

## The Affective Dominant: Affective Crisis and Contemporary Fiction

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Contemporary developments in fiction have so far primarily been interpreted as an attempt to move beyond postmodernism towards a renewed sense of realism and communication. This article suggests an alternative conceptualization and puts forward the hypothesis that contemporary fiction marks a shift towards an affective dominant. In *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) Brian McHale defines the dominant as a structure that brings order and hierarchy in a diversity of techniques and motifs in a literary text. Whereas in modernism the dominant is epistemological and in postmodernism it is ontological, in contemporary literature we contend this dominant is affective. The prevailing questions are ‘how can I feel reality (myself, the other, the past, the present, etc.)?’; ‘how can I feel to belong to reality?’; ‘how can I feel reality to be real?’. This affective dominant manifests itself in motifs such as desire, attachment, fantasy and identification. Formal and narrative devices that in modernist or postmodernist fiction contributed to an epistemological or ontological dominant, tend to foreground questions of affectivity in contemporary fiction. Through the analysis of novels by Ben Lerner, Alejandro Zambra and Zadie Smith this article substantiates this hypothesis. This approach allows us to study contemporary fiction both diachronically, in relation to postmodernism, and synchronically, in relation to its social and ideological context.

**Keywords:** affect, dominant, contemporary fiction, ideology postmodernism

‘Octet’, a short story from David Foster Wallace’s collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999), has become a central text in discussions of the aesthetic sensibility that emerged in the wake of postmodernism. The story invokes postmodern conventions and ideas, but works both within and through them to arrive at a new position. It registers a struggle between a postmodern cultural context and a subject that experiences the former to be no longer adequate and even suffocating. The subject aims to break out, but grapples with the terms on which such emancipation might be achieved.

The convention of postmodern writing that the narrator of ‘Octet’ – who is “unfortunately, a fiction writer” (Wallace 1999: 145) – mainly tackles is “S.O.P. metatext” (147), the conventionalized and standardized practice of metafiction. ‘Octet’ consists of several pop quizzes and in ‘Pop Quiz 9’ the narrator reflects upon his work and its function. He wants the pop quizzes “to break the textual fourth wall and kind of address (or ‘interrogate’) the reader directly” (147fn2). Yet, the narrator makes clear he understands this type of metafiction to be “now lame and old news” (159fn17) and would rather use the means of metafiction toward a different end.

He wants to interrogate the reader about “the sense of something . . . though what that ‘something’ is remains maddeningly hard to pin down” (145). He doubts “whether the weird ambient urgency you yourself feel” will be noticed by the reader (152), but then realizes that the “semi-octet’s interrogative/‘dialogic’ formal structure” (153) allows him to “simply ask”

the reader: “This thing I feel, I can’t name it straight out but it seems important, do you feel it too?” (154)

The main focus of metafiction in ‘Octet’ is thus not, as it usually is in postmodern fiction, on the ontological status of fiction nor on epistemological indeterminacy, but on affective issues. The reflections deal with the narrator’s inability to *cognitively* describe or explain a certain “human sameness”, which he can only evoke *affectively*: “an urgency that you . . . feel very . . . well, urgently, and want the reader to feel too” (147). The quizzes and commentaries deal with relationships, interpersonal contact and the difficulty in connecting: “truly ‘to be with’ another person instead of just using that person somehow” (155). The quotation marks indicate that terms like feelings and relationships can only be used sceptically and ironically: they are “near nauseous term(s) in contemporary usage”. Metafiction demonstrates this awareness in order to convince the reader of the truthfulness and sincerity of his intentions.

This implies that ontological and epistemological issues concerning truth and sincerity are not absent from ‘Octet’. However, as Adam Kelly states, “the guarantee of the writer’s sincere intentions cannot finally lie in representation” (Kelly 2010: 143). Wallace’s narrator in ‘Octet’ wagers that these issues may be resolved when an affective contact is established – when the reader is “feeling anything like what you feel” (154). Cognitive and affective issues are not mutually exclusive – they are interwoven. Yet, for contemporary fiction it seems their interrelations have shifted. The narrator turns to affective means in order to settle the cognitive issues of sincerity and reality/truth.

It is this becoming dominant of affective over epistemological and ontological issues that is at the centre of this article. We argue that this affective dominant is crucial to an understanding of contemporary fiction as a critical frame overdetermining existing conceptions of twenty-first-century fiction. In what follows we will first give a short survey of dominant interpretations of contemporary fiction which will be followed by our own hypothesis of the affective dominant. This will be tested and demonstrated through an analysis of three contemporary novels: *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011) by Ben Lerner (US, 1979), *NW* (2012) by Zadie Smith (UK, 1975), and *Ways of Going Home* (2011) by Alejandro Zambra (Chile, 1975). We will conclude by historicizing this affective dominant by situating it in the ideological, socioeconomic and media context of the twenty-first-century society.

## **Beyond Postmodernism**

In the past two decades a growing number of critics and scholars have tried to conceptualize the emergent aesthetic sensibility beyond postmodernism. This interest has generated a heterogeneous collection of heuristic labels<sup>1</sup>, to which this article will not fail to add its own.

Contemporary fiction has been studied primarily in relation to the postmodern aesthetics that preceded it. As Jeremy Green puts it in *Late Postmodernism* (2005), criticism “addresses the ways in which literature . . . has been described under the rubric of postmodernism and asks how these accounts should be modified in the light of recent literary activity” (2005: 3). Contemporary novels are said to show a shift in perspective: they do not flatly reject postmodern conceptions of reality and identity; rather they accept them and try to move beyond them. Irmtraud Huber speaks of a “wilful aesthetics of the ‘in spite of’, or . . . an attitude of ‘true/but still’” (2014: 6).

On an *ethical* level, contemporary novels are said to search for sincerity, intersubjectivity and commitment in response to postmodernism’s alleged solipsism and irony. McLaughlin attributes to the “post-postmodern” novel a desire to “reenergize literature’s social mission, its ability to intervene in the social world” (2004: 55), whereas for Nicoline Timmer “the problem of solipsism” is “at the core of the post-postmodern novel” (2010: 360). Lee Konstantinou foregrounds a critical tendency that wishes to transcend irony because its “mode of critique no longer adequately addresses contemporary reality” (2016: 8). This “postirony” is not a return to a naïve and anti-ironic representation, but a quest for a new literary form that gives rise to divergent political literary characters as “the believer,” “the coolhunter” and “the occupier”. On an *aesthetic* level, contemporary novels leave behind postmodernism’s anti-illusionist metafiction, its pastiche of literary styles and its formally innovative experiments. They demonstrate a “retreat from the extreme playfulness . . . and the emphasis on textuality and difficulty” (Eaglestone 2013: 14) and prefer “a more stylistically translucent representation of the world” (McLaughlin 2012: 216). Nevertheless, contemporary fiction remains aware of language and narrative as constitutive of any understanding of reality, and displays what Benjamin Kunkel calls “a newly *self-conscious* traditionalism” (2010).

The aesthetic and ethical changes in contemporary fiction could be summed up as a process of “reconstruction” (Huber 2014: 47-48) of values and ideas of subjectivity and reality deconstructed by postmodernism. Although the concept of “reconstruction” helps to clarify the

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<sup>1</sup> In her excellent overview of the debate about contemporary literature of *Literature After Postmodernism* (2014), Irmtraud Huber enlists and critically discusses many of those labels: “‘neo-realism’ (Rebein and others), ‘renewalism’ (Toth), ‘aesthetics of authenticity’ (Funk), ‘new sincerity’ (Kelly), ‘performatism’ (Eshelman), ‘digimodernism’ (Kirby) – all of these terms attempt to designate the “post-postmodern” (2014: 45).

poetics of contemporary fiction it does not explain its historical and ideological particularity. Reflections on contemporary prose are inclined to perceive the world as a given order and disregard the ideological and hegemonic processes in the construction of that social order (Demeyer & Vitse 2014). They tend to rely on a conception of the ‘real’ that remains largely unquestioned: a stress “on representing the world we all more or less share” (McLaughlin 2004: 66-67). Moreover, much criticism naively assumes a return to less formally challenging narrative strategies will suffice for the revival of a tendency toward the social.<sup>2</sup>

We agree with Madhu Dubey, however, that the social novel cannot be revived “on purely formalist terms” (2011: 364) as the wider social conditions that complicate that revival – e.g. globalization and disintegration of the social world – remain in place and have even intensified. More importantly we challenge the assumption that realist form yields *more* reality and truth than postmodern form, as if realism is not in itself a conventionalized and standardized representation of reality. In this article we will argue that the shift between postmodern and contemporary novels relies less on a return to the real and the other, than on a different way of understanding the real and the other. Our hypothesis of the affective dominant contends that the real is no primarily understood and valued in cognitive (epistemological, ontological) but predominantly in affective terms. This different grasp of reality, we will argue, reflects a historical transformation.

