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Writing the world between image, music and text

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Michaël Ferrier Inter-Media: Writing the World Between Image, Music and Text

Abstract

Informed by his practice of music, drawing, photography and calligraphy, and depicting various experiences of border crossing between cultures, languages and media, Michaël Ferrier's eclectic writings are characterised by an aesthetic hybridity that defies generic classifications. In line with his critique of the primacy of the visual in contemporary societies, his versatile prose frequently uses synaesthesia and refers to numerous art forms such as jazz, painting or cinema, thereby appealing to the reader's five senses. Ceaselessly experimenting in his literary work with the flexible form of the novel, between fact and fiction, Ferrier published in 2019 his first photo-text, *Scrabble*, which is analysed in depth in the second part of this article. In this autobiographical narrative focusing on his childhood in Chad in the 1970s, the numerous black and white illustrations introduce a complex game of presence and absence that mirrors the way memory functions. Haunted by the traumatic advent of civil war that brutally halted Ferrier's stay in Africa, this multi-media work circles around an ominous image of the author playing Scrabble with his brother as the conflict is about to break out; evoked at the beginning and the end of the text, this decisive image however remains elusive – a “ghost image.”

Key Words: Michaël Ferrier; aesthetic and generic hybridity; intermediality; photobiography; childhood narratives

Short Biography

Fabien Arribert-Narce is Senior Lecturer in French at the University of Edinburgh. He is the author of *Photobiographies: pour une écriture de notation de la vie* (Champion, 2014), and editor of *L'Autobiographie entre autres* (Peter Lang, 2013); *Réceptions de la culture japonaise*

en France depuis 1945 (Champion, 2016); *The Pleasure in/of the Text* (Peter Lang, 2021); *Michaël Ferrier: un écrivain du corail* (Champion, 2021); and ‘Le quotidien au Japon et en Occident’ (*Revue des Sciences Humaines*, vol. 345, March 2022).

Introduction

The title of this article makes an explicit reference to Roland Barthes’ seminal collection of essays *Image, Music, Text*, selected and translated by Stephen Heath in 1977. Barthes offers in these eclectic pieces a series of reflections on and semiological investigations of film stills, musical and theatrical performances, photographs and various types of texts, in line with his wide-ranging interests. These analyses constitute a theoretical framework that is effective in investigating the relationships between different media and art forms, and therefore particularly helpful in examining Michaël Ferrier’s multi-faceted intermedial practice. Barthes and Ferrier have several features in common beyond their shared passion for Japan, which was for instance expressed by the French semiologist in his 1970 photo-text *L’Empire des signes* (*Empire of Signs*); being both writers and scholars, they have also practiced music – they both played the piano, and Ferrier also learned to play the recorder and balafon as stated in his 2019 *récit*, *Scrabble* (141-147) – and visual arts: Barthes made paintings and drawings, while Ferrier practiced calligraphy, drawing and photography.ⁱ The influence of these artistic practices can for example be felt in Ferrier’s highly musical style of writing and his poetic prose, reflecting in particular his passion for jazz, and in his frequent use of the portrait form, e.g. in *Tokyo, petits portraits de l’aube* (2004), *François, portrait d’un absent* (2018), or *Scrabble*, published in Mercure de France’s ‘Traits et portraits’ series, but also in several critical essays such as ‘Petit portrait de Butor en volatile japonais’ (2011) and ‘Petit portrait de Lacan en maître zen’ (2009).ⁱⁱ Their sharp attention to the relationship between image and text, and more specifically to the material, graphic origin of writing, is another feature shared by Ferrier and Barthes who

for instance asked in *L'Empire des signes*, in relation to an 18th-century calligraphed *haiku*: 'où commence l'écriture, où commence la peinture?' (31)ⁱⁱⁱ Ferrier also conducted literary experimentations around calligraphy in his *Petits portraits de l'aube*, in which he mused on the symbolism and multiple, hidden significations of selected Japanese *kanji* (ideograms) based on their shape and writing technique. This is reminiscent of the 'sorte de vacillement visuel' mentioned by Barthes in the foreword to *L'Empire des signes*, in which he famously claimed that 'texte et images, dans leur entrelacs, veulent assurer la circulation, l'échange de ces signifiants: le corps, le visage, l'écriture' (5).^{iv} One could also think here of *Kizu (la lézarde)*, a novel in which Ferrier playfully uses the word 'lézarde' by alluding to its two main meanings and visual connotations in French, i.e. cracks and female lizard, this animal appearing on the cover of the original 2004 Arléa edition of the book.^v

