

## Of Lost Kingdoms and Strange Moments: Subjective Utopianism in Michel Houellebecq's *Les Particules élémentaires*

Françoise Campbell

**ABSTRACT:** The novels of contemporary French author Michel Houellebecq are notorious for their critique of late capitalist society, offering a vitriolic portrayal of humanity that at times borders on the pornographic, the racist and the nihilistic. However, beyond the depiction of Western decline, one of the driving themes of Houellebecq's writing is the question of how to imagine a way out of our current bind. This paper investigates the subjectivity of utopian desire in Houellebecq's 1998 novel *Les Particules élémentaires*. Focusing on the representation of a futuristic neo-human species in the prologue and the epilogue of the novel, it examines how Houellebecq's writing uses the portrayal of scientific progress to highlight the ethical dilemmas of our social world and, moreover, of our own utopian imagination.

**KEYWORDS:** utopia, dystopia, bioethics, Michel Houellebecq, subjectivity

In a recent *Guardian* review of Michel Houellebecq's poetic anthology *Non réconcilié*, critic David Wheatley states that "Michel Houellebecq is perfectly suited to the age of Trump."<sup>1</sup> This declaration comes as no surprise, given the subject matter dealt with in

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the works of France's most controversial contemporary author. Relaying the trials and tribulations of staying alive in late capitalist society, Houellebecq offers a vitriolic portrayal of humanity that at times borders on the pornographic, the racist and the nihilistic. However, beyond the depiction of Western decline, one of the driving questions of Houellebecq's writing is how to imagine a way out of our current bind.

The possibility, or rather impossibility, as some might argue, of a world beyond capitalism is the problem raised by Houellebecq in his 1998 novel, *Les Particules élémentaires* (henceforth *Les Particules*), published in English under the title *Atomised*. This book tells a typically Houellebecquian tale of struggle, as it follows the lives of the two half-brothers Bruno Clément and Michel Djerzinski and their increasing disillusionment with Western society at the turn of the twentieth century. What sets this book apart from its strikingly bleak predecessor, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (in English as *Whatever*), is the portrayal of a futuristic neo-human world in the prologue and epilogue of the novel. Through the portrayal of this new social paradigm, Houellebecq offers his readers an alternative to the pain and suffering experienced by his human protagonists. However, as this paper seeks to explore, by imagining a world beyond humanity, Houellebecq foregrounds the subjective nature of his novel's utopian proposal, prompting us as readers to question the ethical limits of our social world and, moreover, of our own utopian imagination.

According to Lyman Tower Sargent, a literary utopia can be any "non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space."<sup>2</sup> Such texts perform the dual function of critiquing aspects of the author's contemporary society, while moving beyond these bounds to offer the imagination of a desirable alternative. For Sargent, utopian texts can also be described in terms of the more open concept of *utopianism* that he enigmatically describes as "social dreaming," or the "desire for hope," which, according to Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, is common to all.<sup>3</sup> However, despite humanity's penchant for social dreaming, imagining a solution to our social problems is anything but a simple task.

Indeed, nineteenth century satirist Max Beerbohm suggests that utopias can be defined by their variability. This feeling is captured well by his infamous quote: "So

this is Utopia, Is it? Well? I beg your pardon; I thought it was Hell.”<sup>4</sup> One reader’s utopia may be another’s *dystopia*, a negative social alternative, or in some cases, an *anti-utopia* that directly critiques utopianism or a particular utopia.<sup>5</sup> In seeking to portray a better world, utopias transform individual desires for the future into totalising social visions; however, such perspectives rarely grasp the social experience as a whole, leaving blind spots from which new points of critique may arise. As Margaret Atwood wrote in her dystopian novel, *A Handmaid’s Tale*, “better never means better for everyone.”<sup>6</sup>

This ethical dilemma has been acknowledged by Bloch, who, in *The Principle of Hope*, describes subjective consciousness as the determining factor for utopian imagination.<sup>7</sup> As Bloch explains, “not all people exist in the same Now,” and as such, social dreaming gives way to a panoply of differing desires for the future.<sup>8</sup> This observation has also been made by Fredric Jameson, who, in *Archaeologies of the Future*, suggests that:

The fundamental dynamic of any Utopian politics (or of any political Utopianism) will therefore always lie in the dialectic of Identity and Difference, to the degree to which such a politics aims at imagining, and sometimes even at realising, a system radically different from this one.<sup>9</sup>

For Jameson therefore, the nature of any given utopia is necessarily determined by “the transformation of subjectivity” in utopian texts.<sup>10</sup> In this light, we may ask, if utopias are inherently subjective, how can they be ethical?

Originating from the Greek word *ethos*, the term ethics describes the practices and principles of social interaction, “what is morally good and bad, right and wrong.”<sup>11</sup> The meaning of the term has evolved greatly over time as it has come to encompass a range of differing principles and functions.<sup>12</sup> This evolution is tied to the complex nature of ethics as a set of principles that applies to a social group, but whose meaning comes from individual experience. As philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas explains through his concept of a “humanism of the other,” the ethics of human interaction are essentially derived from the recognition of differing human subjects.<sup>13</sup>

The link between ethics and subjectivity has been furthered by Michel Foucault, who describes ethics as a form of “self-care.” As he states in *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, “concern with the self and care of the self [are] required for right conduct and the proper practice of freedom, in order to know oneself ... as well as to form oneself.”<sup>14</sup> In this way, ethical practice is not only engrained in humanity, but also necessitates an understanding of our own subjectivity. An ethical utopia may thus be one capable of contemplating the subjective nature of its own imagination.

