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### Digital textuality and the Québécois novel: transposition, amplification, parody

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#### Abstract

The textual forms that digital wireless devices allow to exchange occupy an increasingly important place in the contemporary imagination. There are also many traces of this trend in Quebec literary production. This is the case of the novel *Document 1* by François Blais, in which, on the one hand, the contacts of the protagonists with the rest of the world rely on the use of digital devices, and where, on the other hand, the web becomes the space of a virtual trip, lived through a computer screen.

#### Keywords

amplification, digital textualities, Google, parody, Quebec novel, road novel, transposition

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#### Full text (PDF file)

The textual forms that digital devices allow are taking up an increasingly large amount of space in the contemporary imagination; in recent years, they have invaded film, theatre and literature. This trend has become very common in Québécois literature in the past decade. Emails, text messages, Facebook statuses and comments, tweets and blog entries are regularly transposed into the narrative of novels and short stories. What's more, any contact that protagonists have with their friends, family and the outside world in many cases, is systematically on a mobile phone, tablet or computer (amplification). In some cases, virtual journeys take place on the Internet and are experienced through a computer screen or maintained with information taken from a screen. As we have shown, the opening up of literature to digital textuality happens in

two ways. Fragments of digital text (social networks, blogs, emails, etc.) are at times inserted into the narrative in order to add tension and move the plot along to its crucial point. This is the case, among others, in the two latest thrillers from the Quebecois novelist Jean-Jacques Pelletier: *Dix petits hommes blancs* (2014) and *Machine God* (2015)<sup>1</sup> that we presented at a conference on contemporary storytelling in Montreal, in the Spring of 2016.<sup>2</sup> In terms of content, digital textuality seems to contribute to new representations of social contact in fiction and highlights the manner in which connections are formed between characters, while at the same time helping to better define them. Notable examples are email novels, which are still rare in the Quebecois canon,<sup>3</sup> but are increasingly common in the United States and Europe,<sup>4</sup> and novels that are categorised as “chick lit,” that tend to feature female characters with messy love lives,<sup>5</sup> to virtual diaries like in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* de Jennifer Egan, that includes an entire chapter of a 12-year old girl’s diary in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, complete with diagrams and schema, and where digital devices are a tool that helps her to tell her story.<sup>6</sup>

## A virtual travelogue

However, there is another example, illustrated by François Blais’ novel, *Document 1*, that was published in 2012 by Éditions L’Instant Même.<sup>7</sup> In *Document 1*, the plot is not moved forward by fragments of text from digital devices, as is often the case in spy novels for example, neither do the characters communicate exclusively through virtual platforms, as in recent variations of the epistolary novel. In fact, the Internet itself becomes a travel space. The narrative, as we will see, is not that of a journey that actually took place: it is more of an online adventure, with Google providing potential access to the entire world through a computer screen. Blais’ novel thus tells the story of a journey that will never happen, from Grand-Mère, in Mauricie, Quebec, to Bird-in-Hand, in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. The destination is chosen by chance by Tess and Jude, the protagonists, who go through a list of towns in America with strange names and decide they are all equally interesting: “These American small towns are like episodes of *The Young and the Restless*: once you’ve seen one, you’ve seen them all.”<sup>8</sup> In order to finance their trip, the duo start writing the story of their upcoming journey, that is automatically saved on the computer by Word as “Document 1.” They hope that the money they make once the book is published will pay for the actual journey: “We’ve worked out that we need between \$10,000 and \$15,000 [...] to finance the trip,”<sup>9</sup> writes Tess, who narrates thirty of the narrative’s thirty-two chapters—the two others are narrated by Jude. This cost analysis includes food, the purchase of a used car and gas. Tess takes advantage of Sébastien Daoust’s good nature, he is a doctor in literature who has already published a novel entitled *La Mort du ptérodactyle*, and now works in a boat factory. He agrees to sign a grant application to the Canadian Art Council because Tess and Jude are not eligible to do so, having never published a novel. Daoust even agrees to advance the two travellers the twelve thousand dollars they have applied for. The rest of the story is a little predictable: Tess and Jude finally get the grant they hoped for and spend every penny before

