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Performing the Literary Interview: Body and Decorum

Abstract: The author interview in the press and in the electronic media is more than just a promotional activity. It is an interaction between an interviewer, an interviewee, and an audience, where what is said, done and shown can be used to extract information on the author's work. When studied as performance, that is, as a media ritual where the author is embodied, the interview becomes an extension of the author's work by other means. By analyzing examples based largely on the French literary field in the twentieth and twenty-first century, this article shows how the two key elements of the performance—decorum and body—can be used by the audience and in research to make inferences about the author's person and their work. It also suggests that when discrepancies appear between the author in person and the image that springs from their writings, the interviewer and the medial framing try to reduce the gap between the author and their poetics. Finally, the article shows that in literary interviews, gendered scripts are enacted.*

Keywords: literary interview, author interview, interaction, persona; performance, decorum, setting, gestures, embodiment, ritual, scene, gender, media

Introduction

The interview reveals information about the author and their work through what is being said in conversation. It is a genre with a well-established script and distribution of roles: the interviewer is the middleman whose role is to provide a third party (the readers, audience, or spectators) with information about the writer—their person and their work. The author, who appears in the interview in person, is supposed to speak about himself or herself and their work. Thus, an analysis of the conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee enables us to extract data pertaining to these aspects. In a previous work on Nathalie Sarraute's interviews, I showed how the author's image is built through the verbal interaction between interviewer and interviewee (see Yanoshevsky, "L'entretien d'écrivain").

* This article is based on chapter 3 of Yanoshevsky, "L'Entretien littéraire."

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However, the site of an interview holds more than what is said; its analysis should extend to what is being done and shown. To begin with, the author comes in person to the interview. As they "[enter] the scene" (Meizoz, *La littérature "en personne"* 3), their embodied presence conveys more than is contained in their writings and what is said in the interview. Their gestures and their facial expressions, the way they perform their role as a writer-interviewed, is recorded on tape and on paper, and is part of the information conveyed, along with what is being said. Though some argue that interviews are "fluff"—that they are promotional media activity *outside* of the author's works, I claim otherwise. In this article, the author interview is not viewed as yet another type of authors' promotional activity, one which is to be viewed as external to their works. It is part and parcel of their oeuvre, shaping an understanding of their poetics, the specific style (structure and themes) associated with their work. To explore it, we need to study the functioning of the author interview through the notion of performance.

I understand "performance" in a double sense, first as action on a stage. It involves a script, actors—each holding a specific role and interacting with one another, and decorum—a specific setting where action takes place. But "performance" encompasses more than just the activity on stage. In Richard Schechner's understanding, it also comes to include the rites and rituals of all spheres of life. Understood in this way, the interview is one of the many rites performed by authors in the literary and the media spheres (e.g., interviews, debates, and book launches), which can each be studied as a substrate of their respective poetics. In French culture, the author interview descends from the *lieu commun* (*locus memoriae*) known as the visit to the great writer (see Nora), where the journalist travels to the author's place to meet them in their private home, because one can learn about a person from the way they live. In its contemporary rendering, however, the author is interviewed in a studio where, out of their natural environment, they are "caught" on film and tape. While previous research mainly turned to recovering the writer's *persona* through the interview (Rodden; Yanoshevsky, "L'entretien d'écrivain"), or to explaining how the interview is a sociological phenomenon where the writer "enters the scene," and where their image is forged (Meizoz, *La littérature "en personne"*), I am interested in the way the author's specific poetics are simultaneously sought after in interviews and produced in the interaction. In this article, I would like to show how authors' physical traits, corporal gestures, and attire (all falling under the headline of "body") interact with "decorum," here to be understood as how the writer is described or filmed and how the setting is used in relation to the writer and their body in a way that pertains to their poetics. In the last section of the paper, I look into feminine scripts of embodiment in interviews.

The Interview in the French Tradition

With one foot set in the American press of the late nineteenth century and another anchored in the ritual visit to the great writer, the literary interview in France evolves from both the journalistic and the literary traditions. It is initially brought from across the Atlantic, in the form of an interview with eyewitnesses. However, once in France, it turns into interviews with celebrities in various fields, continuing the tradition of the "visit to the great writer" by other means.

