Abstract

Within the context of contemporary French and Quebec literature, this paper reflects on the defining traits of a poetics of the collection. This poetics is based on internal structures as well as on the reading of texts. An investigation of the specific characteristics of recent texts allows me to reflect anew on collection-like narrative practices whose internal structure strongly resembles that of short story collections. The notion of diffraction enables me to define in general terms the tension characterizing these texts.

Résumé

À partir des contextes des littératures française et québécoise contemporaines, je me propose de réfléchir aux éléments de définition d’une poétique du recueil. Cette poétique convoque les architectures internes autant qu’elle prend en considération la lecture des œuvres. Un regard porté sur les singularités des corpus récents amène à ouvrir la réflexion sur des pratiques narratives connexes, dont l’économie interne les rapproche fortement des recueils ; la notion de diffraction permet de saisir de façon plus générale la tension propre à ces œuvres.

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TO RELATE, TO READ, TO SEPARATE
A Poetics of the Collection and A Poetics of Diffraction

The short story, a minor though widespread and well-recognized genre, has seen the development of important critical traditions. Its singular characteristics, notably its brevity, both self-evident and difficult to grasp, have led to numerous studies and as many definitions. Throughout the 20th century, national traditions of criticism have tended to develop separately and are only slowly converging in an attempt to define the genre across its multiple distinct manifestations. Short story criticism has chosen a variety of approaches, ranging from the study of the short story’s consistently fragile border with poetry to the analysis of the minimalistic narrativity of the texts, or the microcosmic nature of the worlds they represent. Sporadically, however, an issue has surfaced across the board, namely the mode of publication, and more specifically, the fact that the stories are gathered into one book, forming a larger work. Critical reviews in newspapers and cultural magazines rarely fail to point out that commenting on these works is not an easy task. Papers and essays that present a more or less panoramic portrait of the genre generally include a passage discussing the manner in which the stories are released, and mention their publication in the form of collections.1 This is because the intrinsically fragmentary nature of volumes of short stories all at once defines the stories’ mode of existence and renders the work as a whole elusive – thus establishing the work’s status while complicating its very recognition.

Studies more explicitly focused on the practice of the story collection alternate between validation and comparison. Some examine the collection in relation to the novel, the ‘major’ genre, while others analyse its internal unity, whether lacking or compensated for. Research from a national perspective, particularly with regard to American literature, tends toward a sociocritical approach,2 while other studies seek at all costs to assert the genre’s identity – of this, the ‘composite novel’ is a case in point.3 The plurality of methodologies and hypotheses certainly confirms the richness of the story collection, but it also demonstrates its elusive character. The very large majority of research tends to consider the collection as a literary artefact and examines it as a static editorial product. Such studies emphasize the collection’s formlessness while seeking through interpretation to attenuate its fragmentary quality. As a result, literary criticism on the story collection itself displays the mosaicked nature of collections, in correlation with specific works and national particularities.

Would it be possible, without lapsing into blandly universal observations, to approach the practice of the collection differently, to open up a broader and less constrained critical perspective? The answer is perhaps to be found in a poetics of the collection, which would allow us to view it as a process producing its own effects. This would be an approach based on the intrinsic possibilities of the collection, and not on its immediate limits. It is from this angle that I propose to study the phenomenon of the collection, from its outer layers down to its core. The collection may be understood here as the sum total of the effects it produces, as well as a form of writing, a form so common that it spreads outside of the short story as well as the other short genres conventionally associated with it. In this way, a poetics of the collection may be defined, which would offer a complementary, perhaps even foundational, approach to any analysis of short story collections.

1. Defining a Poetics of the Collection

The short story has given rise to a rather large body of criticism and theory. How can we define a poetics of the collection, while taking into account the diversity and abundance of the existing research? In order to develop a broader perspective on the collection, it seems necessary to focus on the process of collecting and its theorisation, rather than to dwell on specific cases. From the outset, the central question concerns indeed the very definition of the collection. Though it is a form common to both literature and publishing, the question remains fundamental, both for defining the corpus and for defining individual works. My aim here, however, is not so much to establish such as definition, as to remain alert to its possible extensions. How can we go beyond its simple status as editorial format, even while recognising this functional and necessary relationship between the collection and the short story? Defining a poetics, we must remember, is an act of engaging in a reflection on literary possibilities. Thus we may illustrate what already exists, as well as what may come to be within a literary practice. Gérard Genette sums this up by rightly stating that poetics is not only “the general theory of literary forms”, which completes the activity of criticism, but also “an exploration of the various possibilities of [literary] discourse”.

