Hybrid Topologies of the Self

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Abstract: The following study focuses on Matthew Baker's *Hybrid Creatures* (2018) and Irvine Welsh's *The Sex Lives of Siamese Twins* (2014) in order to explore the problematisation of mediation, remediation, and transmediation that fiction potentially occasions beyond mere ekphrasis, highlighting their elusive and seemingly self-erasing presence in the signification practices that inform representations of identity and reality. Their outlines are mediated by the plurality of discourses weaving the fabric of the cultural matrix, blurring ontological and categorial boundaries into zones, spaces that fold back onto the sites they delimit and identify. The self-reflexive and self-referential interplay of abstraction and materiality articulates topologies of hybridity, a nowhere space onto which the human is displaced and deferred.

Keywords: intermediality, spatiality, hybridity, identity, ontological pluralisation

It is nigh impossible to cross the border into the much-debated territory of intermediality without simultaneously being plunged in the disciplinary field of semiotics, as the former entails an epistemological effort of going beyond the boundaries delineating individual media – from one another, on the one hand, and from other fields (e.g. arts), on the other –, which the latter can provide a theoretical framework and a methodology for. In this respect, one can hardly avoid Lars Elleström's influential anthology *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality* (2010) or its revised and expanded successor, *Beyond Media Borders* (2021b). In the latter, he relates the natures of these borders with semiotic modality, acknowledging, however, the existence of "a *border zone* that is located differently in different periods and cultures" (Elleström 2021a: 67, *emphasis mine*) allowing for "cultural and

aesthetic ambiguity" (Ibid.), before concluding that "the borders between […] qualified media types are largely relative" (Ibid.). There are two interrelated aspects here that articulate the starting points of the following study.

The first is of the order of mediation. The act of establishing the nature of such borders amounts to distinguishing between types of media types (Elleström 2021a: 68), that is, resorting to a particular taxonomy – which is unavoidable within the compass of a semiotic approach. As is inevitably the case with any epistemological endeavour, the object is abstracted to a representation that is mediated by the – in this case semiotic – theoretical framework. Quite unsurprisingly so, in light of Michel Foucault's analysis of Western epistemology in *The Order of Things* (2005), *mediated*, as it were, by his famous analysis of Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*. While the vacancy lying at the heart of self-revealing representation will be considered at a later point, questioning the validity of either the semiotic framework or the results it yields falls outside the aims of this study. What is relevant here is the model this paradigm provides; on an abstract level, the theoretical framework and the discourse it constitutes itself as operate the same kind of mediation as the media its undertakes to explore perform on a more readily perceivable, material level. It is precisely this interplay of the abstract/symbolic and the material that can be traced in literary emplacement, as illustrated by Matthew Baker's *Hybrid Creatures* (2018) and Irvine Welsh's *The Sex Lives of Siamese Twins* (2014).

The second is of the order of mapping. Elleström's understanding of intermediality is predicated on crossing borders, an undertaking which he reads both as categorial instability – "one can classify a particular media product in different ways" (2021a: 68) – and as an act of bridging (Ibid.). Irrespective of how one sees it, this view emphasises the border as a mechanism of identification and opens up on translating the issue into

topological terms: the whole conceptual scaffolding is projected onto a map, along with its varied – and ambiguous – theoretical representations. For the borders that make up structural lines of the map are, themselves, elusive and spatial – the infinitely thin geometric construct grows into a "border *zone*"; its zero width accommodates space within. In *Narratives of the European Border* (2007), Richard Robinson develops a sophisticated theoretical apparatus around the multi-faceted notion of border. Drawing on Heidegger, he identifies the potential of bridging, of connecting, inherent in it, as well as its place-making – and space-opening – capability, enabled by the former (Robinson 2007: 27). In so doing, he abides by the Heideggerian distinction between space and place, which Stuart Elden identifies as abstract/Cartesian and experiential/lived, respectively (Elden 2001: 36), noting, however, that "space is not inertly outside nor purely imaginary – 'neither an external object not an inner experience'" (Robinson 2007: 28).

