**Imaginary Scenarios: Literature and Democracy in Europe**

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The main focus in this paper is on the European public intellectual: literary writers presenting their critical ideas and imaginaries on society, and critiquing the (dis)function and (dis)agreement in politics. The concept ‘imaginary scenario’ will be implemented to investigate imaginative scripts and settings constructed by authors to visualize democratic structures, as such commenting on political and social events and ideas. Two European writers from different nation-states, the French M. Houellebecq (*Submission*) and the Portugese Gonçalo M. Tavares (*Learning to pray in the age of technique*) build their novels around a *Vorstellung* of how (future) individuals and people in power could act and speak. Similarities and differences in these author’s strategies and visionaries will be examined. The ‘imaginary scenario’ is based on Charles Taylor (2004) and Elena Esposito (2007), and as surreal-perspective evidently tells something about the experience of the present. Our claim is that these European writers have to be considered in a critical context beyond the save haven of autonomy: in their novels they address the reader as citizen and invite him to reflect on democratic practices. Thus, these European scenarists prompt us to reconsider what it means to live in the EU and to reflect on its political realities and perspectives.

**Keywords** Literature . Public Intellectual . Imaginary Scenario . Democracy . Europe

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**Introduction**

In January 2015 Europe was shocked by the violent attacks of Muslim terrorists on the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* and on a kosher supermarket in eastern Paris, causing the death of twenty-two people. As in Madrid (2004), Amsterdam (2004) and London (2005), the motives of the assassinators were various and complex but had to do with alienation and poverty and a lack of future perspectives within the Muslim communities.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Although the Paris attacks seemed to have been a domestic incident, there were affiliations between the attackers and Yemen as well as Islamic State (Brunneé, 2015). Furthermore, the European dimension of the incident was marked by the march in Paris, on Sunday 11 January, when about 2 million people and 40 leaders from all over Europe and the world – but tellingly *not* the American president or vice-president – gathered at the *Place de la Republique* to support freedom of speech. All across France and Europe, people expressed their solidarity by claiming ‘*Je suis Charlie’*. In the centre of Paris the ‘Marseillaise’ was heard, and President François Hollande walked arm in arm with German chancellor Angela Merkel as if the parents of the European Union. Significantly, some of the political leaders, among them Israeli president Nethanyhanu, oppose press freedom in their own countries. Jeremy Scahill, co-founder of TheIntercept.org, not incorrectly referred to the ‘circus of hypocrisy’ and underscored that France has a very Islamophobic position toward their immigrant community, but also toward second- and third-generation Arabs or people from other Muslim countries.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Almost one year later, we observe that the consequences of the attacks have been that many Jewish people in France, but across Europe as well, feel vulnerable and fearful, and that there has been a renewal of national efforts to further tighten anti-terrorism regimes and surveillance. It is a widely held view that social media have played a very important role in framing the attacks and in inviting reactions of solidarity as well as of generalized fear and legislative overreach (Toope, 2015, 213). However, while Paris as turning point has received so much attention, it is not explainable that Oslo and Utøya, where in July 2011 Andres Breivik shot 77 mostly young people, is not considered a decisive moment for Europe. Breivik, evidently, was driven by Islamophobia and right-wing fear of multiculturalism, and as such he is the exponent of a rising European xenophobia.

Intriguingly, in the week of the attacks in Paris, French author Michel Houellebecq (b. 1958) published his seventh novel, *Submission*, at Flammarion, in which a middle-aged academic in Paris observes how a Muslim Brotherhood coalition comes into power in France in 2022. In this *fable politique et morale* Houellebecq imagines a future France, in which the country is transformed from a secular republic into a more spiritual and religious nation. The transformation is subtle but definite: Jews begin to emigrate to Israel, women start covering their legs and wearing a veil, polygamy is encouraged, the university gets a new structure. The protagonist accepts the changes and even enjoys the new society. Houellebecq - whose friend, the economist Bernard Maris, was a victim in the Charlie Hebdo attack -, confronts the reader with a visionary *brave new world*, that is both shocking and fascinating. We will take the novel as an example of a relatively new genre of literature, providing a critical scenario on democracy and society. In the footsteps of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell, the French author creates an alternative and critique on today’s political strategies. But whereas Huxley and Orwell imagine a dystopia, a place as non-place, Houellebecq depicts a realist Paris, that we can recognize and envision as a contemporary space. In this article we will develop a theoretical conceptualisation of the literary scenario as ‘wahrscheinlichen Realität’ [probable reality] (Esposito 2007), and we will compare the French novel with another novel recently written by a European author in Portugal. Ideas and literary strategies will then be compared, and will lead in the conclusion to an observation about the democratic impact of literature in current European politics and critical thinking.

