



## NUMBERS AND NUMBING IN CONTEMPORARY ART AND BRITISH FICTION

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For Andreas and Greenhill, we live in a ‘hyper-numeric world’, where, ‘if something is not measured, it does not exist’: it cannot ‘be recognized, defined, prioritized, put on the agenda, and debated’ [ANDREAS & GREENHILL : 1]. An Nguyen considers that ‘[n]umbers occupy a pervasive position in modern life because almost every key aspect of it—from the quality of the air we breathe to the national leader we choose—is numerically measured and represented in one way or another’ [NGUYEN : 3]. How may art and literature respond to our data-driven world? Can they reflect on and appropriate the logic of numerical measurement? Indeed, many artists use numbers to react against quantification as a gauge of reality and undermine what Scott Slovic defines as the numbing of ethics associated with numbering. Thus, as we shall see, Antony Gormley’s experiments with serial production and the (un)countable explore the gap between the individual and the collective, while writers like Caryl Phillips, Zadie Smith, or Jonathan Coe struggle against psychic numbing and devise different strategies to engage with statistical claims.

### *1. Singularity and plurality: the case of Antony Gormley*

When thinking about the plasticity of numbers, Anthony Gormley’s work immediately comes to mind. In his 2007 installation in London entitled ‘Event Horizon’,<sup>1</sup> multiple lone statues stood on the top of city-buildings, directing the eye skywards; for ‘Field for British Isles’,<sup>2</sup> his countless diminutive terracotta figures spread on gallery floors recalled ancient Chinese figures, and gazed up with mute, hollow eyes at human spectators. In 2009, ordinary people stood for an hour on the plinth in Trafalgar

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<sup>1</sup> Antony Gormley’s ‘Event Horizon’ was displayed in London in 2007, then in New York in 2010, in Sao Paulo in 2012 and in Hong Kong in 2015.

<sup>2</sup> For Adrian Searle, Antony Gormley’s ‘Field For the British Isles’ is ‘a startling and arresting sight’: There are more figures than can be counted, more still disappearing out of sight into a further space. Their number seems to be endless.’ Searle explains that the cumulative 40,000 small clay figures, ‘a presence which both consumes and resists us’, were made by families supervised by Gormley in Humberside for the British version of Field; similar figures were made by families in Mexico, in Sweden or in the Amazon basin, for other versions of Field. The seemingly countless figures defy the logic of calculus as they multiply around the world. For Searle they represent the ghosts of the past, as well as the yet unborn global population [SEARLE].

Lela B. Njatin also comments on the ‘formless bulks’ of the figurines, heads raised, with the two cavities that mimic an eerie look: ‘These figurines form a field, which, with a forbidding power, deflects the visitor’s attention away from their fragility, and onto his or her inner being.’ [NJATIN : 101]. As Gormley puts it, ‘For me the extraordinary thing about the genesis of form in the individual figures of Field is that it isn’t about visual appearance at all. What I’ve encouraged people to do is to treat clay almost as an extension of their own bodies.’ [qtd. in HUTCHINSON : 9].

Square<sup>1</sup>; as Malcolm Miles explains, ‘By the end of the project’s hundred days, 2,400 people selected by ballot had each spent one hour on the plinth, day or night, regardless of weather’ [MILES : 217]. In 2009, ‘Clay and the Collective Body’<sup>2</sup> challenged the very definition of artwork as a finished commodity; it offered a shared collective experience as Gormley asked Helsinki’s inhabitants to work on a cube of clay. *Another Place* (a hundred statues set on Crosby Beach near Liverpool) further shows how Gormley’s work engages with numbers, as well as with the sculptor’s and the spectators’ bodies. A 2015 [article](#) in the *Liverpool Echo* entitled ‘Another Place : The Iron Men In Numbers’ explains that the ‘iconic artwork’ has cost £200,000 to install and maintain, that each cast iron man weighs around 650 kg (1,400 lb), and is a 189 cm tall (‘nearly 6 feet 2½ inches’), and estimates that roughly 600,000 people visited the installation during the first 17 months. What the *Liverpool Echo* fails to mention is that each figure is modelled on Gormley himself,<sup>3</sup> thereby mingling unity and multiplicity: each statue is both himself and everyman, ‘no hero, no ideal, just the industrially reproduced body of a middle-aged man’ [GORMLEY, 2000 : 158]. For Mitchell, this further dislocates the traditional site of public museums: ‘His mechanically reproduced ‘corpographs’ are already non-sites in themselves’ [Mitchell in HUTCHINSON : 158]. Mitchell explains that such multiplied figures revisit the Romantic individual subject (and the Romantic use of the shore as a metaphor for vision and inspiration, as in Caspar David Friedrich’s 1810 painting *Monk by the Sea*): ‘*Another Place* is notable, moreover, for the way in which it complicates the Romantic image of the lone, singular figure contemplating the vast, sublime landscape’ [179]. The statues challenge the concept of identical mass production, since they are all casts of Gormley’s body, but were also meant to acquire a singularity of their own over the years, as erosion fashions them differently. Barnacles cover them and the waves wash over them. The statues vanish and reappear, rise and sink in sand and water, according to the ebb and flow of the tides. Dubbed by the French newspaper *Libération* ‘Cent garçons dans le vent’ [FANEN], the statues were meant to be a temporary installation, which was to be moved to New York. They have remained, however, firmly anchored on Crosby Beach since 2005, blindly gazing at the sea, the wind turbines, the passing P&O ferries. Visitors respond to the figures that spread over three square miles (and a mile out to sea), but also to the beach and the sky. For Gormley, such an interaction (an elemental moment, a shared emotion) blends the perception of time and space, of the human and the non-human. Each visitor must experience his own connection to the mute statues, the ‘dark matter placed against the horizon’: ‘The statues create a field, a field that involves the living and the surrogate bodies in a kind of relation, a relation with each other, and a relation with that limit, the edge the [horizon](#)’. Far from Benjamin’s fear that the aura of a work of art might vanish in the age of mechanical

