

Armand and Alienism: Generic Détournement, Translocality, and Hyperrealism in Louis Armand's *Cairo*

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Abstract:

This essay focuses on the shift in Armand's oeuvre, from consisting primarily of poetry and shorter prose, to longer forms of experimental fiction. These longer forms often mediate through a novelistic, noir genre frame, whilst consistently engaging with such themes as surveillance, the limits of realism, and the phenomenology of place. Jack de Highden's article confronts Armandian alienism, with special emphasis on the anti-novel *Cairo*.

Keywords: Armand; alienism; experimental fiction; surveillance; noir.

Foregrounding

Armand's multifarious oeuvre, on a basic level, consists of twelve collections of poetry, eight books of fiction and seven books of theory. Even at its most conventional, Armand's work is highly experimental. This is unsurprising, given his critical and creative imagination is attuned to poetry that "presents an unsettling and rigorous continuation of avant-garde poetics" (Alizadeh, 191). Armand's oeuvre, prior to 2011 consisting primarily of poetry and shorter experimental fiction, has in the past decade shifted focus to longer-forms of experimental fiction, often mediating through a novelistic, noir genre frame. His work has consistently engaged with themes such as surveillance, the limits of realism, and the phenomenology of place.

In 2017, alongside fifteen other members of the semi-anonymous experimental art collective, Interior Ministry, Armand launched *ALIENIST Magazine #1* (2017), in which the basic tenets of Alienism were outlined. *ALIENIST Magazine* has since published five more issues and three major experimental works of fiction. Alienism is an avant-garde aesthetico-political movement created by the international, experimental, literary-focused art collective, Interior Ministry, of which Armand is a prominent member. Their primary channels of circulation run through their website, "ALIENIST MANFIESTO," its associated social media accounts, and *ALIENIST Magazine*. Alienism is a movement founded primarily in resistance. Having found direct opposition ineffectual in creating change, Alienism resorts to a kind of guerrilla cultural warfare. Alienism is deliberately difficult to define, as it is consistently shifting its aims and methods. But in my estimation, and in the face of its emergent revelation, Alienism signals a resistance to literary and artistic homogenisation by forces of totalitarian power. It seeks new ways to understand the world and the forces that shape it. Alienism's discontents manifest in various forms of resistance to, including but not limited to, the art market, the literary establishment, realism, nationalism, capitalism, and totalitarianism. Alienism promotes dissensus over consensus, contending that dissent is what creates change in a given society. Finally, and fundamentally, Alienism is an experimental movement. It thrives in the uncertainty of experimentation, of formulating new questions and experiments, of expanding consciousness and deconstructing systems of power and control. It breaks open frameworks of

knowledge and fissures structures of certainty, all to demonstrate that the limits of possibility lie far outside of where we were told they laid.

Louis Armand's 2014 anti-novel, *Cairo*, is an international, genre-blending work of experimental fiction. It follows the narratives of five characters, situated globally, as they struggle against anonymous forces and assailants, stumbling through a blurred reality with little knowledge of the rules of their worlds. Each narrative and their focal character are represented by a different symbol, located at the beginning of each of their chapters. Throughout the short one-hundred chapters, the five narratives cycle through in order, the first repeating at the close of the fifth.

The overarching narrative connecting these five constellated yet interconnected narratives is left deliberately ambiguous, but there are implied world events loosely framing the novel. In the near-future, the 'meteor' strikes a satellite put in orbit by future corporations to keep track of their time-shifting agents and enable the very process of time-shifting. The meteor hits New York while the satellite crashes in outback South Australia. Organisations scramble worldwide, either attempting to capitalise on or clean-up after these events.

