Expanding the Field of Constraint: Novelization as an Example of Multiply Constrained Writing

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Abstract This essay deals with the question of the multiple constraints that determine the production of highly commercialized literature, namely, novelization. As a literary genre, novelization is easy to define: it is the novelistic adaptation of an original film or, more specifically, of the screenplay of this film. As a cultural practice, however, novelization is hardly known, given its lack of prestige, therefore its near-absence in the scholarly field (novelizations seem so “bad” that nobody thinks they deserve any serious interest). Culturally and institutionally speaking, novelizations are blatant examples of commercial literature, that is, literature not written on the initiative of an individual author eager to give a personal form to certain ideas or feelings but ordered by a publisher to fulfill certain commercial needs. Despite all the prejudices against the genre, however, novelization is a fascinating literary practice which can helpfully be studied via the notion of constraint. At the same time, the notion of constraint can be usefully enriched by the example of novelization, which brings to the fore aspects that are less clearly seen when one focuses on high or elite literature. The essay presents, first, some aspects of the genre, which is less simple or homogeneous than may appear. Second, it discusses a seminal article that has opened the mainly form-oriented domain of constrained writing to the broader field of cultural and institutional constraints: R. A. Peterson’s “Five Constraints on the Production of Culture: Law, Technology, Market, Organizational Structure, and Occupational Careers” (1982). Third, the essay offers a comparative analysis of the novelization genre in various cultural environments, reusing Peterson’s set of institutional and cultural constraints. The case study of novelization demonstrates that constrained writing is not simply a matter of obeying internal formal constraints,
as is generally believed, but also of following external, institutional constraints: the latter are less known due to the fact that the most often cited and studied examples of constrained writing belong to literary genres or domains where these external constraints are less directly felt.

A Very Brief Introduction to Novelization

There are many ways of studying the genre of novelization, the “translation” of an original movie into a novel. Among them, the historical approach describes in a genealogical way the various forms that this specific kind of literary adaptation has taken since its first appearance in the 1910s, or even before, since there is no absolute consensus on the precise origins of the genre (Baetens 2008 is the most comprehensive study to date, but it focuses strongly on the French corpus), while the poetic approach tries to define what distinguishes novelization from other kinds of adaptation in the field of cinema and literature (Baetens 2005, 2007; Hutcheon 2006). Other approaches have been much less followed: for instance, the comparative or intercultural approach, which foregrounds the differences between various types of novelization according to the linguistic and cultural domains where they appear (many interesting comparisons between novelization in the United States and Italy or France can be found in Autelitano and Re 2006), or the institutional approach, which tackles the various conditions that determine, shape, or modify what novelizers are allowed (or not allowed) to do when they are invited to write a novelization. In this essay I will take the institutional approach. Nevertheless, given the meagerness of general knowledge on novelization, some background information is evidently necessary, and I will therefore start this essay with a brief historical overview of the genre.¹

For some authors (Gaudreault and Marion 2004), the often quite long and detailed descriptions in the first producers’ catalogs may be considered a first step toward the real “birth” of the novelization genre. Such descriptions were published during the years in which films were not yet rented but were sold outright to exhibitors—roughly speaking, in the first decade after the start of commercial film production around 1895. Although these texts reproduce with many details the story world of the film, they are only “protonovelizations” (in the terminology coined by André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion), for two key aspects are still missing there. On the one hand, these texts have no literary ambition whatsoever; on the other hand, they are not presented as autonomous texts but as mere representations of

¹. Basic historical background can be found in Virmaux and Virmaux 1998; Baetens and Lits 2004; Carcaud-Macaire and Clerc 2004; Autelitano and Re 2006; Baetens 2008.
visual works. In short, these protonovelizations are purely functional and not yet fictional texts and so do not meet the necessary condition (again according to Gaudreault and Marion) for novelization.

The transition from protonovelization to “real” novelization was due to a double development: first, the introduction of a new film format, the chapter film or serial film, so that films were not released as longer feature films but were released week after week in the short, one-reel format centered around the same character having a new adventure in each installment (chapter film) or around the same action spread over various installments (serial film); second, the rise of new forms of marketing. It was the necessity to bind the public to serialized productions that created the need to invent new forms of publicity that accompany and advance the progressive release of the installments. Novelization became the answer to this problem, and its first forms are a good example of cross-media marketing. Film producers and press moguls discovered that they had a mutual interest in inventing a new form of serialized literature. The outworn and old-fashioned melodrama of the nineteenth century was replaced by the modern adaptation of serialized film plays whose publication followed as closely as possible the release of the successive movie installments. After each cinematographic installment, the public could read the adventure seen on-screen (or catch up with the story if an installment had been missed) while using the newspaper or magazine version as a springboard to the next adventures on-screen (for a good introduction to the novelizing practices of this period, see Lacassin 1972). The earliest known example of this kind of novelization seems to be associated with the 1912 Edison film What Happened to Mary initially serialized in Ladies’ World and one year later published in book form (on the quite amazing figure of its novelizer, the avant-garde poet Robert Carlton Brown, see North 2005: 74). All other producers followed this example, which has proved to be very profitable for both the film business and for the press. But what matters here for the genre of novelization is not only its immediate and widespread success but also the two modifications—the shift in publication format and the attempt to produce a literary upgrade of the genre—that were elaborated in the following decades.

First, novelization then shifted gradually from one publication format to another (Lacassin 1972; Virmaux and Virmaux 1998). The earliest novelizations (i.e., just prior to or during World War I) appeared in the daily newspapers or in weekly magazines, and if the film looked very successful, they might be reprinted as a volume; later on (mainly after the vanishing of the serial and chapter films after World War I and the commercial triumph of the feature film), novelizations were published in separate and cheap
booklets and sold, along with pulp magazines, in newsstands, not in bookshops; it is only when novelizations came to be published at once in “real” book format, first as pocket books and later in other formats (a process starting timidly in the 1920s and 1930s and becoming more systematic after World War II), that the genre found its place in more prestigious bookshops. In the 1920s, at the time of the first experiments with publication in “real” book format, there were some rare and quite debatable attempts to write “quality” novelizations, and the acceptance of the genre by quality bookshops was still far from complete—despite the generalization of the book format after World War II.

Second, the gradual shift from newspaper and pulp brochure to book format was followed and reinforced by a similar movement toward upgrading the style of the genre. In the first decade of the genre (say, till the early 1920s), novelization was strongly indebted to the clichés of the genre whose place it took in the literary system: the typically nineteenth-century form of melodrama, the “feuilleton” or installment novel. Mixing stylistic, narrative, thematic, and ideological features, the clichés of the melodrama as studied by Anne-Marie Thiesse (1984) and subsequently by Daniel Couégnas (1992) were transferred from this vanishing genre to the emerging genre of novelization.

