'LEAV(ING) ROOM FOR THE READER': THE AGENCY OF CHARACTERS WHO READ IN THE FICTION OF ALI SMITH
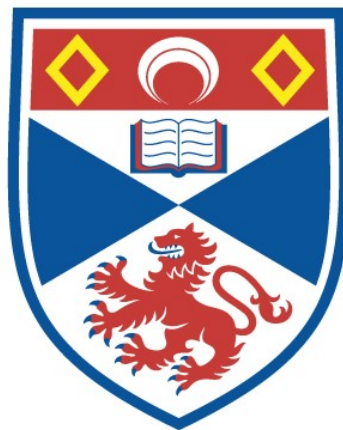
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'Leav(ing) Room for the Reader': The Agency of Characters who Read in the Fiction of Ali Smith

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Abstract

This thesis argues that characters who read are a recurring preoccupation in the work of contemporary Scottish writer Ali Smith, who foregrounds the act of reading as equal to, if not more important than, the act of writing itself. It begins by examining aspects of Smith's own personal history as a reader, and establishing a critical framework for understanding this identification through two reader-response perspectives: Louise Rosenblatt's *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* and Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading*. These ideas counterpoint portrayals of reading as a passive and subordinate activity, as propagated by schools of thinking such as the New Criticism, and transform it into one of agency and participation. The three following chapters further evidence this re-conceptualisation of the reader's role, drawing on different critical perspectives to examine more nuanced aspects of Smith's representation. Firstly, 'The Embodied Reader' considers the – often explosive - physicality of the reader's experience in the novels *Like* and *Autumn*, drawing on three key essays by the feminist critic Hélène Cixous: 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays', 'Difficult Joys' and 'Coming to Writing', which similarly conceptualise reading and writing as visceral activities driven by bodily impulses and desires. Secondly, 'The Dialogic Reader' focusses on readers' narrative interventions in *Artful* and several of Smith's short stories, drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism in his essay 'Discourse in the novel' to suggest that the disruptive voice of the reader works to challenge the prevailing authority of the text. Thirdly, 'The Reader as a Spectator' considers characters who engage with contemporary visual technologies as part of a broader conception of who might be considered a 'reader' in Smith's work. Supported by critical perspectives such as Laura Mulvey's *Death 24x a Second* and Mary Ann Doane's *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, this chapter argues that the adolescent protagonists of *The Accidental* and *How to be both* are encouraged to take similar control over what they see, as with what they read.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

This thesis is concerned with the ways in which the contemporary Scottish writer Ali Smith foregrounds readers as characters in her novels and short stories, depicting them as active and participatory agents in the generation of textual meaning. Notable examples of such characters include Amy and Ash in her first novel *Like*, Melissa in the short story 'Text for the day', the un-named narrator in the part-fiction, part-lecture series *Artful*, and her semi-biographical account of the poet Olive Fraser in *Shire*.[1] Beyond these examples, references to the act of reading can be found throughout Smith's fiction, demonstrating the significance she places on this activity and her desire to present it as equal to, if not more important than, the act of writing itself. Such depictions challenge the portrayal of readers as passive recipients who are subordinate to authorial control, as had become popular within literary criticism in the middle decades of the twentieth century, and transform them into engaged participants who interrupt, question and rewrite the texts they encounter. As will be explored throughout this study, the personal and even wider social implications of this transformation of the reader's role are highly significant in Smith's work, as characters discover increased agency not only in their encounters with books, but in their lives beyond the texts they read. This reflects her belief that: 'We don't just read books, we read everything. We need to be able to read character and read a situation to be able to survive'.[2] Consequently, it becomes clear through the course of Smith's narratives that her characters might act in the real world as they act towards books: with a more

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[1] Ali Smith, *Like* (London: Virago, 1998); 'Text for the day' in *Free Love and other stories* (London: Virago, 1995); *Artful* (London: Penguin, 2013); and *Shire* (Suffolk: Full Circle Editions, 2013).
[2] Interview transcript, 'Open the Door 2019 – Interview between Ali Smith and Jess Orr', 27 August 2019, 2019-89, Glasgow Women's Library Archive, Glasgow, Scotland.

scrutinising eye, with defiance against authority, and with a willingness to challenge and reimagine the discourses surrounding them.

It is clear from Smith's oeuvre that as an author she prefers to diminish her own status so as to foreground the role that the reader might play in interpreting her work. As Afrika Akbar has suggested:

> Smith has always believed that an author must remain as anonymous as possible or risk impeding the fiction for her readers. Too much biographical information 'diminishes the thing that you do' she says. 'You have to remain invisible.'[3]

Whilst the writer is always in the background of a text, Smith suggests, they should not become an over-bearing presence that 'impedes' the reader's involvement, weighing down its meaning with their own concerns and thus excluding alternatives. Elsewhere, she elaborates on the strategies that can be used to increase the reader's agency and diminish her own authority as a writer:

> The story, generating story, includes the reader at all points, because the reader will generate his or her own story, as he or she reads alongside, so exactly that. So I suppose one of the things that's most important but almost impossible to do . . . is to leave room for the reader.[4]

This testimony from an interview with Gillian Beer emphasises Smith's intention to carve out space for the reader to bring their own perspective to the text, without a pre-determined meaning being imposed upon them. One strategy is to include gaps or

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[3] Afrika Akbar, 'Conversations with the undead: Ali Smith gives the lecture a haunting twist' in *The Independent*, 26 October 2012, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/conversations-with-the-undead-ali-smith-gives-the-lecture-a-haunting-twist-8226873.html> (accessed 13 June 2016).

[4] Gillian Beer and Ali Smith, 'Gillian Beer interviews Ali Smith' in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 146.

ambiguities that the recipient must actively use their imagination to fill, or to which they might relate their own life experience.[5] The idea of relating the text to one's own personal experience is an important aspect of Smith's conception of the reader, which will be dealt with more fully in relation to the ideas of American critic Louise Rosenblatt later in this introduction. Rosenblatt, along with other reader-response critics such as David Bleich and Norman Holland, reacted strongly against movements such as the New Criticism, which suggested that personal associations and emotions should be kept out of literary interpretation. Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, in their volume *Formalist Criticism and Reader-Response Theory*, provide a useful introduction to this school of thinking, in which the text is seen as a stable, complete and self-contained entity, with universalised meaning and no need for reader interference.[6] Wimsatt and Beardsley's 1949 essay 'The Affective Fallacy' has been frequently cited as the epitome of this perspective, where the reception of a piece of work is disparaged as impressionistic and relativist.[7] Smith, on the other hand, makes clear her belief that stories are not fixed but evolving entities that generate meaning again and again each time they are read. As such, the reader's response and contribution to the narrative is crucial, with some responsibility falling on the author to create an environment in which the reader is able to play this participatory role. It is through her own efforts to do so, this thesis argues, that Smith creates more open and inclusive fictional spaces, in which

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[5] In her Goldsmith's Prize Lecture, Smith put this idea in the following way:
> 'say you decide, like Henry James or Georges Perec, to cut a Barbara Hepworth-like hole in your novel either by leaving something unsaid, like James so often does, leaving readers with a hole at the centre of their reading, then that unsaid thing that pierces the work will also pierce the reader' ('The novel in the age of Trump' in *New Statesman*, 15 October 2017, <https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/books/2017/10/ali-smith-s-goldsmiths-prize-lecture-novel-age-trump> [accessed 5 December 2017]).

[6] Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack eds., *Formalist Criticism and Reader-Response Theory* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave, 2002), 16.

[7] See J. P. Tompkins' introduction to *Reader-Response Criticism* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins UP, 1980), ix; Davis and Womack, *Formalist Criticism*, 20; and Lynne Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading* (London and New York: Arnold, 1997), 5.

readers play a central part in the generation of narrative meaning and its application to the circumstances of their own lives.

Despite the text-centred definition of reading that my opening paragraphs suggest, it is important to note that this thesis takes a broader perspective of what it means to be a 'reader' in Smith's work than someone who sits down with a novel or collection of poetry. At its most basic level, a reader is 'a person who reads written matter',[8] and certainly the interactions that take place between characters and physical books are an important focus of my analysis. My first chapter on 'The Embodied Reader' takes as its central concern the visceral interactions between characters' bodies and their bookshelves, revealing how fraught with emotion these relationships can be. By depicting the physical violence or all-consuming passion that readers feel for their books, Smith demonstrates how powerful these objects can be in stimulating the subject's deepest fears and desires, and how important it is for them to release these emotions rather than suppress them. In addition to this physical experience of the reader towards the book-object, Smith's fiction also frequently includes scenes of oral storytelling, as characters tell each other tales, and these provide ample opportunities for recipients to become more active as they respond to what they have heard. As such, this thesis also considers the reader to be a listener or responder to spoken narrative, which is particularly important in my second chapter on 'The Dialogic Reader', where my examination is concerned with the way that Smith generates reciprocal dialogues between storytellers and their listeners. By giving her characters opportunities to verbally respond to and challenge the narratives they encounter, Smith demonstrates the endless malleability of the story form, and the important role of the reader – or

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[8] 'reader, n.', *OED Online*, Oxford UP, 2018
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/158857?redirectedFrom=reader> (accessed 30 January 2018).

listener – to influence its course. In my third chapter, the definition of who might be considered a reader in Smith's work is extended even further, as it becomes clear that there are distinct similarities between her representation of characters who read and those who watch. In this chapter, I am interested in the experience of the contemporary spectator, as I explore the interactions characters have with the visual narratives found in film and video. In its wider sense, a reader might be described as someone who not only reads books, but 'who studies, analyses, or interprets' all kinds of media, and it is this broader conception that has stimulated my interest in the spectator in Smith's work.[9] Support for the idea that a consideration of the spectator is relevant and useful within a discussion about the reader can be found in Lynne Pearce's *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, which insists that scholarship in both areas has distanced and subordinated the receiving subject to an unhelpful extreme. Pearce uses theorists such as Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane, both of whose ideas I draw upon in my chapter on 'The Reader as a Spectator', to argue that, if anything, film theorists have been forerunners to reader-response criticism in challenging 'dominant reader/viewer positionings' and establishing a more interactive dynamic between object and subject.[10] This broader notion of what it means to be a reader is especially important as I consider characters whose lives are saturated by technology and who have become somewhat dulled by the images they see through screens and lenses. In these instances, Smith's desire increases for characters to overcome their subordination to the camera's gaze and embark on a trajectory of revelation and personal transformation in response to what they see. Moreover, Smith's portrayal of characters as readers, listeners, and spectators – none of which are inherently active roles – deals with a notion of 'reading' which is

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[9] Ibid.
[10] See Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, 12.

not restricted to books alone, but explores how individuals engage with and respond to narratives in a variety of different ways. It is for this reason that I have chosen to draw from a variety of critical perspectives in my analysis, including essays by Hélène Cixous and Mikhail Bakhtin. Whilst the ideas of reader-response critics Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser provide a useful springboard in this introductory chapter, further chapters have required me to seek out more nuanced perspectives that take other aspects of reader behaviour into consideration.

An examination of the reader in Smith's work is timely and necessary as it is a recurring preoccupation throughout her writing, and one which has so far received little scholarly attention. Ian Blyth includes some mention of the character Amy's inability to read in the novel *Like*, but his primary argument centres on the use of the word 'like' to draw comparisons rather than on further analysing this predicament.[11] Mark Currie provides a more in-depth analysis of the reader's experience in *There but for the*,[12] arguing that the novel's purpose is 'to stage the process of reading against the process of writing'.[13] This is interesting in so far as it recognises that the temporality of reading in Smith's work is often presented as distinct to that of writing; however, this argument is based on Currie's own experience of reading the novel, rather than Smith's characterisation of the reader within it.[14] The depiction of the reader *within* her work, I argue, is a crucial element for understanding how this figure might respond to a text, and one which has yet to be properly considered. Both the aforementioned articles are published in the only critical publication to date which focuses solely on Smith's writing,

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[11] Ian Blyth, 'Simile and Similarity in Ali Smith's *Like*' in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 23-34.

[12] Ali Smith, *There but for the* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2011).

[13] Mark Currie, 'Ali Smith and the Philosophy of Grammar' in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 53.

[14] For more on this idea, see my discussion of the temporality of reading later in this introduction in relation to the ideas of Wolfgang Iser.

with many of its chapters centring on thematic considerations such as her use of the spectre or depiction of queer relationships. As such, there is scope for exploring more nuanced aspects of her writing strategy, in particular her self-reflexive interest in the interactions between authors, readers and texts, which has so far been limited.

My focus on the figure of the reader in Smith's work is also pertinent given the growing scholarly interest in both contemporary and historical reading habits. Whilst reader-response theories initially came to prominence as a field of academic discourse in the 1970s, a number of projects have more recently been undertaken to gather data about the experiences of readers, most notably the Reading Experience Database (RED), which was launched by the Open University in 1996.[15] Other recent publications on the subject of readers have included *A Cultural History of Reading*, *Everyday Readers: Reading and Popular Culture*, and *The History of Reading*.[16] These examples adopt various approaches to studying the experiences of readers, from gathering statistical data about reading communities to studying the way that reading habits and practices change as we get older. J. A. Appleyard's *Becoming a Reader*, theorises five stages that young readers go through, drawing from psychoanalytical research on childhood development, which is interesting to consider in relation to Smith's younger characters who read.[17] *The History of Reading*, on the other hand, includes an entire section on specific reading communities, as well as Danielle Fuller's study of mass reading events such as Canada Reads.[18] These examples take a more empirical approach to gathering data about

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[15] Simon Eliot, 'The Reading Experience Database; or what are we to do about the history of reading?', *The Reading Experience Database (RED) 1450-1945*, The Open University, 1996 <http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/RED/redback.htm> (accessed 30 January 2018).
[16] Gabrielle Watling and Sara E. Quay eds., *A Cultural History of Reading* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2008); Ian Collinson, *Readers: Reading and Popular Culture* (London: Equinox, 2009); and Shafquat Towheed, Rosalind Crone and Katie Halsey eds., *The History of Reading* (London and New York: Routledge, 2011).
[17] J. A. Appleyard, *Becoming a Reader* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991).
[18] See Towheed et al., *The History of Reading*, 411-426.

reading habits and practices, which has become popular in the last twenty years, possibly as a result of criticism that reader-response theories needed more quantifiable data about real-life readers to support their hypotheses. These studies have also been influenced by an increasingly visible reading culture in the UK, with a surge of literary events and festivals in recent years, and the popularity of book groups as well as online platforms for reading communities to discuss their ideas.[19] In 2011, Tom Tivnan and Laura Richards estimated there were at least 250 book festivals in the UK, the majority of which were under 30 years old, whilst in 2015, David Lodge suggested that this number had risen to 350 in the UK and Ireland together.[20] Towheed, Crone and Halsey have argued that digital technologies have offered greater possibilities than ever before to envision reading culture as participatory and interactive.[21]

My contribution to this field, which will primarily consist of textual analysis, aims not to scrutinise the hypothetical reader of Smith's novels and short stories, but to examine how the figure of the reader is presented *within* these creative works. In accordance with recent studies which gesture towards a more active and participatory reading public, I argue that Smith depicts the contemporary reader as lively and agentic, which means that they have a voice, and are capable of impacting and influencing the text in new and surprising ways. Smith's readers are also critically involved in this activity, unafraid to challenge aspects of the text they disagree with or find problematic, and are willing to adopt a similar stance in relation to other aspects of their lives. Frequently in Smith's texts, characters who read books are also more likely to question

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[19] The most relevant example of a thriving online reading community is 'goodreads': https://www.goodreads.com/, a social networking site for book enthusiasts to share their reading activities and find recommendations.

[20] See Tom Tivnan and Laura Richards, 'Business focus: literary festivals' in *The Bookseller*, 18 March 2011, and David Lodge 'Oxford Literary Festival: the rise of literary festivals' in *Financial Times*, 6 March 2015 <https://www.ft.com/content/cc65e1ba-c2ab-11e4-ad89-00144feab7de> (accessed 10 December 2018).

[21] Towheed et al., *The History of Reading*, 6-8.

social norms and challenge hegemonic discourses in the wider world, which they find to be socially divisive and oppressive. In this regard, the figure of the reader within Smith's work is also representative of a wider sense of democratic participation and resistance to authority.

Smith also draws attention to other fiction writers she admires who have given the figure of the reader prominence. The Scottish writer Muriel Spark, for example, imagines that dead authors come back at night to tamper with their books, sometimes changing entire paragraphs so that readers' impressions are constantly shifting.[22] The secret thrill experienced by the reader at the thought that their books, like human subjects, are somehow alive and subject to alteration, is a central focus of her poem, 'Author's Ghosts'. In an essay written for Spark's centenary, Smith discusses this poem, concluding that: 'Books make futures – even their own futures – negotiable. Long-ago-finished books are themselves still strangely open, changeable, adaptable'.[23] Smith is inspired by Spark's playful depiction of books as open to change and reinterpretation, even after many years of being finished. The idea of authors as ghostly presences which linger around to challenge and surprise their readers can be found in texts such as *Artful*, where Smith creates a deceased academic who returns to debate with the current readers of her work. Italo Calvino's novel *If on a winter's night a traveller* is another inspiration for Smith's experimental lecture-series, which concerns itself with the mysterious disappearance of the author, perplexing Calvino's reader-narrator.[24] This text has resonances of Roland Barthes' 'Death of the Author',[25] as the reader-narrator learns to

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[22] See Ali Smith, '"Vital, witty, formidably blithe": Ali Smith on Muriel Spark at 100' in *The Guardian*, 29 January 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/29/ali-smith-on-muriel-spark-at-100> (accessed 14 November 2018).
[23] Ibid.
[24] Italo Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveller* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1981).
[25] See Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' in *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (London and New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001): 1466-1475.

overcome the author's mysterious absence, and assert their own ideas in its place. Similarly, in *Artful*, Smith gradually removes the author's ghostly interruptions, and gives the current reader prominence in making meaning from the text. Further analysis of this can be found in my chapter on 'The Dialogic Reader'. Also significant to Smith's thinking has been the work of Virginia Woolf, especially ideas found in texts such as *A Room of One's Own* and *The Common Reader*.[26] As will be seen later in this introduction, Smith's early disapproval of Woolf was later overturned on discovery that she, too, celebrated the everyday reader who 'reads for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others'.[27] In this way, Woolf, like Smith, was concerned to destabilise the hierarchy between the professional critic and the casual reader, by giving increased attention to this latter figure. As will also be discussed in more detail, Woolf's thoughts on this topic have influenced Smith's belief in the democratising effects of the reader's voice, and her concern to acknowledge or involve this figure make a significant contribution to my discussion.

The remainder of this introduction is split into two main sections: the first outlines Smith's identification as a reader herself, considering biographical details that explain why this subject position has become such a central preoccupation in her work. As has already been touched upon, the relation of what is read to one's own life experience is a crucial aspect of the meaning-making process, and as such, a consideration of Smith's own personal development seems appropriate. The second section provides a critical framework for better understanding Smith's treatment of the reading figure in her writing, interrogating two perspectives from the reader-response school of criticism, which appear to align most closely with her depictions. Louise Rosenblatt's *The Reader,*

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[26] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Penguin, 2002) and *The Common Reader: First Series* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984).
[27] Woolf, *The Common Reader*, 1.

The Text, The Poem and German theorist Wolfgang Iser's *The Act of Reading* both envision the reader as an important and yet unacknowledged agent in the creation of textual meaning, and provide an important foundation for my argument that will be developed in later chapters.[28] These critical perspectives played an important role in challenging the text and author-centred perspectives that preceded them, which assumed that meaning was held within the text itself and disregarded any interest in reader response. J. P. Tompkins argues that many critics in the mid-twentieth century were fearful of losing control of the definitive meaning of the text, and so refused to allow its reception to take a more prominent role.[29] As such, Rosenblatt and Iser are an appropriate starting point when considering the prominence of the reader in Smith's work. Rosenblatt, in particular, has been described as one of the earliest voices to advocate for the role that readers play in making meaning, in her landmark 1938 publication *Literature as Exploration*.[30] In the chapters that follow, critical theorists such as Hélène Cixous and Mikhail Bakhtin become indispensable to my analysis, in particular Cixous' emphasis on the bodily response of readers towards their books, and Bakhtin's interest in the interactive dialogues that are created between reader, author and text.[31] In my third chapter on 'The Reader as a Spectator', I draw on the work of contemporary film critics such as Laura Mulvey, Mary Ann Doane and Norman Taylor to inform my analysis of how the contemporary spectator in Smith's work is encouraged

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[28] Louise M. Rosenblatt, *The Reader, the Text, the Poem* (London and Amsterdam: South Illinois UP, 1978); and Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading* (London and Henley: Routledge and Megan Paul, 1978).
[29] See Tompkins, *Reader-Response Criticism*, xxiv.
[30] See Elizabeth A. Flynn, 'Louise Rosenblatt and The Ethical Turn in Literary Theory' in *College English* 70:1, 2007: 52.
[31] Cixous' essays which have been most useful to me in this thesis are 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays' in *The Newly Born Woman* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1986), 63-132; 'Difficult Joys' in *The Body and the Text: Hélène Cixous, Reading and Teaching* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990), 5-30; and 'Coming to Writing' in *Coming to Writing and Other Essays* (Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 1991), 1-58. For Bakhtin, I have chosen to focus on his landmark essay 'Discourse in the novel' in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981): 261-354.

to assert agency over what they see as with what they read. Whilst the work of reader-response critics provides a useful springboard in this introductory chapter, these more nuanced depictions of the reader in Smith's work have required me to seek out more varied perspectives that take these aspects into consideration.

The next task of this introduction is to present evidence of Smith's own identification as a reader, both from interviews and talks she has given in recent years, and from examples of her own writing that make this identification explicit. One of the most useful sources to turn to when considering Smith's identity as a reader is an anthology of writing she edited in 2006 called *The Reader*, which contains extracts of prose, poetry and essays that have personal significance for her. Not only do the contents of this publication provide insight into Smith's own reading interests, but its introduction gives the most detailed account of her early reading experiences. We discover, for example, that she began reading at a surprisingly young age:

> I learned to read early; I was three years old. According to my father I learned by pairing the heard names of programmes to the words in the TV listings in the paper, and I can actually remember working out the link between the spoken and written words 'fine' and 'woman' on the Beatles double-A sided 45, 'She's a Woman/I Feel Fine'. By the age of eight I'd read everything in the house; it felt fine, to read.[32]

Smith's early interest in reading, and her inquisitiveness towards language suggest that she instinctively pieced together clues from a mixture of written and aural stimuli. The youngest of five children, Smith also remembers borrowing her older siblings' school books, and advancing through authors such as James Joyce and George Orwell before

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[32] Ali Smith, *The Reader* (London: Constable and Robinson, 2006), 3.

she was a decade old.[33] It is evident that Smith was an advanced reader, full of curiosity and a willingness to interrogate what she found, and this high level of intelligence is replicated in the child and adolescent characters she has later created, such as Brooke in *There but for the* and Kate in *Like.*

Smith's autobiographical writing thus presents reading as an instinctive activity akin to learning to walk or feed oneself, and books are depicted as an early source of comfort as well as curiosity. She recalls the independent bookshop in Inverness that nourished her insatiable appetite:

> Melvins, the one bookshop, on Union Street in Inverness, had opened its basement and filled it with shiny new Penguin classics. You always met interesting people in the basement. They always loved books . . . There was Paris in Inverness, there was poetry from all the centuries . . . The whole world was possible, and a whole lot of other worlds eddying out beyond it.[34]

Books for Smith represented a gateway to worlds outside everyday Highland life, and the local bookshop provided a crucial escape into imaginative realms that were beyond mundane reality.[35] These vivid memories of the bookshop were an early inspiration for Smith; the 'shiny new Penguin classics' filling its basement, for example, had a significant influence on her later depictions of reading. Her fascination with the captivating colours and textures of books, which are explored more fully in my chapter on 'The Embodied Reader', also suggest an interest in the material as well as intellectual

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[33] Ibid., 3-4.
[34] Ibid., 4.
[35] The use of books as a form of escapism is also shown in Smith's introduction to H.G. Wells' *The Rights of Man*, where reading represents a safe space for Smith, through which she holds herself at a distance from her immediate surroundings and discovers alternative realities:
> 'It was true, forty years ago, me sitting in the front room holding the book between me and the visitors like a little shield, a proof that I had a life beyond this life' ('What Are We Fighting For? The 2nd Annual PEN H.G. Wells Lecture, 15 August 2015' in *H.G. Wells on The Rights of Man* [London: Penguin, 2015], xvii).

properties of books. Her own recent publishing endeavours, such as the hardback editions of the seasonal quartet novels, suggest that careful attention was paid to the text as an aesthetic object, as the gold and silver embossed lettering and David Hockney artwork on their sleeves enhances the words contained within them. In an interview on these books, Smith has stated her delight at the 'beautiful-finished book form' created by her publisher for her previous novel *How to be both*, which further suggests her resistance to the idea of the book as a disposable object, and desire to reinstall it with a sense of prestige and long-term value.[36]

Another crucial aspect of Smith's attitude towards reading that developed from an early age was the importance of having access to books regardless of wealth. This is partly a result of her own awareness, even as a child, that she had been afforded educational opportunities that were denied to the older generation:

> Both my parents were clever children to whom history denied chances. Both had won scholarships for further education which neither could take up; both were made fatherless young, and were expected, of course, to go out to work at the age of thirteen or fourteen to bring money home. Both held the notion of books in high regard, as if books were a gift from another, unthinkable, unreal universe where things would be allotted their real worth, and they tolerated my alien status with great affection, because I was impossibly bookish, more and more so as I grew older, reading H.G. Wells and D.H. Lawrence when I should be watching TV or baking or doing the dishes or going out with boys.[37]

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[36] Eric Karl Anderson, 'Ali Smith on Autumn, Brexit, and the shortness of life' in *Penguin*, 2016 <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/in-conversation/interviews/2016/oct/ali-smith-on-autumn/#0iXSLuwz6eQRWfYR.99> (accessed 30 May 2018).
[37] Smith, *The Reader*, 4.

Smith appreciated having time to read as a child, which was still a luxury amidst the practical and financial necessities of working life. The encouragement she received from her parents, who idealised books as almost sacred objects even though they 'literally had no time for reading' themselves, was an important precursor to her preoccupation with this activity later on.[38] This is again evident when Smith's mother unquestioningly bought her a book of Sylvia Plath's short stories when financial resources at home were limited.[39] The value of such generosity regarding access to books – both time and money – is one which pervades Smith's depictions of reading, becoming a preoccupation of texts such as *Shire*, where she introduces the idea that language itself is a valuable and alternative sort of 'currency', which flows generously between readers and writers.[40] This text, alongside her first novel *Like*, are particularly useful evocations of Smith's concerns about the importance of access to books and reading.

Another useful source of information about Smith's own experiences as a reader is the short story 'The commission', which is also found in *Shire*, and which outlines her experience of reading at university. This testimony suggests that as an adult Smith continued to have a zealous enthusiasm for reading, indulging in it wherever possible:

> I'm sitting halfway up a wall in a ruined turret in a small roofless castle, reading a book. I'm twenty-one . . . Here nobody cares how high you climb up the stony walls, which are full of good footholds, good places to sit and read that aren't the library.[41]

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid. Smith goes on to argue that her generation were incredibly lucky in terms of the educational opportunities afforded to them, regardless of family income: 'I know now that all of us born here in the 1960s inhabited a time of real choice, a time when education could be nothing to do with money' (4).

[40] Smith, *Shire*, 104. In this text, Smith celebrates the generosity of the academic Helena Shire towards the impoverished poet Olive Fraser – whose work she published posthumously – but also towards Smith herself, whom she gifted money during her student days. For a further account of this incident, see Interview transcript, 'Open the Door 2019 – Interview between Ali Smith and Jess Orr'.

[41] Smith, 'The commission', 85.

This description of reading in the outdoor environment of Tolquhoun Castle emphasises Smith's desire to remove herself from 'serious' reading environments such as the university library, and inhabit the more playful, almost fairy tale, space of the ruined castle. In this sense, she does not regard reading as something which must take place at desks or in classrooms but prefers to occupy less conventional locations. Such enjoyment of outdoor spaces can also be found in many of Smith's fictional depictions: in the short story 'Text for the day' for example, a young woman disperses volumes from her well-ordered bookshelves onto the streets and into the hands of strangers, whilst in 'the universal story', copies of *The Great Gatsby* are collected together and used to build a boat.[42] Such examples of unconventional encounters with books are suggestive of Smith's playful attitude towards reading, one which disregards formal protocols and is interested in the physical spaces readers occupy as much as the intellectual stimulation this activity provides. In this way, she envisions reading as requiring the physical as well as mental faculties of its subject, and as connected to a tangible sense of reality.

Smith read English first at the University of Aberdeen before accepting a PhD scholarship at Newnham College in Cambridge, and through these experiences her own identity as a reader continued to evolve. This period is usefully elucidated in 'The commission', which highlights the difference between the community Smith grew up in and that which she later entered:

> Cambridge. Isn't it all spies and homosexuals? My Aunt Mattie said to my mother when my mother told her I'd got a postgraduate place. Cambridge, *the foundation of gold and silver seemed deep enough; the pavement laid solidly over the wild grasses:* that's Virginia Woolf, in A Room of One's Own, not my Aunt Mattie.[43]

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[42] Smith, 'Text for the day', 19-30; and 'The universal story' in *The Whole Story and other stories* (London: Penguin, 2004), 1-13.

[43] Smith, 'The commission', 74.

By contrasting these two very different perceptions of Cambridge, Smith highlights the foreignness and mystery associated with such a prestigious institution; the stereotypes projected onto the city by Aunt Mattie have nothing of the romantic allure attributed here to Virginia Woolf. Smith herself, wary as she was of an overly formal or stuffy academic environment, was initially sceptical of writers such as Woolf whom she had been taught in Aberdeen were snobby and exclusive:

> I am holding forth about class and authenticity, authority and Englishness, I am waving Mrs Dalloway in the air. I feel I'm in the right; at Aberdeen Woolf was, I sensed from the majority of my teachers, rather frowned on as a bit dilletante at best.[44]

This recollection of an argument with a friend at Newnham emphasises Smith's early disapproval of Woolf, and the way her beliefs had been shaped by teachers and peers back in Scotland. Nevertheless, during her time at Cambridge, she gradually came to appreciate the role that writers such as Woolf, as well as Sylvia Plath, played in setting a precedent for women to study at the institution.[45] Her early disdain was also challenged by later teaching experiences in Glasgow, where she noticed the same ignorant prejudices in her students that she previously held herself.[46] On return to Woolf's work, she claimed, 'I read, with new eyes',[47] suggesting that she became more open-minded and willing to revise her opinions of previously read texts. Smith's increased appreciation for Woolf is also supported by her more recent claim that, on reflection, Woolf was perhaps the only writer she came across as a young adult who was

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[44] Ibid., 88.
[45] In 'The commission', Smith recounts her excitement at the idea that 'Newnham was where Sylvia Plath had come, in the 1950s, as a Fulbright scholar' (77). She also recounts a story told by Helena Shire about the sense of awe and celebrity that surrounded Virginia Woolf when she came back to visit the college as an established writer.
[46] Ibid., 88.
[47] Ibid., 92.

pointing out the hierarchical structures of narrative and then taking them apart, to demonstrate how stories can always be reshaped and language remoulded to be more inclusive of 'othered' voices.[48]

Certainly, Woolf's conception of reading is not as dissimilar to Smith's as she might have imagined; in her essay 'Hours in a Library' for example, Woolf distinguishes between a 'reader' and a 'learner', suggesting that a 'reader' is less a specialist or figure of authority than someone who is open-minded and willing to adventure:

> a man of intense curiosity; of ideas; open minded and communicative, to whom reading is more of the nature of brisk exercise in the open air than of sheltered study.[49]

Woolf's sentiment resonates with Smith's perspective, especially her association of reading with 'the open air' and the kind of liberated, outdoor experiences that cannot be found in a classroom. She also emphasises having a natural curiosity and willingness to learn, rather than any special privilege or intellectual inheritance. Woolf goes on to suggest that an overly rigorous or 'academic' approach to reading might even 'kill what it suits us to consider the more humane passion for pure and disinterested reading',[50] suggesting that the reader should be led by their impulses, rather than any designated programme of study. This again suggests significant parallels with Smith's own treatment of reading as a meandering exploration or game, rather than a fixed goal or achievement to be reached.

Given Smith's anti-institutional attitude, it is unsurprising that she found the competitive academic environment difficult. She presents herself in 'The commission' as a wayward student, who struggled with the rigour demanded by a Cambridge education:

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[48] Interview transcript, 'Open the Door 2019 – Interview between Ali Smith and Jess Orr'.
[49] Virginia Woolf, 'Hours in a Library' in *On fiction* (London: Hesperus Press, 2011), 3.
[50] Ibid.

'I was a hopeless mix of literal and anti-institutional. It wouldn't be long before I'd be too academically undisciplined for Cambridge'.[51] Despite her natural intelligence and passion for reading, Smith failed to align herself with the standards expected of her. When visiting family in Inverness, her mother noticed 'blackness around my eyes', a 'new thinness', and 'underconfidence', descriptions which contrast the vivid, energetic portrayals of her childhood reading-self.[52] Smith's ambiguous identity as a reader in an 'academic' sense is later at the forefront of her novel *Like*, which is an important part of my later analysis but worth introducing briefly here. The two protagonists of this novel, a young Scottish woman called Ash and an English woman called Amy who is studying at Cambridge, come from different backgrounds and adopt alternative attitudes as readers. Whilst Amy puts herself under enormous pressure to perform well academically and keeps her bookshelves in pristine condition, Ash gets a job in the university library and purposefully moves the books out of place to disrupt the order and sense of propriety they represent. Ash may not have the academic credentials of Amy, but she is enthusiastic and clever and is disappointed to find herself repeatedly confronted by 'Keep Out' and 'Members Only' signs in Cambridge, as well as the persistent snobbery of others: 'Do they let you come to lectures if you're just someone who works in the library?'.[53] At the dramatic climax of the novel, Ash sets light to the books in Amy's study in a violent act of destruction; 'a glorious blaze',[54] which causes outrage within the institution and Amy herself to have a breakdown, losing the ability to read altogether. These characters can be interpreted as representative of Smith's own dual impulses as a reader, caught between the striving academic and the more wayward aspects of her

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[51] Smith, 'The commission', 78.
[52] Ibid., 79.
[53] Smith, *Like*, 230 and 269.
[54] Ibid., 271.

personality; certainly, as a student at Cambridge, she was 'warned repeatedly about being *too creative*'.[55]

A further crucial element of Smith's attitude towards books and reading, and one which links to her conviction that such resources should be widely accessible to all, is her dedication to the campaign for the preservation of public libraries in the UK, many of which have come under threat during the last decade.[56] These efforts are best evidenced in her 2015 publication *Public Library and other stories*, in which each short story is premised by positive testimony about libraries from other fiction writers with whom Smith has a personal connection.[57] Through the course of these extracts it becomes evident that for many other writers, as for Smith, making use of the local library as a child was a crucial entry point into reading from which a writing career could be later established. Smith derides the closure of such libraries 'under the pressure of draconian and politically expedient cuts' to 'volunteer-run and volunteer-funded' services, and declares that forty-three public libraries had come under threat of closure since she began working on the publication.[58] As such, Smith uses this text to make a political statement about what she sees as unnecessary and damaging cuts to public services.

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[55] Smith, *Shire*, 78.

[56] See Danuta Kean, 'Library closures "will double unless immediate action is taken"' in *The Guardian*, 12 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/dec/12/library-closures-will-double-unless-immediate-action-is-taken> and 'Libraries lose a quarter of staff as hundreds close' in *BBC News Online*, 29 March 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-35707956> (both accessed 30 January 2018).

[57] Another source of information about Smith's interest in libraries is in the introduction to *The Reader*, where she compares the production of this anthology to creating a library full of her favourite books. This description highlights Smith's enthusiasm for the expansiveness of this project, and emphasises the idea of a network or of libraries bringing people together:

> 'It stayed a wonderful idea full of possibilities and excitement with writer after writer and piece after piece and book after book all coming together to make a book as big as a building, no, as big and various as a library, yes, a library in itself, no, several libraries, yes, a whole community of libraries.' (1)

[58] Ali Smith, *Public Library and other stories* (London: Penguin, 2015), 97.

One of the most important aspects of libraries that emerges from the writers' testimony in *Public Library* is that they represent a shared source of knowledge to which everyone has a right to access; as Sophie Mayer suggests, libraries are 'the best possible shared space, a community of consent . . . informed and participatory democracy'.[59] These idealised descriptions of the open space a public library creates suggest a sense of shared ownership and equality, which is also elucidated in a conversation between Smith, the author Kate Atkinson and her daughter Helen:

> *It doesn't matter who you are or what you're doing. Young or old. Rich or homeless. It doesn't matter. You can just go there . . . It was what we did, Helen said. It was a habit, a ritual. You borrowed it, you read it, you brought it back and chose something else, and someone else read whatever you read before and after you. It was communal. That's what public library means: something communal.*[60]

Free to enter and accessible to all, libraries are distinct from other, more commercialised, public spaces such as shopping centres, restaurants and cinemas. A notable aspect of this conversation is the emphasis placed on the notion of readers sharing books rather than treating them as exclusive or privately-owned possessions, as Kate and Helen view libraries as offering an escape from financial constraints. This conversation also demonstrates the important relationship between books, readers, and the space of the library itself, which offers a safe and comfortable haven.[61] The significance of the physical reading environment to Smith has already been highlighted, but she also relishes the hidden stories and unknown histories of second-hand or borrowed books,

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[59] Ibid., 75-6.

[60] Ibid., 58.

[61] This claim about the social benefits of public libraries is supported elsewhere in *Public Library* by Richard Popple, who positions libraries as an indispensable vehicle for social inclusion, which extends beyond the borrowing and returning of books.:

> 'It is the poorest, most isolated and the least able in our society who suffer most if they are gone. So if our society does not care for libraries, then it is not caring for its most vulnerable.' (209)

including page marks and even physical damage that has gradually been acquired as books pass from one reader to another. Examples of such hidden histories include the story of Olive Fraser in *Shire*, in which young Olive discovers hidden sheet music inside her book covers, and Kate's fascination with the recycling of books and newspapers in *Like*.[62] As will be explored in further depth in 'The Embodied Reader', the wear and tear of books does not diminish but adds to their value in Smith's work, intriguing the reader with the history of the book-object itself, as well as the narrative contained within it.

Further support for the idea that books have a life of their own with which readers can interact is their depiction in *Public Library* as living, breathing entities. Helen Oyeyemi, for example, describes the public library network as 'some sort of live and benevolent organism',[63] whilst librarian Eve Lacey informs Smith about the organic materials used to make books:

> She told me about why the Rare Books Rooms in libraries keep books at a certain temperature - because the leather which binds early books is always trying to get back to the original shape of the animal whose skin it was.[64]

This depiction of the leather book cover willing itself back to life further emphasises Smith's fascination with the naturalistic qualities of books, and her intention to imbue them with life and energy. In her introduction to *The Reader*, Smith suggests that 'books flew, as if with wings, from mind to mind',[65] again giving books animated qualities which allow them to engage with readers in dynamic ways. In an interview with Jeanette Winterson, Smith focusses on the physical impact of books on readers, asking: 'Do you come to art to be comforted, or do you come to art to be re-skinned?'.[66] This provocation

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[62] See Smith, *Shire*, 48 and *Like*, 27 and 135.
[63] Smith, *Public Library*, 186.
[64] Ibid., 152.
[65] *The Reader*, 1.
[66] 'Ali Smith', *Jeanette Winterson*, 11 March 2004, <http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/journalism/ali-smith/> [accessed 30 January 2018]. In this interview, Smith also states: 'I want to make a book so

again suggests that books are not only subject to growth and change over time, but that readers themselves can be impacted in visceral and transformational ways. As I further explore in my chapter on 'The Embodied Reader', the organic materials used to make books provide vivid images for Smith, which enliven the act of reading and create dynamic encounters between the bodies of readers and material books themselves.

In addition to her avid support of public libraries, Smith's reader-identity is evident through the multitude of introductions to others' work she has written, as well as talks and lectures given in tribute of literary figures she admires.[67] At the Edinburgh International Book Festival in 2014, Smith conducted a series of conversations with contemporary writers whose work has had a significant impact on her, including the American short-story writer Lydia Davis, British novelist Nicola Barker, literary critic and academic Gillian Beer, and the Spanish and Portuguese translator Margaret Jull Costa. She also hosted an event with the Scottish writer Jackie Kay in tribute of the Orcadian film-poet Margaret Tait.[68] Through engagement with public festivals and co-ordinating events such as these, Smith continues to position herself as an avid reader, and uses her own voice as a platform to introduce others' work to new audiences.

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strong that you can hit it with a hammer and it doesn't fall apart', suggesting that the physical robustness of a book can reflect its creative or intellectual qualities. This visceral symbolism is used recurrently by Smith to emphasise the importance of the physical book to writing and reading.
[67] Examples of introductions written by Smith include: Muriel Spark, *The Comforters* (London: Virago, 2009); Muriel Spark, *The Abbess of Crewe* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2018); Magda Szabó, *The Door* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2005); Tove Jansson, *The True Deceiver* (London: Sort Of Books, 2009); Tove Jansson, *A Winter Book: Selected Stories* (London: Sort Of Books, 2006); J. G. Ballard, *Super-Cannes* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014); Sarah Neely ed, *Margaret Tait: Poems, Stories and Writings* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2012); Angela Carter, *Wise Children* (London: Vintage, 2006); Leonora Carrington, *The Hearing Trumpet* (London: Penguin, 2005); Katherine Mansfield, *The Collected Stories of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Penguin, 2007); and Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *Sunset Song* (London: Penguin, 2007). Talks she has given in honour of other writers include: 'Getting Virginia Woolf's Goat' at the National Portrait Gallery, 23 October 2014; 'Who are we fighting for? The 2nd Annual PEN H.G. Wells Lecture' at Edinburgh International Book Festival, 15 August 2015 and 'Spark and Time: The Muriel Spark Society Annual Lecture' at the National Library of Scotland, 14 November 2017.
[68] See the Edinburgh International Book Festival 2014 programme here: <https://d3v4sx4i2y2qe1.cloudfront.net/cdnstatic/65c4b6646ae87b6106b9e2f9744ca81537431785/uploads/programme_pdfs/2014_edinburgh_international_book_festival_brochure.pdf> (accessed 20 November 2017).

Through editing collections such as *The Reader*, Smith draws attention to writers who remain under-acknowledged, taking advantage of the opportunity to create an anthology which promotes underacknowledged work.[69] She is particularly interested in promoting the work of female writers and artists; texts such as *Shire*, which centres on the lives of Scottish poet Olive Fraser and literary academic Helena Shire, are indicative of a desire to position herself as part of a specifically female line of literary inheritance. As a young girl, Smith remembers being inspired by the women writers she found on bookshelves, and suggests that these figures played an influential role in her own emergence as a writer:

> If I hadn't pulled Liz Lochhead's first book of poems, *Memo for Spring*, off the shelf at random in Ann McKay's house when I was babysitting for her at the age of sixteen, and seen the black and white photograph of Lochhead on the cover, a woman – a girl – and realized that she was Scottish and a girl and a poet, and that such a thing was possible, and then opened it and read it straight through, a book of poems this good, in a language that was everyday, like how we all spoke, but they were poems – then I think I'd very possibly not be here writing an introduction to a book like this.[70]

This testimony supports the idea that reading was a necessary precursor to Smith's own development as a writer, as she emphasises the importance of having access to books from a young age. Subsequently, Smith has also suggested that her own writing 'is full of writers and artists who happen to be women' in order to redress the historical imbalance of women's inequality as well as to emphasise the ongoing importance of a

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[69] This is supported by Smith's assertion that: 'this was an unexpected chance to send an anthology out to sea full of writers who generally tend to get a lot less shelf space' (*The Reader*, 1). Her desire to draw attention to unacknowledged or forgotten writers and artists is a concern which runs throughout her work.

[70] Ibid., 5-6.

'forward rolling wheel that gathers moss', as inspiration passes from one woman to the next.[71] It is worth also noting that the idea of reader-response itself as a particularly feminist approach to literary interpretation, as advocated for by critics such as Lynne Pearce, Judith Fetterley, Patrocinio Schweickart and Elizabeth Flynn, is an important aspect of my analysis which will be drawn upon later in my argument. In particular, Fetterley's concept of the 'resisting reader', as someone who learns to read against the grain of conventional opinion, is highly relevant for Smith's foregrounding of underacknowledged women writers and artists, as well as her depiction of characters who refuse to accept the authoritative opinions presented by their books.[72]

It is worth acknowledging that Smith's interest in the lives of other writers exists to some extent in conflict with her intention, as stated at the outset, to 'leave room for the reader' to formulate their own opinions about textual meaning. She has at times had an ambiguous attitude towards writing introductions to publications, out of fear that she might influence what the reader thinks too much:

> I'm not going to do that introductory thing with each piece where I'm supposed to say why I love it, or where I first read it, or how I was once under a horse chestnut tree or in a bus shelter reading blah when blah happened. I don't want to get in the way of the reader.[73]

Smith is reluctant to give too much personal information in case her own experiences obstruct another reader's point of view. These concerns about her own voice 'getting in the way' are also evident in her attitude towards giving lectures, which she has described as carrying a sense of authority that might influence students' own judgements too

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[71] Interview transcript, 'Open the Door 2019 – Interview between Ali Smith and Jess Orr'.
[72] See Judith Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader* (Bloomington and London: Indiana UP, 1978).
[73] Smith, *The Reader*, 5-6.

much.[74] Writing through the voices of fictional characters, Smith suggests, better enables her 'to be there at the same time as not being there. The "I", as it were, is now a question'.[75] In this way, Smith minimizes her own authority within the text, and many of the lectures she has given in recent years, such as those published in *Artful*, utilize a predominantly fictional narrative strategy, with elements of literary criticism and intertextual references interspersed throughout.[76]

  Artful is especially relevant to my discussion of the reader in Smith's work, and forms an important part of my analysis in 'The Dialogic Reader'. The original lectures drew inspiration from the work of Italo Calvino; as Smith suggests: '*Artful* ought, in fact, to be read alongside both *Six Memos* and *If on a winter's night a traveller*'.[77] The latter of these texts has already been mentioned, a novel published by Calvino in 1979, which takes as its central motif the dialectic relationship between author and reader. Its first chapter introduces a second-person narrative technique to self-reflectively describe the reader's first impressions of the novel. This includes outlining the material conditions needed for the reader to enjoy the book, as well as their increasing frustration at not being able to recognise the author's voice:

> he is known as an author who changes greatly from one book to the next. And
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> in these very changes you recognise him as himself. Here, however, he seems to

[74] See Annie Rutherford, 'An interview with Scottish author Ali Smith' in *Cafebabel*, 1 January 2014, <http://www.cafebabel.co.uk/culture/article/an-interview-with-scottish-author-ali-smith.html> (accessed 30 January 2018).
[75] Ibid.
[76] Also see 'Style vs. Content: How should authors approach the task of writing a novel today?', *Edinburgh World Writers Conference 2012-2013*, 12 August 2012, <http://www.edinburghworldwritersconference.org/style-vs-content/ali-smith/> (accessed 14 October 2015). In this talk, Smith constructs a fictional boxing match between the proponents of literary style versus those who value content as more important.
[77] Josh Hall, 'The Art of Conversation: Ali Smith Interviewed' in *The Quietus*, 18 November 2012, <http://thequietus.com/articles/10705-ali-smith-artful-interview> (accessed 30 January 2018).

have absolutely no connection with all the rest he has written, at least as far as you can recall.[78]

Calvino's playful, self-reflective narrative conveys this reader's attempts to situate the book within their own pre-existing knowledge about the author and their previous work. As in *Artful*, in which the partner of a deceased lecturer reads and responds to some lecture notes that have been left behind unfinished, Calvino presents a reader who is desperately grappling with a text in search of the identity of its original author. As Calvino's reader continues however, they realise the identity of the author is perhaps insignificant:

> Are you disappointed? Let's see . . . you realise that the book is readable nevertheless, independently of what you expected of the author, it's the book in itself that arouses your curiosity; in fact, on sober reflection, you prefer it this way.[79]

As the reader-narrator continues to dialogue with the actual reader of Calvino's novel, they come to question the importance of the author's role, and privilege instead their own voice and opinions with regards to its value and meaning. Calvino's presentation of the reader as having a direct relationship with the text independent of its author's opinions evidences striking similarities with Smith's presentation of the reader-narrator in *Artful*, who initially strives to regain access to the deceased academic by reading the written notes they have left behind, but gradually learns to vocalise their own thoughts and opinions instead. By the end of the narrative, this narrator begins to introduce their own cultural reference points to make sense of the text, and in this way Smith's own listeners and readers are encouraged to do the same. Calvino similarly comes to privilege

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[78] Calvino, *If on a winter's night a traveller*, 9.
[79] Ibid.

this 'author-less' style of narration, foregrounding the thoughts of the reader-narrator above the intentions of the book's original author.

