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User-Friendliness and Virtual Reality
A Hypertextual Reading of Alain Mabanckou's *Verre Cassé*

Je suis conscient et plus que convaincu que c'est en partant du 'local' qu'on atteint le monde, l'universel.[1]
Alain Mabanckou

§1 Set in a seedy Congolese bar seemingly far removed from the ever-present influences of globalization (aside perhaps from the occasional copy of *Paris-Match*), Alain Mabanckou's *Verre Cassé* (2005)[2] does not have a single foot- or endnote. In fact, the novel has no such peritext[3] whatsoever aside from its title and two short inter-titles that serve to identify the two parts of the work as *premiers feuillets* and *derniers feuillets*. However, this absence of peritext is not in the least surprising given that the novel does not contain any lexical, idiomatic or vernacular terms specific to the region that might confuse or otherwise disorient the reader. Rather, what is shocking is the novel's syntax. Rivaling the syntactic dexterity of Perec and Proust, the eponymous protagonist's long-winded narrative (presented in the form of a notebook that recounts the exploits and hardships of his fellow patrons at *Le Crédit a voyagé*) amounts to nearly 250 pages without recourse to a single punctuation mark aside from commas and quotations marks. What is even more shocking (and clearly a testament to Mabanckou's talent as a wordsmith) is that, rather than being impeded by Verre Cassé's stream-of-consciousness prose, readers soon find themselves swept up in the current of the narrative agent's ingenuity, carried along in seemingly effortless fashion to the novel's "conclusion" (which, of course, lacks final punctuation)[4].

§2 Whereas the orality conveyed by Verre Cassé's unconventional syntax may be interpreted as a harkening back to Africa's fading *griot* traditions[5], I propose to examine Mabanckou's novel along quite different lines; namely, as a cautionary 21st-century tale. Considering each surreptitiously embedded intertext in Mabanckou's novel as a potential hyperlink, I will argue that these hidden titles proffer information and even insight that—while not immediately available to an unsuspecting or under-prepared reader/user—warrant pause for reflection. What I propose to demonstrate is not only why and how Mabanckou's novel can be read hypertextually (i.e., as a web page or e-book of sorts with countless possible hyperlinks[6]) but that, for this very reason, "correctly" interpreting the text is best achieved by way of demonstrating its virtual potential rather than imposing any single definitive or "most-informed" reading.

§3 In a collection of essays titled *Nouvelles Mythologies*, Mabanckou illustrates, on the level of language itself, the increasing acceptance of and demand for such plurality of vision in contemporary society. In fact, his article, "Le WiFi", gives a particularly insightful and humorous account of semantically out-dated expressions in the virtually-functional world of information technology:

> Les moyens de communication ont atteint l'âge de l'invisibilité. Moins on est visible, plus on est efficace, fidèle — et d'ailleurs, l'appellation Wifi ne pouvait pas mieux tomber, (Wireless Fidelity). L'Internet sans fil incarne ainsi la fidélité, la fiabilité, l'aspect pratique. Ne resteraient plus dans nos esprits que des expressions surannées du genre: *passer un coup de fil, avoir quelqu'un au bout du fil,*

> *suivre le fil de la pensée de son interlocuteur, de fil en aiguille, cousu de fil blanc, donner du fil à retordre, ne tenir qu'à un fil, suivre le fil de la vie.*[7]

§4 What is immediately conveyed by these expressions is the idea of unequivocal linearity, of which "having someone on the line" and "hanging by a thread" are good examples. According to this traditional mindset, we are connected singularly by way of a plausible, identifiable conduit. When the connection is broken, both parties are immediately aware of the problem and (usually) immediately set out to repair it. In this mindset, "Can you hear me now?" is not only today a telephone company's catchy motto but moreover one inspired by a perennial problem faced by cell-phone users everyday: interrupted telecommunication connections. On a narrative level, such linearity is a traditional, if not absolute, method of story-telling[8].

§5 While *Verre Cassé* adheres to this fundamental structure to the extent that it entails a single first-person narration, what underscores the narrative's linearity is ironically its absence of traditional punctuation, namely periods. As one run-on sentence, the novel's initially disconcerting appearance could in fact not be more *concerting*; it is after all an unmistakably singular, uninterrupted narrative. Furthermore, the free-flowing prose compels a reader to continue reading with what in hindsight might be construed to be far less freedom than would appear fitting. After all, the reader's impulse is to *not* stray from the page or the (literal) sense of the word at hand since, should he stop if even only momentarily, it is unclear as to how far back in the text it would be necessary to go in order to pick up the flow of the reading again.

