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**In Between the Writerly and the Readerly: Utopia and Metafiction in  
Abe Kazushige's *Individual Projection***

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# In Between the Writerly and the Readerly: Utopia and Metafiction in Abe Kazushige's *Individual Projection*

Elaborating on Barthes' famous distinction, this article examines the relationship between the writerly and the readerly in Abe Kazushige's novel *Individual Projection* (*Indivijuaru purojekushon*). The "writerly" (*scriptible*) designates an open-ended, playful narrative, giving free rein to the interpretation of the reader who thus becomes a co-writer of the text. The readerly (*lisible*), by contrast, implies authority and redundancy: it imposes a meaning or message, thus turning the reader into a consumer rather than producer of the text. I argue that Abe's novel is built upon an internal tension between the openness of the writerly and the more assertive and ethical message of the readerly. The first two parts of this essay focus on the writerly side of the text. *Individual Projection* could be first described as a parody (*1. Political Utopia and Genre fiction as Parody in Individual Projection*): through its unreliable narrator, the novel toys with stereotypes associated with political utopia and genre fiction. Such distancing with *clichés* destabilises the text and opens a free space of interpretation for the reader (*2. Metafiction as Writerly Text: When the Reader Writes*). Yet, the novel ends with a final metatextual reversal which reshapes our understanding of the story and redefines the reader's own relationship to the text (*3. Metafiction: Revenge of the Author?*). This end illustrates the paradoxical nature of metafiction in its relationship to the reader: its apparent semantic openness can also be a means to assert the author's authority over the text to convey a theoretical or philosophical message. Here, my own understanding of *Individual Projection* challenges Azuma Hiroki's interpretation of Abe's novel. Azuma saw in the openness of *Individual Projection* another illustration of his own theory both describing and advocating a free consumption of fiction, relying much more on the logic of recycling and recombination than on the linear path of the plot. If Azuma's interpretation sheds interesting light on the agency devoted to the reader in *Individual Projection*, it yet fails to apprehend the potentially critical message of the text: Abe's novel also suggests a pessimistic view of contemporary's hyperreality which seems quite antithetical to Azuma's own eulogy of postmodernity.

Keywords: Abe Kazushige, Azuma Hiroki, stereotypes, heterotopia, utopia, *Individual Projection*, genre fiction, creative reading, metafiction.

## Introduction

In *Metafiction, The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh draws a parallel between metafiction and the Heisenbergian uncertainty principle: “an awareness that [...] it is impossible to describe an objective world because the observer always changes the observed” (Waughan 2003, 3). By ironically displaying the conventions and codes of narrative fiction, metafiction indeed reminds us that fictions are also opened to the various interpretations of specific readers who are always co-builders of the narrative they read. This outer source of uncertainties is closely related to an inner source, the text itself. Setting up stories with internal contradictions or logical inconsistencies, metafiction emphasizes the ambivalent dimension of fiction, or, in Bakhtin’s words, its ‘dialogical’ potential. Metafiction, writes Patricia Waugh, rejoices in the impossibility of subordinating the text to any “dominant ‘voice [...]’” thus clearly revealing “the basic identity of novel as a genre” (Waugh 2003, 4). Such a definition of metafiction echoes Barthes’ concept of “writerly text”: an open, playful narrative, giving free rein to the interpretation of the reader who thus becomes a co-writer of the text (Barthes 1970, 10). Thwarting diegetic coherence and laying bare its condition of artifice, metafiction urges readers to reflect upon narrative conventions and “explore the problematic relationship between life and fiction” (Waugh 2003, 4). However, the very idea of revealing the true nature of novels also implies authority: by deconstructing its codes, metafiction also promotes a discourse on the role and nature of fiction.

Metafiction could thus be defined as a conflicted genre, torn between its openness and its will to pass on a theoretical message. Published in 1997, Abe Kazushige’s *Individual Projection*, is particularly interesting in this respect. I argue that the novel precisely illustrates this internal tension between the writerly and the readerly specific to metafiction. The purpose of this article will be to describe this dual status of Abe's text,

both a playful writerly novel and a reflexive text, carrying a kind of ethical message regarding the tendency of contemporary audiences to fall into fictional fallacies.

*Individual Projection* is mainly the diary of a character named Onuma, working as a projectionist in Shibuya. As the story unfolds, Onuma appears more and more unstable. His unreliability as a narrator makes all his statements seem shady and deconstructs the *topoi* of genre fiction. I will describe, in the first part of my article, this ironic distancing towards stereotypes and show that it is closely intertwined, on a thematic level, to a parody of political utopia (*Political Utopia and Genre fiction as Parody in Individual Projection*). This toying with fiction genre stereotypes opens up the novel to interpretation. I will explore, in the second part of my paper, the writerly side of *Individual Projection* and propose my own interpretation of Onuma's diary (*Metafiction as Writerly Text: When the Reader Writes*). *Individual Projection* evokes here Azuma Hiroki's own take on the openness and modular status of contemporary fiction. The third part of my article (*Metafiction: The Revenge of the Author*) will focus on the more reflexive and, therefore, more authoritarian (or readerly) aspect of Abe's text. I will show that while the unreliability of the narrator allows for a form of playful complicity between the author and the reader, the metatextual reversal that closes the novel tends, on the contrary, to give the last word to the writer's overhanging point of view. I believe the end of *Individual Projection* reflects Abe's own position regarding the social and ethical function of literary fiction. The last pages of the novel specifically emphasise our tendency, as readers or citizens, to look for single reading keys, thus falling into the traps and logic of conspiracy theory thinking. This slightly didactic side of Abe's text challenges Azuma's interpretation of *Individual Projection*, highlighting the differences, rather than just the similarities, between the two authors and the role they assign to fiction within the contemporary world.