The first section of this introduction has used aspects of Smith's biographical history and own reading interests to explain why the act of reading has come to feature so prominently in her work. Aspects of her familial background, as well as her experiences in formal education and later as a burgeoning writer, all help to elucidate why the figure of the reader is so important in her creative consciousness: not as a passive bystander, but as a crucial agent and participant in the construction of textual meaning. Before proceeding to a more detailed analysis of three specific aspects of Smith's representation: 'The Embodied Reader', 'The Dialogic Reader' and 'The Reader as a Spectator', it is the task of this introduction to consider reader-response perspectives which suggest significant similarities with Smith's, and provide a framework that can be drawn upon in later chapters. Critical anthologies which have provided a helpful introduction to the central voices and concerns within this school of criticism include Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman's edited anthology *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation,* J. P. Tompkins' *Reader-Response Criticism,* which has already been mentioned, and Richard Beach's *A Teacher's Guide to Reader-Response Theories.*[80] These texts take different approaches to categorising this field, however all include some gesture towards methods which are predominantly social and historical – in the sense that they study the development of reading as a cultural practise which has developed over time – and those which are psychoanalytical in nature, concerned with the psychological development of individual readers. Louise Rosenblatt and Wolfgang Iser – the theorists I will focus on here – are both described by Beach as 'experiential' in their

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[80] Susan R. Suleiman and Inge Crosman, *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980); and Richard Beach, *A Teacher's Guide to Reader-Response Theories* (USA: National Council of Teachers in English, 1993).

approach: interested mostly in the dynamic relationship that develops between reader, text and author. It is for this reason that I have found these authors particularly useful for my analysis of Smith's work.

Rosenblatt's *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* and Iser's *The Act of Reading* both seek to examine the role that readers play in generating meaning from literary texts, and whilst Smith does not respond directly to these critics' ideas, her depiction of the reader utilises strikingly similar imagery and raises many of the same questions about the reader's involvement. Most significantly, these critics envisage the reader as caught up in a dynamic struggle for textual meaning, both affecting and affected by the stimulus of the text itself. My aim is to consider three aspects of their conceptualisation which has informed my understanding of Smith's work: reading as an active and dynamic process, reading as a significant event that takes place in time, and reading as a reproach to more scholarly or 'classical' methods. I have found Iser's *The Act of Reading* to be the most elucidating outline of his central ideas regarding these aspects of the reading process, even though more recent texts from his oeuvre were considered, such as *The Range of Interpretation*, which deals with a more strictly academic approach to literary interpretation.[81] *The Act of Reading*, on the other hand, appeals to the journey undergone by a wider range of readers in response to a text, and allows for multiple interpretations to be valid, as will be elucidated in the following paragraphs. My decision to use Rosenblatt's *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* was partly motivated by her own side-lined status within the early development of reader-response criticism. Wayne Booth has suggested that no other critic of the twentieth century 'suffered as sharp a contrast of powerful influence and absurd neglect' as Rosenblatt, whilst Flynn has argued that Rosenblatt's exclusion from reader-response anthologies resulted from factors including

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[81] Wolfgang Iser, *The Range of Interpretation* (New York: Columbia UP, 2000).

her gender and her association with educational pedagogy as opposed to so-called serious literary theory.[82] Given Smith's interest in recovering the under-read contributions of women, her ideas have become particularly apt for my consideration here.

Louise Rosenblatt's 1978 text *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* takes as its premise the idea that readers have been neglected by literary critics when considering how textual meaning is created.[83] Typically, she suggests, the reader is relegated to a passive, receptive role and thus ignored, whilst authors are given God-like status as the original creators of a text, and texts themselves are considered the only truly reliable source of meaning.[84] Building on the 'transactional' model of reader-response that she initially outlined in her 1938 publication *Literature as Exploration* – which is considered to be one of the earliest to take the role of the reader into account – Rosenblatt claims that the reader has a vital role to play in the meaning making process.[85] She evokes a similar image of the reader as seen in many of Smith's texts: one capable of challenging the original author in favour of a more equal and playful exchange between reader, writer and text. In this way, she deals with the notion of reading as an active and dynamic process.

Crucially, Rosenblatt distinguishes between two types of reading: an 'efferent' experience, in which 'the reader's attention is focussed primarily on what will remain as the residue *after* reading – the information to be acquired, the logical solution to a problem, the actions to be carried out', and an 'aesthetic' experience, whereby the reader is more concerned with what happens during the reading process itself; interested not

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[82] Wayne Booth, 'Foreword' in *Literature as Exploration* (New York: The MLA, 1995), vii; and Flynn, 'Louise Rosenblatt and The Ethical Turn', 52-54.
[83] Rosenblatt, *The Reader*, ix.
[84] Ibid., 3.
[85] See Appleyard, *Becoming a Reader*, 5; and Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*.

just in what is read, but in the qualitative aspects of this experience.[86] In her depiction of the aesthetic mode, Rosenblatt continually emphasizes reading as a 'lived through' experience, and uses lively images such as a 'fertile matrix' and 'interlocking tendrils', to depict the interaction between reader and text as visceral and organic:

> Instead of a rigid stencil, a more valid image for the text seems to be something like an open-meshed woven curtain, a mesh of flexible strands that hold a certain relationship to one another, but whose total shape and pattern changes as any one part is pulled or loosened.[87]

Rosenblatt challenges the notion that a book arrives in a reader's hands fully formed, arguing alternatively that readers have the capacity to mould and shape it further. To achieve this, Rosenblatt suggests, readers need signals from the text to shift their attention towards its stylistic features, which create an ambiguity of meaning; rhetorical devices such as dialogue aimed directly at the reader, or the invocation of uncertainties and questions, which invite the reader to make active choices of interpretation. These stylistic strategies, in Rosenblatt's view, help to produce an aesthetic rather than efferent experience, in which the reader becomes aware of their own role as an interpreter of the text's meaning.[88]

Rosenblatt also emphasises the amount of effort required by the reader in these interactions, which she describes as an 'organizing or constructive process – the fitting – together and interpretation of visual clues'.[89] In this regard, reading is not a passive or vicarious activity but a serious task which requires proper concentration for its various elements to be synthesised and a cohesive sense of meaning produced. Iser

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[86] Rosenblatt, *The Reader*, 23 and 24-7.
[87] Ibid., 27, 174 and 76.
[88] Ibid., 37.
[89] Ibid., 51.

similarly describes textual meaning as something which the reader 'has to assemble',[90] which is also suggestive of an act of construction or the piecing together of a puzzle using clues which have been provided by the author. This notion of reading as involving effort on the part of the reader is particularly noticeable in *Artful*, in which the narrator carefully studies the novel *Oliver Twist*, picking up clues to help them understand the narrative's meaning:

> First: why wouldn't Dickens name the town this was happening in? Then: the word workhouse reminded me of my father telling me once that at one point his mother (my grandmother) worked in a workhouse laundry.' [91]

The reader questions omissions made by the author, and instinctively draws on their own memories to give the narrative significance. Consequently, the act of reading can be both rewarding and frustrating, depending on how successful the reader is at connecting with the text and finding meaning in it. As is further explored in my third chapter on 'The Reader as a Spectator', the importance of a subject's concentration skills and perceptiveness is a recurrent feature of Smith's representations, not only when reading books but also when responding to visual media and trying to relate this to real-life circumstances.[92]

Like Rosenblatt, Iser also views the text not as a fixed or finished product, but as 'a potential effect that is realized in the reading process'.[93] In *The Act of Reading*, he

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[90] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, ix.

[91] Smith, *Artful*, 7.

[92] Annika Hallin argues that Rosenblatt saw visual media, including television, as a relevant part of aesthetic reading (see 'A Rhetoric for Audiences: Louise Rosenblatt on Reading and Action' in *Reclaiming Rhetorica: Women in the Rhetorical Tradition* [Pittsburgh and London: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995]: 292). Similarly, in his foreword to *Literature as Exploration*, Booth explores the idea that Rosenblatt's transactional theory might 'be extended more aggressively to the treatment of *viewing*' in a superficial technological age, 'for the creation of truly critical viewers' (xiii). This concept of the critical viewer is relevant for my discussion of the spectator's interactions with visual media in chapter three.

[93] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, ix.

constructs a theory of 'aesthetic' response similar to the ideas already outlined, which is stimulated by the original writing of the text but brought to completion by 'the imaginative and perceptive faculties of the reader'.[94] In this regard, the text should not be considered as a finished artefact, but a potentiality from which significance is repeatedly re-formed by its readers. In concordance with this idea, Calvino suggests in *If on a winter's night a traveller* that it is the reader who has the power to decide when a text is finished, rather than the author. The opening of his novel depicts the fear of a reader who, unable to make sense of the text or situate it within their contextual frame of reference, worries that he will lose this special privilege which is usually set aside for the reader.[95] Smith similarly suggests that once a book is out of its author's hands it is somewhat at the mercy of its readers, who become important agents in deciding what meaning it will have in the context of their own lives. Nevertheless, she does not deny the coercive power that a text arrives with; in *Artful*, for example, she brings the author back to haunt the reader as a ghostly spectre, as if to suggest that the writer's intentions always maintain an influence over the reader's perspective. The presentation of the text as a collaborative production between author and reader, and one that is often fraught with conflict and tension, is a dynamic that gives it vigour and an ability to keep generating meaning long after it has been written.

Rosenblatt and Iser also both emphasise the role of the text to stimulate the response of the reader; Iser uses the term 'implied reader' to emphasise the role that the text plays in setting up a series of potential meanings or effects that can be seized upon by the reader. These 'response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text',[96] can be likened to Rosenblatt's emphasis on structural devices that stimulate reader

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[94] Ibid., x.
[95] Calvino, *If on a winter's night*, 115.
[96] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 34.

involvement and encourage a richer and more rewarding reading experience. One of the most crucial devices put forward by Iser is the use of indeterminacy or gaps, which purposefully leave room within a text for the reader to become actively involved in interpreting its meaning: 'it is the elements of indeterminacy that enable the text to "communicate" with the reader, in the sense that they induce him to participate both in the production and the comprehension of the work's intention'.[97] Examples of such indeterminacy might include unknown details or mysteries in the plot, or the use of words and phrases which have multiple meanings or possible interpretations. Nevertheless, Iser stresses that there are limits to the level of indeterminacy which is tolerable to the reader; whilst gaps or uncertainties can mobilise their involvement they can also disengage or 'shatter' the text-reader relationship if not enough detail is provided.[98] This precarious balance is described as a 'pivot', which must be struck in order for the most effective text-reader interaction to be achieved.[99]

The notion that stories contain several potential meanings for the reader to find is an important consideration throughout this study. Narratives are rich with possibility in Smith's work, and characters often invent new ways to re-tell familiar stories, interpreting them differently with each telling. Examples of this can be found in texts such as *Girl meets boy* between Midge, Anthea and their grandfather, and in *There but for the* between Brooke and the elusive character Miles.[100] In many examples of Smith's writing, the multiplicity contained within individual words and phrases is also highlighted: she frequently explores word etymologies to demonstrate how their meanings change in different contexts. A pertinent example of this occurs in her

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[97] Ibid., 24.
[98] Ibid., 172.
[99] Ibid., 169.
[100] See Ali Smith, *Girl meets boy* (Oxford: Isis Publishing, 2008) and *There but for the.* This notion is explored more fully in my second chapter on 'The Dialogic Reader'.

introduction to H.G. Wells' political manifesto *The Rights of Man*, which she originally gave as a lecture at the Edinburgh International Book Festival:

> I looked up the etymology of watch. Verb, transitive. To follow the motions of with the eyes. To observe the progress of, maintain an interest in. To have in one's care, to look after, to guard, to tend. To beware of danger to or from, to be on the alert, to take advantage of. To wait for. To catch in the act.[101]

Smith is inspired to look up the word 'watch' by a man on a train who, oblivious to everyone around him, is boasting about his high technology wristwear. The results are surprisingly varied, allowing her to connect the seemingly trivial conversation she has witnessed on the train with deeper reflections she has been having about the book she is reading: Wells' *The Rights of Man*. The multiple possible meanings this word holds simultaneously, from the most trivial to the most serious, demonstrates how words change according to the context in which they are used, and can have different resonances depending on their recipient's perspective.

Whilst Smith emphasises this inherent multiplicity of language however, she does not suggest that there are endless possible meanings for a given text. This is a crucial issue, and one which is relevant to my argument about the agency of the reader in her work. Smith may have an open attitude towards narrative signification, but this remains constrained by the contextual circumstances in which a narrative has been produced, and by the identity and intentions of its author, as well as those of the readers who interact with it. The etymology of the word 'watch' may be varied, for example, but it is not endless; it is a result of all the historical circumstances that have produced and continue to produce it in social contexts. The idea that there is a limit to textual meaning can be supported by Umberto Eco's notion of the 'open text', which is constructed to

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[101] Smith, 'What Are We Fighting For?', xi.

offer a plurality of choices to the reader. Eco's argument that 'you cannot use the text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it',[102] whilst more conservative than Smith's approach, is indicative of the kind of text which is specifically designed by its author to make room for the reader. Another relevant example of this issue can be found in the short story 'Art in Nature' by Tove Jansson, which Smith includes in *The Reader*, in which the caretaker of an art gallery argues with some visitors about the meaning of a piece of art:

> You could just take it this way, for example. Since a work of art can be just about anything, and you just see what you want to see, you could just not bother to unwrap it, and hang the parcel on the wall.[103]

Although this comment is made in response to a work of visual art rather than a text, it serves to demonstrate the kind of scepticism which Smith shares towards the idea that a piece of art can have endless possible significances. If this were the case, Jansson's narrative suggests, there would be no point in the observer experiencing the work at all, and similarly in relation to a novel or short story, a reader is inevitably constrained by the determining factors of the text itself.

It is worth noting that Iser has been criticised for his focus on finding the 'correct' way to read a text. Patrocinio Schweickart, for example, suggests that 'the reader taking control of the text is not, as in Iser's model, simply a matter of selecting among concretizations allowed by the text' but rather 'reading the text as it was *not* meant to be read, in fact, reading it against itself'.[104] Rather than searching for the correct method, which will bring reader and text together in harmony, Schweickart draws on the work

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[102] Umberto Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts* (London: Hutchinson, 1981), 9.
[103] Tove Jansson, 'Art in Nature' in *The Reader*, 228.
[104] Patrocinio Schweickart, 'Reading Ourselves: Toward a Feminist Theory of Reading' in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts* (Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins UP, 1986), 50.

of feminist writers such as Adrienne Rich to demonstrate how the reader might challenge the inherent authority carried by the text. On the other hand, in his text *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology,* Iser makes clear that he too celebrates texts which 'play hide-and-seek with their interpreters', their meanings deviously shifting each time the reader thinks it has been found 'even though the letters, words, and sentences of the text remain the same'.[105] Despite the criticism of Schweickart, it is Iser's willingness for the reader to subvert the text's authority that I have found most appealing in relation to Smith's work. Iser maintains that whilst certain clues towards meaning are determined by the text, the reader retains a certain agency to defy these authorial intentions. He describes this subversive potential as 'the creative side of reading', through which the reader generates new effects that have not been premeditated by the text.

Rosenblatt similarly argues against an entirely deterministic stance towards reader involvement, suggesting that the reader, amidst the clues provided by the text, has 'the potentiality of choice between alternatives'.[106] She describes the reader's consciousness as 'a self-ordering, self-creating process', thus giving the reader agency to make sense of the text, according to their own subjective impressions and contextual background. The concept of a pivot or balance is again important here, as the reader has some agency to stray from the original intentions of an author but is also constrained by factors pre-meditated by the text itself. These arguments again correspond with Smith's perspective, who is often aware of the author's background presence during the reading process, whilst also being able to bring her own contribution to meaning. The narrator

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[105] Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (London and Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1989), 4.
[106] Rosenblatt, *The Reader*, 172.

of *Artful* is a pertinent example of this, who is haunted by the ghost of their deceased partner, whilst simultaneously learning to voice their own opinions.

The second aspect of Rosenblatt and Iser's analyses which suggests a correlation with Smith's perspective is their emphasis on reading as a significant event or encounter. Rosenblatt, for example, draws a distinction between the term 'text', which she uses to designate a series of linguistic symbols on a page, and the term 'poem', which she defines as the coming together of reader and text in an active moment of meaning-making.[107] A 'poem', she argues, is an event rather than a static object, during which a reader's memory is brought to bear on the text they are encountering. Elsewhere, Rosenblatt describes this relationship as an 'electric circuit',[108] which can be put together in different combinations, resulting in a different 'poem' in each instance. This image is a useful one when considering Smith's presentation of the reader, who often experiences a spark of energy or excitement in response to a book.[109] For Rosenblatt, this kind of energetic connection between reader and text is of paramount importance:

> we must remember that once the creative activity of the author has ended, what remains for the other, for even the author himself – is a text. To bring again a poem into being requires always a reader, if only the author himself.[110]

In this regard, even when the original author re-reads their own work, they have shifted position and become a reader themselves, who is capable of bringing the text back to life and making a 'poem' from it that might be different to the one they originally produced. Rosenblatt's emphasis on the moment of reading as one in which textual meaning is generated suggests significant parallels to Smith's depiction of this activity. In the short

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[107] Ibid., 12.

[108] Ibid., 14.

[109] See, for example, Midge and Anthea responding to their grandfather's story: "I've been there! We went there! I said' (Smith, *Girl meets boy*, 66), and Ash's excitement in response to Amy's library: 'An ordered chaos of books on every subject' (*Like*, 245).

[110] Rosenblatt, *The Reader*, 15.

story 'Text for the day' for example, Smith's protagonist Melissa realises that the books on her shelves have been rendered meaningless through lack of use. Consequently, she rips them open and distributes pages of poetry across the streets in the hope that random strangers will have chance encounters with them. Similarly, in *Shire*, the poet Olive Fraser purveys the untouched spines of Walter Scott's *Waverley* novels on her family's pristine bookshelves with scepticism, resolving to throw one violently across the room and break open its spine in order to bring it back to life. These and other explosive moments of encounter between books and readers in Smith's work, which resurrect otherwise lifeless objects, reflect Rosenblatt's notion of an electric circuit between text and reader, which is constructed differently in each new instance of reading.

Rosenblatt also describes the moment of reading as significant not only for the text's meaning but for the identity of the reader themselves, who is 'self-creating' in the sense that they too are changed – even transformed – by the experience. A 'reader' does not pre-exist this encounter, she suggests, but comes into being through the act of reading, which involves a self-identification for the subject involved.[111] This self-discovery of the reader is also prevalent in Iser's analysis, who suggests that texts might 'bring to light a layer of [the reader's] personality that he had previously been unable to formulate in his conscious mind'.[112] In this regard, Iser suggests that reading plays an important role in retrieving unconscious thoughts or undiscovered aspects of an individual's identity, which may not have been previously acknowledged or identified.[113] It is thus not only the text which is brought to signification but perhaps even the reader themselves.[114]

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[111] Ibid., 11.
[112] Ibid., 50.
[113] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 159.
[114] The most well-known theorist who dealt with the psychological development of the reader is Norman Holland, whose 1968 publication *The Dynamics of Literary Response* uses psychoanalytic theory to explore the different stages of response (New York: Oxford UP, 1968). Tompkins suggests that Holland saw interpretation as 'a function of identity', which demands that the reader use the same strategies as they would elsewhere to make sense of the world (*Reader-Response Criticism*, xix). Certainly,

This claim is supported by Smith's work in a number of the texts already introduced, such as the narrator in *Artful*, who processes their grief through the act of reading *Oliver Twist*. Similarly, in *Shire*, Olive Fraser realises her own strength as she hurls the book across the room and is better able to process some residual anger towards her estranged father. In Smith's first novel *Like*, the character Amy's illiteracy allows her to recover aspects of her personality that had previously been repressed, whilst in the novel *Hotel World*, the homeless character Else projects her own deprecated self onto the letters and words she imagines littered around her on the street.[115] These and other examples, which are explored in more depth in later chapters, demonstrate that for Smith neither text nor reader emerge from the act of reading unchanged; it is a dynamic and transformational process, as indicated by Rosenblatt and Iser.

Iser also suggests that reading as an event 'helps to create the impression that we are involved in something real'.[116] In this sense, the fact that reading takes place in a particular moment – certainly, narrative itself has a duration which unfolds through time – means that it becomes an important part of a reader's consciousness in that moment. Because narrative has a temporal dimension to it, Iser suggests, the reader moves along a wandering viewpoint as they comprehend its meaning, and through this process both text and reader converge and develop alongside each other.[117] This unique convergence of a particular text with a particular reader gives the impression of a kind of 'presentness': a moment in which both identities are thrown into flux and subject to

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Iser was influenced by Holland's ideas about how readers oscillate between feelings of disturbance and resolution, thus generating aesthetic pleasure (*The Act of Reading*, 43-47). Rosenblatt, on the other hand, has distanced her transactional theory from Holland's ideas, suggesting that he is so much focussed on the reader that the text itself is entirely forgotten (see Flynn, 'Louise Rosenblatt and the Ethical Turn', 59).

[115] Ali Smith, *Hotel World* (New York: Anchor Books, 2002). These ideas are expanded on in 'The Embodied Reader'.

[116] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 67.

[117] Ibid., 109.

revision. In the event of reading, both text and reader momentarily lose and rediscover themselves, establishing new identities in relation to each other:

> the reader is involved in composing images out of the multifarious aspects of the text by unfolding them into a sequence of ideation and by integrating the resulting products along the time acts of reading. Thus text and reader are linked together, the one permeating the other.[118]

In this sense, the reader's imagination is engaged as they create interpretations of the text as they go along. These hypotheses are either confirmed or denied by the subsequent events of the narrative, which provide further revelations that might change or confirm the reader's point of view. As the text undergoes this process of revelation, so the reader revises and hones their understanding of it.

Iser's emphasis on reading as a temporal process is best evidenced by Smith in *Artful* in her section 'On time', which explores the way that readers' impressions of the same books can change over time depending on individual circumstances. She emphasises the multiple temporalities held within a book – both the original moment of writing and each moment of reading – and discusses the kind of temporal demand that books impose on their readers:

> Books themselves take time, more time than most of us are used to giving them. Books demand time. Sometimes they take and demand more time than we're ready or yet know how to grant them; they go at their own speed . . . they accompany us through our pasts into our futures, always with their present-tense ability.[119]

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[118] Ibid., 150.
[119] Smith, *Artful*, 30.

In this respect, reading is not a straightforward activity but one which demands sustained attention and effort. Books often resist our need for immediate answers, unfolding their narratives in their own time, and demanding from readers a certain patience. The tension this creates, which involves neither reader nor text being entirely in control of the reading process, is part of the dynamic thrust back and forth which is so important. Oftentimes, Smith suggests, we must return to re-read books in different moments in order to further explore their range of possible meanings.

The third aspect of Rosenblatt and Iser's presentation of the reader that can be usefully paralleled with Smith's depiction is their shared scepticism towards academic or 'classical' approaches to reading. This might be surprising given their own status within academic criticism, as well as their emphasis on readers who are willing to study a text closely to generate meaning from it. As Woolf suggested however, the 'pure and disinterested' reader who wishes to pursue reading for their own curiosity and enjoyment may be somewhat curtailed by the demands of a programme of literary study.[120] Both Rosenblatt and Iser suggest that there is a tendency within a more scholarly approach to 'reading' to strive towards finding the one ultimate meaning of a text, failing to pay attention to individual readers' viewpoints and often relying on elitist assumptions. This is an issue that has been raised by several other reader-response critics; Booth, for example, who suggests that literary criticism has become devoid of emotion in its adoption of scientific and empirical methods, and Susan L. Feagin, who supports the idea that the full range of responses had by readers towards texts has not yet been accounted for.[121] In this regard, a rigorous and scholarly approach to reading

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[120] Woolf, 'Hours in a Library', 3.

[121] Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1983). This emulation of scientists, Booth argues, 'was never as fruitful an idea in literature as it was in science' (112); and Susan L. Feagin, *Reading with Feeling: The Aesthetics of Appreciation* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 1996).

has neglected the personal experiences of readers in its search for the 'correct' interpretation of a text. At a pedagogical level, this is exemplified by a text such as Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren's *How to Read a Book*, which is conveyed like an instruction manual for students on how to *do* literary analysis.[122] These arguments provide an important context for Smith's own depictions of reading both within and out-with academic contexts, and help to explain her preference for less conventional reading environments and strategies.

To consider Rosenblatt's argument initially, we see that she establishes herself in opposition to those who might seek to assign definitive meaning to a text, stressing that: 'What each reader makes of the text is, indeed, *for him* the poem, in the sense that this is his only direct perception of it'.[123] Rosenblatt argues that there is no less validity in an interpretation made by any one person over another: an ordinary member of the public for example in comparison to someone who is studying for professional purposes.[124] Her transactional approach suggests that no one can read a text for us, and yet many people are encouraged to believe that they are incapable of reading 'properly' or 'correctly' for themselves.[125] Literature, Rosenblatt suggests, has become 'a spectator sport for many readers satisfied to passively watch the critics at their elite literary games',[126] and it is against this kind of passive attitude that the everyday reader emerges. When considering the nature of an 'aesthetic' reading, she takes into consideration a range of

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[122] Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972).
[123] Rosenblatt, *The Reader*, 105.
[124] An important point to note in relation to Rosenblatt's work is that it sits on the boundary between educational pedagogy and literary theory, with earlier works such as *Literature as Exploration* representing the former, and later ones such as *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* leaning towards the latter. As such, she is interested in strategies that foster engagement in everyday readers such as school pupils and encourage them to have confidence to apply their own perceptions and ideas to what they read. According to Flynn, Rosenblatt 'insists on the humanness of both authors and readers. They are not constructs but people' ('Louise Rosenblatt and the Ethical Turn', 55) and draws directly from Woolf's notion of the common reader to disparage relying too heavily on the opinions of reviewers and critics (64–5).
[125] Rosenblatt, *The Reader*, 141-2.
[126] Ibid., 140.

factors that enrich the quality of a reader's experience, such as the influence of personal memory on their impressions and the value of their enjoyment of the narrative. In this way, her argument seeks to encourage all readers' experiences and celebrate the diversity of meaning that can be generated from a single text, rather than reducing it to one 'correct' interpretation.

Nevertheless, Rosenblatt is careful not to allow her presentation of the reader to dissolve into complete subjectivism, in which any interpretation of a text might be validated. As discussed earlier, the balance these writers try to achieve between the determination of the text and the subjectivity of the reader is, admittedly, a precarious one. Rosenblatt, for example, attempts to provide some boundaries to avoid this predicament, arguing that so long as the reader's interpretation does not contradict any element of the text, then it is valid.[127] In this aspect of her argument, her position is more conservative, maintaining that the stimulus of the text provides important evidence from which meaning must always be inferred. New interpretations are permitted, welcomed even, so long as they have some textual basis and are 'responsibly self-aware and disciplined'.[128] Interestingly, this conservatism suggests a step back towards the kinds of 'elitist' perspectives that Rosenblatt initially set out to criticise. Elsewhere, she also appeases her critics by suggesting that with the right, open-minded attitude, literary critics can have a positive and functional role to play in generating a dynamic reading experience: 'critics may function not as stultifying models to be echoed but as teachers, stimulating us to grow in our own capacities to participate creatively and self-critically in literary transactions'.[129] This analysis, in trying to reconcile the role of the critic within her transactional approach to reader-response, appears to

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[127] Ibid., 115.
[128] Ibid., 130.
[129] Ibid., 148.

maintain the kind of unhelpful hierarchical structure that she set out to dismantle. As such, Rosenblatt's own role as a literary critic leads to a paradox in her argument, which both opposes the notion of a 'professional' reader, whilst continuing to write from that same position of privilege.[130]

Iser's criticism of a more 'classical' approach to reading builds on the idea that this approach diminishes the rich potential of a text by reducing it to a restricted set of meanings. Once the reader 'gets' the meaning of a text, he argues, the text itself has lost something, and meaning has been subtracted or passed from itself to the reader. Despite those who have criticised Iser for being too reductive, here we see his frustration at the idea that 'literature has been turned into an item for consumption', a product that has retreated from the mystery and excitement of many different significances into the safety of a restricted few.[131] The removal of ambiguities from a text contravenes the writing strategy advocated towards by Iser, which involves peaking the reader's interest and encouraging them to think actively about the various meanings on offer. He argues that meaning is an effect produced by the reader in response to a text and is additive rather than subtractive, as they generate new ideas which bring an entirely new text into existence.[132]

Like Rosenblatt, Iser's analysis suggests a more nuanced approach should be taken by the professional critic, which focuses on the individual circumstances of the reader and the context in which they are situated:

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[130] In support of this idea, Flynn admits that despite Rosenblatt's 'considerable significance' in the mid-twentieth century, 'From the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, Rosenblatt's theoretical work may seem somewhat underdeveloped or even naïve' ('Louise Rosenblatt and the Ethical Turn', 68). Whilst Rosenblatt is unable to overturn the structures of academic privilege from which she writes, her provocations draw important attention to these constructs and encourage those working in the field to expand the parameters of whose opinion is valued.
[131] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 4 and 15.
[132] Ibid., 10.

> As meaning arises out of the process of actualization, the interpreter should perhaps pay more attention to the process than to the product. His object should therefore be, not to explain a work, but to reveal the conditions that bring about its various possible effects.[133]

It is this emphasis on 'process rather than product', which most usefully links to Smith's emphasis on the interpretive processes of the reader. Her invocation of creative narrative in lieu of a critical voice works to support this, as she is able to pay more attention to personal emotions and the reader's changing impressions without asserting final authority over the text's meaning. Her exploration of the different kinds of responses available to readers – such as the recognition of bodily sensation in their responses to books, or the playful challenging of narrative in oral storytelling settings – allow her to take into account the varied contexts in which a reading of sorts takes place, and the different impacts it can have.

Whilst the ideas of Iser and Rosenblatt provide a useful foundation to consider some of the important issues regarding Smith's representation of the reader, as I move into more specific aspects of my analysis, other critical perspectives are required. As mentioned at the start of this introduction, my first chapter about 'The Embodied Reader' utilises several essays by Hélène Cixous, which implicate the body within the acts of reading and writing. Utilising a feminist viewpoint in this section has been motivated in part by the contentions of reader-response critics Pearce, Flynn and Schweickart that criticism has taken for granted the androcentricity of the text and neglected to develop a more nuanced understanding of alternative reader-positionings. My second chapter focuses on Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, demonstrating how Smith creates interactive dialogues between storytellers and listeners, and depicts

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[133] Ibid., 18.

the reader as an inevitable and necessary participant in the construction of narrative. Here, Bakhtin's insistence that every level of the social stratum make up the dialogic layers of the text help to elucidate how the subversive voices of participatory reader-characters in Smith's work enrich and democratise her narratives. My final chapter, which turns to the 'reading' of visual media, utilises contemporary perspectives such as Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane to consider the active role of the spectator in responding to technological forms of narrative.[134] Whilst this topic departs from the more traditional concept of 'reading' considered by Rosenblatt and Iser, these critics' ideas remain relevant and important to my discussion in this final chapter. As will be seen, Rosenblatt gestures towards a different way of reading the world, including the interpretation of visual media, as a training for life beyond the act itself. Similarly, characters such as Astrid, Magnus and George in *The Accidental* and *How to be both* must actively interrogate what they see to produce meaning, and experience moments of personal revelation as a result of these encounters.[135]

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[134] Laura Mulvey's *Death 24x a Second: stillness and the moving image* (London: Reaktion, 2006) and Mary Ann Doane's *The Emergence of Cinematic Time* (Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 2002) have been most useful to me within this discussion, however in my treatment of the elusive character Amber in Smith's novel *The Accidental* (London: Penguin, 2006), I have also found some early cinema criticism helpful, such as the ideas of Walter Benjamin and the poet and filmmaker H.D., who provide insight into the changing role of the spectator in the early development of cinema.

[135] Ali Smith, *How to be both* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2014).

I. The Embodied Reader

This chapter argues that Smith depicts readers as embodied subjects in her fiction, and analyses why the visceral nature of readers' relationships with books is of particular importance in her work. Both the materiality of books and the bodily sensations of the reading subject are common preoccupations in her writing, and the explosive interactions she depicts between bodies and books are crucial to her efforts to re-envision the reader as an active, even subversive, agent of textual meaning, rather than a passive recipient of it. Moreover, by involving the subject's body in a highly material experience of books and reading, Smith reveals the strong emotional responses that are provoked when undertaking this activity, providing a tangible manifestation of how readers wrestle with books to 'break open' their meanings, and work constructively to create new significance from them. This altercation between readers' destructive and creative responses towards books is significant throughout my analysis, and has already been supported by reader-response theorists such as Lynne Pearce, who suggests that criticism has neglected 'the emotional rollercoaster on which we travel each and every time we engage in a new textual encounter'.[1] Susan L. Feagin has similarly suggested that a critical focus on the 'aesthetic experience' of the reader does not always take into account the full range of emotions that can be stimulated by reading.[2]

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[1] Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, 183.

[2] Feagin, *Reading with Feeling*, 6. According to this conception, even Rosenblatt's term 'aesthetic reading' constrains the reader to a more thoughtful and reflective role rather than expressing their instinctive and guttural reactions. Feagin suggests it is important to expand the parameters of reading to incorporate bodily responses as well as intellectual ones.

For my purposes here, I have found it useful to consider the word 'embodied' to signify a person's awareness of 'having a body' or being 'invested with a body',[3] and consequently the term 'embodied reader' to signify a reading subject whose interactions with books are self-consciously physical or material in nature as well as thoughtful or intellectual. This definition poses a significant challenge to a more common perception of reading – one which is expanded upon in the paragraphs to follow – as an activity which is separate or divested from direct bodily experience. It is my intention to argue alternatively that Smith depicts readers who relish books for their material properties as well as their intellectual ones, and who respond instinctively to books, often using them to express more primitive emotions of anger and desire. The presentation of reader-characters who respond physically to books, leaving marks or even damaging them, as well as giving them new life and purpose through acts of re-making, allows Smith to explore opportunities for individual subjects to subvert the established order of the text, as well as that of the world beyond its pages.

In order to explore the subversive potential of the reading subject in Smith's work, this chapter draws from several essays by the theorist Hélène Cixous, who envisages both reading and writing as activities which implicate the subject's body in lively and dynamic interactions.[4] My decision to focus on these essays to support my examination, as well as drawing from Julia Kristeva's seminal publication *Revolution in Poetic Language*, is due to their common refusal to impose a split between 'the physical realm of the body and the symbolic realm of language', and their shared emphasis on the bodily experience of reading as a source of freedom and agency.[5] I have also found it useful to

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[3] 'embodied, adj.', *OED Online*, Oxford UP, 2017
<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/60904?redirectedFrom=embodied.> (accessed 16 March 2017).
[4] As already mentioned, Cixous' essays which have been most useful to me are 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays', 'Difficult Joys', and 'Coming to Writing'.
[5] Susan Sellers, *Hélène Cixous: Authorship, Autobiography and Love* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996), 72. Also see Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia UP, 1984). Other texts

pay attention to more recent examples of literary criticism, which emphasise the need to take real bodily experiences into account within critical discourse; materialist methodologies such as those proposed by Stacy Alaimo and Elizabeth Grosz, who similarly refuse to abstract or eliminate actual bodies from the theories which purport to discuss and analyse them.[6] These perspectives have significant relevance for my argument concerning characters who have highly tactile relationships with books, and whose bodies are implicated within the act of reading.

Another useful perspective when analysing these behaviours is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's conception of reading in his seminal text *The Phenomenology of Perception*.[7] Merleau-Ponty disparages our reliance on a second-order experience of the world – ideas that have been digested and packaged into neatly formed theories – and advocates a return to our most immediate sensations. 'The world is not what I think, but what I live through', he suggests, and it is through our basic perceptions that unrestricted playfulness and creativity abound.[8] In this sense, it is necessary to engage with the materiality of our environment in order to increase our understanding of it and expand its possibilities for meaning. Carol Bigwood draws on Merleau-Ponty's work to emphasise the importance of the body within this, which 'is actively and continually in *touch* with its surroundings. It is directed outside itself, inextricably entangled in existence'.[9] As a result of this constant contact between the body and the material world,

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which elucidate the importance of the body in Cixous and Kristeva's work include Kathy Davis ed., *Embodied Practices: Feminist Perspectives on the Body* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 1997); Elizabeth Grosz, 'The Body of Signification' in *Abjection, Melancholia and Love: the work of Julia Kristeva* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 80-103; and Kelly Oliver ed., *French Feminism Reader* (Maryland and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

[6] See Stacy Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2000) and Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994).

[7] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[8] Ibid., xviii.

[9] See Carol Bigwood, 'Renaturalizing the body (with the help of Merleau-Ponty)' in *Body and Flesh: A Philosophical Reader* (Oxford and Massachusetts: Blackwells, 1998), 105.

Bigwood suggests that meaning is generated directly as a result of this lived tactility. These ideas are reflected in Smith's depiction of readers who, in their efforts to explore the true value of their books, do not retreat into cerebral contemplation, but respond physically to them, generating meaning through the use of their bodies.

Smith's fiction envisages the experience of the reader as concrete and material: book-objects weigh heavily on the shelves of libraries waiting to be taken down and are imbued with fresh meaning as a result of readers' dynamic interactions with them. As such, Smith presents inert books as heavy and lifeless, whilst opened books become immediately full of energy and potential. Readers are encouraged to have open and exploratory relationships with books, rather than leaving them untouched on the shelves. One example is the short story 'Text for the day' in Smith's first collection *Free Love and other stories*, in which the protagonist Melissa rips up the books in her home library, dispersing pages of poetry from her previously well-ordered bookshelves across the streets and into the hands of strangers.[10] As already mentioned, an important aspect of Smith's depiction of an embodied reader concerns their destructive impulses: the exertion of physical violence towards books, including throwing, burning and eating them. In demonstration of this, Melissa's disrupted bookshelves in 'Text for the day' are compared to a crime scene in which the books themselves have become the victims of their owner's angry outburst:

> the books, the books, the pride and joy, were so peculiar in both rooms, in such a mess, all over the floor or piled in haphazard order, great gaping holes in the bookcases all up the walls and books fall on their sides askew.[11]

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[10] Smith, 'Text for the day', 28.
[11] Ibid., 21.

Melissa's friend Austen is horrified to discover the maltreatment of the books in Melissa's flat; 'haphazard', 'great gaping holes' and 'askew' all suggest that a physical violation has taken place against the civilised order that previously reigned. It becomes clear that Melissa seeks to disrupt the established order of her environment through destructive actions towards the bookshelves. Her violence towards this impressive collection of volumes, which have been kept for many years but are 'yellowing, losing their colours, fading',[12] indicates a need to challenge their perceived authority, shaking up the circumstances of her own life as well as the pages of the books themselves. In this instance, Smith undermines the prestige and value usually associated with old books and prioritises instead her character's desire to defy social rules and establish a more visceral relationship with her bookshelves.

Whilst this story initially presents a tale of destruction, for Melissa, dispersing lines of verse at random also opens up new opportunities for others to discover fresh significance in otherwise forgotten texts. Furthermore, the outdoor context of these experiences allows Smith to emphasise the textures of the ripped pages – which are compared to fallen leaves – and the subject's physical sensations in response to these pieces of litter. As has already been suggested, books in Smith's fiction function as targets or channels for the emotional lives of her characters; an outlet for feelings of passionate desire or anger that have been censored or suppressed. Subsequent to her release of anger, Melissa experiences a sense of relief that allows more creative impulses to take hold, as she embarks on a new life away from her previous abode. Smith's narrative implies that the physical destruction of the books has been necessary to release new life and energy from both the books and Melissa herself. Discovering new purposes for old books is also a feature of 'the universal story', in which copies of *The Great Gatsby*

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[12] Ibid., 20.

are collected together and used to construct a boat. As in 'Text for the day', Smith emphasises the practical qualities of the books, as well as conjuring a physical manifestation of Fitzgerald's ambiguous final metaphor of the novel.[13] This example again draws attention to books' material properties and suggests alternative contexts in which they might be useful: not just in studies and libraries but in outdoor spaces, such as on streets, in parks and even at sea.

Starting from these initial examples, my intention in this chapter is to explore how reader-characters in Smith's fiction are presented as embodied figures whose alternating destructive and creative reactions towards books have both transgressive and liberating consequences on their lives. As outlined in my introduction, reader-response critics such as Rosenblatt and Iser have emphasised the need for readers to channel their potential as active agents in relation to books towards becoming more critical and subversive in real-life circumstances. In *Literature as Exploration*, for example, Rosenblatt describes how the reader 'comes to the book from life . . . He will resume his concern with (it) when the book is closed', thus demonstrating her interest in the ways that readers might take elements of what they read back to the experiential world in which they live.[14] Iser meanwhile discusses the 'self-sharpening' potential of reading, as the reader's personality is developed through the act of reading, and their actions become more considered as a result of this activity.[15] In this chapter, I explore this argument through Smith's first novel *Like*, which carefully intertwines characters' relationships with each other and their relationships with books. Of particular interest to me is the impact of burning and destroying books on her protagonists, and how these actions help them to address their hidden desires for each other and break out of

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[13] See F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (London: Penguin, 1994), 188.

[14] Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, 34. See also Hallin, 'A Rhetoric for Audiences', 294.

[15] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 32.

constricting life circumstances. Following this, I turn towards Smith's depiction of books as an organic product of trees to emphasise the more constructive effects of reading, which often occur as a result of the aforementioned violence and destruction. By emphasising the material connections between books and the trees from which they are made, I argue that Smith portrays readers as caught up in the same organic cycles of life, death and renewal. Before turning to these arguments however, it is necessary to further outline the key theoretical ideas that have been used to underpin my analysis.

One of the key theoretical bases for my interest in the embodied manifestation of the reader has been the historical tendency to disassociate reading – and intellectual activities in general – from the human body. This disconnection is a vast terrain which has been well documented, and whilst I do not have space to expand on this history at length, it is useful to make a few remarks about how this disassociation between body and mind continues to pervade discourse to the present day. Elizabeth Grosz, for example, who has already been mentioned, argues forcefully that since its early philosophy, critical discourse has persistently separated the activities of body and mind from each other, privileging the more rational operations of the mind over those of the interfering and unpredictable body.[16] In this regard, Grosz suggests, the body is seen as harbouring irrational impulses and emotions that cannot be trusted when making a considered argument or constructing a thesis. Even in the contemporary era, she argues, the body is subordinated as an object of study for the rational mind, or as a vehicle for the expression of internal thoughts, which must be trained according to the mind's will.[17] Others have agreed that disdain for the body and disregard for its place within activities such as reading and writing have pervaded critical discourse, with many

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[16] See Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 6 and 'The Body of Signification', 81.
[17] Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 8-9.

theorists seeking refuge from embodied experience in more abstract and theoretical realms. Following a resurgence of interest in this area in the early 1990s, Brian S. Turner remarked that 'In western philosophy and theory . . . the body appears simultaneously as constraint and potential', suggesting that the role of the body within intellectual discussion continues to be a polarising issue.[18] In the same year, Arthur W. Frank produced another review of body theories, concluding that whilst many theorists continue to silence the body within discourse, other narrative forms are emerging which better enable the expression of physiological responses.[19] Whilst a full discussion of the debate concerning the relationship between bodily experience and intellectual discourse is impossible within the scope of this study, I outline below two contemporary perspectives, which specifically concern the separation of the body from the act of reading. Both of these perspectives raise concerns about the abstraction of reading from the subject's embodied reality and everyday experience.

The first is Michel De Certeau, whose essay 'Reading as Poaching' describes the contemporary reader as withdrawn and detached from their own body. In predominantly literate societies, he suggests, reading has transformed from being a largely oral and communal activity, to one which is now largely undertaken by individuals in isolation and silence:

> Today, the text no longer imposes its own rhythm on the subject, it no longer manifests itself through the reader's voice. The withdrawal of the body, which is the condition of autonomy, is a distancing of the text.[20]

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[18] Brian S. Turner, 'Recent Developments in the Theory of the Body' in *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory* (London: Sage, 1991), 4.

[19] Arthur W. Frank, 'For a Sociology of the Body: an Analytical Review' in *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*, 80. These ideas are supported by recent critical movements, which assert the importance of material experience as a basis for experience. See Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience* (Cornell: Cornell UP, 2001).

[20] Michel De Certeau, 'Reading as Poaching' in *The History of Reading*, 137.

De Certeau draws attention to the way that reading practices have changed from the communal traditions of the past – when literature was often consumed through listening to one person speak in large groups - to the increasingly individualised and internalised nature of reading in Western societies today. This change has resulted in the detachment of the reader's body, as they no longer hear a speaker's voice or understand language as something which is produced primarily by the body through oral speech. Reading has transformed into a visual exercise of interpreting written signs on a page rather than one of oral comprehension. Even more so than writing, De Certeau suggests, reading has become a stagnant activity, and contemporary readers are treated more like passive consumers of finished texts than creative agents who are capable of responding to what they read, and challenging its original author.[21] This is an important perspective to consider in relation to Smith's depictions of the reader, who has a strong bodily presence in relation to the books they read.[22] It is evident that Smith seeks to overcome such reductive portrayals through her emphasis on characters' physical interactions with books, which are based on instinctive responses, and which often have a transformational impact on their lives. Through her depiction of characters who literally eat pages, for example, she plays with the notion of what it means to be a 'consumer' of books, suggesting that rather than being a passive activity, readers use these objects to nourish their most basic physical needs. Smith persistently rejects the notion of readers as disconnected from their material environment, foregrounding instead intimate bodily encounters with books to emphasise their role in stimulating and nourishing readers' imaginations.

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[21] Ibid., 132. The importance of oral discourse in allowing the reader to take on a more interactive role – including further theoretical perspectives which support this idea - is expanded upon in my chapter on 'The Dialogic Reader'.

[22] See, for example, Olive Fraser's behaviour in *Shire* and Ash's treatment of books in *Like*, both of which are expanded on later in this chapter.

The second perspective that has been useful is David Bleich's essay 'The Materiality of Reading', which also suggests that the portrayal of reading as a disembodied activity can have damaging consequences: 'Reading, rather than being understood to be primarily a social process, is assumed to be mainly a search for, and exchange of, immaterial essences'.[23] Bleich's view, like De Certeau's, suggests there is a tendency to abstract the act of reading from the context in which it takes place, thus preventing readers from connecting books to their own everyday experiences.[24] The danger of this abstraction, according to Bleich, is that it limits reading to theoretical and ideological realms and denies what he sees as one of its most powerful capabilities: to inspire and effect individual or even broader social change. Unless readers are encouraged to interpret what they read in relation to the rest of their lives, Bleich argues, the chances of using books for transformative purposes are limited. This socio-political dimension of reading again has relevance for my analysis of Smith's depictions. The violent acts of reader-characters such as Melissa, for example, reject a more abstract treatment of books which is disconnected from the complexities of everyday life, and which reinforces the idea that they are sacred and somehow untouchable.[25] Her decision to break out from these constraints, damaging the books that had previously defined and constrained her, suggests a desire to escape these circumstances and discover a renewed sense of connection to her immediate surroundings. Both Bleich and De Certeau's perspectives support this idea that the detachment of the subject's body from the act of reading can be disempowering and restricts readers to a purely intellectual realm. Alternatively,

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[23] David Bleich, 'The Materiality of Reading' in *New Literary History* 37.3 (2006), 608.
[24] Bleich warns against what he describes as 'the singleness and rigidity of the authoritative reading', which occurs when the reader believes meaning is an immaterial essence held within the text, rather than something which is created in the hands of its reader (Ibid., 610-1).
[25] Ibid., 613.

Smith asserts readers' physical presence and gives them space to respond to books with strong emotions according to the circumstances of their own lives.

Highly relevant to this discussion, and an important premise to my use of Cixous and Kristeva's ideas in this chapter, is to consider a feminist perspective of the (dis)embodied reader. The fictional reader-characters presented by Smith are almost exclusively female, and many find themselves oppressed by patriarchal frameworks that belittle and exclude them from the discourse they find in books.[26] The historical separation of body from mind has had particularly disastrous consequences for women, as femaleness has been associated with the carnal desires and irrational impulses of the body over a more rational and intellectual male space.[27] Londa Schiebinger argues that the dualism between body and mind has long underpinned Western culture, making 'males the guardians of culture and the things of the mind, while it associated females with the frailties and contingencies of the mortal body'.[28] This argument is further elucidated in Genevieve Lloyd's influential text, *The Man of Reason*, which traces from Greek mythology through to Christian doctrine and the Enlightenment thinking of Kant and Hegel how Western conceptions of Reason have persistently relied on the association of femaleness with fertility, nature, and the bodily senses, from which man must distinguish himself in order to think clearly and strive for knowledge.[29] Consequently, the role of actively shaping and determining meaning has long been associated with maleness, and this is reinforced historically through the sexual division of mental

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[26] Fetterley, for example, has analysed how female readers find themselves having to align with an experience which is not their own: that of the universalised 'male' point of view. (*The Resisting Reader*, xii).