The opening narrative follows an unnamed character—who awakens on a bridge in the middle of what seems to be Cairo, Egypt. However, the Cairo represented is a dark, futuristic iteration, a dystopian nightmare encapsulated within a colossal dome. This character staggers through Cairo, his body partially under the influence of something called 'the programme', directed by a voice in his head he terms 'the Stranger', who sends him towards a mysterious destination described only as 'the Connection'. The next narrative follows Joblard, an ex-boxer and fixer for a black-market pornographer. Joblard rides around Southern England on his motorcycle, tracking down his boss' enemies and debtors, finding himself caught up in the conspiratorial affairs of clandestine forces. Up next is Lawson, an Indigenous Australian geophysicist-turned-scavenger in the middle of the South Australian outback. Along with her partner, a Palestinian hacker, she tracks down a fallen satellite, retrieving the wreckage from Lake Eyre. Her short-lived victory sets her in the sights of enigmatic pseudo-governmental agents, who pursue her and her partner from the shadows. Then follows Osborne, a disaffected, middle-aged man in New York. Osborne is moving through New York when a supposed 'meteor' strikes ground-zero. Osborne goes on to run errands for the obscure Doctor Suliman, becoming the unwitting courier of a statuette stolen from a museum. In a surreal movement, the statuette implants itself through his left eye, into his brain, sending him on the run from real and imagined pursuers. Finishing the cycle is Shinwah, a 'time-shifting' assassin from the future, who becomes trapped in Prague in a time-cycle of the past, after the completion of a job. Her handler, de Laurentiis, evacuates them both to Italy where he betrays her. After surviving the ensuing shootout, she awakens on a boat with a woman named Margarita and a silent boy named Momo. After explaining that the satellite Shinwah's employers had been using to track her with had been destroyed, Margarita takes her to Cairo to seek 'the Cartouche', a device that will allegedly be used to cleanly extract the trackers implanted in her brain by her employers.

At *Cairo*'s close, it becomes clear that it was never Armand's intention to write satisfying endings. Most of *Cairo*'s characters either have their narratives reset to repeat, or find themselves in intractable situations, dying or being captured. Only Shinwah and Joblard's narratives show the potential of leading anywhere resembling finality, and even then, it does not seem likely either will find the kind of freedom they are looking for.

Generic Détournement

Armand's oeuvre has typified a writer interested in the mediations between genre and experimentation. In broad strokes, *Cairo* may be categorised as cyberpunk, within which distinct genres such as dystopian science-fiction, noir and crime thriller are at play. However, despite the brief outward appearance of being constrained by genre, *Cairo* performs a détournement of genre in which genre is "creatively disfigur[ed]" (Buchanan, 149) by an ambiguation of the expectation and certainty contrived by the conventions of genre. It is through the proliferation of uncertainty within *Cairo* that Armand reroutes its genre texts in support of broader, more experimental questions and assertions.

The androidian character that occupies *Cairo*'s primary narrative, in particular, appears closest to a cyberpunk classification. Andrew M. Butler defines early cyberpunk fiction as "a science fiction set in a near future, dominated by high technology including computers, computer networks and human/machine hybrids" (Butler, 9). In *Cairo*, the city of Cairo finds its best representation in "a gloom punctuated only by the glow of lime-burners' kilns and the random searchlights of surveillance drones" (Armand 2014, 41). The city is suffocated by futuristic technology, yet remains, aching, ancient. The ruined architecture is comprised of "high stone wall[s]," yet drowns under "mountains of rubbish and junked-out machinery" (Armand 2014, 38). Early in the novel we can surmise the near-future setting and the dominance of high technology. The protagonist in this section himself is a human/machine hybrid, his brain cybernetically enhanced. "Green numerics" flicker at the edge of his vision, a complement of 'the programme' (Armand 2014, 10), seemingly a neuro-interfaced computer. It navigates for the unnamed character and even responds to threats automatically, "[s]traightaway a subprogramme kicks in" (Armand 2014, 58), automatically dodging for him and eliminating attacking androids. The setting, characters and themes of this dystopian nightmare all seem to adhere to a cyberpunk classification, exploring a speculative apocalypse trapped in a purgatory of collapsing capitalism. But the reader's experience will certainly not be that of a standard cyberpunk text. As much as this narrative might 'look' cyberpunk, the narrative, especially alongside the other four of *Cairo*'s narratives, performs a very different function.

