

# Narrating Trauma and Human Failures

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## Media, Trauma, Anamnesis: Norman Manea in René Frölke's Documentary Portrait *Le beau danger* (2014)

**Abstract.** René Frölke's *Le beau danger* takes on the condition of the survivor-writer Norman Manea and enquires into the potential of experimental media to illustrate his life and work, and thus to engage with and perpetuate the memory of affliction. This paper explores the tension between Manea's autobiographical pieces and his promotional activity as writer via Foucault's concept of "beau danger" or aesthetic peril, and proposes a transdisciplinary analysis of Manea's literary reworking of multiple traumas inflicted by the Holocaust, Communist totalitarianism in Romania and trans-Atlantic exile. In it, I argue along with Frölke that empathy and identification with the pain of others is possible by means of slow and direct involvement with Manea's prose texts and that transmediality is apt to augment and recontextualise the message passed on by literature in an appealing and highly resonant manner.

**Keywords:** Norman Manea, René Frölke, Foucault, Holocaust trauma, child survivor, Communist totalitarianism, exile, anamnesis, transmediality, experimental media, ekphrasis, autofiction, memoir, language, empathy.

*"In the end, the only real homeland, the only ground upon which we can walk, the only house where we can stop and take shelter, is language itself, the language we learned from childhood"* (Michel Foucault).

*"Someone who is perennially surprised that depravity exists, who continues to feel disillusioned (even incredulous) when confronted with evidence of what humans are capable of inflicting in the way of gruesome, hands-on cruelties upon other humans, has not reached moral or psychological adulthood. No one after a certain age has the right to this kind of innocence, of superficiality, to this degree of ignorance, or amnesia"* (Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*).

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## Introduction

In an increasingly amnesiac world where memory is often contested or impossible to imagine, René Frölke's experimental documentary portrait *Le beau danger* (2014) brings home the idea that autofiction<sup>1</sup> mediated by film is a potent disseminator of individual memory. Focusing his directorial lens on the internationally acclaimed Jewish-Romanian writer Norman Manea, the German filmmaker puts together a collage of cinematic footage and autobiographical quotes that address exile, political oppression and the burden of traumatic memory in Manea's work. Frölke's mediatic version of 'beau danger' or 'aesthetic peril' is modeled on the homonymous book of conversations between Michel Foucault and art critic Claude Bonnefoy,<sup>2</sup> whose focal argument hinges on the dichotomy between "Foucault parlant" (Foucault, p. 7) and Foucault *écrivant*, to use the Barthian term. It pinpoints the clear-cut distinction between the writer as a speaking vs. writing subject. In the same vein, Frölke's docu-portrait features Norman Manea as both public speaker and published author.

This is inherently a filmic meditation on the life and work of the Bukovina-born writer who survived a Nazi Lager as a child of five and Ceausescu's Communist regime as an adult, before seeking asylum in America. The medium chosen to tackle this heavy mnemonic baggage is complex and innovative: it consists of a mixture of slow-moving cinematic images, cross-sectioning scenes from Manea's everyday life as a writer (seminars, interviews, panels, book-signings) and piecemeal segments of translated text from Manea's stark, resonant prose.<sup>3</sup> This structural transmediality (film taking on literature) cogently conveys the difficulties involved in grappling with the question of ekphrasis, i.e. how to narrate the biography of an artist whose work is largely autobiographical while investigating the ironies of our consumption of memory-based culture. This arresting technical unconventionality is specifically employed to trace the disjunction between the author's work on memory and the demands placed on his public figure.

In this paper I look at *Le beau danger* (2014) as a postmodern *ars poetica* that explores the production and transmission of memory through literature, not in Foucault's preferred manner of 'writing', but rather by means of the versatile genre of biopic occasioned by the audiovisual media. I argue that Frölke's extensive, almost programmatic use of soundless intertitles—the lengthy sequences of text from Manea's work—makes the author's written pieces speak louder and more eloquently than any speech he may hold at literary events. Frölke streams these quotes unhastily on the big screen, thus arguing for the pursuit of slowness in dealing with memory in our speed-driven, fast-changing world. By giving the viewers time to read and ponder on these excerpts, he encourages active involvement with the texts. Moreover, he urges the audience to consider the act of reading as inherent to the act of viewing (and of visual commemoration) in the manner of the Sontagian 'regard' for the pain of others, namely as a meditative moment, a pause that suspends brutal action and provides us

instead with the necessary respite from the violence of man.<sup>4</sup> Essentially, he prompts us to take that prolonged glance that allows us to imagine the other's lived memory.

I further suggest that the cognitive engagement with the written word on screen is enhanced by the paratextual context of the audiovisual framework, which produces empathy, specifically transcultural empathy through the event of the translated text.<sup>5</sup> As such, *Le beau danger* (2014) envisages reading (performed simultaneously with the event of watching) as an act of augmented presence and active participation in the narrated past and, therefore, in receiving memory through a communal engagement with the text itself, particularly in the case of multiple viewers watching the documentary at the same time. In what follows I will be looking at the three aspects involved in the layering of this docu-portrait, namely Foucault's critical piece *Le beau danger* (2011), Norman Manea's life and work, and the technical features of this most intriguing and thought-provoking work by René Frölke.

