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The Hypermodern Condition in Isabelle Flükiger's Novels

Isabelle Flükiger is one of Switzerland's most talented and popular franco-phone authors. Since 2003 and her debut novel *Du Ciel au ventre* [*From Sky to Gut*], she has published three additional narratives: *Se Débattre encore* [*To Struggle Still*] (2004), *L'Espace vide du monstre* [*The Monster's Empty Space*] (2007) and *Best-Seller* (2010).¹ In addition, Flükiger regularly posts short stories on her blog, commenting on significant social issues in Switzerland: the rise of racism and far-right politics, enduring gender inequalities and the construction of one's identity in today's globalized society. More specifically – and along with young francophone women novelists such as Claire Legendre in France or Marie Hélène Poitras in Québec – Flükiger has portrayed the effects of hypermodernity on contemporary Western individuals.

This chapter will discuss three main thematic and aesthetic representations of hypermodernity at play in Flükiger's writing. It will first tackle her depiction of excess and stigmatization. Urged by a hypermodern society to live and experience all areas of life to their fullest, her protagonists all indulge in hyperbolic behaviours such as binge drinking or corporeal violence. However, they may not always be able actively to participate in this intensification of life, whether emotionally or socially. As a consequence, they consider themselves mediocre, a condition particularly stigmatized by hypermodernity. Secondly, the implications of hypermodern self-reflexivity and its consequent equivocality will be examined. Contemporary individuals are increasingly asked to ponder their life choices or activities,

1 All translations are my own. This article will only focus on Flükiger's first three novels.

and, consequently, self-reflexivity has become a key aspect in people's lives. Flükiger's heroines constantly question themselves or their respective situation, often unable to decide upon a path in life. Self-reflexivity also constitutes a key aesthetic element in the author's writing. Her novels almost systematically interrogate and mix literary genres, as well as cross the borders between fiction and reality. Consequently, they remain essentially indeterminable and unclassifiable. Lastly, this chapter will discuss how hypermodernity implies performance since individuals are encouraged to emulate famous figures or to follow scripts that should enable them to become successful. However, being paroxysmal in essence, these predetermined scenarios may not always be realized and, thus, trigger anxiety and feelings of – if not actual – failure in Flükiger's heroines.

Excess and Stigmatization

In *L'Individu contemporain* [*The Contemporary Individual*] (2006), specialists from diverse academic disciplines claim that progress and changes in the sociological, political and technological spheres have engendered a new individual. According to sociologist Nicole Aubert, the relationship to oneself, one's body, others, time and religion is now determined by an exacerbated modernity,² where excess 'prédomine, [...] recherché ou subi, [il] colore toutes ces expériences d'une intensité particulière' [predominates, sought after or endured, [it] affects all these experiences with a particular intensity].³ This systematic 'hyperfunctioning of the self' has, consequently, increased the occurrence of pathologies of excess such as eating

2 Nicole Aubert, 'L'Individu hypermoderne. Une mutation anthropologique?', in Xavier Molénat, ed., *L'Individu contemporain. Regards sociologiques* (Auxerre: Sciences Humaines Éditions, 2006), 165.

3 Nicole Aubert, 'Un Individu paradoxal', in Nicole Aubert, ed., *L'Individu hypermoderne* (Toulouse: Érès, 2010), 18.

disorders, stress, addictions or 'blowing a fuse' behaviours.⁴ Furthermore, hypermodernity has triggered a frenetic quest for success, uniqueness and social visibility.⁵ Drawing on the work of philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky, Sébastien Charles also explains that it has generated paradoxical individuals who are simultaneously better informed, more critical and freer to determine themselves, yet who are also more shallow, reliant on fashions and fragmented.⁶

In many ways, Flükiger's narratives illustrate this hypermodern condition and its tendency to experience life hyperbolically. For instance, all her female protagonists engage in various excessive behaviours such as taking drugs, sexual promiscuity, and binge-drinking, or resort to corporeal and verbal violence. *Du Ciel au ventre* appears to be a most compelling illustration of contemporary excess. In the narrative, an anonymous female narrator frequently holds conversations with her imaginary alter ego, 'Annie aux gros seins' [Big-breasted Annie], a nickname that already hints at her hyperbolic nature. This doppelgänger encourages the protagonist to 'live at 100 miles an hour'⁷ and, especially, to unabashedly explore her sexuality and corporeality. The narrator, thus, tries prostitution, participates in orgies, takes several lovers, drinks and does drugs. Still, she remains perpetually torn between her disproportionate sexuality and conforming, again in a paroxysmal manner, to a heteronormative marriage with her (also hyperbolically perfect) boyfriend. Consequently, Flükiger depicts the narrator as always indecisive as to how to achieve happiness:

4 Nicole Aubert, 'L'Individu hypermoderne. Une mutation anthropologique?', in Xavier Molénat, ed., *L'Individu contemporain. Regards sociologiques* (Auxerre: Sciences Humaines Éditions, 2006), 164. Sébastien Charles and Gilles Lipovetsky, *Les Temps hypermodernes* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2010), 53–4.

