

Research Article

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Empowering Signs: Writing and e-motions in Michel Houellebecq's *Platform*

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Abstract: This article explores the working of the cultural literacy concepts of rhetoricity and textuality in Michel Houellebecq's third novel *Platform* through the lens of French philosopher Frédéric Lordon's affect theory, with a view to understanding the way emotions and motion operate jointly through writing in this post-travel literature text dealing with the contemporary travel industry, sex tourism, and emotional alienation. As such, it contributes to the current reassessment of the role played by emotions in human interactions. By exploring the specific layered textuality of *Platform*, which purposefully recycles a series of discursive clichés and tropes, I show how Houellebecq's writing style demands to be considered not only for its literary value but also for its potent, and perhaps unexpected, moving effects, or rhetoricity, which invite readers to reconsider their perception of alterity—i.e. the world and the other—but also of the performative power of art and literature. In order to demonstrate this, the article looks first at the failure of travel writing orchestrated in the novel; it then analyses alternative textual modalities of affect mediation trialed in the text; and finally, it considers the strategies used in *Platform* to “empowerise” signs and, as a result, those who read them.

Keywords: Houellebecq, Lordon, rhetoricity, travel writing, affects

Being “without a doubt the most famous living French writer” (Morrey 1), Michel Houellebecq is also the most widely translated living French author, as well as one of the most controversial, the former being arguably a consequence of the latter. His texts circulate due to the strong emotional reactions they trigger. Motion and emotions go hand in hand in Houellebecq. The relationship between movement and affects in a contemporary context is also at the core of his third novel, *Platform* (2001). While the popularity of both Houellebecq's oeuvre and his persona is testimony to the powerful impact emotions have on the circulation of objects in a globalised world, his third book thematises and explores this connection further, with a view to disclosing aspects of its intricate workings in contemporary western societies. Indeed, with *Platform*, Houellebecq renews the genre of travel writing by focusing on the relationship between the specific type of motion that is the mass travel industry, including organised sex tourism, and emotional alienation in a contemporary context. Motion, in this case, is perceived as a correlate to both the alienation from and the quest for emotions.

As such, Houellebecq and *Platform* contribute a polemical literary perspective to the current revived interest in the role played by emotions in human interactions—whether the recent inflation of emotions in the public sphere is perceived as a threat to reason (see Robert 2018) or as a renewed chance for humanity (see Lordon, *La Société des affects: pour un structuralisme des passions* [*The Society of Affects: Towards a Structuralism of Passions*], *Imperium: structures et affects des corps*

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politiques [*Imperium: Structures and Affects of Political Bodies*], *Les Affects de la politique* [*The Affects of Politics*])—that can be observed in public debates as well as in the fields of sociology, politics, economy and philosophy. For French economist and philosopher Frédéric Lordon, who has been at the forefront of this ‘affect turn’ for the last decade, if we are to make the most of this overwhelming return of emotions in public life, we must acknowledge that individuals are first and foremost moved by their passions rather than by reason. Establishing this with the help of Spinoza’s ethical philosophy enables Lordon to expose the limits of neoliberal theory, which conceives political bodies as mere associations of contracting parties perceived as rational actors who unite in a deliberate and logical fashion. For Lordon, affect does not only designate emotions; it is, in fact, the most general way to understand all forms of human interactions: people affect each other. He argues, therefore, that ideas and ideals are effective insofar as they affect people and, conversely, that people are affected by ideas and ideals only insofar as they are accompanied by emotions. In this regard, literature is seen as a powerful tool that can have an effect on individuals and society as a result of its capacity to produce what Lordon calls “signes empuissantisés” [empowered signs] (Lordon, *Les Affects de la politique* 170-175). While *Platform* provides an uncompromising insight into the intricate dynamics of emotions in relation to motion in the contemporary western societies analysed by Lordon, Lordon’s affect theory offers, in turn, a means to understanding the specific workings of emotions in relation to motion in Houellebecq’s text, and especially of the “signes empuissantisés” it produces.