Introduced in France in 1884 by *Le Petit Journal* (Speirs 301–07), the author interview becomes a sub-genre of the interview, a new journalistic genre of field reporting invented by James Gordon Bennett Senior of the *New York Herald* (Palmer 90). Designed to collect live information from laymen, New Journalism emerged as a form of grassroots journalism meant to inform the general public on topics of human interest and to sell newspapers (Thérenty 333–34). In late-nineteenth-century France, the vogue of interviewing not only laymen, but also celebrities who were not specialists about the topic at hand, gave rise to heated debates about the interview's (un)reliability (Seillan 1033). Though naturalist author Émile Zola questioned the authenticity of interviews, he did not entirely reject the form. Interviews could be useful if the interviewer was "a man of talent, who respected someone else's thoughts" (Leyret). Others agreed with this point of view. Journalist Pierre Giffard and novelist, journalist, and politician Maurice Barrès defended the written form of an interview (see Barrès, "L'ésthétique"; Giffard, *Le Sieur*). Not merely a stenographic report, the text had to convey the journalist's (artistic) talent (see Barrès). According to journalist André Lang an interview belonged to the interviewer, and the interviewee was not entitled to proofreading, an opinion commonly shared by most of the journalists who took part in the inquiry (see Lang). In his view, the interest in interviews is in large part due to the reporter's ability to reproduce the atmosphere and to interpret the thoughts of their interviewee as a function of their own personality.

The literary interview in France is also an offshoot of great authors' portraits in their homes that flourished in eighteenth-century Europe (Nora 563–87; Thérenty 341; Kött 69–72, 239). It was a ritualized institution of literary consecration (see Dubois; Sapiro). Descending directly from "the visit to the great writer" ("la visite au grant' écrivain"), it is a ritualized moment where, according to Nora, one is exposed to the shocking presence of the great writer in flesh and blood, they who are usually ratified by their work, rather than by their person (571). These encounters included visits to the home of the renowned writer, in order to explore the place where their work is produced. They originated from a biographical desire to know the person behind the work, in the tradition of Sainte-Beuve, who

spurred interest in the biography of the author in French literature history (see Sainte-Beuve). Although Marcel Proust vividly protested against the confusion between the two entities of the writer's person—the one who writes and the one who visits the salons—the literary interview ultimately further drew attention to the author's persona and performance outside of his writing (Proust 224).

Such a meeting is encapsulated in a mise en scène made up of a setting (decorum) and a certain way to observe the writer in that space, as the physical ratifier of their work (see Maingueneau, "Ethos, scénographie, incorporation"). This is in fact the opposite direction we take, as readers of a book, as we reconstruct the author's image from their writing, or what Amossy dubs "the discursive image" (*see L'image de soi dans le discours*). Once we get a glimpse of the writer in person, we instantaneously interpret their conduct by inferring from their work and are astonished to discover discrepancies between the writing and the person (like a stuttering in oral discourse of a writer who is otherwise eloquent in writing). As spectators, we cannot help going back and forth between the writer's image as it comes across in the written work, and the extra-literary images transmitted through journalistic accounts of the interview ("des *propos recueillis*") or in audiovisual media.

With the advent of electronic media (radio and television) the paradigm of the visit to the home of the writer has shifted. Interviews are mostly recorded or filmed in the studio, and so the writer has to travel. It is now the writer who invades the interviewer's habitat, rather than the interviewer penetrating the space inhabited by the interviewee. For instance, in the famous French literary roundtable, *Apostrophes*[1] host Bernard Pivot only rarely traveled to the writer's home.[2] The new media context further complicates the performance and the interview's transmission, because it entails that the interviewee is now not only at the mercy of the interviewer's pen, but also has to perform in an unfamiliar media context, one that records their every move and takes an active part in fashioning their performance.

In what follows, I examine two key elements of the performance of the author interview: decorum and embodiment.

1 *Apostrophes* was a live, weekly, literary, primetime, talk show on French television (Antenne 2) created and hosted by Bernard Pivot. It ran for more than fifteen years (1975–1992).

2 Exceptions are Marguerite Yourcenar and Alexander Solzhenistyn. Pivot interviews Marguerite Yourcenar in her home in Mount Desert Island, United States, in September 1979, and Alexandre Solzhenitsyn in his home in Cavendish, Vermont, during December 1983.

Reading Poetics from Decorum

By *decorum* I designate the physical/actual place or the environment in which the interview performance of the writer takes place. Likewise, "decorum" refers to a certain way to frame—to describe or to film—the body's movement in space. The literary interview is conducted on a set or in the writer's home, the latter corresponding to zoological and anthropological conventions of exploring species by describing them in their "natural" habitat, as a means to explain their behavior (in the animal realm) and their activities (in the human realm) through their spaces of living. This perspective echoes Balzac's realistic, Buffon-inspired model:

> There has therefore existed, there will therefore always exist social Species as there are zoological Species. Buffon has produced a magnificent work in trying to represent in a book the whole of zoology, but was there not a work of this kind to be done for society? (Balzac 8, my translation)

