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« Realities of illusion »

In praise of paranoia in humanities

Interview with Pierre Bayard

Pierre Bayard

Pierre Bayard is professor of french literature at Paris 8 University and psychoanalyst. He wrote a great number of essays, among which *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd ?* (Minuit, 1998), *How to talk about books you haven't read* (Bloomsbury, 2009) and *Aurais-je été résistant ou bourreau ?* (Minuit, 2013). Last book published: *Aurais-je sauvé Geneviève Dixmer ?* (Minuit, 2015)

Isabelle Moindrot

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Interview

Isabelle Moindrot. At the crossroads of literary theory and creation, your work keeps exploring the “realities of illusion,” the focus of this *Hybrid* issue. However, you hardly ever use the word “illusion” in your books. Could you please explain why?

Pierre Bayard. As far as the frequency of the word is concerned, I cannot give you a precise answer, but the idea itself is very much present in my books. Take the detective trilogy, for example (*Who killed Roger Ackroyd?*, *Enquête sur Hamlet* and *Sherlock Holmes was wrong: Reopening the Case of the Hound of the Baskervilles*). In all three books, I have revisited famous investigations to prove the author and the detective wrong about the killer's name and show that the official solution was but an illusion. Illusion is also a central theme of the

essays I have dedicated to designing other temporal patterns for literature and art, like *Demain est écrit* or *Le Plagiat par anticipation*, two essays in which I propose to break with the traditional idea of time, according to which the past inevitably precedes the present, which itself unavoidably precedes the future. This is an illusory idea indeed, or at least ill-suited to literary and artistic stories, which follow other models...

Isabelle Moindrot. In *Il existe d'autres mondes*, the opening of the representational field takes you even further, to theories of parallel universes that present the belief in a unique world as an "illusion," through a radical reversal of perspective. Backed by this theory, you develop the idea that "there really are multiple copies of ourselves in many different universes, so that our belief in the unique quality of our personality is but an illusion that is detrimental to our understanding of reality."¹

Pierre Bayard. One of the essential issues we are facing when reflecting upon ourselves is that of *mental plurality*, or in other words the impression that we sometimes get of being several. Psychoanalysis and other theories on the unconscious propose a plausible solution in the form of internal plurality: we would be split into contradictory entities, such as the conscious, the preconscious and unconscious, or the Self, the Id and the Superego.

However, other hypotheses (like that of parallel universes) are suggested by some of quantum physics developments. In this case, plurality may be external rather than internal. We sometimes get the impression that we are several because we are indeed, always accompanied by the shadows of the characters we embody in the parallel universes that are closest to ours. The two models are different, but in both cases, illusion is central to our representation of the world.

Of course, the hypothesis of parallel universes may seem absurd, yet numerous serious physicists consider it as a possibility, while Freudian models, although they have an undeniable heuristic value, are not backed by scientific evidence... It seems to me that this hypothesis is particularly fruitful when it comes to studying the split induced by the creative act.

Isabelle Moindrot. As for the real life, what kind of illusions do we usually live in, which are particularly used in arts and literature?

Pierre Bayard. Maybe the main illusion is precisely that of our and others' uniqueness. The artificial unity conferred upon us by our identity card includes a kind of plurality, sometimes even a multitude of distinct subjects. We cannot help but be struck by these moments when we no longer recognize who we are, as if we had become strangers to ourselves. And what about these other times when we do not recognize our interlocutors (who themselves cannot remember their words, promises or... feelings for us)? Apparently they are no longer the people we were familiar with. Assuming that everyone is in fact multiple, a fresh light is thrown on many of our relationships to others and greater harmony with them is achieved, as we spend less time reproaching them for something.

Isabelle Moindrot. Does the multiplicity of personalities within every one of us underlie the artistic experience?

Pierre Bayard. I do think that literature and art are particularly sensitive to the illusion of uniqueness and frequently stage it, all the more so than creators test it out. Apart from the theme of the double, a great many literary and film

1 Pierre Bayard, *Il existe d'autres mondes*, Paris, Minuit, 2014, p. 44 sq.

works focus on explaining the human beings' strange behaviors and the way they often give the impression that they are not consistent with themselves.

Isabelle Moindrot. In the same way, literary characters are always changing. This is what you explain in *Et si les œuvres changeaient d'auteur ?* and in *Aurais-je sauvé Geneviève Dixmer ?*

Pierre Bayard. In my books, I make the assumption that literary characters are independent, which means that they are free enough to perform actions—stealing, cheating on their partner, committing crimes—that escape their creator. In a sense, I am only developing what is often stated by writers and artists when explaining that they lose their grasp on their creations.

