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Cultural Concerns, Literary Developments, Critical Debates: Contextualizing the Dynamics of Generic Change and Trajectories of the British Novel in the Twenty-First Century

Vera Nünning & Ansgar Nünning

1. Introducing the Aims and Scope of the Chapter

Despite the methodological challenges and difficulties of contextualization discussed in section two of the introduction, the claim that changing cultural contexts and current concerns have had, and continue to have, a significant influence on both the institutions that make up the literary field and the developments of the contemporary novel is probably uncontroversial. It is, however, anything but easy to identify the most relevant contexts that can help to explain literary change in general and the recent trends of contemporary British fiction in particular. Although it means running the risk of being the fools who rush in where angels would fear to tread, we shall nonetheless make a modest attempt to briefly outline and discuss at least some of the salient factors that have arguably served to shape the directions and ways in which the contemporary British novel has evolved since the turn of the millennium.

Taking its cue from the cautious note struck in the introduction and bearing in mind the challenges of contextualization, this chapter sets out to provide an overview of some of the main cultural contexts, concerns and disruptions that have significantly changed the dominant forms of life in the 21st century and that should be taken into consideration when trying to come to terms with recent developments in the history of the British novel (section two). It proceeds from the assumption that the cultural dynamics of generic change of the novel in the 21st century need to be contextualized both in terms of the changing cultural and medial environment, and by looking at the changes that have occurred within the institutions that make up the literary system itself. Taking into account the most important books and collections of articles that have so far been published on the subject, this chapter therefore also provides a survey of some of the main developments of the British novel in the 21st century and the critical debates about what scholars have identified as the prevailing trends (sections three and four). It will be rounded off by a brief outlook on cultural challenges, open questions and possible futures of the British novel in the coming decades, offering some hypotheses on what the main concerns and issues of narrative fiction in the age of digital monopolies and radical technologies could be (section 5).

2. Contexts, Concerns and Changing Forms of Life: Fiction as Cultural Ecology and the Dynamics of Generic Change of the British Novel in the Twenty-First Century

To begin with, the historical conditions and the medial environment have changed so significantly during the last two decades or so that the literary field and the institutions that constitute it (cf. Stedman 2007) face a broad range of new challenges. Some of the most important innovations and trends include an unprecedented degree of commercialization of literature, the radically altered media ecology that constitutes the cultural environment of literary narratives, and the rise of digital information technologies and networks (cf. e.g. Morozov 2013; A. Greenfield 2017). The narrative theorist and literary historian Paul Dawson has provided such a concise inventory of some of the most important determining conditions that impinge upon "the status and function of the novel in the public sphere" (2013: 5) that it deserves to be quoted at some length:

> increased sales and cultural capital for literary nonfiction such as memoirs, the personal essay and popular history; the commercial orientation of multinational publishing houses, large chain bookstores, and online booksellers [...]; the competing claims of cinema, television, and new media; the broader challenge to traditional print culture presented by technological advances in online publishing, print on demand, ebooks and ebook readers […]; and the attendant proliferation of demotic opinion in public debate via blogs, customer reviews, and opinion polls made possible by the same technology. (Ibid.)

Dawson is certainly right to conclude that all of "these conditions contribute to a sense of the fragmentation of the public sphere and a diminishment of the cultural capital of literature and literary fiction" (ibid.), but he wisely refrains from joining the chorus of those who have bemoaned the alleged demise or death of the novel. On the contrary, Dawson is the first narrative theorist to explore how novelists have responded to these challenges, demonstrating that authors and novels have in fact managed to reassert and regain a remarkable degree of cultural authority.

Moreover, as Dawson's list already indicates, the actors and institutions of the literary field have also been greatly reshaped since the millennium (cf. Stedman 2007). Among the catalysts that have recently enhanced changes in the cultural field are the acceleration of digital innovations, the unprecedented growth of the digital monopolies (cf. Taplin 2017), and the pervasive 'colonization' of both everyday life and the domestic sphere by networked devices, products and services provided by digital information technologies (see A. Greenfield 2017: 36, 286 and passim). Although the relation between the literary field and the radical technologies that Adam Greenfield has so masterfully analyzed and critiqued is such a complex topic that it cannot be delineated here, but would rather need and deserve a book-length study of its own, it is important for anyone who is trying to understand the ways in which the contemporary novel is evolving to remember just how comprehensively the digital information technologies and networks that so many people nowadays take for granted have changed everyday experience in the digital age.

The dominant form of life and everyday experience in what Roberto Simanowski (2016) has christened *Facebook-Gesellschaft*., i.e. Facebook society, are largely shaped by the digital information technologies (see A. Greenfield 2017) and their relentless rhythms of round-the-clock consumption that the art historian Jonathan Crary (2014) has exposed and critiqued in his sombre exploration of nonstop neoliberal capitalism *24/7*. Crary's analyses tally well with the observations that the late sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2007) made in his felicitously entitled book *Consuming Life.* Bauman uses the brilliantly polyvalent term 'consuming life' to describe the large degree to which contemporary forms of life are centered around the paradigm of consumption, transforming a society of producers into a society of consumers. Contributing to a transformation of the consumer into a commodity, digital and social media arguably play a central role in the process of reconfiguring forms of life, affecting the very basics of life. As Jonathan Crary (2014) has shown, we are beginning to sacrifice sleep to a market-place that operates 24/7, resulting in a collective fatigue that increasingly characterizes our dominant forms of life. The rapid acceleration of all walks of life in late capitalism has generated a 24/7-life style that provides hardly any space to breathe. We are supposed to be consuming and communicating electronically round the clock, being monitored with digital surveillance techniques that would have made George Orwell's Big Brother blush with envy, and eventually this process can lead to the end of sleep (cf. Crary 2014). In his brilliant analysis of the contemporary cultural imaginary, Crary illustrates perceptively how the widely used expression 'digital age' can be regarded as a questionable act of historiographic construction. It does not constitute a neutral representation of contemporary culture at all, but blocks out a large number of aspects and experiences that are not any less constitutive for the culture(s) of today, but which are incommensurable elements of today's world with its fixation on technical progress and growth: "This pseudo-historical formulation of the present age as a digital age, supposedly homologous with a 'bronze age' or 'steam age,' perpetuates the illusion of a unifying and durable coherence to the many incommensurable constituents of contemporary experience." (Ibid.: 36)

Therefore the disruptions brought about by the rise of digital information technologies and the concomitant changes in the dominant forms of life, far-reaching though they have been, are by no means the only relevant contexts against which recent developments of the contemporary British novel should be gauged. On the contrary, it would be equally (in)accurate to claim that we are living in an age of crises (e.g., the debt crisis or other financial crises), an age of terrorism and the so-called 'war on terror' (see Hodges 2011), in an age of surveillance, an age of climate change and the anthropocene (cf. Harari 2016: ch. 2), or an age of world-wide migration and refugee crises. Moreover, these diverse contextual developments are not isolated but rather interlinked in various ways. The banking and debt crises, for instance, were not just cataclysmic events in the systems of finance and the economy but rather had devastating consequences for society as a whole, changing culture, the mental climate and the dominant hierarchy of values in significant ways. As the prolific journalist and

novelist John Lanchester shows in his brilliant book *Whoops! Why Everyone Owes Everyone and No One Can Pay*, the "hegemony of economic, or quasi-economic, thinking" (2010: 187) has been so damaging for Britain and Europe at large because the "economic metaphor came to be applied to every aspect of modern life, especially the areas where it simply didn't belong" (ibid.: 187-8). He goes on to argue that instead of having discussions about values and principles, the emphasis has almost exclusively been on costs:

> In Britain in the last twenty to thirty years that has all been the wrong way round. There was a kind of reverse takeover, in which City values came to dominate the whole of British life. There needs to be a general acceptance that the model has failed. […] the model which spread from the City to government and from there through the whole culture, in which the idea of value has gradually faded to be replaced by the idea of price. (Lanchester 2010: 188)

This may suffice to show that even the apparently arcane world of finance or the bank and debt crises of the economy, just like the ubiquitous digital information technologies, have far-reaching consequences for culture and society at large, shaping not just the dominant configuration of values and ideologies, but also the design of everyday life and the prevailing notions about living together in a multicultural world. Although the major difficulties of contextualization derive from the fact that there are so many different cultural, economic, political, social and technological contexts that could, and should, be taken into consideration, it is very difficult to describe and explain generic change in the contemporary British novel without relating it to one or several of these contexts. As the chapters in sections two and three of this handbook will serve to show, many recent British novels have responded to the various crises that have occurred in the aftermath of 9/11 and the so-called 'war on terror', and they have also explored many of the cultural and social issues that have shaped the new millennium. These include, for instance, the 'costs' of modernization, acceleration (cf. Rosa 2005), and globalization, which manifest themselves, e.g., in performance indicators, evaluation, and 'burnout', in the brave new worlds of 'new public management' (cf. Bartmann 2012) and in the disruptions of the job-market in many branches and industries. Indeed, as Susana Onega and Jean-Michel Ganteau (2017) assert, an emphasis on vulnerability may well be one of the defining characteristics of many novels in the 21st century. Other questions about contemporary fiction revolve around the fact that we are living in multicultural societies that are increasingly marked by competing forms of life and different values, and by conflicts of integration and identity, which many contemporary British novels deal with.