“Empuissantisé” is a neologism coined by Lordon to qualify the signs—words and components of any other signifying structures—which he considers as endowed with a stirring power able to trigger foregrounding emotions and, ultimately, action. By affecting people, empowered signs set them in motion. In Lordon’s view, symbolic structures and, foremost among them, discourses, have purposes and incontestable effects. This constitutes what is identified by the Cultural Literacy in Europe project as the working of rhetoricity, i.e. the process by which we are talked into thinking or acting in certain ways by the speech structures and figures we are exposed to, and whose study within the context of the production of symbolic structures is one of the main objects of literary and cultural studies. Together with the elements of textuality, fictionality, and historicity, rhetoricity is one of the four key concepts that the Cultural Literacy in Europe project investigates in relation to contemporary art forms and practices. It is through this prism of rhetoricity that I will analyse the textuality of *Platform*, i.e., the specific ways in which signs are both handled and assembled in this text which recycles the clichéd tropes of travel literature, sex tourism, and mass consumption, in order to bring to the fore the nature and extent of the novel’s stirring power.

In order to do so, I use Lordon’s framework to study Houellebecq’s polemical take on travel literature in *Platform*, and, more specifically, to explore how writing and texts are conceived in relation to emotions and motion. Affect theory meets literary criticism and cultural studies with a view to producing an enriched understanding both of the recent inflation of emotions in the public debate and of the workings of rhetoricity and textuality in this topical context. First, I look at the failure of travel writing orchestrated in the novel; then I analyse alternative textual modalities of affect mediation that are trialled in the text; finally, I consider the strategies that Houellebecq develops in *Platform* to empower signs and, as a result, those who read them.

The Failure of Travel Writing

Michel, the narrator of *Platform*, who shares his first name with Houellebecq, works at the Ministry of Culture, where he manages financial accounts for contemporary art shows and exhibitions. At the beginning of the novel, he makes the following comment about his approach to contemporary art:

As far as I’m concerned, I’m not actively hostile to it: I am not an advocate of *craft*, nor of a return to figurative painting; I maintain the disinterested attitude appropriate to an accounts manager. Questions of aesthetics and politics are not my thing; it’s not up to me to invent or adopt new attitudes, new affinities with the world.... My conclusion, henceforth, is that art cannot change lives. At least not mine. (*Platform* 16)

This self-confessed conception of art offered in the first pages of the novel works as a meta-discursive programme for the rest of the text that Michel writes. Indeed, Michel adopts a “disinterested attitude” towards his narrative that befits his professional role as an accounts manager, and he tries as much as possible to avoid emotional engagement with his everyday environment while it provides the material for his account. This is particularly true with regard to the holiday he takes on a package tour in Thailand, whose narration occupies the first third of the novel. In this part of the text, Michel puts into practice his declaration that “it’s not up to [him] to invent or adopt new attitudes, new affinities with the world.” In the same way, as package tours transform the experience of travelling into a manufactured, repetitive and self-centred approach to others and otherness, his narration is made up of quotations, clichés, and stereotypes.