Given that Ferrier has written like Barthes numerous essays on all kinds of art forms (including photography, cinema and manga), and has also used multiple forms of expression himself or in dialogue with artists in various collaborative projects, the aim of this article will be to pinpoint this intermedial dimension of his work, which is essential to understand its originality and creativity. Intermediality, which studies the interrelations between different art forms or media and their signification, is one of the fast-developing areas of research in the Humanities, to which Barthes made major contributions although he never used this term himself (Dayan). To quote Bernd Herzogenrath (1-2),

Much of today's art operates under such an aesthetic: the [re]combinatorics of different media that was forming an artistic and aesthetic profile in Emerson's times. From *intertextuality* to *intermediality*, today, the extent of that paradigm has become immense: today's art, creativity, and originality are marked by intermediality and sampling, by a combinatory juxtaposition of genres, media, styles and surfaces, a rejection of 'objective' history that explores the various connections of aesthetic forms.

This definition emphasises several key aspects of Ferrier's work, which is characterised by its aesthetic hybridity and creolisation of forms and genres. The latter is closely related to the metaphor of the 'coral writers' (2017) that Ferrier coined himself to refer to exophonic authors such as Yoko Tawada, Shirin Nezamafi, Hideo Levy or David Zoppetti, and which suits well his own literary practice.^{vi} From this perspective, this essay will investigate how image and text interact in and between different cultures, languages and historical contexts in Ferrier's eclectic literary work.

Aesthetic and Generic Hybridity in the Work of Michaël Ferrier

In Ferrier's work, aesthetic hybridity manifests itself first and foremost in the form of the novel, which encompasses a long list of styles, genres, and influences across various languages and cultures. He uses it as a flexible form that enhances his creative freedom, and tends to think of it in terms of literary construction, but not in relation to the question of fiction (as opposed to 'factual' truth). This is how Ferrier describes the novel in *Sympathie pour le fantôme* (*Sympathy for the Ghost*, 2009), in reference to his own work: 'Récit tournant. J'introduis un peu de piment dans la belle Narration européenne... Un peu comme un puzzle en somme. [...] Poésie, essai, témoignage? Prose? Ou des Mémoires alors... Une œuvre que l'on pourrait dire musicale, dont les thèmes vivent, se succèdent, se développent, s'effacent pour reprendre, sans que jamais soit rompue l'harmonie de l'ensemble. Roman!' (226)^{vii}

Given its versatility and porosity with other artistic practices such as music, the novel functions as a kind of uber-genre encompassing all other genres for Ferrier, which suits well the prolific author that he is. Beside his literary works, of both fiction and non-fiction, and his numerous scholarly essays, he has also written the screenplays of three documentary films directed by Kenichi Watanabe and he launched in 2014 'www.tokyo-time-table.com', a highly intermedial website richly illustrated and hosting texts written by himself and guest authors. His longstanding engagement with these various art forms and in particular with still and

moving images is naturally reflected in his use of the novel, and in his other books. For example, *François, portrait d'un absent* largely focuses on films, the late friend to whom this 'portrait' is dedicated (François Christophe) being himself a film director. The first work in which Ferrier decided to actually reproduce images is the photo-text *Scrabble*, which will be analysed in the second part of this article.