### Foucault's *Le beau danger* (2011)

Michel Foucault and literary critic Claude Bonnefoy met back in 1968 for a planned series of conversations, out of which only the typescript of their first *entretien* remains preserved in the archives of the Association pour le Centre Michel Foucault, the work being eventually published by the Editions EHESS in 2011. The book is a vivid illustration of Foucault's skepticism regarding the act of speaking about one's own writing, which he perceived as a dangerous act of self-sabotage on the part of *l'auteur parlant*, simply the "endangering of Foucault by himself (*la mise en danger de Foucault par lui-meme*)" (Foucault, p. 22). In his view, writing is a self-effacing and not a self-explanatory gesture of self-writing, therefore talking about *l'écriture* as "an autobiographic discourse" is something he would resent (p.19). Writing and speaking are mutually exclusive to Foucault's mind: when an author cannot write, he/she speaks and viceversa.

Adina Arvatu, who reviewed *Le beau danger*, questions Philippe Artières'<sup>6</sup> suggestion that the level of intimacy and confessional tone in Foucault's conversation with Bonnefoy might still indicate a tendency towards "parole autobiographique" (p. 19), by invoking the above-mentioned reasons, reinforced by Foucault's credo: "I have also placed myself quite frankly on the side of unreality, of make-believe, of lies, even of con artistry" (p. 47); "one also writes in order to have no face" (p. 57). So Arvatu's concludes, "*Le beau danger* is no autobiographical sally then, and no confession either. What it offers instead is a "quai-récit" (p. 42), as Foucault says, of what writing had been for him until the time of this conversation" (Arvatu, p. 270).

Contrary to Mallarmé's type of intransitive writing, Foucault champions the transitive writing practiced by the Barthian *l'écrivain*, i.e. someone who writes in order "to say things" (p. 60) vs. *l'écrivain*, i.e. someone who writes for the sake of creating an *oeuvre*. While pointing out this peculiarity of style, Arvatu doesn't fail to also notice the charming paradox about Foucault's oral discourse, as captured

in *Le beau danger*: "...few other testimonies about transitive writing...come close to the complexity of Foucault's account, which manages to sound deeply invested (affectively, existentially) and humorously detached, often in the same breath" (Arvatu, p. 272).

René Frölke takes over from Foucault the concept of *beau danger* as aesthetic peril, but problematises it differently by showing equal interest in both the author and his work in structuring this docu-portrait. The peril that Frölke teases out in the conception of his particular version of *beau danger* is putting intertitles on the screen for the viewers to read and meditate on, while interspersing them with cinematic images of Manea as public persona talking about his strongly autobiographical work on different occasions, something that Foucault would surely have regarded as very "risky." The result is a summation of contrastive elements: the intense subjectivity of the work describing horrific events of European history witnessed and depicted by Manea as personal stories interferes with the matter-of-factness and pragmatism of literary events (book fairs, seminars, etc.) where professional objectivity restricted by limited timing and technological frameworks take over. The reader-viewer thus witnesses a sort of defamiliarisation when trying to recouple the narrator of the autobiographic event in the past and the empathy generated by the written text with the persona of the author talking in the present, on screen, in a more or less detached manner about his work. Beyond the temporal disjuncture, the audience is faced with the difficult challenge of no longer being able to identify the self-referential persona in the text with the flesh-and-blood author moving on the screen. Negotiating the appropriate strategy to reconcile the narrator's and the author's personas within the arbitrary, paratextual framework of the docu-portrait is the aesthetic peril to which Frölke exposes both Manea and his reader-viewers. The answer to its own question lies in an open, essayistic form, an opera aperta of sorts.

### Norman Manea.

#### The (Fragmented) Portrait of the Artist in *Le beau danger* (2014)

Norman Manea, Romanian-born writer of Jewish origin currently residing and teaching in America, has been discovered by international readers only in recent years, although his work (novels, short-stories, diaries and literary essays) spans across many decades back. The language barrier (he writes almost exclusively in Romanian, with translations reaching their public only in recent years) accounts for his initially limited global readership, while the proverbial anti-Semitism during the Fascist and Communist regimes in his native Romania contributed to the restricted access to his works, drastically censored, if published at all. His narrative is "as incisive, beautiful and demanding as anything that has come out of Europe in the recent decades" (Boyers 1997, p. 63), and mainly depicts realities such as his traumatic childhood memories as infant inmate of the ghetto and the Transnistria concentration camp, the absurdities and terrors of life in Ceausescu's Romania after the war, and

his life as an exile in America after 1986. His prose is “what he himself calls “implicit” rather than “explicit,” “fractured,” only occasionally lyrical, full of feeling, but always suggesting unarticulated, inarticulable depths” (Boyers 1997, p. 63). In novels such as *Plicul negru* (1986)/*The Black Envelope* (1995) and *Vizuina* (2009)/*The Lair*(2012), his memoir *Intoarcearea huliganului* (2003)/ *The Hooligan’s Return* (2003), his volume of short-stories *Octombrie, ora opt/October Eight O’Clock* (1992), and essay volumes *On Clowns: The Dictator and the Artist* (1977-1992), *The Fifth Impossibility. Essays on Exile and Language* (2012) and *Laptele negru* (2010) /*Black Milk*, Manea develops all these themes obliquely, often in cryptic, encoded language and dense metaphors. As Boyers rightly observes,

Though he can move, in the scope of a single work, from withering sarcasm to meditation, from a heightened poeticism to a restrained surrealism, one feels throughout the melancholy, the radical scruple as to diction and tone, the utter resistance of Manea’s imagination to didacticism or posturing. (p. 64)

His lucid approach of Nazism as a “terrible derailment of history, of society, of the psyche (which is to say of humanity itself)” that led to the “gradual extinction–through terror–of civil society and the transformation of everyday life into a state of siege” (Manea 2010, p. 21) matches only his nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of Communism as a duplicitous, contradictory system that forces itself onto the masses with an astounding capacity for mystification (p. 22). However similar in their catastrophic impact, these two political systems must not be regarded as equal in their destructive force, because “this would lead to a relativization of guilt, and therefore, ultimately, to exoneration” (p. 22). The unhappy chance of having witnessed and being targeted by the two most horrendous political regimes of Europe’s twentieth century left an indelible mark on Manea’s narrative style and approach to writing. The sheer luck of having survived the four years of Ukrainian camp internment as a child, his choice of profession as a writer during Communism and his articulate sensitivity enabled him to aesthetically reconceptualise survivorship, the plight of the Jewish-Romanian intellectual and transatlantic exile in very profound ways, which resonated very much with director René Frölke. The latter chose to present the viewer with a fragmented portrait of the writer in question, in order to problematise the artist’s condition faced with the realities of self-marketing and reception.

