of consumerism with *Au Bonheur* providing the supposed scientific demonstration. Zola’s application of psychology, his studies of individuals and massed shoppers, will form part of that assessment. The chapter concludes by positing that Zola’s manipulation of the plot and selectivity in applying his observations, together with the plurality of the theory in this thesis, illustrate the impossibility of fiction making sense of rapid, non-linear change whilst attempting the definitive outcomes required by science in the guise of naturalism.

## HOW THE PLOT OF *AU BONHEUR* DESCRIBES FEAR AND FAILURE

In what appears to be a conventional plot opening, the heroine of the novel, Denise Baudu, arrives destitute in Paris from the provinces, throwing herself and her two young brothers upon the mercy of their uncle Baudu and his family who run a drapers shop: *Au Vieil Elbeuf*.[[215]](#footnote-215) However, before they reach Baudu’s shop, Denise is mesmerised at the sight of ‘Au Bonheur des dames’, also a drapers, but enormous in comparison to the provincial equivalent in which she had worked and that of the Baudu’s, with which it competes. Denise obtains a position in ‘Au Bonheur des dames’ where she observes a culture in which the undermining of superiors and colleagues in order to obtain promotion or increase commission is the norm. The several references to struggle for survival in the department store allude to Darwin’s theories of evolution. References to evolutionary forces are present from the first pages and appear frequently.

Mouret, the mercurial sole proprietor of the store, is omnipresent. He directs all the major displays and sales strategies. His charm and energy disturb Denise, especially as he is known to seduce any shop girl he chooses whilst also maintaining a relationship with the socialite Henriette Desforges. Mouret displays his ability to manipulate the material desires of the bourgeois ladies at Mme Desforge’s soirées with the fashions and materials he intends to sell. Zola infuses these gatherings with sexual tension. The combination of the material and sexual in consumerism is a central theme in the novel.

Mme Desforge’s afternoons serve as a laboratory in which the reader is introduced to the consumers. The participants in these afternoons feed Zola’s experiment, providing a selection of temperaments that may be seen to respond differently to the allure of Mouret’s *grand magasin*. Mouret’s manipulation of his clientele via sexual allure and instinctive understanding of their desires, his mastery of scientific method, and a proven if high-risk stock turnover strategy, succeeds in convincing the financier baron Hartmann that his *grand magasin* is a sound investment for expansion. Mouret notices Denise and is attracted to her despite her provincial appearance and ways. However, Denise’s employment is short-lived in the hostile environment of the department store. She eventually takes employment with the kindly ex-colleague, Robineau, who has opened a drapery. Denise witnesses the spreading desperation of such small shopkeepers neighbouring the department storewhich, however, fails to blunt her conviction that logic and social happiness are one with the prosperity of the ‘grands magasins’. The decline of Baudu’s business becomes headlong and the small shopkeeper’s family tradition of marrying the apprentice to the owner’s daughter is under strain, as Baudu will not permit himself to pass the shop to the next generation on other than a sound business footing. In a further linking of the impact of *Au Bonheur* to the commodification of sex, Columban, the Baudu’s apprentice, has become secretly obsessed with a notoriously permissive and cynical assistant in the *grand magasin* opposite. Geneviève, the Baudu’s daughter, aware of Columban’s infatuation, declines in silent heartbreak. In parallel, the business of Baudu’s neighbour, Bourras, seller of handcrafted umbrellas, is equally doomed. He survives by letting his sordid rooms, often to prostitutes, again linking the impact of material consumption with sex. Bourras is fanatically opposed to Mouret’s store, the facade of which envelops Bourras’ decrepit establishment.

In a chance meeting in the Tuileries gardens, redolent of the romantic serendipity which Zola had supposedly renounced in his espousal of scientific method, Mouret and Denise converse. Her character, along with a growing mutual attraction and her business acumen, impress him and she returns to *Au Bonheur* at a higher position. Her sexual power over Mouret wins her respect in the department store. Denise struggles to control her own feelings for Mouret. Mme Desforges, conscious of her age and waning sexual equity seeks to humiliate Denise but succeeds only in having Mouret choose the younger woman. In revenge, Mme Desforges, lends her support and influence to a former colleague of Mouret, in creating a rival department store, which Hartmann secretly finances. Mouret’s own business and the fabric of the *grand magasin*, is expanding at a rate which leaves *les petits commerçants* stunned. A series of frauds and thefts organised by senior managers in *Au Bonheur* barely touches Mouret’s momentum, which builds towards the final grand sale.

In that sale, the highly respectable Mme Boves is apprehended in systematic shoplifting, having lost all fear of discovery in her illicit acquisition of luxury. The day’s takings exceed a million francs, the sum Mouret had always sought, yet without Denise he is indifferent to it. In the closing lines of the novel, in response to Mouret’s desperate re-affirmation of his love, Denise admits her own for him. The final five lines state that she would leave Paris for a month to curb gossip, to be then brought back to Paris ‘toute-puissante’ (AB, III, 803) for their marriage. The narrative and experiment are therefore curtailed in what appears to be a conventional manner, with the lovers planning their wedding. Yet the marriage is not described and does not seal the plot. Just as *Germinal*’s Étienne is described leaving for a far from certain future, so too the fate of Mouret and Denise is open and not dictated by Zola.

## CRITICAL RESPONSES TO ZOLA’S SCIENTIFIC DETERMINISM

Whilst there are several studies mentioned below which discuss the sciences individually in the context of *Au Bonheur* there are none that attempt to address the application of the scientific principles encapsulated in naturalism. However, there is a considerable body of work on Zola’s application of scientific development which is relevant to *Au Bonheur*, principally in the fields of physiology, psychology, social science, Darwinism and consumerism.

David Walker refers to Zola’s determination to deliver an optimistic view in *Au Bonheur* and not the ‘pessimistic vision normally associated with naturalism’[[216]](#footnote-216) citing Zola’s ‘plus de pessimisme, d’abord’.[[217]](#footnote-217) Zola’s resolution captures the artificiality and failure of scientific method in fiction. For scientific method can have no place for such subjective, unquantifiable and unprovable qualities as pessimism and optimism. Such comments highlight that the writer in his laboratory-office is subject to more influences than the physiologist. For example, Georg Lukács[[218]](#footnote-218) argues that Zola’s bourgeois values, influenced by the 1848 revolution, prevented him recognising the ‘sharpest contradictions inherent in bourgeois society’.[[219]](#footnote-219) Lukács suggests that Zola unconsciously avoids the more complex symptoms of society in applying his scientific method in merely diagnosing the ‘‘undesirable features’ of capitalism’.[[220]](#footnote-220)

Hemmings dismisses Zola’s theory of naturalism, as set out in the essay *Le Roman expérimental* (part of the eponymous volume of criticism). Implicitly referring to naturalism, he states that Zola was attracted to science as he struggled with ‘abstract ideas’. Of equal significance for the purposes of this thesis, Hemmings adds that the essays in *Le Roman expérimental* ‘remain as one of the more regrettable manifestations of his itch to dominate’.[[221]](#footnote-221) However, although broadly agreeing with this stance, Baguley, sees positive aspects in naturalism, for instance agreeing with Zola that the naturalist novel is ‘un lambeau d’existence’.[[222]](#footnote-222)

Baguley discusses Zola’s interpretation of scientific method. He points to the influence of Hippolyte Taine,[[223]](#footnote-223) whose sociological positivism, derived from Auguste Comte, he assesses as being approximate to that of Bernard.[[224]](#footnote-224) Philip Walker agrees, stating that ‘In page after page, including many of his most memorable writings, we are presented with what amounts to a mimesis of the interplay between sensation and imagination which Taine studied at great length and out of which, he believed, emerges the world of the mind.’[[225]](#footnote-225)

Henri Mitterand is in no doubt of the debt owed by Zola to Taine, pointing out in his introduction to Zola’s *Thér*è*se Raquin*[[226]](#footnote-226)that Zola is referring to Taine in his preface to the novelwhen he writes: ‘Il me semble que j’entends, dès maintenant, la sentence de la grande critique, de la critique méthodique qui a renouvelé les sciences, l’histoire et la littérature’[[227]](#footnote-227)

Larry Duffy considers *Au Bonheur*[[228]](#footnote-228) in terms of the constant movement and cycles of the department store, a movement replicating that of industrialization and capitalism. For Duffy, Mouret’s store represents a Haussmannization of the department store with wide aisles sweeping the clientele from one purchase to another in contrast with Baudu’s dark and narrow *Vieil Elbeuf*. Duffy describes the circularity of Mouret’s business, a cyle into which people are absorbed as mere ‘rouages’ (AB, III, 516). The image of the department store as a perpetually efficient monster is explored by Duffy. He concludes that, for Zola, Mouret’s store is a perfect mechanism. Furthermore, Mouret’s creation has no logical boundaries and may be extended without limit ‘jusqu’aux bois lointains de la banlieue’ (AB, III, 149). However, such a definitive resolution in *Au Bonheur* is argued in this thesis to be problematic in being undermined by unforeseen contingencies and the writer’s own departure from his naturalist theory.

Farley’s article on the French response to Darwin[[229]](#footnote-229)is critical to the study of Zola’s work in the context of the apprehension of the processes of change. He describes how some in the French scientific establishment moulded evolution to Christianity to create a theory of perfecting evolution, meaning one that had a theoscientific or theoteleological interpretation. The scientific and intellectual influences upon Zola, upon which John Evanhuis remarks were numerous and often contradictory: [[230]](#footnote-230) naturalist amalgamated with romantic, pioneering hard science with that belonging to the distant past. All amounted to an inconsistently equipped laboratory from which Zola writes his *roman expérimental*.

With regards to Zola’s reproduction of the psychological tactics and impact upon the the customers, Rachel Bowlby’s *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreisser, Gissing and Zola* devotes a chapter to *Au Bonheur* entitled ‘Traffic in her Desires’. In *Au Bonheur*, consumerism proclaims itself as a science, in its being defined by measurable, repeatable formulae with objective, demonstrable results. However, Bowlby does not consider whether or how Zola applied scientific method to derive the required results. There is no experiment identified, nor reference to Zola’s *Roman expérimental*.

Philip Walker suggests that throughout the *Rougon-Macquart*, there is a ‘desire for omniscience’.[[231]](#footnote-231) However, such a desire is an aspiration not a scientific experiment. His perception of science as a knowledge base of irrefutable observation implies a definitive conclusion which is untenable in fiction. Society, like science, is in constant development and cannot be captured in twenty volumes. Moreover, not all factors are scientifically measurable. For example, Michael Miller points to paternalism, not science, marking the reign of M. and Mme Boucicaut, the founders of the ‘Bon Marché’ department store.[[232]](#footnote-232) Therefore, in the very act of selecting science as the foundation of Mouret’s success Zola has made a decision which has no objective basis or precedent. His application of his observation of the operation of Bon Marché is seen below to be flawed in other respects. This is not the scientific method and calculation triumphantly employed by Mouret and admired by Zola. However, to facilitate the love story, Zola has Mouret reign alone until the final pages of *Au Bonheur*, by which point Denise has started to introduce reforms similar to those of Mme Boucicaut. This is an important development in that Mouret appears to recognise that largely subjective, non-scientific reforms for staff can double as pragmatic gains in output and brand. Miller’s study sweeps such tactics under the too narrow title of paternalism when it may be seen, in retrospect, to be behaviour related to the development of a consumer science.

Miller shows the lives of both genders beyond the store to be often a parody of middle class lifestyle, with the men spending their salaries at the races, cabarets and keeping mistresses. In *Au Bonheur*, some women, such as Denise’s friend Pauline, take lovers to supplement their incomes and allow them to indulge in the luxuries they sold each day. This activity outside of the store is seemingly beyond Mouret’s control or immediate concern. Miller is revealing on the question of the extent to which Zola departed from fact in his experiment. It examines the mass of detail Zola gleaned from the history of the *grand magasin* of the 1860s. As already mentioned, Zola chose to change aspects of Bon Marché’s history to suit his plot. He transferred to his novel selective data and material from the known results of the Bon Marché’. Zola’s factual selectivity also reveal him to be an expression of his time, one who believes in authorial intention but is subject to countless influences, all of which undermine any writer of fiction aspiring to apply scientific method in capturing the process of change. Philip Walker calls such phenomena one of Zola’s ‘centrifugal’[[233]](#footnote-233) forces at work, being a product of Zola’s novels thrown loose, out of the harmony so valued by Zola. The macro economic and social ‘pump priming’ or stimulation of the economy that the sudden disposable income represents is another aspect beyond Mouret’s control, the impact of which upon an experiment, is unquantifiable. The micro impact of consumerism upon the staff and upon the bourgeois clientele depicted in *Germinal* has not been examined in any depth by critics, particularly in respect of the cycle of failure required by capitalism.

The new sciences of physiology and psychology, which constitute important elements of the nascent consumer science, also feature in *Au Bonheur*. As the contemporary theory of the inherited psychological illness or ‘tare héréditaire’, applied by Zola in *Les Rougon-Macquart* combined the physiological and psychological,[[234]](#footnote-234) criticism has consequently addressed them as a single subject. Such theories as the ‘tare’ and Jules Michelet’s theories of sex and imprinting may be attributed to the influence of Comte and Taine which fed the scientism of which Zola is an adherent. Scientism has been defined as ‘the view that the characteristic inductive methods of the natural sciences are the only source of genuine factual knowledge and, in particular, that they alone can yield true knowledge about man and society’.[[235]](#footnote-235) Scientific works, such of those of the now discredited Prosper Lucas and Michelet were popular and influential. However, Zola’s ‘uncritical adoption’ of Lucas’ theory on heredity, upon which he based his ‘tare héréditaire’[[236]](#footnote-236) was probably the result of Taine’s simply having cited him, such was Taine’s reputation.[[237]](#footnote-237) Whilst the ‘tare’is not manifested in *Au Bonheur*, works such as Bowlby’s *Just Looking*;Susie Hennessy’s *‘Consumption and Desire in Au Bonheur des dames’,*[[238]](#footnote-238) and that of Hannah Thompson’s ‘‘Une Perversion du Désir, Une Névrose Nouvelle’: Female Sexuality in Zola’s *Au Bonheur des dames’,*[[239]](#footnote-239) although not explicitly referring to science, draw upon the extensive physiological-psychological material that Zola consciously and unconsciously provides, in his ‘experiment’ upon the clientele and staff of the *grand magasin*. Bowlby explores the acute psychological tactics of Mouret, many of which Zola had observed in the Bon Marché.

Mouret avait l’unique passion de vaincre la femme. Il la voulait reine dans sa maison, il lui avait bâti ce temple, pour l’y tenir à sa merci. C’était toute sa tactique, la griser d’attentions galantes et trafiquer de ses désirs, exploiter sa fièvre […] Mais son idée la plus profonde était, chez la femme sans coquetterie, de conquérir la mêre par l’enfant.[[240]](#footnote-240)

Bowlby therefore concentrates upon Mouret’s psychological and physiological exploitation in his luring in of his customers with loss-leading offers, allowing him to have them at his mercy, ‘séduites, affolées’.[[241]](#footnote-241) Psychology, a science enjoying exponential growth in nineteenth-century France is appropriated by the *grands magasins* to construct the offering of an illusory bourgeois utopia.

David Walker’s *Consumer Chronicles* devotes a chapter to the novel in ‘The *grand magasin*: Zola*,* *Au Bonheur des dames*’.[[242]](#footnote-242) In his introduction, Walker implies that post-structuralism has left suspect our understanding of history when narrated in fiction, the writer of fiction being considered to be influenced by too many variable factors to be a reliable source. However, contending that fiction may still ‘shed light on historical fact’,[[243]](#footnote-243) Walker declares *Au Bonheur* an analysis of the cultural changes revealed in the fiction and ‘essential reading for anyone who wishes to understand a key turning-point in patterns of retail commerce and consumption in the nineteenth century’.[[244]](#footnote-244) Walker points to actions by Zola which this thesis will argue undermine the writer’s claim to scientific method. Walker states that Zola introduces drama in the form of the duel between *grand* and *petit magasin* which was not a feature of the history of the Bon Marché. There is also, in support of Walker’s argument, the question of fictional narrative necessity. The relationship of Denise Baudu and Octave Mouret adds little to the scientific landscape or experimental character of the novel. Walker identifies the abrupt conclusion of *Au Bonheur* and the viability of Mouret’s model of endless growth beyond that achieved at the novel’s dénouement.[[245]](#footnote-245)

As noted, the experimental writer may unconsciously undermine the conclusions they assert to be the result of their experiment. In the case of *Au Bonheur* this may be to understate the impact of consumerism, ‘une religion nouvelle’ (AB, III, 797). Denise is a convert, deciding that, in furtherance of what she believes to be the primacy of logic ‘il lui fallait assister à l’œuvre invincible de la vie, qui veut la mort pour continuelle semence. Elle ne se débattait plus, elle acceptait cette loi de la lutte’ (AB, III, 760). That this logic, based upon the survival of the fittest, may be influenced by unforeseen, uncontrollable factors, facilitating a more egalitarian society, is not foreseen. Such contingencies, arising from the struggle for existence and the vagaries of wealth distribution, are not countenanced by Bernard’s methodologies. As acknowledged above, while there is a body of literature on some of the sciences identifiable in *Au Bonheur*, particularly those of physiology, psychology and their utilisation in the development of financial and consumer practice, the failure of science, chiefly in the form of a putative consumer science, its repercussions upon staff and client and the delivery of a demonstrable outcome, remains largely unaddressed. This will therefore now be explored in parallel with naturalist method in *Au Bonheur*.

## *LE ROMAN EXPÉRIMENTAL*: JUDGING *AU BONHEUR* AGAINSTZOLA’S OWN CRITERIA

The first paragraph of the *Le Roman expérimental* begins:

Le retour à la nature, l’évolution naturaliste qui emporte le siècle, pousse peu à peu toutes les manifestations de l’intelligence humaine dans une même voie scientifique. Seulement, l’idée d’une littérature déterminée par la science, a pu surprendre, faute d’être précisée et comprise. Il me paraît donc utile de dire nettement ce qu’il faut entendre, selon moi, par le roman expérimental.[[246]](#footnote-246)

Responding to such statements, Francois-Marie Mourad in his preface to *Le Roman* states: ‘la posterité s’est surtout laissé impressioner par les déclarations à l’emporte-pièce qui postulent un accord intime et une communauté de destin entre la littérature et la science.’[[247]](#footnote-247) Mourad refers to Zola’s mastery of ‘la rhétorique des manifestes et ses slogans’ of having gained acceptance of a phenomenon – fiction written according to scientific method – one that elicited passionate dispute even within the supposed naturalist group. Mourad’s reference to the qualities of advertising is significant in relation to Zola’s personal engagement with consumer science during his four years at Hachette.

Via the experimental method, Zola sought ‘la connaissance de la vie passionelle et intellectuelle’ (RE, 48), adapting Bernard’s principles of scientific method to assist his quest. The following statement by Bernard suggests the inspiration for Zola’s experimental method and is therefore given in full:

En effet, il y a dans toute connaissance expérimentale trois phases: observation faite, comparaison établie et jugement motivé. La méthode expérimentale ne fait pas autre chose que porter un jugement sur les faits qui nous entourent, à l'aide d'un critérium qui n'est lui-même qu'un autre fait disposé de façon à contrôler le jugement et à donner l'expérience.

Il y aura donc deux choses à considérer dans la méthode expérimentale: 1° l’art d’obtenir des faits exacts au moyen d’une investigation rigoureuse; 2° l’art de les mettere en œuvre au moyen d’un raisonnement expérimental afin d’en faire ressortir la connaissance de la loi des phénomènes.[[248]](#footnote-248)

These principles lead Zola to contend that just as the application of the processes of chemistry and physics to physiology had revolutionised medicine, so too such a transformation could be extended to fiction, via the same analytical approach of the medical researcher. Literature would play its role, for

Comme la science, il est maître du monde. Il aborde tous les sujets, écrit l’histoire, traite de physiologie et de psychologie, monte jusqu’à la poésie la plus haute, étudie les questions les plus diverses, la politique, l’économie sociale, la religion, les moeurs. La nature entire est son domaine.[[249]](#footnote-249)

Zola claimed to have entirely adopted Bernard’s scientific methodologies, quipping that when reading Bernard, he need only replace the word *médecin* with that of *romancier* in order to bring to the novel the rigour of scientific truth.[[250]](#footnote-250) Such rigour provided the foundation for Zola’s scientific approach. He refers to Bernard’s *Introduction*: ‘Ce livre, d’un savant dont l’autorité est décisive, va me server de base solide’ (RE, 47). Zola’s philosophy of naturalism[[251]](#footnote-251) was based upon the *Introduction* as he refers to it, and the credibility of its application in fiction has been discussed elsewhere.[[252]](#footnote-252) Yet the methods employed in the laboratory or dissecting theatres, in which facts are demonstrated and experiments repeated, are not obviously translated into *Au Bonheur des dames*. Furthermore, if objectivity is the defining quality of scientific method then the proof of its existence is in the reader’s inability to ‘draw any conclusions about the author’s sympathies or antipathies’.[[253]](#footnote-253) On this test alone Zola fails as, for example, Denise and Mouret exemplify an energy and logic admired by Zola and echoed in other volumes of the series.

For objectivity may be read naturalism yet the meaning of the term ‘naturalism’ was not universally recognised, even amongst the supposed members of the naturalist school headed by Zola. Nor is the implementation of the scientific method in literature made clear. Zola pleads patience from his reader in stating that ‘le roman expérimental est plus jeune que la médecine expérimentale, laquelle pourtant est à peine née’ (RE, 53), and offers us generalities, suggesting that the writer must firstly observe facts, from which the subject of an experiment will occur. Once the subject is chosen the writer subjects the character to ‘une série d’épreuves […] passer par certains milieux […], pour montrer le fonctionnement du mécanisme de sa passion’ (RE, 53).[[254]](#footnote-254) The apparent experiment therefore occurs when the writer places the character in an environment and situation condusive to obtaining results.

In scientific methodology, *une investigation rigoureuse* is certainly a quality that is associated with Zola’s writing. In *Au Bonheur* this is evidenced in his close observation of the Bon Marché and Louvre *grands magasins.* Such facts, garnered via extensive investigation and then set in train in the laboratory novel, would supposedly provide the desired, demonstrable, scientific outcome. Such a rationale appears to support Huysmans’ definition of naturalism and Zola’s scientific method:[[255]](#footnote-255)

le naturalisme, c’est l’étude des êtres crées, l’étude des conséquences résultantes du contact ou du choc de ces êtres réunis entre eux; le naturalisme, c’est, suivant l’expression même de M. Zola, l’étude patiente de la réalité, l’ensemble obtenu par l’observation des détails.[[256]](#footnote-256)

However, Huysmans’ loyal defence of naturalism ignores the freedom of the writer to select facts, insert ‘êtres crées’, compress timescales and invent plot interest, such as love affairs.

It is not to the critics, nor to Zola’s disciples, that the most telling insights into the failure of science in literature are to be found but Zola’s own account in *Le Roman expérimental*. Firstly, Zola ponders Bernard’s comment that the complexity of medicine had long prevented its elevation to scientific status. ‘Que sera-ce donc pour le roman expérimental, où les phénomènes sont plus complexes encore?’ (RE, 71). Zola sidesteps this by simply declaring that this will not prevent the novel ‘d’entrer dans la voie scientifique, d’obéir à l’évolution générale du siècle’ (RE, 72). Secondly, and most importantly, naturalism founders upon the argument contained in Bernard’s statement that:

Pour les arts et les lettres, la personalité domine tout, il s’agit là d’une création spontanée de l’esprit et cela n’a plus rien de commun avec la constatation des phénomènes naturels, dans lesquels notre esprit ne doit rien créer.[[257]](#footnote-257)

Here lies the most basic objection to the scientific method in literature: the incompatibility of the writer’s creative input and his unconscious with that of scientific objectivity. In Zola’s defence, it may perhaps be argued that imagination, based upon experience, is captured by the *critérium* which Bernard suggests is deployed to calibrate the results. However, this founders upon the third element of Bernard’s *connaissance expérimentale*, that of *jugement motivé* which cannot comprise imagination. The inappropriateness of naturalism in its dependency upon imagination is multiplied by the inexact medium of language. In *Le Roman expérimental* Zola makes only one reference to ‘un langage superbe’ (RE, 85) and only in the context of the distinction it gives to the form of a particular novel, not to its lack of scientific precision.

Despite the above, Zola argues, unconvincingly, that the essentials of scientific method, observation and analysis, remain intact. Tellingly perhaps, Zola does not refer to his intention to apply scientifically framed method in *Au Bonheur*, despite its publication only three years after *Le* *Roman expérimental*.[[258]](#footnote-258) There are other factors affecting the writing of fiction, which are not covered in Bernard’s advice. Not the least of which is that it is simply difficult to imagine a fiction which employs such scientific logic as that advocated by Bernard. Of those critics who reject such a notion, Pierre-Gnassounou’s comments are typical:

Zola went well beyond the supposed naturalist method. The facts which, according to *Le Roman Expérimental*, must precede novelistic invention, rarely come first in the actual creative process […] Zola’s acquired knowledge, received ideas, stereotypes and literary models […] impose narrative patterns […] we are far from the scientific rigour vaunted by Zola (RE, 87).

This supports the argument in this thesis that Zola’s adherence to Bernard’s methodology is limited to the garnering of facts which are then subjected to Zola’s imagination and the demands of the plot.

Science in fiction also attracts the modern suspicion of the *roman à thèse* in that it will seek to deliver, as *Au Bonheur* attempts, a concluding message or moral history. David Walker suggests that poststructuralism has left suspect our understanding of history when narrated in fiction, the writer of fiction being influenced by too many variable factors to be a reliable source,[[259]](#footnote-259) pointing to actions by Zola which this thesis would suggest undermine any claim to scientific method. For example, Zola severely telescopes the actual timescales over which the department store model for *Au Bonheur*, the Bon Marché, achieves the economic and physical expansion that Zola in turn awards Mouret’s project. Zola does this to maintain the pace of the narrative, which also implies that the plot has a destination, a conclusion. The process of change argued in this thesis will be seen to contradict this ambition for any definitive ending, as several contingencies which threaten the domination of any *grand magasin* are present or hinted at in the novel such as the competition from other *grands magasins* and, significantly, the political resurgence of the *petits commerçants*. Even the sexual history of Mouret and that of the bourgeoisie in general in both *Au Bonheur des dames* and *Pot Bouille*, is a threat to continuity.[[260]](#footnote-260)

The writer is subject to more influences than the physiologist. Whilst the writer’s appropriation by capitalism is less pronounced than in late capitalism, it remains relevant to Zola. For example, Lukács[[261]](#footnote-261) suggests that due to his bourgeois values Zola unconsciously fails to engage with the more complex symptoms of society. According to Lukács, this is evidenced in Zola applying his scientific method in merely diagnosing the impact of the ‘‘undesirable features’ of capitalism’ upon the organic unity of society.[[262]](#footnote-262) Scientific methodologies appear incapable of capturing the contradictions, nuances and contributors which constitute the tipping point argued in this thesis.

However, Zola’s creativity, it has been argued by Walker, is a consequence of his failure to fully implement this methodology*.*[[263]](#footnote-263)A possible admission of this exists in *Au Bonheur*. Mouret’s combination of scientific methodology and evangelism earns him the narrator’s highly ambiguous accolade of ‘Le roi despotique du chiffon’ (AB, III, 468). This remark is lost in the passage describing Mouret’s seduction of the attendees at Mme Désforge’s soirée and no similar remarks recur in the novel. Such statements are however characteristic of Zola and several are also to be found in *Germinal* which serve to puncture the vanity or self-delusion of a character. However, this thesis would suggest that on this occasion the word ‘naturalism’ might be substituted for ‘chiffon’, Zola satirising the label he had never claimed and responding to his critic’s accusations of Zola’s autocratic promulgation of its principles. Of particular relevance to this thesis is the suggestion that Zola is alluding to the vanity of scientific method in fiction*.*

Zola’s quest for ultimate perfection or truth suggests a parallel desire to banish ambiguity. The prevailing French interpretation of evolution as a process towards perfection may have supported Zola’s endeavours. Philip Walker discusses Zola’s ‘amour pour l’absolu’[[264]](#footnote-264) in the context of the writer’s desire to ‘attain omniscience, to pin down the whole truth’.[[265]](#footnote-265) Walker adds that in his very failure to do so ‘Zola seizes and makes palpable the unseizable, eternally elusive character of his divine opponent. The full blast of Reality in all its overwhelming vitality and fearful infinitude invades Zola’s best works with the force of a roaring wind rushing through a broken windowpane’.[[266]](#footnote-266) In this dramatic image may be read the failure of scientific method to deliver conclusive outcomes in fiction, where the breadth and complexity of the examined milieu defies systematic observation and conclusion. The reality Zola seeks to analyse evades scientific method, but not his ability to suggest its infinite nuances and contingencies. It is in this scientific immeasurability that is recognised the strength of literature to allude, to represent, and why the novel as science will always be in the mode of failure.

SCIENCE IN MID NINETEENTH-CENTURY FRANCE – ‘UN TEMPS DE SI LARGE TRAVAIL’[[267]](#footnote-267)

The very first line of *Au Bonheur* introduces us to a modernising France: ‘Denise était venue à pied de la gare Saint-Lazare’ (AB, III, 389). Scientific progress in nineteenth-century France occurs across many disciplines, in physics, chemistry and engineering. Gustave Eiffel, an engineer and manufacturer, designed the Bon Marché department store in the 1860s which was famed for its iron lattice work. Mouret’s *grand magasin* in *Au Bonheur des dames* borrows closely in architecture, as in much else, from the Bon Marché. Zola describes the ironwork features which added modernity, spectacle and drama to Mouret’s sales. The progress of science in mid-nineteenth-century France is particularly distinguished by its developments in medicine. Harvey comments that whilst medicine and its students were ‘often in the *avant garde* in the political and scientific movements of the 1860s’, it was ‘the image of the cool dissection of something as personal as the human body [that] became a paradigm of what science was all about’.[[268]](#footnote-268) This quotation recalls Mourtet’s psychological dissection and manipulation of his clientele.

The advent of the *grand magasin* was facilitated by the confluence of scientific innovation and available credit encouraged by the Saint-Simonian ideals of the Emperor Louis Napoleon.[[269]](#footnote-269) Mouret addresses himself to Hartmann as he identifies himself with this age, defending science, dismissing the idle, conservative, ‘rentier’ mentality of those such as his old friend Vallagnosc:

Il répéta qu’il était de son époque. Vraiment, il fallait être mal bâti, avoir le cerveau et les membres attaqués, pour se refuser à la besogne, en un temps de si large travail, lorsque le siècle entier se jetait à l’avenir. Et s’il raillait les désespérés, les dégoûtés, les pessimistes, tous ces malades de nos sciences commençantes, qui prenaient des airs pleureurs de poètes ou des mines pincées de sceptiques au milieu de l’immense chantier contemporain (AB, III, 452).

This extract is one of the rare instances of explicit reference to science in *Au Bonheur*,and its reference to ‘nos sciences commençantes’ may embrace Mouret’s consumer science.[[270]](#footnote-270) Mouret positions himself at the forefront of this break from a financially conservative France, the benefits being understood and desired by Denise, who recognises the *grands magasins* as offering material improvement for all society: ‘Elle était secrètement pour les grands magasins, dans son amour instinctif de la logique et de la vie’ (AB, III, 574). Zola, via Mouret and Denise’s evangelical fervour, associates their enterprise with that of the pioneering engineers and physicians of the day. For Zola, science and literature are influential partners.

Foreign scientific advances, such as the evolutionary theories of Darwin explored below, were influential in France[[271]](#footnote-271)although interpreted in a particular manner. Dubious science, lacking any proven foundation, also enjoyed a wide following, with Michelet’s *L’Amour*[[272]](#footnote-272)and *La Femme*[[273]](#footnote-273)proposing that characteristics of a woman’s first lover pass to subsequent lover’s children. Prosper Lucas’ ‘*Traité de l’hérédité naturelle*’[[274]](#footnote-274) dealt with the classification of inherited mental conditions, influencing Zola’s application of the ‘tare’héréditaire throughout many of the *Rougon-Macquart* novels. In another instance of inconsistency in the appropriation of scientific theory, the ‘tare’ plays no part in *Au Bonheur*. Lucas influenced Hippolyte Taine’s own deterministic theories, linking all personal characteristics to causes capable of analysis.[[275]](#footnote-275) Theories such as the ‘tare’ and Michelet’s theories, fed the scientism to which Zola was an adherent. The definition of scientism, as the only true source of knowledge, appears consistent with Zola’s stated adherence to Bernard and Taine’s principles and is evidenced in the eventual disenchantment of less committed naturalist writers such as Guy de Maupassant and Zola’s ‘most promising disciple’ Joris-Karl Huysmans. [[276]](#footnote-276)

Amongst the existing sciences, new forms emerged. One such is ‘social science’. Given the social change which the *grands magasins* both reflected and accelerated as a result of the greatly increased access to regular wages, it is not surprising that what would come to be called social science is an important presence in *Au Bonheur*. The pioneer of positivism, Auguste Comte, popularised the term ‘sociologie’ in 1839 in his texts *Cours de Philosophie Positive*.[[277]](#footnote-277) Zola is often linked to positivism in the context of naturalism and the application of scientific method.[[278]](#footnote-278) The following definition of positivismis very close to that of Bernard’s for scientific method:

The most important thing to determine was the natural order in which the sciences stand […]. This Comte accomplished by taking as the criterion of the position of each the degree of what he called ‘positivity’, which is simply the degree to which the phenomena can be exactly determined. This, as may be readily seen, is also a measure of their relative complexity, since the exactness of a science is in inverse proportion to its complexity. The degree of exactness or positivity is, moreover, that to which it can be subjected to mathematical demonstration, and therefore mathematics, which is not itself a concrete science, is the general gauge by which the position of every science is to be determined[…] Comte found that there were five great groups of phenomena […] of successively decreasing positivity. To these he gave the names astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology, and sociology. [[279]](#footnote-279)

This quotation is particularly significant as it defines, in the context of positivism, the limits of science and the varying degrees of reliability which can be afforded to it. The low ranking of sociology in the sciences on the grounds of its relative un-suitedness to mathematical demonstration raises questions as to Zola’s reliance upon scientific method, when applied to the complexity - and therefore lack of exactness - of the subject encompassed by *Au Bonheur*. The concern with degrees of determination of phenomena is a founding element of Zola’s naturalism. If Zola sought demonstrable results via his scientific method then the above definition would not have given him encouragement. The rankings of exactness would suggest that literary comment upon what Comte considered the least positive of the sciences, sociology, would result in a lower degree of positivity. Likewise physiology, and especially psychology, in their considerable complexity[[280]](#footnote-280) would, under the same criteria, also be unlikely to occupy high rankings of positivity and exactness of result.

The concern for demonstrable result, for exactness, is also an indication of the will to dominate, evidenced in the following proclamation by Bernard, quoted by Zola, as to what the possible end result might be: ‘asservir la nature’, ‘régler la vie, régler la société’, ‘nous rendre maîtres de la nature’.[[281]](#footnote-281) It is this urge to dominate, shared by Mouret in *Au Bonheur*, in which the *grand magasin* is significantly referred to as a *phalanstère*[[282]](#footnote-282) on three occasions,which adds another determining aspect to Zola’s experiment. The urge to ‘régler’ everything via scientific method when applied to the logistics of the department store and physiological capacities of the staff, directly results in material improvement in the lives of the public in improved access to affordable clothing and other goods. That same scientific methodology also creates an oppressively relentless and stultifying work environment. Whilst the store is occasionally portrayed as a church or temple, there are also references to it as a ‘monstre’[[283]](#footnote-283) heralding the image of the mine in *Germinal*, two years later.

The phrase ‘social science’ appears in Marx’s *Manifesto* of 1848 and, even with its limited distribution in the 1850s and 60s, is likely to have been noted by Zola by the 1880s given the references to Marx in *Germinal*. Social science is not a constant theme of *Au Bonheur* and is found most directly in the context of the actions and thoughts of one individual, Denise. These actions are addressed below but for the purposes of the present discussion, their paternalistic nature lend circumstantial support to the dominating end to which science is applied in *Au Bonheur*. These considerations combine to call into question the component parts of Zola’s claimed scientific method consisting, according to some of his contemporaries, of half-digested science and ideology.[[284]](#footnote-284) Furthermore, not all factors are scientifically measurable and it is this lack of measurability which is one of the strengths of literature and why science in the novel will always be in the mode of failure. One such un-measurable element is Mouret’s relationship to paternalism.

Michael Miller points to paternalism, as having been the dominating element of the reign of the founders of ‘Bon Marché’: M. and Mme Boucicaut.[[285]](#footnote-285) To facilitate the love story, Zola has Mouret preside, alone and autocratic, until the final pages of *Au Bonheur*, by which point Denise has started to introduce reforms similar to those of Mme Boucicaut. This is an important development in that Mouret appears to recognise that largely ‘humane’ reforms for staff can double as pragmatic and scientifically measurable gains in output and brand. Miller’s work provides insight into Zola’s application of the collected data with which he sought to stage his experiment. It examines the mass of detail Zola gleaned from the history of the *grand magasin* of the 1860s, the Bon Marché. As stated, Zola manipulates science in choosing aspects of the history of the Bon Marché to suit his plot. He transferred to his novel selective data and material from the known results of the endeavours of the Bon Marché.

The validity of the choice of subject for experiment in *Au Bonheur* may also be questioned. One element of that experiment, Zola’s implicit suggestion that the new phenomenon of aspiring to a ‘life style’ as advertised by the *grands magasins*,could be confined to something as fluid as class lines appears naïve. Associating scientific progress with one class failed to comprehend the access to its benefits enjoyed by a wider society. Rapid social change was underway, with class distinctions blurring. The *vendeuses* of Mouret’s *grand magasin* take on ‘allures de dame […] prenaient des graces, finissaient par être d’une classe vague, flottant entre l’ouvrière et la bourgeoisie’ (AB, III, 536). Whilst the *grands magasins* dictated ‘the picture of the proper household, the correct attire, the bourgeois good life’,[[286]](#footnote-286) working class women also bought the ribbons and saw the displays. Their aspirations, like those of the *garçons de service*, were also raised. Such references to the working class are rare but revealing. These encroachments upon the bourgeois space represented by *Au Bonheur* not only provide a reference, perhaps not wholly conscious on Zola’s part, to an equally profound and unfolding process of change across all classes. Science had also been embraced by the forces confronting Mouret’s class, for the *grand magasin* would witness: ‘the revolt of modern productive forces against the property relations that are the conditions for the existence of the bourgeoisie and of its rule’.[[287]](#footnote-287) Furthermore, by setting the novel two decades earlier, under a regime and economic circumstances peculiar to the period, the relevance of the results of any supposed experiment must be doubtful.

In addition to claimed scientific observation, the scientific credibility of fiction could be enhanced by the importing of scientific theory. Even engineering, with some slightly anachronistic references to lifts and electric lighting, is present in *Au Bonheur*. While Jules Michelet’s and Prosper Lucas’ theories on chastity and heredity had little scientific basis[[288]](#footnote-288) they appear consistent with other unfounded scientific theory such as the religious interpretation of evolutionary theory prevailing in parts of the French scientific community and explored below in the context of Darwinism. Whilst irrationality is of course present throughout *Au Bonheur* – the reader has only to think of Mme Marty the spendthrift or Mme Bove’s shoplifting – it is not linked to any ‘tare’but rather as reactions to the lure of materialism. Outcomes are often determined by the exercise of rational choice on each individual’s part, a striking example being that of Denise’s friend Pauline, who repeatedly fails to comprehend Denise’s resistance of Mouret’s advances or even why Denise refuses to take a lover who might, in return for sex, help maintain her in relative comfort. Denise’s reasons for rejecting both options are a mixture of instinct and rationality. Out of work and hungry, Denise, having escaped from a stranger in the street who had followed and assaulted her, considers following the example of Pauline and others: ‘Mais un soulèvement de son être protestait, sans indignation contre les autres, répugnant simplement aux choses salissantes et déraisonnables. Elle se faisait de la vie une idée de logique de sagesse et de courage’ (AB, III, 565).

Zola suggests the limits of Denise’s ‘logique’ in referring to the constant turmoil of emotion into which Denise falls whenever she sees Mouret, a scenario used in other novels of course, but of greater significance in a novel in which logic and emotion, as phenomena, bear central significance. This is not to suggest that science cannot attempt to account for emotion and impulse,when observed as responses to given phenomena. Hemmings cites Zola’s remark that ‘there are causes for ambition, for courage or for truthfulness as there are causes for muscular contraction and for bodily temperature’.[[289]](#footnote-289) However, in inhabiting a supposedly experimental fiction, seeking to capture a complex society, the factors determining any outcome will be that more complex and contingent and therefore unrepeatable. The repeatability of an experiment is an important criterion of its validity and, notwithstanding any objections to a writer’s imposition of these results, the action in the novel cannot be exactly duplicated.

In terms of the influence of science in the nineteenth century and its presence in literature, Zola therefore appears to be an enthusiastic, if inconsistent exponent, of the teachings of scientific method. However, in addition to Zola’s representation of the formation of a consumer science, there is another scientific source which Zola names and makes central in at least two of the *Rougon-Macquart*: Darwinism. Zola referred to the nineteenth century as ‘ce siècle de doute’.[[290]](#footnote-290) Whilst Zola does not elaborate on the causes of this doubt it may refer to the impact of science, and particularly Darwin’s theory of evolution, upon established religious beliefs. His statement is contained in an article which raises the novel *Au Bonheur* beyond the simple analysis of the death throes of the ‘Vieil Elbeuf’. The possibility of a more nuanced interpretation of the commercial struggle being extended to that of the evolution of a humanitarian science is supported by the recurring idea of the *phalanstère* in the later pages of *Au Bonheur*. The *phalanstère* is also emphatically suggested in the paternalistic reforms applied by Denise in the closing pages. Their blending of the social and employment lives of the staff, anticipate the *phalanstère* in *Travail*.

There is no critical work directly relating to the influence of science or its methods, as defined by Bernard, upon the writing of *Au Bonheur* in terms of his three phases of observation, comparison and rational judgement. However, several works, such as that of Farley, do address the status of science in nineteenth-century France, particularly that of Darwin. Farley reveals that the French scientific establishment moulded evolution to Christianity to create a theory of perfecting evolution, that is, one that had a theoscientific or theoteleological interpretation, interpreting evolution as the divinely ordained route along which humanity will reach perfection.[[291]](#footnote-291) Darwinism is of course relevant to the struggle for existence in the *grand magasin*,as depicted in *Au Bonheur*, with repeated allusions to the struggle waged between the ‘vendeurs’ and their immediate superiors, whose positions they covet. The central struggle between the *grand magasin* and the *petits commerçants du quartier* is merciless.

A critical point must be made here. There is a common assumption that evolution follows a logical order, roughly summarised as that of the survival of the fittest. There is however, no such law in Darwin’s theory of evolution. As noted previously, the theory demonstrates a process governed by chance, climate, a world where great monsters die and tiny mammals survive, where the ‘point de bascule’operates. Emily Ballou remarks: ‘Darwin ground general laws out of large collections of facts but he could not prevent life’s quiet irreversible passing’.[[292]](#footnote-292) Darwinism faced a hostile scientific, religious and political establishment. France, which had produced its own high calibre naturalists and early evolutionists Buffon, Lamarck, Cuvier and St. Hilaire, was now reduced to relative mediocrity in this area. The French reaction to Darwin, described in Farley, was but one example of the struggle of French science in the middle of the nineteenth century. However, the dominating theme of *Au Bonheur* is that of a long-running, multi-component struggle, mirroring the tipping point process. ‘Une lutte pour l’existence’ rages (AB, III, 421) , not just between the rival retail outlets but also between the staff, from the level of ‘vendeur’to that of ‘la direction’, Mouret. The rapid turnover in staff parallels that of the produce, with both reduced to elements in a process, and each representing equal components of consumer science.

Whilst direct references to any sciences are few in *Au Bonheur*, the indirect references to Darwinism are numerous and deliberate.[[293]](#footnote-293) Darwin remarked that ‘science progresses at rail-road speed’,[[294]](#footnote-294) the rate, in effect, at which unfolds the unequal duel between the old boutiques such as ‘Au Vieil Elbeuf’ and the new stores represented by ‘Au Bonheur des dames’. This combat provides the principal theme of the novel whilst referencing the concept in this thesis, in that whilst the *Vieil Elbeuf* will close there will be no wider, definitive outcome to what is in effect a cyclical struggle. For the struggle for survival is integral to the capitalism portrayed in *Au Bonheur*,with death providing renewal (AB, III, 760-1).

Zola addresses the environmental and economic factors at work serving to threaten the most basic biological relationship in evolution, that of the sexes. Mme Aurélie, a senior manager and successful saleswoman earns three times more than her husband, a fellow employee of the *grand magasin.* He is significantly named Lhomme. He is portrayed as inconsequential, who ‘gardait son humilité devant Mme Aurélie’ (AB, III, 655). Zola implies that materialism is fracturing family cohesion as the Lhomme lead separate lives at work and at home. Their son, Albert, also employed at *Au Bonheur*, implicitly damaged by this fracture, pursues an expensive life style, which he funds by defrauding his employer, an unthinkable act in the traditional family unit of the ‘petit commerçant’. Zola depicts in the Lhomme an example of the power and potential to de-stabilise contemporary conventions underpinning the family unit posed by unchecked pursuit of material gain. Zola implies that this tendency can only be tempered by reformers such as Denise, as her ascendancy and influence coincide with the departure of the most disruptive *vendeurs*.

The impact of consumerism upon the relationship of the sexes threatens the very motor of evolution: procreation. In the intensity of the *Au Bonheur* sales, the personnel are indifferent to the opposite sex, their sexual desires being channelled into those of the consumer:

Si la bataille continuelle de l’argent n’avait effacé les sexes, il aurait suffi, pour tuer le désir […] A peine pouvait-on citer quelques rares liaisons d’amour […] Tous n’étaient plus que des rouages, se trouvaient emportés par le branle de la machine, abdiquant leur personnalité, additionnant simplement leurs forces, dans ce total banal et puissant de phalanstère. Au dehors seulement, reprenait la vie individuelle, avec la brusque flambée de passions qui se réveillaient.’ (AB, III, 516)

For the young female staff (just as for Mouret’s women) a state of semi-prostitution is common. For such women, this is not limited to material survival but is a means to aspire to the materialist hedonism that such supplementary income or support afforded. Capitalism is emphatically seen to affect the sex lives of the staff. For, unlike the miners in *Germinal* who barely earn enough to survive, both sexes in the *grand magasin* are consumers of and consumed by the material wealth of the department store. All, in seeking to progress in the *grand magasin* and consumer hierarchies, are drawn to demand further advancement. The compromises made reveal the trajectory of their supposed improvement to be illusory. The survival of the fittest is not a definitive struggle but an ongoing one, consistent with Darwin’s own contingent evolutionary path.