§6 If this inherent contradiction were the only unorthodox feature of Mabanckou's work, the novelty of being unable to stop reading an otherwise upsetting sentence would be somewhat short-lived. However, *Verre Cassé* is also teeming with intertextual references that introduce a considerably more troubling quality to the narrative due to the fact that, in sharing all or most words with French titles (either original or in translation), the intertexts are incorporated virtually glitch-free into the nonstop sentence. What ultimately snags the reader is therefore not the unbroken syntax but the words themselves with which it is created—words that happen to halt what is an initially unsuspecting reader by ever so subtly exposing her to what might best be described as intertextual stones at the bottom of the narrative stream[9]. Mathieu Csernel remarks in this respect: "Alain Mabanckou glisse toutes les deux lignes une référence littéraire. [...] Discrètes, elles ne ralentissent jamais le récit. Mais lorsqu'on en trouve une c'est un petit moment de plaisir supplémentaire en repensant au livre auquel il est fait allusion et qu'on a la joie de connaître"[10] .

§7 To the best of my knowledge, the first such *stone* is found at the end of the first section of the novel[11] when Verre Cassé explains that the owner of *Le Crédit a voyagé* has entrusted the keeping of a notebook to him out of fear that the bar will cease to exist if no one puts in writing the stories of its patrons:

> ainsi c'est un peu pour lui faire plaisir que je griffonne de temps à autre sans vraiment être sûr de ce que je raconte ici, je ne cache pas que je commence à y prendre goût depuis un certain temps, [...] j'écris aussi pour moi-même, c'est pour cette raison que je n'aimerais pas être à sa place au moment où il parcourra ces pages dans lesquelles je ne tiens à ménager personne, mais quand il lira tout ça je ne serai plus un client de son bar, j'irai traîner mon corps squelettique ailleurs, je lui aurai remis le document à la dérobée en lui disant "mission terminée" (*VC* 12)

§8 In writing "mission terminée", Verre Cassé fashions a combination of words that, while entirely logical and unassuming with respect to semantics and syntax, just might evoke for the reader the 1957 novel of the same name by Cameroonian author Mongo Beti. Nothing guarantees this discovery, however, since aside from quotation marks, nothing else in the text suggests that this potential intertext is anything more than mere coincidence. Furthermore, on a mimetic level, it should be duly noted that, as the first words of the eponymous protagonist's notebook (and Mabanckou's novel) suggest, Verre Cassé most likley assumes L'Escargot entêté will never pick up on this—or any subsequent—intertext:

> disons que le patron du bar *Le Crédit a voyagé* m'a remis un cahier que je dois remplir, et il croit dur comme fer que moi, Verre Cassé, je peux pondre un livre parce que, en plaisantant, je lui avais raconté un jour l'histoire d'un écrivain célèbre qui buvait comme une éponge, un écrivain qu'on allait même ramasser dans la rue quand il était ivre, faut donc pas plaisanter avec le patron parce qu'*il prend tout au premier degré* (*VC* 11, my emphasis)

§9 The engaging flow of *Verre Cassé* is fraught with the undercurrent created by this and countless other literary references lying just beneath the narrative's literal surface, or mimesis. Given that the vast majority of reviewers of the novel have chalked up these intertexts as simple *clins d'œil* on Mabanckou's behalf, one might in good faith imagine the corresponding Oulipian directive the author might very well have presented himself: "Incorporate as many intertextual references as possible directly into a novel without drawing undue attention to them other than through the words found in the titles themselves." However, as the quotation above from Mabanckou's novel demonstrates, the narrative is also highly metatextual in nature; Verre Cassé is often commenting on and critiquing his very writing of and in the notebooks. Consequently, readers have reason to pause mid-phrase to question how the hidden intertextuality might impact not only their (process of) reading but the interpretation of the novel itself.

§10 Interestingly, the linguistic dexterity at the heart of Verre Cassé's ludic narrative might just as soon be dismissed as the very type of abusive metatextuality and affected intertextuality that was recently denigrated by the authors of "Pour une littérature-monde en français"—the petition published in *Le Monde* in March 2007 and of which Mabanckou himself is a co-signer[12]. In fact, to the extent that critics seem by and large to not know what to make of the intertext-laden nature of the novel (aside from simply taking note of it), it is not immediately clear how *Verre Cassé* rises above the type of "littérature sans autre objet qu'elle-même" that is unabashedly devoted to "sa propre critique dans le mouvement même de son énonciation"[13]. One might even conclude that the manifesto's signatories were thinking precisely of texts such as *Verre Cassé* when calling critical attention to the at-once distasteful [rébarbative] and unavailing intertextuality of relatively recent literary endeavors: "[c]es textes ne renvo[ient] plus dès lors qu'à d'autres textes dans un jeu de combinaisons sans fin [...]"[14].