### **Political utopia and genre fiction as parody in *Individual Projection***

The novel *Individual Projection* opens up as a fictional diary written by a young man in his early thirties named Onuma. He has been working as a projectionist in Shibuya for six months when the narrative starts, on Sunday, 15 May (the year is not specified). The main character and narrator of the story, Onuma emerges as an unstable character, a voyeur, highly anxious and fascinated by violence. He expresses an ambiguous nostalgia for the time he spent, five years before, in a mysterious *juku*, a private school close to his hometown, pompously named the “Eminence School” (*kōtōjuku*) and led by Masaki, an eccentric middle-aged man. At first, Onuma and his friends, all recent graduates of a film school in Tokyo, simply want to shoot a documentary about Masaki and his disciples, young males from the surroundings seemingly unfit for the constraints and requirements of the mundane world of work and domestic life (Abe 2000, 43-44). They eventually give up on their film project and join Masaki’s *juku*. As members of the “Eminence School”, they engage in various illegal activities, such as spying on the town inhabitants. They also, tells Onuma, kidnap a *yakuza* leader who is finally released in exchange of a large sum of money and a duralumin briefcase containing plutonium 239.

The movie theatre where Onuma works and the “Eminence School” whose memories fill his mind are not without similarities. They both tally Foucault’s definition of “heterotopias”: counter-spaces which position themselves against the logic of ordinary space and time, yet are real and tangible (Foucault, 1966). However, Foucault’s concept encompasses heterogeneous realities: alternative political systems on the one hand (the organization of Paraguay by the Jesuits, for example); and places simply withdrawn from the topological and chronological logic of everyday life on the other (movie theatres, cemeteries, vacation clubs, museums, etc.). In the first case, heterotopias take on an ideological function. The concept refers to the will to enact

utopia, re-establish the social order and transform reality by creating new topologies and new norms. Heteropia could be here defined as a synonym for what is commonly referred to as utopia or political utopia: “a perfect society in which people work well with each other and are happy”<sup>1</sup>. Heterotopias pertaining to the second category are, by contrast, a simple interlude, a parenthesis within the flow of daily life. The “Eminence School” represents the first pattern of Foucault’s heterotopias, while the movie theatre (and moreover the projection booth in which Onuma works) is an example of the second.

The “Eminence School” is indeed political: Masaki wishes to train a New Man in order to shape the future. Onuma's nostalgia also stems from the exhilaration he felt at being part of an utopian project offering, in the outskirts of a small provincial town, the promise of an alternative society which would transform his life, and perhaps even the entire future of humanity. The fact that Onuma's diary begins on Sunday, May 15, is significant in this regard: Abe Kazushige deliberately chose a fictitious day (the year is not specified) that hints at the May 15, 1932 incident (*go-jūgo jiken*), an attempted coup which initiated the ultra-nationalist turn of pre-war Japan and took place on a Sunday<sup>2</sup>. Onuma’s diary thus mirrors, within its calendar, Masaki’s ideological obsessions. According to its leader, the “Eminence School” should indeed draw inspiration from various groupuscule of 1930s Japan and organise a coup:

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<sup>1</sup> Cambridge Dictionary Online. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/fr/dictionnaire/anglais/utopia>. Accessed 16 May 2023.

<sup>2</sup> In a conversation with Hasumi Shigehiko (born in 1936), a famous film critic and academic researcher, Abe has himself pointed out the fact that *Individual Projection*’s diary is based on a 1932 calendar (Abe and Hasumi, 2005, 336).

“Nowadays, it might seem absurd to plan a reform of the State. However, it is not out of reach, as long as we stay hidden, take our time and prepare it meticulously. In fact, I have set up a plan that should definitely succeed. But we’d better keep it secret. History repeats itself, yet what is repeated is only the form and the content can be corrected, don’t you think? For example, we can use as a model the League of Blood<sup>3</sup>, whose principle was ‘one man, one murder’, or the Peasant Suicide Brigade<sup>4</sup> precisely because we know why they failed.” (Abe 2000, 44-45)

Located in the Northeastern part of Japan, mixing sons of farmers with young men from urban areas, the “Eminence School” is redolent of various utopian projects from the 1930s, mixing agrarianism and far-right ideologies within the frame of alternative communities. Yet, and as Masaki ironically tells, the content is indeed different: in fact, the “Eminence School” seems to have been founded without any real purpose. Masaki, as well as his disciples, are imbued with militaristic and paramilitaristic qualities. However, they do not seem to have any articulate political convictions, let alone political aims. The ultranationalist ideology that the characters

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<sup>3</sup> The League of Blood (*chimeidan*) is an ultranationalist group whose leader Inoue Nisshō (1887-1967) targeted to assassinate around twenty politicians and businessmen. In March and February 1932, two members of the League of Blood were arrested for the assassination of Inoue Junnosuke (1869-1932), former Minister of Finances and former Governor of the Bank of Japan, and Dan Takuma (1858-1932), Director-General of Mitsui conglomerate. Other members were involved in the ultranationalist attempted Coup of May 15, 1932 (*goichigo jiken*).