Should you accept this hypothesis, you would regard the literary text as way richer and more mobile, since you would notice that a series of events occur without the author's knowing, the reconstitution of which allows to make up for the obvious improbabilities that are otherwise difficult to explain. For centuries, one has kept on wondering why the *Princesse de Clèves*, finally free from the conjugal yoke, refuses at the end of the novel to live her love with the Duke of Nemours. However, who is able to affirm that she has not done so and that the couple has not chosen secrecy to live at peace? One must not trust what literary texts tell us—or seem to tell us—, for their narrators are hardly ever trustworthy. In the same way, we must always remember that we are not told everything.

Isabelle Moindrot. It is certainly because they are free that literary creatures appeal to us so much. They frequently shift between the real world and the fictional one, or even “within fiction, between different eras”², as you state in *The Case of the Hound of the Baskervilles*.

Pierre Bayard. The theory of the character's independence is linked to that of the circulation between worlds. I am firmly convinced that literary characters sometimes come out of the books they inhabit, and conversely, that we sometimes plunge into those books.

Isabelle Moindrot. Indeed, that is because their thoughts are “livelier than many living beings and spread through the beings their authors associate with. These thoughts pervade the books that recount them and cross the eras in their search for a benevolent recipient.”³

Pierre Bayard. As early as childhood, many of our behaviors are modeled on those of characters with whom we unwittingly identify. The power they have over us derives from the fact that they do not only live in a fiction, but also in reality, and are part of our existences, sometimes without our knowing. Therefore, it is important to epistemologically break with the illusion that there is a clear boundary between fiction and reality, so as to develop a theory of passages.

Isabelle Moindrot. In *Aurais-je sauvé Geneviève Dixmer ?*, you take Pierre Bayard (one of your many doubles) to the time and place of the novel *Le Chevalier de Maison-Rouge*, written by Dumas and Maquet...

Pierre Bayard. In order to illustrate the necessary suppression of the boundary between fiction and reality, I have used what literary theory calls a “metalepsis,” which means that I have let myself slip into the skin of this novel's main character, modeled on the hero of Woody Allen's short story entitled “The Kugelmass episode,” who enters the novel *Madame Bovary* and becomes the

2 Pierre Bayard, *L’Affaire du chien des Baskerville*, Paris, Minuit, 2008, p. 188.

3 Pierre Bayard, *L’Affaire du chien des Baskerville*, Paris, Minuit, 2008, p. 188.

heroine's lover, before he takes her to New York. It is also modeled on *The Purple Rose of Cairo*, in which one of the movie characters falls in love with a female spectator and goes down in the cinema to seduce her.

Obviously, the metalepsis seems hard to achieve in the real life and most of the time, it is mostly specific to fantastic literature. However, this practical impossibility does not concern the subconscious life, which is not affected by the boundaries between the real and imaginary worlds. Every reader plunged into a novel shuts him/herself away from the world and identifies with the characters, just like when he/she was a child. It is precisely this sensation that I have tried to recreate in my book, by staging this exact moment when, reading the book, we cease to be ourselves. This is how I became, in Dumas's book, an ardent republican lover of a royalist, to her misfortune.

Isabelle Moindrot. Are you taking the reader to a hybrid world then?

Pierre Bayard. Narrators other than myself are entrusted with the enunciation of my books—which I call “theoretical fictions”—since my objective is to create works that stand at the crossroads between fiction and theory.

Isabelle Moindrot. Be it implicitly or explicitly, your works heavily resort to the legal jargon, and not only those which deal with the detective novel. “Defense speech,” “investigation,” “second enquiry,” “defense,” “murder by literature,” “the truth and nothing but the truth,” “victim,” “executioner,” “save,” all of your books abound with these words...

Pierre Bayard. These narrators are often paranoid. Such is the case of those who are convinced that the true literary assassins are still on the loose, those who strive to better the words—or even to put them to other authors' credit—, or those who think that time unfolds in the direction opposite to the one we are used to. Considering their illness, it is no surprise that these narrators frequently use the legal jargon that you mentioned.

Isabelle Moindrot. Why choose paranoia as a means to explore the world?

Pierre Bayard. First of all, because of my personal sensitivity, being quite suspicious myself! This being said, paranoia is also a remarkable tool for intellectual deciphering, since it places us at the heart of the interpreting mechanism, exactly where meaning is established and reality structured through apparent order.

Isabelle Moindrot. So, in the hybrid worlds that you build, readers are not made to question their senses like some of the current multi-sensory works do, but to challenge their own analytical ability, their critical reasoning?

Pierre Bayard. Seeing the world through the prism of paranoia amounts to placing oneself where illusions are developed, by making reality split into two. When you reread *Hamlet* supposing that Shakespeare was wrong and Clodius was innocent, a whole new text appears and all of the scenes transform, while the physical text remains the same.