5 Martine Fournier, 'Intime et public: De la construction à la confusion des frontières. Entretien avec Antoine Prost', in Xavier Molénat, ed., *L'Individu contemporain. Regards sociologiques* (Auxerre: Sciences Humaines Éditions, 2006), 265. Michel Lacroix, 'L'Aventure prométhéenne du développement personnel', in Xavier Molénat, ed., *L'Individu contemporain. Regards sociologiques* (Auxerre: Sciences Humaines Éditions, 2006), 255–6.

6 Sébastien Charles and Gilles Lipovetsky, *Les Temps hypermodernes* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2010), 27.

7 Isabelle Flükiger, *Du Ciel au ventre* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'homme, 2003), 7.

Il faudrait toujours être entre deux choix, toujours entre deux possibilités, entre deux hommes... Toujours entre deux vies. Il faudrait toujours voyager, découvrir, toujours fuir le stable, n'avoir jamais l'impression que notre vie a pris une direction. Être emporté... Dans l'éphémère perpétuel, dans le recommencement. Et la procréation, et le bien-vivre nous retiennent: c'est la sécurité qui nous tend les bras; la peur de l'inconnu, d'une vieillesse solitaire obsède, guide vers l'irréversibilité de nos choix. (91)

[One should always be in-between two choices, always in-between two possibilities, in-between two men... Always in-between two lives. One should always travel, discover, always run away from stability, never have the feeling one's life is one-directional. To be carried away... In perpetual immediacy, in renewal. Both procreation and living-well hold us back: safety reaches its hands toward us; we are obsessed with fear of the unknown, of getting old and lonely, this leads us to the irreversibility of our choices.]

Here, Flükiger strikingly echoes Aubert's analysis as her protagonist's relationship to time, to others and to herself does indeed seem affected by the hypermodern injunction 'plus vite et [...] toujours plus' [faster and always more.]⁸ Naturally, this transpires through her wish to experience everything to the fullest and to make sure no area of life remains unexplored, just as she rejects stability and seeks constant excitement or seemingly new beginnings. Thanks to the use of commas, truncated sentences and repetitions, Flükiger also translates her narrator's frantic desire and lifestyle aesthetically. Finally, this passage illustrates how, for the author, hypermodern ideals can become contemporary diktats. Her narrator's strong rejection of stability appears as authoritative as those that formerly favoured steadiness.

In *L'Espace vide du monstre*, Louisa symbolizes excess too as she behaves violently, drinks heavily and claims to be 'trashy'.⁹ Furthermore, she aspires to achieve another key hypermodern paradigm, namely exceptionality and social grandeur:

8 Sébastien Charles and Gilles Lipovetsky, *Les Temps hypermodernes* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2010), 55.

9 Isabelle Flükiger, *L'Espace vide du monstre* (Charmey: Éditions de l'Hèbe, 2007), 125.

J'aimerais mieux être quelqu'un. Simplement. Ils parlent de pouvoir, tous. J'aimerais du pouvoir moi aussi et que l'on me regarde comme on regarde... Sonia. Mais Sonia ce n'est qu'un début. Il faudrait être plus. Kofi Annan ou George W. Bush. Non non Noam Chomsky. Ça c'est la classe. Tout ce respect, toute cette admiration. (89)

[I'd rather be someone. That's all. They *all* talk about power. I'd love to be powerful too and be considered as... Sonia is. But Sonia is only the beginning. I must be more. Kofi Annan or George W. Bush. No no Noam Chomsky. Now, that's class. All that respect, all that admiration.]

In addition, Louisa creates, throughout the entire narrative, several autofictions involving success in academia, art and in trendy social circles, just as she systematically imagines herself impressing 'an important man wearing a suit' (88, 147, 165) with her knowledge or talent. Once again, hypermodern excess and paradox transpire in this excerpt. Just like the anonymous narrator in *Du Ciel au ventre*, Louisa wants to transcend the apparent dullness of her life. To that purpose, she aspires to hyperbolic fame. This passage also hints at how Flükiger perceives hypermodern ideals not only as diktats but also as fundamentally flawed: Louisa's quest for exceptionality remains blurry. What kind of success does she really want: political, artistic, academic? The famous figures she wishes to emulate could not be more antagonistic. Flükiger, therefore, portrays Louisa, and the hypermodern desire for visibility, as seeking success for its own sake. In the end, this even becomes a (pathological) obsession for her character rather than a way to achieve success herself.