Courting contradiction at every turn, Houellebecq has gained a reputation for being something of an immoral moralist. This paradoxical stance is captured well by Victoria Best and Martin Crowley, who explain of Houellebecq’s provocative portrayal of society: “his texts scandalise, but, scandalously, do so evasively, moving the goalposts.”<sup>15</sup> The unsettling ethical standpoint of these works has also been observed by Carole Sweeney who finds Houellebecq’s writing to be “ideologically forked, as it seems to participate in, even approve of, the very world that it purports to condemn.”<sup>16</sup> Rather than assuming this practice to be the result of an ethical lack on Houellebecq’s part, we might propose that his questionable use of ethics may in fact be designed to bring the question of ethics to the forefront of his writing.

The following analysis focusses on the neo-human paradigm of *Les Particules*, in order to investigate how a reading of subjectivity may help us to understand the ethical nature of utopian representation in Houellebecq’s novels. Following Douglas Morrey’s suggestion that these works interrogate “the very notion of Utopia and its pertinence,” it explores the ways in which Houellebecq questions the ethical limits of a utopian vision based on empirical science, through his imagination of advances in cloning technology as the catalyst for the advent of a neo-human species.<sup>17</sup> This analysis begins by outlining the role of biological science as the ideological framework of the novel, and its influence on our reading of the human subject, before examining the transformation of subjectivity and the ethical bind of Houellebecq’s narration through the portrayal of his neo-human species. Finally, it concludes by considering the remaining presence of subjectivity and its critical role as an inherent aspect of Houellebecq’s utopian imagination.

## ETHICS AND BIO-POWER: *LES PARTICULES*'S DETERMINISTIC STRUGGLE

In order to frame our reading of Houellebecq's utopian ethics, it is necessary to begin by analysing his representation of the human subject. Although the plot of the novel takes place at the turn of the twenty-first century, Houellebecq's portrayal of what would otherwise be a familiar setting is described to the contemporary reader with an impersonal tone by one of the future neo-humans. Looking back upon human society as a "lost kingdom,"<sup>18</sup> or "royaume perdu,"<sup>19</sup> we find a portrayal of our present as an age of misery and isolation, as the narrator informs us:

This book is principally the story of a man who lived out the greater part of his life in Western Europe, in the latter half of the twentieth century. Though alone for much of his life, he was nonetheless closely in touch with other men. He lived through an age that was miserable and troubled. The country into which he was born was sliding, ineluctably, into the ranks of the less developed countries; often haunted by misery, the men of his generation lived out their lonely, bitter lives.<sup>20</sup>

(Ce livre est avant tout l'histoire d'un homme, qui vécut la plus grande partie de sa vie en Europe occidentale, durant la seconde moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Généralement seul, il fut cependant, de loin en loin, en relation avec d'autres hommes. Il vécut en des temps malheureux et troublés. Le pays qui lui avait donné naissance basculait lentement, mais inéluctablement, dans la zone économique des pays moyen-pauvres ; fréquemment guettés par la misère, les hommes de sa génération passèrent en outre leur vie dans la solitude et l'amertume.)<sup>21</sup>

Through this opening the narrator's description outlines the time frame of the novel, the second half of the twentieth century, the principal subject, biologist Michel Djerzinski, and his point of origin. Related with a tone of detached observation, this introduction distances the reader from their familiar surroundings, as we find humanity on the path toward inevitable destruction. According to Guillaume Bridet's analysis, *Les Particules*'s narration share the characteristics of a deterministic "roman

à thèse,” by which Houellebecq employs a rhetoric of biological science to perform a diagnostic analysis of contemporary French society.<sup>22</sup>

The family timeline that follows charts the genetic evolution of the two half-brothers Michel and Bruno, referring to their ancestors to as either “*symptomatic* individuals” or “*precursors*,” as Houellebecq’s narration ascribes the individuals of his novel to a series of biologically determined roles.<sup>23</sup> Removed from the description of personality and appearance typically attributed to fictional characters, as Morrey writes, Houellebecq’s humanity is depicted from a “species-eye view,” whereby human interactions appear to be dictated by the rules of biology.<sup>24</sup> In this way, we may follow Sweeney’s suggestion that Houellebecq’s portrayal of humanity reveals the ideological influence of science as a form of Foucauldian “bio-power,”<sup>25</sup> by which “the basic biological features of the human species [have become] the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power.”<sup>26</sup> This is particularly evident as we consider the interactions between Houellebecq’s protagonists in *Les Particules* and their relation with determinism.

