

The Aging European Body in the Mediterranean in Contemporary Narratives  
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This paper explores representations of the aging, predominantly male European body in the Mediterranean in European film and literature. The earliest narrative I consider is that of Michel Houellebecq's 2005 novel *The Possibility of an Island*: it is Houellebecq's novels that made me aware of this strand of anxiety and melancholy in contemporary European narratives. Houellebecq has been recognized as a magi, a visionary, a writer who has his hand on the pulse of Europe and he is an equally illuminating figure when it comes to exploring how aging is worked through in contemporary narratives. This paper tries to narrow down this preoccupation with aging and death - which can be arguably said to be the Prime Mover in all artistic engagement- by focusing on how the Mediterranean figures in these tales of degeneration, and the kinds of regeneration it points to, such as pregnancy and cloning. I try to determine how northern Europeans try to utilize the Mediterranean weather, scenery, cuisine and bodies to recuperate a sense of youth. So using the concerns raised by Houellebecq in *Possibility of an Island* as an entry point, I will consider how the British films *Unrelated* (2007, dir. Joanna Hogg) and *Trip to Italy* (2014, dir. Michael Winterbottom) speak to these concerns.

In Houellebecq's *The Possibility of an Island* a man at the end of his tether seeks solace in the promise of young bodies littering Mediterranean beaches. In *The Trip to Italy*, two middle aged British men eat their way through Italy while comparing their successes in life. In *Unrelated* a middle-aged woman tries to seek a 'healthy' space to recuperate in Tuscany having received results to a medical test. I am aware that I am trying to draw connections between a French novel and two British films, and that French and British approaches to the Mediterranean are, through the obvious categories of geography and history, very different.\*<sup>1</sup> It is, however, the ease with which Houellebecq's understanding of the Mediterranean can be traced in these British films which makes me propose a Houellebecqian poetics of the aging body and its relationship to the Mediterranean.

Houellebecq's narrators' relationship with the Mediterranean- as the birthplace of what they like to call 'the Occident'- becomes a metaphor for their relationship with their own self, history, and decaying body. In that sense Houellebecq's writing is very much interested in genealogy, and what sort of 'man' will inherit Europe once Houellebecq's generation is gone. His narrators have scant hope or love for

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<sup>1</sup> The spectre of the Mediterranean in the French imagination is the spectre of Empire and it is encapsulated in the narrator's identification of France with his own body, and how it is perceived. Both novels suggest a ritual of renewal for the aging white male body, and the new man that will be able to inhabit both France and the Mediterranean differently.

The end of France is inscribed on the bodies of Houellebecq's narrators, if not his own. These bodies are, in some sense, marked with the Mediterranean stain, and the uncanny is etched onto their frame. The cloning, in that context, makes sense, as a promise of an untainted body.

themselves and humanity. 'Humanity did not interest me' says François in his last book *Submission*, 'actually, it disgusted me' (2015: 207). If Greek and Roman, that is Mediterranean civilizations are the seeds of European culture as we know it today, for France Houellebecq seems to envision an aesthetics of ruin in which the mechanism of disintegration is already built into the structure, the civilization and the northern male bodies he believes are embodiments of that culture. Houellebecq's and his narrators' remarkable nausea concerning the Mediterranean becomes a nausea about origins.

In Houellebecq's work the Mediterranean becomes a multivalent signifier, a cipher, or rather, through the women he encounters, a siren that continually calls and continually disappoints the male protagonist. Each time the narrators try to reach for it for rehabilitation, it throws something nasty and/or uncanny at their feet.