The question is, in other words, what can a collection be? Approached from the angle of poetics, this question falls within the framework of a description of literary forms, but which forms can we speak of in the case of the collection? How are we to address that which emerges indirectly and belongs to the interval created between the stories? The vicarious existence of the collection, so to speak, restrains from the outset the pretence of defining it from the standpoint of poetics. And the two most common ways to deal with this situation – the recourse to the author’s intentions and the study of the publication history of the texts – have always seemed to me questionable ways of bypassing the problem.

Rather than considering only the authors’ creative strategies, it seems worthwhile to focus on the effects produced by the practice of the collection. An ap-

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4. I remind readers that I am speaking from a francophone perspective, in which the word “recueil” is used to designate all collections, cycles and other synonyms commonly used in English to name the practice.

approach based on the reader’s experience allows us to avoid being ensnared in a discourse revolving around the author’s claims, which, however sincere they may be, cannot, as we know, be confirmed by the work itself. And yet, accompanying discourses are legion in collections: texts appearing on the back cover, author or third-party prefaces, comments made during interviews or in critical texts all favour the idea of a form of construction, the feeling that there is an internal unity to the collection. This perception of a construction proves infinitely variable, depending on the reader and the context. It is this myth of the collection’s unity that I have identified and attempted to debunk in my book *Des Textes à l’œuvre. La Lecture du recueil de nouvelles*, and that Gerald Kennedy sums up rather effectively: “textual unity, like beauty, lies mainly in the eye of the beholding reader”.

Once we have removed unity as a marker to define the collection, it becomes necessary to consider what other effects the collection may produce. If we move beyond stylistic and thematic processes in our analysis, there emerges a poetic approach that allows us to describe what the work proposes from the reader’s standpoint. By rejecting certain commonplaces, such as the classification of works premised on a supposed internal unity (i.e. “recueils homogènes/hétérogènes”, “recueils thématiques”, or “recueils-ensembles”), we may elect different approaches – such as theories of reading, narrative and fiction – and focus on phenomena stemming from the reading experience.

2. DEFINING A POETICS OF THE COLLECTION BASED ON READING

The two phenomena I intend to highlight here are not a given, they are not inherent features, but rather symptoms of the performance of works taking the form of collections. This performance is based on elements and clues that cause the reader to adopt a particular interpretive strategy. Thus, the first of these phenomena, the totalizing effect, refers to the tendency to read the collection as a whole and not as a random conglomerate. This effect is purely a product of the reader’s attitude, though it is in part caused by various mechanisms surrounding the collection: from suggestions formulated by literary reviews of the works to the collections’ (highly tendentious) paratext, as well as the general sense that the texts are interconnected. If the reader, after his perusal of the work, does not perceive the object as a simple aggregate resulting from a more or less random selection of texts, this is indeed an effect produced by the collection and the circumstances surrounding its reading; it is not an innate characteristic of the book. The meeting of these diverse parameters, the calibration of their effects based on individual readers’ perception

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8. Notions of homogeneity and heterogeneity were revived by André Carpentier and Denis Sauvé (“Le recueil de nouvelles”, in: François Gallays & Robert Vigneault (eds.), *La Nouvelle au Québec*, Montréal, Fides, 1996, 11-36), whereas René Godenne (*La Nouvelle*, Paris, Champion, 1995) proposed the categories of “recueils thématiques” and “recueils-ensembles”, to name only those, in the wake of comments by Marcel Arland on his own work.

9. In this way, this interpretive strategy falls between the meaning of the work (Umberto Eco’s *intention operis*) and genre-based reading shaped by intertextual parameters, that is, by a memory of the reading experience of related works (Richard Saint-Gelais, “Rudiments de lecture policière”, in: *Revue belge de philologie et d’histoire*, 1997, 75, 789-804).
and their sensitivity to different recurring motifs within the collection explain the potential variability of readings generated by these mechanisms of totalizing effect.