The questions that arise from the cultural concerns, developments and discourses briefly outlined in this section are the following (cf. also Basseler et al. 2015): How does contemporary British fiction respond to the various crises and other daunting developments, and how does it deal with changes in the hierarchy of values and emergent forms of life? What is the role and cultural work that the contemporary novel can perform in the altered contexts of the new millennium? To what extent do these cul-

tural concerns and emergent forms of life constitute a catalyst for the transformation and innovation of the novel in the 21st century?

Although there is widespread agreement that there have been far-reaching changes in the life-worlds and dominant hierarchies of values that have emerged in the 21st century, not much sustained effort has been made in literary and cultural studies to explore the role of literature in responding to these changes, providing alternative constellations of values or generating emergent forms of life. Taking Wittgenstein's analogy between language and form of life several steps further, the volume edited by Michael Basseler et al. (2015) proceeds from the assumption that the narrative techniques and aesthetic devices of literature do not merely mimetically represent traditional, more recent or new forms of life. Instead, it is arguably more productive to assume that they actually serve to shape and generate our notions about individual and collective life forms. The contemporary novel has proven to be a medium of exploring crises of traditional forms of life and gauging the on-going search for viable alternatives; it has also established a reputation of being a medium that offers sustained critiques of the dominant approach in capitalist societies, i.e., the increasing commodification of everyday life (cf. Jaeggi 2014: 24ff.) and its on-going colonization by digital technologies (cf. A. Greenfield 2017). In addition, contemporary novels have begun to challenge and critique the ways in which neoliberalism and late capitalism have come to shape and control our forms of life by penetrating deeply into the private realm in a manner that is perhaps historically unprecedented.

Far from merely reflecting societal transformations or far-reaching changes in the configuration of values, the contemporary British novel has arguably played an active role in the cultural conversation about the values that shape human lives and societies. The same holds true for the challenges involved in the model of multiculturalism and the ways of living together in a multicultural society. Fictional narratives provide thought experiments, delineating alternative forms of life: “A thought experiment is an imaginative exercise designed to determine what would happen if certain conditions were met.” (Elgin 2007: 47) The philosopher Catherine Elgin explains what this metaphor entails: “Like an experiment, a work of fiction selects and isolates, manipulating circumstances so that particular properties, patterns, and connections, as well as disparities and irregularities are brought to the fore.” (Ibid.: 49) By enabling readers to temporarily suspend their own perspective, and to adopt the perspectives (cf. ibid.: 52) of different characters with e.g., diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds, novels “can be epistemically rewarding” (ibid.): “They advance understanding by exemplifying features and playing out their consequences.” (Ibid.: 47)

The contemporary British novel has thus not only been a critical medium of exploring crises, disruptions and debates about hierarchies of values; its importance also resides in the fact that novels fulfil important functions in our cultural ecology (see Zapf 2002; 2016). Narrative fiction has always been engaged in an on-going search for alternative forms of life, worldviews and values, reminding the reader just how absurd and incorrect the slogan is that Margaret Thatcher used to use (i.e. the infamous TINA-

principle: "There is no alternative." (cf. Taplin 2017: 28) Every work of fiction provides an alternative model of what the world could look like. Literature not only confirms what the philosopher Rahel Jaeggi's *Kritik von Lebensformen* suggests, viz. that forms of life are constantly renewed and transformed within the dynamic field of crisis and the rationality of social change. Arguably, literature in general, and narrative fiction in particular, plays an important and active role in that it contributes to the dissemination and generation of new forms of life, alternative values and possible worlds. It aesthetically and experimentally holds up for scrutiny the crises, disruptions and transformations prevalent in our societies, presents alternative or emergent forms of life, and contributes to the narrativization and thus the meaning-making processes that accompany the on-going cultural dynamics of social change. More specifically, contemporary British and American fiction engages in the critique of the on-going commodification of life that Zygmunt Bauman describes in *Consuming Life* (2007; also cf. Jaeggi 2014: 24ff.).

The novel has not only always been concerned with "the way we live now", to quote the title of one of Anthony Trollope's well-known novels, it has also responded to dominant forms of life and perhaps even shaped emerging life-styles. The main reason for this is that the ultimate relation between literary fiction and human life is to be found at the level of narrative. The renowned psychologist Jerome Bruner, for example, has argued that "[s]torytelling becomes entwined with, even at times constitutive of, cultural life" (2002: 31). Elaborating on narrative's social function, he observes that "while a culture must contain a set of norms, it must also contain a set of interpretive procedures for rendering departures from those norms meaningful in terms of established patterns of belief. It is narrative and narrative interpretation upon which folk psychology depends for achieving this kind of meaning" (Bruner 1990: 47). James Phelan has also neatly captured the dialectical back-and-forth between storytelling and living: "[T]he living of our lives affects the way we tell our stories, where the telling of our stories affects the way we go on living, and where part of our living is given over to talking about our telling" (2005: 205). Proceeding from the assumption that there is indeed such a mutual constitution of forms of life and the forms of narrative which we use to narrate them, we should now like to provide an overview of the main developments of the British novel in the 21st century, taking into account the critical and scholarly debates about what the main trends and trajectories of fiction in the new millennium are taken to be.

When reviewing the main trends of the British novel in the 21st century in the light of the cultural concerns and contextual issues sketched out in the previous section, one can hardly fail to notice that some of the transformations have already had a significant impact on the trajectory of contemporary fiction, while others have barely registered or been reflected in literature. On the one hand, the bank, debt and financial crises of global capitalism, for instance, have had such serious social repercussions (see Joanna Rostek's chapter in this volume) that the emergence of a new genre like "crunch lit" (see Shaw 2015) does not come as a big surprise. The same holds true for

what Emily Horton (2014) has christened *Contemporary Crisis Fictions* and for the increasingly important role that the so-called 'war on terror' (see Hodges 2011) and the world-wide spread of terrorism have begun to play in the imaginary worlds depicted in novels (see Michael Frank's chapter in this volume).

On the other hand, processes of gradual emergence and slow transformations like climate change, "mind change" (S. Greenfield 2014) or the heavy toll that the disruptions of digital technologies have been taking on many people's working lives not only defy direct observation but also seem to challenge literary representation. At least they have not yet left as many marks on contemporary fiction as one might suspect. One tends to look in vain for a British fictional narrative equivalent to either George Packer's fascinating factual narrative of the breakdown and decline of American institutions, lives and values delineated in his prize-winning *The Unwinding: An Inner History of the New America* (2013) or J.D. Vance's sobering crisis memoir *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (2016). Although novels like Martin Amis's condition-of-England-novel *Lionel Asbo: State of England* (2013), Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012) and Kate Tempest's acclaimed and brilliant novel *The Bricks that Built the Houses* (2016) demonstrate that there are very eloquent literary voices in Britain that give us more than just glimpses of social disintegration, novels depicting either the increasing number of disrupted lives (cf. Becker 1997) and broken narratives occasioned by the endless series of crises, or the dissolution of the institutions and values that used to hold British society together and that eventually culminated in the Brexit, are still few and far between.

