

# Autofiction: The Forgotten Face of French Theory

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## Abstract

This essay argues that, compared to other components of French critical theory (structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction, feminism and intertextuality), autofiction has been less influential both in its 'home' country and in the English-speaking world. This relative neglect is ironic because, as the article shows, those different areas of theoretical inquiry each helped pave the way for the development of ideas about autofiction, but simultaneously eclipsed them so that for decades autofiction remained under-conceptualized and under-researched. Having identified and critiqued a number of reasons for this belatedness, the essay then identifies two recent contexts that are more auspicious for the evolution of theories of autofiction. Specifically, it argues that developments in the concept of participatory culture (including audience research) on the one hand and the proliferation of various forms of historical and/or cultural memorials, commemorative events and public anniversaries on the other both provide meaningful contexts in which theories of autofiction have recently started to reach their full potential.

**Keywords:** *autofiction, Doubrovsky, authorship, participatory culture, audience research, memorials, commemorative events, heritage industry, life writing, intertextuality*

*Autofiction* is a term used by the French writer-critic Serge Doubrovsky in his 1977 novel *Fils* to describe the nature of that specific work. Although it has subsequently been received into the French dictionary and has increasingly been used to make a general distinction between straightforward forms of autobiography on the one hand and a more precise (and newly emergent) writing practice on the other, this wider critical currency does not appear to have been Doubrovsky's aim. On the contrary, research carried out by Isabelle Grell has revealed that he first scribbled the word in notebooks as early as 1973, while making regular visits to a psychoanalyst in New York, apparently as a way of describing what he had tried to do in his own writing, no more.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the use of the term *autofiction* to invoke a larger body of theoretical work did not come about immediately and in fact has taken almost half a century to occur. This means that, compared to other strands of French critical thinking that emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s, such as post-structuralism, deconstruction and intertextuality, autofiction has received much less critical attention. It is also notable that where it has received such attention, it has done so somewhat more belatedly than those other areas of thought. This essay will explore a number of theoretical, institutional and cultural contexts in which this delayed emergence has taken place, while also attempting to chart the relationship between autofiction and those other components of critical theory that have attracted more interest and have been applied to a wider range of critical practice.

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<sup>1</sup> Isabelle Grell, *L'Autofiction* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2014), 9.

## Origin and Definitions

The initial context in which Doubrovsky developed the writing practice that he would eventually refer to as *autofiction* was an upturn in interest in different forms of autobiographical writing in the 1970s. Philippe Lejeune had argued that an autobiography in effect is a form of contract, or pact, between the writer and his or her readers.<sup>2</sup> This is because there is an implicit conflation of writer, narrator and protagonist which has the effect of bringing the reader into the confidence of all three, so that the reader is entitled to assume that what he or she reads is faithful and factual unless the text clearly signals otherwise.<sup>3</sup> This transactional relationship, based on the assumption of trust, is what distinguishes autobiography from fiction in Lejeune's account.

Doubrovsky appears to have been troubled by these assumptions. Since *Fils* takes the form of a memoir, which is a sub-variant of autobiography, if the autobiographical pact were to hold true, then his readers would be entitled to assume both that there was a precise homonymic fit between author, narrator and character, and that the narrative itself was a true, faithful and authentic reproduction of events narrated. But this was not the case – or not exactly. Although Doubrovsky appears under his own name as both narrator and narratee, the relationship of authenticity and trust supposedly elicited by the autobiographical pact is not functional in *Fils*. This is because it is a highly experimental text in which the author commits himself to narrating events from his own life; but also displays an extraordinarily deep awareness of the complicated and complicating nature of the roles of memory and emotion on which autobiographical writing depends. Such complication renders assumptions of truth and authenticity simplistic and in the last instance untenable. For this reason, *Fils* simultaneously commits itself to narrating the truth while also thematizing and problematizing the concept of truth itself.

The problematization of truth that emerges from *Fils* is the first point of connection between autofiction and critical French theory of the period more generally.<sup>4</sup> Post-structuralism and deconstruction are both concerned in different ways with drawing attention to the constructed – as opposed to inert – nature of representation; while intertextuality reveals that linguistic representation is a necessarily 'relational' process rather than a static product.<sup>5</sup> Since this was the overwhelming theoretical backdrop against which he worked, Doubrovsky could hardly fail to bring such critical advances to bear on the realm of autobiographical writing in which he was interested.<sup>6</sup> For Doubrovsky, the situatedness of the teller of an autobiographical narrative within what is told, and the uneasy effects of memory and the emotions, all render the assumption of complete truth highly spurious. According to the autobiographical pact, the reader can assume the revelation of strictly accurate facts because the person telling

<sup>2</sup> Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 13.

<sup>3</sup> Lejeune, 'The Autobiographical Contract', in *French Literary Theory Today*, ed. Tzvetan Todorov (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 193.

<sup>4</sup> See Arnaud Genon, *Autofiction: pratiques et théories* (Paris: Mon Petit Éditeur, 2013), 109.

<sup>5</sup> Graham Allen, *Intertextuality* (London: Routledge, 2000), 8.