Zola’s application of *l’évolution* and other flawed scientific principles to his literary experiment, is problematic. Zola unconsciously undermines this theory of a perfecting evolution in revealing many factors that threaten his own[[295]](#footnote-295)and Mouret’s programme of development in literature and retail. For example, Zola’s conservative perspective on Darwinism as a perfecting process is all the more surprising given the disruptive role the ‘tare’ plays in succeeding generations, retarding progress. The reading of evolutionary theory by some French scientists as a progression towards an ordained perfection also has important implications for the ‘point de bascule’ and the the theory posited in this thesis in that the interpretation does not countenance divergence and failure. In evolution, accident and regression play critical roles, often occasioning the death of the strongest and fittest. Contrary to a perfecting mechanism, regression and complex multiple trajectories, captured in the ‘point de bascule’ - where anticipated radical change is reversed - are all possible outcomes. Most significantly however, *Au Bonheur* reveals science in the mode of failure in that theories are appropriated by vested interests with, for example, ‘the survival of the fittest’ successfully adopted by those seeking to justify the vanquishing of the weak, and accepted as ‘la logique’, even by Denise. Only the application of Denise’s humanitarian, unscientific and paternalistic reforms, appear to secure a sustainable future for Mouret’s project.[[296]](#footnote-296)

## ‘L’ÉCOLE DU BRUTAL ET DU COLOSSAL DANS LA SCIENCE DE L’ÉTALAGE’[[297]](#footnote-297)

Consumer science, in its infancy in mid-nineteenth-century Paris, comprises the sciences of physiology, psychology[[298]](#footnote-298) and sociology, sustaining a developing consumerism. Each of these disciplines is represented by Zola in *Au Bonheur* as stimulating the development of marketing, advertising[[299]](#footnote-299) and the physical orchestration of the public within the department store, allowing for mass access to goods in an ambiance and process conducive to purchasing.[[300]](#footnote-300) In the new stores, bartering was abolished and fixed prices prices introduced, enabling more efficient transactions.[[301]](#footnote-301) Goods could be returned, mail-ordered[[302]](#footnote-302) and delivery offered. There was no longer the assumption of the small family-run shops such as ‘Au Vieil Elbeuf’ that once a person had entered their premises a purchase would be made. The palatial appearance of the department stores ‘stirred unrealized appetites’ making buying ‘a special and irresistible occasion’. The splendour of the Bon Marché in 1872 made it one of the tourist sites in Paris.[[303]](#footnote-303) These innovations were supported in turn by increasingly sophisticated financial practices and credit schemes.[[304]](#footnote-304) Harvey details ‘debt-financed expenditures’, direct public subscription, and a complex loan arrangement with builders and Credit Mobilier, the dubious nature of which was revealed by the press in 1868 and ultimately led to Haussmann’s dismissal.[[305]](#footnote-305)

High financial stakes and excelling in marketing were necessities in the turnover of the new department store. The Bon Marché perfected marketing to the extent, Miller argues, that it contributed to the promotion of a ‘consumer culture’ in which the bourgeois identified with particular brands and department stores. The ‘agendas’ sold to the customers arranged the individual’s year around sales, cultural events and useful public information, through which was threaded the self-promotion of Bon Marché.[[306]](#footnote-306) Miller refers to the concerts given as early as the second quarter of the nineteenth century by the store’s orchestra, declaring that: ‘Bourgeois culture became a purchasable commodity’.[[307]](#footnote-307) Catalogues on linen specified what the bourgeois household should contain. The abundance of the store had to be replicated in the bourgeois home. One could no longer have enough sheets, one must have ‘too many sheets’[[308]](#footnote-308) A woman could no longer have just one coat but one for travel, one for the theatre, one for visiting.[[309]](#footnote-309) Leisure, class and consumption merged. In response to such ‘necessities’ Thorsten Veblen first employed the term ‘conspicuous consumption’ in 1899 in his *Theory of the Leisure Class*.[[310]](#footnote-310)

The development of consumer culture, as manifested in the great Parisian department store, is traceable to earlier decades of the nineteenth century. Rosalind Williams suggests that the original social foundations of a consumer society may be argued to be traceable to the court of Louis XIV.[[311]](#footnote-311) Williams proposes that the concept of ‘civilisation’ in seventeenth-century France was manifested in the royal and aristocratic life styles; in their clothes, food and furniture. The bourgeoisie that emerged in the following century aped these indications of a civilised class, which ‘provided an authoritative guide for the consumer […] by positing a humanistic ideal capable of giving consumption a meaning and purpose’.[[312]](#footnote-312) Williams argues that this ideal of civilisation evolved into ‘prestige’ endowed through material possession.[[313]](#footnote-313) The burgeoning Parisian bourgeois class[[314]](#footnote-314) possessed sufficient free-time and income in which to patronise the new outlets. These premises offered mass-produced luxury articles and provided the foundations of a consumer economy sustained by a rapidly developing consumer science.

Early nineteenth-century literary responses to consumerism and, by implication, the consumer science facilitating it, are present in Balzac’s *La Comédie humaine*.[[315]](#footnote-315)Williams provides a scene in *La Cousine Bette* (1846)[[316]](#footnote-316) in which the Baroness Hulot visits the newly decorated and luxurioiusly furnished salon of the courtesan, Josepha, as an early reference to the bourgeois desire to impress in an ‘accumulation of appearances’ upon which their sense of identity depends.[[317]](#footnote-317) Walter Benjamin considers Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) in the context of ‘High Capitalism’[[318]](#footnote-318)and refers to what is possibly the earliest description of capitalist appropriation of a writer. Baudelaire addresses a streetwalker in ‘Au Lecteur’:

Pour avoir des souliers, elle a vendu son âme;

Mais le bon Dieu rirait si, près de cette infâme,

Je tranchais du Tartuffe et singeais la hauteur,

Moi qui vends ma pensée et qui veut être auteur.[[319]](#footnote-319)

Benjamin remarks that ‘Baudelaire knew what the true situation of the man of letters was: he goes to the marketplace as a *flâneur*,[[320]](#footnote-320) supposedly to take a look at it, but in reality to find a buyer.’[[321]](#footnote-321) Benjamin states that Baudelaire loathed Brussels as it contained no shop windows and therefore made strolling impossible for Baudelaire the *flâneur*. In Paris, the *flâneur* strolls amongst the crowds in the new shopping arcades. The arcades, ‘a rather recent invention of industrial luxury […] glass-covered, marble-panelled passageways through entire complexes of houses’,[[322]](#footnote-322) displayed characteristics both of the later department store and an early manipulation of the potential consumer, the development of which would be explored in *Au Bonheur*.

The arcades provide a collective experience to be enjoyed by the public who, in the relative comfort of the passageways, are channelled towards displays arranged to arrest its attention. Balzac describes their impact: ‘Le grand poème de l’étlage chant ses stophes de couleur depuis la Madeleine jusqu’à le port Saint-Denis’.[[323]](#footnote-323)The idea of the intoxicated consumer within the crowded department store will be represented by Zola in *Au Bonheur*, and will be pursued by Benjamin who likens it to religious intoxication. ‘Empathy’, declares Benjamin, ‘is the nature of the intoxication to which the *flâneur* abandons himself in the crowd.’[[324]](#footnote-324) The seemingly detached flâneur within the crowd is not impervious to the sensory stimulations offered by consumer science. Aimée Boutin, asserts that the flâneur of the 1830s and 1840’s is by the 1880s, ‘no longer aloof from the marketplace, but rather wrapped up in bourgeois capitalism and consumerism.’[[325]](#footnote-325) Thus, the intrusion of capitalism into all aspects of existence, a feature of late capitalism which Houellebecq proposes in *Interventions*, *Extension* andelsewhere, is in evidence in the second half of nineteenth-century France.

The evolution of the department store and an evolving consumer science was presaged by the ‘magasins de nouveautés’ of the 1830s and 1840s which would bridge the gap between the old, guild-dominated single-product boutiques and the department store. The ‘magasins de nouveautés’ were sometimes developed from existing arcades. For the first time they offered a mixture of wares at marked fixed prices, with low prices driven by high turnover and advertising.[[326]](#footnote-326) Industrialization assured the supply and the putative science of marketing contributed to the creation of demand.[[327]](#footnote-327)

The stores were departmentalized and hierarchical in their management structures, encouraging effort and sales success from staff seeking to progress. The transition from ‘magasins de nouveautés’ to department store was, consistent with the tipping point, not sequential, with the two existing in parallel for many years. Reference was made to the ‘magasins de nouveautés’ as late as the end of the nineteenth century, as suggested in Huysmans’ *À Rebours* of 1894, in which the central character, des Esseintes, complains about the popularisation of oriental textiles: ‘des étoffes et des tapis de l’Orient, devenus, maintenant que les négociants enrichis se les procurent dans les magasins de nouveautés, au rabais, si fastidieux et si communs’.[[328]](#footnote-328) Unlike those ‘magasins de nouveautés’ developed on the site of previous arcades, Haussmann’s transformation of Paris allowed the department store to occupy dominant locations on the new boulevards, multiplying opportunities for a fledgling consumer science to develop and exploit the consumer’s appetite.

Coinciding with Haussmann’s ongoing programme, the first Paris Exposition of 1855 to which, according to Taine: ‘L’Europe s’est déplacé pour voir des merchandises’,[[329]](#footnote-329) differed from the previous exposition in London of 1851 in that people were now presented with not simply the technological means of production but the labelled prices of its produce.[[330]](#footnote-330) The visitors to expositions and the new department stores were also drawn by the ‘spectacle de la merchandise’[[331]](#footnote-331)where abundance and colour are combined to create ‘divertissement’, a pleasurable experience in which the client will hopefully make impulse purchases.[[332]](#footnote-332) Hamon refers to the expositions as obtaining their architectural inspiration not from the Beaux-arts but from engineers and civil servants.[[333]](#footnote-333) The Paris Expositions of 1855 and 1867 provided consumerism with the engineering and administrative energy of a state-controlled industry. That of 1867 is particularly relevant to *Au Bonheur* being coincident with the novel’s diegesis and attracting superlatives similar to those used by the entranced visitors to Mouret’s department store. Of the exposition, Flaubert wrote to George Sand in May 1867:

Cela est écrasant. Il y a des choses splendides et extra-curieuses […]. Quelqu’un qui aurait à soi trois mois entiers et qui viendrait là tous les matins prendre des notes s’épargnerait par la suite bien des lectures et bien des voyages[[334]](#footnote-334)

The architectural and physiological comparisons of the 1867 exposition and Mouret’s establishment are also striking. Hamon cites Pierre Larousse describing the exhibition:

En circulant “encyclopédiquement” dans une même galerie circulaire, on pouvait passer en revue tel type de production (par example les machines) de tous les pays exposants, et en allant de la péripherie vers le centre on passait en revue les productions différentes d’un même pays[[335]](#footnote-335)

Similarly, for Hamon, the *Au Bonheur* department store is the ‘Bonheur de l’activité humaine maîtrisée, de l’harmonieuse circulation des objets entrant et sortant, du renouvellement perpétuel des stocks, de l’efficacité de leur rangement’.[[336]](#footnote-336) The Expositions also possessed in their impermanence the transitory characteristics of consumer desire. The speed and extent of the development of a French consumer society by the time of the Expositions is reflected in Benjamin’s description of them as: ‘places of pilgrimage to the fetish Commodity’ where ‘the phantasmagoria of capitalist culture attained its most radiant unfurling’.[[337]](#footnote-337)

Walker touches on the question of the control of consumers by advertising copywriters and marketing, in mid-nineteenth-century France[[338]](#footnote-338) drawing an analogy between them and the novelist who delivers the promise of meeting the client’s desires. This is particularly relevant to this chapter as advertising and marketing are aspects of consumer science in which Zola excelled whilst at Hachette, in his capacity as head of publicity.[[339]](#footnote-339) Built, like the new department stores, on one of Haussmann’s new boulevards, the Hachette premises possessed many architectural similarities to the fictional department store in *Au Bonheur* and that of the Expositions, with expanses of glass and iron work. As head of publicity, Zola learnt how to launch a work, familiarised himself with the mechanisms of a large publishing company, one that recognised business opportunities in the growth in French education, the development of a national transport and mass media. Becker refers to Zola’s recognition of the critical link between producing and selling and his personal involvement in the sale and distribution of his works. For Zola, literature was ‘Un marchand comme un autre’.[[340]](#footnote-340) Publishing rights, foreign editions and journal series would become a significant revenue for Zola.

The similarities of Zola and Mouret are striking in their relationship with the public and with crowds. Becker cites Zola: ‘J’ai besoin de la foule, je vais à elle comme je peux, je tente tous les moyens pour la dompter. En ce moment, j’ai surtout besoin de deux choses: de publicité et d’argent’[[341]](#footnote-341)In his negotiations with the publishers of *Contes à Ninon*, [[342]](#footnote-342)Zola made many concessions in return for extensive publicity, with a view to the sale of future works. Publishers fed the growing literacy in the French population by continually driving down the price of novels with Charpentier issuing a collection in 1838 for three and a half francs dropping to one franc in 1853 and Hachette publishing in their ‘Bibliothèque des Chemins de fer’ their *Petit Journal* at one sou in 1863.[[343]](#footnote-343)

This relentless drive for cost reduction, publicity and mass sales is reflected in Mouret’s own strategies which are employed with precision and, consistent with the application of consumer science, their results improved and repeated. However, as will be addressed later in this chapter, for all the rigour of Mouret’s enterprise, his control over events – and implicitly Zola’s ability to represent all the factors contributing to them - is not absolute. As Susan Porter Benson shows, even in the golden-age of the department store there were contingencies operating counter to the delivery of consumer science.[[344]](#footnote-344) She describes the triangle of management, shop-girls and customers and how the store became an arena of class, gender conflict and alliances between two of the three parties. The result was an atmosphere of uncertainty and ambiguity. Similarities exist here with the *Au Bonheur* department store and the limitations of Mouret’s ‘phalanstère’ in respect of its ability to control the lives of its employees. By the fall of the Second Empire in 1870, a consumer science had emerged, the validity of which had been established in the repeatability of its methods and its further development through experiments proven in the department stores of Paris, and as represented in *Au Bonheur*.

The hegemony of neoliberalism in modern everyday existence has been achieved via a scientific application of such methods as Zola had practised at Hachette and the acute observation and exploitation of consumer behaviour this entailed. This is reflected in Mouret’s psychological experiments - and in his above noted determination to capture the mother through her children. Mouret ‘spéculait sur tous les sentiments, créait des rayons pour petits garçons et fillettes, arrêttait les mamans au passage, en offrant aux bébés des images et des ballons […] et qui, tenus au bout d’un fil, voyageant en l’air, promenaient par les rues une réclame vivante!’ (AB, III, 612). In such activities, Zola and his contemporaries may not have recognized consumerism as a science but this section shows how the essential elements of its status as a science were already present.

Bowlby refers to the practice of both Mouret and the Bon Marché’s founders, M. and Mme Boucicaut, of deliberately disorientating clients, breaking down their resistance as they wander past vast displays of produce. Drawing upon Zola’s enthusiastic inscription into the ranks of the philosopher scientists,[[345]](#footnote-345) Bowlby refers to his identification of masculine rationality and female subjectivity[[346]](#footnote-346) in developing his physiological and psychological tactics. Mouret, like Zola, develops his experiment from observation and his experimentation upon and manipulation of the female shoppers. Bowlby comments: ‘Mouret’s enterprise invents or inflects many types and relationships of female subjectivity, ranging from the unsexed, unclassed ‘ouvrière’to the glorified narcissistic body draped in all the commodified wonder of “costly fantasies”’.[[347]](#footnote-347) Her linking of the material and sexual once again refers the reader to the core elements of Mouret’s exploitative consumer science. It is an exploitation which, whilst openly boasted of by Mouret, is not explicitly recognised by Denise, thereby emphasising its successful dissimulation.

In referring in her article’s title to *névrose*,[[348]](#footnote-348) Thompson draws upon a central aspect of psychology in Zola’s exposition of the impact of consumerism upon different female clients, particularly relating to their sexuality. Whilst Freud post-dates the novel, references are made to objects which would become, only a few years later, representative of Freudian fetishization: ‘The three examples which Freud cites as privileged fetish objects – shoes, fur or velvet, and underwear – are all present in the novel’ and anticipate Freud’s ‘attempts to theorize the intriguing link between vestimentary female fetishism and sexuality’.[[349]](#footnote-349) That theory offers ‘one account of the women’s increasingly frenzied buying in *Au Bonheur*’.[[350]](#footnote-350)

The phenomenon of a proffered liberty provoking an actual loss of autonomy on the part of the female consumer, later a marked element of twentieth century neoliberalism and reflected in Thompson’s article, is encouraged by Mouret. Mme Désforges, despite her bitterness at being recently rejected by Mouret ‘succomba devant une ivoire d’une finesse charmante’ at the great sale (AB, III, 789). Mme Marty’s compulsive shopping is done despite her being conscious of the pain and grief it causes her husband. The clients are ‘dépouillée, violée’ (AB, III, 797). This characteristic of consumerism, of its merging of the psychological, sociological, sexual and economic fields into a dominating and colonising force, presented here as *Au Bonheur* replicates many of the marketing policies of the Bon Marché department store reviewed in Miller. Tactics included targeting travellers arriving at select hotels in Paris and providing breath-taking displays of goods or exploiting parental guilt by using ‘pester–power’ to influence the mother via her children’s demands, ‘de conquérir la mère par l’enfant’ (A, III, 612). Mouret is described as ‘le premier étalagiste de Paris […] qui avait fondé l’école du brutal et du colossal dans la science de l’étalage’ (AB, III, 434). This brutality contains aspects with which twentieth century consumers are familiar: the cultivation by the Bon Marché in its clientele and the bourgeois public of a fear that not possessing an article, sometimes even in sufficient quantity, would mark oneself out from the rest of one’s peer group. ‘The life of the bourgeois and the life of the department store had become one and the same’.[[351]](#footnote-351) This scientifically nurtured fear of failure, this aspiration for an ever receding perfection is essential to capitalism, where no definitive conclusion, no satisfaction, is obtained by the client who must necessarily continue to pursue it by purchasing the next item.

Zola, via Mouret, demonstrates an understanding of the bourgeois market and its exponential growth. The putative marketing profession relied upon an analysis of society’s tendencies and their exploitation, responding to increasingly fluid class distinctions. This fluidity is emphatically demonstrated in the ascension of the *vendeurs* and *vendeuses* to a provisional social status permitting them to converse with and persuade its bourgeois clientele. Whilst Miller points out that the *agendas* distributed by the *grands magasins* ‘told their readers that the life of the bourgeois and the life of the department store had become one and the same’,[[352]](#footnote-352) all classes are locked into the same cycle. Just as with evolution, consumerism is not a simple upward trajectory. It can provoke complex responses from its participants, be it insatiable shopping, kleptomania manifested in shoplifting or bankrupt households.

The insatiability nurtured amongst the clientele is explicitly sexual. The transitory sexual pleasure will be repeatedly sought and will be sanctioned by the knowledge that the shopper is participating in a ceremony belonging to a new religion. After the great sale is complete, the clients

s’en allait à moitié défaite, avec la volupté assouvie et la sourde honte d’un désir contenté au fond d’un hotel louche […]. La femme venait passer chez lui les heures vide, les heures frissonantes et inquiètes qu’elle vivait jadis au fond des chapelles (AB, III, 797).

Mouret has scientifically created a religion of consuming, a ‘culte sans cesse renouvelé du corps avec l’au-delà divin de la beauté’ (AB, III, 797-8). A ‘culte’ co-exists with the scientific exploitation of these same shoppers, but in a place of worship which offers no salvation. Mouret’s evangelism is an important component. His winning over of the banker Hartmann whilst describing how he has entrapped the female client is corroborated as the women respond: ‘Oh! monsieur Mouret! monsieur Mouret! Balbutiaient des voix chuchotantes et pâmées, au fond des ténèbres du salon’ (AB, III, 468). Such religious allusions may appear to sit awkwardly with consumer science as they are based upon belief and not scientifically observed fact. However, they have particular resonance in both *Au Bonheur* and in the context of today’s neoliberal hegemony, which dominates as Mouret dominated Paris. The appropriation of religion and sex by consumerism is perhaps the first allusion to the impact, a century later, of neoliberalism upon the sexual status or appetite of a person. In *Au Bonheur* is witnessed the commencement of the colonization of the everyday by future global neoliberal economics, wherein the citizen is replaced by the consumer and participation in the consumer society is the overriding activity of each. Consumerism, presented to Parisian society via the *grand magasin*,is a contributor to that approaching colonization.

Mouret’s clientele are manipulated and acquiescent, are seduced in a system at the summit of which he declares is:

l’exploitation de la femme […] le bon marché qui les attire, la marque en chiffres connus qui tranquillise […] la femme qu’ils prenaient au continuel piège de leurs occasions, après avoir étourdie devant leurs étalages. Ils avaient éveillé dans sa chair de nouveaux désirs, ils étaient une tentation immense, où elle succombait fatalement, cédant d’abord à des achats de bonne ménagère, puis gagnée par la coquetterie, puis dévorée (AB, III, 461).

In such numerous references to the fetishistic and religious connections between the consumer and the coveted goods, *Au Bonheur* again presages neoliberalism. Joshua Ramey cites Philip Mirowski and William E. Connolly who:

[have] detected the politico-theological element in the neoliberal thought collective. […] Political theorists […] have discerned that the neoliberal fetish of market processes as conveyors of absolute knowledge and truth depends on a spirituality of (apparently) radical openness to chance and contingency. [[353]](#footnote-353)

This argument has obvious implications for both the place and definition of science in terms of ‘chance and contingency’ and the existence of Ramey’s purported ‘absolute knowledge and truth.’[[354]](#footnote-354) Mouret’s exploitation of his project’s cult status amongst his clientele locates behavioural psychology within consumerism. These behaviours may include the blind faith shown by the public in *Au Bonheur* but they also betray traits which may ultimately contribute to the undermining of any market process: Mme Guibal always returns what she buys, Mme Boves simply shoplifts and the spendthrift Mme Marty will one day be penniless. Zola’s reverence for scientific methods, as manifested in what this thesis identifies as consumer science, may therefore be tempered by his recognition of the social costs which ravage the ‘vendeuses’and client alike. That science alone cannot provide a sustainable consumer society underscores the conditionality of any attempted definitive trajectory.

The confrontation of ‘scientific’ and romantic literature is paralleled by that of mass production and art. The umbrella maker, Bourras, whose fight to the finish occupies a significant part of the novel, represents the craftsman and Mouret, science. Consumerism is seen to be served by science, in that work on the final phase of the department store is able to continue throughout the night, with the electric lamps maintaining the builder’s efforts to complete the palatial store, to deliver the final goliath. Bourras can only protest ‘L’art est fichu, entendez-vous’ (AB, III, 567). The survival of art and creativity in the context of industrialization and scientific logic had been recognised by Zola’s exact contemporary, William Morris.[[355]](#footnote-355) Zola, whose opinions are, according to David Walker,[[356]](#footnote-356) part represented in those of the logical and far-sighted Denise, does not apparently share the concerns of Morris. Despite the misery caused by the *grand magasin* to her relatives, to herself, and other small local shopkeepers, Denise is unshaken in her view as to the logical necessity of Mouret’s project. Walker argues Zola ‘uses Denise as a vehicle to endorse, while feminising and hence softening, that belief in progress that he is intent on conveying – progress that necessarily entails the destruction of those ill-suited to change and evolve’.[[357]](#footnote-357) It is this logic, missing in all the complaints and doomed schemes of owners of the smaller shops surrounding the *grand magasin*, which separates the victims and victors of the commercial struggle. Zola’s observation of the process in Mouret’s project suggests that this outcome is inevitable and must therefore represent a development in an evolving, and therefore perfecting, capitalism.

However, logic is scientifically antithetical to evolution, in that evolution does not operate to the rule of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. That Zola may have unconsciously recognised the illogical, chaotic nature of evolution is suggested in Denise’s adhesion to ‘la logique’, being contradicted in the same sentence by ‘et de la vie’ (AB, III, 574). Denise subscribes to the view that life is subject to a different framework based upon those other, illogical qualities, which Denise also frequently praises: passion, innovation, loyalty, humanity, pragmatic reform at work and access to leisure, along with a perception that all these, combined with commercial progress, will deliver universal benefits. Mouret’s evangelism is similarly illogical in requiring belief from his clientele: ‘Sa création apportait une religion nouvelle, les églises que désertait peu à peu la foi chancelante étaient remplacées par son bazar, dans les âmes inoccupées désormais’ (AB, III, 797).

Religion, science and consumerism all require failure for renewal, manifested respectively as repentance, re-calibration and replacing outdated fashions. Each demanding to some degree, acts of faith in the benefits offered. Belief, loyalty, passion are some of the very qualities which Zola, armed with Taine’s injunction that all physical and moral phenomena have a cause, seeks to subject to scientific method in his fictions. It is when *Au Bonheur* is read against this background of illogicality, of evangelism, of a prevailing misreading of evolution, of unquantifiable values such as those of Denise; of a lack of scientifically verifiable fact; that any representation of reality and change is seen to be ill founded.

## CONCLUSION

The momentum of *Au Bonheur’s* plot mirrors that of scientific and economic development in mid nineteenth-century France. In naturalism, Zola sought to harness scientific methodology to literature. His novels would be laboratories. However, Zola’s selectivity as to the facts applied, his proclaiming that he would take an optimistic stance, his applying his imagination and a misapplication of the theory of evolution, qualifies *Au Bonheur* as a failure in the application of science in literature. Zola believes in authorial intention but is subject to countless influences, all of which make it impossible for a writer of fiction to fully apply Bernard’s scientific methodology. Zola undermines Mouret’s seemingly unstoppable trajectory, revealing the possibility of regression, evidenced when Mouret recognises that the lives of his staff are beyond his control when outside the confines of his store. Here Zola unconsciously undermines the scientific logic underpinning the results of Mouret’s experiment and reveals the instability of treating the confines of his *grand magasin* as a laboratory. The walls of that laboratory disappear into a complex society teeming with unquantifiable components.

Mouret’s desire for dominance is implicitly challenged throughout the novel through the limitations of his scientific approach to his business. Mouret cannot control the social changes that capitalism is bringing about, such as the freedoms derived from access to a salary which can be spent in any store and on anything. Zola’s application of science in the form of naturalism is seen to be similarly constrained by his inability to corral all components and contingencies of change. Zola’s manipulation of commercial practices in order to support the plot, also contribute to undermining his own naturalist ambitions.

Zola’s theory that the plot (or experiment) may continue beyond the novel is borne out in the subsequent relative stagnation of the department store, the retaliation of powerful small business organizations and the restriction of credit in the dying years of the Second Empire. There also remain significant aspects which are not apparently anticipated by Zola, such as the proto-socialist structure unconsciously founded by Denise, which may spark a desire, within or without the walls of the *grands magasins*,for a replacement of paternalism with greater social equality. In these omissions, conscious or otherwise on the part of Zola, are seen not only the limitations of fiction and science to represent the process of change but a possible admission that this is so and an implicit invitation to the reader – similar to those made explicitly by Houellebecq in *Extension du domaine de la lutte –* to read and question fiction more closely, whilst recognising that the writer’s intention will always be exceeded.

Less explicit than *Extension* in its acknowledgement of the limitations of science in fiction is the second novel in the pairing of Zola and Houellebecq’s apprehension of science in fiction, *Les Particules*. Houellebecq will be seen to appropriate both science and science fiction in the representation of radical global change in a near future. While *Les Particules* does not manifest a similar conscious undermining of the representation of change as *Extension*, *Les Particules* will be seen to reveal a flawed application of science as a means of describing and predicting change.

# CHAPTER FIVE *LES PARTICULES ÉLÉMENTAIRES*: WRITING SCIENCE IN THE MODE OF FAILURE

## INTRODUCTION

*Les Particules élémentaires* figures an economic system which, with the harnessing of pure science, soft science and what has been identified in this thesis as consumer science,[[358]](#footnote-358) enables the mustering of vast marketing and advertising resources whilst appearing to locate, administer to and manipulate the needs or trends of the consumer. The theory of the dual economies in *Extension* (EDL, 100)is not explicitly repeated in *Les Particules* but its impact is implied throughout. *Les Particules* can be read as a science fiction dystopia in which the reader is implicitly warned of the consequences of applying scientific solutions to the impact of what Houellebecq identifies as the parallel sexual and material economies in *Extension*. Critics have addressed the scientific, sexual and socio-economic aspects of *Les Particules*.[[359]](#footnote-359) However, none has considered it in the context of pure science, soft sciences and consumer science in conjunction with the ability of fiction to capture change in a capitalist context.

This chapter will propose that the concept of the tipping point has the potential to challenge the putative ‘certitude rationelle*’* (PE, 270)of pure science in fiction. The rational certainty of scientific output is seen in this chapter to be subject to the intention of the scientist, the interpretation of their theory and that of those who seek to influence them, as well as the possible appropriation of the theory within a global market. This chapter will refer to the work of scientist and philosopher Thomas Kuhn, who sees, particularly in response to crises, no simple link between the scientist and their output which he states is as subject to manipulation and contingency as any other product.[[360]](#footnote-360) This is evidenced in *Les Particules* in the compromised scientific solution to humanity’s problems which occupies the final pages of the novel and which Houellebecq implies to be the result of neoliberal influence on a scientific theory.

Following a summary of the novel and a literature review, this chapter will discuss how, drawing upon the theory of the ‘survival of the fittest’, Darwinism and Social Darwinism,[[361]](#footnote-361) are applied by Houellebecq to the sexual struggle. The novel will be shown to depict change attributable not to biological evolution but implicitly the material and sexual economies. These economies exist as a particularity of capitalism, along with their exploitation of pure, soft and consumer sciences. This combination of different understandings of science and neoliberal economies will be considered in the second section. The chapter then explores Houellebecq’s use of self-reflexivity to reveal the (im)possibility of fiction and particularly science fiction anticipating outcomes. The fourth section relates to the novel’s portrayal of existential crises including the perceived failure of philosophy to challenge neoliberalism. The chapter then concludes in considering how Houellebecq represents a neoliberal commodification of all aspects of human life. It proposes that Houellebecq uses pure science both to offer a falsely deterministic premise whilst exposing the inability of humanity, through its remoteness from science,[[362]](#footnote-362) to question scientific determinism (in particular its appropriation by late capitalism). Houellebecq will show science and neoliberalism to deliver no satisfactory outcome.

## *LES PARTICULES*: THE NARRATIVE OF THE THIRD ‘MUTATION MÉTAPHYSIQUE’

*Les Particules* is framed by a prologue and an epilogue, the former historically serving to explain or commentupon the action it precedes, the latter closing the action with a re-enforcement of its message. This form dates from ancient Greek drama when: ‘at their best the prologue and epilogue were witty and sometimes scurrilous commentaries on the politics and social conditions of the day, written by outstanding men of the theatre […] and spoken by the finest actors of the day.’[[363]](#footnote-363) Prologues and epilogues were also used in moralistic genres to re-enforce the lesson. The contrast of this definition with the prologue and epilogue of *Les Particules* is marked.

The prologue features poor poetry, and at least one significant narrative inconsistency occurs in relation to the mutationor paradigm change marketed by Hubczejak. The function and positioning of poetic register and discourse by Houellebecq is unclear. In the opening lines of the second part of *Extension* there is a departure from the description of the mundane lives of the narrator and his colleagues to a description, part-prose poetry, part-scientific observation, of the shark-infested and reef-filled approaches to Bab-el-Mandel in the Arabian Gulf (EDL, 51-2). The narrator describes the effect of heat upon the horizon as ‘un bouillonnement visquex’ and compares it to phenomena encountered during the ‘troisième phase du minerai de fer’ in the interaction of molten steel with the atmosphere (EDL, 51). The passage ends, illogically, with a synthesis that does not follow from the preceding thesis: ‘C’est pourquoi la plupart des pilotes franchissent cet obstacle sans encombre’(EDL, 52). The narrator then attempts to link this passage with the scene which follows with the statement ‘Parfois, cependant, de telles choses adviennent, et se manifestent en vérité’ (EDL, 52).

The following scene describes him in a freezing train station awaiting his colleague before departing on a business trip. Apart from the theme of travel and weather and the consequent irony in the prosaic nature of the ‘vérité’ encountered by the narrator, the purpose of this poetic departure remains elusive. The mixture of scientific discourse and poetic imagery may represent the narrator’s struggle to adopt a language appropriate to the reality he is attempting to witness. The narrator’s statement commencing ‘C’est pourquoi…’ may also deliberately reveal the absence of any scientific determinism to be derived from the passage and possibly his temporary relief in writing in a less theoretical language, one otherwise unsuited to today’s reality, a theme discussed earlier in relation to the narrator’s struggle to find a language suited to the contemporary reader and the ‘effacement progressif des relations humaines’ (EDL, 42). The poor prose poetry encountered in the prologue to *La Possibilité* may simply refer to the debased emotional capacity of the cloned race whilst ironically linking this quality with the poetry of the classical prologue.

The prologue and epilogue are delivered by the narrator, an anonymous clone who, in the page-and-a-half of narrative composing the prologue, announces the sequence and nature of ‘les mutations métaphysiques’ that have occurred in the history of the human race and Michel’s contribution to the third of that series, that of the creation of a cloned race. What should have been an enlightening introduction and conclusion are flawed and may also be argued to raise questions about the same failure of pure, soft and consumer sciences to provide a theory which might meet the expectation of the consumer-reader. The prologue and epilogue may be read as the narrator’s declaration of what should pertain in the post-human utopia. However, they do not correspond to the promised utopia marketed to a soon-to-be-obsolete humanity. Marketing and advertising are seen to have conveyed a fiction to the consumer and are shown to fail, once again, to deliver the desired product.

Contradicting the clone narrator’s dedication of the novel to the memory of Michel Djerzinski: ‘Ce livre est avant tout l’histoire d’un homme’ (PE, 7), the narrative is in fact the history of two men, half-brothers Michel Djerzinski and Bruno Clément. The novel charts their upbringing, adolescence and sexual awakening, from infancy to death for Michel and permanent incarceration in a psychiatric hospital for Bruno. Both are abandoned from boyhood by their mother, Janine Ceccaldi. She is described as a ‘précurseur’(PE, 25),referring not to any evolutionary biological state but to a person who had recognised and exploited the material and sexual economies. The brothers are farmed out to their respective paternal grandmothers. At school Bruno undergoes traumatic bullying in the lax discipline of the post-1968 educational environment, which only ceases when he and his persecutors reach adolescence. Bruno’s physical torture then becomes that of being unable to find a sexual partner. Michel’s own sexual progression is also difficult, albeit marked by abstention. The maternal qualities and love of Michel’s grandmother and his relationship with Annabelle, his close friend from childhood to late teenage years to whose love he failed to respond would, according to the clone narrator, profoundly influence Michel’s yet unformed scientific theory.

Science is introduced from the first page, presenting Michel ‘comme un biologiste de tout premier plan’ (PE, 7), a contender for a Nobel Prize. The narrator also immediately introduces the concept of a ‘mutationmétaphysique’, constituting a fundamental change in the psychology of humanity,[[364]](#footnote-364) mentioning it four times in two pages.[[365]](#footnote-365)

As the brothers progress from childhood to their teenage years, the narrator remarks upon the socio-economic change in France and the development of late capitalist ideology emanating from the US. Michel’s field is particle physics, a pure science which introduces the novel’s eponymous metaphor of the particulate nature of humanity. Bruno studies literature, becomes a teacher, marries, has a son Victor, divorces and, after exposing himself to a female pupil, has a breakdown. He meets Christiane and forms what is at first a happy relationship, one encompassing orgies and holidays on the Cap d’Agde devoted to sex. Aldous Huxley’s science-fiction, *Brave New World*[[366]](#footnote-366) is central to a discussion between Bruno and Michel on the dominance of science and the fallibility of fictional attempts to predict its trajectory and consequences. Christiane, suffering from chronic back problems, becomes paralysed whilst she and Bruno are at a sex club. She commits suicide.

Following the death of Michel’s grandmother, his estrangement from Annabelle, his observation of an ageing Bruno’s frantic pursuit of pleasure, Michel’s thoughts coalesce one evening with a reading of the ‘3 Suisses’ clothing catalogue.[[367]](#footnote-367) He forms a growing conviction that any scientifically viable future for *homo sapiens* must be one dominated by female characteristics, a theory which will also break the link between procreation and death. Meanwhile, Michel meets Annabelle, now forty, and they commence a sexual relationship. She had been seduced as a teenager by sex predator and later snuff movie director, David di Meola, identified, like Janine Ceccaldi, as a *précurseur*. It is implied that her beauty and appetite for sex had drawn her into the sexual economy of which she is both an agent and victim.

After visiting their mother in her final hours, Bruno and Michel part for good. Bruno returns to his lithium-dosed existence in a psychiatric hospital and Michel to Paris. Michel is encouraged to pursue the theory of human cloning upon which he had embarked. Annabelle is diagnosed with cancer of the uterus and kills herself, using the date-rape drug Rohypnol. Soon after her cremation Michel leaves for Ireland. From this point, his few statements, both scientific and religious in nature and influencing his cloning solution, appear as reported speech. He lives an isolated existence whilst refining his theory, following which he disappears, presumably having committed suicide.

The epilogue proceeds to relate Michel’s clone theory for the replacement of the human race. The narrator then introduces Hubczejak, the Cambridge biochemist who, as scientist-evangelist adopts Michel’s theory and utilising the methodologies of consumer science, takes advantage of concomitant political and religious inertia, convincing mankind to give up its struggle and accept its replacement by a post human race of clones. The depiction of Hubczejak’s marketing campaign and subsequent extinction of humanity is superficial, the novel ending as the clones salute those they had replaced, the human race.

## SCIENCE IN CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE IN *LES PARTICULES*

Pure, soft and consumer sciences[[368]](#footnote-368) are prominent in the novel as features of late capitalism. Abecassis discusses how pure science, through expanding our knowledge in its lifting ‘the veil of ignorance from the face of Eros’,[[369]](#footnote-369) has attempted to persuade us that knowledge will provide liberty and that, armed with the Masters and Johnson report,[[370]](#footnote-370) the individual will apparently find ‘beyond the horizon of knowledge […] the promised land of orgasmic bliss’.[[371]](#footnote-371) In relation to sexuality, Abecassis argues, citing Michel ‘the democratic-scientific fallacy consisted in making a categorical mistake, based on a false analogy: ‘Dernier mythe de l’occident, le sexe était une chose à faire, une chose possible, une chose à faire’.[[372]](#footnote-372) Abecassis sees *Les Particules* as Houellebecq’s identification of the ‘impossibility of desire as a generalized, multicultural project’[[373]](#footnote-373) referring to Houellebecq’s emphasis on the failure of consumerism to transform the consumer into an object of desire, providing instead a novel where ‘the bonfire of our last hopes – the everlasting increase in the consumption of objects in order to augment our individuality, our desire and ultimately our orgasms – burns down to their elemental particles’.[[374]](#footnote-374)

Morrey’s *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and its Aftermath* devotes a chapter to science and religion and addresses areas common to both *La Possibilité* and *Les Particules*. However, Morrey does not address pure or soft science but science fiction utopias and post humanity. Morrey also foregrounds the socio-sexual struggle and the religious and philosophical vacuum which allows post human development, aided by a small number of scientists, to proceed unchecked. Darwinism is also considered by Morrey along with its implications on determinism and free will. Morrey explores the philosophical complexities of cultural evolution or Social Darwinism with which he argues Houellebecq is concerned.

John McCann’s work on the importance of science in Houellebecq’s fiction was briefly touched upon in the Introduction to this thesis. [[375]](#footnote-375) McCann contends that Houellebecq is ‘particularly concerned with the failure to incorporate the insights of science, preferring instead commitment to a political struggle to change society. McCann quotes from Houellebecq’s article ‘Sortir du XX ͤ siècle’,[[376]](#footnote-376) in which Houellebecq alleges ‘l’ignorance scientifique crasse d’un Sartre ou d’une Beauvoir’.[[377]](#footnote-377) McCann argues that Houellebecq considers the importance of science to be such that it must be included in any literature that is to be ‘meaningful’ and also because ‘it is a kind of writing that masses of people find interesting’.[[378]](#footnote-378)

Jerry Varsava contends that scientific communitarianism represents the model for the ‘utopia’ depicted in the epilogue in *Les Particules*.[[379]](#footnote-379) In short, it is an anti-liberal society, challenging the ‘ennobling tenets of liberalism: free will, self-determination, property rights….’.[[380]](#footnote-380) Varsava calls *Les Particules* ‘a powerful *roman à thèse*’ seeking to ‘advance a bitter critique of liberalism and liberal democracy and, in particular, of their economic and cultural forms, capitalism and advanced consumerism’.[[381]](#footnote-381) Varsava’s article otherwise largely ignores the significance of science, instead choosing to attack Houellebecq’s ‘conservative communitarian views’,[[382]](#footnote-382) whilst defending liberalism, including that relating to neoliberal economics. Varsava is most relevant here in relation to his comparison of Houellebecq and Zola in terms of their scientific determinism.[[383]](#footnote-383) He considers both to have ‘fairly unreconstructed views of science and its salutary role on the development of Western civilisation’[[384]](#footnote-384) citing Houellebecq’s assertion that “The movement that has been driving History for centuries […] is science and technology. Zola thought more or less the same thing: we agree with one another”.[[385]](#footnote-385) Varsava does not elucidate the meaning of ‘unreconstructed views’.

In *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*, Carole Sweeney reads *Les Particules* as depicting irreversible decay, citing Houellebecq in *Public Enemies*:[[386]](#footnote-386)

if there is an idea, a single idea that runs through all of my novels, which goes so far as to haunt them, it is the *absolute irreversibility of all processes of decay* once they have begun […] everything that is lost is lost absolutely and for all time. It is more than organic, it is like a universal law that applies also to inert objects; it is literally entropic[[387]](#footnote-387)

However, Houellebecq’s ‘absolute irreversibility’ is not explained or demonstrated. Sweeney does not address the role of the writer nor Houellebecq’s self-reflexivity as to whether fiction is capable of delivering definitive conclusions or solutions.

Ruth Cruickshank’s ‘Sex, Shopping and Psychoanalysis: Houellebecq and Therapy’ foregrounds Houellebecq’s exposure of the threats posed by unrestricted scientific development and the related claims of psychoanalysis in a consumerist society. Cruickshank argues the failure of the soft sciences not only to challenge ‘the false goals of material and sexual fulfilment’,[[388]](#footnote-388) but also the ramifications of genetic engineering’.[[389]](#footnote-389) Cruickshank sees Houellebecq’s fiction as both deliberately and unintentionally challenging consumption, psychoanalysis and unchecked scientific advance. She concludes that Houellebecq achieves this not with the ‘false promises of sex (or sex equality) shopping or psychoanalysis’, nor by offering a ‘revolutionary guide’ but ‘at once by design and in spite of themselves’ through reading fiction carefully, including his own: ‘il ne faut pas se laisser piéger par l’histoire’.[[390]](#footnote-390)

In *Fin de Millénaire French Fiction* Cruickshank includes an appraisal of Houellebecq’s representation of what she calls the failure of science, technology and of the intellectual ‘to apprehend the implications of scientific advance’.[[391]](#footnote-391) The unconvincing solution in the form of the post-human future offered in *Les Particules* and by implication any such theory in fiction,is also addressed. Cruickshank argues that the *dénouement* deliberately fails as a representation of a utopian finality, appearing rather as ‘a pastiche of science fiction’.[[392]](#footnote-392) She suggests that Houellebecq raises the question of the enduring ability of the individual, love and writing to create turning points, despite the ‘homogenizing discourses of the mass media and the global market and the blindness of intellectuals’.[[393]](#footnote-393) Cruickshank differs from this thesis in that, in common with other critics, her articles do not address the inclusion of science within fiction as validation of a fictional theory offering a definitive result nor the susceptibility of science to marketed distortion and its assimilation by late capitalism.

## THE FAILURES OF PHILOSOPHY AND SCIENCE TO PROVIDE CONCLUSION

In a novel where humanity is apparently threatened with extinction, it may seem surprising to read the narrator concerning themselves with the status of several twentieth-century French philosophers. Cruickshank addresses this in *Fin de Millénaire French Fiction*. Globalization is seen as a threat to ‘a nexus of identity narratives – economic, political, diplomatic, cultural and indeed, literary’.[[394]](#footnote-394) Crisis, as Cruickshank argues, had historically generated new philosophies. However, the dominance of ‘nihilistic postmodern relativism and abstraction’,[[395]](#footnote-395) for which Sokal and Bricmont held such as Foucault, Lacan, Deleuze, Baudrillard and Kristeva responsible and made them the objects of ridicule in their *Impostures intellectuelles*,[[396]](#footnote-396) has not, in the narrator’s opinion, offered responses to the crises faced by France. The narrator refers to ‘le ridicule global’ (PE, 314) into which these philosophers had declined. Houellebecq implies that instead of adapting their philosophies, they appear to simply fade as potential challengers to the developing parallel material and sexual economies. The narrative of *Les Particules* represents the intersecting, in-process factors revealing the fallibility of all intellectual argument seeking to impose solutions. Contemporary French philosophers are singled out as globally discredited ‘après des décennies de surestimation insensée’ (PE, 314). Worse still, the narrator continues, they have succeeded not only in leaving ‘le champ libre à aucune pensée philosophique neuve, mais au contraire jeter le discredit sur l’ensemble des intellectuels se réclamant des “sciences humaines”’(PE, 314). These sciences are non-verifiable pseudo-sciences representing another source claiming false solutions.

In relation to pure science, Kuhn discusses[[397]](#footnote-397) how crises provoke new theories. Kuhn’s work proposes that any theory resulting from such crises would eventually provoke a further shift, as scientific theory is in constant evolution. His argument that nothing is immutable therefore has close parallels with the non-linearity and contingency of all change explored in this thesis. Progress is one of the distinguishing characteristics Kuhn suggests distinguishes ‘science’ from ‘social science’.[[398]](#footnote-398) However, the idea that scientific progress has an ultimate truth as its aim is dismissed by Kuhn. He states: ‘We may, to be more precise, have to relinquish the notion, explicit or implicit, that changes of paradigm carry scientists and those who learn from them closer and closer to the truth’.[[399]](#footnote-399) Kuhn even extends this to querying the assumption that evolution is necessarily a process ‘*toward* anything’.[[400]](#footnote-400) The refusal by Kuhn to recognise a trajectory to perfection corresponds to Houellebecq’s refusal to offer any fictional sequence of action in response to the impact of neoliberalism.

Post-war French thought is ridiculed in *Les Particules*, for example in Janine Ceccaldi’s being unimpressed by a Sartre who was ugly ‘au confins du handicap’ (PE, 27) and with whom she dances a *be-bop*. Again, focusing upon the pre-occupation of the leading philosophers with their sexual equity rather than intellectual stature, the clone narrator finds it a ‘propos amusant’ that Deleuze and Debord had committed suicide due to their inability to contemplate ‘leur propre déclin physique’ (PE, 248) following the failure of the *sciences humaines*. Houellebecq’s possible euphemism suggests the philosopher’s failure to honestly describe their own state and by extension the Global North.

In *Les Particules*, reliance upon the soft science of psychoanalysis is argued to have proved ineffective against consumer science and the commodification of sexual life. A failure of the soft sciences is manifested in the existence of the commodification they had failed to vanquish, as argued in Debord’s *La Société du spectacle*.[[401]](#footnote-401) Debord’s theory, that commodification has extended to the point that the consumer buys only a representation, the spectacularisation of an experience is manifested in *Les Particules*. For example, the *Lieu du Changement* campsite that Bruno visits in search of sex serves as a spectacularisation of the spiritual lack felt my many of its clients. Scientists occupy an equally commodified existence. The almost hermetic Michel, whose social horizon extends to television and to observing the relationships between customers form and fail at his local Monoprix, concludes that ‘Ce qui donnait à l’homme une dignité supplémentaire, c’était la télévision’ which provides him with ‘joies répétées et pures’ (PE, 120). These observations anticipate the limited diversions that the cloned race will enjoy. The far from utopian resolution delivered by Hubczejak manifests the impossibility of delivering any proposed solution, in fiction or other spheres.

The promising of a solution to unfulfilled desire is the engine of marketing and advertising. At the *Lieu du Changement* for example, placebos promising contentment are consumed by the campers, a class who, it is implied, in their sexual self-absorption have been distracted from their predicament. The ridiculing of psychoanalysis features prominently in *Les Particules* and is implicated in sustaining neoliberalism, as Cruickshank comments:

the emphasis on how psychoanalysis seems to legitimize the dual neoliberal sexual and material economies highlights the question of the putative failure of the *sciences humaines* to challenge the commercialization of scientific discourses which Houellebecq depicts as providing the means of engineering the radically challenging outcome of *Les Particules*.[[402]](#footnote-402)

Furthermore, the failure of French post-war philosophers depicted in *Les Particules* is suggested by Cruickshank to be attributable to such discourses ‘being recuperated by the system from which it cannot maintain a critical distance […] crises discourses all risk becoming clichés (as is arguably the case with the notions of the spectacular, simulacra, and the hyperreal)’.[[403]](#footnote-403) This encapsulates the impossibility of both philosophers and writers of fiction removing themselves from the influences they seek to challenge.

