# A PALIMPSESTUOUS NOVEL: CLAIRE LEGENDRE'S *LA MÉTHODE STANISLAVSKI*

**Michèle A. Schaal**

Claire Legendre emerged on the French literary scene in 1997 with her novel *Making-of*. A prolific writer, she went on to publish an additional five novels,[1] an anthology of short stories (*Le Crépuscule de Barbe-Bleue*, 2001), two co-authored books with Jérôme Bonnetto,[2] four plays,[3] one book-length essay (*Le Nénuphar et l'araignée*, 2015), as well as numerous smaller essays and short fictions. Despite this prolixity, Legendre's publications have, thus far, garnered little academic attention.[4] Two reasons may explain her current marginality within the field of French Studies. Her second novel, *Viande* (1999), relegated her to the late-1990s trend of scandalous and sexually graphic publications by women writers (Authier 13-31; Bessard-Banquy 25, 95; Schaal *TVFL* 154-56, 223-24). Her work was, thus, promptly dismissed as antiliterary and a mere fad (Schaal "Portrait..." 26; Schaal *TVFL* 155-56). Then, although published by Grasset, Legendre has never actively participated in the French or Parisian literary world. She was born and remained in Nice during the early stages of her career, she subsequently moved to Prague (2008-2011), and now resides in Québec where she teaches Creative Writing at the Université de Montréal. This geographical distance has prevented her publications from garnering significant media and cultural exposure in France or elsewhere (Legendre "Personal Correspondance...").

Despite this lack of critical or academic attention, her work inscribes itself within two major aspects of twenty-first-century French literature: intertextuality and the writing of the self, especially in works by women writers (Damlé and Rye *AEL* 5-18; Damlé and Rye *LAL* 3-16; Viart and Vercier 29-130; 365-439).[5] More specifically, Legendre's fiction has, since the 2000s, proposed a metadiscursive reflection on both hypertextuality—as posited by Gérard Genette—and first-person writing, whether fictional, autobiographical, or autofictional. In *Palimpsestes*, Genette defines "hypertextualité" as "toute relation unissant un texte B (que j'appellerai *hypertexte*) à un texte antérieur A (que j'appellerai, bien sûr, *hypotexte*) sur lequel il se greffe d'une manière qui n'est pas celle du commentaire" (*Palimpsestes* 13, italics in original). Legendre's fourth novel, *La Méthode Stanislavski* (2006), constitutes a palimpsestuous work drawing on various hypotexts and autobiographical elements, therefore forcing her readers to ponder (and venture into) their hypertextual knowledge or interrogate the autobiographical truth within the narrative. In this multi-layered novel, Graziella Vaci, a young woman writer, recalls the murder of actress Serena that has occurred while she was a resident at the *Villa Médicis*, as well as its dramatic resolution. The novel also features the protagonist's reflections on being a "romancière" (*MS* 14), a suspect in the murder investigation, her obsession with

a serial killer and her stay at the French Academy in Rome. *La Méthode Stanislavski* also openly alludes to and plays with Constantin Stanislavski's *La Formation de l'acteur*, Hervé Guibert's *L'Incognito*, just as the novel comprises several connections to Legendre's life. She resided at the *Villa Médicis* (1999-2000) and is herself a novelist once fascinated with the real-life serial killer Sid Ahmed Rezala.[6]

This article demonstrates how, through her palimpsestuous writing, Legendre generates a metadiscourse on hypertextuality and on first-person writing in the twenty-first century. The first section examines how *La Méthode Stanislavski* becomes both a literary and hyperartistic palimpsest. The cultural references within the narrative and *La Formation de l'acteur* become both literal and allegorical hypotexts that, eventually, enable Legendre to question the purposes of hypertextuality but also to posit a literary aesthetics that crosses borders between genres and the arts. The second section explains how, as an autobiographical palimpsest, her fourth novel generates a metadiscursive reflection on first-person writing and, especially, on the problematic notions of truth and authenticity when dealing with such narratives, whether fictional or not.

## A Literary and Hyperartistic Palimpsest

As I explain elsewhere, all of Legendre's books cite, reference, or rework both popular and classic culture (Schaal "Portrait..." 37). For instance, *Making-of* is a *roman noir* modeled on American director Abel Ferrara's films and persona (Bondi and Legendre "Making of"). Her latest novel, *Vérité et amour* (2013), "comprises over 100 explicit references to . . . international literature, cinema, phrases, songs, TV series, cultural icons or political events" (Schaal "*Vérité*..." 112). In her fiction, Legendre, thus, uses a variety of techniques, ranging from intertextuality—which Genette perceives as citing, plagiarizing, or alluding to another text—to intermediality or "*hyperartistiques*" practices, namely borrowing aesthetics and themes from different artistic media (*Palimpsestes* 8, 536, italics in original).

*La Méthode Stanislavski* proves to be no exception to Legendre's hypertextual rule since she explicitly cites or alludes to a variety of hypotexts and cultural items. For instance, Graziella Vaci mentions or compares her experiences, either as an artist or at the *Villa Médicis*, to those of several major French authors such as Henri Michaux, Jean Echenoz, Serge Doubrovsky, Hervé Guibert, Boris Vian, and Marguerite Duras (*MS* 11, 21, 22, 65-66, 91-92, 53). To gently mock her protagonist's inflated ego as a novelist, Legendre also quotes French canonical literature such as Balzac's "A nous deux… [Paris]" and La Fontaine's "*tout flatteur vit aux dépens de celui qui l'écoute*" (*MS* 310, 121, italics in original). When Graziella Vaci writes a film script, American cinema and popular music are also overwhelmingly referenced with mentions of films such as *2001 a Space Odyssey*, *Seven*, *They Shoot Horses, Don't They*, or *Planet of the Apes*, as well as the bands Led Zeppelin or Fun Lovin' Criminals—the latter two items working as a soundtrack to her life and scenario (*MS* 11, 26, 290, 305, 10, 21). Genette underlines how hypertextuality can consist in a "game" with genres or content of one's hypotext(s)'s (*Palimpsestes* 557). Upon a first reading, it seems that

Legendre does merely send her readers out on a cultural scavenger hunt: will they be able to retrieve and understand all references?