§11 As a compelling counterpoint to such a perspective, John Walsh explains that, rather than merely amounting to a "meaningless recitation," the titles woven into *Verre Cassé* serve to encourage "a necessary discussion on the process of canonization and, perhaps, its inevitability". Accordingly, "[w]e must reread the narrator's everyday speech as punctuated with the authority of an African canon. A grammar of intertextuality gives new life to Broken Glass's notebook and defers his anticipated failure"[15].

Moreover, it is the non-hierarchical mingling and mixing of French and African titles (among others) in *Verre Cassé* that both embraces and embodies the ideas expressed in the *littérature-monde en français* manifesto: "What is at stake in the novel is a repositioning of the centers and peripheries of the world in French. For Mabanckou, it is crucial to reframe the debate about the place of African cultures in their changing relationship with the former *métropole*"[16].

§12 In a somewhat similar vein, Pierre-Yves Gallard states that Verre Cassé's narrative is a product of the personal and collective memory on which it "feeds." As Gallard points out, "Verre Cassé" is the title of a song by Congolese poet and singer Lutumba Simaro that evokes heart-break and "le surgissement du souvenir réparateur": "Le cahier que rédige Verre Cassé s'inscrit donc d'emblée dans un rapport de filiation avec les textes qui précèdent, et s'il est mémoire des vies vécues par les clients du *Crédit a voyagé*, il se fait aussi mémoire des livres lus, des films vus et des chansons entendues par l'auteur et ses personnages." In this context,

> [l]oin d'être des collections de clichés, les accumulations de citations qui parsèment le texte semblent donc combattre les idées préconçues sur l'art, sur l'autre ou sur la vie en général. Le jeu des réécritures et du dialogisme s'accompagne en effet du refus des stéréotypes par la multiplication des positions contradictoires et la subversion des formules figées. Il participe ainsi à un mouvement d'émancipation, il garantit la liberté des personnages et l'autonomie réflexive de l'écrivain.[17]

§13 In the remainder of this article, I will propose a somewhat more vexed perspective on the way in which Mabanckou has chosen to reframe the issue of (post)colonial (inter)dependence and dialogue(s). After all, given the novel's less-than-evident literary references and less-than-educated bar patrons, it bears noting that *Verre Cassé*'s hypertextuality (in essence, the very device responsible for the reframing and rewriting to which Walsh and Gallard refer) will remain ineffectual for as long as it is undetected by the reader/user. Someone having read no or little literature will not be sufficiently "equipped" to recognize the hyperlinks lurking in the novel's interface, whereas someone else particularly well-versed in world literature will have the skills necessary to deftly tap into and navigate the abundance of the text's virtual potential. Most readers will likely fall somewhere in the middle, better read in some areas than others, as determined for instance by geography, subject and (original) language of the texts cited[18]. Consequently, the hypertextual functionality of the novel will prove both sporadic and varied, as evidenced by the varying reader reviews of the novel posted on-line. For instance, whereas Vitraulle Mboungou comments on "ce clin d'œil subtil fait à d'éminentes oeuvres littéraires, *notamment africaines*"[19], Alice Granger describes the titles in *Verre cassé* as belonging to "une culture surtout occidentale [...]"[20].

§14 In so far as the prior "programming" of the reader determines which intertexts hidden in the narrative she will "hit," her piqued curiosity will surely slow the pace of the reading as her attention is drawn to the possibility of finding additional hypertextual links. In fact—and here I am drawing on my own experience—what soon ensues is a process by which the reader *tries* to spot the stones lurking beneath the literal level of the text. If something looks somewhat vaguely suspicious or familiar, the reader will scrutinize it and (what better way to verify for sure?) might even go to the Internet to Google key words that, while decidedly suspicious or reminiscent of an as-of-yet unidentifiable title, may in fact reveal no hypertextual "capacity" at all. Suddenly, the

fast-paced flow of the reading experience is brought to a near standstill as the ever-cautious, ever-curious reader spends more and more time looking down through the text than appreciating the text itself[21].

