Retro-Victorianism and the Simulacrum of Art in Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation*

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims at exploring Will Self's novel *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002) as a postmodernist revision of Oscar Wilde's celebrated *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891). Exceptional for ones, immoral and shameful for others, *Dorian: An Imitation* fosters an intertextual relation with the late-Victorian hypotext whereby both texts are transformed out of a refractory process. Like its predecessor, Self's novel is primarily interested in aesthetic issues. In this light, my main concern consists in analysing the artistic discourses that *Dorian: An Imitation* reflects and deflects in the era of simulation. Likewise, I examine how the novel delves into the problematic relationship between "reality" and "fiction", original and simulacra. At the turn of the millennium, when virtual reality/ies are generated by computers, literature has a challenge which, in my view, Self's novel deals with. Thus, from the theories of simulation proposed by Jean Baudrillard and, to a lesser extent, Gilles Deleuze, my essay confronts *Dorian* as a valuable text: it adapts the discourse of new technologies to literary language; it goes into the postmodernist ontological crisis; and, finally, it opens up the debate of aesthetic interaction between the canon and new literatures.

In its process of re-telling, postmodernist literature has proved to be particularly interested in Victorian fiction (Hutcheon, 2006; Llewellyn, 2008; Yates, 2009). In his comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon, Christian Gutleben regrets the incapability of much of today's literature to overcome the anxiety of influence of Victorian classics (2001: 10). In his view, worthwhile revisions are cast a shadow by mere pastiches of canonical works, making thus the whole contemporary panorama rather discouraging. He closes his study suggesting that

post-postmodernist literature is essentially synchretic. For other critics, like Vera Nünning (2008: 373), it is realism and modernism that constitute the new targets of contemporary English literature, especially from the nineteen nineties onwards. Instead of postmodernist "telling", an increasing number of new novels prefer modernist "seeing" (2008: 373). Should we rebuke postmodernist writers for their anxiety of influence then, as Gutleben argues, or should we see it as a retro-movement attempting to imitate earlier forms, as Nünning suggests? In other words, is literature suffering from a lack of inventiveness that can only be solved through former referents? Is this dependence on the literary canon an asset, or a symptom of a new period of exhaustion? In my view, the problem arises from applying scientific parameters to aesthetic discourses, disregarding art's own logic. That is, the developmental Oedipal logic that critics like Harold Bloom have used to explain and theorize on the "evolution" of literature may be rather misleading. The interaction between texts is not linear, but rather complex and multidirectional. This is especially so -or at least more evident- in the case of postmodernism. The new literary discourses are made up of previous ones; however, out of this interaction between hypertexts and hypotexts, both are transformed. This is the core of the refraction theory postulated by Susana Onega and Christian Gutleben in *Refracting the Canon in Contemporary British Literature and Film* (2004). In more senses than one, Will Self's *Dorian: An Imitation* (2002) can be considered as a refractory re-creation of Oscar Wilde's masterpiece, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Moreover, it can be argued that the discourse of Self's revision of the late-Victorian classic relies on Jean Baudrillard's theory of simulation and the hyperreal, *Simulacrunm and Simulation* (1981), and, very especially, on *The Conspiracy of Art* (2005). With all this in mind, I will attempt to determine the prevailing aesthetic discourse of *Dorian: An Imitation* and its role and standpoint with respect to its main hypotext -Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*- and particularly to its own aesthetic context.

A great number of the reviews on *Dorian: An Imitation* regret the sexual and amoral explicitness of the novel. Unlike the indirectness that Wilde advocated in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, in Self's novel "there is absolutely nothing vague and indeterminate about the air of moral corruption surrounding the star of "Cathode Narcissus" [Self's hero]" (Harrison, 2003: 6). *Dorian: An Imitation* is particularly overt as concerns (homo)sexuality and drugs. For both Sophie Harrison and Bertrand Leclair, this novel comes to fill in the blanks left by Wilde, though not always for the better: "Self can indulge in all of the thrusting and fixing that his predecessor was obliged to leave out" (Harrison: 6). Likewise, Leclair points out that in Self's novel:

> On retrouve, parfois violemment actualisé par l'usage de drogues et la revendication homosexuelle qui restait dans l'original le grand secret impossible à assumer, les personages de Dorian, mais aussi de Basil Howard […], du mentor Lord Henry Wotton et de sa femme Victoria, et encore de l'infortunée Sybil Vane conduite au suicide. La fidelité à l'original va plus loin encore, puisque *À Rebours*, de Huysmans, dont le titre n'était pas cité dans l'édition de 1890 […] se retrouve cette fois à sa juste place de détonateur. (2004: 14)

It is obvious that Wilde's novella is being recast. However, I think it would be particularly problematic to assume that *Dorian: An Imitation* is putting into words what in the original

could only be hinted at, as Peter Widdowson argues (2006: 505). The intertextual relation between both texts is far more complex, and not merely re-productive, as Louisa Yates suggests (2009: 205-206). Robert Douglas-Fairhurst contends that, despite its flaws, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* maintains the equilibrium between "sharp-edged detail and soft-focus vagueness, confession and reticence" (2002: 20). However, in his view, Self's homage, parody and critical commentary on Wilde's masterpiece lacks the latter's transgressive reticence, so that:

> [*Dorian: An Imitation*] is oddly lifeless […]. Most of this lifelessness can be put down to the measured excesses of Self's style, which from the start is so mired in blood, semen and the finicky rituals of drug-taking that struggles to keep pace with Dorian's descent into a life of depravity. […] Will Self leaves so little to the reader's imagination that he also leaves too little room for his own imagination to work in. And that is a shame" (Douglas-Fairhurst, 2002: 20).