Criticism on contemporary fiction provides few convincing historicizing accounts of the shift beyond postmodernism. To some the contemporary novel responds to the uncertainty about the value of literature in our current mass-mediated society (Green 2005: 10). Others refer to the weariness with postmodern ideas, which evoke “the feel of a truism” (Dames 2012) and have been institutionalized. Nevertheless, we perceive this weariness as a surface effect of broader social and cultural changes. Changing historical circumstances have made postmodern ideas to become inapt as means to analyse and understand the contemporary. As James Baldwin once put it: “Time catches up with kingdoms and crushes them, gets its teeth into doctrines and rends them” (2017 [1963]: 49).

Peter Boxall opts for a contextualizing interpretation in his study *Twenty-First-Century Fiction* (2013) and focuses on recent technological innovations that have altered our experience

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<sup>2</sup> This view of the novel beyond postmodernism chimes with an evolution some observers deem to be the most important in contemporary literature: the convergence of literary and popular culture – of high and middle brow. Within this popular literary culture novels are not read as part of a quest for truth or reality, but for (literary) experience, therapeutic advice, the acquisition of good taste and a social activity that incites belonging (Collins 2010).

of time and space. The twenty-first-century novel typically communicates a sense of bodily alienation due to this disturbed experience: “a growing sense of profound disjunction” (9). Boxall, however, assumes that the subject will achieve a renewed integration with its changed technological context through the “encoding of a new kind of subjectivity” (38). As Jonathan Crary rightfully points out in *24/7* (2013) the “intensified rhythm” of technological transformations “precludes the possibility of becoming familiar with any given arrangement” (37). This constant temporal dislocation causes social isolation and the disintegration of a sense of future and community.

Similar integrations of historical context and contemporary culture can be found in the work of Lauren Berlant (*Cruel Optimism*, 2011) and Annie McClanahan (*Dead Pledges*, 2016). The latter reads cultural phenomena in light of the twenty-first-century debt crisis and debt economy, whereas the former understands the dominant affective tone of a neoliberal society in terms of cruel optimism: “A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (2011: 1). Berlant links this structure of feeling to the crisis of the welfare state and its accompanying good life fantasies, which all revolve around the belief in a durable life within a trustful social protective environment. Contemporary prose demonstrates their waning in the disruption of temporality and narrativity.

To bring these different frames together, we return in this article to the work of Russian Formalism and Brian McHale and their notion of a dominant. This allows us to study contemporary literature diachronically in relation to postmodernism as well as synchronically in relation to its ideological, socio-economic and media technological context.

## **Hypothesis**

We put forward the hypothesis that contemporary fiction marks a shift towards an affective dominant. In *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) Brian McHale defines the dominant as a structure that brings order and hierarchy in a diversity of techniques and motifs in a literary text. In modernism the dominant is epistemological: its central question ‘how can I know reality’ is foregrounded in its use of montage and multiple perspectives. The dominant in postmodernism is ontological: literary story worlds that constantly shift between factual, fictional and fantastic worlds lead to central questions as ‘what is reality?’ or ‘Which world is this?’ (McHale 1987: 10).

It is our hypothesis that for contemporary literature this dominant is affective. The prevailing questions are ‘how can I feel reality (myself, the other, the past, the present, etc.)?’;

‘how can I feel to belong to reality?’; ‘how can I feel reality to be real?’.<sup>3</sup> This affective dominant manifests itself in motifs as desire, attachment, fantasy, embodiment and identification. Formal and narrative devices that in modernist or postmodernist fiction contributed to an epistemological or ontological dominant, tend to foreground questions of affectivity in contemporary fiction.

The concept of the dominant originated in Russian formalism and is defined by Roman Jakobson as “the focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components” (Jakobson 1971: 82). A literary work or genre is not just a collection of formal devices: one element is more strongly foregrounded than the other and is more important in determining the specificity or distinctive character of a work or genre. This concept allows the formalist critics to develop a synchronic analysis of the system of literature as well as a theory of literary diachrony. They conceive of literary evolution as “shifts in the mutual relationship among the diverse components of the system” (Jakobson 1971: 85). A literary-historical development can be analyzed as a shift in the dominant.

Brian McHale famously applies this formalist concept in *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987) as an alternative to “heterogeneous catalogues of features” (McHale 1987: 7) attributed to postmodern texts. Moreover, the concept of the dominant provides him with a principle to conceptualize the transition from modernism to postmodernism. The vagueness in the original definition of the concept allows McHale to define the dominant as the “common denominator” in a series of textual features or as the overarching question or problem (7-8). Nevertheless, according to McHale this dominant question is foregrounded by specific formal devices. His examples include the use of multiperspectivism and shifting narrative worlds to evoke epistemological and ontological questions in the modern and the postmodern novel respectively.

McHale’s theory has met with significant criticism (see Hutcheon 1988). Some have contested his understanding of the notion of ontology (Fokkema 1997: 20-21) and have questioned the distinction between ontology and epistemology (Vervaeck 2007: 52). Furthermore, it has been suggested that the concept of the dominant might lead to reductively homogeneous conceptions of literary history (Smyth 1991: 12) and might serve to disavow the

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<sup>3</sup> In *Literature After Postmodernism* Huber points in the direction of a pragmatic dominant: “no longer privileging ontological and epistemological questions (that is, by no longer continually interrogating the text’s relation to reality), but rather ethical and pragmatic ones concerned with the motives, effects and conditions of fictive communication” (2014: 40). Huber’s framework, however, remains literary and autonomous: the pragmatic issues that are concerned with ethics and communication are specifically read as an interrogation of fictionality itself and of “the nature, responsibility and power of narration” (74).

social context from which the texts and their dominant ‘questions’ emerge (Tew 2004: 22). Finally, the concept of the dominant raises theoretical and methodological questions: is it correct to think of a literary text (or genre or period) as a hierarchically organized system, and if so, how is that hierarchy to be determined? Without putting aside this criticism, we will take the hypothesis of a shift in the dominant as the starting point for our analysis.

This concept, as revisited by McHale, presents a number of advantages. It allows for a view of literary development as a shift in focus rather than as a break. The shift to an ontological dominant according to McHale does not imply that postmodern fiction no longer poses epistemological questions, but only that these are no longer foregrounded. The shift in dominant, moreover, is not a purely textual feature but also an effect of reading (McHale 1987: 6).

In our use of the concept we contend that the dominant manifests itself in themes, motifs, intertextuality, character and plot as much as it does in formal features. More than McHale we aim for a societal and ideological contextualization of the dominant. We want to complement the diachronic approach implicit in the concept of the dominant with a synchronic perspective on the novel as it relates to its contemporary (societal, ideological, technological) context. We thus aim to provide a historical understanding of the dominance of affective concerns in contemporary fiction.

“Is there any remaining doubt that we are now fully within the Episteme of the Affect?” (Brinkema 2014: xi). Eugenie Brinkema opens her study *The Forms of the Affects* (2014) with this rhetorical question. In the last two to three decades the study of affect has become prominent in cultural and also literary studies. Although our hypothesis is not without a relation to this affective turn, it cannot be reduced to it. It is not our primary concern to theorize affect as a philosophical concept, nor do we aim to analyze the specificity and formal conditions of affect in the novels under discussion or to present a model for the analysis of affect in literature. Our approach is concerned with recent literary history and with a critical reading of 21<sup>st</sup> century fiction rather than with the theoretical study of affect as such. We did not come to contemporary literature from the angle of affect but started from the question how to ideologically understand the emergent “structures of feeling” (Williams 1977: 128-135) in contemporary fiction and arrived at the dominance of affective issues. Our use of the term affective then refers to a wide range of issues and questions that pertain to feelings, desires, attachments and motivations as they are both represented and formally developed in fiction.

The latter distinguishes our take on affect from two influential strands in affect studies that consider affect to elude verbalization and representation. A formalist approach, such as

Isobel Armstrong's (2000), understands affect as being generated by aesthetic form and takes as its starting point "the non-correspondence, the gap, between affect and representation, the disengagement of language and affect" (Armstrong 2000: 115). A Spinozan/Deleuzian approach, such as Brian Massumi's (1995, 2002), sees affect as a non-semantic, bodily intensity and an unformed potential for variation – "nothing less than the perception of one's own vitality, one's sense of aliveness, of changeability" (Massumi 1995: 97). Our allegiance is however less with an understanding of affect as an ontological and autonomous potentiality that defies representation than with affects in their societal and historical (e.g. contemporary) construction.