Stylistically speaking, these melodramas rest upon the systematic reuse of stock phrases, which are endlessly recombined; from a narrative point of view, they emphasize narrative at the expense of description, psychological analysis, and all material that is not directly relevant to the story (if a character sees a tree, for instance, the reader can be sure that this tree will play a role later on in the story). Despite the regular emphasis on the sensational and sentimental aspects of the story world and the story line, these melodramas never sought novelty but were always eager to exhibit the exceptional (accident, murder, violence, social decay, poverty, etc.) and to promote eternal rules (the love between mother and child, the idea of honesty and social responsibility, the inherent necessity of the age-old institutions, etc.). Finally, the ideology of these works, with their strong defense of the family, the state, and all forms of traditional authority, is conservative. To summarize all these clichés in a somewhat brutal way: in a melodrama everything makes sense, but this sense is one that is already known, and its understanding is made easier by the fact that the verbal and narrative formulas used to convey these meanings are also already well known to the public.

The installment novel had been immensely popular since the 1830s. In the first years of the twentieth century, however, its cultural role was violently challenged by a new cultural practice that remediated (Bolter and Grusin 1999) its basic formula: the cinema and, more specifically, its evo-
olution toward narrative cinema. Very soon the new medium (the early narrative cinema, with its typical melodrama-like installment form) replaced the older one (the nineteenth-century melodrama). As to the first novelizations, often written by the same authors who had been active in the literary installment business, they predictably adopted the literary format of the remediated genre. Hence the contemporary reader might receive an impression of an anachronism, given the strong stylistic, thematic, narrative, and ideological continuity between the nineteenth-century installment novel and the new novelization genre. Although the influence of the installment novel can still be felt in contemporary novelizations, as formulaic at first sight as romance novels, the genre struggled from the 1920s on to discover new ways of writing that are more ambitious than the outworn ways known from nineteenth-century melodrama.

Various generations of novelizers have thus tried to innovate. One of the most revealing symptoms of this evolution lies in the appearance of an elite or highbrow novelization totally disconnected from the marketing context of traditional novelization and strongly linked to the cinephilia cultivated in some literary groups (Carcaud-Macaire and Clerc 2004; Baetens 2005). Well-known examples of this tendency are books like Manuel Puig’s *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1979 [1976]), Robert Coover’s *A Night at the Movies* (1987), and Tanguy Viel’s *Cinéma* (1999). All of these books have in common the temporal discontinuity between the films novelized and the moment of their novelization: “serious” writers do not novelize a film to coincide with its release and serve its marketing policy. Instead, such writers remember the films they liked when they started going to the movies, and their ambition is less to reproduce faithfully the film’s story, as traditional novelizers are obliged to do, than to shape as carefully and originally as possible a personal viewpoint on the world of the cinematic images.

Various other aspects of the available novelizations could be added to this overview. An example would be the case of visual or, more precisely, intermedial form: these novelizations rely upon the format and conventions of other, mainly visual genres, such as the photonovel or the film novel (Morreale 2007). Perhaps even more astonishingly, one also finds in this literary corpus a very rich collection of poems, sometimes even book length, which can perfectly be read as novelizations in verse (Baetens 2006). However, the aim of this essay is not to tell the whole history of the genre in all its forms but to examine how the notion of constraint can serve as a meaningful background for the study of a phenomenon that is usually kept outside the study of constrained writing. More details about novelization will be provided of course once this essay starts going into the relationship between this particular literary genre and the distinctive approach to constrained writing suggested in these pages.
Constraints, Conventions, and the Rest

Historically speaking, the interest in *constrained writing* as a specific concept and as a specific school of writing has often been associated with the emergence of the French Oulipo group (OU = ouvroir, LI = littérature, PO = potentielle, or workshop for potential literature). The group arose in 1960 and is still very much alive and kicking, yet now also in other languages and outside the limits of the literary medium itself. Today Oulipo writing is no longer confined to French (some members of the group are Anglophone, like Ian Monk, who writes in English as well as in French, or have adopted German as their working language, like the Romanian-born author Oskar Pastior), nor is literature any longer the only field of activity (there exist, for instance, very active Oulipo-inspired groups that specialize in the graphic novel [the Oubapo] or in painting [the Oupeinpo]; see Mathews and Brotchie 2005). The Oulipians’ aim was in the first place practical, one of the major ambitions of the group being “to elaborate new principles that will serve as governing rules for the production of new texts that will fulfill the creative potentiality inscribed in the pre-defined program of production” (Thomas 2006: 115–16).

At the beginning, however, the Oulipians did not have any sharp definitions of the notion of *constraint*, that is, the rule informing constrained writing, and even today these issues are still vigorously debated (the best general introductions in English are Motte 1986 and Mathews and Brotchie 2005 and in French Bénabou et al. 2001). Yet a consensus has always existed on the fact that constrained writing, whatever form it may take, should be considered a critique of the traditional notion of *inspiration*, on the one hand, and an inversion of the age-old compositional system of *rhetoric*, on the other hand.

Inspiration, first, is debunked as a myth, for it is seen as even more restrictive than the freely chosen writing procedures that are called constraints: “The classic author who writes his tragedy in accordance with a number of rules that he knows is freer than the poet who writes whatever comes into his head and is the slave of other rules that he doesn’t know” (Raymond Queneau, cited in Roubaud 1981: 57). In a landmark survey of the Oulipo’s history, Jacques Roubaud later reformulated this point as maneuvering between the traditional methods of poetic meter and rhyme, on the one hand, and the modern craving, in the name of freedom, for the destruction of these methods, on the other hand. There he argued:

The reasoning is as follows: “asserting one’s freedom” in art makes sense only referentially—it is an act of destroying traditional artistic methods. After these crises of freedom—they are often creative and enriching in their opposition to the fossilized relics of tradition—it finds sustenance only in a parrot-like repe-
tition of the original gesture, a self-parody that immediately becomes irrelevant. One then finds oneself confronted with an increasingly weak, sad, and bitter involvement with the unconscious leavings of tradition. . . . Oulipian writing—that is, writing with constraints—endeavors to rediscover another way in which to practice artistic freedom, one that is at work in all (or nearly all) the literatures and poetic enterprises of the past: the freedom of difficulty mastered. (Roubaud 2005 [1991]: 40–41)

Rhetorical composition, second, is not rejected as such, but the compositional priority now shifts. It is given to *elocutio* (the crafting and delivery of speeches and writing, that is, the stylistic aspects of rhetoric) rather than to *inventio* (the system or method used for the discovery of argument, that is, the systematic search for arguments). In traditional rhetoric, inventio comes first and elocutio second (style is an ornament and is used in the service of the ideas one wants to express). In Oulipian writing, the said is inferred from ways of saying (style is expected here to produce the ideas that will be elaborated in the text).

In the Oulipo, then, we encounter both the replacement of inspiration by language-driven forms of textual genesis and the refusal to start from an already existing subject matter (either the expression of one’s inner self or the representation of the world out there). Both of these tendencies have contributed to the widespread but still quite paradoxical (and for traditional readers and writers counterintuitive) idea that constrained writing equals freedom, inventiveness, and innovation.

