Carolin Gebauer

Digital Times: The Present-Tense Novel as a Response to Digitization and Social Acceleration

About the author

University of Wuppertal, Gauss Str. 20, D-42119 Wuppertal, Germany
gebauer@uni-wuppertal.de

Abstract

How does generic change manifest itself in the twenty-first century? Proceeding from the increasing popularity of present-tense narration among contemporary novelists, this article claims that the present-tense novel is a direct response to the cultural changes and challenges of the digital age. The essay unfolds this argument in two steps: It first establishes a link between digitization and our current understanding of time, which is determined by notions of the extended present (Helga Nowotny) and social acceleration (Hartmut Rosa), and then goes on to investigate how present-tense narrative reacts to these developments. Taking Sally Rooney's *Normal People* and Bernadine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* as examples, the article shows that the present-tense novel negotiates contemporary configurations of time in various ways, as it either imitates the fast and superficial practices of storytelling in the new media environment or functions as a literary corrective to digitization and the acceleration of life.

Keywords

present-tense novel, generic change, configurations of time, digitization, social acceleration, Bernadine Evaristo, Sally Rooney

1 Introduction*

In their introduction to the recent special issue on "Modes of Reading" of *Poetics Today*, the editors claim that "[a]fter a long history of being a privileged form of expression, printed literature is now increasingly in competition with other media, and many consider it an endangered species" [1, p. 132]. The rise of digital media has once more revived the old debate about the allegedly imminent death of the novel.[1] Yet many literary scholars assure us that, at least in the context of anglophone literature, the novel is far from dying. When Vera and Ansgar Nünning begin their introduction to a recent handbook on the British novel in the twenty-first century with a reference to Malcolm Bradbury's ironic proposal to simply write the genre off,[2] they do so only to emphasize that the novel has "continued to flourish by engaging with a host of current issues, generating new forms and sub-genres, and enjoying great popularity and cultural prestige" [5, p. 3]. Likewise, Christoph Bode, in his contribution to De Gruyter's *Handbook of the English Novel of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, describes the novel's fate as an "open-ended story" [6, p. 40]: The genre, he predicts, "can prevail as long as it stays novel," sticking to its traditional "success formula" of "continuity through discontinuity" [6, p. 40]. Even in times of digitization and social media, the novel is far from extinction. On the contrary: the rise in book sales figures in 2020 [7], [8], as well as the flourishing of virtual book clubs during COVID-19 lockdowns [9], [10], leave us in no doubt that the genre is "alive and kicking" [5, p. 3].

Like all genres, however, the novel does not exist in a contextual vacuum, but is rooted within historical, cultural, and political contexts [11, p. 12]. Given that these external influences are permanently in flux, the novel is also constantly subject to change. Some of the most influential theories of generic change suggest that "genres can be conceived of as answers or responses to history or cultural challenges" [11, p. 27]. It is entirely natural, therefore, that changes in the language of our reality should evoke changes in our literary system – the language of its imaginative interpretation. In light of the progressive digitization of all spheres of contemporary life, it seems reasonable to assume that the novel will be strongly influenced by its digital background and its closer competitors, especially the internet and social media. Qualifying as an 'old' print medium, the genre is under increasing pressure to react to the ways in which the contemporary common reader has become used to consuming information via digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, or e-readers.

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That this article focuses exclusively on the novel is not supposed to imply that Andersen et al.'s argument only pertains to this particular literary genre [1]. The first part of Adam Hammond's Literature in the Digital Age, for example, addresses the question whether literature in general is dying in the digital age [2], and Simone Murray, at the beginning of The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing and Selling Books in the Internet Era, revisits previous speculation over the "death of [the medium of] the book" [3, p. 1] in the wake of advancing digital communication technologies.

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After showing, in his preface to The Modern British Novel, that the genre was declared dead in every decade of the twentieth century [4, pp. xii–xiv], Bradbury concludes with a wink that it may probably be best to "agree that the novel [...] is dead," while at the same time accepting that a considerable number of authors carry on "writing something peculiarly like it" [4, p. xiv]

But how exactly does the contemporary novel respond to the rapidly changing conditions of the "digital literary sphere" [3]? Bode's success formula implies that one reason for the novel's survival in the digital age is that it continuously reinvents and adapts itself to new media environments. And one of the genre's striking adaptation strategies is arguably an aesthetic feature: the use of the present tense. Indeed, the last two decades have seen an unprecedented surge in present-tense narration. While in the middle of the twentieth century, the present tense was still considered an unconventional characteristic of the French *nouveau roman*, it qualifies today as a common narrative feature that is no longer restricted to literary experiments. As previous work on the present-tense novel has shown [12], [13], this multifaceted strategy appears in various genres, ranging from the historical novel to science fiction, from romance to thriller, from children's books to young adult fiction; in bestsellers like Suzanne Collins's *Hunger Games* series or E. L. James's *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy; and in the work of critically acclaimed novelists like Margaret Atwood, J. M. Coetzee, Ian McEwan, Hilary Mantel, and Ali Smith. Over the last ten years, the fictional present[3] has continually caused literary critics to argue about the pros and cons of its functions and effects;[4] besides, present-tense narration has paved its way into guidebooks on creative writing [15, Ch. 4], [16, pp. 49–56] and, most recently, even into one of the popular MasterClasses [17].