The starting point for this film is an impersonal, curt bio-blurb from a German edition of one of Manea’s novels that comes in stark contrast with the realities it describes: “Norman Manea, born in Bukovina in 1936, was deported with his family in 1941. He survived the concentration camp and was a freelance writer in Bucharest from 1974 on. He has lived in New York since 1986” (Frölke, *Le beau danger*, 2014). These terse introductory details of personal history are followed by excerpts from Manea’s novel *The Black Envelope* and the whole short story “We Might Have Been Four”<sup>7</sup> streamed throughout the documentary as 170 black and white panels; they

alternate with footage of Manea, the author, meeting his reading public for interviews. The intended impact of this juxtaposition of his work and professional life, enhanced by the absence of any sort of dialogue, music or commentary, is a decentralised effect of sorts: the viewer is challenged to grasp on his own for meaning out of bits and pieces of mixed information. No pre-formulated message is readily provided by the film-maker who was intrigued by the gap between the writer's experience as narrated in his literary work and the same experience he describes verbally in interviews: "The oral narration of this biography, especially in an interview situation, never met the expectations I had developed from reading his novels and short stories. The pressure of public attention and the oral form seemed to force him to simplify and abridge" (Frölke, *Arsenal Forum* 2014, p. 2).

This fragmentary, essayistic approach to Manea's biography is as close as Frölke comes to Foucault's *beau danger* in that he stresses the fundamental contrast between Manea the writing author and Manea the speaking author, between Manea *écrivain* and Manea *parlant*, and ultimately between the written and the spoken word. By substantially bringing Manea's literature (i.e. the written word) to the forefront via intertitles, Frölke intends to suggest not only the strong impact of the Romanian author's prose, but also to reinforce the Foucaultian stance regarding metatextual talk as perilous for a writer and his work: to talk about the meaning of his oeuvre would equal *la mise en danger de Manea par lui-meme*, to paraphrase the French philosopher. The essence of literature is that it speaks and stands for itself and therefore it has to be experienced firsthand, which is precisely the purpose behind the extensive use of quote panels in *Le beau danger*.

Such an experimental, extreme mediatic form also serves Frölke's declared aim to create a tension between text and image, by turning the text into a readable image: "The film is ultimately an attempt to have text and image question one other. I also regard it as an observation that makes the disruption of our time recognizable, a disruption in which information becomes the adversary of experience and thereby also becomes memory" (Frölke, *Arsenal Forum* 2014, p. 2). By that Frölke implies that the topos of repetition involved in the procedure of interviews, which feature highly in his documentary, creates the kind of routinised information that often competes with the actual experience described in Manea's autofictional work, thus being taken for second-hand or received memory by the audience of these public events: "What enthralled me about these scenes, Frölke declared in an interview himself, was the constant repetition—the ceremony of presentation before an audience, always the same interview questions and similar answers. The routine without which, it seems, one cannot survive in the literary business" (p. 2). He implies that his technique highlights the modern gap between the memory of authentic experience conveyed by Manea's autofiction and the mnemonic material the audience is provided with during each public talk he gives, simplified and diluted, and ready packed for commercial delivery and cultural consumption.

The type of memory that fuels Manea's work as featured in Frölke's *Le beau danger* stems from both his internment as a young child in Transnistria during the Holocaust, and his adult experience of persecution in Communist Romania. Director Frölke's radical experiment in collective reading begins with the fragmentary display on the screen of a whole short story titled "We Could Have Been Four" that reveals the depth of the child-survivor's trauma when confronted with the debilitating experience of the concentration camp at a young age. It is part of a collection of fifteen interrelated short-stories published under the title *October, Eight O'Clock*, which trace the protagonist's evolution from an infant inmate of the ghetto and camp to a nine year-old survivor returning home to Romania and facing the war's aftermath as an adolescent and adult. The short story follows the protagonist and three other characters (his mother, a nameless "he" and a neighbour's daughter Finlanda) as they cross a bridge and walk across a forest after their forbidden midnight feast. Not much information is provided and a lot has to be inferred about the context of this journey through the woods, but the reader is let in on the fact that hunger drove these inmates to steal a fowl from a neighbouring village, take it to the woods, cook and eat it during the night, and that they are now on their return walk "home."

The narrator creates an oneiric, impressionistic atmosphere of slow-motion movements and dream-like images blurred at the edges and permeated by overwhelming feelings of anxiety and insecurity. In the child protagonist's imagination, the forest is a magical, ambiguous realm, at once protective and deceitful:

And now there was the forest. The heady, fragrant scent with which, time and again, it tried to call or shelter us—a sad, useless cunning that stalked my moments of loneliness and doubt, a slow cunning of trees, earth, leaves, and passing seasons—was a pointless temptation, because we would survive, united against the fears that sent their poisons at us and the calm green refuge of the forest. We had only to stay together, confident that not one of us would betray the others (Manea 1992, pp. 21-22).