Yet, for Robinson, the border is not merely that which lies between, producing, separating, and connecting place at the same time. It is a specific site, a place – and space – on its own. In this respect, his view extends the spatial unfolding within the zero width of the border. In order to describe it, he draws on Roland Barthes, who uses the term *atopia* to define "a placelessness associated with the unusual, the unclassifiable, that which resists stereotype" (Ibid.: 6), often in connection with the text. In Robinson's employment, "[a]topia […] suggests an anomalous nowhere place which does exist, but which evades the taxonomising language of sovereign spatial histories" (Ibid.: 6–7). In this respect, atopia shares in the characteristics expressed by Foucauldian heterotopia, yet, as the author remarks, it "also balances them with a micro-historical emphasis on the nowhere condition" (Ibid.: 35). In order to define this shared ground, Robinson extends Foucault's well-known definition of the term in

'Of Other Spaces', by the more abstract, textually-rooted one provided in *The Order of Things* gesturing towards an "impossible heterogeneous site" (Robinson 2007: 34), which "is given physical, social form in 'Of Other Spaces'" (Ibid.). It is of particular relevance in the economy of the following analysis to further extend Robinson's extension and note that Foucault links this "impossible heterogeneous sites" with language, which they "secretly undermine, […] because they destroy syntax in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also the less apparent syntax which causes words and things […] to 'hold together'" (Foucault 2005: xix). Moreover, in this respect, heterotopia opens up onto hybridity, "a worse kind of disorder than that of the *incongruous*, […] in which fragments of a large number of possible orders glitter separately in the dimension, without law or geometry, of the *heteroclite*" (Ibid.).

In *Narrative Space and Time* (2014), Elana Gomel employs Robinson's definition of atopia in the study of literary renditions of impossible spaces – "spaces that refuse to be mere places" (2014: 3). For her, atopia is not to be limited to the border, but expanded to the whole world, a space that "is both somewhere and nowhere, both familiar and strange […] simultaneously infested by ghosts of undead histories and echoes of half-understood languages" (Ibid.: 67). Predicated on the construal of the human as a "*narrative* animal" (Ibid.: 4) whose "operational spaces" are equally determined by sensory information and (narrative) representation (Ibid.: 4–5), her project bridges the fields of science and humanities into the ""unified field" of cultural narrativity" (Ibid.: 9), which she characterises as "a complicated semantic ecosystem, in which mathematical formulae and narrative templates feed on each other" (Ibid.). Consequently, she argues, "[n]on-Newtonian spaces define the postmodern spatial imagination" (Ibid.: 3). If Stuart Elden's study, *Mapping the Present*, focuses on the relation between space and time,

noting the need to "think of the two together: we need to both historicize space and spatialize history" (Elden 2001: 3), Gomel's project preempts the perception of space and time as two separate entities. Within the cultural matrix, the idea of reality underlying fictional representations is indissolubly linked with Einstein's theory of relativity and the notions of space and time in Newtonian mechanics have been replaced by the spacetime continuum.

Nevertheless, to limit the scope of this analysis to the discourse of science and the notions of space it helps construct would be to oversimplify. Elana Gomel herself *does* acknowledge that "the common matrix of culture […] also includes technology, politics, religion, economy, and the material conditions of life" (2014: 7) and, in the landscape of contemporary culture, media should be added to the list, as well. On the one hand, all these discourse are intertwined in producing cultural representations and they all have the potential to produce and construct narratives. On the other hand, maintaining the distinction between space and place is hardly operational in this context. Abstract space is hardly simply Cartesian, while experiential place is hardly less abstract. They find themselves reconciled in Patricia Garcia's analysis of the interrelation between subjectivity, body, and space in the production of the real (2015: 51–53). Suffice it to note that, in their representational and narrative capacity, all these discourses combine into a mediated sense of both reality and self, where the abstract and the material are intertwined. The characters in the literary works proposed for analysis evolve within a hybrid space that is multiply mediated and subjectivities emerge as mapped onto convoluted topologies, the dimensions of which are equally articulated by the materiality of media and the abstraction of (meta)discourses.

In Matthew Baker's short-story collection *Hybrid Creatures* (2018), hybridity extends across multiple medial and

ontological boundaries, latent ambiguity springing right from the tile as the 'creatures' it identifies can equally substitute for the four stories that make up the volume and for the subjectivities constructed in each – both equally hybrid. It is a quality that permeates the entire book both formally and thematically, foregrounding the whole against an overall irresolvable topology. The narrative discourse seamlessly combines natural and constructed language – the latter represented by html, mathematics, musical notation, and formal logic – thus undermining the boundaries outlining cultural constructions of reality, a question that also looms behind the collage of graphically differentiated first-person narratives, diary entries in various hands, fragments of art criticism, and email messages that weave into the fragmented and nonlinear fabric of Irvine Welsh's *The Sex Lives of Siamese Twins*. The title of the latter finds itself re(du)plicated in the novel in the typographically set-off fictional counterpart on a poster advertising a movie that is the cinematic remediation of the serialised infotainment story of real-life – well, within the compass of the fictional storyworld, that is – Siamese twins Annabel and Amy – which provides the background to the unfolding of the main characters' own evolution –, thus disrupting the structural lines of focus and narrative hierarchy. Baker's title also resorts to typographical manipulation, as its representation on the cover is rendered as </hyьri♩ creΛ+Ures/> – paratextually reiterating the principle underlying sensei's passwords in leet in "Coder" –, followed by the subtitle "{STORIES}", mirroring Tryg's use of set notation in "The Golden Mean". Yet, the passwords are both a mechanism of enabling access – like the keys sensei provides to the protagonist along with them (Baker 2018: 8) – and one of establishing identity, as use of a password fulfils the function of proving that one really is who one claims to be, like an identity card, which is what Tryg uses set theory to define with respect to himself:

