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 **Małgorzata Holda**

University of Lodz

*L'homme agissant*  
and Self-understanding:  
Pamela Sue Anderson on  
Capability and Vulnerability

## ABSTRACT

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This article addresses Pamela Sue Anderson's philosophy of capability and vulnerability as an important contribution to the advancement of today's feminist ethics. Following Paul Ricœur's hermeneutics of *l'homme capable*, Anderson extends the phenomenological perspective of the capable human subject to embrace the distinctly feminine capability. She advocates for women's recognizing and re-inventing of themselves as capable subjects, and claims that the perturbing initial loss of confidence in their reflective capacities can be redeemed via the transformations in women's emotional and religious lives, as well as through their creative impulse. Locating in hermeneutics' openness to ambiguity, incompleteness and insecurity a potential to unveil the non-transparent aspects of the assumed male-female equality, Anderson focuses on the interlocking aspect of human capability and vulnerability. She calls for transforming an ignorance of vulnerability into an ethical avowal of it. In reconfiguring patriarchal culture myths, Anderson sees the possibility of re-shaping our approach to vulnerability and capability, especially the human capacity for love.

**Keywords:** capability, self-understanding, Pamela Sue Anderson, Paul Ricœur, vulnerability.

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## INTRODUCTION

8 In her reflection on the pre-given capable subject, Pamela Sue Anderson takes as a point of departure Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics of *l'homme capable* (see especially *Oneself as Another* [1990] and *The Course of Recognition* [2004]). In hermeneutics' openness to various and also conflicting interpretations, Anderson sees a chance to give a fuller account of human capability. She argues for hermeneutics' propensity to create a spacious perspective for an understanding of the human subject in her/his gendered aspect and recognizes phenomenological investigation's insufficiency in this respect. Anderson's personal history—the Lutheran upbringing and the feeling of an important part of her self as constrained (“Engaging” 314)—urges her to search for a retrieval of the specifically feminine capability, which she recognizes as lost. She rests her thinking on a critique of Western culture myths and is especially concerned with the meaning and impact of the Biblical story of Adam and Eve. In her endeavor to restore feminine capability, Anderson uses Julia Kristeva's and Luce Irigaray's feminist writings (cf. Anderson, “Engaging” 320), although she does not follow their psycholinguistic path that acknowledges the implications of the human subject as sexually differing.

## THE LOSS OF CONFIDENCE, RECOGNITION AND SELF-REFLEXIVITY

Anderson's philosophical deliberation on human capability, driven by an acute sense of loss, the loss of something she discerns to be a uniquely feminine confidence of being a capable subject, is consequential for the development of her feminist philosophy of religion. Setting herself the task of probing the problematic of this loss with the available feminist apparatus, she draws on Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler, as well as the already mentioned Kristeva, and Irigaray. Investigating female philosophy as that which is in the shadow of male philosophy, she reflects on the woman-philosopher's starting point (“the primal scene” as identified by her friend, French feminist philosopher Michèle Le Dœuff)—the experience of initially being banned from philosophy (Anderson, “Primal Scene” 13). The event of being excluded is emblematic of the feminine experience of the masculine world of philosophy. The prohibition/marginalization of the distinctively womanly capability reverberates strongly in the female subject's mind, incapacitating her from thinking positively about her reflective aptitude. Anderson draws on Le Dœuff's recollection of her teacher's words, at once condescending and attesting to his own intellectual ineffectuality: “That is *much too hard for you*. Kant . . . Kant . . . you



know . . . Kant is very difficult . . . (143–44; emphasis added)” (“Primal Scene” 13–14). Feminine capability needs to be voiced, to gain in power, or, rather, to *regain* its original strength. This voicing is the empowerment of thinking, of thinking-the-difference, of recognizing other thinking in its differing texture. Baffled by the ban, the female capability seeks ways to overcome the constraint, to display a woman’s own inimitable ways of cultivating reflectivity. This expositional move to transgress the barrier of “the forbidden” stumbles against the simultaneous introvert countermove of “shying away” because of not being recognized by the male Other.

The question of recognition is pivotal in an understanding of the female need to reclaim her true self, while she is disengaging herself from the masculine bias and mistrust of her capacity of reflectivity. Paul Ricœur’s *The Course of Recognition* (2004) is helpful in locating the meaning of the recognition of oneself, the Other, and of mutual recognition, which happen on an interpersonal and societal level. For the sake of elucidating the loss of confidence in the feminine subject we shall extend this perspective and refer to thinkers whose intuitions are complementary to Ricœur’s, while introducing at the same time a slightly different angle of vision. Mutual approbation of the entirety of the Other’s existence is the staple condition of recognition’s indispensability in the even distribution of the epistemic power between male and female subjects. In her essay on personal identity construction, Gabriele Chiari, demonstrating the proximity of Ricœur’s, Axel Honneth’s and William James’s thinking, provides us with an important insight into the problematic of recognition. She convinces us that mutual recognition is the only pathway to mature intersubjectivity—“an intersubjective balance between emotional fusion and ego-demarcation” (59). Whereas Honneth stresses disrespect as the basic source of the loss of confidence, Ricœur takes his point further, speaking of the lack of approbation that can be equated with a feeling of non-existence: “The individual feels looked down on from above, even taken as insignificant. Deprived of approbation, the person is as if nonexistent” (Ricœur, *Course of Recognition* 191). In a similar vein, James accentuates the exigency of recognition for the subject’s psychological stability and a sense of existence (Chiari 61). Recognizing oneself as a capable self and being recognized by the Other as capable originates and facilitates our self-understanding (*Selbstverständnis*)—gaining practical knowledge of the laudable position of being a human being, recognizing one’s strengths and weaknesses. Identification of the lack of approbation, as well as the areas of psychological destabilizations as painful wounds inflicted by a male subject helps deconstruct a woman’s loss of confidence and construct it anew in an arduous process of rebuilding her feminine capability.

The initial, underprivileged position experienced by a female subject is the source of a righteous resistance and calls for renunciation.

Recognition of the Other is not possible when the approbation of her/him is negated. The feminine unarticulated, silenced or ignored voice searches for its gendered and legitimate locatedness. Ever since the moment of recognition of not-being-recognized, the diverse faces of the feminist philosophical project can be nailed down to the varied forms of combating the poignant imbalance between sexes in terms of their self-reflective potential. The capable female subject wrestles to redeem the primordial harmony of human capacity, expressed in the Latin formula of *homo capax Dei*. Impacted by Ricœur's hermeneutics of *l'homme agissant*, Anderson attempts to rehabilitate feminine capability by bringing it back to its primal source—the creation of a human being in God's likeness. It is instructive to mention at this point the backdrop of Ricœur's philosophy of *l'homme capable*—its two important sources. Through Gabriel Marcel, Ricœur delves into the repository of the Christian tradition of a human being's privileged position in the universe as a person able to love and know God. The other important source for him is the Protestant notion of a human being, with a special reference to Karl Barth and his formula of *finitum non capax infiniti*, which accentuates the insurmountable distance between the human and the divine (cf. Wierciński, *Hermeneutics of Education* 141).

To delve deeper into the salient truth of a human being as *homo capax Dei*, we will use John Crosby's splendid explication of it in his book *The Personalism of John Henry Newman*, where he reminds us of the interrelatedness of human capability and the infiniteness of God's capacity:

In a living relation to God, if only in the form of yearning for God, we experience ourselves as *capax Dei*, as having a capacity for God, as therefore having an infinite capacity, an infinite abyss of existence. Without this relation to God we would not know ourselves, would never suspect our infinite capacity, and so we would underestimate ourselves, and would remain vulnerable to being intimidated by the immensity of space-time, and to being depersonalized. (163)

To understand Anderson's venture to recuperate feminine capability in the light of Ricœur's recourse to the Christian tradition of *homo capax Dei* is of no small significance. The original equity of the male and female subjects is entrenched in God's bestowing dignity on the two sexes and making them equally capable. Thus, we are not "mere cosmic specks" (Crosby 163), but are driven by an enormous power—via a recognition of the divine in us, we are capable of experiencing the restless and unlimited possibilities that we are. Anderson's feminist philosophy of religion, when situated within a wider context of phenomenological and hermeneutic inquiry, allows the admirable position of a female subject, and her equal propensity for creativity and self-reflectivity, to be seen. Anderson's re-

visitations of Ricœur's hermeneutics of the self remind us of his germane words: "The confidence I place in my power to act is part of this very power. To believe *that I can* is already *to be capable*" (Ricœur, "Autonomy and Vulnerability" 76). The increase in power is meaningfully evocative of Gadamer's notion of an increase in being (*Zuwachs an Sein*) (see Gadamer 135–36). Applicable to the subject's empowerment, the placing of confidence in one's power results in being empowered, and thus in an increase in being.

Anderson criticizes the assumed gender-neutrality in Western philosophy which camouflages the actual inequality in the acknowledgement of the epistemic power of female and male subjects, stating the following:

Claims to gender-neutrality in Western philosophy conceal highly significant issues of loss of confidence, loss of epistemic justice and loss of reflexive self-understanding. Loss not only damages subjects of knowledge and action, but this damage obscures that which was in phenomenological terms originally given: capability. ("Lost Confidence" 43)

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Re-addressing Ricœur's hermeneutic phenomenology, Anderson recognizes the strengths of the phenomenological investigation, while seeing in hermeneutics further possibilities to inquire into the non-transparent aspects of the supposed male-female equity.

## HERMENEUTIC SENSIBILITY AND THE QUESTION OF HUMAN CAPABILITY

Hermeneutics welcomes the ambiguous, the incomplete, the insecure, and thus it grants us with a true possibility to reach the otherwise inaccessible and nuanced senses of the problematic at hand. Anderson credits hermeneutic interrogation in its special propensity for unraveling the abstruse and the confusable thus:

Hermeneutics is interpretation; and, in this context, the hermeneuticist interprets the opaque, in order to make the capacities of the subject more transparent. So, hermeneutics can help women and men to make sense of themselves, to understand their own cognitive and conative abilities, and to achieve greater self-awareness. ("Lost Confidence" 43)

In displaying its hospitable gesture, hermeneutics situates itself in the position of recognizing and listening to the voices whose expression was counteracted and disavowed. Hermeneutic sensibility's all-embracing horizon is the space of the limitless possibilities of interpretation. In

recognizing the dignity of opposing interpretations, hermeneutics precludes violence, oppression and calculation (cf. Wierciński, *Existential Hermeneutics* 387). Pursuing her project to reinstate the validity of the blocked, or even hideously subjugated, feminine voice, Anderson locates her endeavor at the very heart of hermeneutic investigation. It is worth highlighting once again that hermeneutics is “in the service of those voices that are suppressed and denied expression” (Wierciński, *Existential Hermeneutics* 387).

Concerned with the silencing of the feminine voice, Anderson aims to heighten awareness of the gendering of philosophy in the changing landscape of European culture. At the same time, she calls for our openness to philosophy’s possibility to “articulate the material, social and cognitive dimensions of a subject’s conditioning,” and emphasizes hermeneutics distinctive role in locating and explicating those dimensions of our humanness which are opaque and phenomenologically understood as “non-natural” (“Lost Confidence” 43). Her employment of Ricœur’s thinking to elucidate the subject’s conditioning involves yet another important perspective—an understanding of a human person as an embodied subject. Alongside Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Gabriel Marcel, Maine de Biran, Merleau-Ponty and others, Ricœur endorses the conceptualization of human subjectivity as embodied (cf. Kearney 179–80). Ricœur maintains that the human subject *is a body* and also *has a body* that belongs to the world. According to him, it is exactly one’s embodied being that is constitutive in discovering oneself as a capable human being. He writes:

... in projecting myself as the subject of action, I affirm myself capable self of that action. To decide, we have said, is to project myself in general as the theme of conduct proposed for the body to obey. My capacity is hidden in the imputation of myself in the context of the project... I feel *capable* as an incarnate being situated in the world, of the action which I intend in general. (Ricœur, *Freedom and Nature* 203)

The prescient content of the aforementioned quotation from Ricœur’s early work *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary* (1950) interconnects with the subject matter of his influential *Fallible Man* (1960), *Oneself as Another* (1990) and *The Course of Recognition* (2004). Those works uphold three important theses in reference to human capability: the capable self is the embodied self, self-understanding is related to the conceptualization of the human subject as the embodied subject, and self-understanding is reflective rather than immediate. Ricœur’s important insight into human capability as ensuing from the will entrenched in the embodied being can be summarized thus: “In spite of all conditioning,

a human subject is not a subject-like object but a willing subject engaged in living being . . . It is in this living, embodied existence that a subject finds him- or herself as capable” (Helenius 193). The embodied and reflective character of self-understanding, which Ricœur propounds, seems to be crucial for an understanding of Anderson’s reflection on the loss of, and the possibilities of regaining, a distinctly feminine capability.

Picking up on Ricœur’s assertions, as well critiquing Merleau-Ponty’s view of the body (in his *Phenomenology of Perception*)—the seeming openness of the “fleshy” existence as “located in a world it did not create and over which it does not have ultimate control”—Anderson makes a connection between the embodied subject and the female subject’s loss of confidence in her capability (“Lost Confidence” 44). Upholding the stark binary opposition of body (the inferior—the feminine) and mind (the superior—the masculine), Western culture has proven to be a culture of denigrating the female subject—disturbingly viewing her as less capable. As Anderson argues, struggling to assert her voice, the female subject confronts the decapacitating configurations of woman’s agency in myths, including religious myths.

Musing on the loss of female confidence evoked in the traditional patriarchal understanding of the Biblical story of Adam and Eve, she adds an example of the young de Beauvoir’s loss of confidence. De Beauvoir upgrades the male capability of self-reflectivity when she thinks of Sartre “the philosopher,” gives up her original thinking, and does not venture to call herself a philosopher (cf. Le Dœuff 136) (Anderson, “Lost Confidence” 44). In consequence de Beauvoir’s self-doubt is expressive of the loss of her ability to understand herself and to think philosophically (Anderson, “Lost Confidence” 45). Combining Ricœur’s hermeneutic phenomenology and de Beauvoir’s existential phenomenology of “the second sex,” Anderson sees “the bodily situation of a woman as originally capable, yet vulnerable to gender norms” (“Lost Confidence” 45). Gender-based vulnerability, as instantiated through de Beauvoir’s case, inspires further interrogation of the question of lost confidence.

### ETHICS, *L'HOMME CAPABLE* AND *L'HOMME FALLIBLE*

Before we tackle the problematic of vulnerability as enrooted in gender distinction, it is worth taking a closer look at a more general notion of vulnerability. Capability is intertwined with vulnerability. Human capacities and relatable vulnerabilities inform us about our condition of being human beings, both capable and liable to harm. Affected by the knowledge of his/

her strengths/gifts and the liability to get hurt, the self participates in an incessant quest for self-understanding, marked by a sense of provisionality, incompleteness and finitude. The essential relationship between capability and vulnerability can be viewed thus:

The fundamental capabilities/incapabilities of a human are linked with his/her corresponding vulnerabilities. As existing and inhabiting the world, the human person is, by virtue of the very nature of being human, also *l'homme faillible*. Human fallibility, weakness, and suffering describe the inabilities of the capable person. Ricœur's anthropology develops as the transition from the phenomenology of a suffering human being toward the phenomenological hermeneutics of the capable person. (Wierciński, *Hermeneutics of Education* 149)

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It is our vulnerability which makes us open to love, friendship, justice, but also abuse, domination, injustice. Investigating various forms of oppressing and silencing women's voices, Anderson refers to the most basic notion of vulnerability as "being liable to wounding, to openness or exposure; this vulnerable relationality makes us liable to harm and infection, but also to mutual affection" ("Speaker Vulnerability"). This definition leads us to the potential source of gender-based vulnerability. The traditional, historically established, patriarchal distribution of power between genders encompasses women's position as more exposed to harm due to the social and financial dependence on men. This, however, is strictly related to a woman's self-esteem (governed by a male perspective) of emotional dependence, of being affectively bound to man. The fossilized schemes of dependence are often taken for love.

It is necessary to accentuate the possibility of the impairment of one's emotions by fear and anxiety in situations of vulnerability in love relations. Historically speaking, this has been an experience of women throughout centuries and appears in many forms in today's societies. The scarring of emotions relates to the incomprehensibility and misunderstanding in the case of an abuse of love, when, paradoxically and frightfully, instead of a fulfilling relation, one experiences an emotional mutilation, or a debasement of feelings. Deplorable as it is, the disgrace and disparagement of one's identity, total enslavement, or the taking away of part of one's freedom, which seems to be highly improbable in the case of love relations, does happen when attachment, compassion or duty are taken for love and the crux of love is misunderstood. Reflecting on human capabilities, Martha C. Nussbaum, the renowned contemporary social, political and feminist thinker, warns us: "Perception without responsibility is dangerously free-floating, even as duty without perception is blunt and blind" (155). In

the tarnishing of love (when it is mistaken for duty or varied forms of emotional attachment), the shame brought on the Other, decapitates and disables the self from loving truly. On the other hand, the loved one, if not loved genuinely, suffers from the corruption and the dishonor of not experiencing the authenticity of love. This results in acute humiliation and disablement, akin to that which happens in social situations—human capability is blemished.

The confusing journey of a feminine subject's self-discovery—her path toward self-understanding—can lead through a recognition of the deprived or constrained self as part of her self in order to regain her *able* self. Paradoxically, for the incapacitated female self, suffering displays a recuperative force of restoring inner balance, via combating the misgivings which shroud the pervasively poignant state of mental, emotional or physical inability, and haunt the positivity of self-search. Disabling can often mean denying one's freedom. It happens as something exterior, but it can arise from a self-denial in a situation of pressure, dominance and subordination. The laborious path towards rehabilitation—the movement from an incapable to a capable self—rests on an increasing understanding of the available, the existing and the formerly undiscovered potentialities.

Despite being an uneasy path, the recourse to a genuine practicing of love becomes a remedy in the recuperation of human capability, and, at the same time, the restoration of the distinct feminine capability. Even though Anderson, in her essay "On the Boundaries of Intellectual Thought in Late Twentieth-Century Europe," is not explicit on the topic of capability and vulnerability, its concluding sentences say a lot about the exigency of love as the greatest of human capabilities. Ethically speaking, inasmuch as love makes us vulnerable, at the same time, it makes us capable. The renewing power of love partakes in the true refurbishing of the human subject as a capable subject. Anderson contends:

... we are aware that both individually and communally we need not only to discuss writings on exile and dissolution but to construct writings on love, that is to create those fragile boundaries that render concrete attachments possible. . . . the urgent task for us on the boundaries of thought in late twentieth-century Europe is to learn to express love, calling ourselves to the ethical relationship in response to the Other. ("On the Boundaries" 49)

Since the issue of vulnerability as entwined with love is of special import in an interpretation of the common conceptualizations of vulnerability and vulnerable relationality, a closer look at some of the contributions to *Love and Vulnerability: Reflections on the Work of*

*Pamela Sue Anderson* Conference, held at Oxford University between 16 and 18 March 2018, is instructive (see <https://www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/event/love-and-vulnerability-memory-pamela-sue-anderson>). The participants paid homage to Anderson's momentous insights into the problematic of the human being as *l'homme agissant* and *l'homme souffrant* a year after her premature death. The speakers developed diverse "vulnerability paths" that Anderson acknowledged as important in contemporary feminist ethics. The Conference contributions gave rise to full papers collected in the double issue of *Angelaki* 25.1–2 (Ed. Pelagia Goulimari, 2020). The first part of the collection comprises Anderson's unpublished works on vulnerability and love edited by her colleagues. The second presents works on the topic by her friends, collaborators and former students, as well as those who engaged with her written output, not knowing her in person.

A brief overview of some selected papers in part two indicates the exceptionally wide range and depth of Anderson's thought displayed through the eyes of the volume contributors. Laurie Anderson Sathe, Pamela's sister, touches upon Anderson's project "Enhancing Capable Life: Transformative Change, Confidence and Creativity" (58–62). Its aim, as the philosopher herself explained, was "to develop an ontology of becoming, with a transformed and transformative conceptual scheme, for creating new concepts to live by (April 2015)." Anderson's unfinished project bespeaks the profundity of her hermeneutic sensibility. Laurie Anderson Sathe accentuates that Anderson "conceived of vulnerability as a capability to enhance our lives in a continual creative process of transformation" (58). It is this transformative dimension of vulnerability, understood in terms of an all embracing mind-body-soul change that Laurie Anderson Sathe finds meaningfully applicable in the context of today's world afflicted with unceasing fear and violence. The import of the formative and trans-formative aspects of human existence—a life-long *metanoia*—is one of the central themes developed by the iconic figures of philosophical hermeneutics. Undoubtedly, this aspect of Anderson's work on vulnerability is closely akin to Ricœur's hermeneutics of the self and Gadamer's hermeneutics of conversation.

In "Pamela Sue Anderson—Witness to the Gospel, Prophet to the Church" (63–67), Susan Durber comments on Anderson's perplexed connection with the church, claiming that her thought is both a challenge to the church and a novel rendition of the church's most profound and pressing teachings. She stresses that Anderson's work encourages women to re-evaluate their life experiences as a legitime wellspring of knowledge, to re-shape their vulnerabilities and to reconfigure love as offering freedom and hope. Morny Joy's "Pamela Sue Anderson's Journeying



with Paul Ricœur” (84–96) shows Anderson’s engaging with Ricœur’s thought, and accentuates the growing import of the philosophical concern with vulnerability in the past ten years, as well as her work on converting the troublesome state of our ignorance of vulnerability into an ethical avowal of it. Paul S. Fiddes (109–25) espouses Anderson’s voice on the controversial issues of justice in case of women as victims of abuse, their need for personal and societal integrity and justified anger, as well as the necessity of securing autonomy in expressing themselves. Anderson’s reflection on forgiveness, justice and love resonates with Ricœur’s discussion of love and justice, and the place of love in executing justice. Interestingly, Fiddes theological account of forgiveness intersects with Anderson’s insistence on the human struggle with justice involving the promise of a new future.

Another central issue in Anderson’s *oeuvre* is raised by Dorota Filipczak who responds to the philosopher’s addressing of the social mechanisms preventing or censoring feminine self-expressiveness as that of “a knower” (156–64). As Filipczak explains in “The Disavowal of the Female Knower. Reading Literature in the Light of Pamela Sue Anderson’s Project on Vulnerability” the female (often feminist) philosopher is mostly perceived through a perspective which is never detached from her physicality. Her femaleness is seen as denigrating her reasoning, or as a disappointment. In the mental constructions controlling cultural and literary discourse, femaleness and intellect are viewed as binarily opposed. Emily Cousens examines Anderson’s notion of ethical vulnerability as activating an openness to change, and pursues possibilities that ensue from affirming vulnerability, especially in the context of feminist responses to sexual abuse (165–80). Carla Bagnoli’s essay “Love’s Luck-Knot” defends Anderson’s argumentation for untying love and vulnerability from Western philosophy’s myths that insist on their inextricable connection to subjugation, fragility and dependency (195–208). Basing her reflection on the less explored ontological vulnerability in Kant, Bagnoli upholds Anderson’s claim of vulnerability’s positive value, and argues that love’s distinctive dynamism and reciprocity allow for vulnerability not to be seen as an impediment but rather as a fundamental capability that molds human identity and “drives and expands agency, and sustains relations of mutual accountability” (195). Let us conclude this survey with another perspective drawing attention to Kantian legacy in Anderson’s thinking. Elaborating Anderson’s debate with Kant, Alison Assiter investigates vulnerability’s relationship to freedom and autonomy (222–30). She also discusses convincingly the normatively desirable vulnerability (e.g., psychical or corporeal openness to others), and undesirable forms of vulnerability (domestic violence and rape).

## SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND WOMAN AS A KNOWER

The human capability of love and the corresponding vulnerability are undeniably important facets of Anderson's philosophical reflection. However, it is noticeable that she places greatest emphasis on the situation of a female subject whose intellectual capabilities have been denied by a male subject/s. This stance calls for the consideration of a far more encompassing conceptualization of vulnerability, one which reaches out for an understanding of a human being in his/her entirety. Anderson's overall view of vulnerability (a woman-philosopher stance) as less affective-oriented, more open, and epistemically laden finds its counterpart in the broader landscape of conceptualizing vulnerability. The epistemic and existential standpoint on vulnerability has been commendably expressed thus:

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Vulnerability is the very condition of knowledge since it makes us sensitive to all the details that are relevant to our engagement with life: awakening to ourselves. It encompasses transforming the inexplicable into the real fabric of life, a life that can be experienced by everybody who is able to do the necessary exegesis (ἐξήγησις—“reading from”) without falling prey to imposing one's own pre-conceived ideas of the projected meaning (εἰσήγησις, eisegesis—“reading into”). This transformation is a long and laborious path to the discovery of meaning. It is an exercise in allowing that which needs to be interpreted to speak to the interpreter. (Wierciński, “Phronetic Education” 8)

Considering vulnerability as a pathway to discovering our true selves in the complex and changing reality of life draws us nearer to a comprehension of Anderson's insistence on the distinctly feminine capability and her loss of confidence. The revalidation of the weightiness of the female voice as expressive of her idiosyncratic thinking involves openness on the part of both sexes: male and female. Instead of fleeing from what seems to be at first too perplexing, too discomfiting, or even endangering in a relationship oriented toward mutual trust and enrichment in particular societal constructions, gender coexistence/cooperation requires an effort to disavow one's pre-conceptions of life. It calls for a resignation from the safeguarding of one's borders and from upkeeping one's defenses. This is a situation of vulnerability which requires maturity and wisdom. It is the recognition of the Other's valuable presence and voice that enables us to surmount excessive vulnerability and opens a genuine path of self-understanding. Recognition of oneself, of the Other, and of oneself through the Other are crucial for our development as human subjects. Ricœur asserts:

Recognition is a structure of the self, reflecting on the movement that carries self-esteem toward solicitude and solicitude to justice. Recognition introduces the dyad and plurality into the very constitution of the self. Reciprocity in friendship and proportional equality in justice, when they are reflected in self-consciousness, make self-esteem a figure of recognition. (*Oneself as Another* 296)

The constitution of the female self demands a renewed recognition of her capability. This is one of the central concerns of contemporary feminist ethics. Anderson's critique of the patriarchal configuring of the Biblical story of original sin can be viewed as representative of the important response that today's feminist ethics gives to the imposed intellectual disequilibrium between genders. Her invaluable contribution to the feminist hermeneutic reconfiguring of the Bible messages can be seen as drawing attention to "male self-projection implicit in traditional theism," but also as offering "a way to transform biased beliefs so as to include the needs of women and nonprivileged men" (Filipczak 15).

The Bible excerpt on original sin can be re-read hermeneutically to unveil Eve as a powerfully capable subject. She is capable of choosing. If demeaned later (and this relates to Adam too), it is only because of her primordial capability of choosing. Even if the wrong choice infuses her with a sense of being less capable, Eve testifies to God's creation of her as a free human being. In not choosing rightly, she is still a capable subject. The outcome of the transgression of God's law is acute for both the female and male capability. We can talk about a wounded, or even shattered capability, regardless of gender. The beauty of creation was desecrated, and this is what needs to be restored. The guilt lies equally with Adam and Eve, and affects them both; it only has a different form. The form, however, is of secondary importance because it is the pre-given capability that asks to be reinstated.

Undeniably, the rehabilitation of the feminine voice is what underpins Anderson's feminist philosophy of religion. Although this article does not aim to focus on her accomplishments in this field, it is worth mentioning the areas of research in which the female feminist philosopher finds inimitable ways to raise topical queries. In *New Topics in Feminist Philosophy of Religion, Contestations and Transcendence Incarnate* (2010), Anderson claims that:

Feminist "philosophers" of religion exist; but due to social and institutional resistance, many of these feminists work for change at the margins of philosophy, in interdisciplinary locations bridging philosophy and theology, philosophy and literature, philosophy and women studies, philosophy and religious studies, philosophy and gender theory, philosophy and politics, philosophy and the social

sciences (including anthropology), and philosophy and education (e.g., critical pedagogy). (xii)

The feminine voice in the domain of the philosophy of religion, located at the junctions of various disciplines, calls to be fore-fronted. It also expresses the necessity of promoting the distinct feminine capability.

Although, as mentioned earlier, Anderson does not follow the precepts of Kristevan psycho-linguistics in resolving the question of the loss of the specifically feminine capability, it is vital to notice that she acknowledges Kristeva's insight into the situation of a female intellectual as that of an exile. Creating from a perspective of the periphery incites a specific kind of input into feminist ethics. Anderson writes:

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What more precisely, does marginality contribute to either the knowledge or the transformation of the subject and its other? Kristevan psycholinguistics may not have an explicit, epistemological answer. Yet at the very least Kristeva follows the post-Hegelian philosophy in implying that marginality can offer a new standpoint on good and evil—for an “ethics of knowledge.” (“On the Boundaries” 42)

The position of an intellectual dissident enables to make a real contact with the empowerment of thinking through thinking-the-difference. The woman subject uncovers in her denigrated femaleness a new impulse to reconsider the expected balance between the sexes, and to oppose the imposed reductionist approach in exposing her intellectual strengths and gifts. As Filipczak explicates after Anderson, this involves women reinventing themselves as “other,” prompted by the “paradoxes and transformations in their emotional life, religious experience and creativity” (21) (see Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy* 19).

Discussing the marginalization of the feminine voice in philosophy as interwoven with the question of lost confidence, Anderson draws our attention to an important aspect of disregarding the feminine input into philosophical thought. In “Silencing and Speaker Vulnerability: Undoing an Oppressive Form of (Wilful) Ignorance,” which could be treated as her manifesto of the need to re-empower feminine thinking, she argues that “[s]ilencing exploits vulnerability; and speaker vulnerability is an exposure to either violence or affection, in its dependence on an audience.” Examining the ways in which contemporary conceptualizations of vulnerability reduce it to a susceptibility to violence, and ignore the unthought—an openness to affection, she makes the following claim:

A wilful ignorance of vulnerability develops not as a lack of knowledge, but its disavowal—on which various forms of oppression are built.

An active disavowal of thinking (the unthought) is the other side of a striving for invulnerability; and this striving is encouraged by a social world which remains ignorant of its own wounding, as well as its own potential for ethical relations in vulnerability. (“Speaker Vulnerability”)

Anderson’s capacity to see the other side of the problem of vulnerability, which, at the same time, amounts to her piercing through the state of invulnerability, attests to realizing the ethos of thinking-the-difference *par excellence*. Thinking-the-difference results in the possibility of subverting the pejorative side of the vulnerability issue and seeing the potentialities that lie on the reverse side as brought to light.

Anderson’s deliberation on being a knower, being recognized as a knower, and woman as a knower is an interesting contribution to our understanding not only of the psycho-dynamics of speaking, but is one of the ways of rendering the import of the epistemic autonomy. She says:

every speaker—whatever their sex or gender—is vulnerable precisely because they are also dependent on an audience not only to hear them, but to recognize them as a knower. So, to repeat, a philosopher is open to not having her speaker’s needs met; this means vulnerability. Silencing is the risk a speaker runs, since an audience might not hear her or recognize her as a knower. (Anderson, “Speaker Vulnerability”)

Highlighting the importance of transforming our ignorance of vulnerability into a distinctively ethical assertion of it (Anderson, “Speaker Vulnerability”) leads us to the very crux of her standpoint, which is a re-thought understanding of a human being as a vulnerable and capable being.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The problematic rendered in the above reflection on Anderson’s philosophy of capability and vulnerability, with the inclusion of references to some selected papers in the recent volume on vulnerability and love, does not exhaust the conversation with her philosophical thought continued posthumously. The essay’s aim was to show that thinking with Anderson is undoubtedly an enriching journey into the highly nuanced paths of thematizing capability and vulnerability. Her hermeneutic approach encompasses those forays which are easily overlooked in less comprehensive attempts to do justice to the versatility of the capability/vulnerability quandary. We are indebted to her for her insightful appropriations of Ricœur’s philosophy and the acquainting of a wider readership with his hermeneutics of the self (especially in the United

Kingdom's academic milieu), and also for her original, feminist thought that allows for engagement with the otherwise neglected, marginalized, or even silenced areas of what it means to be a human being, also a human being as *homo religiosus*.

It is vital to emphasize that Anderson's *oeuvre* (approached here through the topic of her assertions on capability and vulnerability) is not just most influential in a dialogue with the orthodoxies of traditional theism opened by the feminist philosophy of religion, but also impacts contemporary, multidisciplinary research in the Humanities. Anderson proves that being deaf to the idiosyncrasies of feminine thinking in the humanistic research substantially delimits our understanding of the crucial facets of human existential situation as a capable and vulnerable subject. Expanding our scope of thinking, Anderson's is a resounding voice which not only identifies the masculine prejudice against the significance and value of feminist thought, but inspires women and men alike to engage in blossoming as embodied, gendered subjects, awakened to cooperate with, rather than oppose, each other. Her feminist writing can also be viewed as perfectly expressing women's need to liberate themselves from the constraints of being defined by assumed feminine emotionality. Anderson's continuous insistence on including women as legitimate subjects in philosophy, and the philosophy of religion in particular, testifies to her ambitious project of upgrading an autonomous feminine voice in its expressiveness of regained confidence in her distinct female capability.

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# LITERATURE GOES POP

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# A SPECIAL GUEST OF *TEXT MATTERS*

**Mieke Bal**

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## IT'S ABOUT TIME: Trying an Essay Film

# ABSTRACT

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This essay is about the essay, a form (as Adorno called it) of thought alive that is partial in the two senses of the word: subjective and fragmented. Thinking as social, performative, and always un-finished; as dialogic. Through the mythical figure of Cassandra, who could foresee the future but was cursed to be never believed, I tried to “figure,” make a figural shape for the thoughts on the indifference of people towards the imminent ecological disaster of the world. At the invitation of Jakub Mikurda of the Łódź Film School to come and make an essay film, within one week, but with the participation of many great professionals, I was able to create, at least in the first draft, the essay film *IT'S ABOUT TIME!*

The ambiguity of the title suggests the bringing together of my thoughts about time, in relation to history in its interrelation with the present, and, as the exclamation mark intimates, the urgency to do something. The former is enacted by a tableau vivant of Cassandra's lover Aeneas as Caravaggio's *John the Baptist*, with a contemporary painting by David Reed shifting over it; and by interactions with two paintings by Ina van Zyl. The urgency is presented in many of the dialogues, quoted from various sources, especially Christa Wolf's novel *Cassandra*. I argue that “thinking in film,” with film as a medium for thought, is what the essay film's foremost vocation is. Through a reflection on “thought-images,” which I see as the result of “image-thinking,” I also argue for the intellectual gain to be had from “essaying” thought artistically.

**Keywords:** essay, figural, form, meandering, mutuality, partiality, trying.

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The week of 1–8 March 2020, just one week before the coronavirus shut-down, I was in Łódź, making, or trying to make, an “essay film.” This was at the invitation of the “Narrative Media Lab” (dir. Krzysztof Pijarski) of the Łódź Film School, which has an experimental program on the essay film, directed by dr Jakub Mikurda. The School has been the recipient of a grant that allows dr Mikurda (henceforth, Kuba) to invite some people to explore through creative practice what an essay film is: what it can be, what it can do. Even regardless of the question of whether I considered myself capable of making a film of any length or genre in one week, which is trying in more than one sense, I had never thought about this essay-film question. So, I was slightly flabbergasted; but when, upon receiving his invitation, I said so, Kuba’s quick answer was: “but all your films are essay films!” The truth of that answer stunned me. Why did he know something about my work that I didn’t? Upon reflection I had to agree, and was grateful, both for the invitation and for the way it compelled me to think again about my own films in the light of this concept. Is it a genre, an approach, a characterization of a specific content? If the latter, how could I briefly describe the content of each of my films? With my innate curiosity, the topic of the essay film began to haunt me.

I remember the term “essay” from school, where it meant simply: “not narrative.” Given my life-long engagement and fascination with, and subsequent study of, narrative, this doesn’t sound right to me; narrative can well be an integral part of an essay—just think of the deployment of stories as examples. And in light of my resistance against binary thinking, the problem is this: in addition to the simplifying effect of dualism, which is problematic in itself, we must keep in mind that logically, negative definitions are vague; so to speak, by definition. Instead, reflecting on what the essay, as genre, approach or, as Adorno would have it, form, is or does helps understand some nuances which, for me, are very important in cultural production and analysis. I also find it remarkable that Adorno’s extensive writings on literature (two volumes in English) begin with an essay on the essay, thus giving it pride of place in literature. But not as a genre. Rather, unexpectedly, as “form.” To honour this inflection, I give the present essay on the essay-film experience-cum-experiment an essayistic form. But what form is that, if none can be fixed? I decided to give it the formless form of short fragments, presented in alphabetical order by lack of any other order, logic, binary, or hierarchy. Each fragment, except the final one, concerns a common noun and a proper name, bound together for a variety of reasons, different in each case.

## ATTEMPT, ADORNO

Adorno devoted a large part of his essay on the essay as form to bridging the gaps that binary oppositions tend to dig, which he did by means of nuancing, even if he does not foreground that verb. Among many passages I could have selected, this one characterizes the philosophical *tone*—a nuance that goes well with Adorno's use of "form": "The essay allows for the consciousness of nonidentity, without expressing it directly; it is radical in its non-radicalism, in refraining from any reduction to a principle, in its accentuation of the partial against the total, in its fragmentary character" ("Essay as Form" 9). Along with the series that ends on the rejection of reductionism, of these words of wisdom, "partial"—mind the ambiguity of that word!—and "fragmentary" in particular seem to bring us closer to what an "essay" can be or do. Both words resist the idea of the total, of the encompassing whole, but also, in its shadow, the totalitarianism that seems to have many places of the current world in its grip. In addition to the opposite of totality, "partial" means also "subjective," in the sense of acknowledging that what the essayist brings forward cannot pretend to be an objective, factual truth; "passionate" in that the holder of the view brought forward cares about it; and "rational," since partiality also encompasses the wish to persuade, which can only be done through rational arguments. As for "fragmentary," this accords well with the non-total(itarian). I will keep these two words in mind, foregrounding even more strongly that nothing can be whole.

"Essay": in addition to taxing, difficult, the word "trying" means attempting to say something for which no ready-made (literary) genre exists as yet. Perhaps "genre" is not where we should look to understand the essay, then, but rather, explore the word-name itself. The modesty that word includes is crucial. Trying, attempting, groping towards, fumbling, even floundering. That modesty itself acknowledges that nothing is perfect, and also, that no one does anything alone; that making something is collective and social. It also has a temporal consequence, since it intimates the idea that "things," such as artworks or films, are never finished; they are, as the saying has it, "in progress," since "trying" is never over. But "essay" also includes "thought." You don't try something without, first, thinking about it. As it happens, one of my films that Kuba considered essay films, *REASONABLE DOUBT: SCENES FROM TWO LIVES* (2016), concerns precisely thought; the social, collective, performative aspects of the activity and the resulting ideas. According to the essayistic thrust of this film, thinking itself is tentative. Thinking, then, occurs in the essay-mode. This makes the essay an important, indeed, crucial cultural phenomenon.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On this and my other films, see <http://www.miekebal.org/artworks/>  
This film, on René Descartes and Queen Kristina of Sweden, premiered in the Muzeum Sztuki MOCAK in Kraków, in the film and philosophy festival in 2016. Professor Roma Sendyka

## BI-LATERAL, BOLLAS

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There is one aspect of the essay that I consider as fundamental as modesty; one that derives from it. That is reciprocity, mutuality, reversibility: dialogue, not monologue. Whether or not essayists are alone when making it, they are already responding to other ideas that are around; an essay is bi-lateral. As convinced as the essayist is likely to be when embarking on making an essay, the fact that nothing can be done in isolation—even sitting in a study in front of a computer, one is intellectually, mentally surrounded by others—entails a responsive attitude to the call and contribution of other people to the topic of the essay and the essayist’s argument. This is the dialogic nature of thought, and of the subsequent trying. This holds not only for the other people directly or indirectly involved, but also for what, in our binaristic mode of thinking and considering the world, we too easily take to be the “object.” In my work on visual art I have frequently advocated an open ear and eye for what the object has to say. In this line of thought I have put forward one of my academic catchphrases, “the object speaks back.” By that I mean that the object of analysis must be given the opportunity to resist an interpretation the subject, the academic, comes up with. This can be done by means of a simple procedure: whenever we cite or quote something, or use an image to “illustrate” an argument, it pays off to look back and check the alleged example against what we just wrote about it. If it doesn’t quite match, so much the better; thinking that non-matching through, we learn from the object (Lutters).

This bi-lateral collaboration also holds for thought itself. The most effective formulation of this I know is by psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas, who wrote, in one of those sentences that became an enduring guideline for me: “I often find that although I am working on an idea without knowing exactly what it is I think, I am engaged in thinking an idea struggling to have me think it” (10). Not only does this phrasing express modesty—the author acknowledges that he doesn’t know exactly what he is busy thinking about or thinking out—but it also qualifies the intensity (“engaged”) and the liveness of the thought-in-becoming. Most importantly, the idea Bollas is trying to think itself collaborates with him. The author and his “object,” the idea he is working on, do it together. The idea wishes to be thought; it even struggles to achieve the status of idea. In a strikingly comparable formulation, Kaja Silverman formulated her theory of the image of, or *as* memory, in the following way:

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made this possible. Simultaneously, the Museum of Photography displayed the 5-screen installation on the same subject, curated by Roma Sendyka and Curatorial Collective, with an Open Access catalogue (in Polish): <http://jagiellonian.academia.edu/KolektywKuratorski> A book on this project appeared later—see Gomulska, Koziol and Sulowska (eds.).

If, in trying to make sense of this strange account of unconscious memories, I am unable to avoid attributing to them the status of a subject, that is because subjectivity itself is in its most profound sense nothing other than *a constellation of visual memories which is struggling to achieve a perceptual form*. (*World Spectators* 89, emphasis mine)

That struggle is not only bi-lateral; given that both Bollas the author and the idea-in-becoming are connected to many other beings, issues and things, it is multiple. Silverman's word "constellation" intimates that same multiplicity. This is also a feature of the essay as form, approach or genre, if we endorse the following summing up in a reflection on Adorno's essay:

Nearly all the familiar topoi are here: the apparent spontaneity of presentation, the emphasis on rhetorical sophistication, the exaltation of the incomplete, the rejection of a purely deductive logic, the eschewal of heavy-handed profundity, the antipathy toward systematic dogmatism, the treatment of non-scientific, often unconventional subject matter, the central importance of play, the insistence on human fallibility, the image of a meandering, exploratory journey. (Pourciau 624)

This list reads like an impressionist painting. The features are like the dots that, without line drawing, end up figuring something. There is nothing systematic about it, which, in positive terms, helps to characterize the essay even better. It helps to avoid any attempt to define the essay as a genre. It also helps to renounce attempts, on the part of the essayist, to fulfil all these expectations, since incompleteness is part of the essay-as-attempt. So, if only as a tactic, it is useful. But how, then, can I begin thinking an essay film? From the awareness of the importance of bi-laterality and with a lack of fear of contradiction, I now reflect on my primary interlocutor, who is a fictional being.<sup>2</sup>

## CHARACTER, CASSANDRA

With multiplicity, reciprocity and tentativeness in mind, it was not easy to get started. I had to design, write a script, without the proximity of all those people I knew were going to be crucially important; I didn't even know them. But the notion that I was to develop something around an issue that

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of "tactic" as distinct from "strategy" has been developed by Michel de Certeau in the introduction to his 1984 book *The Practice of Everyday Life*. In a brilliant recent study, Tingting Hui brought it to the present world. Exceedingly briefly put, a strategy is for the powerful who seek to win a battle; a tactic for the ordinary people who seek to live (Certeau xix).

was important to me (“partial”) made it happen in a flash. What bothers me most in the current situation of the world is the general indifference or, at least, powerlessness towards the imminent environmental disaster. So, in view of this bleak state of our world, an essay film, with my belief in the relevance of narrative, and the bi-lateral temporality in mind that I have termed “pre-posterous history,” made ancient history in relation to the (very) near future pop into my mind. At the same time, my narrative impulse called up a character. Cassandra: the prophetess who could foresee the future, but nobody believed her. The most extensive ancient story about her is in Aeschylus’ play *Agamemnon* (458 BCE). The best-known modern retelling is Christa Wolf’s novel, entirely written “in the first person”, identifying (with) Cassandra as the subject, not only of the story but of the emotional heaviness it entails, reflecting during the day she knows she is going to die.<sup>3</sup>

Wolf’s Cassandra is a strong-headed, sensitive, worried young woman, in love with the Greek Aeneas. This character lends itself to the *figuration* of the essay’s warning in visual form: to what Rodowick has termed “the figural” in his attempt to call on especially Lyotard to overcome the tenacious opposition between words and images, and also on Deleuze’s rejection of the opposition between abstraction and figuration in his theorization of images (“Presenting the Figural” 1–44). In the essay film, the figural is where the essay’s argumentation and its narrative concretization in the character can seamlessly merge. Kuba found someone eminently suitable for the role, Magdalena Žak. I had ideas about how to figure stubbornness and despair. I also thought about costume, a shapeless and colourless (off-white) silk dress and a necklace consisting of large links, a chain evoking captivity. Slavery is a topic I have been intensely focusing on in the video project I have just finished and am currently showing, *DON QUIJOTE: SAD COUNTENANCES* (2019). And in Wolf’s novel, Cassandra reflects on her captivity. For the role of Aeneas, Kuba’s creative expertise found the actor Adrian Budakow—like Magdalena, a true find. A preliminary question I had for him was, if he would mind appearing half-naked, in a figuration I had conceived but not yet written. This was an impersonation, as a *tableau vivant*, of Caravaggio’s 1602 *John the Baptist*—an act I had been nurturing for some time as a demonstration of pre-posterous history. Such mundane-seeming issues are all part of designing a film. Thankfully, Adrian didn’t mind.

<sup>3</sup> On pre-posterous history, see my 1999 book *Quoting Caravaggio*. I was alerted to the relevance of Wolf’s novel by the 2012 video-shadow play *In Search of Vanished Blood* by Nalini Malani, and subsequent conversations with the artist. On this work, see the first chapter of my 2016 book *In Medias Res*. My ongoing dialogue with Malani is evidence of the dialogic nature of thought.



Then a title was needed, which would harbour the allusions to the many aspects of the Cassandra figure. Determined to bring together my many concerns about time, the ambiguous title *IT'S ABOUT TIME!* came up. As mentioned above, I have developed a notion of time that acknowledges that not only the past influences the present, hence, also the future, but also the other way around. But the title contains a warning, too: hurry up! figured through the exclamation mark. Hence the subtitle, *REFLECTIONS ON URGENCY*. Another figural aspect of time is rhythm. This has a bodily side to it, which is important if we want to recognize the importance of the body as not separate but at one with the mind. This was a strong issue in my film on Descartes (see note 1).

The backbone of the essay is Cassandra's temporal awareness. Her repeated call for urgency is key, both to the ancient myth and Wolf's subjectivation of it, and to my attempt to make an essay film on this issue. And in addition to these three aspects of temporality, the most personal, intimate moment in the film, I thought, should be one when the near-future infringes on the figures' personal lives. This became the moment when Cassandra dumps Aeneas because he remains too close to the powers-that-be, resulting in a near future in which he would become stultified. This, in her wording, concerns the future—one she rejects. She abandons him with the poignant words: "I cannot love a hero. I do not want to see you being transformed into a statue."

## DIRECTING, DAMISCH

Down to earth again. Like any film, the essay film needs to be "directed." Directing a film in the spirit of the bi-laterality and the multiplicity inherent in the practice of filmmaking cannot be the bossy and hierarchical activity the word suggests in its common usage. Thus, an additional aspect of the "essay" concerns my own role: without formal training as a film director and having landed in a linguistic community whose language I didn't understand, even had I wished to enact directorship in the traditional sense—which I did not—I couldn't have. Instead, I considered the dialogic work of, among many others, French philosopher and art historian Hubert Damisch, on whose ideas and, especially, intellectual attitude, I had made a documentary I now see as an essay film in 2011. Inspired by his work I felt that the directing was a humble and heavy job of overseeing the many tentacles of the process and keeping these together so that chaotic threads could become a woven tapestry. And obviously, such overseeing was indispensable, yet included unconditional respect for, endorsement of, and indeed, pleasure in the autonomy of the participants. As it happened,

they, and especially camera operator Magdalena Bojdo and sound engineer Jacek Harasim, immediately relieved me of any concern I might have had about the relationship between my script and their work of realizing it. They had studied it, understood its thrust, and their interpretations are what ended up as the film, figurally shaped by the actors.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, directing remains a necessary element. For, in response to my insistence on multiplicity, Kuba's pointed and relevant question, "how about authorship?" cannot be discarded. In this respect I was reminded of an article I once wrote in dialogue with a brilliant American linguist, Ann Banfield, who claimed there are sentences without a narrator. Yes, but then, where do those sentences come from, within the narrative "subjectivity network," as I had termed it (*Death and Dissymmetry*)? The key issue is not so much the copyright, the right to show, or the income generated, which, in the case of my films, is a non-issue anyway. What matters is *responsibility*. Having written the script and, therefore, bringing forward, with some insistence, the different conceptions of temporality with today's urgency at the core, taking on the role of director is less a privilege than an ethical duty. It means taking responsibility for what the essay is saying, or trying to say—not only to "it," which, as per Bollas, desires the best way of coming across, but also towards the interlocutor, spectator, or engager; the essay's second person, or "you." And by acting as "creative producer" in a profoundly collaborative spirit, Kuba endorsed a part of that responsibility.<sup>5</sup>

## ESSAY, ELIOT

Keeping current the list of features of Adorno's essay on the essay, I now want to foreground the final characterization of that list, "the image of a meandering, exploratory journey." In a short film, with such a short production time, this feature of the essay might easily be overlooked or even disappear. Yet, aesthetically, as well as intellectually, each word of this phrase counts. The "image" aspect must not be overshadowed, especially in an (audio-)visual medium. More on this below. But the combination of the two qualifiers, "meandering" and "exploratory," that lead up to the temporal-spatial metaphor of the journey, are key to understanding a film that calls itself an essay. Luckily, the conception of historical time as bi-lateral takes

<sup>4</sup> See my short film—HUBERT DAMISCH: THINKING ALOUD, 20'13", 2011. Of Damisch's scholarly work I have been especially inspired by his *Origin of Perspective*, in view of the "pre-posterous" historical perspective for which it sowed the seed.

<sup>5</sup> Ann Banfield, *Unspeakable Sentences*. My response combined two of her book titles, also her *Phantom Table*, and was adopted by the editors for the volume title: Bal, "Phantom Sentences."

care of the former. For this, the fragment from T. S. Eliot's 1919 essay with its deceptively obsolete title ("Tradition and the Individual Talent") that has guided my reflections on history (*Quoting*), was called upon once more, now to inaugurate the meandering aspect. Cassandra, with her constant warnings, should also figure as the teacher of historiography, explaining to her lover Aeneas how time refuses to be plotted as linear. Meandering is, then, what counters linearity. This scene includes the impersonation of Aeneas as John the Baptist, a scene where the "teacher" explains preposterous history through Caravaggio, and a contemporary painting by American artist David Reed also shifts into the reproduction of the Caravaggio, over-layering parts of it. Moving across the image, Reed's painting becomes a character.

"Exploratory," which seems a self-evident feature of the essay, one that enhances the tentativeness of the arguments, takes from "meandering" a spatial nuance, which suits the medium of film very well. This feature also re-calls the bi-lateral aspect. The teacher-student interaction is dialogic when Aeneas appears in the "class" with Walter Benjamin-style round glasses, armed with the latter's text on history. He does not disagree with the teacher, but comes up with arguments that give her historiographic diagnosis more depth and urgency. Together, they explore historical time. After some discussion in which teacher and, now, the philosopher, take turns speaking, he quotes from Benjamin's fifth thesis of the philosophy of history: ". . . For every image of the past that is not recognized by the present *as one of its own concerns* threatens to disappear irretrievably" (255, emphasis mine). This, of course, is where Eliot and Benjamin shake hands; it is what clutches Cassandra's argument, strengthens my choice of topic, and unfolds the ambiguity of the essay film's title.

## FILM, FREUD, FLAUBERT

The moment we went out for the first shoot, and the only one set outside in the city, it started to rain. Not a heavily pouring rain that would be a figuration of disaster, but still a firm rain. At first, this seemed unfortunate. But soon, we realized it actually helped the mood of the scene. For this was the scene where Cassandra begins to seriously doubt her commitment to Aeneas, along with her suspicion of others. Under the impact of politics, she seems to endorse the binary thinking of that institution and practice when she says:

Maybe I am being contaminated by the relentless drawling on of the men of the Council. I begin . . . to divide the people I meet into two groups in view of an unknown future emergency. You can count on him, not on him.