The perception of a cross-linking is the second, and perhaps the most obvious, reading phenomenon related to the poetics of the collection. Very often, books give us the sense that the texts are part of a network, an organisation that exceeds them. About John Updike’s short stories, Robert M. Luscher states that the “stories [are] driven by a coalescing network of incidents and images”, thus maintaining the idea that the reader is led to derive meaning and order from a series of proposed elements. This interpretive strategy is then guided by a search for links and transtextual connections, suggested by the table of contents, by the book’s structure, by lexical fields, etc. However, the perception of this cross-linking effect is not only based on suppositions and vague impressions: it stems from the clear presence of recurring elements within the short stories. Repeated words or phrases, similar narrative situations (the use of a same type of narrator or an identical plot pattern), a similar intertextual motif found in various texts (elements borrowed from a single work), recurring themes and the sharing of a common fictional world are certainly instrumental in creating the impression that the texts are not entirely independent from one another. It is by observing these recurring elements that the reader develops hypotheses or, in fact, abductive inferences: if a character appears in the first two short stories of the collection, the reader can state that he or she will likely be present throughout the book, thus confirming a shared world among the texts; or perhaps the co-presence of a recurring autodiegetic narrator and the anaphoric use of a sentence may confirm the pervading impression that the texts within the collection are highly connected. However, it is important to remember that the idea of a web spun between the texts remains the result of the reader’s decision to pay attention to recurring elements – one may not have noticed them and to attribute meaning to them, a meaning that the collection does not fail to produce through its very form:

The work involved in organising the series (the collection) indeed consists in uniting the short stories by their edges. This collage, this assembly produces sometimes unexpected, sometimes even incongruous connections. But these encounters inevitably generate meaning. In other words, to publish a collection, however heterogeneous, is to classify. And to classify, is to leave open, sometimes despite oneself, to new meaning.

Combining formal and contextual processes, the collection is an impressive inference-producing device.

By outrightly rejecting the essential unity of collections, I have sought to demonstrate the mechanisms involved in their reading. In this way, it is possible to focus on the relationship – the tension – existing between the whole and its parts. This problem is often dealt with in critical analyses of short story collections, but mostly inconsistently, because of a refusal to approach collections from a reader’s

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11. “Le travail d’organisation de la série (du recueil) consiste en effet à réunir les nouvelles par leur frange. Ce collage, ce montage produit des rapprochements parfois inattendus, parfois même incongrus. Mais ces rencontres génèrent inévitablement du sens. En d’autres termes, publier un recueil, même hétérogène, c’est classer. Et classer, c’est ouvrir, même malgré soi, à une signification” (André Carpentier & Denis Sauge, “Le recueil de nouvelles”, 15; our translation).
standpoint. Moreover, writers seem to eagerly seek this sharp tension produced by
the collection, as it affords the opportunity to cultivate within their literary world-
view a fertile ambiguity. An approach based on reading theory offers the possibility
to recognize, on the one hand, the organic whole formed by the assembled sto-
ries, and, on the other, the – editorial and semantic – independence of the stories
themselves, thus revealing the curious relationship between the completeness of
the texts and their complementarity. It is therefore important to favour a dual rea-
ding process, as the collection can be seen to contain two textual strata: the texts
themselves, to be read in juxtaposition, and the cross-linked whole, as perceived by
the reader. These levels of attention given to the collection cannot be completely
dissociated from one another, but we must be able to distinguish them, in order to
better understand the effects and meanings that stem from specific processes and
contextual variables. Conversely, the constant interference between the textual stra-
ta leads to the production of an entretexte (literally, an ‘in between text’), a semantic
surplus value associated with the whole formed by the collection. In poetry, Neil
Fraistat uses the term “contexture” to describe the hybrid textuality formed by
the reading of the poems and the group to which they belong.12 This focus on the
tension inherent in the collection appears fundamental to the study of the practice.
It is consequently impossible to view the collection as a simple editorial artefact,
given its strong impact on the reading of individual stories, just as it is inadmissible
to reject the individuality of the texts in order to view the collection as a (pseudo)
unified whole. The observations made here about the story collection can easily be
extended to other types of collections – particularly of poetry and essays. With the
help of seminal work by Neil Fraistat and Jean-Marie Gleize (in poetry), as well as
Irène Langlet, Dominique Combe and François Dumont (about the essay), it is pos-
sible to identify common dimensions within the three practices. First, there is the
recognizable nature of the collection: it can be recognized through the processes it
develops and through its internal dynamic: the relationship between autonomy and
dependence, between variety and communication as described by Michel Butor.13
The collection, regardless of genre, also constitutes a singular embodiment of the
idea of the book. It is singular because of the solutions used by the collection to
overcome the difficulties related to materially assembling individual texts, but also
because it constitutes a distinct practice when compared with the conventional form
of the book. What is more, collections of poetry, essays and short stories are cha-
racterized by the idea of a composition, ranging from allusive connections to com-
plex architectures. The transversality observed among the three genres suggests the
possibility of a general poetics of the collection, which would constitute a poetics
of quilting.14 The term ‘quilting’ is to be understood in connection with the sub-
sequent publication of a text that first appeared in another format (in a magazine,
for example; this editorial sequence is highly significant for essays). This quilting is
also to be perceived as a form of stitching: the collection leads to the inclusion of a
text in a polytextual15 publication regime that favours marks of intratextuality: “The