<sup>4</sup> The Peasant Suicide Brigade is the name adopted by disciples of Tachibana Kōsaborō (1893-1974), an ultranationalist and agrarian thinker for whom the village community should be the paradigm of a national one. The Peasant Suicide Brigade were also largely involved in the ultranationalist attempted Coup of May 15, 1932 (*goichigo jiken*).



hint at functions as an empty signifier and seems relevant to them only because of its semiotic impact. The totalitarian will to control the entire nation body, or to create “a New Man” is also reshaped into various farcical and unsuccessful enterprises, such as trying to raise the rates of divorce in the neighbourhood or attempting to manipulate local elections (Abe 2000, 58-62)<sup>5</sup>. From the outset, Masaki’s students are in fact aware that their teacher is probably a pathological liar and see the various actions they are engaging in as totally pointless. The “Eminence School” appears a dead end, a permanent in-between, both real and phantasmagorical, tinged with sectarian logic and violence. It thus reads more as a parody of an enacted utopia than as a serious ideological project: Abe portrays a small male community redolent of various far-right groups from the 1930s but he exaggerates and ridicules their features. The fact that Masaki ends up being arrested for molesting a young schoolgirl, a relative of Onuma (Abe 2000, 71-72), while in the act of doing so, confirms the dubious aspect of this character, whose main drive was never political. Dismayed by the loss of their leader, Masaki’s young disciples then split into two groups: some remain in the North-East (“Muranaka group”); others, including Onuma and Inoue, return to Tokyo (Abe 2000, 74-76).

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<sup>5</sup> For Masaki, the spy constitutes "the ultimate sophistication of human aesthetics" (*ninjen bigaku no saishū senren keitai*). This expression is underlined by a diacritical mark and repeated at least twice (Abe 2000, 50 and 54). The leader of the “Eminence School” seems to draw his inspiration both from popular culture stereotypes (the spy character found in thrillers and action movies) and fascist aesthetics (he views the spy as a sort of Nietzschean *übermensch*). On the fascist aim to create a “New Man”, strong and virile, see, for example, Robert Soucy’s article on fascism Encyclopaedia Britannica (Access Date: April 08, 2021) or eorges L. Mosse’s book on *The Fascist Revolution* (Mosse, 1999).

Retrospectively, the narrator regards the “Eminence School” as a clumsy and preposterous imitation of a political utopia:

The “Eminence School” was probably for us, as it was for Araki and Sae, a convenient place to flee reality. Neither we, nor the five first School members, could fail to enjoy the slightly unreal life we were experiencing there. Undoubtedly, it was a special kind of gratification, one you would not be exposed to if you were having just a regular kind of life. We could feel as though we were watching society from the outside. The “Eminence School” was most importantly befitted to people like us, yearning for violence. We did not need, to that end, any so-called “political” ideology. What we were looking for was more a graphic-novel like type of fiction (another kind of ideology), according to which repeating training would enable us to turn into powerful cyborgs. (Abe 2000, 46)

If the “Eminence School” failed to establish a reliable political utopia, it nevertheless provided its members with the semantic solace of stereotypes regarding masculinity and masculine violence, conspicuously borrowed from popular culture. As Maria Roemer has aptly commented, the *juku* is described as an environment in which young males could “live out their aspirations of power based on SF fantasies and their own aggressive drives” (Roemer 2015, 93). The reference here to graphic-novel like fiction (*gekiga*) and cyborgs adds up to a rich series of fiction genre *clichés* appearing in the “Eminence School” narrative (*yakuza*, kidnappings, close-combat, wiretaps, clandestine mass destructive weapons, etc.). Onuma’s diary somehow suggests that the *topoi* themselves are the only achievable, or at least reachable, utopia — if we understand utopia as a place devoid of the uncertainty and imperfections of reality. It seems relevant to draw a link, here, between the topographical implications of the word *topoi* and the quest for “place” that shapes the entire novel. Located in-between the realm of adulthood they refuse and the childhood universe from which they were expelled, the young immature males of the “Eminence School” can only find a place in the

“commonplaces” of an imaginary hyper-masculinity built from the semantic bricks of various popular fiction genres<sup>6</sup>.

The “Eminence School” is a mock ideal community, a nonsensical male phalanstery, which feeds Onuma with *clichés* regarding virility, but never brings any ideal to conform to, nor any social role to comply with. In this respect, Onuma is yet another embodiment of 1990s Japan’s precariat and lost generation<sup>7</sup>. His craving for physical power and spy techniques could be read as an answer to his feeling of degradation at his exclusion from the previous generation’s privileges of lifetime employment and salaryman lifestyle. Yet, I argue that the text’s critical discourse is also, and perhaps mainly, expressed through its formal work. *Individual Projection* is notably built on a reversal of the logic of this stereotype. As the diary unfurls, the nature of the *clichés* and narrative codes used by the narrator become more and more unstable. “Commonplaces” lose their positive function as semantic and narrative stabilizers, pointing at the narrator’s scattered mind and

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<sup>6</sup> A commonplace can be defined as a "commonly held and shared opinion", usually prejudiced and unquestioned (Amossy, 1991). Like *clichés* (a worn-out figure of speech), commonplaces provide the (illusory) comfort of steady and lasting meaning. Similarly, stereotypes of masculinity give to *juku* students the illusion of a stable and positive identity masking the precariousness of their situation between adolescence and adulthood. In his diary, Onuma repeatedly talks about his search for such a stable place and the difficulties of his intermediate status between youth and adulthood. This point is echoed in the final text of the novel, in which the character M (cf. *infra*) describes a Julio Iglesias song mentioned by Onuma as an illustration of a life dedicated to the “search of a place” (*aru basho wo sagashi motomete ikiteiru*) for a character who is “‘between’ youth and maturity” (*wakasa to oi to no “aida”*, Abe 2000, 189).

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion on the theme of precarity in *Individual Projection*, see Roemer 2015.

unreliability. The satirical depiction of a place such as the “Eminence School” is closely connected to the formal work of the novel, which tends to disrupt the reading contract between the narrative and the reader specific to detective fiction or the mystery novel genre.