These new principles are in a way related to the very broad field of adaptation. And adaptation is considered today a basic feature of *any* literary text (Genette 1997; Hutcheon 2006), yet now defined in a more formal and formalist or, more precisely, *algorithmic* spirit. To show how close many Oulipian methods are to the general principle of literature as adaptation, let me bring in two frequently used procedures, “homovocalism” and “grammatical translation.” Both are selected from the *Oulipo Compendium* (Mathews and Brotchie 2005) and are illustrated with examples by Harry Mathews himself (who not only edited that volume but also provided many of the examples given there).

Homovocalism, whereby the sequence of vowels in a source text is kept, while all its consonants are replaced. For example:

To be or not to be

\[ o e o o o e \]

Lode of gold ore

Since the difficulties of this procedure only increase with the length of the source text, its interest will probably remain that of an exercise. (Ibid.: 160)
The other procedure consists in grammatical translation. There, by altering various aspects of grammar, a chosen text can be given a markedly different colouring.

Examples:

1. **Change of tense**
   To have been, or not to have been: that might have been the question.

2. **Inversion of nouns and adjectives**
   How could that finger-like terror and vagueness push
   The glorified feathers from her femoral looseness?
   (Mathews and Brotchie 2005: 154)²

Readers familiar with Queneau’s *Exercises in Style* (1981 [1947]), a two-paragraph story told ninety-nine times, each time in a different “style,” will probably have no difficulty recognizing the all-encompassing “meta-constraint” of Queneau’s book, which proposes ninety-nine variations on the same anecdote. This shows the easiness and the extreme productivity of this kind of adaptation (as if, once the author has selected a textual basis, he or she can quickly and almost endlessly generate a new output). It is important to stress from the beginning this fundamental relationship between constrained writing, adaptation, and derivation in order to make it possible to link the traditionally highbrow field of constrained writing with the generally very lowbrow practice of novelization. That practice is also, and to an extent not very different from that of some Oulipo exercises, a type of adaptation by derivation.

The success of the Oulipo, that is, of constraint-based writing, has given

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2. Mathews’s “grammatical translation” from William Butler Yeats’s sonnet “Leda and the Swan,” whose ludic dimension I do not analyze in detail, modifies the fifth and sixth lines of the original poem, first published in 1928:

> A sudden blow: the great wings beating still
> Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed
> By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,
> He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.
>
> How can those terrified vague fingers push
> The feathered glory from her loosening thighs?
> And how can body, laid in that white rush,
> But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?
>
> A shudder in the loins engenders there
> The broken wall, the burning roof and tower
> And Agamemnon dead.
>
> Being so caught up,
>
> So mastered by the brute blood of the air,
> Did she put on his knowledge with his power
> Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

(Yeats 1973: 441)
birth to various attempts, by both Oulipians and non-Oulipians, to define the
notion of constraint in a more detailed way. Generally speaking, a con-
straint can be understood as the rule that one freely chooses in order to
write a literary text that is inspired by this rule (for it is the rule that triggers
the formal elaboration and the subject matter of the text, as, for instance,
the rule “write a text without using the letter E” produced the most famous
eexample of Oulipian writing, Georges Perec’s novel *A Void*) but that also
follows it from beginning to end (for a rule followed only partly is not
considered a real constraint). In recent years development has gone in
two opposite directions, one that tends toward a broadening of the notion
of constraint and another that tries to establish a distinction between the
category of rules in general and that of constraint in its particularity.

The first of these directions relates to the Oulipian concept of *anticipatory
plagiarism*. This is “the paradoxical and provocative expression which the
Oulipo uses to identify its predecessors: authors who have previously used
methods now seen as ‘Oulipian’” (Mathews and Brotchie 2005: 211); a good
example would be Lasos of Hermione in the second half of the sixth century
B.C., who invented the first lipogram, a text in which one or more letters
are precluded by the writer. In line with this conception, various authors
have advanced the working hypothesis that constrained writing cannot be
limited to those texts and those authors that make explicit claims for it but
should be considered, at least theoretically, a universal device: since it is
possible to unearth constraints in texts that are not labeled as such, every
text becomes virtually constrained (see Beaumatin 2006). In this respect,
an important role has been played by the posthumous publication of Ray-
mond Roussel’s *How I Wrote Certain of My Books and Other Writings (Comment
j’ai écrit certains de mes livres)* (1995 [1935]), in which the author reveals the
“invisible” constraints that he had used to produce some of his fictions.

Others have gone in the opposite direction. They argue for a rather
restrictive use of the notion of constraint, trying to draw distinctions
among the various types of rules, procedures, conventions, and so on that
unavoidably arise when constraints are employed as a writing device. Ber-
nardo Schiavetta and Jan Baetens (2000) have thus tried to formalize the
differences that everyone intuits among three types of rule-bound writing
that must not be confused:

(i) rules that have to do with grammar, for instance, the necessity, in
French, to suit the adjective to the masculine or feminine form of
the noun it follows (these grammatical rules are not regarded as con-
straints in the analysis offered by Schiavetta and Baetens, since they
are not freely chosen: one simply has to act upon them when one
wants to communicate);
rules that are determined by the discursive context in which one finds oneself, such as a letter one has to write. Given the type of letter concerned, the author will have to follow a certain number of rules, but these rules do not in principle determine the text in a way that is very precise: often various possibilities remain open, and the author is never “constrained” to say something this way rather than that way; rules like the lipogram, which are constraints in the narrow sense of the word (a lipogram is both freely chosen and totally normative).

Nevertheless, in these efforts to develop an approach to constrained writing that tends to limit the use of the term to very precise methods and techniques much is left unconsidered, and much is left to the subjective and unpredictable attitude of the reader confronted with the texts under discussion. One must therefore applaud the essential contribution made by Chris Andrews (2003). He advocates a radical split, within the global field of rule-driven writing, between what he calls constraints and conventions (examples of the latter would be the rules of a natural grammar or generic conventions). Andrews (ibid.: 229) summarizes his study with a table of the two types of rules. I think this table extremely illuminating and will therefore cite it verbatim:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constraint</th>
<th>Convention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual invention (“monogenesis” is the rule)</td>
<td>Collective and anonymous invention (“monogenesis” is the exception)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formulated by writer</td>
<td>Formulated by critic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formulation precedes composition</td>
<td>Formulation follows composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cannot exist unless formulated</td>
<td>Exists before formulated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprehended rationally</td>
<td>Normally assimilated by imitation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actualized in a small number of texts</td>
<td>Feature of a large number of texts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formulation precise</td>
<td>Formulation approximate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique formulation</td>
<td>Formulation may be multiple</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formulation definitive</td>
<td>Formulation provisional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May be employed singly [sic]</td>
<td>Always operates in association with other generic conventions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In theory, the logical conclusion from Andrews’s typology should be that there are good reasons to restrict the scientific use of “constraint” as rigorously as possible to the domain of rules and rule-governed writing, whereas the use of the term in the domain of regularities and regularity-driven writing—Andrews’s field of “convention”—should be considered metaphorical and even confusing. In practice, however, things are less clear-cut. For in
certain circumstances some conventions can function in a way that is quite similar to that of a constraint (always in Andrews’s sense), at least at the level of the creative process, that is, seen from the writer’s perspective.