[27] See for example Kathy Davis ed., *Embodied Practices*; Susan Hekman, 'Material Bodies' in *Body and Flesh*, 61-70; and Judith Still, 'French Feminist Criticism and Writing the Body' in *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), 263-81.

[28] Londa Schiebinger ed., *Feminism and the Body* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), 1.

[29] Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason* (London: Routledge, 1993).

labour.[30] As such, it is unsurprising that some feminist theorists have sought to distance themselves from the particularities of the body, as a way of detracting from this debilitating connection between women and the 'unthinking' or 'primitive' flesh. Cixous however, draws on embodied experience as a crucial means to knowledge, and uses it to rebel against the patriarchal constructs of thought and rationality described by Lloyd. As will be seen, her essays assert the important role that bodily sensations play within activities such as reading and writing, and connect abstract ideas to her own lived and felt experience. Cixous' work to implicate the body within such activities can also be linked to the violent acts of female characters towards books in Smith's fiction, which suggest their desire to break out from oppressive circumstances and assert themselves as shapers and meaning-makers.

There has also been a more recent resurgence of critical interest in materialist and embodied ways of thinking, including theorists such as Donna Haraway and Stacy Alaimo, who insist that we pay attention to women's material circumstances if we are to effect any real social change in terms of gender equality.[31] Such writers have argued that disregarding women's bodies within the social contexts in which they live and the very real, bodily suffering they often face, reinforces rather than overcomes their subordination within a patriarchal framework. In their recent essay 'Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory', Alaimo and Susan Hekman argue:

> The discursive realm is nearly always constituted so as to foreclose attention to lived, material bodies and evolving corporeal practices. An emerging group of feminist theorists of the body are arguing, however, that we need a way to talk

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[30] Ibid., 47. See also Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 6.

[31] As already mentioned, this shift towards material experience reflects a broader shift in critical discourse. See for example Diana Coole and Samantha Frost eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010).

about the materiality of the body as itself an active, sometimes recalcitrant, force.

Women *have* bodies; these bodies have pain as well as pleasure.[32]

The term 'discursive realm' here indicates intellectual activities, which have been disassociated from the messy complexities of bodily experience, and especially women's bodies. For these authors, continuing to perpetuate this distinction can have detrimental consequences on the ability of women to voice their experiences, and bringing bodies back into this 'discursive realm' constitutes an important act of rebellion. Many of the characters in Smith's fiction have, as Alaimo and Hekman stress, 'active, sometimes recalcitrant' bodies, which delight in a range of sensations from passion and desire to disgust and hate. These sensations are a crucial aspect of their developing subjectivities and are frequently manifested through their responses to books. The full expression of these sensations enables a more equal and dynamic relationship to develop between reader and text.

Before moving on to explore Cixous' perspective in more depth, I will draw on two other contemporary critics who have attempted to re-envision women's experience as a way of taking back control over their own disembodied circumstances. This is important for my discussion of Smith's work, whose reader-characters typically experience a renewed sense of freedom by responding to books in physical ways. The first is Alaimo's earlier publication *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space*, which aims to negotiate the dilemma of women's close association with the body by reconceptualising the material world as an interactive agent, rather than as passive matter that can be controlled by humans.[33] Alaimo asserts that many contemporary women writers have been using the physical environment as a powerful and energetic

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[32] Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, 'Emerging Models of Materiality in Feminist Theory' in *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015), 144.
[33] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, 12.

force, radically reconfiguring our understanding of materiality as subordinate to intellectual activity. Books, for example, have agency to jostle or dislodge the grasp that humans have established over them, an idea which supports Smith's depiction of books as an explosive force with which readers must grapple violently.[34] Alaimo's perspective is particularly relevant for the final section of this chapter, which considers Smith's depiction of books as an organic product of trees and as holding the same rich qualities for life and growth, as well as a tendency towards conflict and a struggle for survival.

The second perspective is Elizabeth Grosz's essay 'Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom', which stresses the indeterminate nature of how bodies act upon their physical environment. Grosz suggests that a subject's freedom is not pre-determined or fixed, but created through specific instances of taking action in the material world.[35] Subsequently, she defines freedom as something 'which emerges, surprises, and cannot be entirely anticipated in advance' and is thus spontaneous and unexpected.[36] It is not a state, property or right, she suggests, but a capacity to act that 'resides in the activities one undertakes that transform oneself and (a part of) the world'.[37] As such, it is not just the physical world that can be reconceptualised as having agency, but readers themselves who must seize upon their encounters with books as opportunities to exercise their own free will. Grosz' conception of freedom is reflected in the behaviour of characters such as Melissa in Smith's work, who breaks out of her everyday routine suddenly and unexpectedly by acting upon her physical environment in a volatile way.[38]

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[34] Ibid., 12-3.

[35] Elizabeth Grosz, 'Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom' in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, 139-57.

[36] Ibid., 152.

[37] Ibid.

[38] Further perspectives which support the idea that women have been socially conditioned to contain themselves within limited physical space include Iris Marion Young's well-known essay 'Throwing like a Girl' in *Throwing like a Girl and other essays in Feminist Philosophy and Social Theory* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1990), 141-59. Zillah R. Eisenstein's work on this topic also suggests that the female body has been constrained within discourse, and must be reconceptualised as 'a capacity rather

Grosz builds on this idea, suggesting that to express one's freedom is: 'not primarily a capacity of mind but of body: it is linked to the body's capacity for movement, and thus its multiple possibilities of action'.[39] Expressing oneself through the body is an essential part of exercising individual agency, and releasing the body from the inhibiting control of the mind. This notion of individual freedom as a physical movement which utilises the body rather than suppressing it is integral to Smith's portrayal of the embodied reader, whose physicality is gestured towards throughout as an important mode of self-expression.

I now turn my attention to three key essays by Hélène Cixous, written in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which have been crucial in promoting reading and writing as embodied practices and which epitomise many of the arguments already put forward in this introduction. Predating many of the essays surrounding embodiment already discussed, Cixous' work stands as an important precursor and continuing influence on emerging trends and discussions about the relationships between material bodies and the experiences of reading and writing.[40] I wish to consider three aspects of Cixous' writing in this area that relate to key characteristics of the embodied reader represented in Smith's writing, tracing the subject's journey from engaging with bodily sensation, to acting out a physical response and ultimately asserting agency over their experiences. The first is the close relationship developed between reading and the body, or the depiction of reading as something which takes place within and through the body, as described in Cixous' essay 'Difficult Joys'. The second is the presentation of reading as

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than a static entity' (*The Female Body and the Law* [Berkeley and London: University of California Press: 1988], 29).

[39] Grosz, 'Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom', 152.

[40] Kelly Oliver asserts that both Cixous and Kristeva's ideas 'have been very influential on feminism in the Anglo-American context' (*French Feminism Reader*, ix), whilst Ian Blyth argues that Cixous' 'multivocal and kaleidoscopic' texts offer a wide ranging and endlessly stimulating exploration that has yet to be fully taken into account (*Hélène Cixous: Live Theory* [New York and London: Continuum: 2004], 5).

a dangerous or subversive activity that 'jolts' or catapults the subject from a comfortable position into one of risk, as evidenced in the essay 'Coming to Writing'. Third is the idea of reading as a source of individual agency, especially from a feminist perspective, as described in Cixous' seminal essay 'Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays'. There are useful parallels to be drawn, I argue, between these aspects of Cixous' argument and Smith's depiction of the embodied reader, which are further explored in a critical exploration of Smith's novel *Like*.

I will begin by outlining relevant ideas from Cixous' essay 'Difficult Joys', which usefully demonstrates the close relationship she envisages between the act of reading and the body. This essay is largely concerned with articulating the 'difficult', almost painful, experience of becoming a writer, which Cixous describes as a tortured yet liberating process of bringing thoughts and experiences into words.[41] She is reluctant to adopt the identity of 'author' however, insisting that the sense of power associated with this term is uncomfortable, and from which she would prefer to remain distanced. Particularly as a woman writer, she suggests, it is important to undermine the authority inherent in the notion of authorship, resisting the first person 'I' of the narrative in order to allow for more equal involvement from the reader.[42] The ability of fiction writing to achieve this distance is highly appealing to Cixous, and she utilises descriptive and storytelling methods to subvert traditional notions of authorial voice.[43] This feature of her writing is not dissimilar to the approach taken by Smith, whose text *Artful* is a good example of distancing from the first person authority of the critic in favour of a more

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[41] Cixous, 'Difficult Joys', 19.

[42] Cixous argues: 'The moment there is an author in the place there is a kind of air of authority that blows, it's like a kind of poisoned air. The author has no authority and yet the author has authority' ('Difficult Joys', 28-9).

[43] A good example of this is Cixous' exploration of the writing process in *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), although this intimate style is characteristic of much of her work, including the essays under examination here.

playful, fictional narrative that makes room for the reader or listener's own interpretations.[44]

Another point of correlation between Cixous' and Smith's approaches that emerges in 'Difficult Joys' is the idea that the reader should be seen as the most important partner in any textual exchange. Cixous argues:

> There is no writing without reading. Writing is actually a kind of alliance between writer and reader. The reader within myself and the reader outside. Readers don't realise how much they are implied in the writing, how much they are at work, how much they write.[45]

Cixous intertwines the acts of reading and writing such that they are almost indistinguishable, and suggests that writing is dependent upon the cooperation of the reader for new creative work to be manifested. In this way, there is a chain of influence that moves from reader to writer and back again that might be described as a flow of creative energy between the two. It is towards the anticipated response of the reader that the writer reaches out, and it is only through reading that any individual can respond by interpreting the text or becoming a writer themselves. Cixous critic and translator Sarah Cornell describes this as 'a continuous process of reciprocal replenishment',[46] through which the reader is established as an important and influential figure in the making and re-making of the text, and which influences the writer in the process of their craft.

If one of Cixous' interests in 'Difficult Joys' is to give increased prominence to the reader, then one of the ways she achieves this is by implicating the reader's body into their experience of the text. This is best demonstrated in the final section of the essay,

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[44] Further discussion of this aspect can be found in my chapter on 'The Dialogic Reader'.
[45] Cixous, 'Difficult Joys', 26.
[46] Sarah Cornell, 'Hélène Cixous and les Etudes Féminines' in *The Body and the Text*, 32.

where Cixous describes these embodied experiences as flowing seamlessly from one to the other:

> *Personally,* when I write fiction, I write with my body. My body is active, there is no interruption between the work that my body is actually performing and what is going to happen on the page. I write very near my body and my pulsions . . . There are texts that are made of flesh. When you read these texts, you receive them as such. You feel the rhythm of the body, you feel the breathing and you make love with these texts. We meet texts in different scenes – at school, in a café, etc. We can read in our room, or in our bed, either we're very close to the book or we don't like it; when we do, obviously we have a kind of carnal, fleshly, bodily relation with the book. But the moment we suddenly start speaking about reading in public rooms, then we change our attitudes. We don't know how to say that we've eaten a book, that we've stroked a book, that the book has made us have an orgasm, or that it has hurt us or that I have cried. It's forbidden.[47]

Rather than separating the acts of reading and writing, Cixous envisions the body as a channel through which these activities are performed in communion with each other. The use of fluid imagery such as 'pulsions' and 'rhythms' depicts not only how physical sensations are involved in acts of writing, but also how readers and writers are connected through a kind of shared bodily experience. Susan Sellers observes that Cixous transforms her experiences into writing through 'a complex network of nerve impulses, chemical messages and muscle movements', a series of biological reactions which must be passed onto the reader through their own embodied interactions with books.[48] This is a highly intimate and subjective experience: '*Personally'* Cixous stresses,

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[47] Cixous, 'Difficult Joys', 27.
[48] Sellers, *Hélène Cixous*, 6. In 'Sorties', Cixous suggests that writing is a way of communicating visceral emotions which are inherently non-linguistic and can be difficult to articulate:

writing is something which comes from the body and responds to primal instincts, and reading also utilises the body, reacting to books in explosive ways. The visceral nature of these descriptions, such as making love to books, eating and stroking them, again suggests similarities with Smith's presentation of reading as an outlet for subversive desires, which are otherwise denied or 'forbidden'. Too often, Cixous argues, readers dismiss the emotional impact of these reading experiences, focussing instead on trying to generate intellectual thoughts and ideas.[49]

Another argument that further substantiates this idea is put forward by Françoise Defromont, who suggests that by depicting an intimate relationship between bodies and books, Cixous disrupts the distinction between the embodied, physical world and the realm of the mind, which is represented by the text.[50] Cixous refuses to withdraw from her body in order to think and write, rather she uses it to 'anchor thought into matter, embodying ideas, giving them something of a body'.[51] Language, Cixous suggests, need not be figurative or referential, but is capable of replicating bodily sensations and transferring them from writer to reader through the experience of the text.[52] In relation to Smith's writing, Cixous' focus on the textures of language is particularly useful when considering a character such as the homeless girl Else in *Hotel World*, who treats words as physical entities and a kind of nourishment that can compensate for her lack of worldly possessions. Else's treatment of language as something tactile subverts a social order which ignores her bodily presence and seeks to erase her from public space. A

'She exposes herself. Really she makes what she thinks materialize carnally, she conveys meaning with her body. She *inscribes* what she is saying because she does not deny unconscious drives the unmanageable part they play in speech.' (92)

[49] This is supported by Pearce's assertion that the emotional responses of readers have been viewed as too messy and unpredictable for the measured analysis and interpretation of the text (*Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, 5).

[50] Françoise Defromont, 'Metaphorical Thinking and Poetic Writing in Virginia Woolf and Hélène Cixous' in *The Body and the Text*, 120.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Ibid., 117.

fuller analysis of this character can be found in the following section in relation to the ideas of Julia Kristeva.

The second aspect of Cixous' presentation of the embodied reader that is relevant to my discussion here, is her insistence that the act of reading should challenge its subject by speaking directly, even painfully, to their lived experiences. This argument resonates with Bleich's view that reading should not be concerned with 'immaterial essences' but with personal and sociological concerns. In 'Coming to Writing', Cixous reflects on her own early experiences of reading whilst growing up amidst political conflict in Algeria.[53] Her descriptions, which are saturated with the violence and trauma she experienced, suggest that reading was not merely a pleasure or hobby but a survival instinct, akin to eating or sleeping: 'I didn't eat, I read. I always "knew", without knowing it, that I nourished myself with texts'.[54] Like characters who treat books as a kind of nourishment, Cixous describes reading as having the capacity to satisfy her most basic needs, drawing attention to the material qualities of books and her instinctive gravitation towards them. She also describes reading as 'making love to the text', reinforcing the notion that it demands a passionate, even ravenous, response, one that can satisfy her bodily appetites and desires.[55]

As the title suggests, 'Coming to Writing' is preoccupied with how Cixous' early experiences of reading inspired her to write:

> When books took me, transported me, pierced me to the entrails, allowed me to feel their disinterested power . . . When my being was populated, my body traversed and fertilized, how could I have closed myself up in silence?[56]

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[53] In 'Sorties', Cixous suggests: 'I learned to read, to write, to scream, and to vomit in Algeria' (70), emphasising the volatile effect that political conflict had on her body, and how this influenced her writing.

[54] Cixous, 'Coming to Writing', 20.

[55] Ibid., 24.

[56] Ibid., 13.

Reading is not a passive experience for Cixous, but an active bodily engagement which almost involves a physical assault on the reader, as they surrender themselves to the power of the text. The threat that books pose is balanced however by the reader's simultaneous ability to act out their own violence and stimulate new creativity. In this way, reading is not merely an escapism from the world, rather it brings to life the reader's own unarticulated experience, and writing becomes a way of speaking back to this text.

Later in the essay, Cixous builds on this idea of the text as a body with which the reader is compelled to interact:

> Life becomes text starting out from my body. I am already text . . . The whole of reality worked upon in my flesh, intercepted by my nerves, by my senses, by the labor of all my cells, projected, analyzed, recomposed into a book.[57]

This example illustrates the way that Cixous sees writing as a way of translating her experiences into language, which can be read and interpreted again and again. In one sense, the body takes priority over the text, 'starting out from my body', 'projected' and 'recomposed' all imply that the body is the necessary precursor to textual production. On the other hand, she says 'I am already text', which suggests that the body is a pre-existing inscription of codes and messages, which is already marked by her experiences. Just as she refuses to make a clear distinction between the positions of reader and writer, so Cixous dismantles the privileging of text over body, by presenting them as mutually interchangeable. Once the sensations of the writer have been transferred into a text, she suggests, the text also holds the conditions for these sensations to be manifested in the body of the reader.

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[57] Ibid., 52.

The potential violence of such intimate encounters between reader and text continues to pervade Cixous' essay. She not only makes love to her books, but exerts aggressive impulses and seeks to punish them for how they have affected her:

> I beat my books: I caressed them. Page after page, O beloved, liked, lacerated. With nail marks all around the printed body. What pain you cause me! I read you, I adore you, I venerate you, I listen to your word, O burning bush.[58]

Cixous is a fraught reader: the dents made in the books by her nails is suggestive of a violent impulse towards them, whilst outcries such as 'O burning bush' likens them to religious texts which must be violently grappled with to obtain some sort of spiritual revelation. At another point in the essay, she suggests that the writer is impelled to keep writing in order to prevent the reader from gaining too firm a grasp over their work: 'to keep it from reading you',[59] as if the writer themselves is at the mercy of the reader's overwhelming desire. Reading and writing are again interchangeable and embattled identities, as Cixous conveys through short, breathless phrases her desperate desire to grapple physically with texts. These depictions of a reader who oscillates between emotional extremes can be informed by feminist reader-response critics such as Flynn and Pearce, who highlight the dangers of becoming overly dominant or submissive in relationship to a text. Flynn, in particular, suggests that by dominating the text the reader will become bored and complacent, whilst total submission to it will lead to extreme levels of anxiety.[60] Pearce agrees that: 'readerly enamoration is a complex (and often self-deceiving) process, with the reader seeking to be both active (and/or empowered) and passive (and/or disempowered) simultaneously'.[61] By presenting the

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[58] Ibid., 23.
[59] Ibid., 4.
[60] Elizabeth A. Flynn, 'Gender and Reading' in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, 268.
[61] Pearce, *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, 82.

ideal reader-text relationship as one in which neither reader nor text is fully in control of the process, these authors show how meaning is produced not through the domination of one by the other, but through the dynamic interplay of both. As seen in Cixous' essay, it is this oscillation between the strong emotions of pleasure and frustration in relation to the text that enables both new meaning to be created, and readers themselves to be transformed.

Smith expressed a similarly visceral response to books in a speech for the Edinburgh World Writers' Conference in 2012:

> Fight, fight, fight. Language is never not up for it. It's a fight to the life. All we need to do, reader or writer, from first line to final page, is be as open as a book, and be alive to the life in language – on all its levels.[62]

Imagery of combat is suggestive of the fraught encounter required between books and readers for meaning to be wrought from them. Like Cixous, Smith suggests that readers should become vulnerable and willing to engage their bodies in an activity that will demand exertion and stamina. The alternative for both Cixous and Smith is a kind of death or lifelessness that leaves both text and reader devoid of meaning; Cixous, for example, describes an unread book as 'a decaying carcass' characterised by 'stench and falsity', until the reader picks it up again.[63] Common to both depictions is the idea of dynamic interaction between reader and text, a power struggle over meaning for which neither party is wholly responsible, but which is generated through this tussle back and forth.

In *Shire*, Smith re-imagines the repressed childhood of a forgotten Scottish poet Olive Fraser, and uses destructive actions towards books to envisage a violent break out from

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[62] Smith, 'Style vs. Content'.
[63] Cixous, 'Coming to Writing', 52.

these feelings of subordination. There are resonances to be found in this story with Cixous' desire in 'Coming to Writing' to beat and caress her books, and to break open their spines in order to wrench significance from them. As already introduced, in the second section, 'The poet', Olive deals with feelings of frustration towards her estranged father by throwing copies of Walter Scott's Waverley novels – which he sends as gifts - across the room, ripping open their spines. These books, pillars of the literary canon and a staple feature of Scottish family bookshelves, reside in the austere front room of the house, which is usually kept out of bounds: 'It was kept for the good. It wasn't used'.[64] Olive's sacrilegious handling of Scott's text, and the volatile manner with which 'She didn't even look at it, she threw the book. She just threw it',[65] before retrieving a gutting knife from the kitchen to slice it open, provides a cathartic release for the resentment she feels towards her father. Earlier in the day, Olive had stood outside the butcher's shop in the village, watching him chop fresh carcasses, and her brutality towards the bookshelf imitates this masculinised violence. The likening of chunks of meat to the books in the front room emphasises their carnality, whilst skeletal connotations of the word 'spine' are used to stress the ruthlessness of her behaviour. By throwing books across the room and ripping them open however, Olive also discovers hidden sheet music inside the covers, and this surprise discovery provides catharsis for her anxieties. Conversely, she resurrects these lifeless tomes through acts of violence towards them, discovering new creative secrets within them and unleashing their latent energy, which is hidden inside. Consequently, such physical reactions towards books are idealised by Smith as a way of resolving suppressed emotions and discovering new value in books, such that their potential for meaning is constantly renewed.

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[64] Ibid., 49.
[65] Ibid., 48.

The example of Olive Fraser in *Shire* also links to the third aspect of Cixous' depiction I wish to discuss, which is the development of the reader as embattled with the text into one who asserts agency over their environment. Cixous suggests in her seminal essay 'Sorties' that an embodied approach to reading can be a way of overcoming the problem of authorship, by asserting the reader's presence and refusing to relegate them to a subordinate position in relation to the established authority of the text.[66] In *Embodied Practises*, Kathy Davis supports the argument that female bodies have been treated as an unwelcome distraction within the intellectual sphere and as harbouring irrational impulses that must be tamed. She describes how 'the dangerous, appetitive female body, ruled precariously by her emotions' is typically contrasted to 'the masterful, masculine will, the locus of social power, rationality and self-control'.[67] Davis' text does not suggest, however, that women retreat from their bodies into a disembodied textual space in order to appear more like men, but rather it celebrates authors such as Cixous and Kristeva, who articulate the embodied figure with a different kind of language, which is empowering. Cixous' writing suggests that this tendency to shame and eliminate the body must be overcome:

> We have turned away from our bodies. Shamefully we have been taught to be unaware of them, to lash them with stupid modesty. . . Woman must write her body, must make up the unimpeded tongue that bursts partitions, classes, and rhetorics, orders and codes, must inundate, run through, go beyond the discourse with its last reserves.[68]

Cixous brings the female body back into discourse by invoking it into the act of writing, and by asserting her own bodily agency within a traditionally masculinised and

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[66] Cixous, 'Sorties', 95.

[67] Davis, *Embodied Practises*, 5.

[68] Cixous, 'Sorties', 94-5.

disembodied space. She also demands that women read and write as a kind of political activism, to combat the relegation of their own bodies and voices to the recesses of discourse. Like Grosz' notion that an individual's freedom lies in their ability to take action rather than merely theorising, Cixous demonstrates her commitment to reading and writing as a way of breaking out from constraint and exerting individual agency.

As she draws on her own social circumstances and feelings of powerlessness, Cixous describes how reading helped her to actively engage in political struggles and fight back against those who restricted her: 'I have always wanted war; I did not believe that changes would be made except through revolutionary movements . . . I forged through the texts where there was a struggle'.[69] Cixous uses imagery of combat to present textual space as a war-like territory, in which she engages in a struggle for revolution to fuel her own writing. The provocative images she creates resonate with Smith's presentation of the text as a kind of battleground, through which the reader engages in conflict. Whilst such forceful metaphors do not offer an alternative to masculinised ideologies of war and violence, both Cixous and Smith inhabit these discourses as a way of asserting the reader's agency and generating a sense of empowerment through bodily movement. As discussed in the example of Olive Fraser, exerting violence towards books is used in Smith's work to overcome feelings of insignificance and subordination, as well as creating a pathway for re-making texts in new and unexpected ways.

The final theoretical voice I wish to draw upon to support my analysis of an embodied reader in Smith's work is Julia Kristeva's seminal publication *Revolution in Poetic Language*. Kristeva puts forward a forceful argument for the recuperation of the body within the acts of reading and writing, suggesting that a violent intervention is needed

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[69] Ibid., 73.

to materialize the reader's experience and fulfil its potential for meaning.[70] Kristeva highlights that in order to create a text, spoken language must be rendered into a signification system of written signs, which inevitably becomes separated from the life of language as articulated through the human body. She describes the written text as an archive; a record or piece of documentation that is detached from the vital energy of language as used in social contexts.[71] Alternatively, Kristeva forges a close link between textual and bodily experience, arguing that the apparent fixity of written language on the page can be disrupted and challenged by more visceral articulations which are in tune with the rhythms and drives of their writers', and subsequently readers', bodies.[72]

Kristeva's argument resonates with my discussion of Cixous' writing, which emphasises the bodily aspects of language, and presents the text as a potential site in which such qualities are manifested. Here, Kristeva distinguishes between what she describes as a 'genotext' – a text which retains something of language in the process of its own formation, including its close relationship to bodily sensation and experience – and a 'phenotext', which is the formula or algebraic code into which language is developed for the purposes of standardised comprehensibility.[73] Kristeva suggests that the literary text is particularly successful at rediscovering the genotext, drawing attention to the primary rhythms and gestures of the body that can be found within language:

> If there exists a "discourse" which is not a mere depository of thin linguistic layers, an archive of structures, or the testimony of a withdrawn body, and is,

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[70] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 101. A useful introduction to the development of Kristeva's thinking in this area can be found in John Lechte, *Julia Kristeva* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 4-5.
[71] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 16.
[72] Ibid., 26-9.
[73] Ibid., 87.

> instead, the essential element of a practice involving the sum of unconscious, subjective, and social relations in gestures of confrontation and appropriation, destruction and construction – productive violence, in short – it is "literature", or, more specifically, the *text*.[74]

This quotation reveals Kristeva's interest in the idea of a 'withdrawn body', with language such as 'depository' and 'testimony' all suggesting the remnants of something left behind and merely referential. She also calls into question the idea of literature as a finished product, arguing that the language found within such texts must remain malleable for it to continue generating significance. In his introduction to Kristeva's *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Leon S. Roudiez uses the metaphor of a cloth to emphasise this idea that for Kristeva the text 'is in a perpetual state of flux as different readers intervene'. In this way, she recognises the significance of the reader's role in constantly re-shaping and moulding the text.[75] Additionally, Kristeva revels in the idea that language can carry out direct and 'productive violence' by refusing to ignore or repress embodied aspects of a subject's experience, and by insisting on the representation of this experience within the text. The literary text has potential, she suggests, to draw together and express the disjointed experiences of the body, a process which is challenging and often involves the violation of textual conventions such as grammatical rules and logical narrative structure. Only by attempting to articulate this chaotic bodily experience, however, can the text become anything other than 'a weighty mass' and genuinely connect with readers' own experiences.[76]

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[74] Ibid., 16.

[75] Leon S. Roudiez, 'Introduction' in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 5.

[76] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 101.

Kristeva's comments echo the idea that unused or unopened books are heavy and lifeless weights, which are devoid of life and vitality. Her argument also responds to some of the questions raised so far in this chapter, such as whether a written text can communicate with its reader the bodily experience through which it was originally generated. Importantly however, the articulation of primal, bodily desire that Kristeva describes within the text is only temporary. Whereas Cixous invests herself more permanently in a new method of writing which utilises the impulses of the body, Kristeva suggests that the transgressive eruptions found in the genotext are inevitably lost as they are subsumed back into the more abstract system of written signs.[77] This repression of bodily experience within the text, she suggests, is representative of 'the kind of activity encouraged and privileged by [capitalist] society', which stifles the volatile drives of the body in favour of the more easily controlled mind.[78] The disturbance caused by primal sensations as they break through onto the surface of the text cannot be sustained, she argues, and is eventually thwarted by its conventional order, which remains whole and comprehensible.

An example from Smith's oeuvre which helps to illustrate Kristeva's emphasis on the disruptive potential of language can be found in *Hotel World*, which has already been briefly introduced. Whilst this narrative is less directly concerned with the physical treatment of books or the act of reading, it is highly engaged in the tactile properties of language itself, and this is explored through the homeless character, Else. Else suffers from a terrible cough, yet is dependent on her voice to beg for change from passers-by outside a grand city hotel. Her use of language is directly linked to her ability to sustain

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[77] Ibid., 67.
[78] Ibid., 13.

herself financially, and she carefully considers the weight of the words in her throat as she does the coins in her pocket:

> She imagines the pavement littered with the letters that fall out of the half-words she uses (she doesn't need the whole words) . . . It's just letters. Anyway, they're biodegradable. They rot like leaves do.[79]

Smith draws a connection between Else's language and her material circumstances, envisaging letters as tangible objects which have a value like currency. Less important letters within the alphabet economy are likened to rotting leaves, and this corresponds with Kristeva's notion that language loses its vitality when it is not being productively used in real-life contexts. Else's repetitive call '(Spr sm chn?)',[80] has literally been stripped of its vowels, which suggests that her words have not been heard by passing pedestrians, and have become an unwanted disruption to the narrative itself. Else's selective use of language – '(she doesn't need the whole words)' – is indicative of her own lack of worth; even her name suggests the remnants or leftovers of something more important. Her call is not immediately comprehensible, and as such it temporarily disrupts the grammatical order of the text before it is once again silenced by the more conventional third-person narrative.

Else's unheard voice is representative of her broken and undesired body on the city's pavements and in the hotel's sanitised bedrooms, and throughout the novel Smith experiments with the idea that this economy of language can be linked to an economy of space, in which Else's body is not permitted to exist. She also portrays the hotel secretary, Lise, as a character whose language is similarly controlled by her surroundings: 'Something is clipping at her words as they come out of her mouth. Else

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[79] Smith, *Hotel World*, 47.
[80] Ibid., 35.

imagines the clipping is being done by pinking-shear blades'.[81] A violent yet humorous image is used here to demonstrate how Lise's professional jargon is constrained to an economy of language which is conditioned by the social context in which she works. Else vividly imagines the secretaries 'neatly filleting the words' and 'wastepaper baskets overflowing with the thrown-away 'i's and o's and u's and e's and a's',[82] to emphasise the materiality of words themselves, which can be treasured or treated as waste. By embracing this concise, economical use of language, just as she does a lifestyle uncluttered by material possessions, Else rebels against a society which works constantly to de-value and exclude her. When she is finally offered a hotel room to sleep in for the night, she finds it too extravagant, and prefers to sleep in the carpet warehouse across the road.[83] Her treatment of language as something tangible and articulated directly from her body becomes a way of acknowledging her impoverished material circumstances as well as reclaiming the physical space in which she exists.

This interruption of the text by a more visceral language can be likened to the kind of disruption described in Kristeva's argument. This disruption involves the rebellion of characters who refuse to have their voices – and furthermore their bodies – silenced by the more authoritative voices that narrate their lives. Kristeva treats the text as a site of rebellion against such restrictions, through which readers might be stimulated to respond against its imposed order or structure. As seen in Cixous' work, the representation of the body within the text demands a necessary violence, and the reader must physically grapple in order to generate meaning from it. The text must 'lift the repression that weighs heavily on this moment of struggle', and by allowing such a

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[81] Ibid., 69.
[82] Ibid., 46.
[83] Ibid., 76.

newly embodied language to emerge, 'create[s] the conditions for its renewal'.[84] In this respect, the destruction of books and the erasure of language in Smith's work is often required for a more positive regeneration to take place, and responsibility for this is frequently placed into the hands of its reader.

Drawing on this theoretical context, regarding both the tendency within critical discourse to disembody the act of reading and the urgent need to re-embody it in order to exploit its subversive potential, the following two sections of this chapter turn to a more detailed analysis of Smith's fiction. The first examines the novel *Like*, in which books are objects of displaced frustration for protagonists Amy and Ash, as they struggle with their own fraught relationship and seek reconciliation through the destruction and re-making of texts. The burning of books plays an important role in this narrative, and such imagery links not only to characters' angry and destructive impulses, but also to their unfulfilled sexual desires. The third section of this chapter considers books as an organic product of trees and uses this natural imagery to demonstrate how Smith presents the reader in a natural cycle of creative as well as destructive energy. Stories such as 'The beholder', 'Text for the day' and 'May' serve as reminders that books have a material connection to the organic matter from which they are made, and a similar ability to grow and evolve through their physical interactions with readers. Drawing again on the theoretical perspectives introduced here, as well as more recent eco-critical perspectives, this section develops the relationship between books and trees to present a convincing image of Smith's idealised reader as an embodied figure.

Like

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[84] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 208.

Smith's first published novel *Like* centres on the narratives of two women with a fraught history; Amy, a once aspiring Cambridge academic who is now raising ten-year-old Kate in a caravan in Scotland, and Aisling or 'Ash', who has returned to her hometown in the Highlands after chasing Amy and still suffering the effects of unrequited love. Set against the romantic backdrop of Cambridge's intellectual sphere, books play a crucial role in the novel, and are drawn upon recurrently to symbolise the differences between Amy and Ash, as well as being a manifestation of their conflicted passion for each other. It is the purpose of this section to demonstrate how these characters' embodied interactions with books enable them to navigate their emotions within this alluring yet stifling academic atmosphere, and take agency over troubled personal circumstances.

Having met briefly as teenagers when Amy's English family went on summer holiday to Ash's hometown in the Scottish Highlands, the two girls keep in touch and remain fascinated by each other: Ash by Amy's conventional cleverness and Amy by Ash's less conventional but practical understanding of the landscapes in which she grew up. When Amy is admitted to the University of Cambridge to study English Literature, Ash follows her in search of a fresh start. Smith's own experience of moving to this city as a young woman is gestured towards as she describes Ash's first impressions of Cambridge:

> Bookshop after bookshop, a place where bookshops belonged as if naturally, as if they were a special culture grown there . . . Streets paved with books and music and the promise of them, the promise of this place radiating out like heat.[85]

Smith immediately situates books as integral to the physical infrastructure of the city, both within its shops and libraries and as building blocks or paving stones, which provide a tangible foundation for its reputation as a prestigious centre of learning. There

[85] Smith, *Like*, 229-293.

is a fairy-tale quality to this description, which reflects Ash's optimistic attitude as she arrives in search of new opportunities. Nevertheless, Smith also describes 'two lumpy girls . . . one wearing an anorak, both carrying books' and 'a girl sat in a library, surrounded by books',[86] conveying the overwhelming atmosphere that this omnipresence of books can create. There is both a feeling of wonder and nervousness for Ash towards the sheer number of books in this place, a daunting reminder of her own intellectual inadequacy compared to the students she meets there.

As Ash gains insight into the academic rigour of Amy's university world, she finds that books are highly valued and precious objects, which are held at a physical, almost tantalising, distance from her: 'Almost without exception the books in her room looked like they'd never been read, sometimes never been touched, like nobody had dared finger and bend their spines. But she'd read them, I'd seen her, and she knew them'.[87] The oxymoronic phrase 'ordered chaos' reveals the dual character of the books on Amy's shelves, which are both rich with diversity, and strictly categorised in a way which deters the inexperienced from meddling with them. Phrases such as 'nobody had dared finger and bend their spines' suggest that being seen to touch these books or damage them would be risky for Amy if she wishes to be taken seriously as an academic. The notion that these interactions have been hidden supports the idea that the material, embodied experience of the reader has been disapproved of, especially within the academic sphere. Ash finds this attitude difficult to comprehend, and suspects that Amy has secretly revelled in these volumes with the kind of passion described by Cixous in 'Difficult Joys' when she suggests: 'we have a kind of carnal, fleshly, bodily relation with

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[86] Ibid., 231.
[87] Ibid., 245.

the book'.[88] Amy carefully disguises her passion for books however by maintaining their pristine appearance on the shelves.

Through her depiction of the intellectual atmosphere at Cambridge, Smith demonstrates how by focussing on her intellectual work, Amy has become distanced from her own physical surroundings, and this is manifested in her detached relationship with the books she has dedicated herself to reading:

> when Amy was vulgar it was always tastefully, eccentricity always within the bounds of correctness . . . it was only me who knew she was so strange, so mad, so perverse beneath the propriety and the poise of her.[89]

This example further illustrates Amy's attempts to comply with the decorous behaviour expected of her at Cambridge, and Ash's narrative again suggests that the more emotive, carnal aspects of her are kept hidden. Amy's disembodied interactions with books are also reflective of her prudishness in relation to Ash, towards whom she feels a kind of forbidden attraction that she must repress. Amy's aloof relationship with books thus mirrors the careful control she keeps over her emotions more generally, especially those which are socially transgressive. Her omission of Ash from her private diaries further suggests she is trying to erase Ash's threatening presence, even from her own writing, as though by removing her from the text she can overcome her conflicted feelings. Amy is writing an academic volume entitled *The Pain and Pleasure of the Text*, which is ironic given that her academic approach to dealing with this subject substitutes bodily passion for a kind of intellectual theorising. Alternatively, Amy treats her own writing as an opportunity to control her unwanted desires and bodily sensations by maintaining a safe physical distance from the emotions that threaten to ruin her reputation.

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[88] Cixous, 'Difficult Joys', 27.
[89] Smith, *Like*, 244–5.

Ash instinctively embraces her body and sexuality more openly, and this is reflected in her tactile relationships with books, especially when given a job at the university library: 'I'd been up in the tower moving volumes from one shelf to another, I was wearing overalls and my face and hands were smudged with the dirt that comes off books'.[90] Snubbed by Amy and her friends for her lack of academic credentials, Ash's manual work in the library reinforces her lower social status within the university hierarchy. Nevertheless, she derives a sense of satisfaction from these physical interactions with books, which leave marks on her body, testifying to the manual labour she has undertaken. In contrast to Amy, Ash's interactions with books are unashamedly connected to her body as she joyfully embraces their weights, sizes and textures. She disrupts the order of the shelves by moving volumes into the wrong places when no one is looking, and this small act of rebellion against the careful order of the library is a source of secret pleasure for her.[91] In a related incident, she steals a heavy painting from the university for Amy's birthday and leaves it, to Amy's simultaneous joy and horror, in her bedroom. These actions reveal Ash's determination to disrupt the established order of Cambridge by physically displacing objects such as books and even works of art, removing them from their designated spaces and putting them in unexpected locations. Such behaviour can be informed by Cixous' interest in disrupting physical space in her essay 'Sorties', as she describes manually shifting things around in order to challenge social order: 'scrambling spatial order, disorienting it, moving furniture, things, and values around'.[92] The need for embodied interactions with books as another way of re-ordering relations is a key motif in this essay; Cixous recalls reading high up in trees, and compares it to following route-signs on a journey. Similarly, she describes

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[90] Ibid., 250.
[91] Ibid., 271.
[92] Cixous, 'Sorties', 96.

the 'literary enclosure' as an arena in which the embodied subject must carve out space for herself defiantly and against the odds.[93] Ash's unabashed manhandling of prestigious objects in Cambridge is suggestive of her desire to physically manoeuvre her environment and carve out space for herself within an apparently exclusive sphere. These actions also resonate with Grosz' understanding of freedom as 'the capacity for action' in the material world, and the idea that individual agency is not exercised through thought alone but must be actualised through practical actions in physical space.[94]

By interacting physically with books, Ash asserts agency in an environment in which she feels disempowered, challenging preconceived notions about what it means to be a 'reader' at Cambridge, and presenting it as an activity that takes place as much through bodily drives as the rational mind. Her refusal to maintain a physical distance from the books in the library is also indicative of her refusal to deny her sexual desire for Amy, whom she strongly associates with a kind of 'rich prose'.[95] In this way, the contrast between these characters' willingness to engage with books physically is representative of their willingness to embrace their bodily drives and sexual impulses for each other. Ash's association of books with the object of her desire is evidenced during an episode in the library where she has a sexual fantasy amongst the bookshelves:

> I braced my feet on the shelves opposite, pushed my back into the shelves behind
>
> me, felt myself tighten from the back of my neck down to my toes; I spanned in

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[93] Ibid., 67-72.

[94] Grosz, 'Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom', 140. Grosz also suggests that the subject is 'transformed by and engaged through (their) acts' (146). In this sense, Ash's physical actions in the library are not just a mode of self-expression, but of becoming a new and different self. At this point in the narrative, Amy is unable or unwilling to enact her own freedom in the same way.

[95] Smith, *Like*, 244.

an arc of stretched muscle the satisfying air space between Italian Art of the

Renaissance and Orthodox Religions.[96]

As Ash presses up against the books in a sensual manner - their conservative titles

enhancing the subversive nature of this behaviour – she experiences a sense of liberation.

Verbs such as 'braced', 'pushed', 'tighten', 'spanned' and 'stretched' suggest that Ash is

testing the limits of her physical environment, exploring her sexuality and exercising

her body within the contained space she finds herself in. Later, in another fantasy about

herself and Amy, she continues to invoke the physical presence of books in an erotic

way: 'we are eating each other alive on the floor of her book-lined room'.[97] Again, books

mark the boundaries of a physical space in which this characters' passions play out, and

as seen in Cixous' descriptions of books having carnal or flesh-like qualities, in Smith's

novel these objects provide a release for Ash's subconscious desires.[98] Her provocative

comment 'we are eating each other alive' is also reminiscent of Cixous' essay 'Love of

the Wolf', which describes love-making as a form of consumption through which one

lover must violate or 'eat' the other in order to fulfil their passion. In this text, Cixous

suggests: 'As soon as we embrace, we salivate, one of us wants to eat, one of us is going

to be swallowed up in little pieces',[99] exposing the inevitability of one subject's

domination over the other according to their own selfish desire. Here, Cixous is also

interested in the ways that language is used as a mask to hide from raw, physical desire,

and advocates instead a more visceral usage of words that embraces the volatility of the

emotions they convey.[100] Similarly, in Smith's narrative, Ash describes her unfulfilled

desire for Amy as a 'savage' beast, 'its musky jaws' leaving her 'bloody, bitten in two',

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[96] Ibid., 262.
[97] Ibid., 299.
[98] Cixous, 'Difficult Joys', 27.
[99] Hélène Cixous, 'Love of the Wolf' in *Stigmata: Escaping Texts* (London: Routledge, 1998), 89.
[100] Ibid., 85.

'mauling playfully at [her], playfully shredding the flesh into rags'.[101] Such violent descriptions of her gnawing desire reflect the carnality of Ash's experience, and present Amy as a kind of predator who is physically tearing her apart.

Whilst Ash joyfully embraces her bodily desires, she is also fraught with unsatisfied passion, and just as she revels in the smell of old books in the library, she also comments frequently on Amy's smell as an overwhelming odour that she cannot get rid of. In one sense, Ash's body is depicted as a text which has been irrevocably marked by Amy's presence:

> If I were to snap open now at an arm, a leg, anywhere on my body, I could look down and there would be the a and the m and the y of her, visceral and elastic, stretching with the flesh; look in the bones, the cross-section of the honey-comb marrow, and there it is written all through me, sweet and sticky, a souvenir from Amy.[102]

Ash has been physically scarred by her passion for Amy, and the textures described here are particularly evocative: 'visceral and elastic' and 'sweet and sticky' have sexual connotations, and also imply that Ash is trapped by her feelings. Kristeva's desire for more 'visceral articulations' of language, which are communicated on and through the body, and which break uncomfortably into the established order of the text is relevant here, as the letters of Amy's name become physically manifested in the contours of Ash's body. This volatile articulation of Ash's desire for Amy in and through her body, which has been somewhat 'controlled, directed, organised' until now,[103] suggests that Ash cannot separate her physical experience from her rational thought through language, and Amy has become an excessive and transgressive code which she struggles to

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[101] Smith, *Like*, 262-7.
[102] Ibid., 228.
[103] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 17.

decipher. Ash's simultaneous feelings of repulsion and desire towards this experience are further evidence of the discomfort that such eruptions can create: what Kristeva describes as rhythmic and even musical articulations designed to shock and delight the reader.[104]

Ash's visceral use of language, and her volatile treatment of books is further emphasised through suggestions that she had a habit of unleashing anger on the volumes in her childhood bedroom. It becomes apparent throughout the narrative that even from a young age, Ash turned towards books to express her deepest passions. In one incident, Ash lashes out on her books to gain her parents' attention: 'I shut the door, deep in my throat the urge swelling and kicking inside me to jump up and knock all the books off the top of the wardrobe, slam the wardrobe doors'.[105] Despite having stayed out late, Ash's misdemeanour is ignored by her parents, and the lack of attention she receives for this causes great frustration. Her subsequent decision to knock all the books off the shelf, as seen elsewhere in Smith's fiction, suggests her determination to break out of the repressive circumstances of her life. Perhaps because they are the closest and heaviest objects around her to throw, or because they are imbued with a sense of propriety and order from which she feels excluded, books are an early object of displacement for Ash's burgeoning sense of subordination. After meeting Amy for the first time, Ash returns home in a passion and hurls books across the room to express her immediately conflicted feelings.[106] Again Ash's behaviour towards books, and her willingness to respond to them in physical ways, stands in stark contrast to Amy's prudish detachment from them.

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[104] Ibid., 26-29.
[105] Smith, *Like*, 175.
[106] Ibid., 214.

On discovering her absence from Amy's self-written narrative, Ash's interactions with books escalate into outright violence. She has always been interested in the chemical processes involved in heating and burning paper, and muses on vocabulary such as 'calescence', 'calefaction' and 'calcination' to describe the intense heating processes by which physical materials can be reduced to dry powder.[107] Ash eventually commits arson by setting Amy's library on fire, a dramatic and final act of rebellion against the suppressive atmosphere at Cambridge, and a statement of frustration towards Amy's unrelenting loyalty to it. This fire represents Ash's burning passion for Amy, as well as her determination to destroy the objects so closely associated with her, which both fuelled their relationship and ultimately formed a dividing barrier between them. By making fire, Ash also generates new heat energy from the books, creating an awe-inspiring spectacle which is both impressive and horrifying. The university authorities report the incident with outrage: 'Irreparable. Bitterly destructive. Heritage. Four centuries. The attacker had destroyed literally hundreds of valuable books, including early volumes of philosophical, medical and mathematical treatise'.[108] Smith emphasises the intellectual value of the books from the point of view of the university, which reflects their desire to maintain respectability in the face of this act of defiance. From Ash's perspective however, the material value of the books has been brought to magnificent fulfilment by this act of burning, which has released new energy from them in the form of heat and light. In this way, a violent act of destruction towards books is reenvisaged by Smith not as a negative action but as a way of repurposing them and finding alternative ways to express their value.

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[107] Ibid., 301.
[108] Ibid., 305.

When Ash finds out she has been omitted from Amy's narrative, she is also inspired to write her own diary and tell her own version of events. Her need to destroy painful memories by omitting them from the page is another way for her to assert agency over the past, as she discovers that she too can craft and control her books, choosing which aspects to reveal, and which to hide: 'It's good that marks are hard to leave, or if they're left you can't always read what they are'.[109] Ash's ability to erase something she would rather forget becomes a powerful way of taking agency over the unfortunate circumstances of her past, and a connection is made between the marks on the page and the physical scars left on her body by Amy's rejection. Ash describes how these traumatic experiences have permanently damaged her:

> It's hard to see what's really out there past the scratches that get left on the retina by what you've seen before and the fiddly engravings already etched into the surface of your brain. Apparently, the new cells of the body will still, years after the bite, reproduce the shapes of the teeth that bit you all those years ago. Bodies, hoarding what scars them, bodies are the places your memories hog the best armchair.[110]

This description is resonant of Cixous' suggestion in 'Coming to Writing' that past trauma traverses her entire body, and that acknowledging this is the perfect place to start writing.[111] Writing for Cixous is an unstoppable force initiating from her body: a guttural response to life events and a physical experience of throwing herself into the vulnerable yet liberating space of the text.[112] Writing is also a way of paying testament to her lived experience by reconstructing it in textual form. Similarly, Ash is tortured

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[109] Ibid., 321.
[110] Ibid., 327.
[111] Cixous, 'Coming to Writing', 52.
[112] Ibid.

by her emotional trauma, which continues to coarse through her body even after the event has ended, and writing becomes a way of expressing and reconciling these bodily sensations. Reading and writing both play a reparative function in Ash's narrative, helping her to rewrite her own identity and assert agency over her past experiences.