Our approach is thus closer to the "everyday affect school" (Wiegman 2014, 14) that finds its main source of inspiration in the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) and in queer and feminist critical practice more generally. As for instance exemplified in Ann Cvetkovic's *Depression: A Public Feeling*, this school has a "generic" use of affect that includes both "embodied sensations" and "psychic or cognitive experiences" (2012: 4). Whereas the ontological approach distinguishes affect from ideology, this strand of affect studies allows for the integration of affect in the critique of ideology. It analyses the "affective economy" of political society and culture (Ahmed 2014), the historical dynamics of affect as investment in and attachment to images, persons, practices and discourses (Sedgwick and Frank 2003), and the "impersonal structures" that mediate such investments (Berlant 2011: 121-126). Our own approach, an ideological reading of contemporary fiction, is akin to this sort of inquiry as our study of affect is a means to specify and locate dominant issues in 21<sup>st</sup> century fiction and to interpret these findings in their societal and historical context.

In our following discussions of the recent novels by Lerner, Smith and Zambra we will demonstrate how affect becomes the dominant way to channel the relation to the world. Affect becomes central in the novels' treatment of divergent issues as identity and characterization, poetics, temporality and history, and narrative structure and voice. We furthermore want to contend how the affective manifests itself primarily in the novels' and their characters' concern with societal and political issues. The novels depict widely divergent political situations: the position of a privileged American white middle-class man as an outsider in terrorist-stricken Madrid in Lerner; the silenced legacy of the dictatorial regime in Chile in Zambra; the racial and social inequalities in North West London in Smith. What they have in common, however, is that social and political conflict is primarily experienced at the affective level. Political society is seen to penetrate the characters' affective level of experience and to render it factitious and simulated. Their (lack of) involvement with social issues is premised on their



affective disposition, while at the same time their social position generates affect and the circulation of affect among them.

In Lerner's *Leaving the Atocha Station* the protagonist's failure to engage in the current political situation (notably the response to terrorist attacks) is related to his sense of affective detachment from his life and surroundings. In Zambra's *Ways of Going Home* the affective is most strongly foregrounded in its metafictional narrative structure and the protagonist's processing of recent political history and trauma on which his current intimate failures are predicated. In *NW* by Smith detachment and disaffection are raised by the characters' struggles with the limited possibilities for social mobility in a society strained by racial, gender and socio-economic stratification.

Our hypothesis of the affective dominant, therefore, does not necessarily contradict the reading of contemporary fiction on terms of a commitment to realism and social concerns. The affective should not be read as a (narcissistic) retreat into the private individual that moves away from broader social and political issues. It is rather that the latter manifest themselves primarily at an affective level. The affective is political, in the sense that the political is experienced affectively.<sup>4</sup> Whereas the epistemological and ontological doubt of modernism and postmodernism demonstrates how the political infiltrates at the level of knowledge and imagination, the contemporary affective crisis demonstrates how the political infiltrates at the level of feeling. If Bernardo Soares in Fernando Pessoa's *The Book of Disquiet* did not know "how to have life" (2015: 11), he could nevertheless still note: "Taking nothing seriously and recognizing our sensations as the only reality we have for certain, we take refuge there" (12). The contemporary novel demonstrates how even feelings no longer constitute a reality for how to have life. An ideology critical reading of that affective disposition will be outlined in the last section of our article.

### **Attachment to Affective Forms: *Leaving the Atocha Station* by Ben Lerner**

*Leaving the Atocha Station*, the debut novel of Ben Lerner, consists of several themes that at first seem to evoke a postmodern sensibility, such as the focus on performance and inauthenticity and the fraudulence of the self. The protagonist's skeptical discussion of

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<sup>4</sup> To be sure, affect studies makes a similar claim: 'Affects (...) are the way social life makes itself felt' (Winant 2015, 112). The claim we are making is however less ontological and more historical. An ideology critical reading of contemporary fiction demonstrates how the affective is the primary way in which contemporary fiction processes and discusses social life.

representation and his poetics of potentiality and mediation likewise recall a postmodern frame of reference. Although ontological and epistemological concerns are present, one can nevertheless discern a shift toward the affective in the treatment of these themes and ideas.

In the opening scene of the novel the young American poet Adam Gordon, who resides in Madrid for a year thanks to a prestigious fellowship, visits the Prado Museum as part of his daily routine in the first weeks of his stay. He especially comes to watch *The Descent of the Cross* by the Flemish master Rogier van der Weijden, but finds his daily pattern disturbed when that morning another man is beholding the painting from Adam's beloved spot. Slightly irritated and prone to leave, Adam is stopped in his tracks when the man "suddenly [broke] into tears, convulsively catching his breath" (Lerner 2011: 8). Adam wonders if this man is having "a *profound experience of art*" (8); something Adam is so deeply suspicious of that he thinks the man might be an artist who is performing his emotions (10).

Adam is wary of the man's melodramatic, immediate and intense experience, as he is himself incapable of having such an experience. His is that of affective detachment: "I always already felt removed from my experience" (67). The novel conceptualizes this sense of contemporary disconnected experience through the various issues the novel addresses: its questioning of authentic experience (of both art and existence), its reflections on the aesthetics and politics of poetry, and its exploration of intersubjective relations and contact. Adam, the novel suggests, is trapped in a circular logic of cognitive skepticism and affective detachment. He is skeptical about the possibility that existence can be truthfully represented and authentically experienced. More precisely, in his view the impossibility of truthful representation feeds back into existence, rendering lived experience inauthentic.

Adam understands life in two different ways. On the one hand life consists of "life's white machine": the rhythm of everyday life not punctuated by events but rather the "pure transition" of time passing (64). That life is "falsified" by narrative (64). The impossibility to narrate "entered the experience" (64) and makes it unshareable, adding to his loneliness. On the other hand life is the succession of intense and eventful moments. Those are equally impossible to represent: "the ease with which they could be represented entered and cancelled the experience" (64). These reflections, Adam adds, are "what I felt, if it wasn't what I thought" (64). This suggests that the crisis of representation is not only cognitive, but has penetrated the realm of the affective. Adam has entered a double bind: his skepticism about the possibility of authentic experience precludes his affective investment in lived experience, whereas at the same time his affective detachment generates and reinforces this skepticism.

Rather than wishing to cancel this distance from experience Adam aims to strengthen the feeling of removal. Thereby he turns his problem into a solution: his inability to have a profound experience of art is turned into a skepticism about the possibility of such an experience. Adam endorses the inauthentic and believes it to be general:

that I *was* a fraud had never been in question – who wasn't? Who wasn't squatting in one of the handful of prefabricated subject positions proffered by capital or whatever you wanted to call it. (101)

Being a poet allows him, through its anachronism and marginality, to admit his “bad faith in good faith” (101): even if one is acting in good faith, one is still playing a part.

Adam further explores the inauthenticity of experience through his reflections on the actual and the virtual – the latter referring to “a series of conceptualisations of displacement, deferral and incompleteness” (Katz 2016: 5). These reflections are put forward most consistently in his views on poetry: the actually realized poem can only be a failure with regard to the indefinite virtual possibilities and abstract potentiality of Poetry itself.<sup>5</sup> Similar to his questioning of authenticity, Adam’s aesthetic reflections interlock with his sense of affective detachment. His interest in the arts lays not in their profound effects, but in “the disconnect between my experience of actual artworks and the claims made on their behalf” (9). Adam wishes his own poems to actively sidestep the actual as they are “less poems than a pile of materials out of which poems could be built; they were pure potentiality, awaiting articulation” (39). His is a poetics of displacement: the failure of the actual holds a “negative power” that points at a utopian (virtual) possibility.

Adam’s most engaged description of an aesthetic encounter appears in the middle of the novel when he reflects upon the work of John Ashbery – “one of the only people I described as a ‘major poet’ without irony” (90).

The best Ashbery poems . . . describe what it’s like to read an Ashbery poem; his poems refer to how their reference evanesces. And when you read about your reading in the time of your reading, mediacy is experienced immediately. It is as though the actual Ashbery poem were concealed from you, written on the other side of a mirrored surface, and you saw only the reflection of your reading. But by reflecting your reading, Ashbery’s poems allow you to attend to your attention, to experience your experience, thereby enabling a strange kind of presence. But it is a presence that keeps the virtual

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<sup>5</sup> In his essay *The Hatred of Poetry* (2016) Lerner speaks of the virtual as the “abstract potential of the medium” which is opposed to “the ‘actual poem,’ which necessarily betrays that impulse when it joins the world of representation” (Lerner 2016: 8-9). For an exploration of Lerner’s poetics in both fiction and poetry, cf. Katz (2016).

possibilities of poetry intact because the true poem remains beyond you, inscribed, on the far side of the mirror. (91)

An Ashbery poem allows Adam to attend to his own consciousness and the temporal quality of his own reading. If our relation to the world is always already mediated, it is the experience of such mediacy that allows for the experience of feeling present in time as it passes: “one could experience the texture of time as it passed, a shadow train, life’s white machine” (90).<sup>6</sup> Adam’s is a poetics of experience rather than representation.