Flükiger's protagonists actually all aspire to become someone or to rise above their condition in some sort of a remarkable manner. However, in spite of their endeavours, they remain plagued with feelings of inadequacy and guilt. Flükiger's novels thereby echo sociologists' claim that the hypermodern notion of 'dépassement de soi' [surpassing oneself] has either generated or worsened social problems. Individuals are increasingly made to feel responsible for their social failures,¹⁰ the contemporary asser-

10 Xavier de la Vega, 'La Responsabilisation, nouvelle forme de domination. Questions à Danilo Martuccelli', in Xavier Molénat, ed., *L'Individu contemporain. Regards sociologiques* (Auxerre: Sciences Humaines Éditions, 2006), 318–19.

tion of equality actually masks or has displaced social inequalities,¹¹ just as the stigmatization of banality has rendered the notions of respect and recognition significant for the construction of one's individuality.¹² Louisa particularly incarnates this individual striving to fulfil hypermodern ideals, yet, she remains a social outcast. In an interview about *L'Espace vide du monstre*, Flükiger strongly echoes theorists of hypermodernity, as she perceives her protagonist's behaviour as

symptomatique d'un mode de fonctionnement lié à notre époque: il faut satisfaire à un certain nombre de critères pour obtenir le respect [...] Parce que Louisa fréquente un groupe [...] de 'gagnants' qu'elle admire, il lui est impossible de supporter sa 'normalité', qui pour elle n'est synonyme que de médiocrité.

[symptomatic of today's mode of functioning: you must fulfil a certain number of criteria in order to gain respect. Because Louisa mingles with a group [...] of 'winners' she admires, she cannot bear her 'normality' which, to her, means mediocrity.]¹³

Louisa, indeed, illustrates how hypermodernity stigmatizes banality and how it renders social recognition and respect essential for asserting one's identity. She desperately seeks ways to escape what she considers her plain, unglamorous personality and life. Therefore, she rejects and hates anything that reminds her of her own mediocrity, especially the dull banality

- 11 Valérie Brunel, 'Le Développement personnel au service de l'entreprise', in Xavier Molénat, ed., *L'Individu contemporain. Regards sociologiques* (Auxerre: Sciences Humaines Éditions, 2006), 312. Bernard Lahire, 'L'Homme pluriel. La sociologie à l'épreuve de l'individu', in Xavier Molénat, ed., *L'Individu contemporain. Regards sociologiques* (Auxerre: Sciences Humaines Éditions, 2006), 65.
- 12 François Dubet, 'Les Épreuves de l'individu', in Xavier Molénat, ed., *L'Individu contemporain. Regards sociologiques* (Auxerre: Sciences Humaines Éditions, 2006), 175. Nicolas Journet, 'Le Prix de la liberté', in Xavier Molénat, ed., *L'Individu contemporain. Regards sociologiques* (Auxerre: Sciences Humaines Éditions, 2006), 148. Michel Kokoreff and Jacques Rodriguez, 'Une Société de l'incertitude', in Xavier Molénat, ed., *L'Individu contemporain. Regards sociologiques* (Auxerre: Sciences Humaines Éditions, 2006), 134.
- 13 Elisabeth Vust, 'Entretien Avec Isabelle Flükiger', *Le Courrier.ch*, <<http://www.culturactif.ch/livredumois/marso8fluckiger.htm#extrait>> accessed 4 March 2008.

incarnated by her mother. As we have seen, she admires *and* envies Sonia, a secondary character, who symbolizes hypermodern achievement: young, beautiful, rich, an altruistic individual, adored by men and women alike and who also has a wonderful job. Nonetheless, in spite of all of Louisa's frantic endeavours to become like Sonia, or at least gain social recognition, she constantly feels rejected or lacking in the talents for success:

elle se sent vide et inutile, elle se sent maladroite. Inintelligente, peu cultivée, pas passionnée, ni polyglotte, même pas si belle, ni très douce. Où donc y a-t-il de la place pour des gens comme elle? [...] nulle part. Partout et c'est là le problème. J'ai partout ma place, là où l'on n'en demande pas trop, partout je suis bien, s'il ne s'agit pas d'être plus. Si aucun talent spécifique n'est exigé, là on voudra bien de moi. [...] Je suis celle qui n'a rien choisi. Je ne suis personne et je ne mérite rien. (64–5)

[[S]he feels empty and useless, she feels clumsy. Unintelligent, not well-educated, nor passionate, nor multilingual, nor even that beautiful or sweet. Where on earth do people like her fit in? [...] Nowhere. Everywhere and that's the problem. I'm at home everywhere, anywhere where not too much is required, I'm at ease anywhere you're not supposed to be more. If no specific talent is required, then I'll be wanted. [...] I'm the one who didn't choose anything, I'm no one and I don't deserve anything.]

Here, Flükiger illustrates, once again, how being average has become problematic in a society that encourages success and visibility. Her characters experience self-loathing as she perceives herself as 'only' average. However, ironically, Flükiger makes her heroine express her sense of failure in a hypermodern way. It is itself excessive as the negative lexical field testifies. In the course of the novel, Flükiger even accentuates Louisa's feeling of inadequacy as her social and academic achievements remain unremarkable to her and as she perceives anyone else as extremely successful. Eventually, her increasing sense of inferiority triggers a hypermodern 'blowing-a-fuse' episode. Enraged yet again by Sonia's unintentional demonstration of superiority, Louisa brutally kills her. The protagonist first experiences this murder as liberation but her feelings of inadequacy soon catch up with her again.