It may not be a coincidence that the boom of the present-tense novel set in at the turn of the millennium, almost concurrently with the transformation of the early internet into the participatory and interactive social space of Web 2.0 [18] and with the acceleration of everyday life inaugurated by "digital capitalism" [19]. Proceeding from the observation that generic change is mainly triggered by "cultural dynamics" [11], this essay claims that the present-tense novel is a direct response to the cultural changes and challenges of the digital age. It first revisits possible reasons for the unprecedented vogue of the fictional present documented in previous research, in order to unfold an argument about the relation between digitization and our current understanding of time. My readings of Sally Rooney's *Normal People* [20] and Bernadine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* [21] then show how present-tense narrative reacts to these new configurations of time in different ways, either imitating the fast and fugacious practices of storytelling in the new media environment or functioning as a literary corrective to social acceleration and digitization.

2 Digitization, Social Acceleration, and Present-Tense Narration

At the end of *Present-Tense Narration in Contemporary Fiction: A Narratological Overview*, Irmtraud Huber investigates the rationales behind the widespread popularity of present-tense usage in contemporary fiction [13, pp. 107–109]. She first argues that the current rise of the present-tense novel is largely the result of the growing influence of creative writing programmes and the long-term consequences of postmodernism. Secondly, she takes perspectives from the social sciences and media studies into consideration, synthesizing hypotheses proposed by sociologists and media critics like Hartmut Rosa, Helga Nowotny, and Douglas Rushkoff, all of whom investigate how recent technological advances and the ongoing process of digitization have changed the Western world's conception of time.

Huber's starting point is Hartmut Rosa's theory of social acceleration. In his programmatic study *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, Rosa proceeds from the assumption "that

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I have introduced the term fictional present [12] to set present-tense narration in fictional contexts apart from uses of the present tense in non-fictional discourses such as the conversational historical present [14].

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When Mantel's Wolf Hall won the 2009 Man Booker Prize, it sparked a controversial debate among literary critics, with Philip Hensher and Philip Pullman denouncing the use of the present tense as a feature of unsophisticated writing. For a detailed discussion and criticism of this debate, see Gebauer [12, Ch. 1] and Huber [13, Ch. 1].

the manner of our being-in-the-world depends to a great degree on the *temporal structures* (*Zeitstrukturen*) of the society in which we live" [22, p. xxxviii; italics in the original]. The quality of our lives, he argues, depends on how we want to spend our time; yet as individuals we cannot determine or even influence the parameters of time: its horizons, structures, speed, and rhythm. Since temporal structures "have a collective nature and a social character," they "continuously confront acting individuals as a solid fact" [22, p. xxxviii].

The time structures of our age, Rosa argues, mainly manifest themselves in three different processes of "social acceleration": technological acceleration, the acceleration of social change, and an accelerating pace of life. The first category refers to the "intentional, technical, and above all technological (i.e., machine-based) acceleration of goal-directed processes," including transportation, communication, and the production of goods and services [22, p. 71]. While technological acceleration describes the acceleration of phenomena *within* society, Rosa's second category – the acceleration of social change – relates to the time structures of society itself [22, p. 77]: the pace-change in the structures and patterns, practices and actions of social relationships [22, p. 74]. Rosa's third category – the acceleration of the pace of life – introduces a paradox of the twenty-first century. Given that today we are equipped with better and faster technology, it would only be logical to assume that we have more time at our disposal than we did in the past. Yet the opposite is the case, for in modern times "the increase of the quantity of actions exceeds the technical enhancement of the speed of performance" [22, p. 79]. The result is a "shortage of time resources and [...] consequent 'lack of time' (*Zeitnot*)" [22, p. 78]: we are overwhelmed with a growing sense of being "pressed for time and in a stressful compulsion to accelerate as well as in anxiety about 'not keeping up'" [22, p. 79]. And this influences our human sense of time.

In her well-known study on the modern and postmodern experience of time, Helga Nowotny [23, Ch. 2, especially pp. 48–51] contends that contemporary society has lost its belief in the idea of inevitable and steady progress, long fuelled by technological advance. Today, the consequences of progress, both positive and negative, press ever more powerfully on our lives. Hence the future, Nowotny maintains, "no longer offers that projection space into which all desires, hopes and fears could be projected without many inhibitions because it seemed sufficiently remote to be able to absorb everything which had no place or was unwelcome in the present" [23, p. 5]; instead, it has merged with our here-and-now, with the result that the temporal category of the future has been increasingly superseded by what Nowotny refers to as "the extended present" [23, p. 51][5] – a category Rosa [22, p. 21], in his discussion of Nowotny's thesis, suggests should be construed as a direct consequence of modern processes of acceleration.

Proceeding from the observation that generic change is mainly triggered by "cultural dynamics", this essay claims that the present-tense novel is a direct response to the cultural changes and challenges of the digital age.

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Nowotny's understanding of the extended present shares some striking features with Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's [24] notion of the "broad present." For a more detailed discussion of Gumbrecht's concept in relation to the present-tense novel, see Gebauer [12, pp. 315–317].