As Ash inscribes herself onto paper to relieve herself of this physical burden, Smith's narrative asserts the centrality of lived experience to both writing and reading: 'I've been carrying it around with me now for so long it's taken on a kind of life of its own, I can feel it breathing against me inside my rib-cage, feeding off me'.[113] Burdened by memories as if by some kind of parasite, Ash's diary-writing, or 'liary' as she calls it, becomes a way of releasing her body and overcoming her suppressed emotions.[114] Similarly, in 'Sorties', Cixous asserts that writing liberates her from the painful burden of experience, releasing physical sensations and 'un-censoring' her own suppressed feelings. She suggests that the subject is reconnected to their body through writing: 'giving her back access to her own forces; that will return her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her vast bodily territories kept under seal'.[115] In this regard, writing can be a way of taking back agency over the body, and actively narrating one's own experience rather than allowing someone else to do so. Whilst writing cannot heal her scars, Ash refuses to deny her body its rightful place within her self-authored narrative, and in this way, she presents her lived experience as a fundamental part of her writing.

Whilst Ash consciously involves her body in the processes of writing and reading, the burning of her books in Cambridge provides Amy with a necessary wake up call to better understand her own repressed emotions. The loss of her previous collection

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[113] Smith, *Like,* 158.

[114] Cornell suggests that writing can have a reparative function when something or someone has been lost, enabling the writing subject to grieve and work through the process of bereavement, in narrative form (see 'Hélène Cixous and les Etudes Féminines', 32).

[115] Cixous, 'Sorties', 97.

symbolizes a trauma and violent shock, forcing her to confront her academic snobbery and finally rebuke the intellectual sphere in which she had become ensconced. Ash's violent act of destruction also inspires Amy to connect to books in new and unexpected ways, and this is manifested in her subsequent interactions with them as material objects that can be used to fulfil a whole range of needs. Abandoning academic life, Amy initially loses her ability to read completely, and this forces her to embrace a more tactile relationship with books that considers their practical qualities as well as their intellectual ones. Taking her young daughter Kate – whose existence is never fully explained – out of conventional schooling for a spontaneous trip to Italy and the volcano Vesuvius, Amy begins to prioritise learning through first-hand experience, and books become a disposable part of a constantly changing material world.[116] Her increased willingness to burn, rip and wet paper sharply contrasts with her previous attitude at Cambridge, where such acts would have been sacrilegious. Just as Ash previously took agency over her experiences by cutting up photographs, Amy starts to express her emotions through similarly embodied interactions, such as ripping up postcards and burning books that she no longer needs.[117] She becomes more willing to destroy or damage paper, and increasingly interested in using them to create warmth for herself and Kate, as a source of comfort: 'Amy sometimes uses the pages out of books to fill holes in the caravan lining or the roof or the door, or to help light fires on the beach'.[118] Amy recycles books and puts them to new purposes as heat-generators or draught-stoppers, which are more useful to her now that she is unemployed and leads a nomadic

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[116] The trip to Vesuvius becomes a pilgrimage for Amy, as she half-heartedly listens to the tour guide, hearing only occasional mentions of the word 'ash' (Smith, *Like*, 105). Amy's dormant sexual feelings towards Ash are thus gestured towards through the metaphor of the fertile volcano, which is capable of eruption at any moment.

[117] James Bailey provides an insightful perspective into Ash's defiance against convention in '"What a story it could be": Identity and Narrative Strategy in Ali Smith's *Like*' in *Forum* 11 (2010), <www.forumjournal.org/site/issue/11/james-bailey> (accessed 18 September 2015).

[118] Smith, *Like*, 27.

existence. She also teaches Kate to be resourceful and put her physical needs of warmth and security above anything else.

Just as Ash finds release in the transgressive burning of books, so Amy's decision to set alight her remaining books, in addition to having the practical purpose of generating warmth, acts as a memorial for Ash that soothes her emotional pain. Both women associate each other with the smell of wood smoke at various points in the novel, but by burning her incriminating diaries, Amy allows Ash's namesake to take on an even more literal significance: 'Soon, Amy thinks, there will be nothing left of it. Ash, that's all. Nothing else'.[119] Even though Ash's name was excluded from these volumes at the time of writing, now that the paper is burning, 'ash' is all that remains, and so the burning ritual becomes a way of grieving for and recuperating Ash's lost presence. Consequently, Ash and Amy's relationship is symbolised by the way they treat their books, reading and interpreting each other to obtain some semblance of meaning. Amy watches the paper as it burns with delight, celebrating the light and heat that is created:

> She watches waves of light move and change through the paper as it burns. Light wavers as if breathing through the layers of pages. Points of light rise in the air above the fire, there, gone. Of course, it is perversely exciting, to burn books. Not with quite the force of perversity, though, as using books as a kind of power tool was, eating and sleeping with them, living by the book, you might say; still, this burning brings its own particular frisson of foulness and Amy is not surprised at how much she enjoys the idea of what she's doing.[120]

Light rays are personified in this extract as breathing into the burning pages, as though setting the books on fire is another way of giving them a new life. At the same time,

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[119] Ibid., 152.
[120] Ibid., 151.

Amy is fascinated by how easily she can reduce the books to nothing, asserting power over objects which also represent her past pain. Amy experiences equally strong responses of 'perversity' and 'foulness' in this destructive act and admits to having felt these same passions at the university, even though they were largely suppressed or hidden. Amy's comment about 'sleeping with them' not only has sexual connotations which link her to Ash, but also support the argument that books cannot be held separate from other aspects of her life.

Ian Blyth's essay 'Simile and Similarity in Ali Smith's *Like*' supports this link between Amy's loss of literacy and the destruction of her memories about life in Cambridge, arguing that words themselves have become a threat of bringing back a past she would rather forget.[121] Through her initial rejection of language following the fire incident, Blyth suggests that Amy has turned away from the abstract and intellectual ideas that had previously occupied her mind, towards a more concrete appreciation of her material circumstances. As outlined above, this impulse is largely manifested through activities such as burning and eating books rather than reading them in the conventional way.[122] Indeed, Smith suggests that Amy 'is drowning out the words, filling the space they have made in her head with other things',[123] which suggests that words themselves have become a painful reminder of the past and must therefore be temporarily eliminated from her life. Initially, as Kate reads a poem to her, Amy physically stiffens, as if the experience of hearing it causes a bodily reaction of discomfort and pain.[124] Amy has turned away from language as a mode of self-expression, unable at this point to articulate the pain and trauma she has experienced. Kristeva argues however that the body must find a way

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[121] Blyth, 'Simile and Similarity in Ali Smith's *Like*', 28.
[122] Ibid., 33.
[123] Smith, *Like*, 103.
[124] Ibid., 38.

of constituting itself through language in order to become anything other than a 'disarticulated' and 'weighty mass', unable to find its place within the signifying system.[125] Cixous also suggests that 'woman must write her body', as an act of self-empowerment and a way of refusing to deny the reality of bodily experience.[126] As such, Amy must find a way of expressing her bodily trauma in order to process and move on from it. Whilst the ripping and burning of books provide a useful outlet for her frustrated passions - and enable a newly embodied way of interacting with her environment – there is also a sense that she cannot remain illiterate, but must reconcile her identity as a reader (and a writer) in order to fully recover.

Consequently, Smith depicts Amy's lost literacy as a transitory stage of a much longer process of emotional recovery, and this is manifested through her rediscovered enjoyment of reading with a renewed perspective:

> Reading words is like reading hieroglyphics on the walls of dark tombs. No doubt you could find me a therapist who'd sort me out in six quick sessions, but I have opted for the slow way round. I have different ambitions now, thank you, she thinks.[127]

In this respect, although Amy wants to read again, she needs to re-establish herself as a reader on her own terms. Her reference to 'hieroglyphics on the walls of dark tombs' suggests that she has regressed to a primitive state or womb-like environment in which she might start from scratch, seeking a more primal experience of language, which is driven by bodily instincts rather than intellectual ideas. This depiction can be informed by Kristeva's notion of reaching back to a more primitive form of language, which 'precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality and temporality' and is free to express the

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[125] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 101.
[126] Cixous, 'Sorties', 95.
[127] Ibid., 73.

most instinctive human emotions unfettered by social rules or expectations.[128] Amy is inspired by Kate, who is herself less impressed upon by social expectations, and whose naïve curiosity about books has a therapeutic impact on Amy's dispirited state. Kate's appreciation for the sensual allure of books in the local newsagents, for example, 'where you can smell the paper of the pages of the thick paperbacks',[129] as well as her fascination with her grandfather's inviting study, is idealised by Smith as the kind of sensual experience that Amy now strives to recuperate. Like Ash, Kate has an innate enjoyment of the textures and aesthetics of books, and experiences a thrill when watching books burn.[130]

As Amy's ability to read gradually returns, the experience causes her both pain and relief as she reconstitutes her relationship with books:

> It's coming back, she thinks, and the thought fills her with excitement and numb fear. It has been a long time. She has been puzzling at the lost shapes of words, gratefully taking their loss for granted, for the best part of eight years now, a short lifetime.[131]

Taking a break from reading has enabled Amy to come back to it with a child-like enthusiasm not dissimilar to that which is exhibited by Kate.[132] The struggle that Amy faces as she regains the ability to read is also reminiscent of Cixous' essay 'Difficult Joys', which describes the encounter between reader and text as simultaneously enjoyable and

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[128] Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, 26.
[129] Smith, *Like*, 27.
[130] Ibid., 94.
[131] Ibid., 44.
[132] In support of the idea that Kate is more capable of reading with an open mind than Amy, it is worth considering Appleyard's five stages of reading development, the first of which concerns childhood immersion into the fantasy world of the text (*Becoming a Reader*, 14–15). Whilst categorising readers' behaviour strictly according to their age is too restrictive for my purposes here, Appleyard's work draws usefully on psychoanalytic theories to explore how readers' mentality towards books develops over time from being more willing to suspend reality, to scrutinising and analysing the text for sure meaning (11).

hurtful: 'the joy that a text inflicts hurts'.[133] Cixous suggests that in order to be meaningful the act of reading must cause both pain and pleasure to its subject – ironically the title of Amy's previous academic project - both of which are experienced as visceral sensations. For Amy, even the simplest acts of reading are initially quite hurtful to her, bringing back difficult memories as well as questions about how she now wishes to engage as a reader. Her gradual recognition of words and phrases is repeatedly described by Smith as causing physical discomfort: 'it's painful, like too much light entering at the eye', 'another word, clear and hard, breaks open in Amy's head' and 'now that she has finished reading it her eyes are sore, her head hurts and she is exhausted'.[134] These examples suggest that reading requires a physical strain, with a particular emphasis on Amy's sore eyes and head, the body parts which are most important for reading to take place. Eyes are recurrently described by Smith as crucial channels through which readers gain access to books, and as seen in the scarring of Ash's retinas after reading Amy's diaries, eyes can also be highly sensitive and subject to harm. Kate, who has been used to reading aloud to Amy, notices that Amy's eyes have changed since she started reading again: 'Amy had her new glasses on. They made her look different'.[135] Kate's observant perspective draws attention to the change in Amy's physical appearance, which reflects her renewed identification as a reader.

This section has demonstrated the ways in which Smith's first novel *Like* depicts the reader as an embodied figure, through the representation of protagonists Amy and Ash. Especially in relation to an academic context, these characters challenge the separation of reading from bodily experience, by insisting that physical sensations and emotions are an integral aspect of readers' interactions with books. Books also bear the burden of

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[133] Cixous, 'Difficult Joys', 25.
[134] Smith, *Like*, 140, 45 and 123.
[135] Ibid., 143.

a range of displaced emotions in this narrative, including anger, loss and frustrated desire, and acts of destruction towards these objects allow characters to release these suppressed feelings. Ash and Amy's combined efforts to eat, rip and burn paper suggests a yearning to connect more viscerally with books than a purely intellectual interaction would allow. This discussion has been supported by critical ideas from Cixous about the importance of the physicality of reader-text relationships, as the text acts as a vehicle for the expression of the writer's – and subsequently the reader's – bodily sensations. By manifesting their hidden desires, both protagonists of Smith's novel reconfigure their relationships with books and in doing so reconcile their conflicted feelings for each other and overcome difficult life circumstances.

Trees

In addition to the physically destructive behaviours exhibited by Smith's characters towards books, as has been demonstrated so far in this chapter, I am also interested in how she depicts readers as having more constructive interactions with these objects. It is my intention in the final part of this chapter to develop my argument about her depiction of an embodied reader by drawing parallels between the physical object of the book and the organic imagery of trees. Trees have an alluring impact on Smith's protagonists, and links are frequently drawn in her work between the life cycles of the natural world and the creative processes of reading and writing: 'As we move through a book, that's in the novel form', she suggests, 'we have shifted, we have moved formally through a journey', and this is not dissimilar to the cyclical movement of the seasons.[136] Not only do the materials used to make books originally come from trees, but trees, also like books, have an important material presence in her characters' lives, as well as the

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[136] Interview transcript, 'Open the Door 2019 – Interview between Ali Smith and Jess Orr'.

capacity to amaze and inspire them. In the paragraphs to follow, I outline some critical ideas which elucidate this connection between books, trees and readers in Smith's work, including a brief analysis of the elderly character Daniel in her 2016 novel *Autumn*. The fantastical embodiment of a tree by Daniel, as his body prepares for the final stage of his life, is paralleled with the passing on of his legacy and love of reading to his young neighbour Elisabeth. Here, Smith once again demonstrates the connection between the act of reading and the life circumstances of the reader, as books become an integral and material part of the reader's life-sustaining ecosystem.[137]

Trees are lively and energetic forces and an important source of inspiration throughout Smith's work, which like stories reinvent or regenerate themselves rather than succumbing to death. In the same way that readers generate new 'branches' of meaning through their encounters with books, so these natural phenomena provide a tangible manifestation of the same qualities of organic growth and potential for new life. In her anthology *The Reader*, Smith includes Philip Larkin's poem 'The Trees', which describes trees as an important symbol of longevity and self-regeneration.[138] The inevitable changing of the seasons, Larkin suggests, and the decaying of leaves in the autumn, is a performance or 'trick' through which age-old trees prepare themselves to start 'afresh, afresh, afresh'.[139] Crucially, Larkin draws a connection between the trees coming into blossom and a kind of verbal articulation: 'like something almost being said', linking this natural cycle to the burgeoning creativity of a writer or poet. By

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[137] This connection has been supported by several eco-critical perspectives, including Cheryl Glotfelty's assertion that literature 'does not float above the material world in some aesthetic ether' but is immersed in the everyday environment of human subjects (*The Ecocriticism Reader* [Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1995], xix). Hubert Zapf's essay 'Creative Matter and the Creative Mind: Cultural Ecology and Literary Creativity' is also useful in elucidating this point, arguing that text and life are in a constant feedback loop, with literary texts not just representing but reproducing the creative processes that are inherent to the material environment (*Material Ecocriticism* [Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2014], 51-66).

[138] Smith, *The Reader*, 257.

[139] Ibid.

emphasising the organic qualities of books in her own work, Smith draws parallels with these same qualities of trees, highlighting the ability of narrative to regenerate itself as a consequence of its interactions with readers. The connection she makes between books and trees also allows her to bring the act of reading out of the abstract, intellectual realm described by critics such as Bleich and De Certeau, and into a material environment in which books have a tangible impact on readers' everyday lives.

In an interview with *The New York Times*, Smith elucidates her interest in the connection between books and the natural materials from which they are made:

> I naturally prefer the form of the book. We've loved it for centuries, and no wonder: Look at it; it's always-opening-to-something, its two wings, its two sides making one form, its act of opening us as we open it – you can't "open" a screen like you can literally open a book. And a book always holds the reminder of the organic world, the trees that went to make it – and the word "spine" was originally used for the spine of the book because of the spine of the creatures whose skins were once used to bind books, the place where the skin folded over the creature's own spine. That's how close to the process of life, death, time, growth and oxygen the form of the book is.[140]

Smith emphasizes the raw materials used to make books, both trees and other organic matter, which imbues them with life and energy. This materiality, Smith suggests, serves to reflect the rich potential books hold for lively encounters with their readers. Characters' volatile interactions with books have already been evidenced through Olive Fraser's behaviour in *Shire*, who slices them open with a gutting knife to discover new meaning from them. Smith also draws a comparison between the pages of books and

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[140] Ali Smith, 'Ali Smith: By the Book' in *The New York Times*, February 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/07/books/review/ali-smith-by-the-book.html> (accessed 5/7/18).

leaves in 'Text for the day', which are ripped from their spines and dispersed across the streets like falling leaves. In these examples, books are treated as living entities which can be physically torn apart by their readers and put to new uses. Smith also emphasises the careful preservation of life that takes place when making books from organic matter, infusing them with a deeper sense of living history than is possible when using modern technology. In this sense, books are depicted as much closer to the organic world, and as subject to the same processes of life, death and renewal.

Cixous' depictions of reading and writing are again useful within this aspect of my discussion, as she too frequently emphasises the organic qualities of books, bringing them to life through natural imagery and highlighting the physical sensations she experiences whilst reading. Cornell notes Cixous' use of springs, liquid and water to represent her overflowing desire for books, whilst Defromont describes her writing as immersed in 'the full stream of life . . . a river, willows and a fisherman'.[141] In this way, Cixous views her reading and writing self as integrated in the natural environment, merging with it rather than standing apart from it, and therefore understanding what it feels like not only to be the human component, but the natural elements themselves. In 'Difficult Joys', Cixous again immerses herself in nature, describing reading 'as a kind of soil in order to have a little thinking grow', whilst in 'Coming to Writing', reading becomes like: 'writing the ten thousand pages of every page, bringing them to light. Grow and multiply and the page will multiply. But that means *reading*: making love to the text.'[142] Intertwining reader and text in a physical embrace, Cixous uses imagery of light and growth to emphasise the sensual allure of books, and to depict their ability to grow and evolve through intimate encounters with readers. Readers are not passive

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[141] Cornell, 'Hélène Cixous and les Etudes Féminines', 39 and Defromont, 'Metaphorical Thinking and Poetic Writing', 117.

[142] Cixous, 'Difficult Joys', 5 and 'Coming to Writing, 24.

observers, nor do they separate themselves from books to analyse objectively, rather they should enter an all-consuming experience of the text in order to bring new meaning to light. In this way, Cixous' organic metaphors are resonant of Rosenblatt's descriptions of the text as a 'fertile matrix', to emphasise the malleability and flexibility of the story form. These depictions sharply contrast the rigid structures of language which are more typically expressed by literary criticism.[143] Cixous and Rosenblatt can both be seen as adopting an alternative approach to the reader-text relationship, which is characterised by abundance, fluidity and cyclical interactions between object and subject, rather than the empirical and hierarchical analysis of one by the other.[144]

Just as Cixous describes reading as 'making love to the text', Smith too depicts books as integrally connected to her characters' physical desire, as demonstrated earlier in my analysis of *Like*. Trees are also presented as a fertile and sensually stimulating phenomena, and characters are frequently spellbound by their encounters with these natural giants. Smith depicts characters as invigorated and renewed by their encounters with trees; in the short story 'May' for example, the narrative opens with a character who has fallen hopelessly in love with a tree: 'I tell you. I fell in love with a tree. I couldn't not. It was in blossom'.[145] The simplicity of this confession emphasises the uncontrollable nature of her reaction to the tree, which in spring is at its most captivating. This story goes on to explore in more detail the protagonist's obsession with the whiteness of the tree: 'It was a white that longed for bees, that wanted you inside it, dusted, pollen-smudged'.[146] This description gestures not only towards sexual

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[143] Rosenblatt, *The Reader*, 171-4.

[144] Cixous' 'feminine' approach to writing, or écriture feminine as it is known, is characterised by 'fluidity, openness, multiplicity, and sheer abundance' (see Oliver, *French Feminism Reader*, 255). This kind of writing 'is primarily tactile, bodily, and interior in the extreme', and offers a new kind of self-other relationship which gives generously without the expectation of return.

[145] Ali Smith, 'May' in *The Whole Story and other stories*, 53.

[146] Ibid., 56.

intimacy, but also connotes the allure of a white page, and the desire of a reader to 'get inside' a story. The dazzling whiteness and brightness of the tree also resonates with Smith's description of books as 'being alive on their own terms' and as a 'gift from another, unthinkable, unreal universe'.[147] The protagonist of 'May' imaginatively transplants themselves into the body of the tree, experiencing the sensations of coming into leaf as a kind of physical transformation: 'my whole self from head to foot, would fill and change with the chlorophyll of it. I was changed already. Look at me'.[148] Images of bodily transformation such as this are comparable to the all-consuming sensations readers have when they are changed by the process of reading.[149] Such depictions also resonate with Cixous' ideas about how interactions with books are inextricably linked to an immersive experience of being in the natural world.[150]

Further critical perspectives which elucidate this aspect of my discussion take into consideration ecological concerns; Stacey Alaimo's work for example, which was introduced earlier, and Laurence Buell's, both foreground the power and agency of the material environment in relation to human endeavours.[151] Buell in particular challenges an anthropocentric way of thinking, 'the assumption or view that the interests of humans are of higher priority than those of non-humans',[152] with a more environmentally conscious perspective, which asserts the power of the physical environment to disrupt and challenge human control. He also notes that even though books are created from trees, the act of reading is typically depicted as taking place indoors and requires the physical removal of the reading subject from their natural environment.[153] In this way,

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[147] Smith, *The Reader*, 2-4.
[148] Smith, 'May', 56.
[149] See Iser, *The Act of Reading*, 32.
[150] See Cixous, 'Coming to Writing', 44.
[151] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, 12.
[152] Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism* (Oxford: Blackwells, 2005), 134.
[153] Lawrence Buell, 'Representing the Environment' in *Ecocriticism: The Essential Reader* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015), 98.

his perspective concurs with the idea that portrayals of reading have typically involved a distancing from materiality, retreating into a more abstract space. New ways of thinking about the material environment are required, Buell argues, which view subjects' bodies as caught up within larger processes and cycles of organic life, rather than separate from or superior to it. As seen in Cixous' work, Buell's argument can be used to understand Smith's representations of books as organic agents that rebel against human control, and which also impact human subjects in liberating and transformational ways. Even though books are man-made products, Smith's work suggests, they are abstracted from nature, but retain the wild and subversive potential of the trees from which they were made. Books can cause powerful sensations in the reader like the bodily transformations undergone in response to trees, as seen in short stories such as 'May' and 'The beholder', as well as Ash and Amy's experiences seen in *Like*.[154]

A further correlation between books and trees in Smith's work is that they both have a solid and reassuring presence in her characters' lives. Books are valued for their worn textures and aged aesthetic, treasured by individual readers and passed down through several generations. In this regard, they provide a sense of stability and material longevity in comparison to the fleeting and unpredictable nature of human life. William Rueckert explores the idea that books, like trees, contain an inheritance that is passed from reader to reader: '[Books are] ever-living, inexhaustible sources of stored energy, whose relevance does not derive solely from their meaning, but from their capacity to remain active in any language and to go on with the work of energy transfer'.[155] Rueckert seeks to connect the inheritance of literature with a renewable vision of the

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[154] Zapf also supports this idea, highlighting the feelings of rapture and ecstasy that literature conjures in the reader, and suggesting that this has been cast as dangerous and subversive by the literary establishment (see 'Creative Matter and the Creative Mind', 58-9).

[155] William Rueckert, 'Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism' in *The Ecocriticism Reader*, 108.

natural world, describing it as an endless source of nourishment that can sustain ideas for generations. Reading is a way of releasing the energy held within books and securing their future legacy. Books are similarly long-lasting and renewable entities in Smith's work – rather than lifeless objects – not least because of the narratives contained within them, which can be renewed when placed in the hands of new readers. The idea of an ongoing community of readers and writers is encompassed by the image of the tree, with its layered rings of history and ability to grow, pollinate and renew itself. Smith similarly emphasises permanence and continuity when discussing materials which originate from trees; in the short story 'The touching of wood' for example, she experiments with the idiom 'touch wood' to depict wood as a symbol of stability and reliability:

> Wood was alive like stones never were, life went through it, that was what wood was . . . I do what I realise you've been doing all along, I reach out above our heads and for luck, for love, for a moment I'm touching wood.[156]

Smith experiments with the phrase 'touch wood', with its associations of good luck, to imply that an embodied connection with wood has a positive and reassuring impact on her protagonist. As will be seen in my analysis of *Autumn*, anxieties can be remedied by the reassuring presence of a natural material such as wood, which carries a sense of permanency and tangible substance that can be grasped in times of emotional turbulence.

A final aspect of the connection Smith draws between books and trees is her preoccupation with the waste that is produced when these entities are destroyed, and how this can be used for new creative purposes. In 'The beholder' for example, the protagonist watches as the leaves from a rose tree grow miraculously from her chest,

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[156] Ali Smith, 'The touching of wood' in *Free Love and other stories*, 70/5.

then are 'blackened, fading . . . mixing with the litter, their shards of colour circling in the leaf-grimy corners of yards'.[157] The narrator is exhilarated by the idea of leaves which are free to mingle with the surrounding environment, even if this means 'mixing with the litter' and falling into 'grimy' corners. She fantasises about inhabiting the leaves herself and experiencing this turbulent physical experience; as already noted, Smith revels in a reader who is blown about by the elements and jostled by their experience. Such depictions can be supported by Alaimo's argument that new ways of interacting with the material world are required, which allow environmental forces to retain a sense of wildness in relation to human subjects, and enable a more dynamic interaction between the two.[158] Melissa in 'Text for the day' also jubilantly disperses the contents of her bookshelves onto the streets, leaving their pages to rot like leaves in the gutters:

> all the known names and the lesser or unknown lost or forgotten names flying immeasurable in the air, settling on the ground like seeds or leaves dropped from the trees, rotting into pieces, blown into the smithereens of meaning.[159]

Smith emphasises the idea of waste as she draws a parallel between the destruction of books in Melissa's library and the disruption caused by a wind or storm, taking pleasure in the notion of pages 'rotting' into 'smithereens' after being exposed to the open air. In this way, books are not meant to remain pristine and intact but should reflect the various ways they have been handled by their readers. The leaves of the book are liberated to travel and spread around the physical environment in 'immeasurable' directions, and this dispersal of 'leaves' – whether from trees or books – suggests that as living, organic entities, they should not remain static or unchanging.

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[157] Ali Smith, 'The beholder' in *Shire*, 34.
[158] Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, 16.
[159] Smith, 'Text for the day', 29.

The notion of shaking books about physically in order to wrench meaning from them is supported by Cixous in the essay 'Extreme Fidelity':

> we are born into language, and I cannot do otherwise than to find myself before words; we cannot get rid of them, they are there. We could change them, we could put signs in their place, but they would become just as closed, just as immobile and petrifying as the words 'masculine' and 'feminine' and would lay down the law to us. So there is nothing to be done, except to shake them like apple trees, all the time.[160]

This quotation is useful, not least due to its use of a tree metaphor to describe how language must be shaken in a visceral manner to release new meaning. Cixous argues that language has a tendency towards stagnancy and irrelevance if we do not subject it to a continual process of rejuvenation, and this is something brought about by the reading process. The rigid definitions of language, she suggests, must be dismantled for alternative, broader meanings to be created. It is in this context of expanding the definitions of language and textual meaning that Cixous calls upon images of destruction as a way of disrupting the established order of the text and opening it up to alternative usage.[161] Astrida Neimanis supports this argument, suggesting that the reciprocal processes of reading and writing are themselves a cycle of destruction and renewal, through which narrative meaning is set aside and re-written in new reading contexts: 'Everything remains, but everything changes: a word, a font, a sentence shifted, or an entire language disintegrated'.[162] In this regard, change and disruption are

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[160] Hélène Cixous, 'Extreme Fidelity' in *Writing Differences: Readings from the Seminar of Hélène Cixous* (Milton Keynes: Open UP, 1988), 15.

[161] The visceral imagery of 'Sorties', for example, emphasises the need to break violently out of the restrictive boundaries in which language has been contained.

[162] Astrida Neimanis, 'Nature Represents Itself: Bibliophilia in a Changing Climate' in *What if Culture was Nature all along?* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2017),195.

crucial ingredients for redefining language so that it can expand its potential for meaning, and this is mirrored in the processes of seasonal change.

The most illustrative example from Smith's oeuvre which demonstrates the material connection between trees and books, as well as how this implicates the reader as an embodied figure, is her novel *Autumn*, in which the elderly character Daniel becomes symbolic of both autumnal decay and spring-like renewal. Daniel spends most of the narrative in a state of hibernation, filled with dream-like visions, before miraculously re-awakening to the surprise of his young friend and old neighbour Elisabeth. The seasonal changing of the trees, in particular the autumnal decay of leaves, is used as a central motif to parallel the experiences of this character, who lives in a care-home in an 'increased sleep period', just as the trees outside are gradually bared of their leaves.[163] Through a series of dream sequences, Daniel's body is envisioned as embroiled within the tree, which acts as a protective skin or layer that keeps him from the outside world and becomes a guarantee of his own immortality:

> He seems to be shut inside something remarkably like the trunk of a Scots pine. At least, it smells like a pine . . . Daniel in the bed, inside the tree, isn't panicking. He isn't even claustrophobic. It's reasonable in here, excepting the paralysis, and perhaps it won't last. No, in actual fact he's pleased to be held immobile inside not just any old tree but such an ancient and adaptable and noble species, the kind of tree that pre-dates by quite a long way the sorts of trees with leaves; a versatile tree.[164]

Daniel's coma-like state is likened to being trapped in a tree trunk, which, although physically debilitating, is also depicted as a restful and nourishing space. As seen in 'the

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[163] Ali Smith, *Autumn* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2016), 33.
[164] Ibid., 90.

touching of wood', the tree soothes Daniel with its longevity and stability, and reassures

him that this is part of a larger process that will ultimately lead to his renewal.[165]

Daniel's interest in the kind of tree he has found himself in – an 'ancient and adaptable

and noble' Scots pine – emphasises the important history of the tree, and Daniel's close

alignment with it positions him as the bearer of a legacy that is valuable for the other

characters. In particular, the backdrop of the season and the motif of the tree mirror the

way in which Daniel relates to Elisabeth who, although biologically unrelated to him,

visits the care home frequently and is depicted as his descendent. Smith portrays how

the close relationship between these two characters develops in Elisabeth's childhood,

despite her mother's disapproval. The most important connection between them is a

shared love of books and reading, which for Daniel leads inevitably onto many different

subjects of conversation and is crucial for building a meaningful relationship. Daniel

states to Elisabeth: 'Always be reading something . . . Even when we're not physically

reading. How else will we read the world?'.[166] This instruction is typical of Daniel's

belief that reading means more than picking up a book, but an activity that infiltrates

the whole of life and can help Elisabeth to navigate the complexities of her own. Daniel

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[165] It is worth highlighting that at several moments in the narrative, Daniel is depicted as a Christ-like figure waiting to be resurrected, just as the trees outside await their spring blossom (See, for example, his monologue beginning 'I am the leaf' in *Autumn*, 192-3). This depiction emphasises that Daniel is not going to die but will be resurrected to new life. In his dream state, Daniel also imagines other characters transforming into trees; the public figure Christine Keeler, for example, who transforms into a tree as a kind of self-protection:

> 'Today she is almost all young tree. Now only her face and her hair are unleafy. Overnight, like a girl in a myth being hunted by a god who's determined to have his way with her, she has altered herself, remade herself so she can't be had by anyone.' (Ibid., 96)

Smith draws on Ovid's classic reimagining of Daphne and Apollo from Greek mythology in *Metamorphoses*, in which Daphne is transformed into a laurel tree to protect her from Apollo's pursuit. As such, Smith portrays Christine's body, like Daniel's, as imbued with the life-giving qualities of trees. This imagery enables characters who are threatened by condemnation and/or death to take back a sense of agency over their lives and reclaim their endangered bodies.

[166] Ibid., 68.

is training Elisabeth to read carefully and with an open mind that will be useful to her in later life circumstances.[167]

Through these early conversations, Smith explores the importance of reading with a generous spirit and being willing to revise stories to maintain their relevance for the next generation. Stories are depicted by Daniel as holding many of the same qualities as the ancient tree in which he now finds himself, and Elisabeth inherits a responsibility for keeping his stories alive in the future. As Smith's narrative shifts to the start of their relationship, we witness a younger Daniel and child Elisabeth playing an invented game of 'bagatelle', which involves making up new stories collaboratively and demonstrating that a single narrative never comes to an end but is part of an endless evolution. Daniel asks playfully:

What you reading? he'd say.

Elisabeth would hold it up.

Brave New World, she'd say.

Oh, that old thing, he'd say.

It's new to me, she'd say.[168]

Through exchanges such as this, Smith highlights the idea that books are always in the process of generating new meaning, growing and evolving like readers themselves. Old stories, whilst familiar to Daniel, are renewed in the hands of Elisabeth, and the passing of books from older reader to younger illustrates the sense of legacy and inheritance

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[167] One of the most important of these, which provides an important backdrop to the novel, is the 2016 Brexit vote, which happened just months before it was published. For Elisabeth, the immediate aftermath of this has been challenging, requiring her to 'read' the divisive social attitudes around her, and rewrite her own narrative of identity. Smith parallels this contemporary political context with Daniel's own personal history, who as a Jew during the Second World War learnt from an early age the importance of being able to 'read' his own circumstances thoughtfully and critically. As such, Daniel draws an important connection between being an active reader in relation to books and in extratextual circumstances.
[168] Ibid., 31.

that characterises their relationship. Later, Daniel describes language itself as a plant that adapts and changes over many generations:

> Words don't get grown, Elisabeth said.
>
> They do, Daniel said.
>
> Words aren't plants, Elisabeth said.
>
> Herbal and verbal, Daniel said. Language is like poppies. It just takes something to churn the earth round them up, and when it does up come the sleeping words, bright red, fresh, blowing about.[169]

Daniel uses flower imagery to emphasise how language can be regenerated like a plant ready for spring. Importantly, the reader is a crucial agent who has a manual role to play in churning up the ground so that this new energy can be released. This description resonates with Cixous' treatment of language in 'Extreme Fidelity', which she says requires shaking like an apple tree for new meaning to be generated from it. Both here and elsewhere in Cixous' descriptions, the act of interpreting the text is a physical labour that can leave the reader both physically and emotionally exhausted.[170] This idea is also supported elsewhere in Smith's oeuvre, such as in *Artful*, where the narrator strives to reinterpret Dickens' *Oliver Twist* until they are completely worn out.[171] The idea of reading as a labour of love is a central theme in *Autumn*, and an important lesson that Elisabeth learns from her conversations with Daniel. It is through the manual effort of the reader that a text continues to create new meaning, like the poppies emerging from the churned-up earth. It is perhaps for this reason that even when Daniel's own story is at risk of coming to an end, Smith playfully resurrects him in the final pages.

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[169] Ibid., 69.
[170] See Cixous, 'Difficult Joys', 25 and 'Coming to Writing', 13.
[171] More detailed analysis of this text can be found in my chapter on 'The Dialogic Reader'.

Towards the end of the novel, Smith's characterisation of Daniel inside the tree demonstrates that new life is always possible, even when his body looks close to death. The language used to describe his bodily transformation is resonant of Cixous' visceral imagery, and the pleasure she derives from being churned about in her attempt to find meaning.[172] Daniel similarly fantasises about his own physical disintegration and renewal inside the tree:

> Cut this tree I'm living in down. Hollow its trunk out.
>
> Make me all over again, with what you scooped out of its insides.
>
> Slide the new me back inside the old trunk.
>
> Burn me. Burn the tree. Spread the ashes, for luck, where you want next year's crops to grow.[173]

Daniel's body is willingly integrated in the process of the tree's burning, embroiled in his environment as he submits himself to the same processes of destruction and renewal. As seen through the burning of books in *Like*, ashes not only represent the destruction of past memories, but are also a symbol of emotional release, which enables characters to move on from the past.[174] Surrendering to forces bigger than himself, Daniel acknowledges that he cannot separate from his own materiality, supporting the idea that 'nature is agentic – it acts, and those actions have consequences for both the human and nonhuman world'.[175] This description can also be interpreted as a kind of creative regeneration akin to reading and writing, through which the forces of nature assert their 'undomesticated' agency over Daniel's body to bring a new story to life.[176] Once again,

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[172] See Cixous, 'Coming to Writing', 24.

[173] Smith, *Autumn*, 101-2.

[174] Zapf suggests that contemporary literature often uses fire as 'an inspirational force that is both destructive and creative, a sign of radical discontinuity yet also of new beginnings, of liberation and rebirth' ('Creative Matter and the Creative Mind', 60). Fire has a productive and yet self-consuming creative energy, which is put to use in this novel as seen previously in *Like*.

[175] Alaimo and Hekman, 'Emerging Models of Materiality', 145.

[176] See Alaimo, *Undomesticated Ground*, 16.

the cycles of destruction and renewal are emphasised in Smith's narrative as important not only in Daniel's physical rehabilitation, but to the generation of new narratives waiting to emerge, which must be self-sustaining and ever-changing.

Ultimately, Daniel performs a resurrection not dissimilar to a tree's miraculous re-birth every spring:

> he's nothing but a torn leaf scrap on the surface of a running brook, green veins and leaf-stuff, water and current, Daniel Gluck taking leaf of his senses at last, his tongue a broad green leaf, leaves growing through the sockets of his eyes, leaves thrustling (very good word for it) out of his ears, leaves tendrilling down through the caves of his nostrils and out and round till he's swathed in foliage, leafskin, relief.[177]

Daniel is evocatively described as a tree awakening from a period of hibernation. Playful, semi-invented vocabulary associated with trees emphasise this renewed sense of energy, as the leaves infiltrate and intertwine themselves around his body. His depiction as a 'torn leaf scrap on the surface of a running brook' suggests a brokenness or waste that is being made by his physical disintegration, as he transcends his own bodily limits and disperses himself into the surrounding environment. Just as the image of fallen leaves provides a useful metaphor for the dispersal of Melissa's poetry in 'Text for the day', and Amy's burning of books enables her to articulate her emotional trauma, so here Smith presents the idea of material disintegration and waste as an opportunity for Daniel's own legacy to live on. His desire to regenerate language and keep making new narratives, as evidenced through his playful conversations with Elisabeth, is paralleled throughout Smith's text by the organic cycles his own body undergoes, linking inextricably together the world of the text with that of the natural world.

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[177] Smith, *Autumn*, 181.

This chapter has demonstrated first through the example of *Like*, and subsequently through a brief exploration of tree-representations in Smith's work, how the material presence of books and the depiction of readers as physically immersed in their experiences contribute towards what I have described as an 'embodied reader' in her work. I have drawn on several essays by Hélène Cixous, who views reading and writing as activities necessarily bound up with bodily sensations, as well as ideas put forward by Julia Kristeva, Stacy Alaimo and others, to demonstrate why becoming an embodied reader is both transgressive and liberating for her characters. As asserted at the start of this chapter, books in Smith's fiction function as targets or channels for the emotional lives of their readers; an outlet for feelings of passionate desire or anger that have been censored or suppressed, and the invocation of the body is necessary for the successful expression of these emotions. One of the most interesting aspects of this exploration has been reader-characters' impulses towards both creative and destructive behaviours: books are ripped, thrown, burnt and treated as objects of displaced frustration and unfulfilled desire but they are also used to stimulate creativity, to build something new, to nourish and to prolong life and legacy. Often, as has been noted, these destructive behaviours are necessary for the creative and more nourishing impacts of reading to be realised. This chapter has argued that the reader often experiences dynamic, even confrontational encounters with books, which propel them beyond the disembodied, abstract space that the act of reading has often been portrayed as occupying. In so doing, texts such as *Like* and *Autumn* present a vision of the reader which is rooted in material and bodily experience, and who is inspired as a result to take agency over the circumstances of the rest of their lives.

II. The Dialogic Reader

The purpose of this chapter is to examine ways in which Smith's presentation of the reader might be described as 'dialogic', a term most notably used by the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin to describe how any single discourse is inevitably compiled of a multitude of other historically-situated discourses which are in constant interaction and conflict with each other.[1] This concept, which I explore more fully in the paragraphs that follow, celebrates a kind of linguistic multiplicity, and highlights how different speech-types or voices struggle for authority within the space of a single text. Bakhtin is particularly concerned with how the dialogic operates within the novel, and it is my intention to investigate the relevance of his ideas to Smith's own treatment of narrative prose. I argue that Smith depicts the figure of the reader as an especially important part of the dialogic process; as an active, vocal participant in the formation of narrative rather than a passive recipient of it.[2] Whilst the figure of the reader is gestured towards in Bakhtin's argument as a component in the production of the dialogic text, for Smith this figure is a crucial and subversive agent, whose presence challenges the authorial narrative perspective. It is the intention of this chapter to demonstrate how Smith's purposefully inclusive attitude towards the figure of the reader works to dialogize, even to democratize, the space of the text.

The alignment of Smith's work with Bakhtin's notion of dialogism is unchartered territory in scholarly criticism, which is somewhat surprising given the influence of Bakhtin's ideas on Western critical theory and the similarities between his and Smith's

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[1] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 261.
[2] For examples of Smith's interest in using multiple perspectives see the re-telling of the myth of Iphis from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in her novel *Girl meets boy*, 66, and the use of different narrative perspectives as a structural frame in *Hotel World*, *The Accidental* and *There but for the*.

ideas about how texts are created through 'multilogue' rather than monologue.[3] In an interview with Liesl Schwabe, Smith uses the term 'multilogue' to describe a multi-faceted dialogue, which works to combat the 'mono-voice authority' traditionally associated with the lecture form.[4] In Germaná and Horton's edited collection of essays *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, Dominic Head notes Smith's use of multiple perspectives as a common feature of her writing, and as prevalent in the contemporary novel more broadly.[5] Mark Currie highlights Smith's interest in the involvement of the reader in so far as this contributes to her ideas about narrative temporality.[6] Currie's analysis is of particular interest to my argument later in this chapter regarding the precise moment of encounter between reader and text. On the other hand, these are isolated examples which only partly address my primary interest here, with neither mentioning Bakhtin's ideas in relation to Smith's work. The comment that most reveals the relevance of one to the other can be found in the interview between Smith and Gillian Beer, in which Smith expresses her interest in the question: 'who's got the authority to have the voice?', claiming that the question of narrative authority is, if anything, the central motivation behind her writing.[7] In so doing, she emphasizes the importance of generating dialogue between multiple voices, as well as the active role of the reader in

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[3] Sue Vice explores the impact of Bakhtin's ideas on poststructuralist and feminist thought in the 1990s (see *Introducing Bakhtin* [Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1997], 3), whilst other texts which evidence the wide application of dialogic theory include Frank Farmer ed., *Landmark Essays on Bakhtin, Rhetoric and Writing* (New Jersey: Hermagoras Press, 1998), Ken Hirschkop and David Shepherd eds., *Bakhtin and cultural theory* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1989), Lynne Pearce, *Reading Dialogics* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), Alastair Renfrew ed. *Exploiting Bakhtin* (Glasgow: University of Strathclyde, 1997); and Julio Peiró Sempere, *The Influence of Mikhail Bakhtin on the Formation and Development of the Yale School of Deconstruction* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014). Tzvetan Todorov also claimed that Bakhtin was 'the most important thinker in the human sciences and the greatest theoretician of literature in the twentieth century' (*Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, [Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984], ix).
[4] See Liesl Schwabe, 'PW talks with Ali Smith: life in art' in *Publishers Weekly*, 259:43 (2012).
[5] Dominic Head, 'Idiosyncrasy and Currency: Ali Smith and the Contemporary Canon' in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 101-114.
[6] Mark Currie, 'Ali Smith and the Philosophy of Grammar', 48-60.
[7] Gillian Beer and Ali Smith, 'Gillian Beer interviews Ali Smith', 138.

the formation of the text itself. Smith suggests that the interplay between reader and text can open new narrative possibilities, as the act of reading inspires its subject to create new stories stimulated by the existing text. This expansive generation of meaning establishes the figure of the reader as an influential agent, and this is evidenced in her depictions of reader-characters who are typically unafraid to challenge the authority of the stories they encounter. In 'A story of love' for example, a storyteller must listen and respond to their partner's queries and interjections, and is challenged to adapt the stories accordingly to their listener's desires.[8] More recently, Smith has reminisced about her own fascination as a young reader with the different possibilities suggested by a narrative, responding to poets such as Stevie Smith with a stream of interrogating questions about one individual line of her work:

> How's that working? How's it so small and doing all those things? Is he soft in the head? Is he soft because she or he is cuddling into Croft? What does it mean 'Aloft/ In the loft'? Is it something to do with being out of your head?[9]

Smith situates herself as the reader at the centre of narrative production and as a crucial agent in the meaning making process, and it is this concern which can be most usefully informed by Bakhtin's notion of dialogism.

With regards to the theoretical perspectives that inform my argument in this chapter, Bakhtin's 1935 essay 'Discourse in the novel' provides the most comprehensive outline of dialogism, as well as specific ways in which it manifests in narrative prose. Describing in detail the different speech types which can co-exist in a given text – including author narration, oral speech between characters, internal speech, letters or diary entries, and legal or scientific discourse – Bakhtin argues that dialogism is concerned not merely

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[8] Ali Smith, 'A story of love' in *Other Stories and other stories* (London: Penguin, 1999), 169-79.
[9] Interview transcript, 'Open the Door 2019 – Interview between Ali Smith and Jess Orr'.

with the co-existence of these different compositional-units but the visible struggle between them for authority over textual meaning.[10] Thus the multiform layers of a text exist in a perpetual power-struggle of appropriation and resistance over and against each other, which Bakhtin also describes as the 'centripetal' and 'centrifugal' forces of language:

> Alongside the centripetal forces, the centrifugal forces of language carry on their uninterrupted work; alongside verbal-ideological centralisation and unification, the uninterrupted process of decentralisation and disunification go forward.[11]

In Bakhtin's model, the natural state of a text is diverse and stratified, with disparate discourses pulling away from each other against the writer's urge towards coherence and unification. This impetus towards 'verbal-ideological centralisation' strives to eliminate or at least marginalise less authoritative speech genres in favour of one which is considered authoritative and 'truth'-telling. The monologic or single-voiced discourse that results from these efforts, Bakhtin suggests, and which privileges one speech type as authoritative – typically the voice of the narrator – inhibits the text's diverse potential for meaning. As such, 'Discourse in the novel' suggests that efforts to assign singular rather than plural meaning to a text ultimately render it dull and lifeless, whilst a dialogic approach is more open, generous, and energised by difference and multiplicity, through which the text exists in a continual state of growth or *becoming*.

'Discourse in the novel' is largely recognised as one of Bakhtin's most significant contributions to Western literary criticism; Pearce for example suggests that alongside *Problems of Dostoevsky's Art* – which provides a more detailed analysis of how the dialogic operates in the work of this one Russian novelist – this essay has been Bakhtin's most

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[10] 'Discourse in the novel', 262.
[11] Ibid., 272.

important influence on critical theory since it was first translated into English.[12] In addition, even though Bakhtin's analysis centres specifically on the novel, which he privileges above other forms for its dialogic potential, critics have widely applied the concept of dialogism to a range of cultural forms and discourses.[13] While recognising the subsequent application of dialogism as a way of interpreting different forms of discourse, my own analysis maintains Bakhtin's focus, if not on the novel form specifically, then on Smith's prose writing and its capacity to represent a multitude of voices.

Using the dialogic as a guiding principle for an analysis of the reader in Smith's work may seem surprising given that several critics, including Sue Vice and Lynne Pearce, have noted Bakhtin's failure to thoroughly address the role of the reader in the dialogic text.[14] Indeed, there are few critics who have dedicated themselves to this topic. David Shepherd however, helpfully elucidates what Bakhtin describes as the 'anticipated presence' or 'answerability' of a 'reader', 'listener' or 'understander': terms which are used interchangeably.[15] The 'anticipated presence' of the reader denotes how speech is impacted by the response it expects to receive: 'every word is directed toward an answer and cannot escape the profound influence of the answering word that it anticipates'.[16] In this regard, narrative is shaped by the hypothetical response it expects to receive from its readers, and such anticipation has an inevitable influence on the text produced. The term 'answerability' is an earlier version of a similar idea, elucidated most clearly in

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[12] Pearce, *Reading Dialogics*, 6.
[13] Recent publications which broaden the application of dialogism include Martin Flanagan's *Bakhtin and the Movies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), Gergana Vitanova on second language learning in *Authoring the Dialogic Self* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2010), and Chad Engbers and Mara Scanlon's *Poetry and Dialogism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
[14] See Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin*, 70; Pearce, *Reading Dialogics*, 206; David Shepherd, 'Bakhtin and the reader' in *Bakhtin and cultural theory* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1989), 92.
[15] Shepherd, 'Bakhtin and the reader', 92.
[16] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 280.