In my view, the critic's discourse is concerned with and determined both by aesthetic and moral aspects. That is, when dealing with explicitly gay texts, some critics feel particularly uncomfortable and, therefore, censor what they consider morally objectionable under the cover of aesthetic explanations. Harrison recalls -apparently with nostalgia- the words by Wilde's Lord Henry Wotton, "I have grown to love secrecy. It seems to be the one thing that can make modern life mysterious and marvellous to us". By contrast, in the critic's view, "stripped all mystery, the afterlife of Self's Dorian is strangely prosaic" (2003: 6). On the one hand, should we take Wotton's words seriously if Wilde himself aimed at parodying Decadentism and its followers? On the other hand, why should we necessarily long for the secrecy that nineteenth-century politics imposed upon society in general and artists in particular? All this said, it is debatable whether Self's novel buries its satiric and witty undertones under the excesses of the early nineteen eighties, constantly seeking provocation: "The more 'Dorian' strains to shock, the less shocking it becomes: if pornography is the oldest art, this is pornography's oldest problem. As Self's Wotton might have put it in his turn: it's a damn sight harder to *épater le bourgeois* than it used to be" (Harrison, 2003: 6). What the critic seems to overlook is the "pornographic" character of contemporary culture and literature, and Will Self seems a good practitioner. What I mean by pornographic relates, among others, to Baudrillard's concept of contemporary art, namely a precession of images that devour each other without any apparent referent (*The Conspiracy of Art*, 2005).

A particularly harsh review of *Dorian: An Imitation* is an anonymous one in *Times Online*. In the reviewer's opinion, the novel "is a shameless reworking of our most significant myth of shamelessness" (Anon., 2002). He accuses the novel of plagiarizing Wilde's novella, standardising gay culture, and trying to rouse the morally-concerned reader: "Self is a provocative reader - unless you are a bigoted, homophobic, misogynist, racist aristocrat, [*Dorian: An Imitation*] will make you sick" (2002). However, although I do not match this definition, I enjoyed reading the novel. In my view, the reviewer's politically correct stance affects his analysis of the text and his assessment of potential readers. Although *Dorian: An Imitation* deals with political issues -particularly Blairism in its twenty-page-long epilogue-, it approaches the nineteen eighties from a rather metaphysical perspective, in spite of its aforementioned explicitness. The orgy of sex and drugs the novel so aptly describes turns out

to be not only a rewriting -imitation, according to the subtitle- of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, but a sort of performance that puts forward the artificiality of the writing process and of the referent it fails to represent. In an interview by Robert Birnbaum, Self points to this and related issues. With reference to Blair's England -the actual setting of the novel-, he argues that it is a regime based on appearance rather than reality (2003: 2). In my opinion, Self's words about Blairism do not constitute so much a political criticism as an ethical and aesthetic one, which affects Western culture as a whole. Ours is a civilization living a profound ontological crisis, as *Dorian: An Imitation* shows. In fact, the novel translates the subversiveness of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* as "the tragedy of Aestheticism" into the late-twentieth-century "tragedy of appearance over reality. The tragedy of style over substance" (Birnbaum, 2003: 4). If Wilde's novel was a parody of Decadentism, Self's rewriting constitutes an exploration of the limits of simulacra.

The plot of *Dorian: An Imitation* unfolds between 1980 and 1997, coinciding with the span of Princess Diana's public life. In fact, she constitutes a leitmotif -rather than Blairism itself- that cyclically appears along the novel, especially whenever something outstanding happens to the protagonist. That is, although the novel satirizes new Labourism and its practitioners, its tempo is marked by Diana and all her imagery or simulacra. Likewise, Self argues:

> The Dorian Grays of today are Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman. These are the celluloid imagoes who dominate not only Hollywood […], but actually dominate the psyche of people in a very powerful way. They are the people whose images do not age. And therefore people take [them] to be as kind of totems of our culture's values. I think Wilde saw that. He not only saw that, I believe he actually understood that a kind of liberated homosexual culture would be in the vanguard of that movement. (in Birnbaum, 2003: 4)

Self not only points to the postmodernist ontological crisis -as described by Baudrillard's "precession of simulacra" and Warhol's series[1]- , but to the active role of gays in it. Baudrillard's semiotic theories on simulation and simulacra developed in *Simulacrum and Simulation* (1981) deconstruct the classic referentiality of signs. Signs do not have a "real" referent, since they can only interact with and make reference to other signs in a self-comprehensive relational system. In this light, rather than talking about the "real", Baudrillard speaks of the "hyperreal", a term which discards the traditional concept of referentiality, and exists within the parameters of simulation. Baudrillard's theory was revolutionary, yet deeply rooted in the Western dualistic philosophical tradition from Plato to Nietzsche, which postulates a superior level of existence and conscience. After the loss of faith in transcendence brought about in the Enlightenment, the only thing that remains is a sense of regret and loss as far as "the real" remains unreachable. Only metaphysics seems able to catch a glimpse of Absolute Truth, albeit mediated and distorted by language. Briefly stated, for Baudrillard, behind a web of signs in which we are irremediable trapped, there lies a deep, true ontology. Besides dualistic philosophy, Baudrillard's theory is also connected with deconstructivism. More concretely, his unstable, fluid concept of "the real" matches the anti-identitarian logic of queer criticism. Self's words are meaningful in this sense. Queer and gay culture has been in the vanguard of postmodernism and its aesthetic practices of deconstruction.

Impersonation, camp and performance form part of gays' subversive procedures. I do not mean that gay culture is superficial; it is rather that gays have been forced to make a stand from the surface. Gayness is a cultural label and as such it has been constructed out of texts and images. Thus, the game of signs and images arranged in layers, which Baudrillard applies to a whole culture, was previously a gay territory.