**Conceptualization: imaginary scenario**

Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World (1932)* and George Orwell’s *1984* (1949) explore the danger of social and technological progress; in this context Huxley in particular questions the hedonistic nature of human beings, and Orwell examines the human drive to conformity. Both the very controlled Fordson New World and free Savage Reservation and the cold Republic of Oceania can be considered representations of modern states, Huxley’s model being American society, while Orwell draws on the features of the totalitarian regimes which developed in the Soviet Union and Germany in the 1920s-30s (Firchow 1966, Varicchio 1999). *Brave New World* opens with an epigraph from the Russian philosopher Nicolas Berdiaeff arguing that *‘les utopies apparaissent comme bien plus réalisables qu’on ne le croyait autrefois’*, utopia is not so far away as we think, as such challenging the reader to reflect on current societal models which could transform into utopian places. Huxley’s novel, however, demonstrates that the utopia, albeit it’s efficiency and stability, is not really a place to live in. In the final section of the book Mr. Savage chooses to hang himself and to escape the ‘welfare-tyranny’ (Huxley, Foreword, 1946).

Houellebecq’s fourth novel, *The Possibility of an Island* (2005), fitted in the tradition of the utopian/dystopian novels of the first half of the twentieth century, depicting the clones of a protagonist, Daniel24 and Daniel 25. The clones seem warmer and more human than their originator - even though, as neo-humans, they are said to go through life without joy and without mystery, living on sunlight, water and mineral salts and having only occasional, virtual contact with other neo-humans (Worton 2005). His seventh novel, *Submission*, however, differs from a dystopian world in that it presents a realist and recognizable France, where after (seemingly manipulated) democratic elections, an Islamic government is established. This setting, we claim, is less dystopian and more of an allegory, and at the same time a very challenging *Vorstellung* of how contemporary life could change if some consequences of democracy are fulfilled. The imagined France AD 2020, evidently, is less strange than Huxley’s world AD 2495.

As explained in the introduction, it is clear that Houellebecq is not on his own in creating this type of realist scenario; we could think of the hilarious but at the same time cynical novel of German author Timur Vermes, *Look Who’s Back* (2012), placing Adolf Hitler back in Berlin in 2011, or we could think of Greek renowned author Vassily Vassilikos, who in …*and dreams are dreams* (1996) wrote a story on the Greek history of the present, that alludes to the crisis that would take place a decade later, or we could refer to Hungarian author László Krasznahorkai’s, in the novel *Satantango* (1985) constructing an apocalyptic scene in a desolate village, where a long-thought dead character returns home and people begin to fall under his spell. All these novels are surreal and disturbing (two of them are adapted as well to movies), and confront us with imaginary scenarios. Before analyzing two novels, it will be necessary to elaborate on this concept.

Imaginary scenario is a form of narrative in which a reflection on current societal issues takes place. The scenario offers an idea or moral order, and as such tells about how to live together in society. We ground this concept on Charles Taylor’s ‘social imaginaries’ as characteristic of Western modernity; Taylor points at the market economy, the public sphere and the self-governing people. In this article we expand Taylor’s notion of social imaginary into an artistic complement illustrating the critical ideas of contemporary literary authors. As Taylor argued, the social imaginary as ‘the way our contemporaries imagine the societies they inhabit and sustain’ (Taylor, 2007, 6) has a distant analogy to some modern definitions of utopia, which refer us to a way of things that ‘may be realized in some eventually possible conditions, but that meanwhile serve as a standard to steer by’ and provide ‘the hermeneutic clue to understanding the real’ (Ibid., 6-7). As regards literature, the social imaginaries are about how authors imagine their social and political surroundings and invent images and narratives of the society. Norms and ideas are encapsulated in these stories. Taylor’s modern imaginaries or ‘modes of narration’ (Ibid., 177) can be distinguished in literature, and, as is argued in this article, are in particular made relevant in some contemporary European novels. Taylor does not consider this, but one of his statements is immediately applicable to the novels we are pointing at. As Taylor argues,

Like all forms of human imagination, the social imaginary can be full of self-serving fiction and suppression, but it also is an essential constituent of the real. It cannot be reduced to an insubstantial dream (Ibid., 183).