With the benefit of hindsight, one can argue that literary scholar Ursula K. Heise already anticipated Rosa's paradigm and its connection to Nowotny's ideas when, in her 1997 study *Chronoschisms: Time, Narrative, and Postmodernism*, she contended that "the most significant changes in the last thirty years have taken place in transportation and communications" – spheres of innovation which "have foregrounded mainly two temporal values: simultaneity and instantaneity" [25, p. 23]. Since these temporal values are, moreover, closely linked to the permanent urge for instant availability [25, p. 25], Heise maintains that the use of new ICT "immerses the individual in a 'hyperpresent' of sorts, a hyper-intensified immediacy that focuses the user's attention on a rapid succession of micro-events and thereby makes it more difficult to envision even the short-term past or future" [25, p. 26].

Heise's notion of the 'hyperpresent' offers a possible explanation for Rosa's time-pressure paradox. Previous analyses of contemporary society that foreground his acceleration thesis have often established a causal link between technological acceleration and the constant time pressure characteristic of our high-speed society [19, p. 16]. The reason for this is that digital communication increasingly relies on real-time technologies which create a "growing sense of time-space compression in everyday life" [19, p. 17]: "Time becomes beyond control as distance disappears in a world of instantaneous and simultaneous events." [19, p. 17] Instant messaging and social media technologies serve as perfect examples of such time-space compression: Status updates in instant messaging apps or timelines on social media sites invite us to constantly report on our current actions and whereabouts, so that the virtual community of our followers can always share in our experiences irrespective of their location. But the 'hyperpresent' generated by real-time technologies has a significant effect on our minds: it puts us in a state of what media theory has identified as "present shock" [13, p. 108]. In his eponymous book, Douglas Rushkoff defines this as a state of anxiety about society's need for constant up-to-dateness that severely impacts the ways in which we make sense of our world [26]. "[O]ur culture," he argues, "becomes an entropic, static hum of everybody trying to capture the slipping moment," a condition in which "[n]arrativity and goals are surrendered to a skewed notion of the real and the immediate" that perfectly fits the short-winded format of Tweets or status updates on Facebook and Instagram [26, p. 6].

How does this analysis of our understanding of time in the digital age relate to the present-tense novel? As I have argued in *Making Time: World Construction in the Present-Tense Novel* [12, pp. 312–313], Huber considers the possibility that the widely observed focus on the here-and-now could be causing the recent surge in present-tense narratives. The use of the present tense, she affirms, might seem to heighten the significance and urgency of a story, thus directly responding to our contemporary obsession with the present moment. However, she also casts doubt on such a view, as she emphasizes that fictional present-tense usage is not confined to simultaneous narration, but may similarly occur in retrospective narratives [13, p. 108]. What is more, she observes that new media and modern ICT do not feature as themes in the forty-three novels she examines in her study, stressing that none of these narratives explicitly deals with topics relating to social acceleration [13, pp. 106, 108].[6] In light of these findings, Huber concludes that "the old medium of the novel seems to remain quite conservative in its resistance to recent technological and social changes" [13, p. 108].

Unlike Huber, I have suggested that the contemporary present-tense novel *can* "be read as a direct response to current trends such as social

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A similar observation has been made by Nünning and Nünning [27, p. 41]: "[T]he predominant role of digital media has up to now been largely conspicuous by its absence in contemporary British fiction. Although some contemporary novels have adapted and integrated, e.g., particular text-types (like emails and text messages) of electronic communication, generating new genres like the email novel, it is still an open question whether other new genres will emerge from a more intense engagement with the rapid developments of digital media, technologies and lifestyles."

acceleration or the increasing digitization of contemporary culture" [12, p. 313] – one of the most important forces driving our accelerated lives [19, p. 6]. My reading is inspired by Heise's contention brought forth in *Chronoschisms* that narrative fiction "is most directly dependent on its deployment in and as time" and thus constitutes the literary genre "where changes in the cultural conception of temporality can be expected to play themselves out most visibly and with the greatest impact on literary form" [25, p. 2]. It may be true that, as Huber notes, few contemporary present-tense novels make social acceleration or new ICT their explicit theme; nevertheless, I would argue (with Heise) that "these texts engage with new configurations of time in the present age" [12, p. 313]. As my readings of Rooney's *Normal People* and Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* will show, these novels negotiate the effects of the extended present on society (e.g. shortage of time, present shock) through their narrative form rather than their themes.

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3 Episodic Narration and the Unnarrated: Sally Rooney's *Normal People*

Sally Rooney's *Normal People*, first published in 2018, revolves around Marianne and Connell, two young adults who grew up together in a small town in the west of Ireland. The novel traces the protagonists' on-off relationship over a span of four years, covering their final year at school and their first years at Trinity College Dublin. In school, Marianne is a loner who becomes a victim of mobbing, whereas Connell is popular and well-liked. However, the character constellation changes as soon as the two lovers enter university: now Marianne is the famous student, while Connell, with his rural and working-class background, remains in the shadows of his girlfriend's popularity among her rich urban friends [28, p. 30].