14. In French, we use the term reprise, which conveys the dual meaning explained hereafter.
15. Bruno Monfort develops the notion of polytextuality, in a very enlightening paper (“La
nouvelle et son mode de publication. Le cas américain”, in: Poétique, 1992, 90, 153-171.
act of ‘quilting’ establishes a novel context, created by the gathering of otherwise dispersed texts; in this way, it leads to a relational reading, insofar as the texts are likely to be influenced by their surroundings. As we can see, a transverse poetics of the collection sheds light on the tension between the whole and its parts that is inherent in such works, and reveals the foundations of a cross-linking dynamic, through which elements become connected without losing their independence. The polysemic idea of quilting offers a good illustration of the underlying processes involved in writing and reading a collection.

3. Writing a Collection: A Few Processes

To conceive of a poetics of the collection is thus to consider the possibilities afforded by the practice, to define the toolbox and playground at the writer’s disposal, and to consider the potential territory available to the reader. A survey of contemporary works, in my case those published in Quebec during the 80s, 90s and 2000s, allows us to observe the extent to which authors invest not only in the writing of short stories, but also in the writing of collections. The Quebecois short story oscillates between a close attention to form and an exploration of intimist themes, and is invariably characterized by a focus on the density and the poetic nature of language (by allusiveness or the resurgence of oral traditions). This inventiveness can also be observed in the writing of collections, which prove more useful than ever for the publication of short stories, since the magazines devoted to the genre, created in the 1980s, either no longer publish or have lost their former prestige. A study of the poetics of the collection reveals that the collection in itself mobilizes a strong creative investment, which can be witnessed through a wide variety of processes and strategies. In particular, three central approaches to the architecture of collections are explored in Quebecois literature (though they are not specific to Quebec); they will be briefly presented in what follows.

First, we can observe a rather inventive approach to the formal architecture of collections. Their internal organisation appears to be carefully thought out, and, from the outset, the paratext reveals a focus on composition (in the table of contents). Common practices lend a ready structure to the short stories: the triptych is frequently used, with sections displaying a thematic coherence highlighted by their titles. We also find interesting variations of this: Paul Zumthor’s La Porte à côté, for example, introduces sections defined by genre (“Récits”, “Esquisses”, and “Médiévales”). Some works also insert interconnected short stories throughout the collection, creating a form of interrupted continuity among the individual texts, which is immediately apparent in the table of contents. In Les Aurores montréalaises, Monique Proulx inserts at intervals a series of letters addressed to existing cultural figures, which serve to express and pay tribute to the mix of cultures and ethnic origins that characterizes Montreal, Quebec’s largest city. The table of contents.


reveals this technique, which also becomes apparent when the reader leafs through the pages, as the inserted texts are printed in italics. Finally, structuring methods are sometimes borrowed from other art forms. Thus, Gilles Pellerin’s *Les sporadiques aventures de Guillaume Untel* has a strong affinity with the typical structure of the sonata, with three sections bearing the following titles: “Dodecagonale: a piacere”, “Scherzo”, and “Finale”. It is important to note that these different architectural structures have little to do with the texts themselves, but they do define a reading context and a certain direction.