*Possibility of an Island* is the story of Daniel, a very successful French comedian, who we get to know through his own and his clones' narration. This is a futuristic, dystopic novel in which humans have been divided into 'clones' and 'wildings', and in which the Mediterranean has dried up due to man-made natural catastrophes-cycles of 'dry periods'. In the future world that the clones live in, the word 'Mediterranean' is still used, but the sea is only a ghost of itself, a spectre, as 24<sup>th</sup> clone of the original Daniel, tells us what he sees on a screen:

The cliffs tower above the sea, in their vertical absurdity and there will be no end to the suffering of man. In the foreground I see rocks, sharp and black. Further, pixelated slightly on the surface of the screen, is a muddy, indistinct area that we continue to call the sea, and which was once called the Mediterranean. Creatures advance in the foreground, along the crest of the cliffs, like their ancestors did, several centuries before. They fight, try to regroup, form packs or hordes (Houellebecq, 1995: 42)

Later on his journey this 24<sup>th</sup> clone says the following about the edge of Europe:

The sight before me was almost the same in all directions [...] Estremadura and Portugal had disappeared as differentiated places. The succession of nuclear explosions, of tidal waves, of cyclones that had battered this geographical zone for centuries had ended up completely flattening its surface (411)

The original Daniel, the father of the clones, as it were, has kept a memoir in which we read about the last stages of humanity and the earth as we know it. He chronicles a Europe that is more and more obsessed with ageing and immortality and that at last manages to defy death by cloning, also to make making babies through sex irrelevant, and then illegal. We witness Daniel spend summers in the Mediterranean as he grows older, with different partners, trying to hold onto his fleeting youth. Daniel thus defines a northern European type. For this type to work we need to consider Paris to be part of northern Europe, indeed, it is the contrasting scenes in the Mediterranean beaches that renders Paris 'northern'.

Daniel, as a comedian, has made his money and fame by making light, making fun of the north's traditions. Houellebecq introduces him as a kind of parasite that feeds on the ready-made heritage, *patrimoine*, of Northern Europe, and little concerned with its

propagation, the type is interested in its deconstruction. In *Possibility of an Island* Daniel says that the comedian 'transmuting the violence necessary for any revolutionary action, into laughter' makes reform impossible 'Like all clowns since the dawn of time, I was a sort of collaborator'<sup>2</sup> We encounter this irreverent type also in Michael Winterbottom's *Trip to Italy*, in which two comedians, Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon, take a road trip in the Mediterranean during which they practice 'their art' of comedy for the benefit of the audience, but ostensibly to sample the food in various hotels. The hotel is the natural habitat of the irreverent type- a space with zero domestic responsibilities, the state of the coupled or uncoupled middle aged male taken to the extreme.

In *Possibility of an Island* Daniel has a house in Almeira where he spends time with his partners and where he keeps ogling the women on the beach. The Mediterranean is where he goes to recuperate from city life, and where his age and mortality, in a background of shapely female bodies, becomes more and more apparent to him. The beach, the Mediterranean beach in particular, becomes the perfect stage for the drama of the relationship between ageing and young bodies- and an apt metaphor for the relationship between an ageing global north and a more vital global south. This is how Daniel describes the drama, or the war of the ages:

The age difference was the last taboo, the final limit [...] In the modern world you could be a swinger, bi, trans, zoo, into S and M but it was forbidden to be old [...] Well, yes, I was an ageing man, this was my disgrace- to borrow Coetzee's term [...] the repellent insistence of an old fart who refuses to give up the ghost (182)

[...] considered guilty because of the simple fact of being parents. From this sad life [...] all joy would be pitilessly banished. When they wanted to draw near to young people's bodies they would be chased away, rejected, ridiculed, insulted and, more and more often nowadays, imprisoned [...] This was the true meaning of solidarity between generations; it was a pure and simple holocaust of each generation in favour of the one that replaced it, a cruel prolonged holocaust that brought with it no consolation (343)

In Houellebecq, the narrator's body is slowly failing and yet is able to attract younger women for a while still. It is at the point where Daniel no longer can attract women, that he decides his current body is not working out for him and decides to join a cloning cult, the Elohimites who are developing cloning for the rich. Daniel's last, and much younger lover Esther who leaves him is Spanish, another instance of the Mediterranean promising light and pleasures, but then extracting its due with vengeance, by reminding him of his age and dispensability.<sup>3</sup> As exemplified in the

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<sup>2</sup> (134- a sort of petty clerk of the trahison- he sees academics/journalists in the same light)

<sup>3</sup> The relationship with the Mediterranean, mostly Spain and Morocco in Houellebecq's novels, is one of alternating dependence and nausea. *The Possibility of an Island* where the protagonist tries to get out of his moments of depression by thinking of Mediterranean beaches and the young female bodies they are populated by. We might do well to remember that *The Possibility of an Island* was written in 2005, before the refugee bodies drowned in the Mediterranean started making

original Daniel's movements the Mediterranean is a place where the European body keeps returning.