Morrey addresses what he argues to be the determinism implicit in Houellebecq’s treatment of Michel and Bruno, suggesting they illustrate a genetic imperative to pursue their individualistic impulses. Furthermore, this thesis suggests that whilst both characters have the opportunity to remove themselves via love from the deterministic trajectory on which they find themselves, neither is capable of committing to that change. Morrey cites John Dupré[[404]](#footnote-404) who argues that change can be directed and may even be so in the service of freedom and justice to create its own human nature unlocked from genetic determinism.[[405]](#footnote-405) However, John Gray[[406]](#footnote-406) argues that purposeful change implies a common human consciousness and qualities which belong to individuals and not a species.[[407]](#footnote-407) Such conscious direction, argues Gray, belongs to ‘not science but religion’.[[408]](#footnote-408)

The determination of any solution is undermined where there is a lack of common direction according to Gray. This assertion implicitly extends to scientists. In a rapid review of the development and reversals in quantum mechanics, ‘de particules élémentaires’ throughout the twentieth century, the narrator suggests alternative schools of thought exist in that branch of science (PE, 125-6). Firstly, theories of certain hidden properties which changed the behaviour of molecules are widespread, that ‘les particules pouvaient avoir l’une sur l’autre une influence instantanée à une distance arbitraire’ (PE, 125). Secondly, that the scientific community had to renounce the ‘concept de particule élémentaire possédant, en l’absence de toute observation, des propriétés intrinsèques’ (PE, 125) and concentrate only upon what was mathematically predictable. Drawing upon the work of quantum physicist Alain Aspect (1947- ), Houellebecq suggests that researchers would naturally identify such a mathematical approach as evidence that matter has no hidden potential to act in other than a foreseeable manner. The epilogue proceeds to contradict this foreseeability in demonstrating the impossibility of excluding the character and ambitions of scientists and the ability of such as Hubczejak to manipulate any theory to commercial or personal ends, which are themselves subject to infinite variation and reversal. Just as Michel proves to have only partial command of the outcome of his theory, so too a writer faced with the multiplicity of intersecting factors presented in late capitalism struggles to construct a plot which reflects that unforeseeability.

Whilst accepting Desplechin’s offer of a post, Michel notices a statue of the Buddha on Desplechin’s mantelpiece (EDL, 127). For Michel, this immediately contradicts their shared opinion of ‘renonçant définitivement à l’idée de réalité sous-jacente’ (PE, 125), of sweeping away any notion of transcendence or return. An unforeseen component in a conversation allows this critical scientific discussion addressing the subject title of the novel, to be undermined by a single glance at an ornament. The narrator admits that it is impossible to scientifically integrate Michel’s ‘*Clifden Notes*, complexe mélange de souvenirs partiels, d’impressions personnelles et de réflexions théoriques jetées sur le papier’ (PE 307). Here, in so many ‘zones d’ombre’ (PE, 307), these fragments, expose the limitations in fictional anticipation of change, despite that fiction having some basis in pure science. In *Les Particules* the reader sees pure science to be as subject to market forces and other intervening factors as any other product.

Aspects of pure and soft science are implicated in the parallel sexual and material economies, revealed in ineffective *New Age* consolation for ageing hippies at the ‘Lieu du Changement’ campsite. However, Michel’s implicit intention, primarily in response to what he learns of Annabelle’s experience in the sexual economy, is for pure science to remove the corrosive egoism that is fed by market-led desire, a desire to which it has contributed. For example, Michel hears an account of the changes caused by Roche and Lilly - pharmaceutical companies - and Microsoft, the computer science giant, to a previously quiet area of Ireland:

L’Irlande se modernise. […] tous les gens de ce pays rêvent de travailler pour Microsoft. Les gens vont moins à la messe, la liberté sexuelle est plus grande qu’il y a quelques années, il y a de plus en plus de discothèques et d’antidépresseurs. Enfin, le scénario classique (PE, 291).

This account encapsulates the effects of dual material and sexual economies, sustained by consumer science and in this case, ‘Big Pharma’ and the IT industry. The reference to *discothèques et d’antidépresseurs*, the sexual economy and the science which maintains it, echoes aspects of Annabelle’s experience, for it was from a ‘discothèque’ that she was led away to be seduced by the sexual predator, David di Meola.

The danger of selling solutions based upon contingent, complex networks of scientific research is inferred. Michel is also erroneously described as a biologist when he is a particle physicist. Such unreliability on the narrator’s part and Houellebecq’s intended irony in the narrator’s re-assurances, similarly detected throughout *Extension du domaine de la lutte*, also contributes to undermining all assertions including those of scientific authority. This is revealed during another interview between Michel and Desplechin, following Michel’s resignation. Whilst Desplechin is curious as to Michel’s plans, Houellebecq presents him as appearing distracted, more interested in the opposite bank of the Seine where ‘des homosexuels circulaient au soleil’ viewing them through a telescope (PE, 18), suggesting the dominance of sexual desire over the rationality of science. It is an appetite that cannot be extinguished even though physical decline frustrates its realisation: ‘Il n’arrivait plus à se souvenir de sa dernière érection; il attendait l’orage’ (PE, 21), one that his knowledge of science cannot counter. The unrealisable desires of the human, the ambition of scientists and their theories moulded to meet market expectations, all serve to undermine the sovereignty enjoyed by pure science in late capitalism and the determinism of their solutions.

Desire, science and Desplechin’s impotence are linked to Bruno’s sexual status, whose parting words in the novel commence: ‘Avec le lithium je bande plus du tout’ (PE, 263). The narrator states that women suffer a similar decline. Science and the extension of the economic struggle into all realms are in league. At the ‘Lieu de Changement’:

les femmes qui avaient eu vingt ans aux alentours des “années 1968” se trouvèrent, la quarantaine venue, dans une fâcheuse situation […] Faisant partie d’une génération qui […] avait proclamé la supériorité de la jeunesse sur l’âge mur, elles ne pouvaient guère s’étonner d’être à leur tour méprisées par la génération appelée à les remplacer […] Les hommes de leur âge se trouvaient *grosso modo* dans la même situation (PE, 106-7).

This not only encapsulates Houellebecq’s representation of the loss of sexual equity experienced with age but also the impermanence and contingencies which accompany it, the sexual and social freedoms granted having been appropriated within the dual economies.

The potential influence of philosophy upon all spheres of society is addressed and recognized:

À l’époque où vécut Djerzinski, on considérait le plus souvent le philosophie comme dénouée de toute importance pratique, voire d’objet. En réalitié, la vision du monde plus couramment adoptée, à un moment donné, par les membres d’une société détermine son économie, sa politique et ses moeurs (PE, 7).

The narrator here recognises the potential importance of philosophers in attempting to explain and understand how a society might function. It is the inability of philosophy to respond in challenging the transformation of humanity into *particules élémentaires* with its consequent rejection of the possibility of love, which motivates Michel’s work on particle physics. However, his attempt to harmonise pure science with philosophical and religious elements, in order to retrieve the ability to love, will be seen to fail when his theory is made reality via Hubczejak. In this derailment of a theory, linear change, whether in fiction or science, is frustrated through multiple contributors. In this case Hubczejak’s marketing and implementation of Michel’s complex hybrid of scientific theory informed by mysticism, constitute an element of the possible contingencies at play.

It is suggested that the potential agency of love will disappear with the scientific replacement of humans ‘qui ne cessa jamais pourtant de croire à la bonté et à l’amour’ (PE, 316). However, the revelatory slogan that the mutation ‘NE SERA PAS MENTALE MAIS GÉNÉTIQUE’ (PE, 314), allowing the possibility of love to continue, is preceded with a statement of easy assurance that the slogan was launched without fear of being contradicted, that science had become for all ‘un critère de vérité unique et irréfutable’ (PE, 314). Michel’s solution is indeed flawed. He and his disciples implicitly fail to produce a clone capable of love. In his *Clifden Notes* Michel writes of ‘L’amour lie et il lie à jamais (PE, 302). Hubczejak notes with some ambivalence that ‘le plus grand mérite de Djerzinski’ was to have known how to ‘restaurer les conditions de possibilité d’amour’ (PE, 302). There is only Hubczejak’s assurance that Michel did indeed know how to restore the ability to love. Its absence from the prologue and epilogue suggests that if this were the case, it has not been implemented.

Houellebecq suggests that neoliberalism and the consumer science which underpins it are similarly flawed but that there remains no philosophical or religious engagement to successfully argue that failure. Nor, significantly, does Hubczejak encounter scientific challenge, even when he belatedly realises that he had under-estimated ‘l’ampleur du basculement métaphysique (PE, 313). The verb ‘basculer’ is used here in the sense of a collapse that has been realised. The possibility, argued elsewhere in this thesis of a ‘point de bascule’ not necessarily denoting such finality, remains relevant here in that Hubczejak’s overlooking of the ‘basculement métaphysique’ signifies that there may be other contingencies that he may also have overlooked, which may alter or even reverse his programme.

Here, change is highly contingent, non-linear and liable to move both backwards as well as forwards. Fiction, like science, like history, is in continual evolution and exposes the fallacy of definitive satisfaction. A satisfaction peddled by what the epilogue to *Les Particules* will reveal to be the short reign of consumer science. A redundant consumer science also challenges the contemporary opinion of the enduring nature of capitalism, Houellebecq suggesting that its ability to undergo infinite adaptations may be limited.

## DARWINISM, CHANGE AND THE SEXUAL SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST IN LATE CAPITALISM

In contemplating his own question ‘à quoi servaient les hommes?’ (PE 165), Michel considers humans to have mistakenly detached themselves from the rest of evolution, when in fact they are as vulnerable as any other life-form to its laws:

Outre les souffrances absurdes qu’elles provoquaient, les révolutions et les guerres détruisaient le meilleur du passé, obligeant à chaque fois à faire table rase pour rebâtir. Non inscrite dans le cours régulier d’une ascension progressive, l’évolution humaine acquérait ainsi un tour chaotique, déstructuré, irrégulier et violent (PE 165).

Here change emerges as chaotic, characterised by the possibility of sequences of reversals along with intersecting, unforeseen components. Houellebecq brings into question humanity’s faith in its own ability to shape and influence the future and the dangers of it doing so.

Michel’s statement reveals a parallel with the final lines of *Germinal*, which herald the future race of the miners. However, in Zola’s novel it is a symbolic race, the future ‘armée noire’ which is depicted as superior to the defeated present generation of miners.[[409]](#footnote-409) Darwin’s evolutionary theory argues no such linearity in the process of change but instead, constant, multiple failure and divergence. The hasty description and flat character of the clones suggests that Houellebecq has assigned them a similar role to the future race of miners in Zola’s *Germinal*. The ‘vengeresse’[[410]](#footnote-410) quality of the miners does, however, resonate with the clones of *Les Particules*. The clones are not overly concerned with science, art, truth and beauty. As such, they may represent a judgement upon humanity and what it stands to lose as a result of the neoliberal ideology that it had failed to challenge.

*Les Particules* suggests that evolution has brought about the growing irrelevance of individual skills once associated with the species’ ability to feed and clothe itself. Bruno considers that were all engineers and scientists to disappear ‘je serais incapable d’assurer le moindre redémarrage […] je ne serais même pas en mesure d’assurer ma propre survie’ (PE 202). An agent of neoliberalism, consumer science rationalises production and distribution to absolve the vast majority from producing their own goods. The consequence is de-skilling and dependence on being part of the consumer cycle. The only ‘personne utile’ (PE, 202) Bruno thinks he knows is Michel, who in his early career creates a genetically modified cow producing more milk, of better quality. ‘Il a changé le monde’ comments Bruno with prophetic irony, ‘Moi, je n’ai rien fait, rien crée’ (PE 202). However, as is often the case in Houellebecq, there may also be irony buried in the possibility that Michel’s achievement is not remotely world-changing but simply a contribution to consumption. Economic evolution, in the form of late capitalist consumer science and its contribution to the dual economies, is symbolised by the ‘précurseurs’

fortement adaptés d’une part au mode de vie majoritaire de leur époque, soucieux d’autre part de le dépasser “par le haut”. […] Ils ne jouent cependant qu’un rôle d’accélérateur d’une décomposition historique – sans jamais pouvoir imprimer une direction nouvelle aux événements (PE 26).

Through such behaviour, what could be described as an example of the discredited soft science of Social Darwinism occurs in the form of a select few who have evolved to enjoy access to instant sexual gratification. Hubczejak’s campaign would, via genetics, seek to universalise this attribute.

Doubt as to the dominance of science resurfaces in response to Hubczejak’s marketing of Michel’s creation of the theory of human cloning and further contributes to undermining the idea of definitive change. As previously discussed, Kuhn rejects science as something controlled by such an elite. He asserts that several paradigms often exist and agreement upon a new paradigm is usually a political process with members of the relevant discipline attempting to influence colleagues.[[411]](#footnote-411) Bruno’s conclusion may serve as a challenge to the reader to question their own dependence upon the skills of scientists. Neoliberalism is presented as having succeeded in becoming the natural order to the extent that its principles are seen as evolutionarily beneficial and requiring the vast majority acquiesce in their dependence upon the ‘useful’ minority and buy the products they are persuaded they need. [[412]](#footnote-412)

Morrey questions Houellebecq’s distinction between animal instinct and moral codes,[[413]](#footnote-413) and argues that cultural evolution[[414]](#footnote-414) operates quite differently from natural selection, the former being pursued by self-interested individuals or groups, normally in the same generation, rather than across millennia. Morrey also cites John Gray’s consideration of post-human evolution via technological change and that ‘we would be […] deluded if we saw ourselves as masters of our own technological progress’.[[415]](#footnote-415) The idea that science is a tool at the service of humanity is particularly relevant to the presence of multiple, constantly adapting phenomena in *Les Particules* and Michel’s unfulfilled desire to ensure the survival of what Cruickshank terms the ‘potential agency of love’ in a cloned race.[[416]](#footnote-416) It is similarly relevant to the unforeseeable nature of intervening contingencies, that Michel’s work would have remained unknown beyond a scientific elite were it not for Hubczejak’s adoption of Michel’s theory and his selling it via the consumer sciences of marketing and advertising. As Kuhn argues, new paradigms are often poorly understood by other scientists and their acceptance based upon political consensus, allowing for compromise, in the process of which the theories and solutions are adulterated. Science is seen to be as subject to the same unforeseeability and haphazardness as the late capitalism to which it is bound.

Echoing the concept of the tipping point in this thesis, Morrey refers to the impossibility of predicting definitive change when he refers to John Dupré’s argument that even if a mechanism were detected in the male brain which ‘disposed men to select very young women as ideal mates’ this would not tell us much of modern behaviours ‘because this atavistic mechanism would be only one of several inputs affecting mate selection and might itself affect a variety of other behaviours in unpredictable ways.’[[417]](#footnote-417) In common with fiction seeking to forecast definitive change, any attempt to predict clear conclusions from processes which may be subject to unquantifiable modification and even reversal, is likely to fail. The complex processes referred to would therefore appear to conflict with the apparent fictional extinction of humanity in the epilogue in *Les Particules*,which presents the end of humanity as determined by its having co-operated in its own commodification.

The concept of evolutionary determinism has been examined in Chapters Two and Four based, amongst other factors, on Darwin’s rejection of a progressive perfecting evolution. The clones are an evolutionary regression, a ‘point de bascule’, illustrating the ability of a process to reverse, as evolution conventionally assumes the possibility of a life form to re-produce. There is little sexual reproduction in *Les Particules*.Annabelle has three terminations. Christiane would not grieve unduly if she learnt of her son’s death. Janine’s genes are re-produced in Michel and Bruno but only Bruno has a child, one who, by his own reckoning, already shows signs of reproducing only his father’s failure to find sexual satisfaction. This scenario of a recession in fertility, represents a ‘point de bascule’ in the Global North reversing the evolutionary impulse and social conditioning to re-produce. It is ironically exemplified in Michel’s poem to the dying Annabelle: *‘Elle aurait pu donner sa vie pour d’autre vies /Au milieu des petits nés de son même lit’* (PE, 285). The reversal may itself be reversed – or intensified. The frustrations of such as Bruno are suggested to have become cyclical and a hereditary feature of modern society. As he watches his teenage son Bruno muses: ‘Les enfants supportent le monde que les adultes ont construit pour eux, ils essaient de s’y adapter de leur mieux; par la suite, en général, ils le reproduisent’ (PE, 250). This pattern reflects the in-built failure in consumerism, which requires denying the consumer the promised conclusive satisfaction of their desire This cycle of frustrated desire leaves the lives of such as Bruno, and implicitly his son ‘sombre, douloureux et indistinct’ (PE, 250).

In common with his father, Bruno’s son will lose his struggle in the sexual economy. Morrey argues that socio-sexual competition fits closely with the ideology of Social Darwinism.[[418]](#footnote-418) Darwin did not reject aspects of Social Darwinism, although his theory of chaos and chance within evolution limits Social Darwinism’s perfecting, teleological philosophy. Social Darwinism – and late capitalism – therefore run counter to Bruno’s deliberately ironic ‘C’est mon droit…’ (PE, 138) which, typical of neoliberal discourse -‘because you’re worth it’[[419]](#footnote-419)- is his declaration of entitlement to his share in the sexual economy, uttered whilst heading resolutely for the hot tub and his first encounter with Christiane. Michel considers how contemporary women, in their choice of partners, ‘étaient plus avisées et plus rationelles (PE, 282). This results in their choosing:

sur la base d’une adéquation suffisante des situations socio-professionelles et d’une certaine communauté de goûts. Bien entendu elles se coupaient ainsi de toute possibilité de bonheur […] mais elles espéraient ainsi échapper aux souffrances sentimentales et morales qui avaient torturé leurs devancières’ (PE, 282-3).

In response to yet another unconvincing declaration from the narrator in the above quotation, the denial of any possibility of future happiness for these women may attract the reader’s scepticism. The constantly diverging and intersecting factors contribute to a process of change, the nature and direction of which is impossible to predict and thus suggest it will not be definitive.

## SCIENCE, NEOLIBERALISM AND THE MARCH TO PERFECTION

For Houellebecq, the multiple processes of neoliberalism, its innumerable components and unforeseeability are the catalysts for the ‘mutation métaphysique’ (PE 160). There are many allusions in *Les Particules* to the impact of neoliberal ideology, often referring to the merging of the sexual and material economies and a newly evolved consumer science which promoted: ‘une consommation libidinale divertissante de masse, en provenance des États-Unis d’Amérique’ (PE, 26). Serge Clément, Bruno’s father, reviews the economic conditions in France when considering the launch of a cosmetic surgery business in France. He sees: ‘l’éclatement concomitant du couple traditionnel, le probable décollage économique de l’Europe occidentale’ and decides that ‘tout concordait en effet pour promettre au secteur d’excellentes possibilités d’expansion’ (PE, 27). As individuals, Michel and Bruno represent separate but intersecting elements influencing change to unforeseeable degrees. *Les Particules* argues the evolution of humans no longer to be connected to the ability of the whole race to adapt to survive. Instead, Houellebecq suggests that in humanity’s pre-occupation with pursuing its consumer science dictated existence, it has outsourced this function to a scientist élite which, in turn, may be co-opted by consumer science.

The impact of Neoliberalism is expressed in tropes of science fiction and ostensibly eugenic conclusions which promise a resolution for humanity, ‘cette espèce torturée’ (PE, 316) via its replacement. However, consistent with the built in short-term realisation of desire maintained by consumer science, any definitive conclusion reveals itself in reality to be always receding. The phrase ‘mutation métaphysique’ refers to a profound and lasting transformation in the rational approach to ‘la connaissance de l’être absolu, des causes de l’univers et des principes premiers de la connaissance’.[[420]](#footnote-420) The narrator considers this to be evidenced in the three ‘mutations métaphysiques’: the replacement of Roman power by Christianity, the replacement of Christianity by science and the third *mutation,* that of the replacement of humanity by the cloned race.

Michel, whose theory will precipitate that replacement, summarises the workings of late capitalism as based upon a desire to replace goods, either through an in-built failure of the goods consumed or their unfashionableness. Both these impulses generate consumer desire: ‘Pour que la société fonctionne, pour que la compétition continue, il faut que le désir croisse, s’étende et dévore la vie des hommes’(PE, 161). Such neoliberal principles form a part of successive French administrations’ attempts to revive an ailing economy, manifested for instance in the ‘rigour and the avowed economic liberalism of the successive plans proposed by the French Prime Minister, Raymond Barre’[[421]](#footnote-421) and which would form the economic backdrop to both the early adulthood of Houellebecq and the protagonists of *Les Particules.* Pure science is harnessed by neoliberalism, with ‘Big Pharma’ constituting a significant sector of the global economy.[[422]](#footnote-422) The soft sciences, such as psychoanalysis, appear to serve only to re-install the struggling competitor to the dual economies. Consumer science plays a key role in supporting neoliberalism with its marketing, its slogans, all featuring significantly throughout the novel, often along with the prices of purchased goods, such as Bruno’s purchase of ‘une tente igloo à La Samaritaine (fabriquée en Chine populaire, 2 à 3 places, 449 F) (PE, 98) or the price of Michel’s ‘CD-ROM de charme à 79 francs’ which, with ‘son catalogue 3 Suisses’, occasionally accompanies his masturbation (PE, 122). The combination of sex, albeit amusingly bland, along with a reference to prices, underscores the link between sex and consumer science in the promise of a desired sexual status. Such promises attempt to simplify a trajectory towards a supposedly definitive state.

In a union of pure and consumer science, Michel is described as inspired by the ‘3 Suisses’ catalogue to recognise that ‘une mutation de civilisation à venir trouvait sa formulation définitive’ (PE, 123) and that, as page seventeen of his copy of the catalogue encapsulated: ‘Optimisme, générosité, complicité, harmonie font advancer le monde. DEMAIN SERA FÉMININ’ (PE, 123). All such slogans, capitalised, admitted by the narrator to be of a style ‘quasi publicitaire’ are implicitly advertising, linking sex and material consumption. Vehicles for the roles of marketing and advertising in consumer science, these slogans will not be realised with the clones that are a new, asexual species, so re-enforcing the inability of science and implicitly, fiction, to foresee all contingencies when attempting to offer solutions and definitive conclusions.

Nevertheless, Michel remains a representative of pure science, of which his particle physics are central to the novel. Soft sciences, such as psychotherapy and psychology are also featured, both being shown in *Les Particules* to contribute, along with consumer science, to a failure to deliver happiness. Additionally, *New Age* ‘sciences’ proliferate at the ‘Lieu du Changement’ campsite. The promised solutions of these pseudo sciences consistently fail to deliver relief from the stresses of a diminishing sexual equity in an economy created by the campers. Not one camper appears to benefit from the pseudo sciences they have paid for.

Links between pure science, consumer science, soft sciences and sex are present from the first page of the prologue in a short narrative immediately preceding the clone’s poetry. Not only is the reader referred to Michel’s scientific discipline and his future importance but also to the impact of consumer science in facilitating the combining of the sexual and material economies, a process enabled by the pure sciences. This is anticipated in the reference to the people of Western Europe living in ‘des temps malheureux et troublés […] les sentiments d’amour, de tendresse et de fraternité avaient dans une large mesure disparu’ (PE, 7). The third ‘mutation’, following that of Christianity and the advent of modern pure sciences, is not immediately described.

Between pure science and a sexual-material economy driven by consumer science and the soft sciences, the outcome for humanity in the grip of a global inertia appears to be determined. Philosophy is one of the two possible fields which might counter that of science in that a conception of the metaphysical risks and necessity of Hubczejak’s proposed ‘mutation’ may have created unified opposition and debate. However, the narrator states that all ‘questions philosophiques avaient perdu, dans l’esprit public, tout référent bien défini’ (PE, 314). The second possible source of resistance, religion, is equally overwhelmed by a world which only has confidence in science. In *Les Particules*, the outcome for *homo sapiens* appears therefore to be in the control of a few hundred people belonging to the pure sciences, marketed by consumer science: ‘la montée en puissance des scientifiques dans tous les domaines de la pensée était dès lors devenue inéluctable’ (PE, 314).

As the idea of the third ‘mutation’ forms in Michel, through the lack of philosophical debate and his remoteness from the ‘catégories chrétiennes de la redemption et de la grace […] sa vision du monde acquérait quelque chose de mécanique et d’impitoyable’ (PE, 89). His resulting speculations might be applied equally to science or neoliberal economics and by extension therefore to consumer science:

le réseau des interactions initiales étant paramétré, les événements se développent dans un espace désenchanté et vide; leur déterminisme est inéluctable. Ce qui s’était produit devait se produire, il ne pouvait pas en être autrement (PE, 89).[[423]](#footnote-423)

Through the attrition of free will by consumer science, the idea simply spreads throughout ‘des sociétés occidentales’ that a ‘mutation fondamentale était devenue indispensable’ (PE 313). The prevailing intellectual inertia implicitly encourages complacency. The emphasis upon determinism and inevitability here is significant, with a recurrence in the above quotations of the word ‘inéluctable’. The scientific community, already established as susceptible to the the dual economies, are also revealed to be creatively fallible, as the resulting unimpressive cloned race demonstrates.

In *Les Particules* the inference appears to be that pure science, the soft sciences and consumer science have, in their appropriation within late capitalism assumed a similar ability to adapt to any phenomenon, with writers relegated to recording their impact. This is contradicted however, firstly, in the existence of *Les Particules* which engages in the form, if not the content of a *roman à thèse* describing pure science as offering a response to humankind’s metaphysical crises, described by the narrator as ‘une réelle souffrance issue d’une dislocation psychologique, ontologique et sociale’ (EDL, 313). Secondly, the third mutation, based upon scientific progress,extinguishes neoliberalism thereby freeing pure science from its previous supportive role to that ideology. As Michel comments in relation to the 1932 science fiction *Brave New World*: ‘La compétition économique, métaphore de la maîtrise de l’espace, n’a plus de raison d’être dans une société riche, où les flux économiques sont maîtrisés’ (PE, 160). However, that the only means of envisaging the end of neoliberalism is via a science-fictional extinction of the human race serves to underscore the invulnerability of that economic system and the weak epilogue to *Les Particules*.

The appropriation of pure science within late capitalism may be questioned on the basis that pure science is in a constant state of diversion and change, supporting Kuhn’s remarks relating to science not being on a trajectory towards anything and unlikely to be suitable to late capitalist control. In contrast, scientists, as in Michel’s case, are seen to be as capable as anyone of being excited by ‘les Dernières Nouvelles de Monoprix’ (PE 228), and implicitly composing an elite as susceptible to manipulation by consumer science as any other grouping, with the verifiability of pure science equally capable of failing to deliver the promised solution.

The ‘scientific’ rational certainty that Zola craved, resonating here with ‘les clefs de la certitude rationelle’ (PE 270) is, in Desplechin’s opinion, held by a scientific elite. Varsava proposes that in maintaining this ‘unproblematized faith in scientific and technological progress’,[[424]](#footnote-424) Houellebecq suggests that the same elite have participated in the sacrifice of humanity’s ‘religion, son bonheur, ses espoirs, et en definitive sa vie’ (PE, 270). Scientific rationality, with all the progress towards resolution that it promises, is seen to fail to deliver a solution to the ills of humanity. Earlier, Bruno appears to suggest that the pursuit of scientific rationality implies a rejection of irrationality or emotion in humanity, informing Michel “Tu n’es pas humain, […] je l’ai senti dès le début, en voyant comment tu te comportais avec Annabelle’ (PE, 180). However, Bruno misreads his brother, for there is no rational certainty possessed by any of the scientist characters. Michel has his weakness for the ‘3 Suisses’, whilst Desplechin is unconvinced by the spiritual disregard of the physicist community he knows, who ‘n’en ait jamais conçu au moins un doute, une inquiétude spirituelle’ (PE 271) and who himself ‘entrevoit des perspectives infiniment lointaines, des configurations mentales fantomatiques et inconnues’ (PE, 273) and longs to be part of the sexual economy. Hubczejak’s power is not rational certainty but a mastery of consumer science: ‘conviction’, ‘séduction’, ‘charisme’, ‘une simplicité profonde’ (PE, 312). Hubczejak’s irrationality is such that he does not question an ‘idée bizarre’ in Michel’s notes (PE, 313) and he constantly underestimates the impact upon humanity of a ‘mutation biologique aussi profonde’ (EDL, 313). Furthermore, Hubczejak displays a ‘méconnaissance grossière des enjeux philosophique du projet’ (PE, 313). Similar to the examples related by Gladwell, the project succeeds to an extent never envisaged by Hubczejak. However, this is testimony only to the intervention of factors such as the ‘résignation’ of humanity to its fate (PE, 316). The illusory trajectory towards perfection is undermined, with the un-challenged dominance of pure science seen to be as flawed and as subject to unforeseen interventions and ingredients as any theory or soft science proposing solutions.

## THE HUXLEY DISCUSSION AND SELF-REFLEXIVITY

A notable vein of self-reflexivity runs throughout *Les Particules*, foregrounding the nature of fiction, its unreliability, the contingency and plurality of any meanings that may be obtained from it and its inevitable openness to misinterpretation. Self-reflexivity is prominent in the description of Michel’s mixture of memoir, reflections and scientific formulae in producing his theory, suggesting possible components also used in the writing of *Les Particules*. Of Michel’s memories, the narrator admits: ‘nous avons si peu de détails’ (PE, 303)[[425]](#footnote-425) calling into question the theory exploited by Hubczejak which drew upon this and other elements of Michel’s work. The undermining of Houellebecq’s own text is effected by Bruno’s writing, his poor poetry and racist articles, the novel’s weak prologue and epilogue and the intellectual trope of a discussion of a novel within a novel in the brother’s debate on the association of Aldous Huxley the science fiction writer and Thomas Huxley the evolutionist. This undermining is foregrounded from the first page of the novel, when the narrator proclaims Michel to be a biologist of the highest order, only for the reader to see Michel’s life develop in quite another branch of science, that of particle physics. As noted earlier, there is further introductory inconsistency in the narrator’s proclaiming the novel to be the story of a man when it is ostensibly that of two brothers (PE, 7). The reader is on notice as to the narrator’s unreliability.

Bruno and Michel are presumably intended to be symptomatic of middle aged, middle class neoliberal consumers. The brothers represent the ‘deux grandes conséquences’ of the ‘mutation’ in *Brave New World*: rationalism and individualism (PE, 160).The physicist Michel finds no contradiction in assessing Aldous Huxley’s novel, as though it were a scientific thesis, given the Huxley family’s scientific renown and their embodying the English tradition as ‘intellectuels pragmatiques’ (PE, 158). Fiction supported by science is still fiction and any resulting theories suspect. Michel argues that Huxley had misread the relationship between rationalism and individualism born of science and materialism depicted in *Brave New World*. This may be read as suggesting the possibility of a self-reflexive staged misreading by Houellebecq in *Les Particules*.

The reader is reminded that they are engaging with a fiction, one which also conveys a flawed scientific solution. Just as Michel concludes that Aldous Huxley had erred in overlooking individualism so too, Houellebecq is equally capable of oversight. As noted, Houellebecq implicitly urges caution with such discourses offering meaning. However, Cruickshank[[426]](#footnote-426) argues that *Interventions* holds out the possibility of resistance through literature, in its ability to adapt and to confront unpleasant aspects of life: but also that ‘Chaque individu est cependant en mesure de produire en lui-même une sorte de révolution froide, en se plaçant pour un instant en dehors du flux informatif-publicitaire’ (I, 80). The manipulating tactics and unfulfilled promises of another ‘agent of change’, Hubczejak, alert the reader to all fictional formulae for salvation and redemption in that they do not deliver the desired result.

The discussion on the Huxleys suggests that wherever financial and sexual interests predominate, the motivation of a scientific experiment is open to question. Michel describes the economic and sexual struggle resulting from the second *mutation métaphysique*:

La mutation métaphysique ayant donné naissance au matérialisme et à la science moderne a eu deux grandes consequences: le rationalisme et l’individualisme […] de l’individualisme naissent la liberté, la sensation du moi, le besoin de se distinguer et d’être supérieur aux autres (PE, 160).

The association of the Huxleys parallels Houellebecq’s inclusion of science and the question of evolution in his fiction. Michel declares that Aldous Huxley was wrong to state that society has been and will be for centuries ‘exclusivement pilotée par l’évolution scientifique et technologique’ (PE, 157) when it would in fact be determined by the contingencies and contributors of individualism, resulting from the rationalism of the second ‘mutation’, that of science. Ironically, Michel fails to see the possibility of his forming an equally flawed theory of cloning, the reading or interpretation of which will not fully embody his ideals. As further evidence of the limits of writer and scientist, the narrator presents physical proof of Michel’s science in the form of cloned cows (PE, 290). In an aside which may be self-reflexive as to the common position of some writers and scientists in relation to their theories, the narrator notes that rather than Michel seeming godlike to the cows ‘elles semblaient indifférentes à sa présence’ (PE, 290). This ironically suggests that the theory of writer and scientist alike may not be recognised as delivering the results they claim.

The conversation about Aldous Huxley’s science fiction *Brave New World* also presents a partial *mise en abyme*,all the more self-reflexive in its being partial, with the apparent focus being upon an evaluation of Huxley’s theory rather than a simple reflection of that theory, as would be conveyed in a complete *mise en abyme*. The agency of science fiction is demonstrated as capable of challenging contemporary socio-scientific shifts and the ability or otherwise of fiction to successfully deliver a coherent vision. Michel dismisses Huxley’s future society as having overlooked ‘l’augmentation de l’individualisme produite par une conscience accrue de la mort’ (PE, 160). Houellebecq self-reflexively presents his own quasi-science fiction as similarly fallible. This is suggested in the final pages of *Les Particules* when the narrator admits: ‘ce livre doit malgré tout être consideré comme une fiction, une réconstitution crédible à partir de souvenirs partiels, plutôt que comme le reflet d’une vérité univoque et attestable’ (PE, 307). Once again Houellebecq is self-reflexively referring to the ability of all fiction to manipulate and withhold and therefore never represent the real.

References to the lack of clarity and theoretical substantiation of Michel’s writing invite the reader to question not only the clone narrator’s sources and reliability but – by extension - that of other fictions (including *Les Particules* itself). Significantly for this chapter, the fragmentary nature of Michel’s thoughts render a failure the scientific conclusion peddled by Hubczejak which bases itself upon them, as well as undermining the consumer science used to deliver them. Having declared the novel to be a fiction, the narrator continues: ‘Ce que suit par contre, appartient à l’Histoire, et les événements qui découlent de la publication des travaux de Djerzinski ont été tant de fois retracés, commentés et analysés qu’on pourra se limiter à un résumé bref’ (PE, 307). Having admitted that there were elusive elements in Michel’s notes, the clone narrator is offering the reader a mere synopsis of an incomplete text, further undermining the credibility of the epilogue. The self-reflexivity of this passage is apparent in its demonstration of the impossibility of writing a *roman à thèse* given the indefinable components of change. Similarly, whilst structurally significant in ironically re-enforcing the fictional nature of the novel, the prologue and epilogue also suggest a definitive conclusion, a completeness that is lacking in *Les Particules*. The self-reflexivity found throughout the novel highlights Houellebecq’s message regarding the implication of science in the sexual and material economies in exposing the unreliability of all fiction whether it is employed in selling consumer solutions or that of *Les Particules*.

CONSUMER SCIENCE, FREEDOM AND DETERMINISM

From the first lines we are told by the narrator that the reader is confronted by the story of a man living in troubled times. These times correspond to a neoliberal economic and philosophical shift in the Global North. Consumer science, embryonic in *Au Bonheur des dames* is now supported by globalized trade and world-wide marketing and advertising. However, in *Les Particules* humanity has supposedly reached a point at which it is forced to terminate its own unhappy existence in favour of a clone world ‘rond, lisse, homogène et chaud comme un sein de femme’ (PE, 310).

Science only succeeds in effecting the end of the human race when it is ‘marketed’ using consumer science, with that science having apparently appropriated the rationalism associated with both pure science and neoliberalism. With characteristic irony, Houellebecq signals the insincerity of Hubczejak in selling his solution, proclaiming ‘Il ne fait aucun doute qu’ Hubczejak était sincère’ (PE, 311). Consistent with such irony, the description of Hubczejak’s use of consumer science via his selling the concept of a cloned humanity to religious communities and atheists alike is cursory and unconvincing. The narrator relates Hubczejak’s integration into his sales pitch of positivist logic ‘du cercle de Vienne et le positivisme religieux de Comte’ and that he received the precious support ‘d’un certain nombre de néo-kantiens’ (PE, 310). Most unconvincing is Hubczejak’s ‘trait de génie in using ‘cette idéologie batarde et confuse […] sous l’appellation de *New Age* (PE, 310-11). This false science which had failed to answer the desires of those attending ‘le Lieu du Changement’ is apparently capable of convincing the planet to forsake that same individualism.

The emphasis on determinism and freedom here is significant, for in *Les Particules* the inference appears to be that science and neoliberalism have the ability to adapt to any phenomenon. This is contradicted however in the existence of *Les Particules* which, in spite of Houellebecq’s own respect for science, questions its role, offering an ontological response to humankind’s existential crises, in which science plays a diminished part in the clone’s world. In presenting an unconvincing epilogue and provoking disappointment on the part of the reader, Houellebecq may be demonstrating the ultimate purpose of consumer science: to avoid providing definitive satisfaction.

In *Les Particules* the deterministic influence of a small minority upon the consumer appears to intersect with Gladwell as to the capacity of such people to provoke significant change, seen both in the role of the small elite of scientists who facilitate the realisation of Michel’s theory but also in the destructive forces of the integrated sexual and material economies of the 1960s, accelerated by the *précurseurs*. All are ultimately part of a cycle of failure and the regressive movement of change, charted throughout *Les Particules*, whether in the form of social disruption to parts of Ireland, or the suffering endured by Annabelle. Michel never fully expresses the desired outcome of his experiment other than in allusions regarding the removal of hate and envy and a genetically democratic distribution of love. In contrast, Houellebecq is clear as to the erosion of those narratives which bind society. Religious and current social structures are seen to falter under the extension of the market economy to that of the sexual:

le couple et la famille représentaient le dernier îlot de communisme primitive au sein de la société libérale. La libération sexuelle eut pour effet la destruction de ces communautés intermédiaires, les dernières à séparer l’individu du marché. Ce processus de destruction se poursuit de nos jours (PE, 116).[[427]](#footnote-427)

The ‘point de bascule’, or the ability of events which appear to have already passed the point of return but which may in fact experience a reversal,reveals the novel to once again appear to argue an irreversible process of change whilst undermining such definitive change in the prologue and epilogue and elsewhere via the operation of multiple conflicting factors.

For Hubczejak’s marketing campaign to be successful, the idea of self-abnegation by the soon to be obsolete humankind, normally associated with religion, must be exploited, thus incorporating irrationality into the application of a scientific theory. There is another apparent contradiction here in that Houellebecq suggests that humanity is still capable of such sacrifice despite, as Morrey expresses it, ‘the focus on individual desire that has become ingrained in us through decades of relatively peaceful and carefree consumerism’.[[428]](#footnote-428) Such a rationale may be evidence of a ‘nostalgia’ which has already been replaced today by what Morrey terms a ‘post human logic’.[[429]](#footnote-429) This logic is based upon the Social Darwinism associated with neoliberalism, contributing to ‘a humanity irrevocably overtaken by the prosthesis of the global economy’.[[430]](#footnote-430) Morrey contradicts this assertion, supporting the idea of the tipping point in describing how this determines human relations in ‘*unpredictable and unintended ways*’.[[431]](#footnote-431) Morrey’s argument extends this logic to the economy via its reference to unforeseen contingency and non-linearity, concluding that the current scientific and capitalist hegemony results in the ‘absurd inadequacy’, exposed by Houellebecq, where ‘capitalism can only propose itself as a solution to the problems caused by capitalism’.[[432]](#footnote-432)

The ability of consumer science to manipulate intellectual freedom is seen in the episode featuring Bruno’s foray into writing. The ‘intellectual failure’[[433]](#footnote-433)exposed by science has, as we have seen, been attributed to those such as the character ‘Sollers’ based upon the writer Philipe Sollers. He is depicted as adopting ideals conforming to market demand. Sollers, ‘en pleine période “contre-réforme catholique” (PE, 184) entertains the publication of Bruno’s racist article but turns it down simply in order to protect his own position at Gallimard, where ‘On guette la faute’ (PE, 196). He is purportedly representative of the philosophical *avant garde*, to whom one might once have looked for philosophical opposition to the marketing of humanity’s replacement but who have all ‘sold out’ to late capitalism.

As noted, the purpose of consumer science is displayed in the epilogue: to frustrate satisfaction. That the reader is unconvinced by the epilogue is in part due to the individual determination of two of the protagonists associated by Michel with human failure: Bruno and Annabelle. Like the sexually frustrated Tisserand in *Extension*, Bruno and Annabelle possess a similar faith in the possibility of love despite their experience in the sexual struggle. Bruno tells Christiane: ‘Mais je crois qu’on peut être heureux, ensemble, jusqu’à la fin. En tout cas j’ai envie d’essayer’ (PE, 223). Annabelle echoes Bruno’s desire for love: ‘J’ai quand même envie d’essayer […] Je ne comprends pas comment les choses ont pu merder à ce point. Je n’arrive pas à l’accepter’ (PE, 237). The next line, which commences a new chapter retorts ‘Au milieu du suicide occidental, il était clair qu’ils n’avaient aucune chance’ (PE, 237). Despite such definitive statements, Houellebecq may suggest that the possibility of resistance, if not reversal, operates where the potential for love remains. Even relationships containing such damaged characters as Bruno, Annabelle and Michel survive after a fashion until death curtails them. Cruickshank points to Houellebecq’s comparison of the agency of love as a possible means of resistance presented strategically alongside pure and consumer science, with the unattainable promises of consumerist ‘discourses that occlude tangible crises and palpable turning points, with potentially radical implications for the future of mankind’.[[434]](#footnote-434) The inability to challenge metaphysical, genetic or eugenic threats may, through the continued existence of the possibility of love, be reversed.

A further aspect should be considered in defining science in the mode of failure, revealing unforeseen contingency, undermining fictional conclusions, scientific determinism or a writer’s ability to provide solutions. This relates to the technological obsolescence of Houellebecq’s 1998  perspective. The impact of the World Wide Web was far from fully realised at that date. The idea that Michel and his collaborators or Hubczejak’s marketing would be able to progress without global challenge today is perhaps less probable than when *Les Particules* was written. Social media as a global tool and the provider’s ability to adapt to market pressure have recently been highlighted in the case of Facebook, the social media networking service, having to revise its advertising policy in response to pressure from its users.[[435]](#footnote-435) Consumer science in *Les Particules* has therefore already been undermined retrospectively by the very media tool it has exploited for the last two decades. An unforeseen technological development has emphasised the lack of *certitude rationelle* of the scientific basis in a fictional resolution.

## CONCLUSION

The twenty-three pages of the prologue and epilogue to *Les Particules* present the reader with a ‘pastiche of science-fiction’[[436]](#footnote-436) and a suspect proclamation as to the successful establishment of a cloned race utopia. However, in the intervening two hundred and ninety three pages of narrative, such simplistic conclusions are continually undermined. Pure science, subject to commercial intervention, compromise and other contributors, is seen to fail to meet the need for rational certainty, the resulting cloned race appearing a poor response to Michel’s intention to restore the ability to love.

The novel’s depiction of the failure of both pure science and philosophy to avoid the extinction of humanity is itself brought into question by the unforeseeability of intervening contingencies composing change. The fictional theory of the integrated sexual and material economies, pure, soft and consumer sciences are all ultimately presented as part of a cycle. Their collective inability to provide a solution mirrors that of consumer science to satisfy the desires it creates. Houellebecq recognises the capacity of pure science for radical change and duly draws on tropes of science fiction whilst undermining these via narrative strategies. In doing so he exposes the failure of soft sciences and their fixation on the application of theories promising supposedly demonstrable outcomes. Houellebecq, through the failing structure of the narrative, appears to be proclaiming his story to be fiction and intrinsically unreliable, with the undermining of determinism a consequence of this process. Self-reflexively, Houellebecq appears to reject totalizing narratives whether that of neoliberalism or its opponents whilst opening himself to claims of articulating just such totalizing theories. However, as in Zola, Houellebecq represents the difficulty of attempting scientifically demonstrated change in fiction when change driven by science is revealed to be subject to contingency, non-linearity and the potential of reversal.

The following chapter is the first in the final pairing, comprising Zola’s ‘*L’Assommoir*’and Houellebecq’s *‘La Carte et le territoire*’. Each reveals the writer’s representation of capitalism’s excesses at times of profound change. In ‘*L’Assommoir*’excess take the form of overwhelming poverty, class marginalisation, family rupture and alcoholism, implicitly refuting scientific causes, such as the ‘tare héréditaire’. As in the previous pairings, Zola and Houellebecq are linked not only in their concerns over the depredations and excesses of capitalism but also in the writer’s conscious attempt to represent them, without offering a definitive conclusion. In *L’Assommoir*, just as in *Germinal* and *Au Bonheur*, Zola indirectly reveals the limitations of the writer’s ability to embrace the totality of contingencies and contributors to change.

# CHAPTER SIX *L’ASSOMMOIR*: PROJECTING CAPITALISM’S EXCESSES

## INTRODUCTION

In comparison with *Germinal*, *Au Bonheur des dames*, *La Curée*[[437]](#footnote-437)and *L’Argent*, *L’Assommoir* appears to be a work in which capitalism is not to the fore. However, if socialism is considered as an ideological response to capitalism, then Zola’s statement that ‘J’ai toujours consacré, dans mes ouvrages, une part au socialisme’, confirms capitalism’s presence in *L’Assommoir*.[[438]](#footnote-438) Despite the apparent prominence given to the Macquart ‘tare’of alcoholism, this does not diminish the predominant role of capitalism in *L’Assommoir* nor the excesses, sometimes violent, which result from it. Capitalism is implicit in depictions of consumption, appetite and aspiration; all constituting the essential components which will later drive the retail revolution depicted in *Au Bonheur* and ultimately the consumer society and dual economies of Houellebecq’s *Extension* and *Les Particules.*

Zola portrays Gervaise as enduring the same excess as her neighbours; that of an overwhelming present or threatened poverty from which the economic system provides no support, other than alcohol. In doing so Zola undermines the possibility of attributing the fate of Gervaise and her neighbours to any ‘tare’. Instead, Zola infers that the lives of the proletariat are pre-determined by a wider, impersonal factor, that of capitalism. Zola will be shown to exceed his extra-textual theory of naturalism in delivering more than the scientific demonstration of the suffering and pre-determined fate of a member of the proletariat under the Second Empire. He does so in describing capitalist-driven change which will eventually absorb Gervaise and the narrow streets of her neighbourhood, anticipating social movement beyond the pages of *L’Assommoir*.

Zola stages his action in the limited space of ‘la rue Goutte d’Or’ and its immediate neighbourhood. This setting provides Zola with a controlled scientific area in which to observe his characters. However, the novel will be shown to exceed these boundaries and reveal the reality of capitalist excess. In *L’Assommoir* Zola presents a working class urban population whose inhabitants are undergoing physical and social trauma. Whilst Zola does not overtly attribute such suffering to the excesses[[439]](#footnote-439) of capitalism, there are contemporaries who are less reticent. The ills of the proletariat had been addressed by Karl Marx and Freidrich Engels in the *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*[[440]](#footnote-440) and in *Das Kapital*,[[441]](#footnote-441)published ten years earlier in 1867, the half-digested principles of which Étienne would attempt to apply in *Germinal*. Zola was certainly aware of Marx by 1891 referring to him in *L’Argent*, introducing Sigismond: ‘à Cologne, il avait connu Karl Marx’.[[442]](#footnote-442) Saccard and Sigismond[[443]](#footnote-443) had discussed Marxism, Sigismond claiming Marxism to be complicit with capitalism.[[444]](#footnote-444) Marx specifically addresses the urban environment of *L’Assommoir*. In the *Manifesto*, Marx recognises the contribution of the bourgeoisie in having created ‘enormous cities […] and thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life’.[[445]](#footnote-445) The solitariness of each person in the new cities is, in the opinion of Marx, the result of capitalism in its ‘naked self-interest’.[[446]](#footnote-446) This traumatic change, ascribed by Marx to the replacement of a patriarchal feudal rural society by an urban capitalism, has seen the proletariat alienated from religion, their family and each other.[[447]](#footnote-447) Excess will be seen to denote waste. Waste has become a by-product of consumerism and in its twenty first century forms will be considered in Houellebecq’s *La Carte*. In *L’Assommoir* waste principally relates to that of the workers, deemed disposable due to age, mechanization, their skills and strength having become worthless commodities. A parallel consumption of the workforce by alcoholism will be seen to represent an equally corrosive waste.

Following a summary of the plot and a literature review, the chapter first addresses excess. The chapter will then discuss the physically absent bourgeoisie, the proletariat and an accompanying consumerism and aspiration. The third section examines the closed physical horizons which dominate the novel and which represent excess in the form of a confining hopelessness in which the ‘point de bascule’ is in evidence with the rewards of ceaseless labour not bringing the stability and happiness sought by Gervaise. Darwin is then examined and capitalism’s own cyclical ability to reform following excessive behaviours. The death of Gervaise is argued to be part of that cycle, she becoming the nameless filth she had eaten (A, II, 796).[[448]](#footnote-448) Conforming exactly to Zola’s theory of the fluidity of the novel, the plot will be argued to continue beyond its final pages. The children of Gervaise each taking their own path in seeking retribution from a society and economic system the excesses of which had determined the existence of Gervaise.