The image of the mirror is particularly interesting here. As a poetical image the mirror does not accommodate mimetic realism, nor does it serve as modernism’s broken mirror (prompting epistemological questions about how to know the world) or postmodernism’s infinite simulation of mirrored images (prompting ontological questions about the world’s being). The mirror’s reflection in Adam’s poetics is not cognitive but affective: it is felt. This experience nevertheless depends upon a representation that never becomes actualized and thus upon the postmodern postponement of meaning. Affect is both dependent on and untied from representation.

In more general terms, Adam’s poetics is focused on the affect of form that does not correspond to any actualized content. It is this becoming dominant of the affective that distinguishes the “negative power” Adam ascribed to poems from a (post)modern progressive poetics of subversion and formal complexity that negates normative concepts of the world and subjectivity. Whereas that poetics implies a political critique, Adam cannot “even imagine imagining” any politically effective intervention from poetry (44). Nevertheless, its negative power is needed because in a world in which art is lost and “the total triumph of the actual” is realized, Adam “would swallow a bottle of white pills” (45). The negative power of the arts serves affective rather than ideological aims. It allows for the affect of possible alternatives – an emancipation from the “damaged life” (20) of detachment into a stronger sense of absorption or “perfect social integration” (67).

This poetics of the actual and the virtual in Adam’s life becomes an ethics as he extends it to his relation towards himself and others. Sheila Heti rightfully remarks that “it’s as though [Adam] believes himself to be a poem” (Heti 2012). As a contemporary *Madame Bovary* Adam confuses art and life:

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<sup>6</sup> In his ‘The Future Continuous: Ashbery’s Lyric Mediacy’, an essay out of which the novel heavily copies, Lerner talks about “*lyric mediacy*” (Lerner 2010: 209).

that the tissue of contradictions that was my personality was itself, at best, a poem, where ‘poem’ is understood as referring to a failure of language to be equal to the possibilities it figures; only then could my fraudulence be a project and not merely a pathology; only then could my distance from myself be redescribed as critical, aesthetic. (164)

Either as critical project or as pathological fraudulence, Adam’s “anxiety about whether anyone can have a profound experience of art extends to not believing that anyone can have a profound experience of him” (Heti 2012). The virtual possibilities that people might project upon Adam are far more interesting than the actual Adam he can possibly be. Therefore, he turns to several tactics of displacement: Adam puts masks on, tells lies, performs emotions and talks enigmatically. This causes an endless regression of projections and stimulations of how one is perceived or thinks to be perceived – “it was like seeing myself looking down at myself looking up” (41). Although these performances could be read as raising epistemological and ontological questions on authenticity and identity, their dominant function is affective: to serve Adam’s affective needs, and in particular his desire to be liked and admired.<sup>7</sup>

Adam enacts affective forms and values that do not correspond to any actual position he is committed to identify with. Sara Ahmed argues how these forms and values rely on representation and mediation. They come to stick to signs in an affective economy. Affects do not reside positively in a subject or object, but are “an effect of the circulation between objects and signs (= the accumulation of affective value over time)” (Ahmed 2004: 120). Affects adhere to signs through a process of historical accumulation and through metonymy: the “‘sticky’ associations between signs, figures and objects” (idem). Adam refers to these histories but voids them of their cognitive meanings. As he separates the affective value of a sign from its semantic content, it should then not come as a surprise when Adam refuses to elaborate upon the cognitive meaning of his affective messages. Having said earlier that his mother is dead, a lie he told to get sympathy from the “attractive stranger” Teresa (Lerner 2011: 29), he tells her that his father, the “gentlest of men”, is a fascist:

“What do you mean by ‘fascist’?” [Teresa] said.

...

“He is a man of right-wing politics,” I said, meaninglessly. “He only respects violence.” As I said this, I thought of my dad patiently trying to get a spider to crawl from the carpet onto a piece of paper so he could escort it safely from house to yard. (85-86)

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<sup>7</sup> Adam is mostly honest about his dishonesty and in a way suffers from his own projections and stimulations: “Why was I born between mirrors” (Lerner 2011: 181).

Adam uses words on their affective level in order to elicit people's affection. Whenever he is confronted with the meaninglessness of those words new lies are needed to counter the threat of disclosure.

Trying to create an "aura of profundity" (53) about himself, Adam invites others to read him as a poem. This affective aura depends on gaps and absences: the meanings that get lost in translation and lead to a silence that creates depth by "the swelling of potential meanings" (51). He thinks he functions as an Ashbery poem: allowing others to attend to their own attention in order to experience themselves. His only chance to be liked resides in acting as a screen onto which others can project favorable self-images: "Her experience of my body, I thought, was more her experience of her experience of my body" (47).

In a comparable way, Adam uses the others as a screen that allows him to attend to his own consciousness. His lack of understanding Spanish fluently offers a poetic experience: "it was less like I failed to understand than that I understood in chords, understood in a plurality of worlds" (14). Similarly, Adam keeps all possible interpretations of Isabel's emotional story open. This however implies that he does not know why Isabel is crying: his wandering in virtual possibilities cuts him off from a connection with the other – "You miss it, it misses you. / You miss each other" (91).

Rather than being invested in his two love interests Isabel and Teresa, Adam is "invested in the idea that Isabel and Teresa were invested in me" (101). Adam experiences the affective forms that stick to love scenarios, but only at a distance from himself. When Isabel talks about her partner Oscar, Adam "experienced the shape of pain but no pain" (105). More than his actual relation with Teresa, he favors the virtual possibility of her love for him. If he and Teresa "never slept together or otherwise 'realized' our relationship, I would leave Spain with this gorgeous possibility intact" (88). Importantly he adds: "I'd never formulated this notion before, but had felt it" (88). The virtual thus fulfils him affectively more than actual relationships.

Significantly, Adam also misses events. After having spent the night at the Ritz Hotel to impress Isabel, Adam awakens to a Madrid that has just suffered a terrorist attack: the bombing in Atocha Station on March 11 2004. Adam's responses can be read as an exploration of contemporary political alienation. He walks from the Ritz to Atocha, wanders around and walks back to his apartment. There he opens several news websites and he "could feel the newspaper accounts modifying or replacing my memory of what I'd seen; was there a word for that feeling?" (119). The ease with which a spectacular event can be represented in standardized cultural images and phrases detach him from his own experiences, rendering them inauthentic. Rather than delivering him from his complacency, the shocking and violent event reinforces

the disconnection between himself and the political through the machinery of representation. It turns the political from an event in which to engage into a spectacle to behold: ‘these attacks were “made for TV”’ (140).

This affective disposition makes Adam feel like a fraud. At the protests, representations again get in the way between himself and his experience. He is picturing ‘how [the march] must have looked from the helicopters’ (122), and can only think of his chanting as ‘affected’ and ‘conspicuous’ (123): the disconnection between self and experience turns the gaze toward one’s own (re)presentation. Moreover, his failure to blend in generates a conceptual distance from experience which, the novel suggests, is shared. Hanging around at a protest event at a gallery, Adam reflects: “A ‘post’ was being formed, and the air was alive less with the excitement of a period than with the excitement of periodization” (140). The ‘immediacy’ of a historical event becomes mediated through a narrative of history that involves a position that is at a distance from the events: people are positioning themselves towards the event at the level of a retrospective representation, and not so much as actively involved in the making of the period.

Whereas in Poetry the virtual might hold a utopian possibility, in life Adam’s dwelling in the virtual closes off any attachment and constantly returns him to his anxiety and incapability in fulfilling affective needs. Whenever he allows himself to think he is leading himself astray or whenever he fears the other might be aware of their own projections, his sense of loneliness, fraudulence and lack of essence (his contingency) are reinforced. Behind the several mediated reflections the mirror causes, the actual Adam’s presence can only become an absence: “I have never been here, I said to myself. You have never seen me” (178).<sup>8</sup>

### **Writing to Expose and to Protect: *Ways of Going Home* by Alejandro Zambra**

In contrast to *Leaving the Atocha Station*, the narrator and protagonist of *Ways of Going Home* (2011), the third novel by Alejandro Zambra, does search for attachments with his lover, his family and his country Chili. The country’s dictatorial history has however caused any intimate relation to be pervaded by a ‘long distance’ – as a title of one of Zambra’s short stories suggest (2015: 55-70). In both its formal structure and motives, the novel foregrounds these shifting affective relations between intimate attachment and distant detachment.

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<sup>8</sup> These phrases are lifted from a poem that within the fictional world is written by Adam Gordon (128), but has actually appeared earlier in Ben Lerner’s first book of poetry, *The Lichtenberg Figures* (2004: 15), cf. Rogers (2013: 230).