> Family A had members {Mom, Stepdad, Tryg, Natalie, Isabel}. Family B had members {Dad, Stepmom, Tryg, Elliott, Parker}. They were separate families, but together they were his family, $A \cup B$, {Mom, Stepdad, Dad, Stepmom, Tryg, Natalie, Isabel, Elliott, Parker}. He was the only member of both sets, the only intersection, $A \cap B$, {Tryg}. That was what defined him. (Baker 2018: 27–8)

The association of key and password bridges between – apparently natural – physical space and – apparently virtual – cyberspace, at the same time as it connects presence and identity. It is in similar fashion that the graphical devices mentioned above upturn the hierarchy of narrative priorities, drawing attention to their liminal, border-like status as interfaces, interstices between ontological levels, on the one hand, and to their mediating capacity with respect to the act of reading, on the other. In other words, the very boundary that is supposed to separate disjunct – and potentially incongruous – levels becomes permeable and opens up space within its infinite thinness. The topology of this space thus extends beyond the storyworld, incorporating the text that mediates it, and presence – which mediates identity – conflates place, space, and medium. Sensei's practice of writing his passwords in leet only serves to reinforce this extended topology, as it relies on substituting digits for letters based on visual resemblance: '"l1b3r7y," "3qu4117y," "ju571c3"' (Ibid.: 8). The play on signifiers brings code into focus, which both furthers and complexifies the effect of identification. On the one hand, Sensei is a master hacker, that is, one who is an adept coder who conceals his identity not only in cyberspace but also in 'real' life. The narrator renders this explicit as he reminiscences the combination of skill and chance that enabled him to discover the address of the place where he lived and, as a result, his *name*, so that finally, upon further determination, his presence should become available physically, after first being mediated by the

buzzer and then by the door. On the other hand, the act of reading, mediated by resemblance, semantically enlarges sensei's identity: he is not only a hacker, but a hacktivist driven by political motives, member of an anonymous collective, who "[a]t marches and protests […] all wore masks of the same identical goateed face" (Baker 2018: 8) – the same mask which elsewhere triggers misrecognition in the narrator's eyes.

Yet the mask is as much a medium as it is a permeable boundary enacting identity in the field of visual appearance – like the key and, by extension, the door it metonymically fits into. Keys play a crucial role in the outcome of Welsh's story as they *change hands*, enabling the progress of the plot. Access, enabled by both key and password – or the substitution of the physical one for the digital other, as Lena's computer dispenses with password protection in the safety of her home, thus mapping physical place onto cyberspace –, is precisely what allows Lucy to pose as Lena in her exchange of email messages with her parents and redefine her relationship with them, restoring disrupted communication between her mother and father in the process. Digital identity invades the material space as Lucy is struck at the realisation that she has signed in as Lena on her own iPhone. It is key-mediated access, again, that regulates both the relationship between place, presence/absence, and identity, as it both warrants Lucy's avowed identity in Lena's former boyfriend Jerry's eyes and triggers his questioning of it, the ensuing fight between the two, and his consequent demise, eventually occasioning the story's denouement and residual vacancy in hybrid form, as his larger bones *may* have been incorporated in Lena's *The New Man* sculpture, the selling of which will secure their financial future and leave behind residual indetermination and "a pang of loss" (Welsh 2015: 448).