If there is a gay literary icon, this is *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. The impact of Wilde's personal life -particularly his imprisonment for homosexuality- has been so extraordinary that same-sex desire and its literary representations have ever since been Wildean in one sense or another. Self's novel is paradigmatic in this respect. The writer himself has declared having suffered "not simply an anxiety of influence but a neurosis of influence" (in Birnbaum, 2003: 6) while imitating such a complex work. As Neil Bartlett implicitly suggests in his review of the novel, Self's subtitle, "an imitation", is aptly chosen:

> The locations, characters, plot, epigrams are all transposed from the 1890s to the 1990s, chapter by inexorable chapter. […] The original's picture, a Sarget-via-Whistler oil painting, becomes a Viola-via-Warhol video installation. Dorian's first victim, a teenage Whitechapel actress called Sybill, becomes the teenage Soho rentboy called Herman, his suicidal overdose of heroin doing duty for her prussic acid. Henry Wotton, Wilde's vitriolic, magisterially affected, blackly camp Chelsea queen of ceremonies, becomes … well, Henry Wotton […] proof that nothing much about London haute queenery, its sexual tastes or its parasitic relationship with the upper classes, has changed. (2002: 2)

Dorian Gray's myth, almost as old as literature itself, is thus recast once again. However, despite its faithfulness to the original, the concept of imitation in Self's novel has nothing to do with plagiarism. It is rather a Baudrellarian, post-realist text that, as Madelena Gonzalez argues, takes contemporary aesthetics to its limits (2008). Moreover, following the logic of "refraction theory", *The Picture of Dorian Gray* cannot be read in the same way after reading *Dorian: An Imitation*, and vice versa. The concept of imitation is not so simple and can no longer be considered unidirectional.

Imitation? Whose Imitation?

The OED defines simulacrum as: "a. a material image, made as a representation of a deity, person, or thing; b. something having merely the form or appearance of a certain thing, without possessing its substance or proper qualities; c. a mere image, a specious imitation or likeness of something." Simulation, a concept also used by Baudrillard, is closely connected to the former, with the difference that, whereas simulacrum is rather static, an image, simulation makes reference to a process. In practical terms, the latter has been particularly useful, technologically applicable. By contrast, the use of simulacra has been virtually limited to aesthetic practices, especially Warholian Pop Art, and "the theoretical field" (Sandoz, 2003: 3). In my view, the constant, fast movement of *Dorian*'s imagery breaks the subtle difference between both concepts. Self's novel belongs to a group of technologically-influenced, post-realist novels (Gonzalez, 2008: 117), which take postmodernist fiction to its limits. The

imagery of the novel is changeable, with metamorphosing characters and settings, so that any ontological barrier is broken in a pornography of images: violent sex, drug-use and technology are ever-present. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* focuses on the protagonist's portrait, a supernatural object, an image which imitates or has the appearance, though not the substance, of something else. *Dorian: An Imitation* is midway between simulacrum and simulation. Its images are active and aim at interacting with the reader differently. The novel demands from the reader some involvement and responsibility. He is exposed to "the insincerity of the copy and the poetics of consumption" (118). That is, in the technological, cybernetic era, fiction must re-articulate its discourse to render testimony to and survive the new forms of representation. In this light, *Dorian: An Imitation* takes the post-realist devices of postmodernism to the extreme, even against themselves. The postmodernist questioning of the medium is here patent in the novel's specularity. Once we learn that most of the novel is just a *roman à clef* envisaged by Lord Henry Wotton, the specular character of the novel -as a faithful imitation of its Wildean hypotext- becomes more complex. This "layering and *mise en abyme* is typical of the technological sophistication of [this writer]" (118). As Wotton himself argues: "We're all inventions of one sort or another" (Self, 2003: 276). In the cybernetic age the oil painting of Wilde's novella turns into a video installation, which reproduces the image of a campy Dorian,

> Baz's attention was wholly caught by the first monitor which zigged and zagged into life. it showed the naked figure of a beautiful young man, posed like a classical Greek kouros: one hand lightly on hip, the other trailing in groin […]. A naked figure that turned to face the viewer as the camera zoomed in. […] The sensation imparted as all nine monitors came to life was of the most intense, carnivorous, predatory voyeurism. (12)

The virtual world of *Cathode Narcissus*, the video installation, interacts with its "real" original in unexpected ways, demanding, as I mentioned before, a readjustment in representational practices. Like Lady Di's photographs and videos, *Cathode Narcissus* lives parasitically on the person represented, namely Dorian. However, this Dorian is just Lord Wotton's own fictional creation of the "actual" Dorian, the gay-proud entrepreneur described in the epilogue. In other words, fiction resorts to the possibilities allowed by new technologies to put to the test its own aesthetic limits. The individuation process of Dorian -the "real" one, itself an "imitation" -or should I say simulacrum- of Wilde's character, and the second, Wotton's creation - runs parallel to Lady Di's - in its turn a media-constructed one. As Sandoz points out, recalling Camille, simulacrum "is a deviation and a perversion of imitation itself, a false likeness" (3). In other words, it "uses our experience of reality against us, creating a false likeness that reproduces so exactly our visual experience with the real that we cannot discern the falseness of the imitation" (3). This is what happens with Dorian and his video installation. This blurring of ontological boundaries that technology fosters necessarily involves the reader who, as Gonzalez argues (2008: 119), must be conscious of and witnesses to the(ir) act of looking. Like the television spectator and the internet user, the reader of this novel is saturated with images and simulacra that constantly make us complicit with the representational process. However, all this is rather problematic in artistic terms, for what is the aesthetic and ethical ground of an art that merely reproduces images *ad nauseam*? As Baz

answers Dorian, *Cathode Narcisssus* can be reproduced once and again through different media. Is it an infinite process of refraction where different texts re-produce each other? Is it that, as Gonzalez points out, "watching itself becomes the single most significant act of the twenty-first-century post-reality" (121)?