Mostly written in the present tense, *Normal People* presents the narrative events through the voice of a heterodiegetic narrator who alternately takes Marianne or Connell as focalizer. Although the plot mainly unfolds in the protagonists' present – i.e. the period from January 2011 to February 2015 – every chapter contains internal analepses [29, p. 49] recounting events that take place earlier than the point in time designated in the chapter heading[7] but without exceeding the time-span of the novel. As is typical of present-tense novels that include flashbacks, these analepses are indicated by tense shifts into the preterite [12, p. 65]. Rooney uses the strategy of tense-switching as a means of *temporalization* [12, pp. 69–70] that helps readers grasp the temporal structure of *Normal People*: After reading the first chapters, they will quickly understand that the present tense refers to the diegetic present, whereas the past tense refers to moments in the diegetic past that lie within the scope of the story time covered by the narrative[8]

A closer look, however, reveals that the "formulaic" [30, p. 172] pattern of tense alternation in *Normal People* is more complex than it first seems, for Rooney's tense shifts correlate with changes in style which highlight different

7 Chapters in Normal People are not numbered but headed with a time designation. The first chapter, for example, is titled "January 2011" and the second chapter is titled "Three Weeks Later (February 2011)."

8 For a more detailed linguistic analysis of Rooney's tense-switching scheme, see Miyahara [30, especially pp. 172–174].

modes of narrative representation. To make this clear, I will first focus on the present-tense passages. Thus, the beginning of the second chapter depicts Marianne sitting at her dressing table, getting ready for a date with Connell. The first paragraph informs us that, while contemplating her face in the mirror, she tries to make up her mind whether or not to put on make-up. Without further ado, the second paragraph sends us to the downstairs hallway, where Marianne is surprised by her brother when she is about to leave the house:

> Downstairs, when she takes her coat off the hook, her brother Alan comes out from the living room.
> Where are you going? he says.
> Out.
> Where's out?
> She puts her arms through the sleeves of her coat and adjusts the collar. She's beginning to feel nervous now and hopes her silence is communicating insolence rather than uncertainty.
> Just out for a walk, she says.
> Alan moves to stand in front of the door.
> Well, I know you're not going out to meet friends, he says. Because you don't have any friends, do you?
> No, I don't. [20, p. 9]

The excerpt illustrates that Rooney's use of present-tense narration correlates with the representational mode of showing.[9] Except for a few scattered inquit phrases ("he says," "she says"), which are necessary for readers to keep track of who is saying what, the confrontation between Marianne and Alan is presented without any discernible interference on the part of the narrator. Readers consequently get the feeling of perceiving the narrative action as if they were "somehow near the events of the story" [31, p. 846], while at the same time having immediate access to Marianne's consciousness. The seeming lack of any narratorial mediation, however, leads to important information gaps. At this point of the narrative, readers do not yet know that Marianne has a dysfunctional relationship with her brother, so they can only infer from Alan's domineering questions and bullying remarks and Marianne's reactions (short answers, nervousness, and a wish to appear strong) that there is something odd about the ways in which the siblings interact with each other. But readers will learn only later that Alan abuses Marianne [20, pp. 65, 141–142]; in the given scene she eventually manages to leave the house before the situation escalates [20, p. 10].

Such instances of what Gerald Prince would refer to as "the unnarrated, or nonnarrated" [32, p. 2] are also relevant for the novel's macrostructure. The individual chapters of *Normal People* not only begin *in medias res*, as in the previous example, but also end abruptly, typically in the middle of a conflict or decisive moment in the focalizing character's life. Chapter 9 illustrates this perfectly. When Connell realizes that Marianne always tends to be submissive in relationships (he knows of her family situation) and finds himself contemplating the idea "that he could hit her face, very hard even, and she would just sit there and let him" [20, pp. 105–106], he is shocked about these thoughts and starts feeling sick. Marianne, who notices the sudden change in her boyfriend's behaviour, tries to find out what is going on:

> You look morbidly pale, she says. Are you feeling faint? He says no. She takes his hand and tells him it feels damp. He nods, he's breathing hard. Quietly Marianne says: If I've done something to upset you, I'm really sorry. He forces a laugh and takes his hand away. No, a weird feeling came over me, he says. I don't know what it was. I'm okay now. [20, p. 106]

The scene marks a turning point in Marianne and Connell's relationship: Will he give in to his feelings or will he manage to repress these dangerous thoughts? For the time being, the narrative leaves us in the dark, as the chapter ends with a cliff-hanger. The next chapter is set three months later – now we are presented with a scene in which Marianne is standing in the supermarket and talking on the phone to her friend Joanne [20, p. 107] – and it is only nine

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For a discussion of the narratological distinction between telling and showing, see Klauk and Köppe [31].

pages into the chapter that a flashback eventually informs us that Connell broke up with Marianne shortly after he detected the first signs of his dubious desire [20, p. 116].