If the visual dimension is often prominent in Ferrier's books, his powerful lyrical evocations usually appeal to several senses, his prose reflecting the vibrations and resonances of his entire body. In this respect, his descriptions are characterised by his frequent use of synaesthesia. This is for instance what happens when the narrator of *Sympathie* tastes a very old Japanese plum (*umeboshi*) in a Tokyo bar:

Simultanément, tout votre corps se remet à exister comme jamais: cinq sens, votre voix qui change, et votre sourire étincelant comme une averse. Vos narines palpitent. Votre nez a des ailes, vos oreilles des pavillons. Vous devenez oiseau, insecte, papillon. (95)^{viii}

We can note here the use of comparisons with animals, and of paronomasia ('pavillon' and 'papillon'), two aesthetic devices often used by Ferrier in conjunction with synaesthesia. This synaesthetic dimension and tendency to rely on all senses even when the visual seems to be prevailing may have been partly influenced in Ferrier's work by his deep connections with Japanese culture. Indeed, as explained by the philosopher Yuriko Saito,

The Japanese tradition does not make the Western distinction between the so-called higher and lower senses, the former generally considered as more legitimate vehicles for conveying aesthetic values. A typical aesthetic experience, according to the Japanese tradition, engages several senses, which together inform the aesthetic value. (546)

Ferrier's bodily engagement in his writing is not only informed in part by his multicultural upbringing between France and Africa, but also by his prolonged stay in Japan and exposure to its refined art and aesthetic traditions, as we can see here. It has become one of the defining characteristics of his prose. Perhaps one of the most striking examples in his work combining multiple sensory experiences beyond the mere visual describes the great earthquakes that hit Japan in Spring 2011:

Un peu plus tard, nouvelle réplique. [...] Dans n'importe quel point de l'espace il [le tremblement] se déplace, tissant entre les différentes pièces de la maison une véritable navette sonore. [...] Quelle musique dans ce désastre! Les tuiles tombent, les volets s'envolent. Les toits des maisons dévalent en pente, on dirait une avalanche... Triple salve de poèmes dans la nuit... (*Fukushima* 192-194)^{ix}

Ferrier is orchestrating here colourful sounds and loud flashes in a tense epic opera that closely reflects the uproar of the earthquakes. This powerful operatic dimension is carefully staged in his writing, and used in various kinds of scenes in his literary production. Ferrier is particularly wary of the predominance of images over other media in the context of Fukushima, in which the representation of the invisible nuclear pollution is a major challenge in aesthetic terms. If no image can directly express in itself the dangerousness of this type of pollution, Ferrier clearly states in *Fukushima, récit d'un désastre* (*Fukushima, story of a disaster*) that 'L'invisible existe, et il se manifeste par des ondes, des flux, des vibrations' (14) – in other words, via other sensual perceptions. The visual is even presented by the author as potentially harmful in this situation as it can obscure other sensations and contribute to normalise the abnormality of the disaster. In a 2013 interview with *Revue des deux mondes*, Ferrier claimed in this respect that:

L'image est devenue notre principal mode d'accès à l'information [...]. Le cas de Fukushima est exemplaire: en 2011, les télévisions se mettent à diffuser des images en boucle, ajoutant pour ainsi dire le désastre au désastre, dans une forme de résignation à l'impuissance qui confine à l'hypnose. On vous montre des paysages dévastés et les téléspectateurs ont tout de suite l'impression de comprendre. Or la capacité à convoquer une image ne préjuge pas de la compréhension d'un phénomène [...] De plus, les médias de l'image ne se contentent pas d'enregistrer la réalité, ils la définissent. La formule 'on se serait cru dans un film' est révélatrice: on ne réalise plus ce que l'on est en train de vivre; on essaye d'emblée de le connecter à une culture visuelle banale au lieu de le sentir et de le goûter de toutes ses forces. (101)^x

From this perspective, inter-media relations should be understood in terms of a rivalry, the combination between the auditory (music or sounds), the tactile, the olfactory and gustatory countering the overwhelming presence of the visual – one ought to listen to the inner animal in us and always be on the lookout, thereby following the advice given by his friend Amaboua to the young narrator of *Scrabble*: 'Toumaï, vis comme le chien!' (63)^{xi} This is perhaps one of the main reasons why Ferrier decided not to use in *Fukushima* any of the numerous pictures he took in the North-Eastern region of Japan in Spring 2011, preferring to rely instead on the power of words and literature to resist the sideration effect induced by images. Inspired by Guy Debord, what Ferrier criticises are spectacular representations of the catastrophe – the catastrophe as spectacle. This did not prevent him however from showing the essential part played by prominent visual artists such as the photographer Chihiro Minato and the art collective Chim-Pom for our understanding of the March 2011 triple disaster in his edited volume *Dans l'œil du désastre, créer avec Fukushima (The Eye of the Storm: Art in the Time of Fukushima, 2021)*, these artists being precisely praised by Ferrier for their ability to deconstruct in their work the systematic and stereotypical use of images in this context.

