Is Sollers Still Avant-Garde?
The New Avant-Garde City and
Philippe Sollers' *Un Vrai Roman*

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Philippe Sollers' semi-autobiographical novel *Un Vrai Roman; Mémoires*, published in 2007, recounts the important incidents in the life of the author, whose well-known tenure as leader of the avant-garde journal *Tel Quel* from 1960-1982, helped establish his reputation as one of France's important contemporary intellectuals.[1] After experimenting with style in novels such as *Nombres* (1966), *Lois* (1972), *H* (1973), and *Paradis* (1981), where Sollers employed radical techniques such as total absence of punctuation and capital letters,[2] his fictional literary style changed in 1983 with the publication of *Femmes*. This novel, like many subsequent ones including *Un Vrai Roman,* weaves a semi-autobiographical storyline with political and social commentary. Although there are examples of experimental techniques in these later novels (which exhibit cut-up or fishbowling techniques, where the chapters and paragraphs do not advance in chronological order, but seem to be "cut-up" and randomly arranged), on the whole, the form of Sollers' later works becomes more traditional and more "readable."[3]

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[1] Sollers certainly sees himself this way. He praises himself for rectifying (via *TQ* and *Infini*) to Sade, Artaud, Bataille, Ponge, Celine, Dante (with a modern translation), and providing new perspectives to the writings of Joyce, Proust, Claudel, Ezra Pound, Lautréamont and Rimbaud, among others (see pages 153-154). Because of this attitude, and other controversial statements and behaviors, there is some controversy surrounding Sollers' reputation as a serious intellectual. But his prolific output, fiction as well as cultural and political critique, and his presence in the media, all attest to his status as a *public* intellectual in France.

[2] See *Paradis* and *H*.

[3] Roland Barthes, on page 69 of his short analytical book *Sollers Ecrivain*, explains how one must approach novels like *H* and *Lois* with openness, with a certain "étonnement" or surprise, instead of the resistance with which many critics read such novels, resulting in their being labeled "illisible".

Despite the more conventional form, it is the aim of this essay to argue that the content of *Un Vrai Roman* is avant-garde. Many of the theories and ideas in this novel elaborate upon some of the most important avant-garde concepts. The city, one of the more important themes of the novel, is a prime example of a typically avant-garde theme that Sollers expounds and develops.

Because of Sollers' well known connection to *Tel Quel* and avant-garde history, and because of the urban, avant-garde concepts that permeate the novel, can we consider *Un Vrai Roman* a continuation of avant-garde history, despite its dearth of experimental techniques? It is the aim of this essay to examine the avant-garde features of *Un Vrai Romain*, specifically those connected to Surrealism and Situationism, in order to determine whether Sollers uses these techniques to develop an overarching urban philosophy, and to conclude whether this urbanism, and whether the novel as a whole, can be considered avant-garde.

One example of an avant-garde feature in *Un Vrai Roman* is the Surrealist concept of the *flâneur*, the perceptive individual who, by aimlessly walking through the city streets, transforms a commonplace experience into an adventure. Louis Aragon and André Breton, two of the more important members of the Parisian Surrealist group, develop this idea in their respective works *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926) and *Nadja* (1928), both of which, in semi-autobiographical fashion, recount the experiences of a young man perambulating through Paris and attempting to ignore social conventions in an effort to experience the city in a more free and liberated way.

Sollers brings the *flâneur* concept back to life in two ways. The first way of re-erecting this concept is metaphoric. The narrator wanders through the memories of his life, drifts through the pages of the book, and digresses through the narration, all of which reinforce the rambling nature of the *flâneur*. The second way of re-establishing the *flâneur* is by directly emulating his actions. Sollers' narrator, throughout the book, actually walks the streets of Paris. But these streets are

eighty years older than when the Surrealists first walked them. The narrator's jaunts, which echo

the earlier strolls of the Surrealist group, serve to emphasize the passing of time and the

historical nature of the movement.

   There are many references to Surrealism's history and its ongoing dialogue with the present.

For example, Sollers, on his wedding day in 1967, randomly encounters Aragon at a restaurant,

over forty years after the publication of *Le Paysan de Paris*. Sollers writes:

> Comme la vie peut être surréaliste, on se marie discrètement à la mairie du Ve
> arrondissement, devant un maire ahuri qu'on ne veuille pas porter d'alliances et
> qu'on soit sans cesse au bord du fou rire. On va ensuite déjeuner, avec la sœur
> violoniste de Julia et nos deux témoins, à La Bûcherie, sur les quais, en face de
> Notre-Dame, à côté de Shakespeare and Co. Mais quel est donc ce vieux couple
> morose, deux tables plus loin ? Non, c'est trop drôle : Aragon et Elsa Triolet.
> Intersigne, mauvais œil, exorcisme?[4]

In this passage, Sollers gives a prime example of the Surrealist technique of *hasard objectif*,

which is the idea that seemingly unrelated events or objects can be connected and draw meaning

from one another. The "magic" of the aforementioned experience, which entailed the refusal to

wear wedding bands, the suppressed mirth during the ceremony, the denigration of bourgeois

ritual, and the coincidence of seeing one of the more important French Surrealist writers at the

celebratory meal, whose wife was, as was his own wife, from Eastern European and formerly

communist country, was an ideal example of *hasard objectif*.