Thus it may indeed occur that a convention is seen and used as a constraint by one who starts writing. In that case, the writer will rely upon the convention as he or she would upon a constraint. First, the writer will use the convention in order to complete or even to replace his or her inspiration (just like constraints, conventions can prove helpful tools when it comes to inventing new texts); second, the writer will try to apply the convention as strictly and as completely as would be done with a constraint (although at first sight a convention seems to allow for many variations, the implementation of a convention may involve a process that rules all aspects of a certain dimension of the text). If this is the case—and I would like to suggest that the example I am going to study in this essay illustrates such a logic—the very distinction between “rules” and “conventions” can be pragmatically loosened or relaxed.

So conventions can become constraints when, for instance, an author decides to foreground a convention of natural grammar as artistic constraint. This is what happens, for example, in French constrained writing with the rule of masculine versus feminine forms of the adjective: in Régine Detambel’s feminist novel La modéliste (1990) only feminine substantives are used, while in Anne Garetta’s queer novel Sphinx (1997) the author uses only adjectives with gender-insensitive forms. Of course, this use of a convention as if it were a constraint does not imply that the convention involved (here certain grammatical conventions) becomes a constraint “in itself” but that its use, in very specific circumstances (here in very distinctive and idiosyncratic texts), can come very close to the way constraints are used by authors.

Conversely, constraints can become conventions once they are implemented in a loose manner. A typical example is how Roussel applied his own extremely idiosyncratic, homophonic procedures. Roussel’s Comment j’ai écrit certains de mes livres has become a cult book and is now often studied in the French educational system and in creative writing classes (for obvious reasons, Roussel is also often quoted in Oulipian circles). So many Francophone readers have come to know that Roussel originated a way of inventing that could be easily used by any writer eager to find a viable alternative to the failures of his or her imagination. As he himself explains:

I chose two almost identical words (reminiscent of metagrams). For example, billard [billiard table] and pillard [plunderer]. To these I added similar words capable of two different meanings, thus obtaining two almost identical
phrases. . . . The two phrases found, it was a case of writing a story which could begin with the first and end with the latter. Now it was from the resolution of this problem that I derived all of my material. . . . Expanding this method, I began to search for new words relating to billard, always giving them a meaning other than that which first came to mind, and each time this provided me with a further creation. (Ibid.: 3, 4, 5)

This means that, for example, the phrase “les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux billard” (the white letters on the cushions of the old billiard table) must somehow come in contact with the phrase “les lettres du blanc sur les bandes du vieux pillard” (letters [written by] a white man about the hordes of the old plunderer). Here we encounter a newly and idiosyncratically invented homophonic rule, which is a good and clear example of a constraint as Andrews defines it. Yet the problem with this rule is that it has many variations in Roussel’s work, which make it vague and its application loose. Consider a later version of this method, which appears, for instance, in his *Impressions of Africa* (2001 [1910]):

As the method developed I was led to take random phrases from which I drew images by distorting it, a little as though it were a case of deriving them from the drawings of a rebus.

I take as an example that of *The Poet and the Moorish Woman*. In this I made use of the song “J’ai du bon tabac dans ma tabatière.” The first line: “J’ai du bon tabac dans ma tabatière” gave me: “jade tube onde aubade en mat (objet mat) a basse tierce [Jade tube water aubade in mat (mat object) third base]. We recognize in this latter grouping all the elements from the beginning of the story. (Roussel 1995 [1935]: 12)

For one thing, the source phrase is no longer manifest in the final text. Nor is the homophonic play any longer restricted to the first and last sentences of the text but exhibits itself everywhere. Finally, the homophony in question is also much looser than in the first version of the method so that ultimately almost any word can produce any other word. This makes it quite clear how a method that in the beginning was a constraint in the narrow sense of the term can eventually become a very loose principle which is much closer to the spirit of a convention than to the spirit of a constraint. Once again, this treatment of a constraint as a convention does not imply that the constraint itself necessarily has to be seen as a convention but that it can be used in a way that is close to the way writers use conventions.

The boundaries between constraints and conventions are therefore more blurred than they may appear in Andrews’s scheme, and the example of Roussel’s homophonic games—invented as a constraint but used sometimes as a convention—suggests that this scheme should leave room for
maneuver. Andrews’s last criterion, for instance, states that, unlike a convention, a constraint can be “used singly,” that is, by itself, not in association with different rule-based mechanisms. Yet even if one may accept that a constraint can be used in dissociation from other constraints, it is difficult to imagine that it can be used without association to other conventions, for the specific context of any type of constrained writing will always entail the encounter between constraint and convention. True, most constraints foreground just one single aspect or parameter of the text: so we can see, for instance, in the case of isogrammatism, the identical number of letters that compose the selected words in a text by Charles Bernstein analyzed by Marjorie Perloff (2009). Yet the very application of this constraint in a constrained text inevitably creates what Andrews calls an “association” with other conventions (albeit very general ones, like “poetry”). This question is not a purely theoretical one. It hints at the impossibility of drawing an absolute line of demarcation between constraints and conventions. In practice, constraints and conventions interact. But as Andrews (2003: 230) himself admits, “yet little is known about this kind of interaction.”

The interaction between constraints and conventions is, I would like to suggest, one of the most fascinating aspects of any reflection on constrained writing. And this question becomes even more intriguing if one limits the field of conventions to what is normally taken into account, that is, to the domain of generic and grammatical regularities (for instance, the sonnet as an example of genre and the variation of male versus female forms of the adjective in French, respectively). Just as it is not possible, at least not in the process of reading the text, to isolate the work of the constraint from that of the convention, so it is not possible to cut off these two types of verbal or linguistic conventions from the broader field of nonverbal conventions, whose role and pertinence are crucial in art in general as well as in literature in particular. Yet nonlinguistic conventions and constraints—and I will soon give examples of such mechanisms—are much less studied than their linguistic counterparts. Or they are only studied from a sociological rather than from a poetic perspective, as if there were a gap between the “internal” (verbal) analysis of the role of conventions and constraints in literature and the “external” (sociological) analysis of another category of conventions and constraints that are seemingly less central to literature than the “internal” ones.

This essay wants to make a strong plea for bringing together these two perspectives. Let me suggest that a certain number of social or “external” mechanisms that determine the writing and reading of literature, and relate to its cultural and institutional embedding, should be taken into account as well. Such external constraints cannot be left aside when one wants to
analyze the internal (i.e., verbal) dimensions of constrained writing. In emphasizing the point, this essay of course does not pretend to introduce a new approach but rather wishes to reconnect with the traditional but today neglected interaction between “internal” and “external” approaches to literature, a key issue in the classic book by René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature* (1984 [1949]).