In all of Zambra's novels, the protagonist is a writer who perceives his profession to be both humble, necessary and shameful. In *Ways of Going Home* (2011) the narrator, similar to Adam Gordon, understands the novel to be a falsification of lived experience:

We remember the sounds of images. And sometimes, when we write, we wash everything clean, as if by doing so we could advance toward something. We ought to simply describe those sounds, those stains on memory. . . . That's why a book is always the opposite of another immense and strange book. An illegible and genuine book that we translate treacherously, that we betray with our habit of passable prose. (Zambra 2011: 125)

The narrator would like to evoke the images of his childhood, a time that seemed more innocent as he was not aware at the time of the atrocities of the Pinochet regime. For him, the dictator was only a man whose television show came at irregular hours and the National Stadium, the "largest detention center in 1973" (97), was never more than a soccer field.

*Ways of Going Home* tentatively constructs a narrative that comes to terms with the legacy of that regime in contemporary Chile now that the country, according to the narrator, has forgotten its past. The impending victory of Sebastián Piñera in the presidential race makes it "obvious we've lost our memories. We will calmly, candidly, hand the country over to Piñera and to Opus Dei and the Legionaries of Christ" (130). In contrast, the novel reflects upon ways of bringing the country home, that is creating a narrative which gives all actors in the country's history a sense of belonging. More specifically the narrator wishes to focus on his parents' class: the silent middle class that neither supported nor opposed the dictatorship.

The novel recasts the past and the present situation primarily in affective terms. It describes relations to the past and to the other in degrees of emotional intimacy or distance, protective care and concealment, surrender and control, attachment and detachment. The narrator does not attempt an epistemological or ontological enquiry into the status of political conflict and identity: what is a community, what is a victim or a perpetrator, what is complicity or neutrality, what is guilt or innocence? The protagonist does not want "to talk about innocence or guilt", but wants "nothing more than to illuminate some corners, the corners where we were" (48).

In terms of an influential essay by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the narrator's method is more "reparative" than "paranoid". Paranoid reading involves a "hermeneutics of suspicion" (Sedgwick 2003: 124-125): it aims to expose false consciousness and wants to unmask the violence or injustice that is hidden within the object one is reading. This involves an affectively *detached* attitude toward the object as the paranoid gaze needs to remain sceptical at every



instance. Reparative reading, however, is far more concerned with *identification* and affective *attachment*: “a reparative impulse (...) wants to assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer an inchoate self” (2003: 149). It wants to catalogue the diverse ways a subject invests in an object and thus “prefers acts of noticing, being affected, taking joy” (Love 2010: 238) – “to illuminate some corners”.

Although a reparative or restorative impulse is predominant in *Ways of Going Home*, the subject matter of the novel makes paranoia unavoidable. The dictatorial regime created a political atmosphere in which one needed to hide one’s true political identity and could not easily or naively trust the other. In his retelling of history, the narrator hopes to arrive at a sense of belonging from a situation of secrecy and conflict. The novel’s relation to the past is thus characterized by a double affective movement of approach and retreat, of reparative and paranoid impulses. Retrospection is not conceived in epistemological or ideological terms – in terms of knowing or criticizing the past – but in affective terms of caring, sharing and being-with. Yet, the narrator remains aware that this project is unsustainable.

The novel’s title evokes the affect of nostalgia: the longing for a home, yet a longing that is multiple – *ways* of going home. Svetlana Boym talks of “reflective nostalgia” which “thrives in *algia*, the longing itself, and delays the homecoming – wistfully, ironically, desperately” (Boym 2001: xviii). Rather than truly returning and reconstructing a lost past, the narrator-writer wishes to live in his longing:

That I prefer writing to having written. I’d rather stay there, inhabit the time of the book, cohabit with those years, chase the distant images at length and then carefully go over them again. See them badly, but see them. To just stay there, looking. (Zambra 2011: 39)

The writer carefully attends to the images of the past, as if to protect them from being forgotten and from being tainted by the present. He is aware, however, of the risks an affective relationship with the past might entail, as nostalgia might tempt one to romanticize or gloss over past conflict. Moreover, the narrator carefully tends to the guilt that might stick to past images:

although we can’t and don’t know how to talk about innocence or guilt, we spend our days going over a long list of things that back then, when we were children, we didn’t know. It’s as if we had witnessed a crime. We didn’t commit it, we were only passing through the place, but we ran away because we knew that if they found us there we’d be blamed. We believe we are innocent, we believe we are guilty: we don’t know. (112-113)

The children were protected by their parents from the country's political events and from the responsibility they now have towards the course of the country's history, and it is for that time of innocence and freedom the generation of the narrator longs. Therefore, the narrator needs to avoid the trap of nostalgic misrepresentation, while both protecting those who are affected by his act of retelling and considering his own involvement in this history. It is the particular structure of the novel that points at the difficulty of this balancing exercise.

The novel consists of four chapters: the first and third are presented as fiction, written by the protagonist and narrator of the second and fourth chapter. The latter, metafictional chapters are diary entries, set in the present, that reflect upon the writing of the novel – the novel we are reading – and tell of his memories, his encounters with his parents and his ex-wife Eme. The protagonist in the other chapters is an alter-ego of the writer. In the first chapter he is a young boy who on the evening of the earthquake of 1985 meets Claudia, a girl three years his senior. Shortly after she asks him to spy on his neighbour she claims is her uncle Raúl. In the third chapter the protagonist is in his thirties and encounters Claudia again who came from the U.S. to Santiago because of her father's death.

The structure foregrounds the act of storytelling and fictionalization and its difficulties at a literary, political and affective level. It raises questions that are affective: in his retelling of history, the narrator needs to reconcile conflicting interests with the desire for a shared attachment. These are interwoven with cognitive uncertainties. The narrator doubts the legitimacy of his voice and feels incapable to write the novel because of his status as a “less relevant” or “secondary” character (42). That status is generational and historical. He and his peers are secondary characters in Chilean history because they were just children during the dictatorship, oblivious to what was going on. Therefore ‘the novel’ – here apparently referring to the realist genre that captures the complexity of human experience through a causally connected sequence of events in a solid way – belongs to the parents:

That's what we grew up believing, that the novel belonged to our parents. We cursed them, and also took refuge in their shadows, relieved. While the adults killed or were killed, we drew pictures in a corner. . . . While the novel was happening, we played hide-and-seek, we played at disappearing. (41)

The epistemological and affective difficulties are numerous: how can one write the “literature of the children” (69) if they have been kept hidden from (literary) history? How does one recast oneself as a protagonist without relegating the other to a secondary position? “I knew little, but at least I knew that: no one could speak for someone else. That although we might want to tell

other people's stories, we always end up telling our own" (85). The narrator wishes to inscribe himself into political history via intimate encounters: with Claudia in the fictional, Eme in the metafictional narrative and the parents in both. The narratives aim at attachment and intimacy, but end with distance and separation. In these encounters the split affective economy of paranoid and reparative impulses, of suspicion and care, is doubled.

'Secondary Characters' is the title of the first chapter, which focuses on the children Claudia and the anonymous protagonist. Her request to spy on her so-called uncle is put in terms of both care and suspicion: "I need you to take care of him," Claudia first says (20). Yet, what she really needs him to do is "to watch over Raúl: not take care of him but rather keep an eye on his activities" (20-21). In the third chapter we learn that Raúl, whose real name is Roberto, is Claudia's father, a leftist who needed to hide from the regime and therefore lived separated from his family. Her request for the boy to spy on her father is her way of caring and preserving some sort of contact. Claudia's relationship with the boy similarly combines distance and intimacy. As she does not inform him, the political context of his actions is lost on the boy. She thus puts him at an emotional distance and turns him into a secondary character within her story yet convinces him by appealing to their friendship (21).

The metafictional level adds a political meaning to this affective encounter. We learn that the trip where the boy follows Ximena is based upon "a real trip I took more or less at that age" (58). The stories differ, as Mary Friedman points out, in their level of politicization: "Whereas the original event has been apolitical, its reelaboration as part of the Claudia narrative incorporates politics" (Friedman 2014: 620). The retelling serves in giving the narrator's life at least the semblance of an oppositional act his true youth has missed because his parents did not tell him the truth about the country's politics.

The protagonist's encounters with his parents reveal a similar double movement of attachment and detachment. His parents were secondary characters in that they belonged to the silent middle class. That secondary status is underlined by the novel's setting. The family lived in Maipú, one of the 52 municipalities of Santiago, a place that seems to be geographically and historically peripheral.<sup>9</sup> It is further emphasized as their house is in the Alladinstreet, one of the "streets where the new families would later live – the families without history, who were willing or perhaps resigned to live in that fantasy world" (17). It is to this family house the narrator returns, aiming to undo its political concealment.

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<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of Maipú as periphery in *Ways of Going Home*, see Willem 2015.