<sup>6</sup> That Doubrovsky was deeply engaged in the major intellectual developments in French theory from the period of their inception is evident from his *New Criticism in France* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1973).

them also happens to be the person they are told about. In autofiction, the reader cannot assume those things *for the same reason*. Hence, Jacques Lecarme proposes an ‘autofictional pact’ whereby the elements of Lejeune’s autobiographical pact are rendered contradictory and unstable.<sup>7</sup> Isabelle Grell argues that by complicating the autobiographical pact, various contemporary theoretical developments, including psychoanalysis, structuralism and post-structuralism, all contributed to the development of theories and practice of autofiction.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, there are at least three different ways in which Doubrovsky used the term *autofiction* during his career. First of all, there is a stylistic definition: ‘Fiction of strictly real events or facts, if we want, autofiction, of having entrusted the adventure of language with the language of an adventure, outside the wisdom of the traditional or new novel.’<sup>9</sup> The adventure of language that he talks about is tantamount to a form of literary experimentation, exploring how far it is possible to move language in the direction of direct representation and how far the distortions added by memory, thought, feeling and mood impinge on that process. Thus, he simultaneously committed to the narration of real events and to the designation of his works as novels. They employed, in an apparently non-fictional genre, the stylistic literary techniques more commonly associated with modernist fiction: temporal experimentation, stream of consciousness, radical shifts in narrative perspective, a loose or open-ended causality and an open-ended symbolism that renders meaning opaque and elusive.

On its own, however, this stylistic approach does little to distinguish autofiction from the autobiographical novel. A second definition was therefore made on a sociological rather than stylistic basis. Using the work of Rousseau as an example of classical autobiographical writing, Doubrovsky reasoned that only major figures of cultural, historical or political significance are privileged to write autobiographies and that this privilege does not extend to a mere ‘nobody’ such as himself.<sup>10</sup> In any case, by the last third of the twentieth century the intervention of theoretical developments in Marxism, feminism, post-structuralism and deconstruction had all made the writing of autobiographies in the classical mould somewhat problematic by questioning the construction of the subject.<sup>11</sup> A third, generic, way of defining autofiction is that it is a new genre that offered to fill the gap created when more traditional forms of autobiography were rendered sociologically unavailable by the changed cultural conditions prevalent by the end of the century compared to conditions of earlier historical periods when the classical autobiographies were written.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Jacques Lecarme, ‘L’autofiction, un mauvais genre?’, in *Autofictions & Cie*, ed. Serge Doubrovsky *et al.* (Paris: RITM, 1993), 242.

<sup>8</sup> Grell, *L’Autofiction*, 10-12.

<sup>9</sup> Serge Doubrovsky, *Fils*, cited in Catherine Cusset, ‘The Limits of Autofiction’, unpublished conference paper available at <http://www.catherinecusset.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/THE-LIMITS-OF-AUTOFICTION.pdf> [accessed 31 July 2017].

<sup>10</sup> Serge Doubrovsky, *Un amour de soi* (Paris: Folio, 2001), 104.

<sup>11</sup> For this reason, Linda Anderson calls for a ‘new form’ to replace those older genres. See Anderson, ‘Life Lines: Auto/biography and Memoir’, in *The History of British Women’s Writing, Volume Ten. 1970-Present*, ed. Mary Eagleton and Emma Parker (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 191.

<sup>12</sup> Bran Nicol has argued that one of the major factors in those changed conditions is the prevalence of so-called ‘reality television’, which in effect usurped the role of print fiction in the dissemination of traditional confessional narratives, so that the writers of such narratives then had to redevelop and redefine their practice. See Nicol, ‘“The Memoir as self-destruction”: A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius’, in *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*, ed. Jo Gill (London: Routledge, 2006), 105.

The relationship between autofiction and autobiography is therefore pivotal in a curiously literal way: critical interest in autobiography was the starting point for the development of Doubrovsky's autofictive practice, but theoretical developments rapidly rendered the notion of autobiography as a non-fictive genre difficult to maintain.<sup>13</sup> It could therefore be said that interest in autofiction has increased as belief in classical forms of autobiography has declined. What this highlights overall is again the important intellectual context generated by critical theory of the third quarter of the century for the emergence of autofiction. But as mentioned at the start of this essay, compared to virtually all other sub-fields of French theory from the period in question, autofiction has received much less interest and attention. Ironically, it might be the case that although critical theory created the intellectual conditions in which autofiction could develop, the very high status of critical theory itself may well have eclipsed that of autofiction and hence have been one of the barriers to its full recognition until much more recently. The next section will explore some potential reasons for this eclipse and delay.

## Barriers to Reception

Although it is not easy to speculate on why developments fail to take place or take place only gradually and unevenly in different societies, it is possible that the imprecision with which Doubrovsky first wrote about autofiction is one of the reasons that the concept took longer to catch on in academic circles than might otherwise have been the case. As we have seen, at the time of its neologism the term *autofiction* initially referred to a single text, *Fils*, and only gradually came to refer to an emerging body of similar texts, then to the act of producing such texts and finally to a way of thinking about these things. Thus, the same concept variously invoked a genre, a practice, a process and a theory (or perhaps a set of related theories). That autofiction had the propensity continually to cross and re-cross the unspoken boundary between theory and practice appears to have set it apart both from theories of post-structuralism and deconstruction on the one hand; and from the practice of the French *nouveau roman* on the other. Occupying an uncertain hinterland between theory and practice, and lacking not just singular definition but also singular categorization, might have rendered autofiction an awkward proposition, difficult for researchers and practitioners to align with.<sup>14</sup> It could then have been fated to remain eclipsed for a time by those other disciplines to which it ironically owed its emergence.