Filming the author's home and surroundings sheds light on this perspective of habitat, where the author is, as Claude Lévi-Strauss puts it, "in his element" (Lévi-Strauss). Upon his request, Jean José Marchand and his team film Lévi-Strauss in his mansion of Montigny-sur-Aube in June 1974. In the introduction to the film ("Claude Levi-Strauss"), Lévi-Strauss appears elegantly dressed, using a cane as he strolls on the paths of his property, and finally settles down in an armchair across from a chateau, described in the voice-over alternately as his home (une maison/sa maison) or as an old French residence ("devant une vieille demeure française"). The apparently minor difference in description bears a special meaning in the context of the interview: in the first part, we are shown the familial context in which Levi-Strauss grew up (the first few images shown are photos of his grandparents and his childhood). The second part focuses on Lévi-Strauss's professional life as a post-war author, his return to France in 1948, and the period in which he headed of one of France's most prestigious institutions, the École pratique des hautes études. Describing his house as an "old French home" ("une vieille demeure française") leads the spectator to connect what they are seeing with *enracinement* (being part of a place, taking root, for generations) and "old Frenchhood" which was contested by antisemitism throughout the war and—given Lévi-Strauss's Jewish heritage—would have been denied to his family. The decorum thus restores Lévi-Strauss's right to belong to the French nation, signaling that he is a French writer. The introduction to the third part incorporates alternating images of Lévi-Strauss walking along a path and photos of his books and expeditions; this represents the crossing paths of the young Lévi-

Strauss and members of South American Indigenous groups and provides a symbolic introduction to his lifelong career as an anthropologist.

In a 1961 documentary devoted to Louis-Ferdinand Céline, by then one of France's greatest living writers after being rehabilitated from his pre-war notoriety as siding with France's collaborationists during the second World War, Céline walks to his house in Meudon (Pauwels). While comparable in certain respects, Louis-Ferdinand Céline's walk is symbolically different from that of Lévi-Strauss's. The anthropologist's stroll is staged in a way that elevates an everyday gesture towards the importance of his work; his walk towards the house, as we have shown, is accompanied by a montage of images of his various field work with South American Indigeneity. Known for his collaboration and avowed antisemitism, Céline's walk is anything but elevating: it dismounts the writer from the great author's pedestal by showing him dressed in rags and surrounded by his domestic animals. The voice-over emphasizes this effect by describing his walk toward his home in the following manner:

> Still full of anger and shrouded in misery, here he is. His true companions are mongrel and angry dogs. He calls them all 'my little peer' [*sic*.] with great tenderness. His most intimate friend is the parrot that you will hear hissing during our conversation. For indeed Céline lives, works, and dreams among the furious barking and this ironic bird's whistling. (Pauwels, my translation)

In previous examples, we saw how an author's reputation and works are symbolically represented in the contact between the writer and their surroundings. In the following example, the description of the author's surroundings provides the journal's readers with an analogy between the writer's environment and their literary themes. In the summer of 2015, journalist Ariane Chemin offered *Le Monde*'s readers a weekly portrait of best-selling author, Michel Houellebecq, notorious for his rowdy relationship with the media and his provocative literary themes. Like the narrator of *Soumission* (2015), Houellebecq lives alone, in a tall building in the thirteenth arrondissement. Moving back and forth between the building which is inhabited by middle class Chinese and Houellebecq, and its environment which encompasses the small shops, supermarkets and the ring road represented in his novels, the descriptions supposedly give the reader the writer's perspective on the world. According to Chemin, Houellebecq prefers the ordinary and the banal (view of the ring road, or no view at all) to celebrity and shoulder rubbing with the Saint-Germain élite. The look cast on the author's residence serves as proof of this claim.

Detailed descriptions of the writer's environment can be used to reveal the sources of their oeuvre. A good example of this tendency is Roger-Michel

Allemand's documentary film interview with French laureate author Michel Butor (*Michel Butor*; see Allemand). Butor's interview is part of François Flohic's collection of in-depth interviews with writers, designed to trace back the sources of the works through the author's life. It shows Butor at *A l'écart* (literally: "apart"), his residence at Lucinges in Haute-Savoie, France. The back cover of the DVD describes this interview as an "original portrait of the writer in the privacy of his place of life and work." Dressed in his usual pocketed overalls, Butor is filmed in his home office, packed with books. During the interview, Butor draws an analogy between the house and his writing: His home is "bursting with objects," to a point where to add something, you must remove something else. In the same manner, the process of writing a book involves forgetting other books you have written. The camera focuses on the background, loaded with books, brushes and paintings. A few close-ups of Butor's face, with a globe in the background, hints at Butor's lifelong experience as a travel writer whose travels have shaped his writing. The camera follows Butor as he strolls on the path of his home and says: "I am a classic in the difference, apart," this last adverb is the name of his property, *à l'Écart* (indicated in the film by a sign). Everything in the visual framing of Butor's interview in his residence works to prove the relationship between a life and a work: Butor's writing is given here as the result of the daily living conditions of the author of *La Modification* (1957).

