Interview

Jean-Cristophe Valtat

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RJH : We are very pleased to have Jean-Christophe Valtat here on campus as a lecturer today. He is the author of a number of books, two of which are recent releases: *03* and *Aurorarama*. *03* is the English translation of a novel that existed on the Gallimard *Série blanche* that has now been translated and has been available since June 2010, and then we have *Aurorarama*, which was a novel that Professor Valtat originally wrote in English, which has been out for three weeks today, appearing the 31st of August 2010 with Melville House Publishing.

Moving on to a few questions for Professor Valtat, who is also a professor of comparative literature at l'Université de Clermont-Ferrand: How does your research inform your writing experience, your experience as an author?

JCV : When I write in French, I really try to separate both activities; but the book in English [*Aurorarama*] is more related to my research, I think, especially in that it is a work on hallucinations and hallucination plays an important part in the English novel. So, there's more of my research in the book, even if it's not – of course – directly related, only somewhat.

CC : You mentioned that you work on hallucination and you've done a lot of work on nineteenth-century authors. Are there nineteenth-century authors that influence your work today that you are particularly indebted to?

JCV : The authors who have most influenced my work in this area would be mostly the writers who wrote adventure novels at the turn of the century. The arctic theme was a big theme at the turn of the century – so were adventure novels, airships were big, anarchy was big as well, and there were often anarchies in airships. Sometimes kind of have to connect the dots between such tendencies to get an idea of the era.

CC : What particularly interested you, when you wrote this? Were you trying to get a turn-of-the-century feel in *Aurorarama*? Why that period, and why snow, why white? Is there a connection between the blank slate of the white north and the idea of the dawn of a new century?

JCV : There is. First of all, the city of New Venice is an imaginary city in the Arctic. It is modeled on the world's fairs at the turn of the century, like the Chicago World's Fair, the St. Louis World's Fair, the San Francisco World's Fair, the Seattle World's Fair and, of course, the Paris World's Fair; so, it's typical turn-of-the-century architecture between neoclassical, iron-and-glass architecture

and *art nouveau* buildings as well. So, visually, it's very connected to that period for me. Regarding the North Pole and arctic feel, it was a big theme at the turn of the century because that was a time everyone felt the pole was going to be reached and there was a lot of speculation about what was going to be there, because the place was not really mapped. So, this was really a place where you could project your imagination and this is really a book on visualization, mapping the mental image. In Elaine Scarry's *Dreaming by the Book*, she explains that snow and ice allow the reader to have good mental images, precise mental images, because there is no background, and you can concentrate on the characters. So, there is a certain logic between what I am trying to do in terms of visualization and the fact that it is in a snowy or icy landscape.

RJH : Staying with the nineteenth century and the idea of anarchy that you mention, in an earlier conversation you noted that Mugrabin is something of a mix between Dostoyevsky and Rasputin. I find him to be a very important character and he reminds me of another radical Russian, Souvarine the revolutionary anarchist from Zola's *Germinal*; "Faut *qu'ça* saigne" seems to be his refrain – much like your character. Is this another source of influence? How do you explain this character?

JCV : As I was saying, the book is about themes at the turn of the century and anarchists – especially Russian anarchists – are omnipresent at this time. If you read *Paris* by Zola, a turn-of-the-century novel, you find a similar kind of character. So, Mugrabin is less influenced by *Germinal* than by the cliché figure of the Russian anarchist from this time period.

CC : You mentioned the visual, and I know you've made a film before. I was wondering if you have any plans for this book yet, or if you would like to eventually see this become a film because of the visual aspects you talk about?

JCV : Well, I'm a bit in two minds about this because you never want to see the real imagination confiscated by an industry and, therefore, for all readers who are going to read the book, the visualization would be determined by the movie. At the same time, yes, I'd be curious to see it as a movie, of course – but, not by me.

RJH : So, by whom, then, if not yourself?

JCV : One of my favorite movies is *Archangel* by Guy Maddin, a Canadian filmmaker. I would really like to see it done in that style, you know, like a white and black, silent movie. That would be the best way to do it for me.

CC : Interesting.