Mediating the interplay of place, space, presence, and absence, access similarly underlies the stories in *Hybrid*

Creatures. In "Proof of the Century", Wills desperately – and unsuccessfully – repeats the procedure of logical proof in order to assert control over his failing mind and to come to terms with both his wife's potential absence, whom he suspects to have died, yet whom he is constantly looking for, as indetermination looms over the identity of the woman who appears in the end to bring him back in. His continuous search is hampered into displacement, as he walks around the house only to be confronted with the presence of people who he can only suspect must be members of his extended family. In "Movements", the conductor is stranded on a hotel rooftop on a journey undertaken to in order to reenact his dead partner's presence by adopting his travelling habits, which he had long rejected and criticised. In "The Golden Mean", Tryg is forced to come to the realisation that "he couldn't be anywhere without creating an absence elsewhere" (Baker 2018: 40), torn between two families and two places, fractionally sharing in the histories of each, mapping time onto space and space onto time, in a continuum where the fractions of himself only amount to his incompleteness. In "Coder", while sensei is politically motivated, for the narrator, "hacking [is] social. [He] just want[s] to find people to love" (Ibid.: 14). In his endeavour, he "follows" people, which implies going beyond public information shared across various types of online media, [h]acking private content, mining every last bit of biographical information" (Ibid.: 4). The procedure seems to grant him access to people's inner worlds, crossing bodily barriers into their mental realities, which he pieces together from fragments of mediated information, yet reinforcing the very oppositions he breaches on – interiority/exteriority, visibility/invisibility – by the employment of html structuring tags:

> Structurally, the source code for every webpage had exactly two elements: the head and the body. Viewing a webpage in your browser, you didn't see what was in the head. The head, that

> data in there, wasn't displayable. Only the body was. But, still, no webpage was a body only. (Baker 2018: 2)

As in the case of leet discussed above, the code induces a heterotopian dimension, as it hosts multiple different – and, arguably, conflicting – orders. As html, the tags fulfil their wonted functions. Embedded in the text, they provide information on the way in which it should be read – and, in this respect, they become (topologically) equivalent with the other codes embedded in the linguistic representation of the other stories –, positioning themselves both within and without the text and articulating a metatextual dimension. Moreover, to some extent, they achieve structural purposes as well, as the various sections that make up the text are enclosed within <html> tags, while <head> tags enclose mental processes and <body> ones visible bodily features – thus amounting to a textual mapping of identity. In this way, code enables the hacker to gain access to both the inside and the outside. Yet the semantic associations implicit in their names ground the tags in the linguistic code, establishing relations with it, which undermines their metadiscursive function, while the very structures they construct exile the narrator – and protagonist – on the outside. For, as he himself acknowledges, the <html> entities only contain two elements, <head> and <body> – nothing in between –, whereas the whole of his narrative discourse – his very presence – is placed outside the two, wrapped around them. Moreover, the <head> content that he is after, that which lies beyond appearance, actually only contains metadata, not the entity itself, revealing the impossibility of retrieving the quiddity of reality behind mediated representation and thus preempting access to the inside. The very code that defines him and underlies his whole system of signification locks him on the outside. Sensei, the most important figure in his life, the one in position to pronounce him a hacker – as, although a member of the same hacktivist collective, he is *training* to become one – and thus fix, complete

his becoming identity, only does so in a parting remark made during a brief enigmatic appearance, almost in the same breath as he announces his definitive disappearance. What he offers instead is only vacancy and a cup of tea. The tags, the function of which is to differentiate between entity and attribute, that is, between reality and perception, end up providing just one half of the whole: appearance – exteriority –, while what he wants is the opposite, as he muses, contemplating the sundry anonymous people he shares the heterotopia of the underground carriage with: "I could view the bodies, but I didn't know what was in any of the heads. It broke my heart. I wanted access.' (Baker 2018: 12). All he is left with is a voice in his head and not even the materiality of bodies. Like the tea grown cold within the lapse in his presence produced by his own interiority – the "thoughts and feelings in [his] brain" which "would have have broken most machines" (Ibid.: 24) –, spoiling sensei's farewell offering, the identity of place is erased by mediation. To him, the inhabitants of his hometown – the crucial factor that turns the city into place – are reduced to those he "follows", that is, those whose subjectivities he has symbolically placed on his map of reality, as opposed to the anonymous – and meaningless – bodies in the underground. Making a mental inventory of the status of a set of individuals in the former group, he concludes: "Everybody was still there. Boston had survived another day" (Ibid.: 20). Place has been abstracted to meaning – in a process that undoes it and recomposes it in a different symbolic order, yet preserves and reasserts its geographical presence at the same time.