This time-jump is representative of the narrative progression in *Normal People*. Whenever a situation gets complicated, the narrative discourse stops and sets in again only at a later point in time. The resulting gaps in the plot are filled – typically in the following chapter – with a flashback. As already mentioned, these past-tense analepses stress a different mode of presentation, featuring the external perspective of a narrator rather than the internal perspective of a protagonist [33, Ch. 7]. This is especially apparent in the flashback presented in Chapter 8. In the first (present-tense) paragraphs, Marianne apologizes to Connell for her behaviour on the previous evening: they both went to a party where she got drunk and tried to seduce him, even though they are no longer a couple. As is characteristic of Rooney's use of the present tense, which highlights the mode of showing, the conversation between the two friends only alludes to this event, Connell replying to Marianne that "these things happen" [20, p. 83]; yet readers are still ignorant of what this means. But the next paragraph provides clarification: Its first sentence – "This is the thing that happened" [20, p. 83] – not only introduces the flashback, but also establishes a communicative situation between narrator and narratee. The former becomes an overt, commenting voice revealing its influence on the narrative discourse through "hypothetical focalization" [34, p. 303], speculating about how Marianne would have responded to Connell's reactions if she had not been drunk: "He made a kind of frowning expression, which if she had been sober would have induced her to pretend she had only been joking" [20, p. 87]. The past-tense analepses in the novel can thus be seen to favour mediated over immediate forms of presentation.

What is the purpose of this fixed correlation of past and present tenses with the modes of telling and showing? Following Kazunari Miyahara's suggestion to consider Rooney's tense usage as "collectively symbolic" [30, p. 186], I would contend that tense alternation in *Normal People* fulfils a *thematic function* [12, Ch. 5.7] which engages with the notions of both social acceleration and present shock. Rooney's present-tense narrative, it seems, never takes the time to resolve the conflicts between the protagonists or elaborate on their complicated relationships with other characters, but instead jumps from one situation to the next whenever the depiction of a scene would require the intervention of the narrator to explain its complex circumstances to the reader. The temporal leaps thus created result in an episodic mode of presentation which, viewed in isolation, accelerates the overall narrative pace of *Normal People*:

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each of the eighteen chapters concentrates on a specific moment in the protagonists' lives; yet these moments do not immediately follow one another, but are unevenly distributed over a time span of four years. According to Miyahara, the novel consequently "endeavors to metaphorically translate the 'pathological need for up-to-dateness' into the use of present-tense narration" [30, p. 187].

One could interpret this as Rooney's attempt to attune literary storytelling to a reading habit strongly influenced by how we process information through new media. In our contemporary media environment, it is increasingly difficult to concentrate on a single topic for a longer period of time. Reading an online article on a tablet or smartphone, for instance, makes it almost impossible to focus exclusively on the topic of the article, as numerous hyperlinks constantly tempt our attention away to other, related subjects. Social media, furthermore, condition their users to prefer short, ephemeral content that can be processed within a few minutes, or even

seconds: tweets and status updates only seem relevant and interesting until other more immediate and more urgent posts come along. Both these examples show that digital media necessitates what N. Katherine Hayles calls "hyper reading," a reading practice which correlates with the cognitive mode of hyper attention and which, therefore, "has a low threshold for boredom, alternates flexibly between different information streams, and prefers a high level of stimulation" [35, p. 12].

It seems to me, then, that novels like *Normal People*, which primarily feature comparatively fast-paced and episodic sequences of present-tense narration, seek to adjust to the brief attention span of contemporary readers who have grown accustomed to the fast and superficial reading practices associated with the digital age [36, p. 175]. However, Rooney's novel does so with a twist, as it characterizes present-tense narrative as deficient. Were it not for the narrator's explanations in the past-tense flashbacks, readers would not stand a chance of grasping the complex relationships of the protagonists. Viewed in its entirety, then, the novel appears to advocate more profound modes of reading, which are "often undervalued in a contemporary world that is obsessed with time-saving" [30, p. 187]. The example discussed in the following section showcases precisely such practices of slow reading.

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4 Fragmentary Life Stories and "Fusion" Style: Bernadine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*

First published in 2019, Bernadine Evaristo's award-winning[10] *Girl, Woman, Other* traces the lives of twelve British characters who are mostly women (one character, Megan/Morgan, identifies as non-binary) and who are either black or have black origins (as is the case with Penelope, the only white character in the book). The novel divides into five chapters and an epilogue, with the first four chapters once more dividing into three subchapters, each of which focuses on one of three characters connected by kinship or other social bonds. After relating the main characters' life stories in the form of twelve fragmentary "social portraits" [37, p. 95], Chapter 5 is set at the National Theatre in London, where six of the twelve characters – Amma, Yazz, Dominique, Carole, Shirley, and Morgan – meet to watch the premiere of Amma's *The Last Amazon of Dahomey*, an activist play about eighteenth-century lesbian West African warriors. The last missing (family) link between Penelope and Hattie is revealed in the Epilogue. The structure of the novel illustrates that, despite its lack of an overarching story, *Girl, Woman, Other* establishes a complex network among its characters: "[T]o be racialized as black," Micha Frazer-Carroll argues, "brings with it some level of connectedness" [38, n.p.], for all the characters share the experience of being othered in contemporary British society [Evaristo qtd. in 39, n.p.].