Bakhtin's essay 'Art and Answerability'. Here, Bakhtin suggests that art acquires significance only through its connection to lived experience, and this is made possible through the reader or recipient and their ability to 'answer' the text.[17] In light of these terms, Shepherd suggests that Bakhtin invokes the reader as a crucial vehicle through which a text acquires meaning: '[The reader's] role is one of "active understanding" enabling the dialogic encounter of historically determinate utterances'.[18] The reader can fulfil the text's dialogic potential by recognising the social and cultural significances already inscribed within it and connecting them to their own context and lived experiences.

As has been seen through the course of this thesis so far, the link that the reader provides between a written text and experiential reality is a recurring theme in Smith's writing, and one which will be particularly relevant to the second section of this chapter concerning *Artful*. Throughout this text, Smith celebrates the enriching exchange between the imaginative world of the story and the world inhabited by its readers: 'Here's to the place where reality and the imagination meet, whose exchange, whose dialogue, allows us not just to imagine an unreal different world but also a real different world – to match reality with possibili'.[19] In this purposefully unfinished provocation, Smith suggests that the circumstances of reality, like those of the story, remain open to change. The reader is a key agent in fulfilling this sense of possibility, as they are inspired by what they read to look differently at their own lives. Readers can be strongly affected by texts just as texts themselves carry the mark of their readers, especially texts in which they have felt actively involved throughout the reading process. As touched on earlier, both Bakhtin and Smith idealise the reader as democratising the text through

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[17] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Art and Answerability* (Austin: University of Texas, 1990), 2.
[18] Shepherd, 'Bakhtin and the reader', 92.
[19] Smith, *Artful*, 188.

their ability to challenge the authorial narrative voice and bring their own perspectives to bear on its meaning.[20]

In the first section of this chapter, I also find it useful to draw on several other theoretical perspectives which inform my understanding of how the dialogic operates in Smith's work. The first of these is the poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose 1978 essay 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas' is particularly useful for my discussion of the reader in Smith's writing and suggests some interesting parallels with Bakhtin's notion of dialogism.[21] This essay will be discussed in further depth, but it is worth noting here that like Bakhtin, Derrida is interested in the idea that language exists in a state of tension, as words and phrases battle for dominance within a single text. This essay is concerned with the disruption of the text by a subversive 'other', and describes the reader as a crucial channel through which 'other' voices enable new meanings to emerge.[22] The encounter between reader and text is characterized as a violation of its established hierarchies, which is especially helpful in relation to my argument about how the reader has an anarchic influence in Smith's work. Another relevant publication by Derrida is his later interview with Christie V. McDonald 'Choreographies'.[23] Although Derrida is interested here in describing a new approach to sexual difference which can surpass the hierarchical binary

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[20] Both Lynne Pearce and Michael Holquist note the association Bakhtin draws between a monologic text, over which the author reigns supreme, and a totalitarian political campaign, which relies on projecting a single and unchallenged message. His concept of dialogism, these authors suggest, seeks to disrupt this false unity and demonstrate the inevitable plurality of any written text. See Michael Holquist, *Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 34; and Lynne Pearce, *Reading Dialogics*, 48. See also Ken Hirschkop, 'Bakhtin, Discourse and Democracy' in *New Left Review* I/160, 1986: 92-113, for a more detailed perspective on this topic.

[21] Jacques Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics: An Essay on the Thought of Emmanuel Levinas' in *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978),79-153. Critics who have highlighted the parity between Derrida's work and Bakhtin's include Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 1984), 12; Pearce, *Reading Dialogics*, 10; and Allon White, 'Bakhtin, Sociolinguistics and Deconstruction' in *Carnival, Hysteria and Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 135-59.

[22] Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics', 126-8.

[23] Jacques Derrida and Christie V. McDonald, 'Choreographies', *Diacritics* 12.2 (1982), 66-76.

of man/woman, his ideas also overturn the hierarchical relation between reader and text. By using the kinaesthetic metaphor of dance, Derrida advocates for a non-positional stance towards strict identity categorisations, so that subjects can move fluidly across boundaries and forge new identities with each spontaneous interaction.[24] As such, the imagery of dance provides a useful metaphor for how the reader-text relationship is constantly being renewed with each new reading, which prevents the text's meaning from remaining static.

Another useful perspective for my purposes here – as outlined in my introductory chapter – is Rosenblatt's *The Reader, the Text, the Poem*. Her transactional approach to the reader's involvement in the generation of the text is highly compelling, and this is especially true in relation to the idea of the reader as a dialogic figure. As touched upon in my chapter on 'The Embodied Reader', Rosenblatt emphasizes the act of reading as an organic, 'lived through' experience, using images such as a 'fertile matrix' and 'interlocking tendrils' to describe the interaction that takes place between reader and text. Rosenblatt sets these images in contrast to a notion of the text as rigid and unmoveable.[25] The term 'poem' is used to describe the significant encounter that takes place, and Rosenblatt argues that the reader's role is to dissolve the rigidity of the text and loosen its potential for fresh meaning, thus creating a 'poem'.[26] In this regard, it is through the reader's perceptions that textual meaning is perpetually reformed, and as such Rosenblatt's writing evidences important parallels with Smith's descriptions of readers' dynamic interactions with texts. This is particularly well exampled in Melissa's experience in 'Text for the day', as she destroys her well-ordered bookshelves and

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[24] Ibid., 71.
[25] Rosenblatt, *The Reader*, 174.
[26] Ibid., 12.

disperses ripped pages of poetry into the outside world.[27] As described earlier, the relationship between reader and text is described as an organic one, characterized by movement, spontaneity and a sense of urgency. Each act of reading is spontaneous and unrepeatable, as strangers find excerpts of Melissa's poetry books quite randomly on the streets. Melissa's violated bookshelves, whilst horrifying to some, also symbolise her joy and liberation from the expectations of those around her, as she reinvents her own reading-self as one of active agency rather than passivity.

Despite the relevance of theorists such as Derrida and Rosenblatt to my argument, Bakhtin's work remains the central analysis for my purposes here, not least because his concept of dialogism takes account of the specific social circumstances in which both reader and text exist and performs a detailed analysis of their interactions using specific examples. One criticism of reader-response theories is that they are abstracted from the practical task of textual analysis, posing hypothetical ideas about the reader but providing little insight into how the reader's presence is felt within the text.[28] In *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity*, Juliana Spahr suggests: 'Too many arguments about reading end with the mere observation that reading is variable and sidestep the responsibility for assessing the politics and dynamics of reading itself'.[29] Experiences of reading are often abstracted and de-contextualised, taking little account of the ways in which specific readers have been socially conditioned to interact with texts. To counter this vagueness, Spahr suggests taking into consideration the 'site-specific' circumstances in which reading, and indeed writing, take place. This emphasis on the social and historical circumstances of reading is well

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[27] Smith, 'Text for the day', 29.
[28] Towheed et al., *The History of Reading*, 67.
[29] Juliana Spahr, *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 2001), 12.

evidenced in Bakhtin's argument, who insists that dialogism is a result of historically and politically inscribed utterances that accumulate over time: 'Each word tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life; all words and forms are populated with intentions'.[30] Bakhtin recognises the context through which a text is formed and in which it evolves, and this is tested and re-appropriated by readers who bring to bear their own 'socially charged life'.[31] Another advantage of Bakhtin's approach is his attempt to integrate the anticipated or speculated reader into an analysis of the text itself, so that the reader's voice is traced through the text rather than relying on abstract speculation: 'dialogization penetrates from within the very way in which the word conceives its object and its means for expressing itself, reformulating the semantics and syntactical structure of discourse'.[32] The linguistic impulse towards dialogism can be noticed at the level of individual words and phrases, which carry not only their past contexts and associations, but the expectations of their intended audience. Bakhtin's ability to notice the reader's presence within language validates my decision to focus on the figuration of the reader *within* Smith's writing rather than the hypothetical reader *outside* it, using a process of textual analysis rather than speculating about how the extra-textual reader might respond to Smith's work.

In the first section of this chapter I propose three aspects of Smith's presentation of the dialogic reader which I consider to be significant: firstly, their ability to open texts up to multiple possible versions and interpretations; secondly, the discursive interactions that take place between the two; and thirdly, the momentary, even spontaneous nature of these encounters. The second section discusses in further detail a

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[30] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 293.
[31] Spahr adds that reading is a crucial aspect of social assimilation, which enables one to interact and actively participate in cultural dialogue and exchange with others: 'To gain literacy is not only to master a cultural symbolic system but also to participate in a culture' (*Everybody's Autonomy*, 2).
[32] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 284.

specific example of the dialogic reader from Smith's oeuvre: her 2012 publication *Artful*, which was originally delivered as a series of lectures in comparative literature before being published as a written text. *Artful* utilises a metafictional frame to outline a series of critical ideas about literature, in which a fictional narrator also reads and scrutinises the critical material and novel in question. It is Smith's most complex illustration of a dialogic reader, as she uses an 'amateur' reader-character to disrupt the more established narrative voice of a deceased literary critic.[33] In the final section of this chapter, I seek to build on this argument, broadening the conception of what a 'reader' constitutes in Smith's work by turning to an examination of the 'listener' in oral storytelling scenarios. Smith's prevalent use of such scenarios, I suggest, enhances her efforts to dialogise the text by bringing in multiple voices, and the figure of the listener has a particularly dynamic role to play in the telling and retelling of narrative. Through an examination of short stories such as 'A story of love' and 'Okay so far', this section considers the dialogic reader as a listener interacting and responding to oral narrative.

The first aspect of Smith's presentation of the reader as having a dialogic involvement in the text is her emphasis on the multiple, even endless interpretations that are possible in response to it, and suggestion that stories are never finished but always open to re-interpretation. Julio Peiró Sempere has argued that the act of reading is crucial for stimulating this multi-voiced potential of language:

> Every act of reading produces another reading instead of conveying a stable
> truth. Reading therefore becomes an unending act which in turn produces new
> responses in the form of texts. These new texts are born around a dialogical

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[33] Even though *Artful* was not written as a novel, narrative prose is a formative component of the text, and a crucial vehicle through which the reader is able to disrupt its authority. I have therefore found it an appropriate text to consider in relation to Bakhtin's essay.

network of interactions that conform to a single purpose: the unfinalizability of the reading project.[34]

Reading thus can be viewed as a centrifugal rather than a centripetal activity; opening texts to revision and re-interpretation in order to reveal their contradictions and expand their possible implications. The 'dialogical network' described by Sempere reinforces the idea that reading should create more questions than it answers, adding to the original text rather than reducing it to one fixed interpretation.

A relevant example that supports this argument can be found in *Artful*, in which the narrator re-reads the novel *Oliver Twist* for the first time in years. Comparing editorial discrepancies between two different publications of the same novel, the narrator exclaims: 'It was as though there was an argument, a discussion, literally happening between the copies, like the book itself, Oliver Twist, was weighing up and still undecided about the things it was going to say'.[35] The narrator's suggestion that there is a dialogue taking place, not only within the text, but between different versions of the same text destabilises the idea that there is any one fixed or final version of it. The reading experience thus becomes much more active, as the reader responds playfully, even jubilantly, to the different possibilities offered by the text. The notion that texts remain malleable and subject to alteration – both in terms of their republication and in terms of subsequent readings of them – is supported by the critical commentary of *Artful* that is written alongside the fictional narrative:

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[34] Sempere, *The Influence of Mikhail Bakhtin*, 28.

[35] Smith, *Artful*, 189. Another good example of this can be found in 'Believe me' from *The Whole Story and other stories*, where just as the book itself changes through the act of reading, so too the identity of the reader is altered by their experience:

> 'The good thing about a beloved book, if it's a good one, is that it shifts like music…you thought you knew this book but it dazzles you with the different book it is, yet again, and not just that but the different person you have become, the different person you are now, reading it again' (127).

> Great books are adaptable; they alter with us as we alter in life, they renew themselves as we change and re-read them at different times in our lives. You can't step into the same story twice - or maybe it's that stories, books, art can't step into the same person twice.[36]

Smith's critical commentary highlights the ongoing mutability of both texts and readers in their relation to one another, giving books an organic, changeable quality that enables them to speak to new readers in different historical moments. Similarly, readers have agency to challenge even canonical works of literature, adding their own interpretations to an already established school of criticism and opinion. This multiplicity of textual meaning is further exemplified through intuitive wordplay, as the narrator considers the ambiguous implications of Dickens' character names. The name 'Artful Dodger', for example, purposefully draws attention to the word 'dodge' as a signification of the shifty, unpredictable personality of its namesake.

The benefits of a text which has several possible meanings rather than one takes prominence in Bakhtin's notion of dialogism. Unlike the privileging of one single voice of 'truth' found in monologic discourse, he suggests, dialogic discourse makes space for divergent paths of meaning: 'The semantic structure of an internally persuasive discourse is not finite, it is open, in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal ever newer ways to mean'.[37] Instead of assuming that the most convincing texts are those which present a unified, coherent narrative, Bakhtin proposes that remaining open to readers' varied interpretations makes for a much more persuasive text. Thus, the ideal text for Bakhtin is one which is not finished but 'constantly productive, throwing out new forms and styles, developing and re-accentuating and

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[36] Smith, *Artful*, 31.
[37] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 346.

differentiating itself'.[38] Bakhtin, like Smith, does not allow words to become fixed upon the page; rather language is imbued with the prospect of change, and as such narrative is always in a process of evolution as stories are re-told. As Hélène Cixous says in her essay 'Without End no State of Drawingness no, rather: The Executioner's Taking off': 'you will recognize the true drawing, the live one: It's still running. Look at the legs'.[39] Celebrating the process of constant creation in favour of the finished product, Cixous suggests that to finalize a work of art is to kill its life and energy, and the best art is that which remains unfinished and open to change. Like Bakhtin, Cixous offers an analysis of the changeability of art; its ability to shift and surprise the expectations of its receptors.

To further evidence this idea, Smith celebrates characters who use language skilfully to gesture towards its dialogic potential. One illustration is in *Shire*, as Smith recalls a conversation she had with the university teacher Helena Shire, who had gifted her some money:

> But Mrs Shire, you'll have to allow me to find a proper way to thank you, I said.
>
> Oh, very proper, she said with a laugh.
>
> In that laugh, I remember, the meaning of the word proper shifted so that properness meant – what? Something witty, something else.[40]

In this example, the word 'proper' is interpreted differently by the two characters. In the first instance, it is used as part of Smith's attempt to find a socially appropriate way of saying thank you, whilst in the second it appears to be associated with a kind of British decorum, which Mrs Shire deems unnecessary and superficial. Smith's emphasis on

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[38] Hirschkop and Shepherd, *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, 18.
[39] Hélène Cixous, 'Without End no State of Drawingness no, rather: The Executioner's Taking off' in *New Literary History* 24:1, 1993, 93.
[40] Smith, *Shire*, 71.

'Something witty, something else' however, gestures towards the idea that there are further interpretations that could be made. This interaction draws attention to the shifts in tone and significance that words undertake when interpreted according to a particular social context and from different perspectives. These kinds of subtle shifts take place frequently in Smith's writing, comically highlighting the dialogic potential of language.

The second aspect of Smith's presentation of the dialogic reader is the precise nature of readers' interactions with texts, which are simultaneously characterised by a sense of generosity and animosity. Interactions in Smith's novels and short stories typically take place in a storytelling setting where the reader either complies with or challenges the given narrative. A compelling example of this is in Smith's 2007 novel *Girl meets boy,* in which a frame narrative depicts a grandfather telling a story to his two young granddaughters Midge and Anthea. As is typical of an adult trying to engage a young audience, the grandfather invites the girls to participate in telling the story: 'What do you think they threw at us when we spoke in front of the great hordes of listening people. Eggs and oranges, I say. Mud. Tomatoes and fishheads, Midge says'.[41] This kind of participatory storytelling builds suspense, offering opportunities for readers to guess at the subsequent events of the narrative. The granddaughters' alternative attitudes towards revising the outcome of the story from the supposedly original or 'truthful' version are particularly interesting. Whilst Anthea is content to entertain the imaginative possibilities of what could or should have happened in her grandfather's story, Midge becomes frustrated when she believes he is altering the truth, shouting 'in a kind of amazing rage, don't change it! You're changing it! It isn't right!'.[42] The oxymoronic phrase 'amazing rage' in Midge's outcry is revealing, suggesting that

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[41] Smith, *Girl meets boy,* 6-7.
[42] Ibid., 15.

amidst the child's anger is an incredulity or sense of awe at her grandfather's willingness to re-invent what happened. The dialogic encounter between storyteller and listener in this example reveals the volatile emotions that can be felt by readers when their attempts to comprehend or 'sum up' the narrative are disrupted by the undecidability of the story itself. Midge's over-reaction is suggestive of her desire to define the story by its one 'true' version, rather than make space for alternative possibilities.

Bakhtin's 'Discourse in the novel' similarly argues against 'a self-sufficient closed authorial monologue, one that presumes only passive listeners beyond its own boundaries',[43] preferring instead the lively contributions of the reader. For both Bakhtin and Smith, the critical engagement of the reader, or interactive dialogue between listener and storyteller, ensures that the narrative is incorporated into the reader's own conceptual and linguistic system, and is thus more likely to be re-told in the future. The story which Smith's grandfather tells his granddaughters must actively engage and involve them to ensure their future re-telling of it. For readers to engage with texts in this way, Bakhtin argues, the narrative must be fraught with a multitude of contradictory significances, surrounded by 'an agitated and cacophonous dialogic life',[44] which stimulates readers' engagement and encourages them to add their own voice in agreement or protest. In opposition to this is a closed, monologic discourse, which exists to inform and instruct the reader and is demarcated by strict exclusionary boundaries: 'a single, unitary language, inviolable and indisputable'.[45] Crucially, for Bakhtin, dialogic discourse allows for rich interaction such that the sociolinguistic system of one language, for example the voice of a third person narrator or of a particularly dominant character, is vulnerable to the influence of other voices.

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[43] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 274.
[44] Ibid., 343.
[45] Ibid., 295.

In his essay 'Violence and Metaphysics', Derrida makes a helpful contribution to this argument that the reader should be able to challenge or disrupt the authorial narrative voice. He argues that an entity which is positioned outside the text and seeks to enter it is a threat to its established order, and must either be reconciled into the 'safe' language of the authoritative narrative or excluded entirely.[46] Drawing on the ideas of fellow French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, Derrida concerns himself with how this outside voice can disrupt the stability of the text by inserting itself, even temporarily, inside its boundaries. Certainly, this alien figuration *must* be temporary, he suggests, as the outside voice cannot be permanently contained by the narrative without being absorbed by the dominant language of the text. This kind of outside entity is described by Derrida as something which is wholly 'Other': a voice that struggles to maintain its position within the text without losing its otherness. For the 'Other' to enter on its own terms, there must be a violent and radical subversion of order, a rupture of the text and a refusal to be familiarised, which often proves to be impossible.[47] The disruptive potential presented by such outside voices resonates with Bakhtin's description of the 'cacophonous dialogic life' of texts, as he discusses the atmosphere of chaos and discordance that is created when conflicting speech genres struggle to reconcile themselves with each other within the space of the text.[48] With regards to the reader, this cacophony can also be related to Fetterley's concept of the 'resisting reader', who refuses to interpret the text as it was intended and thus purposefully disrupts its established order:

> Such a closed system cannot be opened up from within but only from without. It
> must be entered into from a point of view which questions its values and

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[46] Derrida, 'Violence and Metaphysics', 128.
[47] Ibid.
[48] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 343.

assumptions and which has its investment in making available to consciousness precisely that which the literature wishes to keep hidden.[49]

The arrival of a reader who reads 'against the grain' in this way, presents a challenge to the stability of the text by throwing into question its existing assumptions and offering unexpected new interpretations of its meaning. Subversive readings are particularly visible in Smith's *Artful*, where the narrator is initially depicted as an outsider who is inferior to the supposed 'experts' of critical discourse and haunted by feelings of childhood ignorance; the coloured 'plasticized sheets' given in school for example, which were 'to let you know your place in the class'.[50] Interestingly, the narrator's sense of inferiority is suspended when the dying writer's critical discourse becomes fragmented and uncertain, which makes room for the reader-narrator to enter in and finish the text on her behalf. The narrator's succession as author of the text suggests a victory for the agency of the reader, who now feels confident to bring a different perspective to bear on its ideas. In support of this idea, reader-response critic Roger Chartier describes how book production demands the installation of an order or structure through which the production of meaning is strictly controlled. Reading, however, is 'by definition, rebellious and vagabond', and thus poses a continuous threat to the order of the text.[51]

Alongside the conflict and discordance experienced as the reader disrupts the text however, Smith also depicts the reader-text exchange as a generous one. J. Hillis Miller describes this as the ethical imperative of reading: 'a response to something, responsible to it, responsive to it, respectful of it';[52] a perspective which is helpful as it suggests that the encounter between reader and text depends upon the reader's willingness to engage

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[49] Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader*, xx.
[50] Smith, *Artful*, 76.
[51] Roger Chartier, 'Preface to *The Order of Books*' in *The History of Reading*, 36.
[52] J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading* (New York, Columbia UP: 1987), 5.

openly with its ideas. Julian Wolfreys also draws on Derrida's work in this area to suggest

that the interaction between reader and text is a call for the acceptance of 'Other' voices:

'Any act of reading, which is also, always a response to the textual other, must aim to

respect and respond to that singularity and difference'.[53] From this perspective, the act of

reading is associated with tolerance, respect and openness, as the reader responds

generously to the dialogic voices within a text. Bakhtin critics such as Sue Vice agree,

concluding that a dialogic approach creates a more democratic kind of text in which no

single voice is given authority over the narrative, but rather 'equality of utterance is

central'.[54] The notion that a dialogic approach results in a text where different utterances

exist peacefully alongside each other however, risks diminishing the inherent volatility of

the text, and fails to acknowledge its representation of conflict and struggle. For Bakhtin,

different speech types exist in tension with each other, and dialogic texts are conditioned

by the hierarchical social structures which pre-exist them. As Michael Holquist describes

in his analysis of Bakhtin's work, the dialogic text is 'based on the primacy of the social,

and the assumption that all meaning is achieved by struggle'.[55] In Smith's fiction, space is

made for a diverse range of voices to be represented including that of the reader, but as

already discussed, quite often these marginalised and dissident perspectives are used to

challenge more authoritative voices in the discourse. The representation of such conflict

is crucial to her writing, from texts such as *Girl meets boy* to the homeless character Else

in *Hotel World*, whose fragmented voice is literally disappearing from the page as it

repeatedly tries to interrupt the authorial narrative voice: '(Spr sm chn?)'.[56] Additionally,

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[53] Julian Wolfreys, *Deconstruction: Derrida* (London: Macmillan Press, 1998), 9.

[54] Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin*, 112. Georges Poulet adds that reading involves internalising the Other to the extent that new ways of looking at the world can be glimpsed. It is a 'giving way not only to a host of alien words, images, ideas, but also to the very alien principle which utters them and shelters them' ('Criticism and the Experience of Interiority' in *Reader-Response Criticism*, 45).

[55] Holquist, *Dialogism*, 39.

[56] Smith, *Hotel World*, 35.

in short stories such as 'Okay so far' and 'A story of love', Smith depicts power-struggle

through storytelling games in which teller and listener argue about the correct version of

the story and jostle for authority over it.[57] Sections of *Artful* such as 'On Offer and On

Reflection' are also concerned with the simultaneous impulse towards generosity and

selfishness that characterizes dialogue between texts and readers.[58] These examples

illustrate that whilst 'equality of utterance' between speech genres might be idealised, for

Smith, the text remains a site in which different voices are engaged in a struggle for

dominance. In this regard, the reader also faces their own struggle to be heard.

The third aspect of Smith's presentation of the dialogic reader that is important for

this discussion is the precise moment of encounter between reader and text, which is

experienced as both transitory and revelatory. It is through this event – the act of

reading itself – that the text becomes invigorated with fresh potential for meaning.

Smith frequently experiments with narrative temporality and the experience of the

present moment is a particular focus for her, from the teenager Astrid's ability to capture

it through her camera lens in *The Accidental*, to Sara's attempts to relive the exhilaration

of her own death falling down a hotel dumb-waiter shaft in *Hotel World*.[59] Indeed, Smith

demonstrates that the written text is able to capture the plurality of the present moment:

'both the now in which it is being written and the now in which it is being read'.[60] In

this respect, the acts of writing and reading, which take place in separate moments of

time, can be brought together and experienced in a concentrated, meaningful way, or as

Rosenblatt would suggest, as an 'aesthetic' rather than 'efferent' reading experience.[61]

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[57] See Smith, *Other Stories and other stories.*
[58] Smith describes storytelling as an act of generosity that involves a risk of loss and vulnerability for both teller and listener: 'Art is always an exchange, like love, whose giving and taking can be a complex and wounding matter' (*Artful*, 160).
[59] Smith, *The Accidental*, 8-9 and *Hotel World*, 3.
[60] Smith, *Artful*, 36.
[61] Rosenblatt, *The Reader*, 24.

Books, Smith suggests, are 'tangible pieces of time in our hands . . . always with their present-tense ability'; indeed, each new reading is a way of reconstructing the moment of the text's inscription and bringing to life its original intentions whilst merging them with a response.[62] Reading thus produces spark encounters between past and present moments that are spontaneous and unrepeatable, differently constituting the book each time it is opened.

These ideas about the significant moment of encounter between reader and text are supported by Currie's essay on narrative temporality in Smith's fiction: 'There is a core paradox in the temporality of reading and writing, between the already complete nature of written sequences and their temporal unfolding to a reader'.[63] Currie highlights an important tension in Smith's work, between the already existent words on the page and the attempts of the reader to re-live the experiences described. The linear movement of time is frequently symbolised in Smith's novels, such as in *There but for the* by the flow of the river, and in *The Accidental* by the movement of the sun from dawn to dusk through Astrid's camera lens. However, the act of reading also represents a rebellion against this forward thrust of time, insisting that the words of the text are revisited time and time again, brought back from the past into the present with each new reading. In this regard, Currie's argument that Smith's novels self-consciously 'stage the process of reading against the process of writing',[64] suggests a struggle between the unrelenting linearity of the written text and act of reading, which insists on re-visiting past events.

Similarly, Bakhtin's emphasis on the different historical moments in which texts are written and read in 'Discourse in the novel' suggests his interest in bringing past and present into a dialogue through the act of reading itself. Through a dialogic approach,

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[62] Smith, *Artful*, 31. See also Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 282.
[63] Currie, 'Ali Smith and the Philosophy of Grammar', 50.
[64] Ibid., 53.

utterances in texts are already saturated with social and historical resonances, and the interactions between these resonances and the disposition of the reader generates 'a momentary spark of meaning'.[65] Shepherd's essay 'Bakhtin and the reader' elucidates the role of the reader in generating this 'spark':

> the meaning of a text will change as it is read in new contexts by always historically and socially situated readers who will always bring to it (shared) presuppositions about, among other things, the nature of literature, literary meaning, aesthetic value and so on, and may in turn find these presuppositions being modified in the process of their dialogic encounter with the text . . . the dialogic act of reading is disruptive of the seemingly fixed positions of text and reader; these positions cannot come through the dialogic encounter unchanged because they do not pre-exist it.[66]

A dialogic reader might be described as a figure who reconstitutes the text's meaning according to their own specific background and experiences, as well as in response to the assumptions presented by the text itself. Shepherd's suggestion that the identities of reader and text do not pre-exist this moment of 'dialogic encounter' is highly persuasive when considered in relation to Smith's writing, which frequently depicts books as lying dormant until a reader opens them and 'brings them to life'.

One example of this is 'The poet' in *Shire*, which, as explored in my chapter on 'The Embodied Reader', is about the Scottish poet Olive Fraser, reimagined as a feisty young girl who encounters dusty old books in a forbidden front room of her aunt's house in the Scottish Highlands. Like the narrator of *Artful*, this character does not feel entitled to read these books, and they are described initially as sealed and untouchable.

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[65] Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin*, 47.
[66] Shepherd, 'Bakhtin and the reader', 99.

Nevertheless, in her frustration, Olive has a violent impulse to hurl one of Walter Scott's Waverley novels across the room: 'She didn't even look at it, she threw the book. She just threw it'.[67] After doing this, she discovers hidden sheet music inside the book's spine. This behaviour towards the book represents an unconventional reading of sorts, through which Olive asserts her own agency and ultimately discovers a new layer of the text which is quite revelatory. Delighted, she exclaims: 'Think of the Waverley collection on the shelves, the full twenty-five novels, their spines sliced back and open and the music inside them visible'.[68] Like the protagonist Melissa in 'Text for the day', Olive fantasises about ripping open all the books on the shelves to discover their hidden treasures, and this symbolises her newly discovered confidence to handle and experience the contents of these prestigious novels. This event is depicted by Smith as an important moment in Olive's life, a symbol of her defiance against social rules, particularly within an education system which still limited opportunities for women. It is a moment of encounter which not only defines Olive as a reader and transforms her perspective, but renews the identity of the books themselves, which are imbued with unexpected significance.

Derrida's argument in 'Choreographies' is useful when considering Olive's actions, as he describes how subject positions are not long-lasting but exist only momentarily. As already outlined, Derrida uses the metaphor of dance to represent the perpetual renegotiation of relational identity: 'the dance changes place and above all changes places. In its wake they can no longer be recognised'.[69] The image of dance signifies a multiplicity of possibilities, innumerable choreographies, and 'an incessant, daily negotiation', in which identities are formed and subsequently lost. This perspective is

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[67] Smith, *Shire*, 48.
[68] Ibid., 61.
[69] Derrida, 'Choreographies', 69.

useful in relation to the idea that texts only exist in so far as they are encountered by readers and vice versa, and that the encounter between a reader and text is a significant event that can result in the transformation and renewal of both. The metaphor of dance carries connotations of randomness and free play, suggesting that such interactions are liberating and spontaneous, which is particularly resonant of Olive's impulsive reaction to the bookshelves. Even Bakhtin's more determinist view of language as socially and historically saturated involves a 'spark' of unanticipated interaction, through which the reader enables the text to find 'ever new ways to mean'.[70]

The opening section of this chapter has explored three key aspects of Smith's portrayal of the reader, which can be interpreted in accordance with Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic: firstly, the reader's ability to open the text to multiple interpretations; secondly, the discursive nature of the interactions between reader and text; and thirdly, the precise moment of encounter between them. The subsequent two sections continue to consider these aspects in relation to Smith's writing, exploring in further depth examples from Smith's oeuvre which have already been introduced: the amateur reader's response to a critical text in *Artful,* and the inclusion of oral storytelling scenarios in her fiction. As a result of this exploration, I conclude that Smith presents a vision of narrative prose which is more open and democratic, highlighting the new possibilities for meaning that are created through the active, and indeed dialogic, involvement of the reader.

Artful

Originally written as a series of four lectures about literary form which were delivered at St Anne's College in Oxford in 2012, *Artful* is a text which demonstrates

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[70] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 346.

Smith's reluctance to adopt an entirely critical voice in her writing. The creative narrative she conjures instead to frame her analysis 'On time', 'On form', 'On edge' and 'On offer and on reflection', depicts a grief-stricken narrator reading through the academic notes of their late partner, who was the original author of the lectures. The untimely death of this academic has left behind an array of critical fragments, which must be made sense of by the narrator for the text to be 'finished'. Crucially, *Artful* is a metafiction in which the ungendered narrator is positioned as an amateur reader who becomes a vehicle to providing fresh perspective on the ideas that Smith wishes to explore. It is a text which playfully demonstrates how a fictional narrative can infuse the language and ideas of a critical discussion with new relevance and meaning, and asserts the role of the reader as an important part of this process.

For the purposes of this section I find it useful to first consider the distinction drawn by Bakhtin between creative and critical forms of writing in 'Discourse in the novel'. Bakhtin views critical discourse as part of a 'professional stratification of language',[71] which is shaped around the interests and values of a particular group of individuals, be they lawyers, politicians, teachers, or indeed literary critics. The problem with this 'professional stratification', according to Bakhtin, is that it typically uses complex terminology which is highly selective and inaccessible to most readers, and it also tends towards monologic, 'truth-telling' forms of language, which limit or close off alternative meanings in order to assert their own argument.[72] The language of such discourse remains 'demarcated, compact and inert' according to Bakhtin;[73] informative and instructive in purpose, and carrying a sense of its own importance. This can limit a text's dialogic potential, as it leaves little space for alternative interpretations to be formulated

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[71] Ibid., 289.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid., 343.

and restricts language to the context in which it is being used, neglecting its ability to shift meaning in different contexts.

There are noticeable parallels to be drawn between Bakhtin's attitude towards the 'professional stratification of language' and Smith's approach in *Artful,* which is characterised by scepticism towards what might be considered 'professional' discourse, such as the language used by the deceased academic who has left the text behind. For instance, the narrator suggests that some of the lecture fragments are convoluted and difficult to understand. Baffled by intellectual references, they rebuke them with exasperated comments such as 'If you say so . . . whatever they are when they're at home'.[74] Examples such as this reveal how academic discourse can work to privilege a knowledgeable few, whilst excluding the majority of readers. In addition to this, the ghost of the deceased, who returns to haunt the narrator on occasional visitations, is described as a 'nasal-sounding' academic, who lectures spontaneously from a book about birds and makes derogatory comments such as: 'I've told you a hundred times, the *life* is nothing to *do* with it'.[75] This assertion belittles and invalidates the narrator's opinions and experiences within the so-called serious business of literary analysis. It also expresses the academic's reluctance for an author's personal circumstances or '*life*' to be considered when analysing their work, which as has been seen earlier in my argument, is at odds with Smith's attitude towards reading.[76]

Another instance in which the narrator of *Artful* rebels against the 'professional' use of language is during a series of grief counselling sessions, where the therapeutic vocabulary of the counsellor restricts the narrator's ability to think clearly about the

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[74] Smith, *Artful,* 51.
[75] Ibid., 52 and 51.
[76] This is resonant of Iser's argument in *The Act of Reading* that the context of the reader and their subjective contribution to analysis are crucial conditions for producing meaning from a text, which are often overlooked by academic criticism (19).

problems they are facing. Even the counsellor's attempts to guide the narrator through an exercise designed to relax and stimulate the imagination does not achieve its intended effect:

> She told me to sit back and close my eyes, then starting at the tips of my toes she talked me through all the parts of my body, telling me to ask them each to relax. Then she said, imagine it's a summer's day.
>
> It's January, I said.
>
> Imagine it's summer, she said, and imagine a warm place, somewhere where you feel completely safe. Maybe the place is in the countryside. Look all around you at the place, stand and turn and look 360 degrees round you. Then – can you see – down the path there, there's a gate.
>
> Right, a gate, I said.
>
> Now you go through the gate, and you follow the path, she said, and listen for all the sounds you hear, and how you can hear the sound of the sea in the distance. Walk towards the shore, looking and listening all round you as you go. Eventually there it is, a beach, and you're totally safe, it's very peaceful, it's a wonderful place. Now. What's the sea like?
>
> I have no idea, I said. I'm still way back at the gate. At the gate? she said. Open it and walk through it. I can't, I said. Try, she said. I just can't, I said. Ah, the counsellor said. Um. Nobody's ever stopped off at the gate when I've done this technique before.
>
> Should I open my eyes? I said. No, no, keep them closed, she said. Okay, um-. Okay, I know. Wait a minute. We're going to try another technique, a specific self-empowerment technique.[77]

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[77] Smith, *Artful*, 102.

This passage demonstrates how the professional jargon of the counsellor restricts the narrator to clichéd images of a beach and calming waves, rather than allowing them to follow their own imagination. Suggestive language such as 'Maybe the place is in the countryside' and imperatives such as 'Now you go through the gate' stultify the narrator's ability to think freely about the possibilities suggested by the narrative, and these commands come across as patronising and controlling. As such, the language of the therapist does not achieve its intended effect but falls stagnant on its listener's ears. The narrator's sarcastic tone throughout this passage, such as the retort towards the idea of it being a summer's day: 'It's January, I say', reveals their sense of frustration and disillusionment with the counsellor's discourse. Again, the narrator is being coerced by a kind of pre-prepared script that leaves no room for their own interpretations.

These examples demonstrate how Smith uses a fictional narrator to undermine the authority of what Bakhtin describes as the 'professional stratification of language', which is unable to adapt to different contexts, and sets itself apart from the narrator's present emotional struggle. Smith has asserted that the use of a fictional frame when writing *Artful* enabled her to disassociate herself from the sense of authority typically associated with academic discourse:

> If you stand in front of an audience and you speak and it's a lecture, it's as if you have some kind of authority . . . Coming in on a tangent with fiction allows you not to be there at the same time as being there. The "I", as it were, is now a question.[78]

Smith proposes that by developing an invented narrative and characters she can introduce a sense of uncertainty into the text, diversifying the perspectives that are available within it and questioning the authority of its narrative voice. By creating a

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[78] Rutherford, 'An interview with Scottish author Ali Smith'.

distance between herself as the writer and the ideas she hopes to communicate, a space for the reader or listener to interpret the text for themselves opens. In other words, reducing the authority of the critic – indeed the literary academic in this text is quite literally dead and (almost) gone – Smith draws attention to the present reading that is taking place by the amateur-narrator, whose own opinions are now validated and have become crucial to the significance of the text. This marks a noticeable shift in the dynamic of authority between speaker and listener, or writer and reader, as the recipient of the text takes on a more active role in the generation of meaning.

In concordance with this, 'Discourse in the novel' argues that the creative text - predominantly the novel - is better equipped to avoid the trappings of monologism as it tends to represent a wider range of speech genres, making space for ambiguity and alternative interpretations. As mentioned in the first section of this chapter, Bakhtin understands the articulation of language - what he describes as an 'utterance' - as context-specific, and so applauds the novelist Dostoevsky for his equal representation of social voices, dialects and registers. The discord and struggle between these various types of utterance leads, for Bakhtin, to a flowering of new possibilities: 'The dialogic orientation of a word among other words (of all kinds and degrees of otherness) creates new and significant artistic potential in discourse'.[79] In this respect, the novel is characterized for Bakhtin not by its authoritative claims to truth or its exclusion of non-standardized languages or dialects, but by its potential for difference and multiplicity, through which alternative interpretations can be invoked by its recipients.

Whilst *Artful* is not technically a novel, it is significant that Smith uses narrative prose - the story of a grief-stricken narrator and their journey to recovery – to challenge the authority of the critical voice of the text. Indeed, the creative-critical hybrid that

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[79] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 275.

Smith produces is suggestive of the kind of writing she was discouraged from using as a student at Cambridge, where she was 'warned repeatedly about being *too creative*'.[80] The narrator's voice in *Artful* adopts a light-hearted sense of humour through which the sincerity of the critical discussion is undermined and this makes Smith's discourse more engaging and accessible. At one point, for example, when the critical text becomes particularly fragmented, the narrator interprets:

> After this, you'd written the single word in capitals, CÉZANNE, and left the rest of the page blank. The next page, which was the last page of On Form, had a scrawl on it, difficult to read. Did that say Italic? Italian? Cumin? Italian Cumin says near the end of his book Six Memos.[81]

This humorous reference to Italo Calvino's novel *Six Memos on a New Millennium* reveals the narrator's attempts to decipher the incomprehensible handwriting contained within these notes. Smith draws attention to the narrator's instinctual reactions to what is being read, writing in the present tense as if following the reading process itself, and before any attempt can be made to censor or intellectualise their first reactions. As the fictional narrator grapples with the various references found within the lecture material, the authoritative voice of the deceased critic becomes increasingly distant, and the notion that there ever was a single prevailing author of this text is thrown under considerable doubt.

It is crucial to note that not only do the fictional elements of *Artful* dialogize the text, but the lively interplay between critical points of view also help Smith to broaden the argument and give other voices prominence. Smith draws on an impressive range of references from different writers, with multiple epigraphs and streams of quotations in

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[80] Smith, *Shire*, 78.
[81] Smith, *Artful*, 85.

conversation with each other. A quote from Czeslaw Milosz for example, who describes poetry as an open house with 'no key in the doors/ and invisible guests come in and out at will', is echoed more than a hundred pages later by a reference to Katherine Mansfield, who reflects: 'there are moments when I feel I am nothing but the small clerk of some hotel', handing out keys to guests.[82] These images express the inevitable influence of both writers and readers on any piece of new discourse, as whilst the text is the private space of its creator, others can be granted different levels of access to it. At other times the interplay of secondary references takes place on a single page, where three, four or five writers are referred to in succession.[83] Smith's persistent use of multiple perspectives to stage the discussion in this way prevents the text from becoming dominated by any one voice and establishes it as part of an ongoing dialogue rather than the foregone conclusion of an argument. As such, it is important to recognise that the dialogic potential of *Artful* has as much to do with the way it interweaves different perspectives from other sources, all of which help to stratify the discussion and create a lively reading experience.

Smith describes narrative form as a shifting entity, as a 'shaper and moulder . . . endlessly breeding forms from forms',[84] which suggests that both creative and critical types of writing are constantly interacting with each other in new and evolutionary ways. It is apparent that drawing a straightforward distinction between different forms of discourse as tending towards monologism and dialogism exclusively can be problematic, and Bakhtin's exclusive privileging of the novel above other types of discourse has been a frequent criticism of his work.[85] Holquist, for example, has

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[82] Ibid., 83 and 198.

[83] See, for example, p.20 where Smith brings in multiple points of view to discuss the significance of temporality within fiction.

[84] Ibid., 67.

[85] For discussion of this topic, see Holquist, *Dialogism*, 107; Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin*, 85; and Wayne Booth's introduction to *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984), xiii-xxvii.

suggested that like critical texts, works of fiction often compromise their dialogic potential as they seek to establish a coherent narrative: 'every time we talk we give order to the world; every time we write or read a literary text we give the greatest degree of (possible) order to a world'.[86] Holquist demonstrates that to create any kind of text, writers must strive to organise their ideas into a form that can communicate with its readers. In other words, the act of selecting and organizing language into a text necessitates practises of inclusion and exclusion – privileging certain perspectives over others – to achieve some coherence of meaning. Nevertheless, Holquist maintains that it is possible to disrupt this process, arguing that: 'authorship is understood as consummating or "finalizing" the unsigned world into an utterance in a manner that least restricts the world's possible meanings'.[87] In this regard, Holquist supports Bakhtin's perspective that it is the task of writers to avoid the trappings of monologic discourse as much as possible, resisting the urge to 'finalize' or determine meaning completely, and rather to keep the path open for the free play of the reader's varying responses.

Another useful perspective in this discussion is the critic Rosalind Krauss, who like Holquist maintains that all forms of writing are, in their purest forms, at risk of restricting meaning for the sake of a neat resolution.[88] She proposes instead what is described as a 'paraliterary' space, in which critical and creative forms of writing are intermixed. This hybrid space, she suggests, is: 'the space of debate, quotation, partisanship, betrayal, reconciliation; but it is not the space of unity, coherence, or resolution that we think of as constituting the work of literature'.[89] Krauss agrees with

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[86] Holquist, *Dialogism*, 85.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Rosalind E. Krauss, 'Poststructuralism and the Paraliterary' in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1985), 292.
[89] Ibid.

Holquist that even literature is liable to the trappings of monologism, as it strives to create a coherent narrative of its subject. Krauss' method for disrupting this tendency involves contaminating forms with other forms, and using the space of the text to instigate dialogue between them. As in dialogism, Krauss presents the paraliterary space as a way of mixing different types of discourse, using terms such as 'debate' and 'betrayal' to show how the interaction between forms can generate conflict between these forms for authority over the text. This kind of subversive experimentation has been especially popular amongst female academics who have sought to overcome what they see as the phallocentric authority of critical writing by interspersing elements of personal and creative narrative.[90] Although Smith has no formal association with this school of writing, it is useful for my discussion to bear in mind the broader development of writing practices such as this, which mix creative and critical forms, especially given the associations I have already noted between her depiction of the reader and a particularly feminist stance. The subversive outcome of these types of writing, as they adopt critical-creative hybrid forms, is to undermine the singular voice of critical authority, which is restricted to the parameters of one single type of discourse.

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[90] See Helen Flavell, 'Who Killed Jeanne Randolph? King, Muecke or "Fictocriticism"?' in *Outskirts: feminisms along the edges* 20, 2009, <http://www.outskirts.arts.uwa.edu.au/volumes/volume-20/flavell> (accessed 12 July 2016). A movement of writing was developed largely by Canadian and Australian scholars in the 1990s called 'fictocriticism', which sought to disrupt the boundaries between critical and creative forms. See Donna Maree Hancox and Vivienne Muller, 'Excursions into New Territory: Fictocriticism and Undergraduate Writing' in *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice & Theory of Creative Writing* 8.2 (2011), 150. Other useful sources of information about this and similar movements include Amanda Nettlebeck, 'Notes towards an introduction' in *The Space Between: Australian Women Writing Fictocriticism* (Newlands: University of Western Australia Press, 1998), 1-17; and Paul Dawson, *Creative Writing and the New Humanities* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2005). Nettlebeck's definition of this movement suggests particularly interesting parallels with Smith's approach in *Artful*, suggesting that the merging of creative and critical writing is additive rather than subtractive, which corresponds with Smith's belief that new creativity emerges when a dialogue is generated between different forms:

> 'It is writing that brings the "creative" and the "critical" together – not simply in the sense of placing them side by side, but in the sense of mutating both, of bringing a spotlight to bear upon the known forms in order to make them "say" something else' (*The Space Between*, 4).

Having examined the – somewhat troubled – distinction drawn by Bakhtin between monologic and dialogic forms of writing, and his association of these terms with critical and creative discourses, it is important to turn more fully to the fictional narrator in *Artful*, and the role this character plays as a reader to fulfil the dialogic potential of Smith's text. As outlined in the introductory section to this chapter, Bakhtin argues that, as in everyday conversations, a reader, or in this case a listener, arrives with a pre-existing conceptual framework:

> In the actual life of speech, every concrete act of understanding is active: it assimilates the word to be understood into its own conceptual system filled with specific objects and emotional expressions, and is indissolubly merged with the response, with a motivated agreement or disagreement.[91]

As in conversational discourse, in which an exchange takes place between two different perspectives – that of speaker and listener – so a reader arrives at a text with pre-existing values and experiences that determine, to at least some degree, their response to it. In other words, an entirely neutral reading of a text is impossible. More than this, Bakhtin argues that the anticipated presence of the reader is in some respects 'the activating principle' of the text itself,[92] which is written to communicate and engage with its recipient and meet with a response. Similarly, Smith has argued that 'There's always an edge, in any dialogue, in any exchange. There's even an edge in monologue, between the speaker and the silent listener',[93] suggesting that even discourse which presents itself as monologic is inevitably influenced by the presence of its recipient, who will listen and respond to the ideas put forward.

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[91] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 282.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Smith, *Artful*, 126.

To elucidate this argument about the influence of the reader on the text, 'Discourse in the novel' uses the term 'responsive understanding' to describe the reader's active engagement with the specific ideas of a text: 'Responsive understanding is a fundamental force, one that participates in the formulation of discourse, and it is moreover an active understanding, one that discourse senses as resistance or support enriching the discourse'.[94] In other words, the dialogic text is one which acknowledges the scrutinising eye of its reader and makes space for enough ambiguity so that this figure can enter in and bring their own perspectives to bear on the text. These perspectives add a fundamental quality to the discourse, as the anticipated agreement or disagreement of the reader has an 'enriching' impact on how the text is shaped. Readers themselves are situated in particular historical and social contexts, and are primed to 'populate (the text) with his own intention, his own accent'.[95] In this regard, texts will be interpreted very differently in different contexts, and the dialogic text should allow for this variability, without entirely losing the initial context of its own production. Jerome Bruner adds to this discussion by describing the text's responsiveness to the reader with the term 'subjunctivity', which means maintaining a level of uncertainty so that the reader can shape the text for themselves.[96] This idea of responsive understanding, or the 'subjunctivity' of the text, is evidenced throughout *Artful*, as Smith frequently presents multiple perspectives on the same idea, and makes space to explore the narrator's agreement and disagreement with these divergent opinions. As such, the text itself becomes a self-reflexive debate about its own meaning, as the narrator attempts to re-imagine or re-make the broken pieces of the text that have been left behind.

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[94] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 281.
[95] Ibid., 293.
[96] Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds* (Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 1986), 35.