As the reader steps deeper into Onuma’s diary, they indeed realise that the novel is grounded in an ironic use of narrative and semantic *topoi* borrowed from the fiction genre. The detective novel plot, which drives the reader from the mystery to its resolution (Dubois 2005, 19-30), seems notably subverted in the “Eminence School” story. The text keeps on formulating new riddles which cannot be solved: Who is Masaki really and who denounced him to the police? What was his background? Who are the *yakuza*? Where is the alleged plutonium? What are the goals of the so-called Muranaka’s group? As the story unfolds, it seems obvious that these mysteries will never be solved and might just be the product of the narrator’s delusive imagination. Onuma doubts his own perception of reality, makes enigmatic comments, jumps from one subject to a completely unrelated one, and so on. He reports that other characters find him crazy. Various protagonists, especially the male protagonists within the story, such as Inoue, seem to be in fact hallucinations of his own mind. As in various works toying with the codes of the detective novel, the unreliability of the narrator subverts the rules of the genre<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by Agatha Christie (1926), in which the narrator James

Sheppard is the murderer could probably be considered as the first example of the use of an unreliable narrator in detective fiction. The use of an unreliable narrator became a common practice in post-war noir and hardboiled detective fiction, as exemplified by the work of Jim Thompson (1906-1977).

It seems likely that Abe is here specifically parodying the genre or *honkaku* or *shihonkaku* mystery novel. In opposition to a trend embodied by Matsumoto Seichō (1909-1992), probably Japan's most famous crime fiction author whose works put the emphasis on social background and human psychology, the *honkaku* and its successor the *shinhonkaku* genre, can be described as a "puzzle" (Abe, Norizuki, and Azuma 2004, 269-274; Matsuda 2018) focusing on the thrill of riddle-solving and the mechanics of the detective novel. While infused with references to mystery or detective novels, the last quarter of the novel is intensely chaotic: the diarist, in a confused state of mind, is supposedly chased by the *yakuza* after he kills one of them and steals a bag from them which, unbeknownst to him, is full of cocaine. Then, a fire breaks out in the movie theatre where Onuma is working and he is hospitalized. The story ends quite abruptly, while the narrator is dating a teenage girl. No answer is provided to the vast number of questions the story triggers (Abe 2000, 171-187).

*Individual Projection*'s aesthetic and textual functioning is largely grounded on a playful deconstruction of well-known *clichés* regarding masculinity and far-right political utopias. The novel's diarist is constantly looking for places — be they political utopia or *topoi* from popular fictions — that would allow him to escape the world's disorder. But these places always turn out to be illusory havens immediately overrun by the diarist's disordered state of mind. Abe here toys with stereotypes not only on a thematic but also narrative level, by ceaselessly dismantling the smooth and straightforward linearity of the detective novel-like plot. Thus, the novel could be clearly described as a parody. Masculinist *clichés*, and *topoi* associated with crime or detective novels, are caricatured and deconstructed. They finally destabilise and disorganise the text's meaning instead of organising it.

In her work seminal study, Patricia Waugh first defines metafiction as a genre opposed to “eternal verities”: the reader is confronted with a text suggesting that everything is merely “a series of construction, artifices, impermanent structures” (Waugh 2003, 7). Metafiction is primarily a form that tends to amplify the naturally ‘dialogic’ character of the novel genre: no discourse takes precedence over the others, no character has the truth, no meaning is unquestionable or uncontested. To a certain extent, the disorder of the diary and the obvious confusion of the diarist would match such a definition of metafiction. Any narrative with an unreliable narrator indeed implies a multilayered and polysemous text: the untrustworthiness of the storyteller questions every sentence and suggests various interpretations to each single word. Yet, in metafiction the text’s instability usually has various origins: the narrator, but also the general inconsistency of the fictional world and of its chronology, the absence of a connection between what characters do and who they are, etc. All these elements might be present in *Individual Projection* but they come from a single source: the diarist. Understanding and explaining the narrator’s delusional state of mind might thus be a way to reduce the text’s entropy.

### ***Individual Projection* as a Writerly Text: When the Reader Writes**

The confusion of *Individual Projection*’s diary has a clear origin: its fictional author’s delirium. In fact, the text is laden with stylistic devices hinting at the narrator’s lunacy. The very rhythm of the diary, oscillating between long and short sentences, moments of tension and moments of ease, emphasises Onuma’s mental instability. Convinced that a banal videotape promoting the “Eminence School” hides clues as to where the hypothetical plutonium bomb might be found, the narrator seems utterly bewildered, unable to restrain both his excitement and despair:

Masaki is hinting at something in this film. Probably, the hiding place of the plutonium bomb. I cannot imagine anything else. [...] But why did Masaki had to do this? Was this also one his practical exercises? Or maybe, it's only that I am the only one not to know. Anyway, I find this really absurd. Who on earth am I to spend so much efforts solving riddles. Why should I care? Even if I knew where the plutonium might be, I have no need for it. What is Inoue doing so desperately? *Isn't it really nonsense?! Does he plan something now? Is he suggesting that we have to do something with the plutonium and other stuff?*

Today was relatively calm. Ayako, who came to see a movie with a friend of her, was having an amicable chat with Kayama whom she just met. It was a pleasant scene. (Abe 2000, 116)

Convoluting queries, interwoven with categorical assertions (“I cannot imagine anything else”, “I find this really absurd”), illustrate the narrator’s confused mind. The author also uses *katakana* (the parts in italics in my translation) to stress Onuma’s madness. This unconventional writing comes across as a strange foreign body slowing the reader and highlighting the diarist’s mental illness. The contrast between the peaceful description ending this excerpt and the tangled lines above add another layer of oddity to Onuma’s behaviour.