In what follows, I will rely on a seminal article by R. A. Peterson (1982), who has studied five of these external constraints on the production of culture and names them in his subtitle: “Law, Technology, Market, Organizational Structure, and Occupational Careers.” The idea behind Peterson’s analysis is very simple, and the reason why it is interesting to link that analysis with the theory and practice of constrained writing has to do with the strongly antiromantic vision of art. Contrary to the naive myth of the artist’s freedom as the refusal of all constraints, which is stoutly challenged by the Oulipo, Peterson claims that any artist has to negotiate a certain number of obligations—which he also calls “constraints”—that prevent one from doing as one likes, to put it bluntly. These include (1) law, for not everything can be said on every occasion (even in a context where freedom of speech is guaranteed, there are limits to that freedom); (2) technology, for what can be said will depend on the technological possibilities of the day (even a wealthy author like Roussel, who financed the publication of most of his own books, could not afford certain expensive print options that he had in mind during the writing of his work); (3) market, for the audience is not only the passive recipient of the author’s work but also an active partner in the mutual shaping of what can be published and distributed; (4) organizational structure, for the notion of author is much broader (more “organizational”) than the mere writer of the text: publishers and editors, for instance, do play a role as well, and this role can be dramatically normative; and (5) occupational careers, for the writers are also influenced by the position they occupy in the field, and many of them plan a career there (beginning and unknown authors will be or feel obliged to explore or accept this or that kind of writing, whereas successful and well-known writers may be “obliged” to produce more of the same, and so on). These five types of constraints—and if Peterson uses the word *constraint*, it is because of the normative force of the rules in question—may seem very general, and in fact they are, but in the rest of this essay I will try to demonstrate that they are really at work in the field of novelization.

The constraints listed by Peterson are of great importance and relevance. Yet they have been neglected and not only because of their often nonverbal aspect (they seem to be social or institutional, rather than strictly linguistic, constraints). Another even more decisive reason for such neglect is the
allegedly unaesthetic field to which they apply: popular, commercial, mass media, or in a word “low” culture, which seems light-years away from the extremely sophisticated and—in the eyes of most readers—elite production of the Oulipians and analogous constrained writing authors. Nevertheless, it can be very illuminating to take a look at a specific case from the viewpoint adopted by Peterson. This is not in order to “deconstruct” the opposition of rule versus regularity but in order to start exploring the more complex field of interactions between constraints and regularities. (In what follows I will use the phrase “external constraints” in order to avoid any confusion with “literary” constraints in the narrow sense of the word.)

The External Constraints of the Novelization Genre

As outlined above, a novelization is the transformation into a novel of an original film. Or rather, for the commercial reasons that have already been hinted at, it transforms a more or less definitive version of the screenplay. Given the fact that the average novelization is expected to be available in print the very day of the film’s release, most novelizers have to operate upon a version of the film that precedes the shooting and montage of the film itself, for if they have to wait for the final cut, it will become almost impossible to have the book written, printed, and distributed in time.

Again, novelization is obviously a form of adaptation, but it is quite different, in semiotic as well as institutional terms, from the better known and well-studied case of the filmic adaptation of a literary text. Semiotically speaking, most novelizations are not intermedial: they do not transform a narrative in a certain medium into another medium (as occurs with the filmic adaptation of a literary text), since their source text is not visual (the film) but verbal (the screenplay). As I explained in the beginning of this essay, the normal or average (that is, the commercial) form of novelization is not written by an author who has seen the film but by a novelizer who is asked to transform a screenplay in order to have the book ready and distributed at the moment of the film’s release (this is of course a prototypical situation, which later examples will nuance).

Institutionally speaking, novelizations are opposed to cinematic adaptations of literary texts by their apparent lack of freedom. In the case of a cinematic adaptation, once the adaptation rights are bought, the director can freely transform the source text. In the case of a novelization, the situation is very different, since the genre is characterized by a larger number of constraints on the transformer. Most studies of novelization (e.g., Virmaux and Virmaux 1998; Carcaud-Macaire and Clerc 2004; Hutcheon 2006) focus on matters of intermediality and adaptation, where the genre offers
also an interesting example of intralinguistic transformation (novelizers “translate” a source text into a target text, but they do so within the same language). But the genre is even more intriguing for those interested in the work of constraints not only because this kind of literature, mostly commercial and lowbrow, has been underexplored in literary theory, which maintains a strong preference for high-art corpora. The genre’s interest also resides in the specific nature of its constraints, which are cultural and institutional rather than merely verbal. The basic operation of any commercial novelization, translating a screenplay into a novel, does not just proceed in the way the individual novelizer would like to do it (this case is restricted to the already mentioned subgenre of high-art novelization, whose advent is rather recent). The translation must observe to the views and desires of the producer of the movie (and to a lesser extent of its public, whose tastes are of course of great interest to the producer). In all cases, novelizers also take into account rewriting criteria, such as smoothness of reading (i.e., the narrative fills out the more concise screenplay version) and psychological motivation (which is also less developed in the screenplay, because a good movie is supposed to tell by “showing”). On the other hand, few other genres are as marked by external (institutional, cultural, social) constraints as this one, and the foregrounding of this despised genre may counterbalance the high-modernist reference point often assumed in constrained writing scholarship.

To give the reader an idea of how the making of a novelization concretely works, let me cite two testimonies. One comes from Christopher Priest (1999), the (somewhat highbrow) novelizer of David Cronenberg’s eXistenZ, and the other from John August (2004a), the young scriptwriter who novelized Quentin Tarantino’s Natural Born Killers and tells quite a different story about it.

Priest’s work can be considered representative of commercial novelization. First, the novelization is not initiated by the novelizer but by the producer, who wants to accompany the release of the film with a corresponding book. Second, the cultural prestige of the movie and that of the novelization do not diverge, and the same can be said of the respective genres to which both movie and novelization belong. A movie by Cronenberg is an auteur’s movie, and therefore the novelist chosen, Priest, is also a respected author; moreover, the latter is a specialist in science fiction, which makes him a good choice for the novelization of Cronenberg. Third, the novelist is a professional writer but not a writer who specializes in novelizations. Priest only undertakes to write them when he needs the money, but once the contract is signed, he respects the rules of the game. Nevertheless, in order to underline the difference from his “real,” personal
work, Priest uses a pseudonym, John Luther Novak, for the novelization. But let us listen to him now regarding this job:

I tackled it in exactly the same way as I have written other novelizations in the past. I read the script through to get some sense of what the eventual film might be like, thought about it for a bit, mentally decided which scenes would work best in a novel, and which ones would need to be revised slightly to make them work, then got down to it. Time is always short with a novelization. You become involved with the film when they’ve almost finished work on it, and they want the book to be ready so that it can be on sale at the same time as the film is released. And of course publishing a book takes time. So there’s no time to waste.

In general, what you try to do is produce a book that will run parallel to the film. It should try to have the same effect on the reader as the film will have on its audience. It should tell the same story, have the same characters, have the same general “feel.” But a book requires many more words than a screenplay, so you have the opportunity to embellish a little: work in some back-story, fill out the background, describe the locations, and so on.