Whereas Taylor takes social imaginaries as the collective imagination of people of their social life, we use imaginary scenario as a specific idea and critique on social life presented by a novelist. The author creates a fiction that is probable and credible, due to its real potential, or as Italian literary theorist Esposito claims: ‘Die fictive Realität der *fiction* bleibt nicht ohne Folgen für die reale Realität’ (Esposito, 2007, 11) [the fictive reality has consequences for the real reality]. Esposito points at a doubling of reality [Realitätsverdoppelung] and a manifold offering of realities [Überangebot an Realitäten], which are all real at the same time. As she underlines,

Jeder dieser verschiedene Bereiche der realen Realität beansprucht, eine Realität zu sein, d.h. nicht nur eine Phantasie, eine Halluzination oder eine willkürliches Gebilde. Der ausschlaggebende Punkt ist allerdings gerade die Gleichzeitigkeit von Kontigenz und der Abwesenheit von Willkür, und darin besteht die Modernität der Konstruktion. (Ibid., 68). [Each of these different dimensions of the real reality claims to be a reality, that is, not only a fantasy, hallucination or an at random construction. The main point is the simultaneity of contingency and the lack of arbitrariness, and that underscores the modernity of the construction.]

Drawing on Taylor and Esposito, we argue that the imagination of the novelists discussed here, is not contingent or just idiosyncratic but addresses realities that are experienced in society, and as such the fiction makes us aware of the world, and vice versa: the world illustrates the fiction. The imaginary scenario is a fictional construct rooted in reality, and critiquing societal norms and events emerging in reality. The novels may seem surreal, but in fact offer us pivotal ideas on the current transformation of European societies. Hence, our claim is that the European writers discussed here, have to be considered in a new critical context beyond the frame of autonomy: in the novel-as-scenario the text addresses the reader as citizen and invites him to reflect on democratic practices. In the two sections that follow the imaginary scenario will be used as a productive frame for the interpretation of two contemporary novels in the context of a transforming Europe: Houellebecq’s *Submission* (2015) and Tavares’ *Learn to pray in the age of technique* (2007*)*.

3. **M. Houellebecq, *Submission***

After defending his dissertation on Joris-Karl Huymans, the protagonist of Houellebecq’s seventh novel realised that the best part of his life was over: ‘so it goes, in the remaining Western social democracies, when your finish your studies’ (Houellebecq, 2015, 5). With this opening passage, we immediately are in the critical imaginary scenario that the French renowned author creates around an academic, reasonably paid by a Parisian university, who has been lecturing for fifteen years, while having regular affairs (‘internships’) with his female students. In the present of the narrative considering the bleakness and mediocrity of his life, and while his last girlfriend has stopped seeing him months ago, François enters a midlife crisis. The tone of the novel is ironic as well as sceptical, as we recognize from Houellebecq’s previous work. Since François is appointed full professor, he does not have to work as hard anymore, his courses being reduced to only teaching on Wednesdays. And then not many students are interested: ‘When I gave my lecture, at eight, the hall was almost completely empty except for a small knot of chillingly serious Chinese women’ (Ibid.,19). This novel, like Houellebecq’s earlier ones, is realist, truthful, and depressing art, as Ben Jeffery (2011, 8) argued, and foregrounds a character defined by isolation and apathy. As such he is the typical Houellebecq hero as ‘soft-bodied, aging cynic who yearns exclusively for sex with young women and then spirals off into brooding monologues about the impossibility of living when it eludes him’ (Ibid., 8). However, not only the realist dimension is noticed, many critics have pointed at the autobiographical dimension of Houellebecq’s work as well, and Jeffery refers to acquaintances of the author, affirming that the novels are ‘versions of his life’ (Ibid., 9).