One particular scene in which the protagonist argues with his mother is told twice: the original scene is in the second chapter (62-65) and it is retold in a more politicized manner in chapter three, incorporating Claudia and Roberto's story (107-111). Both scenes convey a double sense of detachment: while blaming his parents the narrator feels detached from these accusations. The narrator for instance reproaches his mother when she says to like the novel *The Other Side of the Soul* by Carla Guelfenbein. Their argument reveals the different identifications of mother and son. He cannot understand that she identifies with "characters from another social class, with conflicts that aren't, that could never be, conflicts in your life" (63), yet for the mother the novel's problems "felt" as hers even though there might be class difference. She backfires the question to her son, asking if his love interest Claudia is from the same class. The protagonist's relationship with Claudia will in the end not hold because the narrative they wish to tell is different. Their longing for a shared narrative conflicts with their divergent positions and interests in the story.

A similar situation arises when the writer tries to rekindle his relationship with his former wife Eme. She keeps an emotional distance and tells him they need "to pretend we've just met. That we've never shared anything before" (119). The narrator, however, uses literature to give them a shared history. It is her personal history that gave him the idea for the novel (40). When Eme reads the novel he is writing, she feels as if their former trust has been breached. "'You told my story,' she said, 'and I ought to thank you, but no, I think I'd prefer it if no one told that story'" (133). Similar to Claudia, she has been turned into a secondary character that is part of – and thus controlled by – the writer's narrative.

For the narrator, writing is both about exposition and protection and he is thus aware of these effects. It is necessary to use other characters in the construction of a narrative for the country to go home, but inevitably the other becomes incorporated within one's own story. The structure of the novel exposes that effect and in that sense protects the singularity of the others' past. The narrator does not, as a paranoid reader, simply expose the country's pain and the silence of the middle class, but aims to show the different ways in which one has coped with the dictatorial regime.

The writer is no longer "full of conviction, dogma, rules" (134). He does not write from a position of knowledge, but from one that acknowledges its own complicity and instability. An earthquake both at the beginning and the end of the novel, serves as a reminder that things are fragile. Therefore the novel's tone remains tentative and restorative throughout. What he has come to understand is "failure" (134) and that failure is both political and affective. The clash between the fictional and metafictional level has revealed the lack of any foundation

within the country's recent history to write a narrative that gives a shared history to an intimate couple or to parents and their children. In the end the novel demonstrates how the affective crisis and the political crisis are inextricably interwoven. The difficulty of attaching to a person is as difficult as attaching to a convincing story of the country:

And we left, each going our separate way.

...

*Alone again (naturally)*. What hurts the most is that *naturally* (134).

Failure is nevertheless necessary, accepting that the necessity offers no solution to the problem of political and affective detachment.

### **Affective encounters in *NW* by Zadie Smith**

Whereas Lerner and Zambra explore affect, politics and poetics from a perspective of relative privilege and security – albeit, in Zambra's case, in a society torn apart by a history of political conflict – Smith is concerned with those trying to escape precarious conditions of living. In *NW* Zadie Smith carefully explores affective responses to social conditions of class, gender and racial inequality. The novel's two main characters, Nathalie Blake (born as Keisha in the Caldwell-estate in a family of colour) and her childhood friend Leah Hanwell (white, of Irish descent) embody its central theme of social mobility, more specifically the conflict between claims for equal opportunities and a more neoliberal conception of meritocracy. They were both raised in London's NW district yet manage to obtain a university degree and a middle-class life.

In an intricate five-part structure, displaying a dazzling variety of narrative strategies and timescales, *NW* traces the movements of a number of NW-born Londoners in their thirties whose lives intersect in the stabbing of one of them. The first part of the novel, 'Visitation', introduces Leah Hanwell, who is still living in NW. 'Guest', the second part, details one day in the life of Felix Cooper – the last day, as it happens, as he is the one being stabbed, presumably by Caldwell-bred Nathan Bogle. The third part, 'Host', chronicles Natalie's life from childhood until the present, in a series of numbered vignettes, after which the brief fourth and fifth part pick up the story after Felix' stabbing, leading up to Leah and Natalie incriminating Nathan with the police.

The novel's self-conscious use of both modernist and postmodern narrative techniques might suggest an epistemological and ontological questioning of this social issue – concerned with its intelligibility, with the availability of a critical perspective, or with the mediation of

social life by fictional narrative. Although these concerns are not alien to the novel, we contend that *NW* approaches the issue from a primarily affective perspective, focusing on the circulation of affect generated by social conditions of class, gender and racial inequality and the limited possibilities for upward mobility. A focus on affect, moreover, will guide our reading of the novel's specific approach to intertextuality and metafiction. We will first discuss narrative form as it relates to the character's affective state and their experience of social mobility, then we discuss the affectivity as it circulates through social relationships, highlighting the societal conditions by which affect is mediated.

A salient feature of Smith's writing in *NW* is its wide variety of intertextual references, both to period styles and to individual authors and works, and both to canonical English literature and popular culture. Wendy Knepper discusses Smith's experiments with narrative technique in *NW* in terms of a revisionary reflection of modernist stream of consciousness and avant-garde aesthetics.<sup>10</sup> Vanessa Guignery observes that "each [chapter is] written in a specific narrative mode and literary tradition" (2014: 7) and she concludes that "[i]n *NW*, Smith continues to draw from the modernist heritage and mixes it up with realism and postmodernist techniques while challenging the hierarchies between high and popular culture" (42). A key reference point in this intertextual reading is Smith's essay 'Two paths for the novel' (2008), which anticipates a new way forward for the contemporary novel at the crossroads of the realist tradition and its avant-garde and postmodernist counterpoints. *NW*'s narrative structure reconnects with the modernist critique of realism, while creating a self-critical and more politically aware breed of lyrical realism.

Further developing this train of thought, we explore an affective dimension to this compositional feature. On the one hand, we suggest that the various narrative modes in *NW* underscore the sense of affective detachment which pervades the life of the novel's female protagonists. On the other hand, the novel explores the characters', specifically Natalie's, relationship to canonical and popular culture in terms of affective investment and (failed) identification. Intertextuality thus contributes to the affective dominant we identify in this article.

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<sup>10</sup> Considering an excerpt reminiscent of visual poetry in 'Visitation', for instance, she claims: "The whimsical interventions go beyond the metafictional trope of postmodernism, with its emphasis on the text as an artifice, to convey a form of psychological realism" (Knepper 2013: 118). Knepper elaborates on an observation on James Joyce by Smith herself, which Knepper interprets as implying that "style (...) [is] a quest for a new kind of mimesis, which expresses felt and lived experience" (Knepper 2013: 113).

Leah's anxieties about her "[t]hree years of useless study [of philosophy, HD & SV]" (Smith 2012: 28), her professional prospects and social pressure to raise a family are refracted through a modernist stream of consciousness in 'Visitation'. One particularly revealing example from 'Visitation' is to be found in chapter 5, in which Leah's sexual relationship with Michel is observed from a seemingly distant and objectifying perspective. It remains ambiguous, however, whether this depersonalizing distance should be attributed to the third-person narrator or to Leah's focalization of the scene. The opening line "Leah believes in objectivity in the bedroom:" is followed by depersonalized observations on their bedroom conversation about Leah's encounter with Shar. "The woman tries to talk to the man who is her husband about the desperate girl who came to the door" (Smith 2012: 20).

The objectifying perspective on the conversation conceals or perhaps suppresses the high emotional charge the event discussed holds for Leah and her inability to come to terms with the event through conversation. Moreover, the impersonal tone is symptomatic of a communicative impasse between both partners, as Michel "is missing a vital piece of information" – which, it is suggested, refers to his being oblivious of Leah's pregnancy, which Shar had noticed immediately – and fails to pick up on Leah's "submerged, feminine logic" (20).

Ambiguity in narrative voice and attribution in 'Visitation' consistently signals Leah's varying degree of detachment from or involvement in her personal and professional life. Chapter 8, set in her London office, sets out with what appears to be an external, mildly ironic observation comparing this workplace to others elsewhere in town. "Elsewhere in London, offices are open plan / floor to ceiling glass / sites of synergy / wireless / gleaming" (27). While the office talk buzzes with the discourse of 'public-sector accounting' (Small 2013: 540)<sup>11</sup> – "relatability", "empathy" and "personal connection" (28) – and Leah "doodles passionately" around the words "I AM SO FULL OF EMPATHY" (29), she experiences the office ambience from a detached position. Anxiety about pregnancy sets her apart from her female coworkers. Smith's abundant use of (typically modernist) free indirect discourse in reported thought thus

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<sup>11</sup> Helen Small convincingly argues for a reading of *NW* in the context of "UK public funding", from Leah's council distribution center to the university, and 'the burden of reporting to government on the social benefits returned to the public' (Small 2013: 540). Small suggests a "partial but telling resemblance" between the language of qualitative accounting for social benefits and "the aspirations of realist fiction writers to get beyond representations of the external features of a society to the psychologic and moral experience that might yield a deeper valuation of it" (idem).

evokes a question of the character's affective involvement in the situation rather than a question of the epistemological certainty regarding the attribution or representation of thought.