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<sup>1</sup> Antony Gormley. *One & Other*, Fourth Plinth Commission. Trafalgar Square, London, 06 July-14 October 2009. The performing bodies claim their own private space within the public space of Trafalgar Square. Antony Gormley’s huge book devoted to the event begins with a series of meditative phrases, such as ‘A Living Portrait of the Nation’, ‘A Voice For the Voiceless’, and a question, ‘Us Now?’ [GORMLEY, 2010 : n.p.], suggesting that the project engages with what Hugh Brody calls ‘The Anthropology of Ourselves’ [in GORMLEY, 2010 : 350]. Gormley’s book begins with a staggering series of numbers, such as ‘100 DAYS’, ‘1,210 MEN’, ‘1,190 WOMEN’, ‘2,400 HOURS’, listing the professions, including 112 artists and 1 taxi driver, the 3 who jumped off, the numbers of applications, the millions of hits on the website, ‘843,000 USERS OF WEBSITE’, ‘33,000 COMMENTS ON WEBSITE’ [GORMLEY, 2010 : n.p.]. Charlotte Gould explores another aspect of those artistic figures: funding. [GOULD, 2019].

<sup>2</sup> As is the case for many contemporary artists, Gormley’s art thus tends to be displayed outside museums in order to seek a more direct interaction with the spectators as well as with time, space and the forces of nature.

<sup>3</sup> Using his own body is a recurrent practice for Gormley. Cast iron is also significant: ‘I’m very keen that sculpture resists the immediate gratification and instant obsolescence of most of our consumer culture.’ [SPENCER]

reproduction, the ‘hundred cloned foreign bodies’<sup>1</sup> rekindle a sense of presence in order to bring out, or bring home, what statistics and figures fail to convey:

Can we use, as it were, the memory of a body of a human space in space to catalyse an experience again, a first-hand experience of elemental time, human time, industrial time, tested against the time of the tides?<sup>2</sup>

The installation does not simply reproduce the naked body of a middle-aged man ‘facing a horizon busy with ships moving blocks of coloured containers around the planet’ [Gormley in HUTCHINSON : 158]. The process of serial repetition of the body also engages with the politics of space, as if the statues stood and tried to breathe. For Gormley, ‘Another Place’ is thus also about climate change, precisely because there is no other place: the earth, the sea, are all humans have.

Submerged at high tide, the figures also stare towards the Irish Sea, as if gesturing towards all the Irish and English migrants who once left for New York. In 2005, when they were installed, opponents feared that they might entice careless tourist towards the oncoming tide, on a perilous beach. This concern would have rung a bell in 2005, after 23 Chinese cockle-pickers were drowned on Morecambe Bay, a beach lying not so far away. In *Ghost Milk*, Iain Sinclair draws the connexion between the Chinese migrants, who could not speak enough English to know that the tides would cut them off, and Gormley’s silent watchers.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, angry at recent development projects, corporate values and skyscrapers, Gormley designed *Sleeping Field* in 2016 at the White Cube Bermondsey to challenge the way in which central London is now being ‘bought, developed and abandoned’ [‘Interview with Sarah Ellis-Petersen’]. The work testifies to Gormley’s bewilderment before swift, staggering changes: ‘We are asleep while the forces around us, that seem to be beyond anybody’s control, are changing the nature of our context. We’re seeing London selling itself to the highest bidder’ [*ibid.*] The six hundred cast iron figures lying across the gallery floor may represent buildings seen from the air or human figures lying down, interrogating the individual and the collective. Gormley positions visitors like the spectators of a play or like voyeurs, peeping inside the space from which they are excluded, where those homeless bodies have been trapped and excluded: ‘I think that “Sleeping Field” is the image of, in a sense, our witness and inability to act on a migrant situation that is catastrophic. I just wanted to put that center stage’ [SPENCER].

For Kenneth Helphand, such installations, that ‘employ numbers, faces, bodies, artefacts and places to stimulate a response’ [HELPHAND : 90],<sup>4</sup> do not simply involve a visual experience, but require ‘a combination of participatory actions: looking, reading, moving and contemplating’ [89]. Such works seek to break the silence, to move from the individual, ‘the one’, to reach collective

<sup>1</sup> The expression is Gormley’s. A. Gormley, ‘Another Place : A Proposal for the Wattenmeer, Cuxhaven 1997’ [in HUTCHINSON : 158].

<sup>2</sup> A. Gormley. ‘Sculpted Space, Within and Without’. [YouTube](#) (2012). Transcription mine.