In *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, Buchanan situates détournement as, "[a]n artistic practice conceived by the Situationists for transforming artworks by creatively disfiguring them" (Buchanan, 149). Ken Knabb, a well-known translator of Situationist works, footnotes in Guy Debord and Gil Wolman's *A User's Guide to Détournement* that "[t]he French word *détournement* means deflection, diversion, rerouting, distortion, misuse, misappropriation, hijacking, or otherwise turning something aside from its normal course or purpose" (Debord and Wolman). The aim of détournement is to reroute an artwork by rearranging it—either in itself or among other, often disparate, elements—or resituating it within a new context. Détournement is frequently used in Alienist art, often in the form of agitprop-style images overlaid with Alienist aphorisms. Many Alienist aphorisms are détournements of famous or influential quotes. For example, the aphorism from Interior Ministry's *Category Response*, "EXTINCTION IS NECESSARY, PROGRESS IMPLIES IT" (Ministry 2019, 8) is a détournement of the line from Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, "[p]lgiarism is necessary. Progress implies it" (Debord) which was in turn plagiarised verbatim from Comte de Lautréamont's (the pseudonym of Isidore Ducasse) *Poésies*. I read this particular détournement as implying that the process of plagiarism constitutes an extinction of the plagiarised material to be replaced by the plagiariser, a process which itself takes place if the reader has no knowledge of the source from which the plagiarisation was taken.

Generic détournement, as I would articulate it, involves the appropriation, reconfiguration or repurposing of genre. It is a process that perverts the form or meaning of the détourned genre, rerouting it to communicate something different to the reader. What distinguishes generic détournement from a simple deviation of genre is the radical upheaval and mutation enacted by its re-contextualisation. Debord and Wolman describe this as “deceptive détournement,” which is “the détournement of an intrinsically significant element, and derives a different scope from the new context” (Debord and Wolman). In *Cairo*, this new scope is constituted by the experimental mode that Armand writes in, expanding the ambit of meaning ordinarily limited by the boundaries of genre.

As John Hartley argues, “genres are agents of ideological closure—they limit the meaning-potential of a given text” (O’Sullivan et al., 128). In *Cairo*, the expansion or transgression of the limitations of the meaning-potential détourns *Cairo*’s genres. This expansion occurs primarily through a process of ambiguation, which is to say that where a genre text’s scope of potential interpretations was relatively narrow, ambiguation expands the scope of potential by rendering what was previously clear, more ambiguous. In *ALIENIST Magazine #5*, contemporary experimental fiction writer, Germán Sierra, writes, “[p]roper experiments generate further uncertainty, they continuously define one fugacious speculation zone after another preventing the possibility of calculating risk” (Sierra, 16). It is through these definitions that I oppose genre, seeking to constrain interpretation, and experimentation, seeking to liberate it.

One of the primary ways ambiguation takes place in *Cairo* is through an assertion of or allusion towards the unreliable aspects of the text. Throughout *Cairo*, the possibilities of alternative worlds and timelines are mentioned recurrently. To present only a few:

De Laurentiis had called [Cairo] the palimpsest. All the possible worlds that’d never come to fruition, overlaid in a kind of schizophrenic mesh, in which only contradictions survived;
“Each sphere of the pyramid, he said, represents a possible future. While the one at the very apex represents the most perfect of all possible futures...”;
The anti-selves of all their possible selves. (Armand 2014, 211, 327, 290)

Cairo’s protagonists only ever hear fragments of whispers and scarcely comprehend anything happening in the novel. In Osborne’s closing chapter, as he lays paralysed and mute on a slab in front of Doctor Suliman and one of the cloned thugs, he hears the two discuss a mysterious statuette that had implanted itself in Osborne’s left eye,

“Does he know?” Suliman asked.
“Know what?”
“What it’s for.”
“Tell me,” the thugs says, turning to the Doctor, “do you know what it’s for?”
“Only what I’ve been told.”
“Well, then.” (Armand 2014, 360)

The fragmentation of the novel form leaves the reader searching for threads of a narrative, which are reduced to innumerable possible reading outcomes, each coalescing into a vision

which never quite solidifies. At the close of the novel, the reader may feel no closer to an understanding of the events of the novel than they did at the beginning.