   In addition to employing the surrealist concepts of *flâneur* and *hasard objectif*, Sollers

appropriates techniques from another important avant-garde group. The Situationists were a

band of artistic and social theorists influenced by Marxism and led by Guy Debord, who helped

formed the Situationist International in 1957. The Situationists' wanted to improve the life of the

city dweller in the face of an ever more encompassing consumer society, and they came up with

techniques that the city dweller could act out in his or her everyday life that would make living

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[4] Sollers, *Un Vrai…,* 101-102.

more meaningful. One of these techniques involved creating or orchestrating a "situation" in the city, which meant that the urbanite, instead of moving through the city spaces numb and unaware of his or her surroundings, would plan to walk through the city, alone or with others, in such a way that would subvert the intended use and meaning of city spaces. These walks were called *dérives*, or drifts, and typified the Situationist philosophy of undermining conventional social norms and specifically, consumer culture.   Debord and the Situationists believed that the desires and needs created by the rise in importance of consumer culture resulted in a blurring between reality and what they termed the *spectacle*, or the false projection of reality due to the confusing and misguided visions of a society dictated by capitalist consumerism.

Sollers is also aware of this division between real and false. For instance, Sollers writes that his books, contrary to the social world, embody meaningful and important experiences. He writes, "La vraie vie, réellement vécue, c'est le livre, car l'autre, la sociale, est toujours un enfer plus ou moins brûlant."[5]

Not only are books more genuine than the reality constructed by the *spectacle*, according to Sollers, they also diminish the power of the *spectacle*. For Sollers, who has published thirteen novels to date, with a new one in 2009, the more books published the better one's chances of resistance. He likens a book to a fish in a stream: in order to avoid drowning in the currents and cataracts of the market, his books have to swim and navigate the treacherous waters. The more "fish" there are, the greater the chance that art can resist the *spectacle* and shape its own destiny.[6] And if ever there is doubt about this, the narrator adamantly advises: "Réponse tous les matins, très tôt, la plume à la main, sur la page."[7]

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[5] Sollers, *Un Vrai...,* 221.
[6] Sollers, *Un Vrai...,* 156-157.
[7] Sollers, *Un Vrai...,* 146.

Sollers emphasizes this theme of textual proliferation in order to develop the idea that multiple texts, multiple voices, and multiple meanings all contribute to a breaking down of the hegemonic power of the *spectacle*. The various voices in the narration (shifting from First Person, to Second Person, to Third Person) are part of this multiplication of meaning. Instances of metatext, or writing that refers to the writing itself, and of passages where the text turns to speak to the author, renders *Un Vrai Roman* more complex and its meaning more evasive. If the spectacle dictates life by imposing certain ideas and meanings on people and objects, then Sollers' book is an attempt to punctuate this process and make classification, interpretation, and definition more difficult.

One last area where Sollers applies this multiplication method is personal identity. In the chapter entitled "Extention," Sollers explains how the narrator has many different identities, which he calls *IRM*, or *Identités Rapprochées Multiples*.[8] Sollers himself exhibits this phenomenon. His penname, "Sollers," represents his intellectual persona, which is separate from his paternal name "Joyaux," which is also different from "Monsieur Kristeva," a name with which his wife's students address him.[9] To make matters more complicated, Sollers' *IRM* are interspersed with the narrator's *IRM*, creating constant uncertainty concerning the identity of the speaker.

Now that we have examined how the novel engages with Surrealist and Situationist ideas, we will focus on how Sollers' conceptions of them differ from the conceptions of these avant-garde groups he references. The most important difference between Surrealist theories and Sollers' take on them is the notion of time and its progression. By referencing the movement and expressing nostalgia for the past, a sentiment categorically rejected by the Surrealists, Sollers

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[8] Sollers, *Un Vrai...,* 137-138.
[9] Sollers, *Un Vrai...,* 144.

sets himself apart. In both Breton's and Aragon's narratives mentioned above, there is not one instance of looking to past authors or events. Their stories focus on the present and living life by the moment, which is why they embraced ideas like *flâneur* and *hasard objectif*, both of which enhanced the experience of living for the "now." Sollers, however, uses these devices to bring meaning to the present as well as the past. Sollers sees the city as a time-space continuum, and unlike previous avant-gardistes, recognizes the significance of history and its relation to the present and future.

In his conception of time, Sollers resembles more the Situationists. They had had already begun to understand the importance of the past in formulating methods for improving the present.[10] But Sollers differs from the Situationists too. Although both Debord and Sollers provide their own methods for resisting the power of the *spectacle*, and both agree that escape from it is difficult if not impossible, Sollers recognizes the practicality of certain things in contemporary culture, like technology, especially if he can use it in his favor.

