

**“KEEP IT NEW”:  
RECENT TRENDS IN EXPERIMENTAL FICTION IN ENGLISH**

‘Fiction is called experimental out of despair’ (Raymond Federman)

‘Literature is news that STAYS news’ (Ezra Pound)

Experimental literature, in its broadest sense, might be said to ask the following question: what more can fiction do than it currently does? It is a consideration that inevitably discloses both a sense of dissatisfaction with what we have, and a trusting optimism in the future’s ability to deliver new possibilities. The experimental has connotations of risk, excitement, innovation, and aesthetic progressiveness, but it also frequently contains a knowledge of its own possible failure: an awareness that experiments by their nature might go badly wrong. Experimental fiction is a series of attempts at change, and yet the last sixty years of literary history has been marked by an anxiety about its own possible exhaustion (John Barth). What if all experimentation has already been tried? Both the experimental, and its close relation the avant-garde, look forward – a potentially problematic stance given a contemporary scene that is preoccupied with its own ‘post’ness. Indeed, as Brian McHale has recently asked, can the literature of the postmodern be experimental at all?

Both the avant-garde and the experimental thus bear a combative relation to what has gone before, and to literary history as a whole. The avant-garde contains the promise of both an aesthetic and a political radicalness: remembering the term’s military etymology, we are cognizant of the neo or contemporary avant-garde’s aggressive potential. Perhaps for this reason, experimental or avant-garde fiction often rubs people (readers, critics) up the wrong way: it implies there’s something wrong with what we already have, and seeks to usurp it. It refuses consolation, recuperation, all of the dulling and soporific effects of traditional narrative, and is subsequently accused, variously, of self-indulgence, political quiescence and solipsism. Sometimes it is too political – the history of the avant-garde in the twentieth-century, especially French ‘literature of commitment’ (*littérature engagée*) – and sometimes it is not political enough – the characterization of experimental writers and audiences as aloof, anti-reader literary elites. Itself a marginal mode, experimental literature has obvious affiliations with other types of writing that have been pushed out, overlooked or ignored by the mainstream, in particular women’s writing. Nevertheless, as Christine Brooke-Rose has noted, many experimental novels are ‘surprisingly phallogocentric’. Does the stylistically experimental necessarily imply the politically subversive?

Experimental as a term is unavoidably evaluative: either as a synonym for unsuccessful, unreadable, or elitist; or with its positive but equally problematic associations of progressiveness and intellectual ambition. In its positive incarnation it contains an implicit condemnation of everything that is *not* experimental; it creates its own version of what it subverts or moves on from, conceiving the non-experimental as a homogenous mass. Keeping in mind Rita Felski’s warning that those critics ‘who proclaim the subversive power of formal experimentation, fail to consider that the breaking of conventions itself becomes conventional’,

we ask whether the paradox inherent in the canonization of experimental and avant-garde fiction means that postmodernism has incorporated and recuperated it to the detriment of experimental literature's ability to fulfil its remit: that, is, as Eva Figs put it, 'What matters is that the writer should shock into awareness, startle, engage the attention: above all that he should not engage in the trade of reassurance.'

We invite contributions that will help to negotiate some of these complexities, including from a specifically linguistic or stylistic perspective. They might include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Postmodern experimentalism / neo avant-gardism
- Avant-garde genre fiction – science-fiction, fantasy, horror
- Transgression, subversion, shock: the rise of 'transgressive fiction'
- Apocalypse and/or post-9/11 fiction
- Futurity, possible worlds and new dystopias/utopias
- Videogames into literature : 'ludic literature', ludology and gaming
- Multimodal literature, digital technologies, electronic 'code poetry', collaborative e-fiction
- Women's experimental writing and *nouvelle écriture féminine*
- Visual experimentation, typography and the page as experimental surface
- Commodification and globalization, experiment as resistance
- Movements, manifestoes and influence – Oulipo, Surrealism, Dada, Futurism

Although we do not wish to draw up a closed, let alone exhaustive list of writers whom we see as specifically representative of the above rubrics, and who would therefore appear as more desirable objects of analysis, the following will give a reliable illustration of the kinds of fiction we had in mind under the label "experimental":

- Christian Bök
- Mark Danielewski
- Chuck Palahniuk
- Lawrence Norfolk
- Charles Palliser
- Tom McCarthy
- Nicholas Royle (author of *Quilt*)
- Will Self
- Lydia Davis

We welcome interdisciplinary approaches, ranging across critical theory, literary and cultural studies, linguistics as well as other disciplines in the humanities. Contributors are advised to follow the journal's submission guidelines and stylesheet. The deadline for article submissions is 15 March 2014. Articles should be sent as attachments to: [wordandtext2011@gmail.com](mailto:wordandtext2011@gmail.com) or directly to the editors of the volume:

Julia Jordan (University College London), Laurent Milesi (Cardiff University, [senlpm@cf.ac.uk](mailto:senlpm@cf.ac.uk))

All submitted articles will be blind-refereed except when invited. Accepted articles will be returned for post-review revisions by 30 March 2014 and are expected back in their final version by 15 April 2014.