Fascinatingly, there is a much more complex relationship between realism, autobiography and fiction in this work, between main characters and the author, between the inside and outside of the literary novel. This becomes clear when we consider Houellebecq’s posture and performances in public. His self-presentation can be regarded as form of literary negotiation between text and author figure. We could point at the example of a hilarious clip on YouTube, in which we observe the author as *chansonnier* in the company of singer Jean-Louis Aubert[[3]](#footnote-3), while he *lip syncs* the lines of one of his poems, as such underlining the lost identity of the ageing man. But we could also refer to the 2014 film *The kidnapping of Michel Houellebecq*[[4]](#footnote-4), in which the author plays himself while being captivated by three strange figures. The movie intermingles reality and made up stories, gossip and serious debate in a very ingenious construction of reality, and can be understood as a narrative in which real life and fictionalization have become a hybrid. Both clip and movie underscore the specific self-representation of the author as an unadjusted and anti-bourgeois figure, as such similar to almost all protagonists in his oeuvre.

Turning now to *Submission* as imaginary scenario, implies that we have to be aware of the inventive narrative constructions the author is establishing both in his texts and performances. There is no escape out of storytelling, as Jeffery (2011, 57) underlined, but at the same time the stories are very much part of reality and of our conception and understanding of reality. In *Submission* Houellebecq encapsulates a realist fantasy in culture critique and vice versa. The first part of the novel introduces the protagonist in his Parisian life. His girlfriend Myriam leaves him. The second part starts depicting the political context in France AD 2022, when election day is coming up: since 2017 the Muslim Brotherhood, leaded by Mohammed Ben Abbes interfered in French politics, and they are considered as less extreme than the Islamic Party. They even keep up good relations with the Jewish religious authorities. Just before the elections the Brotherhood is

now polling just behind the Socialists: at 21 versus 23 per cent. As for the traditional right, the Union for a Popular Movement (UMP) had plateaued at 14 per cent. The National Front, with 32 per cent, remained far and away the leading party of France. (Houellebecq 2015, 41)

It could be argued that François is interested in politics, in his own particular way: ‘I’d always loved election night. I’d go so far as to say it’s my favourite TV show, after the World Cup Finals’ (Ibid., 60). But we could claim as well that Houellebecq here, far more cynically, refers to the idea that politics have been reduced to a television show with a wide range of actors, spectacle and general excitement. Following this idea we could recognize current populist responses to politics from all over Europe, voters are not interested in rational debate, but only in emotions and sensation.[[5]](#footnote-5)

From halfway part Two till almost the end of part Three, the novel then develops as a diary, starting on Sunday 15 May, and closing on Tuesday 31 May, when the centre-right party and the Socialists form a coalition, backing the Muslim Brotherhood. François makes the diary notes, and discusses the political situation with an acquaintance, who explains to him that Ben Abbes is a crafty politician, just like François Mitterrand at the time, and a moderate Muslim striving for a sort of Roman Empire, bigger than France:

For him, European integration is just a means to this glorious end. The main thrust of his foreign policy will be to shift Europe’s centre of gravity towards the south. (…) Ben Abbes’s true ambition (…) is eventually to be elected president of Europe – greater Europe, including all the Mediterranean countries. (128-129)

Ben Abbes believes in a Europe as a project of civilization, as becomes clear when the university of Paris suddenly is transformed into ‘the Islamic University of Paris-Sorbonne’ (Ibid., 148). François is offered a plentiful pension even if he is only in his forties. Other consequences of Abbes’s policies are a dramatic drop in crime in the most troubled neighbourhoods, success with unemployment due to women leaving the workforce en masse in relation to large subsidies for families, as well as drastic cuts in education finances. All these reforms are implemented to ‘restore the centrality, the dignity, of the family as the building block of society’ (Ibid., 165). On May 25, François watches on television how a mass is gathering on Place de la Concorde, led by populist politician Marine le Pen, while people are carrying placards with the slogan ‘We are the people of France’ and ‘This is our home’. François, however, stays at home eating his meal and watching on television how the riots break lose. The next day he travels to the South of France, - ‘I didn’t actually know much about France’ (Ibid., 103) - and mainly discovers how everything is unusually quiet en empty: “Something was happening in France, I knew it, and here I was, still driving along the hexagonal motorway system at two hundred kilometers per hour – and maybe that was the solution’ (Ibid., 105). The suggestion of a catastrophe taking place becomes stronger: television and wifi are out of the air, and apparently polling stations have been attacked by armed men.