As this unreliability becomes more apparent within a given genre text, the prospect of a habitual degree of certainty becomes less viable. In *Cairo*, this turn towards uncertainty produces a generic détournement resulting in a radical widening of possibility. As such, the previously ubiquitous truths espoused by genre texts—perhaps commenting on the human condition or the state of modern society—are relegated to the status of conditional truths, their condition as ‘truth’ being dictated by the boundaries of context. Given the difficulty in finding a viable meaning within the détourned genre texts, the focus shifts to the kinds of questions often asked by experimental texts.

Translocality

Framed through an Alienist lens, geographical coordinates constitute a commodification or codification of place. They are the conversion of a location into a mathematical language that fits in among a vast system of commodities. The commodification of place is a process of abstraction and quantification, the reduction of a location to a mere data point. Geographical coordinates objectify a place by converting all of its irreducible content—its culture, its politics, its people, etc.—into a series of numbers and directions that designate scarcely even the exterior appearance of the place. Through its commodification, place takes on a form that is compatible with other mechanisms of power and surveillance. In contrast, translocality is the differentiation of place, the expansion and accentuation of the details that make a place unique, thereby reinforcing the irreducibility of place to abstract descriptions such as is embodied in commodification. *Cairo* exemplifies this dichotomy—between the reduction and abstraction of place performed by geographical coordinates, and the intensification of a place’s specificity, produced by translocality—through the contrast of paratextual coordinates and the translocality of Armand’s prose.

In *Cairo*, each chapter is headed by a title, a symbol designating which narrative thread we are following, and a set of geographical coordinates, indicating where in the world the chapter supposedly takes place. The simplest interpretation of the five symbols is that each represents a different protagonist. Alternatively, we can say that the symbols operate as a kind of signifier to a textual hyperlink, almost as if each chapter was an individual webpage and the symbol was the URL of an internet domain. The coordinates take this internet analogy further by utilising the internet as a prosthesis for the text. Entering the coordinates into an internet application such as Google Maps will pinpoint the precise location the chapter supposedly takes place in. On the front cover of *Cairo*, among a collage of images, just to the right of the author attribution, is an image taken from Google Maps, mapping out the route taken by Osborne on a psychogeographical journey through New York (Armand 2014, 85-90). While the reader could search the coordinates with an atlas or flat-out ignore them, the inclusion of this particular image legitimises the use of Google Maps as an intertextual prosthesis and designates the importance of *Cairo*’s hypertextuality.

In the very first chapter, Armand alludes to the unreliability of the coordinates he himself provides. Shortly after awaking on a bridge on the opening page of the novel, our nameless protagonist wonders as to whether he has awoken “[i]n a wrong set of coordinates. Like the coordinates of dreams. Except this’s nothing like a dream” (Armand 2014, 9). This line simultaneously expresses the narrator’s disorientation while suggesting something erroneous

about the coordinates provided above. The distrust this line evokes is later confirmed just over halfway through the novel. In another of this chapter sequence, “SYRINGE,” the coordinates provided are, “31°15'19.08"E / 31°15'22.98"E” (Armand 2014, 240). The mirroring of the longitudinal coordinate effectively invalidates the device’s function as an indicator of location. This glitch in the system proposes an insufficiency in this particular geographical language, asserting its general unreliability. Jennifer Mills remarks on the unreliability of the hypertextual markers, writing in her review of *Cairo* that “[e]ach chapter is headed with ... the co-ordinates of the location in which it *ostensibly* takes place” (Mills, my emphasis). It seems that Armand is attempting to say something about place and designation of place, both in *Cairo* and in ‘reality’.