This mischievous aspect is reinforced by Legendre's claim to have intentionally played an architextual game with the conventions of crime fiction (Alpozzo). For Genette, the "architextualité," or belonging to the same genre as one's hypotext, also constitutes a form of palimpsestuous writing (*Palimpsestes* 12). *La Méthode Stanislavski* involves a crime subplot and Legendre was influenced, while writing the novel, by Ngaio Marsh's detective novels, especially those set in theaters (Alpozzo; Legendre "Personal Correspondance..."). [7] In the narrative itself, she explicitly affiliates *La Méthode Stanislavski* with crime fiction since her protagonist often feels like in a "roman policier," Georges Simenon is referred to, as are the Italian exploitation genre "*giallo*" and American crime series (*MS* 181, 184, 208, 307, italics in original; Schaal "Portrait..." 37). All the above examples are but a few of the almost endless cultural, hypertextual, and hyperartistic references in *La Méthode Stanislavski.* This abundance necessarily raises a question: why so many and what purpose, in the end, do these hypotexts serve?

As Legendre concedes, while a crime fiction "en apparence," her fourth novel cannot be limited to genre writing or to tricking her readers into recognizing the many references used (Alpozzo). Beyond the playfulness lies, indeed, a more ambitious artistic agenda: with *La Méthode Stanislavski*, Legendre also initiates a metadiscursive reflection on the nature, and purpose, of hypertextuality itself. As Genette reminds his readers on several occasions, hypertextuality eventually lies in the eyes of the beholder. It relies essentially on one's cultural experience or training. Some hypotexts, consequently, may forever remain unbeknownst to us (*Palimpsestes* 292, 532, 533, 549-50, 557-58). With *La Méthode Stanislavski*, Legendre unveils the limits of superficial palimpsestuous writing and, for the readers specifically, the futility of attempting to retrieve or understand all references. It is, in the end, a losing game since there are so many to identify in her novels, one might never uncover them all. Furthermore, Legendre has her readers realize that a hypertext may be fully enjoyed without any knowledge of its hypotext(s) (Genette *Palimpsestes* 554-55). One can read *La Méthode Stanislavski* as "just" either a crime fiction or a fictionalization of the author's experience at the French academy in Rome. However, as Genette stresses, hypertextuality cannot be entirely ignored and does participate in the shaping and understanding of the hypertexts themselves (*Palimpsestes* 555). In *La Méthode Stanislavski*, hypertextuality becomes more an aesthetic statement rather than a mere referencing game or literary tribute. Since all hypertextual occurrences may not be examined within the scope of this article, I will focus briefly on film and then elaborate on the literal hypotext, Stanislavski's *La Formation de l'acteur*.

Genette explains that hypertextuality does not solely mean toying with themes or genres, but also with a hypotext's structure and meaning (*Palimpsestes* 557). The names or cultural references in *La Méthode Stanislavski* actually play an intricate part in determining the narrative or characters themselves. As mentioned above, even if brief, the references to classic French literature stress the protagonist's foolishness or arrogance. Legendre sometimes uses hypotexts as

well to translate her characters' feelings instead of conveying them directly in the narrative. In the following passage, Graziella Vaci realizes, to her horror, that she has merely been a pawn in the whole story leading to the murder of Serena, the daughter of a rich Swiss mobster. With the help of a resident at the *Villa Médicis*, Serena's father tricked Graziella Vaci into writing a play. This eventually led to the staging of *Minutes d'arrêt* with Serena as the lead actress (Legendre *MS* 268-313):

> Je me sentais comme quelqu'un qui réalise qu'on lui a menti depuis le début. Comme le type de *La Planète des singes,* à la fin, quand il tombe nez à nez avec la statue de la Liberté. On croit qu'on vit, qu'on prend des décisions, qu'on invente, qu'on a son libre arbitre, et puis un beau jour on découvre qu'on n'est qu'un personnage—qui plus est, secondaire—dans une fiction imaginée sur un caprice par un escroc richissime. (*MS* 305)

Beyond hypertextuality as Genette defines it, this excerpt and all film references have two main functions. First, they provide comic relief since they occur during dramatic key moments in the narrative, as is the case for Graziella Vaci's realization here. Next, these film passages also work as hyperartistic instances. By transposing key moments from the screen to the page, Legendre forces her readers to recall these very scenes; here the dramatic discovery that the protagonist in *Planet of the Apes* had been on Earth all along (Schaffner 1:50). Yet, she also performs "un exercice de *thème*," another form of palimpsestuous practice for Genette (*Palimpsestes* 106, italics in original). Legendre adapts to and translates into both a contemporary *and* literary context a highly emotional, if not classic, cinematic moment. In this passage, the hypotext functions as a hyperartistic proxy. Instead of Legendre directly describing Graziella Vaci's state of mind, she calls upon an iconic moment of despair and plot twist. By crossing genre and media borders, Legendre demonstrates as well how hypertextuality reveals the essentially dynamic nature of literary, if not artistic creativity altogether. With palimpsestuous writing, classic tropes or cultural milestones may be endlessly recycled, repurposed, reused, and granted new meanings (*Palimpsestes* 557-59).