On the other hand, the lack of a straightforward definition is not necessarily an obstacle to the critical reception of a newly emerging concept or field of research, as the histories of deconstruction and post-structuralism demonstrate. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that for the first two decades or more of its 'existence', autofiction was subject to a much lower status than them – or, indeed, than the so-called 'new novels' that emerged in France immediately before it.<sup>15</sup> If not due to conceptual difficulty alone,

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Timothy Dow Adams, *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> This is because, as Tom Kindt and Hans-Harald Müller point out, new theoretical concepts tend to have more likelihood of passing into widespread critical currency if their usage is not 'confined to an esoteric or specialist set of initiates'. See Kindt and Müller, *The Implied Author: Concept and Controversy* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2006), 5.

<sup>15</sup> See Marie Darrieussecq, 'L'autofiction, un genre pas sérieux', *Poétique* 107 (1996): 369-80.

there must therefore be one or more other reasons to account for the critical inhibition to which it was once subject.

The extent to which its low intellectual status hindered the early adoption of autofiction within France is significantly magnified when we consider its reception in other societies – and especially, in other languages. None of Doubrovsky's autofictive works have been translated into English, although certain critical articles and interviews have been.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, since he was based at a number of different academic institutions in New York over the course of his career, a very limited number of his early critical and theoretical texts were available in English. Lawrence Venuti has drawn attention to the many different factors that inform the politics of translation at both the individual and the institutional level, and since these have a significant bearing on which works are translated and which are not, they bear also on questions of canonicity and cultural capital.<sup>17</sup> Not having been translated into English, or only having had a few minor and specialist items translated, cannot fail to have formed a significant barrier to wider critical engagement with autofiction. Thus, it is notable that whereas the other domains of critical theory already mentioned are frequently brought to bear on such diverse disciplines as history, politics, geography, literature and film throughout the English-speaking world, autofiction has remained almost exclusively the preserve of modern foreign languages departments (with the occasional intervention from life writing).<sup>18</sup>

The main argument of this essay is that autofiction has a dialectical relationship to other branches of French critical theory of the early 1970s, which simultaneously enabled it and obscured it. In fact, the institutional milieu in which autofiction research has gathered momentum more recently can usefully be compared to the related field of intertextuality, which, Mary Orr has argued, was embraced more slowly by critical thinkers both inside and outside France than the work of Barthes, Foucault or Derrida. Orr attributes this slowness to embrace intertextuality to the gender of its progenitor, Julia Kristeva, and to the fact that throughout history female intellectuals have less commonly been recognized as major thinkers than men.<sup>19</sup> Her argument could with only minor modification be applied to the history of autofiction too, because although Doubrovsky cannot rightly be said to have been marginalized on gender grounds, many of the principal practitioners of autofiction in France are women, and even Doubrovsky himself has not tended to receive the same high status as such philosopher-intellectuals as Foucault or Derrida.

Having eventually started to catch up on other areas of critical theory, intertextuality today not only features in critical discussion more often than it once did, but has also undergone a good deal of further research and even modification of meaning. Where Kristeva used it in a highly specialized linguistic sense to refer to the sociology of language, it has been applied more recently in a whole variety of different

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<sup>16</sup> See, for example, Serge Doubrovsky, 'The Place of the Madeleine: Writing and Phantasy in Proust', trans. Carol Bové. *Boundary 2* 4.1 (1975): 107-34. Doubrovsky outlines elements of his creative practice for an English readership in a short interview with Roger Céléstin, 'An Interview with Serge Doubrovsky: Autofiction and Beyond', *Journal of the Twentieth-Century/Contemporary French Studies* 1.2 (1997): 397-405.

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence Venuti, *The Scandals of Translation: Towards an ethics of difference* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 1.

<sup>18</sup> For an example from within French studies, see Elizabeth H. Jones, 'Serge Doubrovsky: Life, Writing, Legacy', *L'Esprit Créateur* 49.3 (2009): 1-7.

<sup>19</sup> Mary Orr, *Intertextuality: Debates and Contexts* (Oxford: Polity, 2003), 23.

ways.<sup>20</sup> In other words, the proliferation of different theories and definitions has coincided with an upturn in critical interest and new applications of the concept.<sup>21</sup> A comparable process of critical interrogation, re-definition and expansion has only more recently taken place in the field of autofiction: for example, in the work of Isabelle Grell, Jacques Lecarme and Vincent Colonna. Thus, the field of autofiction has started to follow a similar trajectory to that previously traced out by research into intertextuality. In turn, the relative success of theorists of intertextuality in helping their field become as well established as deconstruction and post-structuralism illuminates the potential for autofiction to make a similar movement.

There are, however, reasons for caution in seeing the history of the concept of intertextuality as a blueprint for the potential present and future elaboration of autofiction. Arnaud Genon has interpreted the recent increase in the number of researchers and theorists engaged in the field of autofiction as evidence of the increased vitality of the field overall.<sup>22</sup> However, both the structure of academic institutions and the nature of scholarship mean that critical theory has tended to be associated very strongly with the careers of individual theorists. As the number of people interested in autofiction has increased, the less it can be reduced to a single progenitor of this kind. This is especially clear when autofiction is compared with such other bodies of work as post-structuralism, deconstruction and intertextuality which cannot simplistically be reduced to the work of Foucault, Derrida and Kristeva.