<sup>3</sup> Sinclair’s *Ghost Milk* laments the passing of areas of Hackney to make room for the 2012 Olympics superstructures, and tries to make the government accountable. The multiple interpretations of the figures on the beach is something Gormley calls for. Already in 1997, when the work was first installed in Germany, Gormley considered that it represented holiday-makers on the beach, immigration and the ‘birth of the New World’, as well as modern tragic ‘mass exodus’ [Gormley in HUTCHINSON : 158].

<sup>4</sup> Helphand is not speaking of Gormley but discussing works like Detroit activist Tyree Guyton’s 2011 installation ‘Street Folk’, that used thousands of discarded shoes to suggest the plight of the homeless, or the 888,246 ceramic poppies placed in the moat of the Tower of London in 2014 to represent World War One casualties.

experience and express the fate of ‘too many’: ‘These projects all have a goal. They aspire to reach individuals both rationally and emotionally, to connect numbers with the nerves. They want to make anonymity personal, to have you feel for strangers’ [89]. Gormley’s works, from *Another Place* to *Sleeping Field*, seek to represent multiplicity and address relationality.

Relying on numbers to address the plight of too many, such works also engage with the problem of what Scott Slovic calls ‘psychic numbing as numbers increase’ [SLOVIC & SLOVIC : 19], or what Annie Dillard refers to as ‘compassion fatigue’.<sup>1</sup> The greater the numbers, the number one’s mind gets, or as Paul Slovic and Daniel Västfjäll put it: ‘as numbers get larger and larger, we become insensitive; numbers fail to trigger the emotion or feeling necessary to motivate action’. In other words, in situations of catastrophic loss of lives (such as natural disaster and genocide), people will attempt to help if they grasp the situation of a single victim, a child or a dog on TV; but people are less likely to help if more and more victims are concerned, as if the scope of response were limited. British Fiction addresses the scandal of numbers, depersonalization and compassion fatigue in different ways. We shall study here three kinds of devices that address the plight of the dispossessed and turn figures into a narrative strategy, namely psittacism, repetition, and satire.

## 2. Caryl Phillips’s unspeakable figures

Caryl Phillips’s 1993 novel *Crossing the River* offers contrapuntal views of history. The eponymous section, the log-book of a slave trader recording the number of slaves collected over a period of time on the coast of Africa, revisits the 1754 *Journal of a Slave Trader* by John Newton.<sup>2</sup> Phillips uses ellipses between entries, dots that suggest that the history of slavery remains incomplete, so that, as Abigail Ward puts it, ‘[i]n these gaps we can perhaps sense the unspoken or missing parts of this past’ [WARD : 53]. For Françoise Kral, Newton’s text is the ‘ghost-text’ haunting the novel, while the telegraphic style of the log-book obliterates the ‘T’, ‘a convenient way of carrying out a responsibility-free zone and an ethical lacuna’ [KRAL, 2017]. The strategy radically differs from Toni Morrison’s landmark 1987 novel *Beloved*. To convey the Middle Passage and the fate of the uncountable ‘50 millions and more’,<sup>3</sup> Morrison created a rhizomatic poem in prose, a free-floating, haunting monologue. To redress the past, Phillips questions instead the ways in which history is performed or housed in the *white* archive. Kathie Birat explains that he problematizes history ‘by revealing its discursive nature’ [BIRAT, 1999], so that the novel, mimicking Newton’s computing and ‘assembling the bio-human cargo’ (to borrow Stephen Blevins’ words), ‘is about *unhousing* the past: about opening up archives and drawing history out’ [BLEVINS : 5].<sup>4</sup>

Ventriloquism confronts the reader with the captain’s computation. The log is packed with numbers, such as the date of each entry, specific times, the coordinates of the ship’s positions, the tons of rice, the regular reckoning of the number of slaves acquired, the death toll. As Vanessa Guignery points out, such psittacism comes with an edge: duplicating and displacing the copied text (by embedding it in a different context) alters its purpose [Rouen 2016].

<sup>1</sup> American writer Annie Dillard called this phenomenon ‘compassion fatigue’, after reading a newspaper headline: ‘Head-Spinning Numbers cause Mind to go Slack’ [See SLOVIC & SLOVIC : 80-81].

<sup>2</sup> John Newton was a slave trader; he later became an abolitionist and wrote the song ‘Amazing Grace’. In Phillips’s text, Hamilton’s journal offers no inkling of such a forthcoming conversion. Newton’s text is mentioned in the novel’s paratext, the opening acknowledgements.

<sup>3</sup> The epigraph of *Beloved* dedicates the novel to the victims of the Middle Passage.

<sup>4</sup> For Bénédicte Ledent, this recalls that, ‘far from occupying distinctly separate terrains, colonizer and colonized—their histories intertwined by imperialism—have since their encounter inhabited overlapping territories’ [LEDENT, 1995].

This is all the more significant as the numbers that seem to spring from Newton's journal are actually tampered with. Phillips signals appropriation by pasting together entries, changing a few words, and altering figures. For instance, rather than one woman on the 13<sup>th</sup> of June, 'No 47' [NEWTON : 56], three women, '(Nos 71, 104, 109)' are buried on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May [PHILLIPS; SEARLE; NEWTON : 56];<sup>1</sup> whereas Newton's entry for the 29<sup>th</sup> of May, reads 'Buryed a boy slave (No 86) of a flux' [NEWTON : 55], Hamilton's entry, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of May, becomes 'Buried a boy slave (No 189) of a flux' [PHILLIPS : 122].