The importance of the home as a driving force for writing is evident in French Academy's author Michel Tournier's interview. He uses metaphors and analogies based on the link he establishes between his country home and his work. The work is like a plant or a tree, he says, which must be cared for by a gardener. The whole interview is therefore set not in his Paris residence, but rather in his countryside home. As he welcomes interviewer Viviane Forrester of the *Chemins* series, he admits that he cannot possibly imagine writing in Paris, without a garden, which for him is an essential space for writing (Forrester, "Interview with Michel Tournier").

When in the same series Viviane Forrester interviews French New Novelist Nathalie Sarraute, she visits her not in the author's residence, but rather in her writer's habitat, that is, the Parisian café where she is known to write her novels: in the tumult of the place, among strangers, the author of *Tropismes* manages to detach herself, to withdraw into herself, in order to capture the microscopic movements in the confines of consciousness that her novels are all about (Forrester, "Nathalie Sarraute").

In all examples cited above, the interviewers reference the authors' current location (more or less removed from the epicenter of literary action or from "home") as an explanation of their literary production. However, other interviews

give a diachronic perspective on the origins of writing. Georges Perec and Amos Oz, for instance, are interviewed in their biographical surroundings. Viviane Forrester sets Georges Perec's interview in rue Vilin, Belleville, where his mother used to own a hair salon. This is Perec's first visit to his childhood place after the Second World War, and the interview clearly views it as a trigger to speak of his works. Israeli laureate writer Amos Oz's first steps in becoming a writer date back to the days when, as a teenager, he made himself a "room of his own" at the communal Herzl house in Kibbutz Houlda. As he is filmed by journalist Ilana Dayan, the camera follows the paths of the kibbutz today before focusing first on Oz's walk towards Herzl house, where he used to clandestinely write away from the mocking eyes of his peers: "I didn't want the other children to know that I was writing. Every evening I went to the Herzl house" (Dayan). The interview then takes place in the now empty space of Herzl house, used here to recall Oz's past.

Jean José Marchand films Nobel prize winner Jorge Luis Borges's interview in the Argentinian writer's workplace, the library (Marchand, "Interview with Jorge"). He thus gives a symbolic meaning to the space, turning it into a place: Borges is seated on a chair and surrounded by books at the corner of the National Public Library in Buenos Aires. Already blind at the time of the interview, Borges cannot read the countless books that have nourished his writing. In a dark and viewless corner of the library, surrounded by wooden walls, he talks about the connection between his blindness (symbolized by the dark windowless space) and explains that his sedentary life is just as rich as that of his military ancestor, and that many of his poems were spurred on by that type of active soldier life which was denied him by his blindness.

The connection between the writer and their writing can be made not only in the fixed location of their own residence or surroundings, but also on the move. This is how journalist Jules Huret interviews Leo Tolstoy. The Russian aristocrat is surprised by Huret on the train, as he heads to Tambov or Voronezh to distribute wheat to starving peasants. The interview takes place in a third-class compartment which the interviewer finds "very hard, following the night I had just spent on a bench" (Huret, "Léon Tolstoï" 229). The reader becomes acquainted with Tolstoy through the latter's alternate remarks on changing landscapes and on French literature. Huret's description of the compartment's modest conditions, of the landscapes, and of the words uttered by Tolstoy provide a background to the works by the author. A rather rare setting for interviews, the itinerant decorum could perhaps be attributed to the energetic and surprising style that characterized Jules Huret's interviews for *L'Écho de Paris*. But it is also a perfect setting for Tolstoy to perform his social ideas.

We have seen that the writer's home plays a variety of roles in the great writer's visit ritual. First and foremost, it makes it possible to infer the writer's professional orientation from their home (Butor). Secondly, it views the author's residence as a place for literary incubation (see Dayan; Perec). The home can also be conceived as a necessary element for writing (Tournier) or, on the contrary, as a place from which one must stay away in order to write (Sarraute). In addition to the multiplicity of functions the environment plays in relation to the writer and their writing, the decorum is represented differently depending on the type of media in which the interview takes place. Thus, in the absence of a camera in Jules Huret's press interviews, the verbal description of the setting abounds, and the interviewer's talent plays a considerable role in depicting the setting in a manner that corresponds to the expected portrait. Where in the past it was necessary to condense the journalist's gaze into a description, the advent of video and photography facilitates a visual portrait of the author and their space. It is tempting to believe that photography and video are a means to relieve the description of its subjectivity but it turns out that electronic media are as selective in "describing" a space, in fact playing a determining role in fashioning the way a writer is perceived and understood. The camera's traveling and panoramic shots capture the essential parameters of the setting relevant to the author's image that the production wishes to create. In what follows, I concentrate on embodiment, or the way the author's body is described in space. The purpose is to show how the writer's poetics shapes the description of bodily features and enactment.

