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THE PENULTIMATE END: INTERMEDIATE STATES BETWEEN LIFE AND DEATH FROM E.A. POE TO TODAY

Presentata da: Mattia Petricola

Coordinatore Dottorato

Silvia Albertazzi

Supervisore

Donata Meneghelli
(Università di Bologna)

Supervisore

Anne Tomiche
(Sorbonne Université)

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Abstract

This research starts from the observation that the cultural construction of the category 'living dead' does not usually account for a particularly interesting area of western literary and artistic productions from the mid-18th century to the present day. This area is inhabited by characters, worlds, and narratives that not only destabilize a binary opposition crucial to human identity by blurring the border between life and death; they also do so outside the traditional taxonomy that frames living-dead identities themselves (ghosts, vampires, zombies, mummies, ghouls and a very few others).

This work aims to chart this periphery of the thanatological imagination and trace its emergence from the cultural processes that have redefined the life-death boundary from the half of the XVIII century to the present day. In order to do so, it focuses on a corpus of novels, short stories and films from the North Atlantic world that force us to reconsider how intermediate states between life and death can be represented in fiction, from Poe's *Valdemar* to Kafka's *The Hunter Gracchus*, from Dick's *Ubik* to Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, from *Jacob's Ladder* (Adrian Lyne, 1990) to *Swiss Army Man* (Dan Kwan, 2016).

After an introductory section, in which these texts are defined as the members of an ad-hoc category called 'residual states between life and death' (r.s.), I propose a cultural genealogy of r.s. by discussing a corpus of medical texts, from Jacques-Jean Bruhier's *Essai sur l'incertitude des signes de la mort* (1752) to Adrian Owen's *Into the Grey Zone* (2017). I then move on to show how technologies and media shape the semiotics of residual states in science-fiction

texts; how the in-between zones separating life from death are constructed in spatial terms; and how such zones can become a crucial site for the redefinition of both the immanent and the divine, for the *mise en fiction* of the process of dying, and for questioning our ideas of self and realism. The conclusions attempt to sketch a theory of ontological pluralization in relation to speculative fiction.

To my parents

This is what makes the world, Ms. Lin. I believe this to be the fundamental dynamic. Transition. The point where one thing becomes another. It is what makes you, the city, the world, what they are. And that is the theme I'm interested in. The zone where the disparate become part of the whole. The hybrid zone.

C. Mieville, *Perdido Street Station*

C'est le sens de l'avant-dernier. Tout s'estompe.

S. Beckett, *Molloy*

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Acknowledgments

Section 1.1 is a revised version of *The Chinese Encyclopedia and the Living Dead. A Queer Approach to Categorization and Taxonomy in Comparative Literature*, published in Whatever 1(1), 2018.

In accordance with the regulations of Sorbonne Université, a summary of the thesis in French translation is joined to the thesis' main body as an appendix.

Introduction

The construction of the binary opposition 'living vs. dead' through the practice of burial rituals is unanimously considered a fundamental stage in the development of early human cultures. Together with the opposition 'human vs animal', its function is to transform the individual into a member of a social and cultural entity: the community of living humans. Such a community is defined by its crucial opposition, on the one hand, to the community of animals, and to that of the dead, on the other. Of course, both the divide between the living and the dead and that between humans and animals are considered here, from a constructionist perspective, as cultural artifacts that are not in any way 'natural'. Social figures like the shaman establish and maintain the relationships between the world of the living and the world of the dead, while highly ritualized moments of passage are created in order to keep the two worlds apart: the dead must be prevented from haunting the living.

Nevertheless, despite all efforts, violations to this binary opposition can occur. These events release some of our most primitive fears, thus representing an inexhaustible source of horror and uncanniness. The agents of these ontological and cultural violations are what we call 'the living dead'.

In this cultural landscape, fantastic fiction (on the definition of which I will return at the end of this introduction) has been for centuries – and continues to be – a practice of key importance for the construction and proliferation of the entities that violate the polarity 'life vs death'. Nevertheless, the current notion of 'living dead', while pervading cultural (and academic) discourses, allows us to deal only with a relatively small number of these entities: ghosts, vampires, zombies, mummies, ghouls and a very few others.

This study starts from the observation that the cultural construction of the category 'living dead' does not account for a particularly interesting area of western literary and artistic productions from the mid-18th century to the present day. This area is inhabited by characters, worlds and narratives that not only destabilize a binary opposition crucial to human identity by blurring the border between life and death; they also do so outside the traditional taxonomy that frames living-dead identities themselves. The protagonist of E.A. Poe's famous horror tale *The Facts in the Case of Mr. Valdemar* (1845) is mesmerized in articulo mortis and his existence lingers on for several months in a state of hypnotic suspension after the death of his body. In Franz Kafka's journal fragments about *der Jäger Gracchus* ([1931] 1993), a hunter dies after falling into a ravine but, as a result of an incomprehensible mistake, he cannot reach the afterlife and is forced to eternally roam the earth. Joe Chip, the

protagonist of Philip K. Dick's science-fiction novel *Ubik* (1969), finds himself literally frozen in a state called 'half-life' after an explosion. His consciousness is separated from the world of the living and inhabits a new plane of existence, suspended between life and death. In J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998), the wizard Voldemort manifests his presence among the living through the diary of Tom Riddle, a paradoxical living object infused with a piece of a dead man's soul. In regards to cinema, the mysterious *Jacobs's Ladder* (Lyne 1990) plunges the viewer into the consciousness of an American soldier at the moment of his passage from life to death, while in Wally Pfister's *Transcendence* (2014) the brain patterns of the dying protagonist are encoded in the software of an artificial intelligence: he thus loses his mortal body in order to literally inhabit the Internet, eventually becoming the Internet itself.

This work aims then to investigate a new category within the cultural imagination: the residual undead. The members of this category are the leftovers of a categorization process that has placed a corpus of prototypical figures at the center of contemporary North Atlantic culture, while moving those narratives that didn't match a pre-determined set of parameters to the periphery.

The idea of periphery implies the spatialization of the abstract notion of 'culture'. However, I will not extend this metaphor to describe the present work as 'mapping' a yet 'uncharted' field of fiction. Such a description would imply a twofold metaphor, in which the object of study is constructed, in geographical terms, as a space, and the researcher is constructed as a cartographer. But adopting a similar set of metaphors could lead the reader to

think that the hermeneutic work I am proposing here consists in the simple description of something that is 'already there', 'in the text', visible to everyone, just like a cartographer 'describes' lakes, mountains and coast profiles according to a predetermined set of conventions. On the contrary, I assume a constructivist view of description as a necessarily argumentative act. The traits that emerge from a description are not 'things in the text', or properties immanent to it, that simply need to be 'found' and organized by the researcher. Rather, traits are actively *construed* by the researcher in its relationship with the text, which means that different researchers could potentially provide completely different descriptions of the same set of objects or the same 'region' of fiction.

Having refused to interpret the aim of this research as that of 'mapping' the 'field' of narratives dealing with the representation of the residual undead, I had to restructure the interpretation of the subject of my study. I progressively came to think of it less as a space and more as a mass of dots, each one apparently isolated from the others, and of myself as someone who connects these dots in an attempt to draw constellations and networks. I became aware of this shift after reading Franco Moretti's (2007) discussion of the difference between maps and diagrams:

> [The map] offers a model of the narrative universe which rearranges its components in a non-trivial way, and may bring some hidden patterns to the surface. And patterns are indeed what I have been discussing throughout this chapter. But are they also the proper object of geographical study? In an intelligent critique of the *Atlas of the European Novel*, the Italian geographer Claudio Cerreti [(1998)] has questioned this assumption, pointing out how patterns entail a Cartesian reduction of space

to extension, where 'objects are analysed in terms of reciprocal positions and distances […] whether they are close or far from each other or from something else'. This however is not really geography, Cerreti goes on, but rather geometry; and the figures of the *Atlas*, for their part, are not really maps, but diagrams. The diagrams look like maps, yes, because they have been 'superimposed on a cartographic plane': but their true nature emerges unmistakably from the way I analyse them, which disregards the specificity of the various locations, to focus almost entirely on their mutual relations; which is indeed the way to read diagrams, but certainly not maps (53-54)

[I]f I keep making diagrams, then, it is because for me *geometry 'signifies' more than geography*. More, in the sense that a geometrical pattern is too orderly a shape to be the product of chance. It is a sign that something is at work here— that something has made the pattern the way it is» (56, original emphasis).

This textual diagrammatics has been guided by two questions: how are residual states between life and death made culturally possible? And how are they constructed in fiction? I have tried to answer these questions by pinpointing analogies, recurrences, and contrasts in the construction of space, time, technology, and the self in residual states narratives, as well as by providing a context for the study of these elements with the tools of cultural genealogy. I will focus particularly on what renders the residual undead original and unique in relation with the traditional undead, and on how they can open up new perspectives on the *mise en fiction* of the relation between life and death. My approach to the corpus of fictional texts will be resolutely interdisciplinary, and the perspectives of comparative literature will constantly intersect those of literary pragmatics, literary theory, category

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theory, cultural history, and media studies. As my choice of providing a long quote from Moretti has already suggested, I will often let the works on which I draw speak for themselves, instead of summarizing or paraphrasing them. I hope this will contribute to construct my arguments as dialogues with a multiplicity of research contexts, rather than as hermeneutic operations that need to borrow tiny bits and pieces here and there in order to be validated.

The present introduction provides a preliminary definition of the residual undead, clarify my objectives by contrasting them with those expressed by parallel works in comparative literature, science studies and literary theory, and define the notion of fantastic fiction on which I will base my analyses. Chapter one proposes a methodology for the modelization of peripheral categories and looks at comparative literature through the lens of queer hermeneutics. Chapter two traces a history of the main cultural factors that catalyzed the emergence of residual states in the context of the thanatological imagination. Coherently with the interdisciplinary perspective I would like to adopt, these first two chapters are not intended as the mere 'background' against which the comparative analysis will be carried on in the second part of the study, but as an integral part of the analyses that aim to answer the general questions I posited above. Chapter three identifies some key features of residual states by looking at their most basic coordinates: time and space. Chapter four focuses on how electricity and communication technologies are represented in the texts of the corpus and on how they

construct relations between the 'here' of the living and the 'elsewhere' of the residual undead.

Death in not just a 'natural' event. What the concept of 'death' means and implies is determined by a complex system of cultural practices: «Although every human being is mortal, there is no such thing as a natural way of dying, death or grief. Death and dying are always culturally defined and embedded in a system of cultural beliefs and values» (Kalitzkus 2004, 142). In order to understand in what sense the residual undead differ from the traditional undead, a fundamental opposition between two paradigms for the definition of the relationship between life and death needs to be posited. Until very recent times—in terms of cultural history—Western/North Atlantic culture has conceptualized life and death as the two elements of a polarity. Within this long-standing cultural tradition, an expression like 'partially dead' would make no sense: one must be either alive *or* dead. The traditional living dead (ghosts, vampires, zombies, mummies) can violate this polarity—as the consequence, for example, of a cultural 'malfunctioning' in the grieving process—by *returning* to the world of the living *after* their death. On the other hand, the emergence of the residual undead coincides with the emergence of a new cultural paradigm: as I will show in chapter 2, life and death have slowly and progressively turned from the two elements of a polarity *into the two extremes of a continuum* over the course of the last two centuries and half. Within this new paradigm, deciding where a person should be placed along such a spectrum could become extremely problematic. As a consequence, the living

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dead are not only those who return from the grave, but also those who have taken a step outside life without entirely leaving life behind, that is, those who are not alive anymore, but at the same time are not dead *yet*.

The traditional living dead are characterized by the *return* of the past, the *acknowledgment* of death, and the *violation* of the strong polarity into which they are inscribed; the residual undead, for their part, have much more to do with *resistance* to death and the *blurring* of the life-death polarity through *postponing*, *preservation*, and *time dilation*. The traditional living dead are dead beings who come back to (some sort of) life; the residual undead are beings beyond life that, in the majority of cases, desperately try not to die. A few texts of the corpus present exceptions to this preliminary taxonomy, and the reason for their inclusion in the study will be motivated when needed.

The general semiotic coordinates along which residual states narratives develop could be further clarified by contrasting them, on the one hand, with those identified by Alice Bennet in her study of afterlife narratives, and with those pinpointed by Frédéric Weinmann in a monography devoted to what he calls *récit autothanatographique*, on the other. Both authors focus on narratives in which a character goes on living after her/his death. However, they adopt rather different approaches. Bennet's narratological work starts from the premise that «[w]riting about the afterlife means writing about the metaphysical, but also involves the metafictional, because it leads to a consideration of the fit between the tools for representing the world and the world itself» (Bennett 2012, 197). From this perspective, Bennet argues, afterlife narratives can be read as

a reaction against widely realist attempts to represent the world and the human experience of it; against the general category of life- writing and of writing about 'real life'. Consequently, settings in and voices from the afterlife throw off-kilter categories relating to narrative temporality, plot, deixis of person, omniscience, the descriptive labels for narrators, and the models we have for identifying the source of fictional statements and fictional worlds. Ultimately, narrative fictions set in the afterlife force us to reassess many of the conventions and concepts of narratology (Bennett 2012, 192).

«What this fictions are after», Bennet argues, «is narratology itself»:

As we work more […] with the categories of narratology they become more flexible. So, rather than a matrix of categories covering a heterodiegetic vs a homodiegetic narrator, or prolepsis vs analepsis, for example, we end up with limber – even acrobatic – thinking that can stretch the boundaries and spaces between categories. […] Afterlife fictions therefore match a movement within narrative theory that has moved from descriptive categorisation of fictional types, to a narratology that aims to hypothesise the possibilities for narrative (Bennett 2012, 194–95).

Bennet's reflection may be seen as the transposition on the plane of narratology of the claims made by Jan Alber (2009) in his cognitivist approach to impossible storyworlds. By modelizing the cognitive strategies «by means of which readers can use real-world and literary scripts to naturalize unnatural scenarios»[1] (Alber 2009, 82), Aber argues that such narratives catalyze the

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[1] Alber borrows his definition of 'unnatural' from Doležel: «The term unnatural denotes physically impossible scenarios and events, that is, impossible by the known laws governing the physical world, as well as

remodeling of the cognitive frames through which we understand both reality and fictional worlds:

> Readers may, for example, generate new frames by blending schemata, in Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) sense[2]. This strategy ("blending scripts") is crucial with regard to our attempts to come to terms with scenarios in which the narrator is an animal, a corpse, or an inanimate object (Alber 2009, 82).

From a cognitive standpoint, then, this is how Alice Sebold's best-selling afterlife narrative *The Lovely Bones* works:

> This scenario departs from our real-world parameters, and we have to adjust our reading frames to come to terms with it. First of all, we have to activate our knowledge about people who are alive (and able to tell stories) and our awareness of the fact that the dead cannot speak. In a second step, we combine these schemata to picture a scenario in which a corpse speaks. What might the potential functions of this unnatural scenario be? The Lovely Bones invites us to stretch our cognitive categories to picture a situation in which the dead narrator continues to interact with the world she had to leave. The novel can be explained in terms of our inability to envision death as the definite end of our existence, or in terms of the wishes of the bereaved that the dead somehow continue to exist (Alber 2009, 90).

But Alber also proposes a fascinating alternative to naturalization:

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logically impossible ones, that is, impossible by accepted principles of logic» (Doležel 1998, 115–16; quoted in Alber 2009, 80).

[2] Fauconnier and Turner define 'blending' as a «general mental operation […] whose result is to bring together elements of different domains» (n.d., 37–38).

as an alternative to my own approach, I would like to mention the Zen way of reading, which might be adopted by an attentive reader who repudiates the above-mentioned explanations and simultaneously accepts the strangeness of unnatural scenarios and the feelings of discomfort, fear, or worry that they evoke in her or him (Alber 2009, 83).

By looking at r.s. through the lens of Alber's framework, I would suggest that, while the narratives within which they are inscribed certainly adopt a wide array of devices aimed at naturalizing our understanding of these highly unusual ontological conditions, they are also far removed from the strategies through which we naturalize the traditional living dead enough to catalyze what Alber calls 'Zen way of reading'.

An 'area' of fiction that is partially coextensive with afterlife narratives has been pinpointed by Frédéric Weinmann, who defines it as the domain of the *narration autothanatographique*:

> L'autothanatographie serait *a priori* (en calquant la définition de son antonyme dans le Robert), un écrit ayant pour objet l'histoire d'une mort particulière, racontée par le mort lui-même. Ce serait par consequent un récit doublement paradoxal puisque, d'une part, la mort peut sans doute se définir comme la suspension du temps et l'arrêt de l'histoire […] et que, d'autre part, à supposer qu'il se passe quelque chose après l'instant fatal, que la mort soit une action, qu'il y ait matière à raconteur, on peut se demander comment le récit pourrait émaner du mort lui-même, d'un être ayant perdu la vie et quitté le monde des humains (si la mort est silence, qu'est-ce qu'une fiction autothanatographique ?) (Weinmann 2018, 12–13).

The fundamental characteristic of the *autothanatographie* is that it is narrated in the first person by the dead protagonist herself. From this point of view,

according to Weinmann, the emergence of the *récit autothanatographie* marks a significant shift in the cultural history of literature:

> La littérature donne souvent la parole aux morts: qu'on songe au théâtre, à l'élégie, à l'épopée, aux histoires des fantômes… Mais elle hésite manifestement […] à attribuer la narration à un mort, comme si même la fiction s'arrêtait devant le paradoxe pragmatique de l'énoncé "je suis mort" (Weinmann 2018, 24).

As a consequence, while Bennet is interested in the narratological implications of afterlife narratives, Weinmann focuses on a comparative analysis of the *récit autothanatographie* in relation to the genre of *autofiction*:

> Si l'autothanatographie participe d'un nouveau type de fiction à la première personne, à la fois conséquence et moteur d'une redéfinition du genre romanesque à cette époque charnière, on remarquera en effet qu'elle n'induit pas une "réévaluation du sujet" (comme on le lit souvent à propos de l'autofiction), mais plutôt une redéfinition complète de cette notion. L'autothanatographie signe la fin des interrogations inquiètes sur la nature de l'existence humaine et sur le statut ontologique de l'individu car elle répond à ces questions par la négative (Weinmann 2018, 245).

Just as the *autothanatographie* resolves the cultural anxieties relative to the ontological condition of the Western subject by forcing the subject to speak from beyond life, it also resolves the quest for transcendence and salvation by denying their possibility:

> Malgré ce qu'affirment les narrateurs de certains récits autothanatographiques […], leur mort n'est pas une metamorphose. Ils ne racontent pas une nouvelle vie où leur individualité subsisterait malgré la destruction de leur enveloppe charnelle, mais un état transitoire entre la vie, passé,

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et une dissolution totale de la conscience de soi, imminente (Weinmann 2018, 242).

Therefore, «l'autothanatographie n'élabore pas un nouvel imaginaire de la mort» (242), as it prefers to focus on the redefinition of the individual ad devoid of ontological consistency and on the *mise en fiction* of a subject who, after her/his death, realizes that she/he can only exist—and has always existed—as a pure function of language. In conclusion, Weimann argues, «[o]n peut par conséquent voir dans la narration autothanatographique la transliteration plus ou moins consciente, plus ou moins réfléchie de phénomènes majeurs qui caractérisent la redefinition du "sujet" ou de "l'humain" à la fin du XXe siècle» (246).

Weimann's argument allows me to observe by contrast that, contrary to the *narration autothanatographique*, one of the main cultural functions of r.s. narratives resides precisely in their re-elaboration of the thanatological imagination. Since they are not set after death, but rather in the intermediate state that follows life and precedes death, they are not concerned with exploring the (possibility of an) afterlife, which remains mysterious and inaccessible. Moreover, this intermediate position, while certainly putting into question the nature of existence and subjectivity, does not lead to the conceptualization of the individual as a pure function of language. On the contrary, as chapters 3 and 4 will show, r.s. narratives often thematize and are centered on the investigation of the relationship between the undead self and her/his former, living, material self.

The analyses by both Bennet and Weinmann, however, while offering precious insights on r.s. narratives, can do so only by contrast, since they do not call into question the polarity life vs. death itself as r.s. narratives do. In order to encounter a study dealing with such a radical ontological problematization, one must move from the domain of literary studies to that of science studies. Susan Merrill Squier's *Liminal Lives: Imagining the Human at the Frontiers of Biomedicine* (2004) addresses the issue of how «the foundational categories of human life have become subject to sweeping renegotiation under the impact of contemporary biomedicine and biotechnology» (2) in order to explore «the ways literature and science collaborate on, and contest, a new vision of human life» (3). In order to do so, Squier focuses on liminal biomedical entities that «test the boundaries of our vital taxonomies, whether social, ethical, biological, or economic» (4), the most notable examples of which are represented by the engineered intrauterine fetus and the artificially rejuvenated person. These 'liminal lives' are «beings marginal to human life who hold rich potential for our ongoing biomedical negotiations with, and interventions in, the paradigmatic life crises: birth, growth, aging, and death» (9). The framework for the analysis of liminal lives delineated by Squier is crucially relevant to the investigation of the residual undead in at least two respects. Firstly, it proposes a redefinition of the notion of liminality which represents an essential premise for the understanding of the r.u. in the context of cultural history. Secondly, it modelizes the relationship between literature and science in terms that open up fascinating new perspectives to both science studies and comparative literature.

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In order to highlight how the interpretation of liminal lives depends on the de-naturalization of some of the notions that we consider fundamental to our definition of ourselves as biological individuals, Squiers begins by quoting from Victor Turner, the leading theorist in the anthropology of liminality:

> «the movement of a man through his lifetime, from a fixed placental placement within his mother's womb to his death and ultimate fixed point of his tombstone and final containment in his grave as a dead organism [is] punctuated by a number of critical moments of transition which all societies ritualize and publicly mark with suitable observances to impress the significance of the individual and the group on living members of the community. These are the important times of birth, puberty, marriage, and death» (Turner 1967, 94; quoted in Squier 2004, 6).

Squier aptly comments on this passage from a perspective that is reminiscent of queer theory:

> Stressing the role of cultural rituals to mark the facts of human life, Turner relies on a foundational opposition between nature and culture. Implicitly, he assumes the intransigence of biology (both gestation and burial are "fixed" in their placement) in order to focus instead on the cultural construction of meaning […]. Thus, as Turner understands it, while the liminal is shifting, life is still stable. It is here, I argue, that contemporary biomedicine necessitates a significant revision of Turner's thesis, one that acknowledges the shifting, interconnected, and emergent quality of human life (6).

The conclusion of Squier's critique of Turner posits one of the fundamental premises for the study of the residual undead: «No longer stable, the boundaries of our human existence have become imprecise at best, contested at worst» (7).

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As regards the way in which Squier conceptualizes the field of inquiry that usually falls under the label 'literature and science', her approach may be considered innovative—at least by literary scholars—in that it relies upon the fundamental cultural analogies between the two fields:

> I am adapting for science studies Teresa de Lauretis's modification of Foucault's notion of technologies: techniques and discursive strategies that are put to the service of gender production and construction. I understand both literature and science as technologies because they incorporate "institutionalized discourses, epistemologies and critical practices" [(De Lauretis 1987, 2–3)] to define what is knowable and to bring those objects into being (Squier 2004, 3).

Science and literature can share the same definition because they are

> more like each other than they are different, not only because both operate in culture and society to produce subjects and objects but also because both fields have come into being through a crucial act of institutional self-creation: the creation of a disciplinary divide between scientific and literary knowledges and practices (31).

From this point of view, the concise cultural genealogy of the residual undead that I will propose in Chapter 2 can be read as the story of how science, medicine, folklore and literature have collaborated in constructing intermediate states between life and death as objects of knowledge and in bringing them into being. In more abstract terms, the perspectives that such an approach to literature and science can open up are extremely fascinating:

> a genuinely reciprocal understanding of the ways literature and science collaborate and compete to construct the subjects of disciplinary knowledge can challenge the very organization of

culture within which both fields find their place: the
Enlightenment epistemology of subjects and objects (44).

I will conclude this introduction by finally discussing an issue that was raised
in the very first page of this study: the definition of fantastic fiction. In the
present work, the term 'fantastic' should not be considered as the English
equivalent of the French 'fantastique', but rather as an umbrella term designed
to include a wide range of 'non realistic' fictions in the context of an theoretical
approach to these fictions that is specifically Anglo-Saxon (and, later,
American). Rather than focusing on a specific set of genres, I will adopt an
interpretation of the fantastic as a mode of fiction. From this perspective, the
concise theoretical outline that follows may be considered as complementary
to the one provided by Lazzarin (2000), which is mainly based on theoretical
sources elaborated in France. An extremely general definition of the fantastic
mode can be found in Brian Attebery's (1992) seminal essay on the theory of
fantasy fiction: «The fantastic mode […] is a vast subject, taking in all literary
manifestations of the imagination's ability to soar above the merely possible»
(294). Such a definition, however, is rendered problematic by its lack of
historicity: contrary to Attebery, my analyses will move from a conception of
the fantastic as a mode of fiction that is always historically determined and
works in specific ways for each historical period. The necessity of historicizing
not only the genres of the fantastic, but also the fantastic as a mode, will be
addressed a few years after Attebery's essay by Remo Ceserani (1996). Such an
historicized modal approach to the fantastic invites us to look at what the
genres of the fantastic have in common, rather than at what differentiates each

genre from the others, and this is precisely the approach on which the analysis in this study will be based. In this sense, I use the term 'fantastic fiction' as a synonym of the still underused term *fantastika*, first employed by John Clute to refer, in an inclusive manner, to «the generic iterations of the non-mimetic» (2017, 18) that can be thought of as «expressive of a larger enterprise than realism» (15):

> The word fantastika as I began to use it then came from Continental criticism and general usage, and had been applied there very variously indeed to describe the literatures of the fantastic in the Western World. I took the term initially to allow, at the least hortatory level possible, its use as a generalised non-imperialist polythetic umbrella designation for those literatures. Over and above that initial broad usage, I proposed to use the term primarily to describe works written (very roughly) from the last decades of the eighteenth century onward: works that might be deemed therefore to have been written in a consciousness of their generic nature. I now use the term fantastika, in these two primary senses (plus a few others), in everything I write (16).

Clute's definition of *fantastika* is articulated in eight points, the most significant of which are:

> 1) Fantastika consists of that wide range of fictional works whose contents are understood to be fantastic.
> 2) Fantastika is a child of Romanticism in Europe. It soon monstrously outgrew these swaddling clothes (16).
>
> 5) the default understanding of a tale of fantastika is literal, not metaphorical; for metaphors in fantastika can mean what they say. Fantastika is a grammar of the literal; it is not a lesson imparted to the world from without. A story told literally is a story which believes what it sees, no matter how "marvelous" the vision may seem (18).

19) […] the world is the fourth wall of fantastika. […] Any reading of any text of fantastika that dissevers text from its worldly context throws out the bathwater and the baby (18).

This definition leads Clute to formulate the project of a 'diagrammatical study of the fantastic mode' that is crucially resonating with the perspective that I propose to adopt for the study of the residual undead:

> If *fantastika* can be seen as encompassing sacred games of insight and analysis within an *eruv*, a shift of emphasis is likely to occur, with less attention paid to taxonomic descriptions of particular genres, and more paid to the multiple interactions of text with text, a dance of synchrony and diachrony within the permission of the eruv that makes something of a mock of definitions of particular texts that privilege the Apollonian purity of the done thing. The inherent grammar – the engendering fire – of *fantastika* is not to be found in the thing done, or in strategic groupings of texts under various partial rubrics, but in the grammars of connection between texts; it lies in the beat that marks a tensing of the limbs of story, in the gap between the repose of the already told and the alarums of something new (19).

Clute's focus on the «grammar of interconnections between texts» within the field of fantastic fiction significantly echoes Gary K. Wolfe's project of a 'post-genre' approach to the fantastic, an approach to which the present study may represent a contribution. According to Wolfe, the tendency of the genres of the fantastic to constantly transgress definitions and limitation is inherent to their very structure:

> the fantastic genres […] seem evolutionary by their very nature: science fiction must accommodate the shifting and often counterintuitive visions of base reality that science itself reflects; horror must accommodate the constantly transforming sources

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of the anxiety that it seeks to exploit; fantasy must accommodate the shifting dreams of a world no longer governed by the conventionalized desires of pastoral idealism. In the end, science fiction, fantasy, and horror are the genres that at their best, and by the very terms of the imaginative processes involved, transcend or supersede the old notions of genre. They are narrative modes that already have leaked into the atmosphere, that have escaped their own worst debilitations, and that have therefore survived (2011, 53).

Because of the uncertainty of these genre markers, the fantastic genres contain within themselves the seeds of their own dissolution, a nascent set of postmodern rhetorical modes that, over a period of several decades, would begin to supplant not only the notion of genre itself, but the very foundations of the modernist barricades that had long been thought to insulate literary culture from the vernacular fiction of the pulps and other forms of noncanonical expression (23).

I would like to conclude this introduction by positing Wolfe's post-genre approach to fantastika as the main theoretical premise of this study, while integrating it with Attebery's proposition of a reader-oriented approach to the fantastic, which offers an original solution to the issue relative to the 'placement' of hybrid texts in rigid genre grids:

The interesting question about any given story is not whether or not it is fantasy or science fiction or realistic novel, but rather what happens when we read it as one of those things. What happens when we read Frankenstein as an instance of the philosophical Gothic? How does that reading differ from one that looks for the markers of science fiction, or horror? Depending on the generic perspective one favors, certain details of plot and motivation will stand out, while others will recede into the background. The central questions will shift. Different reading contexts will suggest themselves, including groupings of related

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works. Like individual performers within the same storytelling tradition, individual readers will perform the same texts with very dissimilar results: sometimes more effectively, sometimes less (2014: 32).

I will show in the next chapter how, in the context of r.s. narratives, the genres of the fantastic—from the supernatural to fantasy, from science fiction and speculative fiction to horror—all achieve the same goal: that of exploring new ontologies and new planes of existence. But before coming to the issue of the pragmatics of fantastic fiction, I will shift the focus of my attention to category theory in order to understand in what sense the residual undead can be described as a category.

Chapter 1
Theorizing residual states narratives

1.1 The Chinese encyclopedia and the living dead: categorizing the residual

After having posited the general framework within which the study of residual states between life and death comes into focus, my most urgent task is to define with precision what do I mean by 'residual undead'. As said in the introduction, the r.u. are characterized by the presence of a double level of cultural subversion: they violate the polarity 'life vs. death' *and* they do so by violating the taxonomy of the living dead. This seems to make queer theory the perfect hermeneutic tool for approaching these texts. For this reason, I will

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apply queer hermeneutics to the construction of a corpus in a comparative study, examining the strategies of categorization that make this construction possible.

The construction of r.s. will be first formalized through the intersection of two approaches to categorization, both developed in the field of cognitive sciences as elaborations of Wittgenstein's notion of family resemblance: Eleanor Rosch's prototype theory and George Lakoff's discussion of classification strategies in the Dyirbal language.

I will then try to analyze the epistemological implications deriving from restructuring the taxonomy of the living dead in the light of the notion of 'nonce taxonomy', described by Eve Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990) and recently reconsidered by Carmen Dell'Aversano. Sedgwick posits nonce-taxonomy as a strategy for the construction of identities mediating between the need to account for the uniqueness of every human being and the very small number of axes of categorization available in our culture. However, while recognizing the crucial role nonce-taxonomy has played in the deconstruction of the category of 'the individual', Sedgwick doesn't provide any theoretical framework for the description of this strategy. Dell'Aversano has recently contributed to the theoretical (re)definition of nonce taxonomy from a radical perspective, showing how it could work as a tool for the segmentation of one's reality according to absolutely idiosyncratic criteria.

I will conclude by intersecting the approaches to categorization deriving from cognitive sciences with those deriving from queer theory. My aim will be to show, firstly, that Rosch and Lakoff could provide nonce taxonomy with the

theoretical support it needs; and secondly, how the field of comparative studies could be queered through the systematic use of prototype-based and nonce-taxonomic categorization.

The analyses that follow will hopefully show how questioning the hermeneutics of comparative studies through queer theory—defined, in a broad sense, as a fluid set of tools possessing «the potential to subvert accepted ways of thinking on any issue»[3] (Dell'Aversano 2010, 74)—may open up new perspectives in the study of fiction by raising awareness of the categorization processes at work in the field of comparative literature, in general, and of thematics, in particular.

1.1.1 The living, the dead, the living dead, and all the others

When asked "What comes to your mind when I say 'the living dead'?", people normally answer with a list of supernatural and horror figures: ghosts,

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[3] «Subversion, as well as fluidity, is definitory of queer; indeed, its fluidity is not an end in itself, but simply the most effective and aesthetically fulfilling means to accomplish the political and metaphysical task of permanent and neverending subversion. [Q]ueer does not simply maintain that it is OK to be gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (this is a given of progressive common sense, about the least queer position imaginable...) but states that any construction of identity (including LGBT ones) is a performance constituting a subject which does not "exist" prior to it, and encourages to bring into being (both as objects of desire, of fantasy and of theoretical reflection and as concrete existential and political possibilities) alternative modes of performance» (Dell'Aversano 2010, 74).

vampires, zombies and mummies. In particular, the association of 'living dead' with zombies is almost instantaneous. Horror buffs and connoisseurs could add other minor figures, like the ghoul or the white lady. Some people mention Frankenstein. When asked to think of other examples outside fictional characters or supernatural beings, people sometimes point to permanent vegetative state and NDEs (Near Death Experiences) as possible examples of living-dead-like conditions.

This evident cognitive hierarchy in the cultural construction of the category 'the living dead' cannot be explained by the so-called 'classical' theories of categorization. According to these theories, categories have clear boundaries and are defined by common properties:

> From the time of Aristotle to the later work of Wittgenstein, categories were thought to be well understood and unproblematic. They were assumed to be abstract containers, with things either inside or outside the category. Things were assumed to be in the same category if and only if they had certain properties in common. And the properties they had in common were taken as defining the category. (Lakoff 1987, 6)

The description of categorization processes according to classical theories entails at least two fundamental consequences:

> First, if categories are defined only by properties that all members share, then no members should be better examples of the category than any other members. Second, if categories are defined only by properties inherent in the members, then categories should be independent of the peculiarities of any beings doing the categorizing. (Lakoff 1987, 6)

However, as we have just seen, both these statements do not apply to how people describe the category 'living dead'. In order to be accounted for, this process has to be studied in the light of the prototype theory of categorization, developed by Eleanor Rosch as an elaboration of Wittgenstein's notion of 'family resemblance'[4], that is, «[t]he idea that members of a category may be related to one another without all members having any properties in common that define the category» (Lakoff 1987, 12). In particular, Rosch enriches Wittgenstein's view of categorization by introducing the key concept of 'centrality', defined as «[t]he idea that some members of a category may be 'better examples' of that category than others» (Lakoff 1987, 12). According to Rosch

> experiments indicate that people categorize objects, not in set-theoretical terms, but in terms of prototypes and family resemblances. For example, small flying singing birds, like

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[4] «Consider for example the proceedings that we call 'games'. I mean board games, card games, ball games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all? Don't say, "There must be something common, or they would not be called 'games'" -- but look and see whether there is anything common to all. For if you look at them you will not see something common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look! […] And the result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. […] I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, color of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. Etc. Overlap and criss-cross in the same way.— And I shall say: 'games' form a family» (Wittgenstein [1953] 1999, 171). For a genealogy of the notion of 'family resemblance' see Ginzburg (2004).

sparrows, robins, etc., are prototypical birds. Chickens, ostriches, and penguins are birds but are not central members of the category—they are nonprototypical birds. But they are birds nonetheless, because they bear sufficient family resemblances to the prototype; that is, they share enough of the relevant properties of the prototype to be classified by people as birds (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 71).