There is of course considerable irony in this since both Foucault's writing about the author function and Kristeva's concept of intertextuality based on social linguistics critiqued the idea of author as owner. In the process, they rejected also the romantic image of the author working in isolation from all other social and cultural processes and creating great works by sole dint of his or her inherent and uncontaminated genius. This thorough critique of the author as owner (Foucault) or as sole creator (Kristeva) does not appear to have prevented Foucault and Kristeva from being afforded a status not unlike owner or creator with regard to their distinct areas of critical thought. This observation need not be interpreted as a charge of hypocrisy against those individuals, but if properly understood is a means of drawing attention to the tendency of schools of thought to flourish when they have been associated historically with specific and identifiable innovators.<sup>23</sup>

It is a tendency that has itself undergone significant change over the past fifty years, not least because of the contribution of those critical thinkers named above in addressing it. Critical theory as a whole has subsequently become less committed to the idea of the author as isolated genius and more attentive to the collaborative social relationships in which any form of cultural production occurs. This development in turn has provided a fertile intellectual context for the potential (if somewhat belated) critical recognition of autofiction as a valid field of critical inquiry in its own right. In contrast to the historical tendency to treat authors and artists in isolation, which the critical practices of post-structuralism, deconstruction and intertextuality did so much to sweep

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<sup>20</sup> See Rob Pope, *The English Studies Book: An Introduction to Language, Literature and Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 246.

<sup>21</sup> See Marko Juvan, *History and Poetics of Intertextuality* (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>22</sup> Genon, *Autofiction*, 191.

<sup>23</sup> David Galenson distinguishes between two kinds of innovator – the conceptual and the experimental – but his investigation of different artistic schools subscribes to the overall feeling that innovations belong to individual innovators. See Galenson, *Artistic Capital* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 8.

away, autofiction is a field whose practitioners actively embrace their own non-luminary status. As we have seen, one of the major contexts for the emergence of autofiction in France was the impossibility in the second half of the twentieth century for ordinary people to write autobiographies, because the autobiography was a genre reserved for figures of major historical or intellectual renown: stars in their fields. Autofiction, by contrast, disavows the star status of its own practitioners. Thus, Doubrovsky also repeatedly emphasized that, although he coined the term *autofiction*, he did not own the field, or even invent the ‘thing’ [*chose*] itself.<sup>24</sup>

## The Context of Participatory Culture

The argument developed above can be expressed in the following way: between the middle and end of the twentieth century, a shift took place in critical thinking about concepts of authorship and of cultural production more generally. This shift was in large part enabled by those critical French theorists previously mentioned, with the unintended side effect that they emerged as the kind of proprietorial figures that they were strongly concerned to disavow. This development in turn hindered the critical emergence and recognition of autofiction as both critical theory and creative practice because it lacked a comparable figurehead. It is logical, therefore, that the more we have got used to thinking about the sociological model of the author – as opposed to the individualistic model – the better the ground has been prepared for critical attention to be turned towards autofiction in a fuller and more critically engaged way than was earlier the case. This is what has happened.

One of the major insights of French theory of the period 1966-70 is that a much larger network of people participates in cultural production than the individually named artists chiefly associated with particular genres or specific works. This adumbration of a critical concept of participatory culture provides one of the most significant contexts in which the emergence of autofiction has to be understood. In the United Kingdom, for example, until the 1990s the Arts Council of Great Britain was the body primarily responsible for providing opportunities for people of all backgrounds to experience the arts. However, this mandate was interpreted mainly as a mission to bring forms of so-called ‘high’ art such as theatre, opera and dance to new audiences. Since the 1990s, two major historical developments have taken place: the Arts Council itself was disaggregated into separate bodies for each of the nations of the United Kingdom, thereby allowing for the possibility of different cultural practices in each.<sup>25</sup> Secondly, the priorities of each of the bodies changed, becoming less concerned with creating new audiences for existing art forms, and more committed to creating opportunities for direct participation.<sup>26</sup> This altered priority can be expressed by the distinction between watching a dance performance and learning how to dance, or between listening to music and learning to compose a piece of music, and so on. A comparable shift has taken place in Australia and New Zealand.<sup>27</sup> In the United States of America there is no body

<sup>24</sup> Doubrovsky, cited in Genon, 205.

<sup>25</sup> See John Pick, *Vile Jelly: The Birth, Life and Lingering Death of the Arts Council of Great Britain* (Corbridge: Brynmill Press, 1991).

<sup>26</sup> See Liz Tomlin, *British Theatre Companies, 1995-2014* (London: Methuen Drama, 2015), 26-53.

<sup>27</sup> For a survey of different models for state funding of arts and cultural activities in Australia, and varying modes of participation in them, see Jennifer Craik, *Re-Visioning Arts and Cultural Policy: Current Impasses and Future Directions* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2011), 36.

directly comparable to the Arts Council and so it is less clear if such a transition has taken place. Arguably, the absence of a body like the Arts Council that was historically committed to the dissemination of high art has made the concept of participatory culture even more appropriate to the cultural conditions that prevail there.

In critical theory, the practice of participatory culture has an effective counterpart in reader research – and more recently, audience research – which are themselves rooted in Roland Barthes's suggestion of the death of the author. According to reader reception theory, the reader ceases to be seen as passive recipient of narrative and instead is elevated to the status of active participant in the building up of meaning and the ascription of value, by participating in one or more 'interpretive communities'.<sup>28</sup> Central to the idea of reader research is the belief that narrative is a form of dialogue between author and reader, rather than a monologue pitched from author to reader. This assumes that a given literary object is radically incomplete until it is experienced by a reader. Indeed, according to reader research it is the reader who builds up the finished impression of the contents of the text and so completes it as narrative. In other words, reader research posits readers as co-creators along with authors of the literary artefact in question. In this, it accords with the changed understanding of authorship occasioned by the theoretical context of the 1960s and 1970s discussed above, especially perhaps with Barthes's writerly function.