Sociologists Michel Kokoreff and Jacques Rodriguez have underlined that despite the contemporary belief that anyone may control one's destiny,

the actual realization of individuality still depends on social position.¹⁴ With *L'Espace vide du monstre*, Flükiger denounces these enduring class inequities and reveals how privileged people still hold true social power. The dominating caste, Louisa's bourgeois friends, is a group of predators willing to enforce hypermodern ideals and ruthlessly rejects those who cannot keep up with them. Louisa probably belongs to the working- or middle-class but has penetrated, to a certain extent, this richer circle. Her 'in-between' situation constantly reinforces her feelings of inferiority and her need for recognition and acceptance by this circle. For instance, Mirel, another seemingly successful character, purposefully ignores and denies her, although she attempts to impress him. In one passage, both Louisa and Myrtille, a friend, ask him how long he has lived in his apartment. While he almost does not answer Louisa, he provides every detail to Myrtille, whom he wants to seduce. Profoundly humiliated, she eventually also murders him and perceives the killing of the privileged as a form of social justice (210–11, 96). Indeed, hypermodernity has paradoxical consequences for Louisa: she somehow manages to transcend her social condition, yet, her obsession to succeed and conform to excessive ideals leads her to madness.

Self-Reflexivity and Equivocality

As early as 1976, Jean Baudrillard believed Western society had entered a 'referendum mode', but it remained essentially a simulacrum, only providing a false sense of having multiple choices to determine oneself.¹⁵ Thirty years later, Jean-Claude Kaufman claims hypermodern individuals still have several possibilities at their disposal to shape their identities, just as they

14 Michel Kokoreff and Jacques Rodriguez, 'Une Société de l'incertitude', in Xavier Molénat, ed., *L'Individu contemporain. Regards sociologiques* (Auxerre: Sciences Humaines Éditions, 2006), 137.

15 Jean Baudrillard, *L'Échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 96–7.

are systematically required to ponder the choices they make.¹⁶ However, Kaufman also stresses that this self-reflexive practice paradoxically maintains social discrepancies. As illustrated in *L'Espace vide du monstre*, dominant groups have a greater chance of building and maintaining positive self-worth, while others must endlessly fight for recognition and acceptance.¹⁷

Self-reflexivity represents a key element both of hypermodernity and in Flükiger's novels. In all three narratives studied here, the author makes both her protagonists and auxiliary characters endlessly interrogate, or at least reflect upon, their life choices. *Du Ciel au ventre* and *Se Débattre encore* are especially punctuated by question marks, just as the questions 'Who am I?' and 'What am I to do?', whether stated explicitly or not, remain leitmotifs throughout. Echoing the first excerpt from *Du Ciel au ventre*, the anonymous narrator often wonders how to experience life at its best and examines her personality accordingly:

Je suis peut-être une malade mentale, incapable de m'amuser dans les règles? Une asociale absolue? J'aime pas les gens. J'aime les baiser, mais pas leur parler. [...] Je n'aime que le jeu de la séduction, je n'aime que les rencontres... [...] Qui dois-je être? Qui suivre? Comment rendre ma vie captivante, passionnante, comment vivre bien? (58)

[Am I perhaps mentally ill and unable to have fun like one ought to? Completely asocial? I don't like people. I like to fuck them, not to talk to them. [...] I only enjoy the game of seduction, I only enjoy encounters... [...] Who should I be? Who should I follow? How do I make my life captivating, passionate, how do I live well?]

Once more, hypermodern excess transpires in this passage: Flükiger depicts a narrator obsessed with her desire to live a flawless life, tailored to her sole specific needs or aspirations. The excerpt also reveals that this permanent self-reflexivity, while it seems to be a liberty to define oneself, also triggers

16 Xavier Molénat, 'Devoir s'inventer. Questions à Jean-Claude Kaufmann', in Xavier Molénat, ed., *L'Individu contemporain. Regards sociologiques* (Auxerre: Sciences Humaines Éditions, 2006), 178.

17 Jean-François Dortier, 'Du Je triomphant au moi éclaté', in Xavier Molénat, ed., *L'Individu contemporain. Regards sociologiques* (Auxerre: Sciences Humaines Éditions, 2006), 10. Xavier Molénat, 'Devoir s'inventer. Questions à Jean-Claude Kaufmann', in Xavier Molénat, ed., *L'Individu contemporain. Regards sociologiques* (Auxerre: Sciences Humaines Éditions, 2006), 181.

a profound uneasiness. The narrator has chosen a rebellious life of (excessive) debauchery, yet, because it questions the competing standards of conformity in which she also believes, she remains, as Flükiger declares herself, 'une femme toujours partagée entre des sentiments contradictoires, ballottée, déchirée' [a woman constantly divided by contradictory feelings, conflicted, torn].¹⁸ Indeed, throughout the narrative, her self-reflexivity makes her ever-indecisive.