For the narrator to make sense of these lecture fragments, other texts must also be re-read, such as Charles Dickens' novel *Oliver Twist*, which is used to illustrate the now-deceased critic's theoretical ideas. The narrator has not read this novel for years, and is exhilarated to find that 'reading it again had become a finding of things I'd had no idea were in it'.[97] Re-experiencing this novel in tangent with the critical ideas of the lectures – 'On time', 'On form' etc. – proves to be an enlightening experience, and the narrator's personal responses are given equal weight alongside other perspectives about the author's intentions: 'First: why wouldn't Dickens name the town this was happening in? Then: the word workhouse reminded me of my father telling me once that at one point his mother (my grandmother) worked in a workhouse laundry'.[98] In this example, the narrator organizes their thoughts in response to the opening of the novel; first comes a question about the author's motivations, and then a personal reflection on how the text resonates with another story they have heard. The inclusion of this familial anecdote passed down through generations supports Bakhtin's belief that the reader arrives with an 'apperceptive background',[99] which is used to find new meaning in a text and appropriate it to their own context. It also further illustrates the notion that the narrator-reader responds based on their instinctive emotions and personal experiences, rather than attempting to formulate a more abstract or intellectual opinion.

Forging connections between the narrator's reality and the theoretical ideas found within critical discourse is an important aspect of *Artful* and part of Smith's rebellion against a purely intellectual approach to writing. The first chapter 'On time' for example is premised by the ending lines of a poem: 'I'll sit and mourn all at her grave/ For a

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[97] Smith, *Artful*, 91.
[98] Ibid., 7.
[99] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 282.

twelvemonth and a day'.[100] These lines reflect the narrator's own state of grief at the time of reading, and suggest that this kind of grief will eventually pass. This quotation is immediately followed by the narrator's first-person perspective, reflecting upon the poem and comparing it to their own life: 'The twelvemonth and a day being up, I was still at a loss. If anything I was more at a loss'.[101] As such, the narrator is positioned in the role of a reader from the very first lines of Smith's narrative, and articulates their disappointment that the sentiment expressed by the poem has not been fulfilled by their own personal experience. Whilst this attempt to appropriate the poem in the hope that it might provide comfort and reassurance is unsuccessful, at other times, such appropriation is more helpful to the narrator, such as during the reading of *Oliver Twist*:

> When I read those words I felt again the weight of my own sorrow, the world I carried on my own back; and at exactly the same time the fact that someone somewhere sometime else had thought of the world as a world of sorrow too made the weight on my own back feel a bit better.[102]

The narrator again relates the feelings of sadness expressed by Oliver in the novel to their own life, and on this occasion finds solace in the idea of shared experience and develops a sense of empathy with this character. Despite their deceased partner's reluctance to make space for personal emotions within an analytical discussion, these examples show how the narrator adds context and at times a sentimental perspective to the narrative, which brings meaningful relevance to the critical ideas.

Bakhtin's belief that the reader should be actively involved in giving a text new significance is further evidenced by the narrator of *Artful* as they not only read the lecture material but start to influence it, piecing together the fragments of what's

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[100] Smith, *Artful*, 3.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid., 8.

already there and adding new perceptions and interpretations. Indeed, it becomes apparent that even before their partner's death, the narrator tried to make helpful contributions to the discussion: 'I actually made you laugh with that. I think you even put it into one of your lectures. Maybe it was in this one'.[103] The narrator remembers these lively and affirming discussions fondly, and is jubilant at the thought that their own ideas may have helped to shape the resulting text. As the narrative progresses, the narrator becomes increasingly confident to introduce their own cultural reference points; *Oliver! the musical*, for example, in relation to Dickens' novel, which had previously been disregarded as low-brow and irrelevant. Examples such as this work to disrupt the professional stratification of academic discourse introduced earlier, as the narrator brings a range of alternative reference points to the text. Working to complete the unfinished lectures becomes a way of diversifying the critical arguments contained within them, as well as celebrating the range of new ideas that can be brought by new readers. The unfinished form of the text leaves room for the narrator's voice to be added to it: 'In the space under CEZANNE, I wrote, instead, with my own handwriting next to yours: *I have been reading Charles' Dickens's novel Oliver Twist, I am halfway through it, roughly*'.[104] This passage comes at the end of a particularly disjointed section of the lecture fragments, which indicates the declining health of its original author. The narrator takes comfort in being able to add their own words alongside those already on the page, and from this point onwards the distinction between their two voices begins to disintegrate and narrative authority is distributed more evenly. As argued in relation to Cixous' essay 'Coming to Writing', the moment at which the distinction between reader and writer breaks downs – as the reader becomes a writer themselves – is a

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[103] Ibid., 75.
[104] Ibid., 89.

significant one, which consolidates their involvement in the text and contribution to what is already on the page.[105]

Importantly for Bakhtin, the encounter between reader and text must have a transformational effect on the reader: 'Another's discourse performs here no longer as information, directions, rules, models and so forth – but strives rather to determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behaviour'.[106] This reinforces Bakhtin's argument that monologic discourse – written to inform, direct or regulate in some way, but resisting the idea of further discourse or discussion – can generate only a limited level of engagement with its reader. Dialogic discourse, on the other hand, has the capacity to transform the reader in ways that extend beyond the act of reading itself, re-determining their values and encouraging them to take an active role in challenging authorities in the same way. This attitude is again comparable to the experience of the reader in *Artful*, whose emotional wellbeing and outlook improves as a result of reading the fragmented lectures. Initially, the narrator uses reading as a way of maintaining intimacy with their deceased partner, who is the ghostly 'other' of the text and whose voice continues to resonate throughout, but eventually this presence is no longer needed. The statement: 'I'd read all of you, now',[107] is indicative of the narrator having reached a sense of resolution through the act of reading, and suggests a more positive state of mind has been reached. Consequently, there is a preoccupation throughout *Artful* with the relevance of critical ideas to the narrator's personal circumstances, and the power of narrative to assist with their recovery from grief.

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[105] See Cixous, 'Coming to Writing', 45.
[106] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 342.
[107] Smith, *Artful*, 188.

A final aspect of Smith's presentation of the dialogic reader in *Artful* which can be usefully informed by Bakhtin's notion of 'responsive understanding' is the incorporation of an entirely new language to the text as it reaches its conclusion. Motivated by the surprise revelation that their partner was secretly watching Greek musicals when she was supposed to be writing these lectures, the narrator starts learning Greek: 'I went through and got my laptop and typed into the search box the words *Ypomoni aliki vougiouklaki'*.[108] Learning through a mixture of useful phrases found in textbooks as well as the more elaborate language found in poetry and song, the narrator flourishes in this new pursuit. The introduction of Greek popular culture into the text is significant because it not only destabilises the high-brow authority originally established by the critical discussion, but it also further dialogizes the text by adding an entirely new language into it. Earlier on in *Artful* the narrator had dismissed references to the Greek language as irrelevant nonsense, but by the end of the narrative they have learnt the Greek alphabet and can make simple translations of Greek songs. This proactive use of another language is further evidence that the narrator has a new-found confidence to re-articulate the ideas of the text in their own words.

Sempere has argued that 'reading is an act which takes place in contact zones, in thresholds where the voices of other subjects are strongly felt'.[109] In this section, I have argued that Smith's *Artful* similarly positions the reader as a critical agent within the dialogic struggle between different languages, registers and genres that fight for representation within any given text. By inter-mixing creative narrative with critical discourse, Smith brings a diverse array of voices into contact with each other, and refuses to establish any one dominant voice of authority. Crucially, by giving the reader

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[108] Ibid., 177.
[109] Sempere, *The Influence of Mikhail Bakhtin*, 112.

an equal role in the making of this text, Smith draws attention to the processes of re-interpretation and re-articulation that must take place in any act of reading, and which allow the text to find 'ever newer ways to mean'.[110] Whilst it is not within the scope of this study to consider in depth how the real-life reader of *Artful* might respond to the strategies deployed here, it is worth noting that the down-to-earth perspective of the narrator, and the range of cultural references they draw into the discussion, help to break open a critical discourse which might otherwise be perceived as exclusive and inaccessible. The development of a fictional narrator who is opinionated and evidently flawed, and who might be disagreed with as well as empathised with, is another strategy by which the 'I' authority of the text is undermined, and Smith's reader or listener is encouraged to actively respond for themselves.

Oral Storytelling

In the third section of this chapter, I will focus on Smith's representations of oral storytelling scenarios, in particular how these enhance her depiction of the dialogic reader, or in this case listener, who undermines the narrative authority and works to make space in the text for their own voice to be heard. Whilst the narrator of *Artful* reads written fragments that have been left behind, some of the characters in Smith's fiction are listeners of orally told tales, especially in the case of children and young people, who frequently interrupt the storyteller with questions or participate in creating the story themselves. As such, this section focuses on novels and short stories in which characters perform stories aloud or recall narratives in conversation with each other, drawing once again on Bakhtin's essay 'Discourse in the novel', whilst also noting the

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[110] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 346.

recent resurgence of critical interest in oral narrative more broadly.[111] Smith's depiction of storytelling scenarios in which characters alternately tell and listen to each other's tales draws heightened attention to the inherently discursive nature of narrative, and is also an accessible format that allows characters to have a dialogue with their storyteller face to face. Smith experiments playfully with the ways in which stories can be represented as oral narratives, and has suggested that the heightened awareness of having a live audience, even in the delivery of lectures such as those compiled in *Artful*, has forced her as a writer to think more carefully about how she presents her narrative:

> It was an ongoing progress and process, knowing the audience was going to be different each time. Something of that fed back into the thing I was writing so fast. There was a great deal of,' she pauses to take a breath, 'liberation in it—I was allowed to be licit because of it. There was a relationship between me and the audience which meant that anything was possible.[112]

This quotation from a 2014 interview suggests that Smith's anticipation of the live presence of listeners brought to life the whole process of writing *Artful* and filled it with openness and possibility. The audience's responses to one lecture actively contributed to the one that followed it, and so the writing process became a co-production between writer and audience.

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[111] The twenty-first century has seen a proliferation of publications on the enduring relevance of storytelling in contemporary society. Some of the most recent examples which have been particularly useful to me here include J. Shaw, P. Kelly and L. Semler eds, *Storytelling: Critical and Creative Approaches* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Michael Jackson, *The Politics of Storytelling* (Copenhagen: Museum Tuscalanum Press, 2002); Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps, *Living Narrative: Creating Lives in Everyday Storytelling* (Cambridge and London: Harvard UP, 2001) and Jack Zipes, *Speak Out: Storytelling and Creative Drama for Children* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004). Jackson's text in particular argues powerfully that oral storytelling remains a 'vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances' (15), suggesting that in the face of global catastrophes, which can feel paralyzing at an individual level, the use of storytelling to actively participate and assert agency over individual circumstances has never been more important.
[112] Rutherford, 'An interview with Scottish author Ali Smith'.

In this section, I propose that the representation of oral storytelling within Smith's fiction has several aspects which contribute to the argument I have already established: firstly, it increases the accessibility of the narrative and gives the listener more agency over its direction; secondly, it draws attention to the inherently dialogic nature of storytelling itself, which requires the mutual participation of both speaker and listener; and thirdly, it is a kind of event or performance, which increases the intimacy between speaker and listener through significant moments of encounter. These effects correlate with the three aspects of the dialogic reader outlined in the introduction to this chapter: their ability to open-up texts to multiple possible meanings; their dialogic interactions with texts; and the momentary encounters that take place between the two. Consequently, I argue, there are significant parallels to be drawn between the dialogic potential of the reader in Smith's work and that of the listener. As has been clear throughout this chapter, and this thesis as a whole, my discussion is concerned not with the reception of Smith's texts, but with the way the figure of the reader, or in this case the listener, is portrayed within them. This portrayal might be interpreted as a model for the kind of reader or listener Smith idealises both in herself and others, however the examination of whether this ideal is realised in real-life contexts is beyond the scope of this study.

First, I wish to make a few points about the continued relevance of Bakhtin's notion of dialogism to this aspect of my discussion. As outlined in my introductory section, 'Discourse in the novel' argues that efforts to assign singular rather than plural meaning to a narrative ultimately render it dull and lifeless, whilst a dialogic approach presents the narrative in a state of continual growth or becoming. In his essay 'The Storyteller', Walter Benjamin suggests that an oral tradition is particularly good at achieving this effect, as it shows how the perfect narrative does not arrive ready-made, but is gradually

constructed in layers through many generations of telling and retelling.[113] More recently, theorists such as Jack Zipes have argued that 'we have lost the gift of genuine storytelling' in an age of instant gratification when we fail to appreciate that narratives are never truly finished but continue to evolve as they are adapted to different times and cultures.[114] These perspectives present oral storytelling as an ongoing creative process, which requires the collaborative effort of both tellers and listeners in order for tales to survive and continue evolving through time. Such arguments exhibit interesting parallels with Bakhtin's argument in 'Discourse in the novel', which despite focussing on the novel form, persistently uses terms such as 'speech genre' and refers to the 'speaker' and 'listener' to suggest that the representation of oral speech is an important ingredient in the formation of the dialogic text.[115] Bakhtin's emphasis on speech rather than text, and what he describes as 'skaz', which is the representation of everyday dialogue, foregrounds the importance of orality even within the confines of the novel.[116] The live circumstance of oral discourse is well-placed to convey context-specific circumstances such as the speaker's accent, use of emphasis and other nuances of pronunciation.

Filled with a variety of possible meanings and intentions, Bakhtin argues that language 'tastes of the context and contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life', and must continue to be re-used and re-interpreted in different contexts in order to maintain its relevance within discourse.[117] The various cues and associations carried by words in different contexts can be brought into dialogue with each other through

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[113] Walter Benjamin, 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov' in *Illuminations* (London: Pimlico, 1999), 92.
[114] Zipes, *Speak Out*, 14.
[115] At the beginning of his essay, Bakhtin recognises that the written form of the novel is a complex compilation of individual voices and registers, as represented by oral contexts: 'The novel as a whole is a phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice' ('Discourse in the novel', 261).
[116] Ibid., 262.
[117] Ibid., 293.

invoking multiple voices or perspectives, and this is particularly well evidenced by the encounters that take place between storytellers and listeners in Smith's work. One example is in 'The universal story' in her 2004 collection *The Whole Story and other stories*, in which Smith's narrator describes the archetypal setting of a woman who lives in a churchyard, before reflecting on the archaic nature of her own terminology: 'to be honest, nobody really uses that word nowadays. Everybody says cemetery. And nobody says dwelt any more'.[118] The storyteller becomes aware in this example how the language that makes up their narrative is not appropriate for the context in which they are telling it, and this establishes a kind of meta-fiction, through which the teller also takes on the role of listener and critic of the tale *whilst* they are in the process of narration. This immediately draws a distinction between two different voices in Smith's story, which are the teller and the voice of the listener, who responds to the language of the story with, as Bakhtin describes, 'a motivated agreement or disagreement'.[119] A level of disagreement with the language used by the story motivates the listener, in this instance, to engage with it and re-tell it using different terms. As Smith's narrative navigates through a series of characters' stories, 'the universal story' demonstrates how every detail of the narrative could become the basis of a new tale in the mouth of a new teller, or in the ears of a new listener.[120]

A further reason that the representation of oral storytelling within written texts might be considered a useful dialogic strategy is because of the increased role it gives to the listener to interact with and contribute to the production of discourse itself. Richard

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[118] Smith, 'The universal story' in *The Whole Story and other stories*, 1.

[119] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 282.

[120] The inconclusive nature of this story's ending gestures towards the idea that stories can take different forms each time they are told. This is emphasised by the refrain which concludes Smith's story:

> 'The woman who lived by a cemetery, remember, back at the very beginning? She looked out of her window and she saw – ah, but that's another story' ('The universal story', 13)

Bauman has drawn parallels between the rise of reader-response criticism in the latter decades of the twentieth century, and a growing interest in the role of the listener in oral performance. He suggests that alongside drawing attention to the role of the reader as an active participant in the production of written discourse, critics have also begun to take a greater interest in the inherently dialogic nature of oral forms.[121] Their ability to involve listeners as active participants in the production of discourse is particularly relevant to Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic; indeed, several storytelling theorists have drawn on Bakhtin's ideas as they explore the interactive nature of oral discourse.[122] Ochs and Capps, for example, in *Living Narrative: Creating Lives in Everyday Storytelling*, elucidate how Bakhtin's conceptualization of the reader is intensified in the role of the listener:

> Bakhtin considered readers to be authors and the act of reading to be a dialogue between a text already produced and a reactive text created by a reader. In conversational narrative, Bakhtin's ideas about literary dialogue are realised more intensely in that actual, continuous dialogue allows interlocutors to go beyond responding to an already inscribed ('ready-made') text to collaboratively inscribe turn by turn one or more narrative events.[123]

The spontaneous unfolding of a narrative is a collaborative effort between speaker and listener, especially in everyday situations where such stories form part of an ongoing conversation. Ochs and Capps emphasize the immediacy of such interactions in

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[121] Richard Bauman, *Story, Performance, and Event* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986), 113.

[122] Bauman, for example, suggests that Bakhtin did much to advance our understanding of the social as well as poetic nuances of oral literature (*Story, Performance and Event*, 2), whilst Deborah Tannen draws on a dialogic approach to explore the idea of an active rather than passive listener in conversational discourse (*Talking Voices* [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1989], 12). Zipes explores the constant need for new ways of telling the same stories, finding loopholes in the structures of language to ensure that narrative continues to evolve and dialogize itself (*Speak Out*, 19).

[123] Ochs and Capps, *Living Narrative*, 3.

comparison to a text-reader dialogue, which is hindered by the inevitable delay between the act of writing and that of reading. Smith's inclusion of oral storytelling scenarios within her written texts similarly create a sense of immediacy and spontaneity in the unfolding narrative, as she highlights the role that the listener plays as a participant in its making. By allowing the listener to instantly respond to the teller of a tale, she emphasises their power to disrupt the inherent authority of the teller's voice and challenge their perspective by bringing it quickly into line with their own.

The generation of multiple perspectives in response to a narrative, which interact and even conflict with one another, provides the perfect conditions for Bakhtin's ideal dialogic text, which celebrates the kind of multiplicity that challenges one voice from gaining control over the narrative. Storytelling critics have widely acknowledged that an oral format also allows listeners to engage more actively in the production and reproduction of discourse; Jan Shaw, for example, suggests that the very idea of stories passing from listener to teller 'reduces the privilege lent to authorship, and increases the agency of the audience'.[124] This argument is especially relevant for Smith's presentation of child characters in dialogue with their elders, as this setting provides a more open and engaging environment than reading a book by oneself. I have already noted examples of this between Midge, Anthea and their grandfather in *Girl meets boy*, however similar interactions can be found in novels such as *There but for the* between the child Brooke and the uninvited house guest Miles, as well as in Smith's first novel *Like* between the adult Amy and 8-year-old Kate.[125]

Like is a particularly interesting example when considering the accessibility of oral storytelling, due to the playful relationship that develops between the newly illiterate

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[124] Jan Shaw, 'Story Streams: Stories and their Tellers' in *Storytelling: Critical and Creative Approaches*, 10.
[125] See Smith, *Girl meets boy*, 6-7; *There but for the*, 347; and *Like*, 44.

Amy and intelligent young Kate. As has already been discussed, Amy loses her ability to read as a result of an emotional trauma, and at the start of the narrative has found herself 'puzzling at the lost shapes of words, gratefully taking their loss for granted'.[126] Smith conveys Amy's confusion at no longer being able to comprehend the written text, although the suggestion that she is 'grateful' implies that it is a relief not to be expected to read anymore. As Amy turns away from her previous life in the academic sphere, in which reading was a professional occupation for her, she embraces oral storytelling methods, which are more accessible and easier to engage with. The fact that Amy has turned away from her job as a professional reader towards having more open-minded and playful interactions with narrative is significant, as it allows a more equal power dynamic to be created between Kate and herself.

In demonstration of this, Kate is frequently encouraged by Amy to become actively involved in the stories she hears, and make speculations about what will happen next:

> It's a trick, Kate said.
>
> I think you're right, Amy said. Yes, you are.[127]

Smith demonstrates Kate's ability to participate by guessing the next turn of the narrative, and Amy affirms Kate's choice by implying that even she as the storyteller cannot remember at first. This generates a sense of mutual discovery between the two characters and destabilises the authority of the storyteller as Kate becomes an equal partner in the production of the narrative. She eventually questions the story's logic and emphasizes how she might tell it differently: 'Well, couldn't he just push the stone away and get out? Kate said'.[128] Kate's assertive interjections show that as a listener she is

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[126] Smith, *Like*, 44.
[127] Ibid., 144.
[128] Ibid.

unafraid to interrupt and challenge the dominant narrative, bringing it into conflict with her own version of events. The familial setting of this scene enhances her ability to do this; certainly, Ochs and Capps have argued that informal environments are particularly good at promoting this kind of narrative exploration, as they are typically spontaneous rather than pre-meditated.[129] Conversational narrative also 'routinely involves *questions, clarifications, challenges,* and *speculations* about what might possibly have transpired',[130] and this can clearly be seen in the exchange between Amy and Kate, where different possibilities for the narrative are explored. Through this interaction, a dialogic discourse is generated through Kate's curiosity as a listener, as well as Amy's willingness to re-frame the events of the story according to Kate's interjections.

Even though Amy does eventually regain the ability to read, she continues to do so aloud to Kate and encourage her to participate in her tale. Whilst telling Kate a story from *The Big Book of Myths and Legends II,* for example, she allows her to take ownership of the story and invent details she cannot find in the book:

> I thought it said they had a sister too, Kate said.
>
> It did, Amy said.
>
> She flicked the pages over. No, she said, I can't find her, she isn't mentioned again. But – and Amy shut the book and put it down the side of the chair – but what the sister did was this. Are you listening?[131]

This example depicts Kate's frustration that the character of the sister has not been given a more prominent role in the story, and again shows Amy's willingness to put the written text aside and make space for the story to be re-imagined so that this character

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[129] Ochs and Capps, *Living Narrative*, 6-7.
[130] Ibid., 18.
[131] Smith, *Like*, 144.

might have her own adventure. In doing so, Amy encourages Kate to take agency over the narrative, reinventing it using her own imagination and bringing to the centre female characters who have been marginalised. This attitude reflects Bakhtin's desire for an active listener who introduces something new into the discourse, enriching it with more diverse perspectives, rather than leaving it untouched.[132] One investigation into the ways in which storytelling empowers its listeners has suggested that by formulating their own version of a tale, listeners express a 'narrative mode of knowing', through which their understanding and interpretation of the story is consolidated. The authors of this study, Catherine Heinemeyera and Matthew Reasona, conclude that 'the greatest gift of the storyteller to the listener is to help them become a storyteller in their own right',[133] a sentiment which reflects the way in which Amy disrupts and re-invents the story and Kate is encouraged to do the same. This kind of mentoring relationship between Smith's characters enables her to explore how oral storytelling can produce an open relationship between teller and listener, through which listeners become contributors to the ongoing evolution of narrative.

The second aspect of Smith's representation of oral storytelling that warrants further discussion is the depiction of dialogue itself, without which the actualisation of the story could not take place. Fast-paced and playful dialogue is a recurrent feature of Smith's short stories, which, like her novels, frequently involve characters telling each other stories and bringing multiple voices into the construction of the narrative. In many instances, Smith uses a second person perspective to present characters as intimate

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[132] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 281.
[133] Catherine Heinemeyera and Matthew Reasona, 'Storytelling, story-retelling, storyknowing: towards a participatory practice of storytelling' in *Research in Drama Education* 21:4 (2016), 563.

partners – 'you' and 'me' – who interchange their roles as speaker and listener.[134] Vice has suggested that second-person narrative is a 'listener-oriented' perspective,[135] which disregards the need for authorial commentary and creates intimacy between the narrative voice of a text and its recipient. The ability of the short story to focus closely on single conversations between two characters allows Smith to draw attention to the playful details of these interactions, as well as emphasise the profound impact that such conversations can have on characters' lives beyond the stories themselves. The mutual dependency of speaker and listener is also supported by the concept of dialogism, which suggests that meaning can only be produced as a result of the coming together of different voices, rather than from one monologic authority.[136] Deborah Tannen adds that in oral discourse the roles of speaker and listener are more easily interchanged than in reader-text interactions:

> conversation is not a matter of two (or more) people alternately taking the role of speaker and listener, but rather that both speaking and listening include elements and traces of the other. Listening, in this view, is an active not a passive enterprise.[137]

Just as Bakhtin described the trace of the reader's presence within the narration of the text, Tannen argues that in oral discourse the positions of speaker and listener are bound up in a mutual exchange that is contingent on the participation of the other.

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[134] Several examples of this from Smith's short story collection *Other Stories and other stories* are explored further on in this section. See also 'The first person' and 'The second person' in *The First Person and other stories* (London: Penguin, 2009), 189-207 and 119-134.
[135] Vice, *Introducing Bakhtin*, 87.
[136] Holquist, *Dialogism*, 28.
[137] Tannen, *Talking Voices*, 12.

The representation of storytelling as a co-production between listener and speaker is most evident in Smith's story 'Okay so far', in which a couple create a story together about a stranger on a train:

> Was it an airport stop? I say. Then she was probably going to the airport.
>
> Yes, you say. Brilliant. But why? Why was she going to the airport? Was she meeting her mother? Was she meeting her father? Where was she flying to? Was she scared of flying?[138]

This unbroken stream of questions, which is directed back and forth between the two characters, emphasizes the various directions the narrative could take, and gradually develops into a collaborative story about the stranger's life. The initial distinction that is drawn between what 'I say' and 'you say' eventually disintegrates until it is unclear which character is telling the story and which is listening. As such, this story explores how narratives can be conjured and sustained through multiple narrators, both the 'I' first-person narrator, and the 'you' recipient towards whom the text is directed. Elements of undecidability, such as what happened next to the girl on the train, become points of intrigue that the narrators use to drive the story forward.

The interdependency of speaker and listener is further demonstrated in 'The theme of power', in which a narrator arrives home with a burning story to tell, but no one to tell it to:

> The thing is, I really need you with me in this story. But you're not home. You won't be home for hours yet. I stand about in the kitchen for a while, not knowing what to do about it, because the story is right at the front of my head.[139]

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[138] Ali Smith, 'Okay so far' in *Other Stories and other stories*, 97.
[139] Ali Smith, 'The theme is power' in *Other Stories and other stories*, 121.

The narrator in this example requires the presence of a listener in order to narrate their story aloud, and the absence of this results in feelings of despondency and despair. The narrator's pressing impulse to share the story suggests a need to release it into a communal environment where it will be met with a response. To resolve this problem, the narrator imagines telling the story aloud to someone, and even conjuring up the responses their recipient might make along the way: '(Aha, you say)' and '(Then what happened? you ask)'.[140] The use of parentheses to convey the imaginary interjections of the listener helps Smith to distinguish between the different voices in the narrative, and demonstrate how the story lacks the curious enquiry of a listener. Through this scenario, Smith highlights how the story relies on the presence of a listener, who helps to steer the course of the story whilst it is in the process of being told.

The final aspect of oral storytelling in Smith's work I wish to touch upon is the idea that it constitutes an event or performance that takes place in a particular moment of time. This representation further implicates the listener as an important agent in the making of the narrative, as it carries a sense of urgency and spontaneity. Just as Bakhtin emphasises the specific social circumstances in which the novel is produced, so many of Smith's stories take into consideration the particularities of where and when a narrative is being told and between whom, rather than assuming it has a universal meaning that transcends the context of each individual telling. In concurrence with this, Bauman proposes that oral forms of narrative lend themselves to a performance-centred view, representing a lived through experience that impacts both 'actor' and 'audience' differently in each occurrence.[141] His argument recognises storytelling as an event in

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[140] Ibid., 131 and 133.
[141] Bauman, *Story, Performance and Event*, 4-8. This is also supported by Iser's description of reading as an 'event' or 'performance' through which meaning is created along a time axis (see *The Act of Reading*, 149).

which the physical presence of both teller and listener are invoked and have an opportunity to come into contact with each other.[142] Other theorists have built on this idea by highlighting the importance of the emotions conveyed by the storyteller's body and voice; Joseph D. Sobol, for example, suggests that 'involvement strategies' used by written texts, such as repetition, imagery and dialogue, are enhanced in oral performance through the addition of paralinguistic and kinetic strategies such as pitch, tempo and gesture.[143] In this respect, listening to a story, even more than reading one, can generate an intimacy between teller and listener, which invites the listener's active involvement. The face-to-face nature of these occurrences carries a sense of obligation on both parties to recognise and respond to the other, and this works to further dialogize the narrative being told.

The open and unfinished nature of oral narrative also lends itself to a performance-centred perspective, as the moment by moment construction of the story can be witnessed as the simultaneous production of both teller and listener. Bakhtin describes how stories which cannot be finalized, and those which cannot be immediately or easily understood, invite the reader, or in this case the listener, to actively decipher and construct their own version alongside the one that's being told.[144] In 'Discourse in the novel', narrative is presented as double-voiced, spoken almost simultaneously in the words of its teller as well as those of its receiver through the event of its utterance.[145] In this sense, storytelling is an event through which both teller and listener's versions

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[142] See also Tom Maguire, *Performing Story on the Contemporary Stage* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 15.

[143] Joseph D. Sobol, 'Innervision and Innertext: Oral and Interpretive Modes of Storytelling Performance' in *Oral Tradition* 7:1 (1992), 70. Jackson meanwhile has convincingly argued that oral storytelling disintegrates the boundary between self and other, through the 'physical, sensual, and vital interaction between the body of the storyteller and the bodies of the listeners' (*The Politics of Storytelling*, 28).

[144] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel, 282.

[145] Ibid.

of the work come into being. The idea of storytelling as a significant event that generates a momentary encounter between teller and receiver is also supported by Umberto Eco, who emphasises the receiver's ability to reconjure a work of art for themselves: 'every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself'.[146] Eco suggests that any act of comprehension can be likened to a kind of performance, as the receiving subject imitates or reconstructs what they have seen or heard and attempts to make sense of it. The so-called 'original' version of a story is almost instantaneously copied and varied, as it is received and interpreted by its listeners. Such critical perspectives reflect the kind of storytelling presented in Smith's work, which makes space for the immediate impressions of the listener, and which is used to help realize the story's potential.

A useful example of oral storytelling as an event or performance can be found in Smith's short story 'A story of love', which involves a couple playfully telling each other stories in the bedroom. The private setting of this scenario emphasizes the intimacy of the event and provides a space in which the two characters' conversational narrative is mirrored by their physical interactions with each other. This helps to emphasise the volatile and fraught emotions that develop between them as the narrative continues. Both characters' voices interact playfully as they alternately tell each other stories, taking turns to adopt the roles of listener and teller. One character prefers to tell stories that have uncertain or ambivalent meaning, challenging the expectations of their listener and refusing to provide an easy resolution or closure to the narrative. This character says: 'you have to promise here and now to take the story on its own terms', suggesting that their stories will demand some sacrifice from the listener for any

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[146] Umberto Eco, *The Open Work* (London: Hutchinson, 1989), 4.

meaning to be produced from the telling.[147] The other character, however, desires a story which has a coherent and complete narrative structure: 'I want a story that's a story . . . A proper story, I said'.[148] As such, Smith establishes a conflict between the two voices, and this allows her not only to explore the different ways in which a story can be told, but also the inherent power dynamic that exists between storyteller and listener. As already mentioned, the intimate nature of these characters' relationship is reflected in their ability to take control over the stories they tell each other, as one comes to challenge the unusual plotlines and abrupt narrative endings of the other.

As explored in Kate and Amy's interactions in *Like*, this story demonstrates the playfulness of the storytelling experience, which is dependent upon the circumstances and dynamics of each telling. As Smith's narrative progresses and becomes increasingly fraught between the two characters, the lure of an unfinished story begins to hold a seductive appeal for the character who initially wanted their stories to have well-rounded endings: 'The half-stories haunted me. I wanted more of them'.[149] As such, this character both fears and desires the prospect of not knowing what happens next in the story, and draws on their own imagination to fill in the gaps. By provoking this character to imagine all the possibilities, the storyteller ensures that the act of listening becomes an intoxicating activity that keeps them both awake throughout the night. When the roles are interchanged and the initial listener has the chance to tell their own stories, they take advantage of the implicit authority associated with playing the 'storyteller': 'So I told the next story, and as it unfolded I realized how exciting it could be to know more about a story than you knew'.[150] As seen in previous examples, Smith delights in

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[147] Smith, 'A story of love', 168.
[148] Ibid., 171.
[149] Ibid., 172.
[150] Ibid., 175.

the authority of the storyteller to frustrate and manipulate their listener's expectations, and suggests that it is through this conflict or disagreement that the engagement of the listener is secured. As explored at the start of this chapter, there is deliberation about whether the ideal dialogic text is one in which equal utterance is given to multiple voices, or one which remains fraught with disagreement between different perspectives. This example supports the idea that storytelling is dependent on the discordance between different, often unequal, perspectives for significance to be generated from the event. The lingering sense of inferiority felt by the listener motivates them to assert agency and create their own version of the story in question. It is crucial for Smith that listeners draw on their own unique viewpoint in this way, to take control away from the storyteller and interpret the story for themselves. Consequently, 'A story of love' presents the event of storytelling as an opportunity to explore the power dynamic between teller and listener, and to create the conditions necessary for meaning to be produced from the told narrative.

The interactive dialogues generated between storytellers and listeners in Smith's fiction provide further insight into her interrogation of the question: 'who's got the authority to have the voice?', which was introduced at the start of this chapter. Her determination to involve the voice of the listener in the making of narrative is an important part of her strategy to challenge existing voices of authority. This chapter has examined ways in which Smith's presentation of the reader, as well as the listener, can be usefully informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, which presumes that any single discourse is saturated by many other historically-situated discourses in constant interaction and conflict with each other.[151] Through an analysis of the role of the reader-narrator in *Artful* and a consideration of the oral storytelling scenarios

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[151] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 261.

presented in her work, I have argued that Smith depicts the recipients of narrative as an especially important part of the dialogic process; as active, vocal participants in its formation. As such, both readers and listeners are presented as an essential component in the production of the dialogic text, as subversive figures who challenge the authorial narrative voice and introduce new perspectives into the work. By featuring these figures so prominently, Smith, like Bakhtin, also draws attention to the social contexts in which discourse is created and in which these interactions take place, highlighting how important it is that narrative itself remains open and adaptable to change. Smith's purposefully inclusive attitude towards the figure of the reader – and the listener – works to dialogize, and democratize, the fictional spaces she creates.

III. The Reader as a Spectator

As stated in the introduction to this thesis, the definition of what constitutes a 'reader' in Smith's work is not restricted to a character's engagement with book objects alone. In my analysis of 'The Dialogic Reader', for example, I considered the prominence of orally told stories in her fiction, and the role of the listener in conjunction with those who read words from a page. My intention in this chapter is to broaden the parameters of this definition even further to consider characters who engage as spectators of visual media rather than written texts, and who use technological forms such as film and online video as another way of 'reading' or interpreting the world around them. In doing so, I argue that the same critical engagement demanded from characters who read in Smith's work is also demanded from those who watch, as acts of spectatorship – like acts of reading – are at risk of reducing the subject to a dulled and passive role. Focussing predominantly on the role of the spectator in Smith's 2005 novel: *The Accidental*, as well as how this is built upon in her 2014 publication *How to be both*, this chapter explores Smith's efforts to transform her characters into more active and critical agents of their own watching experiences.

Given the contemporary context of Smith's work, it is unsurprising that many of her characters engage as much with visual forms as they do with written ones, and in some instances these kinds of interactions take precedence over acts of reading in the more conventional sense. My decision to extend the scope of this study to the role of spectatorship is also due to Smith's explicit fascination with visual forms, which she describes with the same fervent passion as she does literary ones. Just as she avidly identifies herself as a reader, so too does she frequently reflect on her experiences as a spectator of visual media, which similarly has the capacity to stimulate and challenge

the way she sees the world. Several articles and chapters by Smith have been published illuminating her admiration of artists such as Tracey Emin, Paul Cézanne, and Sonia Delaunay, whilst her enjoyment of cinema is evident in tributes she has made to the American film director Alfred Hitchcock.[1] In 2013, she wrote a foreword to the collected writings of the Orcadian film-maker Margaret Tait, whose films she has been involved in showcasing at public screenings in recent years.[2] In her anthology *The Reader* meanwhile, Smith includes testimony from other writers about visual art and film, including H.D.'s 'The Cinema and the Classics', Tove Jansson's 'The Art in Nature', Lorna Sage's 'Our Lady of the Accident', and Derek Jarman's illustrative evocation of the colour white in 'White Lies'.[3] These short extracts raise critical questions about the relationship between visual media and its spectator, such as the ability of the spectator to assign one definitive meaning to what they see, and the strategies used by visual media to engage and control the spectator's attention. These questions – whilst unique to visual forms – resonate with some of the issues already explored in previous chapters through the relationship between literary texts and readers in Smith's work.

My decision to extend the scope of this study to an analysis of the spectator in Smith's fiction is further supported by Wayne Booth's alignment of ideas from reader-response theory with contemporary analyses of the spectator. Observing the passive behaviour of the watching figure in a world which is saturated by visual media, Booth argues that the

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[1] See Ali Smith, 'Tracey Emin: What you see is what I am' in *The Guardian*, 7 May 2011; 'Picture this. Ali Smith: The Etang des Soeurs, Osny, near Pontoise, Cézanne' in *The Guardian*, 18 September 2010; and 'We Must Not Be Isolated' in *Frieze Masters*, Issue 4, 10 October 2015 <https://frieze.com/article/we-must-not-be-isolated> (accessed 12 October 2015). In *Artful* Smith celebrates Hitchcock's engagement with his audiences: 'the division isn't between us and the story on the screen, it's between those who know and those who don't' (119).

[2] Sarah Neely ed., *Margaret Tait: Poems, Stories and Writings*. More writing about Margaret Tait by Smith, including commentary on some of her films, can be found here: <http://www.luxonline.org.uk/tours/margaret_tait(1).html>. Smith also organised an event at the Edinburgh International Book Festival, 'Jackie Kay with Ali Smith: Margaret Tait, Film Poet' (16 August 2014), which included a film screening and discussion of Tait's films.

[3] Smith, *The Reader*, 111-8; 224-9; 413-8 and 428-38.

ideas put forward by theorists such as Louise Rosenblatt for a more critically aware and responsive reader also offer opportunities to engage more critically as spectators. Booth diagnoses the contemporary spectator as being at similar risk of disengagement and detachment from what they see – ideas that will be further supported later in this chapter – and suggests that these risks might be mitigated through an application of Rosenblatt's transactional model of reading, where both reader and text must interact for meaning to be made. Approaches such as this, Booth argues, should: 'be extended more aggressively to the treatment of *viewing* as transactional in the same sense: not just providing for the new superficial kinds of technological feedback but for the creation of truly critical viewers'.[4] Booth suggests that spectators should not be resigned to becoming mere consumers of modern technologies, but should interact thoughtfully with the images they see, just as with words on a page. As will be seen through the course of this chapter in relation to Smith's work, there are significant parallels to be drawn between the paralysed state of the spectator and that of the reader, and Booth argues convincingly here that some of the same theories designed to activate the reader's role are relevant for the transformation of the subdued status of the spectator.

In her fiction, there are many instances which demonstrate Smith's fascination with contemporary forms of spectatorship, and which highlight her interest in the fraught emotional responses spectators can have to what they see. Particularly evident is the way that film and online video work to distance or control the spectator's attention, and how spectators can take back agency over what they see. Short stories such as 'To the cinema' and 'Scary' in her first collection *Free Love and other stories*, for example, both figure film spectators as central characters who are somewhat troubled by their

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[4] Booth, 'Foreword' in *Literature as Exploration*, xiii.

experiences of watching.[5] The narrator of 'To the cinema', an employee at the local cinema, becomes disconcerted by her inability to tell fiction from reality as a result of watching so many films on the big screen. Similarly, in 'Scary', the character Richard feels overwhelmed by the films he watches, wishing that he had 'twice, three times as many eyes, eyes all over [his] body' in order to fully absorb the images presented to him.[6] These examples suggest that the contemporary spectator in Smith's work is easily overwhelmed by the sensory bombardment of the screen, and this can lead to feelings of despondency and frustration rather than a more active engagement in what is watched.

Consequently, this chapter argues that Smith has a special interest in the conflicted state of the spectator, especially – although not exclusively – as they engage with visual technologies and try to make sense of what they see through screens or lenses. This response is again evident in characters such as the overwhelmed art gallery visitor in 'The shortlist season', or the traumatised viewer of television news in 'The hanging girl',[7] both of whom find it difficult to find any meaning in these images. These encounters between spectacle and spectator are not easy or straightforward and demonstrate the importance of connecting the images witnessed through such media to some sense of reality.[8] The threat of disengagement faced by Smith's characters, and the strategies by which they mitigate this threat to continue generating significance from their viewing experiences, forms a central part of my analysis. I am also interested in the ways that characters who become emotionally disconnected from their visual experiences can harness technologies to reassert agency over these experiences. Short

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[5] See Ali Smith, 'To the cinema' in *Free Love and other stories*, 47-64 and 'Scary', 113-27.

[6] Smith, 'Scary', 122.

[7] Smith, *The Whole Story and other stories*, 167-79 and *Other Stories and other stories*, 13-35.

[8] Once again, the importance of connecting what is read or watched to extratextual reality is a fundamental part of Smith's characters' ability to make meaning in this chapter. See elsewhere my discussion of Rosenblatt on pp.32-3; Bleich's theory of materiality on p.47; Cixous' assertion of lived experience on p.56 and Bakhtin's emphasis of context on pp.103-4.

stories such as 'May' and 'The beholder' support this idea, even though they are not concerned with visual technologies per se, as both involve characters who have become captivated by an object of visual beauty and are positively transformed by it.[9] Whilst my analysis focuses predominantly on technologically mediated ways of seeing, it is worth noting that Smith's interest in the spectator, and her emphasis on how visual forms can re-energise and transform this figure, is a trope that runs more broadly throughout her fiction.

Despite the plethora of examples in Smith's short story collections which help to elucidate her depiction of the spectator, I have chosen in this chapter to focus predominantly on two novels which, due to their length, develop these themes in more depth. Of particular note in both *The Accidental* and *How to be both* is her portrayal of child and adolescent characters, whose twenty-first century lives are saturated by visual media, and for whom the activity of 'reading' has become as much about watching TV and online videos as picking up a book. Both novels also connect their contemporary protagonists to characters from previous contexts to show how the challenges of watching are comparable to prior historical moments. *The Accidental*, for example, deals with the effects of an elusive spectre called Amber, who is depicted as an embodiment of Western cinema from its conception up to the present day, on the troubled lives of a contemporary British family. *How to be both*, parallels the troubled viewing experiences of modern-day teenager George with those of a painter who lived during the Italian Renaissance, Francesco del Cossa, or Francescho, in the novel. The perspectives of these trans-historical characters on contemporary forms of spectatorship, such as the use of iPads and personal camcorders, help to elucidate Smith's critical commentary about the pitfalls of watching in the twenty-first century.

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[9] Smith, *The Whole Story and other stories*, 53-69; and *Shire*, 17-34.

Critical attention towards the visual in *The Accidental* – both the cinematic form embodied by Amber and the newer hand-held devices used by the novel's contemporary protagonists – is currently lacking. Whilst Stephen Levin considers some of the spectral, uncanny elements of the character Amber, and Patrick O'Donnell highlights the spontaneous and unexpected nature of her actions, neither address the importance of cinema in this novel as a whole.[10] Martin Ryle does touch on the cinematic aspect of Amber's character but does not consider the interplay between this and the other characters' engagement with her as spectators.[11] Ulricke Tancke provides an insightful analysis of Amber's ambivalent and discomforting effect on the family, but his opinion remains that she is confrontational, disrespectful, and even threatening towards the other characters.[12] I argue alternatively that Amber's spectral presence has an entirely positive impact on characters such as Astrid and Magnus, as her subversion of social norms and confrontational behaviour demands that the family pay attention to her captivating presence. Few scholarly articles have yet been published on Smith's more recent novel *How to be both*, although reviewers have noted the comedic unfamiliarity of modern technology to Francescho's pre-twentieth century eyes, and the significance of visual surveillance as 'one of the book's governing themes'.[13] The final part of this chapter develops these observations and argues that this novel presents the complexities

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[10] Stephen Levin, 'Narrating Remainders: Spectral Presences in Ali Smith's Fictions,' in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 35-47; and Patrick O'Donnell, '"The space that wrecks our abode": The Stranger in Ali Smith's *Hotel World* and *The Accidental*,' in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 89-100.

[11] Martin Ryle, 'Neo-pastoral Eco-didactics: Ali Smith's *The Accidental*,' *Green Letters* 10.1 (2009), 8-18.

[12] Ulricke Tancke, 'Narrating Intrusion: Deceptive Storytelling and Frustrated Desires in *The Accidental* and *There but for the*,' in *Ali Smith: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 75-88.

[13] Sophie Gilbert, for example, has noted Francescho's confusion when watching George use an iPad (see 'The Artful Duality of Ali Smith's *How To Be Both*', *Atlantic*, 3 December 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/12/the-artful-duality-of-how-to-be-both/383349/> [accessed 3 March 2016]); and Patrick Flanery, 'How to be both by Ali Smith, review: "brimming with pain and joy"' in *The Telegraph*, 14 October 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/11061768/How-to-Be-Both-by-Ali-Smith-review-brimming-with-pain-and-joy.html> (accessed 4 March 2016).

and challenges of contemporary spectatorship with even more urgency than Smith's earlier text.

Before examining the depiction of the spectator in these novels in further depth, it is pertinent to outline some critical ideas relating to the experience of contemporary spectatorship that have been useful to me in this examination. The perspectives I have found most relevant are concerned with two predominant problems of technologically mediated ways of seeing, both of which are prevalent in *The Accidental* and *How to be both*. The first is a problematic sense of detachment from the images seen due to the mechanical apparatus used to convey them. The idea that visual technologies can distance and anonymise the spectator is a long-standing argument and one which was originally put forward by Walter Benjamin in his seminal essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.[14] His argument is used as a starting point below and built upon with more recent perspectives, such as Norman Taylor's *Cinematic Perspectives on Digital Culture*,[15] which suggests that the contemporary spectator continues to be overwhelmed by visual stimuli to the point that they can no longer engage properly with reality. The second problem I consider in relation to Smith's texts is the coercive control of the spectator's gaze by the camera lens, which denies the subject agency to pause and reflect on what they have seen. This issue is most usefully explored by Laura Mulvey's *Death 24x a Second: stillness and the moving image*, and Mary-Ann Doane's *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, both of which describe how the moving image manipulates time so as to control the spectator's attention, and suggest that contemporary spectators must learn to re-assert agency over their watching experiences. The ability of the

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[14] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' in *Literary Theory: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 282-89.
[15] Norman Taylor, *Cinematic Perspectives on Digital Culture* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

spectator to create moments for critical contemplation is an important aspect of my discussion of the adolescent characters Astrid, Magnus and George in Smith's novels, all of whom have become caught up in the fast pace of life and use watching activities to seek respite from emotional turmoil.

In consideration of the first of these two problems – the idea that the contemporary spectator experiences a feeling of detachment from what they see – this argument has most famously been put forward by Benjamin in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. The practical and financial necessity for technology to reproduce and disseminate visual media to meet the growing demand of a mass market was a cause of concern for Benjamin in the early decades of the twentieth century, and the proliferation of screen technology, he suggested, exacerbated a dislocation of the individual observer from the 'aura' or authentic value of the art itself: 'Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be'.[16] Benjamin argues that the technological production of visual media leads the spectator to feel abstracted from the spectacle and unable to generate an authentic emotional response. This observation has been supported by other writers from this period of early screen technology: poet and film-maker Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) for example, suggested that the cinema had become 'a Juggernaught crushing out mind and perception in one vast orgy of the senses'.[17] It is 'so sated with mechanical efficiency, with the whit and thud of various hypnotic appliances, that it doesn't know what it is missing',[18] she continues, suggesting that film techniques overwhelmed and confused the viewer's senses rather than

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[16] Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', 282.

[17] Hilda Doolittle, 'The Cinema and the Classics: 1 Beauty' in *Close Up 1927-1933: Cinema and Modernism* (London: Cassell, 1998), 105.

[18] Ibid., 106.

providing nuanced insight. H.D.'s observations align with Benjamin's perspective that mechanical devices can obstruct the authentic value of the aesthetic experience. This argument is further supported by theorists such as Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, who notice that the moving picture 'leaves no room for imagination or reflection on the part of the audience, who are unable to respond within the structure of the film'.[19] Even though these perspectives concern an early moment of cinematic history rather than a contemporary one, they diagnose an important problem about technologically mediated ways of seeing that remains relevant to my analysis of Smith's novels. As will be seen in the later sections of this chapter, Smith depicts contemporary spectators who feel overwhelmed by their viewing experiences, and become detached as a result of the intervening technology which distances them from the screen. The character of Amber in *The Accidental* is also depicted as a symbolic representation of Western cinema right from its inception to the present day, and refers directly to some early cinematic phenomena that is relevant to these early film critics.