1. Jean-Jacques Pelletier, *Dix petits hommes blancs*, Montréal, Hurtubise, 2014; Id., *Machine God*, Montreal, Hurtubise, 2015.
2. See Sophie Marcotte, “Médias sociaux et narration romanesque chez Jean-Jacques Pelletier,” a paper presented at the conference *Narrations contemporaines: écrans, médias et documents*, UQAM, April 2016. [Online] <http://oic.uqam.ca/fr/communications/medias-sociaux-et-narration-romanesque-chez-jean-jacques-pelletier> [accessed 2 February 2018].
3. *Iphigénie en haute-ville* a novel by François Blais (Québec, L’instant même, 2009) is one of the few examples of a Quebec novel that is entirely written in emails.
4. See, among others, Maria Semple, *Where’d you go, Bernadette* (2012), New York/Boston/London, Little Brown and Company, 2014; Daniel Glattauer, *Quand souffle le vent du nord*, translated by Anne-Sophie Anglaret, Paris, Grasset, 2010; Martina Wachendorff, *Le Baiser électrique*, Paris, Gallimard, 2001; Matt Beaumont, *E*, London, Plume, 2000; Matt Beaumont, *E<sup>2</sup>* [2009], London, Plume, 2010.
5. For a study of the new modes of social interaction in this type of novel through digital devices, see Sophie Marcotte, “La sociabilité numérique comme ressort de la fiction,” *Sens public*, December 2016. [Online] <http://www.sens-public.org/article1225.html> [accessed 15 January 2018].
6. Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Washington (D.C.), Anchor Books, 2011.
7. The novel was published in paperback the following year: François Blais, *Document 1* [2012], Québec, L’instant même, 2013. The quotes from the novel come from the translated English version. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018.
8. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 18.
9. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 37.

even leaving Grand-Mère, driving around the region in their dilapidated Chevrolet Monte Carlo, eating overpriced meals in high-class restaurants. The trip to Bird-in-the-Hand never happens; the protagonists never cross any real borders, only virtual ones.

## The virtual quest for happiness

*Document 1* could very easily be seen as an echo of the road trip novel, that has, in fact, been the subject of renewed interest in the past ten or fifteen years in Quebec. We could also think of, among others, two novels by Guillaume Vigneault, *Carnets de naufrage* and *Chercher le vent*—clearly inspired by Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues* and Jack Kerouac’s legendary *On the Road*—, of *La Foi du braconnier* by Marc Séguin, *Sur la 132* by Gabriel Anctil and *Le Fil des kilomètres* by Christian Guay-Poliquin, all of which follow the individual quest of a male protagonist who is trying to give his life meaning by travelling through North America.<sup>10</sup>

What François Blais proposes is more of a parody of the road trip novel. First of all, he does not put a male protagonist at the centre of the “quest,” but a couple, or more precisely an improbable pair made up of a young woman who makes sandwiches at Subway, and a young man on welfare, who share an apartment in the centre of Grand-Mère. The girl, who narrates most of the book, is very clearly the more dominant of the two. Next, the protagonists do not head off on their trip without knowing where they are going: they go on “Google Maps to choose their destination and plan an itinerary [...]”<sup>11</sup> The finality of the journey is not very clearly established. Indeed, if one of the premises of the road novel is the quest for a form of happiness and redemption, in *Document 1*, we are dealing with a couple of losers who think they are unhappy, but are very self-aware, and even joke about other unhappy people (perhaps a nod in the direction of those who blindly believe the self-help psycho-babble that is all over the Internet and social media). At the very beginning of the novel we read:

I know it’s totally stupid, but unhappy people genuinely believe they can leave their problems behind, they can fix everything with a change of scenery, or by starting over from scratch, or by going off to find themselves, all that crap.<sup>12</sup>

Jude’s theory is that anyway, he and Tess are “too unimportant to be unhappy.”<sup>13</sup>

Their wanderings (browsing) on the Internet is, nevertheless, reminiscent, in some ways, of characters in a road novel:

Jude and me [...], we also liked wandering aimlessly around the world—particularly around America, in fact, for reasons that will be explained later—thanks to Google Earth, Google Maps and Bing Maps. For example, you can tour the Gaspésie in twenty minutes [...].<sup>14</sup>