To interrogate this device further, we must look to *Cairo*’s translocal qualities. David Vichnar, writes that, “[t]ranslocal writing can be best defined as one created outside of its native emplacement and concerned with dwelling, identity, and place as experiences of writing” (Vichnar). Translocal writing emphasises the particularities of place, engaging with the culture, politics, landscape, people and so on, of various localities. Vichnar specifies that “what marks off the *translocal* category is the degree in which its experimentation is place-bound, whether geographically or linguistically” (Vichnar). Translocal writing seeks, not to reduce place into quantifiable terms, but instead to expand one’s perception of place, to increase their consciousness of the variations within different localities.

Cairo is set in places such as London, Cairo, New York and Trieste in Italy and is emphatically translocal, written by an Australian born, Prague-based author. Armand highlights Joblard’s urban British dialect, “[w]ell if it ain’t Ol’ Pasty, back from the dead. How’d you manage that, then, eh? Pulled a little switcheroo, did we?” (Armand 2014, 328) Armand plays and experiments with the kinds of language used by a motorcycle-riding thug who finds himself all over London and Southern England for work. Osborne’s New York is a locality defined by street addresses and signage with a fittingly cosmopolitan veneer, evocative of its overdeveloped consumerism, “[t]he trail began auspiciously below the EZ Pawn Shop (watches, jewelry [sic], electronics) and the Great Wall Laundry Cleaning Inc. Next came Luz’s Shoe Repair. Charlie’s Smoke Shop followed” (Armand 2014, 86). The passage proceeds in a psychogeographic journey through New York, accentuating the characteristic features of numerous localities. Armand achieves the evocation of a multitude of microcosms, shifting the emphasis of his prose in response to the movements of his characters.

In *Cairo*, locality is not reduced to mere geographical location. As Megan Garr once argued, writing on translocal poetry, “the very pivot of translocality would indicate that there are many, many kinds of localities, and we need not focus solely on where our (or the author’s) feet are standing” (Garr). Armand presents the irreducible idiosyncrasies of a throng of localities, immersing the reader in the immediacy of the place, rather than presenting a ready-made stereotype,

[t]he landscape around Old North Circular Road had evolved into the new millennium with cretaceous slowness, a backwater in the march of progress, a stagnant pool left behind by the fast eddying currents of the Cool Britannia mainstream (Armand 2014, 42).

Rather than simply describing the landscape, Armand synthesises a complex of cultural, political and economic perspectives with which to characterise the locality, prompting a feeling of lethargic inertia. With every description, Armand evokes the multiplicity of places that can be split into further, innumerable localities, contrasting both the physical and psychological under- and overcurrents.

In contrast to the nuance of Armand's prose, geographical coordinates abstract and reduce a place to two lines of numbers and directions. It represents the all-too-common tendency to attempt to capture the entirety of the world in simple and transferrable terms, a kind of codification or commodification. In several other places throughout *Cairo*, Armand's characters suggest the incapacity of geographical coordinates. For example, as Lawson searches Lake Eyre for the crashed satellite, she comments, "[w]hatever the GPS was pointing at seemed to warp space. A coordinate that didn't belong on any map" (Armand 2014, 153). Geographical coordinates are incapable of representing places that do not conform to their spatial logic, as Armand demonstrates.

In our increasingly digital era, geographical coordinates are nigh inseparable from their surveillance function, suffused with the image of the red, blinking light of a satellite. By placing coordinates at the head of each chapter, Armand imposes a paranoiac, all-seeing eye, and juxtaposes the translocality of his prose with the surveillance function of geographical coordinates. The ubiquitous surveillance of geographical coordinates functions as a mechanism of power, an attempt to dictate an administrated spatial logic. In *ALIENIST #3*, Interior Ministry discuss the phenomenon of "social architecture" (Ministry 2018, 26), arguing that "[f]or Power, the architectonics of surveillance is first & foremost a matter of getting the world into its grasp by constituting the logic of the world" (Ministry 2018, 30). By establishing geographical coordinates as a standardised descriptor of space, power does indeed "constitut[e] the logic of the world." The omnipresence of coordinates throughout *Cairo* signals an inescapability, even as the protagonists grasp for a freedom or emancipation that is rendered impossible by the terms set up from the beginning.