The forest's call, the reader would assume, is the sly call of interment (earth, leaves) and death, which the four fugitives can elude if they stay united. Since Manea was deported to Transnistria with both his parents and grandparents, the incentive to keep the family united through tough times must have been imprinted into his subconscious.

Yet this unity is challenged as the short story progresses. The protagonist is suddenly hit by pangs of disappointment as he fails at his self-imposed task to drop the evidence of their feast (the fowl's remains tucked into a newspaper) without haste into the river. The rush of his gesture, as the only fast motion segment of the otherwise slow-moving short story, triggered a whole psychological mechanism of long-repressed feelings of human indignity, as it forced the little boy to acknowledge his guilt, weakness and defeat:

I dropped the bundle into the swift, clear water too quickly—spared a prolonged agitation, but shamed by the pettiness of the weakling's haste...as the bundle began to

float away, carried off by the stream that scattered the last traces of the forbidden and hasty banquet, the others ... did not suspect that I had planned another, the true celebration, and that I had spoiled it: the act that was to redeem, through a deliberate ritual, the greedy rush of the evening before (Manea 1992, pp. 23-24).

The guilt overwhelms him to a visceral extent, as his body seems to succumb to the same feelings of self-loathing, shame and ruin:

I started to shake—it was as though the chicken kept expanding, rising into my throat, my mouth. Sadness over my failure, the vertigo of the forest, my disgust with myself, with them, with the woods, with the food. Overwhelmed with hate, I wanted to burst into a run, to soil the trees and the grass with all the bilious flow that was choking and constricting my mouth, to avenge everything by emptying myself. I was sick in waves, my back against the bark of the tree. ... I was left empty, dizzy, lying on the ground (Manea, 1992, p. 27).

Entirely defeated and frightened, the boy comes to realise how frail their familial unity is and how divided by their fear of death and insecurities they are.

Finlanda, who had previously joked, teased him, mussed his hair with a “burning hand” and walked by his side was now “giving in” to the forest, “her flowering, indolent body...abandoned to the waves of fresh, cool, intoxicating pine,” flowing in her new dress “beyond anyone’s reach” until she left everything behind and vanished, with “him” behind her (Manea 1992, p. 24). The reader is given ample indication through this abundance of metaphors (her “burning hand”, giving in to the forest and final disappearance with “him,” who could be the equivalent of Death) that Finlanda is now dead, which left the boy with an unbearable, incomprehensible burden and the fear that his mother, the pillar of his strength, is also gone: “I became afraid of the bewitching forest, which was preying on my weakness to make me need it, to do with me as it wishes. I was not in control of myself” (Manea, p. 27). The boy’s fear of death and furious struggle for survival signals a crack in the sense of community with his kin, since everyone faces their fears alone. In the end, his mother, too, who was previously smiling reassuringly and giving them support, gives in to “the terrors that were defeating us, degrading us, separating us, mocking us” (Manea, p. 28). What began as a reverie and a dream-like feast and walk through the forest ends in nightmare, and the reader is not sure whether the whole story is not, in fact, the summation of recurrent bad dreams indicating the profound trauma of a child exposed too soon to the catastrophic realities of the internment camp: “the dogs, the guards, the uniforms, the hunger, the lice, the bullets...” (Manea, p. 23).

The question of child exposure to Holocaust trauma and of subsequent memories affecting the child and adult survivors in the long term was posed by child psychologists like Judith S. Kestenberg (1996), Charlotte Kahn (1998), Paul Valent (1998), and Gabriel Motola (1999), as well as literary scholar Susan Rubin Suleiman (2002). They all agree that a child’s psychological make-up is not designed to sustain

the physical and emotional abuse inflicted by the Nazi camp environment, and that child survivors are left with life-long personal scars and difficulties to relate to their kin. Paul Valent puts it in very eloquent terms: "At the time of the Holocaust, children underwent possibly the greatest attack in history on every aspect of their existence. They were the most vulnerable group marked for the most extreme extinction by the most powerful dictatorship" (1998, p. 109).

Child psychiatry owes Judith Kestenberg (1998) the division of Holocaust survivors into the three main categories: "adult survivors" with first-hand memory of the Holocaust at a mature age, "children of survivors" born in the aftermath of war (and affected by "postmemory"),<sup>8</sup> and "child survivors," who experienced the Holocaust at a very young age, before their sense of identity and self-protection mechanisms were fully developed (Kestenberg, p. 59). These children, who represented only eleven percent of the overall population of Jewish children in Europe before the war, were famously categorised by Suleiman (2002) into the so-called "1.5 generation: "too young to have had an adult understanding of what was happening to them, but old enough to have *been there* during the Nazi persecution of Jews" (p. 277). Psychologist Paul Valent sets the age boundary for child survivorship at sixteen years old at the end of the war, while Suleiman discusses different classifications and generally accepts the age limits considered by the National Association of Jewish Child Holocaust Survivors (NAHOS), that is children born between 1920 and 1943 (Suleiman, p. 281). While the second generation struggled with belated second-hand memories, the 1.5 generation grappled with "premature bewilderment and helplessness," and an abrupt transition from "at least some degree of stability and security to utter chaos" (Suleiman, pp. 277-278).

In order to understand the impact of childhood trauma onto adult identity and self-representation, one needs not only to demarcate childhood from adulthood, but also to identify internal boundaries within the category of childhood, or between childhood and adolescence. Particularly in Manea's case, it is essential to question to what extent the age-related cognitive and affective traits modified by trauma have influenced his memories and autobiographical narratives. Thus, Suleiman identifies three separate groups:

children "too young to remember" (infancy to around three years old); children "old enough to remember but too young to understand" (approximately age four to ten); and children "old enough to understand but too young to be responsible" (approximately age eleven to fourteen). By responsible, I mean having to make choices (and to act on those choices) about their own or their family's actions in response to catastrophe (p. 283).