Similarly, the frequent author intrusions in 'Host', while on the one hand echoing postmodern metafiction, can on the other hand be interpreted as markers of affective detachment. Nathalie's tale of self-realization in 'Host', a story she clings to at the expense of her affective wellbeing, mimics a postmodern rewriting of the *Bildungsroman*. Paragraph 172 provides a fine example: "Walking down Kilburn High Road Natalie Blake had a strong desire to slip into the lives of other people" (245). The narrator goes on to scrutinize said desire – "'Slip into' is an imprecise thought" (245) – and ends up mimicking the language of a tourist brochure, as if addressing visitors of London with "[a] local tip (...). You're welcome" (245). This narrative device not so much exposes representation as a fictional construction, as it highlights Natalie's unfulfilled longing for emotional connection and intimacy. "Natalie Blake wanted to know people. To be intimately involved with them" (245).

Natalie Blake, as the narrator carefully explains, "was crazy busy with self-invention" (183), determined to carve out a new identity for the underprivileged girl Keisha Blake she used to be. Her remarkable success at class mobility, obtaining a law degree and considerable wealth, comes at the cost, however, of intensifying her loss of a sense of self. With typical narratorial distance the narrator comments on "Ms Blake having no self to be" (183).

From childhood onwards Keisha observes life, including her own lineage and personality, from a distance. For instance, she questions "parental legacy" and the narrator comments that "a non-existent father and/or mother was a persistent fantasy of hers" (158). Throughout these childhood vignettes, the narrative voice strikes a delicate balance between distance and empathy, blending Keisha's childhood experience with the analytical detachment of an adult cultural critic, thereby mimicking Keisha's objectifying distance from herself. A striking image in section 14 reveals that detachment as a combined product of economic disadvantage and commodification of desire: looking through a window glass at Nike Air trainers Keisha is "[s]eparated from happiness" (158). The sports brand's commodification of "the infinitely available thing" (158) – air – is doubled by its commodification of affect, putting Keisha at arm's length from her own happiness.

This structure of commodification is reflected in Keisha's affective disposition: she confronts her own emotions as if they were objects to be attained, or instruments to be wielded. From observing Leah, she concludes that generosity is a quantifiable good and "had to be employed strategically" (157). She is fooling no one, though: "no one ever mistook Keisha's cerebral willfulness for her friend's generosity of spirit" (157). Her underprivileged social



position does not allow her to experience emotions in the present, forcing her to postpone them as future goals. Thus she is denied the simple “ecstasy” (159) of enjoying popular music and the “celebrated will and focus” that guides her social mobility does not even “leave her much room for angst” (162.)

Keisha’s sense of detachment is continued into adulthood and into her new persona as Natalie, and is further elaborated in relation to motherhood. When Natalie Blake gives birth to her first child the narrator conspicuously points out the change this supposedly life-changing event *fails* to bring: “Which is all to say that the brutal awareness of the real that she had so hoped for and desired – that she hadn’t even realized she was counting on – failed to arrive” (237). Pregnancy had merely continued, even expanded the “image system at work in the world” (237): the uninterrupted flow of simulacra and semiotic stimuli. Online pregnancy advice further removes her from a direct awareness of her existence. “She grew anxious that she was not anxious about the things you were meant to be anxious about” (237). Not even in the experience of giving birth Natalie feels to be inescapably, viscerally involved. “At the vital moment she was able to say to herself quite calmly: ‘Oh, look, I’m giving birth’” (237).

This excerpt seems to resolve around the question, not so much of the reality of existence, but rather of the awareness of that reality. Natalie does not question reality from an epistemological or ontological perspective – how can reality be known or distinguished from fiction – the point is rather that life does not feel real and does not seem real to her<sup>12</sup>. The latter is a question of affectivity, involving the various layers of affective mediation, such as anxiety or euphoria, that provide or conceal a feeling of the real.

Natalie moves back and forth between this foreclosure of connection and a longing for intimacy and belonging. In ‘Host’ this desire is often mediated by references to the literary canon, an institution which has historically tended to excluded people like Keisha/Natalie Blake. The interplay between the section titles and the narrative content is striking in this regard. A section entitled ‘Jane Eyre’ reveals Keisha’s eagerness to identify with and take comfort from “the relevant literature” and “the pertinent movies”, “even if the people in the literature and the movies looked nothing like you (...) and – had they ever met you – would very likely have enslaved you” (160). A section on Keisha’s university application is significantly entitled

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<sup>12</sup> Natalie has a similar experience when meeting up for coffee with her cousin Tonya. Natalie feels inadequate (213), believing she lacks her cousin “gift of living” (214). She refuses “to make a deeper ‘connection’” and hopes “to avoid precisely this intimacy” by keeping her cousin “at bay” (214). This emotional distance extends to physical contact with Tonya’s children: “Neither child ever seemed real to her no matter how many times Natalie felt their weight in her arms” (214).

“Brideshead unvisited”, given the financial obstacle that even buying a train ticket to Manchester or Edinburgh presents.

When at one point, during a dinner party at university, this intimacy suddenly seems to present itself, the experience is so powerful that awareness of its artificial and temporary nature almost eludes her. Natalie “had to remind herself that this intimacy . . . . was being manufactured at this present moment, along with its history” (190). Significantly Natalie’s powerful sense of belonging is elicited by a judge’s speech referencing Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*’s first performance and an Anglo-Saxon chronicle on the Peasants’ Revolt from 1381 – that is to say British cultural history predating Afro-Caribbean presence in the UK, a history which she has had to work extremely hard to make her own. Yet Natalie is thrilled by the experience of belonging to that heritage, promoted from being “an accidental guest at the table” to “a host, with other hosts, continuing a tradition” (190). This scene suggests an illuminating reading of the chapter titles: whereas Felix remains ‘Guest’ – stuck in his class position – Natalie achieves the position of ‘Host’.

*NW* has been read as an inclusive panorama of London’ multicultural and class-divided society. This political reading extends to the characters’ subject positions. As Beatriz Pérez Zapata remarks, for instance, Natalie’s crisis in subjectivity is not founded on a postmodern deconstruction of the self; rather “this selfless subject results from the influence of political, patriarchal, and neocolonial discourses which silence Natalie’s origin as a working-class woman” (Zapata 2014: 91). While this reading provides a welcome shift to political critique, we suggest a further shift towards a conception of subjectivity rooted in notions of belonging, feeling connected (or excluded) and affective involvement.

Moreover, we aim to show that *NW* reveals socioeconomic stratification as an affective structure. As Knepper observes, “*NW* eschews chronology in favour of a spatially configured story concerning various “visitations” or encounters in the space of *NW*” (112). These encounters indeed exemplify and embody the conflicts underlying a socio-economically stratified and ethnically diverse community with limited possibilities for social mobility. More specifically, they highlight the affective charge both generated and mobilized by those conditions of living.

As a promising student of law, having recently met her wealthy future husband Frank de Angelis, Natalie “took out a large student loan and made a point of spending it only on frivolous things” (Smith 2012: 185). Raised in a family of colour in an underprivileged estate, for Natalie spending money, let alone owing money, has always been accompanied by the

“bottomless anxiety” (185) of debt. The prospect of social mobility, however, sparks an affective shift, more specifically in the affective dimension of time. “Now that she glimpsed the possibility of a future, an overdraft did not hold the same power of terror over her” (185). Frank, having the benefit of wealth and unearned male confidence, seems unaffected by such terror, or even unaware of its existence.

As this example indicates, affect is embedded in socioeconomic hierarchy. Natalie’s affective detachment, then, is distinguished from a more typically middle class sense of malaise. In a telling scene in ‘Host’ Natalie’s affective condition is contrasted with Leah’s white art-student boyfriend’s talk about “his short films” (Smith 2012: 176). “They’re all about boredom essentially. It’s the only subject left. We’re all bored. Aren’t you bored?” (176) Natalie’s is a socially conditioned detachment which cannot be assimilated to a general millennial sense of dread<sup>13</sup>.

A specific feature of her alienation is its being accompanied by shame, both shame for her own social background and self-contempt about this shame. A double reference to Genesis signals this entanglement of emotions. First Natalie visits her family’s flat and experiences “a new feeling of lack. A new awareness. And lo they saw their nakedness and were ashamed” (218). In contrast to Natalie, who feels ashamed of her underprivileged family, the middle class friends she meets in a second scene seem to know no shame for their own privilege. “And lo they saw their nakedness and were not ashamed” (221).