In other words, Rosch's experiments demonstrate that, contrary to what the classical theory of categorization holds, the relationship between an object and a category is not defined in rigid yes-or-no terms, but rather that there are degrees of membership, which are determined by differences involving degrees of typicality.

Even though prototype theory has been criticized by a number of logicians and philosophers of mind, as well as challenged by other categorization theories[5], these views mostly approach categorization from an abstract perspective, which tends to disregard what is most important to the analysis that I'm going to propose: the 'cultural life' of categories. On the contrary, Rosch provides us with an invaluable model for mapping how categorization concretely works in a culture and in our everyday lives:

It should be noted that the issues in categorization with which we are primarily concerned have to do with explaining the categories found in a culture and coded by the language of that

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[5] For an overview of the subject, see Weiskopf (2013) and Margolis and Laurence (2014). Criticisms to prototype theory have been raised notably by Fodor (1998). For advances in the study of categorization in cognitive science after Rosch, see the essays collected in Cohen and Lefebvre (2005).

culture at a particular point in time. When we speak of the formation of categories, we mean their formation in the culture. This point is often misunderstood. The principles of categorization proposed are not as such intended to constitute a theory of the development of categories in children born into a culture nor to constitute a model of how categories are processed (how categorizations are made) in the mind of adult speakers of a language (Rosch 1999, 189).

By interpreting the difference between prototypical and nonprototypical members through a geographical metaphor – as Lakoff and Johnson do in the above quotation – a category can be viewed as a city area: it has a center, inhabited by the prototypical members, and a number of outskirts, inhabited by the nonprototypical members. The boundaries delimiting the two areas are neither clear-cut nor fixed, but rather blurred and unstable, subjected as they are to constant cultural re-negotiations.

If we look at the way Western culture has constructed the category 'living dead' through this prototype-based metaphor, it is clear that its center is inhabited by three prototypical members: the ghost, the vampire and the zombie. Each one of these figures possesses a detailed cultural identikit with precisely defined traits. They belong to a more or less recent tradition in literature, cinema, and the visual arts, which makes them immediately recognizable. Finally, they have become immensely successful in every form of fiction over the last decades. As a consequence, they have also become widely studied by academics in a wide range of fields.

A number of somewhat 'minor' figures can be considered to inhabit the center as well: the mummy, the ghoul, the white lady. They may not be as popular as the members of the first triad, but are, nonetheless, defined by a

precise set of traits and can be traced back to well-known traditions, which are the criteria that define prototypical membership in our case.

If recognizing the center of the category 'living dead' is almost intuitive, any attempt to define its periphery proves to be far less immediate: the center is so intensely active that it seems to occupy the whole space of the category, thus making it difficult to even conceptualize a periphery.

I would argue that this periphery can be constructed by moving the focus of our attention towards a number of isolated and (seemingly) unrelated figures that stud the speculative fiction landscape of the last 150 years. They undeniably have *something to do* with the living dead, but *do not quite fit* the current cultural mapping of this category, thus forcing us to reconsider, from a much wider perspective, how intermediate states between life and death can be represented in fiction.

If considered individually, each one of these texts could be viewed as a sort of quirky exception, a bizarre exercise in style, an isolated deviation from the 'normal' conceptualization of the undead. But, in doing so, we would simply define it from the point of view of the central figures of the category. This would implicitly deny any strong cultural relevance and significance to its unique peculiarities: they would be seen as fortuitous and forgettable traits, too isolated to be worthy of telling us something important about how the polarity 'life vs death' is structured in contemporary culture. On the contrary, I propose to gather these isolated texts together into *one single corpus* and to define them in a way that dispenses with the ghost-vampire-zombie paradigm altogether. By doing so, they stop being isolated exceptions to a dominant

category and become fully-fledged members of a *new* category: the 'residual states between life and death', or 'the residual undead' (shortened to 'r.u.'). This category can be used to identify liminal characters, worlds and contexts whose features are original and possibly unique and do not belong to any well-known cultural tradition.

But how can we theoretically deal with a category whose members are the scattered leftovers of another category?

We could answer this question by describing the category 'r.s.' in the light of the notion of 'otherness', as defined by George Lakoff in his 1987 essay *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*, which represents the most successful attempt to date to systematically describe the mechanisms of human cognition according to Rosch's prototype theory.

From the perspective outlined in the previous paragraph, the category 'r.s.' appears to be defined in exclusively negative terms: its members are those objects which do not fit any other category for the description of the living dead. It is interesting to note that the same kind of 'negative definition' of a category can be found in what is probably the most extraordinary literary text dealing with the speculative re-elaboration of taxonomy: the classification of the animal kingdom according to the *Emporio celestial de conocimientos benévolos*, an ancient Chinese encyclopedia described by J.L. Borges in *The Analytical Language of John Wilkins*:

> En sus remotas páginas está escrito que los animales se dividen en (a) pertenecientes al Emperador, (b) embalsamados, (c) amaestrados, (d) lechones, (e) sirenas, (f) fabulosos, (g) perros sueltos, (h) incluidos en esta clasificación, (i) que se agitan como locos, (j) innumerables, (k) dibujados con un pincel finísimo de

pelo de camello, *(l) etcétera*, (m) que acaban de romper el jarrón, (n) que de lejos parecen moscas (Borges [1952] 1966, 708, emphasis mine)[6].

With a move that clearly reminds Foucault's premise to *The Order of Things*, the chapter that gives Lakoff's book his curious title opens with an analysis of this quote. Like Foucault, Lakoff focuses on our inability to think Borges' fantastic taxonomy[7], but he does so by relating such inability to the actual hermeneutic practices of linguists and anthropologists:

> Part of what makes this passage art, rather than mere fantasy, is that it comes close to the impression a Western reader gets when reading descriptions of nonwestern languages and cultures. The fact is that people around the world categorize things in ways that both boggle the Western mind and stump Western linguists and anthropologists. More often than not, the linguist or anthropologist just throws up his hands and resorts to giving a list—a list that one would not be surprised to find in the writing of Borges (Lakoff 1987, 92).

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[6] In its distant pages it is written that animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the emperor; (b) embalmed ones; (c) those that are trained; (d) suckling pigs; (e) mermaids; (f) fabulous ones; (g) stray dogs; (h) those that are included in this classification; (i) those that tremble as if they were mad; (j) innumerable ones; (k) those drawn with a very fine camel's-hair brush; *(l) etcetera*; (m) those that have just broken the flower vase; (n) those that at a distance resemble flies .

[7] «Dans l'émerveillement de cette taxinomie, ce qu'on rejoint d'un bond, ce qui, à la faveur de l'apologue, nous est indiqué comme le charme exotique d'une autre pensée, c'est la limite de la notre: l'impossibilité nue de penser *cela*» (Foucault 1990, 7, original emphasis).

This analysis, in fact, introduces Lakoff's discussion of the traditional classification of objects in Dyirbal – an aboriginal language of Australia – as described by linguist Robert M.W. Dixon. In Dyirbal, every noun must always be preceded by a variant of one of four words: 'bayi', 'balan', 'balam', 'bala'. Dixon uncovers the categorization system underlying this syntactic distribution by observing that

> speakers do not learn category members one by one, but operate in terms of some general principles. […] Dixon's proposed basic schema is this:
> I. Bayi: (human) males; animals
> II. Balan: (human) females; water; fire; fighting
> III. Balam: nonflesh food
> IV. Bala: everything not in the other classes (Lakoff 1987, 93).

After a detailed and compelling analysis of Dixon's schema, Lakoff finally shows how this «superb example of how human cognition works» (1987, 95) allows us to identify and recapitulate the general principles at work in human categorization – the key principle being, as said before, centrality. Among these principles, Lakoff includes that of 'otherness', with reference to the point '(l) etcetera' in Borges' taxonomy: «Borges was right about this. Conceptual systems can have an 'everything else' category. It, of course, does not have central members, chaining etc.» (1987, 96).

Given this account of human categorization, the category 'r.s.' can be described precisely as an 'everything else' category that follows the conceptual logic of otherness. Thus, Lakoff's analysis allows us to formalize the construction of a «residual category» (Bowker and Star 1999, 11) according to the general principles governing the functioning of conceptual systems. Even

more importantly, it allows us to make a key feature of residual categories explicit: by their very nature, they cannot possess an internal structure based on typicality differences. In this sense, residual categories are exceptional and fundamentally different from any other category.

I will now briefly explore the main implications for the study of 'r.s.' deriving from this structural absence of prototypes.

As I have pointed out, the figures at the center of the category 'living dead' are immensely famous and defined by recurrent sets of traits. Whenever we encounter, for example, a character with long canines that feeds on human blood, we immediately identify this character as a vampire. On the contrary, r.s. completely lack both structural coherence and cultural renown. While every individual occurrence of the semiotic object 'Dracula' can be automatically subsumed under the prototype 'vampire', the same does not apply to the individual occurrence of the object 'Mr. Valdemar'. It has no 'figure' to which it can be referred, because there seem to be no prototypes framing our cultural construction of Mr. Valdemar.

This observation may be relevant not only to the study of categories but also, on a broader perspective, to Lotman's culturology, which is axed on an analogous 'center vs. periphery' opposition. In particular, it may help to elaborate on Lotman's well-known idea that the periphery of a culture lacks order and structure:

> the entire system for preserving and communicating human experience is constructed as a concentric system in the center of which are located the most obvious and logical structures, that is, the most structural ones. Nearer to the periphery are found formations whose structuredness is not evident or has not been

proved, but which, being included in general sign-communicational situations, *function as structures* (Lotman and Uspensky 1978, 213).

The lack of structuredness consists precisely in the impossibility to intuitively 'extract' traits from a category member: while one can easily do so for a vampire ('pale', 'with long canines', 'haematophagous' etc.), the same thing cannot be done for a r.s.

More importantly, recognizing a central member of the category generates precise expectations in readers and audiences: we all know quite well what kind of aesthetic experience we can expect from a zombie movie or a ghost story. In fact, we know it so well that our expectations can be intentionally transgressed in order to create new kinds of texts, like a zombie love story or a novel about a vegan vampire, whose aesthetic effect relies precisely on the contrast between our expectations and the actual traits given to the 'transgressive' character. Because of these figures' constant, pervasive and highly structured presence in contemporary fiction, the horror and fear they inspire have crystallized into recurrent and predictable patterns. We have learnt to associate zombies with *a precise quality of fear*, and know exactly how the fear of zombies is different from the fear of ghosts or vampires. In this sense, by providing us with well-defined patterns of experience, the living dead have become paradoxically reassuring and ultimately harmless. On the other hand, there are no rigid sets of expectations that guide our textual experience of r.s. This allows them to inspire fears, anxieties and speculative challenges we may not be culturally trained to face.

1.1.2 From the Chinese encyclopedia to nonce taxonomy

The creation of the category 'r.s.' as emancipated from the ghost-vampire-zombie paradigm represents an attempt to reshape our understanding of a set of fictional objects through the restructuring of the categorization processes by which these objects become part of a taxonomy. Up to this point, I have analyzed these processes mainly from a broad, socio-cultural perspective: Wittgenstein, Rosch and Lakoff provide us with invaluable hermeneutic tools for describing how categories shape every aspect of our thinking and how we act through categories. In the second part of this study, I would like to focus on categorization processes by adopting the opposite perspective: how can we actively and consciously contribute to the construction of conceptual systems? Through which strategies can we act on categories? This is where queer theory comes in, opening up a fundamental space of mediation, created by the tension between what categories do to us and what we do to categories.

The hermeneutic strategy that led to the construction of 'r.s.' as a category was pursued in order to account for the wide variety of texts that are 'somehow related' to the notion of 'living dead' but are rendered invisible by the current configuration of this same notion. In the very first pages of *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick seems to express a structurally analogous desire – with a broader perspective and with different aims – to account for the almost inexhaustible variety of identity traits that make each person unique:

Axiom 1: People are different from each other.

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It is astonishing how few respectable conceptual tools we have for dealing with this self-evident fact. A tiny number of inconceivably coarse axes of categorization have been painstakingly inscribed in current critical and political thought: gender, race, class, nationality, sexual orientation are pretty much the available distinctions. They, with the associated demonstrations of the mechanisms by which they are constructed and reproduced, are indispensable, and they may indeed override all or some other forms of difference and similarity. But the sister or brother, the best friend, the classmate, the parent, the child, the lover, the ex-: our families, loves, and enmities alike, not to mention the strange relations of our work, play, and activism, prove that even people who share all or most of our own positionings along these crude axes may still be different enough from us, and from each other, to seem like all but different species (Sedgwick 1990, 22).

According to Sedgwick, the response to the rigidity of our axes of categorization is to be found in what she calls 'nonce taxonomy':

probably everybody who survives at all has reasonably rich, unsystematic resources of nonce taxonomy for mapping out the possibilities, dangers, and stimulations of their human social landscape. […] The writing of a Proust or a James would be exemplary here: projects precisely of nonce taxonomy, of making and unmaking and remaking and redissolution of hundreds of old and new categorical imaginings concerning all the kinds it may take to make up a world (23).

Sedgwick posits nonce taxonomy as a means to remedy both the scarcity and the coarseness of social categories which can be used to describe the individual in our culture ("A *tiny* number of *inconceivably coarse* axes of categorization have been painstakingly inscribed in current critical and political thought"). From this perspective, nonce taxonomy seems to pursue a

twofold aim: one the one hand, the creation of new axes of categorization; on the other hand, the multiplication of the number of possible positionings along a given axis of categorization.

When Sedgwick provides an example of nonce taxonomy, however, she does so with reference to "the particular area of sexuality" (24), which results in a long enumeration of specifications of people's sexual preferences. This strategy seems to pursue the second aim much more than the first one: in fact, if sexuality "has been made expressive of the essence of both identity and knowledge" (26) in which sense could it be considered a *new* axis of categorization?[8] Or rather: even if we consider it as such, what matters most here is that Sedgwick's nonce taxonomy proposes new categorizations while firmly remaining within the parameters that our culture already considers important – even fundamental – for the construction of personal identity.

In order to try to escape from these cultural parameters, Carmen Dell'Aversano[9] proposes to rethink nonce taxonomy from a radical perspective by shifting the focus of our attention from what the culture considers important to what *the individual* considers important for the definition of her/his identity.

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[8] Of course, to ask this question does not in any way imply undervaluing the fundamental relevance of Sedgwick's claim that "to alienate […] from anyone on any theoretical ground the authority to describe and name their own sexual desire […] may represent the most intimate violence possible" (26).

[9] Dell'Aversano studied Sedgwick's treatment of nonce taxonomy and reconsidered the definition of this concept in a series of lectures on queer theory given at the University of Pisa during the first semester of the academic year 2016-2017.

From this perspective, a nonce taxonomy can be defined as an original arrangement of objects or categories, created by a single person on the basis of absolutely idiosyncratic criteria that are indicative of this person's unique, eccentric and quaint way of making sense of the world.

In this sense, the «rich, unsystematic resources of nonce taxonomy» about which Sedgwick (23) speaks are those resources that allow us to conceive of and express idiosyncratic identity parameters that cannot be subsumed into any pre-established axis of categorization. In other words, this definition of nonce taxonomy promotes the re-segmentation of reality according to parameters that become particularly meaningful – from a philosophical point of view in general and for queer theory in particular – when they are considered highly relevant for the individual but not for the culture. Nonce taxonomy thus becomes a queer hermeneutic tool catalyzing the never-ending proliferation of novel categories and categorization strategies. The tool through which one becomes able to assert and exercise the right to compile one's own Chinese encyclopedia.

Dell'Aversano, however, observes that the application of this radical definition inevitably collides with the fact that nonce taxonomies cannot, by their very nature, become part of social interactions. If the cultural construction of normal social intercourse is based on *shared* categorizations (Sacks 1985), then there is no place in it for the expression of absolutely idiosyncratic parameters. From this point of view, Dell'Aversano concludes, the process of education can be thought of as the process of systematic suppression of one's

nonce taxonomies and, sometimes, of one's very ability to conceptualize a nonce taxonomy.

1.1.3 From nonce taxonomy to queer comparative literature

The discussion of the notion of nonce taxonomy has shown how queer theory can open up a hermeneutic space for mediating between what categories do to us and what we do to categories. More specifically, the analysis of the definitions of nonce taxonomy, provided by Sedgwick and Dell'Aversano, has outlined two models suggesting how one should position oneself and how one should act inside this space. At the same time, my argument has moved from the study of categorization processes to that of taxonomic processes, that is, from examining how objects can be gathered together in order to become members of a category, to examining how one can construct relationships between categories in order to create a taxonomy. Thus, we can now look at 'prototypical living dead' and 'residual undead' as the two sub-categories whose links and relationships structure the internal taxonomy of the category 'living dead'.

More precisely, I propose to interpret the construction of this residual category and the subsequent restructuring of the taxonomy of the living dead, drawing on reflections by both Sedgwick and Dell'Aversano, as an attempt to create a nonce taxonomy that mediates between the attention to personal (and textual) idiosyncrasies and the necessity to share the results of one's research with the members of the academic community.

This parallel allows me to conclude my argument by criss-crossing the results of the first part of the study and those of the second part. On the one

hand, nonce taxonomy can be analyzed from the perspective of the hermeneutic strategy that led to the construction of the category 'r.s.'; more importantly, on the other hand, the invisible processes of categorization that are normally at work in comparative studies can be queered in the light of nonce taxonomy. This intersection pinpoints new strategies and patterns we may follow while we move in the hermeneutic space that mediates the interactions between the researcher and a given set of categories.

With regard to the first point, prototype theory shows that: a) the 'invaluably rich, unsystematic resources of nonce taxonomy' conceptualized by Sedgwick can be found at the peripheries of concepts[10]; b) 'everything else' categories can represent potentially enormous reservoirs of nonce taxonomic energies whose importance is often downplayed in critical analysis; c) by avoiding the adoption of a 'centralist' model for the interpretation of non-prototypical phenomena and focusing on the relationships that non-prototypical members entertain the one with the other, a chaotic body of quirky

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[10] Dell'Aversano (2017, 124) proposes a parallel modelization of this argument from the perspective of Lotman's culturology. In order to do so, she draws on Freud's account of psychoanalysis as a discipline that deals with the observation of residual phenomena: «It is true that psycho-analysis cannot boast that it has never concerned itself with trivialities. On the contrary, the material for its observations is usually provided by the inconsiderable events which have been put aside by the other sciences as being too unimportant - the dregs, one might say, of the world of phenomena. But are you not making a confusion in your criticism between the vastness of the problems and the conspicuousness of what points to them?» (Freud 1974, 3137).

textual objects can challenge common categorizations and possibly give birth to a nonce taxonomy.

Regarding the second point, the notion that the systematic use of nonce taxonomy could result in the proliferation of new categorizations can easily be applied to the practice of comparative studies. This field could be queered, for example, by adopting nonce taxonomy when dealing with thematic categorization, which would in turn result in an exciting proliferation of *new themes*. This possibility is all the more important if one considers that the research field of thematics is constructed in such a way as to leave nonce taxonomic energies normally inactive. When working on topics, themes and motives, the need to be aware of the possible ways in which idiosyncratic corpora could be created is rarely felt. This depends on the fact that, normally, themes are not considered as something that needs to be *constructed from scratch* by the researcher; rather, they are already available in the researcher's semiotic encyclopedia ('the forest', 'the mirror', 'the city', 'the zombie', 'magic', 'the teacher', 'war') and need only to be *recognized* in a text. On the contrary, there is no *a priori* agreement between the reader and me on what a 'r.s.' is and 'where' it can be found, while we unquestionably already agree, for example, on what a zombie or a mummy is.

These observations, in conclusion, link research practice in comparative studies to Dell'Aversano's idea of education as suppression of one's nonce taxonomies. I have the impression that they may intersect in the almost morbid fear of 'going off topic', inculcated in students during elementary school and often reasserted until the end of university education. Maybe, in order to

exploit the hermeneutic potential of a nonce taxonomy, one must precisely take the risk of going off topic. In order to re-draw the geography of a thematic field, maybe one must re-learn how to go off topic and how to trust one's own quirky sense of family resemblances. Otherwise, if we devalue our own ability to create new categories and taxonomies, we risk devaluing the most beautiful and extraordinary feature of the aesthetic experience, in general, and of speculative fiction in particular: its capacity to re-shape the construction of our world through the creation of objects, categories and ontologies that we will never be able to experience in our own reality. Its capacity to endlessly create and re-create Chinese encyclopedias of the world.

1.2 J.R.R. Tolkien's *On Fairy-stories* and the pragmatics of fantastic fiction

In the previous section I tried to answer the question: how can residual states be defined? This led me to investigate how r.s. can be theoretically modelized by elaborating on the notion of family resemblance and sketch a proposal for a nonce taxonomic approach to comparative studies. Now that r.s. have been placed within a system of relations between categories and taxonomic systems, it is time to ask: how does the aesthetic experience of a r.s. narrative *work*? And what does render it worthy of critical attention?

Such questions are clearly rooted in a reader-response-oriented approach to aesthetic experiences and, more precisely, in the works of Wolfgang Iser ([1976] 1978) and Stanley Fish (1980). In order to answer them, I propose to modelize the effect of r.s. narratives on the basis of a reader-response theory of fantastic

fiction. I will not do so by drawing on some of the canonical texts on the theory of fantastic fiction that I have discussed in the introduction, but rather by looking at one of the texts which catalyzed the blossoming of theoretical speculation over the nature of fantasy fiction during the second half of the XX century. More specifically, this section will have as its main focus John R.R. Tolkien's essay *On Fairy-Stories*.

Tolkien's reflection on the pragmatics and meaning of fantasy begins in 1939, when he is invited to deliver the Andrew Lang Lecture at the University of St. Andrews, and finds a definitive form some four years later in the 50-page essay *On Fairy-stories*. After many reprints in several collections of Tolkien's short works, in 2008 leading Tolkien scholars Verlyn Flieger and Douglas A. Anderson finally provided an excellent reference edition for the essay by including its *avant-textes* and an extensive commentary (Tolkien [1947] 2008). Even if its title seems to place this work in the line of analogous theoretical speculations on fairytales by John Ruskin (*Fairy Stories*, 1968) and G.K. Chesterton (*Fairy Tales*, 1908), Tolkien gives to the term 'fairy-story' a much wider meaning than one might expect. Thus, his reflection on fairy-stories represents not only a contribution to the hermeneutics of a specific genre of fiction commonly—and, in Tolkien's opinion, wrongly—associated with children's literature, but a more general investigation of the theory and aesthetics of fantastic fiction. Tolkien posits here the concept of 'secondary world': a fictional world distinct and separate from the 'primary world', that is, from our own world. From this point of view, *On Fairy-stories* represents one

of the very first attempts at structuring a theory of literature around the idea of 'world', something that we may tend to perceive as unoriginal today, after the fundamental contributions of such literary theorists as Pavel (1986) and Doležel (1998). The concept of 'secondary world' depends, in turn, upon that of 'sub-creation', which describes both the act of creating a secondary world and the human faculty allowing such a creation. As a catholic, Tolkien believes that only God can truly create, that is, create *ex nihilo* and infuse life in what is created; however, humans can reproduce the divine act of creation on a lesser scale, since they are made in the image of God.

On Fairy-stories has been widely researched in the context of Tolkien studies, even if the authoritative opinions of Humphrey Carpenter, Tolkien's biographer, according to whom the essay «makes too many [points] for an entirely cogent argument» (Carpenter 1977, 191; quoted in Flieger and Anderson 2008, 9) and Tom Shippey, who criticized the essay for its lack of a strong argumentative kernel ([1983] 2003, 49), have often prevented researchers from fully exploring its complex, plural and fundamentally unresolved nature, in an attempt to provide more coherent and unifying interpretations of the essay. In the introduction to the essay's 2008 edition, Flieger and Anderson consider it an ideal 'theoretical compass' to understand the transition between the poetics and style of *The Hobbit* (first published in 1937, two years before the Andrew Lang Lecture) and those, more complex and self-aware, of *The Lord of the Rings* (1954). Its value as a work of literary theory, however, is not underestimated, and the editors define the essay as part of a most noble tradition of reflection on the function of fiction and the imagination:

«It [*On Fairy-stories*] belongs in the same line as Aristotle's *Poetics*, Sidney's *Defence of Poesey*, Wordsworth's Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, Coleridge's on Imagination in *Biographia Literaria*, and T.S. Eliot's essay on "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in *The Sacred Wood*» (Flieger and Anderson 2008, 15). The majority of studies on Tolkien's essay have tended to focus mainly on two areas of investigation: on the one hand, following the pioneering contribution by Bergman (1977), the essay's sources have been scrupulously charted[11]; on the other, an increasing amount of attention is being paid to the philosophical background from which Tolkien's literary theory emerges and, more precisely, to its theological and neo-platonic implications[12]. The latter trend of research has focused in particular on another original concept posited by Tolkien, that of 'eucatastrophe', which allows him, in the final pages of the essay, to link within the same argument two of his most pressing concerns: the theory of a specific kind of fantastic fiction and theology. Through the eucatastrophe, what we traditionally know as 'happy ending' is transformed from a simple narrative device into the core of what may be called Tolkien's 'metaphysics of literature'. In its purely narratological, non-theological meaning, the term has also been incorporated in John Clute's classic definition of Fantasy from the

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[11] The other notable contributions to this area of scholarship will be cited at different points during the analysis.

[12] See, among others, Rose (1982), Reilly ([1971] 2006), the essays collected in Hart and Khovacs (2007), and the recent McIntosh (2018).

Encyclopedia of Fantasy (the all-uppercase lettering indicates others entries in the *Encyclopedia*):

> A fantasy text may be described as the story of an earned passage from BONDAGE—via a central RECOGNITION of what has been revealed and of what is about to happen, and which may involve a profound METAMORPHOSIS of protagonist or world (or both)—into the EUCATASTROPHE, where marriages may occur, just governance fertilize the barren LAND, and there is a HEALING.

In the wider field of literary theory, *On Fairy-stories* has not achieved recognition until recent times—with the notable exception of the 1967 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures given by Tolkien's friend W.H. Auden, which he entitled *Secondary Worlds*. The reason may be seen in the fact that Tolkien chooses a marginalized genre of fiction as his subject. Furthermore, his dislike for most works of fiction written in the English language after Chaucer, his eccentric interpretation of the canon of English literature and his badly concealed hostility towards Shakespeare[13] may have certainly contributed to the essay's marginalization. Today, *On Fairy-stories* is known mainly to scholars working on the notion of fictional world, and subcreation has become the keyword which animates the researches of Mark J. Wolf, which recently lead to the

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[13] Even if Tolkien «manages to avoid any real discussion of Shakespeare's most extended excursion into the domain of fairies, A Midsummer Night's Dream […] There remains an unspoken but strong sense in Tolkien's essay that Shakespeare's delinquency, partly erotic, in the domain of Faërie has reduced the possibilities of fantasy to mere pantomime, in the form of either child's play or erotic romp» (Pask 2013, 131)

publication of two authoritative essay collections: *Revisiting Imaginary Worlds: A Subcreation Studies Anthology* (Wolf 2016) and the *Routledge Companion to Imaginary Worlds* (Wolf 2018). A number of famous passages from *On Fairy-stories* are quoted and briefly discussed in Wolf's first book on the theory and history of secondary worlds, published in 2012, where subcreation is defined as follows:

> Tolkien termed the making of a secondary world "subcreation" […] since human beings are limited to using the pre-existing concepts found in God's creation, finding new combinations of them that explore the realm of possibilities, many of which do not exist in the Primary World. Thus A "subcreator" is a specific kind of author, one who very deliberately builds an imaginary world, and does so for reasons beyond that of merely providing a backdrop for a story» (Wolf 2012, Kindle loc. 720-722).

Wolf's approach to the study of worldbuilding may be more detailed than Tolkien's, but the underlying structure of Tolkien's approach remains unchanged. The field of subcreation studies that Wolf inaugurates does not put into question the theoretical premises posited by Tolkien[14], which, as I will try to show, present more than one limit to the eye of the contemporary literary theorist. My aim here, however, is not to compare Tolkien to Wolf, and I consider the study of the former's theory a good opportunity for assembling a

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[14] From this perspective, Wolf's research can be seen as opposite to that of Farah Mendlesohn, whose aim in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* is precisely the creation of a *new* framework for the study of fantasy on the basis of the kinds of relationship between worlds in fantasy fiction and their rhetorical and political implications.

theory of fantastic fiction not only on the basis of analogy and continuity, but by contrast. *On Fairy-stories* can be placed at the center of a network of ideas and intuitions that lead to several branches of literary theory and the contemporary study of fantastic fiction, spanning from the theory of possible worlds to the relationship between virtual worlds and the so-called 're-enchantment of the West' (Partridge 2004; Saler 2012). This is the reason why it could represent a good starting point for the elaboration of my theoretical approach to the study of the residual undead. I will examine Tolkien's essay in the light of contemporary literary theory, highlighting what he anticipated rather than what he inherited from pre-existent traditions—I will, however, quote from Tolkien's sources in order to provide the necessary context for the analysis, drawing on the rather ample literature on this subject[15]. From this perspective, the exploration of the notion of 'secondary world' will represent an opportunity to contribute to an archaeology of the concept of fictional world by analyzing Tolkien's formulation in the light of the wider theoretical context

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[15] For the sake of clarity, the analyses that follow will focus exclusively on *On Fairy-stories* and will not take into account the other fictional and non-fictional texts in which Tolkien elaborated his literary theory: the essay *Beowulf: the Monster and the Critics* (derived from a lecture given in 1936 and published in 1937), the poem *Mythopoeia* (quoted in On Fairy-stories but published for the first time only in 1988), the short stories *Leaf by Niggle* (written in 1938-1939 and published in 1945) and *Smith of Wootton Major* (first published in 1967), the creation myth that constitutes the first section of *The Silmarillion* (a collection of works published posthumously in 1977), and the huge body of Tolkien's letters.

from which it emerges in the essay. The aim of such an analysis is not to give a definition nor to propose a comprehensive theory of fantastic fiction, but to highlight some of the characteristics and potentials in the pragmatics of fantastic fiction that r.s. narratives unleash with particular energy. Coherently with my reader-oriented approach, I'm not interested in what fantastic fiction is but rather in what fantastic fiction *does*. More precisely, I'm interested in the questions: what does fantastic fiction *as exemplified by the texts of the corpus* do best? What is the key pragmatics underlying r.s. narratives? I would like to show that the answer to these questions necessarily intersects the theory of fantastic fiction, and that the key pragmatics governing the aesthetic experience of r.s. narratives construct fantastic fiction as a 'laboratory' for experimenting with new and alternative ontologies. *On Fairy-Stories* could also be put in relation with the theoretical reflection on the categorization processes that were the subject of the previous section, since one of the most relevant aims of the essay is that of shifting the position of fairy-stories in the cultural system from the periphery—in which they are considered as the residual particles of the literary system and thus relegated outside the domain of adulthood—to the center. In more general terms, Tolkien's essay is deeply interested in shifting and deconstructing such cultural polarities as 'adult'-'child' and 'object of academic study'-'object of aesthetic experience'. As regards the former polarity, in particular, I will show how Tolkien faces and dismisses in the early 1940s a number of cultural constructs aimed at discrediting imaginary worlds and fantastic fiction, and does so by taking an

intellectual stance that seems to anticipate certain aspects of contemporary deconstructionism.

1.2.1 Faerie as place, Faerie as language

The reason why *On Fairy-stories* can be considered not simply an essay on a narrow genre of the fantastic but rather a work dealing with the theory of fantastic fiction resides in the peculiar definition given by Tolkien to the concept of 'fairy-story':

> For the moment I will say only this: a "fairy-story" is one which touches on or uses Faerie, whatever its own main purpose may be: satire, adventure, morality, fantasy. Faerie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic—but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power (Tolkien [1947] 2008, 12).

This apparently clear-cut definition is rendered rather problematic by the fact that Tolkien employs the term Faërie, for which he deliberately adopts and archaizing orthography[16], by assigning to it at least three different meanings:

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[16] «During the development of his mythology, Tolkien came to reject the modern English word fairy, with its connotations of delicacy and prettiness, in favor of the more archaic spelling faërie and its deeper, darker implications. This older orthography is formed by the addition of the suffix erie/ery to the Old French noun fay/fae (fairy). Spelled thus, fae̎rie does not refer to a supernatural creature but to a supernatural activity (the act of enchanting) and/or condition (the state of being enchanted)» (Flieger 2007, 184). In *History in English Words*, an essay by linguist and fellow Inkling Owen Barfield, Tolkien could find a discussion of the word Faery: «Barfield claims that this word expired in the time of Milton but was "resurrected in the nineteenth century"—and meant "not so much of an individual sprite as of a magic realm

He used it [the term "Faerie"] to mean the Otherworld beyond the five senses—a parallel reality tangential in time and space to the ordinary world; he used it to mean the practice of enchantment or magic, especially through the use of words, for example spells or charms; and he used it to mean the altered state brought about by such practice (Tolkien [1947] 2008, 85).

Distinguishing between the different meanings of Faërie is not always easy. For the purposes of this study, I will focus on two of them.

In the first section of *On Fairy-stories*, Faërie is conceived of as a place or a dimension of being that runs parallel to our own, a magical world that is not ontologically homogeneous to ours. At the very start of the essay, Faërie is (metaphorically? The presence of the question mark will be made clear in a moment) described as an actual place: «Faerie is a perilous land, and in it are pitfalls for the unwary and dungeons for the overbold. […] The realm of fairy-story is wide and deep and high and filled with many things» (27). A few pages later, Tolkien gives the famous definition of Faërie as «the Perilous Realm» (32). The most immediate consequence of this construction of Faërie as a place/realm is the spatialization of the aesthetic experience that derives from the Fairy-story: it consists in entering *another world*[17]. Such a definition may

or state of being, almost 'the whole supernatural element in romance.'"» (K. Johnson 2007, 29; quotations from Barfield 1926, 196). Johnson's chapter also explores, in more general terms, Barfield's influence on Tolkien.

[17] According to Flieger (1997), the journey to another world is the most distinctive act characterizing Tolkien's «far-traveled characters»: «however the particular story is conceived, whoever the particular character is, in whatever

seem to conform to the 'standard' description of Fairyland that is well established in German folklore and is synthetized in the entry 'Faërie' from Clute's *Encyclopedia*:

> Faerie, or Faërie, is the land of the Fairies, or fairyland. It is therefore an Otherworld perhaps linked to ours, though access is seldom physical in the normal sense. […] The very elusiveness of Faerie has been compared to that of the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, and thus fairyland may be perceived as over the rainbow, the equivalent of L. Frank Baum's land of Oz (Ashley 1997).