## GOLD, BOLTS AND DIRTY LAUNDRY

In the opening line of *L’Assommoir* and unusual with regards to other novels within the *Rougon-Macquart*, the central protagonist, Gervaise Macquart, already inhabits the neighbourhood which she will never leave, save for her wedding and a few disorientating hours in her final days. This is particularly significant in that the narrative of *L’Assommoir* will largely be focused upon Gervaise, a *laveuse*[[449]](#footnote-449) whose universe is confined to her street and what she can see from it. In being unable to name the force which is oppressing her class, she cannot discuss capitalism as Étienne does in *Germinal*.The charting of Gervaise’s shrinking world under the excesses of capitalism will conclude with her death in a space beneath a staircase, a reversal of the opening scene of the novel in which she observes the panorama of the masses of workers entering the city.

The opening lines describe Gervaise’s foreboding that, following their arrival in Paris, she and her two children may have been abandoned by Lantier, the feckless father of her children. Slowly realising that Lantier has left her, she gazes to one end of her street where the morning crowds of workers descend into Paris from Montmartre, a movement she will remain apart from until the closing pages of the novel. Taunted by Virginie, sister to Lantier’s new mistress, Gervaise and Virginie have a vicious fight at the laundry. Gervaise triumphs and publically humiliates Virginie by spanking her in front of the other women. Gervaise steels herself to survive alone with her children and, working hard and skilfully, she succeeds in gaining the respect of the owner of the laundry. Coupeau, a roofer and co-tenant of the building in which Gervaise lives, begins to court her. Gervaise resists his attentions as she has no confidence that Coupeau will prove any better than Lantier. She is also determined to avoid her mother’s fate, ‘qui avait servi de bête de somme’ for her lover, Macquart (A, II, 408).

Gervaise is surprised in the street by Coupeau who, in a reversal of the temptation in the Garden of Eden, forces her to enter and share the forbidden fruit, ‘une prune’[[450]](#footnote-450) at ‘L’Assommoir’ (A, II, 403), the name of the bar belonging to ‘le père Colombe’. Reassured by Coupeau, they converse chastely and she confides her modest ambitions in life which include to be able to work peacefully, to always have bread to eat, a place to live which is simply furnished and to bring up her children as decent citizens, After a pause she adds – that she would be happy if she was not beaten. Coupeau, who will largely contribute to her eventual failure to achieve these limited ambitions, agrees with her. However, her stated ambitions at this point[[451]](#footnote-451) do not include any desire to run her own business, employ her own workers, entertain friends and neighbours and enjoy the respect of the neighbourhood. *L’Assommoir* has rarely been consideredas a novel of consumption yet the impulses and appetites of Gervaise will dominate the plot.[[452]](#footnote-452)

Gervaise is described as sensual, implicitly making her susceptible to material comforts, the desire for which will eventually consume her. This impulse is suggested to derive from the family ‘tare’ of unregulated desire, manifested largely in alcoholism. Her struggle is hinted at in the scene with Coupeau during her visit to ‘pére Colombe’s’ bar, when she starts at the sight of the still and attempts a cheerful demeanour. The struggles of Gervaise to control her desire for material and eventually, alcoholic comfort, will be central to the consideration of excess under capitalism.

Persuaded of Coupeau’s sobriety, affection and work ethic, Gervaise reluctantly becomes his mistress and equally reluctantly his wife. She is introduced to his sister and her husband, the Lorilleux. They inhabit a filthy apartment, blackened and fume-filled from their trade as gold chain makers. Various other inhabitants of the neighbourhood are introduced. These include the Boches, manipulators of their neighbours, whose attitude to Gervaise and others changes once they inveigle themselves into the favour of the landlord, Marescot. The Boches take the position of *concierges* in the great tenement in therue Goutte-d’Or. The exploitation of the proletariat by their own class refers the reader to the reach of capitalism into the everyday and its defying simple proletariat-bourgeoisie patterns.

The neighbourhood of the rue Goutte-d’Or is flanked by building development. Paris is being transformed by Haussmann in response to the speculative investment characterising the era.[[453]](#footnote-453) Building work is plentiful around the *rue de la Goutte-d’Or*. Rented property is insalubrious and, once the rents were paid, leaves little for food and drink. Gervaise and Coupeau enjoy a few years of relative prosperity, during which she gives birth to Nana. Gervaise is determined to run her own ‘lavoir’. However, her savings are spent on medical fees after Coupeau suffers a serious fall. She is loaned sufficient funds by Goujet, a former neighbour who has an undeclared love for her, to lease and convert a local building into her long-desired business. The desire to run her own business is not on the list Gervaise relates to Coupeau when they converse for the first time at ‘L’Assommoir’. Gervaise develops the ambition to enjoy bourgeois material comforts and status. Excess is present here in such social aspirations being denied to all but the most ruthless, represented in *L’Assommoir* by Marescot the landlord, who was originally a knife grinder. Zola signals that Gervaise will succumb in the inequitable struggle of her class. She takes in the stinking washing of her neighbourhood and is described as being morally sapped by the poisonous air she breathes.

Following his fall, Coupeau starts to drink. Gervaise makes a series of choices, each influenced by the excesses precipitating the decline of her fortunes.[[454]](#footnote-454) Coupeau’s drinking becomes worse as he takes to the brandy from the still at ‘L’Assommoir’, a name symbolising the strength of the alcohol it produces. The name translates as club or bludgeon[[455]](#footnote-455) used in the slaughter of animals and thus links to the scenes in the opening and closing pages of *l’Assommoir*,referring to the ‘piétinement du troupeau’ (A, II, 377 and 765) of the workersentering and leaving the city, their status in capitalism implicitly that of the cattle, ‘les bêtes de somme’ (A, II, 481) which end their days in the nearby abattoir at one end of the Goutte-d’Or. This definition evokes the overwhelming and unforeseen power of the blows which fall upon Gervaise and her neighbours, the incapacitating impact of which evoke no sympathy from the capitalist system from which they rain.

On her Saint’s day, Gervaise throws a great feast at which Lantier is re-introduced by a now alcoholic Coupeau. The feast is the apogee of Gervaise’s social and economic status but also a ‘point de bascule’ which might equally herald a recovery in her crumbling self-respect. Lantier moves in as a lodger and, following Coupeau’s increasingly intolerable behaviour, becomes Gervaise’s lover. Étienne, the radical political force in *Germinal* is removed to an apprenticeship with Goujet. The other son fathered by Lantier, Claude, who had already appeared, out of sequence four years earlier as friend to Florent, the hapless revolutionary protagonist of *Le Ventre de Paris*,[[456]](#footnote-456)is mysteriously adopted by a Gentleman who recognises a talent. Only Nana remains. One who has noted the exploitation perpetrated by the bourgeoisie and, in the eponymous novel, she will in turn exploit in a remorseless excess of self-indulgence.

In the final chapters, the decline of Coupeau and Gervaise into the last stages of alcoholism gathers momentum, with Coupeau dying after a four-day alcoholic fit. Shortly before, in another ‘point de bascule’, Gervaise had walked the streets trying to sell herself but meets Goujet instead who, after feeding her, confesses his love for her. He is rejected by Gervaise. A few days later, following Coupeau’s death, Gervaise is found dead, already decomposing in her straw-filled space beneath the stairs of the tenement. Only in death does she receive pity at the hands of a neighbour, the alcoholic undertaker Bazouge, ironically nick-named ‘Bibi-la Gaieté, who sobs as he tends to her.

## ZOLA THE CORONER – DID CAPITALISM KILL GERVAISE?

William Gallois examines capitalism in the *Rougon-Macquart*, including an appraisal of Zola’s pre-Dreyfus political sympathies.[[457]](#footnote-457) *L’Assommoir* is barely mentioned, Gallois concentrating instead upon those novels in which, for him, capitalism occupies a more obvious place. His views are relevant in relation to broader observations on Zola’s perception and representation of capitalism. Gallois states, without evidence, that Zola’s ‘position on capitalism was that it could not be theorized, though it could be understood’. He states that any theories, including those offered by Marxism and other ideologies of the left, fundamentally misconceive the realities of capitalism.[[458]](#footnote-458) Gallois argues that Zola sees capitalism as capable of being comprehended ‘in the local, human details of its operations’.[[459]](#footnote-459) Gallois strongly rejects that Zola’s work is non-political, arguing it to be profoundly so. Referring to the breadth of Zola’s ambition in the *Rougon-Macquart*, Gallois considers the cycle ‘anti-theoretical’, offering no solutions, ‘founded in the realities of the present rather than the possibilities of the future’.[[460]](#footnote-460)

Brian Nelson[[461]](#footnote-461)points to excesses perceived by some critics in Zola’s description of the working class with some bourgeois critics accusing Zola of pornography whilst those on the Left saw it as caricaturing the working class as work shy, permissive drunkards. Zola had declared his novel as ‘une œuvre de verité, le premier roman sur le peuple, qui ne mente pas et qui ait l’odeur du peuple’.[[462]](#footnote-462) David Baguley’s *Emile Zola*: *L’Assommoir*[[463]](#footnote-463) plots the precise dates that the novel covers: May 1850 to sometime in January 1869, a span roughly equivalent to that of the Second Empire of 1852 to 1870. However, for Baguley, whilst the period’s importance in terms of the condition of the working class under Napoleon III ‘is by no means irrelevant’, in *L’Assommoir* ‘existential time, time as biological process and a thematised time of fatality and disintegration are far more important.’[[464]](#footnote-464) Such a view does appear to ignore the fact that the same period witnesses the rapid expansion of French capitalism.

Furstreviews the novel from the position of gender in *L’Assommoir: A Working Woman’s Life*. Furst’s study reveals capitalism’s excess in the daily existenceof Gervaise and other protagonists of both sexes, manifested in the squalor, alcoholism and overwork which broke people and families. In addition to addressing space, food, both in its absence and excess is shown as both charting Gervaise’s history as a working class nineteenth-century woman but also as a disposable member of the proletariat. Zola’s dedication of his novel to the detail of the everyday of a laundress provoked an *‘écœurement’* amongst readers and critics, with many considering it deliberate provocation in order to boost sales.[[465]](#footnote-465) However, this chapter seeks to show that Zola was just as engaged upon demonstrating excess as the artist Courbet or the members of the Internationale. Zola’s failure to explicitly link the misery of the Goutte-d’Or to the excesses of capitalism is, in the eyes of other left-wing writers such as Henri Barbusse, ‘an enormous error of judgement’.[[466]](#footnote-466) Whilst for Baguley, Capitalism in *L’Assommoir* denotes a world of ‘urban alienation’, de-skilling by mechanization and the ‘unfettered powers of the instinctual within the shaky constraints of modern civilisation.’[[467]](#footnote-467) Despite differing as to the degree to which Zola links the miseries of the Goutte d’Or to capitalism, each of the above critics recognises that *L’Assommoir* is a work denoting the crushing excesses under which the proletariat sought to survive

Continuing this idea of the impossible struggle, Sandy Petrey focuses upon the key episode in which Gervaise visits the foundry where Goujet works. Petrey argues a clear proposition that not even the ideal worker, sober and skilled, can survive under the prevailing conditions. Petrey refers to the *ébauche* to *L’Assommoir* ‘Le roman doit être ceci: montrer le milieu peuple, et expliquer par ce milieu les mœurs peuple’.[[468]](#footnote-468) In the scene following Goujet’s prowess in a myth-like competition with another worker to win the admiration of Gervaise, Zola has Goujet lead Gervaise to a glimpse of the future for skilled manual workers such as himself. He shows her a huge machine which cuts and hammers rivets in one process. The bourgeois values of thrift, hard work and sobriety are a failing currency in the rue de la Goutte-d’Or, emphasising that for the vast majority of the working class, material and social progression is impossible.

Excess is seen by some critics to be evidenced in Zola’s decision to use the genre of the novel to portray the sordid lives of the working class, rather than an explicit attack upon the capitalist system.[[469]](#footnote-469) For example, *L’Assommoir* was read by critics of the Left, such as Barbusse, as a moving portrayal of the proletariat but ‘hopeless, issueless, purely negative’ offering no remedies, ‘no weapon of destruction against a wicked order except the indirect destructive virtue possessed by all truthful works’.[[470]](#footnote-470) Others, such as Jacques Dubois saw it as an example of ‘the paternalistic discourse of certain bourgeois social reformers of the age […] on the problematic intemperance of the workers.[[471]](#footnote-471) This chapter will argue that the existence depicted does not attribute the drunkenness and debauchery of the characters to the ‘tare’or evidence of Social Darwinism but to the above argued economic and social excesses creating an impasse in which the proletariat are marooned.

Larry Duffy sees the isolation of the proletariat to be an expression of the Haussmannization of Paris.[[472]](#footnote-472) Duffy argues that the Haussmann façade of a ‘proletarian-free Paris’ and the marginalization of the working class will only exacerbate the growing frustration of Gervaise and her class. The relentless workings of L’Assommoir’s still are argued by Duffy to be a metaphor for the growing frustration and alienation of the working class. The still is ‘une source lente et entêtée, qui à la longue devait envahir la salle, se répandre sur les boulevards extérieurs, inonder le trou immense de Paris’.[[473]](#footnote-473) This uncontrolled excess also anticipates the daughter of Gervaise, Nana, whose presence will similarly fill the salons of the ruling class of Second Empire Paris, whilst evading its control.

Gervaise and Lantier are part of the nineteenth-century migration of the French rural population to the cities. Two centuries later, capitalist excess will be depicted in Houellebecq’s *La Carte et le territoire* dictating a reverse migration of the bourgeoisie to the provinces, leaving Paris to the proletariat.

Some critics struggle to recognise Zola’s opposition to aspects of social injustice, believing that this had been somehow veiled until his intervention in the Dreyfus affair. The Marxist Ernst Fischer is a typical example, considering Zola to have ‘Refused for many years to draw political conclusions [in the cycle] […] only much later, after the Dreyfus case and his magnificent *J’Accuse!* did Zola’s attitude change.’[[474]](#footnote-474) Similarly, Hemmings noted Zola’s disdain for the process of politics in having ‘played no part in the turbulent political life of the period, though the trend of certain of his novels – particularly *L’Assommoir, Germinal* […] – showed clearly enough where his sympathies lay’, believing they were made public only upon his intervention in the Dreyfus case.[[475]](#footnote-475)

Hemmings sees a clear distinction between the role of literature and political action. This is central to the argument of this thesis: the extent to which Zola and Houellebecq responded to the trajectory and impact of capitalism and their conscious and unconscious understanding of the value of literature as a response. Gallois provides a strong argument for fiction as a source of understanding, citing Christopher Prendergast with relevance to *L’Assommoir* and the ability of fiction to create meaning and thereby social commentary: ‘A paragraph on the lack of sunlight in the urban slum dwelling tells us more about the actual texture of experience than a string of statistics’.[[476]](#footnote-476)

Despite his exasperation at Zola’s evasiveness as to declaring a political allegiance, the Marxist critic, Georg Lukács, considers him to have been aware of and having fought contemporary capitalism ‘first in the literary sphere and later openly in the political’. However, Lukács assesses Zola as never having ‘got beyond a paler version of the libertarian socialist Fourier’s Utopianism’.[[477]](#footnote-477) Lukács asserts this in his chapter ‘The Zola Century’, without making a single reference to any Zola text. In *Paris, Capital of Modernity*,[[478]](#footnote-478) David Harvey provides statistics and discussion on the financing of the transformation of Paris, its propertied interests and the labour economy in the capital of the 1860s. He also recognises the ‘abstract forces of capitalism brought to bear on the concrete experience of labouring under the Second Empire’,[[479]](#footnote-479) illustrating this with a reference to *L’Assommoir*. Harvey selects the scene in which Goujet shows Gervaise the steam engine at his workplace (A, II, 535-537). Whilst his references to Zola are limited, each chapter in Harvey lends further to the historical forces against which Gervaise and Goujet battle in vain, despite following, albeit to different degrees, the values of a bourgeois, conservative capitalism. Harvey’s view that the excesses facing Gervaise are an insuperable barrier to her attaining stability and happiness, accords with that of this chapter. Harvey’s Marxist standpoint emphasises the importance of the city to nineteenth-century economists and activists as ‘a body politic’ fundamental to any idea of good society.[[480]](#footnote-480) It was Pierre Proudhon in *What is Property?* (1840)[[481]](#footnote-481) and Marx in *Capital* (1867) who would make the connection between pauperism and capitalism.[[482]](#footnote-482) In *L’Assommoir* Zola will be amongst the first to make that connection in fiction.

## ‘LA FIN DES FINS’[[483]](#footnote-483)

Excess in *L’Assommoir* is reflected primarily in suffering. The causes are various and may be traced to three broad areas: Firstly, a pervasive and oppressive force within the neighbourhood which is perceived as fate by Gervaise and Coupeau, but which may be traced to the indirect consequences of capitalism, such as the marginalisation of the proletariat in the extensive development of Paris, which excludes their district. Excess in the indifference of society to the fate of Gervaise is symbolised in the final pages as she attempts to solicit with a repeated “Monsieur, écoutez donc…” (A, II, 770-74). Earlier that evening she had walked past a notice offering a fifty francs reward for the finding of a lost dog remarking to herself ‘Voilà une bête qui avait dû être aimée’ (A, II, 768), an ironic reference recalling the use of ‘troupeau’ to describe the workers en route to and from work and their value relative to that of the dog. The excesses of capitalism are manifested in the steadily reducing wages for skilled labour as a consequence of mechanisation, starvation wages and chronically poor working conditions. There is no medical care and the local hospital is feared. There is an abundance of alcohol and poor housing conditions, with the constant threat of eviction. Excess is manifested in descriptions such as that of the death of Coupeau over a four day long alcoholic fit but also in the excess of the feast Gervaise throws on her Saint’s day or in the reader being referred to Lantier’s greed as he literally eats his mistress Virginie out of her delicatessen business.[[484]](#footnote-484)

In this world of excess, the good worker is unrewarded. Goujet, the sober, decent and highly skilled worker whose wages are falling, will implicitly face eventual redundancy and poverty.[[485]](#footnote-485) In *L’Assommoir*, unlike *Germinal*,there is no sense of solidarity, with characters such as the Boches and Lorilleux portrayed as self-interested. Thirdly, there is that which Baguley describes as the naturalist’s pathological vision of life’[[486]](#footnote-486) of drunkenness, physical and mental deterioration, resulting in a focus upon excessive behaviours. The alcoholic Bijard’s battering to death of his wife and then his daughter is one of the most shocking examples (A, II, 757-60) and will be returned to below. However, this category may also include the depiction of excessive desires within Gervaise, reflected in her desire to attain bourgeois status in running her own business (in which she exploits others), the abuse of the kindness of Goujet, an excessive desire to win the respect and affections of her neighbours through the unaffordable feast she throws for family and friends. Instead of her declared ambition to see her children raised as ‘des bons sujets’ (A, II, 410), she and Coupeau are swift to dispose of them to apprenticeships freeing the couple to aspire to a better standard of living. In her final years her alcoholism leads her to neglect her daughter, Nana, who is free to slyly observe the lessons of the street. All these elements exceed or undermine her original stated desires and recall her declaration to Coupeau at their first conversation over a plum brandy ‘Mon Dieu! Je ne suis pas ambitieuse’ (A, II, 410). Both Gervaise and Coupeau protest at what has befallen them. Shortly after his fall Coupeau complains to Gervaise that whilst his father, also a *zingueur*,[[487]](#footnote-487) had fallen whilst drunk ‘Moi, j’étais à jeun, tranquille comme Baptiste, sans une goutte de liquide dans le corps, et voilà que je dégringolade […] Vous ne trouvait pas ça trop fort? S’il y a un bon Dieu, il arrange drôlement les choses’ (A, II, 488). Capitalism is seen to function whether the workers are drunk or sober, a Goujet or a Bec-Salé. The proletariat’s lack of control over their own fate is contrasted with that exercised over them by the bourgeoisie, as explored below.

The interpretation of capitalism and excess along political lines is evident in the criticism of *L’Assommoir*. For the Marxist Lukács capitalist excess may signify exploitation whilst for a neoliberal it is part of a natural, self-calibrating process. Despite the hardships of the neighbourhood, capitalism is not foregrounded. Unlike the financial schemes of *L’Argent*, the capitalism of *L’Assommoir* is witnessed in the detail of the everyday, in the laundry, in the home workshop of the Lorilleux but also in the dying Lalie Bijard’s care for her siblings. Its apprehension is perhaps assisted in an image used by Wittgenstein: ‘we are all quite unable to describe [it] with the means at our disposal. We feel as if we had to repair a torn spider’s web with our fingers.’[[488]](#footnote-488) Whilst Wittgenstein is not referring directly to Zola or capitalism, his description might be applied to the representation of the contingent, complex, multi-layered nature of capitalism in *L’Assommoir*.

Economically, the Second Empire was a progressive regime, in which some development of welfare capitalism takes place. Vast public works,[[489]](#footnote-489) investment and expansion provided employment for Paris and those attracted from the provinces.[[490]](#footnote-490) Coupeau, even as a broken alcoholic, obtains building work. Yet Harvey describes the fluctuating fortunes of free-market capitalism at that time, marked by periodic bouts of speculation, market collapse, de-skilling, soup kitchens and unemployment.[[491]](#footnote-491) For the twenty-first-century reader, the causal link between capitalism and the excesses it causes may be established, however, in Second Empire France, where industrialization was still in process, those links were less apparent. In relation to the causes of excessive consumption of alcohol amongst the working classes, Zola highlighted the inconsistencies in the *loi Roussel* which sought to protect the workers from drink, yet ignored specific causes. Baguley refers to Zola’s referring to the ‘drunken pleasures of the ruling classes’ and arguing pointedly against the prevailing bourgeois view that the revolutionary spirit of the age “stems from a badly corked litre bottle and that the great legal conquests of ’89 were gathered up in the slops of the cheap bar”.[[492]](#footnote-492) Zola lays the blame for the worker’s state squarely at the feet of the same bourgeoisie:

If he slips, if he rolls into drunkenness, it is your fault. Do you not want him to be stupid, drunk with ignorance, like an animal? So he enters a bar, turns to the only joy that he has at hand, takes it to excess, because you close up his horizons and because he needs a dream, even if it is the dream of intoxication.[[493]](#footnote-493)

The polemical tone of this article contrasts with the ambiguity in *L’Assommoir* which may be read as suggesting that the ‘tare’contributes to Gervaise’s predisposition to excessive drinking.[[494]](#footnote-494) Even if this were the case, it does not account for the drunkenness of other workers and must therefore be due to factors beyond their control, specifically those excesses associated with capitalism.

Unlike the privations of the miners in *Germinal*, those of Gervaise and her neighbourhood have no oppressive employer driven by investors: ‘La puissance invincible des gros capitaux’ (G, III, 1464) of *Germinal* are not seen. Saccard, the main protagonist and financial speculator of *La Curée* and *L’Argent* is absent. There is certainly no material excess evident in *L’Assommoir*’s rue de la Goutte-d’Or. ‘‘To live as a labourer, is not to die’’ was the saying of the time according to Harvey, with no expectation of any change in condition.[[495]](#footnote-495) However, this chapter will show that *L’Assommoir*’s representation of the impact of capitalism at the onset of Haussmann’s Paris shows it to be one of the chief sources of the excesses described for, even in the poor streets of the Goutte-d’Or, capitalist power structures are operating.[[496]](#footnote-496) Gervaise is employed and in turn employs assistants in her laundry. To simply attribute all excess to capitalism would overlook the nature of the tipping point which recognises not only the complex, elusive nature of capitalism but also the multiple contributors which exist beyond that system, such as the innate morality of Gervaise and Goujet.

Excess in *L’Assommoir* must be read in the context of it being one of the first French novels on the proletariat. Balzac’s *La Comédie humaine* contained no working-class character, although in *Pierrette* of 1839 Balzac does make a single, one-line reference to a young man whose demeanour and slang announced him to be ‘un prolétaire’.[[497]](#footnote-497) Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables*[[498]](#footnote-498)foregrounded the proletariat whilst the Goncourt brother’s *Germinie Lacerteux* of 1865[[499]](#footnote-499) acknowledged this new social class, in having a dissolute maidservant as the main protagonist. Many of the literary class in common with much of the bourgeoisie had received notions of working class excess and were unsympathetic to the subject. Hemmings considered the character Goujet to be a ‘concession to the philanthropists who believed in the deserving poor’,[[500]](#footnote-500) a remark signifying the political values that so many critics bring to their work on *L’Assommoir*. There were less Olympian occupations than that of Goujet which also hid the hopelessness of the workers’ toil. Mlle Remanjou is described working late at night whilst the rest of the house slept: ‘un filet de lumière glissait par la serrure de Mlle Remanjou, taillant encore, avec un petit bruit de ciseaux, les robes de gaze des poupées à treize sous’ (A, II, 431). The relentlessness of the pressure upon the inhabitants of the Goutte-d’Or originates, as was the case in *Germinal*, from elsewhere: ‘un lieu vague et reculé’ (G, III, 1141).

Another ‘assommoir’ operates in the rue Goutte d’Or, that of the expendability of the victims of the economic system. For Marx, as well as for Zola, the consequences of such neglect of a population condemned the society permitting it. This is seen in a passage occurring shortly after Gervaise’s feast, when Lantier’s return has already started to hasten the decline in her fortunes and, in deep winter, the rent is due from all the tenants of the tenement. The landlord Marescot, ‘le mot d’expulsion à la bouche’, arrives to collect his rents:

Dans la maison entière, d’ailleurs, une lamentation montait. On pleurait à tous les étages, une musique de malheur ronflait le long de l’escalier et des corridors. Si chacun avait eu un mort chez lui, ça n’aurait pas produit un air d’orgues aussi abominable. Un vrai jour du jugement dernier, la fin des fins, la vie impossible, l’écrasement du pauvre monde. La femme du troisième allait faire huit jours au coin de la rue Belhomme. Un ouvrier, le maçon du cinquième, avait volé chez son patron (A, II, 683).

The people who starve are a surplus commodity in an economy of excess. This cycle appears efficient and therefore unlikely to produce change amongst those who benefit. Yet, a contrary factor operates in the form of the charitable actions of Gervaise suggesting the potential for change and escape from the logic of the market. Indeed, Gallois argues ‘that Zola understands change as taking place in individual actions and human interactions’.[[501]](#footnote-501) Whilst change is not explicitly considered in *L’Assommoir*, the brief popularity of Gervaise in the Goutte-d’Or, founded upon her good nature, suggests the possibility of a different society. Her morality is implicitly compared to that of the priests – ‘les corbeaux’ – that she and Coupeau encounter when arranging their wedding (A, II, 433). An alternative system might be possible and, whether in the laundry or in the bar, there is the potential for the germination of a new solidarity in the proletariat. However, excessive hardship and its origins in unseen, unacknowledged oppressors, compel the citizens of the Goutte-d’Or to devote their strength to their personal survival, suggesting, as in *Germinal*, any immediate break in the cycle to be unlikely. The comment of René Ternois regarding *Germinal* that: ‘Nothing in this book allows us to think that the people will one day have a clearer awareness of what they can be, of what they can create’[[502]](#footnote-502) may equally apply to the citizens of la rue de la Goutte-d’Or. Zola’s belief in his adherence to scientific objectivity is maintained even in *Germinal* where the novel’s title and mythical imagery suggest revolution and a radical conclusion. Once more, the same observation may be made of *L’Assommoir*, in which the innumerable contingencies at play would make any conclusive dénouement appear simplistic.[[503]](#footnote-503)

## THE INVISIBLE BOURGEOISIE AND THE PROLETARIAT

According to Marx, the mid-nineteenth-century was ‘the epoch of the bourgeoisie’ with society split into ‘two great hostile camps […] directly facing each other: Bourgeoisie and Proletariat’.[[504]](#footnote-504) However, hostility between the two camps – possibly due to lack of interaction - is at most implicit in *L’Assommoir*. As stated, critics are divided as to how and when Zola first manifested political interest, some, such as Hemmings and Baguley, believed he maintained a largely apolitical stance until the Dreyfus Affair. This is inaccurate on two counts. Firstly, this may indeed have been his first intervention in the political sphere but as the Affair crossed traditional political divides, it did not label him as belonging to either Left or Right. Secondly, and most importantly, as Gallois argues, Zola’s entire *Rougon-Macquart* cycle is political.[[505]](#footnote-505) This thesis understands ‘political’ to denote the class tensions which developed in the first half of the nineteenth century in response to economic and political inequalities and a lingering resentment amongst parts of the proletariat that the 1848 revolution had brought little reward for the working class.[[506]](#footnote-506) Any fictional description of class in that era is inherently political.

With the exception of the landlord Marescot, who has risen from knife grinder to relative riches, the bourgeoisie are rarely referred to. The near invisibility of the bourgeoisie in the novel makes the references to the visits of the bourgeois ‘vieux de Nana’ seem like that to a rare species of bird out of its range: ‘Des fois même il entrait jusque dans la cour’ (A, II, 725) report the excited neighbours, ignoring that he is a predator pursuing the daughter of a neighbour. The consent of the neighbours signifies an absence of collective values. They are reduced to onlookers without the will to recognise the personification of the system that oppresses them and their children. Yet, this rarely glimpsed class is, like the proletariat, one which has undergone and is undergoing rapid change. The bourgeoisie, Marx wrote: ‘is itself the product of a long course of development, of a series of revolutions in the modes of production and exchange.’[[507]](#footnote-507)Marescot is not just a landlord but also a manufacturer. Marx argues that ‘The fast-frozen relations’ of ancient societies has given way to ‘uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty’[[508]](#footnote-508) and it is this tumult that Zola describes in *L’Assommoir*. Capitalism has displaced the old social certainties and has brought with it the exploitation that capitalism demands for, as Marx argues, greater competition requires lower wages. The commodification of the worker is defined by the surplus value, or profit, that the bourgeois employer could derive from them after deducting the cost of their labour. Goujet is representative of the powerless of the proletariat to argue against this simple economic logic which results in an excess of misery. The absence of the bourgeoisie renders their oppression of the workers of the rue de la Goutte-d’Or no less real. One illustration is the work of the Lorilleux, which consists of manufacturing gold chains.[[509]](#footnote-509) They turn the wire alloys supplied by their implicitly exacting, unseen employer, into gold chain which will presumably be worn by the bourgeoisie, even aristocrats, and for which they have sacrificed their health, youth and any compassion. They live and work in a single room ‘une pièce étranglée, une sorte de boyau (A, II, 424) in which the couple strive to live. Lorilleux struggles to describe his work: ‘pris d’un accès de toux, se pliait sur son tabouret. Au milieu de la quinte, il parla, il dit d’une voix suffoquée […] “Moi je fais la colonne”’ (A, II, 426). The accuracy of Zola’s depiction of the oppression of the Lorilleux is supported by Harvey’s illustration that at the 1867 Paris Exposition the ‘very moderate workers’ delegation of goldsmiths complained in their report of ‘an insatiable capitalism’ which left them defenceless and unable to protect against ‘the obvious and destructive evil […] where accumulated capital, enjoying every freedom, becomes a kind of legalized oppression’.[[510]](#footnote-510) Class conflict is avoided by the people themselves. One of the other rare references to the bourgeoisie occurs when Goujet is asked why he had never taken up arms for the Republic, Goujet explains ‘le peuple se lassait de payer aux bourgeois les marrons qu’il tirait des cendres, en se brûlant les pattes’ (A, II, 475). This is the one genuine expression of class discord and the discontent of ‘le peuple’ within *L’Assommoir*.[[511]](#footnote-511)

The ‘médecin en chef’ (A, II, 785) and his medical student assistant, exercise a possibly more sinister control in observing the excesses of working class alcoholics. Baguley states that

the Foucauldian might argue that the doctor’s role mirrors the whole repressive structure of the society in which he operates, defining and confining to preserve and protect its precarious order. Ultimately, these two characters also represent the naturalist writer – not the creator of Gervaise, but the clinical analyst, the dissector (the *coupe-peau*) of Coupeau.[[512]](#footnote-512)

Like the naturalist writer, the doctor does not seek to impose a solution but to analyse and report and allows Coupeau to proceed on his course of self-destruction. He gives Gervaise nothing more than a stern paternal warning to avoid following Coupeau’s path. As Zola observed in his article in *Le Corsaire*, these representatives of the bourgeoisie are not scientifically objective nor even indifferent but excessive in re-affirming their perceptions of a proletarian alcoholic couple.

The present absence of the bourgeoisie[[513]](#footnote-513) is emphasised by the idealisation of bourgeois values by some of the characters within *L’Assommoir*. This recurs in both the stated and undeclared ambitions of Gervaise but in other, less evident bourgeois behaviour. The very act of marrying sets Gervaise and Coupeau apart, as it was relatively uncommon in their class, partly due to the cost of the licence.[[514]](#footnote-514) After ‘quatre années de dur travail’ (A, II, 463) Gervaise and Coupeau, their wealth calculated on their joint daily income, still struggle to make ends meet. The departure of their older son, Claude, who ‘leur coûtait déjà les yeux de la tête’ (A, II, 464) is greeted as a blessing. Their unconcern at their child’s departure is reminiscent of the self-interest of the Lorilleux. However, the saving allows them to rent their own apartment and the list of the furniture they accumulate is presented. The narrator remarks: ‘C’était pour eux comme une entrée sérieuse et définitive dans la vie, quelque chose qui, en les faisant *propriétaires*,[[515]](#footnote-515) leur donnait de l’importance au milieu des gens bien posés du quartier’ (A, II, 464). In another scene, Gervaise defends her over starching of Goujet’s shirts to Mme Goujet, assuring her that: ‘Les chemises pour s’habiller doivent être un peu raides, si l’on ne veut pas avoir un chiffon sur le corps. Voyez les messieurs…. C’est moi qui fais tout votre linge. Jamais une ouvrière n’y touche’, to which Mme Goujet responds that Goujet ‘ne tient pas à avoir l’air d’un monsieur’ (A, II, 539). The fragility of a worker’s aspirations is evident, for in the same interview Gervaise is both compelled to demand payment, departing from their agreement to deduct her costs from her debt and also learns in return that Goujet’s daily rate has fallen by a quarter. Gervaise exploits the Goujet family in her desperation to maintain a semblance of stability in an existence over which she is slowly losing control.

The workers in *L’Assommoir* are not a homogeneous group. Mechanisation does not impact all trades. With the exception of Goujet, the work undertaken in the neighbourhood is not that associated with the Marxist proletariat.[[516]](#footnote-516) Steadman Jones identifies the working class or proletariat class in the first half of the nineteenth century as ‘yet in its infancy […] without any historical initiative or any independent political movement.[[517]](#footnote-517) This lack of political consciousness generally accords with Gervaise and her neighbours. Becker describes those depicted in *L’Assommoir* as ‘une fraction retardataire, apolitique du prolétariat, une arrière-garde de l’armée en marche, sans aucun lien avec les ouvriers de la grande industrie naissante.’[[518]](#footnote-518) Zola refers to ‘le peuple’ as ‘en bas, dans l’ignorance et dans la boue, et c’est de là qu’on doit travailler à le tirer’.[[519]](#footnote-519) All the characters surrounding Gervaise are to varying degrees oppressed. She herself is steadily overwhelmed by a world ‘ruled by contingencies over which she has no control’.[[520]](#footnote-520) ‘Elle se sentait prise d’une sueur devant l’avenir et se comparait à un sou lancé en l’air, retombant pile ou face, selon les hasards du pavé’ (A, II, 417). Gervaise is defeated by the conditions of her existence. In a letter to a politician, Zola is clear that it is these excessive burdens by which the proletariat is brutalised: ‘Oui le peuple est ainsi, mais parce que la société le veut bien’.[[521]](#footnote-521)

Gervaise’s feast occupies the whole of chapter seven. Excess here is defined by Gervaise’s class and environment. The feast is excessive because the hostess cannot afford it but also in the quantity of food and drink consumed. The occurrence of the feast at a point in the novel when Gervaise is losing her battle with the forces stacked against her, underlines the complexity of factors at play. Her work is suffering as Coupeau’s alcoholism absorbs her earnings and optimism. For the moment, she seeks comfort in giving but also in consuming, of seeking the image which she had always craved of a good respectable, bourgeois household. She is now in thrall to a distorted image of her original desires and senseless of the consequences. The feast represents the apex of the plot of *L’Assommoir* with the decline of the fortune of Gervaise following the feast implicitly inevitable. However, the insistence of Zola upon her unchecked trajectory of descent ignores possible ‘points de bascule’ at which reversal might occur, such as the advances of Coupeau in the laundry and Goujet’s declaration of love. Zola’s insistence that Gervaise adhere to the predetermined route to ruin that he has assigned her may be argued to represent a further contradiction of his naturalism.

A ‘point de bascule’also occurs at the feast. Gervaise sends her wedding ring to be pawned to buy more wine. It is this act which reverses her implicit ambition at the feast to re-enforce her status within her community and marks instead the onset of her weakening position and sense of control. In pawning her ring she has surrendered a symbol of her aspiration to bourgeois status. Accentuating the reduced standing Gervaise will enjoy following the feast, a drunken Coupeau brings Lantier to dinner, attempting to counter any expected objection from Gervaise with ‘Faut pas gronder, la bourgeoise, dit le zingueur. Nous sommes sages’ (A, II, 596). The teasing title of ‘la bourgeoise’, *argot* for ‘femme’ or wife, is significant, as from that precise point the struggle of Gervaise to maintain her ‘bourgeois’ aspirations will be doomed. The excess represented by her feast and the ambitions it represents is symbolically punished by a society that, as Zola had remarked above, expects the proletariat to stay in its place.

The guests at the feast are conscious of their social marginality. Those at the table become aware of the neighbours and the stares of passers-by provoke them to make a rare reference to their own social status (A, II, 581). In a passage mixing style indirect libre and reported speech, Coupeau, drunk, demands: ‘Pourquoi donc se serait-on caché? La société, lancée, n’avait plus honte de se montrer à table, au contraire, ça la flattait et l’échauffait, […] On n’était pas dégoûtant à voir n’est-ce pas?’ (A, II, 581). This is a rare instance of self-awareness as to their social standing, implicitly in relation to the bourgeoisie. This may be read as either the seed of solidarity and potential change or simply an urge to emulate ‘la société’ in the wider sense.

Despite attempts by Gervaise and her neighbours at adopting bourgeois habits, their language remains that of the Parisian working class vernacular, and is employed throughout *L’Assommoir.* Zola’s use of *argot* generated accusations of obscenity and of dishonouring the language and literature of France, one critic accusing Zola of using ‘le langage des ruisseaux’[[522]](#footnote-522) Zola responded to one such critic:

Vous me concédez que je puis donner à mes personnages leur langue accoutumée. Faites encore un effort, comprenez que des raisons d’équilibre et d’harmonie générale m’ont seules décidé à adopter un style uniforme. […] D’ailleurs, ce langage de la rue vous gêne donc beaucoup? Il est un peu gros, sans doute, mais quelle verdeur, quelle force et quel imprévu d’images, quel amusement continu pour un grammairien fureteur!’[[523]](#footnote-523)

However, as much as the use of the popular vernacular reflects the linguistic verisimilitude of *L’Assommoir*, it particularly emphasises the isolation of the Goutte d’Or from Haussmann’s regeneration of Paris. The above protest of those at the feast at the dual standards of ‘la société’, acknowledges this separation. That sense of being removed from the rest of society is emphasised in Zola’s location of the feast so as to permit the guests and passers-by to scrutinise each other. The hunger and envy of the neighbours is emphasised in the language of a coachman making fun of a female guest who has over-indulged: ‘“Dis donc, tu ne paies rien?...Ohé! La grosse mêre, je vas chercher l’accoucheuse!”’ (A, II, 580-1).

As the feast progresses, the guests become more intoxicated and employ *argot* more frequently, at ease in their common language, with phrases such as: ‘Tiens! crève!’(A, II, 582); ‘Ah le sale mufe,’ (A, II, 590); ‘Ils sont paf’ (A, II, 593) The guests join Coupeau to sing a song including the lines: ‘I’m’lich’ la moitié d’ma goutte: / Qué cochon d’enfant!’ (A, II, 593). Robert Neiss suggests that the narrator’s use of *argot* can act ‘as a barrier to understanding and sympathy, like a mask or too heavy make up on oriental actors.’[[524]](#footnote-524)However, the creation of barriers is precisely the purpose of such language and, for Gervaise and her guests in their songs and conversation, it is also a marker of urban space.

The agency of the narrator renders the application of *argot* more complex, with reported speech and style indirect libre using popular language occurring in the same passage. For example, following the coachman’s joke the narrator proceeds to list the responses of the neighbours to the sight and aromas of the feast. Mme Cudorge and her daughter are described as walking past the revellers ‘les yeux en coulisse, rouges comme si elles avaient fait des crêpes.’(A, II, 581). When not employing the popular vernacular, the language of the omniscient narrator is that of the bourgeois, further accentuating the isolation of Gervaise and her class.

In the narrator’s description of the proletariat and recording of their vernacular, Gervaise and her guests appear to have been scientifically classified and confirmed as a different species from the other inhabitants of Haussmann’s Paris. Clark argues that the use of *argot* in conjunction with style indirect libre, serves not only to allow the reader access to the character’s thoughts but also allows the exploration of an unfamiliar exterior environment’.[[525]](#footnote-525)However, while Zola’s bourgeois readers may indeed gain an insight into the conditions and thoughts of the proletariat, Gervaise and her neighbours remain largely static subjects of examination, in all their social and economic isolation.

Whilst the fleeting excesses of Gervaise and her guests at the feast are implicitly compared to those of the bourgeoisie, the far more corrosive and immovable excess in the form of bourgeois indifference to the fate of Gervaise and her class is present in this chapter. Society has denied Gervaise her reward for hard work and sobriety and has undermined her resolve in doing so.

## CLOSED HORIZONS – ‘UNE MORTE SOUS L’ESCALIER’

Alcohol represents one of the most obvious manifestations of excess in *L’Assommoir*. As stated, five years before *L’Assommoir* Zola had attacked the *loi Roussel* seeking to restrict alcohol consumption, exonerating the worker and assigning the blame for his plight to the bourgeoisie. The image of closed horizons and the worker’s escape in drink is central to *L’Assommoir* and the excesses of capitalism and, as Zola observed above, is a tool of repression. Drink serves to dull the pain of capitalist exploitation and enables them to continue. The eponymous still which generates the liquor and feeds addicts such as Gervaise and others in her community, takes on the image of ogre, as does the mine head in *Germinal*, another symbol of capitalism’s dominance. However, reflecting the ambivalent role of alcohol as both source of comfort and agent of oppression, the still is less obviously the agent of capitalism, described at one point as lit like a cathedral for a grand mass. However, the image of religion in *L’Assommoir* in the contempt shown by the priests towards Gervaise and Coupeau when purchasing their wedding mass, renders the image of the cathedral ambiguous. Coupeau haggles for an hour over the fee with an old priest ‘voleur comme une fruitière’ (A, II, 433). The church is clearly associated by Zola with the wider economic exploitation of the proletariat. The image of the cathedral also occurs in *Au Bonheur* where it is equally one of consumption and excess as well as symbolic of the new religion of capitalism.[[526]](#footnote-526)

Both the still and the department store promise an answer which it is in their interests not to supply. The drinker will soon return to attempt oblivion as will the shopper who indebts herself at Mouret’s store. Via a nascent consumer science capitalism seeks to maintain this cycle of unrealized desire. As discussed in relation to *Au Bonheur*, in the consumer, whether drinker or shopper, it is the individual’s self-interest and satisfaction that is encouraged whilst avoiding resolution in response to either impulse. Both the still and the indebted customer are symptoms of capitalism’s excess, for the disposability of the worker, the precarity of their existence, finds no support within society other than alcohol, a recourse which perpetuates a cycle of waste, dependency, destruction and renewal as new consumers replace the old. All these are fed by poverty and the struggle that accompanies it, exemplified by starvation wages, promiscuity and the crumbling physical propriety and space of the central character Gervaise in the face these insurmountable hardships. A process aided by a state which enables the capitalist system to progress, drawing upon an excess of desperate workers. Despite the bourgeois fear of drunken revolutionaries, the interests of capitalism are served in rendering the worker drunk and incapable of action or revolution.

Alcohol also serves to deaden pain and hunger: ‘Au deuxième verre, Gervaise ne sentit plus la faim qui la tourmentait’ (A, II, 706). It undermines worker and family, in absorbing the meagre income available to the family it sparks conflict, fragmenting a unit which might otherwise offer solidarity and support in the face of capitalist excess. In creating isolation rather than confronting less fallible family units, alcohol parallels the encouragement and targeting by consumerism of the individual. Gervaise’s consumption increases as her family weakens. One of the most violent examples of family disintegration through alcoholism in *L’Assommoir* is that of Gervaise’s eight-year-old orphan neighbour, Lalie Bijard. She had replaced her mother, her father having killed his ‘bourgeoise’ with a kick to the stomach. The drunkard father, ‘pour compléter la ressemblance, assommait aujourd’hui la fille comme il avait assommé la maman autrefois’ (A, II, 689). Other than Gervaise, the neighbours and authorities are unconcerned. Lalie had little commodity value. The portrayal of Lalie’s fate verges upon Dickensian pathos but avoids that in the excessive violence, contrasting with the ideal family and the trope of a saintly Little Nell.[[527]](#footnote-527) In respect of its dissolution of social bonds, capitalism’s excesses are seen to be indiscriminate and insuperable.

The Coupeau blame their decline upon themselves not realising the corrosion that drink has caused until they are no longer a family:

Oui, c’était la faute du ménage, s’il dégringolait de saison en saison. Mais ce sont des choses qu’on ne se dit jamais […] Ils accusaient la malchance, ils prétendaient que Dieu leur en voulait […] il semblait que quelque chose avait cassé, le grand ressort de la famille, la mécanique, qui, chez les gens heureux, fait battre les cœurs ensemble (A, II, 685).

The family unit is important to Gervaise, she takes in Coupeau’s mother rather than leave her to the neglect of the Lorilleux, exclaiming ‘Mon Dieu! Quelle sale famille!’ (A, II, 524) in apparent recognition of a family which had been transformed by the excessive pressures of capitalism. That economic system has broken the bonds of family in brutalising the Lorilleux in ceaseless toil and inhuman conditions, rendering the Lorilleux incapable of love and largely indifferent to the fate of Mme Coupeau, the mother of Mme Lorilleux.

The theory in the *Rougon-Macquart* of the ‘tare héréditaire’suggests Gervaise to be the victim of an ostensibly pre-determined fate as she is slowly consumed by her disposition to excessive sensuality and a propensity to drink. Her susceptibility is evidenced in the fumes from mounds of clothes in her wash house, in her acceptance of the parasitic behaviour of Coupeau and Lantier and, finally, alcohol. Yet Zola undermines this theory in presenting her fate as brought about by circumstance, isolation and the indifference of a society itself struggling for survival - or riches. In doing so, Zola is recognizing the intersecting factors influencing his protagonists and the over-simplification of Taine’s categorisation of race, milieu and moment,

Whilst there is no explicit political struggle, the narrator states that at the time of Napoleon III’s December 1851 coup, ‘Goujet ‘s’occupait de politique, était républicain, sagement, au nom de la justice et du bonheur de tous’ (A, II, 475). The reader learns that Coupeau had been saved by Gouget when the former had strayed by curiosity too close to the barricades during the brief resistance to the coup. Significantly, Goujet, having led Coupeau to ‘la hauteur, rue des Poissonniers […] il avait tourné la tête regardant Paris’ concerned that ‘le peuple un jour pourrait se repentir de s’être croisé les bras’ (II, 475). Yet Coupeau’s response represents the passivity and disillusion of the Goutte-d’Or: ‘Coupeau ricanait, appelait trop bêtes les ânes qui risquaient leur peau, à la seule fin de conserver leurs vingt-cinq francs aux sacrés fainéants de la Chambre’ (A, II, 475). This passage is significant in several respects. Firstly, in Goujet’s backwards look down upon Paris occurs a separation in the narrative from any further reference to events which will parallel Gervaise’s own history. Goujet appears to carry Coupeau back to his proletarian community, as if attempting to seal themselves from the changes occurring behind them. Secondly, in Coupeau’s snigger, there is a hostile recognition that his own community do not consider themselves as possible contributors. Thirdly, Coupeau’s reference to the vingt-cinq francs reveals that all energy and thought in the Goutte-d’Or is limited to immediate needs with no expectation of change. The payment in return for compliance is consistent with the control exercised by the bourgeoisie over the proletariat depicted in *L’Assommoir*.