Bruno in particular is portrayed as an unfortunate “omega animal,”<sup>27</sup> as in the chapter of the same title Houellebecq depicts a visceral scene of domination, where the young character is both physically and sexually abused by his classmates:

Bruno leans against the washbasin. He has taken off his pyjama top. The folds of his pale stomach press against the cold porcelain. He is 11 years old. ... Wilmart comes up behind him and pushes him and Bruno backs away, trembling, he knows what will happen next. ... Pelé comes up behind him now. He is short, stocky and very strong. He thumps Bruno hard and the boy starts to cry. They push him to the group, grab his feet and drag him across the floor to the toilets. They rip off his pyjama bottoms. His penis is hairless, still that of a child. Two of them hold him by the ankles while others force his mouth open. Pelé takes a toilet brush and scrubs Bruno’s face. He can taste shit. He screams.<sup>28</sup>

(Bruno est appuyé contre le lavabo. Il a ôté sa veste de pyjama. Les replis de son petit ventre blanc pèsent contre la faïence du lavabo. Il a onze ans. ... Wilmart s'approche, d'abord seul, et pousse Bruno à l'épaule. Il commence à reculer en tremblant de peur ; il sait à peu près ce qui va suivre. ... Pelé s'approche à son tour. Il est petit, râblé, extrêmement fort. Il gifle violemment Bruno, qui se met à pleurer. Puis ils le poussent à terre, l'attrapent par les pieds et le traînent sur le sol. Près des toilettes, ils arrachent son pantalon de pyjama. Son sexe est petit, encore enfantin, dépourvu de poils. Ils sont deux à le tenir par les cheveux, ils le forcent à ouvrir la bouche. Pelé lui passe un balai de chiottes sur le visage. Il sent le goût de la merde. Il hurle.)<sup>29</sup>

Through this passage, the narrator's unflinching description surveys the events in an objective tone, depersonalising the characters by referring to Bruno's attackers with their last names although they are the same age as our young protagonist. The stark depiction of Bruno's childlike body further displays the lack of empathy offered by the narrator, heightening the bestial nature of the scene as the protagonist becomes the victim of a fierce hierarchy. Through the supposed objectivity of its scientific narration, Houellebecq's writing thereby dehumanises his protagonists. Moreover, the animalistic behaviour depicted in this scene bears witness to a loss of subjective status, and therefore ethical interaction in the novel.

This sense of de-subjectification is underlined further as Houellebecq's narrator goes on to equate the social ladder of Bruno's boarding school with the Darwinian competition of the animal kingdom. As the narrator states:

Animal societies, for the most part are organised according to a strict hierarchy where rank relates directly to the physical strength of each member. The most dominant male in the group is known as the *alpha male*, his nearest rival the *beta male*, and so on down to the weakest of the group, the *omega male*.<sup>30</sup>

(Les sociétés animales fonctionnent pratiquement toutes sur un système de dominance lié à la force relative de leurs membres. Ce système se caractérise

par une hiérarchie stricte : le mâle le plus fort du groupe est appelé *animal alpha*; celui-ci est suivi du second en force, *animal bêta*, et ainsi de suite jusqu'à l'animal le moins élevé dans la hiérarchie, appelé *animal oméga*.)<sup>31</sup>

According to this set of rules, the human subjects of Houellebecq's novel find themselves locked into the same deterministic struggle as all other animals. As noted by Robert Dion in his analysis of Houellebecq's first novel *Extension*, Houellebecq's animalistic descriptions act to underline humanity's close relation to nature.<sup>32</sup> The lost kingdom of Houellebecq's novel thereby reveals itself to be a realm of bio-power, in which biology acts as a means of dehumanising the human subject. Even the physical bodies of Houellebecq's humans appear as foreign objects, as these sites of fleeting pleasure and connection soon succumb to defect and decay.

This can be read across Bruno's commentary on women throughout the novel. Continually reducing the female characters of the text to their sexual and reproductive function, the deterministic nature of Bruno's gaze is particularly evident through his objectification and ultimate rejection of his wife Anne, recounted later in the novel. In a rather offhand comment to his half-brother, Bruno explains:

I met Anne in 1981, ... She wasn't really beautiful, but I was tired of jacking off. The good thing, though, was she had big tits. ... Later her tits started to go south and our marriage went with them.<sup>33</sup>

(J'ai rencontré Anne en 1981 ... Elle n'était pas tellement belle, mais j'en avais marre de me branler. Ce qui était bien, quand même, c'est qu'elle avait de gros seins. ... Plus tard ses seins sont tombés, et notre mariage s'est cassé la gueule lui aussi.)<sup>34</sup>

Illustrating the ageist exclusivity of a society based on Darwinism, Bruno's aversion to physical decay, and that of society at large, is portrayed as a brutal form of natural selection for Houellebecq's characters.