***Scrabble*: a photo-text haunted by a traumatic, ‘ghost’ image**

Although Ferrier repeatedly criticised the tyrannical domination of the visual in contemporary societies, and remained for a long time reluctant to use actual images in his literary work, he eventually did so for the first time in *Scrabble*, his first photo-text. Focusing on his childhood memories in Chad until the age of twelve, when a civil war broke out in the country, this autobiographical *récit* contains dozens of illustrations ranging from photographic images (both private archives and pictures taken by famous artists such as Raymond Depardon and Malik Sidibé) to various maps, archival documents and drawings.

The illustrations in *Scrabble* have been carefully selected and arranged based on their visual and thematic content but also because of the part they play in the structure of the book and its narrative progression. The photos generate a sense of immediacy and familiarity with the author, which is compounded by an extensive use of the present tense in the story and its numerous descriptions, creating a certain proximity with the events related from the present of writing: e.g. ‘Je me revois dans la cour...’ (17); ‘Mais, pour l’instant, j’ai dix ans...’ (24); ‘j’entre dans le temps de l’enfance qui précisément ne connaît pas le temps’ (18),^{xii} this example evoking a kind of extended, endless present that characterises childhood. Concurrently, photographic images representing Ferrier are treated in the text and in the captions from an external and distant perspective, the third person being used to refer to the child on the pictures: ‘L’enfant’ (‘The child’, 26), ‘Le garçon’ (‘The boy’, 225), the ‘il’ (‘he’) occasionally alternating with the first person (‘je’), e.g. on page 76: “Non, Saleh. Je n’oublierai pas” Je n’ai pas oublié’.^{xiii}

This oscillation in the book between distance and proximity, and between presence and absence as epitomised by the photographs, largely contributes to the ambiguity, to the mysterious dimension of the narrative which is introduced from the opening scene with the two brothers playing Scrabble. This scene is pervaded by the ominous tension of the war that is about to break out, and we understand that the children’s mother asked them to play this board

game so as to stay as calm as possible in this frightening situation. It is as if time was put on pause, and the narrator's childhood suddenly interrupted. Here is how he describes this primary, almost primal scene in the book:

Tout ce paysage, aussi immobile qu'une nature morte, où tout mouvement paraît figé dans l'attente du coup qui se prépare, mais dont le sens demeure pour l'instant hermétique, est captivant comme un rébus et comme un rébus indéchiffrable. Chaque détail y est méticuleusement calculé [...], mais la composition d'ensemble demeure mystérieusement illisible. [...] C'est comme si on était entré dans un temps suspendu et dans une zone interdite.
(12)^{xiv}

This tense scene is characterised by its immobility; it reflects a state of sideration or medusa-like effect, as if everything was petrified. As clearly stated in the text, 'Les enfants eux-mêmes ont l'air figés dans une pause faussement naturelle' (12).^{xv} The strangeness of the situation is reinforced by an ominous, deafening silence – the calm before the storm. To continue quoting from this opening scene, 'Le silence est total maintenant. Un silence de mort' (14).^{xvi} This explicit mention of death and of an imminent war was already announced by the earlier reference to a still-life image, which creates a memento mori effect, and by a repeated use of the semantic field of warfare.

When considered all together, these various characteristics are very reminiscent of photographic images, Christian Metz for example claiming in this respect that 'the powers of silence and immobility [...] belong to and define all photography' (83). In the same 1985 article entitled 'Photography and Fetish', Metz adds that 'Movement and plurality both imply *time*, as opposed to the timelessness of photography which is comparable to the timelessness of the unconscious and of memory' (83). As we can see here, there is a congruence between the opening scene described by Ferrier in *Scrabble* and photography, which both combine silence, immobility and timelessness, and by extension, a reference to death, photography being defined

by Metz (via Philippe Dubois in *L'Acte photographique*) as a 'thanatography' (83). According to Metz,

Photography is a cut inside the referent, it cuts off a piece of it, a fragment [...], for a long immobile travel of no return. Dubois remarks that with each photograph, a tiny piece of time brutally and forever escapes its ordinary fate. (84)