The few other occasions where reference to politics is made include Lantier’s hollow radical clichés, delivered to his cronies in the bar and significantly, also to his son Étienne, who, upon leaving for Lille to take on an apprenticeship he advises: ‘Souviens-toi que le producteur n’est pas un esclave, mais que quiconque n’est pas un producteur est un frelon’ (A, II, 608). Zola immediately accelerates the decline of Coupeau and Gervaise following Lantier’s hypocrisy, emphasising the reality of the life of the ‘producteur’ class.

Although there is no radical similar to Étienneof *Germinal* to point it out, capitalism bears down relentlessly upon the people: The landlord M. Marescot, who ‘avait jadis tourné le meule, le long des trottoirs […] on le disait riche aujourd’hui à plusieurs millions’ (A, II, 493) is an example of a worker who had succeeded in raising himself to the bourgeois class, a rare example of realised aspiration. Gervaise is unable to employ the exploitation which presumably secured Marescot’s fortune. Marescot had struggled, the narrator informs the reader, paraphrasing the landlord as he relates his life to the subservient concierges, ‘Mais le travail menait à tout’ (A, II, 493). Such phrases are as empty as those of Lantier to Étienne and are contradicted by all those in the neighbourhood, whose toil barely brings survival.

Just as merciless as Marescot, Gervaise’s sister-in-law and her husband, the Lorilleux, ceaselessly work at their gold, dismissive of any calls upon them from parent or sibling when it compromises their own immense self-interest. They represent a resounding contradiction of Marescot’s homily to the virtues of work, representing the platitudes of the bourgeois rentier class. Prudent workers such as Goujet and Gervaise remain vulnerable to the processes of change in capitalism. There are no successful examples of Marescot’s virtues of work. Instead the reader learns of Mlle Remanjou, paid starvation wages for her dolls, and the clockmaker who stares in hunger and envy at Gervaise’s feast. One character who provides an important example of the dispensability of the lives of the proletariat is ‘le père Bru’ who she meets, begging, like her. Gervaise exclaims, shocked for him despite herself starving: ‘Avoir travaillé cinquante ans et mendier!’ (A, II, 773). He has lost his sons in colonial wars, capitalism being seen once more to consume the proletariat. It is to le père Bru that a starving Gervaise ‘jetait des croutes […] ce pauvre vieux, qu’on laisssait crever, parce qu’il ne pouvait plus tenir un outil, était comme un chien pour elle, une bête hors de service’ (A, II, 686). It is her observations which list the excess of miseries in *L’Assommoir*, without specific accusation as to the cause. Zola depicts the proletariat of the rue Goutte-d’Or as lacking the ability to deduce or articulate the cause of their misery. There is no suggestion, as there is in the final lines of *Germinal*, of a community on the verge of a *dénouement*.

An excess of misery, eventually beyond tolerance for Gervaise, exists in the Goutte-d’Or apartment block from which noise, poverty, debauchery and greed ooze like the coloured waters of the dyers on the ground floor. The excessive smell of the washing in her *laverie* befuddles her senses rendering her unable to rebuff Coupeau’s drunken advances. Goujet and the servile Boche apart, there is not a character who remains uninfected by the hardships of the quarter – all are crushed by their environment and unremitting struggle. How the excesses of the daily life of a laundry woman and those around her in *L’Assommoir* are measured, is curiously difficult. Intertextual comparison with other parts of the cycle such as *Germinal*,highlight the difficulties. In *Germinal* there is a strong allusion to the fraternity between the miners and the bourgeois owners. Both are prey to ‘la puissance invincible des gros capitaux’ (G, III, 1464). While the inhabitants of the rue de la Goutte d’Or are aware of the bourgeoisie, no such fraternity exists in *L’Assommoir*. In this present absence, Zola, in having Gervaise employed by and employing her neighbours, reveals the complexity and elusiveness of the social divisions in process.

Zola does not offer a simplistic diagnosis for the fall of Gervaise. Her repeated small retreats from her intended courses of action are not ascribed to any hereditary flaw. If the fate of Gervaise was predominantly due to the ‘tare’this would undermine Zola’s portrayal of the oppression of a people. For the ‘tare’ to be the cause of the tragedy of Gervaise the reader would be required to accept that the countless workers who similarly struggle and fail must also be afflicted with their own inherited psychological flaw, revealing a national pathology. Certainly, Gervaise is shown to have inherited from Fine, her mother,[[528]](#footnote-528) an apparent susceptibility to alcohol and sensual comfort, as was seen in Gervaise’s decision to visit Goujet. However, it is the avalanche of economic factors that drive her, like so many others, to eventually seek refuge in drink. Gervaise and her community are consumed, expended and forgotten.

The question of the ‘destin’ of Gervaise and her class reflects the definition of the French noun as a ‘puissance qui […] fixerait de façon irrévocable le cours d’événements’.[[529]](#footnote-529) In *L’Assommoir* capitalism governs the trajectory of Gervaise’s existence. The only exception to this being the ‘point de bascule’ which occurs when she refuses Goujet’s final offer of love. Gervaise’s fate is symbolised by eating, both in the image of her eating and of her being eaten: ‘La mort devait la prendre petit à petit, morceau par morceau, en la traînant ainsi jusqu’au bout dans la sacrée existence qu’elle s’était faite’ (A, II, 796). There is a typical ambiguity in this extract which suggests some culpability on the part of Gervaise. A failure which requires her in her final days not to eat goose but ‘quelque chose de dégoûtant’ that neighbours have dared her to eat ‘pour gagner dix sous’ (A, II, 795). A few days later she is found dead, rotting beneath the stairs, ‘déjà verte’ (A, II, 796).

The image of eating and being eaten to describe the existence of those in the Goutte-d’Or reinforces capitalism’s consumption of the proletariat. In scenes book-ending the novel, the footsteps of the workers entering Paris ‘entre deux pavillons trapus de l’octroi’ create ‘un piétinement de troupeau’ (A, II, 377) as if entering the mouth of the Minotaur,[[530]](#footnote-530) and – nineteen years later – at the novel’s end, Gervaise is caught in the same herds returning from their toil: ‘le piétinement du troupeau, les bêtes de somme se traînant, éreintées! Encore une journée de finie’ (A, II, 765). This very circulation, renewed each day, evokes that of capital: ‘le renouvellement continu et rapide du capital’ as Zola expressed it.[[531]](#footnote-531) The implication in the repeating of the scenes and the use of identical imagery is that nothing has changed in the intervening eighteen years and that capitalism creates extreme volatility in the lives of individuals whilst leaving the seemingly unchanging masses to continue to shuffle into the city each day. The idea of circulation of capital may also be represented by blood, in the bodies of the worker-herd, in the proximity of the abattoir, its bloody walls revealed when it is itself dismembered, and in the generations and family connections in *L’Assommoir*.[[532]](#footnote-532) Once again, in the numbers of workers Gervaise witnesses, the reader is presented with a crowd of Coupeaus and Gervaises. As argued above, in comparing these people with a herd for which social advancement is impossible, Zola is not locating a universal ‘tare’in operation. He is suggesting a single common factor at play: capitalism.

The physical changes surrounding the rue Goutte-d’Or are a constant backdrop to the lives of its inhabitants. However, apart from Lantier’s remark that it is all a plot by the emperor to remove the workers to the provinces, no character associates the redevelopment with capitalism. As Gallois observes: ‘One of the most interesting aspects of Zola’s cycle is the manner in which abstract, human trends, such as capitalism are naturalized’.[[533]](#footnote-533) Capitalism is present in everything. Gold, the very symbol of excess and a pillar of capitalism, is traceable not only through the material the Lorilleux weave into jewellery chains ‘ce métal noirâtre, villain comme du fer!’ (A, II, 426) but in the eau de vie of the still and the repeated reference to the yellow glint in eyes full of malice and the irony of ‘Goutte-d’Or’ as the name of the neighbourhood. Nana will be similarly titled the *mouche d’or* in the eponymous novel, carrying with her from *L’Assommoir* the association of gold with corruption and exploitation.

Gervaise becomes conscious of the Paris of the immediate vicinity of her neighbourhood, serving to reveal her misery and perhaps a vaguely comprehended cause. She is overwhelmed when, in the closing pages, she enters the boulevard amongst the workers rushing home: ‘Oui c’était trop grand, c’était trop beau, sa tête tournait et ses jambes s’en allaient, sous ce pan démesuré de ciel gris, tendu au-dessus d’un si vaste espace’ (A, II, 765). Zola leaves ambiguous whether it is her hunger or the scale of what she beholds which causes her to swoon. This ambiguity confuses both the capitalist cause and its result. The similarity with the opening scene of *Germinal* is striking in which the old miner Bonnemmort responds to Étienne’s question as to who actually controls the mine with ‘A des gens. Et de la main, il désignait dans l’ombre un point vague, un lieu ignoré et reculé, peuplé de ces gens pour qui les Maheu tapaient à la veine depuis plus d’un siècle’ (G, III, 1141). Earlier, Gervaise is similarly confounded by the scale of the redevelopment of Paris: ‘La belle bâtisse du boulevard Ornano la mettait hors des gonds. Des bâtisses pareilles, c’était pour des catins comme Nana’ (A, II, 737). Despite the fact that ‘on voyait une immense éclaircie, un coup de soleil et d’air libre’ she sees revealed her own failure, one which she fails to attribute to anyone but herself: ‘son ennui venait de ce que, précisement, le quartier s’embellissait à l’heure où elle-même tournait à ruine. On n’aime pas, quand on est dans la crotte, recevoir un rayon en plein à la tête’ (A, II, 737). Capitalism, symbolised and fuelled by Haussmann’s re-building of Paris, is gathering pace and revealing itself to Gervaise, auguring her doom and that of her neighbourhood, to the gain of the bourgeoisie.

However, in Gervaise joining the crowd of workers there is a possible allusion to her being briefly part of a future movement, one in scale with the size of the crowd and skies of the boulevard. Amongst the crowd, Gervaise is now part of a class which has temporarily reversed the isolation of the proletariat and has in turn isolated the bourgeoisie:

A cette heure, les dames en chapeau, les messieurs bien mis habitant les maisons neuves, étaient noyés au milieu du peuple, des processions d’hommes et des femmes encore blêmes de l’air vicié des ateliers […] cassés en deux de fatigue et galopés par la faim (A, II, 765).

With an ambiguity similar to that of the race of germinating miners in the closing lines of *Germinal*, Zola undermines the possibility of change for Gervaise and her fellow workers. The new houses are inhabited by the bourgeoisie who will in due course further marginalise the proletariat. As Haussmannization progresses, they will soon be able to leave their houses and no longer be drowned in a proletarian crowd.

## MARX, DARWIN AND PROGRESS THROUGH EXCESS

A neighbourhood in which survival is the dominant ambition invokes Darwin’s theory of evolution. Darwinism and socialism both address the inter-play of excessive conditions and the processes of change.[[534]](#footnote-534) Engels states that the proletariat’s freeing itself from the exploiting and ruling class – the bourgeoisie – will emancipate society at large and that this will ‘do for history what Darwin’s theory has done for biology’.[[535]](#footnote-535) This remark is understood to recognize that the constant struggle and revolution relating to humankind is the same as that in nature. Marx, at first welcoming the implied atheism and ideas of progress contained in Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species*, argued that its ‘bourgeois’ author had ‘transformed the struggle for existence in English laissez-faire capitalism, into the natural world. Darwinists naturally saw this as a reason ‘for human society never to emancipate itself from its bestiality’.[[536]](#footnote-536) As noted in references to *L’Argent*, the character Sigismond, proclaims some of the tenets of Marxism, including communism, to be the natural progression of capitalism via collectivism: ‘toute la marche de l’évolution est là. Reste à l’exécuter en fait’.[[537]](#footnote-537) However, Sigismond recognizes the aspiration of those such as Gervaise – and its importance to the evolution of society: ‘l’état social actuel a dû sa prospérité séculaire au principe individualiste, que l’émulation, l’intérêt personnel rend d’une fécondité de production sans cesse renouvelée’.[[538]](#footnote-538) A fruitfulness which, Sigismond concedes in anguish, collectivism will not match.

Marx assumes that Darwinism condemns Gervaise and her class to permanently suffer and fail, as slaves of the bourgeois class[[539]](#footnote-539) under the excesses heaped upon them. This analysis is rejected in part by Zola in his depiction of the impossibility of success for Gervaise in face of excessive odds and the implied necessity of change. However, Zola’s rejection is unconvincing as it contradicts his assertion as to the continuation of the novel beyond the final pages. He will similarly contradict himself in *Germinal* in his closing symbolism of hope represented by the germination of ‘une armée noire’ (G, III, 1591) in failing to suggest a single reason why they will succeed in overcoming the excessive obstacles of their own existence where their predecessors have failed.

However, Marx also asserts that ‘the modern bourgeoisie is itself the product of a long course of development of a series of revolutions in the modes of production and exchange’.[[540]](#footnote-540) Marx adds, ‘the bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production […] and with them *the whole relations of society*’.[[541]](#footnote-541)

The inability of Gervaise (and implicitly her class) to alter their situation is introduced from the opening lines of *L’Assommoir*.Zola has Gervaise anxiously viewing her constricted world from her lodgings. Her position in the rue de la Goutte-d’Or places Gervaise equidistant from Haussmann’s renewal at one end of the street and the abattoir at the other. The notion of the ‘point de bascule’ and the ability of change to both progress and regress, with Gervaise balancing between these points, elucidates the reversals of Gervaise throughout the novel, not only in her losing her business but in refusing Goujet’s declarations of love. The hopeless trajectory of Gervaise, whilst appearing overwhelmingly determined by the combination of factors that undermine her, is not inherited by her children, who will continue their own struggles for survival in subsequent novels. The cyclical pattern of capitalism’s ability to re-form following its boom and bust lifecycle of sequences of excess is reflected in the narrative of the subsequent *Rougon-Macquart* cycle but it is one from which Gervaise and her class are excluded.

In the cycle of physical decomposition and death experienced by her neighbourhood, Gervaise, who both eats and becomes *ordure* – itself a product of excess– in being found decomposing in the final scene appears to fade from existence, having barely understood or articulated the determining forces that had brought about her agonies. In contrast her children will inhabit a much wider society of excess and failure than can be retained within the walls of the Goutte-d’Or. Capitalism has caused the family to evolve in a few years far beyond Gervaise’s horizons, the tipping point elucidating the energy, creativity and destructiveness of her progeny, contradicting the apparent definitiveness of her end beneath the stairwell.

## CONCLUSION

The excessive hardships endured by Gervaise and her neighbours are portrayed as overwhelming, with capitalism bludgeoning all before it. Any accusation that these ills are simply due to the ‘tare’or the idleness of her class is seen to be unsustainable. The word excess suggests waste, intemperance and a going beyond a limit, one which represents the norm. Excess also suggests imbalance and consequence. There is an implication of barely supressed pressure, symbolised in the still in L’Assommoir. However, whether change occurs or not is seen in the operation of ‘points de bascule’ where the possibility of forward or backward movement may contradict expectations, as in Gervaise’s repeated rejection of Goujet.

This chapter has recognized how rapid capitalist change permeates *L’Assommoir* and, contrary to the accusation of Barbusse, is inextricably linked to the ills besieging the Goutte-d’Or. Whether Zola forecasts any consequences issuing from these excesses is as ambiguous as the concluding pages of *Germinal*. To summarise the work as scientific observation of the present without regard to the future also appears unfounded given Zola’s loose observation of the rules of naturalism. Such a contention ignores the potential energy for radical change in the Goutte d’Or and neighbouring streets, represented by the solidarity shown by Gervaise towards her neighbours. That this might translate into change is also hinted at by the references to the fatalism of Goujet and Coupeau towards the bourgeoisie’s domination of politics, however it is a fatalism that may transform as capitalism itself transforms. The increasing complexity of the capitalism that assails the rue de la Goutte-d’Or and the occurrence of correspondingly uncertain, indefinable factors, prompting changes beneficial to the proletariat – rather than any radicalisation of the citizens of the Goutte-d’Or – are the driving forces that may determine the nature and duration of capitalist excess.

The children of Gervaise will go on to struggle in a society far removed from the narrow streets of the Goutte-d’Or. Zola thereby suggests multiple components that will undermine the apparently definitive conclusion to *L’Assommoir*. Étienne will take up an openly political struggle in *Germinal*. Likewise, Nana will strike at the heart of Parisian aristocratic excess personifying, in the putrefaction of her deathbed, that social corruption upon which she had fed yet which, as with Gervaise, ultimately consumes her. Both powerfully illustrate the Darwinian process of contingent, diverging components, whilst fulfilling Zola’s opinion of the novel; that it may exceed the pages which contain it. Capitalism is not a natural phenomenon, it is made by people[[542]](#footnote-542)and by inference can be dismantled or its damage limited by them. Zola acknowledges that fiction, even naturalism, is incapable of embracing every contributor to change and refuses to depart from this in offering an unrealistic conclusive message – ‘Je ne suis qu’un greffier qui me defends de conclure’.[[543]](#footnote-543)

In the following chapter, this thesis addresses the second work of the final pairing depicting capitalist excess: Houellebecq’s *La Carte et le territoire*. In this novel, Houellebecq, like Zola, leaves ambiguous the consequences that may flow from the excesses he presents. In *L’Assommoir*, as in *Germinal*,the potential for revolution in response to the miseries of the proletariat may or may not be realised. In *La Carte*,the colonisation of west European industrial sites by nature in the final page may also symbolise the terminal state of neoliberal France, or it may simply confirm the re-founding of the French economy on rural industry and local produce. Capitalism’s capacity to adapt and survive is re-affirmed. While Houellebecq confronts the art market and the appropriation of writers and artists in late capitalism and its impact upon their representation of reality, he depicts social upheaval of equal significance to that described by Zola. Ironically, this change includes a reversal of the marginalisation of the proletariat in Paris in *L’Assommoir*,in representing middle-class flight from Paris to the provinces.

# CHAPTER SEVEN *LA CARTE ET LE TERRITOIRE*: PROJECTING LATE CAPITALISM’S EXCESSES

## INTRODUCTION

The theory proposed in this thesis anticipates the qualities of excess, its unforeseeable trajectory, the multiplicity of factors producing it and the elusiveness of the language applied to its representation. *La Carte* addresses the challenge of describing excess in late capitalist society from within. It does so by Houellebecq presenting two characters existing within the art and literature markets: an artist who achieves global fame and a writer character[[544]](#footnote-544) based upon Houellebecq. In this unusual context, the representation of change is relevant in locating the ability of art or literature to fully reflect all aspects of human development including excess, whilst responding to a market in which the definition of artist and business leader are sometimes blurred. In creating a character named Michel Houellebecq, Houellebecq may not simply be bating the media and their excessive behaviour, but may also be demonstrating the problematic apprehension of ‘those old notions of art’s ineffability, touched more with mysticism than analysis’,[[545]](#footnote-545) suggesting that such strategies may be read as artistic gestures defying media categorization. Such ekphrasis reveals the complex layering of representation that occurs throughout *La Carte*.

Houellebecq’s Goncourt prize-winning fifth novel represents the perceived impact of neoliberalism on contemporary France and projects into a mid-twenty-first century future. The rapid evolution of capitalism and the adjustment of France to a narrow but sufficient economy based upon tourism and regional food suggests the unforeseeability of capitalism. Change is driven by tourists and immigrants from fast developing economies prompting or responding to a marketing of French regional food, drink and wider culture as the traditional industries disappeared. A revitalisation of provincial towns and villages occurs. The critical theory posited in this thesis will be shown to assist in appreciating the extent to which the writer apprehends and represents the uncertain and indefinable nature of the components of this evolution.

Preceded by a plot summary and literature review, the argument in this chapter will commence with the first section addressing the significance of the inability of the artist protagonist (and implicitly that of the writer) to escape inscription in the late capitalist market. Jed participates in that market and attempts to record what he sees. This section also explores how the novel might be considered in relation to the possible meanings of the phrase Jed uses: ‘*rendre compte du monde*’ (CT, 420) [[546]](#footnote-546) a phrase which may translate as ‘to report’, ‘to justify’, or ‘to explain’. *La Carte* foregrounds the problematic of a writer commenting upon a market in which they participate, one subject to numerous intersecting, indefinable factors, which must frustrate any definitive account.

The chapter will then review the significance of the contrast between Jed’s objective, descriptive early phase and his highly symbolic late art, and the extent to which both phases recognise that late capitalism is too rooted in society to be challenged effectively. This section will also address whether Jed is the embodiment of the ‘pas de côté’[[547]](#footnote-547) Houellebecq posits in *Interventions*,in having supposedly[[548]](#footnote-548) removed himself from neoliberal society and indeed whether the 1998 concept of such an act has less relevance in 2010 late capitalism, the evolution and expansion of which having met with no effective opposition. The third section addresses the neoliberal excesses depicted in *La Carte* and their impact upon the creative process. The final part considers the responses of both Jed and Michel Houellebecq to capitalist excess and what this might suggest regarding the relationship of art and writing to late capitalism.

‘UNE CARTE N’EST PAS LE TERRITOIRE (LES MOTS *NE SONT PAS* LES CHOSES QU’ILS REPRÉSENTENT)’[[549]](#footnote-549)

The first two pages of *La Carte* establish Houellebecq’s themes: the bringing into question of the representation of late capitalism by artists and writers working in a market distinguished by excess and the degree to which they acknowledge and negotiate their co-implication. This is presented in the description in the opening lines of what appears to be a tense meeting between two businessmen. Entitled ‘Damien Hirst et Jeff Koons se partageant le marché de l’art (CT, 208), the subjects, both dressed in black suits, resemble businessmen rather than artists. They meet in a luxury hotel in Qatar or Dubai – the implication being that it does not matter which – both places synonymous with the excesses of global wealth. Koons’ forehead is gleaming, presumably perspiring. The reader then discovers that this a painting on which Jed is working. The shining forehead is probably wet paint.

Jed lives alone, having left the family home in a once soundly bourgeois Raincy, now effectively a ‘banlieue’. Jed’s mother commits suicide whilst Jed is still a child. He attends the national college of fine art in Paris, at which he meets Geneviève, a Madagascan fellow art student, who helps fund her own studies via prostitution and with whom he claims a relationship of several years. Jed embarks upon a portfolio entitled ‘Trois cents photos de quincaillerie’ (CT, 50) believing that as the history of humanity is associated with its mastery of metals this would progress his desire ‘de donner une description objective du monde’ (CT, 510. Geneviève leaves him for a client offering better financial prospects.

Jed becomes a photographer for trade magazines producing technically-perfect shots whilst also dedicating himself to what he describes as an objective description of the world, albeit one limited to manufactured items.[[550]](#footnote-550) It is his journey to theCreuse for his paternal grandmother’s funeral and his purchase of a Michelin map of the area at a service station which inspires Jed’s next project: the juxtaposition of aerial photographs of France with the corresponding Michelin maps. Engrossed in this project he becomes reclusive, venturing only from necessity as far as the local hypermarket. At an exhibition featuring an example of his juxtaposition of Michelin maps and his photographs, Jed meets Olga, a beautiful Russian working in the Michelin marketing department of this iconic French business, now based in Switzerland. Her assignment is to re-target Michelin’s hotels and French lifestyle businesses to the new Chinese, Russian and Indian markets. Olga and Jed become lovers. Jed joins her at various exhibitions, acquiring the correct behaviours for such a *milieu*.

Jed’s exhibition, entitled ‘LA CARTE EST PLUS INTÉRESSANTE QUE LE TERRITOIRE’ propels Jed to fame. Olga and Jed embark on a tour of luxury hotels in rural France. During one weekend Olga announces that she will be returning to Russia to take up a more senior post to further exploit the French market for Michelin.[[551]](#footnote-551) Olga’s departure triggers an immediate abandonment of his work on Michelin maps. Jed begins to paint people representing various occupations, particularly those which he considers likely to disappear. Jed also seeks to depict those who had organised their lives around their work, such as his father delivering a speech to his staff and Bill Gates and Steve Jobs discussing the future of information-technology. Jed requests Michel Houellebecq to write his exhibition catalogue and travels to Ireland to meet him. The character Michel Houellebecq appears to be an amalgam of the characteristics associated with the writer’s media image: isolated yet media aware, a heavy-drinking misanthrope, living as a tax exile in Ireland before returning to France, friend of Frédéric Beigbeder, chain smoking, hard drinking, taking sex holidays in Thailand, wearing his beloved Camel Legend parka, he acquires a pet dog and is constantly referred to as the writer of several of Houellebecq’s novels and collections of poetry.

Jed’s portraits have propelled him to even greater fame with his works selling for millions of Euros in a global marketplace. Jed appears unmoved by the values. After an absence of ten years, Jed joins a visiting Olga at a New Year’s Eve party, taking place in Jean-Pierre Pernaut’s lavish Paris residence. Pernaut is a television host,[[552]](#footnote-552) and recently a writer specialising in products of the *terroir* and now anchorman on Michelin’s television channel. Jed’s nausea and vomiting at the end of the event evokes his similar reaction to the unfinished painting of Hirst-Koons, both the party and painting encapsulating neoliberal excess, and its failure. He spends the night with Olga, too drunk for sex, eventually leaving as she sleeps.

Following his final visit to Michel Houellebecq during which Jed takes from their conversations on art the direction he desired, the two are not to meet again, for the third section of the novel opens shortly after the discovery of Michel Houellebecq’s corpse. The murder repeats the motif of excess in its extreme and careful brutality. Michel Houellebecq has been decapitated along with his dog and dissected into strips arranged around the room. The investigation of the murder is led by Inspector Jasselin who, despite his infertility, is happily married to Hélène, a disillusioned professor of economics. During a visit to the scene of the crime Jed reveals to Jasselin that the portrait of Michel Houellebecq is missing. Its huge value confirms Jasselin in his opinion that all crime is provoked by sex or money.[[553]](#footnote-553)

Jasselin fails to trace Michel Houellebecq’s murderer and retires from the police to his parents’ house in Brittany. The murder is only solved when a traffic offence leads to the search of murdered surgeon Adolphe Petisaud’s premises. The police discover his obsession with death in the extreme perversion of displays of body parts, many joined and altered to grotesque effect, as well as a huge central display, equipped with mechanisms to release insects to prey upon each other, in a manner symbolic of late capitalist corporate behaviour. Petisaud is a plastic surgeon, an industry epitomising late capitalist excess and the imbrication of the latter with murder and perversion is clear. The search also reveals the stolen portrait of Michel Houellebecq.

At what will transpire to be their final Christmas reunion,[[554]](#footnote-554) Jed and his father discuss the latter’s inability to pursue his own artistic and architectural ambitions and his acquiescence to the functional demands of the market. Jed’s father, who has been suffering from cancer, leaves for a euthanasia clinic in Zurich without informing his son. Jed realises and follows, discovering he is too late and, distressed at the business-like attitude of the clinic staff, assaults the female manager.

Jed retires to his grand-parent’s house in the Creuse, his wealth allowing him to accumulate and fence off the surrounding land. The final pages of the novel relate Jed’s reclusive later years. Upon venturing for the first time in a decade to the neighbouring villages, he discovers a changed France. The villages have grown, are pristinely maintained, swollen by people who have left the cities, wealthy foreigners from the BRIC nations and the French who serve them. Although superficially in keeping with local traditions, the villages are full of internet cafes and ‘art nouveau’ bistros, a radical alteration of deepest France. In response to such excessive, rapid change, almost all the original inhabitants have departed. Late capitalism, after undergoing successive crises has evolved to produce a France whose economy is devoted to selling holidays in its country hotels, perfumes and *rillettes*.

In the only interview Jed gives in his old age, he repeatedly states over the space of a whole page that ‘Je veux simplement *rendre compte du monde*’.[[555]](#footnote-555) Jed has moved from the putative objectivity that he had previously sought to one of subjectivity, in which he appears to anticipate the disappearance of humanity. His final works also centre upon representations of those who had accompanied him during his life, whose photographic images are left to disintegrate in the elements and presumably will eventually be smothered by layers of plants. Inspired by a journey through industrial Germany thirty years previously, in which he had seen the forests encroach upon the ruins of steel furnaces, Jed makes films on the transience of humanity’s endeavours, manifested in industry and implicitly consumer society. Acid-attacked Playmobil figures in model cityscapes are slowly engulfed by vegetation, leaving a universal calm.

## FICTION IS FICTION NO MATTER HOW REALISTICALLY IT IS WRITTEN[[556]](#footnote-556)

Following publication, *La Carte* provoked far less scandal than Houellebecq’s *Les Particules*,[[557]](#footnote-557) *Plateforme*[[558]](#footnote-558) and *La Possibilité d’une île*.This has led critics such as Agathe Novak-Lechevalier to consider[[559]](#footnote-559) whether Houellebecq had written *La Carte* for the Goncourt committee and had sought to manage his media persona, adopting as she expresses it a ‘réalisme balzacien’, ‘ni bordel, ni sexe cru’.[[560]](#footnote-560) Novak-Lechevalier rejects this, pointing out that Houellebecq is ostentatiously, perhaps excessively, present – as a character.[[561]](#footnote-561)

Themes addressed in Houellebecq’s previous novels recur in *La Carte*: globalization, the alienation of the individual, the role of the novelist in a neoliberal economy, the impact of that system upon France and the ability of literature to both provoke debate by writing *at* (against) the excesses of late capitalism, including the dual sexual and material economies. Houellebecq’s prominence as the leading contemporary novelist is reflected in *France Since the 1970s: History, Politics, Memory in an Age of uncertainty*,[[562]](#footnote-562) which makes only one reference to a novelist, Houellebecq, on page one of its introduction. Whilst not their stated purpose, this collection of essays helps locate *La Carte* in a France faced with a pervading sense of the excesses to which late capitalism had subjected it, along with that of uncertainty. David Harvey[[563]](#footnote-563) and Sherry B. Ortner[[564]](#footnote-564) provide other examples of neoliberal exceess in addition to those included in *La Carte*.[[565]](#footnote-565)

The foregrounding of art and photography in *La Carte* reflects Houellebecq’s own interest in the visual arts, witnessed in his photography in *Lanzarote*[[566]](#footnote-566) and his exhibition at the Palais de Tokyo in 2016.[[567]](#footnote-567) Morrey emphasizes the extension of neoliberalism to all aspects of an individual, but does not engage with the limitations or possibilities of fiction, a theme which Houellebecq continues from previous novels.[[568]](#footnote-568) Novak-Lechevalier[[569]](#footnote-569) explores the title of *La Carte* and argues how, in the map’s representation of the landscape, Houellebecq is commenting upon a writer’s relationship with the reality they are attempting to represent. Novak-Lechevalier refers here not simply to Houellebecq’s questioning of the role of fiction but to its ability to represent, apparently suggesting that this is enhanced via the confusion of fiction and reality: ‘C’est aussi la beauté de *La Carte et le territoire*, [sic] en dissolvant les seuils et les frontières de la fiction…Le roman semble avoir le pouvoir de distordre la matérialité de la page’.[[570]](#footnote-570) Novak-Lechevalier refers to the postmodern aesthetic that neither writer of fiction nor artist can represent all factors determining an outcome, just as Jed cannot photograph every man-made object. Houellebecq will be argued to appear to acknowledge this in *La Carte*.

Ruth Cruickshank[[571]](#footnote-571) identifies Houellebecq’s use of food in *La Carte*, its marketing, conflict, waste and decomposition as symbolic of excess in a globalized France. The challenge to fiction from a society based upon the production, marketing and consumption of the immaterial, is also argued by Cruickshank. Her comparison of Baudelaire’s’ Une Charogne’[[572]](#footnote-572)with that of the description of the murder scene of Michel Houellebecq draws out, with particular relevance to the present chapter ‘a repelling and creative uncertainty, creating from remainders new ever-changing traces, whatever the market conditions.’[[573]](#footnote-573) Although predating *La Carte*, Cruickshank’s *Fin de millénaire French Fiction* sets out the crisis discourses that assailed French intellectuals in the 1990s and the trope of the turning point. Cruickshank presents the systemic status of late capitalism, its parallel material and sexual economies and the failure of intellectuals to challenge its dominance and exploitation of crisis. The same issues of identity, globalization, culture, literature and an ineffective intellectual discourse, whilst dealt with differently,[[574]](#footnote-574) recur in *La Carte.* This continuation confirms Cruickshank’s reference to the ‘cultural dominant’ being ‘putative postmodern aesthetics of crisis without end’.[[575]](#footnote-575) Houellebecq may be argued both to depart from and re-enforce such an aesthetic in his tracing the fate of a France of the *Trente Glorieuses* to one which has evolved beyond the late capitalist model, whilst stopping short of delivering a definitive conclusion. In doing so he anticipates the successive intervention of unforseeable factors, of which excess is a part, preventing the anticipation of outcomes.

Cruickshank suggests that appropriation of cultural creation by the marketplace is so pervasive that ‘the extent to which any form of cultural production, and prose fiction in particular can escape the double bind of recuperation and commodification is recurrently called into question.’[[576]](#footnote-576) This subject is addressed by Jed and Michel Houellebecq in their conversations. Michel Houellebecq criticises the media commodification of his image. Cruickshank proposes that Houellebecq has fallen into the double bind faced by every critical analysis, the risk of becoming totalizing in its own right and of being recuperated by the system from which it cannot maintain a critical distance. The blurring of reality and fiction, the appropriation of the artist by late capitalism and its implicit part in preventing their recording the world, suggest a self-reflexive acknowledment of the recuperation of *La Carte* itself.

Focusing upon *La Carte et le territoire*, Bernard Maris[[577]](#footnote-577) appraises Houellebecq as the most radical of modern French novelists with regards to the relationship of France and the excesses of neoliberalism. Maris discusses Houellebecq’s ability to express ‘sous la forme délicieuse d’un roman ou d’un poème’,[[578]](#footnote-578) the indigestible theories that economists feed us. Maris references the late capitalist excesses exposed by Houellebecq, playfully admitting that Houellebecq is not an economist as Maris’ own title implies. He suggests that Houellebecq also fails to discuss the French economy, asserting that Houellebecq holds economics to have no scientific basis and that its so-called theories simply dress the suffering in the application of the law of supply and demand to the market of goods, work and sex.[[579]](#footnote-579) Maris concludes from *La Carte*, that the ‘morbidité du capitalisme’[[580]](#footnote-580) has condemned humanity to a self-destruction similar to that depicted in *Les Particules* and *La Possibilité*.

Sweeney[[581]](#footnote-581) centres upon the impact of neoliberalism as revealed in *Extension* and *Les Particules* and, whilst not making reference to *La Carte*,her argument may be extended to it, particularly in respect of late capitalist excess. Sweeney also explores the colonisation of ‘affective spaces’ by late capitalism as revealed in *Extension*.[[582]](#footnote-582) Sweeney summarises the components of post-Fordism and the de-regulation which would develop to produce the globalization manifested in the twenty-first century France of *La Carte*. The de-industrialization of France and its replacement by immaterial or ‘networked exchanges of knowledge and information’,[[583]](#footnote-583) is the new economic reality. Sweeney points out the irony that under late capitalism, those, such as Olga in *La Carte*, who administer and regulate the economy, are now in turn regulated byan economy that is:

aimed not only at the exploitation of its subjects as a workforce but on the increasingly lucrative regulation of their ways of life, life dynamics and personal and affective interactions, emotions, consumer habits and satisfaction…producing contexts of interpretation and assessment, forms of identification and membership, interpersonal behaviour and human interaction – in other words, its mission is essentially the production of sociability itself.[[584]](#footnote-584)

Reference to the critical framework in this thesis suggests that such an economy containing so many abstract qualities that neoliberalism aspires to regulate, re-emphasises the impossibility of attempting to dictate innumerable, unmanageable aspects of life. Such absence of direction in both the lack of rationale in late capitalist economics and its global impact is another aspect of the excesses of neoliberalism.

## “OUBLIONS ROBBE-GRILLET” – REPRESENTING EXCESS

Late capitalist excess is manifested in *La Carte* in the prices Jed’s works fetch on the global art market whilst homeless gather in the lobby of his apartment block; the hypermarkets -those cathedrals to excess and waste (that Jed loves); the Ryanair map of a world distorted to reflect its markets; the fetishization of expensive food; the luxury hotels; the industrial efficiency of the Swiss euthanasia clinic; the motive for and manner of Michel Houellebecq’s murder; the marketing of water; Pernaut’s party and the worthlessness of Geniève’s art. Excess is also manifested in the degree to which neoliberalism has eroded the possibility of one element of possible resistance: ‘l’amour, l’amour réciproque du couple qui irradie les murs d’une certain chaleur se transmet aux futurs occupants pour leur apporter la paix de l’âme’’ (CT, 59) as Jed notes upon entering his grandparent’s former home, a couple who had escaped the effects of late capitalism and the excesses of that system.[[585]](#footnote-585)

Twelve years before *La Carte*, Houellebecq took the analogy of contemporary art as an expression of late capitalism, declaring that ‘l’art contemporain me déprime’ yet nonetheless provides a ‘témoinage porté sur l’époque [...] d’une précision éprouvante’ (I, 84). He continues with a description of modern art containing similarities to the murder of Michel Houellebecq in *La Carte*: ‘J’ai rêvé de sacs poubelle débordant de filtres à café, d’épluchures, de viandes en sauce. J’ai pensé à l’art comme épluchage, aux bouts de chair qui restent collés aux épluchures’ (I, 84). These items of excess and of superfluity presage the shreds of the murdered Michel Houellebecq’s flesh, stuck to various surfaces, mixed with the remains of his pet dog. In this possible intertextual reference, Houellebecq may suggest that writers of fiction and their pets also belong in the bin sacks. The occurrence of similar dream images in *Les Particules* (PE, 16)is noted by Cruickshank, who suggests that such images suggest not only the waste associated with late capitalism but develop Houellebecq’s metaphor of modern society ‘comme supermarché et dérision’, with literature ‘uniquely able to counter postmodern irony: ‘absorber et digérer des quantités illimités de dérision et d’humour’.[[586]](#footnote-586)

During their first meeting, Jed and Michel Houellebecq discuss a radiator in the context of Robbe Grillet’s realist descriptions. The writer animatedly describes how he would develop the history of the cast iron composing the radiator, the globalization which has seen the industry disappear in France, the scandalous fitting of such an old radiator and its subsequent explosion. They agree that fictional representation makes no claim to objectivity but to that of the artist’s compulsion to represent. Michel Houellebecq advises Jed: ‘On ne décide jamais soi-même de l’écriture d’un livre […] c’était comme un bloc de béton qui se decide à prendre, et les possibilités de l’auteur se limitaient au fait d’être là’ (CT, 254). This quotation suggests that the slavish representation of reality, previously pursued by Jed, is not the role of the artist or writer. The role is one of responding to reality, when compelled to do so.

Jed’s Damascene moment occurs in Shannon airport, on his way to see Michel Houellebecq for the first time. In a corridor at the airport Jed views the photographs of celebrity passengers. However, John F Kennedy is ‘immortalisé […] bel et bien d’un *tableau*’(CT, 135)[[587]](#footnote-587) and despite the Shannon painting being described by the narrator as ‘une croûte’[[588]](#footnote-588) Jed concludes, without attempting any justification, that he must paint to attain ‘une sorte de vérité humaine et symbolique’ (CT, 136). This is a truth which is never defined by Jed but is one which, in the case of Kennedy’s portrait, had seemingly allowed the artist to smooth away Kennedy’s wrinkles and sagging face, creating a mediatised representation, immediately undermining mimesis as truth.

In his final meeting with Jed, the fictional Michel Houellebecq declares he has rejected ‘le *monde comme narration –* le monde des romans et des films, le monde de la musique aussi. Je ne m’intéresse plus qu’au *monde comme juxtaposition* – celui de la poésie, de la peinture’ (CT, 258-9).[[589]](#footnote-589) He re-affirms this later, as Jed parts, stating that ‘Je n’ai plus l’envie ni l’habitude de conclure’ (CT, 267). His adoption of juxtaposition, of presenting without commentary, suggests that this, rather than a narrative which is built from the writer’s selection from limitless contingencies, is more fitting to encapsulate the world in which he lives. Houellebecq develops this announcement in having his fictional namesake immediately follow it with an invitation to Jed to share in a ‘pot-au-feu’(CT, 259) a traditional dish which follows no formal recipe and is produced over a lengthy period and composed of many ingredients. Poetry and art offer fragmentary records of life, ephemeral perceptions. Jed’s transition from objective description and its implicit linearity, its beginning middle and end, is replaced by the juxtaposition of events of varying degrees of interconnection, producing unforeseen impacts without seeking to make sense or provide a conclusion.

Recalling the concern of the narrator in *Extension*, Jed, now a painter, leaves Michel Houellebecq for the last time and questioning the possibility of representing contemporary life:

Il se demanda fugitivement ce qui l’avait conduit à se lancer dans une représentation artistique du monde, ou même à penser qu’une représentation artistique du monde était possible, le monde était tout sauf un sujet d’émotion artistique, le monde se présentait absolument comme un dispositif rationnel, dénué de magie comme d’intérêt particulier (CT, 268).

The above apparent confirmation of the objectivity Jed should bring to his art supposedly confirms the ‘synthèse’ (CT, 252) that he had sought from Michel Houellebecq. However, neither of them make the meaning of ‘synthèse’ explicit. It is also contradicted, firstly by the earlier conversation of Jed and Michel Houellebecq rejecting Robbe Grillet’s literary theory and secondly, by Jed’s later work, which is highly subjective. Significantly, upon leaving Michel Houellebecq, and after expressing his gratitude for the writer’s assistance, Jed switches on the car radio for traffic news ‘qui se limitait à délivrer des informations concrètes’ only to learn that congestion ‘se poursuivraient *probablement* jusqu’à Paris’ (CT, 268).[[590]](#footnote-590) With this immediate and humorous confirmation of the impossibility of definitive representations of reality, Jed embarks upon the final, abstract phase of his career.

This layering is evident in Jed’s Michelin map work. The title of Jed’s Michelin exhibition invites the fictional visitor to compare the map and aerial photograph, suggesting that a map is trustworthy and informative, merely reproducing and codifying a landscape and providing interest. However, maps and the boundaries they represent are artificial restraints upon the natural, a manifestation of excess in its attempt to control an ever changing world, one which is incapable of being captured on a map just as literature fails to capture every component and contingency of reality. Houellebecq implies that the portrayal of the landscape and the ongoing processes of change in it are similar to the attempts of fiction to represent reality. The map and the photographs have attempted to capture only a single instant of a constantly changing phenomenon, which has already evolved beyond the artist’s image, one later confirmed in the relentless arborial re-colonisation of industrial wasteland in Germany, related in the closing lines of the novel.

In an example of an interpretation of reality through mapping - on this occasion with a distinctly late capitalist perspective - a Ryanair map of the world captures Jed’s attention as he waits at Shannon airport. The map subverts Jed’s suggestion in his exhibition title as to the objectivity and impartiality of the map, for this map is far from objective. It reflects market forces, giving only the workplaces of Polish immigrants and the holiday destinations of the Irish. Excess is represented in capitalism’s subverting the scientific representation of the world, distorting reality:

Ainsi, le libéralisme redessinait la géographie du monde en function des attentes de la clientele […] À la surface plane, isométrique de la carte du monde se substituait une topographie anormale où Shannon était plus proche de Katowice que de Bruxelles, de Fuerteventura que de Madrid (CT, 152).

The implicit reference to the ability of literature to similarly adjust reality when creating a narrative is consistent with Houellebecq’s suggestion in *La Carte* that language cannot represent reality, being subject to multiple agents and components. Houellebecq re-affirms in the Shannon map the unreliability of representational practice, especially in the context of the excesses of late capitalism, in which he is a participant.

On leaving Olga for the last time Jed believes he knows what he must do to enable his desire to realise objective representation:

il se rendit compte qu’il allait maintenant quitter ce monde dont il n’avait jamais véritablement fait partie, ses rapports humains déjà peu nombreux allaient un par un s’assécher et se tarir, il serait dans la vie comme il était à présent dans l’habitacle à la finition parfaite de son Audi Allroad A6, paisible et sans joie, définitivement neutre (CT, 269).

His removal is not linked to a definitive change in his approach to representing the world. He establishes a rural estate that he creates around his grandparent’s former home by purchasing neighbouring properties. Jed cannot escape the excesses of neoliberalism in his Audi and will emerge eventually from his security-fenced land and be witness to and be affected by a changing France and its continuing manifestations of excess. His own attachment to the excesses of late capitalism is revealed in his estate road giving him convenient access to his local hypermarket in Limoges where, in the quiet of early morning shopping, he obtains ‘une assez bonne approximation du bonheur’ (CT, 410). In Houellebecq’s novels, all are subject to the vagaries of a plural in-process phenomenon of half-understood change and consequences, all are influenced by its intersecting contingencies, including those resulting from the excessive influence of the market. The artist and writer are implicitly part of the same economic system they seek to describe and any objectivity is inevitably compromised.

Jed attempts to challenge the market’s appropriation of artistic creativity. He responds physically to the excessive value and implicit market manipulation represented in his painting of Koons and Hirst. Maris ascribes Jed’s vomiting in reaction to this unfinished painting to the impossibility of representing them ‘comme si l’art était une substance aveuglante, impossible à regarder’.[[591]](#footnote-591) However, his reaction is also in response to the fact that Hirst and Koons represent the epitome of excess. Maris sees Jed’s status as artist to render him ‘hors territoire, hors de la loi de l’économie, qui ne peut être cartographié comme les autres, un *extraterrestre* en quelque sorte: l’artiste’.[[592]](#footnote-592) This allusion to alien life by Maris is supported in *La Carte* with respect to Jed’s own excessive behaviour which appears to explicitly set him aside from humanity. This is evidenced when he is asked by the writer Beigbeder whether he realises he is with one of the five most beautiful women in Paris. Jed is silent, reflecting ‘Que répondre, en générale, aux interrogations humaines?’ (CT, 75). A similar event occurs when Jed fails to recall the image of any of his former fellow art students and he wonders ‘s’il appartenait au genre humain’ (CT, 64). These and other references to Jed’s non-human attributes make this more than simply a reference to reduced social interaction skills or to his response to impossible questions. They appear to endow him with the status of a facilitator of change, as possessed by Michel in *Les Particules*, one who, in his supposed scientific objectivity considers it possible to separate himself from late capitalist excess, manifested in its marketing and manipulation of his work. It is ironic that the possibility of Jed occupying any position as commentator on late capitalist excess has been obtained in providing the opportunity for ‘les hommes d’affaires les plus riches de la planete […] d’acheter un tableau qui représente eux-mêmes’ (CT, 206).

The extension of such difference to the writer is problematic given Houellebecq’s depictions of those such as Jed and Michel, who he suggests have been appropriated by a market from which it is in fact impossible to escape. This is indicated in part in the murder of Michel Houellebecq occurring as a direct result of his taking a portait from Jed in lieu of a fee, implicitly avoiding tax, only to be murdered due the market value and consequent fame attached to the work. He is murdered despite having sought and briefly obtained happiness in the home of his grandparents. Another writer, Beigbeder, is depicted as a valuable tourist attraction, drawing visitors to the café Flore. Beigbeder, the author of *99 Francs*, a novel about the excesses of the advertising industry, relates how Michel Houellebecq has lost money in a Spanish property investment (CT, 131) and is therefore likely to show interest in a sufficiently generous offer for his services. In a possible self-reflexive reference to the offering of solutions in fiction, Beigbeder’s advice proves incorrect.

Jed is aware of the late capitalist market he inhabits whether manifested in his recognising Olga and himself as the ‘l’archétype des clients idéaux’ (CT, 95) as they tour Michelin hotels or his quickly learning how to work the floor at an exhibition. He suspects the popularity of paintings has increased ‘pour des raisons commerciales. Un objet c’est plus facile à stocker et à revendre’ qu’une installation’ (CT, 149). He is sufficiently vain to be perplexed to notice the fictitious *Le Monde* art critic, Pépita Bourguignon avoiding his exhibitions after a single visit. His response to this rejection may also signify his concern for possible adverse publicity and consequent impact on prices, revealing Jed to be integrated in the same market as Hirst and Koons. Whilst not explicitly motivated by profit, Jed produces work to sell, content in his ‘Michelin’ phase to sign contracts and co-operate with the company’s marketing of a manufactured image of France. Indeed, Jed must be aware that the rise of French consumer capitalism is synchronous with that of the Michelin company. In an example of late capitalism’s adaptation to and recuperation of all contingencies, including artisitic sensibility regarding independence, Michelin offer to remove themselves from any direct association with Jed’s exhibition, ironically advising that: ‘Il est hors de question pour nous de *paraître* aliéner votre indépendence artistique’ (CT, 92).[[593]](#footnote-593) In fact, Michelin are controlling the entirety of activities which will translate his art into profit, facilitating the Internet site and logistics, whilst Olga delivers the wider Michelin strategy of which Jed’s art is part, thereby exploding the myth of authorial intention or artistic infallibility in the excessively commercial framework they construct around his art.