Art? The Art of Vacuity?

In *Dorian: An Imitation* Baz Hallward works for Andy Warhol, the father of artistic hyperrealism. However, the novel is rather critical of the movement. As Baz himself argues: "The fucking medium is dead. Fuck, it was born decadent, like all the rest of conceptual art. First it was Nauman, then Viola and me, now it's finished" (13). In spite of Baz's censure, is the novel doing what it questions? I think so, since it falls prey to the pornography of images fostered by Warhol and his peers. The novel constitutes a permanent prostitution of the image in the name of the word. For Baudrillard, much contemporary art just "adds the same to the same *ad infinitum*" (2005: 118). In other words, it lacks the double pulse required of any art, classic or contemporary, "an impulse to annihilate, to erase all traces of the world and reality, and the contrary resistance to this impulse […] The artist is the one who resists with all his strength the fundamental impulse to leave no traces" (118). Self's novel fulfills Baudrillard's concept of art: against the contemporary pulse to annihilation fostered by Baz and his friends, the novel aims at transcending the vacuum of meaning by involving the reader emotionally and by questioning the medium.

Baudrillard's words recall Plato's and, particularly, Nietzsche's outlook on the function of art. For the French philosopher, the original illusion of art -once inextricably linked to "the real"- has passed away, and a complex game of shallow images has arisen instead:

> Images have entered things. Images are no longer the mirror of reality, they have invested the heart of reality and transformed it into hyperreality where, from screen to screen, the only aim of he image is the image. The image can no longer imagine the real because it is real; it can no longer transcend reality, transfigure it or dream it, since images are virtual reality. It is as if things had swallowed their mirror. (2005: 120)

Briefly stated, Baudrillard is rather nostalgic of former times, regretting the centripetal, self-referential and phagocytic character of contemporary art. According to him, only Warhol can be exempted from this aesthetic crisis dominated by the new technologies and the fetishism of advertising (41). However, Baudrillard cannot help closing by recalling the Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Twilight of the Idols*. The German philosopher is not only mentioned, his ideas are crucial to understand the fact that for Baudrillard, art and aesthetics constitute strategies to control and sublimate the primal illusion. Thus, when cultural simulacra (like Western art) collapse, a return to pre-aesthetic forms may occur: "A certain primitive scene of illusion where we return to the inhuman rituals and phantasmagoria of the cultures preceding our own" (129).

Dorian: An Imitation is, among other things, a revision between true and false, real and imaginary, thus validating Baudrillard's simulation theory. Art is virtually dead, and New

York and London are peopled by clones of Dorian (92). The novel as a whole and *Cathode Narcissus*, its *mise en abyme* and main simulacrum, work as signs do according to Baudrillard. As Sandoz points out: "The simulation […] brings us into a circular world in which the sign is not exchanged for meaning, but merely for another sign" (2003: 3). Just like the different characters in *Dorian: An Imitation* stand for those in Wilde's novella, the *roman à clef* (that we learn is), written by Lord Henry, fictionalises the already-fictional characters of Self's novel. Likewise, the *roman* devours the "real" Diana as a symbolic referent within and outside the text. Dismembered into her images, the princess has become a postmodernist specimen, a Baudrillardian apotheosis, a queer object of study,[2] and the thread of Self's novel. Like Dorian's images, hers have been reproduced to such an extent that they have swallowed the original behind. When she marries the Prince of Wales at Saint Paul (64), Dorian and his friends watch the scene on TV while they participate in an orgy of drugs and sex, which closes "as a conga line of buggery" (68). The exchange of rings at Saint Paul is parodied and given a new meaning when overlapped with "the sodomites' queue […], perfect for viral propagation [and] a strange blending of the essences of the five men" (67 and 68). Like the Royal wedding, the orgy follows a ritualistic pattern, pure performance conducted with "professional precision" (66). In the end, going on with the overlapping of sequences, the screens turn from the wedding to *Cathode Narcissus*. Reality and fiction are thus mixed up and questioned. Dorian tries to find "reality" on the screen, yet to no avail since "closer and closer he drew, until all he could see were lines of dots leading into the future" (70). The hero's gesture points to the precarious nature of representation: the screen is deconstructed to its most basic components, thus showing both the power and fragility of technology and its allied artistic language.

    With the outburst of AIDS the Princess became even more popular, performing the role of benefactress with the victims. In an acid, ironic tone, the already infected Lord Wotton recalls Lady Di's publicized visit to Broderip ward. Thanks to his terrible affliction, the character is paradoxically saved from "having to kowtow to Princes Nightingale and her fat Yank friend [Barbara Bush], or, worse, give her the opportunity to rock me in her arms like that poor fool next door" (80). While AIDS spreads through the world, Wotton's Dorian keeps young and beautiful, like his Wildean predecessor. The narrator shows the contradiction very graphically: "They say HIV may have been present for years in the West, and that it was this ever lengthening conga line of sodomy -with jet travel connecting cock from San Francisco with asshole in NYC with asshole in London - that allowed her to get out of control." (95). In the middle of this health and moral crisis worldwide, the hero closes his *Bildungsroman*, from "Ingénue to Omnivore" (Mallon, 2003). He not only participates in all sorts of wild, transgressive sex, he also commits a violent crime (96). In spite of crises or adverse circumstances, both Dorian and Lady Di seem unscathed, cultural totems, unchangeable as their images. They are postmodernist creations, ever performing themselves and, therefore, putting to the test ontological boundaries. As Wotton argues:

> He [Dorian] has developed a particular affinity with Thickie Spencer, because like her he's a psychological parvenu. After all, both of them have bona fides aplenty to be themselves in the *beau monde*, yet they prefer to act. They find acting so much more *real* than reality. (108)

The much discussed and deconstructed concepts of identity and reality are particularly questionable with these two characters, a fictional and a "real" one. Dorian was originally Wilde's experiment. In Self's novel, the character becomes a polymorphous, double-layered being who can metamorphose endlessly, taking identity politics to the limit: "Dorian was the mother of all mothers, showing us how to give birth to our own images" (129). Likewise, Wotton, his Pygmalion and creator, continues with his post-identitarian discourse:

> Remember, Dorian can be whatever you want him to be -a punk or a parvenu, a dodgy geezer or a doting courtier, a witty for or a city yuppy. I tell you, Baz, the eighties was Dorian's decade - he revelled in every opportunity that London offered him to assume an imposture. Sometimes I think […] that it is Dorian who's the true retrovirus. Because throughout everything, his true self has remained inviolate (108).

Baudrillard and Deleuze

As mentioned above, Baudrillard seems to regret the loss of an original, the mere game of images that characterises contemporary art. By contrast, for Gilles Deleuze, this is not necessarily bad news. In his view, as Sandoz points out, "the impending death of the real can reveal new possibilities of interpretation in a critical realm where sensation is the focus instead of meaning. Signs are not about the communication of meaning but rather about the learning of the affects, perceptions and sensations to which we are subject" (518)" (4). In my view, although Self's novel owes a lot to Baudrillard, it is also indebted to Deleuze's concept of simulacrum. Even though Deleuze -together with Felix Guattari- do not carry out a systematic analysis of this concept, "a theory of simulation can be extracted from their work" (Massumi, 1987: 1), particularly in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980). Against Baudrillard's nostalgic and whining outlook on simulation and representation, they undertake a rather positive one. First of all, they contend that copy and simulacrum are utterly different. While copy always remains inextricably linked to its model for signification, the simulacrum "bears only an external and deceptive resemblance to a putative model, its resemblance to it is merely a surface effect, an illusion" (Massumi, 1987: 2). In other words, the simulacrum has a nature and a logic of its own. What is at stake (and where the conflict stems from) is whether simulation stands for a deep reality -as Baudrillard suggests- or it is self-sufficient. According to Massumi, "Deleuze and Guattari say yes to both" (3). For them, the problem is not so much the dichotomy between the real and the imaginary as how to overcome representation. With this aim, they devise the concept of "becoming", whereby "an all-invasive positive simulation can turn back against the grid of resemblance and replication and overturn it for a new earth (Massumi, 5). Simultaneously utopian and dystopian, Deleuze's and Guattari's project attempts to break with the slavery of classic representation. They break with paralysing nostalgia, which they transform into "a glimmer of possibility. Against cynicism, a thin but fabulous hope of ourselves becoming realer than real in a monstrous contagion of our own making" (Massumi, 6). Likewise, Sandoz argues:

The simulacrum is not a degraded copy. It harbours a positive power which denies the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction … There is no longer any privileged point of view except that of the object common to all points of view. The simulation changes the way we view a work of art or experience a sensation, disposing with an earlier hierarchy that valued the original work highest, and what we are left with is exactly what Plato commented, a system in which the viewer and his manipulation become more important than any underlying ideas (1987: 4-5).

All this said, the presence of Baudrillard materialises in chapter 11. An exchange between Baz and Fergus -an upper-class, cynical queen- at the Wottons' is particularly remarkable. Fergus' Baudrillardian outlook, whereby AIDS is "non-existent" as far as it is deferred (and therefore only approachable through) linguistic signs, is inassimilable and ethically irresponsible for the painter:

- "I'm dying, Fergus, just like Henry, and I've no time left for being stoned."
"Ah yes, Baz, but you've always insisted on calling a spade a spade, so it's no wonder that you've managed to dig your own grave."
"Are you suggesting it's my literalism that's killing me rather than AIDS?" […]
"I wouldn't know," the Ferret snuffled; "I haven't qualifications in either philosophy or medicine."
(138)

However, the most ethically polemic Baudrillard finds a voice in the hero. Parallel to the exchange between Fergus and Baz, Dorian exposes his theory on the Gulf War to Hester Wharton, another of the guests at the Wottons':

"Of course", he drawled, "the Gulf war never really happened …"
"What the hell d'you mean?" […]
"I mean that the Gulf War didn't happen". Dorian held up his hands and began telling off the fictions on his manicured fingers. "There was no invasion of Kuwait, no tense standoff, no coalition–building, no Scuds falling on Tel Aviv, no bombs smartly singling out Ba'athist apparatchiks in Baghdad, no refugees on the Jordanian border, no Republican guards buried on the Basra road, no Schwarzkopf, no dummkops, no tortured RAF pilots, no victory, none of it. No Gulf War. Can I make myself clearer?"
"I bet you wouldn't say that," she said, "if it was one of your kids who'd died in the Allied bombing […]. Like all liberals, she had a goat-like ability to gain the high moral ground of other people's suffering.
"Do you know anyone who lost a kid in the war?" […]
"Uh - no, but that doesn't mean it didn't happen."
"D'you know anyone who knows anyone else who lost someone in the war?"
"Ferchrissakes"
"For anyone's sake. Look, the point is, Mrs Hall, you may well be at more than six degrees of separation from this "conflict", and that means it barely exists at all so far as you're concerned."
[…]
"If one doesn't talk about a thing it never happened. It's simply expression -Henry says- that gives reality to things" (143-144)