Douglas Morrey stresses that “*Plateforme* often reads a little like a sales brochure” in which “Houellebecq describes holiday packages in considerable detail, citing not just their duration and price, but also the official title, catalogue reference number and choice excerpts from the promotional literature” (71). In addition, Michel frequently quotes the popular French tourist guide *Guide du routard* and the more upmarket *Guide Michelin*, as well as tourism textbooks, studies in consumer behaviour, and even a fake paper from the *Annals of Tourism Research*, itself a real journal, which is referenced in a footnote in proper academic fashion. Alongside this patchwork of (pseudo)authorised sources, he also reports the words of his fellow travellers who accumulate cultural and racial clichés, from the comparative specificities of Asian and French cuisines as discussed by the group, to the alleged sexual expertise of Thai women that Robert, a retired maths teacher, celebrates as innate. If anything, these discourses and signs are as much disempowered by their hackneyed and prejudiced quality as they are disempowering due to their failure to produce useful or enlightening knowledge of any kind about their objects. Encounters with the local population are in fact always described through, and framed by, reported speech, leaving no room for the representation and discovery of the Other’s subjectivity. As for Michel, he keeps his distance from his environment by mediating his experience by means of borrowed scientific discourses, both real and made-up. In this context, therefore, little room is left for the possibility of experiencing genuine emotion through the discovery of the world and others—be it from the tourists’ point of view, as they limit themselves to what they already know or believe, be it in the narrator’s case, as he uses a series of authorised and pseudo-scientific discourses to stay aloof, or indeed, in the end, for the reader who is faced with this ultimate postmodern approach to travel writing.

Interestingly, it is worth noting here that Michel is, in this regard, on an equal footing with his readers as he admits he knows this challenging reading situation only too well: during his Thai holidays, he indeed casts himself as the disappointed reader of another type of clichéd travel writing—the airport novel. True to the stereotype, Michel buys *The Firm*, by John Grisham, and *Total Control*, by David G. Balducci, in the airport lounge before departure. His contempt for the content and style of both novels is repeatedly emphasized throughout his trip. He is particularly critical of what he judges to be poor, clichéd sex scenes on sunny beaches, and stresses the disposability of such texts by declaring “it wasn’t the kind of book you read twice” (89), after ejaculating into their pages. Ironically, though, “the titillating soft porn scenes of such fiction are also recognisable as one of the many generic styles incorporated by Houellebecq into his own writing [...] in order, no doubt, to undermine the opposition between ‘serious’ and popular literature” (Ní Loingsigh 81). For that matter, this stylistic weaving strategy is also explicitly adopted by Michel, the narrator of *Platform*, who reveals at the end of the novel that he is the author of the story we have just read. Indeed, the presence of this discursive layering effect corroborates his initial statement that “it’s not up to [him] to invent or adopt new attitudes, new affinities with the world”: rather, he prefers to recycle the tropes and clichés by which we are surrounded in order to reveal our commodification of the world, the Other and, ultimately, literature, with a view not only to undermining the opposition between serious and popular literature, as claimed by Ní Loingsigh, but also, I would argue, to exposing the sheer impossibility of unmediated relations, be they of the travel, sex or writing kind. The novel does not only play with literary codes; rather, it questions the extent to, and the ways in which, the lens we use to understand and approach the Other can be altered and acted upon.

On the one hand, by saying that “it’s not up to [him] to invent or adopt new attitudes, new affinities with the world”, Michel explicitly admits his submission to existing discourses and approaches to the

world; on the other, his statement raises the following questions: if it is not up to him, then who is it up to to invent or adopt alternative views of the world? Who or what can be invested and trusted with the mission to counter and replace the commodified and commodifying discourses displayed in the novel? One might have wished that this honest approach would have allowed for a reassessment of the critical and creative abilities of literature; acknowledging at once the artificiality of our relation to the world and the impossibility of originality would, ideally, have made room for a more objective and, as a result, empowering approach to reality, in line for instance with the position advocated at the moment in philosophy by the New Realism movement (see Ferraris, *Manifesto del nuovo realismo* [*Manifesto of New Realism*]; Beuchot and Jerez, *Manifesto del nuevo realismo analógico* [*Manifesto of New Analogical Realism*]; Gabriel, *Fields of Sense: A New Realist Ontology*) for whom the resistance opposed by the outside world to our conceptual schemes should not be seen as a failure, but as a resource. However, Michel does not seem to appreciate this potential, and he expresses his opinion clearly: “My conclusion, henceforth, is definitive: art cannot change lives” (*Platform* 16). He still ends up writing his life story. If they cannot change lives nor reform our relationship to reality, what can art and literature do, then?