The dangers of physical decay and suffering are demonstrated further by the death of Annabelle, Michel's childhood sweetheart, toward the end of the novel. Diagnosed with uterine cancer, Annabelle is obliged to undergo surgery to remove her

uterus, a procedure that her gynaecologist describes as standard for women of her age. As we find:

He was not surprised: cancer of the uterus often attacks women in the years before menopause, and not having had children simply increased the risk. There was no question as to the treatment. “We have to do a hysterectomy and a bilateral salpingo-oophorectomy. They’re standard surgical procedures nowadays, complications are almost unheard of.”<sup>35</sup>

(Il n’était pas réellement surpris : le cancer de l’utérus s’attaque souvent aux femmes dans les années qui précèdent la ménopause, et le fait de ne pas avoir eu d’enfants constituait un facteur d’aggravation du risque. Les modalités du traitement étaient connues, sur ce point il n’avait aucun doute. « Il faut pratiquer une hystérectomie abdominale et une salpingo-ovariectomie bilatérale. Ce sont des gestes opératoires bien maîtrisés maintenant, les risques de complication sont quasi nuls. »)<sup>36</sup>

Through this description, the body appears as a foreign entity, as the narrator employs anatomical terms to distance the un-indoctrinated reader from the procedure about to take place. Moreover, the gynaecologist nonchalant remark that hysterectomies have become the norm for women following menopause underscores the fallibility of the human body, which appears flawed and doomed to deterioration. This procedure resonates with Houellebecq’s earlier descriptions of the brothers’ absent mother Janine to emphasise the loss of the maternal figure in the novel, as through the removal of her reproductive organs, Annabelle comes to symbolise humanity’s incapacity to generate new life.

Following Annabelle’s death, Michel forms the conviction that human society must change, as he devotes himself to developing a new form of reproductive technology, leading to the creation of the neo-human species. Through this deterministic lens, the human subject thus appears as an object to be modified and finally eradicated with the coming of *Les Particules*’s neo-human solution.

## THE NEO-HUMAN SOLUTION: TRANSFORMING THE SUBJECT

In the wake of humanity's inevitable decline, Houellebecq's neo-human paradigm would appear to be a utopian alternative for the novel's protagonists. However, the ethical nature of this new world is quickly brought into question as Houellebecq's transformation of humanity leads to the eradication of not only the human subject, but also subjectivity.

Described in the prologue and the epilogue of the novel, the introduction of this new world is coupled with a rhetorical shift that contrasts with the naturalistic descriptions of humanity with the poetic portrayal of this new species. As the narrator informs us:

*We live today under a new world order,  
The web which weaves together all things envelops our bodies,  
Bathes our limbs,  
In a halo of joy.<sup>37</sup>*

*(Nous vivons aujourd'hui sous un tout nouveau règne,  
Et l'entrelacement des circonstances enveloppe nos corps,  
Baigne nos corps,  
Dans un halo de joie.)<sup>38</sup>*

The description of these new beings as bathed "In a halo of joy," as well as the comforting repetition of the third person pronoun "We," juxtapose with Bruno and Djerzinski's isolation to cast a favourable light over the new species.

The neo-humans do not suffer from the misery of physical decay of their human predecessors, as Djerzinski has succeeded in creating an immortal species that reproduce asexually, thereby removing the need for sexual competition. Cut off from interpersonal relations, Houellebecq's neo-humans also have an increased number of pleasure-producing Krause corpuscles, which now occur on non-erogenous zones, so that interaction between individuals is no longer necessary for the satisfaction of desire. *Les Particules's* neo-human paradigm thus offers the reader a vision of tranquility and infinite pleasure. Furthermore, in the novel's epilogue, the narrator

assures us that “to the humans of the old species, [the neo-human world] seems a paradise.”<sup>39</sup>

In this sense, the idyllic contrast between the future and present worlds of Houellebecq’s novel would suggest that the neo-human paradigm of the novel is to be read as a utopian means to overcome the inevitable failure of the human condition through the realisation of science’s potential. However, turning our attention back to the subject and, as Jameson would advise, to the transformation of subjectivity in this new world we find this paradigm to be decidedly lacking in terms of ethics.

No longer subject to the isolation and the pain of human emotions, the neo-humans have no need for the concepts of “personal freedom,” “human dignity” and “progress.”<sup>40</sup> These now antiquated notions, which were once so central to “people in the Age of Materialism,” have now been cast aside in favour of social progress.<sup>41</sup> As we learn:

The confused and arbitrary nature of these ideas meant, of course, that they had little practical or social function...<sup>42</sup>

(Le caractère confus et arbitraire de ces notions devait naturellement les empêcher d’avoir la moindre efficacité sociale réelle...)<sup>43</sup>

Houellebecq’s description of these modified beings reveals the neo-humans to be a heightened version of the de-subjectified humans, as this species finds its basis in the efficiency and homogeneity of their new social system. Returning to Foucault’s theory of bio-power, this transformation finds parallels with his notion of the “docile body,” which provides a physical manifestation of ideological power over the individual. As Foucault explains, the docile body takes its form from “the optimisation of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, its integration into systems of efficient and economic controls.”<sup>44</sup>

This in mind, the immortality of these new beings can be read as a logical extension of contemporary humanity’s obsession with youth, highlighting the paradoxical nature of the neo-human as the end-goal of evolutionary progress. Described by Houellebecq’s fictional biologist Desplenchin as “un peu n’importe

quoi” in the original French version, human DNA is shown to be a haphazard and unreliable means of genetic coding.<sup>45</sup> Djerzinski thus creates a new molecule for replication by removing all sources of variation; however, by eliminating the possibility of genetic mutation, he destroys the means by which the creation of his neo-human species was made possible, and thereby the potential for new progress. As Jerry Andrew Varsava argues in his reading of the novel, “in seeking to neutralize time, utopianists destroy the very basis for ongoing progress in their pursuit of HISTORY.”<sup>46</sup> This new species thus symbolises stasis and not the promise of continued progress.