§15 For the sake of argument, this proposed hypertextual reading of *Verre Cassé* could be deemed amusing at best. It *is* however noteworthy, if only because the novel's subject matter on the literal (mimetic) level is far from "profound"; while "interesting," the stories recounted by and about the regulars of *Le Crédit a voyagé* are usually banal in nature, centering for example on the physical abuse suffered by le Type au Pampers in prison, l'Imprimeur's nostalgic descriptions of his rise and fall as a married Congolese man in France, and Robinette's epic and highly successful urinating contests. Along the lines of the *clin d'œil* often evoked by reviewers of the novel, the hypertextuality might thus amount to a clever mismatch and intertwining of grotesque humor and debauchery on the mimetic level, with the hypertextually-crafted erudition of intertextuality that is found at the level of the diegesis. However, given that Verre Cassé (a former school teacher fired as a result of his excessive drinking habits) is himself a huge fan of literature and has clearly provided the intertextual references on purpose, to *not* discover the novel's hypertextuality can be likened to missing out on revealing clues concerning Verre Cassé and his community.

§16 Much like actual hypertexts designed to lead the user to related information on demand (those found on Wikipedia pages being a prime example), titles embedded in *Verre Cassé* serve, for instance, to expound upon important stages of Verre Cassé's "voyage en littérature" (*VC* 209-213). Each text cited informs the reader not only of the literary works Verre Cassé has read but—without it being said explicitly—of the significant events in his lifetime. The hyperlinks thus also in many ways serve the same function as foot- or endnotes by giving the reader (albeit in elusive, esoteric fashion) additional information and background with respect to the primary story and its characters. Accordingly, references such as Lucky Luke, Tarzan, Zembla and Zorro depict Verre Cassé as a young boy aware of the injustices around him, who feels a sense of empowerment and believes that he might bring about change for the better in the world. Such bold, by definition *childish* optimism (it is a question of comic books) is eventually undermined due to unfair, uncompromising circumstances combined with an ever-growing awareness and questioning of self—as revealed in titles such as *l'enfant noir*, [*cahier du*] *retour au pays natal*, *ces fruits si doux de l'arbre à pain*, and *le feu des origines*. Such self-scrutiny soon leads to a state of isolation and identity crisis, as suggested by *cent ans de solitude*, *le tunnel*, *l'étranger* and *l'homme approximatif*. Furthermore, the hyperlink provided by *un vieil homme* named Santiago—if recognized and understood as an allusion to *The Old Man and the Sea*—proves not only descriptive of Verre Cassé's life but predictive as well, since both Verre Cassé and Santiago die similarly solitary, watery deaths[22]. To be clear, *not* hitting on each of these hypertextual links in the text does not render the story itself less complete to the extent that the abridged chronicles of Verre Cassé's successes and frustrations may be understood without them. However, a reader who finds herself well-enough versed in world literature to add a second or concomitant virtual reading to the first has, unquestionably, a richer, more complete understanding of Verre Cassé's existence as gleaned through the stories and experiences of others.

§17 Mabanckou eludes to the value of this intertextual awareness in "Le Chant de l'oiseau migrateur" his contribution to the collection of essays published under the title *Pour une littérature-monde*:

> La fratrie littéraire se nourrit de plus en plus de la disparité. Des liaisons — j'allais dire des connivences — éclatent au grand jour: un écrivain congolais se sentirait par exemple plus proche d'un auteur mauricien, djiboutien, colombien ou italien que d'un auteur de sa propre contrée. Cet écrivain congolais aura fait le "voyage en littérature", il aura survolé, toutes ailes déployées, des territoires et écouté les échos les plus variés qui soient. L'expérience de cette mobilité engendrera forcément un autre regard sur sa création.[23]

§18 The *mobilité* at stake in Mabanckou's novel is thus potentially two-pronged. As I have suggested, the unpunctuated prose whisks the reader along and begs to be left uninterrupted on the one hand whereas, on the other, each hypertext embedded within the text proposes a continuation of this movement in an analogous yet necessarily divergent direction.