*La Méthode Stanislavski* also functions as a literal palimpsest: namely a partial rewriting of Stanislavski's *La Formation de l'acteur*, a book best-known as setting the guidelines for "method acting." In the latter narrative, aspiring actor Kostya recounts his training sessions (together with five other students) with stage director Torstov. For Genette, a palimspsest is both, literally, a "parchemin dont on a gratté la première inscription pour en tracer une autre, qui ne la cache pas tout à fait, en sorte qu'on peut y lire, par transparence, l'ancien sous le nouveau. . . . [et] au figuré, [les] palimpsestes . . . [sont] toutes les œuvres dérivées d'une œuvre antérieure, par transformation ou par imitation" (*Palimpsestes* back cover). *La Méthode Stanislavski* fits both these definitions. First, the hypotext remains clearly visible underneath Legendre's narrative. She literally reprises each of Stanislavski's chapter titles in *La Formation de l'acteur*. If the number of characters varies more significantly, *La Méthode Stanislavski* still features a charismatic yet tyrannical stage director (Vlad Zeletin) and Graziella Vaci's

dealings with her fellow residents. Both books are first-person introspective narratives where Kostya and Graziella Vaci share similar reflections on the meaning of creativity and "naturalness" in art, their fear of being foolish, or their confusion with the events depicted. The two novels make also extensive use of *discours rapportés* and dialogs. Finally, both depict confined microsocieties: Torstov's school of theater for Stanislavski and communal life at the *Villa Médicis* for Legendre.

Legendre also makes a few significant changes more specific to literary hypertextuality, namely what Genette calls "transformation[s] sérieuse[s], ou transposition[s]" (*Palimpsestes* 291). There is a "transformation thématique" (from a treatise on acting to a treatise on writing;[8] and from an actor's *Bildungsroman* to a crime fiction); a "translation spatiale" (from Russia to French territory in Italy); and, finally, a "changement de sexe" (*Palimpsestes* 292, 423). Similar to the list of literary and cinematic hypotexts, the list of commonalities and differences between both books proves to be almost endless. One even runs the risk of merely establishing a catalog of the latter occurrences. Hence, the question of authorial purpose begs to be asked once more: Why has Legendre written *La Méthode Stanislavski* as a literal and allegorical palimpsest? As Genette himself underlines, certain transformations work as a naturalization, in the immigration sense of the term, or as "*bricolage*," a way to "'faire du neuf avec du vieux'" (*Palimpsestes* 431, 556, italics in original). Such is certainly Legendre's goal: transposing Stanilavski's theories in a French *and* contemporary context. It becomes an *exercice de thème* on Stanislavski's artistic legacy but as it may be applied to literature. In the following excerpt, Graziella Vaci sums up Léa's[9] views on method acting:

> Ça avait été sa seule ambition, . . . réhabiliter le système stanislavskien—oui, on disait le système, et même avec un grand S. Ceux qui appelaient ça la Méthode faisaient un contresens, une erreur de traduction. Une méthode, c'est quelque chose de fixe, d'unilatéral, qui peut s'appliquer dans l'absolu, tel quel, à n'importe quoi. Le Système, c'est un processus dans lequel on entre, quelque chose de mouvant, dans quoi on se glisse, et qu'on adapte à sa propre personne. (*MS* 252-53)

In addition to providing a contextualization for the character of Léa (her background, passion for Stanislavski, and the reason why she works with Vlad Zeletin), the passage also constitutes a metadiscourse on hypertextuality and Legendre's own palimpsestuous writing in *La Méthode Stanislavski*. Beyond merely transposing or rewriting *La Formation de l'acteur*, Legendre intends to apply this system to her novel (Alpozzo; Schaal "Portrait..." 34).[10] Therefore, more than a thematic or literal palimpsest, *La Méthode Stanislavski* becomes an hyperartistic one. Discussing Stanislavski's theater, Legendre equates method acting with novel writing: both actors and "romanciers" make use of their "mémoire affective," or a stock of emotions they have experienced, so as to authentically represent them on stage or in writing (Legendre "Le Théâtre..."). This eventually leads readers to identify with and feel these very emotions; hence method acting and literary fiction—particularly in the first-person perspective—

rely on identification and authenticity (Legendre "Le Théâtre..."). In this excerpt, Legendre echoes not only her hypotext but explains her literary, hypertextual, aesthetic, and authorial politics: have the readers feel and identify with her protagonist as they would with actors in a play. However, Legendre's palimpsestuous writing simultaneously questions the limits of the notions of authenticity or truth in art, and especially when applied to first-person writing.

## An Autobiographical Palimpsest

Drawing on Genette's typology from *Seuils*, Philippe Gasparini explains how a variety of paratexts establish a narrative, for readers, as either fictional or autobiographical (61-63). If authenticity and truth are crucial to the Stanislavskian system, these notions also lie at the heart of first-person writing, its reception or interpretation.[11] The excerpt from *La Méthode Stanislavski* cited above comprises another significant element pertaining both to Legendre's work and hypertextuality in her fourth novel. Through Léa, she underlines how the Stanislavskian system applies specifically to the writing of the self—whether fictional or not—since it is based on recalling one's experiences and emotions and, thus, on authenticity. Yet, she simultaneously offers a metadiscourse on the pitfalls of approaching, as readers, such narratives through the lens of truth.

Briefly reconsidering the references to authors in *La Méthode Stanislavski*, one quickly realizes that nearly all are associated with autobiographical or autofictional writing, namely Doubrovsky, Duras, Guibert, Michaux and Stanislavski himself.[12] Although Genette doubts that some genres—specifically those of the self, including memoirs, diaries, or autobiographies—may lead to hypertextuality, he still acknowledges that "un écrivain prend appui sur une ou plusieurs œuvres antérieures pour élaborer celle où s'investira sa pensée ou sa sensibilité d'artiste" (*Palimpsestes* 552). Similar to the cultural references at stake in *La Méthode Stanislavski*, the authors mentioned by Legendre are too many to be considered within the scope of this article. Furthermore, Legendre goes again beyond a mere name-dropping game or display of her "culture livresque:" the writers she mentions function instead as a "transcendence textuelle" (Genette *Palimpsestes* 11). More specifically, they constitute an "architexte" (Genette *Palimpsestes* 12), that is to say a genre exploration that clearly situates Legendre's fourth novel within the French history of life writing, the debates around its many manifestations (autobiography, autobiographical novels, autofiction), as well as claiming the legacy of some of their iconic authors (Schaal "Portrait..." 26). Some passages, for instance, work as humorous accolades. Considering the possibility that a film script she wrote may lead to a bad film directed by a fellow *académicien*, Graziella Vaci deplores that "n'ayant pas la notoriété de Marguerite Duras, je ne pourrais même pas organiser une conférence de presse pour débiner le film et me déclarer outrée" (*MS* 53-54). In addition to being comical, this passage is based on an actual event: disappointed with Jean-Jacques Annaud's adaptation of *L'Amant*, Duras published a different script version (*L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*) before the release of the film (Günther 134-36). If *La Méthode Stanislavski* cannot be considered a palimpsest of Duras's two books, her literary legacy still works as an architext. The connection to Duras participates in