The recognition that some contextual factors seem to have shaped the development of contemporary fiction more than others also serves as a welcome reminder of the fact that resorting to contextual aspects is by no means sufficient if one wants to account for or delineate, let alone explain, literary change. Although changes of literary genres may, of course, be caused extrinsically, i.e. by cultural and historical transformations, literary innovation and generic change can also be attributed to intrinsic factors in that such changes often occur when e.g., the need to counteract predominant, traditional genres arises. Lothar van Laak has suggested alternative reasons, attributing changes within and between genres to poetological reflection and the testing of the artistic and generic 'playing field' ("*Spielräume*"), which, as he claims, can lead to a diversification of genres within the genre system (cf. 2010: 70). Moreover, intrinsic triggers of generic change can often be attributed to works that have a decisive impact and can be said to have established a norm or generic prototype. As the juxtaposition of the key concepts 'cultural dynamics' and 'generic change' in the title of a recent volume (see Basseler et al. 2013) highlights, transformations of literary genres can result from changes within the literary system but they can also be triggered by extra-literary contexts, e.g., cultural, economic, and social factors. The chapters in this volume thus try to bear in mind what the Finnish literary scholar Heta Pyrhönen observed in an excellent essay on the theory and history of genres: "[E]xplanations of generic change need to account both for modifications within the literary system and for the im-

pact of the larger socio-cultural context." (Pyrhönen 2007: 122) Heeding Pyrhönen's wise words, we shall try to contextualize recent changes and outline prevailing developments in contemporary British fiction in the next three sections.

3. Blurring Boundaries, Closing Gaps between Literary Fiction and Popular Culture: Institutional Trends and the Popularity of British Novels in the Twenty-First Century

Although the novel has changed in a number of ways in the 21st century, the popularity of contemporary British fiction is undiminished. Many critically acclaimed novels have also become bestsellers such as Hilary Mantel's historical novels on the Tudors, which won the prestigious Man Booker Prize twice: "[T]he Chair of the judges for the Man Booker Prize 2012 proclaimed her the 'greatest modern British prose writer working today'", as Lisa Fletcher (2017: 37) points out. While Ian McEwan may well be the novelist with most critical acclaim (cf. Wilson 2015: 149), there are many other contemporary British novelists who are equally well-known nationally and internationally. They include not only authors who were already well-established in the 1990s (and some even before) like Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, A.S. Byatt, Nick Hornby, Kazuo Ishiguro, David Lodge, Salman Rushdie, and Graham Swift (to name but a few), all of whom have continued to publish critically highly acclaimed and successful novels in the 21st century, but also a wide range of younger writers such as David Mitchell, Ali Smith, Zadie Smith, and, perhaps most recently, Kate Tempest whose rise to stardom dates back to the beginning of the new millennium.

Many developments and institutions have contributed to the modifications within the literary system that have fostered the on-going boom and popularity of contemporary British fiction and the celebrity status of the most prominent novelists. Some of the important factors include the host of literary prizes and book awards, the wide media-coverage that these prizes receive in traditional media like television, the boundary blurring between highbrow literature and popular culture, the adaptation of novels into films, and the possibilities that the new digital media offer both for purposes of self-marketing and for non-professional readers and critics to join in the conversation about contemporary literature. The Man Booker Prize, for instance, and the sometimes heated debates about literary quality among critics, members of the juries and journalists have not only been quite reliable harbingers of literary trends, as Sibylle Baumbach shows in the third chapter of this volume, but also an object of satire in novels like Edward St Aubyn's *Lost for Words* (2014).

Literary agents, self-presentation and the old and new media have also been on to a good thing, promoting authors and their novels and being instrumental in the construction of the celebrity status of quite a few: Keen agents can net enormous sums for the rights to books written by 'stars' like Martin Amis and even authors previously unknown are occasionally offered advance payments of up to a million pounds. Zadie Smith, for example was allegedly paid $ 390.000 up front for her first novel *White*

Teeth (2000), even though at this point only a small part of the book had been written. The BBC film series based on the novel was broadcast soon after publication, and this – along with the massive book sales – shows that those in charge at the publishing house had made a good deal. This inspired investment and the photo of the charismatic young author (still only 25 at the time) may have contributed to the novel's enormous success, along with its popular style and eccentric multi-cultural characters whose lives are described in a witty yet understanding manner (cf. V. Nünning 2007b: 1-2). The commodification of authors, the turning of authors' names into brand names, and the importance of the institutions within the literary marketplace play a growing role in the production and dissemination of literature, and rightly gain more and more attention from literary scholars (see English 2006; Boxall 2015: 9; Rosen 2015).

The great popular success of Monica Ali's, Andreas Levy's and Zadie Smith's novels can, of course, also be attributed to the fact that they deal with pressing cultural and social issues in a serious, sensitive and discerning manner. They also emphasize the close connection that continues to exist between British literature and cultural, moral and social issues in a wider sense. Questions of identity creation in a multi-ethnical society are in the foreground, along with the intercultural workings of different subcultures and problems with gender identities. Recent novels tend to locate these competing traditions within what has come to be known as Englishness, Britishness or rather cosmopolitanism or globalism. While quite a few recent novels by established authors of the by now older generations focus on English life-worlds of the 20th century or the ambivalent legacy of the British Empire, David Mitchell has been hailed as the "Global Novelist of the Twenty-First Century" by no less an expert on the contemporary novel than Brian Finney (2017; see also the chapter by Birgit Breidenbach in this volume).

Another new trend that has arguably fostered the great popularity of contemporary fiction is its increasing openness to popular culture and the interest that recent novels have shown in the history of the latter. Quite a few contemporary novels have deconstructed many of the fictions that television and other popular media disseminate on a daily basis or have delineated the history of popular formats like situational comedies, the ubiquitous chart shows or reality TV series. Cases in point include e.g., Ben Elton's *Chart Throb* (2006), James Meek's *The Heart Broke In* (2012) and Nick Hornby's *Funny Girl* (2014), to name but a few of the novels that engage with popular culture. Many novelists have obviously heeded Leslie Fiedler's famous call to cross the border between highbrow literature and popular culture, and to close the gap that used to separate them.

In his cogently argued monograph *Bring on the Books for Everyone: How Literary Culture Became Popular Culture*, Jim Collins (2010) has done an excellent job in delineating the most important developments within the literary system and cultural institutions at large that have fostered the popularity of contemporary British fiction and closed the gap between highbrow literature and popular culture. These trends include such diverse aspects as the marketing of novels and authors, sales figures, the

composition of the readership, and the increasing popularity of the central topics, but also the by now porous boundary between literary fiction and film: "adaptation films that have dominated the Academy Awards have been winners of Man Booker, PEN Faulkner, and Pulitzer Prizes" (Collins 2010: 17), and have been successfully marketed as such. After the highpoint of postmodernist works of the late 20th century, "something else happened […] that redefined the entire notion of accessibility. Writers of literary fiction such as Amy Tan, Ian McEwan, Toni Morrison […] and Cormac McCarthy have the brand-name recognition once enjoyed by writers of bestsellers" (ibid.: 3). Donald Maass (2012: 2) also observes that in the 21st century "literary fiction is selling the way that commercial novels are supposed to. Certain commercial novelists, on the other hand, are celebrated for their literary quality and simultaneously sell far better than most in their category."

Although it is impossible to summarize the wide range of pertinent observations made by Jim Collins, a brief enumeration of some of the factors that have contributed to closing the gap between highbrow literature and popular culture may suffice in order to indicate how far-reaching the changes both within the literary system and the institutions and media that constitute the cultural environment of literature have been. They include the irresistible rise of Amazon, which has served as a game-changer for the way in which books are marketed and disseminated, the growing importance of the giant chains like Barnes & Noble, and the power of institutions like Miramax, Oprah Winfrey, Book of the Month Club, and Goodread. In the age of digital networks and social media, Virginia Woolf's common reader has become a critic her- or himself, with readers recommending works to other readers – and algorithms producing suggestions of what else was bought by persons who liked a particular book.

This ties in with a new appreciation of the role of readers, who often act in the role of critics – next to professional literary critics in the established papers or other media. Nowadays there are several agents and institutions competing for authority with regard to directing public taste: Professional critics, academics and judges for the big literary prizes, who generally appreciate literary innovations, are pitted against common readers, internet platforms, and celebrities like Oprah Winfrey and her book club. Similarly, there are different kinds of critics and ways of reading one has to reckon with: On the one hand, academic and professional forms of reading of critically acclaimed literary works, which often play with established conventions, making identification with the characters difficult; on the other hand, a new boost for identificatory and immersive reading which is pursued with a passion for books that directly speak to readers and that the latter can relate to.