Increasingly, geographical coordinates are normalised as a system through which place is communicated, extending a homogeneity that reduces place to a representation that is compatible with an increasingly internet-driven world. The result is a system of language or logic that begins to break away from the reality it attempts to represent, constituting an increasing separation between place and the representation of place. Translocality counters this movement by engaging and experimenting with place in an attempt to derive an understanding of what truly characterises different localities.

Hyperrealism

In Alienist theory, realism is problematised particularly for its tendency to construe itself as unideological, issuing a claim to universality as the one true reflection of an objective reality. When we speak of realism, it is usually understood that we are speaking of a text that represents reality. But the question that often goes unasked is what, exactly, we are talking about when we say 'reality'. Literary critic Pam Morris, comments that "the term realism almost always involves both claims about the nature of reality and an evaluative attitude towards it. It is, thus, a term that is frequently invoked in making fundamental ethical and political claims or priorities, based upon perceptions of what is 'true' or 'real'" (Morris, 2). Our ability to make claims about the nature of reality relies on a confidence that what we are seeing is true. But what if the problem is not 'what' we are seeing, but 'how' we are seeing?

The Interior Ministry proclaim the purpose of Alienism is “to intervene in the ideological solipsism of ‘emancipation from ideology,’ represented by the transparent myth of realism” (Ministry 2017, 19). The article claims that a given ideology will purport to occupy the entirety of the ideological horizon, appearing as the only option, therefore conflating an apparent absence of ideological ‘options’ with an emancipation from ideology entirely. When realism is ostensibly ‘transparent’, it is portrayed as depicting an objective reality, rather than a reality mediated through language and thus ideology. One of Alienism’s goals is to dispel the myth that realism is an objective, unideological viewpoint, and thus reality itself.

Given that all texts are inherently ideological, realism cannot objectively depict reality, as it will always be necessarily influenced by ideology. In a masking of its ideological influences, realism conveys itself as a transparent window through which language alights on reality, crafting a transparent myth through which it gains power. To reflect on the nature of the present, cultural theorist, Mark Fisher, characterises realism as “capitalist realism” (Fisher). The dominance of capitalist ideology is so profound at this stage that capitalist realism ends up conveying itself as the only kind of realism. As Fisher explains, “capitalist realism is therefore not a particular realism; it is more like realism itself” (Fisher). This brings me to my discussion of realism in *Cairo*, or, as my continued analysis will demonstrate, Armand’s use of the hyperreal. Although *Cairo* was written before the establishment of the Alienist movement, one can see the immediacy by which *Cairo* precedes the Alienist impulses when closely analysing functions such as Armand’s interrogation with the limits of ‘realism’.

The opening line of *Cairo* reads, “[e]verything about it seems fake and yet too-real. More real than any place on Earth” (Armand 2014, 9). “It” is the city of Cairo, Armand’s vision of a world trapped in the perpetual cycle of a collapsing capitalism and its recurrent re-stabilisation: “[u]p above, tireless nanotech machines reconstitute the city’s inner shell, working against the equally tireless processes of erosion and sabotage” (Armand 2014, 57). The city is fake because, by most accounts, it is a virtual simulation. It is too-real because despite it not being ‘reality’, and instead, virtual reality, it appears to be realer than reality. A state of hyperreality occurs when what is taken to be ‘real’ detaches from reality. Hyperreality develops as the individual or collective idea of what constitutes ‘real’ no longer relies on an underlying reality, but instead upon other models and viewpoints of the real. As Baudrillard puts it “[i]t is the generation ... of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal” (Baudrillard, 166). As we are starting to see, realism in late capitalism is itself a form of hyperreality. Realism relies on and helps shape these hyperreal accounts of reality, resulting in the distension and moulding of reality, and thus creating a version of the hyperreal.