This remark perfectly matches the Scrabble scene, which is a decisive, traumatic moment stopped in time, with clear photographic features and a punctum-like dimension to borrow Roland Barthes' expression. In other words, it is described as if it was a photograph, and in this respect it shares the spectrality of memory and of photography, between presence and absence, past and present, life and death. The suspended present evoked by Ferrier, haunted by terrifying memories and images, is in fact that of his own childhood (the age of innocence), brutally interrupted by war and forever put on hold. This is well emphasised by the last photo published in the book, taken by Depardon in Chad in 1980, and representing a child soldier (214). As Ferrier explains in the text, this inextricable overlap between childhood and war (and therefore violence), is his own, personal camera obscura, the dark chamber at the very origin of his work: 'Mon cœur, mon cœur bat comme un tambour, une force obscurément me tire: je touche le fond obscur de ma mémoire, le secret même de l'écriture' (217).^{xvii} Like Barthes' 'Photo du Jardin d'Hiver' (Winter Garden photo) in *La Chambre Claire* (*Camera Lucida*, 1980), Marguerite Duras' 'photographie absolue' (absolute photograph) in *L'Amant* (*The Lover*, 1984) and Hervé Guibert's 'image fantôme' (ghost image) in his book bearing this title (1981), the most important photo in Ferrier's *Scrabble* that would have shown him playing this board game with his brother is an absent photograph, one that was probably never taken – the most decisive events in our lives are indeed rarely recorded by cameras. In these four photobiographical works in which the authors strive to access some truth about their life story and identity via the framework of photography, the central image from which the entire text

stems can only be described to the readers, its dazzling absence being further emphasized in *Scrabble* (and *La Chambre Claire*) by the numerous pictures that are actually reproduced. The decisive memories behind the absent photos carry much more than themselves and were not fixed forever only on the retina of the authors' eyes, but in their entire body; if the photographic framework prevails here for its fixity and immobility corresponding well to a state of shock (a kind of memory flash, clearly separating a before and an after since nothing can ever be the same again after such events), the absent photo which is literally framing *Scrabble* from the *Prélude* to the *Épilogue* is much more than a mere (quasi-)photo, a still image: it is a kind of enhanced, multi-medial photo, the text revealing and activating all its potentialities in slow motion.

After the opening scene of the book, which corresponds to its 'Prélude' (10-20), *Scrabble* unfolds over three acts or main parts: 'Toumaï' (21-68), 'L'école du dehors' ('Outside school', 69-165) and 'La guerre' ('War', 167-222), followed by a brief 'Épilogue' (215-222). Its structure follows a more or less chronological order from infancy to adolescence, and it comes full circle since the epilogue echoes the opening scene. The latter eventually becomes 'lisible' ('legible', 219) and intelligible, as if this long dive into childhood memories functioned as a kind of revelatory bath. To quote the text once more: 'Silence. [...] Des enfants jouent. Autour, un pays s'effondre' (218).^{xviii}

This coming-of-age story is set for the most part in the capital city of Chad, N'Djamena, the narrative winding through its various streets and districts. In this respect, the maps reproduced in the book (16, 126) have a programmatic function since they figure the spatial progression and progressive emancipation of Toumaï, getting further and further away from his house until he ventures in the popular Bololo district in flames at the end of the story, in a dramatic scene. As Ferrier puts it,

Tous ces éléments épars, [...] je peux désormais en concevoir l'ensemble, les réunir et les ajuster comme les pièces du Scrabble ou les voir se disposer l'un par rapport à l'autre sur la carte accrochée au mur du bureau, dans la caserne de mon père. (123)^{xix}

As we can see here, the Scrabble game itself functions as an operative metaphor in Ferrier's book, which is constructed as an album combining black and white photos and texts. This invites readers/viewers to consider each scene and image in succession, or to follow the metaphor, to progress on the wooden board from one square to the next. In fact, the experience of reading this photo-text amounts to observing a Scrabble game unfolding in front of our eyes, with several key memories progressively revealing themselves via double and triple word scores such as 'Toumaï', 'N'Djaména', 'Chari' (the great Chadian river), or Amaboua, the friend to whom the book is dedicated. As Ferrier explains in the 'Prélude', 'tout ce qui va être conté maintenant, le sera à partir de cette puissance de l'enfance, de ces quelques pièces de bois disposées sur la table et d'une case centrale étoilée sur laquelle sera posé le premier mot joué' (20).^{xx}