Legendre's intricate play with autobiographical truth and the notion of authenticity and its necessary transformation through the act of writing (Schaal "Portrait..." 34-37, 45, 46). Just as Duras did—or any writer of the self does—with *L'Amant* and her other autobiographical fictions, "Legendre forces her readers to wonder which elements are true and which are not. The first-person perspective only reinforces this temptation" (Schaal "Portrait..." 37).

Still drawing on Genette's *Seuils*, Gasparini claims that interviews and former publications, among other possibilities, constitute epitexts that will have readers grant a narrative its fictional or autobiographical status (94-100).[13] These paratexts, thus, work as markers of authenticity—or evidence of lack thereof. Several epitextual instances—including interviews, a tribute letter to Doubrovsky, her blog,[14] and my personal correspondence with Legendre—could establish *La Méthode Stanislavski* as autobiographical, if not an autofiction. Graziella Vaci and Legendre are residents at the *Villa Médicis* and both have three kidneys.[15] While at the French Academy, both develop a fascination for the real-life serial killer Sid Ahmed Rezala, referred to by the acronym S.A.R. in the novel.[16] Both translate their obsession in a film script and play, respectively titled *La Fascination du tigre* and *Minutes d'arrêt* in the novel and in real life (Alpozzo; Legendre *MS* 10-21, 43, 84-89, 111-14, 269; Legendre "Personal Correspondance..."). The play becomes a hypotext as Legendre quotes it in the novel yet attributing it to Graziella Vaci (*MS* 282-86). Blurring the lines between (auto)fiction and reality further, *Minutes d'arrêt*, in *La Méthode Stanislavski*, becomes both an autobiographical paratext and an instance of what Genette calls "auto-hypertextualité" (*Palimpsestes* 551). Legendre's play and novel mention "Lara Bell" as one of the serial killer's victims ("Minutes d'arrêt" 23; *MS* 18, 356). This character has also appeared in her short stories "La Sainte" and "The Quick Brown Fox Jumps Over the Lazy Dog," both written while Legendre was at the *Villa Médicis* (*CBB* 35-50, 17). Lara Bell also always ends up murdered. Legendre, therefore, carefully crafts a web of hyper- and paratextuality that both asserts and denies her fiction as autobiographical. Lara Bell is a perfect example of this intricate web: she is Legendre's character yet also Graziella Vaci's (Schaal "Portrait..." 36). *La Méthode Stanislavski* also contains several passages of Graziella Vaci's or Legendre's ambiguous experience with the French literary world, as well as her reflections on writing, especially autobiographical and autofictional writing, and its real-life consequences.[17] One may, however, argue that while undeniably autobiographical, *La Méthode Stanislavski* cannot be considered an autofiction since the author and her protagonist do not bear the same name. Once again, Legendre cultivates ambiguity since Graziella Vaci is a penname (*MS* 15). In a passage discussed later, the protagonist claims that Guibert's *L'Incognito* is dedicated to a woman who has the same first name as hers (*MS* 64). The dedication in Guibert's book reads "à Claire" (9).

Similar to the cultural references or cited authors in *La Méthode Stanislavski*, connections to Legendre's life and other publications prove to be almost endless. Once again too, she has (un)intentionally sent her readers on a scavenger hunt for clues pointing to autobiographical truth or authenticity in her narrative (Schaal "Portrait..." 36-37). Even Doubrovsky himself fell into this trap as he deemed *La*

*Méthode Stanislavski* an autofiction,[18] namely because of the many paratexts mentioned above (Legendre "Cher Serge" 124). Nevertheless, Legendre denies her fourth novel this label (Alpozzo; Bondi and Legendre "La Méthode Stanislavski"; Legendre "Cher Serge" 124-25). Twelve years after the publication of *La Méthode Stanislavski*, Legendre penned a tribute letter to Doubrovsky,[19] in which, gently scolding him, she explains that her novel

> n'est donc pas autofictionnel, Serge, il appartient seulement à la longue tradition du *roman personnel* ou *roman d'inspiration autobiographique* à laquelle on peut, si on tire les fils de la ressemblance, associer quatre-vingt-dix pour cent de la littérature narrative mondiale. L'erreur est commune aujourd'hui. On dit *autofiction* à tout bout de champ, dès que le personnage ressemble un peu au romancier. Terme dévoyé, rendu absurde, ne vous rendez pas complice du malentendu, Serge. ("Cher Serge" 124-25, italics in original)

Here, Legendre asserts that autobiographical para- or hypotexts prove to be nearly meaningless for either the creation or enjoyment of first-person narratives. With *La Méthode Stanislavski*, she merely did what writers have done for a long time and worldwide: get inspiration from real-life events and transform them into fictions. Legendre further discredits autobiographical truth as a reading or creative lens when she criticizes the systematic categorization of first-person novels as autofiction. To her, this weakens the artistic power and novelty of the genre as Doubrovsky has established it ("Cher Serge" 124-25). Nonetheless, the numerous autobiographical para- and hypotexts remain intrinsically connected to the narrative's development and have readers inevitably connect *La Méthode Stanislavski* to Legendre's life. Consequently, my previous question regarding literary hypertextuality begs to be asked for paratextuality as well: what is, ultimately, her purpose as an author when using these autobiographical para- and hypotexts?