In her review of *Cairo*, Mills writes, “[a]lthough it appears on the surface to be a science fiction novel, [*Cairo*] depicts a state of being that Umberto Eco described as hyperreality, in which life is experienced as a bewildering array of simulacra” (Mills). The simulacra Mills refers to are false copies of things. As Shinwah looks at herself in a mirror, she observes that “[h]er hand, when she reached out to touch the glass, seemed less real than its reflection did” (Armand 2014, 239). Her hand seems to her to be a simulacrum of her actual hand, as if the mirror is revealing the distortion of her own perception. Closing out her review, Mills concludes, “*Cairo* will reward those looking for a way to escape the enclosure of realism, cutting a hole in the fence so readers can wriggle out into the more interesting and dangerous terrain of the unknown” (Mills). However, it is not necessarily an escape from realism itself, but more an

engagement with a realism that knows that it is hyperreal, and would not have it any other way. *Cairo* demonstrates this apparent hyperrealism through the melding of the overtly hyperreal, in *Cairo*'s main narrative, and the other four narratives, with each articulating and struggling with differing degrees of realism.

While Armand never states it outright, there is an overwhelming amount of evidence pointing to the setting of the novel's primary narrative being within a virtual simulation. The protagonist lapses in and out of the simulation, the 'real world' indicated by the recurrent image of "the blades of a ceiling fan very slowly turning" (Armand 2014, 39) above him and the feeling of "lying on a cold slab" (9). As he weaves his way through Cairo, he sporadically reawakens on the slab below the fan. As the character reaches the closing chapters of his narrative, his world begins to pixelate, "[t]he albino's face does something strange. A type of pixellated [*sic*] vagueness turns it into a blur that begins, by increments, to spread outwards into the laboratory" (Armand 2014, 323). This pixelation reveals the limits of virtual visual depiction, an insufficient photo-realism that dispels the illusion of reality. During the final chapter of the primary sequence, his antagonist, Slimane, says to the unnamed character, "[p]erhaps, though you don't realise it, you've been here already, before, many times. But each time the clock was re-set, the game begun anew" (Armand 2014, 347). Slimane strongly alludes to the simulational character of the novel's journey, suggesting that their encounter was one of many iterations of an endless simulation stuck on repeat.

Despite the strong inclination towards simulation, this state of reality is never entirely confirmed. The supposed 'real world' narratives also grapple with varying levels and states of surreality and hyperreality. Shinwah, a drug addict, snorts ice (methamphetamine) and finds that the cognitive impact brings "[e]verything in[to] heightened focus, more real than the real" (Armand 2014, 176). Fleeing her pursuers on a train, Lawson locks herself in the bathroom in a panic, stating that "[n]othing seemed real. But it was all, she told herself, all very too-real" (Armand 2014, 280). Despite their various disillusionments, it is never clear what is real and what is unreal in *Cairo*. Throughout, Armand assembles a slew of inter-narrative links between Cairobot's narrative and the other four. There is an ambiguous contiguity and continuity between Cairobot's world and the 'real world' narratives. A duo, both wearing raincoats and consisting of a man with dwarfism and his partner, a man with a facial skin condition, appear within all five narratives. There are mutual events and objects linking all five narratives. In Osborne's New York, a meteorite strikes ground-zero. That meteorite takes out the satellite that Lawson scavenges the remains from. The crashed satellite is revealed to have been tracking Shinwah, compromising Shinwah's employer's ability to time-shift her back to the future. Joblard meets up with his employer, Bludhorn, who is holding a small black statuette, presumably the same statuette that Osborne has implanted in his eye midway through *Cairo*. The links are only ever indeterminate, but they are impossible to ignore.