RJH : Returning to the characters, the main characters, you have Gabriel d'Allier and you also have Brentford Orsini. Both are very endearing characters, they're characters you're drawn to as a reader, but at the same time, they're very flawed characters. What can you tell us about these characters and even their pretensions as aristocrats?

JCV : The aristocrat – or *Arcticocrat* – theme is part of a joke in the book, because the Arcticocracy was founded by the people who founded the city, and they wanted to have something to pass on,

a kind of inheritance to their descendants, so they invented this kind of Arcticocracy, but I think this is what aristocracy is all about. It is a few people giving themselves the title and the myth that goes with the title. As characters, they are a bit different from adventure novel characters. They're answerable; there is more soul-searching, especially with Gabriel, than there would be in an adventure novel, I think.

RJH : I can definitely see that. So, with these two characters, you establish this myth, and there's also the mythical, anarchic text that begins the novel and that Brentford is seen working with, *A Blast on the Barren Land*, signed by the infamously rash Henry Hotspur. This is incorporated as part of the novel and becomes a dangerous, subversive text for Brentford to possess. What are the creative origins of this text? And, why set up your two main characters as anarchists?

JCV : Regarding the Hotspur text, it is a real text and the quotations come from the seventeenth-century English pamphlet. The title *A Blast on the Barren Land* is followed by *The Standard of True Community Advanc'd*. The political elements of this book exist because, of course, New Venice is a utopia. When I say utopia, it is very easy to imagine it becoming a dystopia. Anarchy would be a possible way of saving the utopia from becoming a dystopia; but, it is anarchy in the sense that people from different walks of life are getting together under pressure from the outside and trying to sort out the situation to where they can regain some control of this utopia.

RJH : That seems to sort of be Brentford's conclusion when he meets with the "real" anarchists aboard the battleship *Ariel*. That seems to be his idea of a utopia, really, different people from different walks of life, different ideologies coming together and learning to work together.

JCV : Of course, it has to be improvised. It's an improvisation because, in planning it, it becomes a dystopia.

RJH : It is this excess of planning that leads to a police state with the Gentlemen of the Night, the Council of Seven, and the different organizing groups. Speaking of dystopia, the book has a feel similar to that of *Fahrenheit 451*, by Ray Bradbury. This whole idea of books, the organization of Gabriel's library and the way the books are all rifled through – leaving Gabriel feeling violated – resonates with scenes from Bradbury (or even Truffaut's film version) where they're breaking off the fronts of the television sets to find the books. (Bradbury's) conclusion is to have leftist anarchists who are trying to preserve culture at the same time, much like Brentford. There is also this "Big Brother" *1984* feel, a George Orwellian nightmarish dystopia. Were any novels from this genre of dystopia literature influences for you in addition to the the turn-of-the-century adventure novels you've cited? Additionally, as the book is written in English, are there any influences from English-language literature?

JCV : Well, to answer first on the police state, I think that is more of a contemporary concern, you know, with the shrinking of private lives under the eyes of increasing technological surveillance. Paranoia of such can be used as a form of police control. Regarding the anarchy theme and other American influences, there are certainly a number of various American authors who have influenced me over the twenty years I have been working on the book. There are also many Russian ones. Russia and North America actually converge in a sort of hybrid imaginary land which in-

spired me for this Arctic setting, you know, with this French/English identity in the book.

CC : Speaking of the French/English identity, you chose to write in English. I wonder if there was a bit of a, kind of Beckett moment, where you chose to write in English because it forced you to create differently than in French.

JCV : I think the main reason is that the influences of the book are more American or English than French is; so, it's logical in a way to do this in English, because it's not the kind of book which would exist in France – which is strange because all these adventure novels are based on them. There, in France, they didn't quite make it into the canon. It was logical, as well, to use English to write about it. Personally, it's easier for me to write in English, because there is much less soul-searching than when I write in French. When I write in French, there's always the question, "Do I live up to this tradition that I have to carry as a French writer?" Plus, I have no excuses for the book not being better than it is, because I'm supposed to master the language. So it's a bit of a drag writing in French, actually. There is a lot of pressure that I put on myself. But, when I write in English I feel free from this tradition. I don't have this kind of pressure. I know there will be so much I can do. So it's liberating.