Deported with his family to Moghilev in Transnistria at the young age of five and losing his maternal grandparents to the camps, Norman Manea falls into Suleiman's second category, being "old enough to remember but too young to understand." In

his memoir *The Hooligan's Return* (2003), Manea the child, referred to as "little Noah," confers reversed connotations to life and death. Just like in the short story "We Might Have Been Four," where the forest imagery stands for the call of death, the phenomenon of death as dealt with in his memoir is regarded by the innocent child's insufficiently developed mind as the domain of magic, whereas life is the realm of endless human suffering:

Little Noah was initiated into life, as well as its opposite while in Transnistria. First death claimed my beloved grandfather, Avram, then my maternal grandmother, striking twice within three weeks. The sudden magic of lifelessness: the afterlife, a dead grave without a name ... I was alive thinking about my own death, but what I understood then was that crying and hunger, cold and fear belonged to life, not to death (pp. 227-228).

As psychologists have shown, the damage inflicted by the Holocaust on to the children's psyche is indirectly proportional with the exposed child's age: the younger the survivor, the greater the harm, in spite of the resilience and flexibility of the child's ego (Kestenberg and Brenner, 1986, Valent, 1998, 2006). At five, Manea the child would have been very vulnerable: he would have experienced the onset of non-cohesive linguistic and thought development, marked by a phenomenon called "mental attunement," that is a tendency to imitate and obey the "parent-gods," and experience external situations of crisis as direct consequence of his/her own of disobedience. Even if after the age of seven children's minds gain more cohesion and start to develop critical thinking, "the early imprints are stored unaltered and can sometimes unwittingly over-ride the logical mind" (Valent 2006, p. 2). This explains the fear, confusion and depression endured by them later in life, as also shame and disgust if they survived the Holocaust under the moral parental guidance, as was Manea's case (Motola 1999, 211-212). The inescapable feeling of shame for having stolen and eaten the fowl and thus having succumbed to the dehumanising, instinctual, animalistic level of existence that Manea insists so much in "We Might Have Been Four"<sup>9</sup> is most surely a sign of guilt instilled by early childhood trauma and imprinted in the adult writer's psyche. In fact, judging by his written testimonies and his autofiction, Manea's post-Holocaust experience has been deeply marked by his damaged childhood memories: "a perpetual sense of self-excoriation, of living with incertitude, a deeply entrenched urgency to reject the simplistic and simplifying complacency characteristic of normal frames of life, a felt necessity to expose its crimes, past and present" (Mihailescu 122).

Yet Suleiman cautions against the over-reliance on psychology in assessing the traumatic impact of the Holocaust on child survivors. Although psychological input helps identify similarities and differences between the child age groups mentioned above, it tends to place more emphasis on the original event and less on the survivor's subsequent development, and on the historico-geographical differences that shape a particular child's destiny. Therefore she suggests a messier approach, that is a broader

perspective that should include the family's geographical location and socio-religious background, their degree of cohesion and identification with Jewishness, whether they accompanied the child or not, the child's gender, language and the nature of displacement (ghetto, deportation, fugitive), as well as personal details related to the post-war experience: was the familial unity maintained? Did they return to the motherland or preferred emigration? (pp. 289-290).

For Suleiman, there is no better or more enduring mode to preserve and communicate the stories of the 1.5 generation than "the personal, the subjective expression" through diaries, memoirs, autobiographic literature, since these stories remain inherently individual, even when contributing to the collective tale (p. 291). Literature and not the "raw" testimony has the upper hand when it comes to perpetuating child survivor memory and her enumeration shows that Manea is in rich company when it comes to that: Aharon Appelfeld, Louis Begley, Magda Denes, Saul Friedländer, Elisabeth Gille, Imre Kertész, Ruth Kluger, Sarah Kofman, George Perec, Régine Robin, Lore Segal, and Elie Wiesel (p. 291). Norman Manea actually makes it clear that the assertion of individuality through creativity is the writer's weapon against the collective humiliation inflicted by the Holocaust: "The humiliation of being defined by a collective act of negation and by a collective catastrophe is not negligible, Dr. Freud. However, we are not simply the sum of collective catastrophes. ... We are more than that, and each of us is also different. Yes, different, we should be shouting, in all the languages of the earth" (Manea 2013, p. 246).

For many non-religious child survivors like Manea, redeeming their own individuality after the Holocaust—the horrendous event that abusively assigned Jewishness to them—meant a negotiation with themselves as Jews. In his imagined dialogue with Freud, Manea wants to know "not necessarily what is left after you have lost what you did not possess, but how do you become a Jew after the Holocaust, after Communism and exile? Are these, by definition, Jewish traumas? Are these initiations carved in your soul, not only your body, that make you a Jew even when you are not one" (p. 242)?

As a non-Jewish Jew and member of a "non-people of survivors," to use Lyotard's words, Manea is defined by "a unique profoundness of an endless anamnesis," an endless recalling of things past" (Manea, p. 242). The memory of communal history and fate is what defines and unifies the non-Jewish Jews, what joins them to a collective destiny, but Manea struggles to resist this affiliation in a genuinely Kafkaesque manner by asserting the difficulty and necessity to rediscover oneself as a human being first in the midst of all the confusion and ambiguity regarding the "I": "What have I got to do with the Jews? Kafka replied, "I have got hardly anything to do with myself" (Manea 2003, p. 242).