The word and image assemblage that ensues alternates long narrative passages with frequent ekphrasistic pauses and illustrations, effectively zooming in and out of the focus area, with occasional wide angles and double page spreads (e.g. 100-101 and 130-131). The rhythm of writing and reading is often fragmented, with sudden accelerations such as the final movement leading to the death of Ferrier's childhood friend Youssouf, and the decision of his family to leave Chad and move back to France. It mirrors the way memory functions, which is reflected by several visual echoes and association of images (e.g. the photos of Ferrier and his father both carrying a monkey on their shoulders on pages 32 and 110, and of Ferrier and a young shepherd accompanied by dogs on pages 62 and 65). It also regularly expresses a multisensory pleasure combining image, music and text; this is for example what we observe when the narrator evokes his discovery of the multiple languages spoken in Chad when he was a child: 'Les mots défilent comme des rêves devant mes énormes loupes. Je rêve d'un Scrabble

plurilingue et polyphonique, où des bribes de latin et de grec se greffent à des fragments de gorane et de sar, de kanembou et de massa, de peul et de haoussa' (151).^{xxi} Terms such as 'cheptel', 'transhumance' (172), 'kundu' (a kind of balafon, 146) and of course 'N'Djamena' (123) are mentioned in the text as good examples of words and names that took up almost a magical, auratic dimension for the child that Ferrier was, crossing over linguistic, cultural and medial borders, and arousing his verbal, aural and visual curiosity.

As this telling example suggests, Ferrier first and foremost conceives his intermedial practice as a border crossing activity, thereby following in the footsteps of several travel writers admired by him who have also lived in Japan, such as Nicolas Bouvier and Chris Marker. The latter, whose friendly ghost appears in the mythical Tokyo bar 'La Jetée' in the final scene of *Petits portraits de l'aube* (104-106), for instance claimed in his 1982 photo-text *Le Dépays* (*The Uncountry*): 'le passé, c'est comme l'étranger: ce n'est pas une question de distance, c'est le passage d'une frontière' (not paginated).^{xxii} This quote perfectly applies to Ferrier's work in general, and to his approach to intermediality more specifically. As we have seen, his use of images is cautious and uncompromising, both on an ethical and aesthetic level. There again he is close to Marker and his life-long reflection on memory, identity and the status of the visual. In *Sans Soleil* (*Sunless*), his 1983 essayistic film largely based on Japan (like *Le Dépays*), Marker meditated on the type of images or counter-images that could resist the flow of exoticist representations of this country. He claimed about such pictures that 'Au moins elles se donnent pour ce qu'elles sont, des images, pas la forme transportable et compacte d'une réalité déjà inaccessible.'^{xxiii} This determination to find forms allowing an authentic engagement with reality (in all its dimensions, social, cultural, and political, including violence, catastrophes and wars), within individual media and in-between them, is also at the heart of Ferrier's artistic endeavour. From multimedial references between words, images (paintings, drawings, calligraphies...) and music in his literary production and beyond (e.g. in his website "Tokyo-

Time-Table”) to synesthetic writing strategies across various languages and cultures, from transmedial adaptations between film and text in collaborative projects such as *Notre ami l’atome* (2021)^{xxiv} to photo-textual combinations in hybrid works such as *Scrabble*, his longstanding practice of intermediality and concurrent aesthetic of hybridity encompass a broad range of fields, devices and media and fully contribute to the trailblazing and proteiform nature of his work, sprawling in multiple directions like coral. It is also from this perspective that Ferrier can rightly be considered as a prominent, pioneering contemporary author, a notion most commonly associated with him in relation to the combined context of post-colonialism and global “Frenchness”.

Notes

ⁱ See Ferrier’s 2022 ‘entretien’ with Fabien Arribert-Narce (172-174). Drawings by Ferrier were published in vol. 10 (2017) and 14 (2021) of *Mettray*, a *revue* based in Marseille.