And soon, for her Aeneas ends up on the wrong side of that divide. How did the rain participate in the filmmaking? Here, an aspect of the essay, specifically the essay film, that may be unexpected comes in: mood.

Mood, in film, is a (sub-) *medium*, not the object of representation, if we engage with art on the mode of affect. Affect, wrote American literary scholar Charles Altieri, “comprises the range of mental states where an agent’s activity cannot be adequately handled in terms of either sensations or beliefs but requires attending to how he or she offers expressions of those states” (47). Affects, he continues, “are ways of being moved that supplement sensation with at least a minimal degree of imaginative projection” (47). He then specifies the affects according to a hierarchical range spanning from beyond sensation to passion:

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Feelings are elemental affective states characterized by an imaginative engagement in the immediate processes of sensation. Moods are modes of feeling where the sense of subjectivity becomes diffuse and sensation merges into something close to atmosphere, something that seems to pervade an entire scene or situation. Emotions are affects that involve the construction of attitudes that typically establish a particular cause and so situate the agent within a narrative. . . . Finally, passions are emotions within which we project significant stakes for the identity that they make possible. (48)

From this taxonomy it is clear that *mood* is the affective domain where film and viewer can most easily share the diffuse sense of subjectivity.<sup>6</sup>

The specificity of mood goes further, especially in connection to Cassandra’s situation. She is facing both disaster and personal death. In a brilliant meditation on war and the confrontation with mortality, Silverman, relying on Heidegger, writes that we can assume (or fail to assume) our finitude affectively, rather than rationally, “by way of a mood rather than abstract knowledge” (“Shining” 325). In connection to her own focus in this publication, facing death in war, Silverman offers an illuminating distinction between fear and anxiety, derived from her reading of, mainly, *Being and Time*. Silverman writes:

Fear is the affect through which we apprehend the “nothing” in the mode of a turning away. Anxiety is the affect through which we apprehend it in the mode of a turning toward. Fear fails to reconcile us to the nothing,

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<sup>6</sup> I cannot go into the different conceptions of affect. See Alphen (“Affective Operations”) for a lucid explanation, and Alphen and Jirsa (eds.) for a useful and varied collective volume.

because it always *represents* the attempt to specify or concretize the nothing. Anxiety, on the other hand, “attunes” us to it, because it is the affect par excellence of the *indeterminate*.<sup>7</sup> (“Shining” 325, emphasis mine)

To create a mood appropriate to facing the disasters the world is staging; to create a mood that helps determining how to respond to them, an essay film needs both representational reticence and exuberant staging of mood. This is where the rain became an ally. The discrepancy between mood and events, not the representation of the latter, produces the effect of invading the viewer’s affective capacity. With the cheerful mood of old musical films like *SINGIN’ IN THE RAIN* (1952, dir. Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen) or *LES PARAPLUIES DE CHERBOURG* (1964, dir. Jacques Demy) in our “memory of cinema” (Rodowick, *Philosophy* 1–23), the sad mood becomes stronger by contrast.

A first requirement of a film of any kind is that it must keep its viewers engaged. This is one of the functions of narrative. Mood is an aspect of this narrative engagement, and is frequently enhanced or even imposed by means of music. In the essay film, music’s manipulative power can be resisted, by a sparse use of music, or even avoided. That films tend to be narrative regardless of the presence or absence of a clear plot is due to the movement inherent in film. In an essay film a plot is secondary to the argument, but it supports it, so that viewers remain engrossed in it, taking in the argument through the narrative plot. However, in order to let the stream of the argument remain the most important aspect of content, that plot works best in its supportive function if it is as fragmented, scattered, as the essay form tends to be in its resistance to wholeness, according to the Adorno list. The various roles Cassandra and Aeneas play towards each other, such as lovers, teacher-student, art critics and impersonator, and debaters, are fragments of as many and more potential plots, none of which is really developed. The cinematic image, including its mood-colour, as an image in movement, is the glue that holds the fragments together.

Freud theorized the emergence of the image from the unconscious “struggling to achieve perceptual form,” in Silverman’s formulation (*World Spectators* 89). Yet when it came to cinema, he thought it induced superstition and a belief in magic. This facile rejection was caused,

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<sup>7</sup> The first part of this quotation paraphrases Heidegger’s “philosophy of mortality” (Silverman’s phrase, 341) in *Being and Time* (228–35). She adds a note explaining the multiple connotations of the German word *Stimmung*, which means “mood,” as well as “attunement,” including in the musical sense. Importantly for Heidegger’s philosophy of being in the world, Heidegger characterizes mood as the attunement of *Dasein* to something else.

I speculate, by the fact that he was only able to think *about* film, but unable to think *in* film, or to historicize preposterously. Thinking in film, with film as a medium for thought, is what the essay film's foremost vocation is. Laura Mulvey, whose seminal 1975 essay ("Visual Pleasure") had an indelible impact on film studies, later wrote that Freud's rejection of the cinema was caused by the fact that he could not work with the dialectic, instead of linearity, between the old and the new (*Death*). What she calls "dialectic" corresponds with my "pre-posterous" because it eschews the resolution. But just reading Freud's Dora case again, which originally bore the significant title "a fragment," the cinematic quality of the scene descriptions is striking.<sup>8</sup>

Film's history "as a medium" (Rodowick, *Philosophy* 6) is more alive than ever, now that the distinction between analog and digital is fading away. Three authors who had a key influence on twentieth-century cultural history and the conception of the image, created instances of what American art historian Michael Holly (*Panofsky*) theorizes as the predictive image—an idea quite close to my preposterous history. They wrote about how they despised the new art of cinema and yet began to write cinematically. Freud, as we have just seen, but also Proust and Bergson, each in their own way and within their own disciplinary field all held cinema in contempt. Yet, they wrote *in* images, and about images, like the art historians Holly shows to be deeply, visually impacted by the images they sought to decipher. Thus, they helped us understand film even when writing against it.

Bergson, according to Olivier Moulin, rejected cinema because its movement was false: the frames that together constitute the image produce only an illusion of movement. Freud rejected it because of its alleged vulgarity, but more importantly, because of its tricking, its illusionist magic. Proust was so adamant about the superiority of photography over cinema that he took pains to write in "contact sheets" rather than cinematically. His writing brings us to the photographic form going in the direction of cinema, that is, towards the irreducibly pluralized and moving image. Rather than adventuring into cinematographic writing, Proust explores photography's productivity to the point of absurdity: framed and focused, the photograph is serialized; not according to a pluralization of the focalisor or the object, but rather according to a process of off-setting that produces marginal changes in visibility, which become the object of the quest. If projected, his images would be cinematic, as the cinematic image is fundamentally a still one, according to Mulvey. Perhaps it is tragic irony, or a farce (mind the ambiguity of the term "preposterous") of history, that

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<sup>8</sup> On "thinking in film," see my book with the eponymous title. Space is lacking to analyze the cinematic imagery in Freud's text.

all three influential men rejected cinema because, while they were eminent theorists of the moving image, they were unable to enter it experientially, to be a witness to what happens inside that fictional space; to attempt, to “essay” it.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to these resistances within the unreflective contamination by that influential cultural novelty, I propose another essayistic reversal: Flaubert, who wrote *before* cinema was invented, was an eminently cinematic writer. He went out to scout for locations, designed what he called scenarios, and wrote passages that read like film scripts. A brief passage of the second chapter of the first part of his *Madame Bovary*, when Charles is on his way to his first encounter with Emma, reads like this:

About four o'clock in the morning Charles set out for Les Bertaux, wrapped in a heavy coat. He was still drowsy from his warm sleep, and the peaceful trot of his mare lulled him like the rocking of a cradle. Whenever she stopped of her own accord in front of one of those spike-edged holes that farmers dig along the roadside to protect their crops, he would wake up with a start, quickly remember the broken leg, and try to recall all the fractures he had ever seen. The rain had stopped; day was breaking, and on the leafless branches of the apple trees birds were perched motionless, ruffling their little feathers in the cold morning wind. The countryside stretched flat as far as the eye could see; and the tufts of trees clustered around the farmhouses were widely spaced dark purple stains on the vast grey surface that merged at the horizon into the dull tone of the sky.<sup>10</sup>

One sees the colours (or lack of them at the nightly hour), hears the trot of the horse, then in close-up Charles's sleepy face, followed by his attempt to remember his knowledge. A hard cut to another close-up, of the birds on the tree branches, foregrounds Charles's loneliness, and makes the transition to the long shot of the country road more dramatic. This shot will be durational, lasting long enough for the hunger for human encounter to intensify. In the last sentence we see an elongated perspective, with the compositional device of patches of dull colours to turn a line into a landscape. A shot list of this moment-scene-image is easy to make.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> On Freud's resistance to cinema, and the fundamental stillness of the cinematic image, see Mulvey (*Death* 33–53). On the cinematic in Proust and his “poetics of the contact sheet,” see Bal (*Mottled* 191–212).

<sup>10</sup> Given the many different editions and translations of this world-famous novel, citing page numbers is pointless. The chapters are short. On Flaubert's cinematic writing, see especially Pierre-Marc de Biasi (esp. 453, 476–77, 481–82).

<sup>11</sup> For more on Flaubert's cinematic writing, in connection to painter Edvard Munch, see my *Emma & Edvard* (25–43, 57–61).

This passage is not only cinematic; it is also, through mood, a preparation for that first encounter. The combination of visuality, duration, movement, and preparation for action together constitutes the cinematic as the “fourth dimension”; timespace and movement collude. The emptiness of the road from the darkest night to the beginning of dawn sets up—or “frames”—the originating view of the young woman who will change Charles’s life, as well as her own. In quite precise ways, then, Flaubert designs for us an essay film about film. This brings to our understanding of the essay another important aspect: self-reflection, and media on media: a “meta-”aspect. Thus, his writing accords with Erlend Lavik’s speculation that the video essay might well become the future of academic film and television criticism. Pre-cinema, pre-video: in pre-posterous thinking, it means that not only cinema influenced literature and art, but also the other way around. Such writers called for the invention of cinema; they made it something to “attempt.”<sup>12</sup>

## GENEROSITY, GIRARD

By now it should be clear that, unless a maker can boast an impressive record in the (non-)genre, it is hard, nearly impossible, to raise funds for the making of an essay film. Most essay-films, therefore, are the work of people inventive enough to know how to find generosity. With this search for generosity the making begins. I have experienced it myself, especially when, for the making of *DON QUIJOTE: SAD COUNTENANCES*, any public funding was out of my reach, yet generosity replaced it. The co-makers—camera operators, sound engineer, actors, editors, set photographers, lenders of locations—were all willing and ever eager to participate without adequate or even any payment. Their generosity was motivated by the pleasure they took in contributing to a project in which they believed, and thus, once I had a tiny beginning of support, I was able to make the entire project as planned, in record time.

I am telling this mundane-seeming story because I believe generosity is a feature of the process of making an essay film; a process that is essayistic in itself, and therefore, I wish to put generosity forward as a concept for cultural analysis. It is not, or not only, that the Łódź Film School was able and willing to invite me, but it was clear that the participants added to the task they had taken on. What they added was that surplus that makes for quality in the (always provisional) end-result: adequate preparation,

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<sup>12</sup> See also the probing article by Laura Rascaroli. There is a clear tendency to this meta-aspect; many essay films are analyses of other films.



insight into the project, ample willingness to redo takes and sound recordings, and above all, intense identification with what the essay film was going to try and convey. All together I see this as generosity, which is why I propose to consider it as a useful concept, in addition to a social and human value. This is a concept not only because it helps us notice aspects in cultural domains, but because its opposite is much more visible, and can use a countering force. For, it is not always self-evident, in a world where competition and, hence, jealousy, reigns. Whereas “jealousy” is usually considered negatively, its source, competition, is not only encouraged but is the basis of our economic, educational, and for a large part, social system. The French philosophical anthropologist René Girard was the first modern thinker to have brought competition as a key concept forward and has thereby had a great impact on literary studies, feminist thought, cultural analysis, and more. Generosity is not the opposite of competition, but it is a force that can counter it.<sup>13</sup>

## HANDS-ON, HECUBA

Let me give only one example of this generosity that seriously impacted the mood and tenor of the film. This came from another aspect of the essay film, which derives from the previous one, its “apparent spontaneity of presentation” (Pourciau 624). This formulation harbours a suspicion that the spontaneity is only apparent, whereas this is neither verifiable nor relevant. In contrast to such a suspicious formulation, I propose to consider the spontaneity, or the “hands-on” quality of the process as an important element in the analysis of the essay film, neither as genre nor as product but as approach and process. The example concerns the participation of Monika Talarczyk. Coming in at the last moment and thanks to Kuba’s recruiting effort, Monika played Hecuba, Cassandra’s mother. Here, the lack of prior preparation combined with the limited time we had access to the location, seemed actually to offer an advantage, which in turn made me aware of that hands-on aspect of the essay film.<sup>14</sup>

When the father Priam, played by Grzegorz Małecki, hollers to call Cassandra into the palace because “you are needed here,” a slightly tense

<sup>13</sup> Girard’s theory of competition has been taken up in important ways by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and, in a close analysis, brilliantly brought to bear on contemporary literature and film by Ernst van Alphen (*Art*, 99–119).

<sup>14</sup> The location, the Herbst Palace (Pałac Herbsta) which is part of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, was an amazingly brilliant location for the palace of Priam and Hecuba (with thanks to the museum’s director Jarosław Suchan and staff). It is one of those locations that almost become characters.

situation occurs. This might cast a somewhat simplistic authoritarian light on the parents-daughter relationship, against which Cassandra does not really protest, but which viewers might give a stereotypical negative interpretation. Instead, Magdalena Żak—alias-Cassandra played with brilliant understanding of the mind of a young woman in that situation: anxious, slightly polemical but also at a loss about what to think; angry and loving at the same time. Monika Talarczyk, who just came in for this scene and was barely aware of what had been going on so far, and had not witnessed the sad mood of the scene that was shot the day before but edited after this one—the scene of the lovers’ splitting up in the rain, just described—was able and willing to approach her “daughter” with the empathy a mother would have, yet asking her the critical questions that were needed. No over-acting, no excessive mood-cultivation, no caricature of either an authoritarian or a sentimental mother, but a sensitivity to the disposition in the room led to a very subtle, adequate atmosphere in which the three actors could make the scene together. It is important to realize this process aspect as characteristic of making an essay film, if only because of the dependency of the generosity mentioned above.

## IMAGINING—IMAGING

And if we continue reflecting in this vein of process rather than product, more aspects the film essay shares with other forms of filmmaking that depend on generosity rather than on official funding (only), come to the fore. In combination with the most central feature of the essay—the argumentation inherent in it—I must account for the (audio-)visual nature of film, and how it fits in. For, this is, at first sight, in tension with argumentation. I contend that the aspects discussed so far can collaborate to add something of great impact on the essay “as form” (in Adorno’s phrase). What I want to probe for a moment is how the image and the argument melt together. This is what is currently most frequently called “artistic research”—a search through analysis through artmaking. The concept is quite problematic, but the undertaking is worthwhile. In such an endeavour, the search is neither for direct academic answers nor for tools for mood-manipulation. It comes closer to an attempt to make “thought-images” (from the German *Denkbilder*) by means of its counterpart, the activity of “image-thinking” that helps understanding and reasoning on an integrated level of affect, cognition, and sociality. I have called the specific genre of video production that seeks to create thought-images in previous video works, “theoretical fictions.” This is the deployment of fiction to understand and open up difficult theoretical issues, and to develop theory

through imaging what fiction enables us to imagine. It is how Leonardo da Vinci solved his problem of making his complex, abstract knowledge concrete and thus, clearer for himself, and understandable for others through visualization in painting. My guess is that it was his understanding of that aspect that made Kuba characterize my films as essay films.<sup>15</sup>

The challenge to make a video project based on a literary text, especially one that has an antique and a contemporary version, is quite specific in its troubled relationship between content and form, and between the narrative and visual aspects involved. The “research” part, based on a literary-cultural analysis of the literary texts, was, firstly, to decide which aspects of these are crucial to make a work that has a “point”—the point that the essay attempts to think out, develop, and convey. Secondly, that point had to make connections between artistic and social issues, and to improve our understanding how these two domains can go together, in the present, with the collaboration of the past in what we call “cultural heritage.” This term, again, is somewhat problematic, since it suggests the passive reception of a gift. Instead, the importance of the past for the present, seen as bilateral, must be foregrounded, especially in a work that is “about” time. And finally, of course, the selected aspects and fragments had to be “audio-visualisable,” to be able to liberate them from confinement in the linguistic domain that requires (individual) reading, and open them up for collective perception, interpretation and discussion. But some reflection on what an image is and does is needed here. It seemed relevant that Wittgenstein’s ending of his *Tractatus* (1921), “Of what one cannot speak, one should keep silent,” was modified later into “Of what one cannot speak, one can still show.” The importance of showing is to enable *witnessing* as an engaged activity against the indifference of the world. The theatricality of play-acting and display helps to turn onlookers and voyeurs into activated, empathic witnesses.<sup>16</sup>

To integrate image with argument, the essay film needs to yield “thought-images” or *Denkbilder*, created by means of “image-thinking.” The thought-image was a favourite literary-philosophical genre of the group of writers of the pre-WW2 Frankfurt School of social thought. The small iconic texts Adorno, Benjamin, Kracauer, and others wrote were texts only. What did the word *Bilder* do there, then? This is where

<sup>15</sup> For an excellent relevant critique of the concept of “artistic research,” see Vellodi. On this search in Leonardo’s work, see Fiorani and Nova. Ernst van Alphen proposed the concept of “image-thinking” as a counterpart to “thought-images,” an idea for which I am very grateful. His concept, in the form of a verb, is more dynamic, rendering the interaction between thinking and imaging more forcefully (Personal communication).

<sup>16</sup> See the final sentence of Wittgenstein. On his change of opinion, see *Philosophical Investigations* #41, commented on by Davoine and Gaudillière (159, 170, 173).

“image-thinking” can meet, and yield, “thought-images.” This is a literary genre of miniature essays. In a study of the genre, US-based scholar of German Gerhard Richter describes the thought-image thus: “The *Denkbild* encodes a poetic form of condensed, epigrammatic writing in textual snapshots, flashing up as poignant meditations that typically fasten upon a seemingly peripheral detail or marginal topic” (2). The words “snapshots” and “flashing up” suggests the quick flash that Benjamin urges us to preserve by means of recognition: “The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again” (255). This “literary” congruence between the thought-image and Benjamin’s choice of words led to the scene where Cassandra and Aeneas, in the process of their slowly developing divergence, discuss the issue of time, mentioned above (see section “ESSAY”).

Richter continues: “the miniatures of the *Denkbild* can be understood as conceptual engagements with the aesthetic and as aesthetic engagements with the conceptual, hovering between philosophical critique and aesthetic production” (2). This recalls the key moment in the reflection on the importance of images from the past that I have inserted in the discussion between Cassandra and Aeneas. It comes from Benjamin’s fifth thesis quoted above. It also connects to the question of historical truth. Here, we need Adorno again. In this regard, in his *Aesthetic Theory* Adorno writes:

What cannot be proved in the customary style and yet is compelling—that is to spur on the spontaneity and energy of thought and, without being taken literally, to strike sparks through a kind of intellectual short-circuiting that casts a sudden light on the familiar and perhaps sets it on fire. (322–23)

As in Benjamin’s thesis, the language here is again both visual and shock-oriented, with “sparks,” “short-circuiting,” “sudden light” and “sets it on fire.” This is thought alive, and this living thought is active. It has agency. And it is visual. Thought needs a formal innovation that shocks, as in Bollas’s and Silverman’s *struggle*. Thus, it can gain new energy and life, involve people, and make thought a collective process rather than the kind of still images we call clichés. The essay film’s attempt to achieve such “sparking,” shocking innovation lays in the anachronistic bond between present and past, and above all, the trans-mediation, the intermediality of the audio-visualization of a literary work. In view of the need for witnessing, such a messy “thinking” form enables and activates viewers to construct their own story, and connect it to what they have seen around them. Thus, the multiplicity of making is extended to the viewer-

engager, who participates as a co-maker. In order to make images complex, effective, multiple and affectively powerful, we must make thought visible. This requires the imagination, but then, also, the making-perceptible of thought. We must, in other words, *image* ideas.

\*

I have not yet reached half of the alphabet. The other letters can also each be developed into concepts relevant for understand the essay film, and names of people who are important for those ideas. With the J comes the jeopardy of memory in the case of trauma, and early psychoanalyst Pierre Janet as an inspirator, along with Martin Jay's historization of the image by means of his concept of visual regimes. With the K comes Cassandra in her more traditional spelling in her Greek and German incarnation, coupled with Kuba as the inspiring force behind the entire experiment. The L calls up the transition from "live" as in theatre to "life" as in the social world, connected as they can be with the help of Lacan's concept of the gaze as the visual variant of the linguistic order. With M I can return to movement, and bring in the French philosopher Marie-José Mondzain, who is capable of connecting moving image and political movements on a highly sophisticated level. And so it goes on. What precedes is neither complete nor whole as a view of the essay film. True to its object—which has been struggling along to become something—my essay is first of all a demonstration through practice of what in my conception an essay film can be, or rather, try to be.

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## Dalí, Disney and *Destino*: Alchemy in Animation

# ABSTRACT

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Salvador Dalí claimed that he made his whole life “a work of *alchemy*.” He saw in alchemy the principle of metamorphosis and “the transmutation of bodies.” Carl Jung recognized “*imaginatio*” as the key to alchemy. As Patrick Harpur suggests: “The Work takes place in a realm intermediate between mind and matter. It is a daimonic process, a ‘chemical theatre’ in which processes and psychic transformations interpenetrate.” The alchemist does not simply work on matter, but on the self.

In Dalí’s “paranoiac-critical method,” objects similarly seem to exist in an “intermediate realm between mind and matter”; they are animated presences, with a life of their own. The Dalíean double-image is itself a kind of alchemical magic, invoking the “transmutation of bodies.”

In 1946, Dalí began work for the Walt Disney Company on a short film, *Destino*. This would be, he claimed, the “First Surrealist Cartoon.” The appeal of animation for him may have been based in part in what Eisenstein termed “plasmaticness”: the “ability to dynamically assume any form.” Animation, then, may be seen as a kind of “chemical theatre.” As a “realm between mind and matter,” it also functioned for Dalí as a form of *mundus imaginalis*, in which he could engage with the “obsessing” images in his psyche.

In *Destino*, Dalí invoked the alchemical process as a journey to transfiguration and psychological “rebirth.” The film was not completed in his lifetime; this account is based on the original storyboards which he produced.

**Keywords:** Gala, surrealism, paranoiac-critical method, Jung, Eisenstein, Breton.

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## PART ONE: DALÍ AND ALCHEMY

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I believe in magic, and am convinced that all new efforts at cosmogony and even metaphysics should be based on magic, and should recapture the state of mind that had guided brains like those of Paracelsus and Raymond Lully. (Dalí, *Secret* 370)

I am a believer in magic, which in the last analysis is simply the power of materializing imagination into reality. (Dalí, "Total" 342)

In his autobiography *The Secret Life . . .* (1942), Salvador Dalí affirmed his belief in "magic" and explicitly linked his own work with alchemists such as Paracelsus (370).<sup>1</sup> In his library, he had a number of books on alchemy and magic (by, for example, Giordano Bruno, Paracelsus, and Grillot de Givry) (Ruffa 193). He told Louis Pauwels that he had made his whole life "a work of *alchemy*" and he considered himself "a descendent of the Catalan, Ramon Llull" (a.k.a Lully) (qtd. in Lepetit 232–33). (He was presumably referring to the numerous alchemical texts supposedly written by Llull, although their authorship is now in question.) Dalí saw in alchemy the principle of metamorphosis: he claimed that—like Llull—he believed "in the transmutation of bodies" (*Unspeakable* 147).

In "The Second Surrealist Manifesto," André Breton made an analogy between surrealist art and alchemy, defining both as a means of liberating the imagination (174). Carl Jung saw "*imaginatio*" as the key to alchemy (CW 12 para.400; italics in original).<sup>2</sup> As they stared into their heated flasks, observing the processes of chemical change, the alchemists imagined seeing "green lions, salamanders, ravens, hermaphrodites and the likes" (Irvine). This was less a process of hallucination than "active imagination,"<sup>3</sup> in which entities or "spirits" seemed to materialize and assume "plastic form" (Jung, CW 8 para.402). Jung argued that such "visions" could only be "projections of unconscious contents" (CW 12 para.350). As Patrick Harpur suggests: "The [alchemical] Work takes place in a realm intermediate between mind

<sup>1</sup> The importance of alchemy in Dalí's work has been largely ignored by the critics. Strangely, Finkelstein claims that Dalí's *Secret Life* contains no references to alchemy (305).

<sup>2</sup> In the 1920s–30s, the surrealists declared their interest in Freud; Dalí himself stated that reading *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) was "one of the capital discoveries in my life" (*Secret* 167). Perhaps as a result, the connections and parallels between the surrealist movement and Jung's ideas have not been sufficiently explored by critics. See however Zuch.

<sup>3</sup> Jung saw "active imagination" as a psychological process akin to the "alchemical operation" (CW 14 para.749). The phrase was also used by Corbin, who called it the "organ" we use to perceive the *mundus imaginalis* (4).

and matter. It is a daimonic process, a ‘chemical theatre’ in which processes and psychic transformations interpenetrate” (141).<sup>4</sup>

In Dalí’s “paranoiac-critical method” which he developed in the 1930s, objects similarly exist in “a realm intermediate between mind and matter.” His declared aim was to present “the images of my concrete irrationality with the most imperialistic furor of precision” (“Conquest” 265). Objects and sensory stimuli were viewed “not just as an aspect of external reality, but also as an extension of the subjective self” (Haycock 273). Dalí himself used the example of rocks near the shoreline at Cadaqués: he recalled how, as he passed them in a boat, they seemed to change into different shapes, “as though they had been phantasmal quick-change artists of stone” (*Secret* 305). The rocks existed for him, then, as animated presences; phantoms of the mind, which even appeared to be autonomous entities of some kind, with a life of their own (like the psychic phenomena in the alchemist’s retort).

The Dalíean double-image is itself a kind of transformative, “alchemical” magic: it invokes the process of transmutation, and invites the spectator’s imaginative involvement in it. This is evident in the 1937 work, *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*. The sleeping or dying figure of Narcissus, on the left of the painting, seems to be carved out of rock (and may indeed have been based on rock formations around Cadaqués). He is mirrored or “doubled” on the right-hand side by the form of a large hand holding an egg with a flower emerging from it. In the poem which Dalí wrote to accompany the painting, the emergence of the flower is a moment of rebirth:

....  
 when that head splits  
 when that head bursts,  
 it will be the flower,  
 the new narcissus,  
 Gala—my narcissus. (“Metamorphosis” 329)

The fact that, in the painting, the egg mirrors the head, suggests that the “vision” may be the dream of the sleeping or dying Narcissus. But the work is also an image of alchemical transformation. The egg, as Bruce Elder notes, “is so common an alchemical image that there is a name for it, the *ovum philosophicum*, or philosophical egg” (318). It alludes in part to the alchemist’s sealed retort, where the chemical reactions took place. Marie-Louise von Franz notes that the philosopher’s egg symbolizes death and rebirth, and

<sup>4</sup> *Theatrum Chemicum* was the title of a compendium of alchemical writings, published in six volumes, 1602-61.

also the promise of a new life, or the regeneration of self (*Patterns* 12). In the case of Dalí's Narcissus, his head may be seen as the "egg/retort" in which psychological processes are leading to the "rebirth" of self.

At the end of the poem, Dalí identifies the "new narcissus" with his wife Gala. Edward James has argued that this spousal tribute was "graceful" but "out of place in the context and dragged in 'par quatre épingles'" (qtd. in Lomas 184). It is significant, however, that Dalí refers to Gala as "my narcissus." The flower, in this sense, is *his creation*; it has arisen from his psyche (as in a dream). At the same time, he is a kind of "alchemist," *causing* this transformation to occur within the "intermediate" realm of art.

Dalí met Gala (real name Elena Ivanovna Diakonova) in 1929.<sup>5</sup> In *Secret Life . . .*, he set out his belief, "so deeply rooted in my mind" (43), that he "was really always in love with the same unique, obsessing feminine image, which merely multiplied itself and successively assumed different aspects" (118)—sometimes real, sometimes imaginary. This began in childhood, with an image he saw in an optical toy (perhaps a praxinoscope), of a Russian girl riding in a troika. The fact that she was an animated image made her always-already a form of phantom or dream-figure. Dalí claimed that, even then, he dubbed the little Russian girl "Gala" (*Secret* 41), as if this event was a precognition of meeting the real-life Gala. There is an implication that he perceived the experience as an encounter with a kind of psychic "daimon" (Smith 162), almost a "goddess" (like Sophia or Psyche).

Dalí's claim that he was obsessed by the same feminine image implies that she was an "anima" figure; at once a projection of his own psyche, and yet also a seemingly autonomous entity that manifested itself in different forms. In the months before he met the real Gala, Dalí said he felt that something was coming, as if their meeting was destined. He recalled that, at this time, he was in a state of nervous collapse; but she was able to "communicate immediately with my most secret self"; she "brought me back to the light through the love she gave me" (*Unspeakable* 91). This is how he described his "union" with Gala: "We are welded; time and space become a single reality" (*Unspeakable* 145). This implies a form of what Maslow has termed "peak experiences" (when space and time seem to be suspended, and the individual feels a unique sense of oneness with the universe).

Ian Gibson has argued that Dalí's account (in *Secret Life* and elsewhere) of his relationship with Gala was a form of myth-making, turning her (with hindsight) into his "preordained muse, mistress, psychotherapist

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<sup>5</sup> Gala's own creative agency and facilitation of Salvador's artistic practice has recently been recognized and documented in the exhibition "Gala Salvador Dalí. A Room of One's Own in Púbol" held at the Museu Nacional d'Art De Catalunya, Barcelona (2018). For a more negative view of her role, see McGirk (1989).

and wife” (407). However, as we have seen, Dalí claimed that his obsession with a “unique” feminine image began prior to meeting Gala; and it is evident that, for him, even imaginary encounters with this “image” were real events in his psyche. The “obsessing” image acted as a form of what Jung terms “psychic daimonia” (CW 18 para. 1504): an entity which seems to exist independently, in an imaginal realm between matter and spirit. The phenomenon arises (as Jung argues) from the unconscious (CW 18 para. 1504); and yet it may be experienced, not as a psychological projection, but rather, as a figure “apprehended by the Imagination on a visionary plane” (Corbin 139), as if it is “a transcendent being” (Raff xii). Arguably, for Dalí, the “obsessing feminine image” (*Secret* 118) was just such an “apparitional Figure” (Corbin 139). It could be argued that the meeting with Gala was, for Dalí, the culmination and completion of his obsession; he *needed* her to personify or materialize the “Image” for him.

Male surrealists in 1920s and 1930s aspired to achieve a form of metaphysical fusion with the “feminine, magical” Other (Bauduin 155). Love was seen as a quasi-sacred quest for a “limit-point,” “an intensity of apotheosis” (Gifford 173) and transcendence. Diane Long Hoeweler has suggested that such a merging was doomed to failure; ultimately, the inherent tensions and contradictions “explode the ideal and reveal the impossibility of the task” (22).<sup>6</sup> Arguably, however, in Dalí’s case, the “ideal” was realized more *through art* than in reality; with the art work as a kind of alchemical theatre of the imagination, a *mundus imaginalis*, in which artist could repeatedly re-enact the desired state, in an unending cycle of *solutio* and *coagulatio* (to use alchemical terms): the dissolution and union of Self and Other.

## PART TWO: DALÍ AND DISNEY

In 1946, it was announced that Dalí would work for the Walt Disney Company on a short film, *Destino*. This would be, Dalí claimed, the “First Surrealist Cartoon” (qtd. in Nicolaou). He regarded Walt Disney as one of the great cinematic surrealists (along with Harpo Marx and Cecil B. DeMille); he particularly admired the *Silly Symphony* cartoons (produced in 1930s) as “dazzling cataclysmic rainbows,” which the viewer experiences as a dream (“Surrealism” 154–55).<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Hoeweler is referring here to the Romantic poets, but her argument can be applied equally to the surrealist vision of union with the Other.

<sup>7</sup> The story of the collaboration between Dalí and Disney, and the historical context behind the project, are beyond the scope of this article. For an overview, see Bossert. For possible reasons why the project was aborted, see Canemaker (200).

The appeal of animation for Dalí may have been based in part in what Eisenstein termed “plasmaticness” (21). Eisenstein admired the “spontaneity of becoming” (qtd. in Jach 82) in Disney cartoons: the rejection of fixed form, the “freedom from ossification, the ability to dynamically assume any form” (Eisenstein 21). He termed this “plasmatic” (41) because it was comparable to protoplasm, which does not possess a “stable” form but can assume “any form . . . along the rungs of the evolutionary ladder” (21). He saw, moreover, that the natural “*flow of the subconscious*” was “plasmatic,” involving the “projection of a protoplasmic condition onto consciousness” (qtd. in Jach 81; italics in original). Animation, then, may be seen as a “realm between mind and matter”; a kind of “chemical theatre” in which “processes and psychic transformations interpenetrate” (Harpur 141). In this sense, it is an “alchemical” art form; and the animator’s role is analogous to the alchemist’s.

As we will see, *Destino* invokes the alchemical process of transformation and “rebirth,” culminating in the *coniunctio oppositorum*, the merging of Self and Other. The story follows one man’s quest to fulfill his “destiny” and be united with an “obsessing feminine image” (Dalí, *Secret* 118). The starting point for the project was a popular song with the same title, performed by Mexican singer Dora Luz; the plan was that it would feature on the film’s soundtrack.<sup>8</sup> The lyrics evoke the very idea of love as “destiny”:

. . . you came along  
 Out of a dream I recall  
 Yes you came along  
 To answer my call

I know now  
 That you are my destino  
 We’ll be as one for we know  
 Our destiny of love. (Dominguez)

According to Christopher Jones, when Dalí heard the word “destino,” it sent him “into raptures, and he began creating wild, imaginative pictures to illustrate his emotions” (qtd. in King 88).

Over several months, Dalí worked with Disney animator John Hench on plans for the film. They generated a number of different story treatments

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<sup>8</sup> Dora Luz had previously appeared in a segment in the Disney “package” film, *The Three Caballeros* (1944), singing “You Belong to My Heart.” The sequence combined live action with animation (with shots of Luz’s face as she sang). *Destino* was intended to form part of a similar “package” film. See Canemaker (200–01).

and storyboards. Ultimately, however, the project was aborted by Disney himself (for reasons that remain unclear);<sup>9</sup> only a few seconds of trial footage were shot (Hench, interview by Nicolaou). In 2003, a version of the film was finally produced. The director, Dominique Monféry, worked from the Dalí/Hench storyboards, but introduced significant cuts and changes in order (he admitted) to make the film “more readable” to audiences on a narrative level (Hench, interview by Nicolaou). The following account is based on the original storyboards; they provide the most accurate record we have of the film as Dalí conceived it.<sup>10</sup>

The first image in the storyboards is a tall pyramid with a narrow base, standing on a barren plain. The pyramid features a relief of a male figure, described in a story treatment as “an unknown, a mystery, a statue without features” (qtd. in Nicolaou). The figure is covered in cracks, like an ancient ruin, and resembles Dalí’s Narcissus (with the head again shaped like an egg). It is as if this, too, is a man in a state of petrified, “Atavistic Hibernation” (Dalí, *Tragic* 136), slowly crumbling to nothingness. Significantly, the pyramid, with its narrow base, is shaped like a metronome. The man has one arm raised, his hand pointing to the apex, so it resembles the arm of a metronome. His left hand is resting on a large clock at the pyramid base. According to Hench, the figure was meant to represent Kronos, the Greek God of Time (“... we started in with Kronos. I suppose it’s a pretty obvious connection with destiny” [interview by Culhane 169]). There is a paradox in the God of Time appearing to be frozen, as if perhaps awaiting his moment of “destiny” when he will be released. The Roman version of Kronos is Saturn; and in alchemy, Saturn represents the “nigredo” stage of the process: the initial period of decay and putrefaction. (In the fifteenth century alchemical text *Aurora Consurgens*, the nigredo stage is likened to “a bridegroom in a tomb, awaiting his bride (the lost soul)” [von Franz, *Alchemy* 267].)<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The production team for the 2003 film assembled complete storyboards from images in the Disney archives (see Nicolaou). There were two versions, with minor variations between them; they did not incorporate all of the images that Dalí/Hench produced. Only limited selections from the storyboards have been published (in, for example, Bossert). In preparing this article, I have been able to study them in full. (Limits on space mean that I have had to curtail or omit the description and analysis of some of the scenes.)

<sup>10</sup> The changes which Monféry made to the storyboards turn the film into a simpler and more conventional love story. For example, the climactic “temple” sequence is reduced to a sentimental shot of the man, embracing a large “heart” on the central podium or altar, which turns into the woman in his arms. A detailed comparison of the film and storyboards is beyond the scope of this article. Unfortunately, the majority of critics who have written about *Destino* have been dependent on the film, rather than the storyboards. See for example Pallant (60–65).

<sup>11</sup> The text of *Aurora Consurgens* has been attributed to Thomas Aquinas (von Franz, *Alchemy* 178–81).

Kronos formed part of a triumvirate of Greek gods of time, along with Aion and Kairos. Kronos represented linear clock time, in antithesis to Aion who stood for “eternal time.” Kairos has been defined (by Paul Tillich) as the breakthrough of “eternal time” into the present (Pauck and Pauck 73). It is a sign of “fate,” an “epiphany of the radical change, the revolution and the transition beyond” (Baert 194). Crucially, it is also an alchemical term for the moment when the stars align (so to speak), to create the right moment for change to occur (von Franz, *Alchemy* 44). As we will see, there are a number of key moments in *Destino* when there is a shift from clock time (Kronos) to Kairos. These moments are signalled by a Dalínean double image; the change of image indicates a leap or change in time, as well as a physical and psychological transformation.

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After the opening image of the pyramid, there is a sudden switch to a night-time scene. A sphere which was on the apex of the pyramid sprouts spider-like legs and scurries away. Other night-time creatures appear: the clock itself morphs into three candle-worms, each with a flickering flame for a head and a wriggling snake-like tail. Matter, it seems, is now “plasmatic” (Eisenstein 41). The figure of the man disappears, and a woman appears, walking forward in the pathway, dressed in white. At this point she appears phantom-like (or like a flickering figure on a praxinoscope, perhaps). She wears a translucent dress, with a flowing trail; it resembles a transparent membrane wrapped around her, making her seem chrysalis-like, as if this is a moment of birth (as well as making her seem like another night-creature). She glows white in the moonlight, linking her to the moon. There is an apparent reference here to alchemical symbolism, the moon or Luna representing the “female” principle. (Jung suggested that the moon represents a “white” state of innocence, the albedo stage in alchemy, “which like the moon and a bride awaits the bridegroom” [CW 14 para.155].) The change from pyramid to night-time scene, then, signifies an alchemical transformation, from solar to lunar; and also from conscious to unconscious, light to dark. There is a disruption of Kronos/linear time, with the implication of a shift to dreamtime, or onto a “visionary plane” (Corbin 139).

The change also makes it seem as if the woman is emerging from *within* the man; as if these events are happening in his dream. She is an anima figure in this sense; but also “apparitional” (Corbin 139) or even “theophanic.” She seems to have a magical power: she is the “mercurial” spirit of flux, able to morph into different shapes and forms, but also, to cause change in others. The night-time creatures that surround her could be seen as *her* creatures, as if she has released them, or they are even created by her.

After the switch to the night-scene, there follows another moment of Kairos, marked again by a Dalínean double image. The woman throws



up both of her arms in the air. (Erich Neumann has identified this kind of pose, with arms upstretched, as “the posture of epiphany” [116].) Two faces appear in profile on either side of her: a man on one side, a woman on the other; the “anima” figure forms the negative space between them. (The image is evidently based on the well-known figure-ground image of “Rubin’s Vase,” produced by Edgar John Rubin in 1915, which was designed to be read in two ways: either as a chalice, or as two human faces in silhouette which seem poised to kiss.) The woman’s pose—her hands in the air—suggests that she has conjured up these figures by magic. The double-image marks a leap or “jump-cut” in time, but also, a magical transformation. It becomes clear that the woman on the left is, in fact, *the same woman*: she has left behind her original “chrysalis” state and become, now, recognizably human.

In one of the story treatments, the film was described as a “girl’s search for destiny, to find her true love” (qtd. in Nicolaou). The film in fact has a two-part structure (in the storyboard version): the first part focuses on the woman, and the second part on the man. As noted, the “Destino” song would have been heard on the film’s soundtrack. This would have made it seem as if it was the heroine’s personal anthem, with the lyrics (“I know now / that you are my destino / We’ll be as one . . .”) implying that this is the purpose of her being: to seek union with the Other. Dalí/Hench noted that, to achieve “the working out” of her destiny, she first faces a “series of symbolic experiences which are revealed as temporary seductions and not her true destiny” (qtd. in Bossert 66). The meeting with the man is the first: she stares intently at him, and it seems that a romantic encounter is about to ensue. However, his face starts to dissolve, until all that remains is a hollow shell. She turns away from him, and begins to ascend a helicline around the outside of a tower, described by Dalí/Hench as a decadent “Tower of Babel” (qtd. in Bossert 71). Having assumed mortal form, the woman now encounters only the false “seductions” of material pleasures, and the decay of matter. The men she meets are hollow and machine-like; for example, she passes two frozen figures, holding out champagne glasses to her, as if inviting her to drink; their innards are hollow, exposing champagne bottles in place of internal organs. They are like figures in Pompeii, caught in the folly of hedonistic pleasures at the moment of death.

At the top of the heracline, there are more “hollow men,” with eyeballs for heads, who gaze at her lecherously. She takes refuge in a large conch shell. The draft script states:

But all the while, she moves closer and closer to the precipice [of the tower]. Her balance is failing—she totters, plunges into emptiness . . .

As she falls, the girl becomes detached from her old personality and travels onward in a fantastic journey through space. Finally, she reaches the limitless plane [sic] where she will meet her true destiny. (qtd. in Bossert 59)

Emerging from the shell implies a new moment of (re)birth; and with it, an escape from fate or “false” destiny.

## BELL/GIRL

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In one shot, as the woman descends to the ground, there is a view of the plain where the pyramid stands. Nearby, there is a campanile; and in the distance (at the horizon point), there is a domed “temple,” described in one story treatment as a “Temple of Love” (qtd. in Fanés 191). As we will see, at the climax of the film, this becomes the place of final “destiny,” the site of transfiguration or rebirth.

The bell in the campanile is another example of a Dalíean double image: it is shaped to resemble a girl in a dress. The same image, of a bell/girl in a campanile, appears in other works by Dalí such as *Nostalgic Echo* (1935) or *Landscape with a Girl Skipping Rope* (1936). In *Nostalgic Echo*, a girl is skipping, and the rope as it passes over her head resembles the round arch of the belfry. She is mirrored by the bell/girl in the tower, which is in mid-swing—the image suggesting both a bell being rung, and a girl playing on a swing. The “ringing” of the bell may imply a form of annunciation; as if this is the vision of some transcendental entity or “angel.”

This figure of the bell/girl was based on a memory from Dalí’s own childhood, of the campanile in his sister’s school in Figueres (Joseph-Lowery 17); and, indeed, it is surely another variant on the “obsessing feminine image” (Dalí, *Secret* 118), like the Russian girl in the optical toy. At the same time, the bell may be read as an image of Kairos. (Jim Fitzgerald has suggested that the sounds of bells are a “summons” and “a punctuation of the world’s time” [4], projecting the listener into the time of Kairos, and announcing “the imminent possibility of change” [14].) In the shot of the plain, there is a triangulation of pyramid, tower and temple, invoking the idea of conjunction and alignment. We may see these figures as representing Kronos (pyramid/male) and Kairos (bell/girl), with the temple as Aion (or eternal time). There is also an allusion to the alchemical process, the *coniunctio oppositorum* of “male” and “female” elements, with the temple as the place of transformation and unity. (The location of the temple at the vanishing point of the image implies that it is the ultimate goal of the journey or process.)

The woman descends to the plain, and crosses to the dried-up fountain which lies directly in front of the pyramid. Sunlight appears to circle the campanile rapidly, so its shadow rotates through 180°. It is like the shadow of a gnomon on a sundial; an indication that this is a new moment of Kairos. Finally, the shadow lies across the fountain pool. It is a moment of synchronicity, like a magical sign, as if the universe is pointing the way to the woman's "destiny" and prefiguring her transfiguration. She kneels and looks at the shadow of the bell, and it seems as if she is contemplating her *own* shadow (or her image in a mirror). The draft script states: "she is immediately entranced by the shadow of a bell[,] which appears to her symbolic of the purity within herself: she clothes herself in this shadow" (qtd. in Bossert 59). "The girl, free of her obsessions, takes on a state of purity, unaware of the nearness of her true destiny now released by her act from the bondage of time" (qtd. in Bossert 66).

The fountain is dry and cracked like the pyramid; and yet she now dives into it as if it is water, and even "drowns" it (and is reborn). (This is a form of baptism, in the sense defined by Eliade: "a total regeneration, a new birth" [188].) The woman lies down on the ground, and "clothes herself in this shadow" (qtd. in Bossert 59); indeed, she seems to dissolve into it. When she rises, she has become the bell/girl, brought to life. She is wearing a bell-shaped dress and resembles a ballet dancer in a tutu, or a paper cut-out doll. Her face is blank, like a ball. She is now less an individual, than a form of energy or light, like a phantom figure in a praxinoscope. The suggestion in the script that she has been "purified" may allude to the alchemical process of "purification, initiation, perfection" (Cowlan 17); what Jung terms the "resurrection and transformation into an incorruptible state" (CW 14 para. 727).

She begins to dance, expressing, it seems, the joy of her "release." In assuming her new form, she becomes the principle of metamorphosis or "plasmaticness" (Eisenstein 21): her head and body parts now have the capacity to separate, and move around each other (also as if in a kind of dance). She seems to revel in her freedom of movement and ability to change shape; and she is able to effect change in the man. As the "Dancer," indeed, she logically needs a partner. The moment that she rises from the ground in her new form, the naked figure of the man begins to peel away from the pyramid wall, pulling himself free from sticky membranes that are holding him back, as if he is emerging from a cocoon, or birth sac. He becomes plasmatic, in other words, as if the hard stone has dissolved to become fluid and "soft."<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> For Dali's theory of "the morphological esthetics of the soft and the hard," see *Secret* (304).

With every gesture, the woman “tries to wake him, draw him to her, and thus, free him from the bonds of time” (Dalí/Hench qtd. in Bossert 61). (Indeed, the membranes holding him back seem to be attached to the clock at the pyramid base; in one image, Dalíean melting clocks are draped over his body, clinging to him like limpets.) He sinks to the ground, as if exhausted. At one point, the woman’s head resembles the head of a dandelion flower, which then dissolves into florets, floating through the air in a spiral. The script states: “In her efforts to communicate, she sends him the effulgence of her love—the spin-drift of dandelions, wafted from her head” (qtd. in Bossert 61). The use of the dandelion—the “clock” flower—is another indication that this is a moment of Kairos. Some of the florets land on the man; he rises, and throws up his arms, as if to express the ecstasy of *his* “release” and (re)birth. (His movements mirror the woman’s earlier dance of joy.) In this way, the woman magically brings him to life; indeed, it is as if she *creates* him.

A single dandelion floret floats over his head, and he watches it closely. It morphs into a hummingbird which hovers over his wrist, and uses its long beak to strike at the face of his wristwatch. The hummingbird is evidently a new form of the woman, acting on the man. The rapid beats of the bird’s wings suggest the speeding-up of time; at this moment, “Time is withdrawn,” and the man “sees his own destiny and himself in his hand” (Dalí/Hench qtd. in Fanés 191). There is a reference here surely to the “fate” lines in cheiromancy. There is now a close-up on the man’s hand. Ants emerge from a hole in the centre of the palm, scurrying over it.<sup>13</sup> Ants suggest decay; and the implication may be that this “new-born” being discovers that his body is already threatened with decay and death. The image now morphs: there is a close-up on the hand, and the life-lines become crevices in a hilly landscape. The ants turn into numerous cyclists, all identical, hurrying in different directions, but seeming purposeless. (They have stones strapped to their heads, like some insectile protuberance;<sup>14</sup> they represent, surely, “the mass, the collective . . . the common fund of the obscure folly of humanity” [Dalí, *Secret* 74].) The man himself appears in this landscape; and in the rest of the film, he journeys through it, in pursuit of the woman. It is as if the unfolds *on his hand*, and he is, in effect, traversing the lifelines of his own “destiny.”

<sup>13</sup> A similar image, of a man staring at his hand which is suddenly covered in ants, appears in the Dalí/Bunuel film *Le Chien Andalou* (1929).

<sup>14</sup> The image of cyclists appears in other works by Dalí, such as *Sentimental Colloquy* (1944).

The man now faces the woman across a crevice; he sets off, as if trying to find a way to reach her. He passes through a labyrinth of classical ruins,<sup>15</sup> and finally emerges once more on an open plain; the woman stands opposite, with her arms stretched out towards him. Dalí declared the film would end “with a baseball game ballet culminating in a magical temple of love floating in the sky” (qtd. in Hazucha 109). According to Walt Disney, Dalí saw baseball as a uniquely American form of “ballet choreography” (qtd. in Hazucha 108). In the storyboards, the man now appears dressed as a baseball player; and the man and woman perform a kind of dance around each other. (The draft script states: “Using a ‘pas de deux’. . . the choreography is based on movements executed in a game of baseball” [qtd. in Bossert 61].) The woman’s head becomes detached from her body and forms the ball for the game. Fèlix Fanés has argued that the ball here represents the “focal point” of the man’s psyche (191); according to one story treatment, “Desire is completely oriented” (qtd. in Fanés 191).

At one point, the man strikes the ball with his bat. He chases after it, and there is another leap in time: the ball morphs into the woman’s head. He is finally kissing her, but she appears only as a glowing ball of light behind him, so it is as if he is merging with this “ball” of energy or spirit. In other words, the man and woman are finally becoming one. The moment marks the beginning of the end. The man now appears as if he is buried in the ground, up to the waist; so he resembles a gravestone, or statue. It seems as if, in the moment of the kiss, he is losing energy and dying, prior to his final transformation. He is mesmerized by the figure of a miniature ballerina before him. The image suggests a praxinoscope theatre: a dancing figure on stage, watched by a solitary spectator. His hand reaches forwards as if to grasp this phantom figure; but she morphs into the “ball” again; which in turn morphs into an eyeball, in close-up, filling the screen. The eye seems to open up, and become a kind of “portal”; the camera passes inside, as if entering inside the cone of the eye, and into a tunnel. The moment may suggest that we (as spectators) are passing inside the man’s head, accompanying him on a psychological journey into his own psyche. As the camera passes into the “eye,” what follows may be compared to the stargate sequence in Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968); or to the experience of looking into a kaleidoscope toy, and seeing different lights and shapes as they morph. The end of the tunnel is a wall of glass; it shatters as the camera passes through it. (There is an obvious suggestion of orgasm here.) We emerge (as viewers) in the “Temple of Love” (qtd. in

<sup>15</sup> Dalí once described *Destino* as “a magical exposition of the problem of life in the labyrinth of time” (qtd. in Hazucha 106).

Bossert 62). The film's ending recalls the climax of Dalí's *Narcissus* poem: "Now the great mystery draws near, / the great metamorphosis is about to take place" ("Metamorphosis" 328). A giant, faceless figure rises from the ground ahead, his arms outstretched. There are membranes attached to his arms, as if holding him back to the earth; as if he is bursting free in a moment of new birth, or resurrection. The storyboard invokes a process of physical and spiritual transformation: the figure's head morphs, and takes a heart shape. It stands on an altar at the centre of the "Temple." The heart carries obvious associations with love, but it is also the man's *own* heart, as if this is end-point of his quest *within himself*. The heart splits in two; in the gap, the shape of the pyramid appears. There is now a cross-fade to a shot of the pyramid on the plain, with the figure of the man once more frozen in relief. In other words, we are back to the opening image of the film.