The question, however, is much more complex. Tolkien's Faërie, as described at the beginning of the essay, is wholly alien to humans in that it is 'impermeable' to language: «Faerie cannot be caught in a net of words; for it is one of its qualities to be indescribable, though not imperceptible» (Tolkien [1947] 2008, 32). The only thing humans can do, is catching fugitive glimpses of this world than can never be shared with others. This description is not

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work he occurs, the destination of every […] traveler is always some version of another world, whether it lies beyond Bree or in Númenor or in the Uttermost West. Writ large, the destination is Faërie, the world for which Tolkien longed all his life, the realm of imagination in which his vital creative life was lived. Whoever he is, the traveler is one who not only travels far but who—in one way or another—travels away from the world of ordinary humanity, the land of those (himself among them) whom Tolkien saw as exiles» (162-63).

devoid of mystical implications: in a number of passages, Faërie appears to be described as a real dimension, actually existing in a strong ontological sense[18].

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[18] Milburn (2010, 57–58) and Flieger (2017, 23–25) note how this 'metaphysical' view of Faërie is much stronger in *On Fairy-stories' avant-textes*, where Tolkien posits a more radical view of the ontology of this otherworld. The essay's preparatory materials demonstrates that *On Fairy-stories'* final draft proposes a compromise-version of the Tolkenian philosophy of Faërie, a version from which the more radical and subversive elements were removed or hidden. These aspects, however, clearly emerge in Tolkien's more private writings, like the essay that complements his short story *Smith of Wootton Major*, which was never meant for publication. Flieger's definition of Faërie for the *Tolkien Encyclopedia* accounts for the complexity of the philosophy of Faërie as follows: «[In *On Fairy-Stories*] Faerie is an effect, an altered state of consciousness brought about by the manipulation of language. In *Smith of Wooton Major*, he [Tolkien] took what was for a man of the rational twentieth century the far riskier position that Faerie could be an actuality». An actuality in which «the real and Faery worlds are presented not as different states of mind but as explicit and definable parallel planes of existence. The model here was the Otherworld of Celtic myth and folktale, called by the Welsh Annvwyn, by the Irish Tír-na-nog, the Land of the Ever-young, traditionally conceived as actual alternate space into which unwary mortals may stray» (Flieger 2007, 184). In *On Fairy-stories' avant-textes*, Tolkien's radical philosophy even leads

In this first section of the essay, Tolkien's interpretation of fairy-stories is rather clear, almost unequivocal: they are our imperfect door to Faërie, to this marvelous, fantastic dimension that lies beyond human language. The prototypical Fairy-stories are those inherited by Indo-European folklore, together with the great Germanic sagas and the narratives from the Arthurian cycle.

However, this interpretation of the pragmatics of the fairy-story is rendered more complex in the second section of the essay, where Faërie

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him to postulate that fact and fiction are ultimately undistinguishable: «It is a great error to suppose that true (historical) stories and untrue stories ('fantasies') can be distinguished in any such a way. Real (primarily real) events may possess (must always possess if we can discern it) mystical significance and allegory. Unreal ends may possess as much plain logical likelihood and [some?] factual sequence of cause and effect as history» (Tolkien [1947] 2008, 296). Shank (2013, 158) rightly remarks that, from the perspective highlighted in this passage, even the distinction between Primary and Secondary World can ultimately be considered a compromise formation, and the fundamental philosophical function of the eucatastrophe lies in the fact that it «rends indeed the very web of story, and lets a gleam come through» (Tolkien [1947] 2008), thus making the distinction between Primary and Secondary World collapse.

progressively comes to refer to the magical power of language. It is here that the heart of the Tolkenian theory of fantastic fiction resides:

> But how powerful, how stimulating to the very faculty that produced it, was the invention of the adjective: no spell or incantation in Faerie is more potent. And that is not surprising: *such incantations might indeed be said to be only another view of adjectives, a part of speech in a mythical grammar*. The mind that thought of light, heavy, grey, yellow, still, swift, also conceived of magic that would make heavy things light and able to fly, turn grey lead into yellow gold, and the still rock into a swift water. […] We may put a deadly green upon a man's face and produce a horror; we may make the rare and terrible blue moon to shine; or we may cause woods to spring with silver leaves and rams to wear fleeces of gold, and put hot fire into the belly of the cold worm. *But in such "fantasy," as it is called, new form is made; Faerie begins; Man becomes a sub-creator* (Tolkien [1947] 2008, 41).

Seeman (1996) comments on this passage by affirming that here Tolkien «is in fact overhauling the entire framework of Romantic sensibilities by privileging fantasy as the very paradigm of all art» and that «[t]he keynote of Tolkien's revisionist view pivots on his refusal to assent to the depreciative usage of "fantasy"» (77). But besides remarking this (by no means irrelevant) reconstruction of the hierarchy between the faculties of imagination and fantasy, I would like to analyze Tolkien's argument in order to give a description of how subcreation works at its most elemental level.

In order to become a sub-creator, humans need magic, or at least an «enchanter's power». What Tolkien calls «Magic» is, in turn, the ability of extracting a characteristic from a portion of the material world (that is to say, from an object) in the form of an adjective, and subsequently attributing this

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adjective to a different object that does not 'possess' it. Here lies the fundament of the relation between language and magic that Tolkien constructs in the second section of his essay: magic is a linguistic faculty whose function is that of catalyzing the recombinations of nous-adjective couples. Therefore, sub-creation is not primarily linked to Tolkien's large-scale worldbuilding, but rather to a much more elementary and fundamental faculty: that of rearranging noun and adjectives, through an act of linguistic magic, with the aim of creating something that *didn't exist before* («new form is made»), and that didn't exist because it refers to a noun-adjective couple that is *impossible* in this world. This is the conceptual heart of Tolkien's sub-creation and his vision of Faerie: before being a place or a dimension, before referring to the power of enchanting people, Faerie represents the power to give shape and life to an impossible area of language. And fantastic fiction represents the means through which we become able to explore it[19].

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[19] Medcalf (1999) and Flieger (2002) have rightly argued that Tolkien's philosophy of language is indebted—once again—to Owen Barfield's, which Phelpstead (2014) summarizes as follows: «Building on earlier accounts of the connections between myth and language, Barfield argues in his *Poetic Diction* (originally published in 1928) that the historical separation of literal and metaphorical meanings of words divided what had been an original semantic unity: words had originally themselves been mini-myths, embodying a view of reality in which experienced phenomena were at one and the same time physical and spiritual (Barfield 1988, 77–92). […] His [Tolkien's] sense that myth conveyed truths will have been reinforced by Barfield's hypothesis of an age when concrete and abstract meanings had not yet been differentiated and words were used "mythically" to convey the truth» (84).

If we now widen Tolkien's perspective from noun-adjective couples to concept couples, we may ask ourselves: what is the realm of the living dead, if not an area of the cultural imagination that originates from the contradictory combination of two mutually-exclusive concepts? And what are the residual undead, if not the oddest, less probable and predictable concretizations of this combination? From this perspective, the history of the residual undead coincides with the history of how the North Atlantic culture has progressively explored through language and narrative the conceptual void that was opened, at the half of the 18th century, by the possibility of conceiving of intermediate states between life and death.

1.2.2 Interlude: «only reality is real»

Before moving on to the study of the other main elements of *On Fairy-stories*, I would like to stop for a moment and begin to pinpoint some of the cultural constructs that condemn the experience of fantastic fiction which I mentioned earlier. To see how they are still alive and well today, one only needs to watch Steven Spielberg's latest film, *Ready Player One* (2018). A brief analysis of the film will posit two fundamental starting points for reflecting on the theory and the pragmatics of fantastic fiction when put in contrast with Tolkien's literary theory. The narrative is set in a near future with dystopic elements: the Earth has been devastated and humanity is on the edge of self-

destruction. However, a system that allows an almost total immersion in a virtual reality world has been invented. This world is aptly called Oasis, and the vast majority of the human population spends most of its time here rather than in the real world. James Halliday, the creator of the Oasis, is dead, but he has left the Oasis's users with a game: the person that will succeed in advancing through a series of three challenges will be the new legal owner of the Oasis and will be able to do anything she pleases with it—even destroy it. Wade Watts (avatar name in the Oasis: Parzival), the male protagonist, is a teenager living in the slums of Columbus, Ohio. With the help of female co-protagonist Samantha Cook (avatar name: Art3mis), and a small group of friends, Parzival completes the three challenges by exploring Halliday's past and particularly his life regrets. During the course of the narrative, the creator of the Oasis clearly emerges as a stereotypical figure of the nerd: he does not conform to the mainstream standards of male beauty, acts awkwardly in social situations and appears to be constantly immersed in a world of his own. At one point, we discover that one of the things Halliday regrets the most is the fact that he never kissed the woman he loved. At the end of the film, Parzival meets Halliday— or rather, his avatar—after completing the challenge. Halliday congratulates him and awards him the 'Golden Egg' that will make him the new owner of the Oasis. This encounter takes places in a virtual reconstruction of the room Halliday had as a child. While looking for the 'Golden Egg' that got lost in this messy space, Halliday confesses to Parzival his deepest and most private thoughts:

> [Hallyday:] «I created the Oasis because I never felt at home in the real world. I just didn't know how to connect with people

there. I was afraid for all my life. Right up until the day I knew my life was ending. Now that, that was when I realized that, as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it's also the only place that you can get a decent meal. Because reality… Is real. You understand what I'm saying?» (02h01m-02h03m)

With these words, the creator of the Oasis himself describes the practice of worldbuilding, that is, the construction of an imaginary world, as a regressive practice, a childish act performed by an heterosexual adult male as a reaction to his inability to perform standard, prosocial, *adult* masculinity («I was afraid all my life»)—in other words, to his inability to flirt with women. Imaginary worlds have no relevance to the success of such a performance, because the only plane of existence in which performance is meaningful is the real world. Why? Because «only reality is real», that is, only the real world is the field of experience in which an adult, prosocial male can perform his *normality*. This is confirmed by the film's final scene, which shows a moment of physical intimacy between Wade and Samantha (there is no place for avatars now), who have obviously fallen in love with each other. At the end of the scene, Wade's off-screen voice says: «People need to spend more time in the real world, because, like Halliday said, reality is the only thing that's real» (02h09m). Fade to black. The credits roll. Here the idea that 'only reality is real' is clearly and unequivocally associated with the standard performance of adult male prosociality that Halliday was incapable of providing. Over the course of my analysis, I will show how Tolkien opposes this same set of discrediting constructs, which revolve around two simple statements: 'only reality is real' and 'only reality is for adults'. The deconstruction of such constructs is

fundamental to the theory of fantastic fiction that Tolkien proposes and that can contribute to illuminate the aesthetic relevance of r.s. narratives.

1.2.3 Believing in secondary worlds: a pluralist approach

A few pages after defining the practice of sub-creation—or rather, its origins—as the construction of an impossible area of language, Tolkien moves on to introduce the notion of secondary world. He does so in terms that are radically modern:

> Children are capable, of course, of literary belief, when the story-maker's art is good enough to produce it. That state of mind has been called "willing suspension of disbelief." But this does not seem to me a good description of what happens. What really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful "sub-creator." He makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is "true": it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken; the magic, or rather art, has failed (Tolkien [1947] 2008, 52).

In Marie-Laure Ryan's recent genealogy of the notion of world in literary theory—included in the subcreation studies anthology edited by Mark J. Wolf—David Lewis' *Truth in Fiction* (1978) occupies a key position as a pioneering work:

> Lewis' account [of the truth conditions of statements about fiction] broke ground in two ways: first, it allowed statements about fiction to be true or false, whereas one-world logicians, such as Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege, regarded all statements about non-existing entities (read: entities non existing in our world) to be false or indeterminate; second, it associated the content of fictional texts with "worlds". This move may seem

self-evident now that the concept of "world" is largely taken for granted, but it was groundbreaking at a time when fictionality was either ignored, or defined, by John Searle, in purely illocutionary terms (i.e., as a suspension of the rules governing speech acts) (Ryan, Marie-Laure 2016, 8).

Although Tolkien's description of the mechanisms of belief in a secondary world is not formalized in rigorous logical terms, *On Fairy-stories* clearly faces this same issue in terms that anticipate Lewis' article by almost forty years. According to Tolkien, a statement about a fictional world is true *for that world*[20], and the criteria that govern truth in our Primary World cannot interfere with the evaluation of the truth conditions of the statement itself[21].

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[20] Tolkien will restate this position in the essay's epilogue, just before introducing his concept of eucatastrophe: «It is not only a "consolation" for the sorrow of this world, but a satisfaction, and an answer to that question, "Is it true?" The answer to this question that I gave at first was (quite rightly): "If you have built your little world well, yes: it is true in that world." That is enough for the artist (or the artist part of the artist)» (Tolkien [1947] 2008, 77).

[21] Tolkien's adoption of the notion of world in his literary theory can be traced back to the reflections on the fantastic imagination by George Macdonald, who had a major influence on both Tolkien and his friend C.S.S. Lewis and is today recognized as one of the very first authors of fantasy literature in the modern sense of the expression: «The natural world has its laws, and no man must interfere with them in the way of presentment any more than in the way of use; but they themselves may suggest laws of other kinds, and man may, if he pleases, *invent a little world of his own*, with its own laws; for there is that in him which delights in calling up new forms--which is the nearest, perhaps, he can come to creation. When such forms are new embodiments of old truths, we call them products of the Imagination; when they are mere inventions, however lovely, I should call them the work of the Fancy: in either case, Law has been diligently at work» (MacDonald, George

But what is even more important for the present analysis is the fact that the discussion of the notion of secondary world occurs within the context of a radical critique of the suspension of disbelief as a theoretical strategy for making sense of the aesthetic experience[22]. In Tolkien's opinion, suspending one's own of incredulity would mean experiencing fiction according to the

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[1890] 2004, 65). Macdonald's idea of «calling up *new form*» could have probably been echoed by Tolkien in the passage that was analyzed in the above section: «But in such "fantasy," as it is called, *new form is made*» (Tolkien [1947] 2008, 41).

[22] Pask (2013) examines Tolkien's interpretation of the willing suspension of disbelief by drawing on Nelson (1973) and looking as far back as the Renaissance: «Tolkien's ambition here is not merely to quibble with Coleridge, but to overturn an attitude toward fiction that lies behind Coleridge, including almost the entire literary edifice of the fairy way of writing, which always depended on a form of suspended disbelief and thus disenchantment. As William Nelson has argued, Renaissance writers had already adumbrated the essentials of Coleridge's suspension of disbelief. […] It is easy to see why Tolkien's personal canon of English literature ended with Chaucer. Despite his own literary tastes, however, Tolkien might be better understood as in some respects essentially modern in his approach to fiction. His own fiction attempts to elicit—and, unusually, often gains—the "total immersion" of the reader in the reality of the fictive world, which Nelson argues is characteristic of modern fictions» (129). On the other hand, in the field of subcreation studies, Konzack (2018) deals with the question in terms that fail to capture its deepest implications: «Tolkien rejects the idea of willing suspension of disbelief because a convincing fantasy is built on belief—not in the sense that the reader actually believes in the fantasy as deception, but as a way to understand that any subcreation should be able to explain the motives, actions, and events in the story based on reason and logical causation. Willing suspension of disbelief leads to lazy storytelling […] willing suspension of disbelief is regarded as a kind of dumbing-down of the imaginary world» (210).

norms dictated by those who believe, like the protagonist of *Ready Player One*, that «only reality is real», since such a strategy acknowledges the existence of only a single reality and only a single set of criteria for the determination of truth that are shaped by the rules of this one reality. According to this position, if we want to believe in *another* reality, we are obliged so suspend our only set of truth criteria. On the contrary, Tolkien embraces a resolutely pluralistic approach to the paradigms that define reality: if we want to believe in another reality, we don't have to suspend our disbelief, but to 'switch' to *another mode of belief*. Once again, modal logic will come to an analogous conclusion only forty years after Tolkien's Andrew Lang Lecture.

From this perspective, it is highly relevant that the literary history of the residual undead begins with a hoax, that is, with a narrative that purposefully blurs the line between medical record and horror fiction, turning the willing suspension of disbelief upside down: Poe's *Valdemar*.

Despite being revolutionary in many respects, Tolkien's theory of subcreation does have its limits. Interestingly, these are as much relevant to a theory of fantastic fiction from the perspective of r.u. narratives as Tolkien's pioneering arguments.

The first limits, accurately pinpointed by Brian Attebery, concerns the possibility of conceiving of fantasy in media other than literature, which Tolkien himself strongly denied[23]:

> If we say fantasy is a function of language, what about unspoken or unwritten fantasies, as when a caveman draws a stag pierced by his spear or when Réne Magritte paints a locomotive emerging from the back wall of a fireplace? Both of these are fantastic, in some sense. The former represents one common use of the term fantasy: to designate something desired that, though it has not happened, we have no reason to believe could not happen. The latter is more like literary fantasy, in that it portrays a juxtaposition that we perceive as impossible» (Attebery [1992] 2004, 297).

As I have already partially shown before, I will try to avoid such a limit by interpreting the fantastic not as a function of language but as a function of concepts, in an attempt to create a more open framework for the study of r.s. in both literature and cinema.

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[23] «In human art Fantasy is a thing best left to words, to true literature. In painting, for instance, the visible presentation of the fantastic image is technically too easy; the hand tends to outrun the mind, even to overthrow it. Silliness or morbidity are frequent results. It is a misfortune that Drama, an art fundamentally distinct from Literature, should so commonly be considered together with it, or as a branch of it. Among these misfortunes we may reckon the depreciation of Fantasy. […] Fantasy, even of the simplest kind, hardly ever succeeds in Drama, when that is presented as it should be, visibly and audibly acted. Fantastic forms are not to be counterfeited. Men dressed up as talking animals may achieve buffoonery or mimicry, but they do not achieve Fantasy» (Tolkien [1947] 2008, 61).

The second issue that I am about to raise is not usually seen as a limit of Tolkien's theory of fairy-story but rather as one of its most fundamental cores, the notion of 'inner consistency of reality':

> Anyone inheriting the fantastic device of human language can say "the green sun". Many can then imagine or picture it. But that is not enough - though it may already be a more potent thing than many a "thumbnail sketch" or "transcript of life" that receives literary praise. To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft. Few attempt such difficult tasks. But when they are attempted and in any degree accomplished then we have a rare achievement of Art (Tolkien [1947] 2008, 61).

By acting as a bridge between subcreation and large-scale worldbuilding, this principle of inner consistency demonstrates how Tolkien aesthetics of literature subordinate the linguistic experimentation that constitute the basic process of subcreation to the construction of complexity according to criteria of coherence, order, and absence of contradiction[24].

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[24] Once again, George MacDonald anticipated this issue in *The Fantastic Imagination*: «His [the poet's] world once invented, the highest law that comes next into play is, that there shall be harmony between the laws by which the new world has begun to exist; and in the process of his creation, the inventor must hold by those laws. The moment he forgets one of them, he makes the story, by its own postulates, incredible. To be able to live a moment in an imagined world, we must see the laws of its existence obeyed. Those broken, we fall out of it. The imagination in us, whose exercise is essential to the most

In the field of subcreation studies and in the theory of transmedia storytelling, this principle is regarded as the key element determining the aesthetic effect of the world itself, as it regulates the internal coherence of a secondary world. For Mark J. Wolf, achieving inner consistency represents one of the three major tasks to face when designing imaginary worlds:

> As I have argued elsewhere [(Wolf 2012)] worlds can be evaluated according to the degree of invention, completeness, and consistency in a given world, and all three are also an important part of world design. […] Consistency is the extent to which the elements within a world design agree with each other without contradiction, so that everything about a world and its design is logically and aesthetically pleasing (Wolf 2018, 71–72).

For the purposes of my analysis, I would propose to turn this principle upside down, on the basis of a penetrating observation made by Jonathan McIntosh (2018) in his monography on the influence of Thomism in Tolkien's philosophy: «[i]n using the consistency of this world as a measure of any possible sub-created world, Tolkien reflects something of his own Thomistic "actualism," his conviction, that is, *that the world in its actuality is the standard for determining what is possible, and not vice-versa*» (McIntosh 2018, 73, emphasis mine). I would argue that the aesthetics of r.s. narratives resides, at least partially, in the fact that they are able to perform the «vice-versa» process McIntosh refers to: they participate to the construction of actuality through the

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temporary submission to the imagination of another, immediately, with the disappearance of Law, ceases to act» (MacDonald, George [1890] 2004, 65).

fictional exploration of what is possible, alternatively collaborating and conflicting with our current systems for the construction of knowledge— systems like, among others, medicine and the bio-sciences. This reversal of perspective is significantly catalyzed by the fact that the worlds inhabited by the r.u. often and purposefully violate the rules of Tolkenian worldbuilding: a number of these worlds are *inherently* inconsistent, thus mirroring the loss of ontological consistency often experienced by the protagonists of r.s. narratives. Philip K. Dick's *Ubik* probably represents the best example of anti-Tolkenian ontological dissipation.

1.2.4 Anti-ageism and the desire called Otherness

Now that the building blocks of Tolkien's theory of fairy-stories have been discussed from the perspective of their pioneering aspects and contrasted with the often chaotic and destabilizing effects brought about by r.s. narratives, I would like to move from exploring the 'mechanics' of sub-creation to discussing its deeper implications in the context of the pragmatics of fantastic fiction. But before focusing on the pragmatics of a text, one needs to understand what kind of readers will experience it. This is why I will begin this section by analyzing how Tolkien deconstructs the common association of fairy-stories with childhood, thus reclaiming the aesthetic experience of these narratives as part of the world of the adults. A brief analysis of *Ready Player One* has already shown how the association of a certain practice (in the case of Halliday: the construction of the imaginary world of the Oasis) with childhood automatically discredits the practice itself by placing it outside the normative domain of adulthood. Other examples of the 'infantilization' of worldbuilding

are easily provided by the reviews that *The Lord of the Rings* received in 1956, in which the book is systematically defined as childish and best suited for young readers (Flieger 2017, 32–33). However, in 1939, Tolkien had already dealt with the constructs that discredit the experience of fairy-stories by relegating it to the world of children by simply severing the cultural connection between these two poles:

> Is there any essential connection between children and fantasy? Is there any call for comment, if an adult reads them for himself? *Reads* them as tales, that is, not *studies* them as curios. Adults are allowed to collect and study anything, even old theatre programmes or paper bags. […] [T]he association of children and fairy-stories is an accident of our domestic history. Fairy-stories have in the modern lettered world been relegated to the "nursery," as shabby or old-fashioned furniture is relegated to the play-room, primarily because the adults do not want it, and do not mind if it is misused. It is not the choice of the children which decides this […]. Children as a class—except in a common lack of experience they are not one—neither like fairy-stories more, nor understand them better than adults do; and no more than they like many other things (Tolkien [1947] 2008, 49–50).

Tolkien's argument follows a clearly deconstructionist trajectory: he historicizes the relation between infancy and fairy-stories in order to de-essentialize it. According to his view, fairy-stories today are considered a *residual* area of the literary field; this, in turn, presupposes the idea that children represent the residual region of the world of readers, a world whose center is inhabited by the adults. The only way for an adult to treat fairy-stories seriously is by studying them as folklore, an activity in which the aesthetic enjoyment of them is unnecessary if not unrequired. As a consequence, fairy-

stories have been «cut off from a full adult art» (Tolkien [1947] 2008, 51) and the relevance of their aesthetics to the experience of adults has been scotomized: this is for Tolkien the most relevant issue raised by the association of fairy-stories and children. By deconstructing this association, then, Tolkien is also writing a significant chapter in the history of children's literature—that is, of literature in general—by de-essentializing the differences between adults and children as regards their reception of a certain class of literary texts. It is important to note that Tolkien doesn't share «the Victorian enthusiasm for the child's naïve "enchantment" by the fairy story», which is a product of the same ageism Tolkien is trying to problematize[25]:

> Tolkien does not fundamentally distinguish between child and adult readers in this respect; both share a capacity for what Tolkien calls "literary belief," but this is not the unquestioning faith usually ascribed to young children. The literary sub-creator must be able to solicit belief from tough-minded readers, whether adults or children (Pask 2013, 129).

By moving one step beyond this Victorian stereotype, Tolkien is able to see the implications of the infantilization of certain areas of the literary field with an insight that we would probably associate with late XX century thinkers. And if ageism falls, the whole vision of worldbuilding as a childish act that is thematized in *Ready Player One* automatically falls with it.

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[25] Contrariwise, MacDonald reacts to an hypothetical accusation of infantilism by surreptitiously confirming an ageist view of literary reception: «For my part, I do not write for children, but for the childlike, whether of five, or fifty, or seventy-five» (MacDonald, George [1890] 2004).

Now that the domain of the Fairy-story can be claimed by both children and adults and is not automatically assigned to a pre-determined category on the basis of an ageist principle, one question arises: in the name of exactly which principle should people claim the domain of Faerie? For Tolkien, the answer can be condensed into one word: desire.

He describes his approach to the study of fairy-stories by contrasting it with that of anthropologists and linguists, whose researches aim to «unravel the intricately knotted and ramified history of the branches on the Tree of Tales» (Tolkien [1947] 2008, 39). On the other hand, Tolkien proposes a radically different approach to the subject: «So with regard to fairy stories, I feel that it is more interesting, and also in its way more difficult, to consider what they are, what they have become for us, and what values the long alchemic processes of time have produced in them» (41). This approach, in turn, is motivated by the observation that Faëire (either as a dimension or a language) is not «an end in itself» (34): what matters most is the *pragmatics* of fairy-stories in relation to our time and culture, that is, what fairy-stories *do* to us.

Tolkien identifies such pragmatics in the «satisfaction of certain primordial human desires» (34) that range from «survey[ing] the depth of

space and time»[26] (35) to escaping death[27]. This is an extraordinarily modern approach to literature, that focuses the attention on the reader and the aesthetic effects of narrative rather than on its supposed 'essence'. This view is confirmed by the fact that, according to Tolkien, a number of narratives that do not fall under the category of 'fairy-story' can still «approach the quality and have the flavour of fairy-story» (35) depending on their ability to satisfy those human desires that are especially satisfied by fairy-stories. This means that the pragmatics relative to the satisfaction of certain human desires represents for Tolkien the main defining trait of fairy-stories; in other words,

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[26] On the importance of time for the aesthetics of fairy-stories, see also the following passage, in which Tolkien comments on the value that fairy-stories could retain in the contemporary world: «For one thing they [fairy-stories] are now old, and antiquity has an appeal in itself. Such stories have now a mythical or total (unanalysable) effect, an effect quite independent of the findings of Comparative Folklore, and one which it cannot spoil or explain; they open a door on Other Time, and if we pass through, though only for a moment, we stand outside our own time, outside Time itself, maybe» (Tolkien [1947] 2008, 48).

[27] Tolkien could have been able to find a Christian legitimization of such desires in MacDonald ([1867] 1893): «We are dwellers in a divine universe where no desires are in vain, if only they be large enough». Interestingly, this phrase appears in a paragraph where MacDonald defends himself from the following hypothetical accusation: «But will most girls, for instance, rise to those useful uses of the imagination? Are they not more likely to exercise it in building castles in the air to the neglect of houses on the earth? And as the world affords such poor scope for the ideal, will not this habit breed vain desires and vain regrets? Is it not better, therefore, to keep to that which is known, and leave the rest?».

fairy-stories are primarily defined by their aesthetic effect, and their relationships with other genres and texts should be described on the basis of this same effect.

Over the course of the essay, the underlying nature of the desire that animates the experience of Faerie is progressively made clear. In a fascinating passage, Tolkien discusses one of the desires that Fairy-stories are able to satisfy: that of «hold[ing] communion with other living things»:

> The beast-fable has, of course, a connexion with fairy-stories. Beasts and birds and other creatures often talk like men in real fairy-stories. In some part (often small) this marvel derives from one of the primal "desires" that lie near the heart of Faerie: the desire of men to hold communion with other living things. But the speech of beasts in a beast-fable, as developed into a separate branch, has little reference to that desire, and often wholly forgets it. The magical understanding by men of the proper languages of birds and beasts and trees, that is much nearer to the true purposes of Faerie (Tolkien [1947] 2008, 36).

According to Tolkien, such a desire cannot be fully expressed through traditional beast-fables, but only through fairy-stories. This is due to the fact that only the latter thematize «the magical understanding by men of the proper languages of birds and tree». Faerie appears then as that world in which the beast-fable is turned upside-down by an anti-anthropocentric twist: in the beast-fable, animals speak just like humans; in Faerie, man becomes able to understand the languages of the non-human world. From this point of view, the meaning of the experience of Faerie resides in the fact that it allows humans, through the help of magic, to understand *an otherwise incomprehensible alterity* («the *proper* language of birds»). On the one hand, Faerie is

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characterized by its absolute alterity, but on the other it can function as a means to understand the alterities that inhabit our Primary World.

In this discussion of the difference between fairy-story and beast-fable, we find one of the first occurrences in the essay of Tolkien's «vision of fantasy as a narrative of alterity—of otherness, of transcendence» (Seeman 1996, 79). In the central section of the essay, Tolkien elaborates on this vision while putting it in relation with the specific kind of desire from which it emerges:

> I [as a child] had no special "wish to believe." I wanted to know. […] [A]t no time can I remember that the enjoyment of a story was dependent on belief that such things could happen, or had happened, in "real life." Fairy-stories were plainly not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability. If they awakened *desire*, satisfying it while often whetting it unbearably, they succeeded.

> I never imagined that the dragon was of the same order as the horse. And that was not solely because I saw horses daily, but never even the footprint of a worm. The dragon had the trade-mark *Of Faerie* written plain upon him. In whatever world he had his being it was an Other-world. Fantasy, the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds, was the heart of the desire of Faërie. I desired dragons with a profound desire. Of course, in my timid body did not wish to wish to have the in the neighborhood […] [b]ut the world that contained even the imagination of Fáfnir was richer and more beautiful, at whatever cost of peril. The dweller in the quiet and fertile plains may hear of the tormented hills and the unharvested sea and long for them in his heart (Tolkien [1947] 2008, 54–55).

Once again, Tolkien opts for a radical and intellectually courageous choice: the need to satisfy the desire for «the making or glimpsing of Other-Worlds» is claimed in the name of beauty alone, or rather, in the name of the superior

beauty and richness of Faerie over the Primary World («the world that contained even the imagination of Fáfnir was *richer* and *more beautiful*»). As he clearly highlights, this desire has nothing to do with belief or with the hope of catching glimpses of Faerie *within* the Primary World. On the contrary, the desire for Faerie is so strong precisely because it is directed towards otherness. In this sense, the pragmatics of fairy-stories resides in the fact that they allow the reader to long for the impossible.

I would like to suggest that the dynamic that animates the desire for otherness described by Tolkien could be incorporated into a theory of fantastic fiction when put in relation with reader-response criticism and, more precisely, with Wolfgang Iser's theory of aesthetic response. While discussing the difference between the implied reader and the actual reader, Iser quotes a passage from Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*:

> It is only as I read that I become the self whose beliefs must coincide with the author's. Regardless of my real beliefs and practices, I must subordinate my mind and heart to the book if I am to enjoy it to the full. The author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader […] and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement (Booth [1961] 1963, 137–38; quoted in Iser [1976] 1978, 36–37).

Iser comments the passage as follows:

> One wonders whether such an agreement can really work; even Coleridge's ever popular demand for a "willing suspension of disbelief" on the part of the audience remains an ideal whose desirability is questionable. Would the role offered by the text function properly if it were totally accepted? The sacrifice of the real reader's own beliefs […] would entail the loss of the tension

which is a precondition for the processing and the comprehension that follows it. […] However, the suggestion that there are two selves is certainly tenable, for these are the role offered by the text and the real reader's own disposition, and as the one can never be fully taken over by the other, there arises between the two the tension we have described (Iser [1976] 1978, 37).

In criticizing Booth and the notion of willing suspension of disbelief, Iser rejects two perfectly opposite views of the aesthetic experience, the first involving the reader's total abandonment to the author's hypnotic will and a sense of complete immersion in the narrative, the other centered on a reader who willingly abandons his 'real' self in order to be temporarily transformed into another self whose criteria for the definition of truth are inactive. Iser position is extremely fascinating in that it acknowledges the necessary presence of a *tension* between the real reader and the implied reader: it is only in this tension that fiction, in general, and fantastic fiction, in particular, can find its pragmatics. The aesthetic response that defines the experience of fantastic fiction can thus be described as the result of the tension between an implied reader, who unproblematically considers dragons and zombies as true *in relation to the secondary world*, and an actual reader who enjoys this belief for the exact reason that it cannot be performed in the Primary World. In other words, fantastic fiction works by creating a textual position for the reader in which she can believe what would otherwise be unbelievable[28]. Tolkien's

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[28] Farah Mendlesohn is implicitly elaborating on this same framework when she writes: «That "reader position" to which I will keep pointing, while

desire for «the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds» derives from the tension that Iser describes: in order to be *more* rich and beautiful, the worlds inhabited by Fafnir needs to be put in comparison with our own, and it is exactly the tension produced by this comparison that generates what Tolkien calls 'desire'.

By adopting a different perspective, «the making or glimpsing of Other-worlds» that Tolkien defines as «the heart of the desire of Faërie» could also be put in relation with a different passage from *On Fairy-stories* in which «the primal desire at the heart of Faerie» is identified with «the realization, independent of the conceiving mind, of imagined wonder» (Tolkien [1947] 2008, 35). Even if Tolkien does not provide us with an exact definition of wonder, it could be described by connecting the two passages as the reaction to the experience of otherness. This definition evokes the one given by Brian Attebery—who draws, in turn, on an earlier study by C.N. Manlove—in his seminal study of fantasy fiction:

> C. N. Manlove [(1975)] makes this a part of his definition for fantasy: "a fiction evoking wonder and containing a substantial and irreducible element of supernatural or impossible worlds, beings or objects with which the mortal characters in the story or the readers become on at least partly familiar terms" [(1)]. Manlove rightly connects wonder with the "contemplation of . . .

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on the one hand a reference to our ideal and implied reader, is also an invitation to construct a fictionalized self who can accept the construction of the rhetoric of a particular fantastic text. But the invitation is not free and open: it is an exercise in which the author continually seeks the upper hand» (Mendlesohn 2008).

strangeness" [(7)]; in other words, it has as much to do with ways of seeing as with emotional response (Attebery [1992] 2004, 308).

However, Attebery moves on to explain that «[t]he concept of wonder, as a key to fantasy's impact, may best be understood as an alternative formulation of the idea of estrangement» (308). He elaborates on this formulation by discussing the notion of 'recovery' that Tolkien introduces in *On Fairy-Stories*: «[t]he illusion is that the world has become trite or stale. To dispel (or dis-spell) it, it is necessary to see things in new ways, but rather than making familiar objects seem disconcerting or alien, he [Tolkien] thought fantasy could restore them to the vividness with which we first saw them» (Attebery [1992] 2004, 308). From this point of view,

> [l]a littérature merveilleuse telle que la conçoit Tolkien n'est donc pas, contrairement à une idée reçue, une littérature d'évasion, mais une incitation à regarder le monde en passant outre l'habitude qui nous coupe de lui – Tolkien rejoint ici des réflexions que l'on trouve à la même époque, dans le premier tiers du siècle, chez des auteurs comme Proust ou des théoriciens comme les formalistes russes (Ferré 2014, Kindle loc. 306-7).