§19 Furthermore, as the reader hits on each of the hypertextual links responsible for this second, intertextually-motivated movement, it is important to note that each title is capable of altering the reader's course in ways unintended by Verre Cassé / Mabanckou. For instance, a reader's recognition of *le tunnel* cited during Verre Cassé's "voyage en littérature" is merely the first step in terms of activating the title's intertextual agency; the direction and scope of the ensuing contextualization depends on the individual reader and whether the title evokes, for instance, Argentine Ernesto Sabato's 1948 novel[24] involving a murderous painter's self-portrait from prison, the widely-popular 1913 story by German Bernhard Kellermann[25] which envisions the construction of a tunnel under the Atlantic Ocean to connect America with Europe, or a handful of other literary works of the same name including children's books and even novels written *after* the publication of Mabanckou's novel—but which represent altogether plausible hyperlinks given that virtual reality by definition circumvents or simply transgresses traditional temporal parameters. As such, every title and every *word* of Verre Cassé's narrative constitutes a latent hypertext needing only the reader's knowledge, recognition and imagination to become live.

§20 In what represents another example of hypertextuality's virtually limitless potential in the novel, Verre Cassé sees a new bar patron by the name of Holden, who is reading a book in English with a red horse on the cover. The intertextual reference evokes of course Holden Caulfield from J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*—an extremely complex American icon who, as a highly egocentric adolescent, has been interpreted to represent the socially-awash United States. Toward the end of the novel, Verre Cassé notices the man seated at a table in the bar:

> je viens de demander l'heure à un type bizarre qui boit à deux tables de moi, je ne l'ai jamais vu ici, le gars tient un livre à la main, et le titre est en anglais, moi je ne parle pas cette langue, mais je peux voir sur la couverture du livre un dessin de cheval déchaîné, je ne peux lire d'ici tout le titre du livre, y a que les mots *in the rye* que je lis (*VC* 227)

§21 Despite the many different *clins d'œil* that might clue him in on Holden's (literary-based) identity, Verre Cassé initially seems to fail to understand who Holden is or to

what novel he is *linked*. Simply put, nothing seems to "click" for the individual who has up until that point filled over two hundred pages of his cahier with countless intertextual references from around the world. Given Verre Cassé's apparent difficulty in making out the title of the book Holden is reading, the reader of *Verre Cassé* is left somewhat confused as to how to interpret Verre Cassé—especially when, in response to Holden's claim that, because he has "done" the United States, he is more important than any of the other bar patrons, Verre Cassé says: "ne te fatigue pas mon gars, *tu n'attraperas pas mon cœur* à ce jeu-là" (*VC* 230, my emphasis). Curiously, Verre Cassé's response reformulates the title of *The Catcher in the Rye* in its French translation, *L'Attrape-cœurs*, and the reader is thus unsure as to whether Verre Cassé has indeed made the connection himself or if his response is better explained as an auctorial *clin d'œil* on the behalf of Alain Mabanckou himself.

§22 When Verre Cassé later runs into Holden in the street, however, it soon becomes clear that he has come to understood who Holden is—or, perhaps more accurately, what he represents :

> du reste, allais-tu me dire que tu étais un étudiant étranger, hein, allais-tu me dire qu'un de tes amis t'a cassé la figure dans le dortoir, que tu vagabondais ici et là dans le Manhattan, que tu as été à New York, que tu as vu des canards en hiver au Central Park et tout le bazar, hein, ne me regarde pas avec ces grands yeux, je n'ai jamais mis les pieds là-bas, personne ne m'a raconté ton histoire (*VC* 247)

§23 Upon reading this final remark, readers familiar with *The Catcher in the Rye* will realize that Verre Cassé remains at the top of his intertextual game and therefore have reason to read into Holden's significance in the novel; furthermore, we are encouraged to consider this intertextuality from the perspective of Verre Cassé who, in recognizing what Holden stands for, refuses nonetheless to fully acknowledge his place in the bar or his notebook.

§24 As Walsh points out with respect to Verre Cassé's dismissive reaction to Holden, "Mabanckou cautions the reader about a cultish appreciation of literature; however, he also recognizes its power as an enduring legacy" (136). Along these lines, it should be recalled briefly that when Phoebe asks Holden what he wants to make of his life in *Catcher in the Rye*, Holden explains that he would like to be positioned high on a cliff where he could protect children playing nearby from falling over. This wish on Holden's part has often been interpreted as his desire to "catch" children before they fall from grace and lose their innocence entering into adulthood. If one were to follow the implications of this hypertextually-motivated interpretation of Holden in *Verre Cassé*, the glaring impossibility of Verre Cassé's "rescue" from his state of personal crisis and despair is immediately evident. As his "voyage en littérature" (209) has already demonstrated, Verre Cassé's innocence was lost long ago and he therefore has nothing to gain from Holden or his good intentions—in spite of any enduring "legacy" (literary or otherwise) that his presence invokes.