On the other hand, the contribution made by a hypothetical reader to completing the text is for the most part confined to his or her own psyche; it is not the same kind of creative process as that engaged in by the author. This is not least because, with the exception of specialist readers such as academic researchers, participants in research projects, critics or reviewers, most readers never write down their impression of the text, which necessarily remains intangible.<sup>29</sup> Although in a theoretical sense they complete the narrative by appending their own reading to it, they do not engage in the participatory shift described above, from audience to agent, which is why readers do not necessarily write their own narratives. As Pierre Bayard points out, almost all writers are readers, but the same is not necessarily true the other way around since writers do not necessarily want to cede their own creativity to a reader.<sup>30</sup> There is therefore a discrepancy between different modes of participation, with the role of the author perhaps more manifest and that of the reader (or co-creator) somewhat more latent. The distinction could also be expressed as that between practical and theoretical forms of participation.

This distinction between practical and theoretical ways of participating in the production of culture is even more clearly discernible in the field of audience research, which is principally practised in the areas of film and television studies as well as new media.<sup>31</sup> Researchers emphasize the role played by the viewer in building up an

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<sup>28</sup> This phrase comes from Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980). See also Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980).

<sup>29</sup> For an example of a research project that did entail audience members re-telling narratives (of soap operas they had watched) see Sonia Livingstone, 'The Resourceful Reader: Interpreting Television Characters and Narratives', *Communication Yearbook* 1.15 (1992): 58-90.

<sup>30</sup> Pierre Bayard, *How to Talk about Books You Haven't Read*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (London: Granta, 2000), 178.

<sup>31</sup> On the participatory nature of audience members within audience research, see David Mathieu and Maria José Brites, 'Expanding the Reach of the Interview in Audience and Reception Research: The

interpretation of the text, thereby denying that there is any core meaning to it because this has to come from the interpretation.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, they also emphasize the different kinds of interpretation that arise from membership or participation in different communities of viewers.<sup>33</sup> Again, however, it is difficult to claim that the contribution made by the viewer to forming an interpretation of the film and hence to fulfilling a transaction between co-creators is of the same order as the kind of creative contribution made by the actors, cameramen, director, scriptwriter and so on. It too is a distinction between latent and manifest forms of creation, or between practical and theoretical modes of participation.

Two of the new media to have emerged within the film industry over the past twenty years are the 3-D film and the blu-ray disc. These are favoured by large production and distribution companies because, in addition to their superior aesthetic qualities, they are also more difficult to copy and therefore distribute in a way that infringes copyright. Thus, although there has been a theoretical movement away from the individual concept of ownership over cultural artefacts towards the participatory and the communal, they represent a practical attempt to reverse this shift, back in the direction of the private and the proprietorial. Arguably, the technologies of film and television production are so specialized and so concentrated in specific centres and locations that most people will never in reality have access to them. This too reverses the priority practised by the Arts Councils discussed above of moving away from audience development and towards direct participation in the creative act. Given that this is the case, it is also arguable that audience research, which has been one of the large growth areas in critical practice in recent years, compensates the viewer for the unavailability of modes of participation in film or television narratives by assuring the viewer that he or she is an active participant in the completion of the finished narrative.<sup>34</sup>

The transition from receptive to participatory culture and the related extension of reader and audience research provide another important context for the emergence of autofiction somewhat later than other components of critical French theory. As we have seen, practitioners of autofiction tend to eschew their own star status, which might in itself indicate a greater comfort in the medium of prose writing than in film and television production. Although there are material pressures and competing claims on the time of any writer, the technologies of writing are for the most part much more accessible and both less specialized and less concentrated in the hands of private enterprises and metropolitan centres of cultural power than the technologies associated with those other media. Autofiction is potentially a highly participatory genre – with Chloé Delaume's *Corpus Simsi* (2003) a prominent example of an interactive

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Performative and Participatory Models of Interview', in *Revitalising Audience Research: Innovations in European Audience Research*, ed. Frauk Zeller *et al.* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 44-61.

<sup>32</sup> The extent to which audience members can be characterized as 'active' and the cognitive processes involved in generating interpretation simultaneous to initial comprehension are evaluated in Sonia Livingstone, 'Audiences and Interpretations', *e-Compos* 10 (2007): 1-22.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, S. Elizabeth Bird, *The Audience in Everyday Life: Living in a New Media World* (London: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>34</sup> That it over-emphasized the capacity of audience members to become active in the creation of meaning and thereby neglected hierarchies of knowledge and power in the communications industries was a major criticism of early audience research. It is evaluated by John Hartley in "'Read thy self": text, audience, and method in cultural studies', in *Questions of Method in Cultural Studies* ed. Mimi White and James Schwoch (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 71-104.

autofictional text. Moreover, if reader research has been quick to identify the active, participatory nature of reading, autofiction provides an alternative mode of participation – through the act of writing itself. Indeed, in cases where it is written with the specific aim of achieving therapeutic benefit for the writer in overcoming a past trauma, it does not require a mass audience or even a reader at all.<sup>35</sup>

## Memory, Memorials and Counter-Hegemonic Narratives

The example of conflict within the film industry over different approaches to ownership and participation implies a second major context in which autofiction as a critical practice has belatedly emerged: the commodification of collective cultural memory. This is a process that has mainly become manifest in the huge growth over the past fifty years of mechanisms and apparatuses devoted to creating and marking anniversaries, festivals and other kinds of memorial activities in celebration of different events, people or actions in the historical past. Such anniversaries assume not only an original prior event, person or action to refer back to, but also a construction and narrative elaboration of what precisely about that event, person or action is to be celebrated rather than celebrating other people or events or different aspects of the same event. It is some years since Hayden White established that selections of this kind are implied in the writing of any historical narrative, making claims to total truth untenable; and Benedict Anderson argued that the collective decision to narrativize ‘this day, not that’ was a means by which historical narratives were pressed into the service of nation building through recourse to the construction of a perceived common history during the nineteenth century.<sup>36</sup> But the positions adopted by White and Anderson on the narrativization of collective memory are given fresh impetus by the more recent trend towards contemporary re-enactment and other forms of public memorial of historical events.