These virtual journeys become the basis of the novel, telling the story of the trip to Bird-in-Hand in advance, and are a way of making fun of people who publish these stories. By anticipating potential rejection from publishers (and making sure, in passing, to burn certain publishers who refuse to make room for up-and-coming writers), Tess is keen to point out that “nobody publishes travel writing anymore.”<sup>15</sup> It is “A dying genre,” the title of a chapter in *Document 1* which covers with the travel writings of Marco Polo, Cortez, Cook, Bougainville, Stendhal, Tocqueville, much more grandiose fare than that of our two travellers from Shawinigan. The Internet makes any form of travel useless as:

10. Guillaume Vigneault, *Carnets de naufrage* [2001], Montréal, Boréal, 2005; Guillaume Vigneault, *Chercher le vent* [2001], Montréal, Boréal, 2003; Jacques Poulin, *Volkswagen Blues* [1984], Montréal, Leméac, 2015; Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* [1957], London, Penguin Books, 2000; Marc Séguin, *La Foi du braconnier*, Montréal, Leméac, 2009; Gabriel Anctil, *Sur la 132*, Montréal, Hélotrope, 2013; Christian Guay-Poliquin, *Le Fil des kilomètres*, Saguenay, La Peuplade, 2013.

11. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 129.

12. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 9.

13. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 69.

14. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 16.

15. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 57.

Today, anyone can go anywhere, or, failing that, anyone can chat about what's going on in Rio de Janeiro or Fort Myers, and anyone can learn, should they be interested, that Jason Parrish Casebier, of 2219, Florence Boulevard, in Omaha, Nebraska, was convicted for "rape felony" on November 25 1995.<sup>16</sup>

Most of all, the Internet means you can be anywhere—like Oklahoma City—and nowhere—right in your own living room:

But it never dragged, we'd stay up late in front of the screen, roaming the streets of Edmond or spying on downtown Oklahoma City via the webcam on the roof of city hall, going into raptures every time a passer-by appeared in the frame.<sup>17</sup>

## Too much information

This ironic take on the traditional road novel, transformed into a virtual journey because the Internet provides us with all of the information needed to undertake the trip, also highlights another issue with the Web 2.0, the fact that it gives us access to "too much information"—an issue that is perfectly illustrated by the protagonists in *Document 1*. They show us how a certain segment of the population interacts with this "information overdose."<sup>18</sup> The Internet, as Alexandre Serres pointed out back in 2005, has become "the new regime of truth, in particular for younger people, as they rely on it as a source of most of their information about the world and current affairs."<sup>19</sup> Everything in Blais's book mocks this tendency.

The example of Wikipedia is an obvious one, as the book's travelling pair rely on it as their main source of information about the United States. Blais, who even admitted, in an interview with the *Devoir*, that the Internet is "more or less, his interface with the world,"<sup>20</sup> copied the articles from the online encyclopaedia word for word, in the same way that millions of people do every day who rely on it as their only source of research. His character explains the process as follows: "Next, we'd go and ask Wikipedia everything there was to know about the place. Most of the time there wasn't much to say [...], but every once in a while, we'd come across a fantastic story."<sup>21</sup> The "fantastic stories" include an article, copied in full, explaining the reasons why the town of Hot Springs in Mexico changed its name to Truth or Consequences in the early fifties... The characters in *Document 1* even manage to identify gaps in the information provided by Wikipedia, such as the fact that there is no entry about the town of Knob Lick, while there is one about "The problem of sexuality between men and mermaids in literature"; [...] "List of fictional characters with nine fingers"; [...] "Mucophagy" (or eating mucus); [...] "Nils Olav, the penguin colonel in chief of the Norwegian royal guard"; "List of pigs in history"; [...] "Religion in the Antarctic [...]"<sup>22</sup> In addition, "let's just note in passing that Des Moines fire hydrants are yellow."<sup>23</sup> In other words, the Internet is full of absolutely useless information, and attracts the attention of people who are incapable of deciding what is, and is not, important. Everything, as Tess tells us, is "another piece of crucial information to take up storage space in our brains."<sup>24</sup> In addition, the fact that it implies that the superficiality and a lack of analysis are the order of the day, Blais' novel also illustrates, to take this a little further, "the extent to which too much information can (eventually) lead to a form of regression [...]"<sup>25</sup>

16. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 59

17. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 18.