The materiality of the city, however, is not only rewritten by code – or the narrator's use thereof. The process is reiterated in the field of perception, which brings forth further dimensions of this hybrid topology:

> The city was made of mirrors: shimmering windows, domed bells on the handlebars of chained bicycles, bent bumpers on

> parked taxis, polished brass address plates on marble columns, curved mirrors above banking machines, swinging glass doorways, ticketed glass windshields, glass smudged with handprints over posters billing upcoming movies, cracked glass over expired advertisements. I watched without watching, my reflections following her reflections. (Ibid.: 16)

In the resulting continuum, matter is sublimated into its capacity to communicate, to display, which the reflective surface replacing physical expansion extends to all objects, turning them into devices of mediation. Depth is thus replaced with surface, which, in turn, creates depth differently, articulating a mediating space that place is turned into, while the Cartesian expansion of objects is swapped for the depth of mediating boundaries. It is in this atopian here that identity acquires definition in – doubly – mediated relation to place:

> From my angle as I buttoned my coat, the windowpane displayed me, a faint reflection.
> <body> buzzcut forehead eyebrows eyelashes eyes birthmark nostrils crossbite jaw </body>
> Then I knelt for my backpack, and the windowpane displayed *only* city. (Baker 2018: 3, *emphasis mine*)

The interplay of transparency and reflection privileges the observing subject, as the latter can only represent himself against the refracted background place and only as a gazing subject – when he kneels, there is nobody there to look at the window any longer, and the interior space is completely taken over by the exterior. The code mediating his description is reminiscent of the the mesh web embedded in the door light he peers through into the lecture room with the history teacher "at the chalkboard, gesturing at the map drawn there, ambiguous territories with smudged borders" (Ibid.: 4). Two implications become evident: on the one hand, place, space, and identity determine one another in a

complex, looping topology that evinces mediation in every point and, on the other, this topology foregrounds the border, as well as its intricate effect of transformation and apparent self-erasure, as deeply entrenched in this act of determination.

The involvement of place, as mediated by multilayered representations, in constructing identity extends to the whole of *Hybrid Creatures*. Overall, the work develops a hybrid spacetime topology against which the self is mapped: while the stories are set in specific locations – places – peppered across the United States, the ages of the protagonists describe the arc of the whole human lifetime, from childhood to old age, yet not in the expected order. Any historical sense is subordinate to plasticity as the young adult precedes the child. And the narrative strategies employed in the four stories further complicate the matter as they construct lines of flight reinforcing an alternate topology. If "Coder" and "Movements" are narrated in the first person – looking from within – by their young adult and adult protagonists, respectively, "The Golden Mean", focusing on a child, and "Proof of the Century", centred on an "almost a century old" (Baker 2018: 122) man, are narrated in the third person – looking from without –, thus mapping human lifespan as space, given that the ages they connect are points of entry and exit into it, respectively, outlining its outer boundary and mapping the narrative point of view in terms of interiority and exteriority. The opposition is undermined, however, as the external point of view is mediated by the focaliser-protagonists' minds, which are in turn mediated by the discourses – mathematics and formal logic – underlying their representations of themselves and reality, while the languages of these discourses permeate the ontological – and representational – boundary that validates the opposition in the first place.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that the collapse of binary oppositions should prevent place from fulfilling its function in determining identity, providing narratives for the self

to be mapped onto, while the characters narrativize place in the terms of their own signification practices, in an economy of mutual displacement. Tryg is torn between his two families' homes in the Dakotas, which map onto suburbs and farm, respectively, dividing his time into periods of lengths the ratio of which approximates the golden mean. The only moments when he is platially united with both his biological parents are those when he exchanges families in a neutral spot in between, in the parking lot of a downtown convenience store – which is, itself, merely a place of transit, one of ephemerality – a heterotopia. Oscillating between belonging and loyalty, he is confronted with the realisation that "[h]e would never be whole to any one" (Baker 2018: 40) under a moon that "was 62% shadow and 38% light" (Ibid.: 39), another approximation of the golden mean. His fascination with the latter is motivated by its ubiquitous nature tying together mathematics, art, and nature. Factoring in the author's own confession in an interview for BOMB Magazine that this is also the principle that governs both the construction of the story and the relative length of its two divisions, "A." and "B." (Baker and Mead-Brewer 2018), the stability of the boundary outlining the storyworld is shattered, revealing the vacancy at the core: for the golden mean is an irrational number – it can be visually represented geometrically, but its exact value can never be determined – as the decimal point is followed by an infinite number of digits –, only approximated. It can never be *whole*. Tryg's ever incomplete and ever deferred self mirrors his own fascination with π (another irrational number) and ∞.