In a survey of different kinds of memorial event, for example, Warwick Frost and Jennifer Laing distinguish between commemorative events of a national/historical significance, cultural anniversaries and ‘commercial commemorations’ – which they take to be fundamentally unlike those of a national historical or cultural character.<sup>37</sup> A somewhat different finding is reached by William Johnston, who argues that commemorative events have increasingly been organized and disseminated by educational, arts and cultural institutions in ways that vary according to the forms of public culture and collective self-imagining that predominate in different countries. In this sense, commemorative occasions organized to mark particular anniversaries of prior people, events or inventions have become incorporated into what Robert Hewison had already characterized as the ‘heritage industries’ more generally and hence into the commercialization of culture.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, there seems to be a conscious echo of

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<sup>35</sup> This is discussed by Celia Hunt in ‘Therapeutic Effects of Writing Fictional Autobiography’, *Life Writing* 7 (2010): 231-44, and *Transformative Learning through Creative Life Writing: Exploring the Self in the Learning Process* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013). See also *Creative Writing in Health and Social Care* ed. Fiona Sampson (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays on Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 35.

<sup>37</sup> Warwick Frost and Jennifer Laing, *Commemorative Events: Memory, identities, conflicts* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 124-40.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Hewison, *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Climate of Decline* (London: Methuen, 1987), 12.

Hewison's 'heritage industry' in Johnston's description of the 'Commemoration Industry' and the economic benefits such an industry brings to particular organizations and perceived cultural leaders.<sup>39</sup> Given the commodification of collective cultural memory that this implies, Frost and Laing's attempt to isolate specific 'commercial' commemorations from historical, political or cultural memorials otherwise defined seems wholly beside the point. All have been assimilated to the emerging market for this new form of cultural product and cannot be considered in isolation either from it or from each other.

It is notable, for example, that the immediate occasion for this special journal issue is the impending fiftieth anniversary of the political upheavals of 1968 in Europe and an opportunity to re-evaluate the role of critical cultural theory within them. But this anniversary should not be considered separate from a critical interpretation of the imperative to memorialize and to convert memory into commodity defined above.<sup>40</sup> On the contrary, it should be interpreted in the context of a now very deeply embedded cultural reflex to invoke and remember selectively.

The point is that the cultural mechanics by which we memorialize the past render as apparently natural, inevitable life events occasions that are in fact culturally – and very selectively – constructed. This collective impulse towards the selective re-memorialization of specific moments or actions in the past can be discerned across a whole range of different fields and within the distinct peoples, actions and events associated with them. Indeed, it has become so deeply entrenched within western cultures over a relatively recent period that it can seem tempting to believe that the impulse to celebrate the anniversary of this forerunner or that, this landmark event or that, inheres absolutely within each of the fields in question. But the point is again that rather than inhering in any of the different spheres, the tendency to mark out arbitrarily selected memorial occasions and then celebrate them uncritically as if they were logical endpoints in themselves has become built up over all the spheres over the same period.

The growth of the commemoration industries provides a second important context for the emergence of autofiction because the latter provides both a theoretical perspective and a fictional practice capable of critiquing many of the assumptions implicit in the cultural impulse to memorialize. Chloé Delaume's *La règle du Je* (2010) can be seen as a virtual manifesto – albeit a somewhat playful one – for decoupling such writing from a sovereign individual subject, event, experience or work. What emerges is a writing practice that contributes to the systematic transgression of Lejeune's referential pact by removing the assumption of a surface mimeticism and using the act of writing to construct and explore what events, experiences and relationships, including traumatic ones, mean on an aesthetic and emotional level rather than merely attempting to establish what happened in a simple factual way. The notion of absolute truth is disavowed by the practice of autofiction, and with it disappears also the assumption of a master narrative created by a sovereign self. Memory is important to autofictional practice but the role and reliability of memory are questioned and critiqued in a very open and explicit way by it. This means that autofiction provides a different reading of

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<sup>39</sup> William Johnston, *Celebrations: The Cult of Anniversaries in Europe and the United States Today* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 63.

<sup>40</sup> Thus, Pieter Dhondt has shown that, despite their proclamation of scholarly independence and political neutrality, universities and academic publishers are not free of the imperative to assert their cultural capital by celebrating their own institutional jubilees and other occasions. See Dhondt, *University Jubilees and University History Writing: A Challenging Relationship* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1-18.

the concept of memory to that which we find predominantly associated with the memorial industries. There, arbitrarily selected moments of the past are treated as if they are the logical occasion for some kind of intervention in the present. That the foundational event to which the anniversary refers took place in the way described by the memorial event is not generally opened up to critical interrogation so that its truth content is never questioned. By contrast, autofiction foregrounds the inherent unreliability of memory at both an individual and a collective level. Autofictional narratives therefore do not offer to tell the complete authentic truth of a past event as such, since it is committed to exploring the barriers of memory and emotion that obtrude between any event and its re-telling. Autofiction therefore shifts the parameters of representation away from questions of truth and accuracy towards questions of significance and value. Especially when they are dealing with past events of a collective or communal nature, autofictional narratives invite us to ask not *What happened?* but *What does it mean for the people involved and for the people who come after them?*