Like *Normal People, Girl, Woman, Other* is characterized by heterogeneous tense usage, combining past and present tenses in a temporalizing scheme. This can be best illustrated with reference to the first two subchapters that focus respectively on Amma and her daughter Yazz. Both sections are – as is typical throughout the novel – told by a heterodiegetic narrator who presents the story from the perspective of the character who takes centre stage in this part

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The novel was joint winner – together with Margaret Atwood's The Testaments – of the 2019 Booker Prize.

of the novel. The chapters on Amma and Yazz, moreover, each begin as follows with a passage written in the present tense (this is not the rule, but varies from chapter to chapter):

> Amma
> is walking along the promenade of the waterway that bisects her city [...]
> to her left is the nautical-themed footbridge with its deck-like walkway and sailing mast pylons
> to her right is the bend in the river as it heads east past Waterloo Bridge towards the dome of St Paul's
> [...]
> Amma's play, *The Last Amazon of Dahomey*, opens at the National tonight [21, p. 1; italics in the original; my emphasis]
>
> Yazz
> sits on the seat chosen by Mum in the middle of the stalls, one of the best in the house [...]
> Two members of her uni squad, the Unfuckwithables, are seated either side of her, Waris and Courtney, hard workers like her because they're all determined to get good degrees because without it they're stuffed [21, p. 41]

The excerpts show that both sections are set in the same diegetic present: contemporary London on the day of the premiere of Amma's play[11] While the first of these passages depicts Amma on her way to the theatre and, in doing so, provides readers with precise information on the novel's setting (note the geographical markers "Waterloo Bridge," "the dome of St Paul's," and "the National" emphasized above), the second passage presents Yazz – probably a few hours later – at the National, sitting with two of her friends in the audience, waiting for the play to start. As the sections proceed, they uncover Amma's and Yazz's backstories, in both cases indicated with a shift to the past tense: "[Amma] thinks back to when she **started** out in theatre" [21, p. 2; my emphasis]; "it's also probably fair to say that [Yazz] **was** probably *too* young at thirteen to innocently open the drawer under [her father's] bed [...]" [21, pp. 45–46; italics in the original; my emphasis]. In Amma's case, the flashback is furthermore introduced with a *verbum credendi* ("thinks back"), which clarifies that this moment of analepsis resides in the character's consciousness. A comparable marker is missing in the section on Yazz's character; yet readers are likely to see through the pattern, having read this far into the novel. At the end of the flashbacks, both sections return to the here-and-now of the storyworld – again indicated with a return to the present tense. Having access to Amma's current state of mind, we learn that she "**misses** her daughter now she's away at university" [21, p. 39; my emphasis], whereas in Yazz's section, the narrative sends us right back onto the narrative scene, the auditorium of the National: "and so it **begins** / *The Last Amazon of Dahomey* / the play" [21, p. 74; italics in the original; my emphasis]. Although these examples demonstrate that Evaristo's use of the present tense mainly fulfils a *referential function* [12, Ch. 5.2] which enables us to distinguish the characters' current thoughts from their memories, the second passage quoted above already implies that it also serves an *immersive function* [12, Ch. 5.3]. This effect becomes more obvious when the novel depicts a scene in which ninety-three-year-old Hattie hosts a Christmas lunch for her family:

> Hattie
> [...]
> sits at the head of the banqueting table in the Long Room of Greenfields farmhouse built over two hundred years ago
> her ever-growing gene pool crammed all the way down it
> and their spouses
>
> either side of her are her two children, both in their seventies
> [...]
> then there's the grandchildren in their forties and fifties

11
The diegetic here-and-now is not the same for all characters. Although half of them meet at the party following the premiere of Amma's play at the National, others are located somewhere else (e.g. Hattie, who is bound to the Greenfields farmhouse, or Winsome, who lives in Barbados) or have already died by this time (e.g. Grace).

> […]
> a few of the great-grandchildren in their twenties and thirties are here too […] great-great-grandchildren are seated at a separable table […], a couple of adults are acting as minders to stop them using food as missiles instead of fodder for their mouths then there's the newly-borns she's only just met [21, pp. 341–342]

This (considerably shortened) quotation illustrates how Evaristo's narrative occasionally encourages us to mentally project ourselves into the storyworld and perceive the scene through the eyes of the character who currently serves as focalizer (in this case Hattie). Admittedly, the passage would also allow us to adopt Hattie's point of view if it was written in the past tense; yet, as Marie-Laure Ryan rightly contends, "the present is inherently more immersive than the past," purporting a synchronicity between the narrative events and the act of their reporting [40, p. 97]. Evaristo's use of the present tense accordingly suggests that readers witness the event of the Christmas lunch as it is still unfolding. In other words, it sends us into the here-and-now of the scene, where we take Harriet's place at the banqueting table and observe 'our' guests who are "crammed all the way down it.