The irresolvable loop that folds back on itself as a two-dimensional projection of a Möbius surface also describes the interplay of place, identity, and displacement for the composer in "Movements". In the aftermath of the realisation that he had never *completely* known his deceased partner occasioned by the disclosures of a stranger at his funeral, who had only met the latter

briefly, his act of mourning turns into one of mapping, hinging on their differing views of place and what constitutes knowledge of one. Just like his narrative discourse, his idea of locality is mediated by music. While Beau's mapping was based on diversity and randomness, his own is inescapably filtered through musical knowledge. Even when he attempts to adopt Beau's "method", his decision is made in the exactly same way: "After some deliberation, I'd chosen Nashville, Tennessee. Why there exactly? Nashville was our Vienna: the American "Music City" to the European "City of Music"" (Baker 2018: 46). The endeavour is bound to repeat his Austrian experience, whereby his yearlong musically-mediated, careful, and systematic observation of the city leaves him with the sense of foreignness and incompleteness. It is only when he is not looking, stuck with a DJ whose name fails to fully fulfil its function and only furthers undecidability ("Mel—perhaps a diminutive for Melody?—Melanie, Melinda, Melisande?" (Ibid.: 49)) on the rooftop of the hotel that his understanding of place, of *being* in place, is reassessed, bringing about the reconfiguration of his own representation of himself. Displaced within the atopian space of the rooftop – as they are contained within the space of the border, granted access neither to the inside nor to the outside – he is forced to discover the experience of noise, randomness, meaninglessness behind the theoretical representations that have hitherto mediated his own identity.

The mediated dissolution of place into the "nowhere space" of the rooftop finds its counterpart in Willis' house in "Proof of the Century", where it becomes not only a reflective surface for the the dissolution of the self, but also for that of the (im)possibilities of encoding either. Willis's trajectory around the house translates the map of his life's spacetime back and forth between the mental space of his memory and the physical

mediation of the photographs populating the latter in what seems like an attempt to counter the collapse of the former:

> There were photographs everywhere in there, […], anywhere they had ever lived his wife had filled their rooms with photographs, so that wherever he looked the past was always present. (Ibid.: 116)

His struggle with the bodily vicissitudes of old age is doubled by his failing attempts at negotiating his advancing dementia, which, in his terms, amounts to losing "[t]he ability to speak that language he had learn as a child" (Ibid.: 116). The reflection of Tryg's mathematical language is as evident as the pictures the latter is not in that adorn his mother's mantelpiece. Here, however, the medium tentatively works in reverse: both Wills's presence and his fading memory are externalised in mediated form in the photographs, the topography of which comes to identity with that of the house, displacing him onto the physical outside. The mirroring line of flight reaches further still, as Tryg's fascination with irrational numbers is echoed in Wills's lifelong struggle to fend off irrationality, logic providing the language – and system – to counter his own inner contradiction, which he traces all the way back to his birth, marking his personality in the same way in which the coder's birthmark physically marks his face. Yet, ironically, the innate contradiction that acts as his identifier is at odds with his very own language – as Aristotle's principle of non-contradiction lies at the very foundation of logic –, while the rational system he has devised in order to control it only manages to defer it – as, whenever successful, as in the case of his family, or his job, it has disastrous consequences. Ultimately, the system collapses altogether, as the conclusion to his final attempt at using formal logic "to make sense of what he knew" (Baker 2018: 121) is "Pudding?" (Ibid.: 122). A mere *semblance* of syntax is preserved as the signifiers fail to coalesce

into meaning and the logical symbols that are supposed to convey the structural lines only reveal a hybrid construct made up of a jumble of unrelated discursive fragments than only prove the permeability of its boundaries, as they replicate shards of conversations overheard while navigating the place. Ranging from extraterrestrial life to politics, freedom, gender identity, and the future of humanity (more on that later), their topics construct a discursive map superposed on that of the house, the nodes of which are his relatives – whom he can only refer to indefinitely as people. Bodily reduplicating their own images in the photographs and, in turn, made visually present by the light flowing from phone and television screens, they transpose the place into a meaningless "nowhere space" that symbolically locks him without while physically within, and is populated by what amounts to a hybrid noise that is reminiscent of the one experienced by a different protagonist on a hotel rooftop in Nashville.