Ekaterina Haskins has argued in a reading of the American memorial events that cropped up in the aftermath of 9/11, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq; and Hurricane Katrina, that if they are handled sensitively, dialogically and with openness towards the possibility of diverse interpretation and meaning, such commemorations can help to lay the terrain 'toward a participatory memory culture'.<sup>41</sup> It was additionally argued above that the concept of a genuinely participatory culture provides one of the important contexts for the emergence of autofiction because autofiction is introspective, accessible and does not necessarily require a widespread market orientation or readership. In effect, Haskins combines the two different contexts that have been discussed here in which the genesis of autofiction occurred – the participatory and the memorial – when she advocates new forms of memorial culture beyond the assertion of dogmatic 'facts' and entering into a dialogic relationship with the past. This combination might imply that there is a potential connection between the impulse to commemorate and the practice of autofiction if new forms of autofictive memorial can be identified.

In an article about public memory and memorial culture, Meg Jensen has drawn attention to how Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. enacts this shift in emphasis.<sup>42</sup> What Lin did in public art and monumental architecture in designing the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is paralleled in autofiction by Tim O'Brien's Vietnam book, *The Things They Carried* (1990), which not only draws attention to the fictive aspects of all autobiography but also portrays as if in real time the process by which troubling, uncomfortable and deeply traumatic memories are processed. The contradictions inherent in the text reveal that this narrative processing of memory and experience is still taking place and thereby connects its own present moment to the different pasts that it offers to remember.

Each of these 'monuments' is less about remembering the war as such than about attempting to create and attach meaning to it. They also bespeak a further common component of autofictional works, which is their commitment to modulating individual and communal forms of experience and hence subjective and social modes for narrating cultural memory. In discussing works of creative non-fiction by French writers

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<sup>41</sup> Ekaterina V. Haskins, *Popular Memories: Commemoration, Participatory Culture, and Democratic Citizenship* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2015), 117.

<sup>42</sup> Meg Jensen, 'Post-traumatic memory projects: autobiographical fiction and counter-monuments', *Textual Practice* 28.4 (2014): 701-25.

including Georges-Arthur Goldschmidt, Camille Laurens, Hervé Guibert and Philippe Forest, Arnaud Genon has drawn attention to the fact that autofiction frequently confronts some foundational trauma and then repeats and re-narrates it as part of a process of working through the emotions related to it.<sup>43</sup> Each time the event is narrativized, its significance undergoes a slight shift in meaning. Autofiction is not to be confused with mere archaeology of a literary historical nature, since it is less concerned with recovering historical facts than with using the creative techniques of fiction to adduce new symbolic and emotional meaning.

The traumatic events that lurk beyond the horizon of so many works of autofiction – Genon's *faillite fondatrice* or Grell's *manque* – might alternately appear to be of an individually felt, or commonly held, nature. Thus, the examples of Goldschmidt and Guibert narrate traumatic aspects of history and society that are of widespread importance and collective concern: respectively, World War Two and the AIDS crisis. By contrast, the central challenge for Philippe Forest and Camille Laurens is how to go on writing following a tragic experience of a highly personal, individual nature: the death of a child. Yet this surface dichotomy between individual and collective experiences breaks down completely, as if to suggest that a crisis for the society is somehow a tragedy for the individuals within it; and conversely, the act of writing a private tragedy renders it public and hence commonly shared. As Genon suggests, Goldschmidt's *L'esprit de retour* (2011) is not so much *about* the holocaust in the abstract as it is about exploring a fundamental question for Goldschmidt himself. That is, how to write in the aftermath of such horror, especially given that his own first language was that of the Nazis and therefore apparently symbolically tainted with guilt.<sup>44</sup> Likewise, Guibert's *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* (1990) is not so much about the AIDS epidemic in the abstract as it is about Guibert's (varying) perception of different stages in his own illness.

If collective traumas are modulated into individual dilemma in the works of Goldschmidt and Guibert, the opposite is true of Philippe Forest, whose *Sarinagara* (2004) is a highly unconventional combination of essay, memoir and fiction. Ostensibly it consists of three portraits of the Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa, novelist Natsume Sôseki and photographer Yosuke Yamahata, at changing moments of Japanese history. But these are interspersed with brief sections narrating a period Forest and his wife spent in Japan following the death of their daughter. It is in these interstices, and from the aporia between them, rather than in the portraits alone, that signification arises. Like Forest himself, Issa and Sôseki had suffered the loss of children in infancy and then struggled to address themselves to the continuation of their artistic work, to which they nevertheless remained committed. To some extent Forest forges a form of symbolic kinship with them, as if their tragedies become in his exploration aspects of his own.

To elucidate this feeling of subjective, personal experience taking on an interpersonal and intersubjective dimension in the re-telling, Forest portrays Issa, Sôseki and Yamahata as subject to the stresses and pressures of changing social history (which is always in some senses collective) in addition to the domestic crises in which they played their part. Individual trauma refracts and is refracted by a problematic shared history and Forest explores these refractions in the service of creating a new form of

<sup>43</sup> The term he uses is *faillite fondatrice*, a 'foundational fault'. See Genon, *Autofiction*, 58; 73; 122. See also Grell, who characterizes autofiction as a form of writing suitable to loss ('une écriture proper au manque'), *L'Autofiction*, 80.