Reading Poetics from Body Language

Whether in writing (propos recueillis) or through the camera's lens—the focus is on how the depiction of body parts plays a role in asserting the author's poetics during the interview, especially when there is an apparent difference between the physicality of the author and their text. This distance is minimized through the interaction with the camera.

The writer's body here is defined as a set of their physical features—face, hands, voice—their gestures, and way of dressing and moving in space, as described in writing by the journalist or observed by the camera. A voice and its timbre, a speech rate, the delays in speaking, the writer's gestures, gaze, and facial expressions: the writer's body becomes a corpus (in French), a symbolic text in which the rest of the work at the time of the interview is manifested and through which it can be read. This kind of approach to the physical presence of the author challenges Proust's idea of an inherent divorce between the writer and their

social being (Proust). This watertight separation is strongly contested by Dominique Maingueneau (*Contre Saint Proust* 43) and Paul Dirkx, who precisely proposes to reintroduce the term corpus to abolish this rift and to designate what is indistinctly "textual" and "contextual" ("Corpus" 7).

The writer's body participates in the construction of their media image, but it also extends their literary vision—the one that emerges from their texts—in the interactive context of the interview. Every word and every gesture of the writer in the space of the interview (whether at home or in the studio) takes part in the media rituals which define the writer for the audience. The writer inhabits a communicating body, one capable of producing information and transmitting it according to the conditions being examined (see Dirkx, Review).

Before television, the writer is represented via written descriptions occasionally accompanied by visual illustrations (sketches, paintings, or photos). In such media, the body is necessarily incorporated into the decorum. Take for example Huret's depiction of Tolstoy, set on his mission to distribute wheat to famished peasants:

> He extended his hand to me cordially, with a welcoming smile on his venerable face. Dressed in a gray wool shirt tied with a belt at the waist, wearing a cloth cap, wearing boots, a stick in his hand, he seemed to me like the good pilgrim of humanitarianism that he was. (Huret, "Léon Tolstoï" 228, my translation)

In Huret's description, Tolstoy blends in with the context: the famine and the need to feed his farmers. His body thus parts from the posture of the writer seated in front of his desk and turns to another posture, that of the benefactor that he becomes.

With television, as Sophie de Closets explains, the writing-reading relationship is replaced by an association between the person of the writer, their body, their words, and the viewer's attention (108). According to Noël Nel, television imposes values of embodiment as it reveals the author through the power of direct speech. An authenticity effect is produced by the body's sheer presence, and by the dramaturgic effect of appealing to the emotions of the audience (178). However, it seems to me that the emphasis placed on "seeing the real thing" that television provokes diverts attention from the issue of the display of the writer's body, namely the continuation of literary activity by other means. This is what I attempt to show here.

As we have already seen, when the interview takes place in the writer's own environment, the staging of their body is blended in the general description of the context and surroundings. However, when the author is filmed in a studio, the focus shifts to their body. When positioned outside of the writer's ordinary

environment, their body becomes the *foyer* of their talent, the holder of their writing "secrets." The filming angles are used not only to build or consolidate the writer's image, but also to show and observe the poetics of the writer. In any case, we acquire a new vision of Balzacian realism where space not only explains the person, but where the way of showing the body of the writer becomes a lens through which to interpret and determine the vision we have of their writing.

In this new paradigm, physiognomic features—eyes, hands, mouth—as well as accessories (clothing, gloves, hats, shoes), and gestures are carefully captured, observed, and depicted, and participate fully in the interpretation of the writer's work. A good example is the description offered by a journalist of the *Paris Normandie*, who makes an explicit connection between Nathalie Sarraute's poetics and her physical presence:

> Nathalie Sarraute corresponds perfectly to the idea that one can have of her when reading her novels: a pale face, with clashing features which denotes a great personality, huge black eyes, short hair scraping a stubborn forehead. ("Nathalie Sarraute," my translation)

In this example, a link is drawn between Sarraute's physical presence and her discursive image. In the next example, her gaze is used as cues for her poetics, derived, according to the journalist, from one of her sources of inspiration, Proust:

> Madame Sarraute speaks hesitantly, without ceasing to fix a dark and deep gaze on her interlocutor, that "nocturnal" gaze with which, it is said, Marcel Proust considered his visitors without seeing them. It is also the inner world that interests and fascinates this new novelist. (d'Aubarède 4, my translation)

The eyes stand for a window to the writer's sources, thus considering them as a window to the soul. It comes as no surprise, then, that the opening theme chosen for the literary program *Chemins de la littérature* de Viviane Forrester is a compilation of close-up images of famous authors' eyes (Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, Céline, Proust, etc.).