One of the important recent developments in British novels explored in detail by Jim Collins is the enormous popularity of what has been called 'Lit-lit' (Collins 2010: 220), which celebrates the passion for reading by focusing on characters who love writing or reading novels, who experience the significance of novels in their own fictional lives, and who devote time, interest and passion to reading and discussing recognized literary masterpieces or popular books. Rather than mainly or merely offering

aesthetic experiences by means of complex prose and a nuanced use of literary conventions to solitary readers, such novels show how the characters experience (aesthetic) beauty and good novels. Cases in point include, for instance, Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004) and Zadie Smith's *On Beauty* (2005), two novels which advertise their concern with the appreciation of beauty already in the title. Moreover, there are many recent novels featuring protagonists and characters that are passionate readers. Novels play an important role, and often the characters even devote their life to books by working as e.g., librarians, monks, or in a corner bookshop. A particular type of such self-conscious literary novels focuses on passionate readers who are also writers, partly using the cultural capital of acclaimed authors like Henry James, for instance in David Lodge's *Author, Author* (2004), which, interestingly, deals with the early (failed) attempts of James to become a popular writer. One might add that Julian Barnes's fictional double biography *Arthur and George* (2005) deals with the life (albeit not the works, which are just alluded to) of Arthur Conan Doyle, the famous creator of Sherlock Holmes. Other examples discussed by Collins include e.g., Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), in which the protagonist Henry Perowne is portrayed as a neuroscientist initially very sceptical of the value of literature, but in the end saved by reading, when his daughter makes a great impression on a criminal by citing a famous poem, and Nick Hornby's *A Long Way Down* (2005), in which the four protagonists even form a reading circle. Such intense concern with readers, authors and novels distinguishes 'Lit-lit', which cuts across the boundaries between popular and 'serious' fiction.

The works of 'Lit-lit' mentioned above demonstrate that passionate reading is not confined to bestselling popular fiction. Huge sales-figures can be achieved not only by novels and genres recognized to be 'popular fiction' (e.g. romances, crime fiction, bodice rippers with an emphasis on plot and fast-paced action), but also by other genres such as so-called 'post-literary fiction' (cf. Collins 2010: 187-8). Nick Hornby, for instance, who vociferously campaigns against 'highbrow literary fiction' has published a series of hugely successful novels that have won critical acclaim *and* become popular bestsellers, picking up topics and trends in popular culture which are embedded in 21st century cultural concerns and speak to a large readership (for more details and examples, see Collins 2010). A similar trend can be discerned in a subgenre arguably closely related to – if not part of – Lit-lit: Books that feature minor characters of classic novels as protagonists and that cash in on the popularity and cultural prestige of novels such as *Pride and Prejudice* or *Great Expectations* while at the same time adding a subversive or revisionist perspective to those acclaimed masterpieces (cf. Rosen 2015). The fact that brand names, music, film, consuming, leisure styles and other aspects of popular culture feature prominently not only in Nick Hornby's novels and similar works that German scholars have christened 'Poproman' (cf. Baßler 2002; Gurr 2007), but also in many other novels further serves to show that the borders between highbrow, serious or literary fiction and popular culture have become permeable and blurred in Britain and beyond.

Among the most important developments that have helped to close the gap between literary fiction and popular culture are the disruptions ushered in by digital information technologies, especially the rise of Amazon.com and social media sites like Goodreads.com that revolve around books, reading and readers sharing their views about books they have read. These platforms have not only altered the dominant modes of communication and shaped our everyday experiences and contemporary lifeworlds, they have also had far-reaching consequences on the institutions and roles that constitute the social system we call literature. Amazon.com in particular has profoundly changed the ways in which books are produced, published, disseminated, read, and even reviewed. In a pioneering essay that deserves to be widely read by all students of contemporary literature, Mark McGurl (2016) has shown what the contours of "Fiction in the Age of Amazon" are beginning to look like. Proceeding from the assumption that the rise of Amazon.com should be seen as an important event and a "driving force" in literary history, McGurl analyzes the manifold ways in which what he calls the "Amazon digital ecology" (ibid.: 447) is in the process of altering the practices of literary production, dissemination, reading and even criticism beyond recognition. He convincingly argues that the "entrepeneurial logic, ethos, and temporality of 'customer service'" (ibid.) that Amazon is promoting "might be taken as the dominant logic of contemporary fiction as such" (ibid.).

Taking into consideration the new practices of self-publishing introduced by e.g. Kindle Direct Publishing, electronic consumption of books and the series of initiatives recently undertaken by Amazon, McGurl provides a fascinating and concise analysis of the implications of the rise of Amazon on the forms and functions of contemporary fiction, showing that they are profound and wide-ranging on various levels. As a more or less "traditional publisher with fourteen separate imprints" (ibid.: 449), Amazon has not only ushered "in a new age of self-authorized popular creativity and low-cost literary entertainment" (ibid.), it has also served to foster the overarching trend McGurl meticulously explores, viz. "that fiction in the Age of Amazon *is* genre fiction, a highly gendered and age-differentiated genre system complexly structured by the poles of epic and romance and their characteristic modes of wish fulfillment" (ibid.: 460). Within this system, what used to be the ideal of the great individual novel has been superseded by popular "models of market success" (ibid.) like the series or the sequence, which are based on "effective variation and permutation within established generic structures" (ibid.) and which conform to recent directions in popular fiction (cf. Gelder 2016a). As far as the trajectories of the contemporary novel are concerned, two of McGurl's observations are particularly interesting: "the persistence of literary fiction as something unto itself, something putatively 'ungeneric,' and its demotion to the status of one genre among many" (McGurl 2016: 449). Although McGurl modestly admits that critical projects like his which explore "the institutional ground of contemporary literary production" (ibid.: 450) inevitably run the risk of "near-term descriptive obsolescence and need for renovation" (ibid.: 448), his brilliant and rich essay serves to demonstrate that the on-going dynamics of technological disruptions, the changing

economic environment of literature, and their respective impact on contemporary culture and literature, deserve much more scholarly attention than they have so far received by critics and historians of contemporary fiction.

4. The End of Postmodernism, the Return to Modernism or Realism, or the End of all the 'isms'? Critical Debates about Prevailing Trends in the British Novel in the Twenty-First Century

Other issues and trends hotly debated among academic critics and scholars of literature since the late 1990s concern the questions of the alleged end of postmodernism and of continuities between 21st century fiction and the conventions of Victorian realism, modernism and postmodernism. There is a certain degree of agreement that, at least with regard to British literary fiction, postmodernist modes of writing receded somewhat into the background around the turn of the millennium and that the peak of the postmodern moment has passed: "In terms of literary form perhaps the style that continued to loom over the first decade of the twenty-first century was postmodernism, despite most commentators agreeing that the heyday of postmodern fiction and art peaked around 1980s and 1990s in Britain. Indeed, an exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2011 was very specific about dates in its title: 'Postmodernism: Style and Subversion 1970-1990'." (Bentley et al. 2015b: 13) While the "1990s was also the decade in which postmodern experimenters in fiction could be said to have firmly established themselves as the new literary establishment in Britain: Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, A.S. Byatt, Angela Carter, Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie and Jeanette Winterson" (ibid.: 15), the first decade of the 21st century has been characterized as "a decade in which novelists and cultural critics examine the end, or indeed, ends of postmodernism" (ibid.: 14).

Whether or not attempts to discuss recent trends in literature in terms of postmodernism, post-postmodernism or other -isms, is a particularly fruitful or illuminating way of mapping the complex trajectories of contemporary fiction may well be an open question. The plethora of ever more competing terms that have been suggested may give reason to pause and become slightly sceptical about the heuristic usefulness of "[a]ll the 'isms'" (Smith 2016: 19). In their informative introduction to an interesting collection of essays entitled *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*, Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble and Leigh Wilson have provided a brief collection of some of the trends and terms that have been proposed: "[…] rejection of the postmodern including post-postmodernism (Nealon), beyond postmodernism (Stierstorfer), after postmodernism (Potter and López), altermodernism (Bourriaud), metamodernism (Vermeulen and van den Akker), digimodernism (Kirby), the new puritans (Blincoe and Thorne) and the new sincerity (Kelly)" (16). In his illuminating critical introduction to *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, Peter Boxall (2013: 58-59) provides another balanced assessment of some of the concepts and hypotheses that have been proposed "to describe the new contexts which shape […] fiction at the beginning of the new cen-

tury", including the claim made by Jeffrey T. Nealon in his book *Post-Postmodernism* (2012) "that postmodernism as a global cultural dominant is declining or ending or already over" (qtd. in Boxall 2013: 58), and the category of "Later Postmodernism", proposed by Jeremy Green. Moreover, as Robert Eaglestone observes, even "if the word post-postmodernism wasn't too silly […] it wouldn't be accurate" (2013: 15). After all, contemporary writers are aware of the literary traditions, and they have "integrated [postmodernism], domesticated it, and returned some way to the more traditional forms of the novel" (ibid.).