Flükiger's statement could apply to any of her protagonists. For instance, Louisa suffers from her constant interrogation of her potential, or lack thereof, to fulfil hypermodern ideals of success and social acknowledgment. However, Hanna Brambour in *Se Débattre encore* remains the best incarnation of this contradictory self-reflexivity. At the beginning of this science-fiction-like novel, she wakes up an amnesiac. She has, therefore, the freedom to construct her self almost from scratch, her only references being her wallet, cell phone and roommates. The narrative is punctuated with her questions on, naturally, who she is but also on what to become or what step to take next so as to not '*mourir de non-existence*' [die of non-existence] (35):¹⁹

Que faire à présent? Et elle s'accroche à la seule idée qui ait de l'importance: il ne faut plus jamais qu'elle soit seule. [...] C'est ça qui est important. De n'être pas seule. D'avoir des amis, de l'amour, des gens autour d'elle. [...] Voilà. C'est tout. C'est tout ce qu'elle peut vouloir, au fond, puisqu'on ne lui laisse pas le choix! Elle se sent possédée et impuissante... (42)

[What to do now? And she clings on to the only important idea to her: she must never be alone again. [...] That's what's important. Not to be alone. To have friends, love and people around her. [...] That's it. That's all. That's all she can want, after all, since she doesn't have a choice! She feels possessed and powerless...] ²⁰

18 Olivier, Jean-Michel, 'Entretien avec Isabelle Flükiger', *Scènes Magazine*, <<http://www.culturactif.ch/scenemagazine/smagazinema2004.htm>> accessed 1 October 2009.

19 Interestingly, individuals unable to participate in hypermodern society suffer from an excessive feeling of inexistence according to Aubert ('Un Individu paradoxal', 19).

20 Isabelle Flükiger, *Se Débattre encore* (Lausanne: L'Âge d'homme, 2004).

This passage testifies to the importance of interrogations, self-reflexivity and -examination in Flükiger's writing, just as it strikingly echoes excerpts from *Du Ciel au ventre*. Flükiger actually portrays her three heroines as simultaneously driven to making the most of their lives in a hypermodern fashion, yet, they are plagued by the many questions they ask themselves and the conflicting options they face. This passage also perfectly mirrors the hypermodern false sense of freedom to determine oneself because individual choices are more pre-determined than an actual result from one's will. Furthermore, the novel opens and ends with the same text in italics. This not only emphasizes Flükiger's depiction of her characters as ultimately powerless, it also strengthens their framing by or within hypermodern parameters. In *Se Débattre encore*, Hanna Brambour is condemned to live this life over and over again, with minimal changes. Although she is faced with choices, she always ends up behaving in a similar manner or meeting the same people. All her lovers are named Marc and all live on 'Saint-Thomas d'Aquin' Street, just as she systematically loses her memory in order to start all over again.

Permanent self-reflexivity also triggers doubt and equivocality in Flükiger's novels. The anonymous narrator hesitates between a life of conformity or debauchery; Louisa systematically questions herself, frantically embracing and abandoning any path seemingly leading to social acknowledgment; and Hanna Brambour doubts the freedom of her choices. However, it is aesthetically that these notions transpire. For Bruno Blanckeman, doubt and equivocality are the most prominent literary figures or techniques employed by writers today to portray contemporary society.²¹ Indeed, Flükiger proposes a reflection upon paradoxical, hypermodern self-reflexivity by making her own texts indecisive, by blurring the limits between reality and fiction, as well as by blending literary genres. For instance, *Se Débattre encore* and *L'Espace vide du monstre* constantly oscillate between first- and third-person perspectives which prevents any univocal interpretation of narrative voice, as the quotation above in which

21 Bruno Blanckeman, 'Du soupçon aux points de suspension', *Le Magazine littéraire* 499 (2010), 83.

Louise expresses self-doubt shows. Furthermore, although *L'Espace vide du monstre* is mostly narrated through Louisa's perspective, Flükiger, with a technique close to stream of consciousness, lets her readers know the viewpoints of her secondary characters as well. This enables her to demonstrate how mistaken Louisa is as even apparently perfect figures, like Sonia and Mirel, are also plagued by the hypermodern fears of failure and mediocrity.