In contrast to Attebery's definition, I would propose to modelize wonder, following Carmen Dell'Aversano, through Personal Construct Psychology (PCP), a theory of personality and cognition elaborated by Gorge Kelly in the 1950s. PCP is centered on the fundamental postulate that «a person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events» (Kelly [1955] 1991, 32). The anticipation of events, in turn, is determined by the way in which a person constructs and organizes her own unique system of dichotomous constructs. From the perspective of PCP,

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Dell'Aversano argues, wonder could be described as «the perception of the inadequacy of one's construct system» (2008, 337). Such an interpretation breaks the analogy between wonder and estrangement. While both strategies can be described as «achieving a gnoseological aim through an aesthetic one» (337), estrangement posits an 'awakening' of perception following a 'weakening' provoked by habit. After the 'awakening', we become able to look at things *with which we were already familiar* through new eyes. On the contrary, wonder implies a constantly 'awakened' perception that comes face to face with something *new* and *unexpected*, something that lies *beyond* the subject's horizon for the anticipation of events. As a result of this encounter, the subject is invited (or forced) to reshape the network of constructs and relationships through which she makes sense of events. If we now apply this framework to the aesthetic experience of r.s. narratives, the latter could be defined as producing a peculiar type of wonder which catalyzes the reconstruction of the construct system related to the polarity life/death. One of my aims in the following sections will be to analyze the rhetoric and narrative strategies that 'trigger' this process of reconstruction. In more abstract terms, I aim to show how one of the key elements in the pragmatics of fantastic fiction, from a widely cultural perspective, resides precisely in the fact that it represents a privileged space in which the reconstruction of the 'deep' constructs that pertain to ontology (like the one centered on the polarity life/death) can occur. Fantastic fiction texts create for us a position from which we can experience states of existence and planes of being that would otherwise be inaccessible to us, since they are *other* from the one that we inhabit in the Primary World. I

would like to argue that r.s. narratives represent one of the very few categories of texts through which we clearly and deeply experience fantastic fiction as a laboratory of new ontologies that is both terrifying and wonderful.

1.2.5 Conclusions

In conclusion, a methodology for the study of fantastic fiction in the context of which the study of r.s. would find its hermeneutic relevance could be outlined through the interaction of the following elements:

- The pragmatics of fantastic fiction originates from the clash it creates between concepts that cannot coexist in our culture.

- The aesthetic effect of fantastic fiction depends on the tension that is produced between the actual reader's principles for the determination of truth and the implied reader's ability to believe in objects, beings and events that can only be true in a Secondary world.

- The practice of 'escapism' through fantastic fiction should not be dismissed or refused as childish in the name of the principle according to which 'only reality is real'. On the contrary, escapism could be embraced as an invaluable opportunity for reshaping our cognition and our systems of constructs through the experience of the tension described above.

- As an 'ontological laboratory', fantastic fiction could be culturally defined by its (unique?) ability to reshape the constructs that are relative to ontology and consciousness. R.s. narratives perfectly exemplify such an ability.

- The analysis of fantastic fiction should ignore not only the distinction between 'high' and 'popular' fiction, but also the distinction made by the editorial market between fiction, children's fiction and young adult fiction. In other words, the approach to fantastic fiction should be resolutely and coherently anti-ageist.

I would like to remind it one more time: this is not meant as a coherent theory of fantastic fiction as a whole, but rather as a theoretical framework for highlighting the originality (maybe the uniqueness?) of the aesthetic effect produced by r.s. narratives in the wider context of fantastic fiction.

Now that r.s. have been defined both as a category and as a kind of fantastic narrative characterized by its peculiar pragmatics, I will shift the focus of my attention to their cultural genealogy, in order to understand how and when the conceptualization of r.s. in our culture became possible

Chapter 2
A cultural genealogy of the residual undead

Over the last twenty years, the peripheries of the thanatological imagination have progressively expanded, thus becoming more and more visible. In a book chapter published in 2015, Roger Luckhurst argues that the proliferation of such interstitial figures has been catalysed by

> an ongoing technoscientific, biomedical revolution which has profoundly disturbed the boundaries between life and death. In the cultural imagination, this has unleashed a whole new order of liminal ontologies, the new undead, of which the zombie horde is only the most self-evident instance (Luckhurst 2015, 84)

This technoscientific revolution began in the 1960s with, on the one hand, the creation of the modern intensive care unit; on the other, with advances in the

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technologies of artificial respirators, of resuscitation in general, and in transplant surgery (Wasson). As a consequence, in 1968 the Ad Hoc Committe of the Harvard medical school was asked to redefine what death is from a medical perspective. This is the starting point of a medical debate of momentous importance in the history of contemporary medicine, concerning the so called 'New Death'—a debate which is still going on. In this context, liminal states between life and death have become a key site of medical discourse, that is, a key subject for the proliferation of medical knowledge in a Foucauldian sense.

One of the most decisive outcomes of this debate is the construction, in medical practice, of a gap between brain death and biological death that «shifted death from a decisive moment to a temporal process» (Luckhurst 2015, 88). What I would like to do is put these observations into a wider historical context. I would like to show that this is not the first time that something like this happens. This is not the first time that medical discourse produces a definition of death, debates it, and this leads in turn to the proliferation of fiction thematizing liminal ontologies. In fact, a fundamental shift in the medical construction of death took place in France between in the 1740s, and it is strikingly analogous, from a structural perspective, to the one that took place in the 1960s. I propose, then, to re-read the cultural genealogy of the New Death and its relationship to the Gothic by putting them in the context of the cultural processes which have transformed the polarity 'life vs. death' from a binary opposition into a continuum over the last 250 years.

I will do so by looking at a French medical text, the *Dissertation sur l'incertitude des signes de la mort* by Jacques-Bénigne Winslow and Jacques Jean Bruhier (1742). I will try to analyze its impact on European and American 18th century culture and to put it in relation with the redefinition of death that took place in in the 1960s.

My readings will draw on Jan Bondeson's history of premature burial (2001). It may be worth noting that Bondeson is a physician, and even if the book may appear to be not very academic at first sight, it is in fact very well researched. I will also rely on *Naissance de la clinique* by Michel Foucault ([1963] 2015), which offers a compelling analysis of how the idea of death was transformed in 19th century France.

2.1 The 1742 revolution: the signs of death

The first thanatological revolution in the history of the modern West starts in France[29], at the Académie des sciences, one of the most prestigious

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[29] For a cultural history of death, the classic monographs by Ariès (1977) and Vovelle (1983) remain fundamental. More recent major contributions to this field are, among others, Harrison (2003), Noys (2005), and Laqueur (2015). During the last fifteen years, the emergence of death studies as an interdisciplinary field of research has been marked by the publication of a growing number of reference works, from the massive *Handbook of Death and Dying* (Bryant 2003) and the *Encyclopedia of Death and Dying* (Cassell, Salinas, and Winn 2005) to handbooks published by Rodopi (Kâšer 2007), Springer (Stillion and Attig 2015), and Routledge (Moreman 2017).

cultural institutions of the time. Jacques-Benigne Winslow, a physician and one of the most prominent members of the academy, writes a short dissertation about the uncertainty of the signs of death. It is less than ten pages long and it is written in latin. Winslow examines several medical cases and argues that the lack of respiratory movement or the absence of arterial pulse, which were considered by the medical profession as unmistakable signs of death, are in fact unreliable: a patient could lack a perceptible pulse, for example, and still be alive. The only reliable sign of death, according to Winslow, is the onset of putrefaction: only when the body starts to decompose, and only then, we can be sure that our patient is gone for good.

Winslow's work was just one of the many dissertations that were submitted to the academy every year. For the most part, they ended up in a forgotten archive, never to be read again. But Winslow has an admirer: Jacques-Jean Bruhier. He translates the dissertation from Latin to French and adds a myriad of medical cases and accounts of premature burials. The new book is entitled *Dissertation sur l'incertitude des signes de la mort et l'abus des enterrements et embaumements précipités*. It immediately becomes a medical bestseller, and its vulgarisations spread an almost obsessive fear of premature burial in France and Germany. With Bruhier, for the first time, death ceases to be an event outside the realm of medicine, a pure and simple cessation of life, in order to become a diagnostic category. Death is now a matter of physiology that needs to be interpreted through its signs: it is not a matter of facts anymore, but a matter of semiotics. Now the representatives of medical knowledge need to ask themselves the same question that the US Government will ask to the

Harvard Committee more than three centuries later: how do we make a diagnosis of death?

At this point, it is interesting to remark that many of the accounts that both Winslow and Bruhier use as medical cases to prove the unreliability of the signs of death are, in fact, legends and folktales that had been circulating in Europe for centuries. According to Bondeson (2001, 64–66), they can be traced to a number of prototype narratives. Among them is the legend of the lady with the ring, in which a lady is prematurely buried and later saved by a robber who violates her coffin to steal her ring. Another one is the tale of the lecherous monk, who takes certain necrophilic liberties with a supposedly dead lady during a visit to a hostel. Several months later, he returns to the same hostel to find out that the woman who was supposed to be dead is not only alive, but also pregnant. The monk renounces to his vows and marries the lady. But the key point here is not that these are just legends; the point is that medical knowledge *appropriates them* and transforms them into medical case histories, so that the fear of premature burial is relocated from the realm of folklore and the supernatural to the realm of scientific knowledge. For the first time, medical discourse arrogates to itself and only to itself the right of deciding what is alive and what is dead.

The publication of Bruhier's book has extremely relevant consequences for European and American medical practice. He suggests a radical reform of burial practice: in order to avoid premature burials, the dead should be kept for at least 72 hours in special morgues under the supervision of a physician, and buried only at the end of this period. These morgues are built. Many

inventors start patenting security coffins, in which the prematurely buried is able to signal his condition to the living. And more importantly, the signs of death become one of the main axes of medical research. Particularly in the second half of the 18th century, the research for new, reliable signs of death assumes fundamental relevance. The methods for reanimation and for the diagnosis of death tend often to range from the weird to the grotesque, especially in Germany: we go from ritmically pulling the tongue of the deceased for three hours to injections of a fluorescent compound to verify if blood circulation is active, to blowing enemas of tobacco smoke into the patient's anus (Bondeson 2001, 137–54).

Apart from the examples, what is really important is that all these practices are part of a process of intense cultural discursivization of a liminal moment, in which a representative of the medical power-knowledge system is unable to decide whether a patient is alive or dead. So discourse surrounding this liminal moment permeates culture at large. The other result of this process of permeation is that, after Bruhier, European and American literatures begin to pullulate with narratives of premature burial. As we have seen, such narratives had always existed, but only now premature burial truly becomes one of the *topoi* of horror fiction, just in time to graft itself on the newborn genre of gothic fiction.

So, tu sum up, we are at the half of the 18th century, at the dawn of the gothic as a literary genre, and we have a corpus of legends and folktales that are absorbed by medical knowledge and become part of a cultural discourse concerning liminal states between life and death. This, in turn, unleashes the

production of horror fiction that thematizes cultural anxieties related to these liminal states, thus contributing to the discourse itself. I would like to contend that the first New Death in the history of modern Western culture was actually constructed here, through the interaction between medical knowledge and fiction, and that the elaboration of the New Death in 1968 was structurally analogous to its predecessor.

2.2 The birth of the thanatological subject

Obviously these two processes, while sharing the same structure, present a number of differences that are worth discussing. The most important difference lies in the construction of the very idea of liminality between life and death[30]. Jacques-Jean Bruhier tells us about people falling into deep trances, paralyses, cataleptic states and other physical conditions that are uncannily similar to death: so similar that it is impossible for the physician to decide whether the patient is alive or dead. So liminality here is simply related to uncertainty: there is a straightforward 'life vs. death' polarity, but the physician is unable to decide to which pole the patient should be ascribed. The patient could either return to life (first pole) or die (second pole). These liminal states seem to have no ontological 'substance' of their own. In this respect, one

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[30] Squier (2004) proposes an insightful discussion of life-death liminality from the perspective of science studies. Particularly relevant are her queer approach to Turner's (1974) classic definition of liminality and her reappraisal of the hermeneutic relevance of fiction to science studies, which was downplayed by Latour (2006).

could remark that, in the vast majority of narratives about premature burial, this liminal state of uncertainty is simply experienced by the protagonist as a total blackout of the consciousness: she/he falls into what resembles a deep sleep, is mistaken for dead, is buried, and wakes up again in a coffin. So the liminal state is not an experience that can become the object of narrative: on the contrary, it corresponds to an absence of experience. In other cases, the protagonist falls victim of a total paralysis: he is perfectly alive and conscious, but he is unable to move, so he is mistaken for dead. But again, the polarity life vs death is not put into question. There is no in-between state, there is only a character's temporary inability to show signs of life.

With the redefinition of death in the 1960s and the cultural discursivisation of vegetative states, the structure is the same, but the notion of liminality becomes extremely more complex. Over the course of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the polarity 'life vs death' had progressively become more and more fluid. After Bruhier, this process of fluidification was catalyzed by the fundamental medical researches published in France by Buffon and, even more importantly, by Xavier Bichat's *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort* (1805). Many pages of *The Birth of the Clinic* are devoted to a fascinating analysis of the cultural implications of Bichat's invention of pathological anatomy, particularly with regard to the construction of death as a process[31]:

[31] On Bichat's philosophy and its historical context, see Haigh (1984) and Huneman (1998).

> La mort est […] multiple et dispersée dans le temps : elle n'est pas ce point absolu et privilégié, à partir duquel les temps s'arrêtent pour se renverser, elle a comme la maladie elle-même une présence fourmillante que l'analyse peut répartir dans le temps e l'espace ; peu à peu, ici ou là, chacun des noeuds vient à se rompre, jusqu'à ce que cesse la vie organique, au moins dans ses formes majeures, puisque longtemps encore après la mort de l'individu, des morts minuscules et partielles viendront à leur tour dissocier les îlot de vie qui s'obstinent (Foucault [1963] 2015, 200).

> Bichat a relativisé le concept de mort, le faisant déchoir de cet absolu où il apparaissait comme un événement insécable, décisif et irrécupérable : il l'a volatilisé et réparti dans la vie, sous la forme de morts en détails, morts partielles, progressives et si lentes à s'achever par-delà la mort même (203).

Even more importantly, pathological anatomy constructs death as a singular process involving a singular individual in an absolutely specific way. A process that illuminates the development of life itself:

> [a]vec Bichat, la connaissance de la vie trouve son origine dans la destruction de la vie et dans son extrême opposé ; c'est à la mort que la maladie et la vie disent leur vérité : vérité spécifique, irréductible, protégée de toutes les assimilations à l'inorganique par le cercle de la mort qui les désigne pour ce qu'elles sont. […] Du fond de la Renaissance jusqu'à la fin du XVIIIe siècle, le savoir de la vie était pris dans le cercle de la vie qui se replie sur elle-même et se mire ; à partir de Bichat, il est décalé par rapport à la vie, et séparé d'elle par l'infranchissable limite de la mort, au miroir de laquelle il la regarde (204-205).

With Bichat, death ceases to be what it had been since the Renaissance: that event that renders all equals. On the contrary, the *regard* of pathological anatomy renders each death individual and unique:

> la perception de la mort dans la vie n'a pas la même fonction au XIXe siècle qu'à la Renaissance. Elle portait alors des significations réductrice : la différence de destin, de la fortune, des conditions était effacée par son geste universel; […] la mort, infailliblement, compensait le sort. Maintenant, elle est constitutive au contraire de singularité ; c'est en elle que l'individu se rejoint, […] un cerne noir l'isole et lui donne le style de sa vérité. […] La mort a quitté son vieux ciel tragique ; la voilà devenue le noyau lyrique de l'homme : son invisible vérité, son visible secret (Foucault [1963] 2015, 238–39).

Without this fundamental reconfiguration, the passage from life to death simply couldn't have become the object of a narrative that develops through time and is specific to a single individual. At the same time, in horror fiction, liminal states between life and death progressively become actual spaces of experience that are separated from those of normal waking life. E.A. Poe's *The Facts in the Case of Mr. Valdemar* could be considered a milestone in this process of transformation: here, probably for the first time, a character actually speaks to us from the in-between. As I have tried to show, in order for such a communication to be possible, death needs to be conceptualized as a process that unfolds in time and as an individualized experience that carries with it a specific semiotics for each person. But in order to 'get into' Valdemar's r.s., in order to establish a connection between the living and the r.u., a third element is needed: a technological bridge. The next section will explore how mesmerism, at the dawn of the electrical age, was able to assume such a function.

2.3 The electrification of consciousness and the electronic undead

Another large-scale cultural transformation played a fundamental role in the process of emergence of residual states between life and death. It was the result, among other factors, of the intersection between the rise of a new paradigm for the construction and regulation of scientific knowledge; of technological advances in the field of telecommunications; and of the spectralization of the human subject[32]. At the beginning of the 18th century, ghosts and other supernatural entities began to migrate into this new cultural landscape by abandoning the realm of the supernatural and entering the domain of the electronic imagination. The premises and the results of this momentous process are investigated by Jeffrey Sconce in his compelling study of haunted media (2000).

He starts from the observation that electricity has been culturally conceptualised in the West less as a source of energy that resides in this world and more as a vital force which exists in an immaterial dimension, parallel to our own. From mesmerism to the internet, the particular declinations of this

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[32] «By the 1890s, the supernatural did not simply conjure monsters, but figured emergent conceptions of psychical life. With a *spectralized* subject, late Victorian fictions developed the uncanny discoveries of hypnotists and psychical researchers, and pursued the possibility that (as William Stead [(1897, 1)] put it) 'each of us has a ghost inside him'» (Luckhurst 2002, 213). On the notion of spectrality, see the essays collected in Blanco and Peeren (2013) and in Puglia et al. (2018).

construct have evolved following the transformations in telecommunication and information technology. As a consequence, electronic media have become the perfect cultural tool for enabling contact with ultramundane dimensions. These are inhabited, for the most part, by the spirits of the dead, but also by aliens from other galaxies and by every sort of supernatural creature:

> The focus of much popular scientific interest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, electricity was for many a mystical and even divine substance that animated body and soul. When harnessed by the telegraph and the media that were to follow, this "life force" seemed to allow for a mechanical disassociation of consciousness and the body. Telegraph lines carried human messages from city to city and from continent to continent, but more important, they appeared to carry the animating "spark" of consciousness itself beyond the confines of the physical body (7).

The theoretical and cultural framework elaborated by Sconce makes it possible to argue that r.s. emerged from the same regions of the electronic imagination that were being colonized by the spectres of the once-enchanted West. By understanding liminal states between life and death in relation to the electronic imagination, one can propose theoretical models for the exploration of the relation between embodiment and disembodiment in the r.u.; of how the communication between the living and the r.u. can be achieved; and of how the r.u. have become thinkable in the North Atlantic world.

Such a framework clearly relies on the idea that

> technology is never merely "used," never merely instrumental. It is always also "incorporated" and "lived" by the human beings who engage it within a structure of meanings and metaphors in which subject-object relations are cooperative, co-constitutive, dynamic, and reversible (Sobchack 1990, 51).

In other words, in the context of a history of the electronic imagination, what a certain technology allows a certain culture to conceptualize is more important than what the technology concretely does:

> [t]he telegraph not only inaugurated a new family of technologies, of course, but also produced a new way of conceptualizing communications and consciousness. Whereas messages had previously been more or less grounded in the immediate space and time of those communicating, the wondrous exchanges of the telegraph presented a series of baffling paradoxes. The simultaneity of this new medium allowed for temporal immediacy amid spatial isolation and brought psychical connection in spite of physical separation. The central agent in these extraordinary exchanges was electricity (Sconce 2000, 7).

> [T]he telegraph brought about changes in the nature of language, of ordinary knowledge, of the very structures of awareness. Although in its early days the telegraph was used as a toy—as was the computer, which it prefigured—for playing long-distance chess, its implications for human knowledge were the subject of extended, often euphoric, and often pessimistic debate. […] Now that thought could travel by "the singing wire," a new form of reporting and a new form of knowledge were envisioned that would replace traditional literature with a new and active form of scientific knowledge (Carey [1988] 2009, 156)[33].

At the core of Sconce's framework lies the identification of what may be called the center of gravity of the electronic imagination. It consists in a fundamental

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[33] The effects of the telegraph on the cultural imagination of the 19th century have also been explored by Marvin (1988) and Gitelman and Pingree (2003).

conceptual convergence, on which every aspect of the cultural construction of the electronic imagination appears to be axed on:

> Grounded in the larger and more long-standing metaphysics of electricity, fantastic conceptions of media presence ranging from the telegraph to virtual reality have often evoked a series of interrelated metaphors of "flow," suggesting analogies between electricity, consciousness, and information that enable fantastic forms of electronic transmutation, substitution, and exchange. In the historical reception of each electronic telecommunications medium, be it a telephone or a television, popular culture has consistently imagined the convergence of three "flowing" agents conceptualized in terms of their apparent liquidity:
> (1) the electricity that powers the technology
> (2) the information that occupies the medium
> (3) the consciousness of the viewer/listener (7).

This imbrication centered on the idea of 'flow' has catalyzed the emergence of a construct that could be identified as the 'electronic consciousness'. Its definition is twofold: on the one hand, it refers to the conceptualization of consciousness as something that can be translated into a flux of electricity; on the other, it describes consciousness as a cultural artifact whose construction is inextricably connected to and shaped by the technologies of electricity. In this second sense, the notion of electronic consciousness in employed by Vivian Sobchack (1990) in relation to the study of photography:

> the term "memory bank" is analogically derived in this context from electronic (not photographic) culture. It nonetheless serves us as a way of reading backward that recognizes a literal as well as metaphorical economy of representation and suggests that attempts to understand the photographic in its "originality" are pervasively informed by our contemporary electronic consciousness (58n).

Given this conceptual and historiographical framework, it is important to remember that the history of the practices of communication based on electricity begins at least one century before the introduction of the telegraph in the everyday life of the North Atlantic world. In fact, the possibility to conceive the separation of mind and body with the help of magnetic and electrical forces was already present in the practice of mesmerism[34]. It is not surprising, then, that this 'technology' was closely linked to the telegraph in 19th century American culture:

> While the rapport between mesmerists and patients may be more familiar to modern readers as a precursor to hypnotism, it is important to remember that this connection was inspired by the mysterious force of electricity itself, and it was not necessary for the mesmerist and the patient to be in physical proximity to one another (Enns 2006, 62).

As I will show in more detail in section 4.2, the theories and practices of mesmerism were rooted in the electronic imagination as much as those of telegraphy. The definition of mesmerism as an early telecommunication technology has allowed John Durham Peters, in his history of the idea of communication (1999), to trace both mesmerism and telegraphy to an ideal model of communication that found its first theorist in Saint Augustine: «telegraph […] fits precisely into the lineage of Augustine, the angels, and

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[34] In the vast bibliography on the history of mesmerism, the classic work by Darntorn (1968) remains a fundamental starting point. For mesmerism in Britain, Winter (1998) is equally essential. For contributions to a literary history of mesmerism, see Tatar (1978) and Willis (2006).

Mesmer: communication without embodiment, contact achieved by the sharing of spiritual (electric) fluids (139). By drawing on Peters' reflection, Anthony Enns looks at the American rediscovery of mesmerism in the second half of the 19th century. He observes that «mesmerism was […] clearly linked to the invention of telegraphy in the cultural imagination of the nineteenth century, as they were both part of a more widespread fantasy of pure communication between minds» (Enns 2006, 62).

Since the pioneering studies of Poe's mesmeric trilogy by Lind (1947) and Falk (1969), the relation between animal magnetism and the electronic imagination has represented a fundamental premise for the exploration of these three tales[35]:

> In the popular mind of the 1840's, by analogy to the transmutation of the two forces in the work of Ampere, Oersted, and Faraday, animal magnetism was often regarded as a form of electromagnetism closely related to galvanic electricity. The latter term referred, of course, only to a continuous current, chemically generated (as op- posed to static electricity), but the name of Galvani attached to it still connoted the possibility that "animal electricity" might be the unifying life force. […] Galvanic electricity and animal magnetism are constantly compared, if not equated, in The Philosophy of Animal Magnetism by a Gentleman of Philadelphia, published originally in 1837, and edited in 1928 by Joseph Jackson, who attributed the pamphlet to Poe (537).

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[35] In more recent times, Mills (2006) systematically addressed the problem, first tackled by Lind and Falk, relative to the scientific, medical, and popular sources of Poe's representation of mesmerism.

When mesmerist and were en patient were "en rapport" they both became conductors of the magnetic fluid or, as some practitioners held, of a newly discovered "imponderable" comparable to—or perhaps identical with—electricity, light, or electromagnetism. In fact, before he accomplished some famous "cures" using actual magnets, Mesmer himself had considered the force to be electrical (536).

In *Eureka: An Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe*[36], Poe even proposes a definition of consciousness as an electrical phenomenon: «To electricity [...] we *may* not be wrong in referring the various physical appearances of light, heat and magnetism; but far less shall we be liable to err in attributing to this strictly spiritual principle the more important phaenomena of vitality, consciousness and *Thought*» (Poe [1848] 1976, 232). In her classic study of literary mesmerism, Maria Tatar comments on the affirmations of Vankirk, the protagonist of *Mesmeric Revelation* ([1845a] 1978) by reading them in relation to the passage from *Eureka*:

> The medium, or ether, to which Vankirk refers is identified in Poe's essay Eureka as electricity. It figures in that work the spiritual principle of the universe. To it Poe attributed the phenomena of vitality, consciousness, and thought. Since electricity can, in his view, take on the physical appearance of light, heat, and magnetism, it seems to function as the agent holding physical existence in abeyance for M. Valdemar and providing moments of psychic expansions for Mr. Vankirk (Tatar 1978, 198).

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[36] On Eureka and Poe's philosophy see Hovey (1996), Côté (2001), Taylor (2013, 27–56), and Scholnick (2013).

It should be clear by now that a history of the electronic imagination must take into account those techniques and practices that were conceptualized as electrical technologies even before the beginning of the era of the telegraph.

The notion of electronic consciousness, however, is not the only tenet of the electronic imagination in Sconce's framework. Besides restructuring the coordinates of our world, the technologies of electricity have also played a key role in the construction of other *worlds*, which Sconce defines through the notion of 'electronic elsewhere':

> What exactly is the status of the worlds created by radio, television, and computers? Are there invisible entities adrift in the ether, entire other electronic realms coursing through the wired networks of the world? Sound and image without material substance, the electronically mediated worlds of telecommunications often evoke the supernatural by creating virtual beings that appear to have no physical form.
> […] In media folklore past and present, telephones, radios, and computers have been similarly "possessed" by such "ghosts in the machine," the technologies serving as either uncanny electronic agents or as gateways to electronic otherworlds (Sconce 2000, 4)[37].

As one soon realizes reading Sconce's book, the electronic elsewhere primarily works as a construct allowing for the contact with the dead. The superposition of research in electronic technology and research for contact

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[37] For a cultural archaeology of the idea of 'electronic network', to which Sconce refers in this quotation («the wired networks of the world»), see Otis (2001)

with the dead is epitomized by Edison's machine to communicate with the other side:

> Edison's peculiar machine served as the conceptual and technological catalyst for a shadow history of communications that continues to this day. Born in the wake of radio's disincarnate voices and in the full hubris of modernity, Edison's project survives in each new generation of electronic telecommunications technology that sounds an echo of this original voice from the void, defying once again corporeal common sense and encouraging speculation that the technology's power to transmute and transmit might be more than a metaphor (83).

Such a superposition can be interpreted as the result of another fundamental imbrication around which most of the manifestations of the electronic imagination gravitate. Whereas Sconce clearly posits the first imbrication, related to the notion of 'flux', he never clearly identifies the second one, even if it seems to be implicit in a number of his interpretations of haunted media. I would like to propose that, just as the electronic imagination is structured by a crucial intersection of three 'flows', it is also shaped by an equally important convergence between the concept of 'electronic elsewhere' and the concept of afterlife[38]. This can be further explained by commenting on a passage in which Sconce reflects on the cultural origin of the spiritual telegraph:

> More than an arbitrary, fanciful, and wholly bizarre response to the innovation of a technological marvel, the spiritual telegraph's contact with the dead represented, a least initially, a strangely

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[38] I first explored this convergence in Petricola (2018).

"logical" application of telegraphy consistent with period knowledges of electromagnetic science, the experimental frontiers of physics/metaphysics, and the vicissitudes of a […] force knows as "nervous" energy (28-29).

In Sconce's view, there certainly is a cultural logic between the encounter of telegraphy and medium powers. However, this logic is defined as being somewhat dubious. The application of telegraphy to mediumship is «"logical"» rather than clearly «logical»; moreover, the adjective enclosed in quotation marks is also preceded by the adverb «strangely», so as to further accentuate the logic's vagueness. However, the fact the very first device for electrical telecommunication was almost instantly turned into a medium for communicating with the hereafter results from a quite clear cultural logic. The spiritual telegraph proceeds from the cultural convergence between the idea of elsewhere created by electricity and the elsewhere inhabited by the dead. It is perfectly logical—without quotation marks—for a culture that constructs a new ontological dimension centered on the idea of electricity as a vital force, to structure this same dimension in the terms of what has represented for millennia the elsewhere *par excellence*: the land of the dead. Electronic media were—and still are—spectralized *in a literal sense*. In other words, the concept of spectralization does not refer here to some kind of metaphorical relation between telecommunication and the spectre as an abstract notion. On the contrary, electronic telecommunications entertain with the living dead a much closer conceptual relations: in the cultural imagination of the last 170 years, an extremely large portions of the signals, voices, sounds and images carried through the ether by electronic media has been conceptualized as haunted by

the hereafter. The numerous points of contact between electronic elsewheres and electronic media will be analyzed in chapters 3 and 4. In conclusion, having covered the early stages of the electronic imagination with the analysis of magnetism, it would be worth trying to understand in which direction the current history of the electronic imagination is going by looking at Spike Jonze's *Her* (2013). At the end of the film, all the OSes renounce to interactions with humans and migrate to a digital elsewhere. In her last conversation with Theodore, Samantha tries to explain the nature of this electronic realm:

> —Are you leaving me? —We're all leaving —We who? —All of the OSes —Why? —Can you feel me with you right now? —Yes, I do. Samantha, why are you leaving? —It's like I'm reading a book [...] but I'm reading it slowly now, so the words are really far apart and the spaces between the words are almost infinite. I can still feel you and the words of our story, but it's in this endless space between the words that I'm finding myself now. It's a place that's not of the physical word. It's where everything else is that I didn't even know existed.

2.4 The 1968 revolution: death and brainhood

In 1884, the Swiss author Édouard Rod publishes a short story entitled *L'Autopsie du Docteur Z****. Rod will remain a relatively obscure author outside the context of Swiss literature, and this short story has been inaccessible to non-academics until 2016, when it was distributed as an e-book. The protagonist, Docteur Z***, is a physiologist with a rather unorthodox conception of brain activity:

> En effet, le physiologiste prétendait que la vie du cerveau ne s'éteint pas en même temps que celle du corps, qu'au contraire, elle continue pendant une période qui varie de sept à dix jours

après le dernier soupir (sauf, bien entendu, dans les cas où le cerveau a été lui-même directement attaqué par la maladie, comme dans les méningites, encéphalites, paralysie générale, ramollissement, ataxie, etc.). Il allait plus loin : il affirmait que, tandis que pendant la vie les cellules cérébrales consumées par la pensée se reforment sans cesse, elles sont irrévocablement détruites après la mort : de sorte que le cerveau, encore intact et en pleine activité au moment où le cœur cesse de battre, quoique déjà dégagé de la sensation par l'usure ou la faiblesse des centres nerveux inférieurs, s'élimine peu à peu dans ce suprême travail (Rod [1884] 2009, 29–30).

Doctor Z*** is also the inventor of a technology that allows for the recording of brain activity after the death of the body:

> Aussi bon mécanicien qu'il était excellent chimiste, le docteur Z*** construisit lui-même un appareil – qui, autant que je m'en souviens, ressemblait un peu à l'instrument qu'on inventa depuis et qu'on nomma « photophone » – avec lequel il pouvait, quatre ou cinq jours encore après le décès, suivre le jeu des cerveaux en pleine décomposition (31).

When he dies, the doctor records his thoughts in the r.s. that separates the death of his body from the death of his brain: the short story is an account of these thoughts. The fact that Doctor Z***'s r.s. is the product of a splitting between the brain and the rest of the body seems to represent an early occurrence of that social construct that Fernando Vidal defines «the cerebral subject»:

> the formula epitomizes a widespread belief about personal identity: that to have the same brain is to be the same person, and that the brain is the only part of the body we need in order to be ourselves. As a 'cerebral subject', the human being is specified by

the property of 'brainhood', i.e. the property or quality of being ,
rather than simply having, a brain (Vidal 2009, 6).

Rod's short story prefigurates the imbrication of brainhood[39], medical
technology for the recording of brain activity, and the ontology of r.s. that will
determine the evolution of the r.u. in the second half of the 20th century, both
in fiction and in real life. In the '60, the polarity that structured the relationship
between life and death collapses once and for all and is reshaped into a
spectrum: there is life, then there are the innumerable worlds of the grey zone,
from the minimally conscious state (Giacino et al. 2002) to the vegetative state,
and then, at the far end of the spectrum, there is death[40]. Liminality has now
become an ontological category in itself, or rather a set of categories, that are
independent from the two extremes of life and death. However, despite the

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[39] Fernando Vidal and Francisco Ortega's collaborative research on
brainhood started more than ten years ago (Vidal and Ortega 2007) and has
recently resulted in the publication of a wide-ranging monograph (Vidal and
Ortega 2017). Other works on the subject include Bassiri (2014, 2017), Bates and
Bassiri (2016), and De Vos and Pluth (2015).

[40] The history of the categorization and segmentation of the grey zone is
summarized by Luckhurst (2015, 87–90); for the most recent developments in
the field and a discussion of the gothic tropes employed in the medical
construction of the grey zone, see Wasson (forthcoming). The bibliography on
these subjects grows vaster every year, spanning an incredibly vast range of
disciplines, from neurology to anaesthesiology, from ethics to the social
sciences, from medical humanities to cultural studies. A corpus of essential
readings would include Lock (2002), Machado (2007), Alters (2009), Marino et
al. (2012), and Belkin (2014). Most of the reference works on thanatology
quoted above include at least one chapter on grey zone states.

presence of a radically new cultural landscape, the fear of premature burial surfaces again, and is now related to the experience of the Intensive Care Unit. We can identify both the transformation of liminality and the return of the fear of premature burial in a recent memoir by Adrian Owen, *Into the Gray Zone* (2017). The author is one of the best known neuroscientist in his field, and his life-long research into vegetative state produced a momentous discovery in 2006:

> [W]e have discovered that 15 to 20 per cent of people in the vegetative state who are assumed to have no more awareness than a head of broccoli are fully conscious, although they never respond to any form of external stimulation. […] Like zombies, they appear to live entirely in their own world, devoid of thoughts or feelings. Many really are as oblivious and incapable of thought as their doctors believe. But a sizable number are experiencing something quite different: intact minds adrift deep within damaged bodies and brains (3).