There have been quite a few other developments in contemporary British fiction that can be described in terms of an alleged end of postmodernism, but which could just as well be seen as various kinds of new departures even though the authors and novels in question rely mainly on realist or modernist modes of writing: "Many novelists associated with the expression of marginalized positions in British society, especially in terms of ethnicity, have continued to work in what is predominantly a realist form. For example, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004), and Caryl Phillips's *A Distant Shore* (2003) operate primarily in the realist mode" (Bentley et al. 2015b: 18). Although there may well be "general agreement nowadays that postmodernism, the cultural and philosophical paradigm which has so significantly shaped and inspired the second half of the twentieth century, has fallen out of fashion" (Funk 2015: 2), it is an open question whether or not it is particularly productive to regard e.g., authors and novels that focus on marginalized positions in British society, or the return to modernist forms of writing that can be observed in recent novels by e.g., Ian McEwan, Zadie Smith (cf. ibid.: 19), Julian Barnes and Graham Swift as a "response to the waning of postmodernism in the 2000s" (ibid.).

Resorting to such conceptual tools dating back to discussions of the 20th century may be a way of missing the actual specificity of 21st century concerns and contexts that contemporary British fiction addresses and responds to. Instead of bothering with the somewhat tiresome question of whether or when postmodernism departed from the British Isles (which would presuppose that it was significantly in evidence beforehand), we should like to suggest that it is more important to recognize the 21st century cultural issues and new departures that can be observed in many recent novels. What we are actually faced with is not one general trend (be it the end of postmodernism or a return to realism or modernism), but rather a wide range of diverse developments and genres that testify to the contemporaneity of heterogenous traditions from various periods (*Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*) and to the actual plurality of different trends (cf. V. Nünning 2007b: 6). In order to capture at least some of the aesthetic variety that finds its expression in contemporary British fiction, one should acknowledge that there are many different trajectories that have to be taken into consideration in any attempt to map recent developments of the British novel in the 21st century. This variety partly derives from abandoning the previously significant division into (British) centre and (colonial) periphery. That division led to an outdated notion of antithesis between English (or British) literature and Commonwealth literature, also referred to

as the new literatures in English or *Postcolonial Literatures in English* (cf. Döring 2007; 2008), with the latter being characterized by *writing back*, as though the main concerns of authors and works from countries that used to belong to the British Empire were still dominated by the colonial past and British superiority.

This unsatisfactory opposition has now given way to an appreciation of the multi-ethnic diversity which is undoubtedly one of the most important features of current trends in British fiction. Authors from a great variety of ethnic backgrounds enrich literature with new topics, forms, styles, searches for identities in intercultural constellations, hybridity, difference and attempts to overcome the past. These writing styles have not only become characteristics of so-called 'fictions of migration' (Sommer 2001); due to the keen interaction and interchanges within literature, they have also become features of novels written by English, Irish or Scottish authors. Moreover, the importance of 'Black British' novels, written by authors with an ethnic or migration background, and of multiculturalism to contemporary British fiction has already been widely acknowledged. What would British fiction be, after all, without such authors as Zadie Smith, Hanif Kureishi, Andrea Levy, Gautam Malkani, Nadeem Aslam and many others, one might ask. The significance of 'Black British fiction' in the current political climate can hardly be overestimated, as James Acheson reminds us: "In recognition of the fact that there are still racial tensions in Britain, *Small Island* was made the focal point of a unique mass-reading project in 2007. This 'involved the distribution of 50,000 free copies of Andrea Levy's novel, along with 80,000 copies of a glossy A5 readers' guide. It generated 100 separate events (including library talks, book group discussions, competitions, exhibitions), and 60 school workshops.' To date it is one of Britain's best-known twenty-first-century postcolonial novels." (2017: 11)

Since 2000, if not before, there has been no evidence of one particular dominant tendency in contemporary British fiction. Instead, a great diversity of genres and a concomitant plurality of simultaneous developments prevail. On the one hand, in relation to genres, but also with a view to modes of writing and narrative techniques, for instance, there has been a certain amount of continuity since the 1990s, a tendency that is particularly obvious in such genres as the historical novel (cf. e.g., A. Nünning 1995a; 1995b; 1997) and the fictional biography and meta-biography (cf. Nadj 2006). On the other hand, many novels of the last two or three decades have tended to integrate elements from a wide range of different genres that had previously been separated from each other, mixing conventions of various (sub)genres to such a degree that novels can often no longer be clearly attributed to one genre alone. In fact, just like ethnic hybridity (cf. Bickley 2008: 19f.), generic hybridization has become one of the main characteristics of the contemporary British novel (cf. A. Nünning/Schwanecke 2013), confirming Malcolm Bradbury's (1994: 344) observation that "generic crossovers, crossings of borders, easy passage between the high and the popular forms, or the literary and the media arts" have been among the salient trends in British fiction since the late twentieth century just like „the breakdown of the conventional borders of genre and narrative type" (ibid.: 407). Moreover, media and medialization have also

served as catalysts of generic change (see Nünning/Rupp 2011; 2013), generating ever new manifestations of the novel and encouraging critics to propose new designations and terms for the different books and developments subsumed under the wide umbrella term of the novel.

As a brief look at some of the turns, terms and -isms that have been proposed over and above the discussion about the alleged end of postmodernism shows, there is no agreement as to what the most appropriate designation for the diversity of recent developments and the plurality of generic manifestations in contemporary British fiction would be. Although it is impossible to provide a comprehensive overview of the plethora of suggestions and critical discussions, some deserve to be singled out since they arguably manage to capture some of the specifics of new trends in the British novel in the 21st century. In an outline of what he refers to as "the post-theory theory novel", Mitchum Huehls (2015: 287) recognizes a "realist turn in contemporary fiction", in which "realism is fighting back, capturing and describing theory's slippery signifiers in the fixed and forthright prose of the conventional novel form" (ibid.: 282). Yet he also identifies a strand of literature that "deploys poststructural concepts to innovate new, more experimental literary forms" (Huehls 2015: 283). This second body of works is "rife with opaque signifiers, textually mediated worlds, ephemeral authors, deferred meanings, and empowered readers" (ibid.). What Huehls sees as a distinct feature of the theory novel – "its adherence to the mandate that texts reflexively think their own conditions of possibility and then perform the results of that thinking in and through the text itself" (ibid.: 285f.) – is still relatively rare in contemporary British fiction, but "the ontological turn" that he discusses in detail in his recent monograph *After Critique: Twenty-First-Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* arguably identifies an important new departure or trend in contemporary fiction:

> [T]he ontological turn I identify in contemporary fiction differs crucially from what poststructuralism attempted in the second half of the twentieth century. In particular, poststructuralism's ontological critique of representation […] maintain[s] the distinction between subjects and objects that standard forms of representational meaning-making require. The texts I examine, however, tend to collapse the distinction between subjects and objects. Consequently, the ontological turn is […] an attempt to produce new forms of value in a neoliberal landscape that obscures the doubleness of the subject-object ontology with either subjective or objective representational modes. (Huehls 2016: 172)

Among the many other and competing attempts at identifying salient characteristics of fiction in the 21st century, the claim that there has been a (re)turn to modernist modes of writing has been put forward by quite a few critics. According to Bentley, Hubble and Wilson, for instance, three prevailing trends can be observed in the first decade of the new century: the continued use of postmodernist techniques, now grounded on ethical positions, the re-engagement with realism (particularly in novels written by authors from marginalized positions), and the return to modernism (see also Eaglestone 2013: 14-23). In addition to novels by Ian McEwan and Zadie Smith, several authors and novels are often mentioned to corroborate the hypothesis of a return to

modernism. Cases in point include e.g., Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004), Mark Haddon's *The Red House* (2012) and the three fictional biographies that were all published in 2004 about Henry James, though many other recent British novels also make use of modernist techniques. Although the claim that the use of postmodern techniques had already been "routine and no longer radical" even before the new millennium (Lewis 2005 [2001]: 113) may be debatable in view of the unbroken dominance in Britain of what is considered to be realism, the enhanced familiarity of readers with experimental modes of fiction may be one of the reasons why a surprising number of novels published over the past two decades make use of modernist techniques. Further examples include Julian Barnes's recent novels *Arthur and George* (2005), *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) and *The Noise of Time* (2016) or Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005), *On Chesil Beach* (2007), *Solar* (2010), *Sweet Tooth* (2012) and *The Children Act* (2014). Several of these works feature astonishing resemblances to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, whose *To the Lighthouse* serves as one of the important intertexts for Haddon's *The Red House*. Even McEwan's earlier novel *Atonement* is largely characterized by modernist conventions, covert heterodiegetic narration, multiperspectivity, and the nuanced evocation of the experiences of a wounded soldier. At the same time, however, *Atonement* and several other recent novels which are often adduced as evidence of the alleged return to modernism also bear witness to the fact that the use of modernist narrative techniques is not a nostalgic return to well-established conventions but rather a way of probing their limits and deploying them to new ends, challenging readers' assumptions and necessitating the revision of interpretations by giving "the realist flesh of plot, character and setting to the skeleton of a modernist inheritance" (Hodgson 2013: 28).