Furthermore, across the descriptions of Michel’s work, we can discern the increasing danger of transforming the human subject, as bio-power is portrayed as a progressively destructive ideological force. This finds its most evident example through Michel’s evocation of the end of humanity as a universal holocaust, as Houellebecq’s protagonist forms the conviction that:

taken as a whole, nature was not only savage, it was a repulsive cesspit. All in all, nature deserved to be wiped out in a holocaust—and man’s mission on earth was probably to do just that.<sup>47</sup>

(pris dans son ensemble la nature sauvage n’était rien d’autre qu’une répugnante saloperie ; prise dans son ensemble la nature sauvage justifiait une destruction totale, un holocauste universel—et la mission de l’homme sur la Terre était probablement d’accomplir cet holocauste.)<sup>48</sup>

Beyond Houellebecq’s critique of human society, Michel’s resolution to break with the natural order of things exposes the disturbing brutality behind his experiments. Houellebecq’s novel thus illustrates the fraught position of bioethics in contemporary society, as the desire to progress beyond the limits of human nature sees the justification of humanity’s destruction, thereby demanding a conservative retaliation on the reader’s part.

In fact, the vast majority of critics interpret the neo-human world of *Les Particules* as a dystopia, with some seeing it as an expression of anti-utopianism on

Houellebecq's part. One of the most vehement of these responses can be found with Varsava, who describes *Les Particules* as a "provocative, and frankly, chilling" portrayal of eugenics.<sup>49</sup> This sentiment can also be found with Sweeney's interpretation of the novel, as she states: "Houellebecq seems then to propose no less than an annihilation of the political and the ethical, replacing them with the determinism of science and technology which will finally reduce us all to a monocultural homogenous community of one."<sup>50</sup> These dystopian readings of *Les Particules*, shared by many other critics, resonate clearly with Beerbohm's commentary on utopia's fickleness, revealing that for his readers, Houellebecq's neo-human species in fact represents a totalitarian dystopia. The antagonistic nature of *Les Particules's* reception brings us squarely to the ethical problem posed by Houellebecq's narrative: namely, how can a utopia based on the eradication of the human subject be considered ethical?

By imagining a world where humanity no longer exists, as Jameson suggests, Houellebecq's novel "brings us to the fundamental dispute when it comes to subjectivity, namely whether the Utopia in question proposes the kind of radical transformation of subjectivity presupposed by most revolutions, ...; or whether the impulse to Utopia is not already grounded in human nature."<sup>51</sup> As such, the ultimate contradiction caused by subjective utopianism can be found in its fragility, as by transforming the ideological conditions of utopia's origin, the desired alternative itself may cease to be a utopia. This dilemma leaves the reader in the ethical bind of a scientifically progressive but ideologically conservative narrative.

In rejecting the neo-human paradigm as a dystopia, we are left with the difficulty of reading *Les Particules* as either a tale of utopia's impossibility or, even more terrifying, an anti-utopia that affirms the ideological limits of our present as a preferable alternative. As Jameson concludes, the resolution of this paradox "in either direction would be fatal for the existence of Utopia itself."<sup>52</sup> Despite Houellebecq's critique of scientific progress, *Les Particules's* conclusion resists the totalising closure of an anti-utopian argument by reflexively highlighting the subjectivity of its utopian proposal.

## LOOKING TOWARD THE LOST KINGDOM: THE REMAINS OF SUBJECTIVITY

The subjective nature of *Les Particules*'s utopianism can be read across a number of aspects of the novel. The book itself is divided on multiple levels, as its account of the present appears in opposition to that of the future, whose historicising gaze clouds our reading of this distinction. The text's protagonists, likewise, appear as polar opposites, seeking out utopian experiences along divergent paths. In the second section of the novel entitled "*Strange Moments*," or "*Moments étranges*," the sexually obsessed Bruno wanders from hippy communes to sex clubs in his search for intimacy, while his brother Michel becomes increasingly ostracised through his pursuit of a scientific solution.<sup>53</sup>

Bruno's stay at the New Age camp, "the Lieu du Changement," sees Houellebecq's protagonist continually rejected by the other visitors. During a passage satirically titled "The primitive rituals of 'Happy Hour,'" the Lieu's founding principles of community and free exchange are harshly undermined by the subjective position of Houellebecq's protagonist, as Bruno's omega status sees the character condemned to isolation and longing, shown through the explicit scenes of solitary masturbation found throughout this part of the novel.<sup>54</sup>

As Morrey has observed, it is interesting to note that despite the narrator's keen interest in Michel as the creator of the neo-human species, "more than half of the novel is told from Bruno's perspective."<sup>55</sup> This split in the novel's narration introduces a new framework for utopian desire, as the narrator follows Bruno's futile search for a utopian solution within the realm of liberal capitalism.