Despite this, the outcome on the 31st of May is that Ben Abbes, won the elections, and François returns to Paris. In part Four, he is put out of his job by the Islamic board of the university, and realizes that he now also is deprived of all contact with female students. He starts isolating himself, ‘one outing per week to the Géant Casino, for stocking up on food and for conversation, and a daily outing to the mailbox to collect the books I ordered on Amazon’ (Ibid., 171). In part Five, opening with an epigraph by Ayatollah Khomeini, ‘If Islam is not political, it is nothing’, François is invited to make a Pleiade-edition of Huymans’ work and gets to know academics such as Rediger, the president of the Sorbonne, who has converted to Islam and has settled in the new regime. The main attractiveness of conversion seems to be the polygamy: a possible agreement to have sex with very young girls. François is asked to come back to the Sorbonne, and conversion is the only thing he has to do for this. Rediger explains that this is all about submission,

The summit of human happiness resides in the most absolute submission (…) for me there’s a connection between woman’s submission to man (…) and the Islamic idea of man’s submission to God. (217)

In the final chapter of the novel, written in future tense, it is suggested that François could make the decision for conversion as well, ‘the idea was that I should bear witness in front of my new Muslim brothers, my equals in the sight of God’ (Ibid., 248). He would have to testify that there is no God but God, and Muhammed is the messenger of God. And then ‘it would be over, from then on I’d be a Muslim’ (Ibid., 249). To François, apathetic and without strong principles, this could be an escape to happiness and maybe even love.

The scenario *Submission* provides is that in the near future, France as one of the core European nation-states in which Christianity has become insignificant, will have a Muslim government, and as a consequence each individual will have to make a decision as to whether or not to follow and convert. Houellebecq’s scenario is schematic and satirical, but visionary as well, and, we would argue, it is less ironic than his other novels. According to Alex Preston (2015) in his review in *The Guardian*, Houellebecq seems to be saying that French society, in the form of its politicians, its journalists, its academics and not least its novelists, will get exactly what it deserves – a state run by those who believe in something bigger and grander than their elevated positions. As Preston noted, rather than being a dark vision of a world ruled by mad mullahs, Houellebecq’s *Submission* presents the moderate Muslim who takes over France as a force of spiritual integrity and revolutionary verve. The real targets of the novel are France’s bloated institutions, its venal politicians, its sclerotic literary scene.[[6]](#footnote-6) This idea of a weakened, not Europe oriented France was underlined by the author himself in an interview published on *Die Zeit online*,

Frankreich ist ein Spezialfall in Europa. Es ist ziemlich depressiv, hat aber eine gute Demografie. Das mag ein Widerspruch sein, zeugt aber von einem gewissen Überlebenswillen (…). vor allem verachtet es seine Politiker, wie das in keinem anderen europäischen Land der Fall ist. Und das ist berechtigt. Marine Le Pen profitiert davon. Davor kann man Angst haben.[[7]](#footnote-7) [France is a special case in Europe. It is quite pessimistic, but has a strong demography. That could be a contradiction, but also is the will to survive. Most of all it despises the politicians, like nowhere else in Europe. And that is rightly so, Marine le Pen profits from that. That could make one frightened.]

In the interview the author defended an anti-Enlightenment position, and the need for religion, considering most of his novels as designs of a new religion. When we will have to give up freedom, Houellebecq claims, we will not lose our cathedrals, or Bach, there is much in the West, that we will keep, even when we leave behind Enlightenment.