But remember: at the time the novel is being written, the author only has a screenplay to work with. It’s probably not even a final version, a shooting script. You have no real idea which actors will be in it, or where the film will be shot. You have no knowledge of the music, the pace, what the special effects will look like, the way the lighting will be used, the overall style. All you can do is guess at them, from what’s in the script. Other than this, I was free to do whatever I thought was best for the novel. (Quoted in Van Parys et al. 2004; for a broad survey of the constraints of the genre, see Larson 1995)

A different—yet not completely different—account can be read on the personal Web site of August (2004b), a professional screenwriter and occasional novelizer:

The things you love can hurt you the most, and that’s certainly the case with *Natural Born Killers*. I first read Tarantino’s script in the fall of 1992, when I was in my first year of grad school at USC. His was probably the 10th screenplay I ever read. The moment I finished it, I flipped back to page one and read the whole thing again. It was that good.

So I counted myself incredibly lucky to get to work on the movie the following year. Oliver Stone had directed a heavily-rewritten version of it, and I was hired as assistant to the two producers while the film was in editing. Even though I was mostly answering phones and writing coverage, it was exciting to be one office away from a big motion picture in post. When I finally got to see the cut, I was disheartened: so much of what I loved about Tarantino’s screenplay had been changed. It was like waiting all year for Christmas and finally opening that big wrapped box to discover what you hoped was an Atari was actually Sears Pong. Same idea, but disappointingly different.
I know there are people who love the movie, and with good reason, but to me the film is too much of too little.

Then, remarkably, I got the opportunity to work on the novelization. Penguin had hired writers to do it, but the editor wasn’t satisfied with what they were producing. After reading my first script and talking with my bosses, she asked me to write a new book. It gave me a chance to go back to Tarantino’s original script and incorporate things that had been dropped from the movie, and add new sequences that detailed other pit-stops on Mickey and Mallory’s trail of terror.

I wrote the book in three weeks, while finishing my master’s thesis and working full-time. I slept three hours a night—but you can do that when you’re 23.

I was really happy with the book I wrote, but before the draft went to Penguin, one of my bosses decided to rewrite it. And rewrite it poorly. That’s not just my opinion; on a purely objective level, the text is a mess. Because there was no time for proper copy-editing, characters’ names are spelled different ways in different chapters.

It’s frustrating to have my name on a book that I hate. But I try to look for the positive: I was paid $7,000 to write the book, which was enough money to get by for six months before I got my next writing job. (That next job was HOW TO EAT FRIED WORMS, a charming kid’s book for which Natural Born Killers was a terrible, terrible writing sample. I owe Ron Howard a lot for even considering me.)

I can’t put my original draft of the novel in the Downloads section, because the publisher controls the copyright. But if anyone reading this post is an enterprising young editor at Penguin, I’d love to show you what the book could have been.

Each in its way, these two testimonies reveal the impact of the constraints listed by Peterson: law, technology, organizational structure, occupational career, and market can all be deduced in a direct manner. In what follows I will take a closer look at Peterson’s main categories and explain their specific bearing on the study of novelization as a constrained genre.

**Law**

Novelization is a genre where copyright issues are crucial. In principle, the rights to novelize a film are included in the contract made by the studio/producer (or the director, if he or she is involved in the production deal; if not, then the producer and the company or companies that the director is working with possess these rights). The extreme diversity of the authorship in the genre does not at all modify this basic constraint. The novelizer can be the director but can also be a ghostwriter, the scriptwriter or one of the members of the scriptwriting team, a professional novelizer, a writer who occasionally undertakes a novelization, and so on. But a movie cannot be novelized legally without permission from the copyright holders.
To novelize despite this constraint, an author (or publisher) must do it in a very different way: for instance, by novelizing a filmic genre, not a specific film. This is the case with the already mentioned novels by Coover, *A Night at the Movies*, which gives a prototypical overview of the various genres that were combined during a traditional projection in the cinema, and Puig, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, which plays with the cultural stereotypes of the melodrama. Obviously, these two novels are not novelizations of any specific movie, even if readers may recognize allusions to specific films.

In the terminology of literary history and sociology, it is clear that novelization is an example of highly commercialized literature, where the initiative for the writing does not come from the author but from someone else who commissions a novelization (a movie producer will contact a book publisher, who will contact an editor, who will contact a writer). The importance of copyright issues and the legal power that the copyright holders have over the novelization explain why the author of the novelization is never simply the writer who actually produces the text. Copyright holders can ask for changes, and it may happen that these changes are made by someone other than that writer. In a novelization not only the content but also the form (style, length, atmosphere, target audience, etc.) are shaped by the expectations of the industrial partner, who commissions the book and owns the output of the writer’s work.

In the case of *eXistenZ*, these expectations, not just of the editor but also of the producers or their representatives, played an active role. For despite the support of his editor, Priest was forced to modify what he considered the definitive version of his text. As Priest comments in the same interview:

No, it [the first draft] wasn’t rejected. What happened was that someone in Mr Cronenberg’s office (of course, it might have come from Mr Cronenberg himself) said that the novel wasn’t dark or menacing enough, that it was too fast-paced, too light. They wanted it made more sombre.

The irony of this, for me, was that one of the things I most liked about the script was its pace, its storytelling flair, and the witty and intriguing dialogue. When I read the script the first time I smiled all the way through, and laughed aloud a couple of times. Cronenberg is an excellent writer. The Jude Law character, in particular, has a nice line in dry asides. The Willem Dafoe character is written in an over-the-top way, which Dafoe, incidentally, translated perfectly on the screen. For some unexplained reason many of the characters spoke English with Russian accents, and I assumed this was some kind of obscure joke. On my reading of the script, I mentally imagined the film as being something like a science fiction version of *The Big Lebowski*, kind of bittersweet, amusing, oddball. I wrote the book accordingly.

Then the word came down from on high that it needed to be darker, more
menacing. This was conveyed to me by the editor at the publishers, who by this time had read and approved my manuscript. She had also read the script. We had a long, long telephone conversation, looking through the script, comparing it with the novelized version. In the end she agreed that I had followed not only the detail of the script, but also the spirit of it. She went back to Mr Cronenberg’s office, but they wouldn’t be moved. The book was too light-hearted, and needed to be made heavier.

The outcome of this was that an advance screening was set up for me and the editor at Shepperton Studios. Neither Mr Cronenberg nor any of his staff were there. It was here that I saw the film for the first time. At the end of the screening, the editor and I sat in the tiny auditorium and again discussed what differences there were between the film and the book. We remained united in our belief that far from being dark and menacing, the movie was an amusing, interesting, well-made adventure film with a lot of witty dialogue and entertaining scenes. There was some fairly gruesome stuff (such as the scene in which Jude Law suddenly finds himself impelled to eat the disgusting Chinese meal made out of lizards’ legs and toad entrails, and the whole business of jacking into virtual reality by having a slimy pod hotwired into your nervous system), but even that seemed to us to be played not as horror but as black humour. Maybe it was a culture clash: our British sense of irony against North American literalism?