§25 On a slightly different level, however, Verre Cassé's refusal of assistance can be read not only as the Congo's (or Sub-Saharan Africa's) rejection of American support in the form of economic relief, but conversely as America's view of the Congo / Africa as a young, naïve, child-like entity in need of care or oversight. This latter interpretation clearly explains Verre Cassé's remark to Holden: "l'Amérique ne me fera jamais changer d'avis" (230). Shortly after entrusting his notebook to Holden, Verre Cassé

leaves in the direction of the Tchinouka river into which he intends to throw himself. Rather than simply reinforce or further the understanding of the primary text, this uncustomarily blatant hypertext thereby floods the reader with a virtually limitless number of potential avenues of interpretation. In fact, unlike the peritextual endnotes that Coverdale offers in her translation in order to save the clueless reader from "wormholes [that whisk them] instantly into other times and places," the Holden hypertext *creates* this very chaos, subjecting the well-intentioned reader to a virtual freefall given the endless "cliff notes" all too readily afforded by cyberspace.

§26 Whereas a novel's peritext traditionally indicates what a writer or editor deems necessary for a reader to understand, the fact that the reader alone is left to detect and decipher hypertextual clues in *Verre Cassé* renders the necessity of and access to such information problematic. According to Mbarika et al. (2004)[26], the Internet (and cyber cafés in particular) has become a source for social, political, educational and economic activity in the Sub-Saharan region. That said, the regulars of *Le Crédit a voyagé* are clearly not yet denizens of Africa's burgeoning supra-national cyber café culture, and as such are incapable of appreciating the hypertextuality of Verre Cassé's narrative. Focused instead on their own lives and the personal stories that they want recorded for posterity, they do not suspect that Verre Cassé's notebook may very well have *virtually* the opposite effect: like a web page replete with hyperlinks, it offers an all-embracing, ever-expanding portal that, in linking the bar patrons' experiences to literary characters and contexts the world over, paints a much broader, all-inclusive picture of the universal human condition.

§27 Verre Cassé's hypertextual testimony thus raises a series of pertinent questions with respect to the specificity of today's cultures—sub-Saharan African or otherwise[27]. After all, his narrative fails to present the Information Superhighway connecting *Le Crédit a voyagé* with the rest of Africa, France and the United States, as a necessarily *two*-way conduit of (intertextual) networking. Whereas references ranging from Hemingway and Marquez to de Musset and Sartre orient and influence a trained reader toward a "more complete" and perhaps even "better" understanding of *Le Crédit a voyagé*'s regulars, their tragically empty if by no means colorless lives become in some regards secondary to what is an increasingly influential, highly sought-after and novel medium. Although Verre Cassé is expressly entrusted with the task of preserving the specificity of *Le Crédit a voyagé* and its singular clients, we might nontheless ask just what, exactly, he has in fact chronicled—an atypical Congolese bar or a global village[28]—and, moreover, whether or not Mabanckou's novel would have been so well received without this decidedly vital connectivity. Along these hypertextual lines, Verre Cassé's narrative might be read not only as a *proliferation of the sentence proper* (that is, syntactically) but as a *death sentence* of sorts for static communities that, unable to remain afloat (i.e., autonomous) in a cyber-sea of increasingly-accessible information, will soon find themselves hard-pressed to become a footnote in History[29].

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NOTES

1 Alain Mabanckou, "Le Chant de l'oiseau migrateur", in *Pour une littérature-monde*. Eds. Michel Le Bris and Jean Rouaud, Paris, Gallimard, 2007, p. 63.

2 Alain Mabanckou, *Verre cassé*, Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2005.

3 In the introduction to *Paratexts*, Genette explains: "A paratextual element, at least if it consists of a message that has taken on material form, necessarily has a *location* that can be situated in relation to the location of the text itself: around the text and either within the same volume or at a more respectful (or more prudent) distance. Within the same volume are such elements as the title or the preface and sometimes elements inserted into the interstices of the text, such as chapter titles or certain notes. I will give the name *peritext* to this first spatial category [...]. The distanced elements are all those messages that, at least originally, are located outside the book, generally with the help of the media (interviews, conversations) or under cover of private communications (letters, diaries, and others). This second category is what, for lack of a better word, I call epitext [...]. In other words, for those who are keen on formulae, *paratext = peritext + epitext*" (Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin. Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 4-5).