**4. Tavares, *Learning to pray in the age of technique***

As discussed earlier, the imaginary scenario can be full of self-serving fiction and suppression, but also is an essential constituent of the real, and as such cannot be reduced to an insubstantial dream of an author. The paradoxical negotiation of alienation and recognition in the novel is grounded in realist figures and circumstances. This section focuses on another European imaginary scenario, constructed by the Portuguese writer Gonçalo M. Tavares (b. 1970). In a 2013 interview in *Bomb – Artists in conversation*, he explained how fiction and reality are always mixed up,

the truth is that imagination and direct observation actually blend together a lot. Thus, when you are writing, things blend in such a way that at some point it’s no longer imagination, dream, reflection, or reality, but just a thing. Sometimes, the sensation of not being able to distinguish what happened in reality from what came out of the imagination is one of the most enjoyable sensations: it’s as if we constructed a new world in which the two normal categories no longer function. A novel, for example, destroys, it seems to me, the separation between the real and the imaginary—I see no harm in that. (…) Deep down, I think that literature is able to change the diopters, so to speak, of the reader, until he finds a good lens. So that someone says at the end of the book: now I see certain things in a different way.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Not being able to make a distinction between reality and imagination, that is a very adequate way to point at the persuasive power of a imaginary scenario, and that is exactly what is challenging and confronting in reading Tavares’s work. The novel *Learning to pray in the age of technique,* is one of the four novels of the project ‘livros petros’, black books. Protagonist in the novel is a skilled brain surgeon, called Lenz Buchmann. This name immediately takes the novel out of a Portuguese context: names of the characters (such as Walser, Selig, Liegnitz, Kestner) refer to a Central European sphere, whereas other characters are just nameless: ‘the nurse’, ‘the dying woman’, ‘the vagabond’ and so on. After having been a successful surgeon for many years, and after the death of his brother due to brain tumour, Lenz decides to become a politician. As such, he rises to power – until he falls victim to a tumour himself. Central to the novel is Lenz’s amoral, militarist and technical ethos underlying his success in the first part of the novel, but falling short on him in the second. A politician cannot reason without moral and communitarian principles, seems to be the message of the author. The novel reflects on contemporary politics in a both an explicit and allegorical manner: the critique on bureaucratic policies is explicit, the setting symbolically European. *Learning to pray in the age of technique* is indeed situated in an undefined city, without precise indications of time and place. It is the absence of contextual references that adds to the allegorical dimension of the novel. The name Lenz reminds us of the *Sturm und Drang* author Jakob Michael Reinhold Lenz, and of the novel *Lenz* (1839) George Büchner wrote. These references suggest that we are dealing with political satire that combines reflection and critique. Tavares creates an imaginary scenario demonstrating how individuals and people in power could act and speak. Although Tavares never mentions concrete dates, it could be argued that the novel is contemporary and reflects upon real 21st century political and societal issues. The exaggerated importance of medical technique in the first part of the novel matches the current attention for brain research and cognitive sciences. In the chapter ‘What does a finger matter?’ Tavares describes the bureaucratization of the hospital, and evidently this is one of the main points of critique on contemporary public institutions.

The plot of the novel develops on three main locations: the hospital, in which Lenz Buchmann works as a brain surgeon, the political arena, as the city and its streets, in which Lenz goes around as a politician, and the family house, in which he lives. This is a house in which ‘fear is illegal’ (Tavares, 2011, 73) and where is one room (‘the prison’) in which the children (Lenz and his brother Albert) used to get locked up by their father. Frederich Buchmann was a reckless military man, forbidding his children to feel any fear. This father figure is a central character in the novel, for he has implemented his worldview onto his son: Lenz sees life as an ongoing battle and describes both the brain of the individual and the society solely in military terms. As a surgeon Lenz reflects on his profession in a military way: ‘The brain, when seen up close, and understood thoroughly, has the form and the function of a weapon, no more than that’ (Tavares, 2011, 16-17). A good brain surgeon – ‘a skilful driver’ – functions as a machine, that creates harmony in ways more ‘deeply’ than a musician would do. ‘Precise and profound, this right hand, with its scalpel, expressed the various degrees of intensity one could have, in the world: here, music really could kill or save’ (Tavares, 2011, 20). Within the body, the scalpel reinstates a lost order. Lenz sometimes even speaks of a ‘new monarchy’. Just like the artist creates order out of chaos with his perfect, harmonious artwork, the surgeon creates a ‘new kingdom’ and restores all ruins in the body.