The novel is most strongly organized around the social and affective relationship between Natalie and Leah. Even though the novel acutely analyzes this relationship in terms of its socioeconomic conditions, it also traces the affective responses sparked by those conditions. Their friendship – deeply affectionate and firmly rooted in childhood experiences – is frequently characterized by ‘ugly feelings’, which Sianne Ngai (2005) has defined as feelings which do not allow for a cathartic resolution. When Leah and Michel visit Natalie and Frank, the narrator points out the unease between the two friends: “They have been annoying each other all afternoon” (Smith 2012: 52).

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<sup>13</sup> Interestingly Natalie’s sense of detachment is not shown to derive from the alienating effects of digital media use, although these effects are discussed and exposed in the novel. Natalie anxiously considers the impact on identity formation electronic devices might have on her young children as they are “flicking through past images, moving images, of themselves, on their father’s phone, an experience of self-awareness literally unknown in the history of human existence” (241). When at the end of ‘Host’ she joins two adolescent males in a sexual encounter, she ridicules them for not being able to perform without being hooked up to a laptop streaming webcam images. These men “couldn’t do anything without the net somewhere in the mix” (257). Whereas Natalie’s obsessive internet consumption seems to result from a pre-existing crisis in subjectivity, the lives of these slightly younger men seem mediated by digital technology on a more fundamental level.

Chapter 177 in 'Host' seems to identify their affective relationship as envy, a feeling which according to Ngai "lacks cultural recognition as a valid mode of publicly recognizing or responding to social disparities" (Ngai 2005: 128). By not explicitly ascribing envy to either of the characters, Smith avoids the trap of treating envy as a subjective state of mind and instead shows envy as a non-verbalized affective response to social conditions. Leah asks Natalie to "speak at a charity auction for a young black women's collective Leah had helped fund" (Smith 2012: 252). While delivering her speech, Natalie "found her mind travelling to obscene tableaux. She wondered what Leah and Michel, who always seemed to have their hands on each other, did in the privacy of their bedroom" (253).

It remains unclear who is feeling envious, at whom, and why – is Leah envious at Natalie's social mobility, or Natalie at Leah's supposedly more satisfying sexual relationship? The point is, rather, that their friendship is premised on conditions of socioeconomic inequality – with whom both have struggled as allies as well as competitors, Leah's Irish descent a slight advantage over Natalie's – to which envy is both a personal and a political response.<sup>14</sup>

A telling example of affect as a structure of racial discrimination is found in a scene in 'Guest', in which Felix is caught up between "a white woman, hugely pregnant" (145) and "two men" (146) sitting opposite him in a subway carriage, one of whom has "put his feet up on the seat" (143) next to Felix'. It is implied that the men are of colour, as the white woman addresses Felix as their friend. When he does not succeed in convincing the man to move his feet, Felix cedes his own seat to the woman. The novel analyses the affects involved in great detail:

Felix felt a great wave of approval, smothering and unwanted, directed towards him, and just as surely, contempt and disgust enveloping the two men and separating them, from Felix, from the rest of the carriage, from humanity. (146)

In this highly complex affective constellation, the configuration of these bodies in space is organized by hate, on the one hand. This hate derives both from what Sara Ahmed calls "histories of association . . . such that some bodies are already encountered as more hateful than others" (Ahmed 2014: 54) and from observably aggressive behavior by the men. The scene in that sense illustrates Ahmed's thesis that hate structures social space as it "creates the surface of bodies through the way in which bodies are aligned with and against other bodies" (54). On the other hand, however, Felix feels oppressed by the woman's approval of his behavior, as this

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<sup>14</sup> As Ngai argues, envy is "an ability to recognize, and antagonistically respond to, potentially real and institutionalized forms of in-equality" (Ngai 2005: 129).

approval appears to keep Felix “sealed in [his] skin” (57) almost as much as hate would have according to Ahmed’s phenomenology of racial hatred.

Not only does hate set the men apart from the community, it also sets Felix apart from the community as well as from the excluded men. Felix is caught up in a double bind: either he accepts the subject position imposed upon him by the woman, thereby accepting the racial hierarchy and the contempt implicit in it and reproducing it as a hierarchy between men of colour; or he refuses to break social and racial solidarity with the men, thereby condoning their aggressive behavior.

More generally, we argue that *NW* traces affectivity as circulating within social relationship rather than as being inherent in individual subjects. Take, as a concluding example, a scene in which Leah is on the subway with her mother Pauline, who comments on the plight of the London underclass as being ‘so sad’. That this comment is sparked by an encounter with ‘[a] dirty Gypsy girl and a tall fella’ (39) who turns out to be Nathan Bogle, might suggest a sense of racial distinction is implicit in Pauline’s attitude.

This realm of Pauline’s – the realm of the so sad – is immutable and inevitable, like hurricanes and tsunamis. No particular angst is attached to it. Normally, this is bearable, today it is obscene. So sad is too distant from Pauline’s existence, which is only disappointing. It makes disappointment look like a blessing. (41)

Leah’s unease in this situation is an affective response on a metalevel, as it is generated by her mother’s affective response to social conditions. Whereas Leah’s affective state is continually shifting and modifying according to circumstances, Pauline’s emotions seem fixed, “immutable”, as if no longer organically related to lived experience. This gelling of affect into a fixed emotion then sparks an affective response in Leah, which remains unspecified and unnamed, yet evoked in the novel. This socially conditioned circulation of affect is tracked in great detail in *NW*.

## **To Conclude**

We are not the first to note the importance of feelings and affects in contemporary fiction. Nicolas Dames notices characters that lead “diluted affective existence[s]” (2012). According to Nicoline Timmer (2010: 43-46) post-postmodern characters feel empty inside while at the same time being overwhelmed with feelings they cannot appropriate. Timmer argues that only through sharing feelings the self is able to construct a self-narrative. Whereas Timmer focuses

on a “relational ontology” (46), our hypothesis of the affective dominant shifts the emphasis toward feeling as the crucial means to relate to the other, the self and the real.

The importance of the affective for contemporary fiction is also foregrounded in what Rachel Greenwald Smith has termed “the affective hypothesis” for which she sees renewed support in the last decades: “the belief that literature is at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience” (2015: 1). She understands this tendency in relation to a neoliberal model of subjectivity, in which “emotions are increasingly understood as resources to develop and manage” (6). Yet, whereas Greenwald Smith assumes that the subject succeeds in integrating the workings of the market in its subjectivity, our case studies have demonstrated the lack of such integration and the affective crisis that follows from that conflict.<sup>15</sup>

To conclude this article we would like to develop the ideological and contextual interpretation of contemporary fiction. We do not want to interpret contemporary developments as primarily a response to the preceding postmodern fiction nor as a (re)turn to a postideological conception of the ‘real’. The affective doubt and alienation we have indicated can be understood as an existential reflection of the development Greenwald Smith describes.

The affective effects of recent socioeconomic and technological developments have been studied by the philosopher Bernard Stiegler. He observes how the delegitimization of socio-economic progressive thought – the good life fantasies of social democracy – has reached its end in our historical present. It is the finalization of the process that Jean-François Lyotard already described in *La condition postmoderne* (1979): the dismantling of the community and modernist meta-narratives and the replacement of the true and the just for market efficiency. Stiegler adds that our contemporary informational capitalism has led to the destruction of what he terms the libidinal economy of modernity. Because this economic model mobilizes desire permanently and exclusively for very short-term investments in the consumption of goods and media products, it annihilates more enduring affective investments in the future and in a progressive social project.

The far-reaching epistemological and ontological doubt of postmodern irony demonstrates this process of destruction in full progress. The affective crisis after postmodernism suggests that this process henceforth affects the subject in an even more profound manner. The subject lacks models of identification within a metanarrative of emancipation, whereas the identification with market products leads to an experience of

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<sup>15</sup> Compare McClanahan 2016: 207-207 fn39.

emptiness and finally to the desperate experience of not feeling to exist (Stiegler 2006, 2009). This experience was foregrounded in the affective disconnection of lived experience in Lerner, in the motif of secondary characters in Zambra and in the ambiguous use of narrative voice to emphasize affective detachment in Smith. The responses to this experience can only be affective: the delegitimization of modernity causes emancipatory desires to express themselves exclusively in terms of narcissistic and collective affects – in affective notions of community, relation, identity. We observed this in the desire for protective care in Zambra’s affective approach of history, the attachments to affective forms in service of a reassurance of presence in Lerner, and the search for belonging, connectivity and involvement in Smith.

As our literary analyses have demonstrated this historical foregrounding of the affective does not imply that epistemological and ontological issues are absent from contemporary fiction – nor does our hypothesis dismiss any reading of it along those lines. The dominant, as McHale insists, should not be understood as determining (1987: 6). Similarly we do not contend that a focus on affective issues is new and constitutes an epistemological rupture. We rather think of this shift of dominant as a reconfiguration that allows for new perspectives and interpretations. Nevertheless, we do maintain that there is a shift in the way in which epistemological, ontological and affective questions are organized and that the distinctive hallmark of contemporary fiction is the dominance of the affective.

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