The most vital inter-narrative link for our purposes, however, is the periodic appearance of the colour green in all five narratives. Cairobot repeatedly experiences a "flicker of green numerics" (Armand 2014, 10) in the vision of his left eye. Joblard notices that Bludhorn "was holding a glass of something bright green in his left hand" (Armand 2014, 136). Aboard a plane, Lawson sees, "[a] green light that filled the cockpit like night-vision. The sat-phone's GPS" and "[a] green caravan in the middle of a red desert" (Armand 2014, 138, 105). Osborne notices "a woman in a fur coat walking along the sidewalk, ... something green perched on her shoulder ... *A green fucking parrot*" (Armand 2014, 33, italics in original). As Shinwah enters

the City of the Dead in Cairo, she sees “[a] dozen women mov[ing] around the machinery in soiled green surgical masks, gloves, caps” (Armand 2014, 303). This technique, of reinforcing the colouration of a scene, may reference some of the first computers, the text on their monitors glowing green, evoking in this colour a digital aesthetic. The intrusion of this colouration certainly mimics the distinction between digital interfaces and reality. This colour conveys the sense that all of *Cairo*’s narratives, whether digitally virtual or realist, are simulational. All the narratives take place in some expression of coded hyperreality.

This general condition of simulation becomes clearer as we further examine *Cairo*’s inter-narrative relations. *Cairo* maintains a very fine balance between crafting a vaguely coherent metanarrative, dissociating the narratives enough so that they retain an indeterminacy of association with one another. In doing so, it is clear that there is a mutual quality shared by all the narratives, although they are not identical expressions of a shared reality. This tenuous link asserts that the five interconnected narratives are not contained in a common virtual simulation—although they may be within their own virtual worlds, they are all simulating reality. Although it seems likely that Osborne’s narrative is also virtual, the other three are indeterminately ‘real’. These ‘real world’ narratives are thus different expressions of hyperreality, perhaps not ‘digitally’ constructed, but indeed ‘linguistically’ constructed, proliferating models of reality based on and in interaction with other models of reality.

If, as we surmise, realism is progressively alienating itself from reality, then how does that affect the validity of assertions predicated upon a state of realism? Answering optimistically, I can posit that disillusionment with realism’s universal claims may lead to the Alienist ideal of dispelling the myths by which realism and its ideological influences gain power through their pronouncements of and on reality. Regardless of whether we agree that *Cairo* or Alienism are successful in their endeavour to “intervene in the ideological solipsism of ‘emancipation from ideology’ represented by the transparent myth of realism” (Ministry 2017, 19), they have introduced an element of uncertainty into the discussion of realism. *Cairo* succeeds in blurring the lines between real and unreal, suggesting that what is possible does not lie at the limits of one’s perceived reality, but instead at an imperceptible limit, as an expression of a “generalised mechanics of possibility” (Ministry 2017, 21).

In a world that is simultaneously so sure and unsure of itself, we are constantly in need of artists and thinkers willing to create from viewpoints that genuinely circumvent obfuscating traditions, such as realism, instead of merely sheathing themselves in the spectacle of appearing to. Armand and the Alienists position themselves in support of an emancipatory creativity, in an aesthetic, experimental and artistic sense. Armand’s détournement of genre promotes growth and mutation in those genres, cultivating uncertainty and expanding what they are capable of saying. By contrasting geographical coordinates with translocal prose, Armand accentuates the reductive characteristics of the language of coordinates, while highlighting the fecundity of translocality. Perhaps most importantly, Armand extends the discourse of realism, suggesting that an acknowledgement of the hyperreality of the present state of our reality presents the opportunity for an expansion of our awareness of what it is possible to say, do and think, unfettered by the inherent ideological constraints of realism. Armand and Alienism offer little in the way of concrete solutions, perhaps because that is not what we need. Their work is not the means to an end. It is not a final liberation, but potentially an acid with which to corrode one’s chains.

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