The key to understanding paratextuality and autobiographical hypertextuality in *La Méthode Stanislavski* lies both in her politics as a writer of the self and in another hypotext at stake in the novel. In addition to *La Formation de l'acteur*, Legendre's narrative is also a literal and allegorical palimpsest of Hervé Guibert's *L'Incognito*, an autofiction recounting Hector Lenoir/Guibert's experience at the *Villa Médicis*. *L'Incognito* becomes first a direct hypotext as Legendre quotes the narrative, namely the passage where he anticipates Graziella Vaci's theft of the library card with his autographed name on it (*MS* 64-66).[20] Readers may find many additional similarities between both novels, even more so since Legendre claims to have read *L'Incognito* as a kind of preparation for life at the French Academy in Rome (Legendre "Personal Correspondance..."). Both Legendre's and Guibert's protagonists have a love-hate relationship with their fellow *académiciens*, both novels involve a murder plot although the one in Legendre's is more elaborate, both draw heavily on their experiences in Rome, and both main characters fancy a tea room with a similar name.[21] However, *L'Incognito* appears more as an allegorical than literal palimpsest since it allows Legendre to create a metadiscourse on both first-person writing and her role as a writer of the self.

For the April 2013 special issue on "l'Écriture de soi" by *Le Magazine Littéraire*, Legendre wrote an essay on autobiographical literature titled "Quel pacte entre moi et moi?" After briefly covering the history of the genre, she explains how it has shifted since the late twentieth century. To Legendre, the writing of the self is now "performative:"

> s'écrire, ce peut être aussi s'inventer, se donner un visage, une vie, un nom. . . . En s'écrivant, on se fabrique. Hervé Guibert a inventé son personnage, jusque dans la vie (et dans la mort ?). . . . L'autobiographie descriptive, analytique a laissé la place à la construction du personnage—non plus qui suis-je, mais qu'y a-t-il en moi de matière à roman. . . . L'écrit intime ne se borne plus à tenter de se circonscrire, mais voudrait donner du sens . . . à ce qui n'en a pas toujours. ("Quel pacte..." 47)

In this passage, Legendre clearly underlines how authenticity or accuracy prove irrelevant to understanding the writing of the self. As for any other literary genre, creativity prevails. She also posits life and, by extension, first-person writing, as a path to self-knowledge and making sense of the world; hence the genre's appeal to readers who may project or find themselves in such narratives ("Quel pacte..." 47). Finally, she posits Guibert as the ultimate example of this literary politics and aesthetics of the self.

It is, therefore, neither trivial nor random that *L'Incognito* becomes a hypotext in *La Méthode Stanislavski*. Shortly before she directly quotes from this novel, Legendre writes:

> Je m'aperçus très vite qu'écrire sur l'Académie présentait une double difficulté: il ne s'y passait effectivement pas grand-chose, ce qui pouvait donner lieu à une littérature profondément ennuyeuse. J'aurais pu m'accommoder de cela, si au moins le sujet avait été original. Au contraire, je découvris qu'un nombre considérable de livres—des romans autobiographiques, pour la plupart—avaient été écrits sur la vie à l'Académie. *L'Incognito*, énigmatique roman dédié à une fille qui portait mon nom,[22] fut pour moi la plus vertigineuse découverte. Guibert y décrivait minutieusement ma vie quotidienne, la vie à l'Académie, qui n'avait pas changé depuis douze ans. . . . Il n'y avait plus rien à dire que le vertige de lire ces lignes comme une prémonition. Et même ce vertige, Guibert l'avait senti déjà en lisant le journal de Renaud Camus, qui racontait ces mêmes choses. . . . Voilà pourquoi je ne pouvais pas écrire sur l'Académie: tout, y compris le vertige inerte du recommencement, en avait déjà été dit. . . . Il me fallait chercher ailleurs, le plus loin possible, d'autres pistes à explorer. C'est là qu'intervient mon tueur. (*MS* 62-67)

As I underline elsewhere, Legendre, "through *mise en abyme*[,] . . . interrogates her writing and challenges any univocal reading of her narratives" ("Portrait..." 34, italics in original). Indeed here, Legendre, as Guibert did in his work, blurs the distinction between fiction and reality, as well as between author and narrator. Readers cannot help but wonder who is really speaking here, even more so since Legendre, in yet another epitextual instance, has openly spoken of her inability to write about her stay at the *Villa Médicis* (Alpozzo). This passage

becomes then both a palimpsest and a metadiscourse on first-person writing, if not on the writing of the self. *La Méthode Stanislavski* is palimpsestuous as it attempts to repeat *L'Incognito*'s creative process: a fiction based on one's personal experience at the *Villa Médicis*. It also constitutes a metadiscourse as it questions how an author may deal with the mundane aspects of such an experience, as well as avoiding repeating what has already been written about life at the French Academy. In the end, Legendre cannot stick to the merely descriptive, analytical, or personal—for fear of redundancy—; instead, she must, as Guibert did, resort to the creative process of fiction to make sense of her stay at the *Villa Médicis* and her obsession for Rezala.[23] As Legendre states in her letter to Doubrovsky, *La Méthode Stanislavski* may be based on her experiences yet, in the end, it remains essentially a fiction ("Cher Serge" 124-26). The writing process necessarily alters and transcends any (autobiographical) truth. In appearance, with her second palimpsest, Legendre seems to contradict her own initial authorial stance on authenticity. If the latter concept or truth do not matter, why rely on the Stanislavskian system for novel writing? Through her palimpsestuous endeavor, Legendre actually establishes a clear distinction between creating fictions readers may more readily identify with and autobiographical truth in literature. The former constitutes a powerful artistic technique while the latter may become a trap that, in the end, proves useless to the enjoyment of any kind of narrative.