I have quoted extensively from the novel because there are several remarkable aspects in

Dorian's discourse and, to some extent, in his interlocutor's replies. Humour is the novel's recurrent strategy to confront candent topics, as the quote above proves. Baudrillard's well-known articles on the non-existence of the Gulf War[3] are here ridiculed. In fact, only a frivolous, narcissistic character like Dorian can recall and take them literally. Yet, the conversation is not so simple. Mrs Hall's ethical discourse is understandable and reasonable: as a matter of fact, many people died in the war, and Dorian only speaks from the point of view of the privileged unaffected spectator from the West. Nevertheless, the narrator censors her ethically-committed stance as mere political interests and political correctness. In this light, the criticism of Baudrillard's theory -via Dorian- is ambivalent. On the one hand, the philosopher's outlook may sound ridiculous, at odds with reality: knowing nobody who knows nobody who has been a victim does not mean that the war did not take place. The deferral of "victimhood" is just Dorian's witty re-articulation of Baudrillard's simulacrum theory to defend his view. On the other, the protagonist's cynicism can be considered meaningful: Mrs Hall's total empathy with the victims may be an ethically-dangerous stance, since it is tantamount to identifying with the victims themselves. We experience by proxy, but it does not mean that witnessing and living are equivalent.

Dorian: An Imitation works like a screen which reflects and projects images simultaneously. What is at stake is what lies behind the screen: is there a reality behind these images which has been lost for ever and, therefore, this narrative screen can just regret its loss as a simulacrum? Or is the reality of the simulacrum the only reality conceivable, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest in *A Thousand Plateaus*? In this light, drawing on these critics, Massumi points out: "What they offer […] is a logic capable of grasping Baudrillard's failing world of representation as an effective illusion the demise of which opens a glimmer of possibility. Against cynicism, a thin but fabulous hope of ourselves becoming realer than real in a monstrous contagion of our making" (6). Despite this optimism, whereby *Dorian: An Imitation* opens up new ways of articulation in the cybernetic era, it also presents apocalyptic undertones, as Marie-Noëlle Zeender argues (2008: 76). The new Dorian's London is as putrid as that of Wilde's, though Self's novel is particularly explicit about and fascinated with the abject. According to Zeender, "London, drugs and sex are inseparable in the world of Dorian, together with gayness and of course conceptual art" (70). As mentioned above, although everything apparently remains the same after a century, if looked in detail, everything has changed a great deal. Wilde's sublimated discourse is now multifariously pornographic; AIDS has made its appearance, and gay sex and identity can no longer be the same; at the same time, art, avant-gardisms and, particularly technology have transformed the whole panorama. Basil's static painting becomes Baz's video-installation, whose screens stay alert to swallow and vomit all kinds of images. Wilde's subversive discourse set the bases for a cultural transformation which Self's novel culminates and bears witness to. Arranged as a triptych, its three parts, namely "Recordings", "Transmission" and "Network", are utterly significant, since they recall the artistic process in the technological era. Firstly, images or data are stored, in order to be transmitted later and eventually become part of a universal web. This is the manufacturing process of *Cathode Narcissus* and, indirectly, of its "real" referent, Dorian. The art installation can be recorded *en abyme* and becomes a web-page in the epilogue of the novel. Art and life interact once and again so that finally Dorian is accused of "treating

his life as an artwork" (196). Like art, Dorian is but an artefact, a polyreferential simulacrum, comparable to the Narcissi on the screens, or Wilde's character and his portrait. Both artistic devices eventually rot, somatising the corruption of the protagonists reflected on them. However, Self's novel surpasses its hypotext as concerns explicitness and irony. Its visual language -derived from technology, albeit adapted to the novel- recalls that of films like *American Psycho* rather than Wilde's novella. Technology allows Self a discourse that Wilde had no access to. Dorian is made up of many fragments, signs that interact with each other in the circuits where *Cathode Narcissus* is available (264, 270). Therefore, the different plot lines and identities are superimposed just as windows do on computer screens, images on TV, or viruses among sexual partners: "Performing in excess of a thousand HIV impregnations had given Dorian the forensic attitude of a virologist injecting an attenuated virus into experimental cohorts" (231). In this light, the act of "becoming" claimed by Deleuze and Guattari makes full sense, particularly in the epilogue of the novel. When in this twenty-page afterword, we learn that all we have read so far is just Wotton's *roman à clef* based on the "real Dorian", the ontological boundaries are definitely blurred. Is Lord Wotton able to construct a realer Dorian than the real one? Talking to Dorian, his mentor argues: "It's true that you're the spirit of the age, but it's drunk so much of you it's become cirrhotic" (243). That is, Dorian's excesses reflect and deflect the contemporary excess of reality, especially in the field of art.

As far as the novel plays on different layers of meaning and plot lines, Dorian must die twice. Thus, closure itself is questioned. As Zeender points out, his first death "is rather similar to the death of the original Dorian" (2008: 74). He sits in front of the video installation, "cross-legged and stares at Dorian staring at him" (252). This narcissistic split -a classic in gay literature- matches here the novel's fragmented discourse: is Dorian the one who looks? Or is he looked at? After a few days of sitting and staring, "Dorian got the switchblade out and opened it. It was the one he'd used to kill the creator […]. No don't! The ninth *Narcissus* begged […]. He backed away into a corner of his screen, looking pitifully vulnerable […]. Dorian chose this moment to lunge straight at the screen" (252). Thus, newly subverting the boundaries between reality and appearance, Dorian kills his *alter egos* and, therefore, himself. However, Self's novel introduces a second death, "more contemporaneous, farcical and confused" (Zeender, 75), to close the epilogue. The last section of the novel introduces the third Dorian -after Wilde's and Wotton's- , a hyperrealistic gay businessman in the era of Blair: he embodies the "gentle" capitalism that replaced Thatcher's Victorian neo-liberalism during the nineteen nineties. Healthy, successful -he runs an important magazine with "chutzpah, flair, and a capacity for almost limitless hard work" (262)- , and unprejudiced, "he liked to imagine that every member of the Gray Organization […] was valued for him- or herself" (262), he is no longer a dandy, but a metrosexual gay who is part and parcel of voracious capitalism. That is, in spite of appearances, the third, "true" Dorian constitutes the living proof of how capitalism can swallow any human type for its own purposes under the new Labour movement.