4 The issue of fluidity, or fluency, traverses the novel on many levels. In addition to Verre Cassé's very name and insatiable thirst for the red Sovinco wine, other references to liquid saturate the novel, including the near-inexhaustible story-telling prowess of the bar's regulars, Robinette's exploits as champion pee-er, and the river into which Verre Cassé eventually throws himself.

5 Verre Cassé himself notes, albeit critically, "en Afrique quand un vieillard meurt, c'est une bibliothèque qui brûle" (*VC* 12).

6 Note that I'm taking the liberty to use the term "hypertext" both in the contemporary context of information technology, as well as how Genette defines the term. *Hypertextualité*, according to Genette, is "une relation unissant un texte B ([...] *hypertexte*) à un texte antérieur A ([...] *hypotexte*)." *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1982, p. 11.

7 Alain Mabanckou, "Le WiFi." *Nouvelles Mythologies*, Jérôme Garcin éd., Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 2007, p. 108. The collection of texts is inspired from Roland Barthes' *Mythologies* (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1957).

8 The Choose-your-own-adventure genre is one such exception, as are Julio Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (New York, Random House, Pantheon Books, 1987) and polyphonic narratives such as Maryse Condé's *Traversée de la Mangrove* (Paris, Mercure de France, 1989).

9 I do not choose the word "stone" haphazardly since, in addition to being merely "a small piece of rock of any shape," it can also be defined more precisely as "a piece of rock that has been shaped for a particular purpose." Indeed, it is clear that Verre Cassé / Mabanckou has often had to shape the titles in order for them to fit snuggly in the syntactic and semantic flow of the sentence. Consequently, although Mabanckou's prowess as a writer quickly compensates for the novel's unorthodox grammatical structure, this same structure effectively camouflages countless potential links to literary repositories of historical, political, cultural and thematic significance.

10 Mathieu Csernel, "*Verre Cassé* – Alain Mabanckou", *Canoe.com,* June 30 2006, url: http://fr.canoe.ca/divertissement/livres/critiques/2006/06/30/1755413-ca.html (consulted on September 14, 2008).

11 I use the word "section" rather than chapter because no peritextual chapter heading or number is used to disrupt the narration itself; mere blank spaces constitute the textual divisions.

12 Jean Rouaud et Michel Le Bris, "Pour une 'littérature-monde' en français", *Le Monde*, March 15, 2007. Url : http://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2007/03/15/des-ecrivains-plaident-pour-un-roman-en-francais-ouvert-sur-le-monde_883572_3260_1.html#ens_id=883320.

13 As the authors of the manifest explain: "[...] le sujet, le sens, l'histoire, 'le référent' pendant des décennies [...] auront été mis 'entre parenthèses' par les maîtres-penseurs, inventeurs d'une littérature sans autre objet qu'elle-même."

14 As evidenced by the Littérature-Monde manifesto, such intertextual games are one of the characteristics that firmly rebuked by the *littérature-monde en français*. Without pretending to be in a position to determine to which side of the fence Mabanckou's novel falls, I believe that the issue can perhaps best be addressed textually. In other words, if what the signers of the petition are suggesting is that we move *beyond* the self-absorbed novel that elicits and questions itself ad infinitum and whose references to other literary works seem arbitrary if not downright pedantic in nature, we should perhaps ask if Verre Cassé the novel is in fact calling into question these very practices or merely exploiting them in turn. To phrase the issue differently: if the novel were stripped of its virtual interface, would it have garnered the same critical acclaim?

15 John Walsh, "Sarkozy, Mabanckou, and Notes from the Bar: Alain Mabanckou's *Verre Cassé*", *The French Review* 84.1 (2010), p. 132.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 130.

17 Pierre-Yves Gallard, "Mémoire et intertextualité dans *Verre Cassé* d'Alain Mabanckou", *Malfini*. Url : http://malfini.ens-lyon.fr/document.php?id=140 (consulted on May 18, 2011).

[18] For this reason, Gallard's assertion that Verre Cassé's use of intertexts can be understood as one of "libre appropriation" is not entirely plausible. Gallard affirms: "Qu'elle passe complètement inaperçue ou qu'elle soit modifiée afin de mieux s'insérer dans le propos du locuteur, la citation semble donc bien souvent se détacher de la situation culturelle à laquelle elle fait référence au point que celle-ci est oubliée." Verre Cassé is clearly conscious of the titles he is incorporating into his narrative and, metatextually, invites the reader to find and consider them; in turn, I would argue, any reader who recognizes a given intertext will do so *because* he has encountered it before. This mnemonic means of identification would appear to rule out the possibility of the reader subsequently forgetting the reason for which the title was recognized in the first place.