Evaristo's dominant use of referential and immersive present-tense narration gives rise to the question of how *Girl, Woman, Other* can be read as a response to digitization and social acceleration. To answer this, it is helpful to focus on the distribution of tenses in the novel, where Evaristo uses the present tense primarily to depict each character's here-and-now and the past tense for their backstories – extensive passages written in a non-chronological order. These instances of *hyper-analepsis* [12, pp. 126–127] slow down the narrative pace of the novel, bringing events in the diegetic present almost to a halt. It even seems that does not generate a plot for the diegetic present at all: the two main events that happen within this temporal framework are the reunion of some of the characters at the after-show party and the encounter of Penelope and her biological mother Hattie at Greenfields. Yet these occurrences are not in any way causally linked, so it makes no sense to think of them as an interrelated sequence. The rest of the novel is entirely dedicated to the characters' pasts and the numerous obstacles they had to overcome to become who they are today.[12]

The slow dynamics of *Girl, Woman, Other* is, moreover, reinforced by the novel's form. As the passages quoted above demonstrate, the novel is written in an experimental style which Evaristo herself calls "fusion fiction" [qtd. in 42, §12] – that is, it integrates elements of poetry and prose, with a period only at the end of a (sub)chapter [43, p. 120], and with a line break after every sentence (sometimes even every half sentence), which makes the text resemble poetry rather than prose.[13] According to David S. Miall and Don Kuiken, such unusual linguistic variation, also known as foregrounding or defamiliarization, has a bearing on the reading process in that it deautomatizes our usual perception of written texts, thus prolonging the time we need to read them [47; see also 12, p. 215]. Foregrounding, the authors suggest, "requires cognitive work on the part of the reader" which "is initiated and in part directed by feeling" [47, p. 392]. In other words, novel linguistic features such as the partial lack of punctuation as well as unusual line breaks not only "strike readers as interesting and capture their attention," but they also oblige the audience "to slow down, allowing time for the feelings created by [these linguistic peculiarities] to emerge" as well as an "enriched perspective" on the text to arise [47, p. 392].

Evaristo's novel defies current trends of social acceleration and present shock, as it calls for different practices of slow reading. To make sense of the experimental 'fusion' style of *Girl,*

12
The absence of an overarching plot is probably one of the main reasons why the novel has been associated with genres such as the networked novel [41, p. 305] or the short story cycle [37, p. 94].

13
This formal experiment should not be confused with the style of Evaristo's previous novels Lara [44] and The Emperor's Babe [45]. While these texts qualify as genuine verse novels, Girl, Woman, Other is looser in its use of verse [46, n.p.].

Woman, Other, readers will be well advised to resort to strategies of close reading[14]: Why does the first part of the subchapter on Grace make use of anaphora, beginning every paragraph with the name of Grace's mother, Daisy [21, pp. 373–375]? What effect is created when the narrative discourse inserts a line break after every word to recount Carole's experience of being gang raped as a teenager [21, pp. 125–127]? Why are there line breaks even within words when the novel presents Penelope's feelings after she has learned that her parents are not her biological parents [21, pp. 283–284]? Answering these and other questions certainly requires an act of interpretation.

Similarly, if readers wish to detect all connections between the various characters, they have to pay close attention to small(er) details and motifs. In addition to Chapter 5, in which half of the characters meet at the National, the fragmentary life stories presented in Chapters 1 to 4 contain many subtle references and allusions to one of the other eleven characters, which can easily be overlooked [46]. Dispensing with an overarching plot that explicitly connects all its characters, Evaristo's novel forces readers to concentrate on individual portraits and respective past experiences. The diegetic here-and-now, which is expressed through the referential use of the present tense, does not serve as the site where the narrative events unfold; it rather constitutes a revelatory moment which enables us to realize how the fates of all these black female – or, in the case of Morgan, non-binary – characters converge. And this insightful moment is most rewarding if we allow ourselves the time – and leisure – to explore the character studies of *Girl, Woman, Other* in depth, savouring Evaristo's 'fusion' prose and revisiting previous chapters to detect allusions and motifs that we did not find at a first read. In this respect, *Girl, Woman, Other* can be construed as a corrective to social acceleration: in counteracting any notions of hyper reading typically associated with the digital age, it restores the novel as a perfect means for what Sven Birkerts has called "deep reading" – "the slow and meditative possession of a book" [48, p. 146].

5 Conclusion

To conclude, I would like to reaffirm the claims stated in the introduction to this essay that the anglophone novel continues to thrive and reinvent itself in the twenty-first century. With the increasing popularity of the present-tense novel, the genre, moreover, seems to have geared up for the challenges of the digital age. As my analysis of Rooney's *Normal People* and Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other* has sought to show, the contemporary novel uses present-tense narration as an effective means to question the fast and superficial reading habits cultivated in our high-speed information society.

Evaristo's novel defies current trends of social acceleration and present shock, as it calls for different practices of slow reading.

What is striking in this context is that the large functional potential of the fictional present allows the genre to respond to these cultural dynamics in different ways. A thematic use of present-tense narration can adapt to the scarce attention economy of the contemporary common reader by bringing forth fast-paced and episodic narratives like *Normal People*. The parts of Rooney's novel that are written in the present tense draw on a representational mode

14
According to Hayles [35, p. 12], close reading constitutes the opposite of the mode of hyper reading discussed in Section 3 above. Unlike hyper reading, which correlates with hyper attention, close reading "correlates with deep attention, the cognitive mode [...] that prefers a single information stream, focuses on a single cultural object for a relatively long time, and has a high tolerance for boredom" [35, p. 12].

of showing which never takes time to explain complex situations but instead jumps from one scene to the next whenever things get tangled. *Normal People* thus transfers practices of hyper reading, which we usually apply in the digital media environment, into an (analogue) literary context. Only in its past-tense flashbacks can the novel bridge its narrative gaps with narratorial explanations that help readers to understand the characters' dysfunctional relationships. *Girl, Woman, Other*, by contrast, creates a complex network of characters presented through fragmentary life stories that oscillate between present-tense and past-tense usage as well as between poetry and prose. Evaristo's experimental style prompts us in two ways to slow down and focus more consciously on the process of reading: First, its extensive flashbacks decelerate the narrative's pace, causing the action in the diegetic here-and-now to pause and leaving us pondering about how the different character portraits fit together. Second, the novel's defamiliarizing 'fusion' pattern forces us to pay closer attention to the linguistic make-up of the text and reflect on the arrangement of the words on the page.