**Conclusion**

*La Méthode Stanislavski*, as a palimpsestuous novel, becomes a complex web, if not play, with a broad variety of para- and hypotexts. Beyond sending its readers on a literary and autobiographical scavenger hunt, Legendre's narrative proposes an ambitious metadiscourse on the essential dynamic nature of artistic creativity, as well as on what first-person writing entails. In that sense, she participates in the current debates around intertextuality but also (truth in) autobiographical or autofictional writing. The novel especially constitutes a reassertion of Genette's warning to readers in *Seuils* but as also extended to life writing: one must beware of the "*effet jupien*" or focusing too much on the paratexts—and I would add on the hypotexts—at the expense of the actual hypertext (*Seuils* 89, 376, italics in original).[24] Therefore, Legendre demonstrates that "la paratextualité est . . . surtout une mine de questions sans réponses" (*Palimpsestes* 11). Her use of multiple biographical or cultural elements, as well as the connection to Guibert and Stanislavski, first produce two specific metadiscourses on our own reading practices. When dealing with writings of the self, we can be easily tricked into looking for truth or authenticity and hence are "réduits à jouer les flics, la brigade des mœurs, à épier la vie des écrivains" (Legendre "Cher Serge" 125).[25] When dealing with hypertextuality, we may lose ourselves in the web of connections to other works.

*La Méthode Stanislavski* exemplifies that, in the end, these paratexts and hypotexts prove to be (almost) useless, even if our knowledge of them influences our reading or shapes the narratives themselves (Genette *Seuils* 13; Genette *Palimpsestes* 555). *La Méthode Stanislavski* may "simply" be enjoyed as an

independent literary piece. Therefore, if authenticity proves essential to the Stanislavskian system and may be adapted to the writing of fiction—and especially of the self—so as to trigger a greater identification effect, it has its pitfalls too. If readers look primarily for authenticity—or intertextual connections—, they may be steered away from the actual narrative or forget that "writing consists essentially in a play or artistic alteration of (auto)biographical truth" or of the initial hypotext(s) (Schaal "Portrait..." 46). Nevertheless, Legendre also demonstrates that palimpestuous writing may become a powerful artistic tool for writers. It simultaneously allows authors to create metadiscourses on their work and literature while also revealing the essential dynamic nature of any kind of art. Themes, genres, archetypes, even previous stories, may be endlessly repurposed to create new narratives (Genette *Palimpsestes* 557-58); and, as Guibert did, other, fictional selves.

**Iowa State University**

## Notes

[1] *Viande* (1999), *Matricule* (2003), *La Méthode Stanislavski* (2006), *L'Écorchée vive* (2009), and *Vérité et amour* (2013).

[2] Respectively *Passerelle* (2004), an anthology of poetry, and *Photobiographies*, a series of (auto)fictional essays and photographs (2007).

[3] *Minutes d'arrêt* (2000), *Je prends la pose* (2004), and *L'Instant crucial* (2010). All plays were staged at the Alphabet, a theater owned by Claire Legendre's father, but have remained unpublished. In 2018, Legendre wrote "Les Échoueries" for the Paris des femmes theater festival.

[4] Thus far, only *Viande* has been the object of academic and populist studies. See Authier 23-25, 30, 35, 69-75, 87, 141, 204; Bessard-Banquy 25, 95, 99, 126, 133, 158-59, 190; Caine 427-44; Guichard 103-18; Lasserre ("Mauvais genre(s)") 59-70; Lasserre ("Mon Corps est à toi") 69-88 ; Schaal (*TVFL*) 154-26; and Voždová 331-38. See also my comparative analysis of Legendre's post-2000 fictions ("Portrait..." 26-50).

[5] For clarity and flow, the following abbreviations will be used in parenthetical references: *Aventures et expériences littéraires*: *AEL*; *Le Crépuscule de Barbe-Bleue*: *CBB*; *La Méthode Stanislavski*: *MS*; *Une Troisième vague féministe et littéraire*: *TVFL*; and *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France: Life as Literature*: *LAL*.

[6] For a thorough summary of the "affaire Sid Ahmed Rezala," see Samson.

[7] Ngaio Marsh was a twentieth-century crime fiction writer and stage director from New Zealand.

[8] In addition to the novel's crime plot, Graziella Vaci ponders her occupation as a novelist, as well as the process and consequences of writing, especially when based on the self (Legendre *MS* 9-18, 20-21, 42-46 et passim).

[9] Léa is the actress interpreting Graziella Vaci's protagonist on stage, after Serena's murder.

[10] Legendre's doctoral dissertation focuses on truth in theater and namely in Stanislavski's. See "La Vérité comme enjeu théâtral…" She also claims that her doctoral work influenced the writing of *La Méthode Stanislavski* (Legendre "Personal Correspondance...").

[11] See Gasparini 14-15, 19, 23, 28-29, 233, 251, 282, 343; Legendre ("Quel pacte...") 46; Legendre ("Le Théâtre..."); and Legendre ("Cher Serge") 125-30.

[12] *La Formation de l'acteur* is labeled a "demi-fiction" in its French edition (13). Legendre also openly claims the influence, on her work, of the writers she mentions in *La Méthode Stanislavski*. See Legendre ("2 sept. 2005"); Legendre ("Sublime dit-elle"); Legendre ("Lundi 30 juillet 2007"); Legendre ("Serge Doubrovsky"); Legendre ("La terre..."); Legendre ("Miss Lettres Françaises"); Legendre ("aufiction.org"); Legendre ("Le Seul personnage") 23-32; Legendre ("L'écriture ou la vie"); Legendre ("Cher Serge") 123-32; and Legendre and Genon.

[13] Genette defines the epitext as "tous les messages qui se situent, au moins à l'origine, à l'extérieur du livre: généralement sur un support médiatique (interviews, entretiens), ou sous le couvert d'une communication privée (correspondances, journaux intimes, et autres)" (*Seuils* 10-11).