<sup>44</sup> Genon, *Autofiction*, 58.

cultural memory. Thus, in the final portrait of Yosuke Yamahata, who was the first person to photograph the devastation of Nagasaki after its nuclear bombing in 1945, there is a profound, moving and troubling sense of interrelationship between individual trauma and collective memory. Yamahata cannot fail to have been traumatized by what he saw, but Forest implies that his critical self-awareness was to some extent limited and compromised by the fact that he witnessed it in an official capacity, on behalf of the Japanese Imperial government that had played its own part in plunging the country and the world into war. This complexity militates against too easy an interpretation of the event, Yamahata's experience of the event, or Forest's reconstruction of his experience of the event. In a meaningful sense, the intersubjective nature of the re-narration renders Yamahata's traumas and dilemmas in response to the bombing Forest's own.

Ultimately, therefore, what started off as his project to reconcile himself to the loss of his child through the physical flight to the other side of the planet moved through the experience of discovering other artists and writers who had addressed themselves to that same challenge and ended up speaking and narrating from a series of different socially situated subject positions to that from which he started. The established dilemma many writers and artists feel about the ethics and moral propriety of turning suffering into art is thereby given a new twist in Forest's work, which substitutes the collective trauma of Nagasaki for the individual trauma of having his daughter die, without being able to resolve the emotional pain involved in either.

In this sense, Forest is, like Doubrovsky, painfully honest with himself in his writing even though – perhaps indeed because – he is unlikely to emerge in a particularly flattering light. Indeed, it is notable that Doubrovsky's own *Le livre brisé* enacts the same mediation between the collective remembrance of the war and individual search for meaning discussed above. It opens with a scene where the author watches the French president lay a wreath to mark the anniversary of the liberation of France, and then meanders through various mental, emotional and memory-based digressions into a series of tragedies that are more personal in nature: his failed marriages, his imperfections as a father, his inability to provide emotional support for his young wife Ilse when she suffered a miscarriage, and the question of whether he was responsible for her self-destructive descent into alcoholism and death. This commitment to telling emotional truths through an adumbration of different forms of sensory perception which is subjective, and hence flawed, marks autofiction out from earlier forms of autobiography, and may be what distinguishes creative non-fiction from other forms of truth-telling more generally.

## **Conclusion: A Foucauldian (Re)connection**

Although this essay is principally concerned with major developments in cultural theory, the examples of writing practice by Delaume, Doubrovsky and Forest illustrate the theoretical trajectory undertaken by autofiction since its emergence from the French intellectual context of the 1970s into the wider world. Recent research in areas as diverse as history, philosophy, life writing and women's studies has taken a highly Foucauldian approach to the archaeology of knowledge, drawing attention to the fact that cultural memory does not merely reside in archives and documents in a self-contained way as if it had merely to be excavated in order to be understood. On the contrary, the Foucauldian approach to historical archives and to structures of information and power emphasizes that our memory and knowledge have actively to be

constructed in order to exist. Because this is the case, the findings and interpretations of historical material can be challenged and even changed.

It is in the context of this critique of the knowledge society that autofiction should ultimately be apprehended. Autofiction in effect treats the self as a form of archive, capable of evincing powerful and emotive forms of testimony from within. In doing so, it radically revises the notion of absolute truth, supplementing it with a critical but creative scepticism of all the distortions, digressions and departures that the acts of remembering and of narrating entail.

When looked at in this light, autofiction is no longer a term restricted to the description of Doubrovsky's work as an individual, or even merely the name for a genre of writing that has emerged in his wake. It is, rather, a properly theoretical approach to representations of subjectivity and of the self that are manifest in specific forms of writing, and also increasingly now in other media. In other words, this essay has proposed a cognitive shift in how autofiction can be understood: from genre to theory. By situating autofiction within the intellectual contexts suggested by post-structuralism, deconstruction and intertextuality (on the one hand), and in the cultural contexts of participatory cultural practices and the memorial and commemorative industries (on the other), it has drawn attention to the complicated relationship that exists between autofiction and French theory more generally. It is, finally, a fully dialectical relationship: having been made possible by developments in post-structuralism, deconstruction and intertextuality in the 1970s and then having been for a time eclipsed by them, autofiction is finally able to take its place alongside those other pillars of French critical theory and be numbered as one of them.

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## Autoficțiunea. Fața uitată a teoriei franceze

### Rezumat

Acest eseu aduce ca argument faptul că, în comparație cu alte componente ale teoriei critice franceze (structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstrucție, feminism și intertextualitate), autoficțiunea a avut o influență mai mică atât în țara de unde termenul își are originea cât și în lumea anglofonă. Această neglijare relativă este ironică, pentru că, așa cum articolul de altfel demonstrează, acele arii diferite ale investigației teoretice au ajutat fiecare în măsuri diferite la netezirea căii către punerea în valoare a ideilor despre autoficțiune, dar, în mod simultan le-a eclipsat pe acestea, astfel încât pentru mai multe decenii autoficțiunea a rămas sub nivelul normal de conceptualizare și de cercetare. Identificând și criticând o serie de motive despre întârziere, eseu identifică apoi două contexte recente care sunt mai favorabile pentru evoluția teoriilor autoficțiunii. În mod specific, argumentează că cele mai recente cercetări asupra conceptului de cultură participativă (incluzând cercetarea audienței) pe de o parte și proliferarea formelor variate ale muzeelor memoriale istorice și/ sau culturale, evenimentelor comemorative și a aniversărilor publice pe de cealaltă parte furnizează contexte pline de sens în care teoriile autoficțiunii au început să atingă un potențial maxim.