The narrator’s unreliability calls into question the status of every single sentence and event reported within the diary. The text’s entropy notably results from the collapse of diegetic hierarchies: Onuma does not know how to discriminate the real from the fictional. Consequently, the reader himself is soon unable to distinguish between what pertains to mimesis (the real represented in fiction) and what refers to the imagination of the diarist (the fiction consumed or produced by the character). Such juxtapositions urge the reader to interpret the various and contradictory pieces of information provided by Onuma. The title, in that regard, refers not only to the diarist’s job, but also to his proclivity to project the imaginary as real. The slightly unusual transcription of the English word “Individual” in *katakana* (*‘indibijuaru’* instead of *‘indibiduaru’*) probably

points to the “visual” imagination of the narrator. The title, which could be translated as *‘Indivisual projection’*, underlines the idiosyncrasy of the diary and the hermeneutic challenges it presents for the reader. However disorganised it may be, there might be ways to stabilise the diary’s meaning. The title could also be read as a suggestion to “project” one’s own interpretation into the chaos of the text. The reader could thus be described as the novel’s utopia, the only place from which the anarchic meaning of the diary can be rearranged and organised.

The author indeed leaves a few clues as to how the reader could reinterpret the diary and engage in a participative mode of reading. It seems possible, for example, to figure out, from the diarist’s state of mind, which encounters are likely hallucinations of his mind and which are not. Some details, such as his headaches or the sudden apparition of other male characters (the high school students and Inoue, for example), clearly suggest that Onuma is entering into a state of delirium. Numerous scenes could thus be read as dialogues between the diarist and himself. This is clearly suggested in the last part of the novel: Onuma has visions of other characters appearing at his window, as if hallucinated (Abe 2000, 117) and colleagues look at him with a smirk when he mentions a male employee from the movie theater whose name the others do not know, as if he had never existed (Abe 2000, 146 and 152-153). These hints somehow revive the detective novel-like quest that the “Eminence School” story implied. In between, the investigation’s object has been transferred, relocated from the diary’s story to the diarist’s personality, from the utterance to the utterer. Relinquishing the mystery regarding who killed the four ex-members of the “Eminence School” or what happened to the plutonium, the reader is invited to reconstruct and rewrite Onuma’s mind and past. The Author-Reader contract of *Individual Projection* is, in this regard, redolent of two famous contemporaneous American novels, namely Bret Easton



Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) and Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996) in which the narrator's obvious schizophrenia also seems to call for a participative reading from the part of the addressee.

In a conversation with Abe, Takahashi Gen'ichirō pointed out the freedom of interpretation entailed in such a text:

When I read *Individual Projection*, I shouted with joy. At a certain point, I felt I myself was writing the novel (laughs) and I was very happy about it because it had been a long time since I had had such a reading experience (Abe and Takahashi, 1997, 8).

Indeed, *Individual Projection*'s reader cannot just passively go through the story: it seems he is being asked to make sense of it or invited to co-write the novel to understand and explain the main character's disoriented mind and incoherent words. To that end, the reader could focus his attention on the hidden part of the diarist's story and personality. As Pierre Bayard has shown in *Enquête sur Hamlet* (Investigation on Hamlet), fictional universes are always incomplete: "if a literary work borrows elements from already existing worlds, including our own, it does not present [to the reader] a complete universe to view and experience; it only delivers a series of fragmented pieces of information"<sup>9</sup>. This incompleteness is striking in the case of characters: fiction

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<sup>9</sup> « Si [une oeuvre littéraire] emprunte des éléments à des mondes déjà existants, dont le nôtre, elle ne donne pas à voir et à vivre un univers entier, mais délivre une série d'informations parcellaires qui ne seraient pas suffisantes sans notre intervention. Il serait plus juste alors de parler, à propos de cet espace littéraire insuffisant, de *fragments de monde*. Dès lors, *l'activité de lecture et de la critique est contrainte de compléter ce monde*. » (Bayard, 2002, 55)

protagonists always lack some specifications, part of their story is unknown, their motivations and personalities can never be entirely explained by the text (Bayard 2002, 51-60). Untold features of Onuma's psyche or unknown parts of his biography might enable the reader to make some sense out of the character's inconsistencies.

I am personally tempted to reinterpret the five years spent by the characters in the utopian "Eminence School" as a hidden reference to a long stay in a mental health hospital. It would indeed be surprising that such an unstable character, always on tranquilizers (Abe 2000, 36 and 135), never encountered psychiatric services in his life. Gathering in the countryside marginalized young men with erratic behaviour, who all share a tendency to flee reality, the depiction of the "Eminence School" is itself reminiscent of a psychiatric hospital. The members of the *juku* also engage in activities redolent of such institutions. They certainly indulge themselves in their own delusions, playing the games (being spies, soldiers, gangsters, etc.) of grownups who refuse adulthood. Yet, they also engage in activities that do not comply with regular spy training, but would make sense in a mental health institution, such as singing karaoke or writing long accounts regarding their daily exercises (Abe 2000, 56 and 94). Masaki's obsession with his students' "corporeal sensations" (*shintai kankaku*), which he wants them to describe as precisely as possible, could also be interpreted as a concern for his psychotic patients' lack of bodily awareness (Pankow, 1993). The fact that Onuma is reminded to "take his pills" by Inoue (Abe 2000, 135) and ends up in a "hospital" during the chaotic last pages of the novel (Abe 2000, 173-175) would suggest that he is not done with his mental health issues and that he still meets with psychiatrists. Such a reading is, of course, only one plausible interpretation. Onuma's state of mind and the chaotic nature of his diary allow each reader to formulate their own interpretation of the story.