At the beginning of some of the *Chemins* interview series, the camera focuses on the interviewee's writing tools: the paper, the pen, the hand which accomplishes the process of writing. It provides, for example, close-ups on Sarraute and Tournier writing on a white paper. The writer's hands are also instrumentalized when Roger Grenier interviews Georges Perec in *Actualité littéraire*, about Perec's latest work, *La Disparition* (1969). The camera focuses on the gesticulations of Perec's hands and fingers, as if it were a question of visually exemplifying the magician's work it took to make the vowel "e"—the most frequent in the French

language—disappear from *La Disparition*. A metonymical relationship is thus established between the hands of the writer and the "magic" of writing.

The dress of authors also provides poetic cues. These range from Marguerite Duras's finger rings and turtleneck to Amélie Nothomb's large brim top hat. When Nothomb appears on the set of Thierry Ardisson's popular talk show *Tout le monde en parle*, Ardisson protests that she appears without her trademark ("Amélie Nothomb at Thierry Ardisson"). Nothomb's hat can be understood as part of what Nathalie Heinich dubs "the test of visibility" (80–81), that is, a way to cultivate a public image, one that allows the spectator to identify with the writer. I would like to suggest, however, that it can also be read as a poetic cue. In Nothomb's case, the theatrical image that the writer cultivates in public can be associated with her eccentric characters (like Pretextat Tach, the protagonist of *Hygiene de l'Assassin* (1992), or that of protagonist Sérieuse in *Crime du Comte Neville* (2015) and many others, all a little extravagant). Even though the images promoted by the media and by Nothomb seem to be more closely related to her media persona than to her writing, there nevertheless remains a part of her that links her media appearance and her writing, even on a popular talk show like *Tout le monde en parle*. In the same interview, Nothomb promotes her novel *Stupeur et tremblements* (1999), which tells the story of the social downfall of a young Western woman employed in Japan. She appears to be Japanese (white skin, very red lips) and sings *Utai* in the tradition of *Noh*, the Japanese dance-drama. Her physical appearance and her mastery of Japanese culture, in which she spent part of her youth, serve to authenticate the story of the novel which she declares as "truly autobiographical."

Ariane Chemin's portrait of Michel Houellebecq in the 2016 summer series of *Le Monde* offers a radical link between the writer's body and the corpus of his work. The fourth article in the series is devoted to Houellebecq's own physique in relationship to how he treats the body in his novels:

> Hairstyles, teeth, metamorphoses [...] we talk a lot about the writer's face, but his body basically says more. And each novel also reads like a health report. (Chemin)

Chemin's article reads like an autopsy of the living author, drawing parallels between his diminishing physique (teeth, hair, skin) and his attitude towards the human body in his novels. The reader catches a glimpse of the novelist's poetics of decomposition and compromise by merely "looking" at Houellebecq: Houellebecq, according to Chemin, is "a writer of the dermis, who stuffs his books with drugs and his hypochondria" (18).

A diametrically opposed body-text approach is found in Pascale Bouhénic's series *Les Ateliers d'Ecriture* (1994–2007). Where the previous cases suggest a

sometimes simplistic analogy between the author's performance in the media and their writing, Bouhénic offers a sophisticated visual staging of the writer's body in physical interaction with the body of their work. The stated purpose of Bouhenic's series is to explore an author's writing methods by confronting the author's words, voice, facial expressions, and gestures with the texture of their work: the white page, the printed sentences, and the images related to the content of the text. A good example is Olivier Cadiot's *Writing Workshop* (2007), based on the model of an interview with the author in his workplace, around the techniques of language, play of forms, and choice of style, combined with readings of excerpts from his works (L'atelier). Bouhénic introduces the spectators to Cadiot's writing by filming him walking through his apartment's hallway with the author's voiceover saying "beginning, all the same." This passage leads to the writer's chair, empty at first, then inhabited by different spectral images of Cadiot reading his texts. As in most of Bouhenic's interviews in this series, the viewer is introduced to the materiality of the paper. When we are presented with the material text, the author gets to embody it, fusing it with his breath, voice, and gestures: as Cadiot reads he becomes one with his text, producing it by reading it. The body here is not a mere representation or symbol of the writer's poetics, but it actually enacts it. Thus, the reading makes the writer's physical presence an indispensable condition for performing the text. This kind of enactment draws us away from conventional media appearances of writers in media interviews, where the focus is on the writer's physique as a means to produce a branded image of the writer. Here, on the contrary, the physical means extend the writing and literariness replaces (or complements) the brand.

Femina mediatica—The Embodied Female Writer

According to Jean Baudrillard, the body is simply the finest of the psychically possessed, manipulated, and consumed objects, the place of desire and exchange-value in our society (see *The Consumer Society*). When the writer agrees to come to the set in person, they participate in this game of desire and literary investment, which is enacted through embodiment. However, does the enactment of desire and exchange value have to be considered with respect to gender in the interview? For instance, are female writers expected to "play the woman" in the media, in Judith Butler's sense (see "Performative Acts")? And if so, how does the gendered enactment relate to their work?