Perhaps one of the most enlightening aspects of Bruno's subjective status is shown through his re-reading of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, by which Houellebecq's protagonist highlights the inherent subjectivity of utopian desire. Following a couple of drinks, and in the mood to discuss philosophy, Bruno informs his brother that, for him, Huxley's dystopian novel may actually be a utopia. As he explains:

Everyone says *Brave New World* is supposed to be a totalitarian nightmare, a vicious indictment of society, but that's hypocritical bullshit. *Brave New World* is our idea of heaven: genetic manipulation, sexual liberation, the war against age, the leisure society. This is precisely the world we have tried—and so far failed—to create.<sup>56</sup>

(Je sais bien, ... qu'on décrit en général l'univers d'Huxley comme un cauchemar totalitaire, qu'on essaie de faire passer ce livre pour une dénonciation virulente ; c'est une hypocrisie pure et simple. Sur tous les points—contrôle génétique, liberté sexuelle, lutte contre le vieillissement, civilisation des loisirs, *Brave New World* est pour nous un paradis, c'est en fait exactement le monde que nous essayons, jusqu'à présent sans succès, d'atteindre.)<sup>57</sup>

Described as an act of “counterfactual intertextuality” by Varsava, Houellebecq's re-branding of this hallmark of the dystopian canon acts to highlight the central importance of subjectivity when reading utopian fiction, as the once ominous vision of an institutionalised and hierarchical world appears idyllic to his protagonist.<sup>58</sup> This intertextual inversion further brings the reader's attention to the subjective nature of Houellebecq's own novel, as by undermining the supposed objectivity of his narration his text performs a reflexive critique of its own scientific utopianism.

This can be seen in the epilogue of *Les Particules*, where the subjectivity of the neo-human narrator further troubles our reading of Houellebecq's utopian solution. Questioning the sincerity of his own narration, the neo-human informs us that:

Though we know much about the lives, the physical appearances and the personalities of the characters in this book, it must nonetheless be considered a fiction. A plausible recreation based on recollections, rather than a definite attestable truth.<sup>59</sup>

(Sur la vie, l'apparence physique, le caractère des personnages qui ont traversé ce récit, nous connaissons de nombreux détails ; ce livre doit malgré tout être considéré comme une fiction, une reconstitution crédible à partir de

souvenirs partiels, plutôt que comme le reflet d'une vérité univoque et attestable.)<sup>60</sup>

Highlighting the mediating presence of the novel's narrator, this comment casts doubt upon the reliability of Houellebecq's narrative, drawing parallels with the reflexive commentary at the conclusion of More's *Utopia*, where the narrator admits his scepticism for Hythloday's account of the utopian island.<sup>61</sup> As Crowley states in "Houellebecq—The Wreckage of Liberation," despite the apparent objectivity of the novel's neo-human narrator, "we are left, then, with an approach to framing in which, rather than qualifying its material, the frame sits alongside it, offering one interpretative possibility, irreducible and irrelevant."<sup>62</sup>

The epilogue of *Les Particules* can thus be read as a form of rhetorical decentring, as the narrator's reflexive commentary performs a critique of empirical science's attempt at objectifying the world according to fact and precision. As Houellebecq reminds us in his critical work *H. P. Lovecraft: Contre le monde, contre la vie*: "The universe is nothing but a furtive arrangement of elementary particles. A figure of transition toward chaos."<sup>63</sup> By discrediting the authenticity of his narrator, Houellebecq thus opens the utopian nature of his novel out to new contestation as he underscores his deterministic tale of struggle with a subjective unpicking of its supposedly objective foundation.

In addition to the self-reflexive critique of the neo-human narrator, we also learn that Michel himself was not the instigator of the new species, but rather that he left his findings to be discovered later by the twenty-seven-year-old researcher Frédéric Hubczejak. This added layer of mediation brings a new perspective into play, one that appears to clash with that of Michel and with the greater public. The narrator explains, Hubczejak himself had only an approximate notion of Michel's experiments and is accused of grossly misinterpreting the philosophical subtleties of the neo-human project.<sup>64</sup> This is illustrated by his direct implementation of Michel's theories, without the least reflection. For example, we find that:

the number of individuals in any new species must always be a prime number. ... The purpose of having a population divisible only by itself and one was symbolically to draw attention to the dangers which sub-groups constitute in any society; but it would appear that Hubczejak accepted this without ever wondering what it might mean.<sup>65</sup>

(le nombre d'individus de la nouvelle espèce devait rester constamment égal à un nombre premier. ... L'objectif était bien entendu, par le maintien d'un nombre d'individus uniquement divisible par lui-même et par l'unité, d'attirer symboliquement l'attention sur ce danger que représente, au sein de toute société, la constitution de regroupements partiels; mais il semble bien qu'Hubczejak ait introduit cette condition dans le cahier des charges sans le moins du monde s'interroger sur sa signification.)<sup>66</sup>

Through this application, Hubczejak has overlooked the totalitarian nature behind Michel's intention, as by hindering the formation of sub-groups, the neo-humans have become an anonymous social mass, cut off from both the notion of subjectivity and the other. Moreover, Hubczejak's role is described by the narrator as one of public relations, rather than the application of scientific rigor, thereby blurring the lines between the capitalist discourse and scientific ideology of the novel.<sup>67</sup>

It is also important to note that Hubczejak's early work was met with "unanimous disgust and condemnation" by the public.<sup>68</sup> This reaction echoes the dystopian readings of Varsava and Sweeney mentioned above, drawing the reader's attention to the inherent flaws of the text's supposedly utopian vision. In this way, the subjective contradictions raised by *Les Particules* can be perceived in similar terms to Moylan's description of critical utopias and dystopias as hybrid texts that "negotiate the conflict between Utopia and Anti-utopia."<sup>69</sup> In Houellebecq's text, the line between utopia and dystopia, between the ethical and the unethical, is drawn faintly, if not with duplicity in this work, as we find his utopian representation to be instilled with a critical subjectivity.