The film's ending recalls Dalí's description of his "union" with Gala: "We are welded; time and space become a single reality" (*Unspeakable* 145). There is a close-up on the man. A cavity has appeared in his left breast; in it, we can see the bell/girl. She is his heart; fixed in his breast like a bell in a campanile. The bell/heart may be compared to the flower emerging from the head/egg in *Metamorphosis of Narcissus*. It begins to emit rays (or it could be florets), as if this "heart" is beating; and also implying the tolling of a bell, as if marking another imminent moment of Kairos. The man is once more frozen in time, as if he has expired; however, the return to the beginning also implies that the process of rebirth and regeneration must, in time, begin again. It seems that the artist—like the alchemist—must repeat the "Great Work," in a never-ending cycle; forever creating and re-creating the union of Self and Other, through a process of *solutio* and *coagulatio*.

Throughout his life, Dalí continued to pursue the phantom of the "obsessing feminine image" (*Secret* 118), even after he supposedly "found" her in Gala. *Destino* demonstrates how the art work may function as a form of chemical theatre. It enacts the union of Self with Other, or rather, with the quasi-sacred *image* of the Other, which is evoked through the use of selected religious icons: the temple, the heart, the "angelic" bell/girl, etc. The process is also alchemical: for Dalí, as for the author of *Aurora Consurgens*, the end of the "alchemical" Great Work was to "essentiate" the image of the "beloved" (Corbin 222). Dalí's need to return to the same "obsessing feminine image" (*Secret* 118), was, in fact, a form of "compulsive projection" (Hillman 16); and *this*, it seems, was his personal "destiny."

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# Made to Connive: Revisoning *Cinderella* in a Music Video. From Disney to Arthur Pirozkhov: A Case Study<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

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The article focuses on the way in which music videos can subvert and refigure the message of literature and film. The author sets out to demonstrate how a music video entitled “Зацепила” by Arthur Pirozkhov (Aleksandr Revva) enters a dialogue with the recent Disney version of *Cinderella* by Kenneth Branagh (2015), which, in turn, is an attempt to do justice to Perrault’s famous fairy tale. Starting out with Michèle Le Dœuff’s comment on the limitations imposed upon women’s intellectual freedom throughout the centuries, Filipczak applies the French philosopher’s concept of “regulatory myth” to illustrate the impact of fairy tales and their Disney versions on the contemporary construction of femininity. In her analysis of Branagh’s film Filipczak contends that its female protagonist is haunted by the spectre of the Victorian angel in the house which has come back with a vengeance in contemporary times despite Virginia Woolf’s and her followers’ attempts to annihilate it. Paradoxically, the music video, which is still marginalized in academia on account of its popular status, often offers a liberating deconstruction of regulatory myths. In the case in question, it allows the viewers to realize how their intellectual horizon is limited by the very stereotypes that inform the structure of Perrault’s *Cinderella*. This makes viewers see popular culture in a different light and appreciate the explosive power of music videos which can combine an artistic message with a perceptive commentary on stereotypes masked by seductive glamour.

**Keywords:** Cinderella, music video, Kenneth Branagh, Arthur Pirozkhov.

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In this article I would like to explore the afterlife of Perrault's *Cinderella* in the 21<sup>st</sup> c. by referring to a Disney version of the fairy tale by Kenneth Branagh (2015) and its subversive parody in a music video in Russian entitled "Зацепила" by Arthur Pirozkhov (2019). A careful analysis of particular motifs makes it possible to reveal stereotypes implicit in the construction of femininity in the influential fairy tale. This, in turn, leads to the exposure of mechanisms that have resulted in the silencing of women as speaking subjects. In her seminal text *The Sex of Knowing* the feminist philosopher Michèle Le Dœuff mentions the power of regulatory myths which have rigorously controlled female access to intellectual life. While Le Dœuff discusses regulatory myths that used to restrict women in the past, she is far from optimistic when it comes to the female condition nowadays. This is what she sets out to confront in her book:

I will try to analyze all kinds of reluctance as residues with which we must be satisfied, and I hope at the same time to illuminate some of the many affirmations of women's lack of aptitude for knowledge, our nonaccess to reason, knowledge, sciences . . . or the innumerable claims that for us such things are fairly indecent. (27)

My goal is to demonstrate how regulatory myths affect the constructions of femininity in media and thus prevent the full recovery of female identities. My contention is that while focusing on the particularities connected with individual female endeavors we cannot lose sight of the cultural backlash which sabotages these very endeavors. In order to prove my point I would like to focus on the rather unsettling return of fairy tale scenarios to film, and on how the Disneyfication of fairy tales reinstates the "phantom" of the Victorian angel in the house whose death in each of us (women) Virginia Woolf so fervently encouraged and considered possible in her famous lecture "Professions for Women" (qtd. in Ellis 132). I am not encouraging a simplistic interpretation regarding sexism in media. In fact, I contend that some media can subvert the message of others, as is the case with "Зацепила."

The unabated popularity of fairy tales, which easily cross over into contemporary media, begs for critical attention. Harold Neemann states that "[i]t is precisely because fairy tale characters are types rather than individuals that they live forever" (43). The contention comes close to the Jungian concern with archetypes which are apparently eternal, but such a perspective prevents the reader from confronting the regulatory mechanisms which determine and circumscribe her existence in a particular social context. Jack Zipes, a distinguished authority on children's literature and folklore, brings together a myth and a fairy tale, thus revealing the implicit connection between both phenomena. Zipes's perspective on fairy

tales was influenced by Susan Gilbert and Sandra Gubar's *The Mad Woman in the Attic*. Analyzing Disney's *Snow White* he makes the following point: "the film follows the classic 'sexist' narrative about the framing of women's life through a male discourse" (89). His comments on Disney films based on fairy tales are equally relevant for my argument: "despite their beauty and charm Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella in Disney versions are pale and pathetic, compared to the more demonic characters in the film" (89). In his book *Disney Culture* John Wills connects the beginnings of Disney's impact with the release of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (1937) which "preached traditional gender roles and old-fashioned morality" (5). Wills contends that Disney is much more than entertainment; Disney "exerts a powerful influence on our education, our values, our lifestyle choices" (5). In fact, the Disneyfication of positive female characters in films constitutes a regulatory mechanism that curtails their independence, let alone their intellectual freedom.

It is interesting to examine *Cinderella* by Kenneth Branagh in light of the above. The director is known for drawing inspiration from popular Hollywood films that he watched as a boy. In fact, he brings populist appeal to his adaptations of Shakespeare (Crowl 10–11). In an interview with *E* Branagh explicitly states that his *Cinderella* "pays tribute to" Walt Disney's animated classic. Likewise, it transmits Disney's post-Victorian code of values. The eponymous heroine is duly transformed into a contemporary equivalent of Coventry Patmore's "angel in the house," all her anger at her bad lot wiped out by the desire to please and to connive at her own reduction to a scapegoat. Interestingly, Patmore's long poem combines Cinderella features with the Victorian code, for example in a section entitled "The County Ball," which says: "But there danced she / Her brow more beautiful than morn, / Her sometime look of girlish state / Around her mouth the baby smile[.] Her ball-dress seem'd a breathing mist." According to Karin Hilck, Disney's heroine cum princess is "an epitome of femininity" signifying "girliness" and "cuteness" (52). This emphasizes attributes connected with appearance rather than agency. The same attributes had found their way into Patmore's poem. Thus Disney was Coventry Patmore's epigone.

The lead actress in Branagh's *Cinderella*, Lily James, was made to fit in with a Barbie doll image. Not only was she on a liquid diet throughout the film; her waist was also considerably slimmed, which elicited cautionary comments from media scholars such as Rebecca Hains, quoted in an online *Guardian* article by Tracy McVeigh:

This is an unrealistic beauty image, an exaggerated body type, and the fact that the actress then says, "oh yes, I was corseted so tightly I couldn't

eat,” I think is problematic. As is the plot. How brave is she really being? If she doesn’t have a prince, then she stays and accepts the abuse.

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In fact, Lily James’s image quickly fed into the new Mattel dolls such as Disney Royal Ball Cinderella Doll, which is meant to “enchant” girls. The description of her finery draws attention to “a coordinating bodice” (“Disney Royal Ball Cinderella Doll”). The film and doll industries join hands in selling, or “peddling,” as Hains puts it, the coveted image to millions of girls who are encouraged to dream their lives away instead of making use of their own minds. Young women are forever arrested at the stage of development permeated with what Wills calls “childlike simplicity and sentimentality” (10). Almost disembodied, Ella in Branagh’s film becomes an illusion of timeless youth, unlike her stepmother, an experienced, elegant woman who is avid for success and, therefore, repulsive. Ella’s stepmother belongs in the category that Tomasz Fisiak describes as Gothic female tyrants who “often adopt controversial methods to succeed in the unfriendly phallogocentric environment” (Fisiak 158).

When the prince eventually finds her, Cinderella is locked in the attic of her former home, a damsel in distress in her stepmother’s Gothic scenario. True, she liberates herself by means of her voice, that is, by singing, which attracts the prince’s attention. One might hear echoes of *The Song of Songs* in the scene because in the biblical text the voice is that attribute of the beloved that her lover yearns for when he says: “let me hear thy voice; for sweet is thy voice, and thy countenance is comely” (*King James Bible* 2:14). These two elements characterizing a young woman in love were the only ones that the rigid code of fairy tales accepted. Dunn and Larson contend that singing and music were traditionally regarded as the only safe outlet for female self-expression and the only way to navigate the gap between domestic privacy and public space in women’s case (20–21).

Apart from the above, in Branagh’s film, Cinderella’s agency is transferred on to the animals that help her achieve her goal. It is not only the fact of her being driven in a carriage by the crew recruited from animals at the fairy godmother’s bidding. This continues the Disney tradition in which Snow White was able to converse with forest creatures that protected her from danger (Wills 10). In the scene in which Ella reveals herself by singing, the mice help her by unlatching and pushing open the window so that the prince might hear her. Animals facilitate Ella’s revealing herself to the prince not only as his actual but also as his potential beloved. Even when Cinderella first meets the prince in the forest she distracts his attention from the hunt because her horse carries her away, and the prince is worried that she might fall off. Thus whatever initiative Cinderella might have is subtly diverted on to animals with her being left almost unaware of

the fact that she is pursuing her own desire. Thus, any agency on her part either goes underground and is thwarted, or it is shouldered by friendly creatures. It must be clear to the audience that she does not pursue her own desire, but is acted upon rather than acting.

The Christian moral framework in the respective versions of *Cinderella* by Perrault and the Grimm brothers was analyzed by Cyrille François in "Cendrillon' and 'Aschenputtel': Different Voices, Different Projects, Different Cultures." The question is to what extent Perrault's and the Grimm Brothers' constructions of *Cinderella* are secular echoes of passages about the Virgin Mary in the Gospel of Luke (1:26–55), that is, the excerpts including Annunciation, Mary's consent to being elected and her joyous song, i.e. the Magnificat. Branagh may have been totally oblivious to the Christian framework of the story which lingers on as a trace in earlier Disney versions. Still, he tried to shift emphasis from the patriarchal framework to the female voice by turning the fairy godmother into the narrator. The result was that the patriarchal message was wrapped up in ostensibly female focalization to make it easier for young women to accept. As Angela Carter revealed in her rewriting of *Cinderella*, the fairy godmother may well be the ghost of *Cinderella*'s dead mother (Wiley 93). In Carter's versions of the story, the mother is first seen as the one whose sacrifice is necessary for the daughter's success, which is exposed as problematic. Then she is the one who offers her daughter a carriage and a red dress, that is, freedom of movement and the right to follow her desire (Wiley 97). In Branagh's film the conventionally pink dress that *Cinderella* inherited from her mother is given a new blue color by the fairy godmother. Blue is the Marian color in many Catholic representations of the Virgin Mary, but the statue has been reduced to a doll in the secular story of female salvation.

*Cinderella* is unique in her virtue, perfection and beauty. Also, she is the one who receives the message of supernatural choice and welcomes it like Mary. While she is the only one to be treated like that, her fate sets up a model for imitation. All girls are supposed to identify with her, face humiliations patiently and cope with injustice until they are (or are not) rewarded. Even *Cinderella*'s singing in Branagh's rendition of the tale fits with the expressiveness of women in the Bible. Mary sings the Magnificat in the scene of Annunciation, and through this she identifies with women who praised God by singing. *Cinderella* sings when her future bridegroom is near her house. As stated earlier this brings to mind *The Song of Songs*. In this most unusual book of the Bible and yet one of the most cherished texts in Judaism most of the narrative is focalized and shared by the powerful female voice of a country girl in love with the king. This is certainly a scenario that anticipates *Cinderella*. The sunburnt heroine of a Hebrew pastoral is much more appreciated by the

king (her lover) than the pale and conventional “daughters of Jerusalem,” that is, women from the court (Landy 146–47). The difference is that in the biblical text the beloved is much more active, restless and demanding in the pursuit of her erotic desire. She is certainly endowed with agency because she actively voices and fulfills her erotic potential. In contrast, Cinderella is subdued, and she relies on others to save her. What happens to female agency when Cinderella is translated into a social phenomenon? Amy M. Davis contends that “Disney is the primary curator of America’s fairy tale and folklore” (183), but fairy tales can easily shape expectations and fashion. The critic discusses the popularity of sumptuous fairy tale weddings and draws attention to the way in which the *Cinderella* scenario not only fed into the wedding industry, but also became a bridal version of the American dream, which had its opulent realization in the life of Grace Kelly, “a little girl from Philadelphia,” as the newspaper headlines condescendingly put it (Davis 180).

Let me now discuss the music video starring Aleksandr Revva (whose pseudonym is Arthur Pirozkhov), an actor from the troubled area of Donetsk claimed by Russia and the Ukraine. The title “Зацепила” literally means “she accosted me,” but it was more ambiguously translated into English as “Caught,” which does not reveal who caught whom, or who is caught by what. The video can be classified as a parodic appropriation or rewriting of the main elements in Branagh’s *Cinderella*. I am referring to and modifying one of the categories of intertextuality in media analyzed by Ott and Cameron, who identify a “parodic allusion,” as “a stylistic device in which one text incorporates a caricature of another” (436). The similarities between the video and Branagh’s *Cinderella* include dress code, gestures and splendor of space that is meant to entice and mislead unwary female viewers. The deconstruction of culturally accepted symbolism is actually introduced through music. According to Małgorzata Grajter, a music theorist,

the song by Pirozkhov opens with a quotation from “La valse de l’amour” from the Patrick Doyle soundtrack to the film *Cinderella*, in which the original polyphonic texture is reduced to just one melodic voice and a symphony orchestra is replaced by synthetic strings. The rhythm of a waltz, which was traditionally used in the context of ball (at least, since Hector Berlioz’s *Symphonie fantastique*), is then put in a stark contrast with modern techno music.

Like the representatives of the prince in Branagh’s film, the protagonist (Pirozkhov) in the music video has to face a line of women queuing in order to try on a crystal slipper. He does not hide his exhaustion with what seems to be a futile task, and eventually asks his majordomo to encourage the guests



to dance. This is when a beautiful and unescorted woman appears. Female transformation is central to the space of Disney castles, as Martha Bayless contends (50). Their sumptuous interior is echoed in Pirozkhov's video. But the transformation is not what the viewer might expect. Five minutes before twelve the most attractive woman tries to leave the ball but she is followed by the prince who kisses her, and this is when the clock strikes twelve.

From a slim, ethereal beauty, the woman of the protagonist's dreams is suddenly transformed into a middle aged and "plus size" lady. The prince is utterly horrified when he notices whom he has kissed. In *British Women's Cinema* Imelda Whelehan contends that film is just one medium that has favored youthful women. Older women who are underrepresented in mainstream culture may be seen as liberated from the "prison-house" of femininity or rendered invisible not only to the desiring male eye, but also to the eye of a feminist critic (170). The sudden invasion of middle age in a favored heroine is what a fairy tale cannot accommodate, so it is in the power of *Cinderella* to make use of the allotted time wisely. Pirozkhov's video exposes cultural chronophobia implicit in the tale. In her book entitled *Narratology* Mieke Bal uses the term chronophobia when referring to the merciless king from *Arabian Nights*. The king kills all the virgins after the first night until Scheherazade seduces him into a different kind of temporality, i.e. the temporality of the story, and thus she gains time for her own life. Bal states that "the king suffers from chronophobia, the fear that time is enemy's gain, and from gynophobia, the fear that women have life and desire of their own, hence a subjectivity" (67). Chronophobia is very much at stake in *Cinderella* where the fairy godmother can suspend all the physical laws except the flow of time. It is due to this flaw that ordinary reality returns. In Branagh's film we see the golden carriage crash against the bushes as it is being transformed into the pumpkin again. As the fairy tale demands the heroine is spared death or mutilation, and finds her way home drenched with rain but radiant.

How does Pirozkhov's video come into this? When the clock strikes twelve as the unknown princess is being kissed, time comes back with a vengeance, and the prince faces a "plus size" female body. Horrified by his nightmarish vision of beauty turned into what he cannot accept, the protagonist of the video decides to fit the crystal shoe on to the woman's foot, and a miracle takes place; she goes back to her former self, much to his relief. But when the slipper is removed or even partly taken off, an unwanted change sets in. The music video draws attention to inevitable changes in female corporeality as the prince imagines his future with *Cinderella* at his side, drinking champagne, while their children feast on enormous cakes with cream. In contrast, he imagines himself as perpetually young and changeless. This is a sideswipe at male narcissism.

Revva (Pirozkhov) is, first of all, a comic actor. He deals with his problem in a witty way. He glues and straps the magic slippers on to his dancing partner's feet, as a result of which the dance goes on without any further obstacles. It is pertinent to note that a similar practice occurs in the fashion world. Danica Lo states in *Glamour* that Marc Jacobs had the models' feet glued into their shoes at the spring Vuitton fashion show. There is a serious message in the collective jest that is offered by way of conclusion. The slipper is a symbolic tool pointing to the inevitable connection between successful womanhood and youth. Its message is "Thou shall not age." Swarovski crystal used in Branagh's *Cinderella* has migrated into the music video in a debased form. The woman is encased in a particular construction that prevents her from changing at all costs; she has frozen back into an eternally young Galatea because of her Pygmalion's chronophobia.

Much debate took place among scholars about the material that the famous slipper was made of. Numerous versions of the fairy tale testify to the variety of ingenious choices. Comparing Bruno Bettelheim's analysis of the Brothers Grimm *Cinderella* and Arthur Boyd Houghton's insight into one of the Oriental versions of the story, Allan Life draws attention to the fact that in the Grimms' version the protagonist's slippers are made of gold, which makes Bettelheim compare the ring ceremony and the vaginal symbolism of the slipper which fits on a phallic foot (162). The Freudian interpretation has been in vogue ever since Alan Dundes followed some of his predecessors in refuting the hypothesis about a possible mistranslation of *vair* (fur) into *verre* in Perrault's version, arguing that "glass is an appropriate symbol of virginity . . . once broken it cannot be repaired" (139). The traces of Mariolatry in Perrault's version of the story would explain Dundes's emphasis on the significance of Cinderella's virginity which is "guaranteed" because the glass slipper perfectly fits only her foot. The virginity fetish has persisted, and this is exactly what Pirozkhov's video tackles and transforms.

Before unpacking my point, I would like to focus on a scene from Branagh's film, which makes use of crystal, a symbol of purity and perfection in Christian religion. The stepmother finds and appropriates Cinderella's other shoe hidden in the attic. Then she confronts her stepdaughter and tries to force her to comply with a deal that presupposes the stepmother's share in the power of the future couple. When Cinderella refuses to make the deal, arguing that she did not manage to protect her father from devious scheming, but she will protect the prince, the stepmother crashes the remaining slipper against the door frame, symbolically preventing Cinderella's exit from the attic where she should waste away, potentially into madness, as well as old age.

In Pirozkhov's video the chronology of events from the fairy tale is reversed. When the prince puts the slipper on his partner's foot and finds out that she is young and beautiful, he takes the slipper off her foot again. But to his horror, her youth and beauty are inextricably bound up with wearing the slipper. In his imagination Pirozkhov's prince notices the fabled golden carriage in the middle of the ballroom. The fairy tale turned into a nightmare has now invaded his palace. His beloved is shown next to him in the carriage, both of them encased in the scenario that unfolds relentlessly. The woman eventually drops her slipper on the floor through the door of the carriage and destroys it. Only the fragments remain as the prince's fetish dismally ruins his prospective of conjugal happiness. The scenes from Branagh's and Pirozkhov's versions are definitely related. Just like the stepmother ruined Cinderella's dream by smashing the slipper against the door, so does the prince's monstrous beloved send his dream into smithereens. In both scenes the door—between the attic and the rest of the household or the carriage and the ballroom—operates as a liminal boundary between the worlds of reality and fantasy respectively. Pirozkhov's partner shows her own agency in the act of smashing the crystal slipper of male illusions connected with the perfection of perpetually young female body. But as a patriarchal (and tongue in cheek) fairy tale might have it, the slipper from Pirozkhov's video miraculously comes together again. That was just the prince's bad dream, which he shakes off and sets about the task of gluing and strapping the slippers on to the lady's feet. The fetish from Perrault and Disney has been exposed, but also revisioned as a different kind of fetish: the denial of change, old age and death.

While music videos often recycle stereotypes they can also explode them through a powerful combination of text, sound and image fused into one entity. "Зацепила" pokes fun at the Disneyfied construction of femininity, "[b]ound up with expectations of body type, sexuality, and male rescue" (Wills 122–23). The fantasy of "happily ever after" is smashed like a crystal slipper as "the realities of life" intrude upon the imaginary ballroom in the middle of which the golden carriage is placed. At the same time, the video shows that Disney's message is inexorably resistant to change. This confirms the connection between fairy tales and regulatory myths which relentlessly reassert their sway in patriarchal culture. The jubilation at the end of Pirozkhov's video shows that regulatory myth is alive and well despite the attempts to expose its oppressive character. Branagh's *Cinderella* has been appropriated and parodied in "Caught" as a version for adults. The princess has changed physically after giving birth to two children. Family life is incompatible with fantasy unless the family members take a break from routine in Disneyland. Despite the efforts of the Disney studio to modernize and update its heroines, Branagh's

*Cinderella* falls back on the old message and plays it safe, as Pirozkhov's video reminds us. Far from being consigned to oblivion, Coventry Patmore has the last word: "O queen, awake to thy renown, / Require what 'tis our wealth to give, / And comprehend and wear the crown / Of thy despised prerogative!"

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## Camp and Pop: David Bowie, Oskar Schlemmer, Madonna and Janelle Monáe

# ABSTRACT

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While contemporary pop culture is nowadays considered part of the cultural mainstream, its practices of codification and its use and circulation of signifiers are still shaped by its roots in counterculture. This leads to a second order esthetic that reflects upon mass culture and subverts it by means of transgression and rearrangement. This essay argues that this subversive logic of reference is closely linked to what Susan Sontag has described as “camp.” While doing so it not only sheds light on the aspect of subversion and identity building, but also on the aspect of performance and staging that plays an important role for camp, as well as pop culture and its play with artificiality and authenticity. As a consequence the concept of camp is used to examine the practice and performance of artists like David Bowie, Madonna, Christina Aguilera and Janelle Monáe, and finding structural similarity in their practice and production, which uncovers a tendency towards apersonal self-historization which is typical for pop and is closely linked to its ability to generate new meanings out of materials that stem from other contexts originally.

**Keywords:** camp, authenticity, performance, queer, music video.

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## INTRODUCTION: POP, CAMP AND POSE

Historically speaking, subcultures have often been closely linked to semiotic codification processes, so any analysis of camp's relationship to its era must also consider that era's practice of subcultural codes and their mass cultural ramifications.

Originally the term "camp" is believed to be derived from the French term "se camper" which can be translated as flaunting or posing in an exaggerated, provocative fashion. Its early use is associated with the beginning of the formation of distinct homosexual subcultures and identities in the seventeenth and eighteenth century ("Camp"). From this perspective camp can be understood as a sophisticated code whose necessity emerged from the still precarious position of deviant sexual identities. As Eadie puts it:

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gays and lesbians need to remain hidden yet visible for so long that they developed ways of signalling their sexual orientation to like-minded people that would remain oblique to society as a whole. They also could choose to be so flamboyant that their sexuality could not be ignored. (226)

Typical concepts that are associated with camp include "aesthetic sensibility, irony, exaggeration, outrageousness, theatricality, effeminacy, and homosexual behaviour" (Ertin 24).

In her 1964 essay *Notes on "Camp"* Susan Sontag has, while still referring to this background, famously broadened the focus of the term.<sup>1</sup> For Sontag camp can be used as a description for a wide range of cultural phenomena that flirt with the subversively ironical, the staged, extravagance, artifice and aestheticism. For her, "[c]amp is a vision of the world in terms of style. . . . It is the love of the exaggerated, the 'off,' of things-being-what-they-are-not" (Sontag 8). She identifies it as something that can be a stylistic undercurrent to "whole art forms": "Classical ballet, opera, movies" (Sontag 6).

What is particularly noteworthy here is that for Sontag popular music has also been "annexed" (Sontag 7) by the camp discourse. The relationship that is laid out in not much more than one sentence in Sontag's essay deserves a deeper investigation as it could be argued that the large number of players in today's pop culture operate in performative spaces that are still shaped by the camp discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> It must be noted here, however, that this broadening of the term has caused many critiques that are informed by queer discourse to disapprove of Sontag's account, calling it even "rather homophobic and prescriptive" (Ertin 25). There are still a lot of different accounts that suggest a closer relationship of the term to queer and gay practices (Ertin 25–26).



In regard to the discourse of pop culture camp can be understood as an alternative model that exploits the tools and esthetics of mass culture in order to distance itself from it. Camp does this by accentuating the artificial, the staged and the exaggerated, as a second-order esthetic of pop. Cultural boundaries and hierarchies are subjected to acts of transgression and rearrangement. And while the camp esthetic may always include a subversive drive, it does not follow that every subculture is necessarily camp. There needs to be certain defining features that only developed through the course of pop history. Among these are deconstruction through the tools of production, a concomitant fetishization of the object and the use of theatrical artifice, as the constituent elements seen in certain genres.

The present analysis will begin by taking a closer look at the practices of pop culture as subculture, in order to trace the use of camp esthetics through pop music history. Sontag's fifty-eight "notes" on the logic of camp do not specifically focus on the referential logic of pop, so a direct equivalence cannot be drawn between them. In any case, it is the concept of subculture that has become increasingly important in the theorizing of pop and its countercultural strategies (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik*).

In general, pop music offered young people a way to escape the disciplinary logic of the establishment. The postponement of pleasure, as described by Adorno in his essay on the culture industry, was countered here with intensely hedonistic practices of consumption. As Holert and Terkessidis put it:

They fiercely resisted the factory-organized world of their parents and the constant disciplining and oppression of their bodies, and they demanded that the culture industry deliver on its promises. When Elvis swung his hips, he was inviting his audience to escape from the prison of regimented everyday life. (Holert and Terkessidis 12–13)<sup>2</sup>

In this interpretation, pop had become a medium of physical unshackling, offering a counterpoint to the conformity-based mass culture of the time.

According to Diederichsen, the invoking and transmitting of deviant corporeality was an essential element in the media workings of the new phenomenon of pop. The seemingly authentic nature of rock and roll, which called upon youth to release a "repressed corporeal reality" (Diederichsen, "Nachruf David Bowie"), resulted from rock music's particular claim to truth, namely from its "indices of an exotic, individual, non-standardized corporeality, transmitted in high resolution" (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik* xxiv). And such indices did actually transmit authenticity to the audience. But

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<sup>2</sup> Text was published originally in German, translation by author. This applies to all other quotes from literature that was originally published in German.

while immediacy may be what pop music promises, this immediacy is the result (or benefit) of the medialization caused by the central position of the studio recording in pop music—in this way the liveness of pop music questions the common assumption that “the live event is ‘real’ and that mediatized events are secondary and somehow artificial reproductions of the real” (Auslander 3). The liveness of pop can much better be understood through a perspective that questions “whether there really are clear-cut ontological distinctions between live forms and mediatized ones” (Auslander 7), as Philip Auslander does. For Auslander, in the mediatized culture beginning in early 20<sup>th</sup> century, live performances and mediatized events are much more in a mutual correlation of formal influence and interdependence (11). As a consequence, the liveness of pop music is not bound to the actual live performance on stage but can be best described as a result of mediatization—as a media effect (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik* xxiv).

This effect, which depends on the media possibilities of voice-recording technology, is described by Diederichsen as a “punctum effect” (*Über Pop-Musik* xix-xxiv), using a term coined by Roland Barthes. This was a decisive factor in the mediated esthetic experience of rock music because the “indexical truth of voice transmission” (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik* 375) is what generates the authoritative claim to authenticity, thereby promoting the singing corporeal body within the largely standardized entertainment offerings of conformist Fordist postwar society.

But the punctum effect also points to yet another aspect. The authenticity of the moment, as conveyed by the voice in Diederichsen’s analysis and by photography and painting in Barthes’, is not the only central feature characterizing the recipient’s esthetic experience of pop. In fact, as described by Barthes in his *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (1981), the punctum is closely tied to its visual referent, and is not just some separate unimportant detail offering some promise of authenticity:

A Latin word exists to designate this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument: the word suits me all the better in that it also refers to the notion of punctuation, and because the photographs I am speaking of are in effect punctuated, sometimes even speckled with these sensitive points; precisely, these marks, these wounds are so many *points*. . . . [A punctum is a] sting, speck, cut, little hole—and also a cast of the dice. A photograph’s *punctum* is that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me). (Barthes 26–27)

Here, the accidental in photography is also the authentic, which in Barthes is primarily to be discovered visually, but in Diederichsen is located at the interface between artificiality and authenticity because in photography, just like in painting, what is later called “authentic” has

actually been staged. Both the photo and the painting are staged in terms of their framing, thereby fulfilling the paradigms of artificiality just like in camp, but at the same time, they contain what Barthes describes as the essence of a staged gaze:

the reading of the *punctum* (of the pricked photograph, so to speak) is at once brief and active, crouched like a predator. A trick of the vocabulary: we say “to develop a photograph”; but what the chemical action develops is undevelopable, an essence (of a wound), what cannot be transformed but only repeated under the instances of insistence (of the insistent gaze). (Barthes 49)<sup>3</sup>

The “managing, promoting, processing” (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik* 377) and living out of this claim to truth, according to Diederichsen, becomes a kind of driving force and thus also a “material from which one can do more than pursue leisure and the reproduction of existing patterns; from this material, one can create what could be called a counterculture” (*Über Pop-Musik*, 377). Therefore, counterculture incorporates not only the authentic, as well as the pose (“crouched like a predator”), but also the “essence,” which lies in the accidental and is the object of the gaze.

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## CAMP AS POP

This mode of reception may well apply to all forms of pop. Here, the materials of pop can be grouped on different levels, with questions of authenticity and artificiality structuring them on the one hand, while also creating a distinctive pop esthetic along with opportunities for self-identification on the other. This is also ultimately what engenders the subversive power of the various camp esthetics. This can be seen with those rock musicians, particularly the glam rockers, who broke with rock’s performance of authenticity (itself a self-contradictory idea from the very start) and pointedly staged rock as a big piece of postmodern theater. Here, the cult of authenticity is replaced by an adoration of artificiality, creating a turning point in pop culture as the camp esthetic became its own pop cultural mode of reception.

A highly influential example of this can be seen in the theatrical stage esthetics of David Bowie. What is striking here is how these avowedly countercultural strategies and pop cultural spectacles, built upon the

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<sup>3</sup> The original French text includes the words “ramassée comme un fauve” (“crouched like a predator”), but these were ignored in the 1981 English translation; this image has been reinserted here for the present analysis.

ideal of a free spirit, eventually give way to a more complicated identity politics and body politics. Bowie's performative practices are conducted through a self-objectifying body, one that thereby becomes a flexible code with permeable boundaries. His hybrid esthetic strategies, realized within the media complex of pop, feature a great deal of self-reflexivity and conceptualism, working with a frame of reference that is equally reliant on both art and pop.

These strategies pursued neither the logic of visual understatement nor of trying to present the self-expressive authentic individuality of "real" people. Instead, by the time *The Man Who Sold The World* came out, what shimmered through was a strategy that would later characterize postmodern "performativists" in pop music (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik* 137), namely a deconstruction of the rock form. In his transition to glam, Bowie's performativity is characterized by an emphatic marking of his own performance as a pose and by the heightened effect of his portrayal of androgyny and artificial identity. Inscribed in this performance as narrative staging is a transgressive positioning that oscillates between Greta Garbo pose, sexual deviance, pop art, occultism and Nietzsche. Reflections on pop music itself are also part of this thematic spectrum. In his song "Oh! You Pretty Things," Bowie sings about the exigencies of a generational conflict in which the young "pretty things" break with their parents' moralizing ideas of body and gender, but he also links this to questions of identity and politics, issues that affect Bowie himself and that he uses in his works.

One thesis this text poses is that Bowie's media esthetics represented a turning point in the usage and production of camp in pop. While the rock and roll of the 1950s can already be interpreted as a revolt of nature against culture, this was then overtaken by glam rock with its dandyism and theatricality, as exemplified by Bowie, just a short time later. The dandy stands in hostile contrast to nature, thereby underlining dandyism's role as the historical forerunner to camp, and with this, opening up a necessary precondition for a productive reinterpretation of pop music: "on the one side an unbelieving, irreligious, dispassionate and even self-serving ability, and on the other side a fanatical bent, for unraveling the product and fetishizing certain components while rejecting others—all while observing oneself in the very act" (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik* 26).

Bowie's usage of postmodern theory and his intermedia reworking of diverse influences such as the works of Brion Gysin, along with his direct references to Susan Sontag's essay and the writings of William S. Burroughs, as well as to theater traditions like Japanese kabuki and Oskar Schlemmer's Bauhaus workshop, in addition to his theatrical gender-bending play with signs, exemplify in two ways the citation strategies of camp. On the one hand, he communicates a queer (or drag) subculture, and on the other

hand—like in Sontag’s essay—he makes use of both high and low culture. In his engagement with the social conditions of queer or gay life, which includes camp’s distinctive capacity for empowering the recipient through the unraveling of cultural objects in order to construct new meanings independently of intended ones or in direct opposition to them, Bowie was able to construct his own unique and provocative stage semiotics, which ultimately had a strong impact on the media esthetics of pop culture, as well as on the counterculture and its particular conditions of production (Paglia 35, 60). When Bowie presents himself as a dandy and a diva, this manifests as a playing with stereotypical gender roles, with his expressions then becoming pop cultural codes and solidifying into a second-order esthetic, one that is communicated primarily through visual means before becoming quotable in turn. In reading Sontag, it becomes quite obvious that for her the dandy has no place today, and that in the age of mass culture, the dandy can persist only in the subculture. She writes that the bearers of camp taste are “an improvised self-elected class, mainly homosexuals, who constitute themselves as aristocrats of taste” (Sontag 29).

However, in this play with gender signs, there is yet a third aspect, one in which camp is a form of subversion (as seen in Sontag) and also a theoretical bridge to montage, bricolage (Claude Levi-Strauss) and intertextuality (Julia Kristeva). While standing for an activated recipient who moves between high and low culture while creating new opportunities for self-identification, camp also opens up a new reading of pop cultural codes.

This is what Madonna internalized in her semiotic play with divas like Maria Callas, Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Judy Garland and Barbara Streisand, building upon Bowie’s earlier metaphorological reworking of these divas as signifiers in the pop discourse. Madonna is thus interpreting herself as a camp subject, as described by Pamela Robertson. She is not making herself an object like the prototypical divas did (Robertson 267). In her feminist deployment of camp esthetics, Madonna sets herself up as a performer of gender bending after circa 1983, presenting a parody of male and female masks, as well as stereotypical gender roles, thereby striking a pose between authenticity and camp.<sup>4</sup> With figures like Madonna, Mae West and Joan Crawford, camp becomes a model of pop cultural reception that intentionally draws upon an intertextual web of established references and that propagates itself through imagery. The subversive power of the visual quotation is manifested as an intermedia chain of signifiers, one that

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<sup>4</sup> It was in 1983 that Madonna released her self-titled debut album, including her first mainstream hits “Holiday” and “Lucky Star,” with videos that helped popularize her style and mannerisms.

is continued forward through pop culture and that reaches back to its pop historical and media archaeological roots in Bowie.

In his stage shows, for example, one reference is to the *Tänzmensch* (“dancing human”) of Oskar Schlemmer, which can be understood as one inspiration for the well known jumpsuit Bowie wore in 1974. The *Tänzmensch* becomes a fictional character presented in three dimensions and/or in a kabuki-like stage setting. In this, Bowie quotes a piece of high culture, and this quotation then becomes a piece of conceptual pop culture, thus wandering between media. On the other hand, his androgynous creation Ziggy Stardust (borrowing from Andy Warhol’s conceptual explorations) is the product of his own personal world of signs, one in which gender is freed from heteronormative stereotypes and is injected into the commercial pop discourse as a subcultural quotation. The explosive power of this usage of signs eventually must have become clear to Bowie himself, especially when interviewers repeatedly asked him about his sexual orientation, an issue that nearly cost him career when he declared himself bisexual—a claim he later retracted (Paglia 90).

But the remarkable thing for the present analysis is how Bowie’s use of camp esthetics has spawned its own signifier logic, one that has since established itself in pop culture through intertextual references, as seen in the use of camp esthetics after Bowie.

## CAMP IN THE MUSIC VIDEO

This particular esthetic is well exemplified in the iconography of early music videos, as well as in their later descendants. In fact, music videos offer an important channel for communicating marginalized identities in pop culture. Before the launch of MTV in 1981, it was music magazines, concerts and films that dominated, but music videos then became the ubiquitous telegrams of the pop lifestyle. The intermedia codes of camp are preserved and archived in music videos, which ultimately convey the pop discourses and signifier systems of their time.

It can be suspected that Madonna was also drawing upon Bowie’s camp esthetics in her own explorations of gender and dandyism (for example in the 1990 music video for “Vogue”). When Bowie’s play with signs is taken over by Madonna in turn, this is yet another step in the wandering of the signifier. Such semantic lines of descent are well illustrated by numerous examples cited by Henry Keazor and Thorsten Wübena in their book *Video Thrills the Radio Star*. For instance, in one passage, they look at more recent videos like those of Christina Aguilera, who “at her first appearance in 1999 still presented herself as an attractive but somewhat shy Britney

Spears imitator,” then made a splash with “a wig and heavy makeup” in Ricky Martin’s video for “Nobody Wants to be Lonely,” before only later acquiring notoriety in a “prostitute’s outfit bordering on the grotesque in Paul Hunter’s video for ‘Lady Marmalade’” (421–22). Aguilera then changes her image once again with the grimy sexy esthetics of the video for “Dirrty” (2002), in contrast to her performance as a sensitive and restless embodiment of inwardness in “The Voice Within” (2004). For Keazor and Wübbena, these shifts are reminiscent of Madonna’s frequent image changes. In Aguilera’s 2002 album *Stripped*, which includes the last two mentioned songs, this citation strategy referring back to Madonna “finds its visual expression when Christina Aguilera not only seems to ‘continually reinvent herself’ (just like the thereby imitated Madonna), but now actually appears in an outfit that borrows heavily from Madonna’s look in Chris Cunningham’s 1998 video for ‘Frozen’” (Keazor and Wübbena 436). According to Keazor and Wübbena, there is a clear resemblance:

Starting with the dark mysterious atmosphere in which the two singers present themselves, continuing with the bold black hairstyles and the visible body decorations (henna tattoos for Madonna, bindi-like face markings for Christina Aguilera), and culminating in the similar black gowns with billowing fabric, used in both cases to flow around the women and conceal them as they transform. (436)

By the MTV Video Music Awards in 2003, Aguilera seemed to have successfully made the leap to the big stage with her boldly provocative pose: it was here that Madonna, dressed as a groom, kissed the lips of both Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera, dressed as brides.

Aguilera has thereby acquired an image and a pose that could not have been more closely related to Madonna. Here, the quotations and production esthetics referencing Madonna, virtually copying or imitating her, appear to have reached their full consummation. Such techniques of quotation and referencing can certainly be seen as a deliberate marketing strategy in the production of music videos and pop star images. At a deeper level, one could also see this as an example of *translatio studii*, meaning the “transfer of learning” from role model to successor, an act from which both parties benefit, both the old queen of pop and the new. But this scene can be seen even more as a chain, a wandering of Hans Blumenberg’s “metaphorologies” (Blumenberg), from Kabuki to Schlemmer, onwards to Bowie and Madonna, and continuing through Prince to Lady Gaga and Janelle Monáe, who in turn was heavily influenced by Prince (Murchison 79–90).

The remarkable thing here is how the concepts of hallowed high culture are now circling back to themselves in the advanced stages of pop culture,

just like Bowie circled back to himself through Schlemmer's *Triadic Ballet*. In this respect, pop culture is always about more than just its music, it is also about a wider ensemble of cultural practices. This situation has been astutely and succinctly described by Diederichsen, who states that pop culture, in its well-considered visual strategies and practices of reception, is always also a hybrid that is activated by the camp style of reception (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik* 21–23).

Here, it is no longer just about the queer, and

it is not really every time that the cultural object is unraveled and, so to speak, the genealogy of its becoming ambivalent, the emergence of its double meaning, is retraced; instead, part of later camp's esthetics is that a certain form of the double meaning is also actively intended and finds its own shape. While what is suitable for becoming a camp object may not be entirely arbitrary, once something has been experienced and coded as such, then the culture industry's framework for the unraveling of a work and its readability against the original creator's intentions are ultimately irrelevant for the final reception. (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik* 23)

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In this analysis, anything can become camp.

## CAMP, HOMOSEXUALITY AND QUEERNESS

Camp as an esthetic strategy shaped by queerness, as well as the intentional double meanings of intermedia references, are characteristic features marking the production history of the culture industry's music videos. Music video references to queer camp esthetic interventions are strikingly conveyed in Madonna's video for "Vogue," which itself refers back to Malcolm McLaren's "Deep in Vogue" and to voguing culture, as documented by Jennie Livingston in her 1990 film *Paris is Burning*, which itself became a starting point for the gender theory of Judith Butler. The fact that Madonna to some extent exploited Harlem's homosexual subculture for her own production purposes, going so far as to out her gay dancers against their will, is finally highlighted in the 2016 film *Kiki*. Her video took the New York ball culture of the early 1980s and commercially packaged it as a culture industry product. This discursive thinking, where high and low come together, ultimately culminates in sampling, covering, quoting and imitating, in that space between subversion and commercialization. In a kind of bricolage, there is a pasting together of elements taken from a music video esthetic that constantly reproduces itself by referring back to a history of earlier productions. Here, camp can also be seen as an intertextual economy of references, one in which the history of the music



video and discursive pop culture, which oscillates between subculture/ counterculture and commercial culture, spawns itself. This process becomes particularly striking when queerness itself becomes the camp object or the object to be unraveled, as was the case with Madonna. It is precisely here that “readability against the original creator’s intentions [is] ultimately irrelevant for the final reception.” Nonetheless, since camp is also always “tied to the concrete history of queer culture . . . camp objects are not random or arbitrary” (Diederichsen, *Über Pop-Musik* 24).

## POP, MUSEUM, MONÁE

In May 2019, New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art hosted its annual Met Gala fundraising dinner, chaired by Anna Wintour and underwritten by Gucci, to mark the launch of a new exhibition entitled *Camp: Notes on Fashion*, in direct homage to Susan Sontag’s essay *Notes on “Camp.”*

The Met show featured over 250 items covering developments since the seventeenth century, from a sensuous male figurine owned by Louis XIV to a flamingo headpiece by cutting-edge milliner Stephen Jones. There were also photos, drawings and paintings (e.g., *The Fleet’s In!* by Paul Cadmus), alongside various sculptures. The exhibition included couture items from a wide range of fashion designers, including Vivienne Westwood, Karl Lagerfeld, Chanel, Jeremy Scott, Maison Margiela, Salvatore Ferragamo, Paul Poiret, Cristóbal Balenciaga, Antonio del Castillo, Yves Saint Laurent, Alessandro Michele, Mary Katrantzou, Jeremy Scott, Viktor Horsting, Rolf Snoeren and Thierry Mugler. The background music was supplied by Judy Garland’s “Over the Rainbow.”

In a gallery labeled “Sontagian Camp,” there are artifacts that can be matched to Sontag’s various notes on camp. It seems that Sontag had been a frequent visitor to the museum, so it had some of the items mentioned by Sontag, as it were, “in stock.” On display are photographic portraits of Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, a Balenciaga evening dress from 1965 and even a Tiffany lamp from the early twentieth century. At the end of the Sontagian gallery, relating to the fifty-sixth out of the fifty-eight notes on camp, there hangs Andy Warhol’s famous screen print of the Campbell’s soup can. (Oehmke)

And so this is where pop culture circles back to itself, with the Metropolitan Museum explicitly referencing Sontag, but at the same time, with the performance also incorporating the commercial and the kitschy, along with the high culture institution of the museum itself. Of particular note was the entrance of Janelle Monáe, who arrived in a surrealist outfit specially

designed for the occasion by Christian Siriano. Mounted on her left breast was a very striking element: a mechanical eye that could be opened and closed. Her sartorial mix also included deconstructed tuxedo elements and a stack of wide-brimmed hats. It can be suspected that Monáe has made very intensive use of camp readings in her work. With her 2018 album *Dirty Computer*, she boldly dissects and quotes past esthetics, especially that of Bowie in her own music video for “Pynk,” for which she dons a pair of vagina-shaped pants whose form and design recall Bowie’s 1973 jumpsuit by Kansai Yamamoto, thereby also referencing back to Oskar Schlemmer’s *Tänzerensch.*

With her earlier work, as well, Monáe has championed the use of quotation and appropriation and the continued elaboration of visual esthetics from media history, which is perhaps why her musical *oeuvre* has so often been featured in Sunday arts supplements. Her output has been the object of scholarly study since at least 2008, as a hybrid media esthetic particularly working with film history:

Since releasing the EP *Metropolis: The Chase Suite* in 2008, the popular recording artist Janelle Monáe has been an adventurous and enigmatic performer, blending and mixing a variety of styles and genres, from early rock and roll to psychedelic music, from classical to funk. Along with her Atlanta-based arts collective, the Wondaland Arts Society, Monáe combines these sounds with wide-ranging concept albums, music videos, and stage shows to create sci-fi and futuristic themes that deal with androids, outer space, and the malleability of the very concept of “the human.” (Valnes 29)

Monáe also works with discourses that explicitly engage with theoretical explorations of campy visual esthetics, and that are tied to queerness and the question of gender:

The playfulness and wit in Monáe’s response serves to highlight the gendered nature of the discourse surrounding her work, as well as the way that she critiques the very gendered politics of the musical genres she performs. By drawing attention to her physical appearance—through the reference to her eyelash length—she also highlights what reviewers and scholars by and large do not discuss: the music, and how her message is conveyed in and through it. Implied in her response is the idea that the message is not solely in her appearance, or . . . the lyrics. Rather, her message is conveyed through the ways these elements are combined with her approach to sound organization. (Valnes 3)

As can be seen, camp circles back to itself in pop, and also becomes particularly significant when art and pop are framed together as recently seen at the Met Gala—but camp is always more than just exaggeration or kitsch.

The play with these signs, as a repeatedly recurring “sign of the sign” (Fischer-Lichte 52), is the decisive mark of a media esthetic that seems to have always been rooted in theater and that has clearly not forgotten queerness. Since pop is always more than just its music, that it also includes its poses, hairstyles, images, texts, posters, gestures and attitudes, the material play with these signs is not only tied to pop culture, but also imagines a broader stage, one that has its own politics and media esthetics, which themselves always also point back to their own histories.

Therefore, it is possible to draw clear lines of descent from the early history of the music video all the way through to the latest public performances and spectacles, be they at the museum, on the stage or in other media, and to understand this complex as its own ensemble of references comprising a new history of the music video and its associated media. What is fascinating here is how pop culture, especially with music videos, not only reconstructs its iconological treasures, but also cultivates, archives, reflects and restages its own performances of itself. This is precisely why Janelle Monáe, in a citation logic situated between Bowie, Prince and Madonna, can always be related to other pop cultural expressions in the age of digital media. Pop culture is thus an ensemble of gestures that are recorded and re-enacted through media technology—one could say, a *Pathosformel* that only emerged through a media engagement with camp.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Pathosformel* or “pathos formula” is a term coined by Aby Warburg, referring to an “emotionally charged visual trope” that recurs through the course of art history—see Becker.

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## Cowboy Cops and Black Lives Matter: *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* and the Great White West[ern]

# ABSTRACT

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The racial framework of Martin McDonagh's 2017 film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* rests at the intersection of three persistent cultural myths—the Frontier Myth, the hero cowboy myth and the myth of white supremacy. There has been much criticism of the portrayal of black characters in the film, and particularly the *lack* of significant black characters in a film that sports a solid undercurrent of racial politics. While the black characters in the film occupy a small amount of screen time, this paper argues that the film's treatment of black characters, including their absence, puts on display the cultural dysfunction of racial politics in the US, especially in rural America, and particularly in Missouri. The film's subversion of the cowboy hero instead reveals the disturbing reality of the Frontier Myth and its dependence on racism and white supremacy for validation. In its unmasking of myth, *Three Billboards* challenges the illusion of a glorious Western past that never existed and at the same time supports racial justice and the Black Lives Matter movement.

**Keywords:** race, Black Lives Matter, the Western, Missouri, the Frontier Myth.

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## INTRODUCTION

In *West of Everything*, Jane Tompkins describes the Western narrative as presenting “strength as the ideal . . . the hero is tough and strong, [and] that the West made him that way” (Tompkins 11). The Western genre, including film, novel and art, stresses the “importance of manhood as an ideal” (Tompkins 17) and demands that its heroes be self-righteous, silent, and exhibit a “pathetic determination to be tough” (Tompkins 19). The narrative of the Western hero, the Cowboy (and it is always a boy), is emblematic of not just the West, but of the United States itself from as early as 1908 when “Indian and cowboy pictures” became the top American film export to Europe (Simmon 9). Despite evidence that the cowboy character of early novels and films fought for clearly progressive ideals—individualism, gun control, environmental protection, and the benefits of community—the Western’s iconic hero is most closely associated with modern day conservatism—free market, small government, rugged individualism, Puritan work ethic—particularly after the 1980 election of the cowboy actor, Ronald Reagan, who, before entering politics, starred in numerous Western films. The nostalgic belief in “cowboy values” persists today despite, as Douglas Brode argues, having no basis in the life and experience of actual cowboys.<sup>1</sup> The Western or Frontier myth is a pop culture creation, an “elaborate fantasy of who we were” and is (still) held as the ideal for who we “ought to again become” (Brode 12). The Cowboy, always a part of the American mythos, born from dime novels, radio, film and TV, has enjoyed a resurgence with the election of Donald Trump to the US presidency in 2016. Though not a cowboy at all in the traditional sense, Trump’s public performance of rugged individualism and the flouting of what conservatives see as “elite” cultural norms (intellectualism, science, multiculturalism), have lent support to his campaign slogan of “Make America Great Again,” a bold call to grass-roots conservatives and nationalists that promised a return to that golden age when white men reigned supreme and women and people of color “knew their place.”

And so it makes sense, historically, for Martin McDonagh to locate his award winning film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* in Missouri—gateway to the West and the Frontier Myth, a region emblematic of US

<sup>1</sup> As Douglas Brode explains a real cowboy was a “poorly paid, blue-collar worker who rode the range during the nineteenth century” and often on a well-used horse (10). Henry Nash Smith, in *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth*, explains “the term ‘herder’ was as likely to be used as the classic name for ‘cowboy,’ and it usually called up the image of a semibarbarous laborer who lived a dull, monotonous life of hard fare and poor shelter” (109). In 1874, Laura Winthrop Johnson described the cowboys she saw in Wyoming as “rough men with shaggy hair and wild, staring eyes, in butternut trousers stuffed into great rough boots” (qtd. in Smith 109).

expansion, racial tension past and present, and also the birthplace of a new Civil Rights Movement, Black Lives Matter.

In this paper, I will argue that the racial framework of Martin McDonagh's 2017 film *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri* rests at the intersection of three persistent cultural myths—the Frontier Myth, the hero cowboy and the myth of white supremacy. There has been much criticism of the portrayal of black characters in the film, and particularly the *lack* of significant black characters in a film that sports a solid undercurrent of racial politics. While the black characters in the film occupy a small amount of screen time, I will argue that the film's treatment of black characters, including their absence, puts on display the cultural dysfunction of racial politics in the US, especially in rural America, and particularly in Missouri. As I will show, the film's performance of the Frontier Myth could be seen as a critique of the events in Ferguson, Missouri, when a white police officer shot and killed an unarmed black teenager, sparking a growing movement against the rise of overt racism in America. The film's subversion of the cowboy hero instead reveals the disturbing reality of the Frontier Myth and its dependence on racism and white supremacy for validation. In its unmasking of myth, *Three Billboards* challenges the illusion of a glorious Western past that never existed and at the same time supports racial justice and the Black Lives Matter movement.