Such slight revisions may seem immaterial, since the reader is hardly likely to notice. Nevertheless, they are significant. Quoting Marcus Wood, Vanessa Guignery considers that such fictional numbers have almost 'limitless implications', 'for they erase the trace of someone who existed and suffered, to replace it with a fiction, which does not even stop the slaves from being numbered and not named' [Rouen 2016]. Such altered numbers become a symptom, an element of friction meant to challenge the white narrative, not simply to stress the staggering amount of casualties (even before the journey across the Atlantic has started) but also the very process of erasure. For the fictional Hamilton, recording numbers, from temperatures to goods to the prices attributed to each human being in abstract 'bars',<sup>2</sup> is a routine activity, an industrious list. Adding and subtracting (the death-toll) to compose the 'cargo', reveals Hamilton's own psychic numbing, the process of dehumanization. Hamilton, who writes devoted letters to his wife, is not so much evil as in denial; the slave trade must remain for him a mere transaction, business as usual. Phillips explores here what Hannah Arendt defines as the 'banality of evil' [ARENDR, 1963]. Investigating the atrocities of World War Two, Arendt blames not so much cruelty *per se* or pathological Nazism but passivity, the human ability to obey, to suspend judgment, to create some semblance of normality; what is chilling is the way tattooing numbers, withdrawing identity, dehumanizing becomes a routine, all in the day's work.

Similarly, punctured by falsified numbers, the displaced journal of Hamilton interrogates the way in which numbers are used to weave denial, the 'banality of evil'. As Mark David Kaufman points out, 'Only in the ledger, manifest, or cargo list—in the itemized and quantitative table of the account—could the human body be rendered exchangeable, and so the business of 'bookkeeping' became both the reality and one of the master metaphors of slavery itself' [KAUFMAN, 2013]. The text challenges this 'terminology of bookkeeping', as the pastiche becomes 'a narrative that audits the tropological underpinnings of racial discourse' [*ibid.*] Psittacism, repeating almost *verbatim* the white dominant narrative, becomes a weapon of deconstruction, forcing the reader to engage with numbers, and thereby imagine the obverse reality of the crowded, the broken bodies crouching in the invisible hull below. Phillips's provocative choice of viewpoint prompts us to reach beyond the void of ellipsis and invisibility, to retrieve what has been carved out, glossed over, troped by numbers—to allow *une lecture en creux*.

If Phillips opts for pastiche and psittacism, other British writers try to find 'a voice for the voiceless' (to use Gormley's heading), by relying upon different kinds of repetition to explore other versions of indifference and numbing by numbers.

<sup>1</sup> 'This morning buryed a woman slave (No 47) Know not what to say she died of for she has not been properly alive since she first came on board' [NEWTON : 56]. Phillips remains very close to Newton, except for the figures: 'Before midnight buried three more women slaves (Nos 71, 104, 109). Know not what to say they died of for they have not been properly alive since they first came on board...' [PHILLIPS : 124].

<sup>2</sup> Bars represented an abstract amount used to evaluate the price of goods and slaves, measuring up the amount of goods (beads, weapons, or Indian cloth) that should be given in exchange for each purchase of man, woman or child.

### 3. Zadie Smith and repetitive numbers

Zadie Smith's 2013 short story 'The Embassy of Cambodia'<sup>1</sup> also plays on numbers to explore today's neo-liberal version of slavery. The novella is composed of 21 brief chapters; some of them adopt the perspective of a chorus-like 'we', which seems to stand for standard opinion in Willesden;<sup>2</sup> the other chapters follow the perspective of the protagonist Fatou, a quiet, hardworking maid from Ghana. Fatou has no legal status and no passport (it has been taken by her employers). Although she tries hard to convince herself that she is no slave, she is given no money [AHN, 'Social exclusion']. Sports are used as an ironic metaphor of social segregation. In this summer 2012 when 'we watched the Olympics' [SMITH 2013 : 7], Fatou uses her employers' pass (unbeknownst to them) to go to the swimming pool.<sup>3</sup> On the way, she walks past the Embassy of Cambodia.<sup>4</sup> Strangely enough, Fatou notices a game of badminton that goes on day after day, behind the walls of the Embassy: 'The only sign that a game is under way at all is the motion of the shuttlecock itself, alternately being lobbed and smashed, lobbed and smashed' [SMITH 2013 : 7]. The onomatopoeic motif ('Pock, smash. Pock, smash') is repeated throughout the novella,<sup>5</sup> as if punctuating the switch from 'we' to Fatou and vice versa, or materializing the game Fatou must play with her employers, softly responding to, and coping with ('pock'), their scathing orders ('smash'). Not only is 'Pock, smash' a leitmotif, but Smith heads each chapter with a score, 0-1, 0-2, up to 0-21, the last chapter. The invisible game becomes an allegory for the politics of indifference. Of course, there are 21 sets in a badminton game, but here the game is ironic rather than playful: the numbers suggest that for all her dignity and resilience, life is a game which Fatou cannot win, in fact in which she cannot score at all, always registering 0. To borrow Régine Camps-Robertson's terms, she is 'uncounted, unmarked, zero'. An oblique comment on the lavish display of the Olympics, the score brings into focus the invisible plight of Fatou, or what Agamben would call a 'bare life' [AGAMBEN, 1998] and Judith Butler a 'precarious life' [BUTLER, 2004]. Indeed, when Fatou spontaneously saves one of the children choking on a marble, she steps out of her part, the required invisibility defined by Guillaume Le Blanc [LE BLANC, 2009]. She is therefore dismissed, her employers considering her as expendable, a clear case of what Ilsup Ahn calls 'violence without penalty' [AHN : 143]. In the end, she sits stranded on the pavement, by a bus stop, opposite the Embassy of Cambodia. The people who see her fail to act, the pronoun 'we' mocking the lack of community care:

Many of us walked past her that afternoon, or spotted her as we rode the bus [...] Naturally we wondered what this girl was doing, sitting on the damp pavement in the middle of the day. We worried for her. We tend to assume the worst, here in Willesden. We watched her watching the shuttlecock. Pock, smash. Pock, smash. [SMITH 2013 : 5]

<sup>1</sup> London: Hamish Hamilton, 2013. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>2</sup> This 'we' turns out to be an old woman on a balcony.

<sup>3</sup> Unlike Olympic champions, she has taught herself to swim on a dirty African beach. The pool she goes to with employers' pass is a posh one; she herself swims in her underwear and bra, since she does not own a bathing costume.

<sup>4</sup> The Embassy of Cambodia actually happens to be located in Willesden; here, it inevitably connotes genocide.

<sup>5</sup> Besides, the dual impulse (lob and smash) is as it were replicated on a narrative scale, by the repetitive shifts from 'we' to Fatou.

The story challenges social neglect, the voiceless invisibility of the likes of Fatou;<sup>1</sup> it celebrates her resilience, against all odds, against the numbers, the badminton score, the people who wish to erase her. In multicultural London, she may or may not make it.

Smith's 2012 novel *NW*<sup>2</sup> also explores questions of social mobility, as well as community and divisiveness in Willesden, Smith's signature area. Philip Tew sees *NW* as a post-traumatic novel, pervaded by the sense of the breakdown of Enlightenment values: 'Smith's set of domestic crises is haunted by a city where distrust and violence subtend daily lives, and the text's architectonics echo a larger fragmentariness that permeates events, thoughts and people's understanding' [TEW, 2014]. The novel is split into five sections, entwining the lives of five characters (Leah, Keisha, Felix, Nathan and Shar) who grew up in cheap Council housing, five towers to which the text returns in the end, as if challenging all prospect of social mobility (the 5 sections which happen to be connected form a problematic ensemble or site, like the 5 towers). Leah, a white social worker, drifts and refuses to have a child, while her friend Keisha reinvents herself as Nathalie Blake, a successful black lawyer. Though they have a different social status, they both come from the same place, and so do Shar and Nathan, thus raising the question of the one and the many, the exception and the rule, exclusion and inclusion, or the individual and the collective. For Mary Eagleton, the novel critically questions the 'top girl', the self-driven highly educated 'subject of capacity' 'taking advantage of all opportunities, pursuing her professional goals and monitoring herself closely' [EAGLETON : 145],<sup>3</sup> to fit the neoliberal agenda. Although she becomes a player in the game, Natalie is intensely aware that she remains one among many, the token black woman in the system, so that repetition queries and queers her fate, puncturing her performance of gendered and social identity:

Daughter drag. Sister drag. Mother drag. Wife drag. Court drag. Rich drag. Poor drag. British drag. Jamaican drag. Each required a different wardrobe. But when considering these various attitudes she struggled to think what would be the most authentic, or perhaps the least inauthentic. [NW : 278]

At the other end of the scope, Shar is the intruder, the trespasser who rings Leah's bell to wheedle money out of her. Shar functions as a parasite in Michel Serres' sense of the word, an unwanted guest who may threaten the host organism (the sections are aptly entitled 'Visitation', 'Guest', 'Host'), but who also plays a crucial, dynamic role:

The parasite is an exciter. Far from transforming a system, changing its nature, its form, its elements, its relations and its pathways [...] the parasite makes it change states differentially. It inclines it. It makes the equilibrium of the energetic distribution fluctuate. It dopes it. It irritates it. It inflames it. Often this inclination has no effect. But it can produce gigantic ones by chain reactions or reproduction. [SERRES : 191]

Shar awakens connections with the past, she recalls Nathan (the drop-out whom Leah fancied once), the towers, the school of Brayton. She also prompts a desire that dares not speak its name, as Leah glances at her skin and senses the presence of her body. Numbers are used to make the text vibrate, convey the disturbance, the *frisson*, to provoke a shudder or shiver in the text to suggest what Leah cannot bring herself to think. As if irritated or 'excited' (to use Serres's concept) by the parasite,

<sup>1</sup> Hence the mock disclaimer regarding the limited scope of the interests of Fatou, reflecting the problem of encompassing such bare lives: 'Surely there is something to be said for drawing a circle around our attention and remaining within that circle. But how large should this circle be?' [SMITH 2013 : 24].