Both novels thus address different dimensions of our "attention ecology" [49] in the digital age: Rooney's novel feeds on the notions of acceleration, the extended present, and present shock, offering us a reading experience evocative of digital reading habits, while at the same time criticizing the practice of fast and superficial reading. Evaristo's novel, on the other hand, functions as what Ansgar Nünning [50, pp. 166–171] might well characterize as an indispensable literary corrective to these tendencies, allowing readers to (re-)develop a sense of the importance of reflection and mindfulness in life. That Rooney's and Evaristo's texts respond so differently to contemporary cultural dynamics emphasizes the diversity and versatility of present-tense narration, whose multifunctionality is certainly one of the main reasons why the analogue twenty-first century novel can be considered a vital match for its digital competitors.

…

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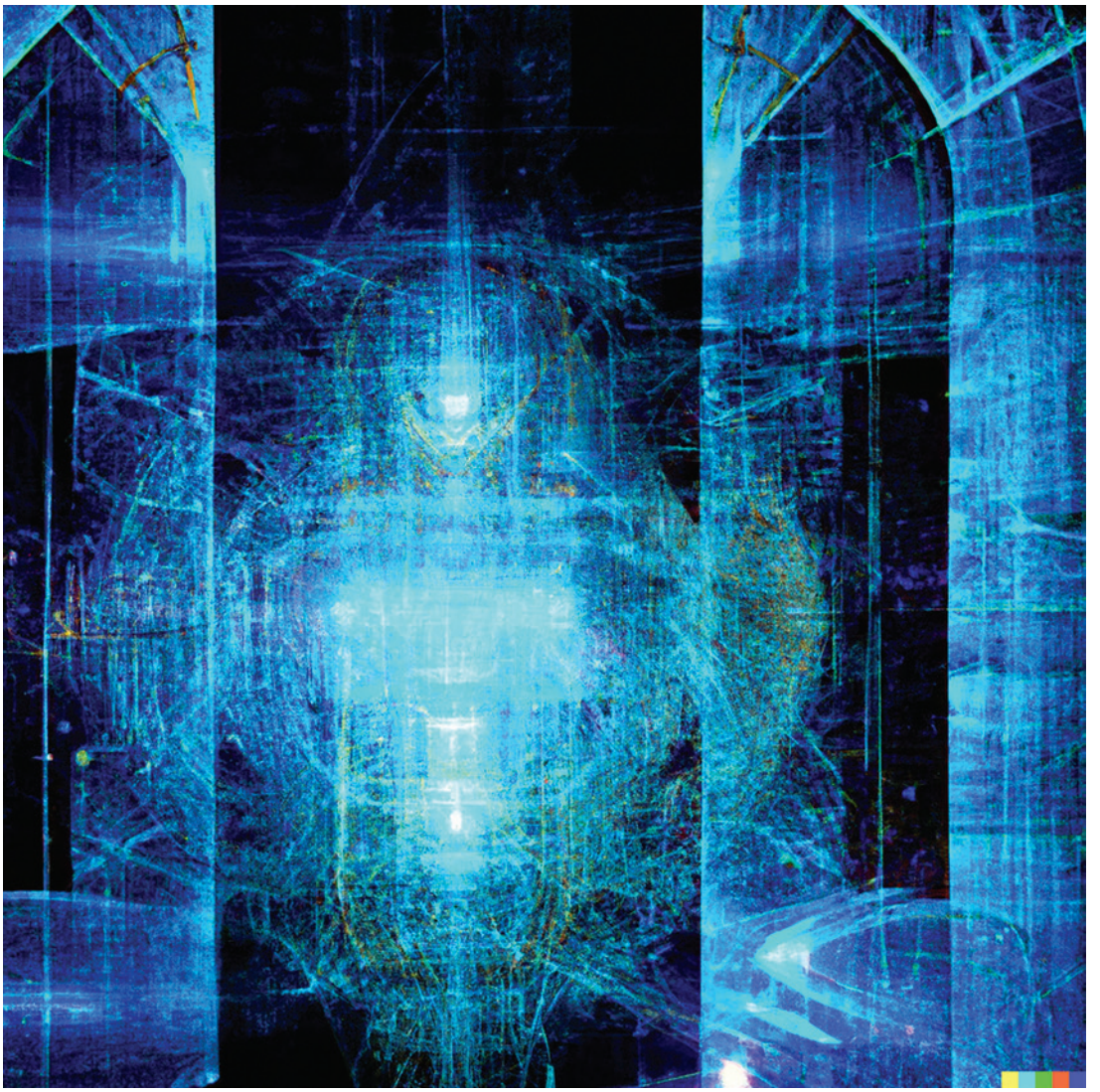

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