It is against a similar interplay of space, place, and mediation that hybrid identity emerges in *The Sex Lives of Siamese Twins*. The place within which Lena and Lucy take turns acting as oppressor and victim to each other, exchanging power relations and finally identifying their intrinsic connection is a ghost apartment in a ghost building in the middle of a ghost town, its interiority shut off from the outside world, its only anchorage in it being the windowpane and a TV set. To the onlooker outside, it is only available as "another cold, black window" (Welsh 2015: 323). To Lena inside, it is "the cool glass window, now cruddy with the marks of my forehead, fingerprints, and breath" (Ibid.: 322), "in the reflection of [which] I study my face" (Ibid.: 248). As before, optics blurs the boundary between within and without, providing it with depth and undermining rational representations of reality:

> You look at causation, but nothing in life is linear. We pretend on our psychotic social networks that we can be reduced to a

> timeline, but we are a stew, a constantly cooking, bubbling casserole. (Ibid.: 318)

Lena's realisation acknowledges twofold hybridity. On the one hand, it operates metafictionally, rendering the very non-linearity inherent in the novel, in terms of both form – as noted earlier – and temporality – as the storyline is pieced together in retrospect, partly by recollection and partly by deferral to other media. On the other, it gestures towards the impossible space of the self, created by the superposition of place and media, which the ghost apartment replicates. Essentially, it is a nowhere place, the only function of which is disconnection and anonymity – while physically positioned on the map of Miami, it is freed from all platial references that might make it meaningful. As such, it displaces the perceived function of place in the (causal) determination of subjectivity. Originally, various characters' identities are mediated by the socio-cultural discourses underlying place. Lucy defines herself as coming from Boston – and she inscribes this into her appearance by sporting a Red Sox cap. Lena's identity is framed by her coming from Potters Prairie, Minnesota. Lester "had that New York arrogance when he first arrived, that tiresome assumption that only interesting, edgy, crazy stuff can happen there, but Florida has chilled him out. He's also learned to use the ghetto talk selectively" (Welsh 2015: 32). The list could continue, but a pattern already emerges: displaced around the map of the US, the relationship between identity and place is equally determined by belonging and not belonging. As intimated in Lena's musing, however, spatiality is rendered more complex by media.

Identified and analysed by Brian McHale (1992) as one of the most salient narrative devices effecting ontological pluralisation, television is ever present in Welsh's novel, complete with the multiplicity of worlds rendered by its programming flow "insinuat[ing] themselves into the real world" (1992: 129), the

invasion of private place, which the TV set is integrated to and blurring the boundary between what is perceived as fictional and what is perceived as real (Ibid.: 127), and actuating Baudrillardian precession of simulacra (Ibid.: 126, 127). The time elapsed between McHale's study and Welsh's work has further complicated the media landscape, and television now shares in the same ontologically pluralising continuum as phones, computers, email, social networking, and YouTube, to wider and more far-reaching implications, outlining a more convoluted topology. The relationships of identification and substitution enacted by email communication and iPhone accounts on identity have been noted earlier. Collectively, however, these media reach more deeply within the constructions of the latter, both personally and culturally. The book opens with numbers introducing a rhetorical question: "2-4-6-8, who do we appreciate?" (Welsh 2015: 3). The mystery behind it is immediately solved, as the next paragraph explains:

> Numbers are the great American obsession. How do we measure up? Our crumbling economy: growth percentage, consumer spending, industrial output, GDP, GNP, the Dow Jones. As a society: homicides, rapes, teen pregnancies, child poverty, illegal immigrants, drug addicts, registered and otherwise. As individuals: height, weight, hips, waist, bust, BMI. (Ibid.: 3)

In a manner which seems to apply Tryg's representation of reality in mathematical terms – or Wills's rationalisation of it in his job – to all aspects of culture, numbers are revealed as an all-pervasive element of American identity. True to her nature, Lucy acknowledges their presence in her upbringing, her father advocating them as the ultimate transcendental metanarrative, as "math comes from God" (Ibid.: 23). To her, numbers mediate her own identity, as well as that of others. Her couple issues are rendered as problems with 2, her age-related career concerns as

problems with 33, and, as a narrator, she ubiquitously introduces new characters with height and weight appended to their names. More significantly, however, they are remediated into an iPhone application aptly named *Lifemap*, transmediating her life story, her *self*, in the process. Her spacetime acquires a new dimension, as her body is mapped into numerical data in the application, simultaneously rooted in two differing, yet contiguous orders – a website and the physical device. Like sensei's non-presence pronouncing on the coder's identity, the code sanctions her "[coming] of age as a number-cruncher" (Ibid.: 34), thus also symbolically confirming her cultural identity. The boundary of code erases itself in the transparency of its abstraction, rewriting cultural and physical orders differently. Yet the materiality of the phone screen, itself a reflective surface in more ways than one, is interspersed with that of other reflective surfaces that populate virtually every place in the novel, collapsing ontological boundaries and opening up impossible topologies within their depths.