As the epilogue advances, its satiric discourse increasingly reveals how close Dorian is to Wotton's fictionalization. Like Huynsman's *À Rebours*, which poisons Wilde's (2007: 180) and Wotton's heroes, Wotton's own *roman à clef* necessarily disturbs its targeted reader,

namely Dorian himself. Thus, in a conversation with Wotton's widow, the protagonist complains about the novel's alleged unrealism: "He's taken colossal liberties with the truth" (259). Just as his predecessors did with the portrait and the video installation, the new Dorian locks the book in the attic room, though he feels a relentless desire to have a look at it (269). In fact, he is henceforth overwhelmed by the spectre of Wotton's Voice -itself a simulacrum of the book-, as well as by the spectre of his own conscience, since reality and fiction are closer to each other than he pretends. Wotton's novel describes Dorian as "completely vapid as well as murderous. A ludicrous, narcissistic pretty boy, with nothing on his mind but sex and sadism […], selfish and egotistical" (259). Ironically, the hero confirms a great deal of his dead friend's words hereafter. He puts the blame on Wotton's self-hatred (263) and his wife's envy, "only another nouveau riche Jew after all" (261), for his distorted biography. However, Dorian gives himself away in a free indirect speech in the third person: "Yes, he had modelled for a few years, but so what? He'd also had the guts to add to his Oxford degree with a course in graphic design at the London College of Printing […]. Henry couldn't abide the fact that he is genuinely stylish [and his] continued good health in the face of his own gradual decline" (263). These words exude fear, hatred and vanity, just as his biography claims. His allegedly moralistic discourse -which he considers compatible with gay narcissism (260)- crashes with his harsh attacks on Wotton, a sort of *alter ego* he cannot get rid of. Like his predecessors, the "real" Dorian feels trapped under the shadow of his own simulacrum, of his own self. Both protagonists are somehow connected by the *roman à clef*, "no wonder Henry accused Dorian of killing Basil Hallward, because that's exactly what he felt himself guilty of" (263). Paradoxically, the more Dorian accuses his mentor of projecting his crises and deeds on him, the closer he feels to him. Thus, Wotton's "Voice" becomes a presence which coalesces with his own, so that the hero even wonders: "But how much of what Dorian had said had been the Voice's words?" (268). This symbiotic process turns, in the Voice's words, "unheimlich" (268) or uncanny. Henceforth, Dorian's process of self-integration with Wotton mixes up with the satire on Blairism.

According to Massumi, David Cronenberg's film *The Fly* constitutes a good (albeit failed) example of Deleuze's double becoming (1987: 5). The film tells the story of Brundle, a scientist who "accidentally splices himself with a fly as he is experimenting with a machine that can dematerialise objects and transport them instantly to any chosen location, in defiance of gravity and Newtonian physics generally" (5). However, Massumi goes on, "Brundle does not so much become fly, nor the fly human. Rather, certain properties or potential of both combine in a new and monstrous amalgamation" (5). The critic states:

> Deleuze and Guattari are not suggesting that people can or should "objectively" become insects. It is a question of extracting and combining potentials, which they define as abstract relations of movement and rest, abilities to affect and be affected: abstract yet real. The idea is to build our own transporting machine and use it to get a relay going and keep it going, creating ever greater and more powerful amalgamations and spreading them like a contagion until they infect every identity across the land and the point is reached where a now all-invasive positive simulation can turn back against the grid of resemblance and replication and overturn it for a new earth. (5)

In my view, Deleuze and Guattari are rather utopian, claiming on the artist's revolutionary

potential. However, fiction can approach their view, and try to do what they claim. Dorian is increasingly mixed with the phantom of his friend and creator. The Voice of Wotton uncannily controls Dorian so that "the spiral becomes tighter and its angle steeper" (Self, 2002: 272). The hero loses his own artificial identity and loses himself "in the throng of his *alter egos*" (272) for, as Wotton's Voice reminds him, "you're completely interchangeable: cocks, arseholes, jeans, brains" (272). Whether be it at Vauxhall or on the screens of Baz's masterwork, Dorian invariably turns out to be a simulacrum, replaceable by others. Similarly, Labour's "gentle" version of capitalism can only show off the artificiality of "being" and art's role in its (re-)articulation: that is, both individuals and art are performative processes, mere consuming and consumable objects like Warhol's series. In the end, Dorian's role as Blairite successful businessman, "busy, busy, busy", as the narrator repeats, turns out to be just a hyperrealistic product which must necessarily explode. Inevitably, the hero's death is linked to that of Lady Di, the Patron Saint of British hyperrealism and simulation. When the screens show the images immediately after the accident in Paris -already part of popular imagery-Dorian feels deeply connected. He shares the simulation nature of these images, as Wotton's Voice reminds him: "This is one of those public events that confirms that history is nothing more or less than the confused wet dream of a humanity yoked to its own adolescent erotic fantasies" (274). The images of Lady Di's burial run parallel to Dorian's final delirium and collapse. He is also a sign of the times, when signs no longer have a meaning in themselves, but only when they interact with each other.