In the first part of the novel, Lenz keeps comparing the brain of the individual with city streets. The privilege of the surgeon to reorder the body, is similar, the narrator seems to imply, to the privilege of the politician to decide on the city map. In addition, there is the observation by Lenz that there is no connection between being a good person and being a good doctor. He hates it when patients consider him good, because he is a skilled doctor. Lenz creates a barrier between his formal and private life. The skilled and technically brilliant brain surgeon is a morally degenerated person. ‘The pleasure he took in humiliating prostitutes, weak women, adolescents, beggars who knocked on his door, even his own wife, couldn’t stand in starker contrast to the holy aura with which some of the relatives of sick people he’d operated on had surrounded him’ (Tavares, 2011, 26). In the first part of the novel, Lenz is portrayed as a man with a disturbing worldview, doing contemptible things in his private life, such as fucking his wife before the eyes of a vagabond, but who can function very well in applying his technical skills in hospital. There he is useful for society. The real trouble starts with his transformation.

After the death of his brother, Lenz aspires to a political career. Attending his brother’s funeral and witnessing how people treat the mayor of the city, he gets fascinated by power: ‘it was really a difference between a man presenting himself as an individual or accepting his place as a member of a group’ (Tavares, 2011, 78). From that moment on, Lenz expands his territory of power and control. He no longer wants to be in charge of the brains of individuals, he wants to operate ‘on the illness of a whole city’ (Tavares, 2011, 81). Lenz becomes a prominent member of ‘The Party’, a non-specified political party, and within short time he develops into a famous politician. The way technique served him at the operation table is comparable to the ‘elementary technique’ that the politician uses in the ‘gigantic medical operation’ of putting ‘thousands of people under the scalpel of a single political decision’ (Tavares, 2011, 92). This technique reaches to people’s fear and admiration. Both ways of operating are compared with the work of a soldier: the surgeon might use his scalpel as a pistol, the politician uses bombs that might destroy entire cities (Tavares, 2011, 93). The politicians in *Learning to pray in the age of technique* are strong men guided by a fierce military will. They cannot stand moral and physical disorder. To create fear and gain admiration they have no difficulties in writing and telling things that oppose the truth. They even go one step further, for their motto is ‘Fear is the mystery that speed conceals’. Lenz and his colleague Kestner decide at one point to blow up the city theatre. That would arouse fear among the people and would inevitably lead to the call for a strong leader of The Party,

First, create a danger whose origin couldn’t be identified; then, through this, force the population into movement; finally, prepare the ideal, strong stage from which two types of people will emerge: those who protect and those who are protected. (Tavares, 2011, 225)

Lenz represents technical, machine-like reasoning, dominated by military values such as order, efficiency and power. The novel thus demonstrates a very cynical political order. The political leaders have just one motivation: becoming and keeping their position in power. It could be argued that the political program of Lenz resembles contemporary populist politics. Populist politicians all across Europe use discourses of fear and anxiety to affirm their position.

In the last part of the novel, Lenz has to leave his powerful political position and cannot but stay in his house as an ill man. His former secretary Julia Liegnietz and her brother take care for him in his own family house, described by Lenz as an ‘alien occupation’. The poor Liegnitz family takes over the wealthy Buchmann family house,

‘The new house, that house, Julia Liegnitz’s, and she herself as its owner – following an old Liegnitz tradition – kept their eyes turned respectfully to the Church. The Church had a new conquest there, and in spite of the apparent failure of his attempt to reclaim Lenz, the priest’s satisfaction when he said good-bye to Julia and to Gustav – who had in the meantime appeared – was more than visible.’ (339)

Lenz’s horizontal perspective gets replaced by the ‘vertical perspective’ – that is to say the Catholic perspective – of the Liegnitz family (Tavares, 2011, 205). It could be argued that Lenz’s fall from power is a critique on his *hybris* as a politician, his ambition to take a godlike position in controlling and constructing individuals’ lives and society as a whole. On the other hand, we should regard the Christian end of the novel as something ironic as well: as we can tell from Tavares’ other novel *Jerusalem*, the Church only *seems* to be a place of hope. In confronting the traditional Christian ethos with the modern war machine worldview, Tavares underlines that all ideologies have as their ultimate goal the gaining of power over the individual.