[14] Legendre shut down her official website and blog in 2015. I thank the author for letting me consult her private archives, as well as her unpublished play *Minutes d'arrêt*.

[15] See Bondi and Legendre ("La Méthode Stanislavski"); Bondi and Legendre ("Viande"); Legendre ("21 octobre 2005"); Legendre ("Mama Roma"); Legendre ("22 février 2012); Legendre ("L'écriture ou la vie"); Legendre (*MS*) 86, back cover; and Legendre ("Cher Serge") 124-25.

[16] On her official webpage, Legendre posted photos and articles about Rezala; the exact same photos and items collected by Graziella Vaci in the novel ("Tigre"; *MS* 13-14, 17-18, 41-42).

[17] See Alpozzo; Bondi and Legendre ("La Méthode Stanislavski"); Legendre ("Le Théâtre..."); Legendre ("Jeudi 23 juillet 2006"); Legendre (*MS*) 15, 30-31, 45-46, 90-91, 113, 129-30, 323, 328-29, 331; Legendre ("La Navette"); Legendre ("Quel pacte...") 46-47; and Legendre ("Cher Serge") 126-29. While not an item considered by Philippe Gasparini for life writing, Genette mentions that maps may also constitute paratexts (*Seuils* 376). *La Méthode Stanislavski* features one of the *Villa Médicis* to enable readers to visualize where the residents live (*MS* 8). Nonetheless and simultaneously, it reinforces the effect of authenticity and the personal connection Legendre, as an individual and as an artist, has with the French Academy. Therefore, the map works both as a literary and an autobiographical paratext.

[18] So do Warren Motte (190) and Schaal ("Portrait..." 34-38). However, Legendre explains that, upon the novel's release, the French media did not make such a connection. Instead, they focused on the crime narrative and how it pertained to recent news, namely Rezala's killing spree and death ("Personal Correspondance...").

[19] This letter becomes yet another epitextual paratext establishing a connection with Legendre's own experience. Both the author and Graziella Vaci write to Serge Doubrovsky to invite him to lecture at the *Villa Médicis* and he only replies a year later (Legendre *MS* 22-23; Legendre "Cher Serge" 123-24). Since Doubrovsky was unavailable, Graziella Vaci invites a "criminologue" specializing in serial killers to lecture about his research at the *Villa Médicis* and who, just like her, is "édité par la maison G" (*MS* 23). This criminologist is Stéphane Bourgoin—also published by Grasset—and Legendre invited him to speak at the French Academy instead of Doubrovsky (Alpozzo).

[20] See Guibert 68-69 for the original citation.

[21] "Badmington" in Guibert's novel (92) and "Babygton" in Legendre's (*MS* 18). However, Guibert's *L'Incognito* is a narrative not as structured as Legendre's and the AIDS epidemic never appears in *La Méthode Stanislavski*. Also, while Guibert mentions the *Villa Médicis*, Hector Lenoir is a resident at the "Académie espagnole" (48, 11).

[22] The dedication reads "à Claire" in Guibert's *L'Incognito* and establishes that Legendre and her protagonist share then the same first name (Guibert 9).

[23] Once again, a paratextual reference sustains this interpretation of the novel. As an epigraph, Legendre quotes from Jean Cocteau's surreal ballet *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* :

"Puisque ces mystères nous dépassent, feignons d'en être l'organisateur" (*MS* 7). See Cocteau 87 for the original citation.

[24] Gasparini cautions us in a similar manner regarding autobiographical writing (101).

[25] As I stress elsewhere, Legendre has already done so—using Guibert as a hypotext—in the short story "Lectrice posthume" ("Portrait..." 35).

## Works Cited


Alpozzo, Marc. "Claire Legendre, entretien." *Marc Alpozzo (Ouvroir de réflexions potentielles). Blog critique & métaphysique* 13 Sept. 2006, marcalpozzo.blogspirit.com/archive/2006/09/13/claire-legendre-entretien.html.

Authier, Christian. *Le Nouvel ordre sexuel*. Bartillat, 2002.

Bessard-Banquy, Olivier. *Sexe et littérature aujourd'hui*. La Musardine, 2010.

Bondi, Michèle, and Claire Legendre. "La Méthode Stanislavski." *Art Vif*.5 n.d. 2007, artviftv2.free.fr/clairelegendre6.html.

---. "Making of." *Art Vif*.5 n.d. 2007, artviftv2.free.fr/clairelegendre1.html.

---. "Viande." *Art Vif*.5 n.d. 2007, artviftv2.free.fr/clairelegendre3.html.

Caine, Philippa. "Marvellous Bodies? Strange Sex(es)? - Fantastic Genre in Recent French Fiction." *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, vol. 44, no. 4 (2008), pp. 427-44.

Cocteau, Jean. *Antigone. Suivi de Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*. 1948. Folio n°908. Gallimard, 2016.

Damlé, Amaleena, and Gill Rye, eds. *Aventures et expériences littéraires: Écritures des femmes en France au début du vingt-et-unième siècle*. Rodopi, 2014.

---, eds. *Women's Writing in Twenty-First-Century France: Life as Literature*. U of Wales P, 2013.

Duras, Marguerite. *L'Amant*. Minuit, 1984.

---. *L'Amant de la Chine du Nord*. Gallimard, 1991.

Gasparini, Philippe. *Est-il Je?: Roman Autobiographique et autofiction*. Seuil, 2004.

Genette, Gérard. *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré*. 1982. Points Essais n°257. Seuil, 1992.

---. *Seuils*. Seuil, 1987.

Guibert, Hervé. *L'Incognito*. Gallimard, 1989.

Guichard, Jean-Paul. "'*La Mariée mise à nu par...*': Corps de femmes, regards de femmes dans la littérature au tournant du siècle." *Sites: The Journal of Twentieth Century Contemporary French Studies*, vol. 6 no.1, 2002, pp. 103-18.

Günther, Renate. *Marguerite Duras*. Manchester UP, 2002.