Jed’s appropriation by the art market, and his contribution to its excess in the form of his work being traded as a valuable global commodity is underscored in his earlier implicit envy of Geneviève’s work,[[594]](#footnote-594) which she does not seek to sell: ‘L’art devrait peut-être ressembler à cela, se disait-il parfois, une activité innocente et joyeuse, presque animale, il y avait eu des opinions dans ce sens, “bête comme un vrai peintre”, “il peinte comme l’oiseau chante”’ (CT, 58). In the judgement of late capitalism, the art of Geneviève is worthless whilst that of Jed is priced according to the market. Jed’s apparent declaration as to the incompatibility of artistic creation and the market brings into question his own judgement as, after voicing his views he would soon enter into a lucrative relationship with Michelin during his map and photography phase. As in *Extension*, the reader learns to treat any such resolution on the part of the artist and writer with caution. Both are constrained by the economy in which they operate. Commentary on Jed’s work usually relates to the market value, suggesting that that is the only criteria in late capitalism whilst re-affirming his appropriation in a market he cannot escape. His work is assigned a value the rationale for which is dictated by ‘agents économiques irrationnels’ (CT, 332).

His work records, is incorporated by and contributes to a global neoliberal market in which the laws of supply and demand will dictate the value, with aesthetic value a secondary consideration. Ironically, the work which is produced without apparent market influence, his ‘Trois cents photos de quincaillerie’ (CT, 50), coincide with his professional photography of objects. He abandons the latter project on the grounds that such work ‘invalidait toute possibilité de les utiliser dans un projet creatur’ (CT, 52). This is the first and last occasion he voices such concerns. Jed and his work are part of that irrational system of excess which determines one work valuable and another worthless. Writers are also subject to the excesses of late capitalism not only in their commercial transactions but in the all-pervading impact of that economic system. Michel Houellebecq is a tax exile, investing in property schemes and seeks to avoid tax when the opportunity arises. Writers and artists are seen to have little control over their position within the late capitalist art market. Geneviève exists as an artist outside the market but only through prostitution. Jed separates himself from the marketing machinery that had made him rich but continues to enjoy the benefits of excess.

THE THIRTY YEAR **‘**PAS DE CÔTÉ’

Production of the immaterial, of experiences rather than goods, is the reality of late capitalism since the 1990s, driven by the marketing and advertising industries. The dominance of those departments is seen in Michelin and their promotion through its TV channel, in the publicity for its hotels, in their *French Touch guides*, of access to an ‘authentic’ French life-style. ‘Ici la vie est belle’ (CT, 100) croons the publicity. The reality is ‘les goûts encore incertains, maladroitement formulés’, a sense of directionless (CT, 102). Novak-Lechevalier extends the significance of the distorted map at Shannon airport commenting: ‘Nous entrons ici dans des territoires sans cartes, et le roman se refuse obstinément à nous en fournir’.[[595]](#footnote-595) Jed and Michel Houellebecq both move to the homes of their respective grandparents and parents.[[596]](#footnote-596) In creating his own security-fenced estate in the Creuse, bought from the proceeds of his successful participation in the neoliberal art market, Jed attempts to remove himself from the influences of that same market. In this removal the concept of the ‘pas de côté’(I, 80) appears to warrant discussion in its relation to late capitalist excess. The original injunction of Houellebecq to remove oneself from the excess of the ‘flux informatif publicitaire’ (I, 80) appears difficult to comprehend in the prescribed brevity of a few seconds as a ‘révolution froide’ (I, 80). Jed and Michel Houellebecq have the means, ironically gained in part from the benefits of the publicity industry, to seek to achieve a more protracted version of this separation in *La Carte*.

Months before his death Jed grants an interview with the art magazine *Art Press* in which he implies, by the obsessive repetition of his desire ‘rendre compte’ (CT, 420) that he has not yet succeeded in achieving his artistic aim of objectively recording the world. In the context of this ambition, Jed’s late work, consisting of the destruction of ‘ces pathétiques figurines de type Playmobil’ (CT, 428) is problematic in departing from the ideal of objectivity expressed in his final interview. The image conjured in his final work is far from objective, being full of pathos as to the vulnerability of the individual, with the image of the playmobil brand referring to the commodification of the populace, now a product of capitalism, in a cityscape swallowed by encroaching vegetation. Jed’s landscape peopled by toy figures may also be a reference to the *fictions animalières* (EDL, 9)of the narrator of *Extension* who, as a boy, plays with ‘ses petits soldats’ (EDL, 13) and confides: ‘Si je n’écris pas ce que j’ai vu je souffrirai autant – et peut être un peu plus […] Elle introduit un soupçon de coherence, l’idée d’un réalisme’ (EDL, 14). A sentiment echoed in the statement that ‘La littérature […] lèche les plaies du malheur’ (I, 79).[[597]](#footnote-597) Such declarations suggest writing fiction concerns both the individual’s response to the excesses of contemporary existence as well as the compulsion to comment and represent.

*Interventions* addresses the potential of fiction to mitigate the impact of late capitalism and suggests a link between Jed’s representation of the encroachment of nature upon cities and Jed’s father’s attempted resistance to the brutalism of Le Corbusier.[[598]](#footnote-598) *Interventions* argues that the possibilities of opposition are limited where: ‘une société ayant atteint un palier de surchauffe n’implose pas nécessairement, mais elle s’avère incapable de produire une signification, toute son énergie étant monopolisée par la description informative de ses variations aléatoires’ (I, 79-80). The writer, like Jed’s father, is unable to avoid inscription in the neoliberal society they inhabit and faced with the market generated change which denies them the ability to construct any meaning from that society, is limited to commenting upon it. The lack of linearity in change, including the possibility of reversal, embodies the aleatory and in this represents the principal characteristic of late capitalism, that of the transitory satisfaction of desire. The incapacity of both a society existing within late capitalism and its commentators to produce meaning is suggested in his comment in *Interventions 2* in which Houellebecq protests that if literature had any influence how is it that despite Dostoïevski’s writing, ‘Marxistes, existentialistes, anarchistes et gauchistes de toutes espèces ont pu prospérer et infecter le monde connu exactement comme si Dostoïevski n’avait jamais écrit une ligne’ (I2, 221).

The work of writer, socialist and artist William Morris, is ‘product placed´ by Houellebecq in *La Carte* via the conversations between Jed and his father (CT, 217-30), as well as Jed and Michel Houellebecq (CT, 262-7). All three associate William Morris with the combination of the aesthetic and useful, implicitly embracing its opposition to the transitory experiences constituting contemporary excess. Morris had sought to restore the creative relationship of producer and product, which capitalism had undermined via mass manufacture. Morrey relates Morris’s conclusion that as long as people take no pleasure in their work, no meaningful change will be accomplished.[[599]](#footnote-599) Once again, the suggestion is that nothing was changed through the writings of Morris as few of his ideals have been realised in modern professions. Despite Michel Houellebcq’s admiration for Morris he has not sought to replicate the clarity of Morris’s vision, for Jasselin falls asleep when investigating the contents of the murdered writer’s computer ‘comme s’il espérait y trouver une explication ou un sens’ (CT, 333). Houellebecq reminds the reader to expect no resolution in fiction.

Houellebecq’s exploration of the potential of art and fiction is mirrored in Jed’s apparent failure to achieve his own declared mission of simply bearing witness to the world, an impossible ambition in a postmodern context. Novak-Lechevalier reads Jed’s statement in old age relating to his artistic desire to ‘rendre compte’ as follows: ‘ce n’est donc en aucun cas se contenter de le copier, ni même chercher à l’expliciter: en le représentant, il s’agit de le révéler’.[[600]](#footnote-600) Such a statement is problematic as it does not define what is entailed in revelation. Moreover, the title of Jed’s photographic exhibition of Michelin maps proclaims the map to be more interesting than the territory and in doing so exceeds his mission to ‘rendre compte’. In attempting to justify his work he has departed from what had been in his phase of photography of industrial objects: ‘une carrière artistique sans autre projet que celui – dont il n’appréhendait que rarement le caractère illusoire – de donner une description objective du monde’ (CT, 51).[[601]](#footnote-601) Jed’s work, once subjected to marketing and provocatively labelled for the exhibition, has evolved from a photographic study of landscapes and their mapped equivalents to become an assertion and not his desired representation.

Even the excessive influence of Koons and Hirst in the art industry, the idea that they can carve up the world market between them is illusory. The world will continue regardless of Koon’s balloon dogs[[602]](#footnote-602) and Hirst’s diamond skulls, for other artists will arrive and new marketing campaigns will in turn catapult them to global status. As described in the opening lines of this chapter, excess is the fruit of market-driven desire, one manifestation of which are the various billionaires competing for artworks,[[603]](#footnote-603) including those of Jed who realises that ‘par la *loi de l’offre et de la demande* la richesse l’avait soudain enveloppé comme une pluie d’étincelles, délivré de tout joug financier’ (CT, 269). To accentuate the excessive sums involved, the news of Jed’s sudden wealth is related to him in *Chez Claude*,a café whose clientele could never aspire to the fortune he suddenly possesses.

In a chapter entirely devoted to Pernaut’s party which is attended by Olga and numerous marketing and television executives, the link between desire, excess and the marketing motor of later capitalism is confirmed. This is revealed in a strained atmosphere of competition relating to the launch of a new television channel backed by Michelin. The commercial manoeuvring takes place against a confusion of dress, music and food representing the French regional theme of the new channel. Pernaut, the host, has had his portait painted by Jed. The same portait resulted in a bidding war in which Pernaut lost to the billionaire art collector, François Pinault. Pernaut happily consoles an uncomfortable Jed with ‘C’est le marché’ (CT, 244). This event represents both excess in terms of the universal recognition amongst those such as Pernaut that art is simply a commodity and the precarity within late capitalism. There is also irony in Pernaut being the figurehead of a channel devoted to culture. This episode contributes to provoking within Jed the same nausea which overwhelms him in his attempt to portray Hirst and Koons and emphasises the struggle of the artist and writer in representing late capitalist society, when they co-operate with those who shape the market. The frenetic and violent undertones of competing material interests at the party are observed by impassive representatives of the Michelin board, whilst the din of the networking media executives slowly drowns out the Breton bagpipes. The shrill frenzy of chaotic self-interest within the party is physically manifested in Jed’s growing discomfort. Jed is incapable of digesting the excesses of a marketing concept which, instead of unity, has succeeded only in coagulating into an indigestible mix of consumables and music. Jed vomits over a dwarf palm in Pernaut’s courtyard in a metaphorical rejection of the disparate excesses promoted by late capitalism and specifically, the potential of heritagized food to save the French economy.[[604]](#footnote-604) The impact of late capitalism, even upon the behaviour of those cooking the food is witnessed, with Anthony and George, who are both gay, indulging in homophobic gossip. A humorous example of an excessively marketed experience in late capitalism is also provided in one passage where Jed is faced with ‘un choix exceptionnel’ of Norwegian mineral water. After analysing the possible differences, he chooses one which ‘était extrêmement pure – quoique en réalité, pas advantage que les autres’ (CT, 133*).* In *La Carte* food symbolises an excess beyond its links with waste and expense. The cuisine offered in restaurants such as *Chez Anthony et Georges*, the confusion of regional produce at Pernaut’s party and the recurrence of references to ‘lambeaux’[[605]](#footnote-605) throughout the novel, suggests the ‘éparpillement des désirs’ (I, 72) in the consumer. Food and its excess within *La Carte* represent the most physical manifestation of the assimilation of the market and the individual.

Other humorous episodes underscore late capitalism’s excess in terms of wealth and luxury, such as the descriptions of the Michelin hotels, where the *French Touch* guide ‘proposait une gamme de plaisirs limités mais attestables’ (CT, 100). In a perfect representation of the dual economies, the hotels offer home-made jam, formal gardens and the obligatory jacuzzi. The humour emphasises the discordant vulgarity and extravagance of the experience for sale. This mixture of ‘*vieille France* ou *terroir* [*…*] Ce mélange improbable’ (CT, 101)[[606]](#footnote-606) is redoubled in the interior and menus *Chez Anthony et Georges*. The reader is informed that the eponymous proprietors have ‘chiné chez des antiquares et formés un mélange coquet et disparate de meubles copiés du dix-huitième siècle français’ (CT, 66). Olga solicits Jed’s opinion on the restaurant and he appears to deliver the definition of simulation: ‘C’est typique. Enfin on a l’impression que c’est typique, mais on ne sait pas très bien de quoi (CT, 67). Like the villages of the future France, the occupants of the tables *Chez Anthony et Georges* are foreigners. The largely foreign guests are being sold a simulated France. The France of the café *Chez Claude* is being replaced by that of *Chez Anthony et Georges*, a simulated, *ersatz* France.

Whilst Franz and Marylin make their last-minute preparations for Jed’s first exhibition, the following non-attributed, italicised statement, in English, is made at the foot of a page: ‘*It’s a game, it’s a million dollar game*’(CT, 194).[[607]](#footnote-607) The game is worth rather more than that, for Jed’s painting of Michel Houellebecq reaches twelve million euros, confirming the art market as a manifestation of late capitalist excess, where value is seemingly arbitrary. Jed comments on this to a journalist: ‘Il ne faut pas chercher des sens à ce qui n’en aucun’ (CT, 395). Jed is portrayed as curiously alone in his apprehension of late capitalist excess within the art market.

There is little mention of French intellectuals alert to the neoliberal threat. Those that are mentioned differ in their response to late capitalism. At his second meeting with Jed, Michel Houellebecq evokes two writers: Jean-Louis Curtis and George Perec both of whom describe a modernising, materialistic France. Of Curtis, Michel Houellebecq identifies with the sense of loss involved in this passage and the disquiet of Curtis at ‘la “société de la consommation’ (CT, 168-9). Of Perec, he states ‘George Perec accepte la société de consummation, il la considère comme le seul horizon possible’ (CT, 169) acknowledging the place of the artist within the consumer society. In Houellebecq’s previous works, for example his depiction of Philippe Sollers in *Les Particules*,the writer and journalist is satirised as lacking any principles. In *Interventions 2*, with reference to Bourdieu and Baudrillard[[608]](#footnote-608) Houellebecq summarises that ‘on s’étonne de ce que l’on puisse, encore aujourd’hui, prendre un intellectuel au sérieux’ (I2, 226). It is an age where, in Houellebecq’s opinion, the intellectual torch has been borne by science fiction, a genre defined by excess in its fantastical futures: ‘sur le plan intellectuel, il ne resterait rien de la seconde moitié du siècle s’il n’y avait pas eu la littérature de science fiction’ (I2, 226). Houellebecq contributes to, as well as subverts the genre in *Les Particules* and *La Possibilité* and addresses the work of the science fiction writer, H.P. Lovecraft.[[609]](#footnote-609) Such statements as to science fiction’s superiority over other fiction implicitly call into question Houellebecq’s other works such as *La Carte* which, whilst attempting to portray a France of the near future, contains no science fiction. However, Jed does project a future France, indeed a Western Europe, in which heavy industry has largely disappeared, to be reclaimed by forest and an economy based upon regional culture. However, unlike *Les Particules* in which consumerism is superfluous to a population incapable of any significant desire, a future France will still be exploited by Michelin marketing and capitalism will continue to adapt.

The influence of neoliberal excess manifested in every aspect of daily life in the dual economies, food, pharmaceuticals and consumption of culture, is seen at its most excessively corrosive in respect of the formation of loving, lasting relationships. The relationship of Jed and Geneviève founders when she leaves him for a wealthier man, whilst that of Jed and Olga ends when she opts for professional success over love. Sex is appropriated by late capitalism. Michel Houellebecq, in his catalogue for Jed’s exhibition, describes a work depicting ‘L’introduction en bourse de l’action Beate Uhse’ the Hamburg pornography business (CT, 189). Desire and the market, whether it is art or French properties in rural France, is generated by global advertising and marketing, which promise the fulfilment of all desire. These are the same professions that had failed in their first attempts to re-populate *‘l’hinterland*’ (CT, 414) the French provinces, and which re-launched their campaigns ‘basée cette fois sur une connaissance precise des lois du marché, et sur leur acceptation lucide, avait pleinenement réussi’ (CT, 414). This success not only refers to Houellebecq’s concept of the parallel economies of the sexual and the material, expounded in *Interventions* (I, 76) and *Extension* (EDL, 100)but the ability of late capitalism to adapt to appropriate any reversal in its trajectory.

Late capitalism’s perception as an unchallengeable, evolving phenomenon, is emphasised in Michel Houellebecq’s four-page description of Jed’s work “Bill Gates et Steve Jobs s’entretentant du future de l’informatique” (CT, 189). The commentary is caustic, aligning the ‘cynisme complet’ of Gates’ business practices (CT, 191) with the businessman’s mantra that ‘le bien du marché s’identifie toujours au bien général’ and he has ‘sa foi dans le capitalisme, dans la mystérieuse “main invisible” (CT, 191).[[610]](#footnote-610) Late capitalism, represented by Gates, in its/his invulnerability is presented as evolving from an ideology, appropriating religious attributes. In comparison, Jobs is depicted as the weaker participant, in his ‘tristesse générale […] l’expression de désarroi’ (CT, 190), clearly aware in his body language and his ‘regard plein d’incertitude’ (CT, 190). Jobs is described as emaciated by ‘la maladie’ that he had long been known to be suffering from and that will kill him the year after the publication of *La Carte*.

Houellebecq’s creation of an avatar of himself in the form of the character Michel Houellebecq may be seen as either an egotistical action responding to his own notoriety,[[611]](#footnote-611) or as a snub to those critics who accuse him of using his own characters as mouthpieces for his own determinist theories.[[612]](#footnote-612) It has been suggested that the murder of this avatar is a symbolic rejection of the media image that has confounded the writer and his characters.[[613]](#footnote-613) Michel Houellebecq’s murder may also be seen as another performance of excess, of narrative horror exceeding the conventions of the detective novel. His body, and that of his dog, serve as a medium with which to produce what Jed later likens, via a police photograph, to ‘une assez médiocre imitation de Pollock’(CT, 353) covering the living room and its walls:

La tête de la victime était intacte, tranchée net, posée sur un des fauteuils devant la cheminée, une petite flaque de sang s’était formée sur le velours vert sombre; lui faisant face sur le canapé, la tête d’un chien noir, de grand taille, avait elle aussi été tranchée net. Le reste était un massacre, un carnage insensé, des lambeaux, des lanières de chair éparpillés à même le sol. Ni la tête de l’homme ni celle du chien n’étaient pourtant immobilisées dans un expression d’horreur, mais plutôt d’incrédulité et de colère. Au milieu des lambeaux de viandes humaine et canine mêlées, un passage intact, de cinquante centimètres de large, conduisait jusqu’à la cheminée emplies d’ossements auxquels adhéraient encore des restes de chair (CT, 287-8).

The murder scene links to Hirst’s own use of dead animals.[[614]](#footnote-614) The swarms of flies which meet the police also refer the reader to Hirst’s use of flies in his art. In a statement of extraordinary detachment Jed appraises the murder scene in relation to Pollock’s own technique which he considers, in this instance fails only for want of ‘force’ and ‘élan vital’ (CT, 353).[[615]](#footnote-615) Excess is manifested in other acts of violence, including Jed’s own attack on the painting of Koons and Hirst upon which he was working.

Consistant with the illogicality of the value of the art market, Maris refers to Hélène Jasselin’s conclusion that economic theory ‘lui semblaient inconsistantes, hasardeuses, et relevant du charlatanisme’,[[616]](#footnote-616) reducing late capitalism to peddling a bogus remedy. However, Hélène goes on to dismiss economics as lacking any substance whatsoever: ‘non seulement ce n’était pas une science, mais ce n’était pas un art, ce n’était en définitivement à peu près rien du tout’ (CT, 331). The oxymoron in this phrase implies economics to be a nebulous discipline defying definition and confirms late capitalism, as depicted in *La Carte*,to be sustained by the sale of intangibles, of experiences, elevating neoliberalism to a cult status, one whose rules are not defined and in which divine intervention may be via the hand of God or Gates. However, Gates’s acknowledgement that the unforeseeable, the uncertain contingencies of change exist, confirms late capitalism to be just as subject as the writing of fiction to the processes of change outlined in this thesis.

This same elusiveness in the basic principles governing late capitalist economics is recognised by Maris in the attraction that Hypermarkets hold for both Jed and Michel Houellebecq. Houellebecq has asserted in *Interventions* that these outletsproduced an atomisation of desire ‘D’où une certaine dépression du vouloir chez l’homme contemporain’ (I, 72) and to which Jed and Michel Houellebecq are implicitly equally susceptible.[[617]](#footnote-617) Maris takes particular aim at marketing and advertising and using the metaphor of supermarket aisles as the corrals which direct the beasts to the slaughterhouse, argues that: ‘La pub est l’aiguillon qui pousse les boeufs ou les moutons, les oblige à bouger. Elle clignote et change sans cesse ‘Elle est la perpetuité du provisoire, la negation de toute éternité, la destruction créatrice permanente, le renouvellement impitoyable et saccadé’.[[618]](#footnote-618) This description powerfully re-affirms the intersection between late capitalist excess and the theory argued in this thesis, in denying any definitive conclusion. Such perpetual provisionality, a policy of failing to provide definitive satisfaction, whether in the withdrawal of Michel Houellebecq’s parka coat or the transitory offers of the supermarket which lure both Michel Houellebecq and Jed, such as the appearance of a new ‘Salad Bar’ which Jed considers would have given Michel Houellebecq ‘envie de revenir; qui lui donnait *diantrement* envie de revenir, aurait dit Houellebecq’ (CT, 196). Even the Hypermarket is in ceaseless development, ironically described as a place where the offers on Italian fresh pasta just keep getting better: ‘rien décidement ne semblait pouvoir stopper la progression des pâtes fraîches italiennes’ (CT, 195). This constant renewal of desire represents the in-process nature of late capitalism as reflected in Hélène’s conclusion below on all economic theory.

The narrator refers to the Jasselin’s dog barking if the names Schumpeter or Keynes are mentioned (CT, 300).[[619]](#footnote-619) This pavlovian reference wittily suggests the response of consumers to publicity, as well as that of adherents of late capitalist theories. Schumpeter’s theory considers the cycle of change and renewal via the ‘creative’ destruction from within of the previous economic model. The replacement of artisanal work by automation and eventual factory production or Fordism, is in turn replaced by post-Fordist practices, a transition recorded in Jed’s portraits of threatened trades and professions as well as of manufactured objects. One of the professions to survive this transition and flourish is represented in ‘Aimée, escort-girl’ (CT, 415). The cycles of change continue with the metropolitan elite leaving the cities for the countryside, producing the re-emergence of some artisanal trades. Schumpeter’s theory appears central to the processes at work in Jed’s France in having allowed its industry to be sacrificed whilst preserving its terroir and tourist assets. It is difficult to envisage the ‘pas de côté’ having any relevance in such a rapidly evolving economy. However, all economic theories, including that of Schumpeter, are discredited by Hélène, culminating in her reflection that: ‘L’existence d’agents économiques irrationnels était depuis toujours le *part d’ombre*, la faille secrète de toute théorie économique’ (CT, 332 Houellebecq implies that late capitalism exceeds all attempts to be theorised or defined.

After drunkenly[[620]](#footnote-620) complaining to Jed about the seemingly arbitrary nature with which consumerism appears to require the withdrawal or alteration of a favourite product, Michel Houellebecq weeps before pronouncing Jed and himself

des produits culturels. Nous aussi, nous serons frappés d’obsolescence. Le fonctionnement du dispositif est identique – à ceci près qu’il n’y a pas, en général, d’amélioration technique ou fonctionnelle évidente; seule demeure l’exigence de nouveauté à l’état pur’ (CT, 172).[[621]](#footnote-621)

This image of the cultural producer as an obsolete product is also presented in a description of Jed’s final work in the closing pages of the novel. The narrator introduces the work as dedicated to the ‘caractère périssable et transitoire de toute industrie humaine’ (CT, 428) but widens this reference to wider humanity in adding that:

Cette interprétation est cependant insuffisante à rendre compte du malaise qui nous saisit à voir ces pathétiques petites figurines de type Playmobil, perdues au milieu d’une cité futuriste abstraite et immense, cité qui elle-même s’effrite et se dissocie, puis semble peu à peu s’éparpiller dans l’immensité végétale qui s’étend à l’infini’ […] Puis tout se calme, il n’y a plus que des herbes agitées par le vent. Le triomphe de la végétation est total (CT, 428).

This passage, suggesting that humanity itself is an excess, has a significant similarity with that in *Germinal* when the anarchist Souvarine declares a similar solution for a humankind enslaved by capitalism: ‘il fallait que l’homme disparût. Autant de sociétés pourries, autant de massacres, jusqu’à l’extermination du dernier être’ (G, III, 1524). Souvarine’s flawed prescription of anarchism suggests Houellebeq’s own conclusion to be equally undermined. Anarchism, as interpreted by Souvarine, requires the removal of existing forms of society before humanity can be mysteriously re-born and links to the representation of humans as branded products in the form of Playmobil figures. Informed by the tipping point, both‘dénouements’ of Houellebecq and Souvarine’s anarchism fail to convince. Houellebecq’s implicit suggestion that the only certain means of assuring the removal of neoliberalism is via the destruction of humanity has been made elsewhere, with Fredric Jameson stating that ‘Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism’.[[622]](#footnote-622) Jed’s final artwork represents degradation over time and does not destroy humanity. Jed’s attempts to represent reality have failed throughout his career. There is no indication that his anticipation of the end of humanity will be any more successful. In projecting the demise of humanity, Jed is writing a fiction, not representing reality. He is attempting a grand narrative in which the capitalist excesses of humanity result in the extinction of the species. Capitalism will implicitly cease to exist only when the dual economies disappear. *Les Particules* and *La Carte* hold out no hope that this will happen.

A belief in the ability of artists and writers to provide the hope of truthful representation of reality persists. Maris dismisses the attempts of neuroscience to definitively map feelings and considers that ‘seul le poète ou l’artiste nous permet d’accéder à la transcendence de la vérité’.[[623]](#footnote-623) However, excess may distort the semblance of truth for the contemporary artist and writer. The image that they attempt to represent may prove false, for example, the portrait of Jed’s father addressing his workforce suggests the strength of his personality to be fundamental to the function of that business. In fact, the company appears to continue seamlessly following Jed’s father retirement from ill health. At Pernaut’s party, in another example of drunken excess, an inebriated and disgruntled fictional Patrick Le Lay,[[624]](#footnote-624) hurls a bottle at the opposing channel’s executives. He re-appears later in the evening with a bloody forehead, suggesting the violent excess of the market and further exposing the veneer of civility depicted in the Gates-Jobs portrait. This scene supports the assertion of Maris that ‘le pub est violente. Les publicités des marques sont les acouphènes d’un monde violent qui n’est jamais muet’.[[625]](#footnote-625) This Darwinian competition, in which late capitalism is represented as breeding violence, is ultimately that of the combat of the surgeon Petisaud’s insect collection.

## THE STRUGGLE TO REPRESENT THE LATE CAPITALIST WORLD FROM WITHIN

The ekphrastic *trompe l’oeil* of the opening lines of *La Carte* relating to the painting of Koons and Hirst references Houellebecq’s practice in previous novels of deploying an unreliable narrator. Novak-Lechevalier asserts that in this scene, this ‘*ekphrasis* insolite […] offre immédiatement l’expérience de la relativité de la frontière entre le monde et sa représentation […] que toute représentation pourrait n’être que représentation d’une représentation’.[[626]](#footnote-626) She concludes that the impact of such deception is to cause the reader to adopt, in common with several of Houellebecq’s protagonists, a position of unease and suspicion. However, the performance of failure in this opening scene, in which the reader is fooled and the painting destroyed, the extremes of nausea and violent destruction involved, move beyond suggestions of scepticism in the reader. It amounts instead to Houellebecq’s demonstrating not only the failure of art to bear witness but that of late capitalism and its inherent economic irrationality, in which Koons and Hirst are imbricated.

Novak-Lechevalier argues that in *La Carte* marketing hyperbole is seen to result in a deception born of ‘la trahison et la tyrannie de ces mots, qui collaborent au leurre économique’.[[627]](#footnote-627) Marketing slogans create a desirable commodity, their excess leaving no event un-exploited. Even euthanasia becomes ‘*une mort digne*’ (CT, 369). The attempt to super-impose a commodified alternative reality does not respect the boundaries of the material but extends to human relations. In the Michelin *French Touch* guide, not only is a chateau a *demeure d’exception* and a chef a *cuisinier d’intuition* (CT, 101) but upon visiting the fictional Michel Houellebecq, Jed smiles what he hopes to be a disarming smile. He muses, self-reflexively: ‘“*Sourire désarmant”* est une expression qu’on rencontre encore dans certains romans, et qui doit donc correspondre à une réalité quelconque’ (CT, 164), its association with the previous marketing jargon implying the assimilation by Jed and fiction into late capitalism. *La Carte* playfully equates marketing and fiction as intersecting. Jed is shown to have been exposed to and assimilated months of Michelin marketing prose in the course of his travels with Olga. The same process is ironically evidenced during this visit with each utterance or description of Michel Houellebecq attracting the attribution of one of his novels, for example: ‘“Une seule bouteille?” demanda ‘l’auteur de *La Poursuite de Bonheur’* (CT, 165). Houellebecq ridicules the style of a marketing piece in which all key aspects of a product must be alluded to in the course of the narrative. The abstract to a Michelin survey on changing tastes and clientele at their luxury hotels refers to their desire for ‘*une expérience* *gastronomique* vintage, *voire* hardcore’ (CT, 97).In insinuating the re-marketed words throughout its text, *La Carte*, as a fiction, replicates the excesses of marketing deceit, to which the reader is implicitly invited to respond with caution.

The challenge for the reader of fiction is equal to that of Jasselin faced with ‘des lambeaux ... difficiles à décrypter’ (CT, 288). This phrase evokes the writer’s task in seeking to represent excess. Michel Houellebecq states that after investigating the subject of a novel, taking notes and aligning phrases, ‘pour se lancer dans l’écriture d’un roman il faut attendre que tout cela devienne compact, irréfutable, il faut attendre l’apparition d’un authentique noyau de nécessité’, implying a compulsion to represent what he sees (CT, 254). Jed recalls these conversations whilst arriving for what will prove to be his last meeting with Michel Houellebecq. A meeting at which the writer announces his interest in the world as juxtapositon, rejecting narrative fiction, implying its failure to represent, to create meaning, for all narratives are selective trajectories of events. Such sense making in a world of excess is as difficult to attain as the motive for Michel Houellebecq’s murder. The murder is solved only upon the occurrence of unforeseen contingencies. Such struggles to describe the present further renders unreliable any attempt to represent change through narrative, especially if that change is as rapid and elusive as that of the late capitalist world.

## CONCLUSION

The impossibility of obtaining critical purchase outside of late capitalism is reflected in the degree to which Jed is compromised in his ability to *rendre compte* when he is also a participant in and contributor to an excessive global art market. The nausea Jed suffers in response to the marketing of a simulated reality provokes his escape attempt; his - almost - complete withdrawal from society. *La Carte*’s figuring of the struggle of the artist-writer to represent contemporary society, simulated or otherwise, further supports the suggestion that the reader should treat fiction with caution.

In presenting a protagonist who declares his life dedicated to the excessive ambition of recording all the economic activity of his time, Houellebecq provides a commentary on the transition of a contemporary France, seemingly passive in its acceptance of late capitalist excess, to a future France which has transformed the provinces, adapting to an economy based largely upon a successful re-branding of its regional culture. Just as Hélène is frustrated in her attempt to explain economics so too, in line with expectations from the last and present centuries as to representational practice, Jed fails in his ambition to describe life in a late capitalist world. Jed’s photos mark the start, and the destruction of photographs, the end of his career. *La Carte* depicts a gradual evolution, a trajectory marked by the boom and bust of the economy, of French society in its urban flight and rural re-population, in the relationships Jed experiences, in the media he takes up and abandons in his attempt to represent. Such a pattern of expansion, contraction, death, creation and unfulfilled ambition are embraced in the theory of the tipping point. The compulsion of the artist and writer to create, to attempt to represent, will implicitly survive the unconvincing declaration of the triumph of the vegetation, itself a manifestation of excess. Just as Jed cannot capture reality in his objective art so too he fails in his attempt at the grand narrative of the eradication of humankind.

Jed’s work signifies the limits of both art and fiction to anticipate and influence change, it reflects a recognisable representation of the unforeseeable phenomenon that is late-capitalist excess. With its artist protagonist entering and operating at the core of a late capitalist market in the form of the global art trade,[[628]](#footnote-628) *La Carte* explores and interrogates representational practices in art and fiction and the evolution of the contingent, exemplified in the marketed, misleading title to Jed’s map art exhibition and his inability to represent Koons and Hirst. In examining Jed’s struggle to represent, in illustrating the appropriation of the cultural producer in a late capitalist world, in juxtaposing its excesses in the everyday and in refusing to provide a conclusion, Houellebecq suggests the qualified potential of fiction to represent the excesses of late capitalism.

# CONCLUSION

This thesis has not sought to replicate postmodernist claims as to the impossibility of delivering theories or definitive conclusions. It has instead, in the tipping point, offered a extra-textual metaphor facilitating an understanding of the ideas bound up with postmodernism, along with an assessment of an author’s conscious or unconscious apprehension of the complexity of change and the inability of fiction to capture all contingencies and consequences. In doing so, this thesis has provided new insights into the work of two important authors who would not normally be associated. In being paired and read in parallel, the novels of Zola and Houellebecq have revealed the convergence of their response to and confrontation of contemporary capitalism manifested in the sexual, economic and social change they witness, whilst revealing characteristics common to capitalism and fiction. Both writers have been seen to be concerned with the representation of reality and change and both exceed their extra-textual theories, Zola through departing from his naturalist theory and Houellebecq through an undermining of representation and meaning, extending to that of his theory of the dual economies. The pairing of the novels and the tipping point offers critical interpretive multiplicities revealing attempts to represent or reveal times of exponential change in capitalism.

In its Introduction, this thesis defined its own understandings of the tipping point, its potential for literary criticism, representing an original, multivalent, extra-textual metaphor for an always failing attempt to convey a definitive conclusion within a fiction. In doing so, this thesis apprehends a significantly different tipping point to that originally proposed in Malcolm Gladwell’s best seller *The Tipping Point*. Gladwell’s theory is argued to fail to sufficiently recognise that change is rarely linear but composed of multiple intersecting and diverging components which are not always identifiable, including the possibility of reversal. The most significant difference between the theory in this thesis and that of Gladwell is that he advocated the Tipping Point as a mechanism for change and not as a framework with which change may be studied. The Leverhulme Project has been shown to have recognised the potential of the Tipping Point in its application in mathematics, physics, the social sciences and its potential as a metaphor but it has not addressed fiction.

Chapters Two and Three explored the impact of capitalism and late capitalism upon work and sexual relationships in *Germinal* and *Extension*. In *Germinal* this is viewed through the optics of the grand narratives of Darwinism and Marxism and their respective evolutionary and revolutionary concepts of change. Darwinism and capitalism are seen to be closely related, for example in the adaptation of the shareholders to the aftermath of the strike and Jeanlin’s individualistic pursuit of his own interests. Zola’s interpretation of evolutionary theory is seen to be ambiguous with an apparent adherence to the idea of a perfecting evolution amongst the French scientific establishment whilst also recognising in the character Jeanlin the possibility of regression. The most significant undermining of the grand narrative of a perfecting evolution is seen in the mythical germinating miners, who are conjured in the final lines of the novel. These imagined saviours lack any connection with the starved and exhausted miners of the narrative and are a far from convincing manifestation of a perfecting evolution. The army of miners rising from the soil will be defeated by the same capitalist system which starved their forebears into submission. Marxism in *Germinal* is treated by Zola as a grand narrative having no relevance to the reality of the miners. Zola also suggests that the characteristics of the opposing classes in the strike to be far more nuanced than Marxism may suggest. In his apparent recognition of the failure of grand narratives and the impossibility of representing all the factors determining change, Zola reveals proto-postmodernist qualities.

Marxism is evoked within the title of *Extension* in Chapter Three and implies that the ideology, the struggle, is extant within an economic context embracing both the material and sexual economies. However, no revolution occurs in *Extension* and implicitly will never do so. This thesis has argued that a similar lack of resolution occurs in *Germinal*,in which both Marxism and Darwinism fail in different respects to impart their teleological ends to the fiction. The tipping point is seen to shed light on grand narratives such as those of Darwinism and Marxism when applied, explicitly or otherwise, within a fiction. The possibility of radical change is consistently brought into question by Houellebecq. The protagonist in *Extension* is denied the transcendence he seeks and instead lives to relate the fiction the reader has just completed. This cyclical pattern reproduces that of the tipping point, with fiction once again exceeding the plot.

The elusive nature of neoliberalism is implicitly recognized in *Extension*,sharing this characteristic with the tipping point in its being an ongoing process with no foreseeable destination. Religion, and in particular psychoanalysis, are added to Marxism in *Extension*’s sweep of totalizing narratives promising cures, the delivery of which are always problematical. Despite the uncertainties throughout the narrative in *Extension*, Houellebecq’s targeting of the sexual and material economies and the appropriation of the ‘soft’sciences within late capitalism, suggests a desire to represent the neoliberal present. The inconsistencies of the protagonist of *Extension* are however part of a composite process, recognising the possibility of reversal and refusing to apply any didactic Marxist argument, yet succeeding in producing a critical work in which contemporary society is recognised. In doing so, Houellebecq proposes a continuing potential for fiction to represent change.

This thesis revealed in *Germinal* and *Extension* the extent to which the two authors have identified the limitations of fiction when attempting to propose deterministic, overarching narratives. Both authors include theories of their own, whether Zola’s naturalism or Houellebecq’s concept of the dual economies, only for both writers to undermine them. Zola does this in implicitly recognising naturalism to be incapable of fully representing change and reality in the compulsions and contingencies of the society and individuals he is attempting to represent. Zola also concedes that his experiment may not be containable within the novel but may continue beyond its pages. In the ‘fictions animalières’of *Extension* the fables depart from the traditional purpose of their genre in declining to provide meaning or moral, indirectly undermining Houellebecq’s own attempt at delivering his central theory withinthe same novel.

The engagement of each writer in representing their societies is evidenced in Zola’s deterministic theory of naturalism set out in *Le Roman expérimental* and in Houellebecq’s commenting upon the potential of fiction and art within *Interventions* and in his fictions. To enhance the semblance of reality in their representation, *Extension* and *Germinal* depict details of everyday existence in the working and sexual lives of their respective, unexceptional characters. Whilst the ‘flat form’ of Houellebecq and the invisible narrator in Zola’s naturalism suggest a neutral representation from which the reader might draw their own meaning, both authors contradict this stance in attempting, whilst undermining, definitive conclusions.

In Chapters Four and Five the application of science in the fiction of both authors is explored in *Au Bonheur des dames* and *Les Particules élémentaires*. For Zola, naturalism represented a means to deliver a logical, provable, measurable agency of motivation and outcome in his fiction, expressed in a clear language free of poetic allusion and authorial intervention. The chapter explored the foundations of scientism in Zola’s naturalism and the context of rapid scientific and capitalist development in which he was writing. *Au Bonheur* depicts capitalism as both a theory and dynamic for change driving, amongst other things, the creation of a consumer science. Zola intends his novels to be laboratories. Self-reflexively, he has Mouret conduct his own experiment. However, in *Au Bonheur*,unquantifiable, distinctly unscientific factors intervene, problematizing Zola’s putative application of scientific method. The love affair of Mouret and Denise, the retrospective representation of the department store in a specific historical context, Zola’s manipulation of researched facts to enhance the plot and Zola’s intention that *Au Bonheur* would not be a pessimistic work, are also significant departures from the objectivity of naturalism. In these inconsistencies, Zola recognises that the intentions of the writer will always be exceeded. Zola’s intention of treating the novel as a laboratory in which to observe the behaviour of his characters is also seen to be suspect in that the plot and its outcome are subject to the will of the writer of a fictional creation, an observation of Claude Bernard that Zola strives in vain to circumvent. Zola manipulates the narrative to deliver a conclusion which he considers to be the natural result of the factors he has introduced into the experiment, overlooking that his selection is pre-determined and scientifically unjustified.

Recalling the image in the final lines of *Germinal*, Zola’s attempt in *Au Bonheur* to provide a vision of perfecting social evolution is undermined by fiction’s inability to comprehensively reflect a society undergoing rapid and unforeseeable change. Unlike the French theoscientific theory of *l’évolution*, promising a linear route to perfection, capitalist change follows no trajectory but that of the tipping point. Zola reveals the operation of the ‘pointde bascule’, reversing Mouret’s disciplinarian in-store regime upon his staff as soon as they leave the store: ‘Au dehors seulement, reprenait la vie individuelle, avec la flambée des passions qui se réveillaient’ (AB, III, 516). Zola unconsciously undermines the laboratory’s walls, having them collapse under the infinite complexities of society, with authorial intention always being exceeded.

In Chapter Five, Houellebecq’s vapid post human race in *Les Particules* fails to convince as a symbol of the rejection of a human race that has self-destructed via the corrosive material and sexual markets. His pastiche of science fiction in *Les Particules* refers the reader to his similar treatment of La Fontaine’s fables in *Extension*. Houellebecq recognises pure science as an agent of change. He uses the tropes of science fiction whilst undermining them via his narrative strategies, exposing the failure of soft sciences and their fixation on the application of theories promising supposedly demonstrable outcomes. Pure science is also seen to fail in *Les Particules* in its appropriation by neoliberalism and consumer science, its ability to deliver change being undermined.

*Les Particules* addresses hard science and proposes an apparently clear conclusion in the replacement of human animals with a cloned post-human species. Such an outcome served to cement Houellebecq’s reputation as a writer of ‘romans à thèse’. However, the clumsy introduction and conclusion are quickly dismissed and neoliberal processes rather than science are revealed as the overriding threats to the human race. Rather than the author of ‘romans à thèse’, *Les Particules* reveals conflicting tendencies to both employ and pour scorn on totalizing theories. In his self-reflexive rejection of grand narratives Houellebecq suffers the double bind of appearing to propose his own totalizing narrative in the form of the post human solution. The fictional theory representing the destructive forces of the integrated sexual and material economies, along with the pure, soft and consumer sciences are ultimately presented as part of a cycle of failure. This failure mirrors that of consumer science to satisfy the desires it creates.

This thesis recognized in Chapter Six how rapid capitalist change permeates *L’Assommoir* and inextricably links it to the ills besieging the Goutte-d’Or. The impassivity of nature in *La Carte* is equalled by that of society in *L’Assommoir* towards the death of Gervaise. Like Gervaise, Jed dies alone. He is the Playmobil figure surrounded by the encroaching vegetation of his estate. In contrast, the death of Gervaise suggests no such finality but Darwinian contingent, diverging components, the novel once more exceeding the writer’s intention. Even in death Gervaise represents the unforeseeable, her rotting corpse recalling the fertile, teeming ground from which *Germinal*’s harvest of miners will emerge. The future actions of the children of Gervaise represent the Darwinian lack of linearity and foreseeability within the tipping point process in fiction, exceeding the pages which contain it.

Contingency and the divergent have also been established in this thesis as principle elements of capitalism. Capitalism is the dominant economic system. It is sustained by society and by inference can be dismantled by it. However, as the tipping point metaphor reveals, capitalism, in a similar fashion to a fictional grand narrative, exceeds the intentions of the author in that the tipping point reveals it to have no clear trajectory. In the six novels examined in this thesis there is a recurring sense of the absence of a stable narrative in the workings of capitalism. In Zola it is evident in Bonnemort’s gesturing towards ‘un lieu vague’ (G, III, 1141) when identifying the mine’s owners, the incipient struggle between Denise and Mouret to define the purpose of the store and the disorientation of Gervaise when beholding the scale of Haussmannization or in the crowded boulevards beyond her district. In Houellebecq it is the theory of the duel economies of *Extension* and *Les Particules* or the world outside Jed’s country estate in *La Carte*.

In a statement closely approximating to that of the character Michel Houellebecq in *La Carte* whilst also utilising the metaphor of shreds in that novel when alluding to late capitalism’s elusive, scattered form, Baguley reports Zola as stating that the naturalist novel is merely a shred of existence and the novelist […] ‘un greffier qui se défend de conclure’.[[629]](#footnote-629) The character Michel Houellebecq in *La Carte* similarly renounces conclusions in his fictions, reflecting that novel’s concern for an author’s ability to represent reality within late capitalist society. In also declaring himself in favour of juxtaposition over narration the fictional Michel Houellebecq appears to validate the application of the tipping point as a concept proposing no linearity but one recognising limitless components, contingencies and other agents of change, following no simple trajectory.

In Chapter Six and Seven the excesses of capitalism manifested in *L’Assommoir* differ from those in *La Carte*. In *L’Assommoir* provides a representation of those encountered and suffered by the protagonist Gervaise in a Parisian working-class district, from whose streets vast physical and economic change is visible. *La Carte* relates the excesses of late capitalism in a twenty-first century France, focusing upon the global art market and parallel rapid economic and cultural change. The concerns of the two writers are also seen to overlap in Zola’s naturalism and the aspiration ofJed in *La Carte* to *rendre compte*,to produce a faithful representation of the world. The realisation of Jed’s ambition appears to constantly evade him and in later years his work evolves from an earlier celebration of the products of industry and their creators to the filming of the accelerated decomposition of consumer goods and the symbolic overwhelming of humanity by vegetation. Once more, Houellebecq interweaves art, writing and capitalism in a parallel process of change. The novel focuses upon the ability of the artist and writer to create meaning within a late capitalist market and the appropriation of its participants, whilst providing no resolution.

The seemingly pre-determined existence of Gervaise is shown not to be defined by any ‘tare’ but the insuperable odds with which she and her neighbours contend in order to survive. The proletariat are presented as isolated by a physically absent bourgeoisie and seemingly immobilised by a fatalism which renders them incapable of questioning the forces directing the trajectories of their existence. However, a rapidly changing Paris driven by capitalist enterprise, will provoke change within the Goutte d’Or with or without the compliance of the population.

Zola’s attempt to apply scientific method to fiction as represented in the ‘tare hérèditaire’ is exceeded by the complexity and excesses of the society he is attempting to describe, in this instance those imposed by capitalism. The Macquart susceptibility to drink is not the cause of the downfall of Gervaise, but the combined pressures of an accumulation of factors overwhelming a determination and spirit which, in a class and milieu less vulnerable to the laws of capitalism, may have seen Gervaise prosper. Any suggestion that these ills are simply due to the ‘tare’or the idleness of her class is seen to be unsustainable. Zola is implicitly compelled to concede that the processes of change render the trajectory of the novel beyond the will of the author, including any attempt to deliver a theory. Zola anticipates proto-postmodern characteristics, in privileging narrative and structure over the definitive ‘thèse’. Zola admits the impossibility of any writer comprehending all the agents of change and therefore that of a definitive conclusion. Zola’s recognition of the impossibility of reconciling the theory of naturalism and its supposed scientific basis with scientifically unclassifiable contingencies such as the humane instincts of Gervaise, may contribute to his jettisoning his naturalist theory in favour of ‘romans à thèse’such as *Travail*.

In the final Chapter, *La Carte* reflects upon the limits of both art and fiction to represent change when operating within a capitalist market as well as representing the phenomenon of late-capitalist excess. It does so in featuring an artist protagonist operating within late capitalism’s elite whilst exploring and interrogating representational practices in art and fiction and the contingent in process. Both the protagonist Jed and the character Michel Houellebecq are aware of their appropriation within late capitalism and each of them attempts to varying degrees to seek refuge from it. The scale of the challenge to create meaning, to *rendre compte*, within neoliberal society is shown to be problematic. The idea of the ‘pas de côté’, first suggested in *Interventions*as a means of briefy detaching oneself from the publicity machine of late capitalism, is seen to be ineffective. In consequence, Houellebecq self-reflexively calls into question his own fiction, reminding the reader, as implied in *Extension*, of the need for the reader to treat any message or meaning in fiction with caution. Jed’s ambition to represent the world whether in photographing its manufactured products, its trades and professions, through Michelin maps or finally, abstract film is both excessive and ultimately unrealisable. In Jed, Houellebecq appears to embody his observation in *Interventions* that representation has lost all its innocence (I, 72). However, whilst Houellebecq’s representation of the challenges faced by the cultural producer when attempting to describe late capitalism offers no resolution, the potential of fiction to represent the excesses of late capitalism survives.