Se Débattre encore remains, however, Flükiger's most literary challenging and ambitious novel to date. In addition to multiple perspectives, the narrative also includes extra-diegetic paragraphs in italics further commenting on or denying specific scenes, it features truncated or unfinished sentences and, most strikingly, extra-diegetic dialogues modelled on the confessional style developed by reality television. Interestingly, for sociologist Dominique Mehl, since reality television relies on personal confessions in order to improve or share one's life, it particularly symbolizes hypermodern self-reflexivity.²² Staged in front of a blurry audience by a mysterious host named BW, the protagonists of *Se Débattre encore* express their ideas on subjects as diverse as themselves, gender relationships, how to lead a successful life or even the unravelling of the narrative itself (21). If we return to the above quoted passage, we may also wonder who is actually speaking in the novel. Hanna Brambour? An extra-diegetic narrator? Flükiger herself? All of them? In addition, the narrative frequently switches between using either her first or full name, further generating a sense of indecisiveness. How then does one define *Se Débattre encore*? We contend that it incarnates an aesthetic illustration of the excesses, the multiple and contradictory choices, as well as the self-reflexive practices hypermodernity engenders.

A first-person narrative, *Du Ciel au ventre* seems to escape this pattern. Nevertheless, Flükiger's use of metalepses, directly speaking to and even interrogating her readers, render the novel equivocal as well. What seems at first to be a diary, consists actually of a confession or social testimony.

22 Dominique Mehl, 'Confessions sur petit écran', in Xavier Molénat, ed., *L'Individu contemporain. Regards sociologiques* (Auxerre: Sciences Humaines Éditions, 2006), 214.

All of Flükiger's narratives address readers directly at some point. Therefore the borders between fiction and reality are always crossed. Furthermore, she claims to use 'comme moteur le fantastique' [the fantastic as a driving force], consequently further blurring the boundaries between genres.²³ *Du Ciel au ventre*, although a seemingly realist novel, features 'Big-breasted Annie', a figure which, at first, does not appear to be imaginary at all. *Se Débattre encore*, the unclassifiable novel par excellence, mixes elements of reality TV but also of science- and crime fiction, since Hanna Brambour first investigates her past to recover her memory. And even if *L'Espace vide du monstre* seems to deny this statement, Flükiger explains that her original idea stemmed from a fantastic perspective which she later reworked ('Interview'). Hence, overtly self-reflexive and conscious of their hypermodern multiplicity, a specific genre for her novels cannot be established. They remain, fundamentally, equivocal.

Hypermodern Performance

Flükiger's narratives on hypermodernity also reveal the existence of scripts to perform in order to succeed or gain social recognition. Sociologist Michel Lacroix believes personal development methods have particularly affected the construction of contemporary identities: people are encouraged to emulate famous persons because their success testifies to the maximization of their potential.²⁴ I may, therefore, claim that these methods rely on performance, especially as they mirror Judith Butler's conception of

23 On October 28, 2009, I met with Isabelle Flükiger. The interview has not yet been published.

24 Michel Lacroix, 'L'Aventure prométhéenne du développement personnel', in Xavier Molénat, ed., *L'Individu contemporain. Regards sociologiques* (Auxerre: Sciences Humaines Éditions, 2006), 255.

gender as a 'stylised repetition of acts'.²⁵ While, naturally, Flükiger's novels raise the issue of gender in hypermodern society, the author believes all contemporary individuals are affected by normative scripts and all her characters, regardless of their gender, seem to adhere to them ('Interview'). For instance, the narrator in *Du Ciel au ventre* pursues and is pursued by bourgeois heteronormativity since she also aspires to have a life 'comme dans les clichés' [just as in clichés] (33):

Je sais que je suis quelqu'un de bien, c'est sûr. Je vais pas gâcher ma vie, je ne vais rien rater. J'ai déjà trouvé l'homme qu'il me faut pour cette vie, et j'ai un cerveau bien remplissable, et de l'énergie, et des ambitions, et puis j'aurai un bon job. J'aurai des enfants parce qu'il ne fait pas bon vieillir seule, et mon homme m'aimera jusqu'à sa mort, et je l'aimerai, et l'on sera heureux dans un paquet de pognon, au milieu d'une marmaille bien éduquée. Il sera bon d'avoir trimé... (17)

[I know I'm most certainly a good person. I'm not going to waste my life away, I'm not going to spoil anything. I've already found the man I need for this life and I have a very furnishable brain, and energy, and ambitions, and I'm going to get a good job. I will have children because it's not good to grow old alone. My man and I will love each other till death do us part, and we'll be happy with loads of dough, among several well-educated kids. Busting our asses will have been worth it ...]

This excerpt echoes Hanna Brambour's attempt to avoid dying of non-existence. In both passages, Flükiger depicts the hypermodern belief, fashioned on personal development methods, that if one performs a particular script, one will necessarily succeed. She also reveals, here, the multiplicity and contradictory choices available to hypermodern individuals to shape their identities. If one compares this excerpt to the first one quoted from *Du Ciel au ventre*, one cannot help but notice some similarities. Although the narrator embraces immediacy and then believes in stability, Flükiger wrote both passages in the same manner and both have the same underlying message: follow the script and you will find happiness. From an aesthetic perspective, the novel also likens itself to a screenplay or a play as it features

25 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 179.

many dialogues and because the author adds comments, modelled on stage directions, to underline her characters' moods or positions.