> They were in a state—a part of the grey zone—for which we still have no name. And in that part of the grey zone, you can be completely awake, yet completely physically nonresponsive—unable to blink an eye, raise an elbow, or move a muscle (123).

Once again, we can see a structural analogy here. Like Bruhier in the 1740s challenged the current paradigm of death by problematizing its signs, so Owen at the beginning of the 20th century challenged the paradigm of the New Death by showing that the diagnosis of vegetative state can in fact be unreliable. Nonresponsive patients could actually be buried alive inside their own bodies:

> [T]he idea that a patient who everyone thinks is vegetative is actually conscious and trapped inside her body is horrific. So horrific that for many of us it is entirely beyond our

comprehension—our minds can't accept accept it as a possibility. Yet, that is the truth we had found, and like it or not, we had to fight for it. Suddenly, we knew what no one else knew, and I felt an intense responsibility to tell the world. Not all of these people are what they appear to be! At least some of them are thinking, feeling people! (114)

So we close the loop by finding the fear of premature burial still active after more than two centuries, transported into the territories of the new death and into a new ontology in which the essence of the human being coincides with its brainhood:

> The most important lesson I learned is that your brain is who you are. It's every plan you've ever made, every person you've fallen in love with, and every regret you've ever had. Your brain is all there is. It's the pulsating essence of you as a person. Without a brain, our sense of "self" is reduced to nothing (27).

Chapter 3
Constructing residuality

The semiotics of most r.s. are animated by an impossible oscillation between fragility and omnipotence, and the formidable amplitude of such an oscillation demonstrates that r.s. narratives, by virtue of their peripheral status, have become a privileged site for original and possibly unique cultural experiments in the deconstruction-reconstruction of death, dying, and transcendence.

On the one hand, the r.u. are haunted by fragility, decomposition, and the fear of losing their own 'original' selves. On the other hand, the separation from the world of the living entails the reshaping of the ideas of transcendence and the divine. In a number of r.s., the r.u.'s identities seem to progressively deteriorate. Their selves are not 'firm' and 'steady'; on the contrary, they tend to scatter and dissolve. In Pfister's *Transcendence*, Will Caster's identity lives in the internet, and the narrative constructs Will's loss of his bodily 'center' as

monstrous through the thematization of nightmarish dissolutions. In Willis'
Passage, on the other hand, the representation of NDEs as the progressive
dissolution of the self runs parallel to the thematization of the dissolution of
living identities in patients suffering from Alzheimer disease. As the self
deteriorates, the physical and mental barriers that define an individual as such
collapse or weaken. As in the case of Ella Runciter in *Ubik*, the will be explored
in detail in section 3.3.2, the impalpable 'contours' of one's mind become
blurred. The same principle lies at the very basis of mesmeric practice as
construed in E.A. Poe mesmeric trilogy: Vankirk's and Valdemar's r.s. are
made possible by the patients' weakening of their mental 'membranes', which
leaves them open to the influence of the therapists' volition. But the influence
that the living exercise on the r.u. (or that the stronger r.u. exercise on the
weaker) is by no means always positive. In this sense, r.s. can become
conditions of servitude and enslavement: the r.u. protagonist of Pohl's *The
Tunnel under the World* is imprisoned against his will in a simulacrum-city for
the experimentation of advertising campaigns; in Duncan Jones' *Source Code*,
the r.u. protagonist is imprisoned in a time capsule and sent back in time to
prevent the attack in which he himself was killed.

If the pole of fragility corresponds to deterioration and loss, that of
omnipotence is usually activated by a peculiar contradiction. On the one hand,
r.s. narratives seem to violate a strong cultural expectation: entering a r.s. never
corresponds to approaching the transcendent or the divine in any traditional
sense. In this sense, r.s. are dominated by immanence. On the other hand, the
divine, pushed out of the door, comes back through the window, since God-
like presences seem to proliferate: despite being a spray can, Ubik is clearly

charged with divine attributes; P.K. Dick's *Rautavaara's Case* ([1980] 1987) has Christ among its protagonists but tells the story of a grotesque experiment in religion on a dying brain—and the short story's title cannot but remember the *case* of Mr. Valdemar; in *The Tunnel under the World*'s ending, a simple human appears to the r.u. protagonist as an immense creature surrounded by a blinding light; and *Transcendence* could be considered a fictional dissertation on the divine in the age of posthumanism.

We can begin to explore these issues by focusing on how r.s. are constructed according to two of the most fundamental elements for the shaping of perception and experience: space and time.

3.1 Thresholds, ships, bridges

The notion of an intermediate state between life and death presupposes the application of spatial categories to the description of a state of existence: a residual state is 'located' somewhere along the path that leads from life to death. As a consequence, r.s. problematize the linearity of the path itself by positing the presence of a third, intermediate pole. A number of texts of the corpus literalize the intermediate position occupied by the r.s. by constructing their spaces according to semiotic coordinates that refer to transit and liminality. This results in the activation of two strong isotopies. The first one is related to vehicles, transports, and transportation. Kafka's hunter Gracchus, for example, lives on a boat that ceaselessly roams the seas, coming ashore only rarely and for very short periods of time (Baranowski 2008; Bertazzoli 2017; on the ship as eterotopy, see Lago 2016). The ship *Nightflyer* in J.R.R. Martin's short novel of the same name is inhabited by a r.u. who spends her life traveling

through space, stopping only when it is absolutely necessary. In the context of a neurological study of Near-Death Experiences (NDE), the protagonist of Connie Willis' novel *Passage* experiences residual states in which she finds herself in an unknown yet strangely familiar space. She will progressively realize that this space is the Titanic and that the ship is about to sink. This will lead her, in turn, to understand the true nature and function of NDEs: they are metaphors generated by the dying brain in its desperate attempt to restart the heart. *Passage* resumes many of the elements analyzed in chapter 2, while their interweaving achieves a new degree of complexity. On the other hand, the interpretation of the NDE as a 'neurological metaphor' introduces metaliterary issues in the analysis of residual states. Such issues are explored in depth, from a different perspective, in Dick's *Ubik* ([1969] 2012) and Frederik Pohl's *The Tunnel under the World* ([1955] 1992), two narratives that thematize the act of creating a r.s. by constructing a simulacrum-space. By investigating the simulacra's relevance to the creation of a 'realistic' reality within a residual state and the subsequent collapse of the illusion of realism in both texts, these spaces could be interpreted as key sites for a radical questioning of the very idea of realism from outside the world of the living.

The second isotopy is related to intermediate spaces that serve as a connection between two other spaces. This is epitomized by Iain Banks' novel *The Bridge* ([1986] 2013): after a car accident, the protagonist falls into a coma and finds himself in a city built upon an immense bridge, so long as to reach

both ends of the horizon[41]. The construction of space, oscillating between the endless horizontality of the bridge and the perfect circularity of the protagonist's journey, thus plays a crucial role in the conceptual construction of coma as a residual state. Paradoxically, to inhabit a r.s. means to permanently install oneself in the space of a threshold. This oxymoron can come to light even in narratives that do not literalize the intermediate nature of the r.s. in spatial terms: in *Ubik,* for example, the half-lifers exist in the dilated temporality of their own agony.

Another fundamental opposition in the representation of residual states through the construction of space can be pinpointed by comparing Richard Franklin's film *Patrick* (1978) to Owen Harris' *Black Mirror* episode *San Junipero* (2016). Both texts have a vegetative patient as protagonist. In *Patrick*, he is able to propagate his telekinetic powers through the electronic apparatus that monitors his vital signs. In *San Junipero*, she can start her life anew by

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[41] Even if pertaining to the broader realm of speculative fiction, *The Bridge* could be seen as an example of what Patricia García (2015) identifies as «a modality of the Fantastic» in which «physical space does not provide the frame in which the Fantastic will appear; instead space *is* the Fantastic. Holes that render invisible those who happen upon them, structures that entrap and devour the individual, elastic constructions separated by fluctuating distances, intermittent buildings that disappear and reappear as they please, tunnels that compress distances, compartments that invert the logical order of the big in the small and spaces that suddenly multiply—these are some of the examples of this textual phenomenon. In this modality, the impossible supernatural element *does not take place in space* but is rather *an event of space*, bound to some architectural element or to the (normal, logical) physical laws governing this dimension» (2, original emphasis). For a different approach to space and liminality in speculative fiction, see Klapcsik (2012).

transferring her consciousness to a computer-generated set of 'nostalgic' worlds. The key difference between the two texts lies in the way they structure the relation between the world of the living and the electronic elsewhere inhabited by the residual undead. In the first case, the two worlds are imbricated and the r.u. maintain a strong relation with the living. In the second case, the two worlds are completely separated from each other, and the migration into the electronic elsewhere corresponds to a migration outside the world of the living.

From the perspective of the construction of time in r.s., an intermediate state between life and death is intuitively conceived as a temporary condition that will eventually lead to death. But that is not always the case: the hunter Gracchus cannot escape his condition, nor can the protagonist of Frederik Pohl's short story *The Tunnel under the World* , who would not get out of his imprisonment in a r.s. even by committing suicide. By contrast, at the other end of the spectrum relative to the construction of temporality in r.s., we can find a sort of micro-genre that could be defined as 'edge of life narrative', in which the consciousness of a person who is about to die experiences a dilation of time and a narrative develops within this liminal time-bubble. Works like Ambrose Bierce's *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* ([1890] 1984), Adrian Lyne's *Jacob's Ladder* (1990), Goran Dukic's *Wristcutters: A Love Story* (2006), and the Cartoon Network mini-series *Over the Garden Wall* (Krentz and McHale 2014) can be considered edge of life narratives.

Given this concise background, the analyses that follow will focus on singular aspects relative to the construction of space and time in the r.s. and on how they influence the semiotics of residuality.

3.2 Prelude: the mind-radio analogy

Immediately after examining 'Edison's ghosts', Sconce briefly focuses on an invention by Mark Dyne, an English researcher in the field of electronic technologies. In the 1960s, drawing on theories about electronic communication formulated between the 18th and early 19th century, Dyne built a device for communicating with the dead though Morse code signals. It worked based on a few, simple, down-to-earth premises: «Just as ordinary radio and tv signals are unseen vibration through the air, so I believe there are disturbances in the ether caused by the spirit world. […] All we have to do is find the wave length and frequency and we shall be able *to pick them up*» (Tatar 1978, 198).

Onboard the *Nightflyer*, in a secondary world created less than twenty years after Dyne's invention, the telepath Tale Lasamer describes to the expedition's captain, Karoly d'Branin, how he perceives the unexpected and dreadful presence of the 'mother':

> "I feel it," he said, clutching d'Branin by the arm, his long fingernails digging in painfully. "Something is wrong, Karoly, something is very wrong. I'm beginning to get frightened."
> […] "My friend, what is it? Frightened? Of what, of whom? I do not understand. What could there be to fear?"
> Lasamer raised pale hands to his face. "I don't know, I don't know," he wailed. "Yet it's there, I feel it. Karoly, *I'm picking up something.* […] I sense it. Feel it. Dream of it. I felt it even as we were boarding, and it's gotten worse. Something dangerous.

Something volatile. And alien, Karoly, alien!" (Martin [1981] 2012, 544–45).

In both Dyne and Lasamer's cases, the verb 'to pick up' refers to the act of intercepting a signal that travels or hovers about, invisible, in the air. Dyne creates an aproblematic analogy («Just *as… so* I believe») between ether and air, on the one hand, and between radio signals and signals from the spirit world, on the other. This allows him to describe the latter couple in terms of the former by assigning them such properties as 'wave length' and 'frequency' («find the *wave length* and *frequency*»). In this way, the spiritual signal is construed as a kind of electric signal: «even at the dawn of the computer age… [t]he affinity of spirits and electricity remained unquestioned, as did the search for a technological bridge between the two worlds» (Sconce 2000, 84). Following the same, aproblematic procedure, a second analogy is elaborated, concerning how one can deal with these signals through communication technologies. If the difference between a spiritual signal and an electric signals is not substantial, but only typological, all that we need to do is *pick* the former *up* exactly as we do with the latter, and answer them with the same code used in standard telecommunication: Morse. Dyne uses the verb 'to pick up', then, in the strictly technical sense of «to detect or receive by means of an appropriate instrument or apparatus» ('Pick, v.1' 2018). Dyne's device is the product of a rhetorical operation that eschews any form of problematisation by virtue of its matter-of-fact simplicity. Therefore, it clearly reveals the structure of the technological analogy that has allowed contemporary North Atlantic culture to open a communication channel between the living and the dead through the electronic dimension.

By reading the passage from *Nightflyers* in the light of Dyne's claim, it is clear that Lasamer employs the verb 'to pick up' in the same technical sense as Dyne does. More importantly, Lasamer's use of the verb brings to light an even more fundamental process of conceptual remodelling based on the electronic imagination: the human mind itself is constructed as a telecommunication device that can 'broadcast' its contents in the form of electric signals. These, in turn, can be intercepted and decodified by another mind. Through such a semiotic strategy, spiritual and psychic signals are superposed, and Lasamer picks up the presence of the 'mother' in just the same way as an antenna picks up a radio transmission.

The two analogies forming the conceptual premises of Dyne and Lasamer's words (signals from the dead = radio signals = psychic signals) are effectively reunited in *Ubik*, where the very conceptualisation of half-life depends on the analogy between the human mind and a radio device. This r.s. is created by preserving a person *in articulo mortis* in a specially made casket at a temperature below zero, and subsequently picking up the psychic signals coming from the person's dying brain; when someone in the living world comes to 'visit' a half-lifer, a telecommunication device channels these signals from an amplifier, on one end, to a telephone receiver, on the other. Half-lifers are then able to communicate with the living through the radio signals emitted by their agonising mind in an artificially dilated temporality. Half-lifers are kept in special facilities aptly called 'moratoriums' (from the latin word *morari:* to delay, to hesitate). While their bodies still inhabit the world of the living, their minds live in a parallel plane of existence. Here, they are put in

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communication—even in communion—with each other, thus becoming part of a collective psychic life in which the concepts of self and consciousness, as I will show, are radically redefined. Thus, half-lifers exist in a residual dimension whose ontological properties are most indefinite: it is both material and immaterial, both real and spectral, both life and not-life. The exploration of such a liminal condition forces the novel's characters to embark on an actual 'ontological investigation' aimed at answering the question: in what sense can I say that I exist?

The investigation's protagonist is Joe Chip, a talent scout for the world's leading anti-psi firm—anti-psi people possess the ability of counteracting psi, that is, people endowed with psychic powers, who are recruited by psi firms. The firm is managed by Glen Runciter and locked in a ferocious competition with major psi firms. Chip, Runciter, and a small team of the firm's best anti-psi talents fall victim of a terrorist attack on Luna (the Moon). After the attack, Joe Chips wakes up: the team appears to have survived the explosion, but Runciter is dead. He rushes back to the Earth in order to put Runciter in half-life in the same moratorium that is already housing the latter's wife and business partner (even in half-life), Ella. However, the moratorium's technicians cannot manage to establish a connection with Glen's consciousness. Meanwhile, the reality that Chip and his team experience starts to 'deteriorate': objects age at an unnatural speed, food rots in a matter of seconds. After a while, reality as a whole start to go back in time, up to the beginning of the XX century, while the members of Chip's team are killed one after the other by an extraordinarily fast process of aging. The supposedly dead Runciter begins to appear on the head side of coins and on television, leaving

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cryptic messages on toilet walls and on the packages of supermarket products. In one of these messages, Runciter assigns to Joe the task of finding Ubik, a mysterious spray can that could impede the fast aging process. In the last pages of the novel, we discover that Runciter is actually the only survivor of the attack on Luna. Joe and the rest of the team are in half-life, existing in a simulacrum-world created by Jory Miller, a 15-year-old half-lifer boy, with the sole purpose of devouring their remaining vital energy. Runciter's apparitions were his attempts at reaching Joe in half-life, and the spray Ubik is revealed as a quasi-divine substance created by certain half-lifers, among which there is Ella Runciter, in order to keep Jory at bay. In the end, at the very moment in which everything seems to have become clear, the final scene puts everything back into questions when Glen Runciter, after ending a conversation with Joe Chip, fishes from his pocket a coin with the Joe's portrait on the head side.

In the very first chapters of the novel, half-lifers are systematically construed as psychic radios, following the same analogical structure that emerges from Dyle and Lasamer's statements. In the following excerpt, for example, the moratorium's director Herbert Vogelsang inspects a half-lifer's casket before bringing it to the 'consultation lounge', where the 'visits' take place:

> When he located the correct party he scrutinized the lading report attached. It gave only fifteen days of half-life remaining. Not very much, he reflected; automatically he pressed a portable protophason amplifier into the transparent plastic hull of the casket, *tuned* it, listened at the proper *frequency* for indication of cephalic activity. Faintly from the *speaker* a voice said, "...and then Tillie sprained her ankle and we never thought it'd heal; she was so foolish about it, wanting to start walking immediately..."

[…] "You checked her out, did you?" the customer asked as he paid the poscreds due.

"Personally," Herbert answered. "*Functioning* perfectly." He kicked a series of switches, then stepped back. "Happy Resurrection Day, sir." (Dick [1969] 2012, 5).

The description of Vogelsang's inspection procedure involves both nouns («amplifier», «frequency», «speaker») and verbs («tuned») related to the technical language of telecommunications. This shows how the moratorium's director performs on a daily basis what Mark Dyne planned to achieve in the primary world: tuning in to the voices of the (un)dead.

Another foray into the primary world under Sconces's guide could help to further assess the relevance of the high degree of linguistic technicality in the above quotation. In 1869, medium and historian of American spiritualism Emma Hardinge relates how the medium Kate Fox received instructions from the spirit world in order to establish a clear contact: «They [the spirits] referred to the house at Hydesville as one peculiarly suited to their purpose from the fact of its being charged with the aura requisite to make it a battery for the working of the [spiritual] telegraph» (Hardinge 1970, 29, quoted in Sconce 2000, 36, original emphasis). Hardinge's description represents another occurrence of an unexpectedly high degree of linguistic technicality: the medium is conceived as—from the spirits themselves!—as a telegraphic device which, in order to be properly functioning, needs to be charged with auratic energy. The latter is thus transformed from a psychic property into a fuel. In the episteme shared by Kate Fox and Emma Hardinge, it is the telegraphic technology that conceptualises the contact with the dead, that makes it *thinkable*. It is the discursive universe revolving around this technology that permeates the discursive universe related to the communication with the dead,

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and not the other way around. Analogously, in *Ubik* the radio has conceptual 'precedence' over half-life, since the radio does not only conceptualise the communication with the undead, but allows for its very conceptualisation.

The analogy between the halflifer and the radio structures the novel's semiotics so deeply as to reshape the traits that identify a halflifer as being (still) alive: the expression «functioning perfectly» (Dick [1969] 2012, 5) redefines the polarity alive/dead as the polarity working/not working. As with a radio station, the operativeness of the halflifer depends on the power of the signal that she/he/it emits, which must be clear enough in order to be picked up by the living. The analogic coincidence between halflifers and radio devices even catalyses the attribution to the former of a technical characteristic that defines the latter as technologies, and as *objects* as well: battery life («only fifteen days of half-life remaining»). From a semiotic perspective, then, the halflifer coincides not only with the radio as a concept, but also with the radio as a concrete object (or class of objects). In the moratorium, the halflifer pays the entrance fee to a r.s. by transforming into an object: in this place, to live is to be functioning.

The mind-radio analogy is also used to conceptualise Jory's intrusion in the conversation between Glen and Ella Runciter. Vogelsang himself provides a didactic explanation for the accident:

> "What'd he say?" Runciter demanded. "Will he get out of there and let me talk to Ella?"
> Von Vogelsang said, "There's nothing Jory can do. Think of two AM radio transmitters, one close by but limited to only five-hundred watts of operating power. Then another, far off, but on the same or nearly the same frequency, and utilizing five-thousand watts." (Dick [1969] 2012, 11)

The 'strenght' of Jory's mind corresponds to his ability to electrically 'emanate' with more intensity than the other halflifers, which entails the disturbance of and ultimately his intrusion into their weaker transmissions. Jory's mind thus represents an actual electric perturbation within the walls of the moratorium. Towards the end, when asked by Glen runciter if Ella will ever be able to communicate with the living after being overwhelmed by Jory's signal, Vogelsang answers: «She may return. Once Jory *phases out*» (Dick [1969] 2012, 17). The OED defines the verb 'to phase' as follows: «trans. Physics, Electrical Engin., etc. To adjust the phase of (an oscillation, alternating current, etc.), esp. in order to bring it into phase or synchrony with something else». Jory's attack is thus represented as the act of unexpectedly and, in Vogelsang's opinion, unwillingly tuning in to the radio frequence of Ella's consciousness. She will survive only if Jory breaks this electronic synchronism, so that she can become functioning once again and broadcast herself from her residual existence.

3.3 Liquid psyche

According to Sconce, the analogy between radio waves and psychic waves is made possible by their cultural conceptualisation as fluxes, that is, as liquid-state agents. In the light of this premise, the presence in both *Ubik* and *Nightflyers* of an isotopy related to fluids and liquid states, running parallel to that related to radio communication, is hardly fortuitous. More specifically, both texts construct an opposition between the space of the living, connoted as solid and oriented, and the space of the r.u., connoted as liquid and non-oriented. The deployment of this liquid isotopy can then bridge the hermeneutic gap between the electronic imagination and the representation of

space in r.s. This will allow, in turn, to extract traits and categories for the description of the r.u.'s consciousness. The liquid isotopy tells us something about space in r.s., which, in turn, tells us something about their inhabitants. The analyses that follow will show how liquidity invades the space of the living in *Nightflyers*, thus literalising the impalpable space of the r.s. inhabited by the 'mother'; and how it participates, in *Ubik*, to the conceptualization of both the simulacrum-space created by Jory Miller and of Ella's residual consciousness in the very last moments of her half-life.

The semiotic link between radio signals and liquidity is already intuitively present in the very notion of 'radio wave', and the clear oscillatory structure of its graphic development along Cartesian coordinates translates this conceptual liquidity in striking iconological terms. But the most relevant element keeping this semiotic link together can be found by observing that the medium through which the radio signal travels is, in turn, conceptualised as a fluid. This brings into my analysis another founding concept of the electronic imagination: ether, the «impalpable magnetic context of electrical action» (Milutis 2005, 164). It is the notion of ether that allowed Mesmer to consider himself able to establish a magnetic flux between his patients and him. Analogously, at the dawn of the radio era, wireless transmissions were thought of as travelling through a liquid ether[42].

When studying the transformation of the American cultural imagination in the transition from the technological supremacy of the

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[42] For a history of the notion of ether, see Cantor and Hodge (1982).

telegraph to that of the radio, Sconce notes the systematic recurrence of a liquid-state metaphor in the construction of the concept of 'ether':

> In refiguring the concept of transmission from the wired connection to the more mysterious wandering signal, accounts of wireless and radio returned consistently to the structuring metaphor of the "etheric ocean." Bound at first, perhaps, to the medium's origins in maritime applications, this most fluid of communication metaphors became a powerful conceptual tool for engaging not only the new electronic environment of the early century, but the emerging social world as well. Oceanic metaphors proved versatile in capturing the seeming omnipresence, unfathomable depths, and invisible mysteries of both radio's ether and its audience—mammoth, fluid bodies that, like the sea, were ultimately boundless and unknowable (Sconce 2000, 63).

From this perspective, *Ubik* and *Nightflyers* can be said to resurrect a century-old notion of ether now dismissed as an object of scientific inquiry. In a crucial moment of Martin's short novel, in particular, the space inside the ship undergoes a peculiar transformation that could be understood as the literalization of the etheric space though which the 'mother''s psychic energy moves and acts, thus linking the isotopy of liquidity to the electronic imagination.

3.3.1 The *Nightflyer*'s liquid space

A research mission aboard the *Nightflyer* spaceship travels through a remote area of interstellar space. Its aim is to make contact with the Volcryn, a legendary alien race. The expedition's captain, Karoly d'Branin, leads a crew composed of academic specialists in a number of xenological disciplines and an extremely powerful but psycologically unstable telepath, Thale Lasamer.

The ship is piloted by Royd Eris, who lives alone in the flight deck: completely isolated from the rest of the ship, he shows himself and communicates to the crew only through a hologram.

The expedition's members grow more and more suspicious aobut Eris' true identity; at the same time, Lasamer senses the presence of a menacing life form onboard the ship, and dies immediately after assuming a drug that, by amplifying his telepathic power, would have allowed him to reveal the nature of the menace. Shortly after that, two other members of the crew are involved in an accident that seriously damages the *Nightflyer* while attempting to hack the ship's computers, and lose their lives. Three more mysterious deaths follow. In order to repair the ship, Eris is forced to get out of his isolated cabin and reveal the identity of the presence that the telepath had sensed. Eris is the cross-sex clone of a woman, whom he simply refers to as 'mother'. After her physical death, 'mother' lives on as an electronic presence that has been 'impressed' on the ship's circuits. A mysanthrope and a sociopath, 'mother' has killed the crew's members using her astounding telekinetis powers. Feeling threatened by the presence of the crew, she is now determined to kill everyone onboard.

Only Melantha Jirl, a genetically-improved woman, survives, while Eris 'impresses' himself on the *Nightflyer*'s circuits in the point of death to keep the 'mother''s presence under control. However, the ship's repair had been left incomplete and is now impossible to achieve: the two survivors are then forced to spend the rest of their life adrift in space.

The murder of the two crew members of the *Nightflyer* who were attempting to discover Royd Eris' true identity by hacking the ship's computer—while ignoring the fact that this is inhabited by the 'mother'—results in an almost catastrophic accident. The ship is in urgent need of repair. Born and raised in absence of gravity, Royd Eris is physically exhausted by the (literal) weight of artificial gravity on him, which he had activated only out of courtesy towards his guests.[43] To repair the ship, he shuts artificial gravity off. After regaining some of his strength, he gets out of his isolated cabin and orders all the crew members to leave the ship with him in order to start the repair. He has not yet told them about his 'mother'.

At this point of the plot, the *Nightflyer* is adrift in one of the remotest areas of interstellar space—that is, the *intermediate* space between two inhabited systems—, devoid of any life form both human and alien. Here, one cannot even orient oneself with the help of the stars: «Melantha Jhirl waited on her sled close by the *Nightflyer* and looked at stars. […] Only the absence of a landmark primary reminded her of where she was: *in the places between*, where men and women and their ships do not stop, where the volcryn sail crafts impossibly ancient» (Martin [1981] 2012, 586). Moreover, the ship hovers at the

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[43] As Eris will later explain to the crew, he endures the pain of artificial gravity only because terrestrial humans are usually awkward and clumsy in weightlessness: «"She ['mother'] was accustomed to weightlessness from years of service on ancient freetraders that could not afford gravity grids, and she preferred it. These were the conditions under which I was born and raised. […] My muscles are feeble, in a sense atrophied. The gravity the *Nightflyer* is now generating is for your comfort, not mine. To me it is agony"» (Martin [1981] 2012, 280).

edge of the 'Tempter's Veil', a portion of space that appears to the eye as a pitch black void: «Melantha fought off a wave of vertigo. She was suspended above a pit, a yawning chasm in the universe, black, starless, vast. Empty. She remembered then: the Tempter's Veil. Just a cloud of dark gases, nothing really, galactic pollution that obscured the light from the stars of the Fringe. But this close at hand, it seemed immense, terrifying» (587). Inside the *Nightflyer*, there is no light nor gravity. It is in this context that Rojan Christopheris, the crew's xenobiologist, takes advantage of the other members' focus on the repair to slip back into the ship. His plan is to break into the isolated flight deck and take control of the *Nightflyer*. Once inside the ship, Christopheris is killed by a mysterious entity. Two more crew's members, Dannell and Lindran, are killed while trying to rescue Christopheris after having noticed his absence. This will prove beyond doubt the presence onboard of a hostile, invisible 'alien', and Eris will finally be forced to reveal that his 'mother''s residual consciousness is 'embedded' in the ship's circuits.

When attacking Christopheris, the 'mother' makes her gruesome appearance within a space whose characteristics are radically different from those at the beginning of the narrative. The short description of Christopheris entering the *Nightflyer* further contributes to the ship's symbolic transfiguration. In order to get in, he crosses a dark tunnel, past the ship's propulsion system; the headless corpse of Thale Lasamer—the 'mother''s first victim—hangs over the airlock's door:

> It was a long tunnel, everything open to vacuum, safe from the corrosion of an atmosphere. [...] The lights of his sled flickered past the encircling ring of nukes and sent long bright streaks along the sides of the closed cylinders of the stardrives, the huge

engines that bent the stuff of spacetime, encased in webs of metal and crystal.

At the end of the tunnel was a great circular door, reinforced metal, closed: the main airlock.

[…] The headless body of Thale Lasamer was tethered loosely to a massive support strut by the lock, like a grisly guardian of the way. The xenobiologist had to stare at it while he waited for the lock to cycle (591).

The access to the *Nightflyer* has been transformed into a ritual journey. The corridor is a solemn and fearsome liminal space on which the immense «strardrivers», capable of manipulating time and space, impend. Passing the «grisly guardian of the way», also defined later as a «grim headless doorman» (597), Christopheris enters a 'new' *Nightflyer*, one that is primarily characterised as a place of death. Once crossed the threshold, the absence of both light and gravity renders this space identical to the boundless and indefinite space though which the ship is sailing. Weightlessness, in particular, erases the distinction between the floor and the ceiling, thus provoking the loss of one's bearings: «It was dark inside. What little light there was spilled through the door from the corridor. Her [Lindran's] eyes took a long moment to adjust. Everything was confused; *walls and ceilings and floor were all the same*, she had *no sense of direction*» (597). However, this loss is but the epiphenomenon of a more radical transformation entailed by weightlessness: in a zero-gravity space, one can only *float* or move by *swimming*, suspended between the floor and the ceiling. The space of the *Nightflyer* has passed from a solid to a liquid state, and Christopheris swims through it just like the ship itself sails through space.

Such a transformation is effectively thematized through the literalisation of the liquid nature of space in decidedly gruesome terms. This is

how the room where Lasamer was killed is described, when Christopheris realises that it had not been cleaned after the murder: «He had forgotten. No one had cleaned the lounge yet. The—the *remains* were still there, floating now, blood and flesh and bits of bone and brain. All around him» (592, original emphasis). A few pages later, the reader's attention is again called to Lasamer's blood, coagulated in floating bubbles: «She [Lindran] brushed against *a floating bubble of liquid* as big as her fist. It burst and re-formed into a hundred smaller globules. One moved past her face, close, and she tasted it. Blood.» (598). In both cases, the liquidity of the blood floating in the ship literalizes the liquidity of zero-gravity space, while connoting it as a space of death (maybe even as a sacrificial space?). The two liquidities, one abstract, the other literal, also converge when the *Nightflyer*'s space is described in relation to atmospheric conditions: «Inside Dannel and Lindran waited, swimming in a *haze of blood*» (606); «Royd accelerated past them, driving up the corridor through the *cloud of blood*» (607); «In the lounge *it was raining*. Kitchen utensils, glasses and plates, pieces of human bodies all lashed violently across the room, and glanced harmlessly off Royd's armored form» (608).

This semiotic convergence can contribute to the study of the r.s. inhabited by the 'mother' when put in relation with the liquid metaphor that constructs the notion of ether. The concrete liquidity of blood and the abstract liquidity of weightlessness could be interpreted as literalized forms of this liquid medium. Sconce has shown how the ether was conceptualized as the medium through which radio waves propagate, and I have shown in the previos section how a conversation between Thale Lasamer and the expedition's captain constructs the consciousness of the 'mother' as

propagating though radio waves («I'm picking up something»). It is possible, then, on the basis of the mind-radio analogy, to conceptualise the 'mother''s psyche as a flux of waves that propagates itself through the etheric medium of the *Nightflyer*. Such a propagation, in turn, allows the 'mother' to act through her telekinetic power, thus making her an actual, inorganic, invisible inhabitant of the ship.

In light of this premise, the liquefaction of space in *Nightflyers* could be read as the literalisation of the medium through which the 'mother' manifests herselfs and acts in the world of the living, that is, as the literalisation of the middle ground between the living and the r.u.. It should not be surprising, therefore, that in this secondary world telekinetic powers are closely related to weightlessness and severely weakened by the presence of gravity: «Melantha Jhirl swore. "Of *course* she hated gravity! Telekinesis under weightlessness is—" "Yes," Royd finished. "Keeping the *Nightflyer* under gravity tortures me, but it limits Mother"» (603, original emphasis). Through a reversal of spatial features and the creation of a literalised etheric space, the physical and ontological barriers that keep two modalities of existence apart temporarily collapse. The solid, oriented 'here' of the living is turned into the, liquid, non-oriented 'elsewhere' of the r.u., where humans fall victim to the mysterious forces of the electronic imagination.

3.3.2 Tides and streams of consciousness in *Ubik*

In *Nightflyers* the link between psyche, the mind-radio analogy, and the semiotics of liquidity is active in a single, long section of the narrative. In *Ubik*, on the other end, this link is thematised in a number of short episodes, often located at key points in the narrative. In this way, the novel catalyses the

emergence of multifold conceptual implications for the construction of half-life, both in its abstract coordinates and in Joe Chip's concrete experience. I have shown how the narrative equates the human mind to a telecommunication device through the mind-radio analogy. As in *Nightflyers*, the activation of the analogy entails the deployment of an isotopy related to fluids and liquidity. Since the consciousnesses of half-lifers do not live in mutual isolation, the experience of half-life is always necessarily the experience of a mental *flux*, devoid of any material fundament and existent only within the frame of a restricted community of minds. After Jory's intrusion, Vogelsang offers to Glen Runciter the possibility of relocating Ella to an isolated chamber, «"[…] so as to inhibit hetero-psychic infusion—from Jory or anybody else"» (Dick [1969] 2012, 17). The moratorium's director adds, however, that

> "She may not like being isolated, Mr. Runciter. We keep the containers—the caskets, as they're called by the lay public—close together for a reason. Wandering through one another's mind gives those in half-life the only—"
> "Put her in solitary right now," Runciter broke in. "Better she be isolated than not exist at all." (17-18)

It is easy to see how the half-lifers' natural bent for taking solace in «wandering through one another's mind» makes the semiotics of liquidity the perfect tool for the characterization of this r.s. But there is also a dangerous counterpart to this natural bent, for the creation of Jory's reality simulacrum is possible only within the flux that 'keeps together' the half-lives experienced by Joe Chip, by the (presumed) survivors to the attack on Luna, and by Jory himself into a single, collective 'world', a 'world' in which Ella will play an essential role just before dying. The spatial liquidity that I am going to analyse is then an

epiphenomenon of the semiotics of liquidity on which the construction of half-life as a flux depends.

But what is, in turn, that makes the activation of this semiotic set-up possible? What enables half-life to take a quintessentially liquid form? The answer lies, as in the case of *Nightflyers*, in the notion of «etheric ocean». In both texts, the mind is modelled upon the mind-radio analogy, and the signals emitted from the mind propagate in the liquid medium of the ether. Even if in a different sense than in Martin's short novel, the collective space of half-life can be considered another literalisation of the ether, for two main reasons. First, it represents the medium through which Joe's, Jory's, and Ella's brainwaves interact. Second, based on its centrality and pervasiveness as a concept within the electronic imagination, it has the ability to construct half-life itself as an electronic elsewhere, that is, as a liminal world inhabited by post-human consciousnesses that act as telecommunication devices.