**5. Conclusion: imaginary scenarios of Europe**

Houellebecq’s Islamic France and the Muslim fantasy about a Roman Empire are as imaginable as Tavares’ city scenes dominated by technocratic politicians who strive for power and not for rational, moral and sensible government. Fear and disorder seem to be the strategy of some contemporary leaders, in and at the margins of Europe, such as Orbán, Yanukovych, Putin or Erdogan. Both offered imaginary scenarios thus are probable in the context of the European Union struggling with national governments, bureaucratic organization and technocratic politicians. There is no idea whatsoever about the European people as a community, about the European history as a joined history. Both imaginary scenarios are presented in a form of literature and partly philosophical and schematic. That Houellebecq’s scenario is more artificial than the one of Tavares apparently has to do with the flatness of François as a character.[[9]](#footnote-9)

The imaginary scenario’s provided in the books of Houellebecq and Tavares are ingenious constructions of imagination and reality, and challenge the reader to be active in negotiating meaning and knowledge. The novel as imaginary scenario evidently has a connection to wordly knowledge and expands, enlarges and reorders our sense of how things are (cf. Felski, 2008, 83). A cluster of terms such as knowledge, reference, truth, mimesis, reappears when reading these novels as imaginary scenarios and accepting the invitation for reflection on current societal circumstances. These works of art reveal something about the world we live in, and push us to respond as reader *and* citizen. Literature takes part in our societal and political context, and should not be enclosed in abstract, autonomous and aesthetic categories and theories. ‘Literature’, as Tavares explained to filmmaker Pedro Sena Nunes,

can help us, as readers, to be aware, to detect the symptoms of evil emerging. It’s not about becoming suspicious and cynical, it’s not that. It’s about becoming people who are aware; people who do not necessarily view the things that the whole of humanity seeks to acquire as good, wonderful things. We have to be aware of the signs because I think that history often repeats itself, only it becomes more and more violent. History, it seems to me, tends toward the repetition of evil but with more technologically advanced means each time. Hence, the state of awareness shouldn’t be, not even for a minute, suspended.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This claim on the awareness of our times, of what is happening and what the consequences are of transformations of politics and society, is a very important one, and contributes to framing intellectual debates in distinct national contexts. Europe, as we have seen in both novels, and in the introduction to this article as well, is a complex project of political, cultural, religious and economical phenomena, and literary authors do take part in democratic discussions as public intellectuals with a talent for sensitivity, anticipation, the thinking through of alternatives, imagination and courage (Heynders 2015). European literary authors can offer us imaginary scenarios as fruit for thought and could function as the legislators of humanity and judges of past and future generations, taking responsibility for historical memory and future generations (Cheneval 2010). Literature is a broad and dynamic constellation of texts and responses, and of flexible and exchangeable roles, performances and scenario’s.

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1. See, Randall Hansen 2015. Although Van Gogh’s murderer in Amsterdam was quite well educated, it seems that his religious radicalization (‘I acted out of faith’, in Buruma 2007, 187-224) was as well motivated by a lack of future perspectives. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Scahill: ‘David Cameron ordered *The Guardian* to smash with a hammer the hard drives that stored the files of NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden. Blasphemy is considered a crime in Ireland. You had multiple African and Arab leaders whose own countries right now have scores of journalists in prison. Benjamin Netanyahu’s government in Israel has targeted for killing numerous journalists who have reported on the Palestinian side, have kidnapped, abducted, jailed journalists’. See: <http://www.democracynow.org/2015/1/12/jeremy_scahill_on_paris_attacks_the>, date accessed 14 October 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRhSK-P-7RA>. Date accessed 30 October. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See, <http://www.berlinale.de/en/archiv/jahresarchive/2014/02_programm_2014/02_Filmdatenblatt_2014_20147835.php#tab=video25>. Date accessed 30 October 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Habermas 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, *The Guardian* 8 September, 2015: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/sep/08/submission-michel-houellebecq-review-satire-islamic-france>, accessed 30 October 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <http://www.zeit.de/2015/04/michel-houellebecq-unterwerfung-charlie-hebdo-frankreich-radikalisierung/seite-4>, accessed 30 October 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See: <http://bombmagazine.org/article/7332/gon-alo-m-tavares>. Date accessed 30 October 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. http://www.volkskrant.nl/recensies/tegenvallende-roman-van-houellebecq-dient-vooral-als-discussiestuk~a3830720/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. http://bombmagazine.org/article/7332/gon-alo-m-tavares [↑](#footnote-ref-10)