On the verge of death, when one of the screens of *Cathode Narcissus* disappears, we learn about Dorian's implication in Baz's death. The hero "had a moment of clarity in the chaos - Campbell must have taken one the night they got rid of Baz's corpse" (275). At this point, the reader is assailed by the question of whether Wotton's is a *roman à clef* or a realistic one. Does it tell the truth -whatever that is- about Dorian? It seems that Wotton's *roman à clef* is not as false as the hero claims. However, we never know for sure, since the novel just plays with possibilities. As Wotton vouchsafes, "we're all inventions of one sort or another" (276). The novel displays various ontological levels: the real ontology of the Blairite Dorian and his demised friend, Lord Henry, and author of a novel, which coincides with the fictional story we have read before the epilogue. In its turn, Lord Wotton's posthumous *roman à clef* echoes Wilde's famous masterpiece. This specular, ontological arrangement proves the possibilities of narrative when working together with new technological media. Thus, with a double process of becoming, whereby Wotton and Dorian constitute signs operating at different ontological and narrative levels, the novel comes to an end. Echoing Cronenberg's *The Fly*, both characters fuse in an uncanny scene that takes us away from "real" Britain and re-writes the hero's former death and that of Dorian in Wilde's novella:

> Dorian realised that Henry had metamorphosed back into being Ginger [a friend of Dorian's first victim], and that the walk over from Kensington Palace, far from being an amiable stroll, had been more in the manner of a forcible abduction. But by now he was also coming to terms with the fact that the beautiful new tie Ginger had just given him with his knife was a warm, sticky, fluid thing, and hardly likely to remain fashionable for very long at all. (278)

Conclusion

In his well-known preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde argued that "there is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well written, or badly written. That is all. […] The morality of art consists in the perfect use of an imperfect medium" (2007: 3). To what an extent can Wilde's foreword be applied to its imitation/simulacrum more than one hundred years later? Wilde's Dorian accuses his mentor of corrupting him: "You poisoned me with a book once" (2007: 180), to which Wotton answers: "Art has no influence upon action. It annihilates the desire to act. It is superbly sterile. The books that the world calls immoral are books that show the world its own shame" (180). Huynsman's *À Rebours* is the book they talk about, and also "the corrupting gift" (Mallon, 2003: 6) that Self's Wotton hands over to the new Dorian. The transmission of moral decadence through a book -the same one in the span of a century- continues being operative. In fact, as Mallon (2003: 6) has pointed out: "Moral decay is something Self has not been embarrassed to say he's bothered by. He has written of his belief in evil as something resident in the world and our natures". Whether Self is concerned or not with moral debauchery, and how to correct it, is not the matter of this essay. What is at stake, as I hope to have shown, is how *Dorian: An Imitation* deals with artistic language in the cybernetic era, without forgetting the aesthetics of its hypotext. As a matter of fact, Self's novel tackles moral issues, particularly those derived from the political masquerade of Blairism and its acolytes. However, I contend that it is the complexity of the medium that mainly matters. Therefore, does the morality of art still consist in the perfect use of an imperfect medium, as Wilde suggests? Although for some critics, *Dorian: An Imitation* is too explicit and excessive, the novel is aesthetically flawless, thus confirming Wilde's dictum. It is a specular artefact that arranges the story of Dorian Gray in two layers, in turn reflecting the Victorian original by Wilde. This three-levelled arrangement questions the existence of ontological boundaries between reality and fiction, between realities and between fictions. Nothing seems to be more real or false than anything else. In the orgy of signs that characterises cybernetic language and *Dorian: An Imitation*, it is rather difficult to spot what is original and what is a simulacrum. Thus, instead of regretting the loss of referents, as Baudrillard apparently does, the novel displays a Deleuzean outlook on reality whereby no (classic) hierarchy holds. This does not mean that *Dorian: An Imitation* cannot point to the moral and ethical contradictions and responsibilities of neo-liberalism, as it does with Blair's Britain. However, what is significant here is that, like Warhol's series or the signs on a computer screen, narratives (and texts in general) refer to each other, thus questioning the medium. Art is autonomous, yet not uninvolved in "reality". That is why Self's novel allows us to interrogate the medium, but also ourselves, always in the process of becoming.

Notes

    1. Warhol's art constituted a victory of late-capitalism over art, or vice versa, as far as mass production could be the target of artistic practices. He was not the first one; Italian futurism, for instance, had already searched for artistic beauty in machines. However, Warhol became the greatest

exponent of this aesthetic philosophy. Soup cans or images of Marilyn Monroe could be reproduced *ad nauseam* as consumable, yet artistic products.

2. When Baz emigrates to the USA in search of fame, he works for Warhol for some time. However, most of his New York experiences are frustrating. He merely survives out of three drag queens' charity, "Desirée, Little Rhea and Lady Di, respectively a rangy Southerner, a Brooklyn Jew and a black kid from Chicago projects" (84). As concerns the latter, Baz points out: "I learned the secrets of assembling […] our very own princess of Wales. Not that this Lady Di had ever even heard of Wales; all she knew was the schick worked" (84). Briefly stated, Lady Di has become an icon of femininity that is deconstructed by transvestites into gender performances. Likewise, she is the paradigm of simulacrum as far as her role has been totally displaced from her "real identity". In fact, she has become her main impersonator: there is no longer a "real" referent, but an avalanche of signs that can be consumed at will. Thus, a black guy in the USA can impersonate Lady Di without even knowing her or the place she comes from.

3. Baudrillard produced a number of articles dealing with the Gulf War as a media product. The last of this polemic series ended up with *La Guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu* (1991).

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