This ties in well with the observation made by quite a few critics that there has not only been a return to modernism but an even more prominent return to realism and the real. Many recent British novels provide highly detailed descriptions of the worlds they project in their novels and equally nuanced representations of experientiality. Peter Boxall (2013: 10), for instance, observes that "one can see the emergence of new kinds of realism, a new set of formal mechanisms with which to capture the real, as it offers itself as the material substrate of our being in the world". In their introduction to a collection on *Twenty-First Century Fiction*, which features subchapters on both modernism and realism, Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard (2013b: 6) draw attention to "the earlier New Puritan Manifesto of 2000, proposed by Nicholas Blincoe and Matt Thorne […]. This manifesto sets itself against the deviceful writing of the 'well-made' novel and calls for a commitment to the real, for texts to be 'set in the present day' and 'to avoid all improbable or unknowable speculation about the past and future' and for 'texts [to] feature a recognisable ethical reality'". Again, this provides a very appropriate description of the dominant mode of storytelling and narrative world-making that one finds in many contemporary novels. As Irmtraud Huber (2014: 6) rightly maintains, however, this "new kind of realism does not revoke postmodernist claims about the power of discourse and the inaccessibility of the real, about the fragmenta-

tion of the subject and the impossibility of truth. Instead, it acknowledges them even while it asserts itself in spite of them". By combining realism with postmodernist self-reflexivity, many contemporary authors situate themselves in the venerable British tradition of the "experimental realist" (Bradbury 1994: 377) that goes back to e.g., John Fowles, David Lodge and Malcolm Bradbury.

The return to the real and the new kinds of realism should thus not be misunderstood as a naïve return to realist assumptions of earlier ages that may have been more innocent than the present. The 'reality hunger' (Shields 2010) that characterizes many contemporary novels does not mean that "writing could be just a simple representation of the world" (Eaglestone 2013: 18; see also 17-22). Instead, many contemporary British novels have not just moved beyond postmodernism, combining both postmodernist and realist devices. They evoke the experience of alterity and defy closure, but they nonetheless create life-like characters and refrain from using the defamiliarizing devices of postmodernism (cf. V. Nünning 2008).

There are, however, other developments in contemporary fiction as far as formal trends and narrative techniques are concerned. Two of the most striking are indicated by the titles of two recent monographs that focus on dominant narrative techniques in 21st century fiction: *The Return of the Omniscient Narrator* (Dawson 2013) and *The Return of the Storyteller in Contemporary Fiction* (Dragas 2014). Areti Dragas not only shows that the storyteller has returned triumphantly in contemporary fiction, becoming a salient feature of many recent British (and American) novels, but also explores its functions: "Through the figure of the storyteller, 'storytelling' – the discourse of the storyteller – is foregrounded and presented not only as a means of knowing the world, but is also set up to question the grand narratives of history, religion and politics, as well as ideological constructs such as nationhood." (2014: 2) Paul Dawson makes a convincing case that the re-emergence of the omniscient narrator in 21st century fiction can be explained as an aesthetic response to prevailing anxieties about the novel's decline of cultural authority in the age of digital media. Although many writers, as well as critics and narratologists, are well aware of the contested nature and limitations of both omniscience as a phenomenon and of authorial modes of storytelling, Dawson demonstrates that these modes, which were virtually abandoned by modernist fiction, have not only returned in many novels in the 21st century; they have also served to reclaim the narrative and cultural authority of the authors in question and of the novel and literature at large. He carefully delineates how writers as diverse as Martin Amis, A.S. Byatt, Jeffrey Eugenides, John Fowles, Jonathan Franzen, David Lodge, Zadie Smith and Salman Rushdie have not merely deployed new, relativized modes of omniscient narration in their novels, but have also scrutinized the traditional critique and rejection of the phenomenon of omniscience, emphasizing the dangers of rejecting the cultural authority and epistemology associated with it.

In some ways similar to Caroline Levine's more recent attempt to connect literary form to cultural contexts in her excellent book *Forms* (2015), Dawson not only provides a detailed formalist and narratological exploration of omniscient narration as

a narrative technique, he also suggests a number of very interesting ways in which formal developments and formalist concerns can be plausibly and fruitfully linked with broader cultural concerns. Seeking to answer the question of "why so many contemporary writers have turned to omniscient narration" (Dawson 2013: 3), despite the plethora of aesthetic and normative prejudices against this narrative mode, he develops a number of very interesting hypotheses. Approaching omniscient narration as "the rhetorical performance of narrative authority" (ibid.: 19) and as "the exemplary narrative voice of post-postmodern fiction" (ibid.: 4), Dawson demonstrates that contemporary omniscient narrators represent both a development of traditional forms of omniscience and a refinement of some of the technical experiments of postmodern fiction. Situating the emergence of contemporary omniscience in the densely mediated cultural landscape which has led to a crisis of cultural authority in the literary field, he also persuasively argues that contemporary novelists have adapted the narrative authority of classic omniscience to a radically altered cultural environment. Thus, the reworking of omniscient narration in contemporary fiction "can be understood as one way in which authors have responded to a perceived decline in the cultural authority of the novel over the last two decades" (ibid.: 5) and to the "cultural anxieties about the decline of literature and the diminished status of novelists" (ibid.: 23).

In addition, critics and scholars of contemporary fiction have identified further innovative forms of novelistic storytelling that have recently emerged. In a rich and stimulating blogpost essay that was first published on July 17, 2013, the prolific music historian and jazz critic Ted Gioia has ventured the hypothesis that "Mainstream literary fiction is falling to pieces". In his tellingly entitled "[t]he Rise of the Fragmented Novel", Gioia (2013: n.p.) suggests that we are witnessing that "a new type of fragmentation has come to the forefront in 21st century novels". He bolsters his claim by listing no fewer than 57 fragmented novels, many of which could also be classified as broken narratives, with e.g., Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) and David Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (2004) and Zadie Smith's recent novel *NW* (2012) being particularly prominent cases in point. In her online book list "Fractured Novels that Mirror the Uncertainty of Everyday Life", the writer and artist Anne Charnock suggests that novels with fragmented structures and fractured narratives which were once considered to be experimental and marginal have recently become one of the dominant trajectories of fiction. And in his stimulating online-essay "Fragmentary: Writing in a Digital Age", Guy Patrick Cunningham (2012: n.p.) even goes so far as to suggest that "works that deal with fragmentation, that eschew not only a traditional narrative structure but the very idea of a work comprising a single, unified whole – take on a special kind of relevance". These diagnoses of an increasing trend towards fragmentation tally well with Emily Horton's (2014) description of "the aesthetic techniques of the crisis novel, including the first person confessional, unreliable narrative voice, discursive irony, genre subversion, and temporal digression and fragmentation, which characterise a mode of crisis-bound writing. These techniques, I argue, formalise the meaning of crisis for the genre, making evident a coherent model of aesthetic assertion" (2014: 5).