Whatever the explanation, the situation remained that Mr Cronenberg was not satisfied, or someone who worked for him said he wasn’t. I agreed with the editor that I would run the manuscript one more time through my word processor, and look for every opportunity to introduce a sense of looming threat. This I did. I put in more negative adverbs: nervously, gloomily, darkly, terrifyingly, and so on. I made the weather worse. I kept the hours of daylight shorter. I described worrying noises. I interjected lines of dialogue and description. “I don’t like this.” “What the hell was that?” That sort of thing. I did what I could.

It seemed to be enough, because after that, up to the present day, I have never heard another word from either Mr Cronenberg or his staff. (Van Parys et al. 2004)

The case of August’s novelization of *Natural Born Killers* is even more blatant, since the rewriting of the text was made without his consent.

**Technology**

The technological constraints involved in novelization are not easily distinguishable from the legal constraints that we have just presented. But they have to do with the way the novelization is part of the contemporary “translation” of a film in different media, which implies that a novelization has become a “must.” Most mainstream films whose screenplays are not based upon previously existing texts, fictional or nonfictional, tend to be novelized, and this is part of the package deal made by the producers.
of the film (the deal may also include the adaptation of the film in various other media, such as toys). Hence my suggestion to consider the very making of a novelization as a constraint: obviously a quite general one, but still a real constraint.

Just as the legal constraints do, the technological constraints diminish the autonomous status of the novelization. There is a tendency toward the networking of cross-media structures. A novelization can no longer be seen as a text that adapts a previous work from a different medium (this would be the syntagmatic view of novelization as belonging to a chain of successive adaptations). Instead, novelization counts as something that is part of a “universe” (for instance, the Star Wars universe or the Star Trek universe) presented simultaneously in as many media as determined by the industrial strategy of the group behind the project (this is the paradigmatic view of the work as the copresence of a “world” across media; see Cubbitt 2004).

In the case of eXistenZ, this cross-mediality is even taken as the basic principle of its own story world, since Cronenberg’s movie is a parable on the blurring of the boundaries between the real world and the fictional world of a computer game, a variant of the classic confusion of reality and fiction (as exemplified in the science fiction of Philip K. Dick). The very fact that even an auteur film like eXistenZ displays this shift toward storytelling across media is extremely significant for the status of this strategy in contemporary cinema.

**Organizational Structure**

This third group of constraints, once again tightly linked to the legal and technological ones, has to do with the specific organization of the work of the novelizer. The writing proceeds under strict organizational rules. Consider, for example, the importance of schedules and deadlines. Priest’s insistence on time (“time is always short”) is a direct reference to the necessity of the simultaneous release of the cinematic and the novelistic version. It is therefore vital that the novelization should be delivered “just in time”: not too early, not too late.

Not too early in order to conform to the latest version of the screenplay. Most novelizations start at the same time of the actual shooting, and many novelizers do not see the actual movie they are novelizing before they have finished their work. In the case of eXistenZ, Priest and his editor were asked to revise the provisional version of the novelization with the help of a special preview (Van Parys et al. 2004).

But the novelization must not arrive too late either, for this would jeopardize its commercial function. A decisive raison d’être of the genre is to give the movie more visibility in places where it is less advertised, such as
bookshops and newsstands. Since it is so crucial to avoid a gap between the release of the film and the appearance of the novelization, novelizers are frequently members of the screenplay team, which is often much bigger than the names listed in the credits.

**Occupational Careers**

This type of constraints—somewhat looser than the other ones—has to do with the fact that the writing of novelizations is related to how authors try to make their way in the professional field. Two cases can be distinguished here. On the one hand, some authors specialize in novelization itself, and the occupational career constraint they have to accept is the fact that the work in that field will always be determined by the wishes and desires of those who commission it. (A good survey of this field is given by Randall D. Larson [1995], who has interviewed most of the professional novelizers working for the U.S. film business.) On the other hand, there are those authors who engage in novelization work as a means of developing a career in another literary field. For them, novelization is not a genre chosen in order to gain critical acclaim or literary prestige; it is a way of making money, buying time for their “real” — and very different — work. As Priest frankly observes, “You obviously wouldn’t do the work unless you were paid,” even though he hastens to add, “but the money’s not that good” (Van Parys et al. 2004). To novelize is to make it possible to pursue other, more ambitious, and less well-paid literary writing. It is therefore important that the novelization job does not take too much time (although time pressure, as an organizational constraint, is very common in the novelizing business) so that performing the job does not harm the author’s chosen career.

Certainly in the case of the “beginner,” but not in it alone, these issues are dramatically important. For one thing, such an unknown novelist is in a weak position when it comes to defending his or her work and hence especially liable to lose time when forced to rewrite (or to lose new contracts if the rewriting is not accepted). For another thing, such a novelist has to preserve the status and autonomy of his or her personal writing; hence also the recourse to pseudonyms (although more often in Europe than in the United States, where authors seem to have a more relaxed attitude toward paid assignments that do not belong to what they see as their core business).

Yet even in the case of respected artists like Priest, among the leading figures in the British science fiction scene, these considerations continue to play a role. Mutatis mutandis, the balance of factors remains the same: the studio provides a stable income but only on condition that the result
serves its needs. *eXistenZ* was first published under the pseudonym John Luther Novak, a name that the author had already used for the novelization of Neil Jordan’s *Mona Lisa* (Novak 1986). As he explains, he reused the “Novak” pseudonym “because just before working on *eXistenZ* I had written and delivered a novel of my own, which has the title *The Extremes* [Priest 1998]. I felt that the similarity of the titles could easily lead to confusion. However, when some of the publishers outside Britain (notably in the United States) discovered who ‘Novak’ really was, they said it would ‘add value’ if my name was on the cover page. Thinking that ‘added value’ meant they would pay more for it with my name on, I agreed. However, I realized soon enough that they meant it added value for them, not for me” (Van Parys et al. 2004).

**Market**

This type of constraint has to do with the orientation to the audience. Of all the constraints, this seems the simplest (who would deny that novelization is market driven?), but it is not therefore always easy to handle. A good example of market pressure can be found at the stylistic level. The novelizer does not have the right to write “too well,” that is, to add too many literary devices and effects to the story. One reason lies in the target readership of commercial novelizations, which is seen as unsophisticated. Another relates to the fact that novelizations are meant to be translated immediately (and easily, i.e., at very low cost) into as many languages as there are markets, a market being defined here as the linguistic area where the movie is released and where there is a possible return on investment for the book.