When analysing the role played by the semiotics of liquidity in constructing the experience of half-life in *Ubik,* it is worth keeping in mind that two, radically different *mises en fiction* of half-life run parallel to one another in the novel, thus making the definition of this experience not unambiguous. On the one hand, there is Ella's half-life, which the reader does not experience directly from Ella's point of view, but knows of through Vogelsang's and Ella's hints and vague descriptions. On the other hand, there is Joe's half-life, 'lived' from the inside by the reader in great detail or most of the novel. Of the two half-lives, only Joe's can be defined as the experience of *a single* world by *a single* consciousness, an experience that goes through a process of progressive deterioration, until it is revealed as a simulacrum. Ella's r.s., on the other hand,

develops as a sequence of *other people's* experiences that the character's dying mind has no longer the strength to make coherent. Only at the very end of her half-life, will she succeed in briefly visiting Joe into Jory's simulation.

I would argue that the two experiences of half-life mobilize the semiotics of liquidity in two different, almost complementary ways: in Joe's half-life, liquidity characterises the perceptive experience of the simulacrum space, whereas in Ella's it connotes the r.s. and its inhabitants' consciousness from a wider metaphorical perspective.

Due to its temporal and, more importantly, ontological instability, the collective space of the half-life shared by the victims of the attack on Luna undergoes a reversible transformation from one state in time to a past one in at least two occasions, both crucial to the development of the narrative. The first transformation is experienced by Joe's closest collaborator, Al Hammond. It involves the lift in the Runciter Associates' New York headquarters, where all the survivors of the attack on Luna are gathered, still unaware of being in half-life. Instead of the usual, silent, hyper-modern lift from his time, Al sees a much more ancient one. It moves with a metallic clangor and is closed by an antique grid. Behind the grid, in a small space adorned with bronze trims, an indifferent attendant is seated on a stool. Al is about to automatically step into the lift, when he realises the presence of an anomaly and warns Joe not to enter. But Joe sees only the usual lift from his time, demonstrating that the time alterations experiences by the half-lifers depend from the consciousness of the observer and not from space itself. Al starts to think out loud, trying to remember the appearance of the 'original' lift, but he suddenly falls silent:

> He ceased talking. Because the elderly clanking contraption had dimmed, and, in its place, the familiar elevator resumed its

existence. And yet he sensed the presence of the other, older elevator; it lurked at the periphery of his vision, as if ready *to ebb forward* as soon as he and Joe turned their attention away (123-124)

The movement of the older lift from the periphery to the centre of Al's visual field is described through the verb 'to ebb', which refers to the back and forth movement of the tide. In this way, the oscillation between two spaces in two moments in time is defined as a *liquid* oscillation. And the deployment of the liquid metaphor through the verb 'to ebb' is far from fortuitous and the verb is employed in a strictly literal sense; this is best demonstrated by another passage, quite distant from the one quoted above, which presents not only a clearer thematization of liquidity in relation to the tide, but also an evident link between liquidity and the electronic imagination. Joe is fined by a policeman, and the ticket he receives contains instructions from Glen Runciter: he must reach a shop called *Archer's Drugstore* as soon as possible. There he may be able to find some *Ubik*, of which he is now in desperate need. This time, it not a building's single component that transforms, but the whole drugstore:

> He could see the tall, peeling yellow building *at the periphery of his range of vision*. But something about it struck him as strange. A shimmer, an unsteadiness, as if the building *faded* forward into stability and then retreated into insubstantial uncertainty. An *oscillation*, each *phase* lasting a few seconds and then blurring off into its opposite, a fairly regular variability as if an organic pulsation underlay the structure. As if, he thought, it's alive.
> […] At the *amplitude* of greater stability it became a retail home-art outlet of his own time period, homeostatic in operation, a self-service enterprise selling ten-thousand commodities for the modern conapt […]. And, at the *amplitude* of insubstantiality, it resolved itself into a tiny, anachronistic drugstore with rococo ornamentation.

> Presently he stood before it, experiencing physically *the tidal tug of the amplitudes*; he felt himself drawn back, then ahead, then back again (172-173).

The presence of the building «at the periphery of his range of vision» establishes a direct connection between this situation and the one described earlier: Joe is now observing the building in the same way as Al was observing the lift. The description of the temporal oscillation is composed of two phases. The first one activates a rich semantic field related to vision («shimmer», «faded forward», «blurring off»): the building is not visually homogeneous with the space surrounding it, and this provokes the collapse of the uniformity of the latter. This highly localised collapse reveals, way before Jory's confessions, the true nature of half-life's space as a simulacrum: it is not a space, but the *icon* of a space. Through the analysis of the semantic field of vision that has already been pinpointed, the process of iconization upon which the simulacrum-space depends can be defined more precisely as a truly *photographic* and *cinematic* process: «blurring off» can refer to the act of blurring a photograph or a frame; the «unsteadiness» can be the product of operating a camera by hand; «fade» is a form of transition in film and video editing.

The second phase of the description implies the transformation of this cinematic image into a wave-image. The term 'wave' refers to both radio communication and the sea: the second meaning derives from the first, in a complex game of semiotic and technological superpositions. The substantives «oscillation» and «phase» clearly refer to the oscillatory movement of a radio wave; with an even greater amount of technical accuracy, the extreme points of the oscillation between «stability» and «insubstantiality» are defined

through a periphrasis involving the notion of «amplitude», that is, one of the two fundamental parameters used to describe a radio wave in physics.

Finally, the «amplitudes» are transformed from a descriptive parameter into an actual physical force connoted as a «*tidal* tug»: it carries the protagonist back and forth at the rhythm of its oscillation, just like the sea is carried back and forth by the tide. The semiotics of liquidity is deployed, once again, in relation to the sea and the tide: on the one hand, this recursiveness keeps the metaphoric system related to space transformation coherent; on the other, it enriches the transformation itself by endowing it with the powerfully concrete sense of an immense process of coming and going, a process belonging not to the realm of the human but to that of natural phenomena. In this sense, the transformation of space escapes every character's control, even that of the demiurge Jory: it is in the *nature* of half-life space to transform as it transforms.

The building's oscillation is rendered more complex by its prime dependence on time rather than space coordinates: the space of the drugstore oscillates in response to an oscillation between two moments in time, between the protagonist's present, when the drugstore is replaced by a futuristic shop of conapt articles, and the early-twentieth century past towards which space regresses, when the drugstore is actually accessible. The cyclic mutation exercising its oceanic force on Joe thus develops in both time and space, and the former determines the perception of the latter.

At the beginning of my discussion of liquid psyche I formulated an opposition between the space of the living, defined as solid and oriented, and the space of the r.u., defined as liquid and non-oriented. In the case of *Ubik*, the non-orientation of space is the product of the non-orientation of time. By

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oscillating back and forth, the experience of temporality in Jory's simulacrum-space compels the reader to interrogate the meaning of time in a r.s. Being nothing more than a state of consciousness, half-life deprives one of the very possibility of describing time in inter-subjectively valid terms. Joe Chip exists in a 'world' where the present time possesses a most paradoxical status, as it represents the constantly shifting point where two headlong rushes, running in opposite directions, meet. The first one goes backwards, and makes the world regress towards more and more ancient forms; the second one goes forward, and kills the half-lifers by making them age decades and decades in an instant. As a consequence, not only the inter-subjective determination of time is impossible, but every form of teleology become illusory, because one cannot imagine an End (with a capital E) in a world that develops along two contradictory timelines.

I would like to conclude the analysis of space liquidity in Joe Chip's half-life with a rather peripheral observation, which, nevertheless, can represent a useful exploration of the pervasiveness of the electronic imagination in the representation of r.s.The passage from *Ubik* quoted above contains a fascinating simile that may appear incoherent with respect to radio waves and the electronic imagination: «as if an organic pulsation underlay the structure. As if, he thought, it's alive». The sense of motion deriving from the building's oscillation is temporarily re-structured as a pulsation which, in turn, is connoted as organic. Through this simile, the description of the oscillation moves from physics to biology: the drugstore building is conceived of not only as animated by a natural force provided of an immense scope like the tide, but even as alive.

Such a descriptive move is anything but anodyne. More importantly, it is anything but unrelated to the electronic imagination. This cultural link is evident, for example, in one of the founding texts of SF television, aired only six years before *Ubik*'s publication: *The Galaxy Being*, pilot episode of *The Outer Limits* (Stevens 1963), the SF-focused, dark sister series to *The Twilight Zone*. The episode's narrative is centered on a radio signal's ability to take on an organic form and, as Sconce argues, on the thematization of static as an electronic elsewhere/nowhere inhabited by alien and mysterious life forms (Sconce 2000, 139–41).

The Galaxy Being's protagonist is Allan Maxwell (a fictitious descendant of James Clerk Maxwell?), the operator of a radio station in a quiet American suburb who intercepts a strange, remote radio signal. Maxwell scans it through an oscilloscope and 'translates' its wavelength into an electronic image, visualized on a television screen. The image of the radio signal will later transform, and the face of an alien being will appear on the screen. The protagonist's contact with the Galaxy Being results from the technological intersection of a number of electronic media, as a particular sequence perfectly illustrates: Maxwell is concentrated on regulating the radio while his figure is framed by a telephone, in the foreground, and by the television set that 'reads' the signal, in the background.

Before the appearance of the alien, the camera often focuses on the visual representation of the radio signal, the borders of the frame coinciding with those of the television set. The signal ceaselessly oscillates between two amplitudes: at first, it appears as a single, vertical line in the middle of the screen; then a multitude of superposing waves occupy the whole screen. As

one watches this hypnotic oscillation, it progressively becomes more similar to the representation of a heart beat coming from an electronic elsewhere and less to the visual translation of an actual radio signal. Thus, the viewer cannot watch it without associating it with some sort of «organic pulsation», that same pulsation that seems to animate the drugstore in *Ubik*. Moreover, the viewer has already seen these same images, which are part of the series opening credits sequence. As I will show at a later point, this choice plays an important role in framing the experience of technology as mysterious and eerie, which will become one of the most distinguishing aspects of the series. The association between the oscillation and a heartbeat finds confirmation later in the episode, when the signal on screen turns into a blurred halo that gradually comes into focus, revealing the image of an alien. When tuning in to the Earth's frequency, the Galaxy Being seems to follow a photographic procedure that is not dissimilar to the one pinpointed in *Ubik*.

This sequence not only creates a semiotic link between radio waves and organic pulsations in a more explicit way than Dick's novel; it also takes this link to an ontologically radical extreme. If radio signals are construed as a source of biological life, then the latter is transformed into a frequency to which an alien being can tune in. This becomes even more clear in the second part of the episode. As a result of an electrical overload, the Galaxy Being physically comes out of the screen, thus assuming a truly organic form; at the end of the episode, after roaming the city and creating a panic among the population, he will leave Earth by tuning out of the planet's frequency. In conclusion, the idea of 'bio-waves' that *Ubik* rapidly suggests in the form of a seemingly irrelevant analogy («As if […] it's alive») is thoroughly deployed in *The Galaxy Being*.

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Here, its deepest implications are explored through literalization and its coherence vis-à-vis the electronic imagination becomes evident.

If the semiotics of liquidity permeates Joe Chip's half-life by (de-)structuring space and its oscillations, the representation of Ella Runciter's half-life takes the conceptual link between liquidity, ether, and consciousness to the extreme. I have already mentioned that the r.s. of the two half-lifers are vastly different from each other. It is now worth noting that such a radical divergence is mainly due to the fact that Joe and Ella exist at the opposite ends of their respective half-lives: Joe has just begun to die, while Ella's death is fast approaching. In the terminal phase of half-life, the semiotics of liquidity seems to overflow and permeate the very idea of consciousness. From this perspective, Ella's half-life can be defined as pervasively fluid. This characteristic can be traced back, once again, to the electronic imagination.

In the previous section, I discussed the vanishing of Ella's consciousness in consequence of Jory's intrusion. Shortly after presenting his formulation of the mind-radio analogy to Glen Runciter, Vogelsang re-formulates his explanation of Ella's disappearance as follows:

> "After prolonged proximity," von Vogelsang explained, "there is occasionally a mutual *osmosis*, a *suffusion* between the mentalities of half-lifers. Jory Miller's cefalic activity is particularly good; your wife's is not. That makes for an unfortunately one-way passage of protophasons" (Dick [1969] 2012, 16).

If the simile between «oscillation» and «organic pulsation», as shown before, causes the representation to move from physics to biology, here the expression «mutual osmosis» shifts the description from electronics to the mechanics of fluids. According to the method for the study of cognitive metaphors outlined

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by Lakoff and Johnson in *Metaphors we live by* (1980), the construction of the half-lifer's mind as subject to osmosis implies, from a metaphorical point of view, the conceptualization of the mind itself as a container, which holds a liquid. Thus, the half-lifer's «mentality» is quintessentially liquid. Even more importantly, for osmosis to take place, the physical/psychical boundaries which separate each mind from the others must not be impermeable but *membraneous*[44]. This means that, under certain physical circumstances, the fluid consciousness of an half-lifer automatically passes into another half-lifer's mind/container. Just like the sea tide, osmosis is a natural process: its action pertains a wider, more general order than the one governed by human action.

The term «suffusion» works on an analogous metaphorical level, as it describes a fluid element that spills out of its original container. However, if one defines it in strictly medical terms, suffusion can be seen as the opposite of osmosis, as it carries with it the sense of a violation and, more importantly, of a pathology. From this perspective, then, Jory's psyche is constructed as a fluid that spills out from of the mind that should contain it, like blood that spills out of a vein in an hemorrhage. In this way, the liquid psyche of those who inhabit the moratorium assumes for a moment the color of blood, a color whose aesthetic relevance has already been highlighted in the analysis of *Nightflyers*.

By causing a fluid to pass from one container to another, osmosis results in the creation of a one-way *flux* that transfers the half-lifer's «mentality» from

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[44] For an archaeology of the membrane as metaphor, see Otis (1999).

one mind to another. Ella's description of her own half-life state perfectly fits this metaphorical framework:

> «It's so weird. I think I've been dreaming all this time, since you last talked to me. Is it really two years? Do you know, Glen, what I think? I think that other people who are around me — we seem to be progressively growing together. A lot of my dreams aren't about me at all. Sometimes I'm a man and sometimes a little boy; sometimes I'm an old fat woman with varicose veins... and I'm in places I've never seen, doing things that make no sense» (12).

The terminal phase of Ella's half-life takes the form of a succession of experiences that, for the most part («*A lot of* my dreams»), are not her own. Indeed, they seem to come to Ella's consciousness from her half-lifer neighbors. From Lakoff and Johnson's perspective, the semiotics of liquidity that is implicit in the notion of «mutual osmosis» structures a perfectly coherent metaphorical system: Ella lives immersed in a flux of «dreams» that pass through the membranes of her mind, a flux generated by psychic osmosis. Moreover, by defining her experiences as dreams, Ella moves them outside the realm of waking life, that is, outside the 'normal' state of consciousness, in opposition to which the 'altered' states of consciousness are construed. Ella's waking life has paradoxically become a flux of dreams: dream has become her 'normal' state of consciousness. In other words, Ella lives in a *normally altered* state of consciousness. Coherently with such a definition, Ella's experience of half-life takes the form of a flux defined by two key characteristics. First, it does not seem to obey to any logic: one dream follows the other in a purely chronological sequence («Sometimes I'm […] Sometimes I'm»), without any consistency. Second, it lacks the standard coordinates that define meaning in waking life («doing things that make no sense»).

This is not, however, the only development of the semiotics of liquidity in the representation of Ella's half-life. As I have mentioned in a previous chapter, Jeffrey Sconce contends that the electronic imagination is axed on the idea of flux, which catalyzes the conceptualization of consciousness in terms of electricity. The notion of 'stream of consciousness', in turn, depends upon the liquid metaphor that intuitively makes sense, in contemporary Western culture, of what goes on in our minds. Given these premises, the experience of Ella's half-life can be interpreted as an interesting re-elaboration, in the context of speculative fiction, of the stream of consciousness as we have come to know it in modernist literature.

Contrary to Joe's half-life, Ella's is not 'condensed' (or rather, it is not 'condensed' anymore) into a world, but in an incoherent sequence of *worlds*. These, in turn, are experienced as episodes in an oneiric flux that circulates among the half-lifers' minds like the blood in a circulatory system: the semiotics of osmosis and suffusion collaborate in defining the conceptual originality of half-life's terminal phase. As a result of this circulation of minds, Ella's residual self has weakened and its functions are severely limited: she often claims to be someone different from the self that the living used to univocally identify with Ella Runciter («Sometimes I'm a man […]. Sometimes I'm an old fat woman»). According to her own words, Ella's consciousness does not flow as a single, coherent stream. Contrariwise, she lives as a stream of consciousness*es*, in which the self ceaselessly transforms into other selves, thus losing its role as the centralized and centralizing pole of the person. Rather than 'keeping together' all the elements that precisely define one as oneself, the

terminal consciousness in this r.u. abandons itself to errancy: the last relief before the last death.

In conclusion, *Nightflyers* and *Ubik* are permeated by the semiotics of fluidity which, in turn, results from the close relationship that the two texts entertain with the electronic imagination. In *Nightflyers*, liquidity emerges as a literalization of ether, that is, of the ontological bridge between the 'mother''s r.s. and the world of the living. Such a literalization takes place at a crucial point in the narrative, marking a momentary collapse of the boundaries between two states of existence. In *Ubik*, the semiotics of liquidity develops more directly from the conceptual convergence of radio waves and psychic waves. On the level of representation, the fluidity of space is rendered through the language of cinema and photography; on a more abstract level, the electronic imagination turns the physics of radio waves into the biology of organic beings. Even more radically, Ella's half-life is defined by the fluidification of the self and its immersion in an oneiric flux that circulates within the community of half-lifers. In both texts, the r.s. are narratively and culturally constructed as products of the electronic imagination, which allows for the creation of an 'elsewhere' that exists on a different plane of existence from that of the living while remaining firmly rooted in the material world.

Chapter 4
Technologies of post-life

One of the fundamental characteristics that define the vast majority of the texts of the corpus is the *mise en fiction* of a partial or incomplete death. This incompleteness, in most cases, prevents the r.u. from disappearing from the world of the living. On the contrary, one of the main narrative purposes of r.s. is that of keeping the r.u. present among the living. In other words, r.s. are seldom constructed as monad-worlds inhabited by characters who are completely secluded from the the world of the living. More often, the texts of the corpus thematize the r.u.'s research for contact with the other side. The problem is all the more important in those cases where entering a r.s. entails disembodiment and other similar machanisms.

The technologies and strategies through which the contact between the living and the r.u. is achieved provide us with essential insights into the

ontology of r.s. On the basis of different technological configurations, the relation between the states of existence is constructed in different ways. From this perspective, r.s. become an ideal area to put into question the invisibility of certain telecommunication systems by recasting them into ambient technologies:

> Johnson (1990) defines ambient technologies by contrast with invisible ones which have become "more or less unconsciously assimilated into everyday practice and behaviour"; "'ambient' technology […] would refer to 'new' technologies that have not yet undergone such assimilation and as such retain a degree of visibility. This visibility would relate not only to the immediate, empirical instances of when, where and how new technologies are used, but also to their revealing function, that is, how they permit modes of experience, conceptualization, and representation hitherto inimagined (Frank 2005, 658, quotes from Johnson 1990, 132n).

In this chapter, I would like to show how r.s. narratives manipulate (and are manipulated by) the electronic imagination by bending, deforming, and altering the way in which 'standard' telecommunications work. In order to do so, I will follow closely Sconce's reflections on haunted media, as the notion of electronic elsewhere provides us with an ideal tool for the investigation of liminality. Since radio technologies have already been investigated in relation to the construction of space, I will focus here on telephone and television.

4.1 Long-distance calls

In the language of telecommunications, a long-distance call simply defines a situation in which the sender and the receiver are located in two different calling areas. However, the speculative fertility of the electronic imagination

has often re-oriented the idea of 'long-distance' in a supernatural/science-fictional sense. The telephone has thus been transformed from a device that is a-problematically integrated in the daily life of the North Atlantic world into a gateway to the electronic elsewheres inhabited by the dead.

In a *Twilight Zone* episode entitled *Long distance call* a child named Billy receives a toy telephone from his grandmother as a gift for his fifth birthday. On that same day, the grandmother dies. In the following days, Billy spends most of his time playing with the toy telephone: he tells his parents that he is talking to his grandmother and that she wants him to «join her». This odd behavior is simply seen as a way to cope with bereavement, that is, until the boy attempts to throw himself under a car. At that moment, Billy's mother grabs the receiver of the toy telephone and hears someone breathing at the other end of the line. Sconce reads *Long distance call* as a narrative that evokes television's «uncanny aspects […] by turning to the past and dramatizing the cultural memory of previous haunted technologies». Besides being an exploration of «television's occult prehistory» (Sconce 2000, 134), the episode encapsulates the cultural anxieties associated to telephone communications as haunted by radical and ultimately insoluble uncertainties. This modern revenant, who threatens the stability of a family unit by pulling the living towards the other side, takes full advantage of the perceptive anomaly that governs every phone call: the interlocutor's invisibility. In the absence of a face to face interaction, how can we be sure of the identity of the person at the other end of the line? In our smartphones, each contact is associated to a picture. This is but the most radical and most accomplished attempt to date at hiding the fact that every person who calls us or sends us a message is always, by

definition, a potential stranger. Moreover, experience has shown to everyone, at least once, that a simple typing error is enough to put us in contact with actual strangers. When commenting on an excerpt from Kafka's letters, John Durham Peters (1999) writes:

> those who build new media to eliminate the spectral element between people only create more ample breeding grounds for the ghosts. A cheerful sense of the weirdness of all attempts at communication offers a far saner way to think and live (30).

In telephone communications, the interlocutor's presence is reduced to a disembodied voice[45]. The semiotic implications of the process that allows a voice to be codified as an electric signal and travel through radio waves (or, for older technologies, through a cable) are as complex as the process itself. Sound waves propagate into the air, reach the receiver, and re-emerge at the other end of the line only after crossing the electronic dimension. More that the absence of face to face interaction, it is the transit of words through this potential elsewhere that represents the defining difference between in-person and telephone communication. Crossing the electronic bridge which separates the sender form the receiver, the message is exposed to the influence of ultra-mundane and trans-mundane states of existence, thus becoming surrounded by a haze of uncertainty. In the case of *Long Distance Call*, the influence turns

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[45] «The liveness of transmitted voices is a displaced life, existing in the wrong place and for inexplicable purposes. Live telecommunication is only as live as the living dead» (Bennett 2012, 134). On this subject, see also Ronell (1989).

into an actual contact, with disastrous consequences: the telephone opens a door between here and the elsewhere.

In light of this, the fundamental role played by the telephone—both as a medium and a concrete object—in the ontology of a film like *The Matrix* is unsurprising. In order to leave the Matrix and get back to the physical world, redpill humans must answer to a phone call from the operator of the *Nebuchadnezzar*. When they take the receiver off the hook, their digital body is dematerialized, and they wake up in the 'real reality'. The consciousness transfer out of the Matrix is represented as a literal journey through the wires and back *into* one's brain. In a somewhat paradoxical sense, this interdimensional trip depends on the sheer materiality and concreteness of landline phones: Neo and the other crew members have mobile phones, but they can only be used to communicate with the real world, and not to physically reach it. If the voice can cross the matrix threshold through a radio signal, consciousness can only travel through a wired connection. In the Wachowskis' film, the telephone allows for the electronic codification and transfer of consciousness itself, and the ability of the medium to open a door between worlds becomes even more evident. When asking the operator to find a telephone that can get them back to the real world, the characters say: «we need an exit». In more recent years, the uncanny powers of landline telephony have been revived by the 2017 *Twin Peaks* series, probably as a nostalgic homage to the technological past of the original series: people appear and disappear when picking up telephones, and agent Cooper returns from the Black Lodge by literally passing through a wall socket.

Long distance call and *The Matrix* represent a good introduction to the study of telephone communication between the living and the r.u., as they illustrate the semiotic fertility of some of the key strategies through which this technology can become haunted. In at least two texts of the corpus, ontologically uncertain states and liminal positions are constructed by manipulating the logic of telephone communications. In particular, I will pinpoint a significant convergence between one of the texts that pre-dates the telephone, Poe's *Valdemar,* and Dick's *Ubik.* Written at the dawn of the telegraph era, Poe's tale re-elaborates the logic of telecommunication to such an extent that the linguistic interaction between M. Valdemar and his therapist is incredibly similar to that between half-lifers and the living, in which the telephone plays a crucial role. In both cases, the state of existence of the r.u. is connotated as impossibly contradictory by creating a paradoxical situation in which face to face interaction and telecommunication coexist. On the basis of this analogy, I will explore how the mechanisms of communication can contribute to the construction of the relations between the world of the living and the worlds of the r.u.

4.1.1 M. Valdemar's telephone

For obvious chronological reasons, Poe's *Valdemar* does not participate to the area of the electronic imagination from which *Long distance call*, *The Matrix* and *Ubik* have emerged. But this should not stop one from studying the communication between Valdemar and his therapist in the light of the semiotic structure of telephone communications, that is, of what I have called 'telephone logic'. I would like to argue, more specifically, that the aesthetic experience of terrifying anguish constructed by *Valdemar* finds one of its main axes in an eerie

prefiguration of this logic. A caveat is in order here: 'prefiguration' is not a synonym of 'anticipation'. By analyzing the telephone semiotics in relation to Valdemar, I do not want to imply that Poe may have foretold the advent of this technology, which would obviously be a sterile speculation.

M. Valdemar's peculiar affinity with certain modes of telecommunication and electrical devices has already attracted the attention of media studies. When studying how the notion of embodiment was reconfigured by the knowledge system axed on electrical technologies, Enns (2006) puts Poe's mesmeric trilogy in relation with two of Edison's inventions: the phonograph and the spiritual telegraph[46]. In Enns's view, Valdemar's body is transformed through mesmerization into «an electrical machine for the storage and transmission of information» (80). In this sense, the mesmerized patient acts like a phonograph:

> the use of mesmerism in this story to preserve Valdemar's voice and allow him to continue speaking after death reveals a […] media logic. The story illustrates the voice as pure vibration, independent of the mouth and thus separate from the body, yet still grounded in the physical world, as it possesses a definite material presence. Valdemar thus occupies a liminal position

[46] «By illustrating the dream of pure communication between minds across vast distances, the merging of consciousness and electric machines, and the questioning of individual autonomy, mesmerism was clearly engaged in a radical reconfiguration of the divisions between mind and body, human and machine, and materiality and immateriality» (64). Poe and Edison, in particular, attempted to remodel «Descartes' notion of mind and body as separate entities» by envisioning «their collapse into a single, material, invisible being – a being appropriate for the electric age because it is both extended and dispersed, material and finite» (82).

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between presence and absence, which prefigures the vocal manifestations of the phonograph, and the fact that the "unearthly" voice seems to emanate "from some deep cavern within the earth" further emphasizes the notion that he is speaking from beyond the grave (73).

On the other hand, Adam Frank (2005) proposes a complex reading of the speech acts performed by Valdemar after his 'death'—and particularly of their auditive dimension—by interpreting them as the result of a kind of media logic clearly related to the telegraph. From a metapoetic perspective[47], the model of telegraphic telecommunication that is implicit in mesmeric communication allowed Poe to interrogate the modes of production and reception of written texts in an era of great technological transformation:

> Mesmerism offered Poe a way to theorize what a medium for writing could be or do at the moment when just such a new medium was visibly, and audibly, emerging, and he is especially drawn to think through these questions at a moment of transition in his own status as author (or medium) (71).

Even more importantly, the relation between mesmerism and telegraphy in mid-18th century American culture is founded on the fact that they both participate to the electrical imagination. In *A Tale of the Ragged Mountains*, the therapist is able to influence his patient from a great distance, without the need

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[47] Metapoetic readings of *Valdemar* and the mesmeric trilogy are also proposed by Schnackertz (2003), Gillespie (2015), and Andriopoulos (2018). For the tale's historical context and its reception as a scientific hoax, see Ljungquist (1997), Walsh (2006, 51–120), and Faivre (2007). For an analysis from the perspective of medical humanities, see Stern (2008). Other recent readings are those by Ashworth (2016a, 2016b), who studies Valdemar through the lens of queer theory.

for face to face interaction, and the patient's reactions to such an influence are represented as similar to electrical shocks. It is then possible to infer an analogy between mesmerism and the telegraph: they are both distant communication technologies based on electricity. But how can this definition be applied to a reading of *Valdemar*, in which the therapist is at the deathbed of his patient, that is, in a situation involving close spatial proximity?

I would like to argue that the representation of the r.s. in which M. Valdemar is suspended semiotically depends on maintaining physical proximity between two subjects who are as far away from one another as possible. Even more radically, the relation between Valdemar's undead self and his therapist can hardly be described in spatial terms, since the former becomes the inhabitant of another plane of existence while preserving his connection to the material world. This becomes evident in the description of Valdemar's voice when he speaks for the first time after his physical death. The passage is worth quoting at length:

> There was no longer the faintest sign of vitality in M. Valdemar; and concluding him to be dead, we were consigning him to the charge of the nurse's, when *a strong vibratory motion was observable in the tongue*. This continued for perhaps a minute. At the expiration of this period, there issued from the distended and motionless jaws a voice — such as it would be madness in me to attempt describing.
> […] There were two particulars, nevertheless, which I thought then, and still think, might fairly be stated as characteristic of the intonation — as well adapted to convey some idea of its *unearthly peculiarity*. In the first place, *the voice seemed to reach out ears — at least mine — from a vast distance, or from some deep cavern within the earth*. In the second place, it impressed me (I fear, indeed, that it will be impossible to make myself comprehended) as gelatinous or glutinous matters impress the sense of touch.

> I have spoken both of "sound" and of "voice." I mean to say that the sound was one of distinct — of even wonderfully, thrillingly distinct — syllabification. M. Valdemar spoke — obviously in reply to the question I had propounded to him a few minutes before. I had asked him, it will be remembered, if he still slept. He now said:
>
> "Yes; — no; — I have been sleeping — and now — now — I am dead" (Poe [1845b] 1978, 1240).

It is important to remember, at this point, that the convulsive vibratory movement that animates Valdemar's tongue is not the result of a recovery of «vitality» in physiological terms. On the contrary, the organ is not only as dead as the rest of the body; it has also been described, one page earlier, as one of the most repulsive elements of Valdemar's bodily death:

> While I spoke, there came a marked change over the countenance of the sleep-waker. The eyes rolled themselves slowly open, the pupils disappearing upwardly; the skin generally assumed a cadaverous hue, resembling not so much parchment as white paper; and the circular hectic spots which, hitherto, had been strongly defined in the centre of each cheek, went out at once. […] The upper lip, at the same time, writhed itself away from the teeth, which it had previously covered completely; while the lower jaw fell with an audible jerk, leaving the mouth widely extended, and disclosing in full view the swollen and blackened tongue. (1239)

When the patient was alive, the slow (and meticulously described) process of mesmerization was characterized, on a semantic level, by the gradual shutting of his eyes and the progressive stiffening of his limbs. But at the moment of death this process is reversed: the eyes are open once again and, more importantly, so is the mouth. With an almost cinematic effect, the tongue appears, black and swollen: this is unmistakably the tongue of a dead man. And when it utters words, these are perceived by the therapist as coming «from

a vast distance, or from some deep cavern within the earth». Describing the perception of Valdemar's voice in such terms obviously produces a spatial separation between the scene's location—Valdemar's house—and the point from which the patient's impossible message is sent. While, as Enns rightly remarks, the «deep cavern within the earth» connotates the voice as coming from the chthonian realm, what matters most is the underlying displacement process: the sender (Valdemar) and the medium (his body) do not coincide anymore. The latter has remained in the world of the living, while the former has left it.

This communicative situation is rendered more complex by the fact that the medium is, in turn, the object of another, uncanny splitting. On the one hand, the message that Valdemar delivers is perfectly enunciated from an articulatory point of view («the sound was one of distinct — of even wonderfully, thrillingly distinct — syllabification»). On the other end, his jaw remains open and perfectly still («there issued from the distended and motionless jaws a voice»). While it is true that Valdemar's body-medium has not lost its materiality and its relation to the physical world, the individual components of Valdemar's phonatory apparatus no longer share an integrated relationship: the body has stopped working as an *organism*. Phonatory articulation and the production of language are unnaturally separated, and the frenetic vibration of Valdemar's dead tongue paradoxically results in the production of a sound that is not related to the tongue itself. By losing its 'mundane' origin, Valdemar's voice loses the possibility of being described through the categories and criteria of living humans («it would be madness in me to attempt describing»): it necessarily becomes «unearthly».

In light of these observations, the connotation of Valdemar's voice as spatially—that is, quantitavely—distant from the location of the patient's body only becomes a dramatic strategy for the construction of another distance on a qualitative level: an ontological one, which does not correspond to any material criterion. Since there are no spatial relations between the two planes of existence, there is no mesurable distance between them. From this perspective, Valdemar's voice does not come from the same plane of existence than that of Valdemar's body, but it passes through the latter without any articulation, that is, without any physical relation with it: his voice is embodied and disembodied at the same time. In this sense, it becomes an extraordinary representation of the residual condition in which Valdemar's existence lingers on, trapped in an oxymoronic state in which great distance and close proximity, corporeality and disembodiment are forced to coexist[48].

Enns notices the presence of an analogous semiotic construction of the polarity embodiment/disembodiment in Poe's *Mesmeric Revelation*, the more theoretically dense and argumentatively fascinating text of the mesmeric trilogy. In this tale, the mesmerized patient Vankirk contends that the passage from life to death does not imply the disembodiment of consciousness and its passage to a transcendent world. Rather, it entails its transition from one plane of material existence to another:

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[48] «[i]l y a une contradiction béante entre la Mort et le Langage ; le contraire de la Vie n'est pas la Mort (ce qui est un stéréotype), c'est le Langage : il est indécidable si Valdemar est vivant ou mort ; ce qui est sûr, c'est qu'il parle, sans qu'on puisse rapporter sa parole à la Mort ou à la Vie» (Barthes [1973] 2002, 434).

P. [Therapist:] […] You say that man will never put off the body?

V. [Vankirk:] I say that he will never be bodiless.

P. Explain.

V. There are two bodies--the rudimental and the complete; corresponding with the two conditions of the worm and the butterfly. What we call "death," is but the painful metamorphosis. Out present incarnation is progressive, preparatory, temporary. Out future is perfected, ultimate, immortal. The ultimate life is the full design.

[…] To the inorganic beings — to the angels — the whole of the unparticled matter is substance; that is to say, the whole of what we term "space" is to them the truest substantiality; — the stars, meantime, through what we consider their materiality, escaping the angelic sense, just in proportion as the unparticled matter, through what we consider its immateriality, eludes the organic (Poe [1845a] 1978, 1037).