This selective overview of some of the main trends that have been identified may suffice to show that no turn, term or -ism can do justice to the diversity of developments and new aesthetic manifestations in contemporary British fiction. While the metaphor of the "novelist at the crossroads" which David Lodge proposed at the end of the 1960s captured the main directions in which the novel had developed in Britain by then quite well, the metaphor of "the spaghetti junction" that Randall Stevenson (1993: 141) suggested as a more appropriate update for the increased diversity of the literary landscape in the later decades of the 20th century provides at least a rough idea of how the novel has evolved since: "Traffic in Britain has moved beyond the crossroads to the spaghetti junction: its complexity – and faintly foreign resonance – may make it a better metaphor for an era of writing in which long-serving main roads remain discernible, but are increasingly overwhelmed by new directions, recombining and diversifying the old." (Ibid.) Although even the metaphor of "the spaghetti junction" may no longer suffice to embrace the complexities that contemporary British fiction has displayed since the beginning of the new millennium, it at least provides a vivid illustration of the fact that there are many different trajectories going in diverse directions.

Over and above the wide array of developments and trends that have already been identified and briefly summarized in this section, the present volume also attempts to take into account and describe some of the factors that have impacted the cultural dynamics of generic change of the British novel in the 21st century. These include, for instance, the proliferation of narratives of crises as a cultural symptom and as a challenge for the questionable assumptions of late capitalism (see Joanna Rostek's chapter in this volume). Although, as Siân Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard (2013b: 2) have observed, "critics in the West have been claiming to see moments of unprecedented crisis virtually every year since 1945, while living through what seems now one of the most secure and stable economic and political period [sic] available to history", there has been a series of catastrophes and crises since 2001 which have left marks on fiction around the world. These include "9/11, environmental catastrophe, peak oil, financial collapse, the neo-liberal dismembering of the social democratic settlement" and "the continuing hollowing out of human cultures and economies by the processes of globalisation, consumerism and marketisation" (ibid.). Moreover, media, medialization and the on-going "acceleration of technology, communication and globalisation" (ibid.) have also been, and continue to be, among the most important catalysts that have fostered generic change in the 21st century.

5. Fiction in the Age of Digital Monopolies and Radical Technologies: Cultural Challenges, Functions and Possible Futures of the British Novel in the Twenty-First Century

Although it might go without saying, neither this brief overview over some of the most salient recent cultural and literary developments nor the chapters that follow claim to provide anything like a comprehensive map of the rapidly changing territories that

make up contemporary life-worlds or of the literary representations of, and responses to, the real and virtual worlds we live in. This chapter merely tries to make a modest attempt to contextualize the various concerns, genres, and developments delineated in the following chapters in greater detail and to outline a rough sketch of some of the overarching literary trends in, and critical responses to, the recent history of contemporary British fiction. What then, are the main cultural challenges and institutional changes that are likely to shape the possible futures of the British novel in the 21st century?

As already outlined above, the far-reaching changes in the design of communication and everyday life resulting from the revolution of the networked digital information technologies (cf. Morozov 2013: 32, 332f.; Simanowski 2014; 2016; 2017; A. Greenfield 2017) constitute one of the main challenges for contemporary literature. It remains to be seen how the British novel will respond to these changes and challenges, and to what degree, and in what ways, it will engage with and respond to digital and virtual forms of life. While the latter are increasingly being thematized, staged, and problematized in contemporary American novels, for instance in Thomas Pynchon's *Bleeding Edge* (2013) or Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013), to mention only two of the most recent and prominent examples, the 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. It has been argued that a new genre that might be referred to as 'fictions of the internet' (see Weigel 2013: 270ff.) is in the process of emerging, but British novels have hardly begun to explore the myriad ways in which Amazon, Facebook, 'gamification', Google, 'second life', 'self-tracking' and 'lifelogging' are becoming the dominant form of life, let alone gauge the dire consequences that these rapid developments may have.

It will be interesting to watch how literature will respond to the on-going digitalization of everyday life (A. Greenfield 2017), to the preference that the so-called 'digital age' has developed for technological solutionism (cf. Morozov 2013), and to the impact that digital technologies and the (a-)social media are having not just on our brains, minds, consciousness, and selves (see S. Greenfield 2014), but also on the dominant forms of communication, relationships, and living together. The daily life-worlds represented in as yet unwritten films and novels are likely to sooner or later show what will happen when we are *Alone Together* and when *We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, as the title and subtitle of one of the important books published by MIT scientist Sherry Turkle put it (see Turkle 2011). As yet, only few British novelists have critically engaged with the radical changes of the dominant forms of life resulting from digital technologies. One tends to look in vain for a sustained engagement with, or critique of, the central role that smartphones, Facebook,

augmented and virtual reality, 'self-tracking' and 'lifelogging' have come to play in everyday life in contemporary British fiction. The prologue of Zadie Smith's recent novel *Swing Time* (2016) provides an example of the odd reference to the iPhone as "the signature artifact of our age" (A. Greenfield 2017: 9) that one finds in some novels: "I looked at my phone, it was sitting on the counter in airplane mode. I had been offline for seventy-two hours and can remember feeling that this should be counted among the great examples of personal stoicism and moral endurance of our times." (Smith 2016: 1f.)

However, by reading recent British novels one could hardly guess that the smartphone has by now "become the universal, all-but-indispensable mediator of everyday life" (A. Greenfield 2017: 9) in the second decade of the 21st century. Although some novels by well-established British writers like Nick Hornby's *Juliet Naked* (2009) or by lesser known novelists like T.R. Richmond's *What She Left* (2015) have incorporated several text-types of computer-mediated communication and of the so-called 'social media' into their repertoire of modes of storytelling, the all pervasive "networking of the self" (A. Greenfield 2017: 9), the services provided by the digital giant monopolies Amazon, Facebook and Google, the "new kind of subjectivity" epitomized by "the networked subject" (ibid.: 28), or the ubiquitous forms of surveillance have so far hardly played a dominant role in contemporary British fiction (see, however, Rostek's discussion of surveillance in contemporary novels in this volume). The same holds true for the modes and ways in which what Roberto Simanowski (2016) has called the "Facebook society" has radically altered prevalent notions of autobiography, friendship, identity, relationships and self (see also Turkle 2011; 2015), and the social practices through which these notions are constructed and negotiated, i.e. with topics that have always been the stuff from which novels are made.

Although novels are unlikely to provide definitive answers to hotly debated questions like "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" (Twenge 2017), it seems reasonable to assume that the radical alterations of everyday life ushered in by digital technologies will not only register in contemporary fiction, but that novels will continue to play an important role as a medium of cultural self-reflection (cf. Butter 2007) and as an important factor in our cultural ecology (Zapf 2016). Novels like Dave Eggers's *The Circle* (2013) have shown what the psychological and social costs look like when we "surrender more of our private lives believing in the myth of convenience bequeathed to us by benign corporations" (Taplin 2017: 12). However, novelists on both sides of the Atlantic have hardly begun to explore what it means for human beings when everything they do, say and write is monitored, tracked, and made subject to surveillance for advertising, economic, political or securitization purposes, and when the choices they are offered are more and more premediated by the design of the digital services and technologies. The fact that George Orwell's chilling dystopia *1984* (1949) recently made it to the top of the bestseller lists seems to suggest that readers are eagerly waiting for updates that depict scenarios reflecting on contemporary cultural imaginaries. Although the somewhat schematic dystopian novel of ideas *2121: A*

Tale from the Next Century (2013) by the British neuroscientist Susan Greenfield is unlikely to become part of the canon (see the chapter by Eckart Voigts in this volume), it does offer us a rather grim and sinister view of a possible future in which technology has radically changed dominant lifestyles and values in a hedonistic, hyper-real and cyber-driven world, while also raising poignant questions about current developments that are not so much dystopian but already very real:

> Networked digital information technology looms ever larger in all of our lives. It shapes our perceptions, conditions the choices available to us, and remakes our experiences of space and time. [...] It even inhibits our ability to think meaningfully about the future, tending to reframe any conversation about the reality we want to live in as a choice between varying shades of technical development. (A. Greenfield 2017: 8)

The undiminished and arguably even enhanced importance of literary fictions in the 21st century derives from the fact that the novel greatly fosters our "ability to think meaningfully about the future" in that it continuously generates alternative worlds that open up new possibilities "about the reality we want to live in" over and beyond the highly reductive "choice between varying shades of technical development" (ibid.). Moreover, as all the chapters in this volume serve to show, contemporary novels remind readers that there are very rich, albeit imaginary life-worlds beyond digital information technology and that the smartphone need not be the "all-but-indispensable mediator of everyday life" (A. Greenfield 2017: 9) that it has by now become in the so-called real world.