Reading or writing creative work based on traumatic experience has been for many of the child survivor writers a healing therapy, a way to rediscover their true selves and overcome moral ambiguity (Kahn, 1998, p. 104). Manea, in fact, went as

far as to quit his job for medical reasons and faked second degree madness during Communism in Romania in order to be able to read, write, and reclaim his own free time from the totalitarian state, and thus, paradoxically, maintain his sanity: "Isn't a true writer beyond hope of recovery? Isn't he capable of sitting in his cage, playing with words, like a mental patient? Reading, writing, reading, then more writing, isn't this his life, Doctor-malady, therapy, malady, therapy, and so on, until the end of ends?" (Manea 2013, p. 240). By reading the German Romantics, English and French Realist writers, as well as Russian literature (Tolstoy, Goncharov, Gogol, Pushkin, Chekhov, Gorky and others), Manea was provided with the antidote to "the deadening effect of the dictator's new language," and was thus shielded against the social demagoguery and "stupefaction, first as an unhappy student of polytechnic and then as an unhappy engineer" (Manea 2004, p. 82). Writing, too, was an experiment in evasiveness, as much as it meant a symbolic evasion in order to maintain objectivity: "Writing at least offers a quick way of exiting the penal colony, leaving the carnage behind" (Manea 2013, p. 240).

For Manea, the refuge he calls home and the best carrier of his mnemonic burden is the Romanian language, in spite of his knowledge of several other languages, which he could not internalise over time: Ukrainian, Yiddish, Russian, then German, French and English. The "repatriation" with his mother tongue on his return from the Lager in the summer of 1945, in spite of the ban to speak it for the duration of internment in what he calls "Trans-tristia," felt like a home-coming (2004, p. 81). The child of nine embraced it and nourished it like he had to nourish his depleted body, and this new infatuation led to his choice of profession as a writer:

An impoverished language, childish, anemic, hesitant, and confused, it needed as I did, the nutrients of normality. I made all sorts of rediscoveries: food, games, school, clothing, relatives, but above all I was mad for books, newspapers, magazines, posters. I discovered new words and new meanings.

Early, too early, I dreamed of joining the clan of word wizards, the secret sect I had just discovered. (Manea 2004, p. 82)

His memorable encounter with the green book of Romanian folktales at nine years of age marks a decisive moment in experiencing the magic of literature and the wonder of the word for the first time. It coincides with the moment of discovering his mission, his vocation and his native space, his homeland: "For the writer, language is a placenta. Language is not only a sweet and glorious conquest, but intellectual legitimation, a home. Through language, writers feel both rooted and free in kinship with their fellows everywhere" (Manea 2004, p. 83). Just like Celan who wrote in German, the language of the oppressor, Manea deliberately chose to write in Romanian, the language of antisemitism, of Left and Right dictatorship, of the surveillance, suppression and censorship mechanism of the Securitate, but also of his forefathers, his parents and his childhood. The inner exile and the ingenuous codes necessary for his survival as a

writer under Communism forced him and others to raise the standard of their writing, to use tropes of thinking and agree with Borges that “Censorship is the mother of metaphor” (Manea 2010, 33).

In Manea’s case, Romanian functions as a mobile home, a portable refuge which he took with him when he was forced to embark on his second exile at the age of fifty and leave Communist Romania for Germany and then the US: “I did take my language with me, like a snail its house. It still is my first and last refuge, a permanent home, a realm of survival” (p. 84). Ever since 1986, this exiled writer has been by choice “an author living in translation” (p. 85), forever reliant on the skill of translators to facilitate communication with his newfound fellow writers. But Romanian is not an easy language to translate, as fraught with “turbulence and obscurity, encodedness, ...ardent oriental excess ... (and) often untranslatable” (p. 87) as it is. Finding a qualified professional to interpret it has only added to the challenges of expatriate authorship, because “a writer’s integrity and his inner self are inseparable from his language” (p. 88). To Manea’s credit it must be added that he was able to take advantage of the situation and strike a balance between English as a “rented tongue” and his native Romanian by transforming the tensions between the two languages into “fruitful synergies and interferences,” and by positively exploiting the way they “mirror and enrich” each other” (p. 93).

Words and writing define survivor and author Norman Manea, which is why director Frölke chose to give language and the written word such a prominent profile in his documentary: English, Italian, Romanian, French and German feature largely as languages of communication related to the protagonist’s life and work. In the following section I will be looking at the technical peculiarities of Frölke’s documentary and the manner in which his ekphrastic manoeuvres, in as far as structure and context are concerned, bring Norman Manea closer to his readers and audience.

### **Rene Frölke’s *Le beau danger* (2014)**

The idea of a biopic about Holocaust survivor and émigré writer Norman Manea was occasioned by the author’s 75<sup>th</sup> birthday anniversary filmed by cameraman and director René Frölke. The latter was fascinated by the rich autobiographical layer and the elliptical style of the author’s works, and decided to foreground them by using “individual texts as scaffolding for the film’s dramatic structure” (Frölke 2015), these texts being meant for reading, with no voiceover involved. The use of a whole short story with all eight or nine pages of text relating Manea’s Lager experience was prompted by the frequency of the author’s childhood recollections in his interviews with Frölke, who paired the autobiographical information with the “literary counterparts” of those declarations (2015). The choice of “We Might Have Been Four” was not at all random, on the contrary, the director aimed at the rich symbolism of the forest fraught with ambiguity and of the four individual characters “steering apart from each other by following their own individual paths and longing”

(2015). This shifting, yet manageable constellation of only four characters appealed to the director. For Frölke, the perspective of the child survivor in a life threatening situation, interacting with other figures while dealing with his inner conflicts was important for tracing the roots of the adult author's own quest individuality, both in his oeuvre and in real life. The choice to include the entire short story was made for reasons of coherence and continuity.