The narrative architecture also plays an important role in the writing of contemporary Quebecois collections. The intent to organize the texts on a narrative level is clear. Like Monique Proulx’s inserted stories, some collections introduce at regular intervals a series of short stories that present a recurring character, who has a particular status (these stories act as a sort of narrative framework). Thus, the character of the grandmother reappears in texts placed at the end of each section of Normand de Bellefeuille’s *Ce que disait Alice*. In some cases, the character is the protagonist of every story, as witnessed in Élise Turcotte’s *Caravane*, which presents a series of (non-consecutive) episodes in the life of Marie. However, the sharing of a fictional world is not required: a common motif, such as the stages of human life, can suffice. The stories in Monique Proulx’s first collection, *Sans cœur et sans reproche*, depict a life sequence (from birth to death, through childhood, adolescence, and adult life), while also presenting a series of different characters who bear the same names (the protagonists are all named either Francoise or Benoit). Finally, in a subtler manner, a recurring character named Thomas, in Éric Fourlanty’s *La mort en friche*, creates a more discrete connection between the stories, as Thomas is sometimes the protagonist, sometimes a secondary character, or even simply a family member or someone named in passing. Together with Thierry Bissonnette, I have proposed to link these creative strategies with the collection’s potential for developing formal *peripétie*. These would be less restrictive forms of narrativity that do not necessarily revolve around a storyline, but rather center on tension, progression, or a shift in focus. The hypothesis is that the collection develops its own kind of *peripétie* based on the texts’ temporality or the work’s internal configuration.

These narrative methods in the writing of collections are particularly frequent in contemporary Quebecois short stories. By framing the texts within a shared fictional world, many collections mobilize various processes that contribute to the development of a fictional architecture. This possibility is of course not specific to the practice of the collection. Fiction theory reminds us that each narrative text builds its own specific world; and yet, some texts share the same world, as witnessed in cycles, sequels, and series revolving around a given protagonist. The writing of the collection offers an original take on this process, which can assume a variety of forms. The aforementioned *Caravane* illustrates the simplest case, that of a shared world throughout the collection: a total fictional coherence leaves no space for ambiguity. Anne Legault’s *Récits de Médilbault*.


19. We identify three types of formal *peripétie* specific to the collection: sequentiality and transformation of events, plot-based configuration and distanced enunciation, and narrative cognitive framework.
presents a slight variation, as one must read the first three stories to realize they share a common world, because the first two are set in such different time periods that the reader may be led to believe they take place in autonomous worlds. This process may also take on more ambiguous forms, as in collections where the stories present a certain ontological affinity. Bertrand Bergeron, for example, published texts in which the fictional universes are clearly connected, though it is impossible to determine whether or not they are the same. The manipulation of fictional correlations can also be played out on another level. Many collections, such as Christiane Frenette’s *Celle qui marche sur du verre*, or Nicolas Dickner’s *L’Encyclopédie du petit cercle*, propose fictional frameworks that confirm the work as a whole, by creating a coherence within the fictional world itself. In Dickner’s book, a foreword tells the story of the collection’s genesis: the author experiencing writer’s block finds inspiration in the discovery of a mysterious (and fictional) encyclopaedia, excerpts of which are found at the beginning of each of the stories in the collection. These strategies, which seem to reinvent Boccaccio’s cornice in his *Decameron*, help to more firmly establish the links that lead us to read the collection as a coherent whole.