Lucy's initial displacement in her reflection on the lens of the camera she is looking at through the car window, which *tells* her how she feels – as the application tells her who she is – anticipates the effect that television will have on the story's ontological structure, as if in confirmation of McLuhan's statement that ""the medium is the message" because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action" (1994: 9) and that ultimately "we become what we behold" (Ibid.: 19). For the characters in *The Sex Lives of Siamese Twins*, it can be argued that this shaping acquires multiple meanings, ranging from the literal to the symbolical. The ghost apartment that outlines the atopia hosting Lucy's and Lena's transformation and substitution conflates the two poles – here, the shaping is both physical and mental. Yet what it achieves is a replica of a larger-scale, similarly atopian space – *Bodysculpt*,

"the fake gym [Lucy] work[s] out of" (Welsh 2015: 20), "a corporate glass and pine-floored yuppie chain, […] more like a freakin daytime nightclub" (Ibid.: 29–30). It is a hybrid space, a superposition of physicality and mediation. As a gym, it serves to shape bodies according to standards not unrelated with the "precession of simulacra" mentioned above, enacting the patterns of visual appearance trafficked by TV. Yet it is "the myriad television screens […] positioned around the walls" (Ibid.: 25) that activate its potential for ontological displacement. It is here that Lucy gets to experience the multiplication of her presence across screens and channels, as she is forced to acknowledge her being positioned both in the "here" in front of them and in the manifold "there", both as observing subject and plural observed objects. The narrative discourse mediating the whole scene reinforces the displacement as the ekphrastic rendering of the moving images on various screens is intertwined with the representations of her watching. It is here, as well, that, in the televised flow across channels and screens, she acknowledges her being embedded in the serialised story of the Siamese twins, which will become the backstory of her relationship with Lena and underlie their signification practices.

While this process of identification and displacement mediated by television will constantly resurface at various points in the novel, Bodysculpt articulates further dimensions to the space of the storyworld, reduplicating the former – not by virtue of what it represents, but by its name. The allusion to sculpting inscribed in it foreshadows identification between the two protagonists. As Lena muses, "[t]he sculptor and personal trainer are both in the molding business" (Welsh 2015: 317). She views herself as "sort of an artist" which, against the cultural background of South Beach, prompts Lucy to cast her identity into doubt, as "[e]verybody in SoBe who isn't *sort of* a model or *sort of* a photographer, is *sort of* an artist" (Ibid.: 75), grounding the

very notion of subjectivity in discourse. Yet it is Lena's art that will provide part of the driving force behind the plot, as well as of the fabric of the narrative, either ekphrastically or mediated through the book of art criticism, exposing, at the same time, hybridity lying at the core of both mediation and identity. While Lucy views her work as sculpting her clients back into human form, Lena's project develops in the opposite direction. Her series of sculptures collectively called *Future Human*, are misshaped representations of human forms along a potential timeline extending into a distant, dystopian future. Variously described as "monster-men" (Ibid.: 119) or "lizard-men" (Ibid.: 120), their hybridity extends into their process of creation. She collects dead animals, strips the bones of soft tissue, then "reassembl[es] the ones of different species into [her] new skeletal structures, modifying them, giving the creatures, say, maybe longer legs" (Welsh 2015: 120). She also confesses to mixing in "anatomically correct fake bones" (Ibid.: 120). Finally, these are cast into translucent resin, which "is translucent enough just to make the bones suspended inside it visible" (Ibid.: 206).

Within the compass of their story, *The New Man*, Lena's latest creation in the series and the totalising result of their interaction, further anchors the artefact into empirical human reality, as it potentially incorporates actual human bones and becomes instrumental in validating Lena's and Lucy's emergent identities and their future safety – both financially and legally. Its own human identification is emphasised in Lena's eyes by the appearance of feelings and reflected in their son, who, in turn is the outcome of a hybrid – natural and medical – procedure in the form of artificial insemination. Combined with computer simulations in the production of the sculptures, art and code are reconciled, bridging between humanist and scientific representations, and revealing the transparency and apparent self-erasing effect of mediation. The spaces that open within its

disappearing border outline an impossible topology where languages become interchangeable surfaces and meaningful representation and materiality collapse into multiplying maps of hybrid realities for the self to be displaced onto. While intermedial approaches to literature are mostly confined to its ekphrastic dimension, the examples examined above are illustrative of the potentialities it opens against the narratives that form the cultural matrix. Both medium and object of mediation, literature affords the development of non-Cartesian topologies that allow for the imaginative exploration of the mechanisms underlying mediation and the way in which they participate in constructions of both self and reality across multiple languages and codes. Like the "invisible thingies" – ever present noise in the field of vision, continuously and invisibly filtering perception –, literary emplacement allows for the possibility of questioning the very instruments employed in both the sensorial acquisition and the representation of reality and self.

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