18. See "The effects of the abundance of information and distraction," *Digital Society Forum*. [Online] [https://digital-society-forum.orange.com/fr/les-forums/554-12\\_des\\_effets\\_de\\_labondance\\_dinformation\\_et\\_de\\_la\\_distraction\\_sur\\_notre\\_attention](https://digital-society-forum.orange.com/fr/les-forums/554-12_des_effets_de_labondance_dinformation_et_de_la_distraction_sur_notre_attention) [accessed 15 February 2018].

19. Alexandre Serres, "Évaluation de l'information sur Internet. Le défi de la formation", 2005. [Online] <http://bbf.enssib.fr/consultedr/bbf-2005-06-0038-006> [accessed 15 February 2018].

20. Catherine Lalonde, "La nonchalance de François Blais", *Le Devoir*, 1 March 2014. [Online] <http://www.ledevoir.com/lire/401308/la-nonchalance-de-francois-blais> [accessed 29 January 2018].

21. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 18.

22. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 133.

23. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 16.

24. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 16.

25. Florence Millerand, Julien Rueff and Serge Proulx (dir.), *Web social. Mutation de la communication*, Québec, Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2010, p. 25.

On this issue, we can cite the example of another novel by François Blais, *Sam*, published in 2014,<sup>26</sup> that plays with the traditional form of the diary this time, as opposed to that of the road novel. *Sam* tells the story of a girl narrator with no ambition, not unlike the protagonists in *Document 1*, in the form of a diary (which, we find out at the end of the novel, is fictional), and her everyday existence, in which she avoids having any kind of a social life. Sam tells us, in her diary, about her explorations of neighbouring villages online, villages she intends to visit later; she spends her free time browsing the Internet and writes down every little detail of the information she finds there—she even copies a nine-page list of pornographic websites<sup>27</sup>—, which amplifies the Internet’s superficial and anecdotal aspect, just like in *Document 1*:

[...] I switched on my computer and went for a wander on the Internet, where I tried to start a fights on a few idiots’ blogs and tried to friend Indonesians called Caca, it’s quite a common name over there, [...] the worst is I think I’m funny [...].<sup>28</sup>

### A critique of mediocrity

The overdose of information in which the two protagonists in *Document 1* find themselves drowning, is another major issue with the Internet: not only is it full of questionable information that is not very useful to most people, the book also takes a very critical look at its literary content, mocking the fact that the Internet is home to so much mediocre literature. As we mentioned above, and repeated by Dominique Monet in a book about multimedia, contemporary society “excludes all intellectual rigour and analytical ability.” It highlights people’s inability to “sort through, understand, direct, then transform the mass of information that teaches nothing by itself, that is, in fact, made up of raw data to be analysed but that instead drowns us.”<sup>29</sup> The digression in the novel on the subject of obscure writers from the Mauricie region underlines this new reality. In fact, after a long bio-bibliographical description of Paule Doyon, a writer from Grand-Mère—one should read her work before one dies because it is “is really not the done thing in the afterlife”<sup>30</sup> not to have done so—, Tess is keen to reveal “a secret” to the reader about the writer’s mediocre novels: “a significant portion of Paule Doyon’s work is available without you even having to get off your ass or lay out any cash: by going to her site (<http://www.cafe.rapidus.net/anddoyon/index.html>).”<sup>31</sup> In the same way, the narrator also mocks Bryan Perro, author of a series of children’s books called *Amos Daragon*, and the Descôteaux, who wrote the television series *Entre chien et loup* that ran from 1984 to 1992, all of whom also hail from the Mauricie region, reminding the reader that “Grand-Mère counts among its inhabitants an impressive number of well-known writers.”<sup>32</sup> This information has nothing whatsoever to do with the main plot, which is the trip to Bird-in-Hand, and shows how easy it is to get lost while browsing the Internet, and the extent to which it can sometimes lead the undiscerning to believe that third-rate writers deserve the same level of attention as first-rate ones. Tess eventually admits that “People call anything a novel nowadays.”<sup>33</sup>