One can find it reassuring to tell oneself that this is but a wild interpretation idea, which is not wrong by the way. However, things are more complex than that, for this wild idea is based on textual loopholes that Shakespearians noticed a long time ago and because of which the traditional solution no longer makes sense. Is the latter the wild idea then? Actually, as Freud first noted, delirium and theory are closely linked. Delirium is an attempt at ascribing the world with meaning, just like theory, which is often based on a delirious core itself... I try to put my narrators in a place where delirium and theory intermingle.

Isabelle Moindrot. The Voltairian tone of some of your books, such as *Le Plagiat par anticipation*, fades as you switch your topics from the field of the history of literature or literary criticism to that of History. Shall we see a growing concern in this invitation to question ourselves (about actions that we cannot have taken, since they belong either to the past, before we were even born, or to literary fiction), a tell-tale sign of a change in paradigm in the field of creation? How do you interpret this shift towards topics that bring us back to reality and the orders of the present time?

Pierre Bayard. It is true that the books of the “*Aurais-je...*” series seem more serious, especially *Aurais-je été résistant ou bourreau ?*, which deals with World War II. Incidentally, I found it difficult to find a narrative system that suited me, for humor (or at least a certain kind of humor) was no longer appropriate.

This being said, it seems to me that there are similarities between this more historical series and the other essays, starting with the reflection on mental plurality once again. The notion that lies at the heart of these books is that of “potential personality.” It designates this part of *ourselves* that we may discover in times of crisis, when all of our points of reference shatter. It represents another form of subconscious, which does not correspond to the one theorized by Freud, because it is not the object of an archaic repression. Instead, the nature of this ignorance is more existential and comes from our not knowing what we could become in another universe.

Hence the idea of resorting to what philosophers call a *thought experiment*, which consists in immersing oneself in another world, using only one’s imagination. What would have happened, had I been 18 years old in 1940? Or if I had lived under the Reign of Terror? In order to determine it, I send what I call a “delegated character,” an avatar which possesses some of my characteristics yet adapts to the era, which allows me to explore biographical possibilities.

Obviously, one cannot tell how we would have behaved in such circumstances, but the steps of the thought process that leads one to ask oneself this question are interesting. As we examine these steps, we are brought back to “the orders of the present time” as you might notice, as well as to highly contemporary issues.

This kind of analysis meets the reflection on literature and ethics. As demonstrated by Frédérique Leichter-Flack in *Le Laboratoire des cas de conscience*, literature (but also cinema or TV series) provides an ideal ground to reflect on ethical issues, conflicts of principle, modalities of commitment, etc.

Isabelle Moindrot. In the epilogue to *Il existe d’autres mondes*, you outline a theory of superimposition, which would replace the theory of contradiction that has shaped our relationship with reality from our early childhood. “The superimposition model [...] gives us the right to think something while thinking the opposite in an equally sincere way, to make opposite statements without anyone blaming us for it, and above all, to live several lives at once, wary of the plurality of universes and complexity of ours.”⁴ Are you leading us to a new form of illusion? What roles do humor and reason play in this exploration of possibilities?

Pierre Bayard. In these “theoretical fictions,” I endeavor to give humor a central role, for it unsettles enunciation, in the same way as the choice of paranoid narrators. This goes against many essays in humanities, in which the

4 Pierre Bayard, *Il existe d’autres mondes*, Paris, Minuit, 2014, p. 150.

narrator coincides with the author and enunciation is therefore more or less monaural, regardless of the nuances in style and thought.

One of the advantages of humor is that it breaks with this monophony, since the jamming of statements (which one is true?) makes them endlessly contradict each other, just like in psychoanalysis. When you undergo a therapy, you often note that the statement you have just made makes no sense, or that the opposite statement would be equally right. We are here facing the utter inability of language to express the reality that you experience in the course of the sessions. Somewhat, it is this experience that I try to reenact by building moving objects, providing an ever-changing meaning and confronting readers with riddles.

For instance, in *Demain est écrit*, the narrator tries to demonstrate that writers sometimes tell us about private life events that have not yet occurred to them. I really find it difficult to situate myself in relation to such a thesis, which I am rather inclined to consider absurd, although it is supported by numerous examples provided by my close family. I am particularly interested in this indecisiveness, which I try to induce among readers and humor is a good vehicle to do so.

Isabelle Moindrot. What is the role of the subconscious in the complex play of illusion?

Pierre Bayard. All of my essays somehow stage the subconscious life. This is the case when the narrator transgresses the boundary between fiction and reality, suffers from paranoid delusion or changes the timeline.

While in traditional psychoanalytic reading the critic strives to comprehend the author's subconscious through his/her life or work—hence remaining outside the latter—, I am trying to make one experience this subconscious part of ourselves by showing the whole fantastical dimension that we deploy as we are confronted with works, as well as the delirium underlying such a confrontation.