By splintering the subjective perspectives of his utopian narrative, Houellebecq thus performs an inversion of the scientific frame of the novel, offering, instead, a somewhat chaotic arrangement of particles, through which we discover the remains of human subjectivity. Keeping in mind Jameson's question of utopia as an impulse engrained in human nature, the critical importance of subjectivity thus becomes increasingly apparent as we turn our attention to the ending of *Les Particules*.

Through the epilogue's description of the neo-human world we learn that this paradigm bears little resemblance to what we may consider an ethical utopia. Despite the supposed paradise of this future world, individual pursuits have disappeared. As the neo-human states:

without the stimulus of personal vanity, the pursuit of Truth and Beauty has taken on a less urgent aspect.<sup>70</sup>

(la poursuite du Vrai et du Beau, moins stimulée par l'aiguillon de la vanité individuelle, a de fait acquis un caractère moins urgent.)<sup>71</sup>

Bereft of subjective desire, happiness in this future world is evoked apathetically, described as an "estimation" in the original French description.<sup>72</sup> In this way, Houellebecq's utopian solution reveals itself as a more limited and bounded society than the present it sought to surpass, as by seeking to overcome humanity's failings, Houellebecq's novel imagines a world in which human nature has been eradicated for the sake of progress.

By shifting the novel's perspective from the neo-human paradise to look back onto humanity, the reader is therefore brought to reflect on the limitations of their own utopian ideal. As the above passage reveals, the pursuit of beauty and truth, shown to be human qualities, remains inaccessible to the neo-humans, allowing us, through the reading of the novel's neo-human paradigm, to explore the question of utopianism as an inherently human impulse.

In the final lines of the epilogue the following dedication to the nearly extinct human race appears, revealing that the book is dedicated to humanity:

As the last members of this species are extinguished, we think it just to render this last tribute to humanity, a homage which itself will one day disappear, buried beneath the sands of time. It is necessary that this tribute be made, if only once. This book is dedicated to mankind.<sup>73</sup>

(Au moment où ses derniers représentants vont s'éteindre, nous estimons légitime de rendre à l'humanité ce dernier hommage ; hommage qui, lui aussi, finira par s'effacer et se perdre dans les sables du temps ; il est cependant nécessaire que cet hommage, au moins une fois, ait été accompli. Ce livre est dédié à l'homme.)<sup>74</sup>

With this final appraisal, the novel takes on an elegiac tone, saluting humanity and its desire for a better world and thereby recasting the unfortunate humans as the utopian heart of the novel. In a twist fitting of Bloch's utopian philosophy, we thus find that a flicker of hope remains in Houellebecq's novel, not with the neo-human future, but rather with present humanity itself. This paradoxical shift reveals something of a veneration of the subjective utopian desire found in Houellebecq's human world. As such, we may conclude by proposing that *Les Particules* can be read as not only a critique, but also as a celebration of utopia's subjectivity. In foregrounding the paradoxical nature of a utopia founded upon the transformation of the human subject into a neo-human other, Houellebecq's novel thereby reveals the subjective limitation of its own utopian ideal, while reaffirming the desire for utopia as a phenomenon ingrained in every human subject.

FRANÇOISE CAMPBELL has recently completed her PhD in French literature in cotutelle at the University of Melbourne and at l'Université Paris 7 Diderot. Her research interests are focused on the study of rhetorical and ideological ambivalence in contemporary fiction, with her doctoral thesis analysing the ambivalence of utopian representation in the novels of Michel Houellebecq. She has recently co-organised the symposium "Houellebecq's cultural transgressions" and will be co-editing a special issue of *French Cultural Studies* on the same theme.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> David Wheatley, review of *Unreconciled*, by Michel Houellebecq, *The Guardian*, January 13, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jan/12/unreconciled-poems-michel-houellebecq-review>.

<sup>2</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, “In Defense of Utopia,” *Diogenes* 53, no. 11 (2006): 15.

<sup>3</sup> Lyman Tower Sargent, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” *Utopian Studies* 5, no. 1, (1994): 3; Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, trans. Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice and Paul Knight, 3 vols. (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> The quote originates from a handwritten note by Max Beerbohm on the verso of an autograph of one of his poems; see Jacobus Gerhardus Riewald, *Max Beerbohm’s Mischievous Wit: A literary achievement* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2000), 53–54. Max Beerbohm, quoted in Sargent, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” 1.

<sup>5</sup> Sargent, “The Three Faces of Utopianism Revisited,” 1.

<sup>6</sup> Margaret Atwood, *A Handmaid’s Tale* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1986), 211.

<sup>7</sup> Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1: 65. The notion of utopian subjectivity is also discussed in Bloch’s writing on non-synchronism. See: Ernst Bloch, “Non-Synchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics,” *New German Critique* 11, (1977): 22–38.