## THE WEST[ERN] IN THE WEST

In “Myth Today” Roland Barthes explains that myth functions as language “adapted to a certain type of consumption” in which objects, images, or any text are “laden . . . with a type of social *usage*” (Barthes 54). Barthes believes that “the language of myth is not arbitrary, it is motivated, ideologically loaded, and responsible for transforming ‘history into nature’” (Barthes 53). No myth has been more effective in transforming “history into nature” than the American Western, or Frontier myth. The myth encompasses a specific geographic space (wide open plains or untamed mountain country) and centers around the Cowboy figure, a lone, rugged, individualist who shuns polite society and city life, who packs a rifle or 6-shooter (or both), who rides a valiant steed (a beautiful and spirited horse), who fights for justice and the “American” way (democracy and freedom) by “taming” the wilderness and the “savages,” and whose humble beginnings reflect the notion of the Everyman/woman who is easy to identify with. The Frontier Myth has been replicated in a wide variety of ways: in literature, art, folklore, visual media, traditions, food, material culture and even politics. It is a myth that became the bedrock of the American cultural character.

Jane Tompkins describes the West of the Western myth as a “place where technology was primitive, physical conditions harsh, the social infrastructure nonexistent, and the presence of women proportionally reduced” (Tompkins 45). Richard Slotkin explains the Frontier Myth as “the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it” (10). In the United States, these two elements combined to create a “national identity, a democratic polity, an ever-expanding economy, and a phenomenally dynamic and ‘progressive’ civilization” (10). For Slotkin, the Frontier Myth encapsulated the Western expansion within specific binary conflicts of nature vs. civilization, primitive or savage vs. civilized, “settler-state vs. European metropolis” (10). These ideas of conquest were certainly not new or unique to America; writers and journalists merely applied long-held colonial ideologies to the settlement of the American frontier. But it is perhaps Stephen McVeigh, in *The American Western*, who most clearly captures the mythology of the West,

which emerged at the beginning of the twentieth century [and] did not appear organically or naturally. Rather, the mythology was deliberately constructed to serve a purpose . . . [its origins] bound up in the upheaval of the 1890s, a decade . . . that saw America’s self-concept, as a place of equality, opportunity, virtue and idealism, corrupted by unregulated big business, exploitation of markets, labor disputes, and political protests. On witnessing such rapid and traumatic change, Americans became nostalgic for a simpler version of America . . . it is [in] this nostalgic longing that the urge towards mythology can be found. [Writers] took the frontier as the embodiment of all that was good about America, presenting it as a place of tradition, inspiration, and heroism, the arena in which the American character was forged in the past, and the repository of these values which could heal America’s ills in the present. (McVeigh 13)

And so the Frontier Myth, born in the literary traditions of James Fenimore Cooper and his *Leatherstocking Tales*, Deadwood Dick, The Lone Ranger, Buffalo Bill and Louis L’Amour, has been an integral part of the American cultural landscape, particularly in American notions of heroism and who a hero is. The genre evolved from the written word to find its purest form in film under the masterful work of director John Ford and many others. As the hero of the Western myth evolved, the fetishistic admiration for the “rugged individual” converged with and shaped notions of masculinity, law and order, and race in American culture. The influence of the cowboy cultural myth affects ideas of masculinity even today, reinforce in the popular action hero films that follow a “Western” trajectory: *Independence*



*Day* (1996), *The Matrix* (1999), *Indiana Jones* films, *Rambo* films, *The Terminator* films, and almost all of the super-hero Marvel and DC films contain the “cowboy” character.

The Hollywood Western film has of course played a significant role in the ways Americans think about “the cowboy” character. As Steve Anderson observes, “like history, cultural memories are produced and must be understood in relation to an array of cultural and ideological forces” (21) that work in tandem at different times in American history to both reaffirm cultural myths or challenge them. One way culture mythologizes the Frontier is by accepting the myth as collective memory—believing that this is what the West was “really like.” When proponents of the myth are confronted with historical fact, it is labeled “revisionist” history (as opposed to just “history”) for daring to challenge the myth. Foucault explains that for the dominant power group it is “vital to have possession of this memory, to control it, to administer it, to tell it what it must contain” (93). And what the Frontier Myth must contain is a hero cowboy who protects innocent [white] people from the bad Other. Foucault states that “there’s a battle for and around history going on [with the] . . . intention . . . to reprogram, to stifle” actual history in favor of the popular mythic memory so as “to propose and impose on people a framework in which to interpret the present,” not through the realities of the past, but through the myth of the past (102). We see this functioning in John Ford’s famous film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962) in which Ford “deconstruct[s] the very myths he had earlier helped create” (Brode 13), summed up in Maxwell Scott’s line: “This is the West, sir. When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.”

Within the Frontier Myth is the “longing for a time when large men walked the earth” (Corkin 226), positioning the cowboy character “not [as] part of the actual, but part of the [im]possible” past, and so to be nostalgically “set at a distance” in which the myth itself becomes politically and culturally idealized and reified (Foucault 102). As a result, the Frontier Myth has become a powerful cultural memory that undergirds the core narrative of the American hero, particularly in film.

## THE LAWMAN

For Jane Tompkins, “[t]he Western doesn’t have anything to do with the West as such. It isn’t about the encounter between civilization and the frontier. It is about men’s fear of losing their mastery, and hence their identity, both of which the Western tirelessly reinvents” (45). While there have been some notable Western narratives whose protagonists are

women—*The Furies* (Mann, 1950) starring Barbara Stanwyck, *Annie Get Your Gun* (Sidney, 1950) with Judy Garland, *Calamity Jane* (Butler, 1953) with Doris Day, *Belle Starr* (Alonzo, 1980) starring Elizabeth Montgomery, and *The Quick and the Dead* (Raimi, 1995) starring Sharon Stone to name a few—the majority of Western narratives feature a white male protagonist. The Frontier Myth is a myth about men, manliness and manly conquest, of both nature and the Other, traditionally Native Americans. It is a narrative that takes place “between men, outside the world of women,” but takes place in wide open, virgin spaces that are framed as ready for conquest and domination by the white male (Simmon 24). For Tompkins, “the Western is secular, materialist, and antifeminist; it focuses on conflict in public space, is obsessed by death, and worships the phallus . . . it is a narrative of [white] male violence” (28). As Stanley Corkin explains, the Western

looks back to an idealized conception of the “frontier” experience, that is, the defining moments of U.S. imperialism when the “traditions” of indigenous peoples or of those outside the social and economic systems of the United States were disregarded, when inhabited lands with their own histories were treated as though they were virgin lands. (234)

The nostalgic longing for mastery over the wild frontier transformed during the modern age. At one point the Cold War space race between the United States and Russia revived the Frontier Myth, only here the Frontier was space. The Western narrative permeated Cold War era films and television as the competition between communism and democracy for the conquest of the “new frontiers” of ideology, production and consumption framed many Cold War narratives. And while the Frontier Myth and its hero cowboy have always been a mainstay of Hollywood film narrative, today the idealized Frontier Myth has reemerged in a far different form: in the return of nationalism, and the nostalgic lament to “Make America Great Again,” a reactionary code for white supremacy and male dominance that grew from white fear of a growing multicultural population, ongoing economic uncertainty and immobility, and post-modern challenges to traditional ideologies.

The Frontier Myth relies on the civilization vs. savage opposition, epitomized in films that feature the “Lawman,” a cowboy-turned-sheriff who tries to bring “civilization” to the “wilderness.” Films such as *Stagecoach* (Ford 1939), *High Noon* (Zinneman 1952), *How the West Was Won* (Ford, 1962), *True Grit* (Hathaway, 1969), *Hang’em High* (Post, 1968), *Unforgiven* (Eastwood, 1992) and *Tombstone* (Cosmatos, 1993) feature lawmen who try to protect the burgeoning American democracy from the corruption of cityslickers, capitalists, or savages, usually Native Americans. This battle between civilized and savage was framed as a battle between good (America)

and evil (anyone of color). As Mark Cronlund Anderson astutely argues, the Frontier Myth relies on conflict, and the Western film “revels in violence” (314). M. Anderson offers an outline of the common Frontier narrative: if there is a problem, “[t]he Other started it; the Other is to blame; the Other must and will be punished til the hegemon [the US, the white male] is satisfied that the Other has come to fear and adore it” (315). The “hegemon,” based on Antonio Gramsci’s notion of the hegemony, the ruling class who manipulate and control the culture of those below them, is found in modern lawmen—police officers—as well. According to a study by Anastasia Prokos and Irene Padavic, “hegemonic masculinity is a central defining concept in the culture of police work in the United States” (442). Michael Bohnke asserts that the Frontier Myth and the Western film often frame law in the context of conflict: the “law as written word (coming usually from the East) and those values and rules established in the community” (48). Modern police officers then, whose very training positions them as literal cowboys,<sup>2</sup> function in ways that ideologically “quarantine the misdirected and potential threats to civil society” (Corkin 151) in order to preserve the idea of the American West.

Police today have been under close scrutiny following a long series of police brutality incidents caught on video, including the killing of innocent adults and children of color.<sup>3</sup> These video captures of lawmen behaving badly essentially function as embodiments of the Frontier Myth’s “savage vs. civilization” conflict. This is not to say that people of color *are* savage, but that the police, the lawman (or woman), through already established racial conflict between whites and African Americans, position people of color *as* savage—both at the moment of confrontation and in its digital replication on social media and other platforms. There is a long history in the US of law enforcement complicity in upholding Jim Crow and other racist social norms. As Prokos and Padavic’s study shows, American police officers “share a myth of policing as action-filled, exciting, adventurous, and dangerous . . . Regardless of the reality, male police officers cling to the image of police officers as crime fighters” and cowboys (442). These

<sup>2</sup> Beverly J. Stoeltje, in “Cowboys and Clowns: Rodeo Specialists and the Ideology of Work and Play,” examines the transformation of the cowboy from guy working cattle on the range to “second generation” cowboys that included “manager, lawman, cattleman,” to the modern cowboy who is college educated, tech savvy, and concerned with participating in rodeos rather than riding the range (147–48).

<sup>3</sup> See “Black Lives Upended by Policing: The Raw Videos Sparking Outrage,” *The New York Times*, 19 Apr. 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/19/us/police-videos-race.html>; Kia Gregory “Killing Us Softly: How Videos of Police Brutality Traumatize African Americans and Undermine the Search for Justice.” *The New Republic* 13 Feb. 2018. <https://newrepublic.com/article/153103/videos-police-brutality-traumatize-african-americans-undermine-search-justice>

myths about action-packed policing are influenced to a certain extent by the Hollywood film hero, whose narrative, from early Ford Westerns to Quentin Tarantino's *The Hateful Eight* (2015), plays out over and over again on screen as a uniquely "American mythology, and the heroic style based on that mythology, thus provides American officers with the wrong set of symbols for measuring 'tough-mindedness'" (Slotkin 529). And so the image of the "cowboy cop" in film reinforces the belief in a heroic white masculinity that is in constant battle with the Other to preserve the myth of the Great White West. And nowhere does the Frontier Myth's performance resonate more than in the border state of Missouri.

## 100 RACE IN MISSOURI

The Frontier Myth finds clear expression in the state of Missouri, where the battles between "farmers and city-dwellers," white and black, frame both class and racial conflicts (Slotkin 20). As a border state, Missouri has held a unique position within US racial politics. Ironically, the state seal of Missouri includes the phrase "united we stand, divided we fall," an apt description of the state's long history as a land of divided interests: north/south, urban/agrarian, slave/free, conservative/progressive. Joe Conason observes that, "for decades, Missouri has spawned or attracted many of the nation's most virulent racists, including neo-Nazis and the remnants of the once-powerful Ku Klux Klan." St. Louis, Missouri, is home base for the white supremacist group The Council of Conservative Citizens, a group that has publicly backed white nationalist candidates, including former Mississippi senator Trent Lott. As Joseph P. Williams explains, "[t]he Show-Me State is, geographically and culturally, almost equidistant between North and South, its status as a 'purple' political battleground [is] defined in part by its urban population and agrarian roots." In *Race and Meaning: The African American Experience in Missouri*, Gary R. Kremer states that Missouri is neither "completely Northern or Southern," and so did not participate in the "rigid, legal, segregation that characterized the post-Civil War South," but that they were not "any less racist" (16). For Kremer, Missouri's racism is "more often subtle and disguised" (16) but still very much a part of the landscape.

In August of 2017 the NAACP issued a travel advisory for African Americans against any travel to Missouri, the first time it has ever issued such an advisory against a state (Cummings). In response, Danielle C. Belton, editor-in-chief of *The Root*, published an impassioned plea for her family to leave the state, describing the "widespread systemic racism" she experienced growing up and where

years after the Ferguson protests, activists and leaders from the movement keep popping up dead. A place where racial apathy is real. A place where they just reduced the minimum wage and where a meth epidemic has been roiling the rural areas for at least a decade or more.

Missouri was also the home of Dred Scott (*Dred Scott v. Sandford*), a slave who sued for American citizenship and lost, adding fuel to the economic panic of 1857 and bolstering racism throughout the South.<sup>4</sup> Missouri was the center of the fight over whether to admit new territory as slave states, a fight that led to the Civil War. The state was also the home of Elijah Lovejoy, editor of the widely-read abolitionist newspaper, *The Observer*, published in St. Louis until 1867 when Lovejoy was attacked and killed by a pro-slavery mob as they tried to burn down the building that housed his printing press. His death spurred more interest in the abolition movement (“Elijah Lovejoy”). Missouri’s unique political and racial climate has made it “one of the country’s most fertile breeding grounds for racial strife” (Williams) or, as Daniel Marans and Mariah Stewart describe it, an “unfortunate sweet spot for racial resentment.”

It is fitting, then, that St. Louis, Missouri, known for its Gateway Arch, a monument to the Western expansion and the Frontier Myth, built in 1965 in the middle of the Civil Rights Movement, became the birthplace of a new civil rights movement, Black Lives Matter, following the killing of unarmed, 18-year-old Michael Brown by a 28-year-old, white Ferguson police officer, Darren Wilson. Wilson shot Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, a northern suburb of St. Louis on 9 August 2014. That shooting sparked local protests that soon spread to an international movement against police killings of people of color, and against the disturbing instances of overt racism seen in American society and disseminated regularly on social media. The Brown shooting inspired three waves of protests and riots in Ferguson that lasted until August 2015 and set in motion an international resistance movement against racism.<sup>5</sup> The rise in police shootings of unarmed, and often innocent African Americans (both male and female,

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<sup>4</sup> See the case (“The Case of Dred Scott in the United States Supreme Court”) at: <https://www.loc.gov/item/10034357/> and the Panic of 1857. After the Supreme Court decided against Dred Scott, some industries—particularly the railroad—lost ground as people were concerned about the expansion of slavery into new territories. See Charles W. Calomiris and Larry Schweikart “The Panic of 1857: Origins, Transmission, and Containment.” *Journal of Economic History* 51.4 (1991): 807–34.

<sup>5</sup> See “Ferguson Unrest: From Shooting to Nationwide Protests.” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-30193354>; or Annys Shin “Recalling the Protests, Riots After the Police Shooting of Michael Brown.” *Washington Post* 3 Aug. 2017. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/recalling-the-protests-riots-after-fatal-police-shooting-of-michael-brown/2017/08/01/9992f044-5a8d-11e7-a9f6-7c3296387341\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/magazine/recalling-the-protests-riots-after-fatal-police-shooting-of-michael-brown/2017/08/01/9992f044-5a8d-11e7-a9f6-7c3296387341_story.html)

child and adult) has emerged, intentionally or not, as a rearticulation and reaffirmation of the white supremacy narrative rooted firmly in the Frontier Myth, which Richard Slotkin defines as “the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the Native Americans who originally inhabited it” and has been “the means to our achievement of a national identity” (Slotkin 10). Within the myth, any person of color fulfills the position of the Other that must be subjugated colonial-style. And so it is also fitting that Martin McDonagh set his screenplay about small-town America race relations in Missouri.

Irish filmmaker Martin McDonagh wrote the screenplay and directed *Three Billboards* with Graham Broadbent and Peter Czernin of Blueprint Pictures producing it for \$15 million. To date, the film has garnered \$159m worldwide (“*Three Billboards*”). McDonagh was inspired to write the screenplay because he saw similar billboards 20 years ago while he was travelling across the American South on a bus. He was struck by the “the pain and rage and sadness of the person who would put that out there.”<sup>6</sup> The image stayed with McDonagh and in 2011 he wrote the script, returning to it in 2015, one year after Ferguson (Abramovitch). McDonagh’s story takes place in the fictional town of Ebbing, situated in the Missouri Ozarks, but he and his production crew chose to film it in Sylva, North Carolina, through May and June of 2016. But for all of McDonagh’s inspiration, he is still an outsider looking in at the complexities of race and small town politics in America. For McDonagh, the experience of scouting locations throughout the Midwest and South seemed to reinforce his pastoral image of America: “every little town I go to feels cinematic” (Mueller). McDonagh states that he “just listen[ed] to people and observe[ed]—the more you do that, the less judgmental you become about red states and blue states and all that kind of stuff” (Mueller), a sentiment that simplifies complex economic, political, social and racial issues that the South has struggled with since its founding. This reduction of complex racial issues is part of the criticisms of *Three Billboards*; yet, as astute as some critics are that McDonagh elides the

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<sup>6</sup> See Matt Mueller “Martin McDonagh on the Real-Life Inspiration Behind *Three Billboards Outside Ebbing, Missouri*.” *Screen Daily* 8 Jan. 2018. <https://www.screendaily.com/features/martin-mcdonagh-on-the-inspiration-behind-three-billboards/5125213.article>

The signs McDonagh saw were in Vidor, Texas, about the murder of 34-year-old Kathy Page, whose strangled body was found in her car in a ditch in 1991. Her father, James Fulton, frustrated by the lack of movement on the case, placed various billboards along Highway 10 in the hopes of solving the case. It remains unsolved. See Criss: <https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/18/us/texas-three-billboards-reward-trnd/index.html>; “Kathy Page”: [http://unsolvedmysteries.wikia.com/wiki/Kathy\\_Page](http://unsolvedmysteries.wikia.com/wiki/Kathy_Page)

realities of racial politics in the small-town American South, I believe the film's treatment of race is a clear denunciation of American racism.

McDonagh insists the film is “not a European's comment on America at all” (Mueller) and yet, it is. In some sense, the characters in the film are representative of both European humanism and the stereotypical American South: half of the characters are compassionate, educated, driven by rationality and humanistic responses while the other half is uneducated, lacks compassion, is hard-nosed, crass, and racist or prejudiced against difference. McDonagh's film highlights that special brand of American Southern racism that produced slavery, Jim Crow and Ferguson in such a way that it is unmasked, challenged and ultimately revealed as a cultural dead end.

## BLACK AND BLUE

As I have argued elsewhere, part of the work of institutional racism in America is to present blackness as strange or different, as not normal, in order to validate whiteness as the norm (Olson). In *Framing Blackness*, Ed Guerrero argues that Hollywood representations of black people position them as “subordinated, marginalized, positioned, and devalued in every possible manner to glorify and relentlessly hold in place the white-dominated symbolic order and racial hierarchy of American Society” (2). In *White Screens, Black Images*, James Snead suggests that “the nature of stereotypes is to insulate themselves [whites] from historical change, or from counter-examples in the real world. Caricatures breed more Caricatures, or metamorphose into more harmless forms, or simply repeat,” which we see throughout the history of Hollywood cinema's portrayal of black people (140). As Frantz Fanon famously wrote, blacks are always positioned to “experience [their] being through others” (82). Nowhere is this phenomenon more utilized than in Hollywood films where the black experience is regularly filtered through whiteness. In Hollywood film, black characters are often made narratively invisible or mute in the sense that their presence has little or no bearing on events, or whites speak for them and tell their story (as in *Blood Diamond*, *Men of Honor*, or *The Help*). Hollywood's black characters often lack depth or complexity when compared to the white characters, or the black characters are “helped” by the white storyteller.<sup>7</sup> In *Three Billboards*

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<sup>7</sup> Dubbed the “white savior” trope in cinema. See Matthew Hughey *The White Savior Film: Content, Critics, and Consumption* (2014); Hernán Vera and Andrew M. Gordon *Screen Saviors: Hollywood Fictions of Whiteness* (2003).

we learn about the black experience in Missouri *through* Dixon and the disturbingly casual references to his torture of a black person in his custody. His name “Jason Dixon” is a clear reference to the “Mason-Dixon” line, the historical line between Southern slave and Northern free states, dividing Pennsylvania from Maryland. The name “Dixon” is also a reference to Thomas Dixon, author of *The Clansman* (1905), the novel that was the basis for D. W. Griffith’s racist film *Birth of a Nation* (1916), the first American full-length, 12-reel, film. And Dixon is very much representative of the Old South ideology: an elevated sense of white privilege, conservative, stubbornly defending racist traditions. Dixon is uneducated (his mother jokes about his 5 years at the academy, “6, counting the year you were held back”), volatile, childish, and immature. Any shot of Dixon at the police station has him looking at comics, dancing, singing, or feet on the desk, showing a clear lack of respect for the job and his role as a law enforcement officer.

We are cautioned early on about Dixon when Mildred makes snide remarks about Ebbing police being “too busy torturing black folks to solve real crime.” Our first view of Dixon’s interaction with a black person is when Dixon confronts Jerome about the billboards. The shot is balanced by Dixon’s car lower screen left, the red billboard upper screen right, and Jerome centered between them suggesting blackness in Missouri is caught between the threat of law enforcement and the lack of oversight of law enforcement. The sign’s message “Still No Arrests?” holds a double entendre—no arrests in Angela’s murder and Dixon was not arrested for his torture of a black man. When Dixon later attacks Red he is also not arrested, though he is fired, mirroring the earlier question “Still No Arrests?”

Despite Dixon’s performance of machismo, Jerome is not afraid of Dixon. When Dixon obnoxiously demands “What the fuck is this?”, Jerome doesn’t miss a beat and quickly repeats back the profanity: “What the fuck is what?” Jerome easily thwarts Dixon’s attempt at controlling the confrontation and when Dixon asks “What is it advertising?”, Jerome answers: “Something obscure?”, leaving Dixon flustered, mumbling a weak “Yeah, I’ll say.” The film here, as it does with the other black characters, positions Jerome as intellectually and morally superior to Dixon. Jerome then asks, “Don’t I know your face from someplace?” and Dixon replies, “I don’t know, do ya?”, to which Jerome slowly and deliberately replies “Yes—yes I do”, then promptly spits on the ground towards Dixon, who then threatens to arrest him for illegally dumping his bucket, which is against the “being bad against the environment” laws. Jerome here is unafraid, firm but polite, and clearly knows the danger he is in in any exchange with Dixon. Yet, Jerome has the upper hand here and tells Dixon



to go look at the first billboard and then come back and they can “have a conversation about the motherfucking environment. How ‘bout that.” Since Dixon is in his car during this exchange the camera positions him lower than Jerome, reinforcing Dixon’s weakness and Jerome’s command of the exchange. Dixon is in very low light, irresolute, almost hiding in his cave-like car while Jerome is lit slightly more and Dixon must look up at him, speaks clearly and unabashedly, highlighting his contempt for Dixon. Jerome is supported by the deep scarlet of the billboard behind him, adding texture to his contempt for Dixon. And while the billboards perform a dual spectacularization of Mildred’s deep-seated (red) rage at her daughter’s murder and the lack of law enforcement attention, the deep red of the billboards also underscores black rage at the “persons of color” torture by law enforcement.

Spitting is a particular trope in *Three Billboards*, as it is in throughout the Western film genre (some of the most memorable spits come from Clint Eastwood in *The Good, The Bad, and The Ugly*, *The Outlaw Josey Wales* and *High Plains Drifter*).<sup>8</sup> According to Esther Addley, “spitting retains an offensiveness beyond . . . all, rivaling perhaps only the racist insult in its capacity to outrage,” not to mention the “glorious contemptuousness” and “effortless momentary disrespect it conveys.” When Jerome spits towards Dixon, his verbal contempt gains materiality in the projectile of saliva and his “phallic genital superiority [is] asserted” (Gomberg 93). Later in the film, Mildred spits on the Dentist after she drills through his hand, Willoughby coughs/spits blood in Mildred’s face (she immediately shifts to “mom” mode, asking if he’s ok and calls him “baby”), and just before Dixon throws Red out the window he spits on him. Spitting in *Three Billboards* is a discursive expression of powerlessness, as well as disgust or contempt. Jerome cannot physically attack Dixon, so he spits at him instead. Willoughby’s cancer makes him powerless, and Mildred is powerless in two ways: she is riddled with guilt about, and she cannot solve, her daughter’s murder. In Dixon’s case, spitting on Red (because he could not spit on Jerome) only foregrounds Dixon’s powerlessness, his lack of emotional and moral control. In fact, for Dixon, Red serves as the substitute for the (red) billboards that Dixon feels destroyed Willoughby. Dixon tortures Red like he tortured the black person in his custody. As Dixon delivers one last punch to Red, he says: “See, Red, I got issues with white folks too,” which rings false as we understand Red to be the substitute for the billboards themselves, or for Mildred, and not as a representative of a race.

<sup>8</sup> For a collection of some of the most famous Western film spits see Semih Okmen “Western Spittle”: <https://vimeo.com/174031604>

## LAWMEN AND THEIR MOTHERS

The law itself in the film is an unsettling matrix of fear of the other, white entitlement and the institutional sanction of violence against people of color. In the police station when Dixon and Cedric argue over whether or not the billboards are legal, Dixon storms out and Cedric asks Willoughby why he “keeps [Dixon] on?” Willoughby replies: “He’s a good man at heart.” Here Cedric exposes Dixon’s unsuitability for the job by reminding Willoughby that Dixon tortured a guy in custody. Willoughby offers a hesitant and unconvincing reply, “There was no—real evidence of that,” underscoring a law enforcement culture that enables such racism—and denial of racism—within its ranks. According to Michael Harriot, “since June 2007, out of approximately 10,000 police shootings, only five white police officers have been imprisoned for killing someone black.” This intersection of white entitlement and race speaks to the broader issue of the way traditionalists fetishize nostalgia, or as Brode states, the way “conservative-minded Americans believe they can be [powerful] again” and revive the West as such: the belief in an “American greatness” and a “return” to “law and order” (i.e. the conservative rally cry to “Make America Great Again”) in which the white male was the unquestioned authority (327). Dixon is McDonagh’s caricature of that white male angst in the face of a changing culture. Popular narratives of White Western greatness are a part of the cultural tensions our nation experiences today as its identity continues to evolve away from the Cowboy and Frontier Myth (i.e. whiteness) and towards multiculturalism, progressiveness, secularity and social consciousness. Ideas about old-style manhood and law and order in such popular novels as *Legends of the Fall* by Jim Harrison, *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy or *The Revenant* by Michael Punke work to keep the “collective social imaginary” (Appadurai 220) nostalgia for the Old West and what it represents alive as do popular Western films like *Unforgiven* (1992), *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford* (2007) and *Meek’s Cutoff* (2010). Even Dixon’s comic book choice suggests his enthrallment with the hero Cowboy myth: *Incorruptible* (Boom! Studios), a comic series by Mark Waid about a villain named Max Damage who wants to be a superhero (the parallels to Dixon are quite clear).

Oddly, Dixon occupies the paradoxical position of being both a police officer, the representation of law and order, and villain—he terrorizes black people and is filled with villainous attributes like cruelty, violence, small-mindedness and racism. McDonagh’s Dixon suggests such conflicts within law enforcement are the norm in the rural US, which he then challenges at films end with the arrival of Abercrombe, the embodiment of the social change that Dixon himself acknowledged when his mother

suggested he go and “tell them to fire that black guy”: “Things have moved on in the South” to which is mother replies: “Well it shouldna!” Today’s convergence of rising nationalism, militarization of local police forces and increasing racism fueled, in part, by a steady barrage of “fear of the other” narratives by conservative pundits and politicians have played a part in the deadly violence against African Americans by law enforcement, such as in Ferguson and in the fictional Ebbing. As Matthew Carter explains, Dixon “highlight[s] the symptomatic hubristic condition of US self-righteousness” and particularly in this age of Trump (6). Although Dixon grudgingly accepts that the man from Idaho didn’t kill Mildred’s daughter, he convinces himself the man is guilty of “something,” a mental justification that allows Dixon to achieve a (false) moral position, a self-righteousness. Jane Tompkins explains that “the Western plot . . . turns not on struggles to conquer sin but on external conflicts in which men prove their courage to themselves and the world by facing their own annihilation” (Tompkins 31). At the film’s end, Dixon, now in an Oedipal partnership with Mildred, who has merely replaced his mother as his guide, head to Idaho to kill an innocent man. Dixon insists on proving to himself (and to Willoughby) that he can “detect,” and that he can be a “good cop.”

## MARGINAL IN MISSOURI

Black characters in *Three Billboards* are rational, humanistic, well-educated and have a high moral center (in contrast to Dixon, Willoughby and Mildred). At the moment when Dixon crosses into the police station after attacking Red, we hear the extra-diegetic song lyrics “he hears his Master’s voice, he hears the call to war” as we see Abercrombie for the first time. (Carter Burwell scored *Three Billboards* and was influenced by the Spaghetti Westerns of the 1970s, particularly those by Sergio Leone [Maniglia].) As Dixon walks to the station, he says to Abercrombie, “What the fuck you lookin’ at?” which suggests both change—his new “master” now will be African American—and Dixon as an object of a contemptuous gaze as Abercrombie’s arrival signals an end to the old South that Dixon represents.

While race remains a constant subtext throughout the film, we never actually see Dixon physically hurting anyone of color. In fact, when confronted by African Americans in the film (Jerome and Abercrombie), Dixon backs down. In *Three Billboards*, McDonagh effectively reverses our perspective of Otherness and renders Mildred, her ex, Charlie, his 19-year-old girlfriend Penelope, Dixon, Cedric and the other racist cops as the strange and different, as remnants of an old West that “no longer

holds true” (Brode 326). The black characters—Jerome, Denise and Abercrombie—and James, Red and Robbie are the people who act with moral and social decency. The black and marginal characters are the only characters who come out the other side with dignity intact. As Wesley Morris observes, McDonagh

[p]lay[s] around with America’s ideological and geographical toys. One of the toys is the word “nigger.” Another is the concept of political correctness. There’s a scene between Mildred and a hotheaded dimwit cop—the racist—named Jason (Sam Rockwell), in which she baits his racism by calling him a “nigger torturer.” He hits the roof. “Person-of-color-torturing” is what Jason says you must call it now, with exasperated lament. They volley the word and poke fun at its impropriety. You can tell that Mr. McDonagh relished the application of absurdism to the political correction (he knows “person-of-color-torturing” really is linguistic torture, maybe even for a person of color). But he also seems to like the loaded nonsense in the sound of the word “nigger.” What you hear in a scene like this is a kind of careless virtuosity. It’s a fun scene that’s sunk by how much fun it’s having with things you’re not supposed to have fun with. The whole movie is like that—it’s like Mildred—rude for sport and proud of it.

And Morris is right to a certain extent; the film does exploit the sheer absurdity of racism and Othering. The little person, James, is a victim of Mildred’s discrimination. She continually demeans him even after he covered for her when she torched the police station. She reluctantly agrees to have dinner with him, but treats him unkindly and insultingly justifies to Charlie why she is having dinner with a “midget.” But James berates Mildred and her behavior towards him, effectively shaming her and walking away with his dignity intact, much like the black characters do after interactions with whites in the film. Even Denise, who Dixon arrests for possessing marijuana, has the last laugh as she joins Jerome, Mildred and others to rehang the billboards after Dixon burns them. In effect, Dixon is the embodiment of what James J. Donahue terms the “failed frontiersman,” who clings to the Frontier Myth even in the face of its ideological barrenness (1). bell hooks in “Eating the Other” states that Otherness “offers the promise of recognition and reconciliation,” at the same time that it fosters “nostalgic evocation of a ‘glorious’ past,” a past that Dixon longs for, but cannot return to (370).

One of the ways McDonagh’s film comments on race is through the concept of “seeing by not seeing,” or, in Derrida’s terms, absence as presence. Derrida’s notion of “there is nothing outside of the text” clearly “demonstrates that it is impossible for signification to be absolutely

present” (158). In doing so, he proves that only through mediated forms like language can one access signification. Importantly, for media theory, representational absence becomes a form of presence” (Bell). The film’s rhetoric continually dances around racism, yet the visual *absence* of the racial violence the rhetoric tells us exists functions only to *highlight* that violence—its absence becomes its presence. By “not seeing” Dixon torture or hurt black characters, but “hearing” about it, McDonagh forces the non-visual (i.e. the elephant) into the room. It is similar to action that we “hear” taking place in off-screen space; we know that action occurred, its echo stays with us.<sup>9</sup> By “not seeing” actual racial violence in *Three Billboards*, McDonagh effectively renders such violence “loud” in its absence, bringing it to the forefront and reifying its existence, particularly as the black characters in the film all appear better educated and more compassionate than the white characters (Mildred’s son is an exception). And we know Dixon is violent; we witness his unprovoked and needless attack on Red. We know he is racist from the first time we see him: he’s driving and singing an old Western ballad, “The Streets of Laredo,” also known as “The Cowboy’s Lament” about a dying cowboy, foreshadowing Dixon’s, and the Old South’s, symbolic “death” in the face of progress and integration. As Dixon comes upon the billboards he pulls over to find out “what” they are, calling one of the men hanging the billboard a “beaner,” a slang term for someone of Hispanic ancestry. We also know Dixon’s racism is generational because of his mother’s comments about how the South “shouldna” changed. Dixon’s racism is in some ways balanced by Mildred, who is not nice to anyone except the black characters, to whom she will go out of her way to help (for instance, when she confronts Dixon about Denise’s arrest). The town name itself, *Ebbing*, is an allusion to an “ebb” tide, an outflow of water, or, in this case, the outflow of old racist notions, to be replaced later by Abercrombie’s arrival (flood tide) and Dixon’s exit.

That Mildred and Dixon join forces to pursue their false sense of justice underscores the film as a cautionary tale against the abuses of the system. As Joe Sommerlad concludes about Dixon, “he isn’t reformed.

<sup>9</sup> Filmmakers often make use of off-screen space for graphic or tension-filled scenes. Some famous “off screen” scenes include in Roman Polański’s *Rosemary’s Baby* in the telephone scene. The old woman is sitting on the edge of the bed talking on the phone, but the camera angle cuts off her face. Only her back is visible—we can hear her talk, but we cannot see her face. And in Brian de Palma’s *Scarface*, when Tony Montana is forced to watch the drug dealer cut up his friend with a chainsaw. We see and hear the chainsaw, and see blood flying, but we do not “see” the actual act itself. See Cristiano Dalpozzo “Off-Screen: The Liminal Dimension of the Cinematic Image.” *Refractory: A Journal of Entertainment Media*. <http://refractory.unimelb.edu.au/2014/02/05/off-screen-dalpozzo/>

Far from it. The film's conclusion sees Dixon and Mildred setting out across state lines to carry out a vigilante hit on a suspected rapist in selfish pursuit of personal catharsis (they may or may not actually go through with it),” in which “retaliatory violence becomes not simply justifiable but imperative” (Tompkins 228). “His indifference to the values he once so hypocritically claimed to embody as an officer of the law remains alive and well” (Sommerlad). And Mildred's selfishness also remains: she learns nothing about being a better parent, effectively abandoning her remaining child in her pursuit to assuage her own guilt over Angela's murder. And it is this lack of growth within Dixon and Mildred that nullifies both Dixon's heroic attempt to solve Angela's murder and Mildred's billboards. Neither action brought truth or redemption. As Slavoj Žižek explains, “we overlook the way our act is already part of the state of things we are looking at, the way our error is part of the truth itself. This [is a] paradoxical structure in which the truth arises from misrecognition” (191). Rather than see the truth of the limits of law enforcement to solve the crime or to make Dixon a hero, both characters interpret those limits as apathy (Mildred) or personal criticism (Dixon). In the end, they resolve to take their “Code of the West” justice to the actual West (Idaho); a new place; but sadly, a place with a reputation for similar outdated notions (Idaho is considered the most racist state outside the South).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, that they leave (head *out*, i.e. *ebb*) Ebbing for Idaho to pursue a false justice against a presumably innocent man highlights the continued social disconnection between the old establishments of law and order [white rule] and the realities of American diversity. And with Abercrombie's arrival as the new “Law,” McDonagh allies the film with social progress: Black lives do matter in Ebbing, Missouri.

## IN THE END

For all the critics' applause over Dixon's seeming change of heart, the film essentially denies Dixon's redemption. That he teams up with Mildred, who is as bitter and hateful as Dixon, to hunt down and kill a man they only “suspect” of a crime, shows that neither one of them has really learned anything at all. Instead, they leave Missouri and its racist history

<sup>10</sup> See Todd Shallat “Racial Discrimination in Idaho: The Myth of the Colorblind State.” *The Blue Review* 4 (2014). <https://thebluereview.org/racism-in-idaho/>; Tim Froh “Anonymous Letters and Threats: How Racism Came to Stalk US Youth Soccer.” *The Guardian* 15 Feb. 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2018/feb/15/us-youth-soccer-racism>; the Southern Poverty Law Center interactive Hate Group map: <https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map>

to go to another place that has a very similar racist culture. Both characters abandon the only person who loves them (Dixon stares at his sleeping mother before he leaves, while the film cuts to a parallel scene with Mildred staring at her sleeping son Robbie before she leaves). As Sonny Bunch, rightly, states, the film has a

stronger message about the dangerously fascist impulse that goes along with the desire for total and perfect justice. It is a damning critique of not only the police for protecting their own but also of those who would join forces with the most corrupt among the cops in order to gain some measure of righteousness in this world. If one were feeling puckish, one might even compare Mildred's self-righteous, half-cocked pursuit of evidence-free justice against all men everywhere to certain currents in our cultural moment.

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Indeed, the current reductive climate of white supremacy and race hate under the Trump administration is a testament to the conservative socio-political discourse which seeks the dismantling of post-modernity itself by rejecting cultural and social progress, and even science, in the name of national “greatness” and (a false) “patriotism.” According to Stanley Corkin, “Westerns appeal to audiences through their power to assert a kind of stability and continuity. Typically, films in this genre invoke a tradition of national character and destiny that connects the present, a sense of the past, and a vision of the future,” which we see today with the Trump phenomenon and its “Make America Great Again” slogan (59).

As Richard Sparks observes, the Western film “poeticiz[es] the struggles of its male hero” (353). And the beautiful cinematography and the Western-themed score of *Three Billboards* attempts to poeticize Dixon as the hero, but instead, he functions as a tear in the very fabric, or myth, of the Western as such. The film hints at this rupture when we first see Dixon as the Western trope of the “singing cowboy” because he peppers the song “Streets of Laredo” with loud “MOWs!”, a verbal rupture of the most iconic of all cowboy images. And so the dysfunction in Ebbing, Missouri, the film tells us, lies with the old notions of white supremacy and racism that are bound to the Frontier Myth and, in this case, representatives of law and order. As a Lawman, Dixon is supposed to be a “protector of traditional American values against the forces that threaten to destroy” them (Brown 85). But the film makes clear that it is those traditional American myths that are the forces to be overcome. The film, like the Western genre as a whole, presents a “superficial veneer of historicity masking an essentially stylized representation whose principle debt of fidelity is to generic verisimilitude . . . rather than to the authenticated historical record” (Langford 27). With Abercrombie’s

arrival, and Dixon and Mildred's departure, the film suggests that there is hope that Ebbing will shed its racist shell and join the rest of postmodern, mostly enlightened, American society.

Most disturbingly, however, is that the nostalgic discourse of the Western and the image of the lone white male facing the "dark savage," plays out in police shootings of black and brown citizens almost every day in America, violence that often appears sanctioned by the legal system itself in the lack of consequences for the majority of the officers involved. It is the "failure of civic process and authority [that] brings further gravity . . . to the heroic presence" of the law enforcement officer in the conservative Trump-era public imaginary (Corkin 148). In American society, as in *Three Billboards*, law enforcement holds the power in the community, and though Chief Willoughby was framed as a "good" man, he still enabled Dixon and turned a blind eye to his deputies' blatant racism and violence against innocent civilians, evidenced by his weak excuse: "What are ya gonna do?" Willoughby tells us that "there was no—real—evidence to support" the charge that Dixon tortured a black man in his custody, and Dixon is not in jail, so we can assume there were no consequences for this act. When Dixon throws Red out the window, he is not arrested or charged, even though others clearly witnessed the unprovoked assault. Dixon does lose his job, however, as many actual law enforcement officers do after a police fatality, but did Abercrombie fire Dixon because of his attack on Red or because of his insubordination? Even under Abercrombie, Dixon is still never arrested for hurting Red, but he does lose his job and with it his imagined hero role. The Frontier Myth "demands violence, supplies it, rewards it, and then projects it onto the Other" (M. Anderson 320) and in Ebbing, Missouri, violence against civilians by police is just a part of life in the West[ern], i.e. "what are ya gonna do?"

Kimberly Jade Norwood, in "The Far-reaching Shadow Cast by Ferguson," argues that the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, certainly not the first African American youth to be killed by police, became the catalyst for a new civil rights movement against the killing of unarmed black people. She argues that Ferguson is not special but is "representative of many similar communities throughout the country, all boiling with social ills that can no longer be ignored" (17). What Brown's death in Ferguson did was "shed light on a racial divide in this country that should shock the world," and set in motion a movement based on the twitter hashtag #blacklivesmatter and fueled by the collective power of social media (Clayton 453). Activists for Black Lives Matter have focused their attention on protesting racial bias within law enforcement, though racial bias is prevalent throughout many areas of American society. A 2017 *Washington Post* study found that the majority of armed civilian



fatalities by police were white, the majority of unarmed civilians killed by police were black, a startling statistic when blacks make up only 12% of the population as a whole (Carbonneau et al 746). Black Lives Matter is part of a continuing struggle, since the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, for “freedom, equity, and dignity by people of African descent,” and a resistance to what Abigail Sewell calls the “American Apartheid reality” of life for black Americans throughout the United States (1444). That Missouri, in the center of the country, the “Gateway to the West,” became the launch pad for modern racial unrest is emblematic of just how embedded racism is throughout the United States. The fictional Ebbing, Missouri, and its clear gap between post-modern inclusivity and Old Southern racism, suggests that change *can* happen—but only if Jim Crow, like Dixon, rides off into the sunset.

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## Representing Absence: Contemporary Ekphrasis in “Apesh-t”<sup>1</sup>

# ABSTRACT

Traditionally, ekphrasis has been defined as the description and analysis of works of art in poetry, and so it has been understood as the verbalization of visual images (Sager Eidt). The article examines the concept in the light of contemporary definitions that include non-verbal media as targets (Cariboni Killander, Lutas and Strukelj; Sager Eidt; Bruhn; Pethö) in order to analyze its applicability to music videos.

It concentrates in particular on “Apesh-t,” a video for a track by Beyoncé and Jay-Z from the album *Everything Is Love* (2018). The video is filmed in different interiors of the Louvre, where the singers appear, together with an ensemble of dancers, in front of selected artworks. The discussion focuses on an analysis of a single shot which presents an ekphrastic re-configuration of one particular work of European art, Jacques-Louis David’s *Portrait of Madame Récamier* (1800).

The author argues that the use of ekphrasis in the video—through elaboration (close-ups and editing) and repurposing of the source material (painting)—plays an important role in the construction of the theme of “absence”: invoking not only what is represented, but what is *not* represented in David’s painting. It also foregrounds the potential of ekphrasis as a tool of political and cultural resistance, in the way it intervenes in the representation of the “other” in art and in the museum space.

**Keywords:** Beyoncé, Jay-Z, ekphrasis, music video.

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In Jacques-Louis David’s *Portrait of Madame Récamier* (1800), the Parisian socialite reclines on a Directoire-style sofa (Schnapper 360). The room is bare, except for an antique-style sofa, stool and candelabra, painted in warm hues and in the same colour scheme as the unfinished background (Schnapper 360).<sup>2</sup> The empty space around the figure seems to be there to accentuate the fluid shape and neoclassical ideal of the sitter’s reclining body (Schnapper 360). Madame Récamier is wearing a fashionable, Empire-line dress, which (as Alicia Caticha suggests) personifies “the aesthetic values espoused by classical sculpture” which were prevalent in eighteenth-century fashion and decorative arts (Caticha). Antoine Schnapper observes that the sitter “is seen from some distance, so her face is quite small, but this is less a portrait of a person than of an ideal of feminine elegance. Madame Récamier (1777–1849), although then only twenty-three, was already one of the most admired women of her time” (360).

The painting is featured in the 2018 Beyoncé/Jay-Z video, “Apesh-t,” directed by Ricky Saiz. In the video (for a track from the album *Everything Is Love*), the singers, together with an ensemble of dancers, appear in different interiors of the Louvre, in front of selected artworks. The painting appears only once in the video, and at the moment of its appearance, it is accompanied by the low, subdued sound of a tolling bell (Caticha), marking a break in the video’s flow. In the image, two black dancers are sitting on the floor in front of David’s painting, and a length of white, fluid fabric flows between them.<sup>3</sup> Both ends of the fabric are wrapped around the dancers’ heads. The shape of the fabric “repeats” the shape of Madame Récamier’s white dress, imitating her silhouette.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Victoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff notes: “As is well known, the artist did not finish the painting because of a serious quarrel with Juliette Récamier, resulting in a complete rupture. David did not respond to the sitter’s wishes concerning her portrait, defending his position as artist in a letter: ‘Madame, women have their caprices, artists have them too’” (334).

<sup>3</sup> The camera zooms towards the portrait and stops, positioning it at the centre of our focus. The two smaller paintings on both sides of the portrait are kept in the shadows. Their content is not clearly visible to the viewer.

<sup>4</sup> The fabric worn by the dancers recalls the tradition and history of the “headwrap,” as discussed by Helen Bradley Foster in her book *New Raiments of Self*. Bradley Foster defines this as “a piece of cloth fabric wound around the head, usually completely covering the hair and held in place either by tucking the ends of the fabric into the wrap or by tying the ends into knots close to the skull. The distinct head covering has been called variously ‘turban,’ ‘head rag,’ ‘head tie,’ ‘head handkerchief,’ or ‘headwrap’” (272). The different meanings of the headwrap, which historically came to be associated as much with “servitude and poverty” as with the representation of “communal identity and . . . resistance” (Bradley Foster 273, 313), create opportunities for multi-layered interpretations of the image in the video; however, this is beyond the scope of the present article. Caticha suggests that the fabric worn by the dancers refers also to John Edmonds’s 2017 series “Du-Rags,” bringing in contemporary photography as a possible interpretative context for the video.

Arguably, the dancers in the *tableau-vivant*<sup>5</sup> are intended to represent those people whose labour underpinned the very existence of the garment worn by the society woman: those who made the material, who sewed the dress, and who kept it clean. In this way, the video comments on the chain of production, in which the people who make the goods are not the ones who consume it. It offers a political comment on silent, unrepresented blackness and “otherness”; it asks the viewer to focus, not on what the painting represents, but on what it fails to acknowledge: the identity of the “other” on whose labour the very existence of the sitter depends.

The scene may be viewed as an example of the use of ekphrasis, as a gesture which extends the painting outside the frame, and also questions the limits of the frame (and what is shown within it). This article will focus on an analysis of this one shot, as it highlights the theme of absence in the video; and also foregrounds the potential of ekphrasis as a tool of political and cultural resistance, in the way it intervenes in the representation of the “other” in art, and in the museum space.

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The concept of ekphrasis dates back to antiquity; traditionally, it has been defined as “a verbal description of something, almost anything in life or art” (Krieger 7); and more specifically as “a symbolic (verbal) representation of iconic representation” (Elleström, “Transmediation” 9), most notably in the description and analysis of works of art in poetry. The theoretical approaches to ekphrasis that have emerged since the 1960s have emphasized the increasingly intermedial character of contemporary art forms; and this makes the concept very relevant to the analysis of music videos. Leo Spitzer’s work has been crucial in stimulating new thinking about ekphrasis (Cariboni Killander, Lutas and Strukelj 10). He defines it as “the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art” (Spitzer 72). In this definition, however, the “target” medium is still verbal (i.e. poetry). Other critics have sought to extend the boundaries of the concept. It has been defined, for example, as the “verbal representation of a visual representation” (Heffernan 297); “the verbalisation of a graphic representation” (Mitchell 35–36); and “the verbalisation of a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system” (Clüver 35–36). As Elleström explains, according to Clüver both “the representing and the

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<sup>5</sup> Caticha proposes that “the scene recalls the popular *tableaux vivants* of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in which aristocratic and bourgeois elites would pose in imitations of artworks or dramatic historical and literary scenes for personal entertainment.” For further discussion on the subject see Caticha.



represented text may be non-artistic; and the represented text may belong to an extensive range of media types” (*Media* 32). Even as Clüver widens the notion of ekphrasis, however, “the target medium is still considered to be verbal . . . whereas the source medium may be any type except verbal” (Elleström, *Media* 32–33). This position has itself been challenged by readings of ekphrasis which problematize the idea of language as “the only acceptable target medium” (Cariboni Killander, Lutas and Strukelj 10). Siglind Bruhn, for example, proposes one of the “most radical re-definitions” (Sager Eidt 17) of ekphrasis, as the “representation in one medium of a real or fictitious text composed in another medium” (Bruhn 7–8). In other words, the “recreating medium need not always be verbal, but can itself be any of the art forms other than the one in which the primary ‘text’ is cast” (Cariboni Killander, Lutas and Strukelj 12). As Elleström notes, “Bruhn’s notion of ekphrasis covers the entire field of (complex) media representation” (“Transmediation” 9).

Elleström sees ekphrasis as the “complex representation of media products”<sup>6</sup> (*Media* 32). “Simple” representation occurs (according to Cariboni Killander, Lutas and Strukelj) when “the media product is briefly referred to or quoted in a different media product” (13); “complex” representation, on the other hand, is “more developed, elaborated and accurate,” and more elements are “transferred from the source medium to the target medium” (13). Cariboni Killander, Lutas and Strukelj claim, moreover, that in order for “simple media representation to become ekphrasis,” there must be both a “a certain degree of elaboration” and a “repurposing of the source—for instance through a semiotic process” (14).<sup>7</sup>

The form and degree of repurposing and elaboration are unique for each instance of ekphrasis. It is, of course, debatable how far the notion of ekphrasis can be extended; nevertheless, it should be acknowledged (as Elleström observes) that “representations of media products are possible, common and worthwhile to theorize about far beyond the more conventional modern borders of ekphrasis” (“Transmediation” 8). Taking

<sup>6</sup> Elleström explains ekphrasis within the framework of media representation; however, he notes that “representing a media product in general includes transmediating it to some extent. Ekphrasis would indeed seem quite pointless if the characteristics of the source media product were not represented again by the target media product” (“Transmediation” 8).

<sup>7</sup> To illustrate their argument, Cariboni Killander, Lutas and Strukelj offer an analysis of a sequence from the 2012 film *Barbara*, directed by Christian Petzold and set in 1980s East Germany. One scene features Rembrandt’s painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp* (1632). The authors offer a detailed analysis of the “relation between *energeia*, as a potentiality in the object (the media product), and *enargeia*, as an actualisation in the head of the subject (receiver)” (14).

this as a starting point, the following discussion seeks to go beyond those conventional “borders” and investigate the effects of the repurposing and elaboration of a particular source medium (i.e. David’s painting/ museum space) in a non-traditional target medium: the music video.