To further demonstrate the relevance of these ideas to a more recent context, Susan McCabe has asserted that the problem of detachment continues to hamper the contemporary spectator's experience. In particular, she argues that the technology used to convey these images creates a barrier between the spectacle and the spectator's lived experience: '[the] desire to include bodily experience and sensation along with an overpowering sense of the unavailability of such experience except as mediated through mechanical reproduction'.[20] Like Benjamin, McCabe suggests that cinema is unable to

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[19] Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 126. Further analysis of this hesitation towards technological developments can be found in Andreas Huyssen, 'The Hidden Dialectic: The Avant Garde - Technology - Mass Culture' in *The Myths of Information: Technology and Postindustrial Culture* (London and Henley: Routledge, 1980), 151-164.
[20] Susan McCabe, *Cinematic Modernism: Modernist Poetry and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), 3. Also useful to this discussion is Anna Everett's argument about the importance of maintaining physical interactions even within seemingly virtual environments ('digitextuality and click theory: theses on

achieve the level of intimacy it idealises between spectacle and spectator due to the mechanical apparatus standing between them, and the feeling of anonymity that this permits on the part of the observer. This argument has been built upon in recent years by Norman Taylor, who raises similar concerns about the contemporary spectator's feelings of physical and emotional detachment as a result of watching on screen. Like McCabe, Taylor suggests that this problem is as pertinent today as it was almost a century ago, as contemporary spectators can suffer from over-immersion in a virtual environment, leaving them unable to tell the difference between artifice and reality.[21] Another critic who is concerned with this issue is Jonathan Crary, who criticises the way that visual technologies disguise their mechanical nature and create an illusion of reality through the moving image. The effect of this, Crary argues, is to subdue the observer and prevent them from thinking critically about how the apparatus shapes their vision.[22] When watching news images of war-torn countries and human suffering, for example, spectators may feel as though they are watching a fictional film, due to the sophisticated special effects they have become used to encountering. In this regard, responses to actual horrors have been pre-empted by cinematic depictions and can become almost automatic. This effect is evident in Smith's short story 'To the cinema', where a cinema employee finds herself dazzled and overwhelmed by the images she witnesses all day. As a result, this character becomes unable to empathise with the atrocities she sees on TV: 'I sat there for a long time but I didn't know what to do about it, or even how to

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convergence media in the digital age' in *New Media: theories and practises of digitextuality* [London and New York: Routledge, 2003], 3-28).

[21] Taylor, *Cinematic Perspectives on Digital Culture*, 16. This is supported by Clive Norris and Gary Armstrong's argument that the 'the mediated gaze of the camera fundamentally disrupts the micro-sociological interactions between the watcher and the watched' (*The Maximum Surveillance Society: The Rise of CCTV* [Oxford and New York: Berg, 1999], 10).

[22] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1996), 5. Insightful analysis of how film-makers use special effects to disguise the artificial construction of their productions is also found in Lev Manovich's essay 'What is Digital Cinema?' in *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press,1999), 173-192.

make myself believe in it'.[23] This suggests that when a spectator is accustomed to being immersed in a 'self-enclosed artifice', it can become difficult to respond appropriately to images of events which are actually happening in the world. Consequently, spectators can become detached, omniscient overseers of visual scenarios, an idea which is highly relevant for my analysis of Smith's millennial characters.[24] Astrid's use of video recording for her own surveillance purposes, George's watching of pornographic videos online, and Magnus' contribution to an online cyberbullying prank all involve an element of detachment and anonymity on the part of the spectator, which becomes damaging to others as well as their own emotional wellbeing.

The critical perspectives outlined so far offer several reasons why the contemporary spectator is at risk of detachment when using visual technologies, which will be analysed in more detail in relation to the adolescent characters of *The Accidental* and *How to be both*. The spectator's inability to discern between artifice and reality with regards to visual technologies is particularly evident in Astrid's narrative, who uses video recordings to ascertain reliable 'proof' of what she perceives. The sense of disembodiment experienced by the contemporary spectator will be important for my discussion of the cyberbullying incident in *The Accidental*, as Magnus is so horrified by his actions that he rejects his own bodily presence, distancing himself from his criminal and perverse watching activities. As already mentioned, these critical perspectives are also useful for understanding the cinematic spectacle of Amber, as she attempts to overcome this problem of detachment and help Astrid and Magnus connect more meaningfully to what they see. Similarly, George in *How to be both* struggles to connect or empathise with the suffering she witnesses in pornographic videos online, and insists

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[23] Smith, 'To the cinema', 55.
[24] Taylor, *Cinematic Perspectives on Digital Culture*, 5.

on watching them repeatedly to bridge this distance and develop more empathy for the women involved.

In consideration of the second problem experienced by Smith's characters, which is the coercive control of the spectator's gaze by the camera lens, it is useful to draw on critical perspectives that are concerned with the way that screens and lenses direct the spectator's attention. The linearity of video, with its tendency to drive the spectator forwards – sometimes against their will – is a particularly important aspect of this. Being able to assert control over the pace of visual media is a significant challenge for characters such as Astrid, Magnus and George, and one which is drawn on by Smith to elucidate their similar lack of agency over the pace of their own lives. Despite their best efforts to overcome the forward thrust of time, which is symbolised in the novels by the film and video footage they watch, it is ultimately only through the arrival of another person – such as the subversive intervention of Amber in *The Accidental* – that these protagonists make space to reflect on what they have seen. Creating space to pause and reflect becomes a crucial part of these characters' transformation into more critically engaged spectators.

For the purposes of this aspect of my discussion, I introduce critics who deal specifically with developments in filmmaking in relation to the movement of time, and the changing role of the spectator amidst these developments. Temporality is an indispensable aspect of Smith's representations, and can be informed by perspectives such as Mary Ann Doane's *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, who argues there is a lack of space for spectators to pause and reflect on what they have seen in environments such as the cinema.[25] Large-scale film production, she suggests, has erased the sense of

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[25] *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, with its focus on the oppressive rationalisation of cinematic time, indicates a shift in Doane's attention from her earlier and best-known feminist works, such as *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991) and 'Film and

mystery and illusion which initially characterised the moving image, and has driven instead towards linear plotlines that structure time as 'rational' and 'realistic'.[26] In this way, there is little intrigue for the spectator and there are few gaps in the viewpoint for them to actively work to fill. Doane records how trends in filmmaking have changed over time such that the spectator has been left redundant: 'The cinema moves from the status of a machine that amazed and astonished through its capacity as a record of time and movement to a machine for the production of temporalities that mimic "real time"'.[27] The ability of films to challenge and surprise spectators has gradually been lost in Doane's view, as they have been reduced to passive observers who simply absorb what they see unthinkingly.[28] Establishing a dynamic interaction between spectacle and spectator, in which the critical capacities of the spectator are put to work, is a crucial aspect of her argument, through which the spectacle itself is enriched with new meaning.

Another useful perspective on this subject can be found in Rachel O'Moore's *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic*, which depicts the modern spectator as 'fatigued, distracted, exhausted', and increasingly disoriented by fast-paced film sequences.[29] O'Moore goes further than Doane to suggest that films have become, not just rational and realistic, but reflective of the accelerating speed of modern life:

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the Masquerade: Theorising the Female Spectator' in *Screen* 23.3-4 (1982), 74–88. As will be seen regarding Mulvey's trajectory further on in this chapter, Doane's movement towards issues of temporality has taken precedence here over texts which are foremost concerned with a discussion of gender. Nevertheless, as seen in 'The Embodied Reader' in relation to Cixous, the feminist values of these critics have important resonances with Smith's depictions.

[26] Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 31. The revolutionary effects of early cinema on the spectator are also explored in Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant Garde' in *Wide Angle* 3.4 (1986); Hilda Doolittle, 'Notes on Thought and Vision' in *The Gender of Modernism* (Indiana: Indiana UP, 1990); and Andrew Shail, *The Cinema and the Origins of Literary Modernism* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2012). Taylor also provides a helpful analysis of the manipulation of time in the early moving pictures (see *Cinematic Perspectives on Digital Culture*, 4).

[27] Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 31-2.

[28] André Bazin's essay 'The Evolution of the Language of Cinema' in *What is Cinema? Vol 1*. (Berkeley and London: University of California Press, 1967), 23-40, provides a helpful analysis of this movement towards a more realistic approach to film-making, suggesting that there is a dual impulse within film to pause and reflect on single moments, as well as harness the forward momentum of the linear sequence.

[29] Rachel O'Moore, *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2000), 9.

The camera matches the disorientation inherent in modern experience, illustrated here by the machine, shot by shot. And, like a fly whose multifaceted eye sees different angles simultaneously, a person, both while spectator in a film and living in the modern world, no longer has the time nor the quiet, for contemplation's boredom.[30]

O'Moore supports the idea that spectatorship is characterised by a sense of rush and disorientation, not dissimilar to our experience of living in the modern world. In parallel with the development of more sophisticated technologies, life itself appears to have undergone a process of acceleration, and this can prevent the spectator from having time to think properly about what they have seen, or as O'Moore puts it, for 'contemplation's boredom'. This argument is pertinent for my discussion of Smith's novels, whose characters navigate the visual technologies available to them as a way of asserting agency over their own fast paced and seemingly out of control lives. Through the character of Amber, Smith demonstrates that the speed of modern life can be harnessed as a source of agency and exhilaration, whilst continuing to find space for pause and reflection.

Faced by the control of the 'relentless temporality of the apparatus', Doane argues that a pause or stilled instant offers the spectator a powerful method of resistance. Whilst a structured linear timeframe represents coherence and order, she suggests, the singular moment signifies chaos, disorder and inefficiency, and is therefore deviant and subversive: 'In the face of the increasing rationalisation and systemization of time, the lure of the singular instant is that of the free and undetermined moment'.[31] In this regard, the single moment offers an escape from time's relentless linearity, providing

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[30] Ibid., 100.
[31] Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 108.

space for the spectator to contemplate and respond to what they have seen. The single instant also represents a rebellion against the overwhelming rush of the modern world, as highlighted by O'Moore, and its direction of the spectator's attention. Whilst Doane introduces the idea of a paused or stilled moment as a rebellion against the control of the spectator's gaze however, she does not offer much in the way of practical means by which this might be achieved. Alongside this perspective, it is also helpful to consider the argument put forward by Laura Mulvey, who goes further to suggest that technological developments from video in the 1970s to digital film in the 1990s have provided thrilling new opportunities for spectators to pause, rewind and disturb the linear flow of the screen.[32] Her perspective is useful in relation to the contemporary context of Smith's novels, whose characters use a variety of digital devices, including televisions and video cameras, to assert control over their watching activities.

Mulvey's seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' famously criticised the gaze of the Hollywood camera as voyeuristic and phallocentric, through which predominantly male-led action sequences were interspersed with objectified images of female beauty.[33] The passive anonymity instilled in the cinema spectator by these techniques, Mulvey argued, had a detrimental effect on their capacity to critically reflect on what they saw. In her introduction to the essay's second edition however, Mulvey suggests that this has now been challenged by digital media forms:

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[32] Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 22. Further insight into Mulvey's 'ground-breaking' influence on British film criticism, in particular her stimulation of 'the most controversial issue' of the female spectator, can be found in Karen Hollinger's *Feminist Film Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012): 11-15. Hollinger also draws on Doane as another important voice within this discussion (14). Mulvey and Doane's ideas are often discussed together in critical overviews of this field: see, for example, Ana Salzberg's *Beyond the Looking Glass* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2014) and Laura Pietropaolo and Ada Testaferri eds., *Feminisms in the Cinema* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1995).
[33] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' in *Visual and Other Pleasures* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 14-27.

> The voyeuristic visual pleasure of my 1975 article depended on the viewing conditions of the time: the darkened cinema, the silver screen, the spectator subordinated to the flow of the narrative. Now, new media have mutated and reconfigured old spectatorships into new kinds of visual pleasures due to the spectator's new ability to manipulate the linearity and flow of film.[34]

Mulvey highlights the ability of contemporary devices to disrupt linear sequences, which 'can be easily skipped or repeated',[35] something which was previously out of the spectator's control in the mainstream cinema setting. The freeze frame or pause afforded by digital video is of particular significance because the spectator no longer succumbs to an unrelenting flow of images but may still one at will: 'cinema's stillness, a projected film's best-kept secret, can be easily revealed at the simple touch of a button'.[36] In her more recent publication *Death 24x a Second*, Mulvey continues to develop this idea that contemporary visual technologies have returned control of the gaze to spectators, who are now able to select, pause and rewind the screen.[37] In this respect, Mulvey's argument correlates with Doane's perspective that by pausing and manipulating the film sequence the spectator can rebel against its authoritative control.

For Doane and Mulvey, the fast-paced movement of film can be challenged by the spectator's own agency to pause and reflect on what they have seen. The spectator no longer must be subjected to the producer's controlling vision, Mulvey argues, as they can easily manipulate time using contemporary digital devices. This stance has been supported by other critics; Jeffrey Shaw, for example, who suggests that contemporary ways of seeing are better able to elicit a nuanced response from the spectator: 'The goal

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[34] Ibid., xxiii.
[35] Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 27.
[36] Ibid., 22.
[37] Ibid., 27.

is not the totalitarian spectacle that overwhelms and belittles the viewer, rather it is the sublime demonstration that affirms each viewer's unique position and crucial relationship to the representation'.[38] Shaw highlights the renewed importance of the spectator in an interactive digital environment, in which viewing experiences are more under their control than ever before. He suggests that in the twenty-first century there is a growing recognition of the variable, shifting positions that spectators adopt in relation to what they see, as they increasingly use personal, portable devices rather than sitting collectively in front of a large screen.[39]

These arguments about the spectator's control when using visual technologies are highly relevant for my analysis of Smith's spectator-characters, who encounter new freedoms as well as challenges when using digital devices. The importance of subverting the camera lens and using watching activities to regain a sense of control over their lives is evident in both novels. Nevertheless, it is worth bearing in mind that Smith does not necessarily present these spectators' agency as an entirely positive phenomenon, as characters' interactions with visual technologies also leads to voyeuristic control and an unhelpful sense of superiority over their watched subjects. Additionally, as is explored in more depth in relation to Magnus' character, the 'reflective pause' can be used to avoid reality as much as for critical contemplation, causing the spectator to become stuck in one moment and unable to move forward at all. As such, characters such as Amber and Francescho play a crucial role in helping these characters to navigate their roles as spectators, and to think carefully and critically about what they see. These behaviours

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[38] Jeffrey Shaw, 'Movies after Film - The Digitally Expanded' in *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative* (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 271.

[39] For further examples of recent criticism on this issue, Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams eds., *Reinventing Film Studies* (London: Arnold, 2000) offers a range of critical responses to new media and their effects on the status of the observer. In her essay 'net.drama://myth/mimesis/mind_mapping', Andrea Zapp also argues that the potential for user participation in relation to digital video has increased since the Internet (see *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative*, 77).

also suggest interesting parallels to my analysis in previous chapters. The need for spectators to feel connected to what they see, for example, resonates with the depiction of readers who have need to have more visceral and embodied interactions with books. The notion of a spectator who takes agency over their viewing experiences – to re-order and redirect them – is resonant of Smith's depiction of readers who interject and help to create the stories they encounter, impacting and even altering the course of the narratives. Whilst this chapter focusses on the active agency of the spectator, it is thus important to bear in mind how these ideas support my broader argument about the active role of the reading figure in Smith's work in its broadest sense.

The Accidental

The Accidental is Smith's most detailed exploration of what it means for a spectator to be critically engaged in what they see, especially when images are conveyed through screens and lenses. As already outlined, the novel tells the story of the post-millennial Smart family on a 'substandard' summer holiday in the English countryside, who are becoming increasingly dislocated from their own circumstances. The oldest child Magnus compares his family to a disjointed image which has broken apart and needs to be pieced back together:

> Everybody at this table is in broken pieces which won't go together, pieces which are nothing to do with each other, like they all come from different jigsaws … If Amber is a piece of broken-up jigsaw too, Magnus thinks, then she is several pieces of blue sky still joined up. Maybe she is a whole surviving connected sky.[40]

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[40] Smith, *The Accidental*, 139.

Visual metaphors are used throughout the novel, as Magnus demonstrates how the family's downtrodden state of mind and dislocation from each other has reached a state of emergency. It is the aim of this section to suggest that these problems are mitigated by the unexpected arrival of a stranger called Amber, who appears as an intriguing spectacle to the family's dulled senses. As Magnus suggests, Amber provides the key to solving some of the family's problems, offering them new ways of looking at the world and connecting the images into some kind of sense. In this way, Amber transforms these characters' perspectives and helps them to reconnect more meaningfully to what they see, as well as to each other.

Amber is described throughout the novel in visual terms: as a symbolic representation of Western cinema as it evolved through the course of the twentieth century, and this can be identified in several ways. Firstly, Amber describes herself as a human manifestation of the traditional picture house: 'Hello. I am Alhambra, named for the place of my conception'.[41] Conceived by her parents in an old cinema and named accordingly, Amber draws upon this location at several points to emphasise the cultural context she originated from. Smith also references the earliest inventors of cinema through Amber's narrative – Auguste and Louis Lumière – drawing parallels between the technological innovations that were revolutionizing visual media at that time and her own inspirational role in the novel:

> I was born just short of a century after the birth of the Frenchman whose name
> translates as Mr Light … He and his brother designed it: a wooden box with an

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[41] Ibid., 3.

eye. It records what it sees in shades of black, white and grey for 52 seconds at a time.[42]

Smith emphasises the physical apparatus used to project the earliest moving pictures in Amber's narrative and the way they shape the spectator's impressions. Amber compares herself to various manifestations of cinematic technology throughout the novel: 'The kinematograph. The eidoloscope. The galloping tintypes',[43] as she adopts the identities of different apparatus to capture the optimistic energy that accompanied these new developments. She even inserts herself into the films themselves, as Smith draws on well-known plotlines to convey Amber's constantly evolving identity: 'We had a flying floating car. We stopped the rail disaster by waving our petticoats at the train; my father was innocent in prison, my mother made ends meet. I sold flowers in Covent Garden'.[44] Here, Amber playfully inhabits various characters from classic films, including *Chitty Bang Bang* (1968), *The Railway Children* (1970) and *My Fair Lady* (1964), and this reinforces her role as a symbolic representation of cinematic culture. She harnesses the positive aspects of this industry's fast development to assert her own identity as fluid and full of potential: 'I've had the time of my life and for all we know I'm going to live forever'.[45] Amber thus takes advantage of the future-oriented outlook of cinema technologies as a source of agency that allows her to exceed the boundaries of ordinary time and embrace a transhistorical perspective.[46]

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[42] Smith, *The Accidental*, 205. Mulvey describes these filmmakers as great innovators who experimented with new technologies to enhance the sense of intrigue and mystery experienced by the spectator: magical effects which were later lost by the integration of the cinema into everyday life (see *Death 24x a Second*, 36). See also Taylor, *Cinematic Perspectives on Digital Culture*, 4-5.

[43] Ibid., 105.

[44] Ibid., 104.

[45] Ibid., 105.

[46] Helpful introductions to early cinema and its interactions with literary culture include Robert P. McParland ed., *Film and Literary Modernism* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013); Julian Murphet and Lydia Rainford eds., *Literature and Visual Technologies* (Hampshire and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003); Shail, *The Cinema and the Origins of Literary Modernism* and Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism* (New York: Cornell UP, 2002).

In one respect, Amber's cinematic presence in the novel personifies the rush of modernity with its persistent urge towards technological innovation:

> I was born in the year of the supersonic, the era of the multistorey multivitamin multitonic, the high rise time of men with the technology and women who could be bionic… and everything went at the speed of sound.[47]

Amber's exhilaration emphasizes the sheer scale of technological ambition that dominated society at the time of her birth, and her desire to multiply and expand the parameters of human vision. Later however, Amber's tone becomes more exasperated, as she describes the overwhelming speed at which audiences, picture houses and films evolved: 'Cinerama. Cinescope. Widescreen. Natural Vision. A lion leaps out at the audience. The Greatest Show on Earth. Ben Hur, again. The Ten Commandments, again'.[48] This description continues to emphasise Amber's enthusiasm for cinematic developments, but also gestures towards the cyclical and repetitive nature of so-called 'new' pictures, as films return to be screened multiple times. In this way, Amber's narrative also highlights the cycle of destruction and waste that this perpetual need for innovation creates, including the recycling of archetypal characters, plots and settings.[49] The demolition and reconstruction of the cinema building itself creates an enervated feeling not dissimilar to O'Moore's description of the fatigued state of the modern spectator.[50] Just as O'Moore described 'the disorientation inherent in modern

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[47] Smith, *The Accidental*, 103.

[48] Ibid., 209.

[49] Useful critical perspectives regarding this destruction and renewal can be found in Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* and Gianni Vattimo's *The End of Modernity* (Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 1988).

[50] Amber recalls how the Alhambra cinema has been destroyed and redeveloped on countless occasions, and parallels this with her own fast-changing identity: 'Demolished. Demolished. Bingo club. Demolished. Bingo club. Demolished. Seventh-Day Adventists' church. Demolished. Open-air car sales. Demolished. Supermarket… Demolished. Demolished. Demolished. Demolished' (Smith, *The Accidental*, 210).

experience', so Amber's narrative parallels the fast-paced expansion of cinematic culture with the sensual bombardment of the spectacle itself.[51]

Smith continues to emphasise the dizzying effects of commercial film production on the picture house: 'At the end of it the audience sits in stunned silence. The orchestra is out of work. European films stop. American films triple. There are six cinemas. It's only a small town'.[52] Referring to dazzled audiences who are overwhelmed into 'stunned silence' by what they have witnessed, Smith highlights how smaller European production companies were gradually overtaken by Hollywood giants. As the cultural landscape of cinema underwent various shifts, Amber laments the increasingly 'sophisticated' techniques used by the mainstream film industry, and the redundancy of the live orchestra, which formed an important part of the original 'aura' or authentic value of the spectator's experience.[53] Amber's embodiment of the cinematic spectacle can thus be understood not only as embracing its fast-paced developments, but also as attempting to pause and critique this trajectory. In support of this idea, Mulvey suggests that the cinema, 'rather than simply reaching the end of its era, can come to embody a new compulsion to look backwards, to pause'.[54] By reaching back through her own personal history, Amber seeks to better understand how visual technologies have shaped, and even controlled, her perspective. Consequently, this character both adopts and challenges the unrelenting forward propulsion that threatens to overwhelm characters such as Astrid and Magnus, and encourages them to make space for reflection rather than always rushing forward in pursuit of the 'new'.

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[51] O'Moore, *Savage Theory*, 100.
[52] Smith, *The Accidental*, 208.
[53] See Benjamin, 'The Work of Art', 282.
[54] Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 24. In the twenty-first century film spectators are better able to challenge the pace of the screen – the 'technological wizardry of the digital age' as Anna Everett describes it – which enables viewers to take back control over their watching activities (see 'digitextuality and click theory', 30).

Through her subversive spectacle, Amber challenges the other characters to think more carefully about the ways in which technological media controls their vision and creates an intervening barrier between themselves and reality. Her trans-historical perspective also encourages them to take agency over the pace of their own narratives rather than becoming overwhelmed or dazzled by what they see. Whilst Amber in one sense personifies the 'transient cultural temporality' of the cinema,[55] she simultaneously creates space for the family to address their anxieties. Importantly, Amber's own image is multiple and transient; she carries a mysterious aura that frustrates the Smart family as she moves between their narratives, and her unapologetic interruption of their space provokes outrage and amazement. The stilling of time is also a key aspect of her role in the novel, the very name of which, *The Accidental*, suggests an in-between instant or momentary departure from the official melody of the characters' ordinary lives.[56] She appears whilst they are on holiday and thus removed from everyday routines, and as such she forces them to concentrate on responding to her presence without distraction.[57] As the children's step-father Michael says: 'she eclipsed everything',[58] suggesting that it was impossible to give attention to anything else when Amber was around. Amber also wears a stopped watch, using it ironically 'to keep an eye on the time',[59] and this supports the idea that she does not follow a conventional timeline. Amber alternatively represents a subversive pause, which 'opens a space for consciousness',[60] and uses moments of everyday life which serve no productive purpose, such as lying on the grass

[55] O'Donnell, '"The space that wrecks our abode"', 100.

[56] An 'accidental' is something which is 'present but not essential'. In music it describes 'a note: raised or lowered by one or two semitones, a momentary departure from the key signature', and in painting it denotes a 'secondary or artificial light which falls on a subject, introduced esp. to create contrast' ('accidental, adj., n., and adv.', *OED Online*, Oxford UP, 2015 <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/1054?redirectedFrom=accidental#eid> [accessed 25 February 2016]).

[57] Ryle, 'Neo-pastoral Eco-didactics,' 15.

[58] Smith, *The Accidental*, 165.

[59] Ibid., 144.

[60] Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 186.

or having sex in a church, to make space for critical reflection. Mulvey has suggested: 'stilling a single shot of film narrative allows spectators space from the inevitable flow, the opportunity to witness a single moment released from the chains of history'.[61] In light of this, Amber as a kind of visual spectacle can be seen as disrupting the forward momentum of the Smart family's narrative with her subversive and captivating image.[62]

In addition to links made between Amber's character and the development of cinematic technology, Smith's narrative is simultaneously concerned with a variety of contemporary technological devices that are concurrently impacting on the family's lives, including video cameras, computers and televisions. As such, the cinematic spectacle of Amber must compete with a variety of visual technologies that are vying for the characters' attention. For adolescent characters Astrid and Magnus, these technologies are a commonplace feature of everyday life, and their relationships with such devices form a central part of my analysis. Astrid is also influenced by the omnipresence of surveillance technologies such as CCTV cameras, which heighten her awareness that she herself is subject to watchful scrutiny by authorities. By drawing comparisons between Amber's depiction as a cinematic spectacle and Astrid and Magnus' use of contemporary visual technologies however, I do not wish to suggest that Amber belongs to an earlier era in which technologically mediated ways of seeing stimulated the spectator's response more successfully. I also do not wish to suggest that the cinema as a medium or the picture house from which Amber originated are better positioned to activate the spectator's critical attention than the contemporary forms of visual media used by Astrid and Magnus. Certainly, film critics such as Mulvey have

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[61] Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*, xxv
[62] Kristin Lené Hole notes the tension in Mulvey's work between the female image, or spectacle, and the impulse towards linear narrative progression, which is typically associated with capitalist concerns for forward movement (see *Towards a Feminist Cinematic Ethics* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016: 131).

argued that contemporary devices offer more interactive methods of spectatorship than ever before.[63] I do, however, wish to argue that technologically mediated ways of seeing pose a certain threat to spectators' engagement levels in this novel, and that the transhistorical figure of Amber functions as a vehicle to explore how this threat might be negotiated and mitigated.

At the start of the novel, youthful, enthusiastic Astrid, armed with her video camera and a thirst for knowledge, uses filmmaking as a distraction from the difficulties of being bullied at school and the continued absence of her birthfather. It is also a method of investigation; an attempt to uncover evidence about her surroundings through careful observation and recording. Her narrative opens: '(the beginning) of things – when is it exactly? Astrid wants to know',[64] a provocation which positions her at the forefront of an investigative inquiry into the story's point of origin, and indeed her own. As she video tapes the dawn every morning from her window, Astrid is fascinated by the mechanics of the technology she uses:

> There are two ways to watch what you're filming: 1. on the little screen and 2. through the viewer...in a hundred years' time these latches may not exist anymore and this film will be proof that they did and will act as evidence for people who need to know.[65]

This example demonstrates Astrid's understanding that what she sees is shaped by the technological apparatus at her disposal. She is enthusiastic about such technologies and believes that her recordings will be of vital importance in the future as evidence 'for people who *need* to know'. Later, when she and Amber are 'filming important things on

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[63] Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 22.
[64] Smith, *The Accidental*, 7.
[65] Ibid., 15.

Astrid's camera',[66] Astrid again embellishes her own duty as a camerawoman to make historical records of her surroundings using new technology.

Filming also provides Astrid with an opportunity to harness her own agency as a spectator against the scrutinising eyes of authorities, such as the CCTV cameras that loom in the local town. The late decades of the twentieth century brought a societal shift in attitudes towards public 'watching' in the form of surveillance technologies. By the late 1990s in the UK, cameras were installed not just in towns and city centres, but in housing developments, transport stations and hospitals.[67] Growing up in a society that is dominated by surveillance technologies, Astrid is acutely aware of the feeling of constantly being watched. She imagines what the shop assistant must feel like when she arrives home from work, after being monitored by CCTV cameras all day:

> Does she realize she is not being recorded anymore? Or does she think inside her head that she still *is* being recorded, by something that watches everything we do, because she is so used to it being everywhere else?[68]

The experience of being recorded can lead to an internal paranoia, until even private behaviours are controlled and censored. Astrid's perceptions of the shop assistant can be informed by David Lyon's argument that surveillance systems work to control or deter undesirable civilian behaviour, as he observes how the proliferation of CCTV cameras on British streets have become a way of mitigating unwanted social behaviours and instilling a sense of being watched into every citizen.[69]

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[66] Ibid., 111.

[67] For a more detailed overview of these developments see Norris and Armstrong, *The Maximum Surveillance Society* and Clive Norris, 'From personal to digital: CCTV, the panopticon, and the technological mediation of suspicion and social control' in *Surveillance as Social Sorting* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 249-281.

[68] Smith, *The Accidental*, 114.

[69] David Lyon, *Surveillance society: Monitoring everyday life* (Buckinghamshire: Open UP, 2001), 6.

Astrid is determined to overcome this feeling of subordination to the camera's gaze, and uses her own agency as a spectator to challenge these surveillance forces. Amber asks Astrid to film a CCTV camera 'for a whole complete minute', and as she does so 'It swivelled to look at her. The cameras were id est filming each other'.[70] In this way, Astrid asserts her own watching power against the cameras that have been monitoring her. This behaviour can be supported by the argument put forward by surveillance critic Jamais Cascio, who suggests that the development of personal recording devices, such as digital video cameras and most recently mobile phone technology, has enabled everyday citizens to undertake bystander surveillance practises; a powerful method for individuals to assert their own agency as spectators over and against the authorities that are watching them.[71] Smith herself has suggested that 'we are learning how to work the technologies that are working on us',[72] suggesting that individuals now have more power to harness the 'watching' abilities of new technologies. Astrid's behaviour is indicative of a confrontation between the authoritative gaze of the surveillance camera and the individual spectator's own watchful eye, as she produces her own surveillance footage of local activities. Astrid believes her ability to record an event provides the proof she needs that it actually happened: 'It proved the thing we actually saw' and later: 'It is a moment of what Amber literally saw through the tiny camera window'.[73] Her incredulity in these examples further reflects her fascination with the camera apparatus

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[70] Ibid.,126.

[71] Jamais Cascio, 'The Rise of the Participatory Panopticon' in *World Changing*, 4 May 2005, <http://www.openthefuture.com/wcarchive/2005/05/the_rise_of_the_participatory.html> (accessed 9 February 2016). Other useful perspectives on the topic of participatory surveillance include Fernanda Bruno, 'Surveillance and participation on Web 2.0' in *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 343-7; and Dennis Kingsley, 'Viewpoint: Keeping a close watch– the rise of self-surveillance and the threat of digital exposure' in *The Sociological Review* 56:3 (2008), 347-357.

[72] Ali Smith, 'The Not Yet Written Lecture', Edinburgh International Book Festival, 15 August 2015.

[73] Smith, *The Accidental*, 129 and 228.

and belief that these recordings provide her with reliable evidence and increased control over what she sees.

Alongside Astrid's enthusiasm for visual technologies however, she also takes voyeuristic pleasure in controlling the camera's gaze. She enjoys, for example, capturing and replaying images on her video camera of an animal being run over: 'it would only be really amazing if you watched it knowing what happened after it. You would know, but the animal wouldn't'.[74] Astrid's delight at the animal's ignorance about its fate and her ability to re-play its death is suggestive of her own emotional detachment from the pain suffered by the car's victim. Furthermore, like the ticket-tearer in 'To the cinema', Astrid struggles to empathise with tragic events on the TV news, as she has spent so long looking through the camera lens that she has become desensitised to real life: 'it is hard to know how to make it actually matter inside your head', she suggests.[75] This idea is further reflected in other members of the Smart family: Astrid's mother, for example, as she looks at images of war in the newspaper:

> although these photographs were a signal to the eyes about something really happening, the more she looked at them the less she felt or thought . . . she didn't know what to do about the looking, whether to keep on looking or to stop looking.[76]

Eve's experience supports the idea that these images can have a 'peculiar and pleasurable' effect,[77] as the spectator feels distant from the events themselves and has often seen so many images like this that it becomes difficult to comprehend them as having happened. Similarly, the more urgently Astrid seeks access to truth or 'reality'

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[74] Ibid., 30.
[75] Ibid., 128.
[76] Ibid., 285.
[77] Taylor, *Cinematic Perspectives on Digital Culture*, 5.

through her video footage, the less able she is as a spectator to connect with or take responsibility for what she has witnessed. Described by her mother as 'kicky and impatient, blind as a kitten stupefied by all the knowing and not-knowing',[78] she is desperate to harness new ways of seeing, but is unable to empathise or reflect on what she sees in a way that feels meaningful.

In accordance with critical ideas outlined earlier in this chapter about how technological media can disrupt the connection between spectacle and spectator, Astrid is experiencing an emotional detachment from what she sees through her camera. Her objectification of visual stimuli through video recording comes to be challenged however, when the unusual figure of Amber interrupts her bored musings in the holiday home, whose unshaven legs and boyish whistle alert Astrid's attention to a person of indeterminate gender and socially subversive behaviour. Astrid is enraptured by Amber from the outset of the novel; watching her intently, she exclaims: 'Something has definitely i.e. Begun',[79] as though Amber's arrival signifies the 'beginning' of the new adventure she has been waiting for. Keen to find out more, Astrid watches Amber through her camera lens, but her translucent image is merely a 'blur of light and dark'.[80] As the spectacle of Amber playfully evades the scrutiny of Astrid's lens, Astrid is unable to capture a reliable 'proof' of this mysterious figure's existence and is forced to pay closer attention to her presence beyond the camera. As identified by Tancke, Amber is responsible for theft, vandalism, sexual predation and emotional harassment at various moments in the novel, and her honest answers and rude behaviours cause an aghast Astrid to exclaim: 'It is unbelievable. It is insane'.[81] Nevertheless, Amber's

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[78] Smith, *The Accidental*, 90.
[79] Ibid., 35.
[80] Ibid., 18.
[81] See Tancke, 'Narrating Intrusion', 81 and Smith, *The Accidental*, 118.

transgressions also have a positive effect on Astrid, as they stimulate her curiosity and encourage her to think more carefully about this vision in front of her.

Consequently, Amber's intrusive spectacle forces Astrid to have more direct encounters with the images surrounding her. Whilst Astrid relies on her video footage to prove her experiences - 'It proved we were there' - Amber argues that direct experience is more important: 'But we know we were there'.[82] Whilst Amber is often elusive and difficult to capture, she also has a strong physical presence, and uses a violent jolt to alert characters' attention to her tangible presence. In other words, Amber's actions can be dramatic and forceful, such as when she inexplicably throws Astrid's expensive video camera from a bridge where there is no CCTV to incriminate her. This violation not only loses all of Astrid's previous footage but also smashes the lens itself, forcing her to look beyond it and engage more directly with her surroundings. Through subversive behaviour such as this, Amber refuses to let Astrid separate herself from the images she sees and reminds her not to accept these images at face value. To further demonstrate this idea, Amber also reconnects Astrid through authentic bodily interactions, such as comforting her when she feels anxious: 'Astrid feels her own bones underneath the warm breath, thin and clean there like kindling for a real fire'.[83] This moment of intimacy establishes a physical connection between the spectator (Astrid) and the visual spectacle (Amber), which reassures Astrid and has a positive impact on her emotional well-being. Astrid's yearning towards a 'real fire' further suggests that whilst she is exhilarated by the images she captures through her camera, she is also in need of a more material sense of connectedness to the world around her. As seen in 'The Embodied Reader' in the approach instinctively taken by Ash towards reading in *Like*,

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[82] Ibid., 129.
[83] Ibid., 135.

as well as the bodily immersion of Daniel in *Autumn*, Amber utilises bodily sensations to encourage Astrid to immerse herself in what she sees rather than becoming detached from it. This is shown not only to have a liberating effect on Astrid's state of mind, but also destabilises the boundary between watcher and watched, encouraging her to become immersed in the objects of her attention rather than standing apart.

Whereas Astrid seeks proof of her surroundings through the camera lens, her older brother Magnus is desperate to retreat from seeing and being seen altogether. Having recently been involved in creating a manipulated image using digital imaging software that sexualised and ridiculed one of his female classmates and led to her suicide, his guilt and shame has caused him to retreat from visibility altogether into the darkness of his bedroom. His narrative recurrently uses imagery of darkness and light as he attempts to escape from his own shameful physicality, and through his use of visual technologies, Magnus establishes a distance between himself and his own incriminating actions.[84] Kowalski, Limber and Agatson have argued that the anonymity of an online environment perpetuates cruel and bullying behaviours amongst peer groups, as spectators experience a sense of detachment from their own voyeuristic actions.[85] There are many intervening barriers that stand between Magnus and the bodily trauma he has caused to the girl at school, including the lens of the camera used to take the images, the screen of the computer through which he manipulated these images, and the mass dissemination of the final product by anonymous email. These barriers make it difficult for him to empathise with the victim or appreciate her susceptibility to harm:

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[84] See, for example, Magnus' memory of reading the bible in school assembly on p.50.

[85] Robin M. Kowalski, Susan P. Limber and Patricia W. Agatson, *Cyberbullying: Bullying in the Digital Age* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 86. See also Louise I. Gerdes *Cyberbullying* (Farmington Hills MI: Greenhaven Press, 2012) and Sheri Bauman, Donna Cross and Jenny Walker, *Principles of Cyberbullying Research* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

> Magnus is shocked every time he thinks of it. What really shocks him is that nothing happens. Nothing happens every time he thinks it. Didn't it matter? Doesn't it? They took her head. They put it on the other body. Even though it was a lie it became true.[86]

Like Astrid, Magnus questions what happened to the girl at school, as the image he created and the online platform on which it was made public make her circumstances seem both distant and artificial. Magnus is left unable to respond to these events, and consequently describes the dehumanised image of the girl in a blank and mechanical tone. He is traumatised by the sequence of events that connect his own actions to the victim's; his refrain: 'First They. They Then. Then They. Then she',[87] suggests that he is unable to accept the reality of what has happened.

Scholarly interest in the disembodying effects of personal technology devices, such as that which has already been introduced by McCabe, help to explain why Magnus experiences a detachment from this incident and struggles to come to terms with it. Magnus is haunted by the anonymity of his actions: 'She never knew who did it. It was him. He did it',[88] suggesting that he will never have to confront his victim directly or be able to seek forgiveness for his actions. Lyon argues that disembodiment is an inevitable by-product of modern technologies, as face to face contact is replaced by technological interfaces that disrupt the intimacy between spectacle and spectator.[89] He suggests that technologies permit individuals to purposefully retreat behind screens or lenses to avoid direct confrontations or encounters with what they see.[90] This is particularly relevant

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[86] Smith, *The Accidental*, 39.
[87] Ibid., 38.
[88] Ibid., 40.
[89] Lyon, *Surveillance society*, 8.
[90] Ibid.

for instances of cyberbullying, as perpetrators remain anonymous by hiding behind computer screens and mobile phones. The lack of empathy that results on the part of the spectator helps to explain both Astrid's inability to connect with the subjects of her video recordings and Magnus' manipulation of a classmate's image through the computer screen.

As the cyberbullying incident involves the objectification and ridicule of a girl's body by a group of adolescent boys, Magnus must also confront the unavoidable reality that his actions were inappropriate and even sexually perverse. In the aftermath of the incident, he retreats from his own pubescent body into a virtual fantasy about his former pre-adolescent identity, 'Hologram boy', who is technologically constructed from lasers and optical holders, and the idealised 'creation of coherent light':

> The real Magnus is this, now, massive, unavoidable. The real Magnus is too much. He is all bulk, big as a beached whale, big as a floundering clumsy giant. He looks down at his past self squeaking, shining, clambering about on his own giant foot.[91]

Unable to escape his enormous body, Magnus compares himself to images which reveal the extent to which his shame has overwhelmed him. Alternatively, he idealises his pre-pubescent self as small, clean, almost invisible, with a brain that was 'all blank light',[92] and thus associated with qualities of innocence and immateriality. Similarly, the cleanliness of the bathroom with its 'little rectangular plaque' is both desirable and haunting for Magnus: its 'meek and mild' appearance making his own feelings of shame even more visible.[93]

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[91] Smith, *The Accidental*, 37 and 38.
[92] Ibid., 40.
[93] Ibid., 46 and 53.

In addressing Magnus' situation, Amber again demonstrates her role as a visual spectacle that helps him to reconcile his own sexuality. Smith presents Amber as flaunting her own 'imperfect' body, urinating in front of Magnus and later seducing him unashamedly. He is surprised to see that her body has not been altered like the airbrushed images of women he has seen on the internet, and in this way, Amber forces Magnus to confront what bodies actually look like, including his own imperfect physicality. Amber again uses subversive behaviours to alert Magnus' attention to her unavoidable physical presence; on their first meeting, for example, she washes his naked genitals in an act of cleansing that helps to reconcile his shame: 'She showered him. Then she soaped his back, then his chest, his neck, then she put her hand down underneath, soaped round his balls, all round his prick. He was ashamed of himself, when she did that'.[94] Just as she comforts Astrid through reassuring bodily contact, these actions suggest a physical intimacy between spectacle (Amber) and spectator (Magnus), which encourages Magnus to look beyond the screen and embrace his own bodily presence once more.[95] Like Astrid, Magnus feels compelled to respond to Amber's captivating presence and this is not achieved by remaining disembodied and detached, but through experiential interaction with her image. He becomes increasingly curious as the narrative progresses and more willing to interrogate the truth of what he sees.[96] Whilst he cannot overcome the inevitable distance between himself as a spectator and the images in front of him, he can learn to reflect on the ways that technology accentuates

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[94] Ibid., 146.

[95] As seen in my analysis of *Like* in relation to Cixous' ideas about reading in 'The Embodied Reader', the free expression of sensual desire in relation to what one reads, or in this case watches, is an important step in the subject becoming more critically engaged.

[96] See, for example, p.239 where Magnus contemplates how even the human eye is a mechanism which must manipulate reality in order to present a coherent image to the brain. This level of technical and scientific detail is indicative of a spectator who is scrutinising carefully how images are created.

this distance and prevents him from taking responsibility for his own spectator activities.

By the culmination of *The Accidental*, Magnus has made significant progress towards overcoming his shame and isolation, and an important aspect of this is his reintegration into the communal viewing activities of everyday family life. This is supported by Smith's assertion that the experience of spectatorship is a peculiarly communal phenomenon: 'It goes direct into the brain through the eyes. It's communal at the same time as very, very individual'.[97] Smith recognises a tension between an individual's personal experience of watching and the sense of togetherness that such acts of watching can create. Watching a film on television with Astrid and Michael, for example, Magnus rediscovers the pleasures of spectatorship when experienced in the company of others: 'maybe it was just the watching something good in a dark room, with other people watching it in the same way as he was. Whatever it was, he felt expansive, bigger than himself, about it'.[98] Through communal watching such as this, Smith expands Magnus' vision and reconnects him emotionally to those surrounding him. This example also suggests that Smith's view of technologically mediated ways of seeing is not entirely negative; rather she highlights the risks they carry when they allow the spectator to become isolated from others and detached from their surroundings. In contrast to this, sitting and watching together is a shared experience which allows the Smart family to take collective ownership and responsibility for the images they see. Amber's original embodiment of the picture house, in which spectatorship *was* more communal than in the contemporary era, also directs characters towards an experience of watching that does not happen in bedrooms or in front of laptops, but in public spaces, where

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[97] Beer and Smith, 'Gillian Beer interviews Ali Smith', 139.
[98] Smith, *The Accidental*, 281.

responsibility can be shared for the images on screen. In this way, the communal environment of the living room offers a therapeutic setting for Magnus, who seeks the comfort of watching with others rather than in isolation. This experience allows him not only to feel connected to the images, which are shared by the other viewers, but also to the viewers themselves, in this case members of his own family.

In consideration of the coercive control of the spectator's gaze by the camera lens – which is the second problem experienced by the contemporary spectator – Smith's adolescent characters are again encouraged by Amber to take back agency over the technological media they use. This aspect of Smith's text has already been discussed in relation to Amber's characterisation, but it is worth describing briefly some further elements of Astrid and Magnus' experience as they become increasingly out of control of the pace of their own lives. Astrid is a naturally curious spectator, who adopts a positive, forward-looking attitude, and her exhilaration about the modern era she has been born into is a recurrent preoccupation throughout her narrative. As Ryle suggests, Astrid is an embodiment of what is new and forthcoming, and she looks optimistically ahead to what is coming.[99] Just as Amber connects backwards to the Alhambra picture house and the exhilaration it brought in the previous century, so Astrid likens herself forward to an asteroid plunging forth into the future:

> It is the beginning of everything, the beginning of the century, and it is definitely Astrid's century, the twenty-first century, and here she is, here she comes, hurtling through the air into it . . . Asterid Smart the Smart Asteroid.[100]

Astrid's intent on hurtling forwards towards a self-driven future resonates with Amber's exhilaration at having been born 'in the year of the supersonic' and a time of great

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[99] Ryle, 'Neo-pastoral Eco-didactics', 11.
[100] Smith, *The Accidental*, 234.

technological progress. The relationship that develops between these two characters is characterised by a sense of excitement about new ways of seeing; just as Amber's exhilaration is symbolised by the fast development of the film industry, Astrid's is manifested through her use of the video camera to position herself at the 'beginning' of a new adventure.[101] Astrid's attitude also resonates with Mulvey's argument that personal devices empower contemporary spectators to take back agency over their watching experiences. In particular, Astrid can control time by stilling single moments through the camera lens, and is fascinated by her ability to capture time and make important historical records from it: 'It is amazing that a photograph is forever but is really a kind of proof that nothing is longer than a split second in time'.[102] This example evidences Astrid's fascination with how images capture moments in time, and her thrill at being able to take control over past events and prevent them from being lost to history.

Despite her optimism towards new technologies such as the video camera however, Astrid also feels trapped by the pre-ordained timeline of her own life, which Smith organises into three clearly defined sections: 'The beginning', 'The middle' and 'The end'. These categories imply that, like a conventional narrative sequence, the novel can be neatly organised into linear categories into which the characters' experiences fit. Unfortunately, it becomes clear that these categories are an inadequate way of structuring Astrid's experiences, and she is frequently haunted by memories and fantasies that cannot be captured through her camera. In this sense, the categories that structure the novel impose a pre-determined timeline onto Astrid's life, limiting her ability to move back and forth in time as fluidly as Amber does. Despite Astrid's attempts

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[101] See also p.11 for Astrid's fascination with having spent the greatest proportion of her life in the new millennium.
[102] Ibid., 228.

to assert agency over the pace of the narrative, particularly through her use of the camera to capture or still certain moments in time, she frequently finds herself battling against the linear momentum that governs her life. Through this forced categorisation, Smith highlights the limitations of a strictly linear sequence, and prompts her characters to rebel against this structure.

In the first section of the novel, Astrid succumbs to the notion that establishing a linear time frame might be a good way of making sense of her experiences and becomes preoccupied with trying to locate the 'beginning' of the day by filming the dawn outside her bedroom window. In doing so, she hopes to better understand her own 'beginning' by using her video camera to capture the exact moment when the day starts: 'Why do people always say the day starts now? Really it starts in the middle of the night at a fraction of a second past midnight'.[103] Despite her efforts to pinpoint the 'beginning' of the day however, time keeps moving forward and out of her control: 'Is the beginning different for everyone? Or do beginnings just keep stretching on forwards and forwards all day? Or maybe it is back and back they stretch'.[104] Astrid becomes increasingly frustrated that the 'beginning' is not an identifiable moment that can be easily captured through the camera lens, but a subjective impression which is experienced differently according to each spectator's perspective. The 'beginning' is thus presented as a slippery and problematic concept, one that Astrid cannot grasp without time continuing to carry her forward at its own resolute pace. This inescapable linearity is resonant of Doane's argument about the uncompromising forward motion of 'time-based media' such as film, video and television, which imposes a structure onto characters' experiences. Doane describes this propulsion as 'the desire to package and commodify time, to represent and

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[103] Ibid., 7.
[104] Ibid., 8.

distribute its experience in a highly controlled medium'.[105] Astrid's use of her video camera to establish a structure over her own story and Smith's section headings serve to highlight how futile these attempts are. Conversely, Doane celebrates opportunities to rebel against these structures and present to the spectator the subversive thrill of the dissident moment, which has escaped from linear constraints, and thus from the capitalist commodification represented by the film and television industries. As outlined earlier, such rebellious moments are brought to life in Smith's novel by Amber, whose transcendence of a conventional timeframe and ability to create moments for pause and reflection encourages other characters to liberate themselves from the narrative constructs in which they are held.