The desirability of the male body is equally scrutinized in *Trip to Italy* where our comedians observe young people at a beach club – with wistfulness rather than Daniel's complete defeatism. In one scene looking at women in their twenties Coogan says: 'Women that age look through us don't they. Let's look this way' he turns to the sea, 'Nature never disappoints you, no rejection' However, although they acknowledge that they are past it, both Coogan and Brydon get sexual partners during the course of their trip. They don't, as it were, exploit the 'local women', or rather, Italy refuses to provide them with the sexualized females of the south- Coogan sleeps with a photographer, Spanish but living in London, and Brydon sleeps with an English woman who's running yacht trips. They are not as young as the women that Houellebecq's narrator Daniel tries to ensnare, but still younger than them. (182) When the female protagonist in *Unrelated*, of roughly the same age –in fact possibly younger- seeks the same kind of solace in the Mediterranean, however, her hopes are thwarted. Anna, as the northern middle-aged woman, experiences the Mediterranean and its attractions differently and thus provides a test-case.

The 'unrelated' Anna comes to spend the summer in a Tuscan house with her friend and her family. The sea is not present in this film, but all other promises of the Mediterranean are there. Like the *Trip to Italy*, involvement with the people of the Mediterranean remains minimal, and Tuscany serves as the stage where old British middle class rivalries and insecurities are played out.

In many ways *Unrelated* is a film of choreographed distances- we know Anna is uncomfortable in her own skin for reasons that will be revealed. It starts with Anna coming to the house: her first exposure to the Mediterranean is young bodies being careless about their health- drinking and smoking because they can afford to. Life at the villa seems to have been divided into two, between the 'olds' and the 'yongs'. The stage is yet again set for drama between the two, and our heroine commits a delinquency of space by choosing to spend most of her time with the 'yongs'. As an 'old' without children though, she seems equally, if not more, out of place when she is shown trying to hold conversation with the 'olds'. There are shots of her looking longingly, at her friend's flirtatious son Oakley- not unlike the way Coogan and Brydon contemplate the young women who they feel look through them. The decisive difference between an ageing male and an ageing female body is of course their fertility: both Coogan and Brydon have children, whereas we find out later, Anna has postponed having children and has now discovered she has entered menopause. This is the crisis that she's trying to come to terms with in the Mediterranean. And thus, retrospectively we read her interest in her friend's son Oakley as Oedipus complex reversed- the attraction of young flesh that she alternatively should already have produced, or may help her reproduce.<sup>4</sup>

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headline news. The refugees of the Mediterranean are only projected in the futuristic novel as wild people trying to break into the homes of the neohumans- there is no Mediterranean left to drown in.

<sup>4</sup> Towards the end of his narration, we see that Daniel feels more and more let down by his holiday home in Almeira. The promise of happiness and comfort that he believes the Mediterranean has made him is threatened by construction, by more

The comedy reveals moments of deeper revelations about what attraction is. These are clearly men- like Daniel- who thrive on their fame. The question is how long will their fame be able to sustain their desirability. Coogan, in rather a Houellebecqian way, says fame, good looks and youth- they are all moments in a man's life and one is not a more legitimate, or essential reason why men should be desirable any more than the other.