Lasserre, Audrey. "Mauvais genre(s) : Une nouvelle tendance littéraire pour une nouvelle génération de romancières (1985-2000)." *Premiers Romans 1945-2003*, edited by Marie-Odile André, and Johan Faerber, P Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2005, pp. 59-70.

---. "Mon Corps est à toi. Écriture(s) du corps dans les romans de femmes de la fin du XX$^{e}$ siècle." *Émancipation sexuelle ou contrainte des corps?*, edited by Hélène Marquié and Noël Burch, L'Harmattan, 2006, pp. 69-88.

Legendre, Claire. "2 sept. 2005." *Le Site Officiel de Claire Legendre*, 2005.

---. "21 octobre 2005." *Le Site Officiel de Claire Legendre*, 2005.

---. "22 février 2012." *Le Site Officiel de Claire Legendre*, 2012.

---. "aufiction.org." *Le Site Officiel de Claire Legendre*, 2009.

---. "Cher Serge (lettre)." *Pourquoi Doubrovsky ?*, edited by Isabelle Grell, Le Bateau ivre, 2018, pp. 123-32.

---. "Je prends la pose." Théâtre de l'Alphabet, 2004.

---. "Jeudi 23 juillet 2006." *Le Site Officiel de Claire Legendre*, 2006.

---. *L'Écorchée vive*. Grasset, 2009.

---. “L’écriture ou la vie - à Cerisy.” *Le Site Officiel de Claire Legendre*, 2012.
---. “L’Instant crucial.” Théâtre de l’Alphabet, 2010.
---. *La Méthode Stanislavski*. Grasset, 2006.
---. “La Navette.” *Le Site Officiel de Claire Legendre*, 2007.
---. “La terre vue du lit.” *Le Site Officiel de Claire Legendre*, 2007.
---. “La Vérité comme enjeu théâtral dans les esthétiques scéniques du XX$^{ème}$ siècle européen: Textes de Constantin Stanislavski, Antonin Artaud, Bertold Brecht.” Diss. U de Nice-Sophia Antipolis, 2009.
---. *Le Crépuscule de Barbe-Bleue*. Grasset, 2001.
---. *Le Nénuphar et l’araignée*. Les Allusifs, 2015.
---. “Le Seul personnage.” *La Revue littéraire*, edited by Arnaud Genon, Vol. 8, Hervé Guibert (1955-1991), Léo Scheer, 2011, pp. 23-32.
---. “Le Théâtre de Constantin Stanislavski (Conférence du 21 janvier 2005, Nice).” *Le Site Officiel de Claire Legendre*, 2005.
---. “Les Échoueries.” *À vendre*, edited by Sylvia Minne, L’avant-scène théâtre, 2018, pp. 146-65.
---. “Lundi 30 juillet 2007.” *Le Site Officiel de Claire Legendre*, 2007.
---. *Making of*. Hors-commerce, 1998.
---. “Mama Roma.” *Le Site Officiel de Claire Legendre*, 2006.
---. *Matricule*. Grasset, 2003.
---. “Minutes d’arrêt.” Théâtre de l’Alphabet, 2000.
---. “Miss Lettres Françaises (une grande muette).” *Le Site Officiel de Claire Legendre*, 2009.
---. “Personal Correspondance with the Author.” Montréal, 2017-2018.
---. “Quel pacte entre moi et moi ?” *Le Magazine Littéraire*, Apr. 2013, pp. 46-47.
---. “Serge Doubrovsky.” *Le Site Officiel de Claire Legendre*, 2007.
---. “Sublime dit-elle.” *Le Site Officiel de Claire Legendre*, 2006.
---. “Tigre.” *Le Site Officiel de Claire Legendre*, 2005.
---. *Vérité et amour*. Grasset, 2013.
---. *Viande*. Grasset, 1999.
Legendre, Claire, and Jérôme Bonnetto. *Passerelle*, Arcane 22, 2004.
---. *Photobiographies*. Hors-commerce, 2007.
Legendre, Claire, and Arnaud Genon. “Les Écrivains parlent d’Hervé Guibert # 92.” *Hervé Guibert.net*, 28 Jan. 2008, www.herveguibert.net/claire-legendre.
Motte, Warren. “La Méthode Stanislavski by Claire Legendre.” *The French Review*, vol. 81, no. 1, 2007, pp. 189-90.
Samson, Michel. “Sid Ahmed Rezala: l’insaisissable tueur des trains.” *Le Monde.fr*, 21 Aug. 2006, www.lemonde.fr/ete-2007/article/2006/08/21/sid-ahmed-rezala-l-insaisissable-tueur-des-trains_805042_781732.html.
Schaal, Michèle A. “Claire Legendre’s Portrait of Hypermodern Society.” *Studies in 20$^{th}$ & 21$^{st}$ Century Literature*, vol. 37, no .1, 2013, pp. 26-50.
---. *Une Troisième vague féministe et littéraire. Les femmes de lettres de la nouvelle génération*. Brill; Rodopi, 2017.
---. “*Vérité et amour* by Claire Legendre (review) ” *Women in French Studies* vol. 21, 2013, pp. 111-13.
Schaffner, Franklin J. *Planet of the Apes*. Perf. Heston, Charlton, Roddy McDowall and Kim Hunter. 20th Century Fox, Beverly Hills, CA, 1968. Film.
Stanislavski, Constantin. *La Formation de l’acteur*. 1963, translated by Élisabeth Janvier, Petite Bibliothèque Payot/Voyageurs n°42, Payot & Rivages, 2001.
Viart, Dominique, and Bruno Vercier. *La Littérature française au présent: héritage, modernité, mutations*. 2$^{nd}$ ed. Bordas, 2008.

Voždová, Marie. “Pour une lecture du roman *Viande* de Claire Legendre.” *Acta universitatis Palackinae olomucensis*. Vol. Philologica 80. Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci. Facultas philosophica, 2003, pp. 331-38.