Sollers' theory about the *IRM* and the proliferation of identities, contrary to Debord's ideas, do not aim to destroy the *spectacle* and recuperate a more real and meaningful world.   Sollers acknowledges the differences between the real and the unreal, and his multiple identities attempt to compete with the *spectacle*, not destroy it.

Jean Baudrillard, a French postmodern theorist, can shed some light on Sollers' interpretation of reality and the falseness. Baudrillard explores theories about reality and non-reality, true and false, in his 1976 book *Simulacres et Simulation*. Baudrillard believes that in the modern world, the proliferation of signs and symbols (contemporary media such as television is one of many examples) complicates one's understanding of reality. The rise and multiplication of these

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[10] See Sadler's discussion of Situationist ideas on urban living and architecture, particularly where he discusses Situationist admiration for city spaces like the 1786 Ledoux Rotunda at the Place de Stalingrade (71-72).

images and signs, or *simulacra*, eventually results in a world where the *simulacra* completely

replace the real things to which they once referred. The result is a kind of parallel universe, or

hyperreality, comprised solely of *simulacara*, or copies of the real.[11]

Whereas Debord would hope that eventually reality could be recovered and life could again

become meaningful, both Sollers and Baudrillard accept the difficulties of *hyperreality* and

consumer society and advocate using it to one's own advantage.

Perhaps one reason for this evolution on ideas about the *spectacle*, reality, and mimesis, is due

to changes in technologies of reproduction. Sollers' account on Myspace[12], an online social

networking site that allows people to present themselves, their interests, their pictures, their

friends and family, and almost anything else they wish to display in cyberspace, is a tangible

example of how new technology and artistic production affect each other. Baudrillard also has

several Myspace accounts, which are currently maintained despite his death in March of 2007.[13]

For Baudrillard, the images (or *simulacra*) are more real than the now deceased Baurdriallrd

himself; the *simulacra* have eclipsed the real, just as he predicted.

Baudrillard and Sollers are not the only intellectuals to experiment with Myspace. Stephanie

Rosenbloom studied a similar phenomenon among American university professors. In a March

2007 *New York Times* article, entitled "The Professor as Open Book," she explains that many

professors are turning to Myspace in order to connect with their students. She describes how a

professor's Myspace page becomes her cyber-office, connecting her with students, colleagues,

and anyone else interested. Rosenbloom concludes that such an online teacher-student

relationship is not much different than the one that traditionally took place in a professor's office

and that the Myspace "office" is remarkably "real" in its resemblance of the traditional

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[11] Baudrillard, .
[12] http://www.myspace.com/philippe_sollers.
[13] Multiple accounts for Jean Baudrillard can be found by searching MySpace for that name.

professorial office space; both display the professor's books, pictures, and other personal

information.[14]

One of the professors interviewed in Rosenbloom's article, William Irwin, compares Myspace

to the Las Vegas of on-line networking sites. Irwin, who terminated his Myspace page, which

had boasted some ten thousand friends, says: "There were all kinds of people I was meeting. It

was kind of an exciting alternate universe to be a part of."[15] The comparison between Msypace

and Las Vegas, considered by theorist Friedrich Jameson as the quintessential postmodern city,

alludes to the exciting, eclectic, and postmodern nature of these online networking sites.

The Las Vegas-like feel of Myspace and its appropriation by such avant-garde writers as

Sollers suggests that the avant-garde's traditional focus on the city continues to be important. It

also proves that the avant-garde continues to react and adapt to the production of new

technologies, which in effect causes the concept of the city to evolve. Theorist Dietrich

Scheunemann would agree. For Scheunemann, avant-garde artists are those who react to new

technologies of reproduction.   According to Scheunemann, the avant-garde was not only artistic

experimentation (as Renato Poggioli claims in his seminal work *Theory of the Avant-garde*,

1962), or an attack on the institution of art (as Peter Burger claims in his work of the same name,

1974), it was (and continues to be) an artistic reaction to the development of new technologies of

reproduction.

Sollers' Myspace is one example of such an artistic reaction to innovative technology. Instead

of moving about through a real urban space, internet *flâneurs* like Sollers can move through

cyberspace, finding the intellectual connections they seek, and creating the *hasard objectif*

experiences so important to previous avant-garde groups. Myspace is just one example of how

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[14] Rosenbloom.
[15] Rosenbloom.

city spaces have remained more or less the same, but how technology continues to inspire artists to employ innovative aesthetic techniques to create different urban landscapes.

We can conclude that *Un Vrai Roman* illustrates an evolved avant-garde urban philosophy that reflects the proliferation of new technologies such as the internet. *Un Vrai Roman* belongs to the avant-garde movement because of its experimental style, its dialogue with recognized avant-garde works and theories, its own self-laudatory proclamations, its author's reputation, and especially because of its treatment of the city and its author's original response to new technologies of reproduction.

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