Throughout this study, the tipping point as a critical concept, when applied to fiction or grand narrative, has been shown to challenge the authority and intention of the writer attempting to represent society. This is particularly the case when writing at periods of rapid economic change. The tipping point has been discussed as a concept or metaphor that eludes definition yet harmonises with fictional writing attempting to make sense of change. When applied to the works of Zola and Houellebecq, the tipping point has been shown to assist with both a comprehension of the processes of change in the writer’s respective eras as well as the structural and symbolic roles of the tipping point in literature and the representation of change. The two authors share inconsistencies in their striving to tell their stories, to create meaning, whether in Zola’s desire to ‘attain omniscience, to pin down the whole truth, symptomized in the fissures, contradictions and ambiguities of his writings’,[[630]](#footnote-630) or Houellebecq’s complex self-reflexivity. Both resort to science as a source of reality with which to infuse their representations. Houellebecq also reveals science and scientists to be equally vulnerable to market influence and their solutions to be treated with the same scepticism as that of grand narratives when offered in fiction. In examining the struggle of art to represent, in illustrating the imbrication of the cultural producer in capitalist and neoliberal societies, in juxtaposing its excesses within the everyday whilst failing to provide a conclusion, Houellebecq suggests the qualified potential of fiction to represent the excesses of late capitalism. Similarly, Zola recognises the impossibility of containing lived experience within a novel, rendering his representation of reality in the three novels studied in this thesis all the more powerful.

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<<http://tippingpointsproject.org/2013/03/07/how-the-financial-crisis-changed-the-world/#comments>> [accessed 13 March 2013]

Woodmansee, Martha, and Mark Osteen, eds., *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of Literature and Economics* (London: Routledge, 1999)

1. Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (London: Abacus, 2001). Henceforth referred to as *The Tipping Point*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gladwell refers to the‘Tipping Point’ as a proper noun. Henceforth, all references to Gladwell’s phrase will maintain that format to distinguish it from references to the tipping point used in this thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Gladwell, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Metlink, Royal Meteorological Society, <http://www.metlink.org/climate/ipcc-updates-for-a-level-geography/tipping-points/> [accessed 20 December 2018].Unusually, the opening summary of this article includes the statement: ‘The tipping point event may or may not be reversible.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cambridge Dictionary, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/tipping-point> [accessed 16 December 2018] [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A full discussion of the phrase ‘point de bascule’takes place in Chapter One. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Zola, *Germinal* (Paris: Charpentier, 1885). All references to *Germinal* are to *Les Rougon-Macquart*, III, ed. by Henri Mitterand (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1964). *Les Rougon-Macquart* is a twenty volume series, commencing with *La Fortune des Rougon* (Paris: Charpentier, 1871) and ending with *Le Docteur Pascal* (Paris: Charpentier, 1893). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Zola, *Au Bonheur des dames* (Paris: Charpentier, 1883). All references to *Au Bonheur des dames* are to *Les Rougon-Macquart*, III, ed. by Henri Mitterand (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1964). Henceforth the short title *Au Bonheur* will be used. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Zola, *L’Assommoir* (Paris, Charpentier, 1877). Henceforth, all references to *L’Assommoir* are to *Les Rougon-Macquart*, II, ed. by Henri Mitterand (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1961). [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Houellebecq, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (Paris: Maurice Nadeau, 1994). Henceforth, the short title of *Extension* will be used and page references will be denoted (EDL)*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998). Henceforth, the short title of *Les Particules* will be used and page references denoted (PE). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010). Henceforth, the short title of *La Carte* will be used and page references will be denoted (CT). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. The phrase ‘Les Trente Glorieuses’ was first used by the economist Jean Forastié in *Les Trente Glorieuses, ou la révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975* (Paris: Fayard, 1979) to describe the strong sustained growth over that period which was only to be slowed by the oil crisis of 1973. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Consistent with the tipping point’s recognition of the in-process nature of language, the definition of ‘Consumerism’ has been evolving over the decades. *Le Petit Robert* (Paris, Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1996) defines it as: ‘Protection des intérêts du consommateur par des associations’. This is also the predominant interpretation in the article of George S. Day and David A. Aaker ‘A Guide to Consumerism’, *Journal of Marketing*, 3, (July, 1970) pp.12-19. However, the authors discuss the alternative definition, offered by Vance Packard, *The Waste Makers* (New York: David McKay, 1960) p.23 who links the term ‘with strategies for persuading consumers to quickly expand their needs and wants by making them “voracious, compulsive and wasteful”’. Day and Aacker stress the dynamic past of consumerism and that it ‘continues to evolve and change at an increasingly rapid rate’, p.14. The Collins dictionary (Glasgow, Harper Collins, 2017) gives both defintions: ‘1 the belief that a high level of consumer spending is desirable and beneficial to the economy; *the obsessive consumerism of the 80s*  2 the protection of the rights of consumers.’ The Oxford English Dictionary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) ignores consumer protection: ‘the buying and selling of goods and services; the belief that it is good for society or as an individual person to buy and use a large quantity of goods and services’. In this thesis, consumerism is interpreted as in the latter definition. Consumer science, as defined below is proposed as the science sustaining that belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Emile Chabal, ed., *France since the 1970s, History, Politics, Memory in an Age of Uncertainty* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), James McMillan, *The Short Oxford History of France: Modern France*. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Larry Duffy, ‘Networks of Good and Evil: Michel Houellebecq’s Fictional Infrastructures’, 49, *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 211-25. Duffy asks ‘whether, like Zola […] Houellebecq can be seen to be constructing a totalizing epistemological account of his age’, p. 224; Schlomo Sand, *La fin de l’intellectuel français? De Zola à Houellebecq* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016). Sand is a historian and addresses a number of French Intellectuals from an historical perspective, concentrating upon antisemitism and islamophobia, in relation to which the positions of Zola and Houellebecq are argued to illustrate their contrasting intellectual stature. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Both definitions were obtained from: <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/late_capitalism>> [accessed 12 November 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. <<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/capitalism>> [accessed 12 November 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. The underlying complexity and adaptability of these systems contribute to the challenges for Zola and Houellebecq in describing their impact upon their societies. David Harvey describes neoliberalism as confused and incoherent. This is consistent with capitalism’s sharing elements of the tipping point, particularly its indefinability, contingency and constant evolution. <<http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/42553-left-out-david-harvey-on-marx-capital-and-the-madness-of-economic-reason>> [accessed 12 November 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Michel Houellebecq, *Interventions* (Paris: Flammarion, 1998) and Michel Houellebecq, *Interventions 2* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009) which re-produces much of the first publication. Both are collections of essays and poetry. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Consumer Science, as this thesis proposes, was already developing in the Parisian *magasins de nouveautés* of the early nineteenth century which were the forerunners of the department store. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Zola, *Son Excellence Eugène Rougon*, ed. II, Ebauche, p. 1498. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. The following definition of science fiction is offered: ‘a class of prose narrative which assumes an imaginary technological or scientific advance, or depends upon an imaginary and spectacular change in human environment […] the destruction of the world as a result of its own technological achievements has been a favourite theme. But the scientific element is often ancillary to an inquiry into the nature of man and his behaviour.’ *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p.734. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. John McCann, *Michel Houellebecq, Author of Our Times* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2010), p. 64, argues that Houellebecq ‘wants us to take science fiction seriously’ and that his fiction has affinities with the subgenre ‘hard sf [science fiction]’. The definition ‘hard sf is science fiction that gets the science right’ is taken from Kathyrn Cramer’s ‘Hard Science Fiction’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Science Fiction,* ed. by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.186-196. However, Cramer nuances her definition, stating ‘What science gives to hard sf is a body of metaphor that provides the illusion of both realism and rationalism […] science is used as a mythology’, p. 188. The possibility that rationality and realism are only an illusion leads McCann to conclude that science is a belief system. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. The term ‘soft science’ will refer to those subjects claiming scientific status but which are not proven. Psychoanalysis, a favourite target of Houellebecq, falls into the latter category. The extent to which Houellebecq’s training as an agronomist has a bearing on this distinction may be a subject for further study. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Excess resulting from capitalism is manifested in many forms in the six novels: The child miners in *Germinal*, the fate of Gervaise in *L’Assommoir*, the shoplifting by bourgeois customers in their insatiable consumption in *Au Bonheur*. For Houellebecq, excess is the impact of late capitalist policies on love and society in *Extension* and *Les Particules*. In *La Carte* it is also the commodification of French culture and the appropriation of artists and writers within the market. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. The theory of the ‘tare héréditaire’is proposed by Prosper Lucas in *Traité philosophique et physiologique de ‘l’hérédité naturelle dans les états de santé et de maladie du système nerveux* (Paris: J.B. Baillière,1847-50). Lucas proposed that all personality traits are inherited. The lack of scientific proof for this theory did not prevent Zola applying it in the *Rougon-Macquart*,where he arguably manipulated it for the purposes of plot in highlighting his character’s negative inherited qualities. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Harvey, pp.125-40, details the boom and bust of the Parisian property market. *L’Assommoir* commences during a severe decline in that market and at its end witnesses the boom of the Second Empire. However, the troops of workers Gervaise witnesses entering the city in the novel’s opening scene and those leaving at the novel’s close, as she attempts to prostitute herself, have not changed. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. xviii-xxi. Although Jameson refuses to define postmodernism, he does link some of its characteristics with late capitalism. Jameson proposes that the phrases postmodernism and late capitalism are interchangeable. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Georg Lukács, ‘The Zola Centenary’, *Studies in European Realism* (London, The Merlin Press, 1972), pp. 85-96. Lukács, whilst considering Zola in a capitalist context intent upon ‘mirroring the humdrum reality of capitalism’ (p. 93), argues Zola to have departed from such objectivity. Lukács describes the huge tensions in Zola’s attempt to apply the demands of naturalism. Lukács is unambiguous in his conclusion: ‘It was only because he could not always consistently adhere to his own programme that Zola could ever come to be a great writer’ (p. 91). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Michel Houellebecq, *La Possibilité d’une île* (Paris: Fayard, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. F.W.J. Hemmings, *Émile Zola* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1953), pp. 130-37. Hemmings describes Zola abandoning realist or naturalist writing for the *roman à thèse*. This may have been due to the waning popularity of naturalism but may also be linked to a greater scepticism towards science. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. The Project website states: ‘The Tipping Points Project, funded by The Leverhulme Trust, provides the Institute of Hazard, Risk and Resilience (IHRR) with an opportunity to provide a fresh and original exploration of a term increasingly used to describe the world in which we live. The relevance of understanding how tipping points occur could not come at a better time, as countries recover from near or complete financial collapse and as ecological devastation due to climate change continues to grow in scale. If there are examples of systems that tip, then it will require a fundamentally different approach to the way in which we live.’ The project will be examined below. <<http://www.dur.ac.uk/ihrr/tippingpoints/introduction/>> [accessed 21 April 2012] [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See Harvey, ‘Paris, Capital of Modernity’. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Respectively: *Plateforme* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001) and *La Possibilité d’une île*. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See Ruth Cruickshank, *Fin de Millénaire French Fiction: The Aesthetics of Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), which ‘analyses the currency of the model of crisis as a turning point in both theoretical and fictional approaches at a time when the cultural dominant is perceived to be a putative postmodern aesthetics of crisis without end’ (p. 4). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Morton M. Grodzins, *The Metropolitan Area as a Racial Problem* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1958), p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. -----, ‘Metropolitan Segregation’, *Scientific American,* 1974 (October 1957), 33-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Thomas C. Schelling, ‘Models of Segregation’, *American Economic Review*, 59 (2) (1969), 488-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Reference to the Tipping Point as a proper noun is continued here in order to highlight the dictionary interpretation as reflecting Gladwell’s concept and therefore inconsistent with the notion of the tipping point proposed in this thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. <http://www.dur.ac.uk/ihrr/tippingpoints/introduction/> [accessed March 20 2012]. The Leverhulme Tipping Point programme, discussed below, took data from the ISI Web of Knowledge to form a striking graph of usage of the term in academic titles and abstracts from 1957 to 2009 showing an exponential rise occurring around 2005-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959). [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) Second edition, online version, March 2012. <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/202387> [accessed 2 April 2012] [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. *Oxford Dictionaries online* http://oxforddictionaries.com/ [accessed 12 February 2012] [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. *Le Petit Robert* (Paris, Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1996). [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. *Le Grand Robert de la Langue Française* (Paris, Dictionnaires Le Robert, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Francis Pisani, [www.scoop.it/t/docteur-smartphone/p/3200778/tendances-et-points-d-inflexion(tipping](http://www.scoop.it/t/docteur-smartphone/p/3200778/tendances-et-points-d-inflexion(tipping) points) Transnets – Blog Le Monde.fr. 25 August 2011 [accessed 24 April 2012] [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. [www.frenchtoday.com/blog/learn-more-french-computer-terms](http://www.frenchtoday.com/blog/learn-more-french-computer-terms) [accessed 24 June 2018] [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. *Le Petit Robert* (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1993). [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. The project is discussed below. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Dubbed ‘Climategate’ by the press, following allegations by anti-climate change lobby groups that Climate Change scientists at the University of East Anglia had been selective in their use of data which did not support the argument for the existence of man-made climate change. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. Including science and economics, two major themes to be fully explored in later chapters. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Malcolm Gladwell, ‘Tipping Points’, *The New Yorker*, 3rd June, 1996. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid., [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Gladwell, pp. 59-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid., pp. 30-59. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. Ibid., pp. 70-88. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. Ibid., pp. 89-132. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. The Hush puppy is a casual suede shoe originally introduced in the 1960s. The campaign in 1996-97 by the manufacturers Wolverine Worldwide Inc., increased sales eleven-fold from a niche popularity to a world-wide fashion item. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. Gladwell, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Steve. D. Levitt and Stephen Williams, *Freakonomics: A Rogue Economist Explores The Hidden Meaning of Everything* (New York: William Morrow, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. John J., Donohue III and Steven D. Levitt, ‘Legalized Abortion and Crime’, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 116 (2) (2001), pp. 379-420. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. Christopher L. Foote and Christopher F. Goetz, ‘The Impact of Legalized Abortion on Crime: Comment,’ *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* (2008) 123 (1) pp. 407-423. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. JSTOR contains one article on Gladwell’s book: Daxton R. Stewart, ‘The Language of Change: General Semantics and Malcolm Gladwell’s ‘The Tipping Point’, *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, Vol.,61, April 2004, pp. 111-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. Debra Jones Ringold, ‘Expertise: People Will ‘‘Get It’’ If It Is Worth Getting’, *American Marketing Association*, 25, March, 2006. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* (New York: The Free Press, 1962). [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Durham University refer to the project as the Tipping Points project. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. <http://www.dur.ac.uk/ihrr/tippingpoints/introduction/> [accessed 21 April 2012] [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. ‘Work Package 4’ as this element is called, is managed by Professor David Greatbatch. This work package seeks to understand the textual and discursive resources and strategies used by journalists, government spokesmen and politicians, including how Tipping Points can become enacted and performed over time. Researchers will also assess Gladwell's hypotheses about the Tipping Point metaphor as well as how a globalised world is influencing and changing the way the term Tipping Point is used. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. http://ihrrblog.org/2011/05/11/the-tipping-point-of-the-tipping-point-metaphor/ [accessed 5 May 2012] [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Paul Mason, *Why Its Kicking Off Everywhere: The New Global Revolutions* (London, Verso, 2012). Podcast of his discussion of his book at Birkbeck College, University of London, 17 March, 2012: <Backdoorbroadcasting.net/2012/03/paul-mason-in-conversation> [accessed 28 August 2012] [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*. Lukács criticised Zola’s reluctance to make overt political statements in his work and attributed this to Zola’s bourgeois background and sympathies. Zola’s naturalist school was based upon the application of scientific observation in fiction and the theory did not countenance the explicit expression of personal or political opinions. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity*. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Ibid., p. 1. My italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Pierre Bourdieu, *Sur la Télévision; suivi de L’Emprise du journalisme* (Paris: Raisons d’agir, 1996), p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. F.W.J. Hemmings, *Émile Zola* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 38.  [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Brian Nelson, ‘The Cambridge Companion to Zola’ (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.1. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. ----, Sandy Petrey, ‘Zola and the representation of society’, p.40. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Émile Zola, *La Fortune des Rougon,* Zola’s Preface (1871). [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, p. xix. Jameson attributes the origin of the term to the ‘Frankfurt School’ in pre- and post-Second World War Germany, who saw it as exemplified in excessive social control on the parts of big government and big business, but that it was also used by other writers after the war and later popularized in Ernest Mandel’s *Late Capitalism* (London: Humanities Press, 1975).

    Ibid., p. xix. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. Ibid., p. xix. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Ibid., p. xix. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Frédéric Beigbeder, *99 francs (14.99€)* (Paris: Gallimard, 2000), p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Jean Fourastié, *Les Trente Glorieueses* *ou la Révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975* (Paris: Fayard, 1979), p. 28.

    Fourastié describes the piecemeal appropriation of the population into the consumer society. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. See Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonisation and the Reordering of French culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996) for an account of late capitalist change within post-war France. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. John Horne, ‘The Transformation of Society’, *The Short Oxford History of France: Modern France*,ed. by James McMillan (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p.144. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Pierre Bourdieu, *Contre-feux: Propos pour servir à la résistance contre l’invasion néolibérale* (Paris: Raisons d’agir, 1998), p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. John Horne, ‘The Transformation of Society’, *The Short Oxford History of France: Modern France*, p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. Ibid., p. 146. Horne states that despite university and secondary education reform, in 1977 fifty per cent of national wealth resided with 10 per cent of the population. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. This economic region embraces the developed economies of the West but also of the Far East. It does not yet include the developing economies of the so-called ‘BRIC’ nations (Brazil, Russia, India and China). [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. James Lovelock, *The Vanishing Face of Gaia* (New York: Basic Books, 2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Jerry Varsava, ‘Utopian Yearnings, Dystopian Thoughts: Houellebecq’s The Elementary Particles and the Problem of Scientific Communitarianism,’*College Literature*, Fall, 2005, pp. 145-67 <http:/findarticles.com> [accessed 8 April 2012] [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. The phrase was coined by James Carville, a Clinton strategist during the 1992 presidential campaign. [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Cruickshank, *Fin de Millénaire French Fiction*, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
99. Pierre Bourdieu, *Contre-feux 2*, p. 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. The Leverhulme Programme remarked that ‘metaphors shape the behaviour of the people who use them’ and ‘they change the way a story is told’. http://ihrrblog.org/2011/05/11/the-tipping-point-of-the-tipping-point-metaphor/ [accessed 5 May 2012] [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. *Germinal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p. 41. Henri Mitterand cited by André Wurmser. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
102. Étienne is the son of Gervaise Macquart, the protagonist of Zola’s *L’Assommoir* (1877). [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
103. Chantal Pierre-Gnassounou, ‘Zola and the Art of Fiction’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Emile Zola* (2007), p. 87. This article argues that far from being a question of placing his research and observation into novel form, Zola had from the planning stage modified or ignored these facts, even adding ‘illusion’. Not the ‘intensity of illusion’ to which Sandy Petrey refers in *Realism and Revolution: Balzac, Stendhal, Zola and the Performances of History*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1988), pp. 1-15, but that of Saccard in *La Curée*, of Octave Mouret in *Au Bonheur des dames*; a creative master who fools his clients. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. Ibid., p. 92. This assertion is considered below. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. David Baguley ,‘Germinal: The Gathering Storm’ in *The Cambridge Companion to Emile Zola*, pp. 137-51.

     Philip Walker, ‘Zola and the Art of Containing the Uncontainable’, in *Zola and the Craft of Fiction*, ed. by Robert Lethbridge and Terry Keefe (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1990), pp. 28-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Lukács, p. 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Ibid., pp. 40-1. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Émile Zola, *Correspondence*, ed. by Bard Bakker *et al,* I, 380 (Montreal: Presses universitaires de Montréal, 1978-). [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Émile Zola, *Œuvres complètes*, X, 139, ed. by Henri Mitterand (Paris, Cercle du livre précieux, 1966-70). [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Walker, p. 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Henri Mitterand, *Carnets d’ Enquêtes: Une Ethnographie Inédite de la France*, ed. by Henri Mitterand (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Baguley, p. 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Petrey, ‘The Revolutionary Setting of Germinal’, *The French Review*, 43 (October 1969), pp. 54-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
114. Ibid., p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
115. Gareth Steadman Jones, *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto* (London: Penguin Books, 1967), p. 5. Marxism is a materialist theory seeking, via the framework of communism, the removal of exploitation, the abolition of private property and the transfer of ownership to the people of the means of production. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
116. Brian Nelson, *Zola and the Bourgeoisie* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), p. 2 provides a quotation from Hobsbawm’s *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875* (London: Abacus, 1977),p. 391*,* giving a Marxist definition of the bourgeois: ‘…economically, the quintessential bourgeois was a ‘capitalist (i.e. either the possessor of capital, or the receiver of an income derived from such a source or a profit-making entrepreneur, or all of these things). And, in fact, the characteristic ‘bourgeois’ or member of the middle class in our period included few people who did not fit into one or other of these pigeon holes.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
117. Steadman Jones, p.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
118. Ibid., p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
119. Naomi Schor, *Zola’s Crowds* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 1977), in which she considers that in his mythical staging of *Les Rougon-Maquart*, class conflict was not contemplated by Zola. Schor stating that ‘The class struggle between the bourgeois and the workers is not the stuff of myth’, p.122. [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
120. See Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity* pp. 78-80 for an analysis of the origins of French socialism and *Germinal* Vol., III, note 1381, p. 1920 for a note on socialist factionalism in 1880s France. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
121. Baguley, ‘*Germinal*: The Gathering Storm’, p. 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
122. André-Marc Vial, ‘*Germinal*’ *et le socialisme de Zola* (Paris: Editions sociales, 1975), p.44. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
123. Steadman Jones, p. 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
124. Ibid., p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
125. Émile Zola, *L’Argent* (*Les Rougon-Macquart*, V, ed. by Henri Mitterand (Paris : Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1967. The main protagonist, Saccard, leaves bankruptcies and suicides in the wake of his grandiose financial dealings, yet not all his ambitions are fruitless. Zola’s admiration for imagination and leadership, for the life force they represent, is voiced by Mme Caroline: ‘Ah! la joie d’être, est-ce qu’au fond il en existe une autre? La vie telle qu’elle est, dans sa force si abominable qu’elle soit, avec son éternel espoir!’ (V, 397). [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
126. Lukács, p. 93. [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
127. *Germinal* (G, III, 1482), where Souvarine deflates Étienne and Rasseneur’s socialist ambitions for the French worker by recounting the response of a worker from Marseille who having won the lottery: ‘acheté de la rente, en declarant qu’ils allaient vivre sans rien faire! ... Oui, c’est votre idée, à vous tous, les ouvriers français, déterrer un trésor, pour le manger seul ensuite, dans un coin d’égoisme et de fainéantise.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
128. André Wurmser, in his préface to *Germinal* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), p. 28 cites Zola’s opinion of the Commune: ‘la bête exaspérée et lâchée’ and the bloodbath that followed ‘une horrible nécessité.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
129. Wurmser, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
130. Baguley, from Zola’s summary of *Germinal* in his ébauche. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
131. Baguley, p. 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
132. Lukács, p. 85. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
133. Petrey, ‘The Revolutionary Setting of Germinal’, p. 57, makes a similar point, cross-referencing literature and reality. The characters Étienne, Souvarine and Ranvier, are all historically based upon various radical types encountered in mid nineteenth-century France. They enter the fiction of *Germinal* ‘before retreating back into the anonymous multitude preparing doom.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
134. Sandy Petrey, ‘The Revolutionary Setting of Germinal’, p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-134)
135. Ibid., p. 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-135)
136. Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of the Species* (London, John Murray, 1859) [↑](#footnote-ref-136)
137. See p. 325 of S. S. Schweber, ‘The Genesis of Natural Selection – 1838, Some Further Insights’, *BioScience*, 5, May 1978, pp. 321-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-137)
138. John Farley, ‘The Initial Reactions of French Biologists to Darwin’s ‘Origin of Species’, *Journal of the History of Biology*, 7 (Autumn, 1974), pp. 275-300. [↑](#footnote-ref-138)
139. Ibid., p. 275. Farley defines ‘*l’évolution*’ more fully at p. 277 quoting E. Chauffard’s ‘De la finalité dans les êtres vivants et de l’évolution’ (1877) in ‘*La vie, études et problèmes de biologie générale*’ (Paris, 1878), p. 391. Chauffard states that it ‘is the regular and predetermined ascension of beings with the purpose of reaching a superior type, it is the progressive ascension of animality towards humanity’. Farley’s quotation from Chauffard is in English. [↑](#footnote-ref-139)
140. See Jonathan Hodge, “Revolution” and “Evolution”, *Journal of the History of Biology*, 38 (Spring, 2005), pp. 101-121. Hodge attacks the ‘evo-revo’(evolution versus revolution) stasis of the last hundred and fifty years, challenging the vocabulary of the debate and suggesting that Darwinist argument has been dominated by social ideologies on which Marxists have revised their opinion as to the social influencers of Darwinist theory and secondly that a Darwinian ‘worldview’ exists reflecting a narrow Victorian perspective. [↑](#footnote-ref-140)
141. The term was first used in Herbert Spencer’s *Principles of Biology*, 2 vols (London: Williams and Norgate, 1864, 1867). [↑](#footnote-ref-141)
142. Zola (Paris: Charpentier, 1873). [↑](#footnote-ref-142)
143. See Farley. [↑](#footnote-ref-143)
144. Nelson, ‘Zola and the Nineteenth Century’, *The Cambridge Companion to Zola*, ed. by Brian Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-144)
145. E .D. Mackerness, ‘Zola, Wells and ‘The Coming Beast”, *Science Fiction Studies*, 8:2 (July, 1981), pp. 143-48. [↑](#footnote-ref-145)
146. Nelson, *Zola and the Bourgeoisie,* p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-146)
147. Ibid., p.23 in a chapter entitled ‘Leadership’ in which Nelson presents Zola’s views expressed in an article in ‘La République et la littérature’, *Revue Bleu,* 25 April 1879, reprinted in *Œuvres complètes,* X, 1830. [↑](#footnote-ref-147)
148. In his preface to *Germinal*, Gallimard 1979 edition, pp. 7-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-148)
149. Ibid., p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-149)
150. Ibid., p. 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-150)
151. See Farley. [↑](#footnote-ref-151)
152. This may also be a rare occurrence of self-reflexivity on the part of Zola, with both reader and character struggling with their respective texts. [↑](#footnote-ref-152)
153. *Germinal,* ‘un galop de bétail mitraillé’ (III, 1509). Even the miners cages rise and fall up the mine to the signal: ‘sonnant à la viande’ (III, 1153). ‘Mme Hennebeau […] se destraire à ce role de montreur de bêtes’(III, 1223). [↑](#footnote-ref-153)
154. Steadman Jones, p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-154)
155. Liesbeth Korthals Altes,‘Persuasion et ambiguïté dans un roman à thèse postmoderne’ (*Les Particules élémentaires*) in *Michel Houellebecq,* ed. by Sabine van Wesemael (Amsterdam-New York: Rodolpi, 2004), pp. 29-45; Marie Redonnet, ‘La Barbarie postmoderne’, *Art Press*, 244 (March 1999), pp. 59-64 (p. 60); Pierre Jourde, ‘Les particules élémentaires’, *Hesperis*, 2 Autumn 1998, pp. 95-103 (p.102); Philipe Forest, ‘Le Roman, le Rien, *Le Nihilisme en Habits Neufs*’, A*rt Press*, 244 (March 1999), pp. 49-58 (p. 55); Guillaume Bridet, ‘Michel Houellebecq et les montres molles’, *Littérature*, 151 (September, 2008), pp. 6-20.

     Olivier Bessard-Banquy, ‘*Les Particules élémentaires*: Roman génial ou bricolage douteux ?’ *Hesperis*, 2 (1998), 91-93 (p.92). [↑](#footnote-ref-155)
156. See Ruth Cruickshank, ‘Sex, Shopping and Psychoanalysis: Houellebecq and Therapy,’in *Le Monde de Houellebecq,* ed. byGavin Bowd (Glasgow: French and German Publications, 2006), pp. 199-212. Cruickshank argues that the theory is maintained through subsequent novels. [↑](#footnote-ref-156)
157. The narrator writes short stories, apparently for his own entertainment, whose protagonists are animals. [↑](#footnote-ref-157)
158. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 3. The IT industry is identified as of ‘intense interest’ to neoliberalism in bringing ‘all human action into the domain of the market’. [↑](#footnote-ref-158)
159. The other occasion being *Extension*, p. 67. Where the narrator witnesses the death of a customer in a supermarket which closes with: ‘Il était dix-huit heures vingt’. [↑](#footnote-ref-159)
160. Cruickshank, *Fin de Millénaire French Fiction*. [↑](#footnote-ref-160)
161. Ibid., p. 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-161)
162. Guillaume Bridet, ‘Michel Houellebecq et les montres molles’ *Littérature*, 151 (September 2008), pp. 6-20. [↑](#footnote-ref-162)
163. Robert Dion and Elizabeth Haghebaert, ‘Le cas de Michel Houellebecq et la dynamique des genres littéraires.’ *French Studies*, LV (October 2001), pp. 509-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-163)
164. Douglas Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and its Aftermath* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 152-162. [↑](#footnote-ref-164)
165. Sandrine Schianno-Bennis, ‘Relents dix-neuvièmistes dans l’œuvre romanesque de Michel Houellebecq’ *Le Monde de Houellebecq* (see Bowd, above), pp. 129-42. [↑](#footnote-ref-165)
166. Ibid., p. 135. [↑](#footnote-ref-166)
167. Ibid., p. 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-167)
168. Carole Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-168)
169. Ibid., pp. 42-3, citing Slavoj Žižek, *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce* (London, Verso, 2009) p. 139 and Catherine Chaput, ‘Rhetorical Circulation in Late Capitalism: Neoliberalism and the Over-determination of Affective Energy’, *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, 43 (2010), pp. 1-25. [↑](#footnote-ref-169)
170. Mads Anders Baggesgaard, ‘The Complexities of Honesty: On the Prose of Michel Houellebecq’, *Le Monde de Houellebecq* (see Bowd, above), pp. 159-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-170)
171. Ibid., p. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-171)
172. The character Michel Houellebecq in *La Carte* declares to Jed ‘j’en ai à peu pres fini avec *le monde comme narration* […] Je ne m’intéresse plus qu’ au *monde comme juxtaposition –* celui de la poésie, de la peinture.’ (CT, 258-9). Houellebecq’s italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-172)
173. Baggesgaard, p. 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-173)
174. Houellebecq’s italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-174)
175. Houellebecq’s italics. Claude Bernard was a physiologist and pioneer in instilling experimental objectivity in science and is one of the chief sources of inspiration for Zola’s naturalist movement.He is best known for his *Introduction à l’étude de la médecine expérimentale* (Paris: J.B.Baillières, 1865). [↑](#footnote-ref-175)
176. Steadman Jones, *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto*. The words ‘struggle’ and ‘fight’ are frequently used in parts of the *Communist Manifesto*. For example, in the opening sentence of the section ‘Bourgeois and Proletarians’ which states: ‘The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles […] constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.’ p. 213. [↑](#footnote-ref-176)
177. Ibid., p. 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-177)
178. Jonathan Sperber, *Karl Marx, A Nineteenth Century Life* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2013) pp. 145-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-178)
179. Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto*, p. 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-179)
180. Ibid., p. 235. [↑](#footnote-ref-180)
181. While the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’ was not originally used in Darwin’s *On the Origin of the Species* he did not disagree with Herbert Spencer’s attributing it to his theory. Darwin later used the phrase in *The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication* (London: Murray, 1868) p.17. [↑](#footnote-ref-181)
182. Michel Houellebecq ‘Le mot ‘déclin’ est presque trop doux’, *Valeurs Actuelles*, 31 octobre 2018, pp. 21-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-182)
183. Ibid., p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-183)
184. Claude Debru, ‘Ré-examen du darwinisme’ *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Etranger*, SEXTUS EMPIRICUS PASCAL FICHTE (Paris: Presses Universitaires, octobre-décembre 1993) pp. 705-715. [↑](#footnote-ref-184)
185. Ibid., p. 712. [↑](#footnote-ref-185)
186. Ibid., p. 713. [↑](#footnote-ref-186)
187. Ibid., p. 715. A similar remark might also have been made of Zola’s selective use of his own research in representing change. [↑](#footnote-ref-187)
188. Ibid., p. 714. [↑](#footnote-ref-188)
189. Henri Lefebvre, *La Vie quotidienne dans le monde moderne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968) and George Perec, *Les Choses* (Paris: Julliard, 1965) in which Levebvre responds from a Marxist position. [↑](#footnote-ref-189)
190. George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (Secker and Warburg, 1945). [↑](#footnote-ref-190)
191. Houellebecq’s italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-191)
192. Sweeney, p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-192)
193. *Extension*, pp. 137-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-193)
194. Sweeney, refers to *The Communist Manifesto* (London: Polity Press, 2008) [1948] p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-194)
195. Ibid., p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-195)
196. Ibid., p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-196)
197. Ibid., p. 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-197)
198. Sperber, pp. 145-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-198)
199. Ibid., p. 147. In short, the essence of the species is to provide labour. [↑](#footnote-ref-199)
200. Misogyny occurs, in the depiction of the conversation of the women behind whose couch the narrator lies in the opening party scene (EDL, 5-7) and racism in the narrator’s descriptions of ‘un jeune Noir’ a ‘métis’ at the disco, whom the narrator and Tisserand agree to murder, along with the attractive white woman he has paired off with. See Baggesgaard, ‘The Complexities of Honesty: On the Prose of Michel Houellebecq, in ‘*Le Monde de Houellebecq’*; Pierre Jourde, ‘Les Particules élémentaires’; Marie Redonnet, ‘La Barbarie postmoderne’ [↑](#footnote-ref-200)
201. Franz Kafka, *Metamorphosis*, originally published in German as *Die Verwandlung* (Leipzig, 1915). [↑](#footnote-ref-201)
202. George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (London: Warburg, 1945). [↑](#footnote-ref-202)
203. Jean de La Fontaine (1621-1695), author of Fables and *Contes*. Amongst the fables, many of which were based upon those of Aesop, are the celebrated ‘*La Cigale et la Fourmi*’, ‘*Le Coq et le Renard*’ and ‘*L’Âne vêtu de la peau du lion*’. [↑](#footnote-ref-203)
204. Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (London, Thomas C. Newby, 1847). [↑](#footnote-ref-204)
205. Gustave Flaubert (Paris: Michel Levy Frères, 1857). [↑](#footnote-ref-205)
206. Sandrine Rabosseau, ‘Michel Houellebecq, un romancier “néo-naturaliste,”’ *Le Monde de Houellebecq* (see Bowd, above), p. 105, cites *Les Inrockuptibles,* hors-série Houellebecq, 27 mai 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-206)
207. *Mickey-Parade*, re-named *Mickey Parade* *Géant* in 2002 (Paris: Disney Hachette Presse) is a bi-monthly children’s comic strip based upon the Disney character Mickey Mouse. [↑](#footnote-ref-207)
208. John Gray, *Men Are from Mars, Women are from Venus* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-208)
209. Émile Zola, *Le Roman expérimental* (Paris: Charpentier, 1902). This work is henceforth referred to as ‘*Le Roman*’and abbreviated as ‘RE’. [↑](#footnote-ref-209)
210. For example: Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola* (London: Methuen, 1985). David H. Walker, *Consumer Chronicles: Cultures of Consumption in Modern French Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011) and Walker’s: ‘Shopping and Fervour: Modern Literature and the Consumer Society’, *French Studies*,LVIII (2004), pp. 29-46. [↑](#footnote-ref-210)
211. Zola, *Au Bonheur des dames* (*Les Rougon-Macquart*, III, ed. by Henri Mitterand (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1964). All references are from this edition. The novel is henceforth referred to as *Au Bonheur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-211)
212. For the purposes of this chapter, science is defined as ‘the intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behaviour of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment’. <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/science> [accessed 16 January 2015] [↑](#footnote-ref-212)
213. A definition of scientific method is provided below in the section on science in nineteenth-century France. [↑](#footnote-ref-213)
214. The twentieth century is invoked in *Au Bonheur des dames* (AB, III, 728) [↑](#footnote-ref-214)
215. An unconventional aspect relates to her having arrived by train. [↑](#footnote-ref-215)
216. Walker, *Consumer Chronicles, Cultures of Consumption in Modern French Literature*. [↑](#footnote-ref-216)
217. Ibid., p.162. [↑](#footnote-ref-217)
218. Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (London: The Merlin Press, 1972), pp. 85-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-218)
219. Ibid., p. 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-219)
220. Ibid., p. 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-220)
221. Hemmings, pp. 109-10. This desire to dominate, may be prosecuted by Zola’s attempt to make of naturalism the final word in the evolution of the novel, just as Mouret’s project seeks to build the definitive *magasin* and dominate Paris. Philip Walker, ‘Zola and the Art of Containing the Uncontainable’ discusses what Zola named ‘monamour de l’absolu’ or as Walker terms it ‘an unending quest for angelic knowledge.’ p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-221)
222. David Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-222)
223. However, given Zola’s previous declarations of loyalty to Taine’s philosophy of criticism, the latter is surprisingly unacknowledged by Zola in *Le Roman experimental.* Comte is addressed below. [↑](#footnote-ref-223)
224. Bernard’s principles by which Zola sets such store are contained in Bernard’s *Leçons de physiologie expérimentale appliqué à la médicine faits au College de France* (Paris: J.B. Baillière, 1855-6). These lessons later formed the basis of Bernard’s *Introduction* *à l’étude de la médecine expérimentale* (Paris: J.B. Baillière, 1865). [↑](#footnote-ref-224)
225. Philip Walker, ‘The Mirror, The Window and The Eye in Zola’s Fiction’, 42, *Yale French Studies* (1969), pp. 52-67, p. 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-225)
226. Zola (Paris: Lacroix, 1867). [↑](#footnote-ref-226)
227. H. Mitterand, *Introduction to Thérèse Raquin* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970), p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-227)
228. Larry Duffy, *Le Grand Transit Moderne* (Amsterdam-New York: Rodolpi, 2005), pp. 125-52. [↑](#footnote-ref-228)
229. The Initial Reactions of French Biologists to Darwin’s ‘Origin of Species’. [↑](#footnote-ref-229)
230. John A. Evenhuis, ‘Zola’s Conversion to Science: An Allegorical Study of Le Vœu d’une morte’, *Nineteenth Century French Studies*, 23(Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-230)
231. Philip Walker, p. 30, [↑](#footnote-ref-231)
232. Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché, Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store 1869-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). [↑](#footnote-ref-232)
233. See Philip Walker, p. 28-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-233)
234. In his preface to *La Fortune des Rougon* in *Les Rougon-Macquart* (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1960-67), I, p. 3, Zola declares it to be ‘l’Histoire naturelle et sociale d’une famille sous le Second Empire’. In the preface he sets out his intention to study the ‘accidents nerveux et sanguins qui se déclarent dans une race, à la suite d’une première lésion organique, et qui déterminent, selon les milieux, chez chacun des individus de cette race, les sentiments, les désirs, les passions, toute les manifestations humaines, naturelles et instinctives’. [↑](#footnote-ref-234)
235. *The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, ed. by Allan Bullock and Stephen Trombley (London: Harper Collins, 1999), p.775. [↑](#footnote-ref-235)
236. Zola says of Taine: ‘Je puis dire que j’ai appliquée dans mes livres sa théorie sur l’héredité et sur les milieux’ Interview in *Le Figaro*, 6 March, 1893. [↑](#footnote-ref-236)
237. See Hemmings, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-237)
238. Susie Hennessy, ‘Consumption and Desire in *Au Bonheur des dames*’, *The French* *Review*, 81 (2008), pp. 696-706. This article is of particular interest in showing the early manifestations of the psychological pressures of consumerism upon the consumer, such as the link between desire and deprivation and women becoming the *matiére premiére* necessary for the machine’s operation ( p.705). The *democratisation de luxe* desired by Denise, promised by science, fails to be delivered. An autocracy prevails instead. [↑](#footnote-ref-238)
239. Hannah Thompson, ‘‘Une Perversion du Désir, Une Névrose Nouvelle’: Female Sexuality in Zola’s *Au Bonheur des dames’, Romance Studies*, 32, 1998, pp. 81-92. [↑](#footnote-ref-239)
240. Bowlby, p. 74 cites *Au Bonheur*, III, 612. [↑](#footnote-ref-240)
241. Ibid., p. 75 cites *Au Bonheur*, III, 425. [↑](#footnote-ref-241)
242. Walker, pp. 155-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-242)
243. Ibid., p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-243)
244. Ibid., p.165. [↑](#footnote-ref-244)
245. Philip Walker, in his ‘Zola and the Art of Containing the Uncontainable’, p.33, remarks upon Zola’s having employed, in addition to ‘the purely scientific vision of reality, itself unstable and constantly expanding’, his parallel, unscientific identities of philosopher and poet. [↑](#footnote-ref-245)
246. *Le Roman expérimental*, p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-246)
247. [↑](#footnote-ref-247)
248. Bernard, *Introduction à l’étude de la médecine expérimentale*. [↑](#footnote-ref-248)
249. *Œuvres complètes*, X, 1240. [↑](#footnote-ref-249)
250. *Émile Zola: Œuvres Complètes,* ed. Henri Mitterand (Paris: Cercles du Livres Précieux, 1966-9, X, 1175. [↑](#footnote-ref-250)
251. Baguley cites Zola’s denial at having invented the term: ‘Mon Dieu! Oui, je n’ai rien inventé, pas même le mot naturalisme’. Zola goes on to attribute it to several sources including Montaigne and Hippolyte Taine. See Volume XIV, p.510 of *Émile Zola: Œuvres Complètes,* ed. Henri Mitterand (Paris: Cercles du Livres Précieux, 1966-9, 15 vols. [↑](#footnote-ref-251)
252. The general consensus as to the credibility of Zola’s naturalism has been damning. For example see: Hemming, pp.109-37, Baguley, *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision*; Chantal Pierre-Gnassounou, ‘Zola and the Art of Fiction’, *The Cambridge Companion to Emile Zola* (2007) pp. 86-104. [↑](#footnote-ref-252)
253. Hemmings, p. 24. [↑](#footnote-ref-253)
254. Ibid., p. 122, Hemmings alleges Zola is insincere with respect to the scientific element of naturalism suggesting Zola admitted that it was good publicity and an easy label as, in Zola’s words it ‘smacked agreeably of the laboratory and the dissecting chamber’. He also benefited in publicity terms from the ‘dupes’ who spent so much effort in refuting the idea. [↑](#footnote-ref-254)
255. Joris-Karl Huysmans is one of the Medan school of naturalist writers who associated with its leader, Zola, at the latter’s home at Medan near Paris. [↑](#footnote-ref-255)
256. Baguley, p. 50, cites *Œuvres complètes de J.-K. Huysmans, II* (Paris: Crès,1928), pp. 149-92. First published in *L’Actualité*, Brussels*,*1877. [↑](#footnote-ref-256)
257. Bernard, *Introduction à l’étude de la médecine expérimentale*, p. 197. [↑](#footnote-ref-257)
258. *An Examination of Les Rougon-Macquart*, ed. by Mitterand (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1964) ‘La Pléiade’ edition containing extensive notes of Mitterand and extracts from *Les Ébauches* of Zola on *Au Bonheur,* reveals no deliberations on the application of scientific method . [↑](#footnote-ref-258)
259. Walker, *Consumer Chronicles*, pp. 155-67. [↑](#footnote-ref-259)
260. Zola, *Pot Bouille* (Paris: Charpentier, 1882). [↑](#footnote-ref-260)
261. Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*. [↑](#footnote-ref-261)
262. Ibid., p. 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-262)
263. Philip Walker, ‘Zola and the Art of Containing the Uncontainable’, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-263)
264. Ibid., p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-264)
265. Ibid., p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-265)
266. Ibid., p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-266)
267. *Au Bonheur*,III, 452. [↑](#footnote-ref-267)
268. David Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, p.255. [↑](#footnote-ref-268)
269. See Alfred Cobban, *A History of Modern France* (London: Penguin Books, 1961) pp. 119-20 and 163-67.