In *L'Espace vide du monstre*, Louisa most faithfully mirrors Lacroix's analysis as she attempts to emulate illustrious intellectuals or successful people around her, as the excerpt expressing her wish to be Kofi Annan or Noam Chomsky shows. In addition, in chapter 4, she sets up a strict program to achieve her hypermodern goals. Every hour of the day is reserved to one specific activity based on the achievements of the aforementioned people. These activities range from studying hard for her exams, learning another language, and reading significant publications, to watching important movies, eating right and getting enough sleep. Again, this will to follow precise scripts to succeed transpires aesthetically as Flükiger purposefully composes this chapter according to specific choruses ('Interview'): Louisa claims five times that she needs to build for herself a 'destiny' (154, 159) through 'solitude and work' (158, 159, 163). *Se Débattre encore*, because of its intermediality with reality television, remains, however, the best illustration of how hypermodernity implies performance. Two types of people coexist in the narrative: 'les boiteux' [the limping ones] (67) and 'les êtres lumineux' [luminous beings] (77), who walk straight. Interestingly again, Flükiger mirrors sociological analyses of hypermodernity since there are now two 'idéaux types' [standard ideals]:²⁶ the 'individu entreprenant' [enterprising individual], who fully enjoys hypermodern life and the 'individu "par défaut"' [lacking individual], who is socially or emotionally unable to participate.²⁷ Naturally, in *Se Débattre encore*, Hanna Brambour wishes to become an *être lumineux* as they appear to be the happiest ones. To that purpose, she believes she must follow specific formulas, as she explains to BW:

Eh bien j'ai en tête ce schéma simple, qui consiste à dire que c'est dans la formule: 'Amour, Amis' que réside le secret de la non-solitude. Quand j'aurai un amoureux et des amis, je ne serai plus jamais dans la détresse. C'est simple. (42)

26 Nicole Aubert, 'Un Individu paradoxal', in Nicole Aubert, ed., *L'Individu hypermoderne* (Toulouse: Érés, 2010), 17–18.

27 Sébastien Charles and Gilles Lipovetsky, *Les Temps hypermodernes* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2010), 77–9.

[Well, I have this simple blueprint in mind that consists of saying that it is in the formula 'Love, Friends' that the secret of non-solitude lies. As soon as I have a lover and friends, I'll never be desperate again. It's simple.]

The more she evolves, the more elaborate this formula becomes as it subsequently involves the (hypermodern) need to excel in her studies and job. Once again, this passage echoes the excerpts from *Du Ciel au ventre* and Louisa's attempt to imitate famous persons. All four quotations testify to Flükiger's will to expose hypermodernity as fundamentally performative.

However, in spite of all their efforts, her protagonists eventually all fail to fulfil these scripts or, they reject them. They illustrate Lacroix's claim that the injunction to permanently maximize one's self eventually leads to a 'nouvelle forme de conscience malheureuse' [new form of unhappy consciousness].²⁸ Being excessive in nature, these are roles 'that no one *can* embody', as Butler underlines.²⁹ Naturally, Louisa remains the best illustration of this hypermodern *conscience malheureuse* when she rejects mediocrity, yet still seems unable to escape it:

Je voulais la reconnaissance [...] Je voulais les éclabousser de notre réussite. [...] Je voulais pas qu'on pourrisse dans la médiocrité, [...] J'aurais dû aller chez un psy, prendre du Xanax, j'aurais dû... Faire autre chose, être quelqu'un d'autre. (304)

[I wanted acknowledgment [...]; I wanted to smear them with our success. I didn't want us to rot in mediocrity. [...] I should have gone to a shrink, taken some Xanax, I should have... done something else, been someone else.]

Even as Flükiger makes Louisa admit her defeat, she simultaneously reveals just how persistent the belief in hypermodern scripts is. She also translates the deep pain caused by the pressure to live excessively and, especially, the social rejection and self-loathing that stem from failing to do so. It is, however, with Hanna Brambour that Flükiger truly illustrates how hypermodern

28 Michel Lacroix, 'L'Aventure prométhéenne du développement personnel', in Xavier Molénat, ed., *L'Individu contemporain. Regards sociologiques* (Auxerre: Sciences Humaines Éditions, 2006), 257.

29 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 176.

theatricality does not imply freedom of self-determination, but, instead, means an endless repetition and interchangeability of specific scripts, as her character understands toward the end of this cyclical narrative:

Ce n'était pas un destin parfait, puisqu'elle aurait pu rencontrer Marc avant Marc et que la situation eût été la même, elle aurait pu être libraire au lieu de journaliste, et elle n'aurait pas vu la différence, tous ces gens qui d'un lieu à l'autre peuvent être remplacés, tout cela tout cela c'est l'interchangeabilité. (101–2)

[It was not a perfect fate, since she could have met Marc before Marc and the situation would have been the same. She could have been a librarian instead of a journalist, she wouldn't have noticed a difference, all these people are replaceable, all this all this is interchangeable.]