Music videos may contain representations of, and allusions to, other works of art (through language, sound and image). This strategic appropriation may be analyzed in terms of those definitions of ekphrasis that “include non-verbal media as targets” (Cariboni Killander, Lutas and Strukelj 12). Parallels may be drawn with the use of ekphrasis in cinema. Agnes Pethö has argued that in cinema, there is a complex and mixed mediality; and in place of the unity of image, language and sound (etc.), there is an unstable set of interrelations between elements; cinema as a medium can, indeed, “remediate” all other forms (Pethö 211). Pethö defines ekphrasis as “a case of media being incorporated, repurposed by other media” (213); and in this way, it contributes to the “interrelation” of elements. As an example, she cites the “remediation” of poetic texts by Verlaine, Rimbaud, Mallarmé and Valéry in two films by Jean-Luc Godard: *Bande à part* (1964) and *Pierrot le fou* (1965). The presence of poetic texts in these films (introduced through voice-over) creates an additional layer of meaning, enriching and complicating the “visual.” The cinematic concept of ekphrasis can, by extension, be applied to the music video, which similarly forges “unstable” relations between sound, image and text.<sup>8</sup>

Cinematic ekphrasis has also been examined by Laura M. Sager Eidt. She accepts the broad definition of ekphrasis as “the verbalization, quotation, or dramatization of real or fictitious texts composed in another sign system” (19); and she proposes four distinct categories, which differ in their “degrees and kinds of involvement with or of the visual arts in the text or film” (45). These categories are the “attributive,” “depictive,” “interpretive” and “dramatic.” Each of these categories implies an increased level of complexity (or elaboration); and all four can, in fact, be found in the “Apesh-t” video. Sager Eidt’s first category, “attributive,” accounts for the lowest degree of complexity and involvement. It may manifest itself in verbal allusion, explicit naming or visual introduction (as an actual image or tableaux), but without further description, and with limited frequency or distribution. “Depictive” involves a more extended discussion and reflection on a given work of art/literature. The last two categories are especially relevant to the present study. “Interpretive” ekphrasis takes the form of “a verbal reflection on the image, or a visual verbal dramatization of it in a *mise-en-scène* tableau vivant” (Sager Eidt 50). It involves a “degree

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<sup>8</sup> This article is not an attempt to analyze the “Apesh-t” video in terms of its cinematic form; rather, it has a narrower focus, on the use of ekphrasis in just one shot.

of transformation” (Sager Eidt 50) which extends the possible meanings and ramifications of the original. “Dramatic” ekphrasis involves the dramatization and theatricalization of the source. Sager Eidt suggests that, in terms of “frequency and distribution, this type of ekphrasis will occur at the central moment in the work and for the extended period of time” (56–57). Sager Eidt’s “interpretive” and “dramatic” categories include, then, an *elaboration* of the source media object (for example, a painting), and a *repurposing* of this object in the target medium (in this case, a music-video) (14).

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In her book on ekphrastic practices in cinema, Sager Eidt discusses the work of German photographer Thomas Struth as an example of visual ekphrasis. She focuses in particular on a series entitled *Museum Photographs*. Created between 1989 and 2005 and collected in several publications, the photographs capture people and works of art in museum spaces around the world; some staged and others unstaged.<sup>9</sup> The images highlight the “narrative the museum provides for the work in relation to its setting” (“Thomas Struth”) and probe the relationship between observer and observed. They also illustrate the ways in which the “visual culture of another era, gathered by later ages, informs the visual and social arenas of the present” (Wylie 152). One of the photographs, for example, taken in the Louvre, portrays spectators in front of Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*, a painting which documents an event (a shipwreck) which is also a moment in the history of European colonialism.<sup>10</sup> The museum visitors are on “terra firma” but their gaze is uniformly drawn to the painting so that “they seem to be eye-witnesses of the human drama” of the shipwreck (Belting 13). Within the painting itself, almost every gaze “is directed towards the distant signal of rescue. The gazes of the [museum] viewers follow the gazes of the shipwrecked sailors, but our own eyes have already taken in this double sequence” (Belting 13).

Belting argues that, in images such as this, “the well-known topos of image versus viewer . . . loses its familiar contours” (13). The photographs

<sup>9</sup> Most of the compositions are a result of Struth’s patiently waiting for the right moment to capture the scene; however, the images in the second part of the series, created in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin (1996–2001), were fully staged (Baxter 203).

<sup>10</sup> In 1816, the ship “Medusa” set off on a journey, the aim of which was to colonize Senegal. It ran aground on a sandbank. 150 crew members boarded a raft which floated for 13 days; ultimately there were only 10 survivors. The painting features in the “Apesh-t” video, where its colonialist context is played against the contemporary politics of race.

highlight the question of the “gaze” and, as Baxter aptly states, confront the viewer with “the mechanism that the modern authority relies on: the eye (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 171–76; *The Birth of the Clinic*, 108–18, 131–43)” (209). What we focus on, where we cast our gaze, what we look at and how, is a *political* act, and potentially a gesture of power. Ekphrasis is used in Struth’s photographs as a strategy to draw attention to the “museum as a medium and its exhibitionary practices” (Baxter 206). The photographs engage in an implicit critique of the conditions in which art is experienced, by exposing the museum space as a “site of dialogic exchange between work of art, site and audience” (Baxter 207).

124 Sager Eidt notes that the museum visitors in Struth’s photographs “seem to represent tableaux vivants” (32). Other critics (including Belting) have emphasized the way that “the paintings’ spaces and figures often seem to extend to the spaces and people of the photograph” (Sager Eidt 32). As Belting observes: “Just as the paintings form a stage for the figures who have been painted, the rooms form the stage for the persons being photographed. . . . The painted tableau, with its composition, corresponds to the tableau vivant of the observers” (9). Belting also argues that blurring of spatial boundaries affects our perception of time (9). The museum space, and the space within the painting, are two very different locations “disparate in time”; but the person looking at the photograph perceives them “simultaneously” (Belting 20). The painting<sup>11</sup> “which bears a different time within it, represents an enclave within our time”; and so “we can experience the presence of what is absent, the visible location of a long since vanished time” (Belting 20). Baxter suggests that Struth’s photographs make us aware, as viewers, of this absence, in part through becoming *self*-aware of our position as a “reflexive museum visitor” who is “critical about the site and conditions” (206) in which art is presented.

Michael Fried has questioned Belting’s claim that there is a blurring of boundaries in the photographs; rather, he sees a demarcation of different “realms”: the people in the paintings and the museum visitors “belong absolutely to two disparate and uncommunicating realms or, as I want to call them, ‘worlds’” (119, 128). Arguably, however, one process does not necessarily exclude the other: the boundaries between the two realms are *both* reinforced *and* blurred in the photographs. There is an interplay of different times and “realms”; and in the tensions between these realms, the very act of viewing is defamiliarized.

<sup>11</sup> The most recent paintings which Struth has chosen to photograph are from the nineteenth century (Belting 16).



In the “Apesh-t” video, the presence of dancers in the Louvre creates two “realms.” The dancers “dramatize” and so act as an extension to the paintings. They merge with the framed image in that sense; but they also comment on the image. In the dynamic between the image and the performers, the space is created for (political) comment. The choreography in the video interacts with the content of the featured artworks, resulting in their dramatization and theatricalization, to the extent that the paintings seem to be “brought to life,” offering at times a kind of *tableau vivant*. The boundary between the world within the painting and the world outside is simultaneously blurred *and* reinforced. The shot of David’s painting, for example, confronts us with an interplay between the composition of the painting and the composition of the *tableau vivant* in front of it; a contrast, or dividing line, between the space within the painting, and the space outside it.<sup>12</sup> The presence of the *tableau vivant* within the image renegotiates the borders of David’s painting, and so leads to a destabilizing of boundaries; but it also draws attention to the *separateness* between the two spaces (painting and museum). The “world” of the women in front of the painting, and the world of Madame Récamier, are clearly “two disparate and uncommunicating realms” (Fried 16). There is no physical connection between the painting’s subject (Madame) and the two women, and no exchange of looks or “gaze.”

It is through the contrast or interplay between different “realms” that the video foregrounds the relation between disparate times—past and present—in the context of postcolonial politics. Paradoxically, it is the co-existence of the two “realms” in one video frame, and the ekphrastic renegotiation of space, which thematizes otherness. There is an implication that, even as social and political rules have kept them apart, the two worlds have always been closely connected: the world of Madame Récamier was dependent on the labour of the Other, whose presence/absence is symbolized in the video by the two black dancers in the *tableau vivant*. In this way, the *tableau vivant*, inserted in the contemporary space of the museum, forges a new interpretation of the painting’s narrative, and acts as an intervention in the historical context from which it stems.

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<sup>12</sup> In the case of the “Apesh-t” video, the viewer is not looking at other “viewers”: there are no museumgoers present (as there are in Struth’s photographs). At the same time, the context for the viewing of an iconic work of art is defamiliarized. The viewer of the video is confronted with a composition which contains both the museum space, and the painting itself. The space where visitors would normally stand to view David’s painting is occupied by the *tableau vivant*. The view of David’s painting is not literally obstructed, but it is rather reconstructed. The *tableau vivant* can be read as an intentional obstacle inserted between the viewer and the painting, to disrupt the usual process of viewing as intended/ designed by the museum.

Ekphrasis occurs throughout the video, and can be seen as central to its conception and development. Art historian Alexandra Thomas has called the video “an embodied intervention” in Western art (qtd. in Lang). The Louvre itself may be seen as a space which sanctifies and confirms the Western artistic “canon.” The use of ekphrasis in the video—through elaboration (close-ups and editing) and repurposing of the source material (paintings and sculptures)—functions as an attempt at the defamiliarization of the context, in the way that it draws the attention of the viewer, not only to what the art exhibited in the Louvre represents, but also to what it *fails* to represent; in particular, the agency of non-white, non-Western bodies and identities.

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One of Struth’s aims in his photographs was to highlight the issue of the “iconicity” of art works. He observes: “I wanted to remind my audience that when art works were made, they were not yet icons or museum pieces” (qtd. in Tuchman). Through the iconic status that a work of art has acquired, it continues to confirm the canon, and consequently, the way that museums visitors view art (as an elitist Western, and predominantly white endeavour). In the “Apesh-t” video, the ekphrastic repurposing of works of art draws attention to wider questions of the way in which a shift in “location and ownership effectively changes the discursive site within which particular socio-political and politico-cultural hegemonic narratives are exercised” (Baxter 207–08). A work such as David’s portrait of Madame Récamier has been given a particular place in the Louvre’s collection—presented for the public to engage with it, within the boundaries of a designated order; and affirming its status as an iconic painting. Creating a collection of canonic works attests, in turn, to the “museum’s authority,” establishing its “identity through representation” (Baxter 209).

In the video, the space of the Louvre itself undergoes a process of repurposing; occupied by the Carters and the dancers, it becomes a stage for their performative action. There is a process of “elaboration” through the addition of tableaux vivant, music and choreography. This process of repurposing and elaboration not only questions the museum’s “authority” but also more importantly generates new possible relations between the viewer and the art object, and between different art objects.

Ironically, our awareness of the fact that a form of political intervention is taking place, is dependent on our knowledge of the cultural status of the Louvre, and the canonical status of the art works, and so on an awareness of the museum as “a space outside the image” (Baxter 211). In this way, ekphrasis works in the liminal space between what is outside the frame, and inside it. The repurposing and elaboration invoke the viewer’s own awareness and memory of both the artwork, and the museum space. The canon is evoked and paradoxically even re-affirmed in the act of transgression. In

this way, the transgression is always-already a possibility, an attempt which can never be fully completed. As we gaze at the video image, our memory of seeing the painting—or similar artworks, displayed in museum spaces—is invoked. Again, then, two time-planes are superimposed on each other, through ekphrasis; and it is this “doubling” which triggers our awareness of the defamiliarizing of the image, and the political intervention which is taking place. In this way, engaging with the video itself “represents viewing” (Baxter 206) as a politically charged experience.

In the video, the re-presentation of David’s painting of Madame Récamier makes it part of a new “order,” through being set against other images—both within the frame (the positioning of the dancers), and outside the frame (the preceding and succeeding shots). The sequence is marked by an interruption or pause in the song, and the insertion of an electronically modified sound which, as music theorist Małgorzata Grajter suggests, has associations with the sound of a tolling bell. This is (Grajter notes) an example of a “general pause” (*grand pause*) or “rest” in the musical narration; a device which is generally used to denote “an ending of a certain stage of a given process, often symbolising death or disappearance.” In musical language, the figure is called *aposiopesis* (Grajter). Etymologically, the term comes from the Greek *aposiopesis* (“becoming silent”) or *aposiōpan*, to be fully silent (*siōpē*: silence). Outside the world of music, it refers to a “rhetorical artifice wherein the speaker suddenly breaks off in the middle of the sentence” (“Aposiopesis”). By means of this rhetorical device, meaning is generated through discontinuity, forging a strong connection between the absence of voice and its presence; between silence, and the sound which is interrupted (and which, in the case of the video, resumes within seconds). On the level of sound, then, the use of *aposiopesis* results in the representation of absence as something palpable, embodied through the artistic process. This parallels the visual representation of absence in the tableau vivant. As such, it can be read as a comment on the absence of the black voice in artistic discourse. The lack of agency is understood as a lack of both visibility and voice (the two being closely related).<sup>13</sup> The

<sup>13</sup> It should be acknowledged that visibility has to involve both subjectivity and agency, leading to expression. Mere visibility alone can itself be a form of oppression. Rosenthal and Lugo-Ortiz point to the fact that slavery is historically associated with a state of “hypervisibility” of the slave, living under the “surveilling gaze of the master and/or its surrogate figure, the overseer” (6). Often, “permission to leave the plantation involved not just a written document stating that such a licence was indeed granted to a particular slave (within restricted spatial and temporal limits) but also an ekphrastic act of verbal portraiture—‘the description of the slave’ by which his or her visual particularities . . . were to be recorded” (7). So the verbal act of “portrayal” actually rendered “the slave subjectless” (6), making him/her a “mere instrument for economic production,” an object of possession (6).

embodiment of black presence—the movement from invisibility to visibility—has to be accompanied by the restoration of the black “voice” in the public sphere (represented in the video by the museum space). The absence of this voice is here implied by means of *aposiopesis*.

The sound of the bell seems to be somewhat incongruous in the museum interior, and so the viewer/listener assumes it is coming from outside, awakening an awareness of the existence of the outside world which stretches beyond the frame. Additionally, the solemn sound of the bell introduces associations with religious shrines (and church bells summoning to prayer); and this can be read as an ironic comment on the role of museums as artistic “shrines” constructed to celebrate art and elevate its status. It follows that the “order” introduced by the museum itself appears sacred and canonical, explaining the world of art to the viewer, and teaching him/her how to experience it “properly” and respectfully. Indeed, the portrait positioned in the middle of the shot—in the centre of a symmetrical composition—brings to mind an altar, adorned by the figures sitting beneath it, and the accompanying paintings on either side. The image of a church is only fleetingly superimposed on the museum space; subtly implied by means of sound and composition, which are replaced a few seconds later by new compositions and new sounds.

David’s painting forms the background for a composition which echoes its shapes and colour palette, focusing in particular on Madame Récamier’s white dress, and introducing a considerable level of transformation. The dancers in the image are physically restricted by the length of fabric suspended between them; sitting with their backs to each other, they form a kind of “frame” for the composition. The source media object (itself present in the frame) becomes extended by means of the *tableau vivant*. The dark background of Jacques-Louis David’s painting is echoed in the form of two “dark” human bodies. The ekphrastic gesture defamiliarizes the painting, extracting “blackness” from the impenetrable background; and this may be seen as a comment on the ideological and historical erasure of black bodies and black skin from art. Cécile Bishop has observed that it was “a widely held notion” in traditional art theory “that the representation of flesh, because it is intimately connected to the living and expressive nature of the body, is . . . the highest achievement of the art of the colorist and its unreachable limit” (2). However it was *white* flesh which was seen as having a range of nuances in colour, and was associated with features such as animation, expressiveness, translucency and, in the case of female portraiture, with purity and propriety (Bishop 4). In his *Essais sur la peinture* (1765), Denis Diderot—discussing the reproduction of skin in painting—stressed the difficulty of the task, and suggested that skin can reflect subtle changes in the sitter’s inner life:



the face of man . . . this canvas which flickers, moves, stretches, relaxes, or fades according to the infinite multitude of alternatives of this light mobile breath we call the soul. . . . Flesh is what is difficult to render; this unctuous white . . . this mixture of red and blue which imperceptibly perspires. (qtd. in Bishop 4)

Bishop argues that, in this case, the text should not be read as racist; however, she also quotes an 1810 treatise by Francois Richard de Tussac, in which the author opposes any criticism of slavery. Like Diderot, Tussac compares (in this case female) white skin to canvas, and draws a connection, firstly between white skin and morality (female modesty), and secondly between white skin and individual sensibility: its transparency allows for the recognition of the emotional state, and so, of that which is unique and which comes from within: “fine, white skin, whose delicate and transparent fabric reveals the pink of modesty and its infinitely varied shades, each painting a feeling of the soul and turning their appearances into a magical and enchanting *tableau*” (qtd. in Bishop 5). In comparison, black skin (for Tussac) reveals nothing; it is flat and allegedly opaque, and as such, represents a “collective” (Bishop 5), an anonymous, undifferentiated mass. It becomes “a marker of race” (Bishop 5) and, in Tussac’s overtly racist argument, this justifies exploitation.

In her study *Shine: The Visual Economy of Light in African Diasporic Practice* (2015), Krista Thompson points to the tendency in Western art to represent black bodies in a manner which has led to their subjugation and reification. She argues that “surfacist representations of black subjects, that is, representations emphasizing material and visual surfaces are historically connected to the commodification of African bodies” (220). The depiction of black skin as an opaque, flat (sometimes shiny) surface has likened it to an object of desire that can be touched, sold and consumed. Indeed the “two women seated in front of David’s Portrait” can be said to delineate with their bodies the shape of the “meridienne” which the sitter reclines on (Vernallis 33). Carol Vernallis notes that they “suggest a piece of furniture” or “Madam’s Slaves” positioned as if at the feet of the painting (33). As Angela Rosenthal and Agnes Lugo-Ortiz have observed, another way in which black subjects were commodified in visual arts, especially in portraiture, was to position them on the margins of paintings, where they functioned as accessories and signs of status. In European art (they write), “the inclusion of . . . servile figures in portraiture often became conventionalized into a type” (2). In a related process, the black subject may be occluded or blurred, almost dissolving into the background, thereby creating a context of otherness, which only affirms the white identity and individuality of the sitter (Rosenthal and Lugo-Ortiz 1–3). An interesting example of this is John Michael Wright’s painting *Portrait*

of *Miss Butterworth of Belfield Hall* (1660s). The painting was cleaned in the 1960s. Previously, it had seemed as if the figure of Miss Butterworth was oddly gesturing “toward the column at her side” (Rosenthal and Lugo-Ortiz 1). Technical analysis, however, “exposed ghostly traces of a figure, a black male slave, who appears in servile position pouring water into his mistress hand, and whose presence overpainting had eliminated” (Rosenthal and Lugo-Ortiz 1). The figure was concealed under a layer of paint, probably at some date after 1772 (Poulter) when the presence of such an enslaved figure in an artwork was no longer fashionable. The painting was, as Maud Sulter has observed, “doctored, so as to paint out that history, that black presence in Britain” (263). The black subject had been “forcefully absented from our collective memory”; following restoration, however, “he is now brought back into the frame” (Sulter 263). In this case, then, the revelatory cleaning has brought the memory back and re-introduced the historical narrative into the frame; but it has not granted subjectivity or individuality to the figure. His presence in the painting was always/already a form of ideological effacement, as within the frame, the artist had granted subjectivity only to the sitter. Arguably, her subjectivity and identity as free and white was constructed partly through the contrast with the “subordinated presence” (Rosenthal and Lugo-Ortiz 2) of the enslaved figure. The subsequent overpainting only produced, not simply a literal erasure but also a “historical erasure” as it eliminated “the historical trace of subjugation” (Rosenthal and Lugo-Ortiz 2).<sup>14</sup> As Rosenthal and Lugo-Ortiz observe:

The cleaning of the . . . painting, and the reemergence of the black figure from behind the column, does not simply bring to life a lost identity. Actually, *stricto sensu*, it does not do it at all. If anything, even at the moment of its initial inscription, the subjective black figure was already, symbolically, under erasure, his presence predicated on a relation that affected his symbolic absenting in the face of the dominant and nonchalantly subjugating white presence. . . . [T]he enslaved presence in representation often becomes a constitutive component of white identity. (Rosenthal and Lugo-Ortiz 4)

In the case of the portrait, then, the reintroduction (or rediscovery) of the black figure does not change its basic premise or inner order: the figure returns to “his” place, as designed for him initially by the “oppressor.”

<sup>14</sup> Although it is not the focus of discussion here, it should be stated that the composition represents the wealth not so much of the sitter herself, but of the family she enters through marriage, and so the wealth of the male members of the family: “In this portrait, thought to be of either Ann or Mary Butterworth, the subject of the painting is presented as an object of her father/husband/lover’s wealth, with water being sprinkled on her hand as she inclines her marriage finger” (Poulter).

To return to “Apesh-t”: the video plays on the dichotomy between white and black, alluding to this dichotomy in art, and in society. The black female dancers appear as if emerging out of the painting. The vacant, anonymous background becomes politicized: now, it not only delineates the white figure of the sitter, but stands for the “absence” of black bodies in the canons of Western art (the art works presented in Louvre feature predominantly “white” subjects).

In the painting, Madame Récamier confronts the viewer directly as she looks straight ahead. Without the intervening tableau vivant, “the exchange” of glances between the viewer and the subject of the painting would remain undisturbed; but the presence of the two dancers destabilizes its dynamics. They do not look at the viewer, and there is also no visual contact between them and Madame Récamier. If we follow their gaze, it will take us outside the frame. In one of Struth’s photographs, entitled *National Gallery I London 1989*, the arrangement of the museum visitors mimics the composition of the painting (Sager Eidt 33; Baxter 208; Belting 20). Two people positioned at the outer edges of the photograph, however, “seem to extend the visible wall of the room to include the side walls we cannot see which carry the paintings they are looking at” (Belting 20). The video does not give any hints about the objects of the dancers’ gaze; what they are looking at can be only imagined. However, as in the photograph, the existence of the frame of the composition is highlighted, through the trajectory of the gaze which ventures outside of it. The awareness of the frame, in turn, reminds us of the existence of the multifaceted viewer: the cinematographer who shot the video; the viewer who is seeing as if through the cinematographer’s lens; and, indirectly, the artist who painted the portrait at the centre of the composition, and who was, after all, the first to cast his gaze. However, even as the power of the gaze<sup>15</sup> is

<sup>15</sup> It can be claimed that, in the case of Struth’s photograph, the power of the gaze and its presence as the subject of the photograph, is reinforced by the subject of the painting. The photograph features a work by Giovanni Battista Cima da Conegliano entitled *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1502–1504), originally an altarpiece (Belting 20); the very title raises the question of doubt, and the relation between seeing and believing. Belting suggests that one of the museum visitors in the photograph, a “girl bending down to read the artist’s signature,” exhibits a similar “curiosity as shown by the Apostle Thomas in Cima’s painting, who places his finger in the wound in the Christ’s side” (20). Baxter goes further, and draws attention to the way that, in the photograph, the sense of sight is related to the sense of touch—like Saint Thomas’s “invasive finger in Christ’s wound” (208). Struth’s lens “echoes the transgressing, prodding touch of the eye, blending sensory experience—touch and vision” (208). The shot of David’s painting in the video does not refer to touch directly; but the idea of physicality is introduced by the presence of the black bodies in the tableau vivant, who are in a way “extracted” from the anonymous black background of the painting. The movement from invisibility and opaqueness, to visibility and clarity of vision, takes place through embodiment: the tangible presence of the black body within the frame.

foregrounded, the control over what we see—the integrity and stability of the composition—are being challenged: the viewer’s gaze is led towards that which he/she *cannot* see, that which is absent from the shot.

In this way—through the use of ekphrasis—the scene problematizes the question of representation: who is being represented and how; what is *not* represented; and how the gaze is framed. David’s painting becomes an element in a new, elaborated composition, re-framed both by the symmetrical arrangement of the tableau vivant, and by the cinematic frame itself. The original purpose of David’s painting can be debated; but in the video, it undergoes a new, expanded repurposing. The tableau vivant is a “dramatization” of David’s painting which forges a comment on a political context and regime in which, as Bishop argues, “individual subjectivity and blackness function(ed) as incompatible codes” (2). It is precisely through the conjunction—the separateness *and* blurring—of incompatible codes, times and spaces, or “realms,” that the artwork is defamiliarized, and the “absent” order or code is brought back into the “frame.”

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## Journeys of Becoming: Hair, the Blogosphere and Theopoetics in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*

# ABSTRACT

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Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* provides provocative reflections on intertextuality and becoming by exploring the potentially transformative power of "blog-writing." Through a combined reading of Mayra Rivera's *Poetics of the Flesh* and Adichie's *Americanah*, this article details intersections between the virtual and the material; writing *in* the (imagined "other-wordly") blogosphere *about* the organic matter of hair. The narrator of the novel, Ifemelu, establishes a blog after she shares her story to decide to stop using relaxants and to allow her hair to be natural, via an online chat-room; she refuses to go through ritual performances in order to succeed as a migrant in America. In this article I argue that Adichie's detailing of Ifemelu's relationship with her hair explores the way in which creative practice, or poetics, is intimately connected to the journey of our flesh; social history is marked on our bodies. The blog becomes a confessional which details the demeaning effect that social constructions of race have had on her body. But the blog ultimately becomes self-destructive. It is only when Ifemelu returns to Nigeria that she embodies the transformative and cathartic power of contemporary modes of story-telling, and where she is finally able to "spin herself into being."

**Keywords:** Adichie, theopoetics, materiality, hair, blog-writing.

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*When you write, it's like braiding your hair. Taking a handful of coarse unruly strands and attempting to bring them unity. Your fingers have still not perfected the task. Some of the braids are long, others short. Some are thick, others thin. Some are heavy. Others are light. Like the diverse women in your family. Those whose fables and metaphors, whose similes, and soliloquies, whose diction and "je ne sais quoi" daily slip into your survival soup, by way of their fingers. (Danticat 192)*

## INTRODUCTION

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This article will focus on the motif of hair braiding that is adopted by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie in her novel *Americanah*, to explore the ways in which contemporary discursive practices (in this context, blog writing) are intimately connected to the experiences of bodies (such as black women's hair movements). This trope becomes even more powerful when thinking about gendered and racialized bodies that are perpetually forced to re-enact histories of colonialism, slavery, Christian imperialism and civility via neo-colonial systems of "body shaming" (such as natural black hair as a symbol of barbarity). The weaving of hair alongside the weaving of a story is a poignant motif for exploring issues of intertextuality, gender, race and material religion, as well as (I will argue) being an intriguing act of "*theopoiesis*." This article will therefore address the following three issues through a reading of *Americanah*: (1) the motif of hair braiding allows Adichie to anchor the potentially transcendent blogosphere in the experiences of the black female body; (2) is the "blogosphere" a testimonial and transcendent space where you can find your voice and liberation by identifying your community or will cyberspace always risk "replicating the hierarchies of classical imperialism"? (Isaacs 187); (3) the third element (or section of hair in the braid) of the article binds these two issues together, and provides a new and distinct reading of how the motif of hair braiding and hair politics functions in Adichie's work. I will refer to the *theopoetics* movement as imagined by the work of Catherine Keller and Mayra Rivera. Liberation and postcolonial theologian, Mayra Rivera, also reminds us that all social discourses are intimately linked to corporality and materiality: "This body that I am, at this moment, did not exist before the world that has shaped it . . . My becoming is dependent on and bound to other bodies" (Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh* 144). This idea is particularly poignant in the context of race and gender and when, as in the case of Adichie's work, the "social discourse" is the genre of blog writing and cyberspace. Adichie's language, when describing the blog-writing process, details vivid images of flesh, corporality but also "*theos*" and transcendence, but transcendence that can be realized *in* not *beyond* the body. I will detail the journey of Ifemelu's becoming (or "incarnation," as Rivera would say) in order to



show the intimate bodily link between the liberatory and communal yet painful acts of hair weaving, story-telling via cyber-space, and, arguably, what Catherine Keller calls “God-making” (Keller 105–18).

## THEOPOETICS

In the epilogue to her collection of short stories *Krik? Krak!* the Haitian author Edwidge Danticat reflects (through a narrator) upon the social shame of a woman becoming a writer. The act of writing, perceived as an act of immateriality, could be seen as undermining the memory of the generations of hardworking women, intimately connected by domestic labour and acts of speech. Danticat complicates this mind-body dualism (the act of writing stories with pen and paper vs. living stories immortalized in shared acts of cooking or labour) by detailing her own act of writing as being an intimate continuation of the generations of female bodies engaged in what Rivera calls “social materiality” (*Poetics of the Flesh* 149). The phrase “you remember thinking while braiding your hair that you look a lot like your mother” (Danticat 191–96) is repeated at the beginning of each paragraph. The final paragraph says:

Your mother, she introduced you to the first echoes of the tongue that you now speak when at the end of the day she would braid your hair while you sat between her legs scrubbing the kitchen pots. While your fingers worked away at the last shadows of her day's work, she would make your braids Sunday-pretty even during the week.

When she was done she would ask you to name each braid after those nine-hundred and ninety-nine women who were boiling in your blood, and since you had written them down and memorized them, the names would come rolling off your tongue. And this was your testament to the way that these women lived and died and lived again. (195–96)

The narrator of Danticat's epilogue (or the author's own words to her mother) testifies that her discursive practice (writing with pen and paper) is her only way to ensure that the memories of the “nine hundred and ninety-nine women” will survive through the imperfect words she weaves for “when you write it is like braiding hair.” The words she weaves are “like the diverse women in your life . . . whose diction . . . daily slip into your survival soup, by way of their fingers” (Danticat 192). Her survival, and many like her, is ensured by weaving the past into the formation of stories of the present. And this process is necessarily a bodily practice. The intimacy of this discourse, which Danticat describes as a testament, is arguably *theopoetics*.

Catherine Keller traces the history of *theopoetics* to ancient Greek: “As *poiesis* means making or creation, so *theopoiesis* gets rendered as ‘God-making’ or ‘becoming divine’” (Keller 107). Keller details the early Christian emphasis on the dependency of “God” on human creation. This history of God-making is lost during the journey of Christianity, particularly Protestantism (108). She does not want to idealize this ancient Christian tradition but rather to “amplify counterpoint resonances working within a received tradition” (108), and so to provide historical depth to the recent movement to understand certain social discourse and poetics as God-making, or *theopoiesis*. “Theopoetics” is often considered a relatively recent term, and movement within theology. Interestingly, Keller herself admits to believing she coined the phrase herself in the 2000s only to find out that *theopoetics* had been used by liberal theologians at her own institution, Harvard, in the 1960s (110). *Theopoetics* in its new millennial form arrived via feminist and liberation theology which has always “experimented” with a “new poiesis of the divine itself—making God black, female, poor, queer, animal, and so-on” (115). In the march towards the complete negation of God, “*theos* . . . remains a cloudy mirror” and “poiesis means materialization” (115). Keller understands the cosmos as an ambiguous entity which is always involved in the act of creation, rather than a single event, via the web of human interconnectedness. She describes this as “material entanglement” (115). *Theopoetics* is, therefore, an act of God-making, capturing “*theos*” in all its earthly and human manifestations and entanglements.

Mayra Rivera calls this entanglement “poetics of the flesh.” Importantly, Rivera sees Caribbean writing as a distinct poetics (Rivera, *Poetics Ashore* 242).<sup>1</sup> Poetics has an ontological function that “refers not only to styles of writing but to modes of knowing, being, and acting in the world” (242). Caribbean history of loss and survival, death and rebirth, bring “*theos*” and “poiesis” together. Danticat’s poiesis of naming each braid after the women who are “boiling in your blood,” whose names you have memorized because you have written them down with pen and paper is testament to this. As Rivera says, “words weave the flesh of the world” (*Poetics of the Flesh* 113) and “social structures” such as race and gender “form the world from which our flesh is woven” (114). The image of nine hundred and ninety-nine women boiling in the blood of Danticat

<sup>1</sup> “The catastrophe of the middle passage and the ongoing devastations of colonialism are ever present in these works, as reminders that the very existence of Caribbean peoples is a testimony to the power of their creativity under the worse possible circumstances, of their embodied poetics” (Rivera, “Poetics Ashore” 243).

details the anguish of a long history which will always form her own flesh and words. Similarly, Adichie's language, when describing the blog writing process, details vivid images of flesh and corporality. Initially, Ifemelu feels "revived" by the process, like she was "giving testimony in church" (Adichie 213).<sup>2</sup> But after many years this becomes destructive. The physical discomfort Ifemelu feels in her own body, and that of those she writes about, is evident; whilst having her hair braided in a salon in Princeton before returning to Nigeria, she reflects that it felt like she was "hacking into the carcass of people's stories . . . Each post scraped off yet one more scale of self until she felt naked and false" (Adichie 5). Although writing from distinct (postcolonial) geographical locations (one in the Caribbean whose memories of the Middle Passage are carved in her lineage, and one, whose body is forced to detail a history of colonial exploitation and neo-colonial systems of slavery as a migrant to the west<sup>3</sup>), both Danticat and Adichie see the motif of weaving hair, which runs in their blood, as a complex site of emancipation. In Rivera's words, social discourse "grounds the hopes of those seeking transformation through creative practice" (*Poetics of the Flesh* 115). Interestingly, in the quotation, Danticat refers to this act of writing as a "testament." As seen, this echo of confessional writing is also detailed in Ifemelu's healing journey, which forms intriguing correlations with theopoetics, particularly as explored by Rivera.

## CONFRONTING COLONIAL TROPES: CARVING A SPACE FOR MATERIAL TRANSCENDENCE

In *Poetics of the Flesh*, Rivera details how colonial discourses are immersed in the classification of people through the racialization of flesh, and how this racialization of flesh parallels the traditional theological tendency to see flesh as the cause of sinfulness (117). In the early pages of *Americanah* (as Ifemelu is having her hair braided, as detailed above) the reader is told that she has stopped writing the blog. Ifemelu begins to reminisce about her childhood and the journey to the United States; much of the rest of the novel is told in retrospect from the hairdresser's chair. The braider tugs on Ifemelu's hair with a comb, causing her to chastise the braider for using the wrong comb. Just like Danticat's narrator, it is at this point that she thinks about her mother:

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<sup>2</sup> All references to Adichie will be from the novel *Americanah*, unless stated otherwise.

<sup>3</sup> See Adichie's lecture "The Danger of a Single Story."

Ifemelu had grown up in the shadow of her mother's hair. It was black-black, so thick it drank two containers of relaxer at the salon, so full it took hours under the hooded dryer, and when finally released from pink plastic rollers, sprang free and full, flowing down her back like a celebration. Her father called it a "crown of glory." "Is it your real hair?" strangers would ask, and then reach out and touch it reverently. (41)

The theological rhetoric used to describe Ifemelu's memories of her mother's hair is poignant; the "crown of glory" provides echoes of Christ but is also reminiscent of the dreadlocked hair in Rastafari (the African-Caribbean postcolonial imaginings criss-cross again). In the Rastafari context, the "crown of glory" is symbolic of Christ, but also the lion's mane of the Lion of Judah (referring to the lineage of Ras Tafari Makonen, the King of Ethiopia, and in Rastafari theology, the second Christ). This is woven with the Biblical stories of Samson's power being held in his hair, and the journeys of resistance and freedom by those enslaved, to signify their refusal to tame their hair to colonial standards of civility, to allow it to grow free. The dreaded hair is a vessel for power which physically distinguishes the Rasta from the oppressive and controlling systems of "Babylon" (white/western colonial/capitalist centres of power). Rivera details those [poets] who "strive to conjure other bodies," which can be extended to a reflection upon the Rastafari embodiment of Christ and a rejection of "Babylon" (*Poetics of the Flesh* 115). She goes on to say that these acts "are not the negation of their racialized features, but rather their emancipation . . . creative practices such as these are vital for redeeming flesh" (115). The Rastafari "conjuring" of other bodies that resist the clothes, food, hairstyles of the imperial and "civilized" centre enables their emancipation. However, the language Adichie uses to describe Ifemelu's mother's hair as a "crown of glory," which at this point is not "natural" but chemically "relaxed," also signifies a complex history of Christian imperialism, as well as black emancipation and identity-formation.

In the following paragraph, however, Ifemelu describes the day her mother's relationship with her hair, and herself, changed:

One day, the year Ifemelu turned ten, her mother came home from work looking different. Her clothes were the same, a brown dress belted at the waist, but her face was flushed, her eyes unfocussed. "Where are the big scissors?" she asked, and when Ifemelu brought it to her, she raised it to her head and, handful by handful, chopped off all her hair. (41)

Ifemelu's mother proceeds to collect all of the Catholic objects from around her home, crucifixes, rosaries and burn them along with her hair:

“I am saved,” she said. “Mrs Ojo ministered to me this afternoon during the children’s break and I have received Christ. Old things have passed away and all things have become new. Praise God. On Sunday we will start going to revival saints. It is a Bible-believing church and a living church, not like Saint Dominic’s.” Her mother’s words were not her own . . . But after that afternoon, her God changed. He became exacting. Relaxed hair offended Him. Dancing offended Him. She bartered with Him, offering starvation in exchange for prosperity, for a job promotion, for good health. She fasted herself bone-thin. (41–42)

This extreme act of bodily purging connects to Christian traditions which saw flesh as a sign of sin. Within this context, racialized flesh and hair was part of “the production of colonialist knowledge and the concomitant structuring of global and local relations according to types of people, types of bodies” (Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh* 116). A key part of the colonial project was the control of the body; in relation to Adichie’s novel *Purple Hibiscus*, Corinne Sandwith writes: “At work here is not only the specific colonial project of disciplining the native body against the propensity for laziness or sexual excess, but also the foundational dualistic logic of Western philosophical discourse in which mind and body are polarized and hierarchized” (Sandwith 98). Here, western enlightenment values are aligned with Christian values through the colonial project and the promotion of Europe as the civilized centre. To control and discipline your body, particularly through suffering, and distance it from the superiority of the mind, is to be truly enlightened: “The Christian discourses of sin and redemption, exemplified in the suffering body of Christ, give privileged place to a view of the body as nobly and necessarily wounded in pursuit of purity, salvation, or the presence of God” (Sandwith 99). Black, and particularly female black, bodies were an ideal place for white (predominantly but not exclusively) male colonizers and Christian missionaries to promote (and often forcibly demonstrate) their notion of enlightenment. White colonial constructions of civility, closely linked to Christian notions of purity of the flesh, fixed the black body as a “degraded form of the human (animalistic, irrational, hypersexual)” which required “the continual exertion of vigilance and the ritualised humiliation of the flesh” (Sandwith 99).<sup>4</sup> Here, Ifemelu’s mother, with “eyes unfocussed” and “with words that were not her own” (Adichie 41) disciplines her (black

<sup>4</sup> Refer also to the work of Kwok Pui-Lan who details the relationship between Christianization and westernization: “As colonial desire and imperialistic violence were masked and reconstituted in a blatant reversal as ‘civilizing mission,’ the Christian church played important roles through the sending of missionaries, establishing churches and schools, and propagating ideas of cleanliness and hygiene. Christianization and westernization became almost a synonymous process in the colonial period” (17).

female) body to perform appropriately within the defined parameters of another righteous Christian notion of salvation and European civility. Rivera's discussion of theopoiesis aims to *redeem* the body from these limited constructions of divinity and transcendence, and therefore lead to incarnation (redeemed *in* the body not beyond it); "transcendence here does not point beyond the world but toward it" (Rivera, "Poetics Ashore" 244). This model of transcendence is guided by how words, poetics, are put into being through creative practice; how creative writers challenge accepted doctrine and carve spaces for new possibilities (Rivera, "Poetics Ashore" 242). The way in which Adichie weaves connections between the body, flesh, constructions of divinity and transcendence, and the discursive practice of writing, and themes of migration, lead toward "modes of knowing, being and acting in the world" (242). Eventually, Ifemelu's mother "left the church and began to let her hair grow again" after being guided by an angel (Adichie 43).

## THE BLOGOSPHERE AS SOCIAL DISCURSIVE PRACTICE

A significant section of the novel is Ifemelu's own act of cutting off her hair in order to "go natural." The similarities with her mother's journey are evident, yet, ambiguous. Adichie draws together issues of Christianization, colonization, westernization, and I would argue, the conflicting journey towards Rivera's notion of material "transcendence" (pointing towards not beyond the world). In contemporary contexts, particularly for migrant women, like Ifemelu, hair is central to "Black women's acculturation and socialization, for it influences the concept(ion) of femininity. The binary opposite "good/bad" hair has for centuries been an epistemological tool used to juxtapose western and Black beauty, devaluing the latter and reinforcing European aesthetics" (Cruz-Gutiérrez 66). Black women, deemed as having "bad hair" are forced to engage in the performance to soften the image of black women for a white civilized audience, with "devastating effects in the identity-formation process" (67). Adichie details this devastation through the character of Ifemelu, whose mother, we have seen, was also traumatized by Eurocentric aesthetics (but distinctively within the (post)colonial Nigerian context). In her article, Cruz-Gutiérrez provides a clear history of black women's hair movements. The author establishes that we are currently in the third wave of the hair movements, and that Adichie's novel is a key commentary on this current wave (67-68). What is distinct about this third wave is the central role that the blogosphere and social media play in the formation of communities

and in the dissemination of counter narratives which challenge dominant epistemological frameworks (67). Cruz-Gutiérrez argues that through her novel *Americanah*, Adichie explores how the internet, or the discursive practice of blogging, formulates a flexible and emancipatory space for black women to explore and celebrate their relationship with their hair (76). What Cruz-Gutiérrez does not reflect on, however, is the destructive effect that the blog writing process (under the identity-umbrella of “Non-American Black”) begins to have on Ifemelu and her identity-formation, which is the point at which Adichie begins the story (as referenced earlier).

In her reading of *Americanah*, Camille Isaacs (2016) focuses on the more destructive elements of social media/blog writing for migrant women. She states that “cyberspace risks replicating the hierarchies of classical imperialism” (187). This importantly pays attention to the dangers of imagining a safe disembodied place (the internet) where we can find liberation, for the space of the internet is constructed and managed by capitalist and Eurocentric agendas. As Rivera reminds us, all discursive practice arises from the experiences of our bodies in the world, not in transcendence of it. Arjun Appadurai (2019) explores the possibility of modern, digital archives as a method of vocalization for migrants in the current Euro-American political climate. This mode of story-telling and memory-making will never be a simple liberation and will inevitably be bound by and in negotiation with the dominant, elitist narratives of nation-building. But within digital archives there exists the possibility for relationship with memory to shift and be re-worked so that migrants can be the narrators of their own stories, and potentially challenge imperial representations of migrant communities. Appadurai writes: “literate migrants have begun to explore social media, chat rooms, and other interactive spaces in which to find, debate, consolidate their own memory traces and stories into a more widely plausible narrative” (561). For those written out of national memory, on-line archives provide the possibility for formulating *other* “imagined communities” (561). Whilst there will always be stories of loss and abjection which potentially feed the elite imagination, he details the possibility of other stories, which increase agency, also being disseminated: “the diasporic archive, or the migrant archive, is increasingly characterised by the presence of voice, agency, and debate, rather than of mere reading, reception and interpellation” (562). The ultimate challenge that Appadurai highlights is how stories of abjection can become stories of aspiration (refugees will always be “supplicants,” not “applicants”). Our models of citizenship are built on our relationship with the past (“birth, parenthood, and blood”); and this model will always be out of reach for refugees (564). But Appadurai sees possibility in the role of migrant archives “not only as a storehouse of memory but also as aspirational

maps” to formulate affirmative narratives which may enable a “basis for secure citizenship” (564). This cannot happen, however, without a major revisioning of sovereign nation-building, a topic he admits has no easy solution, particularly within the parameters of his article (564).

These articles provide insightful reflections into the relationship Adichie creates between migration, the blogosphere and liberation. Within the work of Cruz-Gutiérrez and Isaacs, there is a tendency to gloss over the more complex aspect of the theologically significant language Adichie uses to describe Ifemelu’s, and her mother’s, transition to natural hair; this is not a straightforward notion of transcendence but rather details the tensions between Christian imperialism, abjection, social materiality and connections to an “other-worldly” divinity. When this language and story of becoming is analyzed alongside theopoiesis, which enables ambiguity to be part of the story, we see the possibility of connection with an earthly and embodied divinity. In relation to Caribbean writing, but which again seems utterly relevant to Adichie’s work, Rivera states: “this poetics does not look to the heavens but to the world around us” (“Poetics Ashore” 246). Whilst it is naive and idealistic to imagine the blogosphere as a space free of imperialist structures, the work of Adichie and Appadurai allow space and possibility for counter narratives; there is the possibility of unusual intertextual engagements that are distinctive within the contemporary digital age, without glossing over the abjection contained within these narratives.

### IFEMELU’S “BECOMING”: CYBERSPACE AND TRANSCENDENCE

For the remainder of the article I will focus on Ifemelu’s journey of “incarnation” in relationship to the blogosphere. I will focus more attention on her language of material transcendence, which I understand as the process of poetic God-making that details the “material entanglement” of humans to each other and the universe (Keller 116). This entanglement allows space for both the embodiment of traumatic physical histories and incarnation. Ifemelu’s story details the completion of her studies, and her economic and academic success, but also the constant threat of poverty and being a victim of racist abuse: her migrant black status often makes her unemployable. Following university, it is Ifemelu’s white boyfriend, Curt, who manages to secure her an interview for a job: “in the midst of her gratitude, a small resentment: that Curt could, with a few calls, rearrange a world, have things slide into spaces that he wanted them to” (Adichie 202). A friend advises her to “lose the braids and straighten your hair.



Nobody says this kind of stuff, but it matters” (202). A few years earlier, Ifemelu would have laughed and refused to believe this, but her experience as a “Non-American Black” tells her to accept this advice. She uses relaxant to smooth her hair which burns her scalp: “the smell of burning, of something organic dying which should not have died, had made her feel a sense of loss” (203). Adichie locates Ifemelu’s grief explicitly in the decay of her flesh, exposing how “social constructions materialize . . . ultimately in human flesh” (Rivera, “Poetics Ashore” 242). Her sense of loss is for her homeland, and more poignantly, for the de-humanizing effect of migrancy on black women’s bodies, on their flesh, which carry the scars of social constructions of race and gender. When her boyfriend is horrified by what she has done, and the injury she has inflicted, she explains: “I need to look professional for this interview, and professional means straight is best but if it’s going to be curly then it has to be the white kind of curly, loose curls or, at worst, spiral curls but never kinky” (Adichie 204). Later, after breezing through the job interview, the woman shakes her hand and says she would be a “wonderful fit” in the company: “Ifemelu wonders if the woman would have felt the same way had she walked into that office wearing her thick, kinky, God-given halo of hair, the Afro” (204).

Ifemelu’s reflections on divinity deserve careful attention, as this is a theme which guides her to her online community and writing her own blog. As I have shown, it is often in postcolonial writing that different notions of God are formulated, narratives that attend to the body, flesh and materiality and are not restricted by dominant discourses or imperial classifications, and mind-body dualism. Interestingly, Ifemelu mimics her mother’s actions after her hair starts to fall out because of the relaxant and her friend, Wambui, convinces her to embrace the beauty of her natural hair:

“Relaxing your hair is like being in prison. You’re caged in. Your hair rules you” . . . Ifemelu found a pair of scissors. Wambui cut her hair, leaving only two inches, the new growth since her last relaxer. Ifemelu looked in the mirror. She was all big eyes and big head. At best, she looked like a boy: at worst, like an insect. (208)

She phones in sick to work for three days, unable to show herself. When she eventually goes to work, she is asked if it means something political or if she is a lesbian (211). It is at this point that she goes on a website dedicated to women who have decided to “go natural” and eventually posts her photo and a comment:

She wrote: *Jamilah’s words made me remember that there is nothing more beautiful than what God gave me.* Others wrote responses, posting thumb-up signs, telling her how much they liked the photo she had put up. She

had never talked about God so much. Posting on the website was like giving testimony in church; the echoing roar of approval revived her. (213)

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At the start of the novel, Ifemelu details her discomfort within the hair salon; this community is not the right space for Ifemelu where her diaspora identity is conflicted and raw. In this space she feels vulnerable and exposed. But through the discovery of an online community, Ifemelu initially finds a space where she can finally voice the layers of un-spoken injustices that haunt her “Non-American Black” identity. Significantly, Ifemelu describes this online experience “like giving testimony in church; the echoing roar of approval revived her.” One cannot help but reflect back to Ifemelu’s mother’s “hair journey” in relation to Christian doctrine. For Ifemelu to visualize cyberspace as a church building during her own natural-hair epiphany, I would argue, is an acknowledgement by Adichie that the blogosphere is not a transcendent, disembodied space that is free of (Christian) imperial controls.

Ifemelu’s body, through her hair, is marked by a complex history of Christian imperialism and westernization. The conflicting space of the church building (here synonymized by Ifemelu with the blogosphere community), which we saw with Ifemelu’s mother, shows that we cannot completely transcend demeaning images of our bodies:

People whose bodies are marked negatively in the society in which they live intentionally seek to produce alternative models for being a body and create communities guided by them. Poetic writing is an example of a practice of creating . . . imaginative spaces for the affirmation of corporeal possibilities . . . Demeaning images of my body will still affect me, but they compete with other images, rather than claiming universal validity. (Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh* 148)

Social-material transformations are possible but will always be linked to and affected by “histories we never knew and will never know” (152). Importantly, in the following paragraph, Ifemelu’s “corporeal possibility” is affirmed in the everyday materiality of the world around her. She describes her moment of epiphany in terms of the mundane; this is transcendence and *becoming* within the concrete and organic details of the world around her:

On an unremarkable day in early Spring—the day was not bronzed with special light, nothing of any significance happened, and it was perhaps merely that time, as it often does, had *transfigured* her doubts—she looked in the mirror, sank her fingers into her hair, dense and spongy and glorious, and could not imagine it any other way. That simply, she fell in love with her hair. (213, emphasis mine)

Adichie ensures Ifemelu's moment of epiphany and *transfiguration* is surrounded by the mundane and the bland. It is in the dull, concrete reality of the everyday where the subversion and the magic lies<sup>5</sup> ("an unremarkable day, not bronzed with special light"). It is in her physical and emotional experience of the organic matter of her hair, surrounded by the everyday beauty of the world, where she finds epiphany. God-making/theopoiesis is the entanglement of humans with the earth and materiality.

It is from this point that Ifemelu creates her blog "Raceteenth or Curious Observations by a Non-American Black on the Subject of Blackness in America." It becomes a successful social commentary with articles such as "A Michelle Obama Shout-out Plus Hair as Race Metaphor" where she articulates a powerful counter-narrative to institutional racism: "If Michelle Obama got tired of all the heat and decided to go natural and appeared on TV with lots of woolly hair . . . She would totally rock but poor Obama would certainly lose the independent vote" (Adichie 297). The blog provides sustenance, financially and spiritually, for Ifemelu for many years. But the negative social forces that always threaten to destroy an "affirmation of corporeal possibilities" (which aligns with Appadurai's hope for the role of digital migrant archives) finally cause her own "poetics of flesh" to turn on itself; she begins to "feel like a vulture hacking into the carcasses of people's stories" (5). As Rivera says, "the weight of centuries of racial mythologies falls on a person, and her body crumbles" (*Poetics of the Flesh* 156).

Ifemelu returns to Nigeria, carrying the signs of her diasporic identity; she has become an "Americanah." She learns to navigate this terrain and begins to write again. This time her blogs are about the glorious details of the everyday:

She wrote of the woman at the street corner in Victoria Island who joyously said, "Fine Auntie," when Ifemelu stopped to buy apples and oranges. She wrote about the views from her bedroom window: a white egret drooped on the compound wall, exhausted from heat; the gateman helping a hawkker raise her tray to her head, an act so full of grace that she stood watching long after the hawkker had walked away. (Adichie 475)

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<sup>5</sup> This is explored by Brenda Cooper in her book *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture and Language* (2008). She locates the "spiritual and the unseen" in the "everyday, the material, and the concrete" (20). Within postcolonial fiction, Cooper argues that this becomes a "narrative device" (21). It is a "refusal of the binary between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, the metaphorical and the metonymic" (21).