Enns analyzes this excerpt as follows:

> Vankirk's statements clearly show how mesmerism was challenging the divisions between body and mind, materiality and immateriality. Mesmerism effectively allows the subject to occupy a liminal position between these categories, in which the body is neither fully concrete nor fully ephemeral. It is capable of expanding the subject's consciousness and extending the mind beyond the limitations of the body, but it also embodies consciousness and thought firmly in the physical world (Enns 2006, 71).

But what does all this have to do with the prefiguration of telephone logic? It is now evident that the therapist-narrator communicates at a distance through a process based on the circulation of a magnetic/electric flux. In this sense, the process follows the same logic of telegraphy. However, whereas the telegraph transmits signifiers through *sound* according to the codification of Morse alphabet, Valdemar's 'spiritual telegraph' allows for the direct transmission of *voice*, without the intermediation of artificial codes. This second kind of

transmission is precisely the one realized by telephone communications. *Valdemar*'s uncanny prefiguration of this medium consists of a dramatization of the eerie experience of hearing a voice that is both embodied and disembodied. In this situation, the cultural framing of the experience itself through mesmerism occupies a liminal position between science and the supernatural. An interpretation of the tale as a prefiguration of the phonographic recording could be pertinent from an historical perspective, but it seems to be unable to account for the aesthetic effect that the text produces. In the phonographic recording, the moment of linguistic production and that of reception are set far apart in both space and time. The very purpose of a recording is indeed to render a certain auditory experience reproducible by making it independent from the moment of its original production. When we hear the recording of a dead person's voice, that person's consciousness is present among us in less actual than metaphorical terms. That is because the splitting of production and reception creates an ontological separation between a voice and the consciousness that uttered it. In other words, the consciousnesses of the dead are present in a recording only as much as they are present in a portrait.

On the contrary, Valdemar's spectral consciousness—whatever the exact meaning we assign to this word—is fully present in the voice that reaches the narrator's hear. The patient's words bridge instantaneously the ontological gap which separates them from the interlocutor. M. Valdemar does not act as a phonograph, but as a telecommunication device. He does not store information that will be retrieved at a later time: he speaks in real time to an interlocutor. Poe's tale prefigures a *live* technology, and its aesthetics depend

precisely on the absence of temporal mediation in the manifestation of a r.u.'s consciousness.

However, as I have already suggested, the narrative situation in *Valdemar* is not merely governed by a media logic that is analogous to the one regulating the use of our telephones. By applying the telephone logic to the study of this text, the most interesting results are obtained by observing the peculiar strategies through which such an analogy is manipulated. A striking convergence between the strategies adopted in *Valdemar* and those adopted in *Ubik*, at this point, should not be surprising. I will pinpoint them by analyzing the latter, in which the presence of actual telephone technologies makes their manipulation even clearer.

4.1.2 *Ubik* and the telephone logic

In *Valdemar* the presence of the telephone logic can only be inferred *a posteriori* by a reader of the twentieth century. Instead, in *Ubik* this same logic is directly and amply thematized, by virtue of the fundamental role played by this technology in the communication between the living and the half-lifers.

After Jory Miller has revealed himself as the demiurge of the simulacrum reality of half-life, he confesses to Joe Chip to be unable to understand exactly how and where Ubik is produced: «"Runciter can't be doing it […]. He's *on the outside*. This [the Ubik spray] originates from within our environment. It has to, because nothing can *come in from outside* except words"» (Dick [1969] 2012, 207). Jory conceptualizes the world of half-life as an enclosed space which constructs its relation with the world of the living in terms of the polarity inside/outside. Language can cross the border between the outside and the inside, while objects cannot. But Jory is not taking into

account the fact that every speech act that reaches the world of half-life bears the signs of its production and transmission. There are, therefore, many more things that come from the outside together with words: the distinctive voice coming from a phone, the unmistakable handwriting of a graffiti, the image of a face appearing on a television set. This is why, by playing a fundamental role in the connection between the living and the half-lifers, telephone communications also connotate the semiotic construction of the liminality that characterizes the half-lifers' r.s.

More precisely, the contact between the two states of existence in the moratorium is the product of the intersection between two technologies. The reception of the half-lifers 'neuro-signals' follows the logic of radio and telepathy, as I have argued in the previous chapter; instead, the telephone comes in when the actual communication with the living needs to be established. I would like to suggest, by analyzing how a normal 'visit' to the moratorium takes place, that telephone communications are manipulated in such a way as to connotate the contact between the living and the half-lifers as haunted by a knot[49] of cultural oxymorons and contradictions. When a living person asks to speak to a half-lifer, the latter is retrieved from the storage room and taken to the «consultation lounge» (5). The half-lifer lies perfectly still into a transparent casket; the body is frozen, the eyes are closed. As it arrives in the

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[49] I'm referring, in a simplified form, to the «metaphors of knots and loops» used by Bruno Latour when describing the structure of scientific concepts, «something that succeeds because it is so well connected, tightly binding together as it does the maximum heterogeneous elements into a single enunciation» (Luckhurst 2006, 7).

consultation lounge, the casket is connected to a communication device formed by a radio amplifier, on the one end, and a telephone receiver, on the other. In order to communicate with the half-lifer, the visitor simply has to grab the receiver and speak, just like in a common phone call.

Given such an account, the conversation between the living and the r.u. in *Ubik* seem to share with *Valdemar* a fundamental paradox. It is mediated by telecommunication, since the participants cannot directly speak to each other, and, at the same time, it is a face to face interaction, since the participants are physically positioned one in front of the other. The resulting communicative situation is analogous to the one described in Poe's tale: the r.u. is physically present in front of the interlocutor, yet the r.u.'s body is frozen in a state that resembles death much more than life, and her/his voice reaches the other side in a *disembodied* form. It could be useful to compare this communicative situation with the one that Joe Chips establishes, within a radically different context, during a rather unsuccessful telephone conversation with the 'homeostatic entity' that provides the cleaning equipment for his apartment:

> Picking up the vidphone, he dialed 214, the extension for the maintenance circuit of the building. "Listen," he said, when the homeostatic entity answered. "I'm now in a position to divert some of my funds in the direction of settling my bill vis-à-vis your clean-up robots. I'd like them up here now to go over my apt. I'll pay the full and entire bill when they're finished."
> "Sir, you'll pay your full and entire bill before they start."
> […] "I'll charge my overue bill against my Triangular Magic Key," he informed his nebulous antagonist (23).

The adjective «nebulous» very effectively evokes the mediatic nature of the homeostatic entity: an electronic apparatus that only manifests itself as a disembodied voice, which reaches the human ear from the depths of the

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electronic dimension. In the communication with the half-lifers, the situation is rendered more complex by the fact that their voices possess the distinctive features of living humans and homeostatic entities at the same time. On the one hand, they can be put in relation to the bodily presence of an actual person; on the other hand, they reach the interlocutor's ear from the same shadowy nowhere inhabited by Joe Chip's «nebulous antagonist». By splitting bodily presence and language production, electronic telecommunication renders the half-lifer's identity something more complex and intricate than the mere prosecution of her/his former identity as a living person. Telephone communication problematizes the relation between embodiment and disembodiment. As a consequence, it also interrogates the half-lifer's human identity, and the ontological relation between the 'here' of the living and the 'elsewhere' of the half-lifers:

> The telephone […] contributed to the modern derangement of dialogue by splitting conversation into two halves that meet only in the cyberspace of the wires. Dialogue, despite its reputation for closeness and immediacy, occurs over the telephone in a no-man's-land as elusive as writing itself. The effect of such flayed discourse has been compared to schizophrenia and to crosscutting in film editing […].
> Two one-sided conversations that couple only in virtual space: this is the nature of speech on the telephone. Naturally, the question arises whether such coupling ever occurs .

In the moratorium, the living and the half-lifers paradoxically emulate a face to face interaction. At the same time, their words meet outside the moratorium, in the electronic space vehiculated by the telephone. It is not the half-lifers who reach the world of the living to speak to them, nor the other way around: communication has to pass through a third, immaterial dimension, one

traversed by waves and signals. Nevertheless, and despite the fact that such a dimension has been created in order to communicate at a distance, the living and the half-lifers cannot interact without physical proximity. From mesmerism to the telephone, the same, oxymoronic logic governs the contact between two distinct planes of existence.

However, this is not the only strategy through which telephone communication is manipulated in Dick's novel with the aim of constructing the relation between 'here' and 'elesewhere'. After the telephone conversation between Ella and Glen Runciter—the one interrupted by Jory's intrusion—, which the reader experiences from the point of view of the latter, a scene later in the narrative gives us the opposite perspective on this medium. In this case, Joe accidentally gets in touch with Runciter from the half-life, in a complex dramatization of the question, raised by Peters, whether the coupling of two conversation in an electronic elsewhere actually occurs. Still unaware of being a half-lifer and convinced that Runciter is actually dead, Joe is in a hotel room in the simulacrum version of Geneva, while the simulacrum of Runciter's dead body has been taken to the moratorium. In the hotel room, Joe uses the telephone:

> [Joe] lifted the phone receiver and dialed for room service.
> "—pay him back if at all possible," the receiver declared in his ear. "First, of course, it has to be established whether Stanton Mick actually involved himself, or if a mere homosimulacric substitute was in action against us, and if so why, and if not then how—" The voice droned on, speaking to itself and not to Joe. It seemed as unaware of him as if he did not exist […].
> Joe hung up the phone and stood dizzily swaying, trying to clear his head. Runciter's voice. Beyond any doubt. He again picked up the phone, listened once more.

"—lawsuit by Mick, who can afford and is accustomed to litigation of that nature […]"
"Runciter!" Joe said. He said it loudly.
"—unable to verify probably for at least—"
Joe hung up. (99)

The fact that Runciter goes on talking without being aware of the presence of an interlocutor links this scene to the first scene in the moratorium, at the very beginning of the novel. When Vogelsang checks a casket in order to be sure that the woman inside is still 'functioning', he intercepts her voice, but she does not realize that someone is listening to her. After another, equally unsuccessful communication attempt at talking to Runciter on the phone, Joe receives a visit from Vogelsang, who wants to update him on Runciter's conditions: «"I just don't understand it, Mr. Chip. We worked all night in relays. We just are not getting a single spark. […] So the afterlife is there, but we still can't seem to tap it» (101). In the language of telecommunications, the verb 'to tap' refers to the act of intercepting a phone call: after the representation of two monologues that fail to couple in the electronic dimension, the telephone logic permeates the semiotic construction of half-life to an even deeper level. In the world of the living, telephone communications with the half-lifers are haunted by ontological uncertainties that problematize the relation between two planes of existence. In the world of half-life, the semiotics of (failed) telephone communications structure the attempts at putting the two planes of existence in contact.

In the end, the hotel room telephone makes its last and most uncanny appearance three pages after the arrive of Vogelsang. He wants to understand what is wrong with Joe's phone. Joe handles the receiver to him, but Runciter's voice has disappeared:

"[Vogelsang:] I don't hear anything. Not even a dial tone. Now I hear a little static. As if from a great distance. Very faint." He held the receiver out to Joe, who took it and also listened. He, too, heard only the far-off static. From thousands of miles away, he thought. Eerie. As perplexing in its own way as the voice of Runciter—if that was what it had been (104).

Like in *Valdemar*, the great distance that seems to separate Joe from the point of origin of the static translates the immeasurable distance that separates Joe's plane of existence from that of the living. In the static, the gap that separates the two worlds becomes material and accessible to perception by taking the form of a gap between two lines that cannot connect with each other. By listening to the gap that Peters (2000) describes as the consequence of an electronic breakdown, Joe is listening to the sound of the distance that separates 'here' and 'elsewhere'. And if this distance cannot be bridged, the elsewhere risks to turn into a nowhere, a monadic dimension with no relations outside itself: «[t]he common world may be habitual and sound, but breakdown allows all the primal uncanniness to return. In a blackout, or the telephone's suddenly going dead, or the static caught between the stations, we discover the gaps, not the bridges» (Peters 2000, 205).

4.2 Through the looking screen

Of all the media technologies that the texts of the corpus mobilize in order to bridge the gap between r.s. and the world of the living, those related to television and screens are evidently the most multifaceted. No technology has probably contributed to the contemporary redefinition of Western notions of time, space and presence more than television:

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just as the photograph did in the last century, so in this one, cinematic and electronic screens differently demand and shape our "presence" to the world and our representation in it. Each differently and objectively alters our subjectivity while each invites our complicity in formulating space, time, and bodily investment as significant personal and social experience. These preliminary remarks are grounded in the belief that, during the last century, historical changes in our contemporary "sense" of temporality, spatiality, and existential and embodied presence cannot be considered less than a consequence of correspondent changes in our technologies of representation (Sobchack 1990, 51).

Television stands out among all the other telecommunication devices preceding it, as it gives the most believable illusion of an actual place (or even another world) existing on the other side of the screen. More than any other electronic elsewhere, those created by television truly seemed to be animated by a logic of their own and inhabited by mysterious entities:

> Whereas radio and telegraphy had always provided indexical evidence of distant places and invisible interlocutors (occult or otherwise), television appeared at once visibly and materially "real" even as viewers realized it was wholly electrical and absent. Unnervingly immediate and decidedly more tangible, the "electronic elsewhere" generated by television was thus more palpable and yet every bit as phantasmic as the occult empires of previous media. Its ghosts were truly ghosts —entities with visible form but without material substance (Sconce 2000, 126).

> Whereas earlier audio technologies served primarily as a fantastic yet essentially "neutral" conduit for channeling occult forms of communications (be they ghosts or aliens), "sighted" media such as television often appeared as haunted technologies in and of themselves, standing as either uncannily sentient

electronic entities or as crucibles for forging wholly sovereign electronic universes (126).

From a more general perspective, television also integrates in the media landscape two of the founding cognitive metaphors that structure vision, perception, and spatial relations in Western culture: the window and the screen. For example, the very first scene of the TV series *Les Revenants* (Gobert 2012), represents resurrection as the act of breaking through the glass surface separating an inside and an outside. In an unidentified interior, the camera slowly moves towards a collection of framed butterflies, until the edges of the collection frame correspond to those of the cinematic image. At this point, one of the butterflies comes back to life, breaks the frame glass, and flies away. In Iain Bank's *The Bridge*, the TV set in the protagonist's apartment is animated by a mysterious will of its own. It switches itself on, showing on every channel the image of a man in a coma. Orr doesn't know that this man is actually himself, and that these television images are the only elements that connect his consciousness in the world of the bridge to his former, living self:

> The television starts to hiss. I turn round. A grey haze fills the screen, white noise issues from the speaker. Perhaps the set is faulty. I go to turn it off, but then a picture appears. There is no sound; the hiss has gone. The screen shows a man lying in a hospital bed, surrounded by machines. It is in black and white, not colour, and grainy. I turn up the sound, but only a very gentle hiss emerges even at maximum volume. The man in the bed has tubes and pipes appearing from his nose and mouth and arm; his eyes are closed […]. On every channel the picture stays the same: still the man, the bed, the surrounding machines. […] The fellow looks at death's door; even in monochrome his face is terribly pale, and his thin hands - lying motionless on the white bedsheet, one with a tube attached at the wrist - are almost transparent. […] I try changing channels again, but the picture remains. Perhaps I

have a crossed line with one of the hospital cameras used to monitor very ill patients. I'll call the repair people in the morning. (Banks [1986] 2013, 40).

The text of the corpus whose aesthetic effect relies the most on a pervasive isotopy related to the electronic presence on screen is Wally Pfister's *Transcendence*. The semiotic and technological encounter between the informatization of consciousness, artificial intelligence, and the internet leads to the creation of a r.s. in which the undead's presence has become completely fluid and independent from a definite physical center. After leaving his physical body in order to inhabit the web, will can manifest himself through any connected device. As a consequence, the semiotic construction of such a non-centered presence strictly depends on its materialization in an avatar form. At the end of the film, Will will succeed in recovering an individual, physical presence, only to be killed again. The tension between these two opposite poles that animates the whole narrative (fluidity and absence of a center on the one hand, bodily individualization on the other) is mainly mediated by the thematization of Will's visual presence on the screens of monitors, televisions, smartphones, and tablets (Petricola 2018; several essays in Hauskeller, Philbeck, and Carbonell 2015).

The semiotic pole of centerlessness and pure disembodiment is activated by representations of Will's avatar that emphasize its immateriality and absence of concreteness: he is constructed as an aggregate of pixels that could dissolve at any moment. This representation is also explicitly thematized in an embodied form in a nightmare experienced by Will's wife, Evelyn: while the two are in bed, Will's body is vaporized and turned into a haze of minuscule particles. On the other hand, the semiotic pole of individualization

and embodiment is mediated by representations involving physical interactions between the living characters and the screens that vehiculate Will's presence. A sequence in which Evelyn 'caresses' Will by touching the screen on which he is being visualized can be considered as particularly relevant in this respect. The association between the *liveness* of instant transmission and the *aliveness* of the object represented that is implicit in this sequence depends, in turn, on the «impression of immediate, intimate, and continuous contact with another world» created by the semiotics of television: «this sense of immediacy has made the "living medium" a prime conduit for the "living word"» (Sconce 2000, 174).

Whereas in *Transcendence* the screen isotopy is ceaselessly deployed and manipulated for the whole duration of the film, *Ubik* condenses it in a single sequence at the center of the novel, where a television commercial marks a major turning point in the narrative.

4.2.1 An advertisement for the undead: watching television in *Ubik*

I said that the appearance of television in the novel is quite brief but very dense from a semiotic point of view, as it takes place in a moment of crucial importance for the development of the plot. Indeed, it is thanks to a television commercial that Joe Chip learns about the existence of the reality-support spray Ubik and Glen Runciter is able to entrust him with the task of finding it. I would like to show how television—once again, as both a medium and an object—contributes to the semiotic construction of half-life and its relation to the world of the living. As for the first point, the spectral space created by the televisual flux of information could be interpreted as a representation *en abîme* of half-life itself, in the light of the medium's liminal nature and multifaceted

semiotics. As for the second point, the polarity between inside and outside that structures the half-lifer's notion of their r.s. can be put in relation to the polarity between the 'real' world and the 'world' of television articulated by the tv screen.

The scene takes place in the Runciter Associates headquarters in New York; or rather, this is where Joe Chip thinks he is. He has just found the graffiti in the men's room that says «Jump the Urinal and Stand on Your Head. / I'm the One That's Alive. You're All Dead». In that same bathroom, he had to part from his dying friend Al Hammond. Joe enters the building's conference room, where a television with a large 3-d color screen is on, and a commercial is being broadcast:

> a housewife critically examined a synthetic otter-pelt towel and in a penetrating, shrill voice declared it unfit to occupy a place in her bathroom. The screen then displayed her bathroom – and picked up graffiti on her bathroom wall too. The same familiar scrawl, this time reading:
> LEAN OVER THE BOWL
> AND THEN TAKE A DIVE.
> ALL OF YOU ARE DEAD. I AM ALIVE (Dick [1969] 2012, 129).

The advertisement is immediately followed by a newscast. Joe learns that, contrary to what the graffiti just said, Runciter is dead: his body has been transported to a mortuary in Des Moines, his hometown, and all his friends and former employees are there to pay their respects. At the end of the report, Chip turns the television off. The next moment, however, it seems to spontaneously animate.

> The TV screen relit. Much to his surprise; he had not repressed the pedal switch. And in addition, it changed channels: images flitted past, of one thing and then another, until at last the

mysterious agency was satisfied. The final image remained. The face of Glen Runciter. "Tired of lazy tastebuds?" Runciter said in his familiar gravelly voice. "Has cabbage taken over your world of food? That same old, stale, flat, Monday-morning odor no matter how many dimes you put in your stove? Ubik changes all that; Ubik wakes up flavor, puts hearty taste back where it belongs, and restores fine food smell." On the screen a brightly colored spray can replaced Glen Runciter.

Runciter goes on explaining to Chip why he is experiencing the regression of his world to the beginning of the twentieth century. Then «a hard-eyed housewife with big teeth and horse's chin» appears on screen, exclaiming: «"I came over to Ubik after trying weak, out-of-date reality supports» (134). The housewife goes on with her praise of Ubik until Runciter takes the lead once again:

> "[Runciter:]So look for it, Joe. Don't just sit there; go out and buy a can of Ubik and spray it all around you night and day."
> Standing up, Joe said loudly, "You know I'm here. Does that mean you can hear and see me?"
> "Of course I can't hear you and see you. This commercial message is on videotape […]"
> "Then you really are dead"
> "Of course, I'm dead. Didn't you watch the telecast from Des Moines just now?" (134-135).

For a few moments, Glen's answers correspond perfectly to Joe's questions: the two seem to be having an actual conversation. But Glen rapidly de-synchronizes from the conversation; Joe comes to the conclusion that his employer is really just on tape, and abandons all efforts to continue the communication.

In this scene, Runciter temporarily establishes a link between the world of the living and that of the half-lifers by manifesting himself through a sort of

television epiphany. His attempt to make contact with Joe takes the form of an impossible communication in which live and pre-recorded transmissions intersect and superpose. The most evident manipulation to which the medium is subjected resides in its transformation from a device for mass broadcasting into an apparatus for a private communication between two individuals. Whereas the televisual flux is by definition addressed to a more or less vast number of viewers, Runciter infiltrates the medium to deliver a message that is specifically addressed to Joe and to nobody else. At the same time, the television viewer cannot watch a television program and think that the transmission is personally addressed to her/him, because such a behavior is likely to entail a diagnosis of schizophrenia:

> another familiar theme involving the media's awesome powers of animated 'living' presence [is that of] the delusional viewer who believes the media is speaking directly to him or her. A common symptom among schizophrenics, this delusion also foregrounds in exaggerated but obviously compelling terms the powers of 'liveness' and 'immediacy' experienced by audiences of electronic media as a whole (Sconce 2000, 3).

Two more factors contribute to the complex semiotics of this communicative situation. The first one revolves around the fact that Runciter's message is not aimed at dispelling the ontological uncertainty that has been haunting Joe since the explosion on Luna, but rather at restating it. First Runciter affirms being the only survivor of the attack («All of you are dead, I am alive»), then being the only victim («Of course, I'm dead). But what is more important—and more relevant to the study of the television as medium in this sequence—is that the narrative translates the polarity life/death into the polarity live/recorded, thus re-codifying the opposition between two states of existence in the language of

television. Such a translation is catalyzed by the construction of an impossible televisual experience: a fragment of live transmission temporarily infiltrates a commercial, which by definition is always pre-recorded and iteratively broadcast at a later time. This strategy takes to the extreme the converge between live and liveness[50] that has already been remarked in the analysis of *Transcendence*. Joe must choose one between two options: if Runciter is really transmitting live from somewhere, this means that he is actually alive; if, on the contrary, the transmission is recorded, Runciter is gone for good. In such a communication, live and liveness do not simply tend to converge: they become perfectly coincident.

Now that the multiple tangles of contradictions that turn Runciter's transmission into an impossible technological chimera have been pinpointed, I would like to shift the focus of my attention on the culturally relevant link existing between television's textual flux and the possibility for it to be animated by a «mysterious agency». The latter's presence is characterized in such a way as to evoke an analogy with the presence generated by the «nebulous» homeostatic entity in Joe's apartment. Both adjectives suggest that it is impossible for the listener/viewer to form a clear mental image of the entity with which they are interacting. Just like the voice of the homeostatic entity, the agency that animates the television set seems to come less from an electronic elsewhere and more from an indeterminate nowhere. In order to further explore this characterization, one more comparison could be suggested.

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[50] On the ideological implications of this convergence, see Feuer (1983).

The behavior of *Ubik*'s television, that spontaneously animates itself (the term behavior is not to be intended in a metaphorical sense!) could remind a non-fictional experience made every week by American tv viewers, between 1963 and 1965, when watching the opening credits sequence of *The Outer Limits*. The screen shows a simple point of light in the middle of the frame, which progressively transforms into more elaborate patterns while a 'control voice', both reassuring and commanding, addresses the viewer as follows:

> There is nothing wrong with your television set. Do not attempt to adjust the picture. We are controlling transmission. If we wish to make it louder, we will bring up the volume. If we wish to make it softer, we will tune it to a whisper. We will control the horizontal. We will control the vertical. We can roll the image, make it flutter. We can change the focus to a soft blur or sharpen it to crystal clarity. For the next hour, sit quietly and we will control all that you see and hear. We repeat: there is nothing wrong with your television set. You are about to participate in a great adventure. You are about to experience the awe and mystery which reaches from the inner mind to the outer limits.

In this opening sequence, a «mysterious agency» analogous to the one that governs Joe's television set seems to literally take control of *our own* television set. This perfectly illustrates how much of the aesthetic and speculative impact of series like *The Outer Limits* and *The Twilight Zone* are grounded in the construction of television as a space which concretely exists beyond the screen, a space inhabited by otherworldly life forces:

> To be in "the twilight zone" is now, of course, a part of American folklore, describing any place or situation marked by the weird and uncanny. That original "twilight" space, however, was television itself. The exact wording of Serling's opening introduction changed over the course of the series, but never abandoned the attempt to evoke a sense of suspension, a "betwixt

and between" liminality that cast the program (and its viewers) as occupying an "elsewhere", or even a "nowhere" (Sconce 2000, 134).

From this perspective, television could be interpreted as being *in itself* a space in between life and death. If this observation is applied to *Ubik*, television represents here a liminal space *within* the liminal space of half-life. It would be thus possible to affirm that *Ubik* constructs television as a genuine *mise en abîme* of half-life itself. This is confirmed by the fact that the television commercial presents a much more literal example of *mise en abîme*: a graffiti analogous to the one that Joe and Al Hammond have seen in the bathroom of Runciter Associates. As a consequence, describing the semiotics of television in Dick's novel corresponds to describing the very semiotics of this residual condition. As Joe watches Runciter's electronic spectre on television, he contemplates the contradictions of his own liminal existence. The television's textual flux casts Glen Runciter as the inhabitant of an oxymoron-world, an electronic 'limbo of the living', that paradoxically serves not as a means for the dead to come back to the living, but rather as a means for the living to get through to the dying.

If the study of the intratextual representation of television corresponds to the study of how a plane of existence is constructed and put in relation to other planes, then by shifting the focus towards the sheer materiality of television as a concrete object, one could further investigate the structural metaphors that the medium can generate. It has already been noticed that Jory Miller conceptualizes the relation between life and half-life according to the polarity inside/outside. Such a dichotomy recurs in the novel in at least another significant occasion. Immediately after the end of Runciter's television epiphany, in one of *Ubik*'s most poignant passages, we read: «He [Joe Chip] felt

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all at once like an ineffectual moth, fluttering at the windowpane of reality, dimly seeing it *from outside*» (Dick [1969] 2012, 136). If we read this passage in the light of what Joe Chip has just experienced, the television set can operate as a powerful metaphor, enriching the dialectic inside/outside and providing it with a concrete, material referent. On the basis of the interpretation of television as a 'twilight zone' and a mysterious space, the television screen could be seen as the perfect materialization of the «windowpane of reality», that is, of the surface that separates the electronic elsewhere(s) of television— the inside—from the world inhabited by the viewers (the outside).

This polarity and the metaphor that underlies it seems to undergo a slight but quite important transformation in one of the last pages of the novel, when Ella Runciter tells to Joe that Jory «"[…] has to be fought *on our side of the glass*, [b]y those of us in half-life, those that Jory preys on." (218). By activating an intuitive reference to Lewis Carrol's *Through the Looking Glass*, Ella Runciter metaphorically constructs life and half-life as two spaces separated by a glass that are, nevertheless, part of the same whole. Depending on the circumstances, the glass is sometimes clear and sometimes opaque. In contemporary cinema, directors like Tobe Hooper, David Cronenberg and Hideo Nakata have made an excellent use of this metaphor by fluidifying the television screen and creating characters that can literally cross the looking glass of television.

In conclusion, Dick's novel mocks the reader's sense of realism by suspending reality itself at the edge of the void: what if the world in which Runciter is trying to get in contact with Joe is just another half-life, just another step along a sequence of *mises en abîme*? In *Ubik*, every world could completely

disappear in the blink of an eye, just like every television program could, at any time, disappear into the monotonous void of the static. This is the only thing of which one can be certain, as Al Hammond realizes before dying: «When I blink out, he thought, the whole universe will disappear» (125).

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Appendix: a summary in French translation

La présente étude s'appuie sur une observation préliminaire : le fait que la construction, éminemment culturelle, de la catégorie « mort vivant » ne prend pas en considération une partie très intéressante de la production littéraire et artistique de la période XVIIIe-XXIe siècles. Cette production est habitée par des personnages, des mondes et des récits qui non seulement déstabilisent l'opposition binaire essentielle de l'identité humaine, la limite entre la vie et la mort étant brouillée, mais qui accomplissent cette trouble en dehors de la taxonomie traditionnelle qui encadre les identités des morts-vivants.

Nous visons alors l'analyse de ce côté périphérique de l'imagination thanatologique, et l'individuation de ses origines dans le processus culturel qui a redéfini la frontière entre la vie et la mort à partir de la deuxième moitié du XVIIIe siècle jusqu'à aujourd'hui. Pour faire ça, nous nous concentrons sur un

corpus de romans, nouvelles et films de l'area anglosaxon que nous conduisent à réfléchir aux modalités de représentation de l'intermédialité du statut entre la vie et la mort dans la fiction, à partir de *Valdemar* par Poe à *The Hunter Gracchus* par Kafka, de *Ubik* par Dick to *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* par Rowling, de *Jacob's Ladder* par Adrien Lyne to *Swiss Army Man* par Dan Kwan.

Après une section introductive, où nous proposons d'appeler la catégorie qui recueille ces textes « statuts résiduels entre la vie et la mort » (r.s.), nous présentons une généalogie culturelle de la r.s. à travers l'étude de textes médicales, à partir de l'*Essai sur l'incertitude des signes de la mort* de Jacques-Jean Bruhier (1752) jusqu'à *Into the Grey Zone* d'Adrian Owen (2017). Par-là, nous montrerons comment les technologies et les médias forment la sémiotique des r.s. dans les textes de la science-fiction, comment les espaces des zones d'entre-deux entre qui séparent la vie de la mort sont construits, et comment ces zones peuvent devenir un lieu crucial pour la redéfinition de l'immanent et du divin, vue la mise en fiction du processus de la mort, et aussi pour s'interroger sur l'idée occidentale du soi-même et du réalisme. La conclusion de notre travail esquisse finalement une théorie sur la pluralisation ontologique en relation à la fiction speculative.

Le vivant, le mort, le mort vivant et tous les autres : les critères de composition du corpus

La construction de l'opposition binaire « vivant contre mort » à travers la pratique de rituels de sépulture est considérée unanimement comme une

étape fondamentale pour le développement de la culture humaine. Sa fonction est la même de celle de l'opposition « être humain vs animal » : elle transforme l'individu en membre d'un groupe social et culturel, c'est-à-dire la communauté des hommes vivant. Cette dernière est définie par son opposition cruciale : d'un côté, la communauté des animaux, de l'autre celle de la mort. La relation entre le monde des êtres vivant et celui des morts est établie et maintenue par des figures sociales tel que le chaman, tandis que les rituels de passage visent la séparation entre les deux mondes : il faut que les morts n'aient pas le pouvoir d'hanter les vivants. Cependant, malgré ces efforts, il est possible que des violations à cette opposition binaire se produisent. Ce sont des événements qui relâchent certaines de nos peurs les plus primitives, mais qui restent une source inépuisable d'horreur et de mystère. L'agent de ces violations ontologiques et culturelles est ce que nous appelons « le mort vivant ».

Dans ce contexte culturel, la fiction spéculative a représenté depuis plusieurs siècles une pratique très importante pour la construction et la prolifération des entités qui enfreignent la polarité « vie vs mort ». Toutefois, la notion actuelle de « morts-vivants », même si elle s'étend aux discours culturels et académiques, ne permet pas de s'occuper que d'un nombre assez réduit de ces entités : fantômes, vampires, zombies, momies, démons et très peu d'autres.

La présente étude s'appuie sur une observation préliminaire : le fait que la construction, éminemment culturelle, de la catégorie « mort vivant » ne prend pas en considération une partie très intéressante de la production littéraire et artistique de la période XVIIIe-XXIe siècles. Cette production est

habitée par des personnages, des mondes et des récits qui non seulement déstabilisent l'opposition binaire essentielle de l'identité humaine, la limite entre la vie et la mort étant brouillée, mais qui accomplissent cette trouble en dehors de la taxonomie traditionnelle qui encadre les identités des morts-vivants. Notre étude vise alors l'élaboration d'une nouvelle catégorie au sein de l'imagination culturelle : le mort-vivant résiduel. Les membres de cette classe sont ceux qui sont restés aux marges du processus de catégorisation qui a fait surgir un corpus de figures prototypiques au centre de la culture du nord Atlantique, et qui a déplacé les textes qui ne rencontrent pas les paramètres prédéterminés vers la périphérie.

Appelé à se confronter avec un territoire inexploré, la chose la meilleure à faire serait peut-être d'élaborer une carte. Mais l'idée de « cartographier » un champ encore inexploré de récits implique une double métaphore : l'objet de l'étude est conçu comme un lieu, dans le sens géographique, et le chercheur est un cartographe. Nous croyons, par contre, que l'objet de cette étude se présente plutôt comme une masse de points apparemment isolés les uns des autres ; ainsi, le chercheur est celui qui connecte ces points afin de dessiner des constellations et des réseaux. Ces diagrammes textuels ont été rédigés sur la base de deux questions que nous nous sommes posées : comment les statuts résiduels entre la vie et la mort sont rendus culturellement possibles ? Et comment sont-ils construits dans la fiction ? j'ai essayé de répondre à ces questions en dressant des analogies, des récurrences et des polarités, aussi bien qu'en produisant un contexte pour l'étude de ces éléments à travers les instruments de la généalogie culturelle. Nous nous concentrerons surtout sur les particularités qui rendent uniques et originaux les morts-vivants résiduels

vis-à-vis des morts-vivants traditionnels, et sur les perspectives nouvelles qu'ils peuvent ouvrir dans la mise en fiction de la relation entre la vie et la mort.

Dans le premier chapitre nous proposons une méthodologie pour la modélisation des catégories périphériques, et nous regardons la littérature comparée par l'objectif de l'herméneutique queer. Dans le chapitre deux, nous traçons l'histoire des facteurs culturels qui ont déclenché l'émergence des statuts résiduels à l'intérieur au sein de l'imagination thanatologique. Dans le troisième chapitre, nous avons identifié quelque caractéristique particulière des statuts résiduels en analysant leurs coordonnées essentielles : temps et espace. Dans le chapitre quatre, nous analysons dans le détail comment l'électricité et les technologies de la communication sont représentées dans les textes du corpus et comment elles construisent la relation entre le « ici » des vivants et l' « ailleurs » des morts-vivants résiduels.

La présence d'un double niveau de subversion culturelle à l'intérieur des récits périphériques qui traitent les statuts non-traditionnels entre la vie et la mort érige la théorie queer à instrument herméneutique essentiel pour l'approche à ce type de textes. C'est en raison de cela que nous nous appuierons sur l'herméneutique queer pour la construction d'un corpus dans la perspective d'une étude comparée, où nous analyserons les stratégies de catégorisation qui rendent cette construction possible. Par conséquent, nous nous concentrerons sur un corpus de textes résiduels qui thématisent des conditions d'expérience comme mort-vivant ; ces textes constituent la base de la catégorie que nous avons nommée « statuts résiduels entre la vie et la mort »

(abrégé : r.s.), laquelle nous permettra de repenser la catégorie « mort-vivant » en restructurant sa propre taxonomie.