<sup>2</sup> London: Penguin, 2012. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in the text.

<sup>3</sup> Eagleton draws attention to doubling (Leah/Keisha), and to the 'at-risk girl', Shar [150].

the text begins to stutter, hiccupping on the tale-telling number 37, a figure which for Leah recalls the address of the woman lover she had in her youth. Similarly, Leah traces Shar's squat, thirty-seven Ridley avenue,<sup>1</sup> in a thirty-seventh chapter which takes place, lo and behold, between chapters eleven and twelve. The statue of the black Madonna (with child) addresses Leah (who has just had an abortion) in a mock 'visitation' that occurs in yet another chapter thirty-seven, which is this time set between chapters seventeen and eighteen<sup>2</sup>. Number 37 is thus both ubiquitous and out of place, it makes the fabric of the text pulsate. A symptom of unspeakable emotion, it significantly fails to appear in Natalie's section, which (unlike Leah's neo-modernist stream of consciousness) is shaped like a kind of diary, with its brief entries headed by numbers; there is no entry number 37 for Natalie. Thus the number haunts the text, goes viral, a parasite that stimulates or remains a symptom of failed emotional and social circulation.

Interestingly enough, in this state-of-the-nation novel, number 37 is also applied to transport, as has been subtly studied by Lauren Elkin: 'Every ride in the book recalls this judgment: public transport comes to signify a refusal or an inability to buy into the upwardly aspirational values of Thatcherite Britain' [ELKIN, 2015]. Lauren Elkin connects *NW* and Smith's insistence on bus routes, Google maps and a fateful underground ride<sup>3</sup> with Margaret Thatcher's attack on public transport. The novel quotes the conservative Prime Minister's infamous proverbial phrase, 'Anyone over the age of thirty catching a bus can consider himself a failure' [NW: 44]. Elkin points out that Thatcher's bourgeois dream of a car society actually goes against the very structure of the city, and suggests that later policies changed little to Thatcher's transport act that denationalized and deregulated bus services, as part of a series of budget cuts that crippled the city. The issues that surfaces through circulation are both upward mobility (or lack thereof) and race: 'Bringing the train back up from underground is Smith's gesture at replacing a rhetoric of public transport with one that brings the repressed subject of race in Britain to the surface' [ELKIN, 2015].

#### **4. Jonathan Coe's satirical *Number 11: the great reckoning***

Jonathan Coe also engages with what Elkin calls the 'Tory insistence on cost and efficiency' [ELKIN, 2015], Thatcherian legacy and the post-Thatcher years, from deceptive Tony Blair to David Cameron. *Number 11*, Jonathan Coe's 11<sup>th</sup> novel, was published in 2015, on the 11 of November (the eleventh month of the year). Coe claimed that he was doing critics a favour, saving reviewers hackneyed phrases like 'this is Jonathan Coe's nth novel'.<sup>4</sup> But there is more to this number eleven than a joke, it becomes a narrative strategy. The novel might be called a small baggy monster,<sup>5</sup> with its five stories that are loosely stitched together by the recurrent number 11. In the first story, a spoof of horror movies like *Psycho*, two little girls venture in an old house, 11 Needless Alley; instead of a decaying Mrs Bates in the cellar, they find an old Chinese Man, an illegal alien. In the second story, Number 11 is the iconic bus route in Birmingham, with its roll call of familiar stops. In the third story,

<sup>1</sup> She also recalls a woman who once was her lover and who was fascinated by the number thirty-seven.

<sup>2</sup> The paragraph ends with the desire that things might be 'differently arranged, in a different order, in a different place' [74], a metatextual comment on the play on numbers in chapter headings, reflecting the sense that life is a puzzle that might be pieced back together, if one only knew how, a wish which is ironically undermined by social determinism.

<sup>3</sup> Felix dies because he is asked by a pregnant white woman to take sides on the underground. The black boy he addresses later stabs him in the street, not far from a bus stop, a reworking of the Stephen Lawrence murder.

<sup>4</sup> He said that he just jotted down the number on a page, because it was his eleventh novel and he had no title yet, but it sort of stuck ['Jonathan Coe in Conversation with Roger Shannon'].

<sup>5</sup> As opposed to the loose baggy monster, the Victorian three-decker.

11 refers to a storage facility.<sup>1</sup> In the fourth story, Number 11 is a table in the hall of the magnificent brand-new Birmingham Library, during a banquet for an award ceremony, where the menu is spoken out loud by a living head (it revolves at the centre of the table, the rest of the waiter's body being hidden under the table). In the final story, 'What a Whopper', Number 11 is both 11, Downing Street, where the Chancellor of the Exchequer lives, and a house which is being rebuilt downward. Coe satirizes the constructions that are taking place all over London, the crave for basement conversions: since the law prevents building higher up or extending horizontally, rich owners seek to maximize profit and increase property value through monumental work below. Laurent Mellet notes that *Number 11* revisits H.G. Wells's cityscape 'with the Eloi above and the Morlocks below' [MELLETT, 2018 : 4], adding a dystopian streak to his satirical method. The mega-basement craze involves constant noise and disruption, shaking the neighbours' houses. In Coe's satiric version, the super-basement is not 3 or 4 stories, but 11 stories deep. It accommodates a luxury garage, a swimming pool that occupies three floors with its palm trees and diving boards, and the eleventh floor below, which is meant for the maid and the protagonist Rachel, who takes care of the two little girls (it is significant that the teacher should now occupy the lowest rank rather than the attic).<sup>2</sup> The two owners hardly ever actually occupy the house.