Mediating Emotions

If the discursive signs Michel recycles appear as disempowered in the sense that their hackneyed quality prevents them from triggering any foregrounding emotions, they are nonetheless not entirely powerless. Clichéd signs first have the power to protect him from his environment and peers, both perceived as hostile. Indeed, while in Thailand, he consumes texts in order to keep safe: words have a prophylactic power for him. After burying his two airport novels in the sand, out of disappointment, he confesses: “the problem now was that I had to find something to read. Life without anything to read is dangerous: you have to content yourself with life, and that can lead you to take risks” (*Platform* 91). In order to avoid unnecessary danger, he immediately steals the *Elle* magazine of two young fellow tourists as an emergency coping strategy. He is then rescued by Valérie, with whom he later falls in love and who lends him an Agatha Christie novel. The book serves its purpose even though, or perhaps because, Christie accumulates clichés with her “tendency to limit herself to a couple of stock phrases, limited to the most obvious traits of her characters.”¹ Clichéd literature helps him put up with the world and protect himself from emotions, negative or positive, whilst travelling. Unlike his fellow travellers, who rely on snippets of popular beliefs and stereotyped narratives (the various guides they use, *Elle*, Agatha Christie) to engage with each other and the world around them, Michel holds on to the same printed material to shield himself from reality. The very banality of these trite signs does not constitute an entertaining device for him, nor does it provide him with useful, meaningful insights into his direct environment: it acts as an antidote to radical alterity and helps him negotiate his relation to it. When he later bins his despised *Guide du routard*, the difficulties therefore immediately reappear:

A mile or so later, I realised that now I didn't have anything to read; I was going to have to tackle the last part of the tour without a scrap of printed matter to hide behind. I glanced around me, my heartbeat had accelerated, the outside world suddenly seemed a whole lot closer. (*Platform* 101-2).

With no more generic texts to hide behind, Michel is forced to engage with the world and coincidentally falls in love with Valérie.

Leading a happy life with her back in Paris, he does not use texts to hide from the world and emotions anymore, but to understand them. Words also prove to have an exegetic power. From then on, his text of choice is Auguste Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive* (six volumes, 1830-1842) [*Course in Positive Philosophy*]:

¹ My own translation so as to render the specificity of the original French.

I liked reading this tedious, dense book; often I would reread a page three or four times. It took me almost three weeks to finish Lesson Fifty: ‘Preliminary Considerations on Social Statics, or the General Theory of the Spontaneous Order of Human Society’. I certainly needed some sort of theory to help me take stock of my social status. (*Platform* 178)

For Comte, positive knowledge is based on the observation of natural phenomena and their properties and relations to one another. Information derived from sensory experience, that is interpreted through reason and logic, then forms the exclusive source of all certain knowledge. The analysis of emotions and their impact on human interactions is therefore at the basis of positivism, in the same way as it is at the core of Lordon’s affect theory, as we saw earlier, but also, one could argue, of Michel’s narrative. As mentioned previously, indeed, Michel professes from the outset of his narrative that he is first and foremost dispassionate and objective—as befits his profession—and that his attitude towards art is “disinterested”: he is in favour neither of craft nor of figurative representations, and he will not invent new attitudes or approaches to the world. If this accounts for his specific take on travel writing, it also enables him to produce an unbiased account of human emotions and interactions in order to understand the ways people affect each other. His self-enforced interpersonal exile being over, he now acts as an observer of social life in all its aspects.