Another question they discuss pertinent to this conference is whether Italy can be the refuge of the exile today, as it was for Byron and Gore Vidal- male role models with high libido. These role models came to the Mediterranean to live in ways that were forbidden to them in their Anglophone world. Coogan questions the idea of why the Mediterranean was considered the place to 'come out'. The film ends with family bonds triumphing: Coogan's son, who lives with his mother, joins them for the last leg of the journey and Coogan tells him that he is going to move to a place closer to where he lives so he can see him more often. Brydon seems sorry to have cheated on his wife- and Coogan's agent is very pregnant. And so, the Mediterranean has enhanced these Brits' sense of being, has provided some consolation for their ageing bodies- and we are reminded of nature's way renewal, of bringing young flesh into the world. Although the anxieties are the same, this fecundity is absent in Houellebecq. In that sense, his dead-end world is closer to that of Anna in *Unrelated*, who, tries to reconcile herself to a childless state- and we see her having a more or less happy conversation with her partner on the phone, after the several fights we have witnessed.

It is, however, interesting that the narrative of menopause could not be told in the happy family house. It is after Anna becomes instrumental in a terrible fights between the youngs and the olds that she decides to leave the villa, and checks into a depressing hotel- just within reach of Tuscan hills and yet at a road juncture overlooking warehouses in non-descript *banlieu* surroundings- an inbetween, unseemly

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people seeking the same solace: 'it has become almost impossible to get to the sea' (1995: 330) he says because of bulldozers and construction debris. Parts of the routes he took to the sea 'was now a muddy surface, surrounded by fences' (1995: 330) foreshadowing the dried up space of the Mediterranean and the fenced out wild humans referred to at the beginning. Even before he passes into the realm of the neo-human through his clone, Daniel sees himself as of another species:

I was under the impression that the workers not only had no sympathy for me, but that they were frankly hostile, and deliberately brushed past me when driving their enormous lorries, spattering me with mud and terrorizing Fox [...] I was a foreigner, a man from the North and what's more, they knew I was richer, much richer, than they were; they felt a veiled, animal hatred towards me, made all the more stronger because it was powerless, the social system was solid, the Guardia Civil were only a few kilometres away and would patrol more and more often. (1995: 331)

Coogan and Brydon, tourists as they are, and not 'expats' like Daniel, have much more cordial relations with the locals.

Mediterranean, a heterotopia, the sort of place that appears in Houellebecq but not in Coogan and Brydon's *Trip to Italy*. It is in this in-between space that Anna can own up to, if that is the word, her infertility.

If we stitch this back to my hermeneutic key, Houellebecq's novel, cloning, and the metaphors it functions as, in a way, is at the heart of the quest for all the characters. Daniel's interest in cloning is provoked when his current body can't do the job of attraction or libido, both of which are the main purposes of human life according to him. But of course cloning is also a way of perpetuating yourself- and nature's solution for that has been the production of offspring. In *Trip to Italy*, both comedians are portrayed as having children- so in a way, they have already taken care of the 'cloning' drive, and concentrate on the possibilities of their own bodies. It would be well to remember here that *Trip to Italy* is a sequel to *The Trip*, in which Coogan and Brydon had travelled to the north of England for a culinary trip. At one point Coogan says 'Doing this a second time feels weird', they're already copies, or clones of themselves. They are, in truth, copies of old men who refuse to give up the life of glamour, let alone the ghost- and the comedians take turns doing impersonations of famous old men who were known to be lascivious- Tom Jones, Sean Connery, Anthony Hopkins, Marlon Brando, Michael Parkinson... They are already imagining who would play themselves in their biopic. *Unrelated*, on the other hand, has conceded defeat with its very name. The protagonist is unrelated, hermetically sealed in her own body- she is not following the in the footsteps of anyone, and there will be no issue.

So in these what I take to be Western European narrative Mediterranean performs the function of a stage where different anxieties of the ageing body are played out- not unlike the way Edward Said describes the orient to be the place that provides the same kind of space for Europeans to consider and construct their own identity. The characters mentioned map out the Mediterranean region in different ways, in relation to how fertile and desirable their bodies are. The men in particular hark back to a genealogy of how the Mediterranean has been instrumentalized for recuperation or self-realization by Western and Northern Europeans. This connects to an understanding that any engagement with the Mediterranean is an engagement with origins, and as with all engagements with origins, it is driven by anxieties for the future.