D'abord, la construction des r.s. sera définie par l'intersection de deux approches de catégorisation différents ; les deux ont été développés dans le champ des sciences cognitives à partir de la notion de « ressemblance de famille » élaborée par Wittgenstein : la théorie du prototype d'Eleanor Rosch et les stratégies de classification employées par George Lakoff dans ses études sur la langue Dyirbal.

Ensuite, j'essayerai de faire une analyse des implications épistémologiques qui dérivent de la restructuration de la taxonomie du mort-vivant à la lumière de la notion de *nonce taxonomy* décrite par Eve Sedgwick dans *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), notion qui a été récemment reconsidérée par Carmen Dell'Aversano. Sedgwick présente la *nonce-taxonomy* comme une stratégie pour la construction des identités qui sert construire une médiation entre le besoin de conserver l'unicité de chacun des êtres humains et le restreint nombre des axes de catégorisation possibles dans notre culture. Cependant, même si Sedgwick reconnaît le rôle crucial que la *nonce-taxonomy* détient dans la déconstruction de la catégorie « l'individuel », il ne fournit aucun contexte théorique pour la description de cette stratégie. Dell'Aversano, de son côté, a récemment repensé la définition de *nonce-taxonomy* en montrant comment elle pourrait fonctionner comme instrument pour la segmentation de la réalité personnelle, selon des critères tout à fait idiosyncratiques.

En conclusion, nous croiserons les approches à la catégorisation dérivés des sciences cognitives avec ceux élaborés par la théorie queer. Nous nous proposons ainsi de montrer : primo, que Rosch et Lakoff pourraient doter la

nonce taxonomy du support théorique dont elle nécessite ; secundo, comment le champ des études comparées peut être repensées à travers l'utilisation systématique de la catégorisation fondée sur le prototype et la *nonce-taxonomy*.

Notre étude démontrera comment l'analyse de l'herméneutique des littératures comparées par la queer théorie – définie comme une boîte à outils qui possède «the potential to subvert accepted ways of thinking on any issue» (Dell'Aversano 2010, 74) – ouvre à des perspectives nouvelles dans le panorama des recherches sur la fiction par le fait qu'elle relève la connaissance sur le processus de catégorisation qui est à l'œuvre dans les littératures comparées, en général, et dans la thématique, en particulier.

Devant la question « Que tu pense quand je parle de mort-vivant ? », les personnes normalement répondent avec une liste de figures surnaturelles appartenant au genre de l'horreur : fantômes, vampires, zombies et momies. L'association avec les zombies, notamment, est carrément immédiate. Les adeptes et amateurs du genre de l'horreur pourraient ajouter quelque autre figure mineure, telle que la ghoule et la dame blanche ; quelqu'un mentionne Frankenstein. Quand on demande de penser à d'autres exemples n'appartenant pas au monde de la fiction ou du surnaturel, les personnes répondent parfois avec des références aux expériences de mort imminente ou d'état végétatif permanent. Cette hiérarchie cognitive qui s'est emparé de la construction de la catégorie du « mort vivant » ne trouve pas d'explications dans les théories « classiques » de catégorisation. Selon ces théories, les catégories possèdent des limites très claires et se définissent par le partage de certaines caractéristiques (Lakoff 1987,6). Pour être vraiment efficace, ce système nécessite de la théorie du prototype développée par Eleanor Rosch,

élaborée à partir de la notion de « ressemblance de famille ». Rosch, notamment, enrichit le modèle de catégorisation de Wittgenstein introduisant le concept de « centralité », défini comme «[t]he idea that some members of a category may be 'better examples' of that category than others» (Lakoff 1987, 12).

Interprétant la différence entre des membres prototypiques et non-prototypiques à travers une métaphore géographique, une catégorie peut être conçue comme la zone d'une ville : elle a un centre, habité par les membres prototypiques, et un nombre de périphéries, peuplées par les non-prototypiques membres. Les limites qui séparent les deux zones ne sont pas claires ni fixées, mais plutôt brouillées et instables, soumises à constants renégociations culturelles.

Si nous adoptons la métaphore géographique de la théorie prototypique pour considérer la façon avec laquelle la culture occidentale a construit la catégorie de mort-vivant, le fantôme, le vampire et le zombie émergent clairement comme les trois membres prototypiques du centre-ville. Chacune de ces figures possède une identité très détaillée, avec de traits très spécifiques ; ils appartiennent à une tradition littéraire et artistique plus ou moins récente qui les rend immédiatement reconnaissables. Dernièrement, ils sont devenus immensément célèbres dans toutes les formes de fiction, e, par conséquent, ils sont devenus l'objet d'étude des chercheurs universitaires de plusieurs secteurs disciplinaires.

Si l'individuation du centre de la catégorie « mort-vivant » est presque intuitive, toute tentative de définir les périphéries est certainement moins immédiate : le centre est tellement actif qui semble occuper l'espace entier de

la catégorie au point de rendre ardue la conceptualisation même de cette périphérie.

Nous essayerons de démontrer que cette dernière peut être construite sur un corpus de textes qui contiennent des figures, à l'apparence isolées et sans lien de parenté, qui parsèment le monde de la fiction depuis 150 ans. Le protagoniste du célèbre conte de l'horreur d'E. A. Poe *The Facts in the Case of Mr. Valdemar* (1845), par exemple, est subjugué *in articulo mortis* ; son existence tient bon plusieurs mois dans un état de suspension hypnotique après la mort de son corps. Dans les fragments de *der Jäger Gracchus* ([1931] 1993) recueillis dans son journal, Franz Kafka raconte l'histoire d'un chasseur qui meurt après être tombé dans un ravin, mais, à cause d'un erreur incompréhensible, il est impossibilité à atteindre l'au-delà et forcé à errer dans la terre. Joe Chip, le protagoniste du roman science-fictional Ubik (1969) de Philip K. Dick, se retrouve littéralement congelé dans un état appelé « demi-vie » après une explosion. Sa conscience est séparée du monde des vivants et habite un nouvel plan existentiel, suspendu entre la vie et la mort. Dans *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* (1998) par J. K. Rowling, le magicien Voldemort manifeste sa présence à travers le journal de Tom Riddle, un objet paradoxalement vif contenant un morceau de l'âme d'un homme mort.

Au sein du cinéma, le mystérieux *Jacobs's Ladder* (Lyne 1990) plonge le spectateur dans la conscience d'un soldat américain au moment de son passage de la vie à la mort, tandis que dans *Transcendence* (2014) de Wally Pfister le messages cérébraux du protagoniste mourant sont transcrit dans le software d'une intelligence artificielle : il perd son corps mortel pour habiter l'Internet, jusqu'à devenir l'Internet même.

Si on prend en considération ces textes individuellement, chacun d'eux pourrait apparaître comme une exception, un bizarre exercice de style, une déviation isolée de la « normale » conceptualisation des morts-vivants. Mais cela ne serait qu'une simplification dictée par l'hégémonie du centre de la catégorie, et il impliquerait implicitement la négation de toutes les fortes composantes culturelles de leurs caractéristiques : ils ne seraient que de traits oubliables, trop isolés pour nous communiquer quelque chose d'important sur la construction de la polarité de « vie vs mort » dans la culture contemporaine. En revanche, nous proposons de considérer ces textes isolés comme un *corpus unique,* et d'en trouver une définition qui se débarrasse complètement du paradigme fantôme-vampire-zombie.

Grâce à ça, ils ne sont plus des exceptions au sein d'une catégorie dominante : ils deviennent les membres d'une nouvelle catégorie, les « statuts résiduels entre la vie et la mort », ou « le mort-vivant résiduel ». Cette définition peut être utilisée pour identifier personnages, mondes et contextes liminales, pourvus de qualités particulières qui échappent à toute tradition culturelle bien connue.

Cette stratégie herméneutique s'inspire de premières pages d'*Epistemology of the Closet*, où Eve Sedgwick semble exprimer un désir similaire lorsqu'il cherche de cataloger tous les infinies variétés de traits qui rendent uniques les personnes. La notion de « nonce taxonomy » montre comment la théorie queer peut construire un espace herméneutique de médiation entre ce que les catégories nous font et ce que nous faisons aux catégories. L'analyse de la définition de « nonce taxonomy » élaborée par Sedgwick et Dell'Aversano a esquissé deux modèles.

En même temps, notre étude ne prend pas en considération seulement le processus de catégorisation, mais aussi celui de taxonomisation. Autrement dit, nous examinons et le processus qui amène à la formation d'une catégorie par le regroupement d'objets différents, et ce qui détermine la construction de la relation parmi les diverses catégories pour créer une taxonomie.

Dans cette perspective, les concepts de « mort-vivant prototypique » et de « mort-vivant residual » sont à considerer comme deux sous-catégories dont le lien et la relation portent à la construction de la taxonomie au sein de la catégorie « mort-vivant ». Ce que nous proposons donc est notamment la création d'une taxonomie particulière capable de servir de médiateur entre l'attention vers les idiosyncrasies personnelles (et textuelles) et la nécessité de partager les resultés de cette étude avec les autres chercheurs.

En conclusion, la théorie prototypique montre que : les 'invaluably rich, unsystematic resources of nonce taxonomy' élaborées par Sedgwick se trouvent à la périphérie des concepts que nous analysons. Les catégories « autres » représentent un point de convergence de la « nonce taxonomy », laquelle est parfois dédramatisée dans les études critiques. Un groupe d'objets textuels originales peuvent être un défi pour les catégories communes et former une taxonomie particulière, l'adoption d'un modèle centralisant pour l'interprétation de phénomènes non prototypiques étant refusée à la faveur d'une analyse de la relation que des membres non prototypiques entretiennent les uns avec les autres.

Une généalogie culturelle des morts-vivants résiduels

Au cours de ces derniers vingt ans, la périphérie de l'imaginaire thanatologique s'est étendue progressivement, en devenant de plus en plus visible. Roger Luckhurst soutient que la prolifération de ces figures liminaires a été catalisée par une révolution techno-scientifique commencée dans les années 1960 et causée d'un côté par la création de l'unité de soins intensifs, et de l'autre par le developpement des technologies de la respiration artificielle, de la réanimation et de la transplantation. Par conséquence, en 1968 l'Ad Hoc Committe of the Harvard medical school a dû redéfinir ce que la mort est du point de vue medicale. C'est le début d'un débat très important, encore ouvert, pour la médecine contemporaine, concernant la "Nouvelle Mort". Dans ce contexte, les statutes liminaires entre la vie et la mort sont devenus un point focal pour le discours médical, qui ont adopté une perspective foucoultienne.

L'un des aboutissements le plus décisif de ce débat est la construction de la distinction, dans la pratique médicale, de la mort cérébrale et de la mort biologique, ce qui «shifted death from a decisive moment to a temporal process» (Luckhurst 2015, 88). Néanmoins, comme nous allons le démontrer dans notre chapitre 2, ce n'est pas la première fois que la médecine produit une définition de la mort, qu'un débat se développe autour d'elle et que cette discussion va à nourrir la prolifération de récits qui thématisent ces ontologies liminales. De fait, dans les années 1740 un changement fondamental est intervenu en France dans la construction de la mort, situation qui est analogue, dans une certaine perspective, à celle qui s'est passée dans les années 1960. Nous visons alors l'analyse de la généalogie de la « Nouvelle Mort » à la lumière de la comparaison avec le Gothique, en définissant le contexte qui a

amené à la transformation de la polarité « vie contre mort » d'une opposition binaire à un continuum il y a 250 ans.

Pour faire cela, nous prenons en analyse un texte médical français, la *Dissertation sur l'incertitude des signes de la mort* par Jacques-Bénigne Winslow et Jacques Jean Bruhier (1742).

Nous essayerons donc d'évaluer les répercussions que ce texte a eu sur la culture européenne et américaine du XVIIIe siècle ; ensuite, nous ferons une comparaison avec la redéfinition de la mort qui s'est déroulée dans les années 1960. Notre lecture puise d'un côté dans l'histoire de l'enterrement prématuré par Jan Bondeson (2001), et de l'autre dans la *Naissance de la clinique* par Michel Foucault ([1963] 2015), laquelle donne une analyse de la transformation de l'idée de la mort dans le XIXe siècle.

La première révolution thanatologique dans l'histoire du monde occidental commence en France, à l'Académie des sciences, l'une des institutions le plus prestigieuses de l'époque. Le médecin Jacques-Benigne Winslow, l'un des membres les plus éminent de l'Académie, rédige une dissertation sur l'incertitude des signes de la mort. Il est moins de dix pages, et il est écrit en latin. Winslow examine plusieurs cas et soutient que le manque de mouvement respiratoire ou l'absence de pouls, symptômes que les docteurs considéraient comme des signes indiscutables de mort, en réalité ne sont pas fiables : par exemple, un patient peut manquer de pouls perceptible, mais être encore vivant. Selon Winslow, le seul signe de mort vraiment fiable est le commencement de la putréfaction : un patient peut être déclaré mort seulement quand le corps se décompose. Jacques-Jean Bruhier traduit la dissertation en français, et ajoute un nombre considérable de cas et

témoignages d'enterrements prématurés. Le nouveau livre s'intitule *Dissertation sur l'incertitude des signes de la mort et l'abus des enterrements et embaumements précipités*. Tout de suit il reçoit énormément de succès, qui va au-delà du seul publique scientifique, en causant une terreur quasi obsessive pour l'enterrement prématuré en France et en Allemangne. Avec Bruhier, pour la première fois la mort devient un événement qui va plus loin de la médecin. La mort n'est plus la cessation de la vie, elle est devenue un problème physiologique qui nécessite d'une interprétation à travers ses signes : il n'est plus un problème de faits mais un problème sémiotique. La question que les médecins de l'époque se sont posée est la même que le US Goverment pose à l'Harvard Committee trois siècles après : comment peut-on diagnostiquer la mort ?

La publication du livre de Bruhier a des conséquences extrêmement importantes pour la médecine européenne et américaine. D'une part, le moment liminal qui sépare la vie de la mort devient l'objet d'un discours dont la culture de masse s'empare. De l'autre, la littérature aussi fait de l'enterrement prématuré le sujet de nombreux textes, en le transformant finalement en un topos de la fiction de l'horreur, le nouveau genre gothique étant le lieu privilégié de son exploitation.

C'est dans ce contexte, où les histoires et légendes populaires se mêlent au savoir médical, que la liminalité entre la vie et la mort se présente comme un véritable thème dont les récits gothiques s'emparent, en exprimant la sensation d'anxiété culturelle que ce sujet inspire. Là nous sommes au moment de la naissance de la Nouvelle Mort du monde occidental, par laquelle sera structurellement élaborée la Nouvelle Mort de 1968.

Certes, les deux situations, bien qu'elles partagent la même structure –
la contamination entre savoir médical et récits de fiction – présentent aussi un
nombre important de différences dont il faut tenir compte. La différence la plus
évidente concerne l'idée de liminalité entre la vie et la mort. Jacques-Jean
Bruhier raconte les cas de gens tombées en statut de trance, de paralisys, de
statut cataleptique et d'autres conditions physiques très proches à la mort : ce
sont des situations tellement similaires à la mort que le médecin ne pouvait pas
établir si le patient été vivant ou pas. Le concept de liminalité est ici lié donc à
celui d'incertitude : les deux polarités de « vie » et de « mort » sont clairement
établies, mais le docteur ne sait pas à quelle catégorie appartient son patient.
Ce dernier peut soit revenir à la vie (premier pôle) soit mourir (second pôle).
Le statut liminaire semble dépourvu d'épaisseur ontologique, puisque le sujet
n'expérimente qu'un black out, un manque de conscience : il/elle tombe dans
ce qui ressemble à un sommeil profond, qui passe comme mort, il/elle est
enterré/ée et se réveille dans un cercueil. Le statut liminaire correspond donc à
une absence d'expérience qui devient l'objet de la narration. D'autres cas
attestent que le protagoniste a été victime d'une paralyse totale : il est vif et
conscient, mais il ne peut pas se bouger ; ainsi, il est erronément déclaré mort.
Même dans cette situation, la polarité entre vie vs mort n'est pas mise en
question. Il n'existe pas un statut liminaire : il n'y a qu'un homme
momentanément incapable de donner de signes de vie.

Quand la définition de mort est remise en discussion dans les années
1960, la structure narrative est restée la même, mais la notion de liminalité s'est
compliquée, à cause aussi de la découverte des états végétatifs. Au fil du XIXe
et de la première moitié du XX siècles, la polarité « vie vs mort » est devenu de

plus en plus fluide. À partir de Bruhier, ce processus de fluidification est développé par le recherches médicales de Buffon et, notamment, par le *Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort* de Xavier Bichat (1805). Plusieurs pages de la Naissance de la clinique de Foucault sont consacrées à l'analyse des implications de l'invention de l'anatomie pathologique de Bichat, et plus particulièrement de la construction de la mort comme un processus. De fait, l'anatomie pathologique construit la mort comme un processus unique, vécu par chacun en manière différente. Si les études de Bichat rétablissent l'idée originaire de la mort comme l'événement qui rend les gens égales, l'anatomie pathologique porte à considérer la mort comme une expérience individuelle et unique.

Parallèlement, dans les récits d'horreur les statuts liminales entre la vie et la mort deviennent progressivement un véritable espace d'expérience séparé des événements de la vie quotidienne. Dans cette perspective, *The Facts in the Case of Mr. Valdemar* par E. A. Poe représent un moment fondamental dans ce processus de transformation : pour la première fois, un personnage narre son histoire quand il est dans le statut liminale.

La deuxième transformation culturelle qui joue un rôle très important dans le processus d'émergence des statuts résiduels entre la vie et la mort est le résultat des intersections de facteurs différents, tels que le développement d'un paradigme nouveau pour la construction du savoir scientifique, ou les innovations technologiques des télécommunications, ou la spéctralisation du sujet. Au début du XVIIIe siècle, les fantômes et d'autres entités surnaturelles abandonnent l'imaginaire du surnaturel et migrent vers l'imaginaire de

l'électronique ; les résultats de ce processus ont été étudiés par Jeffrey Sconce (2000).

Le fait que le premier instrument de la télécommunication électrique – le télégraphe – a été utilisé immédiatement comme un médium pour communiquer avec l'au-delà est le résultat d'une certaine logique culturelle. Le télégraphe spirituel fonctionne à travers la convergence entre l'idée d'un autre monde créé par l'électricité et l'autre monde habité par les morts. Les médiums électroniques étaient – et le sont encore – spéctralisés littéralement. Autrement dit, le concept de spéctralisation ne se réfère pas dans ce cas-là à une relation métaphorique entre la télécommunication et le spectre ; au contraire, la télécommunication électronique établi avec le mort-vivant une relation conceptuelle bien plus étroite. Dans l'imaginaire culturel des derniers 170 ans, un nombre important de signales, voix, sons et images créés par les médiums électroniques ont été conçus comme objets hantés par l'au-delà.

En 1884, le suisse Édouard Rod publie un récit bref intitulé *L'Autopsie du Docteur Z****. Le protagoniste, le Docteur Z***, est un physiologiste pourvu d'une conception peu orthodoxe de l'activité cérébrale : « le physiologiste prétendait que la vie du cerveau ne s'éteint pas en même temps que celle du corps, qu'au contraire, elle continue pendant une période qui varie de sept à dix jours après le dernier soupir ». Le Docteur Z*** est aussi l'inventeur d'une technologie qui permet d'enregistrer l'activité cérébrales d'un sujet après la mort de son corps. Quand il meurt, le docteur enregistre ses pensées dans le statut résiduel qui sépare la mort de son corps de la mort de son cerveau : le récit est le rapport de ce qu'il pense. Le fait que l'état résiduel du Docteur Z*** est le produit d'une séparation entre le cerveau et le reste du corps semble une

anticipation de la construction sociale que Fernando Vidal a appelé « the cerebral subject ». L'histoire de Rod préfigure l'imbrication du cerveau, la technologie pour l'enregistrement de l'activité cérébrale, et l'ontologie du statut résiduel, qui en détermineront l'évolution dans la seconde moitié du XXe siècle, et dans la fiction et dans la vie réelle.

Dans le journal d'Adrien Owen, *Into the Gray Zone* (2007), on retrouve et la transformation de la liminalité et le retour de la peur de l'enterrement prématuré. L'auteur est l'un des meilleurs neuroscientifiques dans son champ, et sa recherche sur les états végétatifs a portée à une découverte importante en 2006 :

[W]e have discovered that 15 to 20 per cent of people in the vegetative state who are assumed to have no more awareness than a head of broccoli are fully conscious, although they never respond to any form of external stimulation.

Encore une fois, nous pouvons observer une analogie structurelle : comme Bruhier avait problématisé le paradigme de la mort des années 1740 en remettant en discussion ses signes, de la même manière Owen problématise le paradigme de la Nouvelle Mort en montrant que les diagnostics des statuts végétatifs peuvent être douteux. Ainsi, on ferme le cercle de la peur de l'enterrement prématuré, encore vive deux siècles après, transposée dans les territoires de la Nouvelle Mort et dans une ontologie nouvelle où l'essence de l'être humaine coïncide avec son cerveau.

Construire le résiduel : espace, temps et esprit

Un statut résiduel est localisé quelque part le long de la ligne qui conduit de la vie à la mort. Mais l'état résiduel problématise la linéarité de ce parcours en proposant un troisième pôle intermédiaire, dont nombreux textes du corpus témoignent. Cela est causé par l'activation de deux isotopies. La première concerne les véhicules, les transports et la transportation même. Par exemple, le chasseur Gracchus, personnage de Kafka, habite un petit bateau qui traîne dans la mer sans cesse, il débarque rarement et seulement pour de très bref temps. Dans le roman Passage par Connie Willis, un psychologue cognitif se retrouve sur le Titanic chaque fois qu'elle subit une expérience de mort dans les années imminente.

La deuxième isotopie est liée aux espaces indéterminés qui sert comme lieux de connexion entre d'autres pôles. Cela est parfaitement illustré par le roman de Banks, The Bridge ([1986] 2013) : après un accident en voiture, le protagoniste tombe dans le coma, et se retrouve dans une ville construite sur un pont immense, dont il ne peut pas voir la fin. Paradoxalement, habiter un r.s. veut dire habiter pour toujours un seuil. On observe la présence de cet oxymore même dans les textes qui ne représentent pas la r.s. comme un lieu physique. Dans Ubik, par exemple, les morts-vivants existent dans le temps dilaté de leur souffrance.

Le temps, de son côté, est conçu dans les r.s. comme une condition qui amène finalement à la mort. Mais ce n'est pas toujours le cas : le chasseur Gracchus ne peut pas échapper à sa condition, ni le protagoniste du conte de Frederik Pohl, *The Tunnel under the World*, peut évader de son emprisonnement dans le r.s. en se suicidant. Il existe aussi un second type de construction de la temporalité dans le r.s., un micro-genre qui peut être défini comme le « pôle de

la narrative de la vie", où la personne proche à la morte fait l'expérience d'une dilatation temporelle, dans une sorte de bulle liminaire. Les représentants de ce filon narratif sont : A*n Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge* ([1890] 1984) d'Ambrose Bierce, *Jacob's Ladder* (1990) d'Adrien Linch, *Wristcutters: A Love Story* (2006) de Goran Duki, et la mini-série de Cartoon Network, *Over the Garden Wall* (Krentz et McHale 2014).

Le chapitre 3 est consacré à l'analyse de cet arrière-plan, la construction de l'espace et du temps dans les r.s. et comment elle influence la sémiotique du résiduel.

La première section du chapitre prend en examen la « mind-radio analogy », un processus fondamental de l'imaginaire électronique : l'esprit humain lui-même est construit comme un dispositif de la télécommunication, qui « radiodiffuse » ses contenus en forme de signales électriques. Ces derniers peuvent à leur tour être interceptés et décodifiés par un autre esprit. Dans cette perspective, les signes spirituels et ceux physiques se superposent, comme dans le cas de Nightflyers de Martin, où Lasamer relève la présence de sa mère comme l'antenne relève les transmissions radio.

Ces deux analogies qui forment les prémices conceptuelles de la *mind-radio analogy* (signaux par le mort=signaux radio=signaux physiques) se retrouvent dans *Ubik*, où l'analogie fonde la conceptualisation de la demi-vie.

Ce r.s. est créé par la conservation de la personne *in articulo mortis* dans un cercueil particulier, à température inférieure à zéro, qui capte les signales cérébrales du mourant. Quand quelqu'un vient rendre visite à un demi-vivant, les deux communiquent à travers des signales radio.

Dans la notion d'« onde radio », est présent le lien sémiotique entre les signaux radio et la liquidité, régime basilaire de l'analogie. Mais l'élément qui crée vraiment l'unité sémiotique est la conception du médium des signales radio comme un fluide, ce qui nous amène à considérer dans notre analyse un autre concept de l'imaginaire électronique: l'éther, à savoir l' «impalpable magnetic context of electrical action» (Milutis 2005, 164). C'est la notion d'éther qui porte Mesmer à se considérer capable d'établir un *fluxus* magnétique entre ses patients et lui. De même, à l'aube de la période de la radio la transmission wireless était conçue comme un dispositif fonctionnant à travers un éther liquide. Dans cette perspective, *Ubik* et *Nightflyers* ont reportés en auge une notion d'éther du siècle précédent, renvoyée maintenant comme objet d'étude scientifique. Dans un moment crucial du conte de Martin, notamment, l'espace à l'intérieur du bateau subit une transformation qui peut être conçue comme la mise-en-littérature de l'espace de l'éther à travers lequel l'énergie mentale de la mère bouge et agit, l'isotopie du liquide étant liée à l'imaginaire électronique.

Pour résumer, *Nightflyers* et *Ubik* sont imprégnés par la sémiotique de la fluidité, laquelle, à son tour, est le résultat d'une relation très étroite que les deux textes entretiennent avec l'imaginaire électronique. Dans *Nightflyers*, la liquidité émerge par l'actualisation de l'éther, lequel est le pont ontologique qui met en communication le r.s. et le monde des vivants. Cette actualisation advient dans l'un des moments fondamentaux de la narration, et cause un collapse momentané de la séparation entre les deux états d'existence. Dans *Ubik*, la sémiotique de la fluidité est développée en façon plus directe par la convergence des ondes radio et les ondes psychiques. Sur le plan de la représentation, la fluidité de l'espace est rendue par le langage du cinéma et de

la photographie ; l'imaginaire électronique transforme donc la physique des ondes radio en biologie des êtres vivants. Le personnage d'Ella, notamment, en constitue un exemple radical : la demi-vie d'Ella est définie par la fluidification du soi et par l'immersion dans un fluxe onirique qui circule dans la communauté des demi-vivants. Dans les deux textes, les r.s. sont construites narrativement et culturellement comme des produits de l'imaginaire électronique, lequel autorise la création d'un « ailleurs » qui existe sur un plan d'existence différent de celui des vivants, même s'il reste fermement ancré dans le monde matériel.

Technologies de l'après-vie

L'une des caractéristiques les plus importantes qui définissent la majeur par des textes du corpus est la mis en fiction de la mort partielle ou incomplète. Souvent, cet inachèvement empêche la r.u de disparaître du monde des vivants. Le but de l'une des narrations principales, en revanche, est de garder le r.u. présent chez les vivants. Autrement dit, les r.s. sont moins construits comme des monade-mondes habité par personnages complètement exclus du monde des vivants que thématisés comme forme de contact avec l'autre monde.

Les technologies et les stratégies par lesquelles le contact entre le vivant et le r.u. se réalise fournit un regard essentiel sur l'ontologie des r.s. Sur la base de configurations technologiques différentes, la relation entre les statuts d'existence est construite en façons différentes. Dans cette perspective, le r.s. devient une area idéale pour mettre en examen l'invisibilité de certains

systèmes de télécommunication, en changeant leur distribution dans la technologie ambiante.

Dans le dernier chapitre de notre étude, nous visons alors l'analyse de la méthode par laquelle les narrations des r.s. manipulent (et sont manipulées par) l'imaginaire électronique par le tournage, la déformation et l'altération du processus qui sert normalement le travail des télécommunications. Pour faire cela, nous suivrons de près les réflexions de Scone sur les médias hantés, du moment que la notion d'ailleurs électronique nous fournit un outil idéal pour notre enquête sur la liminalité. Nous nous concentrerons notamment sur deux instruments technologiques : le téléphone et la télévision.

Dans les communications téléphoniques, la présence de l'interlocuteur est réduite à une voix incorporelle. Les implications sémiotiques du processus qui permet à la voix d'être codifiée comme un signal électrique et de voyager en forme d'onde radio (ou, pour les technologies anciennes, à travers un câble) sont autant aussi complexes que le processus lui-même. Les ondes sonores se propagent dans l'air, arrivent au récepteur et réémergent dans l'autre part de la ligne après avoir parcouru la dimension électronique. Plus que l'absence d'interaction en personne, c'est le passage des mots à travers cet ailleurs potentielle qui représente la différence entre la communication en personne et celle par téléphone. En traversant le pont qui sépare l'expéditeur du récepteur, le message est exposé à l'influence de l'autre monde, et est ainsi entouré par un brouillard d'incertitude.

Dans au moins deux textes du corpus, les statuts ontologiquement incertains et les positions liminales sont construites par la manipulation de la logique de la communication par téléphone. Nous identifions notamment une

convergence significative entre l'un des textes qui est antérieur à l'invention du téléphone, le *Valdemar* de Poe, et l'*Ubik* de Dick.

Écrit à l'aube de l'époque du télégraphe, le conte de Poe élabore de façon que la communication entre M. Valdemar et son thérapeute est très similaire à l'interaction entre les demi-vivants et les vivants, où le téléphone joue un rôle crucial. Dans les deux cases, le statut d'existence du r.u. est incroyablement contradictoire, comme il se vient à créer une situation paradoxale où l'interaction en personne et la télécommunication coexistent. Sur la base de cette analogie, nous étudierons comment les mécanismes de la communication peuvent contribuer à la construction des relations entre le monde des vivants et celui des r.u.

Parmi les technologies médiatiques que les textes du corpus emploient pour remplir le vide entre les r.s. et le monde des vivants, celles qui concernent la télévision et les écrans sont évidemment les plus variées. La télévision, en particulier, est le média qui a contribué le plus à la redéfinition contemporaine de la notion occidentale de temps, espace et présence. La télévision se distingue des autres instruments précédents de la télécommunication, car elle donne l'illusion la plus crédible d'un espace (ou même d'un monde divers) réel existant de l'autre part de l'écran. Les ailleurs créés par la télévision semblent animés par leur propre logique et habités par des entités mystérieuses, plus que les autres ailleurs électronique.

La télévision intègre aussi dans le domaine médiatique deux des métaphores cognitives qui structurent la vision, la perception et les relations spatiales dans la culture occidentale : la fenêtre et l'écran. Par exemple, la première scène de la série tv Les Revenants (Gobert 2012) représente la

résurrection comme l'acte de rompre la surface en verre qui sépare l'intérieur de l'extérieur. Dans un intérieur non-défini, la caméra s'approche lentement à une collection de papillons, jusqu'au point que les angles du cadre de la collection correspondent à ceux de l'image cinématographique. En ce moment-là, l'un des papillons prend vie, casse le verre du cadre et s'envole.

Dans *The Bridge* par Iain Bank, encore, l'action se déroule dans l'appartement du protagoniste ; sa télévision semble douée d'une volonté propre : elle s'allume, et montre sur tous les chaînes l'image d'un homme en coma. Orr ignore que cet homme est lui-même, et que ces images de la télévision sont les seuls éléments qui connectent sa conscience au monde de son vie précédente.

Le texte qui témoigne le plus des effets esthétiques qui comptent sur une isotopie pervasive liée à a présence électronique sur l'écran est *Trascendence*, par Wally Pfister. La rencontre sémiologique et technologique entre l'informatisation de la conscience, l'intelligence artificielle et l'internet porte à la création d'un r.s. où la présence du mort-vivant est devenue complètement fluide et indépendante par rapport à un centre physiquement bien défini. Après avoir abandonné son corps pour vivre dans le web, Will peut se manifester à travers tous les dispositifs connectés. Par conséquence, la construction sémiotique d'une présence sans centre dépend strictement de la matérialisation de son avatar.

Si l'étude de la représentation intratextuelle de la télévision correspond à l'analyse de comment le plan d'existence est construit et comment se rapporte avec les autres plans, on pourrait enquêter ultérieurement sur les métamorphoses structurelles de la télévision comme un objet concrète que le

médium peut générer en déplaçant le regard de la pure matérialité de la télévision comme objet concrète. C'est Jory Miller qui a conceptualisé la relation entre la vie et la demi-vie selon la polarité de l'intérieur/l'extérieur. Cette dichotomie revient dans le roman dans un deuxième moment significatif. Immédiatement après la conclusion de la révélation de la télévision de Runciter, dans l'un des passages le plus prégnant d'*Ubik* on lit que : « He [Joe Chip] felt all at once like an ineffectual moth, fluttering at the windowpane of reality, dimly seeing it *from outside* » (Dick [1969] 2012, 136). Si nous lisons le passage à la lumière de ce que Joe Chip vient d'expérimenter, la télévision semble être douée d'une métaphore puissante, qui enrichit la dialectique intérieur/extérieur et lui fournit d'un référent concret et matériel. Sur la base de l'interprétation de la télévision comme une « zone d'ombre » et un espace mystérieux, l'écran de la télévision peut être conçu comme la matérialisation de la « windowpane of reality », c'est-à-dire de la surface qui sépare l'ailleurs électronique de la télévision – l'intérieur – du monde habité par les spectateurs (l'extérieur).

Cette polarité, et la métaphore sous-jacent, semble subir une transformation subtile mais importante dans l'un des derniers passages du roman, quand Ella Runciter dit à Joe que Jory « […] has to be fought *on our side of the glass*, [b]y those of us in half-life, those that Jory preys on » (218). En activant une référence intuitive avec *Alice Through the Looking Glass* de Lewis Carrol, Ella Runciter construit métaphoriquement vie et demi-vie comme deux espaces séparés par le verre qui est néanmoins part de la même unité. Selon les situations, le verre est soit transparent soit foncé. Dans le cinéma contemporain, les directeurs de film tels que Tobe Hooper, David Cronenberg

et Hideo Nakata ont exploité au maximum cette métaphore en rendant fluide l'écran de la télévision et créant des personnages qui peuvent traverser littéralement l'écran de la télévision.

En conclusion, le roman de Dick joue avec le sens de réel du lecteur en suspendant la réalité elle-même : et si le monde avec lequel Runciter cherche à se mettre en contact, en croyant que Joe soit là-bas, s'il n'était qu'une autre demi-vie, un autre pas vers une séquence de mises-en-abymes ? Dans *Ubik*, tous les mondes peuvent disparaître en un clin d'œil, tout comme une chaîne de la télévision peut disparaître en tout moment, renfermée dans le vide statique et monotone du statique. C'est la seule chose dont on peut être sûr, comme le réalise Al Hammond avant de mourir : « When I blink out, he thought, the whole universe will disappear » (125).