Ifemelu's blog settles into a rhythmic poetics which provides an intimate embodied connection with nature (descriptions of a peacock's feathers "fanned like a giant halo" [473]), the material world, and the grace in the exchange and interconnectedness of human bodies. When she contacts her ex-boyfriend, Curt, and says she is still writing a blog, he asks if it is about race. She replies: "No, just about life. Race doesn't really work here. I feel like I got off the plane in Lagos and stopped being black" (476). Ifemelu's material transcendence can finally take place: "Still, she was at peace: to be home, to be writing her blog, to have discovered Lagos again. She had, finally, spun herself into being" (475). The novel draws to a close with a final image of Ifemelu having woven her whole self, not just her hair, into being. Rivera details the etymology of the word religion "religare" which means "to bind" to affirm the "religious duty" poetics embody by their commitment to the traumas of the past and so the writing takes on a "sacred aura" (Rivera, "Poetics Ashore" 244). Adichie's writing equally, through the metaphor of hair braiding (or binding) affirms a religiosity that dares to imagine the possibility of material transcendence, of spinning yourself into being, through the painful negotiation of the body with the socio-material world:

Never forgetting injustice, suffering, or failure, such a poetics seeks to participate in earthly relations, to become flesh. There is nothing less at stake in this commitment than the possibilities of becoming for those who have been condemned by the deprecation of flesh. (Rivera, *Poetics of the Flesh* 157)

Ifemelu's becoming is intimately connected to the deprecated journey of her flesh, and the flesh of the women before her. The poetics that Adichie weaves, or spins, is committed to the complex, and often contradictory, stories of injustice and hope that define being in the world, whilst necessarily defying tidy narratives and conclusive theologies.

## CONCLUSION

This article has provided a distinct reading of Adichie's novel, *Americanah*. I have mobilized the theoretical context of theopoetics to argue that Adichie's use of the motif of hair braiding alongside the intertextual spaces of the contemporary digital age, signal possibilities of becoming. Rather than being opposed to the power of the conventional literary text, the blogosphere in *Americanah* signals the possibility of this contemporary discursive space as a "poetics of the flesh." Our bodies are intimately

connected to the social-material world, and the discursive spaces we create, such as the blogosphere, provide the possibility of transformation and “incarnation” within the body, not beyond it. I have argued that the link that Adichie makes between Ifemelu’s hair journey and blog-writing narrates this possibility of incarnation and can be productively defined as an act of theopoiesis.

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## In the Universe of Cassandra: The Ancient *Topos* of Clairvoyance in the Futuristic World of *Minority Report* (2002)

# ABSTRACT

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The figure of Cassandra is well-known from numerous representations in ancient and modern literature as an archetype of a woman who has the power to see the future, but whose visions are not believed. In ancient Greek literature, Cassandra was an important character serving as a prophet of an approaching catastrophe. In her modern adaptations, this figure became a metaphor in psychoanalytical research on human moral behaviour (Melanie Klein and the Cassandra complex) developed in feminist writing. Cassandra has also been of interest to filmmakers, with perhaps the best adaptation of the subject of Cassandra's clairvoyance being Steven Spielberg's film *Minority Report*. Loosely based on Philip K. Dick's 1956 short story *The Minority Report*, the plot presents a version of the Cassandra myth, in which a woman together with male twins operate as a group mind to predict future crimes. Their visions are used by the state to prevent the crimes and imprison the would-be criminals. This article offers a thorough analysis of all the ancient and modern features of the metaphor of Cassandra employed in this movie within the overarching framework of the central theme of free will vs. determinism. According to this approach, the central theme is examined with reference to ancient Aristotelian and Stoic moral philosophy, the modern feminist psychoanalysis of Melanie Klein, and the political philosophy and legal issues in the post-9/11 world.

**Keywords:** Cassandra, free will, determinism, *Minority Report*.

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## INTRODUCTION

The specific way in which familiar literary intertexts are recycled is classical reception, defining the creative adaptation of various motifs from classical Greco-Roman antiquity. As Lorna Hardwick and Stephen Harrison, leading scholars of Classical Reception Studies, have observed, the main focus in the investigation of classical reception is put on “cultural traffic”: “This traffic is not just between ancient and modern. It includes movement via mediating contexts and then within receiving cultures” (XXIII). Therefore, the scholarly approach defined within Classical Reception Studies has to assume a plethora of interwoven motifs and the various forms and contexts of their expression. Contemporary culture promoting audio-visual media brings an additional challenge in this area when the process of intermedia reception occurs. What was previously familiar from a written text is now transformed into sound and vision, and this change in the form of expression has a fundamental impact on the process of creating meanings. Furthermore, audio-visual media are quite often products created for entertainment only (or mainly) and this purpose determines the way classical reception is proposed. Now, it cannot be a sophisticated intertextual adaptation of an ancient text(s), but a simplified version of selected themes and ideas that work for the common recipient. Obviously, such productions employ and create (pop-)cultural shortcuts—themes and ideas out of their original contexts and interwoven with others—in order to give a fast and simple meaning.

Modern science fiction, with its various forms of expression, has become a particular field in classical reception. Brett M. Rogers and Benjamin E. Stevens describe this phenomenon as follows:

As a locus of classical receptions, modern SF has engaged in historically and formally complex negotiations, not to say contestations, between pre-modern ways of knowing and being human, on one hand, and on the other hand, then-emergent and now-ascendant technoscientific thinking and practice. (5)

Considering modern SF as “a crucial and popular mode, even *the* mainstream mode, of thinking about life in a modern, technoscientific world” (6–7, italics in the original), Rogers and Stevens argue that the study of the relationships between SF and Classics can be a space of epistemological and ethical musing (9), since it provides a comprehensive view of how technology changes our knowledge and perception of the world and how this knowledge directs our moral behaviour. Both scholars agree that the way SF employs classical tropes is of a highly transformative nature:



In this way “the classics” are being made into vivid signifiers *neither* of the ancient past, *nor* even of professional knowledge of antiquity, *but* of a present moment: an advanced post-modern moment marked by a recomposition of past cultural products that is omnivorous and, from a scholarly perspective, generally uncritical. (10, italics in the original)

Keeping in mind the above observations, we should consider SF as a fully-fledged imaginative medium for pondering the epistemological and ethical issues of the technoscientific world we currently live in. Nonetheless, we should also be aware of the postmodern way in which SF recycles the past in order to give answers about, or just to muse upon, the present and the future. There is always a process of voracious absorption of motifs, tropes, themes or ideas in creating a newly imagined story. Essentially, the modern creation of SF appears to be the same activity as the creation of ancient mythologies—in both cases humans try to imagine their potential metamorphoses into other entities, either hybrids of humans and animals or humans and machines/technologies. Consequently, these metamorphoses raise the issue of their epistemological and ethical consequences, in mythologies mostly developed in relation to god(s), while in SF in relation to technology. Therefore, either in ancient mythologies or in modern SF, the apotropaic function is fulfilled and occurs by employing tools of imagination, with much less use of critical thinking.

To epitomize the process of classical reception in modern SF in the context explained above, this article focuses upon the film *Minority Report* (2002), directed by Steven Spielberg. This picture is usually categorized as a neo-noir movie, or even more precisely as a tech-noir or future neo-noir. From a conceptual perspective, the neo-noir genre is the postmodern continuum of the classical film noir with its themes of moral ambivalence followed by an inversion of traditional values, its motives of crime and violence and its feeling of alienation and pessimism (Conard 1). However, in neo-noir movies there is an essential change in the existential status of the main character:

[T]he classic noir detective is a hardened stoic—not a flat character (mind you), but hardly “conflicted” in Shakespeare’s sense. With neo-noir, however, that is precisely the point. The character is “divided” against himself, although not so much emotionally, as in Shakespeare, as epistemologically: divided in time as two selves, and one is looking for the other. (Abrams 7)

Furthermore, such a constructed character’s identity is confronted with the chaotic time loop in which “one self is always ahead, and the other is always behind” (Abrams 10). The personality of a character featured

in this kind of a temporal palimpsest in the subgenre of tech-noir movie is additionally cornered by technology that becomes “a destructive and dystopian force that threatens every aspect of our reality” (Auger 21) and as such it can be seen as a god-like/devil-like force from previous, more theologically oriented noir movies. All the traits of the tech-noir movies such as moral ambivalence, alienation, split personality and the divine power of technology can be found in Spielberg’s *Minority Report*. From this perspective it seems obvious that the movie deals with epistemological and ethical issues at a profound level, and the article will try to investigate how various ancient (Greco-Roman) philosophical ideas and literary motifs are absorbed and transformed in the SF *universum* of the movie. The main tropes, as suggested by the plot, lead us to the *topos* of Cassandra’s clairvoyance with its various derivations in psychology and philosophy. Furthermore, the fictive world of *Minority Report* becomes an appalling prevision of the political narratives in the real post-9/11 world. This issue, in its association with the main philosophical concept of the film, which derived from the metaphorical *topos* of Cassandra and clairvoyance (i.e. free will vs. determinism), will also be carefully examined in the article.

### THE *TOPOS* OF CASSANDRA AND CLAIRVOYANCE: MYTH, PSYCHOLOGY AND FEMINISM

The figure of Cassandra in culture is perceived as an imaginative representation of the gift of precognition attributed to some humans, a foreknowledge of future events, which can be discussed both in its paranormal background of clairvoyance and in the psychological framework of the so-called Cassandra complex. The clairvoyance of Cassandra is a mythical feature that was thrillingly visualized by the ancient Greek playwright Aeschylus in his drama *Agamemnon*. A daughter of Priam, king of Troy, Cassandra, after the fall of Troy, was taken by the Greek king Agamemnon to Greece as a concubine, or a sex slave, to be precise. In Agamemnon’s palace at Mycenae she provides a frightening prophecy of a future sequence of murders, fully cognizant that nobody will believe her: the tragic mark of the figure of Cassandra is that nobody accepts her predictions as true and consequently she is treated as mad. This worthless gift was a curse from the god Apollo as punishment for refusing his sexual advances. Never to be believed, she is doomed to suffer a life of ridicule.

Look, Apollo himself is stripping me of my prophetic garb—he that saw me mocked to bitter scorn, even in this bravery, by friends turned foes, with one accord, in vain—but, like some vagrant mountebank, called “beggar,” “wretch,” “starveling.” (Aeschylus v. 1268–74)

This poetic image has thus become a metaphor for the state of mind in which a person's conjecture about the future, based either on a logical deduction or simply an emotional prefiguration, is met by a strong process of denial, and so an impulse for aggressive disregard for such predictions is born. Modern psychology adapted the Cassandra metaphor to describe the so-called Cassandra complex. Melanie Klein developed the image into a theory of human moral conscience considered within the psychoanalytical framework of super-ego: "Cassandra as a super-ego, predicts ill to come and warns that punishment will follow and grief arise" (Klein 293). However, such predictions are usually rejected as too painful to be accepted:

Denial is a potent defence against the persecutory anxiety and guilt which result from destructive impulses never being completely controlled. Denial, which is always bound up with persecutory anxiety, may stifle feelings of love and guilt, undermine sympathy and consideration both with the internal and external objects, and disturb the capacity for judgement and the sense of reality. As we know, denial is a ubiquitous mechanism and is also very much used for justification of destructiveness. (Klein 292)

Klein's theory of super-ego, explained by the metaphor of Cassandra, was next absorbed by the feminist movement to describe the phenomenon of silencing female voices in the public sphere. The phenomenon called *mansplaining* describes a situation "when a man talks condescendingly to someone (especially a woman) about something he has incomplete knowledge of, with the mistaken assumption that he knows more about it than the person he's talking to does" ("Mansplaining"). In 1973, Rebecca Solnit, in her essay *Cassandra Among the Creeps*, employed the ancient figure of the Trojan princess to bring the phenomenon into sharper focus:

I have been thinking of Cassandra as we sail through the choppy waters of the gender wars, because credibility is such a foundational power in those wars and because women are so often accused of being categorically lacking in this department.

Not uncommonly, when a woman says something that impugns a man, particularly a powerful one, . . . or an institution, especially if it has to do with sex, the response will question not just the facts of her assertion but her capacity to speak and her right to do so. Generations of women have been told they are delusional, confused, manipulative, malicious, conspiratorial, congenitally dishonest, often all at once. (4)

This gender-focused discussion about the phenomenon of Cassandra's gift of foreknowledge,<sup>1</sup> or of female intelligence and intuition in general, seems to correspond with the whole ancient image of prophetesses. They were habitually visualized as "frenzied women from whose lips the god speaks" (Burkert 116), who become priestesses of Apollo or other gods and who remain virgins so as to avoid any sexual involvement with men that could distract them from their devotion to god.<sup>2</sup> Thus, their clairvoyance was always strictly supervised by a male god and, if a sexual relationship with the god was not agreed, they were doomed to be unheeded. This imaginative picture of a female seer appears to be an obvious reflection of the widespread belief in ancient Greek society concerning the lack of authority of women's words (cf. Aristotle, *Politics* 1260a 9–14).

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### THE *TOPOS* OF CASSANDRA AND CLAIRVOYANCE: THE PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATE ON FREE WILL VS. DETERMINISM

The notion of clairvoyance itself, embedded in a human medium, is applicable to the great debate about decision-making process in human life along with the overarching idea of human will. Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* meticulously discussed the contribution of human will in the decision-making process in order to prove that the only factor decisively affecting human life is the human being herself, more precisely—a person is responsible for shaping her character by her behaviour (Aristotle, *NE* 1110b–1111a). The phenomenon that can be called self-determination and that emphasizes the leading role of human free will, was challenged, however, by the notion of determinism established mainly by the Stoics. This ancient philosophical school introduced and improved a theory of causal determinism that was commonly understood as Fate:

Now by Fate I mean . . . an orderly succession of causes wherein cause is linked to cause and each cause of itself produces an effect. That is an immortal truth having its source in all eternity. Therefore nothing has happened which was not bound to happen, and, likewise, nothing is going to happen which will not find in nature every efficient cause of its happening. (Cicero, *De Divinatione* 1.125)

<sup>1</sup> The feminist involvement of the figure of Cassandra has its artistic expression in the German playwright Christa Wolf's drama-like poem *Cassandra*, published in 1983. Wolf emphasizes that a feminine reading of ancient myths might allow us to identify "hitherto unrecognized possibilities" (Wolf 270).

<sup>2</sup> Burkert underlines that this kind of feminine figure appeared not only in Greco-Roman antiquity (116–17).

Nonetheless, the discussion of will vs. determinism was not, and is still not, based on such a simple opposite. From Plato and Aristotle, through the Stoics and Epicureans, early Christian philosophers such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, modern philosophers like Descartes, Kant, Locke, Spinoza, Hobbes and Hume, to contemporary thinkers—Frankfurt, Fischer, Goetz, Coen, Ginet and Zagzebski, to name but a few—the whole debate has grown into a rhizome of thoughts striving to investigate all the possible derivative options of the controversy in focus. Consequently, a great many theories such as causal or logical determinism, fatalism, necessitarianism, compatibilism and libertarianism have emerged.<sup>3</sup> Within the framework of this article, though, the observation made by Aristotle, i.e. that a discussion of free will vs. determinism ineluctably involves an issue of moral responsibility, appears to be the most pertinent.

In relation to clairvoyance (for the time being, let it be understood as a highly developed ability to predict future events on the basis of previous practices), the whole issue seems to concentrate on the questions of to what extent human choices are determined by a person's moral character (i.e. concerning making decisions followed by particular behaviours) or if those choices hinge on the person's various external circumstances; and finally, whether a person could free herself from these two "deterministic" threads and act in a way that was neither predicted nor expected, and so, in fact, create a *minority report* for her action. Aristotle argues that our moral character is the aggregate of all our choices that in time become our habits and, as such, they govern our choices and behaviour in the future (Aristotle, *NE* 1110b–1111a). In some way, we can claim that most of our decisions and behaviour can be rightly predicted on the basis of the statistical data collected from our previous actions, hence a *majority report* can be created. Any derivation from such an organized chain of determinants can hardly be foreseen since it assumes an essential change in one's model of behaviour. The question arises of whether a person is really able to escape her own character's determinism and if we can still talk about free will in this case (if "free" means "up to us"). In the Stoics' view, in turn, human nature rests on general laws of nature which should be followed for a happy life. Any resistance to nature results in pain, so, in a way, a human being can choose a life of pain, but this choice does not change the previously determined thread of events. As the well-known stoic phrase verbalizes it: "Aye, the willing soul Fate leads, but the unwilling drags along" (Seneca, "Epistula CVII" 11). Thus, there is room for choice in Stoic ethics, i.e. for the action of free will; however, if will is not contingent with the plan designed by

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<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion about the topic and full list of references see O'Connor and Franklin.

Fate, an individual has to come to terms with a life of pain that becomes a constant struggle, which is doomed, in advance, to failure:

The programme of life is the same as that of a bathing establishment, a crowd, or a journey: sometimes things will be thrown at you, and sometimes they will strike you by accident. . . . Here is your great soul—the man who has given himself over to Fate; on the other hand, that man is a weakling and a degenerate who struggles and maligns the order of the universe and would rather reform the gods than reform himself. (Seneca, “Epistula CVII” 2)

Seneca’s notion about *reforming* oneself in order to become compatible with life’s programme designed by Fate seems to provide the best conceptual framework for the central idea of the plot created by Scott Frank and Jon Cohen for Spielberg’s *Minority Report*.

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## CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND OF THE FILM: SELF-DETERMINISM FOLLOWED BY MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

The plot of Spielberg’s film is loosely based on Philip K. Dick’s 1956 short novel *The Minority Report*. It is set in the future (2054), when a specialized police department called PreCrime takes “criminals-to-be” into custody based on predictions provided by the three *precogs*. This controversial procedure rests on the assumption that the *precogs* can rightly foresee future crimes and the individuals responsible for them. Leaving aside for a moment the question of the *precogs*’ competency, which will be discussed in the next section, the concept of imprisoning people, purely on the basis of presuppositions, can hardly be justified. The idea, as it seems, evokes both the Aristotelian determinism of human character and the Stoics’ determinism of Fate, since it assumes in advance the train of programmed events that are the results of someone’s usually as yet unstructured intentions of which they are not even cognizant, and as such it reflects a belief that human moral character is fixed and unchangeable and has to follow its nature. Consequently, the foreseen intentions are morally evaluated and become decisive evidence allowing the court to detain individuals. Significantly, the *precogs*’ predictions are interpreted by technology and eventually appear as wooden lottery balls with the names of victim and murderer. The machinery, visualized as an oracle, is clearly reminiscent of the lottery of Fate described by Seneca quoted above, against which human will is defenceless. Fate is programmed and humans cannot change it, even though they usually decide to struggle. The question of

who designed the programme, i.e. who manages Fate, is of a theological nature: in earlier noir movies it is God that administers human life, while in neo-noir films it is technology. The lottery motif is reinforced during an early scene in the film where the first murder's visions, as provided by the *precogs*, are of a children's merry-go-round in motion—suggestive of a wheel of fortune—then, depending on the angle from which it is observed, the murderer's house becomes defined.

This highly deterministic approach to human behaviour, however, plotted in the fictive world of Spielberg's movie, has approached something of a reality in the context of contemporary politics, where the rhetoric of the threat of terrorism is used to establish policies that allow government services to not only intrude on privacy but also to detain people before they commit any crime—epitomized by the Guantanamo prison<sup>4</sup>—or even preventively attack them:

The film adapts Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon metaphor, setting its utilitarian ideal of autonomous supervisory institutions in dynamic tension with a legal model based on individual sovereignty. The film gives fictional form, in other words, to the competing imperatives of modern political philosophies as they have been congealed in everyday practices of rule. A number of mainstream reviewers depicted the film as a cautionary tale about the state surveillance apparatus sent into overdrive by America's "war on terror" (Lane; O'Heir; Ebert), and Slavoj Žižek has seized upon its fictional Bureau of Precrime to illustrate a critique of the "Cheney doctrine" of preemptive aggression. (Cooper 24)

The film, then, anticipated the narratives followed by the legal regulations in the post-9/11 world. Producers released the film in June 2002, a year after the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York, and in the year of Guantanamo's transformation into a military prison in violation of the Geneva Convention. Thus, already then, the political narratives had harshly turned into the propaganda of policies allowing the government to employ unlimited surveillance and aggressively invade citizens' privacy. The "one percent doctrine" of Dick Cheney, the then US Vice-President, mentioned by Cooper, was announced just after September 2001 and it assumed "that if there was 'a one percent chance' that a [terrorist] threat was real, 'we have to treat it as a certainty in terms of our response. . . . It's not about our analysis, or finding a preponderance of evidence'" (Briefly Noted). If a "preponderance of evidence" is not in use, then reality approaches the

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<sup>4</sup> Naval Station Guantanamo Bay is a detention camp transformed in 2002 into a military prison where approximately 700 individuals, mostly from Arabic countries, are detained against the Geneva Conventions.

fictive world of *Minority Report*, with its presupposition of a person's guilt. In the movie universe, the would-be criminals, mostly murderers-to-be, are removed from their real lives and imprisoned in a benevolent virtual reality. The only evidence of their would-be crime is the foreknowledge of the *precogs*, the cassandric characters working for the police.

### THE CASSANDRA'S LEGACY—*PRECOGS*

The PreCrime police department in the film works on the basis of the predictions of three *precogs*. This group of seers consists of one woman, who is the leader, and male twins, all young adults. The previsions of the woman—Agatha (Samantha Morton)—are accepted as the most accurate; however, the final decision to prevent a foreseen crime is made when her predictions are compared to those of the male twins—Arthur and Dashiell (Michael and Matthew Dickman). Together they operate as a group mind hardwired to a system that captures their visions and displays them on 3D screens. This collective cassandric character is formed by the adaptation of several mythical motifs.

All the *precogs* are children of drug-users and as such they are perceived as mentally disabled as a result of genetic mutations; however, their disability (i.e. clairvoyance) turns out to be an effective government tool. Doctor Iris Hineman (Lois Smith), an elderly lady seen in her beautifully kept greenhouse, was the designer of the experiment to use the genetic mutations of drug-addicts' children. But it has to be stressed that she meticulously chose only addicts who had taken neurotin, a drug for intellectuals which speeds up the brain's operation. Actually, the experimentation with drugs to improve human intellect, which can be perceived as an attempt to transcend human limitations in order to achieve god-like capabilities, turns out to be the impetus to connect its genetic end result with technology and create the divine, as it were, machinery of the oracle. The *precogs'* origins seem to correspond with the god-like hybrid of ancient mythology, just like Cassandra with her divine skill of clairvoyance.

The *precogs* were raised and educated as orphans by the government to be imprisoned in the PreCrime department's facility, deprived of private life, drugged and kept in a special pool as part of the technological system. Human subjects are here transformed into objects, into interfaces of data filtering and transferring—"it's better not to see them as humans," one character advises. In the film there are direct indications that this is a strictly scientific and technocratic approach to the human mind, since "science deprived us of miracles." Nonetheless, one character mentions that "the



real power lies not in the minds of *precogs*, but in the hands of the highest priest,” who is personalized in the character of PreCrime’s director, Lamar Burgess (Max von Sydow), an old man with a grey beard. Furthermore, police officers describe themselves as “more priests than cops.” One of them, Danny Witwer (Colin Farrell), who was sent by the government to check the credibility of PreCrime’s work, is portrayed as a deeply religious Irish Catholic, who wanted to be a priest when he was younger, studying at a seminary, and who still carries religious insignia such as a medallion which he kisses when in trouble. Such a religious framework has the effect of creating a reference to the theological orientation of previous noir movies, but now substituted by a technology-oriented approach.<sup>5</sup>

The ontological status of the *precogs* harks back to the circumstances of the mythical Cassandra, whose life was dedicated to the service of god and who was deprived of her private life. Cassandra, as a captive of war, was robbed of her previous life as a princess, and with the status of concubine had no rights as a free human being. Furthermore, her ontological status had previously been diminished by the curse of Apollo, when her refusal of his sexual advances rendered her a social outcast. Eventually, she was killed not *per se* but *per analogiam* to Agamemnon (by attachment to him), not as a person but as a concubine, so even in her death she found no markers of her personal identity. Even though she had predicted her own death, she had no power to prevent it. Thus, the objective status of the *precogs* directly refers to its ancient antecedents; however, the position which Agatha represents as female leader in the group, appears to subvert the notion of the lack of importance of the female voice represented in antiquity.

Agatha, whose skill of clairvoyance is the most highly respected, turns out to be a modern transposition of the figure of Cassandra, who in the movie universe becomes much esteemed, though only as a tool. Furthermore, as already mentioned, her predictions have to be juxtaposed and referenced with the visions of the male twins. This triple group mind perceptibly refers to both the ancient and Christian model of divine trinity. Thus, Agatha appears to be the centre of this trinity and as such her femininity is an advantage, although she has to be supported by a male element. Interestingly, though, in some versions of the ancient myth, Cassandra was supported by her twin brother Helenus, who had the same

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<sup>5</sup> Rogers and Stevens quote Adam Roberts to underline the materialist, i.e. “non-theological thinking,” being the basis of the development of modern SF that is seen as a “*re-emergence of an ancient mode*” (Rogers and Stevens 11, italics in the original). Although this observation is made in relation to literature, it might be relevant also to the change that occurs between the classical neo-noir movies and tech neo-noir.

gift of clairvoyance.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the twin brothers from Spielberg's movie are a multiplication of Helenus and his supportive power for Cassandra. However, although the divine might be a source of this trinity image, it is subjected to the power of technology in order to stress its operative and subordinate status within the oracle machinery.

### THE CASSANDRA LEGACY—THE MINORITY REPORT

The main character in Spielberg's film is the PreCrime Captain John Anderton (Tom Cruise), who leads the police team in preventing murders-to-be. Surprisingly, one of the *precogs'* visions indicates that Anderton is about to commit a murder. He is forced to flee, despite not knowing how and why he is to become a killer as the prediction stands. His struggle to find an answer to these questions is the impetus to resolve his personal issues and to expose the unreliability and thus fallibility of the PreCrime system.

From a personal perspective, Anderton tries to retrieve his life from the trauma: having lost his son, apparently kidnapped, he divorced his wife and became a drug-addict. Against the *precogs'* vision, identifying him as a future murderer, he endeavours to reconstruct his identity so as to invalidate the prediction that he will kill. Even though the homicide he is foreseen to commit turns out to have been plotted by Lamar Burgess, the vision of this murder does appear to correspond with Anderton's state of mind. He suffers deeply from feelings of guilt over his son's disappearance and his use of drugs to try to escape the pain. While investigating the reasons predicting him to be a murderer, he comes to the realization that he is actually capable of killing the man who seems to be his son's kidnapper and killer. By struggling with his painful memories and intense desire for revenge, Anderton experiences a splitting of his personality, which he eventually salvages into the identity of a man reconciled with the past who is able to choose an alternative future, and thus fulfil his minority report and not kill. The dialectical tension between the past and the future in Anderton's personal struggle fits perfectly the model of the neo-noir character described by Abrams as quoted above, when the character's self is entangled in a time loop, and as split, "one self is always ahead, and the other is always behind" (Abrams 10). In fact, being hunted as a murderer-to-be, he himself chases his fragmented identity to prove that the minority report is feasible in order to verify the potential of his free will. It is significant that Witwer, who hunts Anderton and

<sup>6</sup> The most important of the ancient sources is the *Aeneid* by Virgil (Book III).

whose background is of a religious nature, has noted that “everybody runs,” which seems to describe the common situation of escaping one’s painful self.

From the systemic perspective, Anderton intends to expose the fallibility of the PreCrime system and therefore he kidnaps Agatha to interrogate her about her visions. Finally, he discovers the issue of minority reports the *precogs* sometimes generate, which proves the possibility of an alternative future to the main predictions. The presence of minority reports would evidently discredit the PreCrime’s *modus operandi*, hence they are hidden by the director Burgess since “we do not want justice in which there is a room for doubt.” The *precogs*’ minority reports thus become a sign of human free will *per se*, since they confirm that an individual can escape the determinants of her own character or rather its actual state, as Anderton could, and follow the protocol of an alternative. Witwer, as an auditor of the PreCrime system looking for flaws, admits: “But if there’s a flaw, it’s human. It always is.” Eventually, the minority reports are proved to be such human flaws, which the technology of PreCrime cannot accept nor permanently eliminate. In fact, human free will is perceived as a flaw in the context of technological perfection based on programmed, fully determined, algorithms.

## CONCLUSIONS

The ancient *topos* of Cassandra would appear to be the spur for an extensive discussion of human free will and its limits, as it is involved in the decision-making process followed by moral evaluation. Steven Spielberg’s *Minority Report* to a great extent deals with this *topos* by the creative adaptation of ancient mythical motifs and their actualization into current social and political issues. The conceptual framework of the neo-noir movie, in its sub-genre variation of a tech-noir set in the future, allows the director and screenwriters to set up a plot that explores both personal and institutional threads of events in order to observe and analyze both the break and restoration of the character’s identity and the involvement of technology in human action with its almost “divine” nature of processing. The plot is developed from the standpoint of the overarching idea of the free will vs. determinism debate. The figure of Cassandra is recognized in the concept of the *precogs*, who are constructed on the basis of several mythical motifs such as Cassandra’s twin brother and divine trinity. The theme of minority reports would appear to recall not only part of the discussion about free will, but also echoes the feminist debate about mansplaining and silencing the female voice, since it is mainly the female *precog* Agatha who generates

the minority reports that are hidden due to their contradictions. Most remarkable, though, is the plot itself, which in the conceptual framework of the neo-noir style thoroughly investigates the issue of human free will, as the protagonist strives to escape the determinism of his internal (characterological) and external (institutional) circumstances. Overall, Spielberg's film is a Hollywood production that goes to great lengths not only to entertain the audience, but also to explore serious issues regarding both current societal concerns and more universal questions about the nature of human action. As such, *Minority Report* deals in depth with epistemological and ethical issues already discussed in antiquity, both by artists (playwrights) and philosophers, by creatively absorbing them into the realms of a SF universe.

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## “No Direction Home”: The Life and Literature of Bob Dylan—From “Desolation Row” to the Nobel Prize

# ABSTRACT

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Using the Nobel Prize as a prism through which to view the life and literature of a difficult-to-define artist, this article argues that Dylan’s output is one in which life and literature become, and have always been, indistinguishable. It is the life which has made the literature, through years lived in a particular niche of 1960s counter-cultural history; the lyrics gave voice to a man who was never at ease in the formalities of interview. For a supposed spokesman of a generation Dylan spoke very little except through his songs. So too in the more difficult-to-define later decades, little of his life was spoken of except through song, and some samplings of autobiography. Detailing the historically distinctive features of the Nobel Prize, the article shows how Bob Dylan has, through life and literature, broken down the boundaries between the literary and the popular. The article’s title is drawn, of course, from a famous line in Bob Dylan’s era-defining “Like a Rolling Stone,” one which Martin Scorsese used to title a full-length documentary on the life of Bob Dylan. Dylan here occupies the borderlands where art imitates life, and life imitates art. I argue, contrary to critical consensus, that there is a direction home. In Dylan’s lifetime of existentially staring death (political death, the death of romance) in the face, there is some glimpse of home. It is that glimpse which gives the poet’s lyrical output its endurance as literature.

**Keywords:** Bob Dylan, Nobel Prize in Literature, Sara Danius, Swedish Academy.

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## INTRODUCTION

In February 2018, when poetry was more prominent than pandemic, I received a pleasant and convivial note from Professor Sara Danius, then Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy: an august body known as the Eighteen, the number of its members, all of whom are appointed for life. It is a mark of considerable national and international intellectual and cultural prestige to be a member of the Swedish Academy. This is not least, perhaps mostly because, the Swedish Academy is responsible each year for awarding the Nobel Prize in Literature. I had written to Sara with an invitation. I was convening a colloquium on writers and their education at Oriel College, Oxford, in September of that year, and had hoped to have a keynote address from the first woman Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy. Also of interest to me was the fact that Sara Danius had been the main driver of deliberations which would lead to the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature being awarded to Bob Dylan. Sara effusively, in principle, accepted the invitation. I was more than delighted to have a message expressing her honour to be asked, and this from the head of the Nobel Committee, not least because the historical Nobel Prize list had so defined my reading since childhood. The opening day of the Oriel Colloquium was also, however, the date of the opening autumn meeting of the Swedish Academy. Sara would check with colleagues and see if it were possible for the Permanent Secretary to be absent from that opening meeting of the Swedish Academy.

I was as much honoured as a little awestruck. A month or so later, I received a letter from the personal assistant to the Permanent Secretary. Things had moved on in the Swedish Academy, and rather rapidly. The scandal that had been brewing since November 2017 had gathered pace. Indeed, Sara Danius was soon after to resign as Permanent Secretary to the Swedish Academy. On Friday 13 April 2018, the Swedish Academy appointed a new Permanent Secretary after Danius's resignation. The Nobel Prize Committee, and the Prize itself, became part of real-life national and international notoriety. Outside of wartime, 2018 was the only year when no Nobel Prize in Literature was awarded. Two prizes were awarded the following year, for 2018 and 2019, one of which drew particular controversy but neither with anything like the literary acclaim of the singer-songwriter awarded the 2016 Prize. In between, in 2018 Sara Danius had herself published, in her native Swedish, a book on the 2016 winner. Her book dealt—as much as is permitted by the fifty-year secrecy rule on Academy decision-making—with the deliberations which led to Dylan's award. The book focused in more detail on the media onslaught following the 2016 Prize. Little could Sara Danius have known that soon after her book's

publication she herself would become the centre of a national and global story which struck at the moral core of the Prize's integrity. The lives of the Academy had encroached on their judgements about art and literature. On 12 October 2019, following a long battle with cancer that turned terminal, the death of Sara Danius itself became world news.

This backstory has all the more significance to the considerations of this article in which the life of one Bob Dylan, born Robert Zimmerman, has provoked controversy, from the time of protest songs in the 1960s to the Nobel Prize in Literature. There is, for Dylan, whose real-life name and persona have always been masked by his lyrical output, a special, additional current and ongoing significance in 2020. That is, when Minneapolis, the major city of his home state of Minnesota has (even as I write) been suffering several days of burning, looting and rioting; and for causes not unlike those which the youthful protest singer had written and sung about decades ago. Obviously notable here are "Blowing in the Wind," "The Times They Are A-Changin'," "Hurricane" (about an African American boxer falsely charged with murder), and lesser known songs such as "Oxford Town," about Dylan's perceptions of prejudice in the American South at the time of the civil rights movement, in Oxford, Mississippi. So now an Oxford academic, of Oxford, England, writes here in retrospective reflection on the life and literature of a singer-songwriter who had for so many of my own generation—I was born in the same year as Sara Danius—defined the manner in which popular songs could transcend the transience of entertainment and at least seek the endurance of art. The artistic fires burn still, as do the American cities.

In the context of a *Text Matters* special issue on "Literature Goes Pop," or popular, this article frames the beyond-frame life of Bob Dylan as a songwriter, author and cultural icon, an individual who for over sixty years has traversed the boundaries of "literary" and "popular" art. With the award of the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature to Dylan, popular has gone distinctly literary. Using the Nobel Prize as a prism through which to view the life and literature of a difficult-to-define artist, the article argues that Dylan's output is one in which life and literature become, and have always been, indistinguishable. It is the life which has made the literature, through years lived in a particular niche of 1960s counter-cultural history; the lyrics gave voice to a man who was never at ease in the formalities of interview. For a supposed spokesman of a generation he spoke very little except through his songs. So too in more difficult-to-define later decades, little of his life was spoken of but through song, and some samplings of autobiography. Detailing the historically distinctive features of the Nobel Prize, the article shows how Bob Dylan has, through life and literature, broken down the boundaries between the literary and the popular.



The article's title is drawn, of course, from a famous line in Bob Dylan's era-defining "Like a Rolling Stone," one which Martin Scorsese used to title a full-length documentary on the life of Bob Dylan. Where it seems Dylan here occupies the borderlands where art imitates life, and life imitates art, there is "no direction home." I argue, contrary to critical consensus, that there is. In Dylan's lifetime of existentially staring death (political death, the death of romance) in the face, there is some glimpse of home. It is that glimpse which gives the poet's lyrical output its endurance as literature.

## THE NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE

The Nobel Prize in Literature is distinctive because of its much-contested blend of aesthetic criteria and moral judgement, by, according to the 1895 Will of Alfred Nobel, making the said award "to the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an *ideal direction*" ("The Nobel Prize"). The Swedish Academy is the body responsible for making these judgements. The Academy has interpreted the "ideal direction" in diverse ways since the Prize's origins, from aesthetic, cultural and socio-political perspectives. In many such intertextual senses, the Nobel Prize in Literature in its early twentieth century origins—the first award was in 1901—anticipates in unexpected ways the breaking down of divisions between literature (or any artistic output) and life (meaning here the entirety of human experience), particularly the moral lessons of literature. Never more evident than in a contemporary context, present-day cultural tensions are thus ever more fraught between national literary traditions and global or world literatures (Casanova; Said). In conjunction with these tensions, what we may define as the increasing democratization of the arts—the breaking down of historic aesthetic distinctions between popular and "high" art in literary, musical and visual forms—is part of this egalitarian move, an ever-evident backdrop to discussions of literary output since Aristotle's *Poetics*. What this special issue has determined as a prospective "crisis of literature" as artistic outputs take on merely different and (in an historical sense) unconventional forms is but part of a millennia-old interplay of the political (in the widest societal and cultural senses) and the aesthetic (defined, too, in the broadest sense of any attempts to materially represent the world of human experience).

A truncated extract from the Nobel Foundation's outline of Dylan's biography shows how his literary and musical output, and his life, too, have made him culturally iconic over the decades:

Bob Dylan [the Nobel citation uses the name of artistic persona rather than Robert Zimmerman] was born on May 24, 1941 in Duluth, Minnesota. He grew up in the city of Hibbing. As a teenager, he played in various bands and with time his interest in music deepened, with a particular passion for American folk music and blues. One of his idols was the folk singer Woody Guthrie. He was also influenced by the early authors of the Beat Generation, as well as by modernist poets. Dylan moved to New York City in 1961 and began to perform in clubs and cafés in Greenwich Village. He met the record producer John Hammond, with whom he signed a contract for his debut album, *Bob Dylan* (1962). In the following years, he recorded a number of albums which have had a tremendous impact on popular music: *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Highway 61 Revisited* in 1965, *Blonde On Blonde* in 1966 and *Blood On The Tracks* in 1975. His productivity continued in the following decades, resulting in masterpieces like *Oh Mercy* (1989), *Time Out of Mind* (1997) and *Modern Times* (2006). (“Bob Dylan Biographical”)

His controversial tours of 1965 and 1966 are mentioned—when, in a single concert at Newport, Dylan moved from the acoustic folk music with which he had been associated, eliciting coordinated audience cries of “traitor” for his use of electric guitar—or as the Nobel Foundation states, these “attracted a lot of attention” (“Bob Dylan Biographical”). Always aware of his legacy, Dylan had permitted film maker D. A. Pennebaker to document his life at this period in what would become the film *Don’t Look Back* (1967). His work as a painter, actor and scriptwriter is also cited, as is his work of prose poetry (*Tarantula* from 1971) and his 2004 autobiography, *Chronicles*, importantly detailing his major influence at the heart of popular and counter-culture. In short: “Dylan has the status of an icon. His influence on contemporary culture is profound, and he is the object of a steady stream of literary and musical analysis” (“Bob Dylan Biographical”).

The Nobel Prize remains the world’s most prestigious intellectual honour for achievements in Chemistry, Physics, Medicine, Economics, Literature and Peace. With Albert Einstein and his Princeton legacy providing the quintessential correlation between academic distinction and scientific achievement, there tends (perhaps naturally) to be a noted preponderance in the literature on the formative processes of discovery in the *sciences*. This is evidenced in Rothenberg’s 2014 *Flight from Wonder: An Investigation of Scientific Creativity*. Clear too is the context of celebrity and elite studies, instanced by Ganetz’s 2016 “The Nobel Celebrity-Scientist: Genius and Personality” or Krauss’s 2015 “Scientists as Celebrities: Bad for Science or Good for Society?” The Nobel Prize in Economics arguably found its greatest celebrity in John Nash through

Nasar's 2002 biography, *A Beautiful Mind*, the subsequent Hollywood film giving glamour to academic brilliance. Nobel Laureates in Literature are themselves, however, rarely associated with current university positions or academic life, even if university professors of literature are eligible to submit nominations for the Prize. Braun's work on authors and the world has here given much needed attention to literary celebrity, including the Nobel, but addresses the wider question of where the world places its writers in terms of societal context (Braun and Spiers). This becomes important when we see that the Nobel Prize in Literature is distinctive in being awarded precisely for recognizing the contributions of authors to the worlds in which they live.

Kjell Espmark's 1991 (and long-predating Dylan's award) "Nobel's Will and the Literature Prize" identifies progressive shifts in the awarding committee's interpretation of the "ideal direction": "A Lofty and Sound Idealism (1901–12)"; "A Policy of Neutrality (World War I)"; "The Great Style (the 1920s)"; "Universal Interest (the 1930s)"; "The Pioneers (1946–)"; "Attention to Unknown Masters (1978–)." This has, according to Espmark, culminated in the "Prize becoming a Literary Prize." Academy Secretary Lars Gyllensten noted that nowadays the "ideal direction" is "not taken too literally . . . that on the whole the serious literature that is worthy of a prize furthers knowledge of man and his condition and endeavours to enrich and improve his life [sic]" (qtd. in Kjell Espmark). Other useful sources—Feldman's 2013 *The Nobel Prize* or Worek's 2011 *Nobel*—show how year-to-year the Prize reflects often current ideal aesthetic, cultural and socio-political perspectives in authors' outputs. Also indicated here is the power of the Swedish Academy to present to the world what such ideals are, and which geo-literary contexts are deserving of such recognition. In its history to date (2020), the Nobel Prize in Literature has been awarded 102 times to 116 awardees and its interpretation of the "ideal," as well as literary-intellectual merit has rarely been far from controversy. The Nobel Prize in Literature is particularly known in its early years for its neglect of world-renowned literary figures. As Vinocur has it: "The Swedish Academy's official ledger of the immortally ignored includes James Joyce, Leo Tolstoy, Henry James, August Strindberg and Joseph Conrad. Add Honore de Balzac: if the Nobel Prize in Literature existed when he was alive, he would have been passed over, too" (25). The vast majority of awards have also been made to writers in English (29 awards), and other European languages (14 in French; 14 in German; 11 in Spanish; 7 in Swedish; 6 in Italian; 6 in Russian; 5 in Polish; 3 in Norwegian; 3 in Danish; 2 in Greek; and 1 each in Czech, Finnish, Icelandic, Portuguese and Serbo-Croatian). With only 2 Prizes in Chinese, 1 in Arabic, Bengali, Hebrew and Yiddish,

it is possible to indicate a strong Anglo-Saxon and Eurocentric tendency in the Prize's history, though the difficulty of the Swedish Academy in assessing literatures in a multitude of languages as the Prize has globalized has been recognized. Such geo-cultural literary variants provide a rich seam of comparative data in considering correlations between writers and their education.

The Prize has been shared in four award years: 1904 (Frédéric Mistral, José Echegaray), 1917 (Karl Gjellerup, Henrik Pontoppidan), 1966 (Shmuel Agnon, Nelly Sachs) and 1974 (Eyvind Johnson, Harry Martinson). To 2017, only 14 women have won the Nobel Prize in Literature, the first being in 1909 (Selma Lagerlöf), most recently Olga Tokarczuk in 2018, notable others including Toni Morrison (1993), Doris Lessing (2007; the oldest awardee at 88) and Alice Munro (2009). No individual has (unlike other Nobel Prizes) been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature twice, and only two have renounced the Prize: Boris Pasternak (1958), under pressure from the then Soviet authorities, and Jean-Paul Sartre (1964), since, as he stated, he never accepted honours. When Albert Camus was awarded the Nobel (1957) (the second youngest Laureate after the 1907 award to a 41-year-old Rudyard Kipling), Sartre allegedly said that Camus was "welcome to it." Though political motivations for the Prize have often been denied by the Academy, Cold War cases such as Pasternak and Solzhenitsyn (1970) often brought considerations to bear on the Laureates' politics as much as their writing.

Given the notion of the "ideal direction," some of those awarded the Prize have been especially controversial. The 1920 award of the Nobel Prize in Literature to Knut Hamsun brought some disrepute to the award, as well as the author when Hamsun in subsequent decades welcomed the Occupation of Norway, openly supported the Nazi cause, had a personal (if fraught) personal audience with Adolf Hitler, writing a well-publicized eulogy for the Führer on news of the latter's death, and, following a warm personal series of meetings with the Reich Minister of Propaganda, actually sent Josef Goebbels his Nobel Medal. On a lesser scale, the ideals of the Nobel award might also have been said to have been brought into question when the 1972 awardee and President of International PEN, Heinrich Böll, gave open support for the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group. Writers, on the other hand, have themselves been the target of political opposition from states, often their home nations. Two still living holders of the Nobel Prize in Literature live in exile, that is Mo Yan, and Gao Xingjian. Svetlana Alexievich, of Belarus, has been subject to some high-profile political criticism for her views of current Russian foreign policy. Mario Vargas Llosa has been active in Peruvian politics. Orhan Pamuk has not been without high level political opposition from government sources in

Turkey. The 2017 recipient, Kazuo Ishiguro, might be classed as positively apolitical by comparison. The 2019 recipient Peter Handke shows that, despite the 2017 scandals, the Swedish Academy has not steered away from political controversy. In political terms, the 2016 award to Bob Dylan was not contentious. But it did spark widespread discussion around the definition of literature and the Nobel “ideal,” just as the Nobel Prize in Literature often raises questions which are as moral and political as they are aesthetic and literary.

These matters are far from arcane or abstract. That all totalitarian movements of the twentieth century saw the arts as critical to shaping political systems indicates the power of literature in modernity (Adamson). Thus, writing played an important political role in post-Revolutionary Russia. The All-Russian Association of Proletarian Writers was part of this. It later formed the basis for the Union of Soviet Writers, formed by the Central Committee of the Communist Party on 23 April 1932. The first (1934) Congress of the Union of Soviet Writers demanded not only a literary style (Socialist Realism) but a political, that is revolutionary, purpose to literature. Here Andrei Zhdanov conveyed Stalin’s Soviet aesthetic: writers were to be “engineers of the human soul” (Garrard and Garrard). The same decade saw the infamous Nazi-instigated but academic- and student-endorsed book burnings in German University cities; and Joseph Goebbels coming to prominence in Nazi Germany as Minister of Propaganda (Thacker; Longerich). Set in Oxford and Arctic Norway, a novel published in 2019, and narrating the deliberative act of one Henrik Strøm to reduce the earth’s human population to that of the Stone Age through the bacteriological infection of the world’s paper, its books and its libraries, has as its literary backdrop Knut Hamsun’s fraught relationship with the master of Nazi propaganda (Gearon).

As I have detailed in now extensive publications on literature and security, the West too, often covertly, sought to engineer the arts to political purpose. Here, Linda Risso’s *Propaganda and Intelligence in the Cold War* was a pioneering study, as are Sarah Miller Harris’s 2016 *The CIA and the Congress for Cultural Freedom in the Early Cold War* and Frances Stonor Saunders’s 2013 *The Cultural Cold War: The CIA and the World of Arts and Letters*. The interest in security and literature is unabated, as evidenced by Joel Whitney’s 2018 *Finks: How the C.I.A. Tricked the World’s Best Writers*. Peter Finn and Petra Couvee’s 2015 *The Zhivago Affair* details the CIA involvement with the Russian translation of Boris Pasternak’s *Dr Zhivago*, highlighting the Nobel as a cultural reflection of Cold War tensions, as again with the 1970 award to Solzhenitsyn. What Aron described as “the age of total war” and Hobsbawm “the age of extremes” overlaps the history of the Nobel Prize in Literature and ingrains our sense of the importance

of literature in times of peace as in times of war, and further underpins the impetus to understand the formative influences on the writer as much as their literary-political impact on the world.

Mindful, then, of contemporary aesthetics and the political sensitivities which now surround literature and the humanities (Benjamin; Bhabha; Carroll and Gibson; Cascardi; Hagberg and Jost; Jameson; Said; Small), and noting the originating colonial contexts of the Nobel Prize in Literature itself (Rudyard Kipling was awarded the 1907 Prize), we see that the aesthetic is rarely distant from the political. In this historically shifting literary moral milieu, the aesthetic life is never far from the domain of politics. Thinking “literature back into the bigger picture of society” (Braun and Spiers 449), Bob Dylan’s life was then, as now, as important as his output. Though, as always, Dylan uses the latter to define the former, the elision of the singer-songwriter’s life and literature are what has made for his iconic status for a generation and, half a century later, the highest levels of literary acclaim. As with all enduring poetry, it is enigma of interpretation which refuses easy definition for either the life or the literary output of Bob Dylan.

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## NO DIRECTION HOME: BOB DYLAN’S 2016 NOBEL PRIZE

The Nobel Prize in Literature, too, brings or enhances literary fame and celebrity (Braun and Spiers). For Bob Dylan, the 2016 award was received with seeming indifference. He had for weeks refused even to answer the famous telephone call from the Swedish Academy. Their awe of the cultural icon was evident early the next year when 12 members of the Swedish seemed—despite the apparent earlier snub—to host a private party at a secret Stockholm location for Bob Dylan. A leading UK quality newspaper cited the Swedish Academy’s Permanent Secretary Sara Danius’s blog post, stating that: “Spirits were high. Champagne was had . . . Quite a bit of time was spent looking closely at the gold medal, in particular the beautifully crafted back, an image of a young man sitting under a laurel tree who listens to the Muse” (“Bob Dylan Finally Accepts Nobel Prize in Literature”). For those not classically educated, she adds that the motto is taken “from Virgil’s *Aeneid*, the inscription reads: ‘*Inventas vitam iuvat excoluisse per artes*,’ loosely translated as ‘And they who bettered life on earth by their newly found mastery’” (“Bob Dylan Finally Accepts Nobel Prize in Literature”). Despite the awestruck excitement of the party, the recipient had not yet fulfilled the requirement for the award’s prize money of eight million kronor (837,000 euros, \$891,000).

When in 2017 Bob Dylan did fulfil this requirement his eight-minute speech, available in full on the Nobel Foundation's website, was satisfactorily literary in reference and orientation. He made little or no reference to his own work, highlighting a curiously disparate range of Greek epic poetry, a nineteenth century novel of gargantuan intertextual scope, and a renowned work of German post-First World War fiction (one much castigated by Hitler for its un-German spirit), respectively: Homer's *Odyssey*, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* and Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Dylan had curiously, too, mentioned his "grammar school" education where he had encountered other literary greats: "*Don Quixote*, *Ivanhoe*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Tale of Two Cities*" ("Nobel Lecture"). Uniquely in the Nobel Prize in Literature's history, the awardee wonders how his *oeuvre* relates to any contribution to literature or the Prize: "When I first received this Nobel Prize in Literature, I got to wondering exactly how my songs related to literature" (Dylan, "Nobel Lecture"). It is precisely his attitude to the context of his learning of literature, "typical grammar school reading that gave you a way of looking at life, an understanding of human nature, and a standard to measure things by," reading that "I took . . . with me when I started composing lyrics. And the themes from those books worked their way into many of my songs, either knowingly or unintentionally," wishing as he did "to write songs unlike anything anybody ever heard, and these themes were fundamental" (Dylan, "Nobel Lecture"). Indeed, there are innumerable literary references throughout many of his (especially earlier) lyrics—in "Desolation Row," the eleven-minute closing acoustic song of *Highway 61 Revisited*, the references are (much in the manner of T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land") as diverse as they are indirect, from Giacomo Casanova to Shakespeare. In his Nobel speech he begins with *Moby Dick*, and the myths it contains, "the Judeo-Christian bible, Hindu myths, British legends, Saint George, Perseus, Hercules, integrated into a story of whaling." Dylan himself shows how this classic work of nineteenth century American fiction itself breaks down the boundaries between high and low art:

Whale oil is used to anoint the kings. History of the whale, phrenology, classical philosophy, pseudo-scientific theories, justification for discrimination—everything thrown in and none of it hardly rational. Highbrow, lowbrow, chasing illusion, chasing death, the great white whale, white as polar bear, white as a white man, the emperor, the nemesis, the embodiment of evil. The demented captain who actually lost his leg years ago trying to attack Moby with a knife. ("Nobel Lecture")

Dylan himself cites Melville's "[q]uotable poetic phrases that can't be beat": Ahab's response to Starbuck's idea that he should let go of past resentments ("Speak not to me of blasphemy, man, I'd strike the sun if it insulted me"), and the eloquences of Ahab's own poetic mindset: "The path to my fixed purpose is laid with iron rails whereon my soul is grooved to run" ("Nobel Lecture").

For a songwriter renowned for early songs of protest even prior to the Vietnam War, Dylan's interpretive rendition of Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* as "a horror story" seems like home territory. He declaims the achievements of classical philosophy and literature, all the refinements of the Greeks (he mentions Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles), asking "what happened to it?": should it not "have prevented this"? He reminisces here on his own life, with thoughts that "turn homeward," the fear of "some miscalculable [sic] thing that might happen. The common grave. There are no other possibilities" ("Nobel Lecture").