     Henri Saint-Simon, was a philosopher and early socialist. He argued for a meritocratic society, governed by scientists and industrialists, for the benefit of the poorer classes. [↑](#footnote-ref-269)
270. Cobban also rehearses the philosophy of Saint-Simon and that theorist’s confidence in those possessing *les capacités* and rejection of *les classes parasitaires*. For a fascinating discussion showing Saint-Simon’s influence upon Michel Houellebecq, see Bruno Viard, *Les Tiroirs de Michel Houellebecq* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013) pp. 60-68. [↑](#footnote-ref-270)
271. See Chapter 2 and Étienne’s fragmentary reading of Darwin in *Germinal*. [↑](#footnote-ref-271)
272. Jules Michelet, *L’Amour* (Paris: Hachette, 1858). [↑](#footnote-ref-272)
273. Jules Michelet, *La Femme* (Paris: Hachette, 1860). [↑](#footnote-ref-273)
274. Prosper Lucas, *Traité philosophique et physiologique de ‘l’héredité naturelle dans les états de santé et de maladies du système nerveux*, 2 vols, 1847-50 contained unscientific speculation on the influence of heredity upon individuality and was read by Zola (see Hemmings p. 39). [↑](#footnote-ref-274)
275. Hippolyte Taine, *Introduction à l’histoire de la littérature anglaise* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1936). Taine is a critic and historian, and contemporary of Zola. Physiology, a well-established science, appears in the *Rougon-Macquart* in the form of the *tare héréditaire*. [↑](#footnote-ref-275)
276. Hemmings, p., 133. [↑](#footnote-ref-276)
277. Auguste Comte, *Cours de Philosophie Positive*, 1830-42 (Paris: A. Coste, 1908). [↑](#footnote-ref-277)
278. Naturalism is examined below. [↑](#footnote-ref-278)
279. Lester Ward, *The Outlines of Sociology* (New York: Macmillan, 1898). [↑](#footnote-ref-279)
280. By complexity is meant the limited application of mathematic proof applicable to these sciences. [↑](#footnote-ref-280)
281. Émile Zola, *Œuvres complètes*, X, 1188-9, ed. Henri Mitterand (Paris, Cercle du livre précieux, 1966-70). [↑](#footnote-ref-281)
282. Reference to the institution of the *phalanstère* recurs in *Au Bonheur*. The *phalanstère* is a nineteenth-century phenomenon comprising a distinctly shaped building designed to contain a self-sustaining society run on a socially progressive or utopian basis. They were inspired by the views of Charles Fourier. Zola’s *Travail* contains an example. [↑](#footnote-ref-282)
283. AB, III, 434, 761, 763. [↑](#footnote-ref-283)
284. Baguley, in *Naturalist Fiction: The Entropic Vision*, p. 58, cites Dr. René Ferdas, ‘one of the disciples of Claude Bernard’ who, in *La Physiologie expérimentale et le ‘Roman expérimentale’. Claude Bernard et Monsieur Zola* (Paris: Hurtau, 1881),claims: ‘M. Zola n’a pas compris un traître mot du livre de Claude Bernard.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-284)
285. Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché, Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store 1869-1920*. [↑](#footnote-ref-285)
286. Miller, p. 182-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-286)
287. Steadman Jones, *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels: The Communist Manifesto*,p. 12. Marx was considered to be the creator of ‘scientific’ socialism. [↑](#footnote-ref-287)
288. Hemmings p. 140, suggests that Jules Michelet’s *L’Amour* (1858) and *La Femme* (1860)inspired Zola’s ‘reverence’ for science. Michelet’s theory is illustrated in Zola’s *Madeleine Férat* (1868). It influenced several other Zola works, including *L’Assommoir* (1877) where Gervaise, married to Coupeau, is powerless to resist the advances of her first lover, Lantier. [↑](#footnote-ref-288)
289. Hemmings, p. 39, cites an epigraph to *Thérèse Raquin*. [↑](#footnote-ref-289)
290. Letter on his poem *Paulo* 25 juin, 1860, see G. Robert, ‘Trois textes inédits d’Émile Zola’, *Revue des Sciences humaines*, 51 (Paris: Librairie José Corti, I948), pp.181-207 (p.182). [↑](#footnote-ref-290)
291. Farley, p. 275. [↑](#footnote-ref-291)
292. Paul White and Emily Ballou, ‘Science, Literature and the Darwin Legacy’, *19 : Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in the long Nineteenth Century*, No.11 <http://19.bbk.ac.uk/index.php/19/issue/archive> p. 13 [accessed 8 October 2012] [↑](#footnote-ref-292)
293. Examples of allusions to Darwin in *Au Bonheur* are: Baudu gestures towards Mouret’s store: ‘ces sauvages qui se massacraient entre eux avec leur lutte pour la vie’ (AB, III, 410), Mouret considers the commission system ‘qui créait entre les commis une lutte pour l’existence […] laisait les gros manger les petits’ (AB, III, 421), ‘les faibles qui se laissaient manger par les forts’ (AB, III, 534), the nightmare of Denise ‘en voyant les fauvettes manger les araignées, qui elles-mêmes mangeaient les mouches […] cette lutte pour la vie qui faisait pousser les êtres sur le charnier de l’éternelle destruction’ (AB, III, 747). In a similar observation Denise ponders ‘l’œvre invincible de la vie qui veut la mort pour continuelle semence’ (AB, III, 760) and finally Mouret ponders his own state: ‘Il était emporté par le jeu de la machine […] de la voracité qui, de bas en haut, jetait les maigres à l’extermination des gras’ (AB, III, 774). [↑](#footnote-ref-293)
294. Letter of 14 March 1869 from Darwin to JFT Müller. Darwin apologises for a slow response to a scientific question inferring that the delay is due to the rapidity of change on the subject in question. [↑](#footnote-ref-294)
295. See the above quotation by Zola of the end result of scientific method: ‘nous rendre maîtres de la nature.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-295)
296. That future is invoked in the context of the relief fund she establishes for redundancy and retirement: ‘C'était l’embryon des vaŝtes sociétés du vingtième siècle (AB, III, 728). [↑](#footnote-ref-296)
297. AB, III, 434. [↑](#footnote-ref-297)
298. Bowlby, pp. 74-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-298)
299. Ibid., pp. 71-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-299)
300. Miller, p. 24, where the challenges facing the visitor to early nineteenth-century boutiques are listed. [↑](#footnote-ref-300)
301. Ibid., p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-301)
302. Ibid., pp. 61-63. [↑](#footnote-ref-302)
303. Ibid., p., 166-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-303)
304. Harvey pp. 134-135 describes the speculation and overturning of traditional forms of landownership supporting Haussmann’s transformation of Paris whilst concentrating ownership within a small group of capitalists, who were in turn supported by a ‘phalanx of financiers’ p.134. [↑](#footnote-ref-304)
305. Ibid., pp. 142-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-305)
306. Miller, p., 188-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-306)
307. Ibid., p.184. [↑](#footnote-ref-307)
308. Ibid., p.180. [↑](#footnote-ref-308)
309. Ibid., p.180. [↑](#footnote-ref-309)
310. Thorsten Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class* (London: Unwin Books, 1970). [↑](#footnote-ref-310)
311. Rosalind H. Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press: 1982), pp. 91-94. [↑](#footnote-ref-311)
312. Ibid., p.9. In pp. 5-6, Williams also examines the origins of the word ‘consumption’. She provides the Latin phrase ‘cum summa’ and translates this as ‘to make the sum’. Of relevance to the tipping point and consumerism is her suggestion that the Latin phrase may also be interpreted as ‘to carry to completion’ to ‘terminate in perfection’. However, in this thesis consumption, as encouraged by consumer science, is argued to offer completion to the consumer’s desires whilst failing to deliver any such sense of definitive satisfaction. [↑](#footnote-ref-312)
313. Ibid., p.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-313)
314. Hardy estimates that ten percent of Parisians lived off unearned incomes, controlling seventy per cent of the wealth, p. 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-314)
315. Honoré de Balzac, *La Comédie humaine* (Paris: Revue de Paris, 1842). [↑](#footnote-ref-315)
316. Balzac, *La Cousine Bette* (Paris: Boniface, 1846). [↑](#footnote-ref-316)
317. Williams, pp. 52-53. Balzac reveals the illusion of prestige and identity afforded by mass-produced goods for, in this scene the luxury lies in the uniqueness of the articles on display, which are ‘not vulgarized by two thousand opulent shopkeepers.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-317)
318. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*: *A Lyric Poet in the High Era of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-318)
319. Ibid., p.34. [↑](#footnote-ref-319)
320. Ibid., see pp. 36-37 where Benjamin addresses the figure of the *flâneur* , ‘the gentleman of leisure’, in the context of the contemporary fashion for physiology. The *flâneur* is described as implicitly bourgeois (only the bourgeois and aristocratic classes possessed the leisure to stroll and observe), seeking relief from a boredom ‘that easily arises under the baleful eyes of a satiated reactionary regime’ p.37. [↑](#footnote-ref-320)
321. Ibid., p. 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-321)
322. Ibid., p. 36. The arcades date from the early 1820s, famous examples being the Passage de l’Opéra and Passage Vivienne. [↑](#footnote-ref-322)
323. Ibid., p. 157-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-323)
324. Ibid., 55. Benjamin refers to Marx’s light-hearted references to the soul of the commodity. [↑](#footnote-ref-324)
325. Aimée Boutin, ‘Rethinking the Flâneur : Flânerie and the Senses, *Dix-Neuf*, 16, July 2012, pp. 124-32, https://doi.org/10.1179/dix.2012.16.2.01. [↑](#footnote-ref-325)
326. Miller, p. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-326)
327. The phrase ‘Supply creates its own demand’ is attributed to the French economist Jean-Baptiste Say (1767-1832). [↑](#footnote-ref-327)
328. J.-K.Huysmans, *À Rebors* (Paris: Flammarion, 2004), p. 52. [↑](#footnote-ref-328)
329. Bowlby, p. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-329)
330. Williams, p. 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-330)
331. Bowlby, p. 1 quoting Guy Debord. [↑](#footnote-ref-331)
332. Ibid., p.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-332)
333. Hamon, Philippe, *Littérature et architecture au XIX siècle* (Paris: José Corti, 1989), p. 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-333)
334. Hamon, p. 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-334)
335. Ibid., p. 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-335)
336. Ibid., p.98. [↑](#footnote-ref-336)
337. Hardy, p. 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-337)
338. Marketing developed as a profession in the mid nineteenth century, particularly in response to the demands for turnover of stock required by the *grand magasin* and to shift the often excess quantity of mass produced goods. Au *Bonheur* replicates many of the marketing policies of the Bon Marché department store reviewed in Miller. [↑](#footnote-ref-338)
339. Colette Becker ‘Zola, écrivain-homme d’affaires’, *Revue* *d’Histoire littéraire de la France*,No. 4 (octobre-décembre 2007), pp. 825-833 in which Becker describes Zola’s commercial and marketing acumen, developed at Hachette from 1862 to 1866. [↑](#footnote-ref-339)
340. Ibid., p. 825 quoting from *Le Roman expérimental*, *O.C*, t. X, p.1259. [↑](#footnote-ref-340)
341. Ibid., p. 827. [↑](#footnote-ref-341)
342. Zola, *Contes à Ninon* (Paris: Hertzel and Lacroix, 1864). [↑](#footnote-ref-342)
343. Becker, p. 826. [↑](#footnote-ref-343)
344. Susan Porter Benson, *Counter Cultures: Salewomen, Managers, and Customers in American Department Stores 1890-1940* (Champaigne: University of Illinois Press, 1986). [↑](#footnote-ref-344)
345. By ‘philosopher scientist’ is meant those non-scientists, such as Taine who embraced and applied Comte’s positivist methodology to their own milieu in order to rationally determine phenomena. [↑](#footnote-ref-345)
346. Bowlby, pp. 79-80. [↑](#footnote-ref-346)
347. Bowlby, p. 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-347)
348. Thompson, ‘Une Perversion du Désir, Une Névrose Nouvelle’. [↑](#footnote-ref-348)
349. Thompson, p. 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-349)
350. Ibid., p. 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-350)
351. Miller, p. 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-351)
352. Ibid., p.189. [↑](#footnote-ref-352)
353. Joshua Ramey, *The Politics of Divination: Neoliberal Endgame and the Religion of Contingency* (To be published Autumn 2014). See recording of his presentation of 16 July 2014 at Senate House, London: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O93vFGN7VTI>> [accessed 8 October, 2014]. Philip Mirowski, *Never Let a Serious Crisis Go to Waste: How Neoliberalism Survived the Financial Meltdown* (New York: Verso, 2013).

     William E. Connolly, *The Fragility of Things: Neoliberal Fantasies, Democratic Activism, and Self-Organizing Systems* (Duke University, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-353)
354. Alternatively put, neoliberalism’s survival of the market collapse of 2008 has been attributed by the above economists, amongst others, to its having attained a state of un-impeachability. [↑](#footnote-ref-354)
355. Co-founder of the Arts and Crafts movement in the 1850s and influenced by John Ruskin’s writings such as *The Stones of Venice* (London: Smith, Elder & Co. 1851-3). A chapter of that work entitled *The Nature of Gothic* whose preface Morris wrote, is pertinent to both Zola and Houellebecq. At page ii Morris writes: ‘Science has in these latter days made such stupendous strides, and is attended by such a crowd of votaries, many of whom are doubtless single-hearted, and worship in her not the purse of riches and power, but the casket of knowledge, that she seems to need no more than a little humility to temper the insolence of her triumph, which has taught us everything except how to be happy.’ [↑](#footnote-ref-355)
356. David Walker, p. 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-356)
357. Ibid., p. 156. [↑](#footnote-ref-357)
358. The sciences may be defined as follows: ‘Pure science’ includes chemistry, physics and biology. Sciences such as sociology and psychology are referred to as ‘soft’ sciences. So-called *New Age* sciences comprising spiritual beliefs and religious practices are not accepted as science as, in common with the soft sciences, they are not based upon repeatable experimentation, demonstration or proof. [↑](#footnote-ref-358)
359. Cruickshank, ‘Sex, shopping and psychoanalysis: Houellebecq and therapy,’pp. 199-212.

     Jerry Varsava, ‘Utopian Yearnings, Dystopian Thoughts: Houellebecq’s *The Elementary Particles* and the problem of Scientific Communitarianism’, pp. 145-66; Jack I. Abecassis, ‘The Eclipse of Desire: L’Affaire Houellebecq’, *MLN*, 115 (2000), pp. 801-26; Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and its Aftermath*. [↑](#footnote-ref-359)
360. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-360)
361. Whilst its definition is disputed, the theory was an attempt to explain society in terms of competition and the survival of the fittest. Social Darwinism assumes that human nature is unchangeable and that *homo sapiens* behaves along similar lines to animals. Post Nazi Germany, there are few proponents of Social Darwinism. [↑](#footnote-ref-361)
362. A view repeated by Stephen Hawking in 2011 at Google's *Zeitgeist Conference*. In a discussion bearing marked similarities to that of the final pages of *Les Particules*, Hawking declared that "philosophy is dead". He explained his belief that philosophers "have not kept up with modern developments in science". He argued that [philosophical problems](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_unsolved_problems_in_philosophy) can be answered by science. ‘Steven Hawking: Heaven is a fairy tale for people afraid of the dark’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 17 May 2011. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/science/stephen-hawking/8515639/Stephen-Hawking-heaven-is-a-fairy-story-for-people-afraid-of-the-dark.html> [accessed 14 September 2016] [↑](#footnote-ref-362)
363. *The Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). [↑](#footnote-ref-363)
364. The narrator illustrates the three successive *mutations* that have occurred to date: Christianity, science and then genetics, each replacing the other (PE, 7-8 and 314). [↑](#footnote-ref-364)
365. The prologue’s statement that a ‘mutation métaphysique’ has occurred will be seen to be in contradiction of Hubczejak’s declaration in the epilogue that ‘LA MUTATION NE SERA PAS MENTALE, MAIS GÉNÉTIQUE’ (PE, 314). This announcement in the epilogue, in removing any reference to the metaphysical, limits the change to the biological, the result of pure science delivered by consumer science and subverting the intentions of Michel, who had wanted to create a race which would preserve the ability to love. [↑](#footnote-ref-365)
366. Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1932). [↑](#footnote-ref-366)
367. This catalogue, in hard copy format in *Les Particules*,but now on line, sells mainly women’s middle-of-the-road fashion and household items. <http://www.3suisses.fr/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-367)
368. Respective examples would be Physics, psychoanalysis and marketing. [↑](#footnote-ref-368)
369. Abecassis, ‘The Eclipse of Desire: L’Affaire Houellebecq’, p. 814. [↑](#footnote-ref-369)
370. The report contained extensive research into human sexual response from the late 1950s to the early 90s. Their first report being W. H. Masters and V.E. Johnson, *Human Sexual Response* (New York: Bantam Books, 1966). [↑](#footnote-ref-370)
371. Abecassis, p. 814-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-371)
372. Ibid., p. 814. [↑](#footnote-ref-372)
373. Ibid., p. 802. [↑](#footnote-ref-373)
374. Ibid., p. 807. [↑](#footnote-ref-374)
375. McCann, *Michel Houellebecq, Author of Our Times*, p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-375)
376. Michel Houellebecq, ‘Sortir du XX ͤ siècle’, *Nouvelle Revue Française*, no. 561 (April, 2002), pp. 117-121, [↑](#footnote-ref-376)
377. Ibid., p. 120. [↑](#footnote-ref-377)
378. McCann, p. 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-378)
379. Scientific communitarianism refers to a scientifically created communal society, such as that of the post humans in *Les Particules*. [↑](#footnote-ref-379)
380. Varsava, p. 146. [↑](#footnote-ref-380)
381. Ibid., p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-381)
382. Ibid., p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-382)
383. Whilst pp. 152-3 relate to the Zola and Houellebecq comparison, Varsava’s treatment of determinism recurs throughout the article. [↑](#footnote-ref-383)
384. Ibid., p. 153 [↑](#footnote-ref-384)
385. Nicolas Bourriaud, Jean-Yves Jouannais and Jacques-François Marchandise. ‘An interview with Michel Houellebecq: ‘I Have Little Faith in Freedom.’’ trans. by Dawn M. Cornelio, *Sites: Journal of Twentieth-Century/Contemporary French Studies* 3.2: 242-52, 1999. [↑](#footnote-ref-385)
386. Michel Houellebecq and Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Public Enemies* (London, Atlantic Books, 2012), p. 111. Published as *Ennemis Publics* (Paris: Flammarion Grasset, 2008), the book is a collection of letters between the authors. Both writers are considered , in Houellebecq’s words, to be ‘des individus assez méprisables’ by much of the French public, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-386)
387. Sweeney p. 165. However, this thesis would point to the pattern of contradictions in many of Houellebecq’s interviews and those sown self-reflexively in several novels, further demonstrating the impossibility of a clear conclusion. [↑](#footnote-ref-387)
388. Cruickshank, ‘Sex and Shopping’, p. 199. [↑](#footnote-ref-388)
389. Ibid., p. 207. [↑](#footnote-ref-389)
390. Ibid., p. 212. [↑](#footnote-ref-390)
391. Cruickshank, *Fin de Millénaire*, p. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-391)
392. Ibid., p. 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-392)
393. Ibid., p. 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-393)
394. Cruickshank, *Fin de Millénaire,* p. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-394)
395. Ibid., p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-395)
396. Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Impostures intellectuelles* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-396)
397. [↑](#footnote-ref-397)
398. ‘Science’ here represents pure science and the ‘social sciences’ fall into the category of the soft sciences. Kuhn adds ‘progress’ to the other distinguishing characteristic of pure science on grounds of the controlled repeated experimentation that pure science requires. [↑](#footnote-ref-398)
399. Ibid., p. 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-399)
400. Ibid., p.170. Kuhn’s italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-400)
401. Guy Debord, *La Société du spectacle* (Paris: Buchet-Chastel, 1967). [↑](#footnote-ref-401)
402. Cruickshank, *Fin de Millénaire French Fiction,* p. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-402)
403. Ibid., p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-403)
404. John Dupré, *Humans and Other Animals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002). [↑](#footnote-ref-404)
405. Ibid., p. 166, in Morrey p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-405)
406. John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta, 2003). [↑](#footnote-ref-406)
407. This discussion will be developed below in the section on Darwinism. [↑](#footnote-ref-407)
408. Gray, p. xiii in Morrey p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-408)
409. *Germinal*, III, p. 1591. [↑](#footnote-ref-409)
410. Ibid., III, p. 1591. [↑](#footnote-ref-410)
411. Significantly, Kuhn does not believe science is evolving towards anything but rather *away* from something. See Scientific American interview with Thomas Kuhn <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/cross-check/what-thomas-kuhn-really-thought-about-scientific-truth/> [accessed: 8 December 2015] [↑](#footnote-ref-411)
412. The inability of the average person in the Global North to fashion their own everyday objects is pursued in other Houellebecq novels, such as *Plateforme* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001), pp. 217- 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-412)
413. Morrey, pp. 156-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-413)
414. Cultural evolution concerns the directed evolution of human nature rather than the pursuit of a trajectory towards race or class based perfection, as in Social Darwinism. Morrey believes the recognition by Houellebecq of the necessity for what would be equivalent to a mass religious conversion in order to accelerate humanity’s evolution to be ‘one of the most far-reaching insights in all of Houellebecq’s work’ p. 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-414)
415. John Gray, *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Humans and Other Animals* (London: Granta, 2003), p. 14. See Morrey p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-415)
416. Cruickshank, *Fin de Millénaire French Fiction,* p. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-416)
417. John Dupré, *Humans and Other Animals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), p. 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-417)
418. Morrey, p. 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-418)
419. The phrase refers to the L’Oréal cosmetics advertisement written in 1973 and its fame has prompted debate as to its place in the history of consumer science, narcissism and feminism. [↑](#footnote-ref-419)
420. *Le Petit Robert* (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1993).The French word ‘mutation’ does not carry the negative connotations of the English word. [↑](#footnote-ref-420)
421. Michael C. Behrent, ‘Justifying Capitalism in an Age of Uncertainty: L’Association pour la Liberté Économique et le Progrès Social, 1969-73’, *France since the 1970s, History, Politics and Memory in an Age of Uncertainty*, p. 176. Raymond Barre was Prime Minister 1976-7and from the centre-right. [↑](#footnote-ref-421)
422. France itself has the fourth largest pharmaceutical industry in the world and is the world’s largest consumer of pharmaceutical products per capita, <<http://www.finesco-medica.com/industry.html> > [accessed 14 May 2015]

     Michel’s sexual fantasies as a young researcher were provoked occasionally by young saleswomen ‘de grands laboratoires pharmaceutiques’ (PE, 122). [↑](#footnote-ref-422)
423. See Morrey pp. 136-7 and the debate on free will and determinism which has been discussed above. [↑](#footnote-ref-423)
424. Cruickshank, *Fin de Millénaire French Fiction*, p. 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-424)
425. This renders more significant the absence of any reference to love in the clone’s poem at pp. 295-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-425)
426. Cruickshank, ‘Sex, shopping and psychoanalysis’, pp. 199-212. [↑](#footnote-ref-426)
427. It is interesting to note a possible error here on Houellebecq’s part in relating that the ‘processus de destruction se poursuit de nos jours’ when it is supposed to be a post human narration from a future, perfected society. [↑](#footnote-ref-427)
428. Morrey, p. 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-428)
429. Ibid., p. 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-429)
430. Ibid., p. 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-430)
431. Ibid., p. 153. My italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-431)
432. Morrey, p. 153. [↑](#footnote-ref-432)
433. Cruickshank, *Fin de Millénaire French Fiction*, p. 138. [↑](#footnote-ref-433)
434. Ibid., p. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-434)
435. Mark Bridge, ‘Facebook to prioritise “personal moments” over adverts’, *The Sunday Times*, January 12 2018. The article discusses Facebook’s Mark Zuckerburg’s response to customer concerns over the preponderance of adverts on Facebook and his intention to prioritise communications between family and friends.<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/personal-moments-prioritised-as-facebook-overhauls-news-feed-8qx3w08x0> [accessed 4 February 2018] [↑](#footnote-ref-435)
436. Cruickshank, *Fin de Millénaire*, p. 139. [↑](#footnote-ref-436)
437. Émile Zola, *La Curée* (*Les Rougon-Macquart*, I, ed. by Henri Mitterand (Paris : Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1960). [↑](#footnote-ref-437)
438. Zola in interview with Civis Massilae, *Le Gaulois,* 25 April 1890 in Dorothy E. Spiers and Dolorès A. Signori, eds., *Entretiens Avec Zola*, (Ottawa: Les Presses de l’Université d’ Ottawa, 1990), pp.61-64. [↑](#footnote-ref-438)
439. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines ‘excess’ as ‘departure from custom and reason’, ‘the action of overstepping, intemperance, violence of passion’, ‘going beyond (one’s rights, decency)’ (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959). [↑](#footnote-ref-439)
440. Freidrich Engels, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* Karl Marx, (London: J.E Burghard, 1848). References are from Steadman Jones, *Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, The Communist Manifesto*. [↑](#footnote-ref-440)
441. Karl Marx, *Das Kapital, Kritik der Politischen Ӧkonomie,* (Hamburg: Verlag von Otto, 1867). A French edition followed in 1872, five years before *L’Assommoir*. In *L’Argent*, p. 283: Sigismond describes *Das Kapital* as ‘notre Bible’. [↑](#footnote-ref-441)
442. *L’Argent*, p.41. [↑](#footnote-ref-442)
443. Saccard is the main character of *L’Argent* and is an entrepreneur operating on an almost global scale. Sigimund is a minor character, an idealist and the brother of an unscrupulous businessman. [↑](#footnote-ref-443)
444. *L’Argent*, p.283. Saccard jokingly asks Sigismond if Marxism will work. Sigismond, oblivious to Saccard’s tone, responds: ‘En théorie, parfaitement!’. [↑](#footnote-ref-444)
445. Steadman Jones, p. 224, citing *The* *Communist Manifesto* (hereafter ‘*TCM’*). [↑](#footnote-ref-445)
446. Ibid., p. 222, citing *TCM*. [↑](#footnote-ref-446)
447. Ibid., p. 222, citing *TCM*. [↑](#footnote-ref-447)
448. This event is dealt with in full below. [↑](#footnote-ref-448)
449. A professional washerwoman. Zola’s choice of profession for Gervaise is not original. In fact Henri Mitterand suggests that ‘La blanchisseuse est une figure à la mode’, already evoked by the Goncourts in *Manette Salomon* (Paris: Charpentier, 1867). Henri Mitterand, ed. *Carnets d’Enquêtes, Une Ethnographie Inédite de la France,* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1986), p.416. [↑](#footnote-ref-449)
450. Plum brandy. [↑](#footnote-ref-450)
451. These correspond broadly to the conditions stated by Marx as necessary for the function of capitalism: the satisfaction of basic needs, leaving a surplus income. [↑](#footnote-ref-451)
452. William Gallois, *Zola: The History of Capitalism* (Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2000). Although Gallois does not include *L’Assommoir* in the eight novels he examines, he refers to it as a novel on consumption, p. 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-452)
453. See Harvey, Chapter 5. The ‘Crédit Mobilier’ was one of the institutions created in 1852 from the need to restore stability to the finance sector. The bankers Rothschild and Pereire, on whom Zola based his banker protagonists Gundermann and Saccard in his novel *L’Argent* of 1891. [↑](#footnote-ref-453)
454. Lilian R. Furst, *L’Assommoir, A Working Woman’s Life* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), devotes a chapter to these choices, pp. 63-96. [↑](#footnote-ref-454)
455. *Le Petit Robert*, 1996, p. 140,also refers to the phrase ‘coup d’assommoir’ and defines it as an événement soudain qui assomme, accable’. [↑](#footnote-ref-455)
456. Emile Zola. *Le Ventre de Paris* (Paris: GF-Flammarion, 1971). [↑](#footnote-ref-456)
457. William Gallois, *Zola: The History of Capitalism* (Switzerland: Peter Lang, 2000), pp. 29-40. [↑](#footnote-ref-457)
458. Ibid., p. 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-458)
459. Ibid., p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-459)
460. Ibid., p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-460)
461. Nelson, ‘Zola and the Nineteenth Century’, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-461)
462. *Les Rougon-Macquart. Histoire naturelle et sociale d’une famille sous le Second Empire*, ed. Henri Mitterand, 5 vols. (Paris: Gallimard, ‘Bibliothèque de la Pléiade’, 1960-7), II, 373-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-462)
463. David Baguley, *Emile Zola*: *L’Assommoir* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-463)
464. Ibid., p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-464)
465. M. Gaucher, “Causerie littéraire,” *Revue Bleue*, XXXV (March 14, 1885), 324. In Lucien White, ‘Zola’s Commercialism’, *The French Review*, 30 (Oct., 1956), pp. 20-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-465)
466. See Baguley, ‘Zola the Novelist(s)’ in, *Zola and the Craft of Fiction*, p. 21. Henri Barbusse, is a communist and author of the anti-war novel *Le Feu*. [↑](#footnote-ref-466)
467. Baguley, *Emile Zola*: *L’Assommoir* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) p. 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-467)
468. Sandy Petrey, ‘Goujet as God and Worker in *L’Assommoir*’, *French Forum*, 1 (September, 1976), pp. 239-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-468)
469. In the context of the plot of *L’Assommoir* excess may refer to ‘Violence of passion’, ‘Intemperance, *esp*. in eating and drinking’ and, in relation to the tipping point and ‘point de bascule’: ‘The action of overstepping (a limit), going beyond (one’s rights, decency, moderation, etc.).’ [https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/excess’[accessed](https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/excess'%5baccessed) 26 March 2018].Georges Bataille, in *La Part Maudite* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1949) argues interpretation of excess within a capitalist context as the ‘accursed share’, as the wasteful energy of capitalism, with catastrophic attempts to manage it manifested in behaviours ranging from consumerism to warfare. His theory has similarities to that in this thesis in terms of the unforeseeable impact of this energy. Bataille’s remark on class separation within society as a necessary prelude to revolution appears relevant to the sharp separation of Gervaise and her class from the bourgeoisie and consequent theoretical grounds for possible change. [↑](#footnote-ref-469)
470. Baguley, p.21, refers to Henri Barbusse, *Zola* (London: Dent, 1932), pp. 109-10. [↑](#footnote-ref-470)
471. Jacques Dubois, ‘*L’Assommoir de Zola. Société, discours, idéologie* (Paris: Larousse, 1973), pp. 116-19. [↑](#footnote-ref-471)
472. Duffy, *Le Grand Transit Moderne*, pp. 126-27. [↑](#footnote-ref-472)
473. Ibid., p. 126, citing *l’Assommoir,* II, 411-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-473)
474. Ernst Fischer, *The Necessity of Art*: *A Marxist Approach* (London: Penguin, 1963). [↑](#footnote-ref-474)
475. F.W.J. Hemmings, *The Life and Times of Emile Zola* (London: Paul Elek, 1977), p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-475)
476. Christopher Prendergast, *Paris and the Nineteenth Century (Writing the City)* (Cambridge, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 1992), p.18. [↑](#footnote-ref-476)
477. Lukács, p. 85. This form of Utopianism is exemplified in Zola’s *Travail* (1901). [↑](#footnote-ref-477)
478. Harvey, David, *Paris, Capital of Modernity*. [↑](#footnote-ref-478)
479. Ibid., p. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-479)
480. Ibid., p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-480)
481. Pierre Proudhon, *What is Property?* (New York: Humboldt, 1890). [↑](#footnote-ref-481)
482. Ibid., p. 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-482)
483. A, II, 683 [↑](#footnote-ref-483)
484. Like Gervaise, Virginie has aspirations to bourgeois status which also ultimately fail. [↑](#footnote-ref-484)
485. That process will continue in Houellebecq’s *La Carte* where the protagonist Jed will chart the continuing disappearance of trades. Other inter-textual links exist: the Parisian homeless gather in the lobby of Jed’s apartment block just as Gervaise shelters and dies under the stairs of the tenement. [↑](#footnote-ref-485)
486. Baguley, *Emile Zola*: *L’Assommoir*, p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-486)
487. Roofer, using all materials, including metals. [↑](#footnote-ref-487)
488. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations I*, section 106 (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). [↑](#footnote-ref-488)
489. Harvey devotes several chapters to the development of Paris. Most notorious was the replacement of the medieval streets, often inhabited by the poorest, with the wide avenues known today. [↑](#footnote-ref-489)
490. Harvey, p. 180, states that the population of Paris rose from 1.3 million in 1851 to nearly 2 million in 1870, ‘largely fuelled by massive immigration’ from the provinces of which Gervaise and Lantier are part. [↑](#footnote-ref-490)
491. Harvey, p. 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-491)
492. Baguley, *Emile Zola*: *L’Assommoir*, p. 12, citing *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Cercle du livre précieux, 1966-9) Volume XIV, p. 199). Henceforth abbreviated *OC* with volume and page number). These volumes contain other Zola texts. [↑](#footnote-ref-492)
493. Ibid., p. 12, citing *OC* XIV, 200. From an article in *Le Corsaire* 17 December 1872. Baguley’s text is in English. [↑](#footnote-ref-493)
494. This difference between Zola’s articles and novels has been remarked up by critics. Hemmings, p. 64, considers Zola’s journalism to be simply self-advertising. This thesis considers such a divergence not to contradict the non-determined outcomes to Zola’s novels. [↑](#footnote-ref-494)
495. Harvey, p. 170. This minimum income to ensure survival was recognized by Marx as a means to ensure compliant workers and thereby capitalist security. Georges Bataille expressed it thus: ‘La fin de l’activité ouvrière est de produire pour vivre, mais celle de l’activité patronale est de produire pour vouer les producteurs ouvriers à une affreuse déchéance.’ George Bataille, *La Notion de dépense* (Paris: Éditions Lignes, 2011), p. 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-495)
496. Gallois, p. 250, argues that Zola shows that such structures originated in pre-modern times. Such relationships as landlord and tenant and Gervaise’s own profession as laundress may be examples. [↑](#footnote-ref-496)
497. Hemmings, *Émile Zola*, p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-497)
498. Victor Hugo (Paris: A. Lacroix, 1862). [↑](#footnote-ref-498)
499. Edmund de Goncourt (Paris: Charpentier et Cie, 1888). [↑](#footnote-ref-499)
500. Hemmings, p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-500)
501. Gallois, p. 211. [↑](#footnote-ref-501)
502. Sandy Petrey, *Realism and Revolution: Balzac, Stendhal, Zola and the Performances of History* (Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 188. [↑](#footnote-ref-502)
503. Myth is present in *L’Assommoir* but does not play as obvious a role as in other novels of the *Rougon-Macquart* cycle. Whilst the subject of myth has not been developed in this chapter there are several critics who have explored its presence, notably Becker and Baguley. [↑](#footnote-ref-503)
504. Steadman Jones, p. 220 cites *TCM*. [↑](#footnote-ref-504)
505. However, Zola did not have a clear affiliation with a single party and ‘political’ in the context of Gallois should be read here as referring to Zola’s broad and sometimes passionate interest in the issues of his day. [↑](#footnote-ref-505)
506. See Harvey, *Paris, Capital of Modernity*, pp. 225-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-506)
507. Steadman Jones, p. 221. [↑](#footnote-ref-507)
508. Ibid., p. 223. [↑](#footnote-ref-508)
509. Whose name incidentally incorporates ‘L’Or’. [↑](#footnote-ref-509)
510. Harvey, p. 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-510)
511. Lantier voices hackneyed radical phrases, mentioned below. [↑](#footnote-ref-511)
512. Baguley, p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-512)
513. This invisible presence evokes the workings of capitalism via hidden contributory factors. [↑](#footnote-ref-513)
514. Ibid., p. 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-514)
515. My italics [↑](#footnote-ref-515)
516. Steadman Jones, p. 117 cites Marx’s ‘Contributionto the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Law’* in which Marx defines the proletariat as a product of ‘*industrial* development*’*, but also evidence of ‘the *drastic dissolution* of society’ and ‘the complete loss of Man’. Zola will depict dissolution whilst recognizing the countering adaptability of all society. [↑](#footnote-ref-516)
517. Steadman Jones, p. 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-517)
518. Colette Becker, *Émile Zola*: *L’Assommoir* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1994), p. 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-518)
519. Letter from Zola to Georges Montorgueil, 10 February, 1877. [↑](#footnote-ref-519)
520. Furst, *L’Assommoir, A Working Woman’s Life*, p. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-520)
521. Zola letter to Yves Guyot 10 February 1877 see Becker, p. 119. Although Zola’s extra-fictional statements appear to broadly coincide with the fictional, caution should be applied to such statements. Just as his theoretical writing on naturalism is only partly realised in his fiction, so too Zola contradicted his position for example regarding the people’s relationship with alcohol. His stated adherence to the theory of the *tare héréditaire* was also inconsistently applied to the individual novels of the cycle. [↑](#footnote-ref-521)
522. Roger Clark, *L’Assommoir* (Glasgow : University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1990), p. 65, cites an article of Louis de Fourcaud, the literary critic of *Le Gaulois*, 1876. [↑](#footnote-ref-522)
523. Ibid., p. 66 citing Vol. II: 489, *Correspondence* (Montreal: Montreal & C.N.R.S. 1978-88). [↑](#footnote-ref-523)
524. See Robert J. Neiss, ‘Remarks on the ‘‘Style Indirect Libre’’ in *L’Assommoir*’, *Nineteenth-Century French Studies*, Vol.3 (Fall-Winter 1974-5), pp. 124-135 (p. 135). Neiss identifies various inconsistencies in Zola’s use of style indirect libre in *L’ Assommoir*, for example when the speaker is not identifiable or there is discordance in the imagery and the language used. [↑](#footnote-ref-524)
525. Clark, p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-525)
526. ‘C’était la cathédrale du commerce moderne’ (A, II, 612). [↑](#footnote-ref-526)
527. One of the main protagonists in Charles Dickens’ *The Old Curiosity Shop* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1841). [↑](#footnote-ref-527)
528. Zola, *La Fortune des Rougon* (Paris: Charpentier, 1871). [↑](#footnote-ref-528)
529. *Le Petit Robert* (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1996), p. 621. [↑](#footnote-ref-529)
530. Becker, p. 85. This image is repeated in *Germinal.* [↑](#footnote-ref-530)
531. Ibid., p. 92. *Au Bonheur des dames* (III, p. 458). [↑](#footnote-ref-531)
532. Brian Nelson, in ‘Zola and the Counter-Revolution’, *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 30-2 (1993), 233-40 touches upon various symbols of circulation throughout the *Rougon-Macquart* and what Gallois p. 93, terms ‘its potential naturalizing qualities’. [↑](#footnote-ref-532)
533. Gallois, p. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-533)
534. They are foregrounded in *Germinal* via the readings of Étienne. [↑](#footnote-ref-534)
535. Steadman Jones, p. 203, Engels’ Preface to the 1883 English Edition of *The Communist Manifesto*. [↑](#footnote-ref-535)
536. Sperber, *Karl Marx, A Nineteenth-Century Life*, p. 395. The recurrence of the image of bestiality in *L’Assommoir* has already been remarked upon above. [↑](#footnote-ref-536)
537. *L’Argent*, p. 283. [↑](#footnote-ref-537)
538. *L’Argent*, p. 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-538)
539. Steadman Jones, p. 233, citing TCM. [↑](#footnote-ref-539)
540. Ibid., p. 221, citing TCM. [↑](#footnote-ref-540)
541. Steadman Jones, p. 222, citing TCM. My italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-541)
542. Gallois, p. 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-542)
543. Ibid., p. 119. This is close to the statement of the character Michel Houellebecq in Houellebecq’s *La Carte et le territoire* who states ‘je n’ai plus l’envie ni l’habitude de conclure’ (CT, 267). [↑](#footnote-ref-543)
544. This character, also named ‘Michel Houellebecq’ will be referred to henceforth by that full name and the author of *La Carte* will be referred to as ‘Houellebecq’. [↑](#footnote-ref-544)
545. Morrey, p. 95 quoting from Julian Stallabrass, *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-545)
546. Houellebecq’s italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-546)
547. See *Interventions*, p. 80 where Houellebecq enjoins the reader to cease all mental activity for the brief period of the protest. The effectiveness of such an action is not discussed. This action does not halt late capitalism’s activity and the impossibility of suspending all mental activity serves only to re-enforce the impossibility of neutrality in art. [↑](#footnote-ref-547)
548. Jed continues to delight in visiting his local supermarket. [↑](#footnote-ref-548)
549. Novak-Lechevalier p. 8 citing Alfred Korzybski, *Une carte n’est pas le territoire: Prolégomènes aux systèmes non aristotéliciens et à la sémantique générale*, trad. Didier Kohn, Mireille de Moura, Jean Claude Dernis, Éditions de l’éclat, 2015 [1949], p. 57. Korzybski’s italics. The quotation is adapted in Jed’s exhibition title: LA CARTE EST PLUS INTÉRESSANTE QUE LE TERRITOIRE. Novak-Lechevalier asserts that Houellebecq is aware of the Korzybski quotation via the science fiction novel of A.E. Van Vogt: *Le Monde des Ᾱ, Cycle du Ᾱ*, trans. by Boris Vian (Paris: J’ai lu, 2010), p. 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-549)
550. This statement regarding objectivity links to Jed’s final interview in old age in which he mechanically and repeatedly states his desire to record - or justify – the world (CT, 420). [↑](#footnote-ref-550)
551. This takes place at the chateau Vault-de-Lugny (CT, 101-3). In the Palais de Tokyo brochure, p. 33, Houellebecq relates having stayed there, a ‘demeure d’exception’(CT, 101) at the invitation of the proprietors in recognition of the publicity he had provided in *La Carte.* [↑](#footnote-ref-551)
552. The real Pernaut also includes sections in his TF1 bulletins referring to local crafts and the countryside. [↑](#footnote-ref-552)
553. Jasselin had previously concluded that the murder was unusual in lacking those motives. However, Jasselin’s first conclusion may in fact remain valid, as the murderer hides the portrait in his cellar. [↑](#footnote-ref-553)
554. Two chapters commence on Christmas mornings (CT, 127 and 231). [↑](#footnote-ref-554)
555. This echoes his statement at p.51 of *La Carte* that his career would be ‘une carrière artistique sans autre projet que celui – dont il n’appréhendait que rarement le caractère illusoire - de donner une description objective du monde’. [↑](#footnote-ref-555)
556. Ben Jeffery, ‘Anti-Matter: Michel Houellebecq and Depressive Realism’ (Winchester: Zero Books, 2011), p. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-556)
557. The perceived provocation in *Les Particules* is considered in Chapter 5 of this thesis. [↑](#footnote-ref-557)
558. Houellebecq, *Plateforme* (Paris: Flammarion, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-558)
559. Agathe Novak-Lechevalier, *La Carte et le territoire* (Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 2016), p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-559)
560. Ibid., p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-560)
561. Ibid., p. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-561)
562. Chabal, ed., *France since the 1970s: History, Politics, Memory in an Age of Uncertainty* . [↑](#footnote-ref-562)
563. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. [↑](#footnote-ref-563)
564. Sherry B.Ortner, ‘On Neoliberalism’, *Anthropology of this Century*, Issue 1, May 2011, London. <http://aotcpress.com/articles/neoliberalism> [accessed 1 June 2015] [↑](#footnote-ref-564)
565. The excesses Harvey and Ortner identify are outsourcing and de-industrialization, fetishization of economic freedom, environmental degradation, crisis capitalism producing anxiety in populations and nations, de-stabilisation of the state, dilution of social solidarities, promulgation of a ‘no alternative’ stance and raids on state assets often situated in post disaster or war territories. [↑](#footnote-ref-565)
566. Houellebecq, *Lanzarote* (Paris, Flammarion, 2000). [↑](#footnote-ref-566)
567. The exhibition, entitled ‘Rester Vivant’, was accompanied by a guide including interviews with Houellebecq on art and capitalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-567)
568. Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and its Aftermath*. [↑](#footnote-ref-568)
569. Novak-Lechevalier, pp. 17-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-569)
570. Ibid., p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-570)
571. Ruth Cruickshank, Houellebecq, UNESCO and the *repas gastronomique des Français:* Questionable Diagnoses and Twenty-first Century French Food Fictions (In preparation) (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press) forthcoming 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-571)
572. Charles Baudelaire, ‘Une Charogne’ in *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Paris: Poulet-Malassis et de Boise, 1857), XXVII, p. 66. [↑](#footnote-ref-572)
573. Cruickshank, UNESCO and the *repas gastronomique des Français*,p. 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-573)
574. Literature is chiefly represented by the ‘Michel Houellebecq’ character, along with lists of writers from Sophocles to Frédéric Beigbeder. [↑](#footnote-ref-574)
575. Cruickshank, p. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-575)
576. Cruickshank, p. 8. [↑](#footnote-ref-576)
577. Bernard Maris, *Houellebecq Économiste* (Paris: Flammarion, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-577)
578. Ibid., p.17. [↑](#footnote-ref-578)
579. Ibid., p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-579)
580. Ibid., p. 99. [↑](#footnote-ref-580)
581. Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*. [↑](#footnote-ref-581)
582. Sweeney, ‘And yet some free time remains…. Post-Fordism and Writing in Michel Houellebecq’s ‘‘Whatever’’,’ *Journal of Modern Litterature*, 33 (Summer 2010), pp.41-56. [↑](#footnote-ref-582)
583. Ibid., p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-583)
584. Sweeney, p. 45. Sweeney quotes from Juan Martin Prada, ‘Affective Link. Policies of affectivity, aesthetics of biopower.’ <http://www.vinculo-a.net/english_site/text_prada.html>. [accessed 23 March 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-584)
585. A further discussion of excess may be found in Allan Stoekl’s *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985). Stoekl addresses a selection of George Bataille’s articles, including *La Notion de Dépense* (Fécamp: Nouvelles Éditions Lignes, 2011) in which Bataille lists literature and art as amongst ‘les dépenses dites improductives’ of human activity, along with *inter alia,* war and luxury, pp. 11-12. The ‘loss’ that they represent to the artist or writer who frequently expend their words or activity in exchange for misery and despair, suggests Jed’s own experiences as depicted in *La Carte*. [↑](#footnote-ref-585)
586. Ibid., Cruickshank, *Digesting the Potential of Literary Tradition*, p. 3, citing *Interventions*, p. 74. [↑](#footnote-ref-586)
587. Houellebecq’s italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-587)
588. ‘Croûte’ signifies a bad painting. [↑](#footnote-ref-588)
589. Houellebecq’s italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-589)
590. My italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-590)
591. Maris, p. 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-591)
592. Ibid., p. 104. My italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-592)
593. My italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-593)
594. However, Geneviève’s lucrative work, her prostitution, places her within the sexual market and capitalism, and frees her from the need to sell her art. [↑](#footnote-ref-594)
595. Novak-Lechevalier, p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-595)
596. All the main characters eventually flee Paris for their relatively remote ancestral homes. Even the quintessential Parisian, Beigbeder, dies ‘dans sa résidence de la côte basque’ surrounded by his family (CT, 411) all having sought to flee late capitalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-596)
597. A sentiment contradicted in *Interventions 2*, p. 221, in the provocative opening sentence of the essay entitled ‘Sortir du XXe siècle’: ‘La littérature ne sert à rien’. [↑](#footnote-ref-597)
598. See the conversation of Jed and his father in *La Carte*, pp. 217-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-598)
599. Morrey, p. 94. [↑](#footnote-ref-599)
600. Novak-Lechevalier, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-600)
601. In his joint publication with Bernard-Henri Levy *Ennemis Publics* (Paris: Flammarion, 2008), Houellebecq states : ‘On sait qu’expliquer le monde c’est simplement le décrire. En donner la description la plus précise, la plus générale’ p. 150. The apparent contradiction in the last sentence appears to repeat Jed’s own impossible ambition. [↑](#footnote-ref-601)
602. See Hirst’s skull entitled ‘For the Love of God’, 2007, and Koons’ various ‘Balloon Dog’ productions between 1994 and 2000. One, Balloon Dog (Orange) sold at Christies on 12 November 2103 for $58 million. [↑](#footnote-ref-602)
603. As Maris states at p. 36, the prices reflect the law of offer and demand without Jed realising what he is truly worth. [↑](#footnote-ref-603)
604. See Ruth Cruickshank’s ‘Houellebecq, UNESCO and the ‘*repas gastronomique des Français*: Questionable Diagnoses and Twenty-first Century French Food Fictions’ (In preparation). [↑](#footnote-ref-604)
605. Ibid., p.13. [↑](#footnote-ref-605)
606. Original italics. [↑](#footnote-ref-606)
607. It is significant that the proclamation is in English, the lingua franca of global capitalism. [↑](#footnote-ref-607)
608. Bourdieu, a post Marxist intellectual, is discussed earlier in the thesis. Baudrillard (also dismissed by Sokal and Bricmont) wrote on consumerism and argued that need was created rather than innate. [↑](#footnote-ref-608)
609. Houellebecq, *H.P Lovecraft, Contre le Monde, Contre la Vie* (Paris: Éditions du Rocher, 2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-609)
610. Michel Houellebecq refers to statements by Gates in the work *La Route du futur*, Bill Gates, Nathan Myhrvola, Peter Rinearson, *The Road Ahead* (New York: Viking Press, 1995). [↑](#footnote-ref-610)
611. ‘He has become an internationally bestselling phenomenon, his persona almost bigger than his books’ Angelique Chrisafis, *The Guardian G2*, 7 September 2015, p. 6. is a typical introduction to mainstream media articles on Houellebecq. [↑](#footnote-ref-611)
612. For example: Pierre Jourde, ‘Les Particules Elementaires’ *Hesperis*, No. 2 Autumn 1998 (Paris: Editions Memini, 1998) pp. 95-103; Martin Crowley, ‘Houellebecq – The Wreckage of Liberation’, *Romance Studies*, Vol.20:1 (June 2002), pp. 17-28. [↑](#footnote-ref-612)
613. James W. Russel, ‘Pathos, poetry and narrative perspective in Michel Houellebecq’s fiction’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of London Institute in Paris, 2015, pp. 213-16 [↑](#footnote-ref-613)
614. Hirst exhibits animals and sharks in tanks of formaldehyde. The example of Hirst’s ‘Mother and Child (Divided)’, 1993, with the precisely divided bodies of a cow and calf occupying separate tanks is perhaps appropriate to the Michel Houellebecq murder scene. [↑](#footnote-ref-614)
615. Jed is viewing a representation of the scene via the photographic medium that he has by now rejected as incapable of producing ‘une sorte de vérité humaine et symbolique’, something which he considers painting allows. (CT, 136). [↑](#footnote-ref-615)
616. Maris, p. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-616)
617. Maris, p. 76 see *Interventions,* p. 72. [↑](#footnote-ref-617)
618. Ibid., pp. 76-7. [↑](#footnote-ref-618)
619. Joseph Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1942). [↑](#footnote-ref-619)
620. The excess represented by drunkenness in this instance and that at Pernaut’s party, are both associated with alienation in late capitalism: Michel Houellebecq as an ignored consumer in the face of marketing directed obsolescence which denies him his Camel Legend parka and TF1 chief and Patrick Le Lay, bloody and excluded from investing in Michelin’s TV channel. [↑](#footnote-ref-620)
621. The nature of Michel Houellebecq’s murder at once destroys him as an object whilst delivering a true and pure novelty for the team of investigators and the reader. [↑](#footnote-ref-621)
622. Fredric Jameson, *New Left Review* 21, May-June 2003. <https://newleftreview.org/II/21/fredric-jameson-future-city> [accessed 27 April 2017] [↑](#footnote-ref-622)
623. Maris, p. 101-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-623)
624. The real Patrick Le Lay was the Président Directeur Général of TF1 1988-2008 and benefited from and exploited late capitalist practices such as his presiding over TF1 during its privatisation and his abusive use of short term contracts, for which he was taken to court. He is notorious for his statement in relation to TF1: ‘Notre boulot, c’est de vendre à Coca-Cola du temps de cerveau humain disponible’ *Les Dirigeants Face au Changement: barometer 2004* (Paris: Editions du Huitième jour, 2004). [↑](#footnote-ref-624)
625. Maris, p. 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-625)
626. Novak-Lechevalier, p. 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-626)
627. Novak-Lechevalier, p. 13 [↑](#footnote-ref-627)
628. Jed imagines he is viewed ‘à la limite de l’escroquerie’ by local Creuse farmers (CT, 408). [↑](#footnote-ref-628)
629. Baguley, p. 54. Citing *Emile Zola: Œuvres Complètes*, ed. Henri Mitterand (Paris: Cercle du Livre Précieux, 1966-9), 15 vols., X,1240. [↑](#footnote-ref-629)
630. Philip Walker, ‘Zola and the Art of Containing the Uncontainable’, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-630)