In this regard, and perhaps unexpectedly, Michel places himself within the humanist tradition. Indeed, understanding humankind is the declared mission of Humanism, as illustrated by its motto taken from the Latin playwright Terence: *homo sum, nihil humani a me alienum puto* [I am human, and nothing human is alien to me]. It is therefore not surprising that Terence’s maxim is alluded to twice at the beginning of *Platform*—even if it is in altered forms and unusual contexts, the novel playing here again with recycled discourses and tropes. This ultimately shows that for Michel, literature also has a heuristic power: despite his claim, it can, in fact, help him make sense of the world and the others around him. In chapter 1, Michel confesses his admiration for Julien Lepers, the presenter of the popular French television programme, *Questions pour un champion*, which he watches throughout the novel: “I’ve always admired Julien Lepers.... Above all, he understands life: the contestants are human beings to him.... Nothing of what constitutes human reality for the contestants is entirely alien to him”² (*Platform* 7). Julien Lepers is unexpectedly, but clearly, perceived as a humanist whom the narrator uses as a model according to which he adapts his behaviour towards his characters: similarly to the contestants for Lepers, the characters of *Platform* are above all human beings for Michel (in the novel, he meets them before writing their story), and nothing in their human reality is indeed entirely alien to him, from their emotional turmoil to their sexual lives. With this unexpected reference, Michel continues to mix and layer cultural discourses. The combination of popular television show and Humanist philosophical tradition here produces an additional foregrounding comical effect inviting the reader to reconsider their categorisation of discourses, as cited earlier from Ni Loingsigh. In chapter 2, the humanist intertext reappears, this time through its existentialist reinterpretation. Michel writes about the officer who takes his statement after the murder of his father: “He must have had to meet people from all walks of life in his profession: no area of society could be completely alien to him. Police service is a humanism” (*Platform* 13, translation amended so as to render the specificity of the original French). With this implicit nod to Sartre’s 1946 essay *L’Existentialisme est un humanisme* [*Existentialism is a Humanism*] (itself an ironic sop to bourgeois parents), Houellebecq’s reference is both playful in its allusive (from the Latin *ad-ludere*, “to play with”) citational nature and inquisitive in its heuristic dimension. An unexpected parallel can, therefore, be drawn between the forensic work of the police, Sartre’s existentialist philosophy, and the account the narrator of *Platform* gives of his own story, which ends with the death of Valérie in a terrorist attack on a south-east Asian beach: they are all trying to understand what moves people to act in certain ways, just like Comte and Lordon.

Towards the end of the book, however, Michel writes: “I no longer had any desire to understand the world, nor even to know it” (*Platform* 353). Yet three pages later, we see him start writing his story, which is also the novel we read. We are therefore brought back to the same question as previously: what can art and literature do then, if they cannot change lives nor help to deal with humanity?

² I have modified the published English text here as Wynne translates “étranger” by “strange or intimidating” instead of the more accurate “alien”. This modification also works better as an echo to Terence’s maxim, usually translated into French as “Je suis un homme et rien de ce qui est humain ne m’est étranger.”

Empowering Signs

Overall, *Platform* appears to be a book whose stirring power stems from a narration ruled by endless and unsolved contradictions. It is as much about love as about sex-tourism, it both rejects and sanctifies emotions, exposes and recycles clichés and stereotypes, and overlays popular culture with highbrow references. The narrator is a tourist who hates travelling, a humanist who despises humanity; he is at once a romantic and a naturalist who is both lyrical and cynical, a scientist who claims not to believe in art and literature, but nonetheless writes his life story, simply explaining: “Not that these comments, these objections, these remarks are addressed to anyone in particular, nor intended to have any sort of meaning; but, even so, it seems to me to be better, in the end, that they be made” (*Platform* 357).