4. Towards a Poetics of Diffraction

Without a doubt, these writing processes demonstrate the vitality of the contemporary short story. It is nevertheless relevant, with regard to today’s narrative writing in general, to examine how the short story fits into the larger picture. Three cases merit closer scrutiny and, in turn, raise three questions. With the diversification of processes related to the internal architecture of short story collections, there comes a marked increase in works that can be described as quasi-novels. Characterized by a strong fictional coherence, Pierre Yergeau’s *Du virtuel à la romance* (in Quebec), and Antoine Volodine’s *Des Anges mineurs* (in France) are based on a series of recurring characters, a fairly limited number of settings, and repeated intertextual references throughout the stories. Others present strong fictional frameworks, riddled with metafictional indicators that reiterate the overall unity of the whole they serve to designate, creating as a result a fragmented and yet densely woven and organic whole. Hence the question raised by this first case: when is a collection no longer a collection?

Complementary to this research on the short story is the practice of many contemporary works to present themselves as collections of narrative texts, rather than collections of short stories. A creative play on genres thus appears, causing many to reject the more conventional label of the short story. Some prefer the term *histoire*—among the books released by Le Quatranier, a Quebec publisher, Raymond Bock’s *Atavismes* uses this term to evoke a national cultural heritage, whereas Samuel Archibald’s *Arvida* refers, through its *histoires*, to a local folkloric custom perpetuated by the people of Arvida. While these works explore the possible extensions of the short narrative genre, others bypass tradition in favour of pure invention. This phenomenon, described by Sabrinelle Bedrane, is par-

20. As seen for example in “Le monde aurait un nom” and “La soustraction” in *Visa pour le réel*.
ticularly common in contemporary French literature, where Antoine Volodine’s *narrats* mirror J.M.G. Le Clézio’s *romances* and Jérôme Garcin’s *vidas*. The use of new or revisited labels (such as *vies*, or narratives that blur the lines between fiction, reality and biography) shifts readers’ horizon of expectations, and begs a number of questions on their status: do these works still belong to the genre of the short story? Can they be considered collections of short stories? Is there something to be gained in doing so?

A third demonstration of the vitality of contemporary narrative can be found in novels that reject strong internal cohesion in favour of manifest fragmentation. This pluralized form may be seen as a defining aspect of certain literary projects, as witnessed for example in the thoughts, anecdotes, and portraits shared by the protagonist of Éric Chevillard’s *La Nébuleuse du crabe*, or in the 500 micronarratives with which Régis Jauffret draws a portrait of ordinary life in *Microfictions*. Internal multiplicity is also expressed through multiple storylines, such as the three intersecting narratives in Nicolas Dickner’s novel *Nikolski*, or those, more distantly connected, of Oliver Rohe’s *Un Peuple en petit*. These books have much in common with episodic novels, in which the many assembled anecdotes end up shaping an overall narrative framework, as witnessed, for example, in Dany Laferrière’s *L’Odeur du café*. The writers of such works clearly view discontinuity, accumulation, and a mosaicked portrait of the world as an added value. Following the point of view adopted here, the question would be whether or not a fragmented novel can be considered a collection.

This survey of contemporary narrative – to which one could add the field of digital literature which is known for its play on brevity, accumulation, and cross-linked narratives – effectively highlights the polymorphous resurgence of short genres and of the dynamics of tension inherent in the collection. It is important to grasp the dynamics within this new configuration of contemporary literature, where collections aspire to be novels, and novels masquerade as collections. One simple way to account for this would be to say that the poetics of the collection tends to detach itself from the genre of the short story to occupy the entire narrative domain. This proposal, however, proves insufficient, as it comes up against the contradictions which result from the attempt to transpose the form of the collection onto works that reject this form of composition. The question requires a more comprehensive look at contemporary poetics. As I argued at the beginning of this paper, when regarding the poetics of the collection we must focus less on forms – which are of an infinite variety – and more on processes. To explain the collections’ internal mosaic, it is important to determine what constrains the writing and to figure out the dynamics of the works. They represent a world in which unity is lacking (or inappropriate). Views, character roles and stories are disjointed, fragmented, as if the text, the narrative voice and the plot had been put through a prism that decomposed their complexity. They are, in a word, diffracted. Such works are dominated by poetic elements: their discontinuity and their multiplicity result in a mosaicked textuality, which contains frequent and obvious interruptions. However, as inheritors of the interpretive strategies associated with the form of the collection, they are not without meaning or direction, and they remain perfectly legible: “The originality of these forms [...] lies in the genre-related ambiguity of the ‘collection’, in the peculiar association of brevity and connectedness, of the intruding elements
and the system: ‘the strongest opposition is that of things at once connected and dispersed, of the system and the intruding elements’. By shifting the paradigm of the collection to the more general paradigm of the novel and the book, contemporary fiction presents readers with profuse and impressive literary projects – works such as Mark Z. Danielewski’s *House of Leaves*, and Reif Larsen’s *The Selected Works of T.S. Spivet* can be viewed as spectacular illustrations of the current tendency. The fact that these works multiply spaces of textuality, their obvious patchwork quality, and their borrowed textual elements lead to continuous interruptions, diversions and digressions, thus contributing to the overall impression that discontinuity has been raised to the level of organizing principle.