The second half of *Le beau danger* illustrates a divergent, more fragmentary and schismatic approach through excerpts from Manea's 1986 novel *The Black Envelope*, which deals with the suffocating environment of surveillance, insecurity and duplicity in Communist Romania. The intention here is less about "telling a tale" than "creating an atmosphere" (2015). Overall, Frölke's purpose was "to build an associative movement between intercalated elements-these cards containing Norman's writings and my firsthand footage of the man" (2015). Both stylistic components question each other without losing their own intelligibility.

Frölke pushes the experimental touch even further by using both a video camera with synced sound and a 16-mm wind-up camera with a maximum range of twenty-four seconds per take (Frölke 2015). The digital video camera's colour images work in counterpoint with the analog's black and white footage, which is an intentional move, as the director purposefully looked for a means to parallel the writer's own style and keep the viewer alert in the process: "The mix of means with which I observed him derived from his writing style, for which I wanted to find a filmic analogy" (2015). This innovative, playful technique is enhanced by sequences with no sound at all in order to give more prominence to the text or the silent image. The general scope of the endeavour is to create a challenging, meditative atmosphere for the ideas circulated in the film. The director deliberately leaves the text cards on screen for sometimes as long as five minutes, which some viewers found extreme, but this seeming exaggeration stems from a desire to give the audience enough time to reflect on and engage actively with the heavy material in Manea's work.

This is all the more obvious in the sequences that show the author on his book tours in Italy and Argentina, which strike as highly contrastive to the aesthetics, the spirit and gist of the actual work promoted there. In these public events, Manea applies the well-rehearsed strategy of brevity and evasiveness that life under terror had taught him, sticking to the informative content, rather than attempting to discuss his works, as he declares in the "Anamnesis" chapter of *The Hooligan's Return*: "If I committed my life to public scrutiny, would I become its pen-wielding proxy? The audience is hungry for details, not metaphors called Initiation and Trans-tristia. The training in evasiveness I had received during "the worst time in history" was still palpable" (2013, p. 224).

This cautionary measure in relation to "the comedy of the present" (2013, p. 223) contributed to the sense of remoteness and aloofness in Manea's interaction with the camera, the director and maybe the viewers themselves. Director Frölke detailed this

aspect in an interview with the TAZ reporter Bert Rebhandl, noting that he did not seek intimacy with the subject of his film, neither before, nor behind the camera.<sup>10</sup> Well aware that book fairs and book tours tend to be very loud and that the exposure of “private fears in public spaces” is always problematic, Frölke preferred to keep a certain critical distance from them, and the way he filmed these events is consistent proof of that (Frölke, *TAZ* 2014). Manea always occupies centre stage in these sequences, even during the featured interviews with Frölke, who remains invisible throughout them. Like Manea himself, he is keenly aware of the fact that the media business surrounding literary events, although strikingly resemblant to a dramatic performance (“Schauspiel”), has in fact nothing to do with the lengthy subject coverage or the pursuit of exhaustiveness: “Die Medien produzieren Informationen, das muss knapp sein, schnell schneidbare Schnittbilder zum Beispiel”<sup>11</sup> (*TAZ* 2014). The scope of his documentary is restricted, by contrast, to length, ekphrasis and patient reflection.

Perhaps no other scenes in the film speak more for this thoughtful distance from Manea the author than the cemetery scenes, which Frölke was a bit apprehensive of, considering his respect for the emotional and traumatic baggage that such exposure reveals. He accompanied Manea to his mother’s grave in Bukovina and chose to shoot the segments in the Jewish cemetery in Mohyliv-Podilskyi (Ukraine) without him. The former are shot without sound, the ultimate form of deference, while the latter capture a succession of graves, with fragmentary, yet revealing and complex texts engraved on them. The camera lingers on them as if pausing to read them, in a sort of translocal, cross-temporal harmony with Manea’s own texts. Frölke clarifies: “Ich wollte Eindrücke sammeln, sehen, was sich aus den Fragmenten zusammensetzen lässt. Die Grabsteine haben ein Eigenleben, weil die auch Texte sind, so multiplizieren sich wieder die Figuren aus den Texten. An dieser Komplexität war mir gelegen”<sup>12</sup> (Frölke, *TAZ* 2014).

This sought-out complexity is probably best rendered by the documentary’s first text, the word NO screened black on white, inserted as a concise, but determined refusal of all conventional forms of expression, and very appropriate for a destiny and work that are anything but commonplace. Since the overall impression at the end of the film is that a definite closeness with Norman Manea the survivor is impossible beyond the deferent appraisal of his intriguing work, NO could also stand for the productive capitulation that this biopic represents. Yet considering the massive critique of mediatisation that this film is, one cannot but notice that NO also stands for the dissenting decision to go against our liquid modern times, to slow down and slow-read in a fast-moving culture. I would also argue that the documentary’s dissonant structure encapsulated in the programmatic NO eloquently speaks for the disruptive effect of genocide, persecution and exile on life and art, and it is therefore a manifestation of the transmedial and transcultural reworking of the memory of affliction in our broken time.