Gender significance in media representation is old news. For instance, Aliza Lavie claims that news presentation is gendered: women present the news

differently than their fellow male presenters. Sandy Montañola's study of the mediatized body in athletic performance in the press and on television shows that the journalist's gender affects media coverage of female and male athletes. In relation to literature, the question has already been discussed explicitly on the set. For example, Thierry Ardisson asks author Muriel Cerf if she prefers to be called "écrivaine" (the female form or "writer" in French) or "écrivain" (the masculine form of "writer" in French, also used as the neutral form), to which she replies "écrivain, it's still prettier" (Ardisson, "Le clash"). It should no doubt be added that such questions respond to the audience's expectations and interests. A study of the writer's mediated body should therefore ask whether it communicates information specific not only to the writer's profession, but also to the gendered dimensions of conventions and expectations of "going on stage." In this respect, I ask here, what does it mean for a female author to be interviewed?

To answer these questions, I compare female interviewees belonging to two generations. I start with mid-twentieth-century authors, Nathalie Sarraute and Marguerite Duras. I then compare two novelists at the turn of the twentieth century: Amélie Nothomb and Nelly Arcan.

Sarraute is not a writer of femininity or sexuality. She distances her focalizers (author and narrator personae) from the body in writing, focusing on an underlying, sub-epidermal layer (the sub-conversation) where "we are all like two drops of water" (Finas 4–5). What is more, her autobiography, *Enfance*, uses a gender-neutral pronoun ("tu" [in English, you]). In a conversation with playwright Simone Benmoussa, she admits that she is unable to fathom her own image (see Benmussa). Physical portraits of her are hence often limited to her gaze, the writing hand, or her general posture as a *grande dame*, and the question of her femininity is only rarely mentioned.

Marguerite Duras, on the contrary, is a writer of sensuality and sexuality: she has often been associated with the idea of a feminine and even feminist writing.[3] How is this sensuality reflected in her media performance in later life interviews? Upon the release of her autobiographical novel *L'Amant* (1984), Bernard Pivot interviews her on *Apostrophes*. The conversation is accompanied by photographs of a young and beautiful version of herself to which the interviewer alludes:

3 There is a heated debate in the literature on Duras's feminism (or lack of). The debate brings opposing opinions: whereas Gauthier argues that her writing is typically feminine (*Les parleuses*), Selous thinks her characters are subject to a masculine glance; (see *The Other Woman*); where Murphy claims Duras to be a self-acclaimed feminist (see *Feminism and Femininity*), Duras herself declared in one of her interviews "I am not a feminist at all" ("L'arroseur arrosé"). However, determining whether she is feminist or that her writing is feminine goes beyond the scope of this paper, which concentrates on her sensual writing themes.

> Bernard Pivot [photos of young Duras]: At 15, you are awfully dressed
> [he notes that she is sporting a man's hat; Duras recalls how she was seduced by a wealthy Chinese man]
> Bernard Pivot: He is madly in love with you.
> Marguerite Duras: Yes, I was very young, it's impossible not to love such a young [person][4].
> Bernard Pivot: And you, you didn't like it?
> [Duras smiles shyly]. ("Marguerite Duras dans 'Apostrophes'")

The present tense used by Pivot when he states "He *is* madly in love with you" diverts the sensual glance cast upon Duras towards the young woman she was. But her answer in the past tense ["Yes, I *was* very young"] along with the generalization ["it's impossible not to love such a young [person]"] shift the interview away from the current body to one of the past, a younger one, and elevates it to a more theoretical sphere, as Pivot plays along the game of generalization and uses concepts such as "pleasure" and "jouissance" to describe Duras's sensexual experience. However, seven years later, when she publishes a rewritten version of *L'Amant* (*L'Amant de la Chine du Nord* 1991), another strategy is adopted by interviewer Bernard Rapp: the abstract discourse on "pleasure" and "jouissance" gives way to a concrete physical recollection, as Duras evokes the "joy to touch a man, the skin of this man, to seek the skin of this man, his smell" and Bernard Rapp echoes this move:

> Bernard Rapp: You describe the hand
> Marguerite Duras: The hand, yes, the hand. ("Marguerite Duras à propos," min' 51)

As her discourse becomes more concrete in the Rapp interview, she says: "the real women were the whores [*putains*], those who were free, walked alone in the street, on the sidewalks" (min' 55). In comparison to Sarraute, whose interview performance—much like her works—is not related to femininity or to gendered roles, Duras, for whom feminine desire occupies a major place in her work as well as in life, re-enacts these themes in the interview. The interviews on *L'Amant* are a good example of how the author's poetics play a role in determining the interview's perspective, albeit through two opposing strategies. Duras's poetics of the sensual is thus relived through both interviews: it is mediated through remembrances of her younger self, alluding to concepts of sensuality ("Marguerite Duras dans 'Apostrophes'") or, on the contrary, by resorting to crude or very concrete discussions of female and gendered roles ("Marguerite Duras à propos").