It seems relevant here to draw a link between Abe Kazushige's artistic project and Azuma Hiroki's well-known aesthetic theory expounded in his seminal work *Otaku: Japan's Database Animals* (2001 and 2009 for the English translation). Azuma argues that contemporary popular culture is grounded on a new type of consumption of a fictional universe, relying much more on the logic of recycling and recombination than on the linear path of the plot. His analysis elaborates both on François Lyotard's suggestion that postmodernity is characterised by the decline of grand narratives and on Otsuka Eiji's views regarding the consumption of fiction that has been "informed by the fragmentary and piece-by-piece attempt to approach a certain totality" (Otsuka and Steinberg 2010, 101). If many consumers of fiction fetishise by-products, sequels or parodies of famous works of fiction, it is because by doing so they seek to reach the "system", or *database*, from which these objects are supposedly derived and which functions as a kind of substitute for a lost grand narrative. This database does not exist and can never be given as such: there is no longer a source text, a primary narrative that commands all the others. Narratives are plural, fragmented, and rather seen as just other items within the collection of products and images that enable a consumer to imagine the database. In Azuma's view, contemporary culture cannot therefore, writes Françoise Lavocat, "be analysed in terms of intertextuality, but in terms of combinations of the possibles" (Lavocat 2016, 400). Similarly, in *Individual Projection*, Onuma's confused mind creates a plastic and fluid diegetic universe, a scattered puzzle that the reader seems invited to recompose and recombine. It is not surprising that Azuma has expressed a strong interest in the works of Abe Kazushige, specifically *Individual Projection*, for which he wrote the commentary (*kaisetsu*) when the book was republished in 2000 (Azuma 2000, 195-206). The novel not only hints at sociological facts that Azuma himself has thoroughly commented on (from *otaku* culture to cult

movements such as the Aum sect), it has a more profoundly “formal” (*keishikiteki*) and “modular” (*mojūru-ka shiteiru*) dimension that seems to closely conform to Azuma’s own understanding of the contemporary consumption of popular culture as a semiotic and personal reappropriation of merchandised fictions and images (Abe, Norizuki, and Azuma 2004, 277-297).

In other words, the diary’s disorder and the challenges it poses to the reader not only bring to mind Barthes’s notion of the writerly (*scriptible*), they also point to a certain type of consumption of cultural products in contemporary Japan. The names of the characters in *Individual Projection*, written solely in *katakana*, and thus reduced to a sort of semiotic minimum, are a striking symbol of their functioning and of the freedom this allows us to complete them and recombine their specificities. Choosing the *katakana* syllabary to transcribe the protagonists’ surnames might be, on the part of the author, a way to hint at the fictional universes of video games in which characters serve above all as interactive supports and receptacles of the gamer’s imagination. *Individual Projection* was indeed published at a time when popular culture had evolved into a more open and participative universe. Various elements, such as the improvement of video games, the Internet, the growing role of fanfiction, the *mediamix* system and its diversity gave more agency to consumers of popular culture. It is against this background that Azuma’s ambition to reconcile pure literature and the light novel, as well as Abe’s attempt to incorporate recent popular culture references within the frame of “pure literature”, must be read. For Azuma, the combinatorial and modular dimension of contemporary popular culture could connect it to a more elitist culture promoting a proactive and reflexive consumption of fiction.

By the same logic, Abe seems to establish bridges between the influence of formalism in “pure literature” from the 1990s and the semiotic universe of

contemporary crime fiction or science fiction, which are also marked by increasingly formal structures that call for a distant and reflective, almost abstract type of reading (Abe, Norizuki, and Azuma 2004). It is no coincidence that the title of Abe's novel implies the acronym for Internet Protocol: *Individual Projection* is undoubtedly a text which does not lock the reader in one route, the same way IPs do not pre-establish a path for data transfer. In such an open text, the reader might appear as the only possible route, the utopia from which meaning can be finally stabilised. However, Abe Kazushige's novel ends with a final twist that considerably modifies the diary's reading contract. The two last pages indeed add to the novel another level of metafiction which complicate, perhaps even undo, the reader-oriented structure of the diary.

### **Metafiction: Revenge of the Author?**

In his book *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, Wayne Booth defines an unreliable narrator as a narrator who does not act in accordance with the norms of the work (the implied author's norms). In such situations the implied author "carries the reader with him in judging the narrator" (Booth 1983, 158-159). Thus, a dialogue is established between the reader and the author at the narrator's expense. We laugh at or decipher with the author the incoherence of the narrator. As I have shown, the far-fetched and unlikely conjecture of *Individual Projection*'s narrator invites the addressee to engage in a creative dialogue with the author regarding Onuma's case. To carry the topographical metaphor further, one could say that the locus of the text lies in the author and the reader's hands, whilst the narrator is the pathetic jester creating a connection between them. However, the last two pages of the novel destabilise this relationship. The novel ends with a brief text entitled "Feedback" (*kansō*) signed by "M", which suddenly redefines the ontological status of the entire diary and immediately abolishes the complicity between the reader and the author:

Decent work. As always, the depiction of physical sensation is too flimsy. There are also a few contradictions and some judgements are too schematic. Yet, is a well-organized piece. I guess it could be considered as a positive outcome of your training. You would reach an even better condition by running various consciences at the same time and controlling them successfully. But, it seems that you are not really looking for that. (Abe 2000, 188)

The feedback is obviously a comment on the previous part, given by another character who pretends to be well-versed in the art of writing. “M” could thus be a teacher of creative writing commentating on the production of one of his students. Yet, M’s text is not only evaluating the diary, it also pertains to Onuma’s world and references. The signature, as well as the references to deficiencies in the depiction of “physical sensations”, suggest that Masaki might be the author of the novel’s final piece. In the process, the novel’s coherence itself is blown to smithereens: a character cannot be simultaneously located inside and outside the main diegesis. A situation all the more absurd and ironic, since Masaki’s death has been reported in the diary. Blurring the limits between the narrative and metanarrative levels, *Individual Projection* creates undue connections, in a structure redolent of a Mobius strip, whose characteristic is to be unorientable. There are no ontological boundaries between the two sides of the novel’s structure, the narrative on one side, and the comments on the narrative on the other. This interlaced structure projects the reader into a situation that is quite redolent of the diarist’s own experience and situation. Like Onuma, they cannot give order or consistency to the world they have to decipher. The coexistence of elements pertaining to heterogenous narrative levels, deconstructs the coherence of the fictional world, eliciting feelings of loss and isolation.