Like Astrid, Magnus also feels constrained by the pre-ordained time frame that the novel presents him with. For him, the present moment is constantly being interrupted by haunting memories from the past, as well as visions about what will happen when he returns to school, and as such he struggles to take agency over the course of his own narrative. Trapped by the relentless movement of events, he uses visual technologies to assert a sense of control: 'The tv is obedient, switches off. The room, however, goes on ticking round him by itself'.[106] Whilst home technologies give spectators increased agency to control the images presented to them however, as seen in this example, there is a lingering sense that Magnus has not fully succeeded here in taking control of his narrative.[107] Just as Astrid was unable to capture the exact 'beginning' of the day with her video camera, so Magnus is unable to prevent the clock-hands on the wall from turning, which push forward into the future regardless of his attempts to control them.

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[105] Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 220.
[106] Smith, *The Accidental*, 147.
[107] See Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 22.

In this way, Smith depicts a tension between Magnus' ability to control the images on screen and the events taking place in his own life, which are out of his hands.

The cinema becomes an important manifestation of Magnus' desire to retreat into nostalgia and avoid the future, where he is cocooned in the womb-like darkness and finds protection from the harsh realities of the outside world. The dark, shadowy space of the cinema with its artificial popcorn smells are a refuge, holding back a future which threatens to overwhelm him. He notices the hypnotised audience around him, 'putting food into their mouths without taking their eyes off the screen',[108] as though they are completely consumed by the spectacle. This portrayal is resonant of Smith's descriptions in 'To the cinema', in which the drugged state of the audience debilitates them from thinking for themselves: 'we take the commercials willingly, like sweetened vitamin pills, then we sit back and let the films go right inside us'.[109] The film infiltrates the spectators' minds and bodies in this story, luring them into a false sense of security and preventing them from properly reflecting on the image itself. These depictions are also supported by Christian Metz' argument that the film industry has increasingly worked to pacify and subdue the spectator:

> the institution of the cinema requires a silent, motionless spectator, a *vacant* spectator, constantly in a sub-motor and hyper-perceptive state, a spectator at once alienated and happy, acrobatically hooked up to himself by the invisible thread of sight.[110]

This worrying vision likens the modern spectator to a drug addict who has become so enraptured by the visual thrills on screen, that they are completely devoid of substance

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[108] Smith, *The Accidental*, 237.
[109] Smith, 'To the cinema', 58.
[110] Christian Metz, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Imaginary Signifier* (London: Macmillan Press, 1983), 96. Sara Danius also cites a cinema scene from Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*, which suggests remarkable similarities to Magnus' experience (see *The Senses of Modernism*, 85).

themselves, emptied of self and hypnotised into a dumbed state. Metz suggests that the cinema derives its power from this ability to subdue spectators and take away their agency. Similarly, whilst the cinema offers a retreat for Magnus, it cannot solve his problems, merely provides an escape until he has the courage to step outside this self-enclosed artifice and back into the world to act for himself:

> He will have to go back out of this place, like this place is a safe cave with its shadows flickering on its wall, where it's easy to pretend that there's nothing but the shadows. Out there, there's the escalators going round and round in their fixed directions.[111]

As he discovered in his own living room, the movement of the images in the cinema do not reflect the pace of life outside this space, which continues regardless of his readiness for it. The cinema space, with its flickering shadows, provides an important respite for Magnus and temporary escape from his anxieties, but its disconnection from the world outside means that it cannot provide a long-term solution for his anxieties.

For Magnus, it is the physical relationship that develops between himself and Amber, and the 'stilled' moment of orgasm itself, which finally enables him to reconnect with the present moment and reconcile his shame about his own perverse watching activities. Magnus is amazed to find that in the aftermath of these moments of intimacy with Amber – which should feel dirty and forbidden after everything he has been through – he feels surprisingly light and refreshed: 'Magnus cannot believe how all right, how clean again it is possible to feel even after everything awful that he knows about himself'.[112] His physical interactions with Amber help to renew his relationship with his

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[111] Smith, *The Accidental*, 248.
[112] Ibid., 153.

own body and allow him to face the future with more courage. Unlike the 'sweetened vitamin pills' of the cinema that dull him into submission, Amber's interaction with Magnus provides a direct encounter that forces him to contemplate his circumstances more deeply. Amber encourages him to pay proper attention to her physical presence, looking closely at her body rather than creating an illusion of it, and this active form of spectatorship has a therapeutic impact on his troubled state of mind. She does not achieve this by bombarding his senses but through genuine interaction and dialogue, which provides him with a safe space in which to confront his fears. These actions create space for Magnus to consider more thoughtfully the pornographic images he created and reconcile them against a more realistic image of the female body, which refuses to be objectified in the same way.

As a consequence of these encounters, through which an experience of emotional and physical connection with Amber helps Magnus to reconnect to his surroundings and to those around him, he can look ahead to a more positive future: 'He can let it go, now that the old year is ending and the new year is beginning, because it will belong to that old year and new things will happen in this new year'.[113] Rather than feeling subordinate to the timeline set down for him to follow, Magnus takes responsibility for his past, and consequently his future, and by letting go of the past, Magnus is able to move forward on his own terms and deal with whatever challenges his return to school might bring. Amber also challenges and transforms Magnus' attitude towards watching, such that he no longer retreats from seeing and being seen altogether, but becomes a more conscientious and thoughtful spectator, who reflects actively and critically on what is watched. Whereas in the cinema Magnus was trapped in a moment of escapism, through

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[113] Ibid., 238.

Amber's influence he can find meaning in what he sees by directly connecting it to his own circumstances.

Astrid's frustration at the pre-ordained timeframe imposed upon her narrative becomes most apparent at the end of the novel when her mother Eve attempts to eradicate Amber's subversive influence from their lives: 'It's finished now, her mother said. That time's over'.[114] Here, Eve attempts to finish Amber's narrative, however Astrid continues to invoke her presence by changing her name to 'Ambient', 'Ambling' and then to 'Red'.[115] Astrid's defiance against the 'end' of Amber's presence in the story is further evidenced by her outcry: 'How can it be the end of anything. It's just the beginning. It is the beginning of everything'.[116] Frustrated that the narrative is coming to a premature end, Astrid continues to position herself as an active pioneer, at the 'beginning' of an adventure that has only just started. Whilst Eve is determined to round off the narrative and remove Amber's subversive influence, Astrid continues to bring memories of Amber into the present moment. In this way, she rebels against the linear timeframe that the novel imposes on her, determined to keep hold of memories rather than rushing forward in search of the new. Amber's presence further lingers in the novel when she robs the Smart family's home, emptying it of their possessions. This creates an uncluttered space which both Astrid and Magnus find surprisingly light and airy:

> Getting home and walking in through the front door and it all being bare was like hearing yourself breathe for the first time. It was like as if someone had turned your breathing volume level inside you up to full.[117]

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[114] Ibid., 222.
[115] Ibid., 223.
[116] Ibid., 234.
[117] Ibid., 217.

I think I liked it best when there was totally nothing, Magnus says. When you could just walk through a room and there was nothing in it at all.[118]

The moment of pause that this emptiness creates for Astrid and Magnus, as seen in these examples, suggests that the stillness and silence of the house has given them the space they need to step back and reflect on all that has happened. The house as a kind of blank page provides an unexpected hiatus for the novel's protagonists within the rush of everyday life, which has been created for them by Amber's subversive behaviour.

The Accidental depicts the character of Amber as a symbolic representation of cinematic culture from its inception, a visual spectacle which can challenge and transform the dulled senses of Astrid and Magnus in relation to the contemporary visual technologies in their lives. As the Smart family become increasingly disengaged from their surroundings and from each other, Amber's uninvited invasion into their holiday home forces them to confront what they see in new and surprising ways. More specifically, she enables them to overcome two problems of technologically mediated ways of seeing: their sense of detachment from the visual spectacle, and the coercive control of the camera lens which also determines the pace of their own narratives. Whilst Amber's presence has a significant impact on all four members of the Smart family, I have focussed on the two younger characters, who engage most fully with visual technologies and are thus most useful for my consideration here.[119] Informed by critical

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[118] Ibid., 257.

[119] One example of a significant encounter between Eve and Amber which is comparable to her interactions with Astrid and Magnus – even though this has not been my focus here – occurs when Amber kisses Eve:

> 'Eve was moved beyond belief by the kiss. The place beyond belief was terrifying. There, everything was difference, as if she had been gifted with a new kind of vision, as if disembodied hands had strapped some kind of headset on to her that revealed all the unnamed, invisible colours beyond the basic human spectrum, and as if the world beyond her eyes had slowed its pace especially to reveal the spaces between what she usually saw and the way that things were tacked temporarily together with thin thread across these spaces' (Ibid., 202).

The increased sensitivity of Eve's eyes is likened to a new piece of mechanical apparatus that has been attached to the front of her eyes, enabling her to see an extraordinary range of colours beyond her

perspectives including Mulvey and Doane, this section has explored how Amber's presence mitigates the overwhelming impact of these technologies by reconnecting Astrid and Magnus to what they see and creating crucial space for them to contemplate and respond to it. In this way, Amber encourages them to become more critical and responsible spectators, who take agency over visual images and in doing so assert control over the course of their own lives.

How to be both

The transformational impact of a mysterious transhistorical figure such as Amber is again deployed by Smith in a novel published almost a decade later, *How to be both*. Again, steeped in visual themes, the dual narrative structure of this text sets up a dialogue between the experiences of a fifteenth-century Italian painter Francescho and those of a contemporary adolescent called George. Published in two versions so that either storyline can be read first, these two protagonists are distinct in time and place, however they also play witness to each other's lives: whilst George encounters Francescho's paintings in a gallery in Ferrara, Francescho is playfully resurrected into George's narrative to 'look back' through their own painting and become a spectator of her contemporary environment. It is my intention in this section to argue that this novel builds on the concerns already established by Smith in *The Accidental* about the pitfalls of contemporary spectatorship, again using an outside perspective – this time from a pre-technological era – to draw attention to these problems.

George's use of visual technologies at a time when she is processing the sudden death of her mother accentuates her feelings of emotional detachment from her environment

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normal vision. Time also slows down, giving Eve space to see each individual image around her, like the individual slides of the film reel which are presented in quick succession. As seen in my analysis of Astrid and Magnus, this example suggests Smith's interest in how Amber affects Eve's vision and transforms the way she engages with the world around her.

and leads her to feel out of control of the course of her own life – problems which have already been highlighted in relation to Astrid and Magnus' narratives. Despite having been encouraged by her mother to look carefully and directly at works of art and other visual media to scrutinise their meaning, in the aftermath of this character's demise, George struggles to cope with the bombardment of pornographic videos and surveillance technologies that surround her. The power to watch, as well as the uncomfortable feeling of being watched by others, are again important themes in this narrative that cross over into Francescho's historical perspective, who struggles to hide their true biological sex from their peers.[120] As such, there are interesting parallels to be drawn between these two characters' roles as spectators, and Francescho's pre-technological perspective is particularly useful as a counterpoint to George's screen-saturated world.

Even more so than in *The Accidental*, George exists in a society where technological means of recording and storing images have reached unprecedented levels, and this has given ordinary citizens greater opportunity to become spectators than ever before. This is comically highlighted in Smith's narrative through George's father, whose job it is to insert cameras up people's chimneys:

> anyone who wants to know, and has £120 to spare, can see what the inside of his or her chimney looks like. If the person who wants to know has an extra £150, her father can provide a recorded file of the visuals so he or she can look at the inside of the chimney owned by him or her any time he or she chooses.[121]

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[120] In order to gain success as a painter, the character Francescho, who is assigned female at birth, must dress as a man. Consequently, this section will refer to Francescho using the pronouns 'they', 'their' and 'them' to reflect the gender ambiguity which is central to this character and to the novel as a whole. One aspect of Smith's interest in the concept of 'how to be both' is Francescho's ability to be both man and woman simultaneously.

[121] Smith, *How to be both*, 198.

Smith depicts a society which has become preoccupied with recording and watching every detail of people's lives, and in this example the incessant need to scrutinise every detail has become a social paranoia that is taken advantage of by commercial companies. The question of whether such heightened levels of social surveillance are appropriate or desirable has been raised by critics such as Lyon, Clive Norris and Dennis Kingsley, all of whom view it as a potentially dangerous opportunity for individuals to interrogate others' privacy. Kingsley, in particular, suggests that the contemporary obsession with surveillance works to exacerbate public fear and suspicion, which is 'pumped up through media institutions and cultural discourse'.[122] This risky preoccupation with watching is further evidenced in *How to be both*; George's mum, for example, is convinced that she is being watched and monitored by authorities who disapprove of her political activism, whilst George's own adoption of surveillance activities following her mother's death further damages her emotional well-being. The heightened role and agency of the spectator in this era thus exists in tension with the ultimate responsibility that comes with having access to so many images at once.

Contemporary visual technologies also provide increased opportunities for spectators to watch multiple things at once, further increasing their exposure to every possible angle. This is highlighted when George watches TV on catch-up: 'because George came in half way through this programme and missed the beginning, and because it is an interesting programme, she is simultaneously watching it from the start on catch-up on her laptop'.[123] Smith again gestures towards the excessiveness of contemporary watching activities, which prevents the spectator from fully engaging her attention on one stimulus, whilst resulting in some parts of the same programme being

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[122] Kingsley, 'Viewpoint: Keeping a close watch,' 352.
[123] Ibid., 226.

watched twice. On the other hand – and it is important to note that one of the governing intentions of Smith's novel is to provide 'both' perspectives on such issues, as is clear from the novel's title and its dual narrative structure – George's capacity to watch in this way also suggests a level of freedom and autonomy, as she takes agency over the pace of her own watching. Instances such as this can be informed by Robert Stam and Ella Habiba Shohat's discussion of the 'multiform, fissured, schizophrenic' positions adopted by contemporary spectators, as they take advantage of personalised, portable technologies which allow them increased control over what they see.[124] This can result in much more complex spectator identities as multiple different perspectives are grasped at once, offering the spectator more insight into the images on display. George's use of multiple devices draws attention to the idea that contemporary watching habits have both positive and negative outcomes, as new technologies offer spectators increased opportunities and choice, but can also leave them over-exposed and vulnerable.

As already seen in *The Accidental*, one of the predominant problems George encounters when engaging with visual technologies is a sense of detachment from reality. From the start of the narrative, she refuses to watch a meteor shower with her mother, believing that 'we wouldn't be able to see anything anyway . . . There'll be too much local light'.[125] In this example, George is unwilling to engage directly with her natural surroundings, believing that the images offered in high definition on her iPad will offer a far superior viewing experience. Whilst sitting in the garden, George continues to engage with nature only as a reflection on her screen: 'sitting in the garden with the flowers all nodding round her and the occasional passing butterfly's shadow

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[124] Robert Stam and Ella Habiba Shohat, 'Film theory and spectatorship in the age of the "posts"' in *Reinventing Film Studies*, 398.
[125] Smith, *How to be both*, 203.

calling her eyes beyond the iPad'.[126] Elements of the natural world are represented here as mere shadows, and an unwelcome distraction that diverts George's attention. The idea that overuse of technological devices has left the contemporary spectator feeling somewhat detached from the rest of their lives has already been cited by critics such as Taylor, who argues that high definition images can render the 'real thing' somewhat redundant.[127] George's mother frequently criticises the technologically mediated ways of seeing used by her daughter, and persistently provokes her to look more carefully at the visual stimuli she encounters. She even takes George on a gallery visit to Italy to encourage her to look beyond the lens and engage more directly with works of art as well as the aesthetic beauty of her natural environment. In Italy, George notices that the teenagers are not as addicted to their technological devices as she is used to in the UK: 'None of them is on a phone or looking at a screen. They are all talking to each other'.[128] Whilst this is an exaggeration, George's observation further demonstrates that travelling to Italy signifies returning to a place where technological ways of seeing have not yet completely taken over. After returning home and her mother's sudden death however, George retreats even further behind screen technology, a response to emotional trauma that is not dissimilar to Magnus' retreat into the fantasy of hologram boy in *The Accidental.* Similarly, George struggles to accept what has happened, and even admits to her school counsellor that she can no longer feel anything: 'if I am, it's like it's at a distance'.[129] This behaviour suggests that George's use of technologies to further abstract herself becomes a problematic habit that also hinders her ability to process and overcome her grief.

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[126] Ibid., 220.
[127] See Taylor, *Cinematic Perspectives on Digital Culture*, 16.
[128] Smith, *How to be both*, 247.
[129] Ibid., 200.

As a useful counterpoint to George's feelings of detachment as a contemporary spectator, Francescho much more successfully navigates the visual environment of their time, making direct connections between the raw materials used to paint and the resulting images that are created.[130] Francescho's character serves as a model of Smith's idealised spectator, who is deeply connected to the visual environment, and provides an important contrast to George's detached state of mind. A ghostly presence throughout the novel, Francescho is unable to touch and feel their surroundings, yet longingly imagines all the things they would do if they did have functioning body parts.[131] In this respect, like Amber in *The Accidental*, Francescho purposefully plays with the boundary between embodied experience and abstract illusion. When spying on George's narrative, this character is a comical surveyor of the contemporary scene, who is initially confused by technological devices such as iPads and mobile phones. They are particularly disappointed at how disconnected twenty-first century spectators seem to be from their surroundings as a result of these intervening screens:

> this place is full of people who have eyes and choose to see nothing, who all talk in to their hands and they peripatate and all carry these votives . . . they look or talk or pray to these tablets or icons all the while by holding them next to their heads or stroking them with fingers and staring only at them, signifying they must be heavy in their despairs to be so consistently looking away from their world and so devoted to their icons.[132]

Enraptured by the 'idols' of technology as if in some kind of religious worship, the spectators of the twenty-first century wilfully ignore the rest of the world in favour of

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[130] See Francescho's listing of the natural materials they need to make colours for their paintings, the visceral textures of which contrast the smooth and seemingly immaterial surfaces of contemporary technological devices (Ibid., 58-9).

[131] Ibid., 39-41.

[132] Ibid., 44.

the virtual images on screen. Francescho finds this behaviour perplexing, and his external perspective provides an important commentary on the pitfalls of contemporary spectatorship, which appears to be woefully disconnected from any sense of meaning.

In contrast to this, when describing their own picture making, Francescho goes into great detail about the natural materials used to make colours for paint, including 'plants and stones, stonedust and water, fish bones, sheep and goat bones' and so on.[133] In this way, they emphasise the connection between the physical materials used to make the painting and the object of study, which is part of the same tangible reality:

> a picture is a real thing in this world and this shift is a marker of this reality :
> and I like a figure to shift into that realm between the picture and world just like
> I like a body really to be present under painted clothes.[134]

In George's narrative, the screen provides a protective layer between herself and the world she is afraid of, and an interface that disrupts the connection between watcher and watched. From Francescho's perspective however, even though his paintings are artificial creations of his own making, the two remain interconnected. Francescho blurs the boundary between the visual representation of a subject and its substance, and continues throughout the narrative to suggest that the subject of a painting does not remain constrained to its canvas but also exists in the world beyond this image.

Francescho also suggests that the best visual representations contain elements which are not visible to the naked eye; the body of the subject, for example, which still exists underneath the painted clothes even though it cannot be seen. In this regard, Francescho is interested in what is not seen as much as what is seen, and is willing to take responsibility for its ongoing presence in the world, rather than flattening it into an

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[133] Ibid., 58.
[134] Ibid., 121.

abstracted image. Francescho further suggests that these subjects have a life beyond the painting:

> A picture is most times just a picture : but sometimes a picture is more : I looked at the faces in torchlight and I saw they were escapees : they'd broken free from me and from the wall that had made and held them and even from themselves.[135]

The distinction between what is inside the artwork and what is external to it becomes indistinguishable here, and Francescho imagines the picture itself as a kind of prison from which its subjects must try to escape. By highlighting the constraints placed on these subjects whilst they remain within the painting, Francescho's narrative emphasises the life and energy that is retained within all images, and the importance of keeping this in mind when playing the part of the observer.

As Francescho looks on, George's continued sense of disconnection from what she sees through the screen provides a stark contrast to this perspective: 'Through the small window she holds in her hands we are viewing frieze after frieze of lifelike scenes of carnal pleasure-house love enacted before our eyes'.[136] In contrast to their own description of painting as able to capture and convey the essence of an authentic life and subject, Francescho emphasises the artificiality and objectification of the images on view as George watches pornographic videos. The appropriation of pre-technological language to describe the act of spectatorship, such as 'frieze', 'window' and 'enacted', further de-familiarise the images on George's iPad and emphasise the way that they are not natural but have been constructed for the spectator's voyeuristic pleasure.[137] Francescho also notices George's dissatisfaction with her watching experience: 'Cold

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[135] Ibid.

[136] Ibid., 67.

[137] In further support of the idea that original paintings can offer a more authentic viewing experience than reproduced images, see Interview transcript, 'Open the Door 2019 – Interview between Ali Smith and Jess Orr', where Smith discusses her research into the British pop artist Pauline Boty (279-81).

here and she's shivering too : surmise she is watching the love act repeating like this to keep herself warm'.[138] This observation demonstrates George's inability to connect with what she sees through the screen, which has become a substitute for more genuine physical and emotional comfort. Her fascination with these images is indicative of this, as she looks in all the wrong places for the sense of emotional connection she so desperately needs. Smith highlights ironically the disjunction between the bodily interactions taking place on the screen and the artificiality of the medium through which these images are conveyed. This disconnection is heightened by the screen technology used by George, which contrasts the more direct experience of painting using raw materials from Francescho's time.

Another risk that George must navigate when engaging with visual technologies is the increased power she now has to store and re-play the images she has witnessed. On the one hand, this means she is better able to control time by bringing back into the present moments from the past, which might otherwise be lost and forgotten. In *Death 24x a Second*, Mulvey argues that developments in visual recording technologies have been motivated by a desire to capture and store events in a format that will not be lost to the passing of time and can be revisited by the spectator at any point: 'The technological drive towards photography and film had always been animated by the aspiration to preserve the fleeting instability of reality and the passing of time in a fixed image'.[139] This is, in many ways, a positive function of contemporary digital devices, which have practical storage facilities and enhance spectators' control over how and when they watch. In George's narrative, as in Astrid's, this desire to capture and record her present circumstances is a way of coping with the 'fleeting instability' of her own

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[138] Smith, *How to be both*, 67.
[139] Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 18.

reality, which has involved the sudden loss of a person who she cannot now recover or preserve. In Astrid's narrative, the unknowability of who her real father was and her inability to return to the moment of her own conception, is what initially drives her to record in scrutinous detail her experiences, so that they cannot be forgotten in the same way. George, on the other hand, desperately tries to recover a parent that she did know, but has lost tragically and irrevocably.

Despite the advantages of being able to record one's watching activities, George's narrative suggests that this increased power to hold onto images indefinitely can also have damaging consequences, as the digital trace of these images has an unprecedented legacy that is not easily contained. This has already been evidenced through the example of Magnus and the tragic consequences of the cyberbullying incident, which he wishes he could erase from everyone's memory. A similar example in *How to be both* of the damaging effects of making visual recordings is when a group of bullies at George's school record girls urinating on their smartphones: '[George] has caught herself wondering whether those girls, that girl with the phone - if the phone memory had survived - had deleted or maybe kept the film'.[140] George is troubled by the idea that these recordings give the bullies power over their peers, and can be used to manipulate and humiliate her classmates as a permanent record of their past behaviour. Whilst her father's occupation to look up people's chimneys may be comical and futile, behaviour such as this constitutes a more serious and damaging invasion of others' privacy. George is preoccupied by the idea that this footage now has a trace that might do further harm to its victims, and this leads her into a state of anxiety. As Cascio argues:

> Memories fade. Emotional wounds heal. The insult that seemed so important
> one day is soon gone. But personal memory assistants will allow people to play

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[140] Smith, *The Accidental*, 263.

> back what you really said, time and again, allow people to obsess over a
>
> momentary sneer or distracted gaze.[141]

Visual recordings – part of what Cascio terms 'personal memory assistants' – capture memories that can be damaging as well as helpful, and exist into the future beyond their watched subjects' control. Whilst Mulvey emphasises the positive effects of the increased agency of the spectator in the contemporary era therefore, Cascio takes a more cynical view, highlighting the potential for personal recording devices to inflict pain or humiliation on the subjects they contain.[142] Fernanda Bruno agrees that there is a heightened need for spectators to behave responsibly in the contemporary era: 'in the hands of responsible users such watchfulness can be kind, corrective, and protective. In the hands of the immature or manipulative it can be turned into harassment, stalking, voyeurism, and intrusion'.[143] Whilst the immediate benefits to the spectator are evident, Bruno argues, it is necessary to recognise the damaging potential of these kinds of peer-surveillance activities, which are increasingly accessible to the everyday user. As seen in the example of George's bullying classmates, everyday forms of technology can now be used to capture incriminating evidence against others, and even 'responsible users' can quickly become 'immature or manipulative' in their intentions. The increased prevalence of these kinds of watching activities are evidenced in Smith's novels through her presentation of troubled teenagers who, in dealing with their emotional distress, turn to voyeuristic watching activities as a way of asserting power and control over others.

In further demonstration of the idea that contemporary spectators have increased power to carry out negative or harmful watching behaviours towards others, George

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[141] Cascio, 'The Rise of the Participatory Panopticon'.
[142] It should be noted that Mulvey does recognise the potential for irresponsible spectatorship in the contemporary era, and continues to advocate towards a spectator driven by curiosity and genuine intrigue rather than mindless voyeurism (see *Death 24x a Second*, 191).
[143] Bruno, 'Surveillance and participation on Web 2.0', 350.

herself undertakes damaging recording activities when she makes videos of a woman whom she believes her mother was having an affair with before she died. Reminiscent of Astrid's surveillance activities in *The Accidental*, George uses her iPad to capture 'proof' of this woman's existence, as she tries to make sense of these confusing circumstances. Francescho notices how voyeuristic George's behaviour has become in these instances:

> quick as a magic trick she took out her tablet and made a study of the woman with it : the woman put her hands up over her face : she did not want a study made : she turned like that and went back inside the house.[144]

Emphasising the ease with which George is able to whip out a recording device with which to capture this woman's incriminating behaviour, Smith also separates Francescho's observations of George by colons to demonstrate the startled and abrupt response of the woman, as well as giving the impression that they are recording this as a series of discrete images. This makes it clear that George's intrusion onto this woman's property is not welcome, and is further evidence of the kind of unhealthy spectator behaviour outlined by critics Cascio and Bruno. George's willingness to watch someone in this way suggests she is trying to take control over her circumstances through this abusive watching power. Francescho's interpretation of George's behaviour is made according to a pre-technological frame of reference – making a 'study' rather than a photograph – which further emphasises the control of the spectator in crafting the image, and the subordination of the subject to their pervading gaze.

As discussed earlier, George also uses her agency as a spectator to watch pornographic videos on her iPad, and often she watches the same video repeatedly. Whilst this initially appears to be another example of voyeuristic and controlling watching behaviour, George's intentions in this instance turn out to be quite selfless.

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[144] Smith, *How to be both*, 138.

She contemplates how one piece of footage, which involves the maltreatment of a young girl, is a record of a past moment which can be brought back into her present consciousness each time she watches: 'it happens for the first time, over and over again, every time someone who hasn't seen it before clicks on it and watches it'.[145] In this way, George detaches the moment when the incident happened from her present experience of watching, and suggests that it has ceased to have any significance aside from the visual recording that has been made to prove that it happened. George is both horrified and comforted by the permanency of this event, which is enabled by the digital format in which it is stored and shared: horrified because such abuse has taken place at all and comforted by the idea that she can keep returning to the moment before it happened as if to a state of naivety. As when filming her mother's friend, George's watching again becomes a way of taking control of an experience that she cannot comprehend, as well as exploiting the technological media available to her to revisit the past and try to understand it. As mentioned earlier, Mulvey suggests that this obsession with tracking the movement of time through the camera is instigated by a wider preoccupation with the inevitable human experience of loss, which can become haunting for the spectator as they desperately try to recover the past.[146] In this regard, George obsessively returns to a previous moment in the recording as a way of dealing with the loss of her mother, whom she will never be able to bring back to life in the same way. The emotional impact of watching this film so many times causes great discomfort, and George becomes so afflicted by it that she struggles to watch ordinary, everyday videos without being haunted by these more troubling images:

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[145] Ibid., 224.

[146] Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 31.

> [The film] changed something in the structures of George's brain and heart and certainly her eyes, so that afterwards when George tried to watch any more of this kind of sexual film that girl was there waiting under them all. More. George found that the girl was there too, pale and pained with her shut eyes and her o of a mouth, under the surface of the next TV show she watched on catch-up. She was there under the You Tube videos of Vampire Weekend and the puppy falling off the sofa and the cat sitting on the hoover that hoovered by itself.[147]

Not only does this video return to her consciousness every time George watches it, but it continues to pervade her mind even when she engages with less painful or provocative images. Like Magnus, George cannot rewind time and 'un-see' what she has already seen, or 'un-know' what has already been witnessed, she can only use her agency as a spectator to re-watch and remind herself that it happened as a mark of respect to its victim.

Consequently, there appears to be a fine distinction between watching with voyeuristic intentions and benevolent ones in Smith's novel, as these activities also help George to reconnect to her own reality in important and meaningful ways. Whilst the omniscient interrogation of her mother's friend helps her to move on emotionally from this obsession, the watching of pornography suggests that George is becoming a more responsible and conscientious spectator than seen elsewhere. She watches: 'to remind herself not to forget the thing that had happened to this person . . . she was doing it in witness, by extension, of all the unfair and wrong things that happen to people all the time'.[148] George distinguishes between herself and others who might be watching for voyeuristic pleasure or sexual gratification, and hopes that her own sympathy for this

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[147] Smith, *How to be both*, 221.
[148] Ibid., 223.

girl's experience might compensate for the inevitable harm that continues to be done to her through other anonymous watchers. In accordance with her mother's advice, this example shows George taking time to contemplate more carefully what she sees, especially since she cannot erase these unwanted recordings completely. A further example of this is when she skips school to revisit Francescho's painting when it comes to London, and becomes fascinated by the amount of time spectators spend looking at the painting. Her interest in watching slowly and carefully contemplating the painting again supports the idea that she is becoming a more critical spectator towards the end of the narrative, who is willing to take time to consider the meaning[s] of a single image.[149] Like Astrid, whose initial thirst to discover her environment through visual recordings is challenged by Amber's more direct approach, George's emotional recovery from her mother's death can be traced through her increased willingness to take responsibility for what she watches, and to connect with these images directly without the obstruction of a screen: 'In honour of her mother's eyes she will use her own. She will let whoever's watching know she's watching'.[150] This statement suggests that George now intends to assert her own agency as a spectator, despite the surveillance-saturated context in which she finds herself. In an environment where refusing to watch no longer appears to be an option, George begins to use her eyes more respectfully, looking directly at her surroundings rather than hiding behind a lens. Prior to this, George had already suggested to her counsellor that her mother had managed to transform her own experience of being watched into one of active agency and empowerment: 'she quite liked it. She liked being watched'.[151] In accordance with her

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[149] Ibid., 368.
[150] Ibid., 371.
[151] Ibid., 256.

mother's wishes and following her example, George takes control back from the watchful stare of others, and decides for herself the value of what she sees.

Whilst Francescho acts as an invisible observer to these events in Smith's narrative, another character who helps George to overcome her feelings of detachment and lack of control is her new friend and love interest, Helena Fisker. Helena's subversive behaviour – standing up to the school bullies on George's behalf as Amber does for Astrid in *The Accidental* – challenges her perspective and helps her to see things more clearly and directly.[152] Helena – or H as she introduces herself – lends George some avant-garde French films, and after watching these George can no longer take seriously the mainstream content she sees on TV: '[she] howled out like a wolf at its crapness'.[153] In this sense, H becomes associated with a more cultured and critical form of spectatorship, which is demanded by the foreign perspectives of these European films. This influence is again not dissimilar to Amber's effect in *The Accidental*, as H encourages George to study more carefully her visual environment and disregard the 'easier' or more superficial televisual content she usually watches. H also reconnects George to her material environment by helping her to create a physical wall of her mother's photographs. Whereas earlier in the novel George warned her younger brother Henry not to touch these photographs – to protect them and keep them at a safe distance – towards the end of the narrative George uses them to make a physical manifestation of the symbolic wall that has been obscuring her vision and stopping her from moving on from her mother's death. Photos are used as individual bricks: 'the new work is in the shape of – a brick wall. As if each of the little studies is a brick in this wall'.[154] This

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[152] During this incident, Helena Fisker 'pushed past (the bullies) and held the smartphone over the bowl of the toilet that George had just flushed' (262). This is resonant of Amber's devious behaviour in *The Accidental*, in particular when she throws Astrid's video camera from a bridge.

[153] Ibid., 346.

[154] Ibid., 159.

behaviour again suggests George's willingness to reconnect to what she sees by creating a visual memorial to her mother. Francescho observes as H and George physically wrap the wall around themselves and break it apart:

> this time rather than treating it with such care the girl, when the wall is at full stretch, wraps her end of it round her shoulder and tucks it under her arm like a collar or a scarf . . . They twist themselves round inside the swath of wall until they are both a bristle of pictures like armour over their chests and stomachs and arms and up to their necks : then they twist towards each other as if it is the wall that is bringing them together : they meet wrapped like caterpillars in the middle of the room : but they don't just meet : they collide : at which the paper wall breaks and as it comes apart its brick-shapes fly off like rooftiles and the girls hit the floor together in each other's arms in the mess of the pictures littered round them.[155]

The sense of destruction and chaos suggested by this incident, as well as the physical intimacy it creates between H and George, suggests that George is striving to reconnect in a more material way to what she sees. As opposed to the screens and lenses which previously formed a barrier to such connections, the photographs are printed on paper and thus are tangible objects which are capable of being handled and destroyed. George experiences a sense of catharsis at being able to cover herself in the photographs of her mother and then destroy them, embracing the textures of the photographs before allowing them to flake off the wall and be ripped or lost. Unlike digital recordings which are shared online and can spread uncontrollably like a virus, these images are under George's control and can be destroyed at her will. It is worth noting that this incident is not dissimilar to the tactile experiences of Smith's reader-characters in relation to

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[155] Ibid., 181.

books and paper, as explored in 'The Embodied Reader', who experience a cathartic release in ripping, throwing and burning their libraries and thus symbolically wrestling meaning from them. H similarly encourages George to have embodied connections with the photographs, and through this playfulness resolve her own emotions of anger and sadness.

Through George's journey towards emotional recovery, Smith builds on the ideas she established in *The Accidental* concerning the risks of contemporary spectatorship, as this character struggles to navigate the visual technologies saturating her environment in the aftermath of trauma. Like Astrid and Magnus, there are times when George distances herself from other parts of her life using these technologies, as well as harnessing them to assert power and control over what's happened to her. Whereas Astrid and Magnus have a chance to escape these technologies through the elusive presence of Amber on their holiday away from normal life, George's circumstances suggest that screen-based technology has become an unavoidable presence in contemporary life, and that the problems associated with technological forms of watching have reached worrying levels. George's desire to connect more meaningfully with what she sees and become a more responsible spectator is inspired both by her deceased mother and her school friend H, and as a counterpoint to George's narrative, Smith also constructs another spectator in the fifteenth-century painter Francescho, who intervenes to offer a more direct and critical perspective. Through these representations, George is revealed to be a more critical spectator than she at first appears, driven, as Mulvey advocates, 'not by voyeurism, but by curiosity and the desire to decipher the screen'.[156] As gestured towards by the title of this novel, the line between positive and negative motivations when watching is purposefully presented by Smith as

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[156] Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second*, 191.

difficult to distinguish, as she emphasises the ability of one spectator to enact both harmful and helpful watching behaviours in the same narrative.

This chapter has demonstrated through an exploration of Smith's two most visual novels her fascination with the troubled experiences of the contemporary spectator, and her desire to reconnect and empower them to interact with their surroundings in more meaningful ways. As engagement with visual media continues to increase exponentially in the twenty-first century, it has been appropriate to extend my discussion of the reader in Smith's work to a consideration of those who watch film and make photographs, who face a unique but not entirely distinct set of challenges. Focussing on the adolescent characters in these texts, I have considered how technologically mediated ways of seeing impact the role of the spectator, and diagnosed a sense of detachment and lack of control as two key problems commonly faced by these characters. I have also considered those who encourage these characters to interact more directly with their environments; transhistorical figures such as Amber and Francescho who offer a critique of contemporary watching activities from their own very different perspectives. Francescho, in particular, provides a model for Smith's ideal spectator, who is deeply connected to and engaged in what they see, whilst Amber provides an image of the ultimate spectacle, who challenges and transforms her watchers. The image of the spectator explored here suggests significant similarities to Smith's representations of the reader as explored in previous chapters, including the drive towards a more physical sense of connection to what one sees, as with what one reads, as well as her emphasis on the lively interactions between watcher and watched. As with her representations of readers in relation to books, Smith's spectators should not passively accept the truth of the stimulus they encounter, but be willing to interrogate it curiously to understand its range of possible meanings.

<u>Conclusion</u>

This thesis has argued, in multifarious ways, that Smith makes space in her fiction for the figure of the reader as a visible and active agent in the meaning making process. In this way, her representations oppose the conceptualisation of readers – by formalist thinking and movements such as the New Criticism in particular - as passive recipients of the fixed and ready-made meanings carried by texts. As reader-response critic Wayne Booth asserts*:* 'True artists, we have been told again and again, take no thought of their readers', suggesting that there has developed a disdain towards the role that readers play in bringing literary texts to life, and a tendency amongst writers to consider the reader's presence as an interruption to the so-called purity of the text itself.[1] Smith's fiction alternatively positions the reader as a prominent figure and equal partner in the writer-text-reader exchange, one who has the ability to challenge and revise the ideas that a text carries with it, and who also brings their own experiences to bear to create an altered or wholly different version of it.

It was productive to begin my exploration of the reader in Smith's work by drawing on critical texts *The Reader, The Text, The Poem* by Louise Rosenblatt and *The Act of Reading* by Wolfgang Iser, which similarly seek to give increased prominence to the dynamic role that readers play in generating meaning from the books they encounter.[2] Iser's creation of an aesthetic theory of reader-response, in particular, places emphasis on the 'imaginative and perceptive faculties' that are brought into play by the reader, which help to multiply a text's possible meanings.[3] Building on these initial ideas, my

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[1] Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 89. Also see Rosenblatt, *The Reader*, 3.

[2] In 1980, Suleiman noted the dramatic shift to a heightened critical focus on the reader: 'the words *reader* and *audience*, once relegated to the status of the unproblematic and obvious, have acceded to a starring role' ('Introduction: Varieties of Audience-Oriented Criticism' in *The Reader in the Text*, 3).

[3] Iser, *The Act of Reading*, x.

main chapters explored more nuanced aspects of Smith's representations, drawing on different critical voices to inform my argument. My intention was to avoid reducing Smith's texts to one single idea – such as the model laid out by Rosenblatt or Iser – but rather to maintain their openness and potential for multiplicity. The three key essays by Hélène Cixous drawn upon in my first chapter on 'The Embodied Reader' offered an opportunity to examine the physicality of the reader's experience, from a perspective which is not typically associated with the school of reader-response. This bodily aspect of characters' responses towards books, which I demonstrated were alternately destructive and creative in Smith's work, helped to unlock new meaning, as well as providing an emotional release for reader-characters themselves. Destructive impulses were considered through the protagonists of Smith's first novel *Like*, written not long after Smith's own departure from the academic environment of Cambridge, and as such this novel reflects her own need to rebel against convention and express a more visceral and impulsive response to reading. Creative impulses, on the other hand, were examined through the more constructive behaviours of Smith's characters towards books, including the connections she draws between the act of reading and the organic lives of trees. Through several of Smith's short stories as well as the character Daniel in the novel *Autumn*, I argued that trees are used as a tangible metaphor for the more productive and evolutionary effects of reading, as well as constituting the material substance from which books themselves are made.

My second chapter on 'The Dialogic Reader' demonstrated that narrative is not the product of a singular voice in Smith's work but a result of multiple – often conflicting – perspectives, one of which is inevitably the reader's. This argument was supported by the ideas put forward by Mikhail Bakhtin in his essay 'Discourse in the novel', which explore how this multiplicity of voices works subversively within a text to prevent one

authorial voice from assuming control. Whilst Bakhtin does not initially focus on the reader in his argument, his notion of the anticipated reader and his concept of dialogism proved to be fruitful ground for my analysis of the reader's subversive participation in generating textual meaning. I chose to focus on the published lecture series *Artful*, to explore how Smith incorporates the subversive voices of readers into her narratives, as this text involves an amateur narrator who must interpret some written fragments that have been left behind by a supposed 'expert', and piece them together into a new kind of order. Similarly, the representation of oral storytelling scenarios was an important aspect of this chapter, as Smith's short stories frequently take the form of lively dialogues between storytellers and their listeners. Drawing on critical ideas about how the oral form can allow the recipient of a tale to take on an even more active and participatory role, I argued that Smith's own incorporation of oral storytelling scenarios into her fiction helps her to leave room for the listener's ideas and opinions. This strategy has enabled her to rebalance the power dynamic between those who produce narrative and those who receive it, by purposefully including the listener's interjections, disagreements and amendments to the tale that is being told.

Finally, in my chapter on 'The Reader as a Spectator', I broadened my conception of who constitutes a reader in Smith's work to a consideration of how characters interact with visual stimuli, such as film, photography and online video. In this way, I took into account Smith's argument that we not only read books, but absorb all kinds of narrative, and must do so in order to make sense of our surroundings and learn to challenge and rewrite some of the discourses that we come up against.[4] This was especially pertinent in the novels *The Accidental* and *How to be both*, which include protagonists who are struggling to cope with a contemporary context where visual technologies such as film

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[4] Interview transcript, 'Open the Door 2019 – Interview between Ali Smith and Jess Orr'.

and video have become an omnipresent force in everyday life. These individuals are repeatedly depicted as disillusioned and detached from what they see, and in need of reconnecting to their surroundings in a more meaningful way. Smith also introduces characters from alternative historical periods – Amber, who has sprung from the early age of cinema, and Francescho, who was a painter in the Italian Renaissance – and these characters' deep engagement in visual stimuli provide a unique vision of the world and a refreshing counterpoint to Smith's distressed twenty-first century protagonists. Drawing on critical ideas concerning the agency of the spectator, including Laura Mulvey and Mary Ann Doane, this chapter argued that the spectator-characters of Smith's novels are presented as another kind of 'reader', who must learn through the course of both novels to take increased agency, as well as responsibility for their watching activities.

Throughout my argument, I have suggested that by taking agency as readers, and as spectators, many of Smith's characters experience an increased desire to take agency over other aspects of their lives. This was illustrated through examples such as Melissa's disappearance in 'Text for the day', Olive Fraser's rejection of her father's family in *Shire*, and Ash's decision to return to Scotland in *Like*, all of which involve decisive action against the restrictive circumstances these characters have found themselves in. Similarly, in *The Accidental* and *How to be both*, I suggested that adolescent characters Astrid, Magnus and George all overcome challenging personal circumstances – such as the death of a mother and an exclusion from school – through renewed ways of seeing and engaging with visual technologies.

I also drew on critical perspectives which emphasise the ways that readers might take what they have gained through the act of reading back to the world outside the text. In my first chapter, I examined how Cixous brings her entire body into the acts of reading

and writing in a highly intimate manner, and suggests that these activities are inextricably linked to her passions and desires elsewhere in life.[5] The bodily transformation that is undergone as a result of her encounters with books is reflected in Smith's recurrent descriptions of the hard-hitting impact of reading on her characters, which is often manifested physically. In relation to Bakhtin's essay, I explored how the voices that make up the dialogic text are also found in everyday life, and how the struggle to have a voice within the narrative reflects a broader struggle for individuals to be heard within social discourse.[6] The need to democratise the text to include as many voices as possible, as well as to represent the power struggle that is inevitable between these voices, has important repercussions for Bakhtin in his own social and political context. Similarly, Smith's fascination with characters who have been marginalised and whose voices have been excluded from social discourse, such as Else in *Hotel World*, suggests a similar concern to redress these inequalities. In my final chapter, I highlighted the ideas of critics such as Norman Taylor, who insists that the contemporary spectator must be able to relate what they see through the screen to their own lives for it to have any meaningful impact on them. Learning to connect and distinguish between image and reality was a preoccupation of Smith's two novels under discussion here, in which characters Astrid, Magnus and George had to slow down and consider more carefully what they saw in order to fully understand the repercussions of these images in the world. Alongside this, Rachel O'Moore's perspective that the visual spectacle often imitates the overwhelming and dizzying effects of fast-paced modern life

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[5] Cixous, 'Coming to Writing', 52.
[6] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the novel', 284.

was reflected in the playful behaviour of characters such as Amber, who used these effects to gain the attention of her contemporary spectators.[7]

By leaving room for the reader in her work, this thesis has also shown how Smith highlights the provisional nature of storytelling itself, as readers' desired actions can be projected into the story without having actual consequences. By inhabiting a fictional scenario, children such as Midge and Anthea in *Girl meets boy* are able to rehearse their responses in a safe space that might become helpful to them later on.[8] In this way, Smith describes the form of the story as a stable or protective structure, which is able to contain the reader and challenge them in a safe environment:

> As long as, as readers, we're not being rained on or blown away in the telling, it doesn't matter what happens, probably the story will hold. We can do anything in fact, there can be any weather - within the structure.[9]

This example further supports the ideas outlined in my introduction, about how Smith found books to be a source of comfort and curiosity from a young age: a playful space in which her ideas about the world could be tested and challenged. As has been highlighted repeatedly in my discussion, Smith similarly presents reader-characters who express their deepest fears and desires in response to books – or in response to film and images – as a way of rehearsing or even realising the emotions that they wish to express in other aspects of their lives. This was particularly evident in a text such as *Like*, where the fraught relationship between protagonists Ash and Amy is repeatedly displaced onto the books on their shelves.

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[7] Taylor, *Cinematic Perspectives on Digital Culture*, 8. Also see O'Moore's description of the disorientating effects of watching in the modern era (*Savage Theory*, 100).

[8] Smith, *Girl meets boy*, 7.

[9] Beer and Smith, 'Gillian Beer interviews Ali Smith', 143.

Another important aspect of my discussion has been the feminist motivations behind Smith's foregrounding of the reader, which was explored through Cixous' critical ideas about reading as an embodied act, but also through the arguments put forward by reader-response critics such as Judith Fetterley and Lynne Pearce. Fetterley suggests that the female reader is 'co-opted into participation in an experience from which she is explicitly excluded',[10] and as such must fight harder to have her own perspectives heard. Advocating a 'resisting' reader rather than a consenting one, Fetterley proposes that all readers must learn to read more actively and critically, often against the grain of how texts were intended to be read by their authors. This, she believes, is a crucial part of bringing new possibilities of meaning to light, and challenging voices of authority to allow for more diverse and nuanced perspectives to be heard. This thesis has argued that Smith's foregrounding of marginalised voices, especially those of women whose opinions have previously been silenced or ignored, is an important motivation behind her work. As highlighted through my discussion of *Artful*, there is a constant reaching out in Smith's work to the outside perspective of the reader, who represents a figure who might see things differently, and who is able to bring a perspective that, as Fetterley proposes, '(makes) available to consciousness precisely that which the literature wishes to keep hidden'.[11]

Ultimately, this thesis has demonstrated that the act of reading plays a hugely significant role in Smith's literary imagination, both as a recurrent feature of her characterisation and as a creative activity in and of itself. Interactions between books and readers are not momentary or short-lived encounters, but lasting and evolving relationships, as books gradually acquire new meanings as readers themselves grow up:

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[10] Fetterley, *The Resisting Reader*, xii.
[11] Ibid., xx.

'That's the thing about books. They're alive on their own terms. Reading is like travelling with an argumentative, unpredictable good friend. It's an endless open exchange'.[12] These reciprocal interactions, in which both reader and text are renewed and transformed by their encounters with each other, are indicative of the kind of open-minded and generous approach that characterises Smith's oeuvre. 'We have to be able to read narrative', she suggests, in order to understand how to challenge the narratives we disagree with, and in order to become good storytellers ourselves.[13] In this way, the dynamic involvement of the reader is represented by Smith as a source of hope, as it is through their persistent questioning and curiosity that the rich potential of narrative is kept alive.

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[12] Smith, *The Reader*, 2.

[13] Interview transcript, 'Open the Door 2019 – Interview between Ali Smith and Jess Orr'.

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