The pair’s wanderings on the Internet end up leading to a situation where they start to define themselves through it. The narrator, tries to respect the rules as laid down by the writer’s guru Marc Fisher, in his well-known book, *Conseil à un jeune romancier*, where he advises writers to “introduce characters slowly, as the story unfolds,” or to “spread information about,” in other words, make choices, rather than introducing everything in one go. His technique involves finding and filling out a personality test on the Internet:

26. François Blais, *Sam*, Québec, L’instant même, 2014, p. 191.

27. François Blais, *Sam*, Québec, L’instant même, 2014, p. 73-82

28. François Blais, *Sam*, Québec, L’instant même, 2014, p. 72.

29. Dominique Monet, *Le Multimédia*, Paris, Flammarion, 1998, p. 58.

30. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 45.

31. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 45.

32. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 44.

33. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 60.

What do you talk about when you've told someone your name, age, place of residence and profession? [...] I should be able to track down an online personality test, which I will fill in before your very eyes. (site [www.sedecouvrier.fr](http://www.sedecouvrier.fr))<sup>34</sup>

In the end, even the great Marc Fisher can't compete with the sheer volume of advice for writers that can be found with a simple Google search:

In any case, his instruction would be useless to me, as I had no intention of writing experimental shit. So, I turned instead to everyone's favourite mentor, Google, and asked it straight out, "How do you get published?"<sup>35</sup>

Blais' novel reminds us that Google has, to a certain extent, become the equivalent of the all-knowing-narrator, who knows the characters better than they know themselves; that it can predict some of their behaviour, some of their "journeys"; that it even constructs an identity for them with ramifications and a life-span they could never suspect.

## Conclusion

What exactly happens then, when fiction appropriates the digital? We have just seen that François Blais' novel *Document 1*, proposes a new kind of travel narrative, whose only location is the couch in Tess and Jude's apartment in Grand-Mère, and a computer screen. What's the point in travelling anyway, in the digital age? This is one of the questions that the novels asks, in particular in the chapter where they buy a used car:

We allowed ourselves to point out (to Jude's dad) that these days it would be useless—if not absurd—to go in person to a dealership. I mean, what would we even find at Grenier's in Saint-Étienne-des-Grès? A hundred machines at the very most, while 320 000 vehicles were listed just on [autoheβδο.net](http://autoheβδο.net).<sup>36</sup>

In this way, the novel proposes an absolutely up-to-date reflection on the omnipresence of the Internet, information technologies and communications in our everyday lives: immediacy, the inability to take a step back or to think faced with this tsunami of information, the accentuation, in the words of Jean-Pierre Balpe, of the "gap" between those who have the ability to discern and others "who have not made it to that level,"<sup>37</sup> and who are, as a result, incapable of telling the difference between the important and the futile.

Ultimately, *Document 1* is, on a more general level, part of a recent trend in contemporary literature that updates certain traditional forms of narrative and parodies them by inserting them into the digital sphere. Indeed, in addition to Blais' book that mocks the road novel, there are novels written entirely through emails that send up today's working practices, not unlike the British television series *The Office*. In addition, the very principle of web browsing, associated with the metaphor of navigating, in itself, constitutes a form of travel: opening a new window, in a web browser, is the equivalent of setting off on a trip. This is notably the case in Guillaume Morissette's novel, *Nouvel onglet*, where, after spending months partying on a drink and drugs bender, the narrator decides that it is perhaps time to open a "new tab." Obviously, he doesn't mean a virtual trip through location apps, as is the case in *Document 1*, he is making a life choice to rebuild, perhaps away from the Internet and social media, as the narrator at the end of the story, in an improbable rush of lucidity admits "getting the sudden urge to fold Facebook and turn it into an origami heron."<sup>38</sup>

34. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 26.

35. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 77.

36. François Blais, *Document 1*, translated by JC Sutcliffe, Toronto, Book\*Hug, 2018, p. 118.

37. Pierre Lévy et Jean-Pierre Balpe, "[entretien]", by Michel Aberganti, *Le Monde*, supplement, November 20, 1997. [Online] <http://www.site-magister.com/bts/synthese3b.htm#axzz5ZU7FRQka> [accessed 5 February 2018].

38. Guillaume Morissette, *Nouvel onglet*, translated by Daniel Grenier, Montréal, Boréal, 2016, p. 245.

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