The satire of the subterranean building boom is part of the wider reflexion on the collapse of communality. Rachel's employers are not simply wealthy homeowners with diamond-studded baths, they are also tax dodgers who employ an advisor for efficient, legalized tax evasion. They are the new elusive empty elite, taking over from the allegorical Winshaw family of *What a Carve Up* (*Number 11* is the sequel to Coe's best-known novel). With its clusters of numbers 11, the novel is a response to Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne's famous claim at the 2009 Conservative Party conference, 'We are all in this together' [*Number 11* : 231]. The sentence is the epigraph of the last section of the novel, followed by the title of the section in large characters, 'What a whopper!' [231]. The novel clearly targets Osborne and the austerity policies, and sets out to expose his blatant lie.

The phrase recurs in the thoughts of Val, a Birmingham librarian who rides around the city on the Number 11 bus,<sup>3</sup> because she can no longer afford to heat her flat, her working hours having been cut:

In 2008, there had been a global financial crisis and some of the world's largest banks had been on the point of collapse. The people had bailed them out and now, it seemed, public services would have to be slashed and benefits would have to be cut. But it was worth it because we had been living beyond our means and we were 'all in this together' [89-90].

The bewildered Val automatically picks up the spurious 'we' used by Osborne. Internal focalization is used here to prompt the reader to go beyond the character's puzzled thoughts and to question the assumption of equality, especially since 'benefits', meaning social help, may be cut, but profit certainly is not as far as the wealthiest are concerned, as exemplified by the owners of the super-basement in the last section. Coe's vision of the aftermath of the bank crisis adds a twist to Jean-Joseph Goux's analysis of coined words or 'faux-monnyage signifiant', since terms are warped rather than coined: 'This new buzzword—austerity—had only entered common currency about a year ago' [GOUX : 89].

<sup>1</sup> It supposedly contains a valuable copy of a lost movie called 'The Crystal Garden'. Ultimately the box is empty, suggesting that the Edenic pristine social pastoral can never be found, and that the nostalgic paraphernalia of the likes of Downton Abbey is a fabricated lie.

<sup>2</sup> The burlesque construction is only a slight exaggeration of the pools, cinemas and gyms that are actually being constructed in this super-rich takeover of London.

<sup>3</sup> Like the bus, number eleven circulates and goes round and round in circles in the book.

Purposeless lavish spending is opposed to such official austerity. Coe explains that he was prompted by a figure to write *Number 11*, when he read the staggering statistics published by Oxfam. An angry Rachel actually mentions this figure in the novel:

'The poorest half of the world has the same amount of money as the richest *eighty-five* people. Did you know that?'

'Of course I did,' he said, sounding impatient now. 'It was in all the papers a few months ago. It's a meaningless statistic.'

'Meaningless? Doesn't it make you think?'

'It makes me think that the poorest half of the world should get their act together'. [*Number 11* : 301]

Coe satirizes the callous indifference of the financial system; struck by the statistics, he suggests that this does not add up, that such a dissymmetry is monstrous.

If the crisis makes property value soar in London, other values simply collapse— such as the value bestowed on the ethical, the unseen, the emotional. Whatever cannot be quantified is now deprived of value. As Andreas and Greenhill point out, '[w]e live in a hyper-numeric world preoccupied with quantification. [...] Therefore, to measure something—or at least to claim to do so—is to announce existence and signal its importance and policy relevance' [ANDREAS & GREENHILL : 1]. Coe mocks the attempts that are made not to redress the system but to compromise in order, supposedly, to undermine it. One character, Laura, leaves teaching after publishing a book entitled 'Monetizing wonder'. She works for Lord Lucrum (an embodiment of Mammon, as shown by onomastics) and her job consists in quantifying and granting monetary value to abstract things. For instance, she claims on TV that the 25 human skeletons found when digging Crossrail have value, not in terms of historical knowledge but in terms of financial benefits, because they add mystery to urban transport and will increase tourism, and so they should be preserved. Commodification creates a kind of abstract value, perhaps akin to the immaterial bars used for slave trading. Laura has produced an algorithm to quantify the unquantifiable, to price awe and wonder. Without numbers, things no longer exist.

Like *What A Carve Up*, *Number 11* is a satire. For Vanessa Guignery, *What A Carve Up* responds to seismic change in Britain with a postmodernist method, 'its polygenericity, its self-reflexivity, its use of parody and of popular forms and its shifts from one narrative mode to another' [Jonathan Coe : 67]. In *Number 11*, Coe also plays on genres to dissect tabloid culture, TV reality shows, celebrity culture and austerity policies (including the collapse of the Welfare State), as well as the so-called social media. The Internet is a spider's web that allows the circulation of information but also of blind anonymous hate. When Val, a one-time singer hoping for a comeback, joins a TV reality show, she is locked in a cave with insects pouring all over her, in spite of her claustrophobia. She is also forced to try to swallow a huge insect, which defecates in her mouth out of fear. The scene shows equal cruelty towards the human and the animal, for the sake of audience ratings. The show is edited to distort what Val does and says, in order to make her look stupid, so that vile sexist messages swamp her website. There is madness in the show, and in the blind hysterical reactions to it; the process is traumatic (the insect in the mouth is akin to rape), but violence is denied by the society of the spectacle. The boundaries of self and body are no longer protected.