Whilst stereotypes are by definition monosemous and therefore prevent the construction of any contrasted visions (see Amossy, *Les Idées reçues. Sémiologie du stéréotype* [*Received Ideas. Semiology of the Stereotype*]; Amossy and Herschberg-Pierrot, *Stéréotypes et clichés* [*Stereotypes and Clichés*]), *Platform* is essentially ambivalent, equivocal, conflicted, and ambiguous. Analysing the polyphony of the novel, John McCann stresses that, at the beginning of his account, the narrator represents himself holding two tourist guides, one in each hand: the typically French and popular *Guide du routard*, and the more knowledgeable *Guide Michelin*. McCann emphasizes: “the simple fact of having two books, two sources, gives Michel two visions which can potentially contradict each other” (372). McCann continues:

This gives Michel some room to manoeuvre in developing his thoughts and judgments. Despite his dependency, and perhaps even because of this dependency, on a multiplicity of books and other media, Michel retains his faculty of judgement—more than the other characters. He does not limit himself to repeating clichés. He manipulates them, combines them with other ideas—which is what makes him so original. (372)

On a macrostructural level, then, this accounts for the fact that in the novel “thought is always mobile, always temporary, never absolute” (375) and that “all ideas are perpetually at play” (376). Consequently, “This multiplicity and circulation of ideas gives us a choice and prevents the very possibility of ideological totalitarianism” (376), McCann concludes. While ideas and identities are fixed and constrained by stereotypical and totalitarian discourses, they are always moving in Houellebecq’s text due to both their diversity and their contiguity. Going back to Lordon’s politics of affects, it can then be argued that, as a result, these multifarious signs are essentially forcing us into a reaction: they make us move, i.e., we are moved by them.

Indeed, the “contradictory rhetoric” (Korthals Altes 29) and “ambiguous ethos” (Korthals Altes 40) that operate in *Platform* produce a constant tension that works on both a stylistic and an ideological level. Adding to the already manifold layers of meaning constitutive of all cultural signs, as shown in the seventies, in the wake of Saussure’s findings (*Cours de linguistique générale* [*Course in General Linguistics*]), by Roland Barthes (*S/Z*) and Clifford Geertz (*The Interpretation of Cultures*), signs in Houellebecq’s *Platform* are laden with extra textual tensions: they are animated by a heightened, intensified, stirring power. They are, in that respect, “empowerised signs.” When exposed to these stirring, at times antagonistic, empowerised signs, readers are forced into a reaction, be it of discomfort, outrage, or delight: in all these cases, they are affected—which might also contribute to explaining, ultimately, why Houellebecq and his texts are so often the object of heated debates and passionate controversies. It is, as such, all the more important to note that this fundamentally ambivalent approach is a reasoned one, which is in keeping with Houellebecq’s self-confessed literary objective: “From a personal point of view, it seems to me that the only way forward is to keep expressing, without concession, the contradictions that tear me apart, while being aware that these contradictions will probably prove representative of my time” (Houellebecq, *Interventions* 18). In this context, therefore, it is important to “avoid attributing political and ideological viewpoints too hastily to the comments of Houellebecq’s narrators and characters” (Posthumus 363). Rather, it seems more pertinent, or at least conclusive, to focus on the tensions produced by the “contradictory rhetoric” and “ambiguous ethos” that shape Houellebecq’s empowerised signs.