Of course, the many facets of the market make it a tricky and slippery concept. At the same time, the market aspect of the external constraints will help us understand relationships between this kind of constraint and the traditionally studied aspects of constrained writing, which tend to confine themselves to works as autonomous literary products, not as literary products that serve the requirements of publishers and audiences. Mainstream novelizations are obviously not part of any *restricted market* à la Pierre Bourdieu (1984), where, we will see, other forms of novelization occur. Rather, those of the mainstream belong to the mass market, in which the basic rule of the game could be formulated as *all external and no internal constraints*. In other words, it may seem that the role of constraints in the narrow sense of the word is marginal compared with the role of conventions and external constraints. This impression is, however, somewhat deceptive.
Toward an Integrated View of Interaction between Internal and External Constraints

The constraints studied by Peterson (1982) are typically external, that is, institutional and cultural. In his article he applies them to phenomena of mass culture, such as the music industry, but the example of novelization demonstrates that literature is also a field in which these constraints operate. However, the study of constrained writing in the novelization genre cannot possibly be restricted to them as if it were driven just by such cultural and institutional forces. Other constraints, usually associated with more highbrow types of literature, are operative as well, and it is the combination of these two sets of constraints, external and internal, that makes novelization such an interesting case.

Let us begin with the fact that the mainstream type of novelization, as I have tried to sketch it above, does not exhaust the genre’s production. There is definitely room for other types of novelization, and in these the literary notion of internal constraint can become very perceptible (Carcaud-Macaire and Clerc 2004). Take, for instance, Viel’s Cinéma (1999), a novelization of Sleuth (1972), the last movie directed by Joseph Mankiewicz. This novel, from one of the most prestigious publishing companies in France (Les Éditions de Minuit, the publisher of Samuel Beckett and the French New Novel) and immediately acclaimed by the critics as an important innovation in French fiction (Houppermans 2008), obeys much less than usual the five external constraints introduced by Peterson. It finds a way to novelize the film that escapes the control (i.e., the legal constraint) normally exercised by the copyright holders so that it can become an independent novel more than a novelization or a movie adjunct (i.e., subject to the technology constraint). Further, this novel was written outside any institutional pressure or context (organizational constraint) by a young writer who uses the novelization format with a view to gaining high-cultural distinction (recall the occupational career constraint) and without being paid for it in advance (no market constraint). Instead, Viel’s novel applies a certain number of strong internal constraints. First, it transposes the totality of the movie: not just its story line (as would be the case in a mainstream novelization) but what is seen on the screen (an aspect of ekphrasis definitely absent from all kinds of traditional novelization). Second, the novel uses a totally unreliable narrator, whose narrative intervention gives multiple twists to the story told. Doubtless, no reader will be surprised to learn that commercial novelizations do not allow for unreliability at the level of the narrator; inventing such a narrator to (re)tell the movie’s story is clearly to imply the highbrow aspirations of the novelization.
Internal constraints also can be found in a second category of high-art novelizations, namely those in verse (see, for instance, the anthology edited by Philip French and Ken Wlaschin [1994], which contains quite a few examples of poems or poetry books that can be read as movie novelizations in English). An interesting example, written in Dutch but with many English “ready-mades,” is the novelization of the five Dirty Harry movies attempted by Onno Kosters in his collection Callahan en andere gedaanten (2004). This book uses the internal constraint of the cento, namely, a work wholly composed of verses or passages taken from other authors, only developed in a new form or order. This old strategy has been revitalized in postmodern poetry, which favors all kinds of sampling techniques. In Callahan, Kosters does not represent the various movies of the Dirty Harry series by retelling their story lines, as in mainstream novelizations, or by describing what can be seen on screen, as in Viel’s novelization. Instead, a selection of (in)famous one-liners (such as “Go ahead. Make my day”) become the basso continuo for a series of poetic variations. Just one brief example:

The Boss

reacts: You know my record?
Harry: Yeah, you’re a legend
In your own universe.
Out.

But I’m not up for vacation.
I just put you up.
(Kosters 2004: 48; the fragments in italics are quoted in English in the Dutch text; translations from the Dutch are mine)

Just like Viel, Kosters evades Peterson’s logic of external constraints while relying heavily on internal constraints. In general, the structural framework of highbrow novelizations, here illustrated by the works of Viel and Kosters, is very different from that suggested by Peterson, whose corpora belong to fields of mass culture. Its five constraints change accordingly:

(1) **law**: With Viel and Kosters, it is the author who takes the initiative and who finds a way to have the novelization published.

(2) **technology**: Viel’s and Kosters’s novelizations are highly “independent,” using the filmic source text as a source of inspiration for a new work.

(3) **organizational structure**: Viel’s Cinéma and Kosters’s Callahan do not arise as part of a cinematic marketing plan but as individual manifestations of cinephilia or parody, and therefore such novelizations often are written decades after the movie in question.


occupational career: The novelization expresses the personal poetics of Viel and Kosters. Rather than the novelizations being a way of making a living, these authors make a living in order to write “their” novelizations.

market: Viel and Kosters envisage an elite audience, a readership of peers (as do the other authors published by the same companies).

However, the implementation of the internal constraints in highbrow novelizations is less a way of ignoring the external constraints that govern their lowbrow equivalents than a way of interacting with them. Viel’s novelization of *Sleuth* and Kosters’s novelization of *Dirty Harry* illustrate, for example, what one can do to circumvent the copyright problems that constrain mainstream novelization. These books propose new solutions for innovative novelizations. In Viel we thus encounter the unreliable narrator and, more generally, the shift of emphasis from the story narrated to the narration itself. Just as this narrative framework can be reused as a model by other authors, so can Kosters’s cento technique. It suggests that one can novelize by focusing on the film’s soundtrack rather than on its images and story line, thus avoiding any risk of plagiarism and legal trouble. In other words, the distinction between external and internal constraint changes dramatically. Instead of referring to two separate fields—so that a technique or procedure belongs either to A or to B, even if in certain cases there may be some doubt about the exact pigeonholing—the distinction refers to a single but complex field in which the two kinds of constraint interact.

Finally, one may generalize from the practice of novelization where internal and external constraints meet in concrete texts. The crucial lesson of the genre to all those interested in constrained writing resides in the urgent need to examine further the textual use of any type of literary constraint as both “determining” and “determined”: determining, for its activation plays a key role in the genesis of the text (no constraint, no text); determined, for that mobilization does not leave the constraint itself unaffected. The very definition of the internal constraint often depends on the operation of external constraints, even before the first word is written. And once the writing process starts, the internal constraint necessarily interacts with external ones, with less constrained elements (these would be the “conventions” in Andrews’s terminology) and possibly with nonconstrained elements, in which most constrained texts abound. For this reason, the study of constrained writing should no longer be restricted to the study of internal constraints in high-cultural texts that are detached from their cultural and historical context but opened to what I would like to call the
constraint’s expanded field, which encompasses all of these interactions. In other words, the theory of constrained writing has thus far put too strong an emphasis on the generative function of the constrained procedures. Perhaps under the influence of the romantic view of the writer as a creator ex nihilo, scholarship has focused almost exclusively on the relationship between the initial constraint and the text that it supposedly produces. It is time to adopt a more down-to-earth approach. In this approach narrowly literary, that is, verbal and high-cultural constraints, will meet other external and contextual constraints, for which mass culture is notorious, just as this approach will accommodate the idea that constrained texts often contain unconstrained elements, which also have a role to play in the reading and the writing of constrained literature.

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