The journeying of *The Odyssey*, a "strange, adventurous tale of a grown man trying to get home after fighting in a war," arguably draws together the two great themes of Dylan's own life, the conflicts of the world and the search for a never-to-be-found place of solace, a place (emotional, intellectual, social, political) where one can feel at home:

So what does it all mean? Myself and a lot of other songwriters have been influenced by these very same themes. And they can mean a lot of different things. If a song moves you, that's all that's important. I don't have to know what a song means. I've written all kinds of things into my songs. ("Nobel Lecture")

But being Bob Dylan, he is "not going to worry about it—what it all means" ("Nobel Lecture"). And he wonders whether authors like Melville worried either when he "put all his old testament, biblical references, scientific theories, Protestant doctrines, and all that knowledge of the sea and sailing ships and whales into one story, I don't think he would have worried about it either—what it all means" ("Nobel Lecture").

Dylan's award surprised few who had over the decades—perhaps since Princeton's award to Dylan of an honorary doctorate in 1970—engaged at a formal academic level in deciphering his literary significance. A good bibliographical source, Evan Goldstein's 2010 article "Dylan and the Intellectuals," published appropriately enough in the *Journal of Higher Education*, remains the best summary guide to this pre-Nobel Prize intellectual and cultural significance. The flurry of books at the time was to mark Dylan's seventieth birthday. Kevin J. H. Dettmar's *The Cambridge Companion to Bob Dylan* got there early in 2009. There are collections



of essays on Dylan by Greil Marcus, the “dean of Dylan critics,” there are serious historical analyses of Dylan in America (Wilentz), yet more biographies, one in a book series of cultural icons (Yaffe), the other—a work in progress which seems not to have come to fruition—placing Dylan in the context of Jewish life (Rosenbaum). Others, such as Richard F. Thomas in *Why Bob Dylan Matters*, view Dylan’s work in relation to the classical poetry traditions of ancient Greece and Rome. Dylan himself alludes to such connections in the Nobel lecture. Christopher Ricks is unarguably important here, however, in getting to the existential root, not simply the literary exterior. It is Ricks who most powerfully shows not only the classical depth and the Shakespearean scope of Dylan’s output but its *theological* import. Like the sixteenth century Shakespeare, the twenty-first century poet, has (to date, at least—will Dylan be read and performed in four centuries as Shakespeare is four centuries from his time?)—all the signs of an endurance which is based on universal existential import. This, dare one say today, is defined in Dylan’s life and work by a religious sensibility rooted in Jewish heritage and Christian sympathies, a morality whose theology goes beyond earthly judgement, as intimated in the title of Ricks’s book, *Dylan’s Visions of Sin*.

## CONCLUSION

The life and the literature began with a quest for meaning: to put it simplistically, with a young man whose songs of protest from the Greenwich Village of New York City’s Lower Manhattan defined a counter-cultural era which did not begin but which found its global fruition in the 1960s. Thus for the 2016 winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature the links between literature and lyric are those of human experience seeking but never quite being able to rationalize meaning, only to tell the story of the search. It is a living thing: “Our songs are alive in the land of the living. But songs are unlike literature” (*Dylan, “Nobel Lecture”*). If there is a difference in textual form—lyrics are “meant to be sung, not read”—the differences are arguably superficial. It is merely a difference in form and not the existential drive which in both cases gives rise to the expression of disquiet at the elusive meaning at the heart of all literary forms, even the most commonplace of narratives. The form of the text matters less than what the text says, what it communicates and coherently shares about the messy quest for meaning.

For the Jewish-born Robert Zimmerman as for the artist Bob Dylan, however, there is always an existential dimension to his life and to his output, even an apocalyptic one. To my mind, it is not the social and the

political which ultimately define Dylan but his sensibilities of something beyond them. His only work of autobiography, *Chronicles*, is on the surface a mere telling of those intense days of childhood and youth and early acclaim in the music industry. In the Hebrew Bible *Chronicles* is a single text, in the Septuagint Greek of Christian tradition it is divided into two books. In both it is a story of kings, or political leaders, and of prophets, of messengers who delivered often unwelcome messages from God when the people had gone astray. It is a story which redirects the people when they have lost their sense of true home. Dylan's songs may borrow widely from a plethora of sources, the classical and the contemporary, but for the self-framing of his own life, Dylan chose the grand-narrative of salvation history.

Though politically engaged, it is not politics which is ultimately important. Though human passion may be thwarted, life is greater than the disappointments of love. Thus, in verse, everyday existential despair is contained as much as it is constrained by the lyrical structure of sentiment. This is as much evident in the songs of his years of conversion to Christianity in *Slow Train Coming* as in those later lyrics such as "Not Dark Yet" in which Dylan gives love and romance an existential, even mystical edge. Death is ever-present but Dylan always keeps despair at artistic distance. Even when persistently misunderstood, he gives a humourous twist to the outlandish sadness of circumstance. Closely related to this sense of a man whose authorship has been marked by a detachment from the travails of this world, much like the New Testament author of *Letter to the Hebrews* (13:14), who writes in those chapters of a destination beyond struggle, with a visionary knowledge that "we have not here an abiding city." In his later works, such as *Time Out of Mind*, where once politics had vied with romance for centre-stage now metaphysics comes to the fore. In "Not Dark Yet," the man and the artist stand at the existential edge of life and lyric, the poet declaiming, "It's not dark yet, but it's getting there."

Yet it is the Dylan of his first decade of acclaim which still defines the life and the literature. Here, to close with a personal diversion, my own favourite lines from Dylan's entire output, are those surfacing at the end of "Desolation Row." Arguably this song and its framing title suggest the most seemingly hopeless in lyric and life. The cultural importance of this song, out of all Dylan's lyrical output, is indicated by its inclusion in David Lehman's revised edition of *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*. Yet here, even in the most desperate, the most desolate, of times, the transient somehow hints at the transcendent. The political and personal are passing shows. "Desolation Row" opens with the former and closes with the latter: "They're selling postcards of the hanging / They're painting the passports brown"—with all its resonances of Fascism—ending nine minutes later in

the sung version with the ever-quotable lines, “When you asked me how I was doing / Was that some kind of joke.” For Dylan, emotion always stands at the gates of eternity.

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## Billy Woods's Literary Intertexts

# ABSTRACT

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While—like all artistic forms—it allows for deviation from this standard rule, rap is heavily reliant on building blocks of sixteen bars and a refrain. In addition, rhyme plays a prominent role in structuring rap, which is why the form is also colloquially referred to as “rhyming.” In view of this, Billy Woods’s record *Today, I Wrote Nothing* was a considerable departure from the existing rap norm. On the record, Woods stylistically adapted a collection of works by Russian absurdist writer Daniil Kharms, which was also called *Today, I Wrote Nothing*. Kharms was known for writing short prose without any formal structure. Most of his stories deal with absurd situations and slapstick humour. The structure of the fragmented fiction is adapted into rap on Woods’s record. The long rap verses are replaced by short songs without any specific narrative. The record maintains the non-structure of Kharms’s writing, as well as its absurdity, but it abandons any semblance of traditional rap. The second important stylistic and structural choice made in Woods’s record was the integration of aspects of Flannery O’Connor’s writing, particularly its humour and darkness. The article will focus on how Billy Woods integrates intertextuality into his lyrics to give the songs additional layers of meaning.

**Keywords:** Billy Woods, Daniil Kharms, Flannery O’Connor, rap structure, the absurd.

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## INTRODUCTION

Rap has always been a referential art form since its inception: as a sample-based genre, it takes existing recordings and uses them as the basis for the production of new pieces (Schloss 34). In view of this fact, it is important to note that the recordings are integrated mostly for aesthetic reasons, or because they are superficially related to the song on the topical level. Rap is also one of those genres in contemporary music that place the most emphasis on the lyrics. Taking all this into account, one might find it surprising that there are few examples of books of fiction adapted into rap lyrics. Moreover, few such adaptations are successful. One such rarity is *Today, I Wrote Nothing*, a record on which Billy Woods has adapted the structure of Daniil Kharms's writing in the eponymous collection of short stories and various other pieces. Stylistically, Woods has also adapted Flannery O'Connor's writing into the record, and used a variety of references to other writers in the lyrics. This article examines how Billy Woods adapts intertextuality into his lyrics to add additional layers of meaning to the song.

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## CURRENT RESEARCH ON RAP WRITING

Rap writing is a fairly common research topic, yet a comprehensive study on rap writing has not yet been made. There are several books that cover different aspects of rap, such as Paul Edwards's *How to Rap* book series. Alexis Pate focused on the poetic elements in rap writing in *In the Heart of the Beat*, while Adam Bradley and Andrew DuBois edited *The Anthology of Rap*, in which they compiled the lyrics of important rappers from the genre and presented them chronologically. From the late 2000s, studies analyzing specific writing styles of influential rappers started appearing. One of those is *Born to Use Mics: Reading Nas's "Illmatic"* edited by Michael Eric Dyson and Sohail Daulatzai, which is a study analyzing Nas's album *Illmatic*. Nevertheless, critical literature has not been successful in describing rap writing as a whole, which is why I tackle this problem in my forthcoming monograph *Billy Woods: Virtuoso of Intertextuality*. To be able to do this, I had to pick a specific rapper (in my case Billy Woods) and put his writing and characteristic stylistic devices (in the case of Billy Woods, intertextuality) into the broader context of hip-hop as a genre, and look into how this device has developed within hip-hop. To lay bare the connection, two chapters have been exclusively dedicated to defining intertextuality and the form of rap. In the chapter on intertextuality, the connection between intertextuality and sampling is explained. For the

explanation of why and how sampling is used, the producer and rapper Zilla Rocca was interviewed to help develop the most precise definition possible. The same was done in the chapter on the form of rap—in order to develop a proper definition of it, experts were interviewed. The form was explained by Dart Adams, a hip-hop journalist from Boston, and Blockhead, a music producer who works with Billy Woods and Aesop Rock. For more details, the reader is referred to the forthcoming monograph.

## DANIIL KHARMS AND FLANNERY O'CONNOR

Daniil Kharms was a Russian absurdist writer who, in the 1920s, was part of UBERIU, a collective of avant-garde writers from Leningrad (now St. Petersburg). Later, the collective disbanded and Kharms went on to write children's literature. Throughout his writing career, he was in conflict with the Soviet authorities and was imprisoned multiple times. He died in prison in 1942. Kharms's fiction is difficult to define stylistically, but it can be said that it is absurd, and without formal structure. In a sense, it is meta-fiction parodying and satirizing the existing forms and structures of the fiction of its time, with added slapstick humour (see Kharms 12–17).

Flannery O'Connor was an American writer from Georgia whose writing career spanned from 1945 to 1964 when she passed away. It ended prematurely as she was diagnosed with lupus erythematosus, a disease forcing her to move to the rural town of Milledgeville. Despite those obstacles, O'Connor had been a prolific writer. She wrote novels and short stories, such as her 1953 story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." The feature distinguishing her writing from the others' is the grotesque portrayal of her characters, accompanied by dark humour juxtaposed with strong Catholic beliefs ("Flannery O'Connor"). In her writing she was interested in how different institutions operate with each other and the power structures between the genders. In O'Connor's stories, God plays a sinister role. The religious and moral authority of God is appropriated in different stories by her characters to further their nationalist, racist or xenophobic agenda, which O'Connor then satirizes (Boyagoda 60–61). Lastly, O'Connor also consistently utilizes the narrative gap. The narrative gap is a polysemous concept which Hardy (363–65) delineates as information that the narrator either omits because it is irrelevant, or because characters lack sufficient knowledge to convey it. In Hardy's example from O'Connor's short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the grandmother, for example, cannot describe the murdering of her family because she did not witness it. Later it will become clear how the narrative gap can be applied to Billy Woods's writing.



## ASPECTS OF THE ABSURD, THE GROTESQUE AND THE FORM OF RAP

The two main stylistic concepts relevant for the present analysis are the absurd and the grotesque. M. H. Abrams's *Glossary of Literary Terms* defines "absurd" as a "[t]erm . . . applied to a number of works in drama and prose fiction sharing the sense that the human condition is essentially absurd, and that this condition can be adequately represented only in works of literature that are themselves absurd" (1). The grotesque, on the other hand, is "strange and unpleasant, especially in a silly or slightly frightening way" ("Grotesque").

Those are some relevant characteristics of the works of Kharms, O'Connor and Billy Woods. However, before we continue, it is necessary to understand the form of rap to recognize how Billy Woods's *Today, I Wrote Nothing* deviates from it, and why this is significant. Rap, like any other genre of music, has its form. The rhythm is measured with "beats," which are then further divided into bars (Schmidt-Jones 34–38). The most common time measurement in rap is the "four on four" time, which constitutes one bar in a rap song. In order to write a complete rap verse, one needs sixteen bars (Dart Adams in conversation with the author, May 2018; qtd. in Kolarič). Needless to say, this rule is not set in stone and how rigorously it is observed varies from rapper to rapper. However, on *Today, I Wrote Nothing*, it is, remarkably, completely ignored, as we will see in section 2.

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### BILLY WOODS—*TODAY, I WROTE NOTHING*

Considering the basic tenets of the rap form, the absurd and the grotesque from the previous chapter, it is possible to see how Billy Woods successfully adopts Kharms and O'Connor into his writing and enhances this with references to other writers and works. In doing so, he disregards the established rap norm. The following sections will offer an analysis of three songs from *Today, I Wrote Nothing*, namely "Zulu Tolstoy," "Dreams Come True" and "Scales."

#### 1. "ZULU TOLSTOY"

Wrote a story about a rapper  
writing a story rap about a  
shorty tryna rap his way up out  
the trap. Plenty hoes, gats,

run-of-the-mill but flow ill,  
 voice old cognac. He'd say  
 "no homo" if this was his track.  
 So I'm writing about him writing  
 about him writing about that. . . .

[sample of a person reading *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy] The good book says that he that lives by the sword shall perish by the sword, said the black. What right man would have it any other way? . . . It makes no difference what men think of war, said the judge. War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him.

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The reference in the title is a statement made by the American author Saul Bellow, who asked himself how African literature will develop in the post-colonial period, and who will be the Tolstoy of the Zulus (see Menand and Bellow). While according to Edwards's *How to Rap* (26), meta-rap is not uncommon, Billy Woods adds an entirely different dimension to the phenomenon by writing a song about a rapper who is writing about a rapper writing about yet another rapper trying to escape from the inner city. The first rapper, the one who is writing the song, is not successful because he is in conflict with his producer. The young rapper from the song is more successful. However, because he is on parole, he cannot leave the state and therefore his career is stalling. The poetic persona can be interpreted as the least successful rapper of all three, and the lyrics he is writing projects his desires of success. The song ends with a sample of a person reading from Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*. The passage takes place in the part of the novel's plot when the judge and the child, both personae from the novel, are resting at a campfire. Sometime before they stopped to rest, they passed a corpse. The judge is explaining what war is to the child. The scene is connected to the concept of the song: the war becomes the recording industry and everything that the musicians have to endure to be able to make their music. In the song, it does not seem to be the case that any of the rappers is particularly successful. This is reminiscent of the idea that in war, there are no true winners. One of the sides does eventually prevail, but the costs of the aftermath exceed the gain of victory, rendering the victor just another loser.

The meta-fictional aspects of the song are those which mirror Kharms the most. In his writing, Kharms was known for his use of references to classical writers and prominent figures, such as Pushkin, whom he put into absurd situations from which they could not escape. Furthermore, Kharms's characters typically end up in the same absurd situation several times from different perspectives, and this situation always ends with

a disaster or the death of the character. As an example, let us consider the excerpts from the short stories "Anecdotes from the Life of Pushkin" and "Tumbling Old Women":

1

Pushkin was a poet and was always writing something. Once Zhuskovsky caught him at his writing and loudly exclaimed: "Well ain't you a scriber!"

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Pushkin had four sons and all of them idiots. One didn't even know how to sit on [sic] chair and was always falling off. Pushkin himself was not great on sitting on chairs." (Kharms, "Anecdotes from the Life of Pushkin" 82-83)

Because of her excessive curiosity, one old woman tumbled out of her window, fell and shattered to pieces. Another old woman leaned out to look at the one who'd shattered but, out of excessive curiosity, also tumbled out of her window, fell and shattered to pieces. (Kharms, "Tumbling Old Women" 47)

From those examples, similarities between Kharms's and Woods's meta-writing can be observed. Still, this is not the only possible reading of Woods's song since one could also see it as a jab at the statement made by Saul Bellow that Zulus have not yet produced any writer equivalent to Tolstoy. Bellow made this statement in the 1990s and later claimed it was presented out of context (qtd. in Menand), which is ironic as the 90s were the decade when rap was finally fully embraced in the United States and became one of the most popular genres. Historically, rap is part of the hip-hop culture which was developed in the early 70s in the Bronx by African-American, Afro-Caribbean and Puerto Rican children. It was a youth movement comprising DJing, b-boying (also known as break dancing), graffiti writing and rapping (Chang 72-80, 89-104). By 1979 rapping had come to the forefront of culture and started developing into an industry, but it was only in the 90s that the rap industry would establish itself in the broader culture (Charnas 37-50, 277-85, 402). What escaped Bellow was that rap focused on lyrics more than any other form of music: ever since its inception, its lyrics have been reflecting on societal ills, the social environment (see "The Message #7" by Grandmaster Flash and Furious Five) or racial issues in the United States (see Public Enemy) while being demonized for their language use (see Gore or Coleman 349-60). Nevertheless, rap survived and over the years built an industry enabling the social advancement of a segment of the population that would under different circumstances have had difficulties achieving comparable success. This culminated recently in rapper Kendrick Lamar receiving the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for music (Lamarre). It is for these reasons that the

song can be seen as a jab at Bellow's statement: while there is no single Zulu Tolstoy, there are many "Zulu Tolstoys," not in the traditional sense of writing but in rap writing. The rappers were the giants of the medium through which the broader African diaspora was able to establish their voice, which Bellow was unable to perceive even when it was happening right before him.

## 2. "DREAMS COME TRUE"

Let us examine the structure of rap more closely so that we can see the deviation from the standard in Billy Woods's song "Dreams Come True." The relevant concepts are a bar, rhyming and sampling. To recapitulate: Hip-hop, like any kind of music, has its form which is measured with beats, which are further divided into bars. The most common time, the four on four time, constitutes a single bar in a rap song. Typically, a song will comprise sixteen bars. Now, rapping is also referred to as "rhyming." The rhyme is the most common stylistic means in rap and it is a very important part of its structure. Early rap used to have simple end rhymes, but as time progressed, the rhymes became more and more complex, ranging from internal to polysyllabic and later also occasionally morphing into assonance and consonance. Finally, "sampling" refers to taking pieces of music, films and TV shows combining them into a sound collage to create a new song (see Kolarič).

The rapper and producer Zilla Rocca explained the reasons why film music was frequently sampled. In films, the music is there to create a mood and evoke emotions. The viewer needs to connect emotionally with the film. Furthermore, the sounds in film are arranged systematically so that instruments mostly follow each other, not overlapping and leave space. This makes them ideal for sampling as the producer can isolate the sounds easily to extract them and create a beat. Those beats are suitable for rapping as they already allow for spacing and the producer does not have to create space artificially. As a result, the rapper has enough space to rap freely over the beat as he/she pleases. On the one hand, the dialogue is typically sampled because it matches the concept of the song or because it has some personal connection to the artists themselves (Zilla Rocca in conversation with the author, October 2018; qtd. in Kolarič).

Taking a look at a traditionally structured rap song like "Live from the Driver's Seat" by Zilla Rocca from *96 Mentality*, we see that the song has two sixteen-bar verses with a refrain after each verse. In comparison, in the song "Dreams Come True" Billy Woods adopts the (lack of) structure of Kharms's short stories, abandons the formal structure of rap and just writes a short non-structured rap song. The sixteen bars of rap verse are

reduced to two bars with no refrain mirroring Kharms's single-sentence story. Compare them: "Today, I wrote nothing. It doesn't matter" (Kharms 120) and "Caught feelings off an old picture, hit her up like, / I still miss ya. Two words: Nigga. Please. Fair enough" (Woods, "Dreams Come True").

### 3. "SCALES"

The song "Scales" combines the structure of Kharms's stories with the content of those by Flannery O'Connor. It can be seen as a recontextualization of O'Connor's story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." It also utilizes the narrative gap described earlier. In the song, there are four short verses, three of which describe murders and one adultery.

In the first verse, the aftermath of a murder is described by the poetic persona: "No justice, no peace. . . . better have you a piece!" The phrase "No justice, no peace" was popularized by Al Sharpton after the Howard Beach racial incident in 1986 when three African-American men found themselves in a predominately white neighbourhood as their car malfunctioned. They were then attacked by a white mob. As they were escaping, one of them was struck by a car and died (Sharpton). The concept of being killed because of racist motives is reversed in the verse and transformed into an incident of so-called black-on-black crime. In brief, it describes how the police came to a murder scene and people gathered around them. Afterwards the poetic persona reflects how, despite the presence of police investigators, there is still a possibility of confrontation between them and the people. The line "Better have you a piece!" is a double entendre. The word "piece" is used in its slang sense, meaning gun ("Piece"), and simultaneously as a homophone of the word "peace." Therefore, it can be deduced that the poetic persona is advised to have a gun if he wants to also experience peace. The absurd element in the situation is that the people who need protection from the police are the ones who need to protect themselves *from* the police.

The second verse reveals that the poetic persona was the killer:

Better have you a college degree. . .  
 Brutus slid the shiv 'tween Julius' ribs  
 Two type of people in the world, kid, those who load the guns  
 and those who dig  
 Rhetorical question: Can I live?

The persona contemplates getting an education or moving somewhere out of reach of the long arm of the law, as he betrayed the person he murdered. The reference to the murder of Julius Caesar (Toynbee) is used. The poetic persona justifies the murder by claiming that he had no other choice—he either had to be the one who kills or the one who

is killed. His conclusion is further legitimized by the rhetorical question “Can I live?” which is also a reference to the Jay-Z song “Can I Live” (from *Reasonable Doubt*) whose main topic is the choice between betrayal and facing repercussions for one’s past actions. The verse concludes with the poetic persona visiting the grave of the person he murdered and celebrating the victory, but also coming to the conclusion that he will have to accept his fate. This verse also features narrative gaps designed to omit the information of whom the persona killed and why. These are necessitated by the fact that providing this information would be tantamount to confessing a crime. Thus, we arrive at the grotesque in the song: the poetic persona does not feel any remorse for betraying and killing his acquaintance, and dances on his grave.

In the third verse the story continues with the poetic persona still betraying his friends. His next betrayal is indulging in adultery with his friend’s wife: “We all got it coming / smooth her skirt, make sure her shirts buttoned. . . . A good man is hard to find.” The narrative gap is still present as the poetic persona does not disclose the identity of the woman with whom he commits adultery. Nor is the identity of her husband revealed. He justifies this deed by saying “A good man is hard to find,” which is a reference to O’Connor’s short story with the same title. In the story a family is killed by a man, about whom an old lady was having a discussion with Red Sammy, the owner of a diner. “‘A good man is hard to find,’ Red Sammy said. ‘Everything is getting terrible’” (O’Connor 149). The story describes a person named Bailey taking his family for a summer vacation. During the trip the grandmother, who is the aforementioned old lady, tells stories about her childhood to the children. When she realizes that she made a mistake in her narration, she kicks her feet, scaring the cat. This leads to Bailey losing control over the car and causing an accident. As the family are waiting for help, the grandmother hears a vehicle driving down the road and stops it. Three men come out of it and one is recognized by the grandmother. This leads to the whole family being shot by the men. Back in the song, the poetic persona is aware that he is not a good man and that his actions will affect the family negatively, just like the eventual killer in O’Connor’s short story did, but he does not let this fact bother him:

Use untruth to fill that silence  
 Kids in they rooms listening to nullified nihilists  
 Still stylish, ultraviolence. . . .  
 I said “Where’s Wallace?”  
 (sample of *The Wire*) “String, where the fuck is Wallace?”  
 “Huh? String. String. Look at me. Look at me! Where the fuck is  
 Wallace?”

The song concludes with the poetic persona drinking at home, lying about his actions and observing his children listening to violent rap. The word “ultraviolence” is used, which is a reference to the Anthony Burgess novel *A Clockwork Orange*. Later he receives a call from his boss and asks about Wallace, which is a reference to the 12<sup>th</sup> episode (“Cleaning Up”) from the first season of the show *The Wire* when two characters, DeAngelo and Stringer, are conversing. The exact dialogue is sampled in the song. Stringer (the boss) gives an order to kill Wallace because he is seen as a person who could leak information to the police about a past murder committed by Stringer’s criminal drug enterprise. DeAngelo, under whom Wallace sold drugs, wonders why Wallace disappeared because they used to be friends. From the final stanzas and the dialogue, we can infer that the poetic persona was betraying his fellow drug dealers because he was motivated by vengeance. This also runs parallel to the O’Connor’s short story in which the murderer kills the family because the grandmother recognizes him. In the song, a drug dealer kills his fellow drug dealers, whom he assumes are those involved in the disappearance of Wallace. However, in *The Wire* DeAngelo did not learn who killed Wallace but rather was himself killed as he was seen as a liability by the criminal drug enterprise. The ending is thus left open since it is impossible to determine with certainty whether the poetic persona is able to get his revenge.

## CONCLUSION

The three songs discussed here are not the only examples of adaptation of Daniil Kharm’s writing on Billy Woods’s record *Today, I Wrote Nothing*, but are representative of those that demonstrate successful stylistic adaptation of literature into rap. As has been shown, the reason why such adaptation is possible in rap lyrics is because Billy Woods decided to adapt Kharm’s writing style without any specific structure. The question that remains open is whether the only manner of successfully adapting literature into rap is by renouncing the rap structure. To be able to gauge this, a broader analysis of rap records that integrate different literary genres or literary forms with the lyrics of their songs needs to be conducted.

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## Stranger Than Fiction: Gothic Intertextuality in Shakespears Sister's Music Videos<sup>1</sup>

# ABSTRACT

The following article is going to focus on a selection of music videos by Shakespears Sister, a British indie pop band consisting of Siobhan Fahey and Marcella Detroit, which rose to prominence in the late 1980s. This article scrutinizes five of the band's music videos: "Goodbye Cruel World" (1991), "I Don't Care" (1992), "Stay" (1992), "All the Queen's Horses" (2019) and "When She Finds You" (2019; the last two filmed 26 years after the duo's turbulent split), all of them displaying a strong affinity with Gothicism. Fahey and Detroit, together with director Sophie Muller, a long-time collaborator of the band, have created a fascinating world that skillfully merges references to their tempestuous personal background, Gothic imagery, Hollywood glamour and borrowings from Grande Dame Guignol, a popular 1960s subgenre of the horror film. Grande Dame Guignol is of major importance here as a genre dissecting female rivalry and, thus, reinterpreting a binary opposition of the damsel in distress and the tyrant, an integral element of Gothic fiction. Therefore, the aim of the article is not only to trace the Gothic references, both literary and cinematic, but also to demonstrate how Shakespears Sister's music videos reformulate the conventional woman in peril-villain conflict.

**Keywords:** Gothicism, intertextuality, Shakespears Sister, female rivalry, Grande Dame Guignol, music video.

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Discussing the notion of female rivalry in Shakespears Sister music videos would not be possible without going back to the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century when the Gothic movement started to grow in popularity. What started as an initial fascination with the Middle Ages, not infrequently (though inaccurately) termed the Gothic times, and, subsequently, archeology and architecture, led to the birth of a particular literary genre, i.e. the Gothic novel. Fred Botting observes the genre's intertextual underpinnings and notes: "A hybrid form from its inception, the Gothic blend of medieval and historical romance with the novel of life and manners was framed in supernatural, sentimental or sensational terms" (44–45). These sensational elements would usually embrace

a mysterious crime, usually of an illicit or incestuous nature; a villain who in many cases has pledged himself to diabolical powers; persecuted maidens or fatal, Medusa-like women; charnel houses, tombs and graveyards; and nature itself conspiring to produce effects of gloomy terror. (Phelps 110–11)

Early Gothic texts eagerly juxtaposed the above mentioned "persecuted maidens" with tyrannical male oppressors, thereby developing a dynamic binary opposition that would usually form the narrative backbone of each novel. Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) originated the trend and paved the way for numerous followers, with Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Gregory Lewis among the most prominent ones. Initially, Walpole's model of a Gothic novel was strictly observed in terms of structure and characterization. From the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards, however, Gothic texts gained more intricacy and insightfulness, and the seminal damsel in distress-villain pairing underwent significant changes. More and more frequently, both roles would be assumed by female characters, turning Gothic narratives into interesting analyses of complex relations among women. An early example of such a novel is Charlotte Dacre's *Zofloya, or The Moor* (1806).

Undoubtedly, from its outset, Gothicism was an integral part of what one could nowadays call popular culture. With the growing readership in the latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Gothic fiction reached a broad audience, even to the point of oversaturation: "[i]t had fallen into the hands of unskilled, imitative writers: the result was either that the repetition of horrors in vulgar copies of Lewis blunted appetites, or that the dependence on Radcliffe-type explanations became tedious" (Hennessy 335). Fortunately, novels such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818), Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) contributed to the Gothic revival. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Gothicism successfully transitioned to a new medium, that of cinema; the

first Gothic-themed short films appeared as early as the 1890s, with *Le Manoir du diable* (*The House of the Devil*), an 1896 production by Georges Méliès, being a primary example. Horror as a separate genre went through several stages of development in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The 1920s and 1930s films derived inspiration mainly from the classic literary texts or their stage adaptations,<sup>2</sup> as well as folk tales.<sup>3</sup> Then, the audience was confronted with a new fad of the so-called monster movies in the 1940s and 1950s,<sup>4</sup> where the post-WW2 “red scare” and atomic conflict contributed to the Gothic atmosphere of doom and gloom. From the 1960s onwards, more and more horror films exploited the motif of a (usually male) psychopathic stalker and his gruesome murders, which was a modernized rewriting of the perennial woman in peril-tyrant conflict (e.g., Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 *Psycho*, based upon Robert Bloch’s 1959 novel of the same name, or Michael Powell’s *Peeping Tom*, also 1960). The 1960s brought to the fore one more new subgenre of horror, i.e. Grande Dame Guignol, also known as hag horror, hagsploitation movement or psycho-biddy.<sup>5</sup> As it turned out, this subgenre would have a lasting influence not only on cinema in general, but on the music video, as well.

Indeed, the 1970s and 1980s open a new chapter in the history of Gothicism. Increasingly, music videos not only depicted musicians performing their songs. On the contrary, they developed into entities of their own, ensuring that they would eventually become “a mandatory tool in the marketing of music” (Cameron) and signifying a new type of interdependence between the lyrical and the visual content. As Will Straw puts it,

[t]he relationship of song to visuals [was] obviously not simply one of narrative or visualization . . . , but rather one between the basic demands of form (some elaboration of proposed themes, a movement towards closure) and the heterogeneity of codes and visual materials held in play by that form. (258)

<sup>2</sup> The apt examples are F. W. Murnau’s masterpiece of German Expressionism, *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1922), which was an unauthorized screen adaptation of Stoker’s classic, as well as James Whale’s *Frankenstein* (1931), based on Peggy Webling’s play, or *Dracula* (1931) by Tod Browning, inspired by a 1924 play by Hamilton Deane and John L. Balderston.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Paul Wegener’s *The Golem: How He Came into the World* (1920).

<sup>4</sup> Among them one could mention Jacques Tourneur’s *Cat People* (1942) and its 1944 sequel, *The Curse of the Cat People*, but also Arthur Hilton’s *Cat-Women of the Moon* (1953), *It Came from Outer Space* (1953) and *Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1954), both directed by Jack Arnold, Don Siegel’s *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) or Irvin Yeaworth’s *The Blob* (1958).

<sup>5</sup> For an extensive discussion of the genre’s history, see Peter Shelley’s 2009 *Grande Dame Guignol Cinema: A History of Hag Horror from “Baby Jane” to “Mother.”*

A number of music videos directly incorporated Gothic elements such as settings or characters, creatively revamping them.<sup>6</sup> Kate Bush's "Wuthering Heights" (1978) and "Hammer Horror" (1980) respectively paid tribute to Emily Brontë's novel and the notorious British film studio specializing in bloody and highly eroticized adaptations of literary Gothic classics. Sheena Easton's "Telephone (Long Distance Love Affair)" (1983) drew heavily upon Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Meat Loaf's "If You Really Want To" (1983) and Pet Shop Boys' "Heart" (1987) played with vampire imagery. Without a doubt, the rise of a new music genre called Gothic Rock also fuelled the development of Gothic music videos. Nevertheless, it would be shortsighted to conclude that the Gothic in music videos is limited to just one genre and a selection of bands associated with it (The Cure, The Sisters of Mercy, Bauhaus, Fields of the Nephilim or Siouxsie and the Banshees). The case of Shakespears Sister's visual output proves that Gothic intertexts, both literary and cinematic, permeate a significant portion of the (indie) pop scene, too.

Several of Shakespears Sister's music videos owe a lot to both the Gothic tradition and one of its cinematic offshoots, i.e. Grande Dame Guignol. Conflicts would always propel the action in the Gothic texts, as exemplified by the aforementioned damsel-villain opposition that kept developing throughout the centuries. Grande Dame Guignol also mobilized this characteristic Gothic element, ascribing both roles to women. The premiere of Robert Aldrich's *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* in 1962 started a cinematic trend which would portray women, usually middle-aged, at a critical moment of their lives and focus on their mental imbalance, traumas, social exclusion and, most of all, conflicts, especially with other women.<sup>7</sup> Quite ironically, the rivalry applied both to film characters and the actresses cast in these roles, the majority of them starring as leads after a prolonged hiatus. Despite its grotesque excess and uninhibited campness, Grande Dame Guignol still offered a convincing portrayal of the female condition set against a Gothic background. Soon, numerous imitations followed, among them *Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (1964, dir. Robert Aldrich), *Strait-Jacket* (1964, dir. William Castle), *Die! Die! My Darling!* a.k.a. *Fanatic* (1965, dir. Silvio Narizzano) and *What*

<sup>6</sup> According to Michael Shore, music videos "mirror and extend popular culture" (99). Therefore, if one takes into consideration the impact of Gothicism on popular culture, one can agree that rewriting Gothic conventions would be an instance of such extension and enhancement.

<sup>7</sup> For a more thorough discussion of Grande Dame Guignol as a narrative of trauma, see Fisiak "What Ever Happened to My Peace of Mind? Hag Horror as Narrative of Trauma" or "Grande Dame Guignol and the Notion of the Aftermath: A Case Study of Robert Aldrich's *Hush . . . Hush, Sweet Charlotte* (1964)."

*Ever Happened to Aunt Alice?* (1969, dir. Lee H. Katzin). Although the generic formula quickly wore off and by the mid-1970s hagsploitation had practically disappeared, it soon became a source of inspiration for filmmakers and musicians alike, as this article will demonstrate. The *oeuvre* of Shakespears Sister is a case in point. The analysis is going to concentrate on five of the band's music videos, three of which, i.e. "Goodbye Cruel World" (1991), "I Don't Care" (1992) and "When She Finds You" (2019; recorded 26 years after the duo's turbulent split), display a close affinity with hag horror, in particular Aldrich's *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*. On the other hand, "Stay" (1992) and "All the Queen's Horses" cleverly deconstruct Gothic conventions regarding setting, characters and their mutual relations. All five of the videos skillfully rewrite Gothic elements, merging tradition with Hollywood glamour and, most of all, adding a new twist to the seminal pairing of woman in peril and vindictive tyrant.

As mentioned before, in hag horror, a neo-Gothic tyrant usually assumes the shape of a mentally unbalanced woman in her 50s. The role of damsel in distress is shifted onto her female kin—a sister, a mother, a daughter, a cousin. Some hag productions exploit different types of conflicts between two female protagonists, focusing on mothers- and daughters-in-law or close friends instead. In *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?*, starring two silver screen legends, Joan Crawford and Bette Davis, the plot revolves around an ongoing conflict between the Hudson sisters, former actresses. Jane (Davis) was a child star, while Blanche (Crawford) gained fame as an adult. Jane's nasty behaviour towards Blanche in their childhood, followed by Jane's decline in popularity and her subsequent addiction to alcohol, as well as Blanche's enormous success in Hollywood, put a strain early on in their relationship. Eventually, Blanche is injured in a car crash, the blame for which is put on Jane. The wheelchair-bound Blanche and mentally unstable Jane retire from the film industry altogether and cut themselves off from the outside world, immersing themselves in the world of mental and, eventually, physical violence. Aldrich's film seems to distribute the roles in a blatant way: "Initially we see Davis as the antagonist, tormenting her relatively normal but physically disabled protagonist sister Crawford" (Shelley 8). Later, however, the audience is confronted with an illuminating ending: "the climax reveals that Crawford became disabled when she tried to seek revenge on Davis when they were younger. This plot twist makes us re-evaluate Crawford as an antagonist and the revelation turns Davis into a passive child, victimized and insane" (Shelley 8-9). What surely added to the film's credibility was the real-life feud between the actresses: "[t]heir rivalry was as intense as it was renowned, but it took until . . . 1962 for the conflict between [them] to break out into the open" (Helmore).

Similarly, conflicts define the history of Shakespears Sister, a British-Irish/American indie pop band that rose to prominence in the late 1980s. The act started as a solo project of Siobhan Fahey, who was a member of the successful pop trio Bananarama between 1979 and 1988. Due to irreconcilable creative differences, Fahey left in 1988. In a TV interview with Mick Brown, she admitted that she was “sick of making that kind of music”; she found Bananarama too “glossy” and “polished” music-wise, while she intended to go in a more alternative direction (“I’ve always liked imperfection myself”). The name of her new project was inspired by a song by The Smiths, “Shakespeare’s Sister,” itself a reference to Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*.<sup>8</sup> Fahey intended to stay solo. However, at the insistence of her then-husband, Dave A. Stewart, himself a significant figure in the music industry as one half of Eurythmics, and her record company, she was soon joined by Marcella Detroit (a.k.a. Marcy Levy), an established musician, who started her career in the 1970s, worked with numerous artists (Eric Clapton, Aretha Franklin and Chaka Khan, among others) and who had already released two albums (a solo one and a joint effort with Diane Reeves). In the end, Detroit co-authored a few songs on *Sacred Heart*, the group’s debut album. She recalled in a 2005 interview with Michael Hubbard: “By the time we did the last song on the first album . . . my role became more integral. . . . I was asked . . . to become a 50% member. I didn’t just want to be a background singer,” adding that from the start she was aware of Fahey’s leader position in the duo: “It was Siobhan’s band, this was made perfectly clear. But I was cool with that—that’s the way it was.” Unfortunately, a fruitful collaboration soon turned sour. The conflicts kept growing, especially fuelled by the enormous success of “Stay,” the second single promoting their sophomore production, *Hormonally Yours*, which brought Detroit to the foreground, very much against Fahey’s wishes. As Detroit explained in detail on her website:

I think Siobhan and I were very different people which we both came to find out. Unfortunately there were internal conflicts that could just not be resolved. From my perspective, the beginning of the end was when “Stay” became our biggest hit. As I mentioned above, Siobhan was not happy about the release of “Stay” as a single as she felt and said many times, “it does not represent Shakespears Sister.”

After the cancellation of several shows, a spectacular break-up ensued. At the 1993 Ivor Novello awards, Fahey and Detroit were supposed to collect

<sup>8</sup> Talking to Mick Brown, Fahey confessed that the misspelling was not deliberate at first, but that she decided to retain it, as it made it “her thing, as opposed to the song by The Smiths.” It also remained in line with her penchant for “imperfection.”

a prize for *Hormonally Yours*. Although Fahey was absent, she asked the band's publicist to read a note on her behalf. "The acceptance speech instead became a farewell to her musical partner, with Siobhan wishing her a ruthlessly serene 'all the best for the future'" (Hanra), stunning not only Detroit, but also the audience and the music industry as such. Later on, Marcella Detroit recalled in one of the posts on her website:

There were lots of fights between us and considering it was supposed to be a wonderful time with lots of success, it was unfortunately filled with petty bickering and jealousies. I was accused of trying to steal the band away from her, ridiculed and pitted against constantly.

All in all, it took them almost 26 years to join forces again.<sup>9</sup>

It is unsurprising that their music videos often reflect the latent element of (near-Gothic) rivalry, although not much of it is detectable in those promoting their first album, *Sacred Heart* (1989). The first two, a circus-inspired one for "Break My Heart (You Really)" and a runaway bride-themed one for "Heroiner" (both 1988), do not even feature Marcella Detroit. She (and a vamp look for both bandmates) appears for the first time in 1989's "You're History." While the music video for "Run Silent" (1989) situates the two in a dreamy waterscape, creating an ekphrastic parallel with John Everett Millais's famous painting *Ophelia* (1851–52), the one for "Dirty Mind" returns to the singers' vamp image (black clothes, pale skin, lush red lipstick) and shows them performing against a backdrop of their previous music videos.<sup>10</sup> Except for the last one, credited to The Craze Boys, all of the videos were directed by Sophie Muller, who became the band's long-lasting collaborator, holding responsibility for 13 out of the 22 music videos made to date by Shakespears Sister (both as a duo and Fahey's solo act).<sup>11</sup>

The situation changed with the music videos for *Hormonally Yours*—an album clearly influenced by cinema. As Imran Khan explains,

[o]riginally conceived as a concept album written as a sort of soundtrack to a schlocky 50s-era B-film by Arthur Hilton called *Cat-Women of the Moon*, many of the songs' lyrical content was derived from the film's

<sup>9</sup> "Fahey and Detroit discussed reuniting . . . during the summer of 2018 in London, after Fahey had done some reunion shows with Bananarama and Detroit performed with [Eric] Clapton in Hyde Park" (Graff). Fahey explained: "One [reunion] inspired the other, for sure. By doing the Bananarama thing, it was reconnecting with a part of myself that I had left behind—and there was another piece that I'd left behind [with Shakespears Sister] that I needed to connect to" (Parker).

<sup>10</sup> The music video for "Sacred Heart" (1989) was excluded from this brief analysis, as it was specifically prepared for Dave A. Stewart's TV show, *Beyond the Groove*.

<sup>11</sup> All five music videos to be scrutinized in this article are Muller's works.



storyline.<sup>12</sup> The band initially sought to secure the rights to the film in order to expand on the album's concept with planned music videos built directly on actual footage from the film. The idea was shot down by the record company.

Nevertheless, three out of the six music videos illustrating the album display a strong connection with cinema, referring to hag horror and the Gothic tradition as such. They are built around the idea of discord between their two protagonists, thus reflecting the real-life disagreements between Fahey and Detroit.

The most prominent example is "Stay," a Gothic tale taking place in a dark moonlit chamber filled with medical equipment, a mixture of a dark castle interior and a hospital ward. Detroit takes the role of a Gothic sister of mercy taking care of her comatose lover. Fahey appears mid-video as Death, who comes to take the man's soul. The two start a fight, in which life triumphs over death<sup>13</sup>—Detroit saves her lover, who miraculously regains consciousness. Fahey's Death leaves sneering in anger. The Gothic conflict exists on an aural level, as well. Małgorzata Grajter, a music theorist, explains that juxtaposing two completely dissimilar vocal registers is a Wagnerian trick, Marcella's high register connected with the celestial sphere, Siobhan's contralto associated with hell and darkness. Grajter also pays attention to the contrast in the very structure of the song. The introductory part (verse-chorus-verse-chorus) is a delicate pop ballad without a rhythm section, containing, however, ambient, sci-fi elements (which in itself is a nod to Elmer Bernstein's soundtrack for *Cat-Women of the Moon*). Then, more or less at a 2:00 time stamp, Siobhan's bridge part with a riveting guitar riff and a pulsating rhythm section begins. Marcella's whistle register note (2:55 time stamp) overpowers the riff, signifying a symbolic reunion but one that, unfortunately, occurred only on a musical narration level; in the interview with Michael Hubbard, Marcella Detroit recalled: "In the video for 'Stay,' I was singing to this guy who was dying and she (Siobhan) was the Angel of Death. We used our personality differences to our advantage, but it was a little too real!" Grievances aside, "Stay" turned out to be a smash hit, becoming the act's only UK number one.

<sup>12</sup> "Stay," "Moonchild" and "Catwoman" are the most outstanding examples.

<sup>13</sup> Sophie Muller recreates a motif of psychomachia, so typical of Medieval morality plays. The mock-fight between Detroit and Fahey is reminiscent of the conflict between the allegorical Virtues and Vices in *The Castle of Perseverance* and looks as grotesque. The inclusion of excessive Gothic make-up, a sparkly catsuit on Fahey, not to mention the two leads' over-the-top gestures and facial expressions, characteristic of Grande Dame Guignol, add a camp quality to the video.

The music video for “Goodbye Cruel World,” as Gothic and gloomy as the one for “Stay,” re-enacts Grande Dame Guignol camp aesthetics.<sup>14</sup> Its first thirty seconds play with two classics: the aforementioned *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* and Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* (1950). Even though the latter does not really qualify as a hag horror, being more of an attempt at film noir, it surely bears a strong likeness to this genre, depicting “50-year-old, once-great silent film star Norma Desmond (Gloria Swanson), living in a rundown palazzo among the mementos of her past and plotting a ‘return’ in her own adaptation of *Salome*” (Shelley 10). Norma, a tragic screen diva, continues to live in an illusion that “the pictures got small,” while she remained a grand star. Her fate is as poignant as the Hudson siblings’—she kills a man who was supposed to help her stage her triumphant comeback. Before she is transported to a mental facility, Norma is given one final chance to thrive in the limelight, descending the stairs at her lavish mansion, as if she were the actual Salome, enjoying the presence of photographers and journalists, and, most of all, declaring to Mr. DeMille, the director, her readiness for a close-up. The beginning of “Goodbye Cruel World” reinvents that scene. Before Siobhan Fahey announces that she is also ready for her close-up, we see the two in an upscale apartment, Fahey filing her fingernails and towering ominously over Detroit, who fiddles with her guitar. In one of the most iconic scenes in *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* Blanche complains to her sister: “You wouldn’t be able to do these awful things to me if I weren’t still in this chair,” to which Jane brusquely responds: “But you are, Blanche! You are in that chair!” In Sophie Muller’s modernized interpretation, with both characters much younger than their cinematic antecedents, it is Detroit who plays the unfavourable role of the victim, claiming that Fahey’s character would not have been able to do those awful things to her if she had not been stuck behind that guitar. Detroit’s reply is as cruel as Jane Hudson’s: “But you are, Marcy! You are stuck behind this guitar!” From the outset, the music video relies heavily on camp aesthetics associated with the Golden Age of Hollywood, musicals in particular, “with their over-the-top moments of spectacle, robust color schemes, female stars taking center stage, overt theatricalization of gender roles” (Cohan). Fahey and Detroit manifest the “corny flamboyant femaleness” (Sontag 279) typical of Hollywood glamour through wearing fancy costumes (the former a black robe, dark glasses and a turban, the latter—a white fur and heavy

<sup>14</sup> Susan Sontag notes that the origins of camp taste are to be found as early as the 18<sup>th</sup> century, treating Gothic fiction as one of its emanations (280). For a more elaborate discussion of Grande Dame Guignol and camp sensibility, see Fisiak, “Hag Horror Heroines: Kitsch/Camp Goddesses, Tyrannical Females, Queer Icons.”

jewellery), fake acting and excessive mannerisms. Many scenes portray them rolling on their grand beds and making dramatic facial expressions or exuberant gestures. To top it all, in certain scenes, the two are shown performing on a stage in their shimmering “moon” catsuits, reviving the original idea behind their second album. Imran Khan observes that Sophie Muller, aware of the tensions between Fahey and Detroit, “found a dazzling gimmick with which to sell the band’s image,” adding that

[h]er treatment for “Goodbye Cruel World” re-envision[s] the gothic-glam rock palaver<sup>15</sup> as a Hollywood drama, spoofing<sup>16</sup> untouchable classics like *Sunset Boulevard* and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?* Detroit’s Joan Crawford and Fahey’s Bette Davis sweep and cavort around the black and white Victorian gloom.

According to Cazz Blase, the band’s dark, yet glamorous image

was intriguing at the time because it went against the prevailing mood of the early nineties, as did the music. Dance flavoured pop was the dominant theme at the time, and goth and glam were both definitely out, so the presence of Shakespears Sister created a sense of discordance.

Combining Gothic discord with a particular Hollywood feel characterizes the video for “I Don’t Care,” as well.

This time, Muller depicts two women plotting against each other, their conflict set against a background strongly reminiscent of both 1920s Art Deco and the Victorian era. The first scene portrays a fully made-up Marcella Detroit tormented by nightmares<sup>17</sup> of Fahey performing without her. Their first face-to-face confrontation takes place in a sparsely lit corridor and the two look as if they were on the set of Jean-Luc Godard’s 1965 *Alphaville*. The next scene shows the two at a table in their musicians’ company. Both characters cast aggressive looks at each other and make intimidating faces. At one point, Detroit points a knife at Fahey, while

<sup>15</sup> Małgorzata Grajter notices in “Goodbye Cruel World” direct references to the harmonic structure characteristic of Pink Floyd (effect achieved through the usage of D major and G major scales).

<sup>16</sup> While “Goodbye Cruel World” can be considered a spoof of legendary Hollywood productions, Shakespears Sister music videos also became a relevant material for travesty, as demonstrated by “Dickens Daughters” (1993), a brilliant parody of “Stay” and “I Don’t Care” by two British comedienne, Dawn French and Jennifer Saunders.

<sup>17</sup> Philip W. Martin observes that “[i]n its sense of a distressing or disturbingly prescient dream, nightmare is a common device in Gothic fiction” (164), as testified by Walpole’s *Otranto* or Radcliffe’s fiction. The female protagonists of hag horrors also frequently suffer terrifying, elaborate dream visions—William Castle’s *Straight-Jacket* and *The Night Walker* (1964) are representative cases.

Fahey puts poison in Detroit's glass of wine and asks her to drink it. The way Detroit eats makes one think of a certain scene in *What Ever Happened Baby Jane?* in which Jane consumes a chicken leg in a savage, animalistic way. "I Don't Care" efficiently captures the emotional strain between the band members. In the video's final segment, Detroit wakes up in her bed only to see Fahey in a Victorian outfit reciting Dame Edith Sitwell's "Hornpipe" on a miniature stage, itself a surprising intertextual detail. A brief moment of reconciliation follows—Fahey reaches for Detroit's hand and the two start a joyful dance,<sup>18</sup> soon joined by a crew of musicians, all of whom are clad in Victorian costumes, as well.

Before the notorious 1993 split, Sophie Muller managed to create one more music video for the band, this time for "Hello (Turn Your Radio On)," a clever take on Frida Kahlo's paintings.<sup>19</sup> The next video she directed for them, the comeback "All the Queen's Horses" (2019), is an exercise in intertextuality,<sup>20</sup> revamping selected elements from the band's previous music videos. In an interview with Jedd Beaudoin, Fahey admitted that "[Muller]'s produced another masterpiece on a slender budget. And only she could have done it. She explored the struggle we had between ourselves and made it funny. It's sort of a sequel to the early videos." In the same interview, Detroit stated: "Only Sophie could have done that, understanding the dynamic between us and using that in the videos." According to Hanna Hanra, the video to "All the Queen's Horses"

tells their story: the ego struggle, the strained relationship, the paranoia; there's a sparkly catsuit, eye-rolls. The "Stay" video is recreated on a pool table. . . . The only difference to the story is that this time the two walk into the sunset arm in arm.

In this country-flavoured ballad of departure and reunion, Detroit and Fahey, dressed in cowboy garb, talk, argue, drink together, and show each other more or less rude gestures. Theirs is a rocky relationship, full of admiration and hatred at the same time. Drag queens impersonating "Stay" characters endow the video with an additional camp undertone. However, the ending is very uplifting, suggesting that despite their differences, both personal and

<sup>18</sup> What encourages such an optimistic conclusion is the overall upbeat tempo of the song, with a rhythm section reminiscent of Tamla Motown productions.

<sup>19</sup> Muller's music videos for "My 16<sup>th</sup> Apology" and "Catwoman" are excluded from the analysis because they mostly rely on live footage.

<sup>20</sup> In this case, intertextuality embraces the audial sphere, as well, the harmonica inviting comparison with Ennio Morricone's soundtracks to spaghetti westerns by Sergio Leone. Małgorzata Grajter emphasizes the importance of another musical element, i.e. the string orchestra, the aim of which is to form a lyrical counterpoint to the chorus melody, thus introducing a so-called "neoromantic" element.

creative, they are able to talk to each other again.<sup>21</sup> A Gothic conflict is thus deconstructed, allowing for an unlikely union between an oppressed damsel and her tormentor, these two roles ambiguously floating between them.