ⁱⁱ See also Hannah Holtzman’s 2019 article on Ferrier.

ⁱⁱⁱ ‘Where does the writing begin? Where does the painting begin?’ (*Empire of Signs* 21).

^{iv} ‘The text does not “gloss” the images, which do not “illustrate” the text. For me, each has been no more than the onset of a *kind of visual uncertainty* [...]. *Text and image, interlacing, seek to ensure the circulation and exchange of these signifiers: body, face, writing*’ (*Empire of Signs* xi); my emphasis.

^v The title of this book is also a reference to Édouard Glissant’s novel *La Lézarde* (prix Renaudot 1958).

^{vi} See also *Michaël Ferrier: un écrivain du corail*, ed. by Fabien Arribert-Narce (2021).

^{vii} ‘A revolving narrative. I spice up the beautiful European narration... Something like a puzzle. [...] Poetry, essay, testimony? Prose? Memoirs, perhaps... A musical work, in which themes proliferate, expand and replace one another, without ever disrupting the overall harmony. A novel!’ Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Ferrier’s texts are mine.

viii ‘At once, your whole body comes back to life like never before: five senses, your voice changes, your smile gleams like the rain. Your nostrils twitch. Your nose has wings, your ears have auricles. You become a bird, an insect, a butterfly.’

ix ‘A little later, another aftershock. [...] It shifts between every point of space, audibly weaving its way back and forth between the different rooms of the house. [...] What music this disaster makes! Tiles fall, the wings of shutters fly away. The roofs of houses cascade down like an avalanche... Three salvos of poems in the night.’

x ‘Images have become our main way to access information [...]. Fukushima is a good example: in 2011, TV channels continuously played video footage of these events, adding a disaster to an ongoing disaster, in a state of helplessness close to hypnosis. Devastated landscapes are shown to viewers who feel they understand them at once. But the ability to show an image does not imply that the phenomenon represented can be comprehended [...]. Besides, visual media do not only record reality, they define it. The expression “it felt like being in a movie” is telling in this respect: we no longer realize what we’re experiencing; we try from the start to relate our experience to a banal visual culture instead of feeling and tasting it to the full’.

xi ‘Toumaï, live like the dog!’ Toumaï is the Chadian nickname that Ferrier was given when he grew up in Africa.

xii ‘I see myself in the courtyard’; ‘But for now, I am ten’; ‘I enter the time of childhood, which precisely doesn’t know what time is’.

xiii “‘No, Saleh, I will not forget’. I have not forgotten’.

xiv ‘In this landscape as still as a still-life, all movement seems suspended as everyone is expecting an outburst to occur, whose meaning remains unclear for now. This landscape is as captivating as a rebus, as an unsolvable rebus. Every detail has been pondered carefully [...], but the overall composition remains mysteriously illegible. [...] It is as if one entered a kind of frozen time, a forbidden zone’.

xv ‘Children themselves look stunned, taking a falsely natural pose’.

^{xvi} ‘There is total silence now. The silence of death’.

^{xvii} ‘My heart beats like a drum, I am pulled by obscure forces: I reach the dark depths of memory, the very secret of writing’.

^{xviii} ‘Silence. [...] Children are playing. All around, a country is collapsing’.

^{xix} ‘All these diverse elements, [...] I can now perceive them as a whole, I can combine and move them as if they were Scrabble tiles; I can also see them find their place on the map hung on the office wall, in my father’s barracks’.

^{xx} ‘Everything that is about to be recounted now stems from the intensity of childhood, from these few wooden pieces set on the table, and from the star square at the centre of the board on which the first word will be placed’.

^{xxi} ‘In a dreamlike fashion, words come and go in front of my giant glasses. I dream of a plurilingual and polyphonic Scrabble, in which traces of Latin and Greek are combined with fragments in Goran and Sar, in Kanembu and Massa, in Fula and Hausa language’.

^{xxii} ‘the past is like a foreign country: it is not a question of distance, but of border crossing’ (my translation).

^{xxiii} ‘At least they proclaim themselves to be what they are: images, not the portable and compact form of an already inaccessible reality’.

^{xxiv} For more on this, please see Timothy Lomeli’s article in this special issue.

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