This excerpt shares the same pessimistic view as the above quotation from *L'Espace vide du monstre*. Hypermodern individuals are by no means as free as they believe or hope to be. In Flükiger's narratives, rather, they eventually appear solely to act out meaningless, pre-determined and ever-changeable scripts.

Aesthetically speaking, Flükiger's novels may be interpreted as the performance of clichés, a staging that, in the end, exposes the performative nature of hypermodernity itself. Yet, paradoxically, some stereotyped behaviours for the author may also represent an alternative or a form of, albeit still problematic, freedom ('Interview'). The narrator's boyfriend in *Du Ciel au ventre*, for instance, denounces a life of debauchery as a prescriptive script too (58). However, for the narrator, it still remains the only way to escape her *ennui* and bourgeois heteronormativity. Iris, Hanna Brambour's friend, recites a very stereotyped feminist discourse (she denounces heteronormativity, how women are raised to become like their submissive mothers, etc.), yet, it also makes her 'différente dans la société dans laquelle elle se trouve' [different in the society in which she finds herself] ('Interview'). Being women, her protagonists have or wish to perform scripts of normative femininity, but staging this gendered identity enables the protagonists to integrate into society and even thrive in it. Still, they either blindly adhere to certain clichés of femininity, or openly acknowledge the lingering gendered social inequalities. For instance, the narrator in *Du Ciel au ventre*,

deplores how women who freely enjoy and experiment with their sexuality remain stigmatized. Therefore, while at times Flükiger's performance of social stereotypes echoes Butler's ironic performance of gender, she also seems to deny that their 'radical proliferation [...] may *displace* the very [...] norms that enable the repetition itself'.³⁰

Conclusion

Excess, stigmatization of banality, self-reflexivity, equivocality and unachievable scripts: Flükiger has, indeed, painted a portrait of the hypermodern condition in her novels. Furthermore, her entire body of fiction portrays other manifestations of hypermodernity. Her novels and short stories also exemplify how love and friendship are affected by the condemnation of stability and how the human body itself is transformed in excessive ways through surgery and technology. Flükiger also mirrors a broader contemporary literary trend. In *Le Roman contemporain ou la problématique du monde*, Jean Bessière asserts that despite geographical and cultural differences, contemporary novels appeal to broader audiences because they tend to draw on international sources and no longer (or only) inscribe themselves within national literary traditions.³¹ Flükiger actually believes that 'on vit dans un monde totalement globalisé. Je ne m'associe pas du tout à une littérature suisse, je ne sais même pas ce que ça veut dire en fait' [we live in a completely globalized world. I don't picture myself belonging to Swiss literature. I don't even know what that means.] ('Interview').

Interestingly, the paradoxical effects of hypermodernity have similarly haunted the narratives of several francophone women writers of Flükiger's

30 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 189.

31 Jean Bessière, *Le Roman contemporain ou la problématique du monde* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), 10.

generation, namely Claire Legendre and Marie Hélène Poitras. All three authors explore and mix various literary genres and have consequently rendered most of their narratives equivocal or, at least, unclassifiable. They especially play with the conventions of science and crime fiction, as well as with fairy tale leitmotifs. Bessière and Ruth Cruickshank argue that such genres have become common vehicles for social criticism and that their generic nature allows a broader identification.³² Flükiger actually acknowledges how she and the writers of her generation have been profoundly influenced both by fantastic and realistic literary genres and that if their 'mélange est plutôt "noir" [c'est] parce que les préoccupations de l'époque le sont' [mixture is rather 'noir' it is because these are dark times].³³ Consequently, her novels may sometimes seem misanthropic, just as they appear to actualize Blaise Pascal's thoughts on 'divertissements' [leisure activities]:³⁴ people engage in excessive activities in order to forget the emptiness or meaninglessness of their lives. She, thus, once again, echoes sociological analyses and especially Lipovetsky who claims that the freedom granted by hypermodernity has also created feelings of anxiety and insecurity since individuals also increasingly feel left by themselves.³⁵ Finally, by having women symbolize the hypermodern condition, Flükiger purposefully attempts to make the feminine the incarnation of the universal, a feat most successfully achieved in her most recent novel, *Best-Seller*.

32 Jean Bessière, *Le Roman contemporain ou la problémacité du monde* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010), 319; Ruth Cruickshank, *Fin De Millénaire French Fiction: The Aesthetics of Crisis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 68.

33 Elisabeth Vust, 'Entretien Avec Isabelle Flükiger', *Le Courrier.ch*, <<http://www.culturactif.ch/livredumois/marso8fluckiger.htm#extrait>> accessed 4 March 2008.

34 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Michel Le Guern, ed. (Paris: Folio Classique, 1977), 117–27.

35 Sébastien Charles and Gilles Lipovetsky, *Les Temps hypermodernes* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 2010), 81–2.

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