The five stories are made to cohere towards the end of the state-of-the-nation novel.<sup>1</sup> In the section entitled 'The Winshaw Prize', Coe parodies detective stories; the police officer, nicknamed

<sup>1</sup> This is not just a state-of-London novel, but a reflexion upon contemporary Britain.

Nate of the Station, solves crimes by practicing psychogeography, reading Aristotle, Gramsci, Bourdieu and Barthes, inferring clues from the context. It is a *topos* of literary criticism to compare the reader's hermeneutic quest to detection; like the spoonerism (Nate of the Station for State of the Nation), turning the detective into a believer in cultural studies, using the humanities to solve crimes, is a brilliant burlesque inversion. It also reminds the reader to connect the dots and clues, the one and the many, individual situations and social collapse, to trace the various numbers 11 and to place everything in context.

The novel ends with a shift to horror films, referring to old B movies like *Quatermass and the Pit* or *Death Line* [Number 11 : 259]. The villain, the tax adviser, meets his come-uppance in the shape of a giant spider, that attacks him when he begins molesting Rachel. The scene inverts sexual abuse, but also the moment when Val was made to put the insect in her mouth, as the giant spider smothers the tax advisor's mouth.

The spoof of B movies is explained away as Rachel seems to be the only one who sees the monstrous spiders, so that they might be a hallucination. Her breakdown ties in with images of madness that pepper the novel (such as the playing cards featuring a spider drawn by Joseph Baqué, a mad artist, for instance). Ultimately, however, it is England as a whole, not just an individual, that has run mad. The aforementioned Oxfam statistics are the sign of a world gone mad, but as Coe puts it in an interview ['Conversation with Professor Roger Shannon'], it is equally mad to read such a figure in the newspaper and turn a blind eye to it. The 1961 film *What a Cropper*, which Coe explicitly refers to in interviews, deals with a hoax about the Loch Ness monster; yet the genuine Loch Ness monster makes a cameo appearance at the very end. This suggests that the monstrous spider could also be genuine. For the spiders spring from the underground, from below the 11<sup>th</sup> sub-basement floor, they are the Other that have been disturbed by man's hubris, they represent the return of the repressed. The last chapter is a brief monologue by a metamorphic migrant, intent on destroying the villains (such as the tax adviser and Josephine Winshaw, the conservative tabloid journalist and the last descendant of the Winshaws). Thus the novel engages with obscene wealth and drastic cuts, but also with England's inability to face the migrant question. The Chinese man whom the two girls find in the beginning is related to the Chinese cockle-pickers who were drowned on Morecambe Bay. The visible or invisible threads that tie the house, which only Rachel sees, are metaphors, a counter-web opposing the web of money and of the Internet. The monstrous lines are a metaphor for the writer's rhizomatic web which the reader must negotiate. Coe's novel is hilarious, but it is not funny — it aims to create affect through laughter, to wield satire as a weapon,<sup>1</sup> while acknowledging, as Laurent Mellet stresses, the limits of satire.<sup>2</sup> Coe cannibalizes and ridicules strategies of insensitive economic exploitation, to call for a reversal and a return to humane values.

To conclude, in contemporary art, numbers are reclaimed from statistics and become a symptom, a call for experience, an appeal for *dissensus* in Rancière's sense of the word. For Rancière, numbers do not add up, a community and a democracy are composed of more than numbers, including « la partie supplémentaire par rapport à tout compte des parties de la population, qui permet d'identifier au tout de la communauté le compte des incomptés » [RANCIÈRE : 233-234]. Phillips's psittacism conjures up historical crime. Through his novel, through Gormley's silent,

<sup>1</sup> The self-reflexive novel also seems to acknowledge that laughter is not enough, also questioning the actual impact of comedians and one-man-shows, suggesting that they may have become a routine part of the system rather than a challenge to it.

<sup>2</sup> « Coe dénonce alors les écueils d'une littérature satirique qui ne saurait avoir pour objet de 'remettre en question l'ordre établi', et qui crée l'exact inverse de ce que l'auteur entendait faire [...] » [MELLET, 2015 : 297].

interrogating statues, Smith's scoring for the outcasts and Coe's mad arithmetic, the spectator/reader is made to engage with both past and present, in order to recall the value of singularity, relationality and collective structures, as opposed to forces of erasure and exploitation. As Scott Slovic puts it,

*how information is communicated [...] such as the entwining of numerical and narrative descriptions or sometimes the extension of numerical data into narrative or visual analogues—may be essential to our apprehending (and perhaps counteracting) the dangers and injustices human beings impose upon ourselves and the planet. [SLOVIC & SLOVIC : 220]*

Numbers function like a potent signal, a strategic narrative device. Playing with numbers creates parasitic interferences that help to undermine hegemonic systems and revive analytic powers, and perhaps, to trigger underground forces of resistance.

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