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4 Oui, j'étais toute petite, on ne peut pas ne pas aimer, toute petite.

As with the older generation of novelists, the younger generation of female authors is not subject to a uniform handling of gendered aspects in interviews. For instance, interviews with Amélie Nothomb do not encompass a gendered perspective. When Nothomb enters the scene, the spectator's gaze is centered on the novelist's eccentric performance: totally aware of the show, her attire includes elements like a large brim top hat, which have come to be her brand.[5] Comments on her physical appearance, if at all, remain centered on these gadgets and are otherwise reserved to some of her other eccentricities, like her extraordinarily prolific literary production, her noble origins, her childhood in Japan, her fondness of champagne and of strong tea (Béglé). The only aspects of femininity brought to the fore in her interviews are metaphorical, in the sense that they pertain to her writing, which she views as pregnancy, and the release of a novel, which she views as childbirth ("Amélie Nothomb a dédicacé"). These oddities make her an amusing interviewee. Nothomb's feminine perspective is thus mediated in this format of entertainment by the eccentric and funny persona of the novelist.

Unlike Amélie Nothomb, Canadian author of *Putain* (2001) Nelly Arcan's performance in the interview affords a gendered gaze. This autobiographical novel depicts her two-year experience as an escort girl and earns her an inquisitive surveilling on the set of *Tout le monde en parle* ("Nelly Arcan"). There is a stark discrepancy between Arcan's physical appearance in the show and the prostituted sexuality in her novel. She is dressed in the style of a good schoolgirl, with a light blue shirt with collar, hair up and a cross pendant. The interviewer's questions, the *mise en scène*, the participants' reactions, and the camera traveling all attempt to reduce this gap. The interviewer's questions ("what do you like most about prostitution?" "What do you hate most in prostitution?" and answers in her place: "she doesn't like it when guys are on top of her, that's why she prefers doggie style"), his request from Arcan to read a very graphic excerpt, participant Clotilde Courau's disgusted reaction and moral judgment ("It doesn't make you dream [...] I don't know if I want to read that, no," min' 16), and finally, the camera's pointing to Arcan's ample chest and traveling behind her, to a piece of exposed skin between the shirt and the pants, all work together to overcome the unbearable difference between the saintly media persona and the "real" Arcan that springs off the pages of her novel. Each and every detail in the interview works to this effect. Even an innocent question, such as the talk show's standard quiz question, "What is the best thing about you?" becomes a part of this

5 The satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* shows her at the book fair, clad with this hat ("État d'urgence").

gendered narrative when Arcan retorts "foolishly, my eyes" (min' 22). Whereas in other author interviews, the eyes usually stand for the author's inner self or poetics, in Arcan's case they acquire their primary meaning as the seat of desire. Her eyes and gaze are not metonymical for her literary style, but for the theme that occupies the novel—the use of her prostituted body, the absence of which in the talk show is re-embodied in the stare of the interviewer and the audience. Courau implicitly suggests that love is diametrically opposed to the activity of prostitution, and therefore offers it as a healthy alternative, suitable for what Courau considers decent women.

> Clotilde Courau: And you [points to the chest/heart]?
> Nelly Arcan: You what?
> Courau: Love?
> Arcan: Me, love... I believe in it perfectly.
> Courau: Yes?
> Arcan: Yes [...] I don't necessarily believe in it for me [...] but I believe in it, I see people around me who love each other. (min. 20')

In response, Arcan sets herself apart from the narrator of *Putain*: she says she believes in love. When she rails against Courau's attempt to portray her novel as part of a fashionable women's trend of exposing their sexuality ("but I didn't know that existed!" min' 17), she chooses a script that goes against the one imposed on her by the team on set yet remains cloistered within scripts that reproduce dominant notions of femininity.

Conclusion

Considering that the author interview is more than just promotional content, it should be examined as performance. Studying the author interview as such means that both the author's body and the setting of the interview should be taken into account to assess its potential effects on the interpretation of an author's work. The author's environment is staged or can be read as a source of information about the author and/or as an explanation of their writing. The author's physical features and gestures can be interpreted as cues, from which the author's style and poetics are inferable. There is a constant desire in the interview to find echoes of the work and, on the part of the interviewer, to align the interviewee with the discursive image that springs from their novels. Where discrepancies are found between the two images—elements from the context and setting like the camera, the description, and the script intervene to reduce them. In this space,

gendered scripts can be re-enacted to provide an image of the interviewee that is coherent with their discursive one.

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