This diversity within contemporary narrative, which can better be accounted for by a poetics of diffraction, is characterized by three main processes that give each work a particular form. Many books raise complex textuality to the level of theme and explicitly represent it in such a way that the image of the text sheds its conventional invisibility in favour of a constant self-referentiality. The novels are made up of notebooks, and juxtapose various ‘sources’ – elements highlighted by the layout and dramatized through the use of graphic elements or regular textual interruptions. Books such as Daniel Canty’s *Wigrum* or François Bon’s *L’Incendie du Hilton* tend to prevent a full immersion into their fictional worlds through the simple power of narrative language, and make use of elements that undermine mimetic representation – the reader, in the role of the investigator, must reconstruct the coherence of the ‘file’ he is consulting.

To this dramatization of the text can be added two possible approaches to narrative and discursive fragmentation. The first, which calls to mind the organizing principles used in ensemble films such as *Babel* or *Magnolia*, mobilizes brevity and the collecting of contents. The works’ dynamics, based on the tension between the whole and its parts, can be illustrated in terms of the relationship existing between a nucleus and its electrons: a common element unites the portions of text, acting as a narrative substratum around which the stories and spoken words gravitate. The previously mentioned books by Yergeau and Turcotte, as well such ‘novels’ as Caroline Lamarche’s *Le Jour du chien*, David Leblanc’s *La Descente du singe*, and Alain Nadaud’s *L’Archéologie du zéro* all make use of this episode-based format, displaying a fascination for brevity and repetition. These works represent a world in which coherence is recovered through repetitive movements or unexpected coincidences. In comparison, the second approach to narrative fragmentation favours unreliable perceptions and increased representational complexity. Multiple narrative and fictional layers create countless possibilities, scenarios and representations that make any interpretation of the fictional world and its events uncertain. The cohesion and coherence of the narrative voice is often undermined and we commonly witness an encyclopaedic frenzy or a desire to exhaust reality. Olivier Rolin’s *L’Invention du monde*, Jean-François Chassay’s *Les Ponts*, Christian Gailly’s *Nuages rouges*, and Rober Racine’s *Les Vautours de Barcelone* all seek to provoke a saturation effect, through a sort of defocusing process in which the narrative is either based on a possibility or results from an aim to represent reality indirectly, as if through a distorting glass.

In this way, a poetics of diffraction has much in common, in its features and methodological principles, with the poetics of the collection described earlier. Both shift the focus in order to examine the possibilities afforded to narrative practice, thus opening up various avenues of expression and world representation. Many different yet complementary processes have shaped the expectations of readers, who, in turn, mobilize interpretive strategies to negotiate the distance between the ideal of the book embodied by the novel and the impossible diversity associated with the random gathering of texts. The proposition of short story collections is indeed that of letting readers develop a relative semantic and aesthetic coherence based on the tension between the whole and its parts. In light of this potential, the poetics of diffraction may be considered an extension and an enhancement of the poetics of the collection, as well as a fresh approach to examining contemporary narrative: “Contemporary narrative would thus be characterized by various processes of diffraction, which fragment text, story and meaning, to advocate a representation of the world that rejects all simplifying and univocal discourse”.

This fruitful dialogue between the collection and the novel shows indeed that there is much to be gained in identifying processes intrinsic to the short story, often considered in isolation, and transposing them to the whole of contemporary narrative, which benefits from the literary and aesthetic advances of this ‘minor’ genre.

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