While, for Lordon, “ideas as ideas are innately powerless” (*Les Affects de la politique* 171), empowered signs are ideas that have been equipped with “an emotional prosthesis” (170). This “emotional prosthesis” may of course take different forms, be it the equivocal and moving nature of signs advocated by Houellebecq, or the visualising capacity of the texts considered as examples by Lordon—Orwell’s *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), Zola’s *Germinal* (1885) and Marx’s *Capital* (1867) (*Les Affects de la politique* 76). These two strategies form part of what Lordon calls an *ars affectandi* which does not necessarily give literature the power to change lives, nor to fully understand or know humanity, but rather, and perhaps more modestly, to make us reconsider our relation to reality—i.e. to the world and the other—in order to make it better (*Les Affects de la politique* 73). Interestingly, this is also the only power that the narrator of *Platform* is ultimately willing to grant to art, even if perhaps in an unexpected, but nonetheless enlightening, way. Towards the end of the novel, he writes about the young female artist whose “complex piece” made of plastic 3D life-size casts of her clitoris makes him change his approach to oral sex: “Actually, I thought that Sandra was a pretty talented artist; her work encouraged one to see the world in a new light” (*Platform* 305, emphasis in the original). Houellebecq’s texts, most certainly *Platform* but also arguably his other novels, can be said to affect their readers in a comparable way: the stirring, empowered, controversial signs they produce are like 3D life-size casts of the startling neoliberal social discourses and cultural practices surrounding us. They make us see the disconcerting structures and inherent problems of these discourses and practices in highlight, in the specific case of *Platform* within the context of emotional alienation, mass tourism, and its grimmer sex version, global economy, and clichéd cultural productions. In that respect, the title of Houellebecq’s third novel should be understood not as a stylistic call for a flat 2D way of writing, as has often been suggested (the French “*plate-forme*” being interpreted as a pun for “flat-form”), but rather as a literary rostrum (a literal “platform”) whose tense textuality demands to be read as a manifesto that denounces the human and social damages of monosemous neoliberal discourses, be they personal, cultural, economic, or political, and advocates for a more emotionally aware model of society. If one has to be wary not to interpret the polemical comments of Houellebecq’s characters in an ideological or political fashion too hastily, as Stéphanie Posthumus argues in relation to *Platform*, the tense stirring textuality produced by Houellebecq’s specific writing style demands, conversely, to be considered as much for its literary value as for its potent moving effects, or rhetoricity, i.e. its power to make its readers reconsider their approach to social discourses and cultural practices, as well as their conception of alterity, and, ultimately, their relation to reality. In this regard, we can reinforce the idea that the strong stirring capacity of Houellebecq’s writing style contributes greatly to producing the infamous heated reactions usually attributed solely to the content of his texts.

To conclude, it can be said that with *Platform*, Houellebecq has not only contributed to renewing the genre of travel writing by focusing on the mass travel industry but that doing so also enabled him to explore the intricate links between motion and emotions in the context of neoliberal contemporary western societies and global economy. As such, Houellebecq’s third novel casts an uncompromising light on the current debate about the inflation of emotions in the public sphere by highlighting some of its ramifications on a global scale. By exploring the links between motion and emotions within this context, Houellebecq also foregrounds the limits of neoliberal ideology for which, as stressed by Lordon, political bodies are mere associations of contracting parties perceived as rational actors who unite in a deliberate and logical way. The novel shows indeed that this conception ultimately rests on a substrate of affects and that the discursive signs by which it is promoted operate only in so far as they affect people, that is, only insofar as emotions are involved. Reading Houellebecq through Frédéric Lordon’s theory of affects has also allowed us, in turn, to consider the emotional characteristics of the equivocal signs produced in *Platform*. They are “empowered,” to use Lordon’s vocabulary, by the many contradictions and tensions that constitute them, in line with Houellebecq’s self-confessed vision of contemporary society. It can finally be added that the “empowering” strategies analysed here are not limited to *Platform*, but can also be spotted in Houellebecq’s literary practice as a whole, which would ultimately contribute to explaining why his oeuvre triggers such a strong reaction on the global cultural scene. *Platform* stands out as an exemplary case study, though, in the sense that it discloses both the very textual mechanisms by which Houellebecq’s stirring signs are produced through staging their elaboration as the very material of which the story is made (the

story we read is the one written by the narrator at the end of the book), and how they operate in relation to motion and emotions within the context of mass circulation. While Houellebecq's work is commonly read as an acerbic commentary on the post-human condition or as a vitriolic criticism of contemporary western societies, the emphasis on its cynical nature tends to overlook the crucial role that is also played by emotions in his writing and thought. By reading his work through the double lens of Lordon's affect theory, and of the Cultural Literacy in Europe project's concepts of textuality and rhetoricity, its stirring power comes to the fore and reveals its moving—both in the sense of movement and emotion—capacity.

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