[19] Vitraulle Mboungou, "*Verre Cassé* d'Alain Mabanckou", *Afrik.com,* August 4, 2006. Web. Url : http://www.afrik.com/article10158.html (consulted on August 15, 2008)); my emphasis.

[20] Alice Granger, "*Verre Cassé*", *E-litterature.net,* June 19 2005. Url: http://www.e-litterature.net/publier2/spip/spip.php?article124 (consulted on September 1, 2006); my emphasis.

[21] In fact, in *underlining* each discovered hypertext, a truly obsessed reader/user might thereby commit the links to a virtual memory of sorts—and in the process further liken the novel to a web page replete with hyperlinks.

[22] The former dies in a river, the latter at sea. Perhaps not surprisingly, the final stage of Verre Cassé's trip around the world by way of literature may be read as proleptic in nature when it comes to his own life:

> [...] je vis un vieil homme maigre et sec qui me dit d'une voix éraillée 'jeune homme, je me présente, je m'appelle Santiago, je suis un pêcheur, ma barque est toujours vide, mais j'aime la pêche', et ce Santiago était accompagné d'un gamin triste de le voir chaque soir rentrer chez lui avec une barque vide, mais il fallait partir, il fallait s'éloigner, et j'ai toujours voyagé comme ça, toujours à la quête de je ne sais quoi, aujourd'hui je n'ai plus l'endurance d'antan, la volonté s'est émoussée au fil des ans, et je me laisse aller comme une immondice qui suit le courant d'un fleuve détourné. (*VC* 212-213)

While both Verre Cassé and Santiago die solitary deaths, Verre Cassé's suicide can hardly be compared to the epic nature of Santiago's battle with the swordfish. In this regard, Verre Cassé's narrative demands scrutiny since it is not entirely clear to what end the hypertext exists in the novel. One text does not simply speak for the other, in that the two individuals in question exhibit significant ideological differences in spite of their parallel solitude and demise.

[23] Alain Mabanckou, "Le Chant de l'oiseau migrateur", *op. cit.*, p. 62.

[24] Ernesto Sabato, *Le Tunnel*, Paris, Seuil, 1995.

[25] Bernhard Kellermann, *Le Tunnel*, trans. Cyril Berger et Werner Klette, Flammarion, 1934.

[26] Victor Mbarika, Muhammadou M.O. Kah and Moussa Keita, "The Diffusion of Cyber Cafés in Sub-Saharan Africa: Country Case Studies", *Idea Group Publishing*, 2004. Url: http://www.irma-international.org/viewtitle/32525/ (consulted on August 24, 2008).

[27] In an essay entitled published on his blog in July 2005, Mabanckou seems to provide a partial answer to this evident incongruity: "[L]e monde change, mais l'écrivain congolais est immobile, il se cabre, hésite à enjamber le fleuve, à traverser la mer, à prendre le premier navire. Et c'est ainsi qu'il perpétue la crise..." ("La littérature congolaise est-elle en crise? L'or noir et l'encre noire", *Congopage.com*, July 23, 2005. Url: http://www.congopage.com/La-litterature-congolaise-est-elle - consulted on August 12, 2008). When Holden critiques Verre Cassé along these same lines, accusing him of being "immobile comme une montagne" (*VC* 230), it is clear that, for Verre Cassé, his literary travels suffice.

[28] Similar to the notion of global village, Abel Kouvouama evokes the "citizen of the world" in his assessment of the novel: "*Verre Cassé* [...] est à considérer comme une écriture de soi par les autres, une transgression des limites et des codes qui se veut un hymne à la liberté de l'écrivain et du *citoyen du monde*" (Abel Kouvouama, "*Verre Cassé* ou les figures de la transgression: De l'inscription musicale à la production littéraire", *Études de lettres* 279, 2008, p. 131 ; emphasis added). Furthermore, Pierre-Yves Gallard suggests that chronicling the individual and universal are not necessarily contradictory endeavors: "*Verre Cassé* peut ainsi porter la revendication d'une culture personnelle et commune vivante, c'est-à-dire en mouvement, nourrie de multiples traditions et cultures, *puisant sa vitalité dans sa diversité*" (emphasis added).

[29] I would like to thank friend and colleague Tom Peele for first suggesting to me that intertextuality in *Verre Cassé* might be viewed as hypertext.