<sup>8</sup> Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, 1: 6.

<sup>9</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), xii.

<sup>10</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future*, xii.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Singer, “Ethics,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, January 12, 2018, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/194023/ethics>.

<sup>12</sup> As Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen and Rebecca Walkowitz state: “From Aristotle and Kant to Nietzsche and Hegel to Habermas and Foucault to Derrida and Lacan and Levinas ... the concept of ethics and the ethical has been reconceptualized, reformulated, and repositioned.” Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, “Introduction,”

in *The Turn to Ethics*, ed. Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen and Rebecca L. Walkowitz (London: Routledge, 2000), viii.

<sup>13</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Humanism of the Other*, trans. Nidra Poller (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 66-67.

<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, trans. Robert Hurley, ed. Paul Rainbow (New York: The New Press, 1997), 285.

<sup>15</sup> Victoria Best and Martin Crowley, *The New Pornographies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), 190.

<sup>16</sup> Carole Sweeney, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), x.

<sup>17</sup> Douglas Morrey, *Michel Houellebecq: Humanity and Its Aftermath* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 12.

<sup>18</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *Atomised*, trans. Frank Wynne (London: William Heinemann, 2000), 9.

<sup>19</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *Les Particules élémentaires* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), 12.

<sup>20</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 7.

<sup>22</sup> Guillaume Bridet, "Michel Houellebecq et les montres molles," *Fictions Contemporaines* 3, no. 151 (2008): 12.

<sup>23</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 26. In the original French version: "[des] élément[s] symptomatique[s]," "des précurseurs." Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 25.

<sup>24</sup> Morrey, *Humanity and its Aftermath*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Sweeney, *Literature of Despair*, 69.

<sup>26</sup> Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-78* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1.

<sup>27</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 48.

<sup>28</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 48.

<sup>29</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 43.

<sup>30</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 51.

<sup>31</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 45.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Dion, "Faire la bête: Les fictions animalières dans *Extension du domaine de la lutte*," *CRIN* 43 (2004): 55-66, 59.

<sup>33</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 203.

<sup>34</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 170.

<sup>35</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 331.

<sup>36</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 276–7.

<sup>37</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 7.

<sup>38</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 9.

<sup>39</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 379. In the original French version: “Aux humains de l’ancienne race, [le monde néo-humain] fait l’effet d’un paradis.” Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 316.

<sup>40</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 379. In the original French version: “les concepts de *liberté individuelle*, de *dignité humaine* et de *progrès*.” Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 316.

<sup>41</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 379. In the original French version: “les humains de l’âge matérialiste.” Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 316.

<sup>42</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 371.

<sup>43</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 309.

<sup>44</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978), 139

<sup>45</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 272. In the English translation: “a little bit of everything”, Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 325.

<sup>46</sup> Jerry Andrew Varsava, “Utopian Yearnings, Dystopian Thoughts: Houellebecq’s *The Elementary Particles* and the Problem of Scientific Communitarianism,” *College Literature* 32, no. 4 (2005): 163.

<sup>47</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 38.

<sup>48</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 36.

<sup>49</sup> Varsava, “Utopian Yearnings, Dystopian Thoughts,” 148.

<sup>50</sup> Sweeney, *Literature of Despair*, 160.

<sup>51</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 168.

<sup>52</sup> Jameson, *Archaeologies*, 168.

<sup>53</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 111; Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 95.

<sup>54</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 156. In the original French version: “Rites primitifs à l’apéritif.” Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 133.

<sup>55</sup> Morrey, *Humanity and its Aftermath*, 44.

<sup>56</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 187.

<sup>57</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 157.

- <sup>58</sup> Varsava, “Utopian Yearnings, Dystopian Thoughts,” 158.
- <sup>59</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 369.
- <sup>60</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 307.
- <sup>61</sup> Thomas More, *Utopia* (London: Penguin Classics, 2012), 84.
- <sup>62</sup> Martin Crowley, “Houellebecq—The Wreckage of Liberation,” *Romance Studies* 20, no. 1 (2002): 26.
- <sup>63</sup> Michel Houellebecq, *H. P. Lovecraft: Against the World, Against Life*, trans. Dorna Khazeni (London: Orion Publishing Group, 2005), 32. In the original French version: “L’univers n’est qu’un furtif arrangement de particules élémentaires. Une figure de transition vers le chaos.” Michel Houellebecq, *H. P. Lovecraft: Contre le monde, contre la vie* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999), 17.
- <sup>64</sup> In the original text, the narrator writes of “[une] méconnaissance grossière des enjeux philosophiques du projet.” Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 313; and in English: “[a] gross misinterpretation of the philosophical subtleties of the project.” Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 376.
- <sup>65</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 375–376.
- <sup>66</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 313
- <sup>67</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 314–315; Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 377.
- <sup>68</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 372. In the original French: “une réprobation et un dégoût unanimes.” Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 309.
- <sup>69</sup> Tom Moylan, *Scraps of the Untainted Sky* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2000), 191–192.
- <sup>70</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 378–379.
- <sup>71</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 316.
- <sup>72</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 307.
- <sup>73</sup> Houellebecq, *Atomised*, 378–379.
- <sup>74</sup> Houellebecq, *Les Particules*, 316–317.