It has always been one of the main attractions and functions of fiction that it has offered alternative realities or worlds, thus enabling readers to think in more creative and imaginative ways about both the present and possible futures. Since novels are concerned with dominant and emergent forms of life and values, this genre lends itself particularly well to an investigation and conceptualization of the ways in which literature may be understood as an "art of possibility" (Zander/Zander 2000). Even more so than the study of history, fiction has the capacity "to make us aware of possibilities we don't normally consider" (Harari 2016: 59), both on the level of everyday life and subjective experiences, and by imagining possible worlds and alternative destinies for humankind. One of the societal functions of literature is to find answers to the great questions of "what we are and what we could be" (cf. Hüther 2011) and what the 'best of all possible worlds' (cf. Schulze 2003) might look like.

More specifically, the 21st century novel will also be faced with much more concrete questions and current issues that were not even on the agenda some decades ago. How will novels of the future, for instance, negotiate the more than just endangered ecological equilibrium and the precarious balance "between economic growth and ecological stability" (Harari 2016: 20) that seems to overtax the limited imagination of most politicians? Will the "Amazon digital ecology" (McGurl 2016: 447) prove to be not only "the driving force of American literary history" (ibid.), but also a game-changer for the development of the novel in Britain, Europe or even world-wide? Is it even "occasioning a convergence of the state of the art of fiction with the state of the art of capitalism" (ibid.)?

In order to highlight some of the main challenges that contemporary novels will inevitably engage with for the simple reason that every novel presents a possible world, we should like to conclude this chapter with a selection of some other pressing questions that cultural critics and historians have recently raised: "What are the projects that will replace famine, plague and war at the top of the human agenda in the twenty-first century?" (Harari 2016: 20) Moreover, since the possible worlds that novels depict include human-like agents, their experiences, minds, relationships, societies, and hierarchies of values, and a model of how people live, or want to live, in the world, narrative fictions also provide explicit or implicit answers to other key 21st century questions: "What's more valuable – intelligence or consciousness? [...] What will happen to society, politics and daily life when non-conscious but highly intelligent algorithms know us better than we know ourselves?" (Ibid.: 397) Perhaps more than any other form of literature and art, novels have the capacity to offer readers vicarious experiences and imaginary worlds that provide exemplary answers to 21st century questions like the following: "What does it mean to be human in the age of digital addiction?" (Taplin 2017: 214), and what will it "feel like to be human in that posthuman moment?" (A. Greenfield 201: 271)

This list of open questions that are likely to engage the literary imagination of novelists in the 21st century could, of course, be continued almost indefinitely. What will contemporary and future novelists have to say about the prediction made by the historian Yuval Noah Harari in his fascinating but scary book *A Brief History of Tomorrow* that "humanity's next targets are likely to be immortality, happiness and divinity" (2016: 21)? What will future novels look like that reflect the "shift from a homo-centric to a data-centric world view" (ibid.: 390) that is currently underway? How will novels in the coming decades represent the radically altered forms of life that are likely to result from current developments in bio-, nano- and digital technologies? It will also be interesting to watch how novelists will respond to crucial questions like the following:

> What will happen to the job market once artificial intelligence outperforms humans in most cognitive tasks? What will be the political impact of a massive new class of economically useless people? What will happen to relationships, families and pension funds when nanotechnology and regenerative medicine turn eighty into the new fifty? What will happen to human society when biotechnology enables us to have designer babies, and to open unprecedented gaps between rich and poor? (Harari 2016: 269)

Although novelists have already begun to deal with some of these issues and to challenge the prevailing master narratives that global capitalism has lived by, viz. the myths of unlimited economic growth and progress which have acquired an "almost religious status" (ibid.: 207), it is still an open question what the key to happiness could be and what narratives about a 'good life' would look like in the 21st century. Similarly, gradual processes like climate change, global warming, and the on-going erosion of the ecological equilibrium, constitute interesting challenges for future novels in that representing such processes of slow change would require the invention of nar-

ratives largely devoid of actors, events and plots (at least in the traditional narratological sense of these terms). Another big challenge for novelists will be to represent the fundamental alterations of the dominant patterns of communication and the design of everyday life that are rapidly emerging as a result of what Susan Greenfield has called *Mind Change* (2014), and of the transformations in the wake of the digital information technologies (cf. A. Greenfield 2017). Demographic change and ageing societies are also likely to foster new narratives about health and illness.

In sum, although novels may be mere figments of the imagination, the power of narrative fiction derives from the fact that it engages in the processes of meaning-making that constitute the changing cultures and worlds that we live in. Storytelling has always been one of the most important ways of meaning-making and of weaving the "intersubjective web of meaning" (Harari 2016: 149) that is as much based on collective fictions of e.g., ideology, law and religion as on facts (cf. ibid.: 148-51). The heated debates about fake news have demonstrated that it has become more difficult than ever before to distinguish between facts and fictions, and this trend is enhanced by developments in bioengineering and technology: "Thanks to computers and bioengineering, the difference between fiction and reality will blur, as people reshape reality to match their pet fictions" (ibid.: 179).

It is one of the many privileges of literature in general and novels in particular, however, that their authors are fortunately free to decide what to pay attention and respond to, and what to ignore. While a host of novelists and novels have already responded to many of the most pressing cultural concerns of the new millennium, some of the changes outlined in this chapter are so recent that they have hardly left marks in contemporary fiction; they may even challenge or defy literary representation. We would also be wise to remember that "yesterday's challenges all too quickly become today's tedium" (Harari 2016: 39): "Foretelling the future was never easy, and revolutionary biotechnologies make it even harder. For as difficult as it is to predict the impact of new technologies in fields like transportation, communication and energy, technologies for upgrading humans pose a completely different kind of challenge" (ibid.: 45). Moreover, there might even be a backlash to the unprecedented upsurge of digital technology and a renewed appreciation of the pleasure of life in an analogue mode in the so-called real world.

In light of the pressing challenges that face humankind as outlined by e.g., Adam Greenfield, Yuval Harari and many others, cultures and societies in the 21st century may be in dire need of the literary imagination of novelists, and both the cultural authority of novelists (cf. Dawson 2013) and the role of literature as cultural ecology (cf. Zapf 2016) may become more important than ever before. With their unique possibilities of exploring consciousness, representing subjective experientiality, delineating human sensitivity and gauging alternative forms of life, novels may well be one of the most important means of negotiating ethical issues, generating knowledge about crucial moral issues (cf. Harari 2016: 237) and perhaps even of changing readers' minds (cf. V. Nünning 2014) in more promising ways than the mind change that neuroscientists are currently observing as a result of the impact of digital technologies on our

brains. In the new millennium, the study of literary fictions and the roles of fictions in the sciences, society and theory may arguably become more important than ever before, too: "In the twenty-first century fiction might […] become the most potent force on earth, surpassing even wayward asteroids and natural selection. Hence, if we want to understand our future, cracking genomes and crunching numbers is hardly enough. We must also decipher the fictions that give meaning to the world." (Harari 2016: 151)

Although it may be premature or even unwarranted to be lodging too much hope in the power of literary fictions to challenge prevailing developments like the on-going "colonization of everyday life by information technology, the measurement and monetization of ordinary experience, and the cementing of existing power relations" (A. Greenfield 2017: 286), there are obviously also a number of good reasons to entertain a measured optimism about the future of the novel in the 21st century. By offering possible worlds and complex thought experiments, novels keep reminding their readers that "we nevertheless have a degree of choice as to the kind of world we wish to bring into being" (ibid.: 287). Another reason for continuing to be optimistic about the future of the novel is "the extent to which literary experience remains even now unassimilated to the phenomenology of web browsing, from which it is quite distinct" (McGurl 2016: 452). While many digital natives may well run the danger of "succumbing to the powerfully seductive temptations of free-to-download pleasureworlds and brightly gamified compliance regimes" (A. Greenfield 2017: 294) that the digital monopolies will no doubt continue to provide us with, others may prefer to spend their time reading novels, engaging with imaginary what-if-scenarios and pondering complex and relevant questions like those outlined above. The undiminished importance that literature has as a form of cultural ecology (cf. Zapf 2016) derives from the fact that the imaginary worlds of contemporary novels remind us that there are still "seeds of possible futures, seeds that with effort and care might yet be grown into a wiser, more considered, more just and generous way of living together upon the Earth" (A. Greenfield 2017: 315).*

* In this chapter, we have partly drawn on ideas and formulations used in the introductions to other volumes dealing with similar issues (cf. V. Nünning 2007a; Basseler et al. 2013; Basseler et al. 2015; A. Nünning/Rupp 2011; 2013).

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