### Conclusion

Foucault's warning regarding the aesthetic peril of the self-explanatory discourse echoes Cioran's caution against memoirs as nothing but a writer's nemesis: "A cinder bath, a good exercise in self-incineration" (Manea 2013, p. 224). Manea concurs, somewhat self-ironically, in no other place than his own memoir, that self-writing is "peeling away one's skin, layer after layer, in competition with the tell-all confessions of television talk shows or the self-revelations of group therapy" (p. 224). The televised talk shows are a synecdoche for the trivialisation of our modern culture. What Frölke adds to that is the detached observation that the mediatic circus surrounding the popularisation of literature has little in common with the literary production itself. His critique of mediatisation targets not just the imperfection of technology (microphones that fail to work, sound problems that cause embarrassing interruptions, light check-ups that expose the artificial dimension of the whole performance, etc.), but also its impatience with the slow rhythm and depth of literary creation: concise, matter-of-fact information is always preferred to lengthy metaphorical speech. The danger of mediatisation of this kind is similar to that of public commemorations and museum archives, because they normalise horrors by accustoming our minds to them through repetition and "clichés, which have been worked over until they have become petrified, thus fulfilling their function, followed, of course, by fatigue and indifference" (p. 224). Manea's work refreshes our mind by helping us think about genocide, totalitarianism and exile in complex, empathetic terms, while Frölke's camera supports this effort by persistently and thoughtfully engaging with Manea's texts.

*Le beau danger's* rich thematic range (language, memory, Holocaust and Communist trauma) is analysed here by conflating a number of disciplines (philosophy, psychology, media and literature), and proposes transmediality as a means of accessing, supporting and framing the message passed on by the belles-lettres. Although Frölke holds on to the written word as key to (Manea's) autofiction, it is his filmic images that will endure in the viewer's mind and carry his ideas. One such poignant sequence at the end of the film is that of two snails crawling past each other in circles inside a salad bowl, which are nothing but a metaphor for the condition of the exiled writer carrying his linguistic home across the ocean and experiencing feeble, inconsequential contact with his fellow human beings:

Enclosed in their new environment ... they glide on the brim of the bowl with the tragic awareness of being on the brim of an abyss, towards each other, then suddenly meeting; their receptacles clashing, retracting, thinking, reuniting. In the background, Erik Satie's *Gnossienne 3* progresses in the same rhythm. A few seconds later, one of the viscous bodies is hanging in the air, close to falling, but by an acrobatic movement it manages to recover its stability. The two bodies clumsily cross each other, so to speak, and continue their paths, not quite knowing that it's a circle (Cojocaru 2014).

Such a powerful image reinforces the idea that the survivor-writer's existence is inherently and eternally marked by isolation and the struggle to connect. A "really free man in a truly unfree time" (Boyers 2012), Manea is painfully aware of the fact that his freedom is constantly at risk, and that the world is an illusory trap, a vicious circle, a labyrinth way more constrictive than a snail's shell.

### Notes

- 1 I claim that Norman Manea's work is autofictional in the sense that his literature is heavily reliant on reshuffled autobiographical details that retain a strong connection to historic, real-life events. Serge Doubrovsky first defined autofiction on the cover of his novel "Fils" (1977) as "fiction, from strictly real events and facts; *autofiction* if you like, from having entrusted the language of an adventure to the adventure of language, outside the wisdom and outside the syntax of the novel, be it traditional or new novel" (trans. mine). According to him, the only fictitious aspect in autofiction is the work on language. The facts remain real, and the work's mission is to enlighten, to reach a certain truth, which is also the scope of Manea's oeuvre.
- 2 Frölke borrows his title from a published encounter between Michel Foucault and art critic Claude Bonnefoy, in which the former exposes the writer-thinker's vulnerability and isolation, acknowledging language as the sole source of rootedness in an endlessly mutable world (Foucault, *Le beau danger*, 2011).
- 3 Norman Manea wrote all his work in Romanian. The video uses excerpts from his translated work, which speaks for the transcultural act of reading.
- 4 Like Sontag's photographs, Frölke's quotes (or moving images of text) linger on the big screen and help us watch memory unfold at a distance as implicit statement against violence: "There's nothing wrong with standing back and thinking. To paraphrase several sages: "Nobody can think and hit someone at the same time" (Sontag, p. 118).
- 5 These intertitles are translated into the language of the country where the documentary is screened, so that every version that travels around cinema theatres is different depending on the language spoken in that particular country.
- 6 Philippe Artières prefaced and edited *Le beau danger*.
- 7 Published in *October*, *Eight O'Clock*.
- 8 Marianne Hirsch introduced the term „postmemory“ in her 1992-1993 article "Family Pictures: *Maus*, Mourning and Post-Memory," and further developed it in her later work, particularly her 2008 essay "The Generation of Postmemory" (see also Hirsch, 1996, 1997, 2012). The term designates the relationship of the generation after to historical or collective traumatic events experienced by the generation that came before. These events are transmitted and "remembered" indirectly through stories, images, and other reminders and remainders of their family's experiences (2008, pp. 106-107). Hirsch distinguishes between "familial" and "affiliative" postmemory. While the former describes the transmission of traumatic events directly from forebears to descendants, the latter entails a horizontal transmission from the descendants to those of their generation who seek connection to past events (2008, pp. 114-115). Unlike memory, Hirsch explains, postmemory's connection to the past is "not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation [...]. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present" (2008, p. 107).

- 9 The Nazi propaganda and the successful implementation of the final solution was grounded on the premise that Jews were an inferior human species that deserved the subhuman treatment applied to them in the ghettos and camps.
- 10 During the one year and a half of work on the film and the forty days of shooting, the director experienced the writer's texts first, then the real person, but the distance rather than the closeness or rapport prevailed. Which is another reason for his insistence on textual material (Frölke, *TAZ* 2014).
- 11 All the translations from German are mine, unless otherwise stated. "Media produces information that has to be brief, for instance curt takes that can be quickly cut in the editing room."
- 12 "I wanted to collect impressions, to see what will come out of this gathering of fragments. The grave stones have a life of their own because they are also, essentially, a bunch of texts, and so the figures in all these texts multiply. This is the complexity I wanted to convey."

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