Far from sharing a complicity with the implied author “behind the narrator’s back” (Booth 1983, 300), the reader is now experiencing Onuma’s own dismay, unable to figure out how to reorganise the information provided by the text. The dubious clues left by the

diarist, his obsession with a plutonium bomb which probably never existed in the first place, could be interpreted as a *mise en abyme* of the reader's own fishy desire to find some internal coherence within the narrative. Passed on clandestinely from hand to hand without anyone checking on its authenticity, the plutonium bomb could be interpreted as a symbol of the story itself whose authenticity is unverifiable and whose unstable diegetic background is ceaselessly reshaped through the narrator's unreliable eyes. The homology between the reader and Onuma takes an ironic turn at the end of the diary, when Inoue mocks his friend's ambition to find out the bomb's location through a coded message supposedly encrypted in the small movie shot by Masaki's students to advertise the "Eminence School":

- There was no mystery in that film! You only put that into your head by yourself!
  - That's not true, it can't be!
  - Well, how about I explain it to you like this? I thought you wouldn't bother me if I gave you this film, which looked like a mystery. In fact, that's what happened. You did nothing but try to solve the riddle.
- I really felt like a monkey who's had peanuts thrown at him. He was telling me I was a monkey. For sure, I was one (Abe 2000, 179).

Through the novel's ending, Abe Kazushige challenges the reader's propensity to postulate a stable fictional universe predating the act of reading itself, or, in Azuma's words, a database predating the existence of cultural products. In that regard, the real monkey of the text might be the reader seeking diegetic coherence within the diary. By trying to find keys through which the text could be explained and reorganised, the addressee would be acting exactly like Onuma who wishes to solve a non-existing riddle and invents the codes he claims to decipher.

Yet, beyond fiction and gestures to the mystery genre, it is perhaps a dangerous temptation to attempt to find an "answer" to the narrative disorder of the world that

*Individual Projection* is staging in a literary way. In his essays and interviews, Abe Kazushige often mentions, as a source of inspiration, the rise of conspiracy theories in the 1990s, which he strongly connects with the development of the Internet and social networks (Abe, Norizuki and Azuma 2004, 264-265). Onuma's paranoid reasoning, his attempts to find at all costs a key to explain the events of his life, seems to pertain more precisely to what psychiatrists Paul Sérieux and Joseph Capgastre have described as “the delusion of interpretation”: a tendency to attribute a symbolic value to everything and thus to “codify randomness” (Sérieux and Capgastre 1910, 254-255). In order to bring together his dispersed self, Onuma invents allegories and deters a hidden necessity behind visible contingency. As a good conspiracy seeker, the diarist is unable to sort and prioritize information, searching, to no avail, for a unifying figure to mask the disorder of his sensitive experiences. The metafictional outcome of the novel, however, subtly draws a parallel between the diarist’s interpretative biases and the reader’s own attempts to decipher the diary. Like Onuma himself, the reader might have fallen into the delusion of reconstructing the text, becoming its semantic center and origin, the “non-place” from which meaning could be structured. It is precisely what conspiracy theories offer to their proponents: “a very satisfying *feeling of unveiling*, similar to what we experience when we discover the solution to a riddle” (Bronner 2013, 13).

By establishing a homology between the experience of the narrator and that of the reader, the end of the novel questions the status of fiction and our relationship to reality within the contemporary world. Like the diarist, we live in an environment that is perhaps always-already metafictional, or at least partially metafictional: a scattered and second-hand universe, that we only access through various filters such as screens or narrative fragments. As Baudrillard has suggested at length in his works, a full, innocent and direct apprehension of reality seems no longer available, if conceivable: we live in



what he defined as *hyperreality* : a world in which simulacra precedes the real, in which the real itself is created by models “without origin or reality”<sup>10</sup>. Hence Azuma's deep interest in *Individual Projection*: the novel could indeed illustrate his own category of *metareal* (*metariaru*), a portmanteau word suggesting that metafiction paradoxically takes on a logic of verisimilitude within the contemporary context by reflecting the ontological status of our multi-layered and rootless reality.

In Azuma’s view, *metareality* has positive value: it refers to the plasticity and playfulness of various contemporary fictional products drawing a bridge between popular culture and “pure literature”, and offering agency and interactive experiences to their consumers (Azuma 2007, 11-50). I have myself proposed such a modular reading of *Individual Projection*’s diary. The end of the novel does not necessarily invalidate a free interpretation of Onuma's delusional account. But it somehow scales this down to the status of a temporary and precarious game whose rules the reader never controls. The novel’s last words and final twist highlight the fragility of the reader’s attempt to reorganise the text and his eventual subjection to the metafictional order set by the author. The reader’s quest to find a single unifying figure to the diary (such as “the Eminence School was in fact a mental health hospital”) brings them back to Onuma’s

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<sup>10</sup> “Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept.

Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory - precession of simulacra - it is the map that engenders the territory and if we were to revive the fable today, it would be the territory whose shreds are slowly rotting across the map. It is the real, and not the map, whose vestiges subsist here and there, in the deserts which are no longer those of the Empire, but our own. The desert of the real itself.” (Baudrillard 1983, 2).

own attempts to codify randomness. The novel also questions and highlights our own propensity to look for single reading keys as a way to assuage the angst caused by a world in which images and simulacra are omnipresent.

Through his category of *metareal*, Azuma endorses the idea that many contemporary cultural products depart from the classical logic of identification which incite us to identify with a single character. As in literary metafiction, role-playing games or light novels invite consumers to be both inside and outside of fiction and to navigate freely between characters (Azuma 2007, 31-44). This eulogy of the metafictional dimension of recent cultural products is grounded on a positive, sometimes utopian vision of contemporary societies, characterised, in Azuma's perspective, by the coexistence of various orders of values (Azuma 2007, 50). It is also this coexistence of contradictory values, identities and narratives that Azuma finds fascinating in *Individual Projection* (Azuma 2000). Thus however, he seems to neglect the critical dimension of this text towards a society in which ubiquitous signs devoid of any referent and fragmented stories devoid of grand narratives, authorise all kinds of interpretative deliria. The gap between Azuma's reading of the novel and Abe's personal intentions is quite obvious in the long dialogue between the two authors and the novelist Norizuki Rintarō: while Azuma emphasises the horizontal logic of the contemporary semiotic world, implying shifting identities and interactivity, Abe seems more concerned with the question of conspiracy theories prompted by the Internet and the disordered and exponential development of information (Abe, Norizuki and Azuma 2004, 260-280).

These stances implicitly reflect two different understandings of metafiction. Azuma is concerned with the question of agency: metafiction, like video games, allows an interactive experience and a reappropriation of fictional content by the consumer.

Abe seems more interested in the reflective nature of metafiction: in his essays and interviews, he has repeatedly stressed that literature should also make us think about our relationship to fiction. In a world where stories and dubious information are omnipresent, metafiction holds ethical and social value. In this respect, *Individual Projection* establishes a reading contract that is perhaps more “vertical” than the consumption of fictional products promoted by Azuma. The end of the novel leaves the author with the last word, and it is to warn us against the “maelstrom of information” (*jōhō no uzu*) that engulfs a character like Onuma (Abe 2000, 206). Blurring the frontier between content creators and content consumers is not always a utopia.

## **Conclusion**

“What has to be acknowledged is that there are two poles of metafiction: one that finally accepts a substantial real world whose significance is not entirely composed of relationships within language; and one that suggests there can never be an escape from the prisonhouse of language and either delights or despairs in this” writes Patricia Waugh (Waugh 2003, 53). The first part of Abe Kazushige's novel *Individual Projection*, the diary of Onuma, could probably be described as metafiction accepting “a substantial real world”. Onuma, the diary's unreliable narrator, carries the reader into a maze, parodying the detective story genre. Mocking the character's obsessive quest for a stable locus of meaning (political utopia, stereotypes about virility, *clichés* borrowed from popular culture and genre fiction), the author distances himself from classical processes used to trigger the reader's interest and immerse him into the story (such as a suspenseful plot and the construction of a coherent and realistic diegetic universe). Yet, the diary does not forbid the addressee to speculate, behind the text, upon a consistent world blurred only by Onuma's delirium. The reader can engage in a creative reading whose purpose would be to decipher the diarist's madness and reconstruct the diegetic coherence his craziness

has temporarily ruined. As such, *Individual Projection* appears as a highly *writerly* text granting to the reader the status of a co-writer. By promoting a personal appropriation of its content by the addressee, the text brings to mind Azuma Hiroki's analysis regarding the agency entrusted to fiction consumers within the contemporary context. However, *Individual Projection* ends with a final twist: the last two pages suggest that Onuma's diary might just have been a creative writing exercise and should be re-evaluated as such. This excipit pertains more to the second pole of metafiction identified by Patricia Waugh. Indeed, this reversal removes all mimetic plausibility from the novel: it becomes impossible to postulate a preexisting, consistent universe to which the novel would be hinting. The ontological difference between the level of the story and the level of the narrative is blown to pieces. The reader thus finds himself confronted with a strictly semiotic space, a non-coherent set whose aporias deride the very project of verisimilitude.

*Individual Projection* ceaselessly urges the addressee to rethink his relationship to the narrative. In the process, the text seems to question our proclivity to look for a stable meaning, to read both fiction and reality as a coherent and linear story, with enigmas to solve and plots to reveal. *Individual Projection* is hence a paradoxical text which, under the guise of granting interpretative freedom to readers, also warns them against the temptation of monocausal explanations and unifying reading keys. The novel is thus a textbook case of metafiction's inherent tension between the *writerly* and the *readerly*. While opening up the horizon of interpretation, the text also holds a precise, if not prescriptive discourse regarding the nature of fiction. Such duality within a metafictional text also highlights the contemporaneity of the genre as such. The semiotic nature of postmodern world, its hyperreality — the precession of signs over the real, of models over originals — can be considered as a utopia as well as a dystopia. The optimistic viewpoint underlines the agency such a world bestows on its inhabitants, specifically in

the field of cultural consumption: it is up to anyone to create his own set of signs, and to reinvent or co-invent the story. The pessimistic viewpoint will lament the fragmented and dubious nature of today's reality and the way it appeals to delusion or conspiracy theory. If the contemporary world favours, as Azuma postulates, a modular consumption of fiction, it may conversely arouse, as Abe suggests, the temptation to give in to paranoid interpretations compensating for the absence of great narratives within a chaotic world.

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