RJH : I noticed in the official dedication, you dedicate the book to Serge, with whom you say you invented this world of New Venice. If it's not too indiscrete of a question, how did this – you just said twenty years ago – story take form? How did you and this Serge person invent this world of New Venice?

JCV : We were just discussing something to do together (something maybe more like a film project at the start) and then I went to live in the States and so we wrote the first draft of the book together, just shipping the chapters back and forth between France and the United States. The second version I wrote for his birthday; it was a birthday present. We had fun doing this. So, when I decided I was going to do a third one, it was only normal that I dedicate this book to him.

CC : So, this is the third version of the book. Was anything from the first two published?

JCV : No, no, they were not good enough to be published.

CC : You have ideas, though, from those first two that have helped inform this world, right?

JCV : Yes, I think it gives a certain depth to the world-building because even if it's not really explained, there are instances where I mention things which happened before in the book, so it gives a little more substance to this current world.

CC : I want to ask you a question about something that's personal to all three of us. Obviously, Gabriel is a professor. And there are several descriptions of the professor's life in this book that are pretty negative. Is that a way to distance yourself from your own profession? Or are you informed by the life of a professor at all? Is that description formed by that?

JCV : What I was interested in with all that is that the academic world, which seems to be a really calm world of politeness, but is really seething with passions. So, from a professional standpoint, I

thought it was interesting for me to talk about this. But, I don't want to make it too personal either. I mean, it's kind of like a dream. When you dream, there are some elements that are from life, and then there are some elements that are from books. And then there are the pure workings of the imagination all come together. So there is a strong personal element, but it's a fantasy novel as well.

CC : Hallucinations, it would seem, are a theme in this novel. You have the dream machine… the dream incubator. And, then there's drugs as well. Are those, for you, different, or are they both means to a similar opening up of creativity and of imagination?

JCV : I think it's part of the Arctic as a theme, because the Arctic is always described as a place of hallucinations by the explorers. Also, the auroras sometimes are believed to be hallucinations. People seem to have delusions in the auroras and in Inuit folklore, it's rather common to describe the auroras as carrying visions. The book is really interested in this altered stage of consciousness, this stage between lucidity and dream; so, dreams and drugs bring one into that state as well.

CC : Can we ask you, if you don't mind talking about it, about the next book?

JCV : Yeah.

CC : You mentioned that it would be set in Paris. But could you tell us a little about, give us a little preview of that book?

JCV : Yeah, I suppose I can talk about it even if it's not finished yet, and it can, of course, evolve. The characters of the second book will be sent on a mission to help the Parisians overcome a series of terrible winters. It will be a Paris smothered in snow and ice. It will be the same atmosphere but with different settings.

CC : And will it be set in the same time period, the turn of the last century?

JCV : Yes, definitely. 1895, precisely, because there are so many things going on in Paris at that time you don't have to invent weird things or creative things because there's a whole lot of weird and creative things there. You just have to take from reality to write the book.

RJH : Turn-of-the-century Paris will be interesting as a place that goes against some of the tendencies in New Venice. Specifically, I am thinking about the role of women, who, especially since the 1871 Commune had an active role in sociopolitical life. Concerning your book, there is a possible critique or criticism involving women. You have the three main women being Phoebe, Stella, and then Lillian. I can imagine a feminist critique of these women saying that they are fairly flat and very much objectified. How would you respond to that criticism?

JCV : Well, I think that the book is told from the point of view of men; so, there is always more, for them, in a woman than just a woman – there's also the myth of the woman. They're in love as much with the myth as with the real woman. I think it comes from the point of view, because by the end of the book, there are also feminist elements with girls called the "suffragettes," who are part of the revolution at the end of the book.

RJH : Yes, and who are led by Lillian, who I think is the strongest female character. I think Stella was also very strong – but Lillian, I think that she could lead a revolutionary group. Will we see her again in the sequel?

JCV : Yes – mainly because I think my public demands it. She's a character to whom readers really responded.

CC : We'll look forward to that – and to seeing Paris covered in snow. Thank you for your visit and for taking time to give us an interview.

JCV : Thank you.