A similarly uplifting tone is present in Shakespears Sister's most recent song, "When She Finds You," a collaboration with Richard Hawley, promoting their 2019 *Ride Again* EP. This time Detroit and Fahey keep switching in their roles of a psychologist and her patient. The music video, typically for Muller aesthetics, merges Gothic quality, finesse and nostalgia for film noir.<sup>22</sup> Some space is reserved for UFO sightings and the 1950s American sci-fi ambiance. Muller seems to play with the *Cat-Women of the Moon* concept that accompanied the production of *Hormonally Yours*. In a poignant final scene, Fahey goes through a series of UFO pictures/drawings only to discover small-print writing under one of them: "You mean we could have been friends all of this time?", to which Detroit offers Fahey a serene smile. This obviously alludes to *Baby Jane*'s climax, when, soon after Blanche's confession that she was to blame for the accident and Jane's resulting decline, Jane responds in disbelief: "You mean all this time we could have been friends?" A question like this serves as a perfect coda for several interconnected narratives of co-existing affection and rivalry, admiration and hatred, dependence and liberation, on both a personal and fictitious level.

The unexpected truce between Siobhan Fahey and Marcella Detroit has opened a new chapter in the complex history of their band. Their resumed collaboration with Sophie Muller is a promise of new Gothic-themed videos. Gary Ryan, in his interview with the band, states: "Art imitated life in their videos, which jokily telegraphed their rivalry and enmity towards each other," the two recent ones reflecting their newly found understanding, though. Music videos as such demonstrate similar interconnectedness and instability: "[they] ha[ve] . . . undergone shifts in technologies and platforms, periods of intense cross-pollination with other media, financial booms and busts, and changing levels of audience engagement" (Vernallis 207). The same could be written about Gothicism and its dependence on new media outlets, music video among them, that enabled its development and subsequent intertextuality. One may thus assume that the intertextual references to cinematic classics inspired by broadly understood Gothicism will remain an integral element of music video culture, as showcased by Shakespears Sister's musical and visual output.

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<sup>21</sup> For Fahey and Detroit, the video was more than just an illustration of their reconciliation, but also "making fun of [their] past selves" and showing "a sense of humour about [their] paranoia and insecurity" ("Here to 'Stay'?").

<sup>22</sup> The song is very nostalgic also music-wise, with clear references to the 1960s sound, slower surf rock instrumental pieces in particular. Małgorzata Grajter highlights the role of the string orchestra to enhance that "retro" feel.

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## Metanarratives and Storytelling in Contemporary Mainstream Popular Music: *Romeo and Juliet* in the Making of the Star Persona

# ABSTRACT

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This article analyzes how mainstream artists respond to the dynamics of online fan communities, developing complex metanarratives that interrelate their songs and music videos with their “personal” activity on social media. Audiences analyze in depth and discuss each release, contributing to its viralization on the internet. However, these strategies need strong narratives that allow convincing developments and transmedia storytelling, and this is where literature becomes a significant source of inspiration. I argue that the assumption (or subversion) of popular literary characters and narratives contributes to a positioning of artists in the music scene and facilitates their “reading” by the audience. To illustrate this process, I analyze the references to *Romeo and Juliet* by mainstream pop artists in the last decade, paying special attention to Troye Sivan’s debut album *Blue Neighborhood* (2015), considered a homosexual version of Shakespeare’s drama, and to Halsey’s concept album *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* (2017), understood as a queer version of the play. Both artists explained their personal reading of Shakespeare’s drama as a way of expressing their own feelings and experiences. These examples of metanarrative storytelling achieved their aim, and millions of fans engaged with both artists, discussing lyrics, photos and music videos related to *Romeo and Juliet* on social media.

**Keywords:** transmedia storytelling, *Romeo and Juliet*, music.

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## INTRODUCTION

Popular music is one of the main cultural contents on the internet: music videos top the charts of YouTube, music streaming platforms increase the number of subscribers each year, and videogames and social media develop new strategies to offer live performances (see Marshmello concert in “Fortnite” or Coachella Festival on YouTube). But the remediation of popular music to the internet is not only a question of offering new ways of accessing music, it rather implies the development of new strategies to appeal to internet users and to adapt music to the new dynamics of consumption. Considering the data, we can confirm that the music industry succeeded in its adaptation to the new context. In the last decade things have changed significantly; social media and audiovisual content have become central for artists, and releases are constantly beating records, especially with regard to their impact in a short period of time.<sup>1</sup> This situation cannot be explained merely by referring to the increase of internet users or to the current ubiquity of online consumption. It needs a far-reaching approach that delves into the strategies that have been implemented, and a certain perspective that will allow us to evaluate what changes there have been and how certain practices have become standardized and habitual in the promotion of artists.

Firstly, audiovisual streaming technologies have restored the interest of the popular music industry in audiovisual formats. Undoubtedly, the popularity of YouTube played an important role, but we should not forget the increasing attention paid to audiovisual content by music streaming services (Spotify video, Apple music) and the audiovisual technologies in social media that rapidly normalized practices like Instagram stories, Facebook live videos, and popularized apps like Snapchat and TikTok, especially among young users. In this context, music videos gained relevance in the industry and demonstrated its versatility to deploy a new aesthetic that has been analyzed in depth by Carol Vernallis (*Unruly Media*). On the internet, music video has become more flexible and likely to gather influences from various media, developing intertextual strategies that have worked specially well for the online audience. In fact, many official videos have triggered prosumer practices that have contributed to the promotion of artists and have challenged the formal boundaries of this audiovisual genre.

At the same time, artists improved their skills in social media, engaging their fan communities and achieving great impact with their online activity. These communication technologies might have once been seen as an easy

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<sup>1</sup> Most-viewed video in 24 hours (beaten several times in 2018 and 2019).

tool to spread information, but they have revealed themselves to be more about interaction than one-way communication. Certainly, the management of artists' social media profiles has changed over the last decade, they have intensified their presence and their exposure responding to the immediacy of these forms of communication. This is a challenging situation for artists, who need to regularly feed their social media profiles, showing closeness but keeping the aura of stardom and dealing with "the dialectical tension between intimacy and distance, attraction and rejection" (Risi 153).

Fan communities demand constant activity, regular interaction and, ultimately, content. This is where transmedia storytelling and metanarratives become necessary for artists. Not long ago, artists' media exposure used to be restricted to promotional campaigns for the release of an album, and their communication with the audience was established through broadcasting media (TV, radio, magazines); everything was pretty much under control, and their public appearances had a clear motive and a discursive strategy that they just needed to follow. Nowadays, the importance of being constantly present on social media has driven new strategies and rhetorical tools for communication: single releases happen every few months, and promotion campaigns are not reduced to publicize the releasing date through a countdown; they have been extended in time and have become more complex, intensifying their presence on social media and especially using all sorts of intertwined audiovisual formats (teaser, lyric video, behind the scenes, etc.). Thus, master narratives are more important than ever to interconnect the wide range of actions and contents that participate in a promotional campaign nowadays.

## THE BENEFITS OF METANARRATIVES AND TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING

Communication and cultural production on the internet have been widely analyzed from the perspective of transmedia storytelling, mainly following the works of Henry Jenkins. These approaches served to highlight the affordances of digital technologies and the development of participatory culture. However, the aim here is to bring transmedia storytelling to the terrain of narratology in order to explore how artists appropriate and rework existing narratives to articulate discourses and to position their star persona. Of course, this is not a new trend from the (post)digital age: artists have always found ways to establish connections with all kinds of stories. However, I argue that the current communication arena facilitates these strategies and allows more complex promotional campaigns that aim to erase the distance between the person and the star persona, especially

due to the intensification of their exposure in social media. Thus, nowadays, artists are constantly rewriting their narratives in a process in which “the self forms a trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future” (Giddens 75), and the elements that articulate their identities are distributed in different media and interact in a constant flux. The control of time for artists is now more important than ever to create a successful narrative; we are not referring here to the actions carefully scheduled in any promotion, but rather to the way this narrative re-signifies the past from the present of the artist and projects his/her future (Ricoeur 345).

We all use social media as a virtual projection of ourselves; making decisions on those aspects we share of our lives, we also decide when to publish and how to present what we are posting. Thus, we create a narrative of ourselves that also plays in a flexible way with time; even if this process can be tracked in the timeline of our social media profiles, we constantly recall people, actions and events from the past reinterpreted in our present. We have normalized these techniques to narrate our lives through texts, videos and photos in which we share our experiences and thoughts, our likes and dislikes on different topics. We do this from what Bakhtin calls a dialogic consciousness: we become writers of our auto/biography, and those that are skilled and know how to use these narrative tools to engage with other users succeed and gain more followers.

These practices may be better understood as metanarratives, especially in the case of artists dealing with their star persona. Lyotard’s post-modern conception of this term is particularly useful to approach how artists articulate the discourse of their public persona as a hyperreal subject through songs, videos and (social) media communication. All these texts interact and participate in the configuration of a master narrative for artists that does not need to be true but plausible, even if it is always suspected of being fake and entering the terrain of simulacrum (in Baudrillard terms). The intertextual scheme of media interactions needs to keep the logic of a credible and appealing narrative that appears to be real to the fan community.

Again, these practices are not new, but they have been intensified and extensively deployed in the post-digital age through transmedia storytelling strategies in films, series, music, videogames, literature. All these media are being analyzed from the perspective of post-classical narratology that expanded beyond structuralism to embrace a wide range of transdisciplinary approaches (Alber and Fludernik 5). Thus, Thanouli explores post-classical narration in 21<sup>st</sup> century film and television, and Vernallis (*Embracing the Media Swirl*) identifies a “media swirl” in the digital age. In popular music, I argue that post-classical narrative is especially noticeable in transmedia metanarratives that intertwine music videos and social media communication. Metanarratives have always been

relevant for music videos; Simon Frith highlighted the role of videos in the “creation of the star” and Andrew Goodwin used the term to explain how artists use videos to articulate messages and engage with their audiences. But, as Mathias Korsgaard argues, “music video today is in itself a central component of the field of new digital media” (164).

Nowadays, the music video is a pivotal element in the marketing plan of any release: it is a medium with great impact on the release of a single, it is announced on social media with stills, teasers and trailers, and it structures the promotional life of the songs on an album. Besides, music videos have become more intertextual in the (post)digital age, they often articulate the artists’ master narrative in different ways: they gather together artists’ “personal” information and opinions on different matters expressed not only in the song, but also in interviews, performances, public appearances and (especially) on social media; they establish connections between the singles of an album, and between different periods of the artist’s career, referring to actions, topics and characters performed by the artist in previous albums and music videos. Thus, I argue that metanarratives in music videos may be both synchronic with the content that is published in other media and diachronic, revisiting and updating the artist’s past from the present.

In the last decade, we find many examples of music videos that articulate synchronic and diachronic metanarratives in which artists try to erase the boundaries between the person and the persona. In fact, visual albums perfectly illustrate this strategy, and they appear as a new category of music video in the 2010s (see Justin Bieber’s *Purpose* or Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*). But many other music videos use similar tactics, like including “Easter eggs” to challenge fan communities and generate discussions on the possible hidden messages in a video (see Ariana Grande’s “Breathing” or Taylor Swift’s “Me!”). Particularly interesting in this regard are cases like Britney Spears’s “Hold It Against Me,” where we see excerpts from previous music videos played in the background on TV screens, and Taylor Swift’s “Look What You Made Me Do,” where several characters performed by this artist in previous videos interact. At the end of this video we see all of them arguing while the “talking” Swift takes the floor significantly saying: “I would very much like to be excluded from this narrative.”

Metanarratives are not only techniques that configure formal patterns in music videos. They are powerful strategies to articulate ideological discourses that deal with ethics, or rather with meta-ethics because they express political subject-positions, morality and cultural values. In this regard, “meta-narratives both supply the structure for individual narratives and the criteria for perception and appreciation by which sense is made of that structure. This is why ideas about the social world can seem self-evident” (Stephens and McCallum 6). Thus, music videos may be read

as palimpsests, as cultural artefacts of their time, and the metanarratives they put into play might be understood in the same way that literature regularly updates classic narratives, such as *Pygmalion* or *Faust*, from a contemporary perspective.

The possibilities of metanarratives in the current mediascape have favoured the emergence of concept albums in contemporary mainstream pop. This is a format historically linked to rock (from Pink Floyd to Radiohead), but since the 2010s mainstream pop artists have perceived the benefits of developing a concept to interconnect the wide range of media that articulate a musical release. Some notable recent examples are Janelle Monáe's *Dirty Computer* (2018) and Madonna's *Madame X* (2019). This might also be understood as a response to the proliferation of 360° deals in music industry during the 2000s; nowadays artists obtain revenues from many different sources, and marketing campaigns work better under the umbrella of metanarratives capable of sustaining transmedia strategies. The new reality of music marketing implies a diversification of roles that the artists need to play in their career; mainstream artists are now more versatile and need skills as communicators, posers, entertainers, etc.

Being inscribed in a strong narrative might be very helpful to create the star persona of an artist. However, it is not only about impersonating characters or playing roles in music videos; it is rather a question of the perspective adopted to approach that narrative and the subject positioning of the artist in the whole story. The narrative must be recognizable and appealing to the fan community, but it should also provide something new and related to contemporary social and political issues and values. As Lyndon C. S. Way argues, "by vaguely articulating discourses of being anti-establishment, musicians articulate authenticity for themselves and their fans" (114). Thus, it is very common that artists rework traditional narratives including their position on current concerns like global warming, LGBT rights and gender equality, i.e. topics that may connect them to their fan community and generate debate. This is especially relevant in a media context where broadcasting media are losing audiences and celebrities' posts on social media constantly activate countless debates.

## QUEERING *ROMEO AND JULIET* IN CONTEMPORARY POPULAR MUSIC

I will illustrate the use of metanarratives in contemporary popular music by analyzing the adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*. Shakespeare chose for his drama an archetypal narrative rooted in classic literature and popular in the Italian Renaissance. The drama approaches the dialectics of love and

hate, and presents a dramatic structure that drives the story of the main characters from love to death and their families from hate to reconciliation. This narrative facilitates reflections on several universals, like the catharsis of death and the challenge to established social norms (in this case, the fight for a forbidden love) that can easily be updated to the social context of different periods. In fact, Shakespeare's drama was adapted since its early representations, removing comic characters (Mercutio, Nurse) and introducing iconic scenic resources that are not in the text (the balcony).

The drama has been adapted to romance, cinema, opera, musicals, etc. following Shakespeare's work, but adjusting the text, the cast or the aesthetics to appeal to diverse audiences at different times. And the story has inspired celebrated adaptations like the musical (and film) *West Side Story*, introducing the issues of migration and youth violence in New York during the mid-twentieth century. Małgorzata Pawłowska argues that "in the twentieth century a gradual transition occurred of the linearly perceived narrative from classical to popular music" (292). This happened not only in musicals, but especially in songs that narrate the story of the two lovers from different perspectives: The Supremes, Tom Waits, Lou Reed, Dire Straits, Bruce Springsteen and Radiohead recorded songs inspired by the drama.

*Romeo and Juliet* is probably the most popular drama in the Western World nowadays. Students read and study this text in high schools, and it has become a paradigm of romantic love in popular culture. Moreover, to challenge established social norms (as it is the case with forbidden love) is a recurrent theme for every young generation and it has been the main topic of successful productions (*Grease*, *Titanic*). Recently, *Romeo and Juliet* has been reworked in many ways to express female empowerment and LGBTQ relationships: that is, to challenge patriarchy and heteronormativity. For instance, the traditionally sexist Pirelli calendar changed its strategy in 2020 to portray empowered women in a project entitled "Looking for Juliet," while Troian Bellisario directed the film *Still a Rose* (2015), an LGBTQ version of the drama. Lately, feminism and LGBTQ rights have made it to the public agenda and have become a trending topic in modern cultural productions. Women's march on Washington and #MeToo movement (both in 2017) are two relevant examples of a new social sensibility to feminism and LGBTQ rights. GLAAD's report (2017) demonstrates that young people are more accepting of LGBTQ people than ever before in the USA.

Thus, the social terrain was ready for artists to empower female roles in the play and to queer the love story with gender bending characters. In fact, this was nothing new in opera versions of the drama; Pawłowska mentions that "in Zingarelli's opera, Romeo's role was initially written for a castrato, but in the 1820s it was sang by prima donnas. In Vaccai's and Bellini's works, the role was written for a female performer from the

beginning” (97). However, recent queer and feminist versions of the drama in popular music have proved to be striking and successful as metanarratives. Not long ago, homosexuality was taboo for mainstream pop artists and might have ruined their careers (see George Michael). Homosexuality and queerness are nowadays more explicit, less allusive or metaphoric. In 2008 Katy Perry released the single “I Kissed a Girl,” and it triggered scandalized reactions that would seem naïve nowadays. At the same time, some skeptical voices in the LGBTQ community accused Perry of queer-trivializing marketing and considered the music video male-gaze oriented. These are the risks for artists when approaching controversial topics, and Rita Ora experienced it with the reactions to her song “Girls” (2018). LGBTQ communities are very active online, and recognized homosexual and queer artists are celebrated and heavily followed, as demonstrated the success of the hashtag #20GayTeen that lesbian artist Hayley Kiyoko used on Twitter to wish a happy new year in 2018. They share music and engage with artists that show their commitment to LGBTQ rights, but they are always attentive to all their activities and ready to denounce anything suspected of being fake.

I will now focus in detail on some of the latest adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet* in mainstream popular music. I begin with Taylor Swift’s song “Love Story” (2008) to illustrate how promotion campaigns have changed in the last decade. This was the first single from Swift’s second album, *Fearless*, a record which signified a crossover from country to mainstream pop. The single was released in September 2008, and it was advertised on iTunes with the successful campaign “Countdown to *Fearless*.” No specific actions were deployed on social media, and the official music video was not uploaded to her YouTube channel until 16 June 2009. Swift states in several interviews that she wrote the song based on an autobiographical love story that was not approved of by her parents, and the similarities with *Romeo and Juliet* made her relate it to Shakespeare’s drama. She tells the story from the perspective of Juliet and reworks the final part to include a happy ending. Both the song and the music video escape any controversies and follow all the patterns of a heterosexual romantic love story. There are no political intentions in her appropriation of the drama, no critical distance, and Swift’s approach to the story appears to be anecdotal, treating it as the paradigm of true love. This is not surprising as it perfectly fits the metanarrative of the artist at the time.

In 2015 Troye Sivan launched his first album, *Wild*, an EP promoted by a music video trilogy entitled *Blue Neighborhood* that recalls the story of *Romeo and Juliet*. By then, Sivan already had a successful career as a youtuber: he used to upload his own songs, covers and other videos commenting on different subjects, and he even used this platform to



announce his homosexuality in August 2013. Of course, he used social media to promote the album release in September with an intense campaign during the summer that included meet&greet events and several teasers. Other content was regularly published both on his official website and on his social media. Each single release meant the premiere of the music video in YouTube, and his fan community engaged with the episodic story that was narrated in the trilogy, looking for clues and speculating on the possible developments. In the first video, “Wild,” we see two boys that enjoy their friendship. Both the lyrics and the video are concerned with a gradual arousal of desires that go beyond mere friendship. We also see the conflict between their families. In “Fools” both kids are teenagers, they get caught kissing by one of the fathers, who is furious and disapproves of the relationship. The rest of the song is about the necessity of escaping from the “blue neighborhood” in order to be free and enjoy their love. In the last video, “Talk Me Down,” the protagonists are in their late teens; the angry father has died, and both friends meet at the funeral. Love tension is in the air, but one of the guys has opted to negate his feelings and fit social expectations by pretending to be heterosexual, which drives the story to an open ending in which his friend apparently jumps from a cliff.

Again, we see some of the dramatic patterns of Shakespeare’s play: the dialectics of love and hate, the controversies between the two families, the forbidden love, the imposition of social values that repress desire and love, etc. Of course, this was easily read by the fan community as a homosexual version of *Romeo and Juliet*. Sivan stated the story was based on an autobiographical experience he lived growing up on the outskirts of Perth (his “blue neighborhood”), and in YouTube comments there are many questions about what aspect of Sivan’s life inspired it, and what the ongoing storylines mean. This story perfectly fits Sivan’s trajectory as a youtuber with a strong gay community; adopting this metanarrative gives his music a defined gay setting, something that is especially important in an incipient musical career.

The relation to *Romeo and Juliet* is explicit in Halsey’s second LP, *Hopeless Fountain Kingdom* (2017). This is a concept album that took advantage of the many marketing strategies of transmedia storytelling for its promotion. The sequence is difficult to resume here, everything is based on a story that takes place in Anorev (i.e. Verona spelled backwards) and is protagonized by lesbian female character Luna Aurum (“Luna” meaning moon) and male character Solis Angelus (“Solis” meaning sun), respectively from the House of Aurum and the House of Angelus. Besides habitual promotional tools (teasers, album trailer, meet&greet events, etc.), several innovative actions were taken. Both characters and both houses had their Twitter accounts months before the album was released.

Several letters with *Romeo and Juliet* verses were sent to certain fans (and they shared them on their social media), the album cover was revealed through some kind of gymkhana where fans had to find distinct USBs hidden in different cities and share the information online to build up the cover. Halsey also started her career on social media (mainly Tumblr), so these strategies were familiar to her.

It is significant that most of the references to *Romeo and Juliet* are in a series of music videos that interconnect the narrative of the songs. Five music videos premiered along almost one year kept the attention (and generated speculations) of her fan community. There are many recognizable references to Shakespeare's drama: in the video of "Now or Never" the two households are presented, we see the first encounter between the main characters, and Luna (playing the role of Romeo and embodied by Halsey) visits the fortuneteller. "Strangers" shows a boxing combat between Luna and Rosa (played by bisexual singer Lauren Jauregui) that echoes the fight between Romeo and Mercutio. In "Bad at Love" Luna is hiding and escapes with some friends, whereas in the "Angelus cut" version we also see Solis sending Luna a letter. The last video, "Sorry," is a one-shot solo performance of Luna where she apologizes for breaking Solis's heart and explains her inability to engage in a relationship. Again, the end of the story is reworked, here to position Luna (Romeo) as a free spirit.

Dualistic symbology permeates both lyrics and videos. It is not only love and hate, but also life and death (in the many battles), Luna and Solis representing day and night and the celestial bodies that never get together (except in eclipses). Halsey highlights the role of honey, which appears in "The Prologue" (where she uses words from Shakespeare's prologue): she recites "Hands so bloody tastes [sic] like honey," while in "Good Mourning" it's her younger brother who recites "there's a place where love conquers all. A city where the streets fill with milk and honey." Honey means both death (blood) and hope for a better living; the same ambivalence that Shakespeare gives in the play to plants that can both heal and poison. Significantly, Halsey tweeted about bees before the album release, the letters sent to fans were stamped with a bee, and there are several bee allusions in her videos. Of course, the bees were also used in the album merchandising.

Halsey sustains the inspiration of *Romeo and Juliet* for the album comes from her experience of a difficult relationship break up that recalled the impossible love story between the characters. Thus, she adapted the story to make it fit with her own identity (self-defined as biracial, bipolar and bisexual) and reworked the ending to vindicate personal freedom. She was aesthetically inspired by Baz Luhrmann's film *Romeo + Juliet* (1997); in an online conversation between Halsey and the Australian director he

emphasized that “the intersections about you experiencing that film and your personal life, and bringing those things together is what then makes it resonate.” In fact, it is not only that Halsey adapts Shakespeare’s drama to elaborate her own metanarrative, but that she does so by recalling one of the most popular postmodern versions of the play twenty years after its release.

## CONCLUSIONS

A story may be told in many ways and using different kinds of communication tools and strategies. Thus, most of the popular narratives of literature evolve over time, adapting their nature to distinct media and adopting new social and political values according to the times. Popular music has always played an important part in this process, and new developments in marketing strategies and transmedia storytelling have offered artists new ways of reworking these narratives to engage fan communities in social media and to establish a closer communication with them. As demonstrated, embodying a character or adapting a narrative allows artists to create intertwined connections between their “personal” life and their star persona, all in the context of storytelling that is normally based in personal experiences. Posts, photos, music videos and other audiovisual media are increasingly more related to create complex networks that aim to “trap” audiences. We have explored the great development of these tactics when approaching Taylor Swift’s promotion for her second album in 2008. Her campaign objective was iTunes sales and she delayed the free access to her music (videos) on YouTube for several months. The business was in hardcopy and digital sales at a time when social media were still at a developing stage, and this complicated transmedia strategies. A few years later, Troye Sivan and Halsey (both raised with social media) released their albums focusing on YouTube and other social media.

Metanarratives are easier to articulate for artists through different social media. In fact, if metanarratives are consistent enough, they are perfect to solve and take advantage of the constant feeding that these media request. On the other hand, these metanarratives introduce variations in the structure and the archetypes of the story in a way similar to other “media” did decades ago. Analyzing *Romeo and Juliet* as a case study, it was noticed that Shakespeare’s drama has undergone significant changes in representations and adaptations since its early stage performances. Moreover, intertextuality between adaptations is not rare (see Halsey’s and Luhrmann’s versions).

We may wonder, why *Romeo and Juliet* and no other Shakespeare dramas? What makes this story so successful in contemporary mainstream popular music? Beyond its popularity, I argue that the plot is especially appealing for a teenage audience, not only because of the love story, but especially for the incomprehension of society and the opposition of the lovers to parental norms. Moreover, the adaptations offer a wide range of possibilities to drive the story to a happy ending (Swift), to allude to a potential suicide (Sivan) and to stand up for freedom (Halsey). This keeps the suspense (and the speculations) in the fan community through a series of music videos that articulate the whole narrative. Besides, the story is so well-known that it is easy to relocate it in different contexts, both in time and place. Thus, Swift turns the story to the topics of medieval times (castle, clothing, dance), Sivan situates it in the present shooting the videos in the outskirts of Sydney, and Halsey places her story in a timeless apocalyptic scenario in the streets of Mexico city—significantly, the same place where Luhrmann shot most of his movie *Romeo + Juliet*.

If a narrative is reworked, adapted or adopted, it is because it prevails in popular culture, and it probably does so due to its versatility to introduce the issues and concerns of contemporary societies. This means the narrative is alive, not fossilized, and so it evolves. This is the case for *Romeo and Juliet*, which has lately experienced several feminist and LGBTQ versions, including those by Sivan and Halsey, and which is now in the process of being adapted as a hip-hop musical. Some might say that this is the fate of the classics in modern times, but we rather consider it a necessary path that any narrative must go through to become a classic.

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## Taking Horror as You Find It: From Found Manuscripts to Found Footage Aesthetics

# ABSTRACT

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An authenticator of the story and a well-tested enhancer of immersion, the trope of the found manuscript has been a persistent presence in Gothic writing since the birth of the genre. The narrative frame offered by purported textual artifacts has always aligned well with the genre's preoccupation with questions of literary integrity, veracity, authorial originality, ontological anxiety and agency. However, for some time now the application of the found manuscript convention to Gothic fiction has been reduced to a mere token of the genre, failing to gain impact or credibility. A revival of the convention appears to have taken place with the remediation and appropriation of the principally literary trope by the language of film, more specifically, the found footage horror subgenre.

The article wishes to survey the common modes and purposes of the found manuscript device (by referring mostly to works of classical Gothic literature, such as *The Castle of Otranto*, *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*) to further utilize Dirk Delabastita's theories on intersemiotic translation and investigate the gains and losses coming with transfiguring the device into the visual form. Found footage horrors have remained both exceptionally popular with audiences and successful at prolonging the convention by inventing a number of strategies related to performing authenticity. The three films considered for analysis, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), *Paranormal Activity* (2007) and *REC* (2007), exhibit clear literary provenance, yet they also enhance purporting credibility respectively by rendering visual rawness, appealing to voyeuristic tastes, and exploiting susceptibility to conspiratorial thinking.

**Keywords:** found manuscript, found footage horror, Gothic fiction, intersemiotic translation.

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## TAKING HORROR AS YOU FIND IT: FROM FOUND MANUSCRIPTS TO FOUND FOOTAGE AESTHETICS<sup>1</sup>

In the editor's note to the sixth issue of *Text Matters* devoted to Gothic aesthetics, Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet stresses the shifting cartographies of Gothic studies, pointing to scholars' burgeoning interest in the material foundations of the Gothic, be it the physicality of the body or economic, political and cultural conditionings of the day that Gothic aesthetics have been persistently subverting (7). The material turn, one might infer, seems to have impaired critical interest in structural features of Gothic narratives, the found manuscript likely topping the list of the most commonplace and unstimulating tropes that define the genre. Part and parcel of Gothic fiction ever since its very beginnings in the eighteenth century, the convention of the found manuscript has been recognized by both scholars and readers as the epitome of generic tokenization, an instance of Jamesonian pastiche which offers "a knowing nod to literary tradition that is in itself unilluminating" (Baker 56), thus fated to deserve little consideration. Concurrently, however, a number of scholars in the field assert that the device is still relevant to the modern-day preoccupations of the Gothic genre. In his study of found manuscripts and frame narratives as purveyors of Gothic subjects' anxiety over their narrative expression and repression, Daniel Southward renders the trope as "endemic . . . , yet so often critically neglected" (45). Timothy C. Baker suggests that it "still merits investigation" (57) to further prove its significance in highlighting the intricacies of text, language and the past as evident in Scottish Gothic fiction (55). The focus of the following study is to indicate yet another fruitful locus from which to consider the significance of concocted, frame-generating artifacts in constructing Gothic fictions—a distinctive shift in their modality, from the literary to the visual, which accordingly invites one to expose the alterations taking place in transit. The abundance of and continuing demand for found footage horror movies reveals that what originated as a literary convention appears to have lost its potency to regain it in the realm of the visual, where new ways of fabricating authenticity have emerged to better immerse and resonate with modern-day audiences. Borrowing from Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), the analysis begins with an overview of the roles that the convention of the found manuscript plays to enable Gothic writers to simultaneously

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counterfeit authenticity and distance their authorship. Given that the two latter works do not manifest themselves as found manuscripts in the strict sense, I wish to understand the found manuscript as any embedded textual artifact which poses as real and adds to the narrative progress of the novel. The subsequent part of the study surveys the transmutation of the convention into the domain of found footage aesthetics through the prism of intersemiotic translation and Dirk Delabastita's theory of translational operations which characterize the process of transcoding the source text into the target text. In harmony with the now-classic status of the three novels analyzed, the target corpus comprises three classic found footage horror films, *The Blair Witch Project* (dir. E. Sánchez and D. Myrick, 1999), *Paranormal Activity* (dir. O. Peli, 2007) and *[REC]* (dir. J. Balagueró and P. Plaza, 2007), allowing one to better discern the correspondences between the works which proved to be revolutionary in their respective fields, owing largely to the convention of the found artifact.

## LOOKING THROUGH FOUND MANUSCRIPTS

In her seminal work on the use of discovered manuscripts in the Gothic genre, Fiona Robertson observes that “the device . . . offered Gothic writers one way of authenticating and simultaneously distancing material” (94). Arguably still the central rationale behind deploying the trope in Gothic fiction, the above-mentioned tactics converge as early as in the preface to the first edition of genre-defining *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), in which Horace Walpole, a self-declared translator “from the purest Italian” (4), asserts that the manuscript of *Otranto* “was found in the library of an ancient Catholic family in the north of England” and must have been written in the time of the Crusades (4). The remoteness of the purported time and place of its origin (Naples) on the one hand allows Walpole to feign historicity of the artifact and, on the other, is conducive to legitimizing the uncanniness which is about to follow—“miracles, visions, necromancy, dreams, and other preternatural events” (5). As evidenced by another frame narrative analyzed, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, what also lends to the veracity of ostensible artifacts is their dependence on scientific references and lexis. The introductory chapters of the novel forming Victor Frankenstein's account are largely devoted to reminiscences of his educational pursuits. Frankenstein saturates his story with mentions of Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa, Albertus Magnus and Paracelsus, as well as with numerous hints at theories on electricity and galvanism (“Chapter 2”). This part of Shelley's work leaves the reader with a palpable imprint of

a scientific argument, which synthesizes data and offers a purported line of investigation to culminate in the demonstration of findings. Verisimilitudes of scientific discourse also characterize *Dracula*, a work heavily inspired by Shelley's masterpiece, adding to its allure of authenticity. Providing the reader with observations on Renfield, an insect-eating patient confined to an asylum, Dr. Seward's diary entries exercise clinical typology and allude to experts in the field of medical theory:

I shall have to invent a new classification for him, and call him a zoophagous (life-eating) maniac. . . . Why not advance science in its most difficult and vital aspect—the knowledge of the brain? Had I even the secret of one such mind . . . I might advance my own branch of science to a pitch compared with which Burdon-Sanderson's physiology or Ferrier's brain knowledge would be as nothing. (Stoker 90)

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Hailed by Steward as “one of the most advanced scientists of his day” (137), Professor Van Helsing is another character whose sequential and methodical approach to curing Lucy Westenra, as well as to battling vampires authenticates and solidifies the realistic strata of the novel. Interestingly enough, as noted by Carol A. Senf, Van Helsing “takes advantage of contemporary science while at the same time maintaining heavy skepticism about its efficacy” (23), thus leaving space for what is unfathomable to a rational mind and relevant exclusively to folklore.

Shifting focus to another mode of purporting veracity, although not found manuscripts on the overarching level of narrative, both *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* exercise the discussed device inasmuch as they noticeably reify the embedded narratives and the very act of finding (out). While deploying multiple textual forms, Shelley and Stoker likewise fashion their subnarratives as real documents, which are to astound the characters themselves and subsequently to be legitimized by them. In *Dracula* the successful polyphony of literary artifacts (among many, letters, journals, logs, newspaper snippets and phonograph transcripts) owes largely to the fact that the characters take every effort to appreciate and authenticate each other's accounts. A prime example comes with one of Van Helsing's letters to Mina Harker in which he becomes touched by and awakened to the realities of Jonathan's captivity:

I have read your husband's so wonderful diary! You may sleep without doubt. Strange and terrible as it is, it is *true*! I will pledge my life on it. . . . His brain and his heart are all right; this I swear before I have even seen him; so be at rest. . . . I am blessed that today I come to see you, for I have learn all at once so much that again I am dazzle—dazzle more than ever, and I must think. (Stoker 224)

Mina's fears of Jonathan's derangement (as well as Jonathan's own dread of the fallibility of his senses) are mollified as her husband's account of confinement has been validated by another reader of the diary. Similar instances may be found in *Frankenstein*; in one of the final letters to his sister Robert Walton goes to great lengths to assure Margaret that Victor's "tale is connected and told with an appearance of the simplest truth," simultaneously endorsing other documents presented to him by Victor, that is, "letters of Felix and Safie" ("Walton, *in continuation*"). Thus, one's act of stumbling upon a textual artifact and validating it contributes to the overall performance of veracity both in Stoker's and Shelley's narratives. Such a use of the found manuscript device artfully protrudes into the relationship between the reader and the work which poses as real; readers of *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* are invited to emulate the model readers embedded in the texts and yield to the para-authentic substance of the novels.

Concomitant with attracting the reader into placing trust in recovered textual artifacts is the process of abandoning authorial responsibility for explicating the ways in which they interrelate. Thus, apart from being set in remote spaces to distance the author from his or her work (Otranto, Swiss and Arctic settings, and Transylvania in *The Castle of Otranto*, *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* respectively), the narratives which employ the convention of the found manuscript embrace narrative fragmentation, a mode which relocates the narrative authority from the author to the reader. Doing so, fragmented texts undermine the notions of authorship and ownership or, as Ruth Binstock Anolik has it, literalize the strategy of dispossession, both on the level of the structure and materiality of manuscripts (130). Of the works referred to it is perhaps *Frankenstein* which exhibits the most potent manifestation of authorial dispossession, that is, the Creature's coming upon Victor Frankenstein's diary spanning four months preceding his creation. In a bitter tirade targeted at his creator the monster recites various accusations, among them appropriating his representation and agency: "[I]he minutest description of my odious and loathsome person is given, in language which painted your own horrors and rendered mine indelible. I sickened as I read" ("Chapter 15"). Confronted with the Creature's perspective, Victor's narrative discloses its own bias and loosens some of its control as an embedding structure. Victor admits that he "ought to render him [the Creature] happy before [he] complained of his wickedness" and he "consent[s] to listen" ("Chapter 10"). The dominant interpretation of the events is therefore "both resolved and challenged by another text" (Baker 65). As continued by Baker on the narrative framework in *Frankenstein*, "the tension of each narrative strand builds until it is replaced by another, and it is left to the reader to make

sense of the various tales together” (65). Such dynamics of conflicting narratives do not leave the reader unaffected. If every “Gothic Subject, the framer or finder of their respective tale, presses the tale to serve their own agenda” (Southward 53), then the reader is ultimately deprived of any claim to objective reality. As specified by Anolik, fragmentation “clearly works to disrupt the reader’s hermeneutic possession of the text as meaning falls between the gaps of the fragments” (130). The epistemic impasse triggered by fragmented manuscripts further problematizes gaining access to the past. In Baker’s eyes, “[m]etafictional elements, including found manuscripts and clear forgeries, arguably highlight the extent to which any text, or work of language, fails to represent the past objectively or completely” (Baker 55). In *Dracula* such anxieties are typified by Jonathan Harker’s torments over the reliability of his own journal entries as when he admits: “I was in doubt, . . . everything took a hue of unreality, and I did not know what to trust, even the evidence of my own senses” (Stoker 226). To dissolve both the objective sense of the past and himself from the text even further, Stoker notoriously makes his characters convert various records from one medium to another—journal entries are recorded onto phonograph, phonographic recordings are transcribed into text, the log of the “Demeter” is translated from Russian into English to be further copied by Jonathan. At the same time, journalistic forays in Stoker’s novel make a continuous and daring attempt to save the past from obscurity and obliteration. Lucy’s determination to render the events of Dracula’s assault attests to the importance of recording one’s story: “I feel I am dying of weakness, and have barely strength to write, but it must be done if I die in the doing” (172). In a similar vein, as she fears Jonathan’s “lapsing into forgetfulness” (208), Mina exclaims: “[s]ome day he may ask me about it. Down it all goes” (206). Since what is either found or remembered may be easily lost, the characters in *Dracula* put every effort into preserving their records, be it Lucy “hiding . . . paper in [her] breast” (175) or Mina’s copying out Dr. Seward’s phonographic recordings (264–65).

## REWRITING ARTIFACTS

With the advent of digitalization and digitization processes, the proliferation of digital tools, and the dissemination of distribution channels at the break of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Gothic genre was never to remain the same. Given the shift in media production and consumption, from user-passive and unidirectional to user-empowering and interactive, a globalized culture of participation could emerge and elevate storytelling to an entirely new level. Borrowing from Henry Jenkins’s theories on participatory culture,

Anthony Mandal asserts that “creative practice is increasingly being generated by prosumers [producer-consumers] who remix, remediate, and ‘mash up’ texts” (91), thus “[g]iving existing artworks and commercial products a new spin” (91). The inventiveness of the found footage horror film as a modern-day remediation of the found manuscript convention is no exception; it was clearly energized by digital innovation as clarified by Daniel Myrick, the co-director of *The Blair Witch Project*: “In the late 90s, with digital coming into its own, it was only a matter of time before someone made this kind of first-person movie” (Hoad). The question which remains to be answered is that of equivalence between the modalities of the literary and film variant of the device, a matter which invites examination through the prism of translation studies. Resorting to Jakobson’s classic triadic division of translation, on the most general level the remodeling of the found manuscript trope into the found footage aesthetics appears to belong to the realm of intersemiotic translation, also known as transmutation, thus “an interpretation of verbal signs by means of signs of nonverbal sign systems” (233).<sup>2</sup> Extending the definition, Nicola Dusi asserts that

[i]ntersemiotic translation can provisionally be said to take place when there is a re-presentation, in one or more semiotic systems . . . , of a form of the content intersubjectively recognized as being linked, at one or more levels of pertinence, to the form of the content of a source text. (184)

Despite its syncretic form, a film, as continued by Dusi, “should always be considered an aesthetic text” (185). The further investigation in registering gains and losses of transfiguring the discussed convention will be grounded in Dirk Delabastita’s general typology of translational relationships between items of the source text which are being recoded into the target text. These are divided into five types: substitution, repetition, deletion, addition and transmutation. With the act of substitution “the relevant source text item is replaced by a target code item . . . [with] a more or less equivalent relational value” (33–34) and, as aptly observed by Delabastita, “in strict recoding all relationships . . . fall under this category” (34). Repetition occurs when an item is “merely repeated or transferred directly from the source text into the target text” (34). As regards deletion, “a particular source target item is not rendered in the target text at all, not even by

<sup>2</sup> As rightly emphasized by Dirk Delabastita, when approaching the multimodality of film one must not forget that “the visual channel sometimes conveys verbal signs (e.g. credits, letters, shop signs) and that the acoustic channel transmits some non-verbal signs (music, background noise, etc.)” (qtd. in Munday 183).

a low equivalence analogue” (35). In the case of addition, the target text “contain[s] . . . signs that have no apparent antecedent in the source text” (36). Lastly, permutation holds that the position of the item within the target text “does not reflect the relative position of its source text” (36). Delabastita argues that the above-mentioned transformations operate along the lines of three main semiotic codes: a linguistic code, a textual code and a cultural code. A linguistic code indicates “minimal meaningful signs” (6) and the ways they combine in both the source and target text, amounting to the text grammar. In turn, a textual code revolves around the ways “a peculiar type of textual organization . . . [is] impose[d] upon the linguistic material” (11); it is thus analogous to generic and narrative strategies of a given text. Finally, contextual aspects which always leave a stamp on the meaning of the source and target text belong to the concept of cultural code (14). The broad scope of Delabastita’s framework helps to reveal the initial possibilities of intersemiotic reading of the conventions discussed, leaving space for further explorations of intersemiotic complexities. Given the multi-channel nature of film communication as opposed to single-channeled literature, as well as the heterogeneity of corpora comprising the source and target text of the analysis, my study will be predominantly limited to exploring parallels on the level of textual code, an anchor for generic codes and conventions, to which the tropes of found manuscript and found footage undoubtedly belong. A smaller number of observations on the linguistic code follows shortly after.

To begin with, what clearly articulates the literary provenance of found footage aesthetics is the plentitude of textual items which can be perceived in terms of Delabastita’s category of repetition. Consistently with the source text, the films discussed distance the agency of the author while purporting to be authentic footage. Instead of showing the opening credits, both *Paranormal Activity* and *The Blair Witch Project* (henceforth *PA* and *BWP*) attempt to trick the viewer into believing that the discovered video material has been in control of an alleged editor. With regard to the former film, such a role is assumed by Paramount Pictures, with help received from the “families of Micah Sloat & Katie Featherston and the San Diego Police Department” (*PA*); not long before the closing credits does the audience learn that the footage and Micah’s body were found on 11 October 2006 and that “Katie’s whereabouts remain unknown” (*PA*). The latter film implies the presence of an editor as it informs the spectators about the disappearance of three student filmmakers “in the woods near Burkittsville, Maryland while shooting a documentary” (*BWP*) in October 1994; as the audience subsequently learns, “[a] year later their footage was found” (*BWP*). As for *REC*, the lack of opening credits rushes the viewer directly into the realm of two TV reporters following firefighters on their

job, as much as it is possible to assume that the material has not been abridged at all. Limiting the focus to those literary works which utilize the found-manuscript device as a general frame for the entire narrative (Walpole's novel), the condensed settings of the three films appear to be also transcoded directly from the source text. The immediacy of setting the story in the Otranto castle finds its correlative in the close confines of the haunted house (*PA*), the apartment building (*[REC]*) and the woods (*BWP*), adding to the dramatic effect by emphasizing the sense of entrapment.

Another source text item which is repeated in the target text is the act of reifying and authenticating textual artifacts (bearing in mind Dusi's suggestion to perceive film as a textual form) by the characters themselves. The couple from *PA* and the reporting duo from *[REC]* are much alike in their preoccupation with the recorded material, replaying, immersing themselves in and commenting on the registered footage. Such absorption is best typified by Micah, who appears to spend long hours over his personal computer and a hi-tech voice recorder to fathom the nature of the demonic presence which haunts his house. In a similar vein, Ángela, the reporter from *[REC]*, instructs her cameraman to rewind and replay the shooting of one of the infected residents of the building, as if what she saw with her own eyes was inferior to what was filmed. The protagonists of found footage horrors highlight the importance of recording just as their literary counterparts do; Mina and Jonathan Harker's musings on the significance of keeping a journal correspond to fixation on the object of the camera as demonstrated by Micah, Ángela and Heather, the protagonist of *BWP*. The superior status of both the camera and the act of recording is implicitly conveyed in numerous scenes showing the very act. Bathroom mirror reflections in *PA*, as well as *BWP* characters who film themselves filming augment authenticity and do not let the spectator forget about the power of the medium. Moreover, correspondingly to the source text, found footage horrors maximize the potential of recording as a means of preserving the veracities of one's traumas and altered states, which would otherwise be lost. In *BWP* Josh's and Mike's wishes to be kept out of shot are at odds with Heather's tenacity of belief in "get[ting] what [she] can" since "it's all [she] . . . has left" (*BWP*). Similarly for Ángela, the footage of incidents in the apartment house is "the only proof [she and Pablo] have" (*[REC]*).

The final source text items repeated in the target text are the generic hybridity of the studied works and the tactics of implanting scientific references with the aim of reinforcing authenticity. Both *BWP* and *[REC]* are simultaneously behind-the-scenes footage and the actual documentary which is being tried to be completed. Additionally, the latter film and *PA* present themselves as hybrid forms by intercalating subtexts

such as autopsy footage, newspaper clippings and tape recordings. The aforementioned scientific underpinning manifests in the characters of Dr. Fredrichs, a psychic called upon by Micah and Katie to investigate the demonic force that persecutes them (*PA*) and a health inspector arriving at the scene of the quarantine (*REC*).

Although not as prevalent as repetition, other operations delineated by Delabastita are not absent from this intersemiotic transfer. For instance, the working of deletion is evident by the untransferred epistemic deadlock that the narrative fragmentation leads to in the source text novels. Each of the film narratives comprising the target text, albeit fragmented, does not seem to challenge the spectator with glaringly divergent visions of reality. As much as each of *BWP*'s protagonists is a point-of-view narrator in their own respect, altogether they form a coherent narrative body with the dynamics harmonized by a common cause—survival. I would further argue that the films analyzed supersede the tactics of feigning historicity with the tactics of feigning immediacy, thus exhibiting textual substitution and attuning to the digital-era sensibilities concerning communication and information processing. Finally, what might be addressed in terms of permutation is the action of externalizing the main embedding frame from the body of text to the extratextual reality. Now considered a progenitor of innovative horror movie marketing, the marketing strategy of *BWP* involved rendering the disappearance of students as factual (launching a website, distributing leaflets and “missing” posters). As argued by Marc Graser and Dade Hayes, this “was not an added-on marketing tool, but was designed as part of film experience” (qtd. in Telotte 36). If “Walpole’s text was a forgery before it became a type” (Russett 13), so was *BWP* with its expanded frame for the story.

## ADDING UP TO AUTHENTICITY

In *Scars of the Spirit* Geoffrey Hartman observes that

technology has created a new vein of gothic darkness. . . . Augmented techniques of fictional deception, of entangling us in illusions, produce a strange mental indulgence. . . . Yet the psychology of art continues to reflect a spiritual pursuit: for “the One,” the just, chosen, authentic work or individual on which everything depends. (qtd. in Baker 68)

Found footage horror films would not have been successful in channeling pursuits of authenticity, just as they would not have resonated extremely well with contemporary audiences, but for “an added value” they hold. Apart from repeating, deleting, transmuting and substituting generic items



stemming from the literary tradition, the genre has developed its own unique filmic allure tied to the new channels of reinforcing authenticity. These, as I claim, involve purporting audiovisual rawness, exploiting voyeurism and activating conspiratorial impulses. Following the line of my argument I will address them as instances of Delabastita's addition, yet this has to be done with a simultaneous turn to the non-textual code they operate in.

The aforementioned audiovisual rawness is best typified by the way *BWP* operates on the level of linguistic code. Upon seeing a shaky title board, the viewer is prone to think that what will follow is amateur filmmaking which will not seek technical excellence. Doubts are gone when the protagonists set out their hopes and fears about their film project. Before the proper shooting begins, Heather declares: "I want to really avoid any cheese. I want to present it in as straightforward a way as possible" (*BWP*). Handling a borrowed camera, Josh admits that "[he's] used it, like, once before" (*BWP*). Far from exaggeration, the audiovisual grammar of the film excels at professing the video footage as raw and credible. It abounds in shaky tracking shots, abrupt cutting, distorted vision, lack of noise-cancellation and poor framing (climaxing with the now iconic extreme close up of Heather's eyes). Connected to this is the role of dialogue—the protagonists curse, tell dirty jokes and mock the national anthem, attuning the viewer to the mood of extreme informality. Much is also channeled through the linguistic code of *PA*. Differently than in *BWP*, Peli's film reinvigorates authenticity by thematizing the cutting edge recording technologies and inviting the viewer to penetrate deep into the everyday lives of the protagonists. Micah's idea to film the daily routines of his household, as well as to set up a camera in the bedroom with a view to registering supernatural phenomena, harmonizes with the modern-day public spectacle of self-exposure (as exemplified by postings on Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, etc.) and the spectators' unrelenting voyeuristic demand for it. The panoptic camerawork, resembling the supervision of CCTV, seems to additionally coalesce with the viewer's eye to exercise surveillance over Micah and Katie.

Finally, the "critiques of traditional institutions" (Soltysik Monnet 8), as well as appreciation for "alternative epistemologies" (8), as typified by the Gothic, come to a full manifestation in *[REC]*, adding visual force to its cultural subversiveness. Striking the conspiratorial note and viewing the institutions of systemic power (police, army and, presumably, city officials) in a negative light, the film implies that maintaining faith in the sources of institutional trust is no longer possible. Preventing the reporters from filming, as well as denying access to information to the residents of the apartment block attests to the failure of the system which denies one knowledge and participation. The need for alternative, thus

authentic, channels of information and representation is well addressed and highlighted by the visual grammar of *[REC]*. Shaky tracking shots (often the effect of scuffles between the reporters and the police), plenty of zooming and the inquisitiveness of the camera (filming even when fallen to the ground) appear to operate in the fluid, unregulated realm, somewhere between the expectations and limitations of the system. What is at stake is the preservation of the material copy of the recording, an artifact to be found and embraced as an authentic and unregulated testimony.

To conclude, the aesthetics of the found footage horror film build heavily on the literary convention of the found manuscript as evidenced by repeating, substituting and transmuting features of its code. Concurrently, it departs from the literary source in search of its own diction, both generic and audiovisual. It also stands at the nexus of the past, present and future as it anticipates further digital evolution of the trope, already signaled by video game narratives such as *Resident Evil 7* (Capcom, 2017) and *Her Story* (Sam Barlow, 2015). One might be similarly optimistic about the prospects reinvigorating the convention in literature. As argued by Catherine Spooner, “the labyrinthine intricacies of the World Wide Web create the potential for all kinds of felicitous discoveries, while sophisticated word-processing programmes permit ever-more elaborate arrangements of texts” (39), resulting in innovative fiction such as James Paterson’s *The Chef* (2019), a text for Facebook Messenger, and leaving the trope fertile for further critical debates and inquiries.

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## The Consumptive Significance of Images and Interface Values in Cyberpunk Cities

# ABSTRACT

Cyberpunk is one of the latest genres in the development of science fiction. The genre emerged during the 80s and 90s, and in it the characters are confronted by an abundance of images and interface values. As a result, these images and values have become key identifying motifs of this genre. Referring to the theoretical conceptualizations of Adam Roberts about novum, and Lieven De Cauter on capsules and capsulization, the present study argues that the reason for the abundance of images and interface values is due to their facilitation of the consumption of novelties in cyberpunk cities. Within a scientific and rational discourse, images and interface values combine familiar and unfamiliar concepts and package them both as convenient commodities to be consumed by the characters of cyberpunk fiction. One of the key outcomes of such a combination, the study argues, is that the characters of cyberpunk fiction rely on the consumption of images and interface values as a convenient means to handle the overwhelming presence of technological and cybernetic advancements in the represented cities. This outcome turns the need to see and consume the cyberpunk world through images and interface values into an ideological necessity—or what can also be called a defense mechanism—for the characters against the technological shock of cybernetic advancements; a necessity whose qualities will be discussed in the study, as well.

**Keywords:** cyberpunk, the City, image, interface, novum, capsule.

## INTRODUCTION

The present study investigates the significance of the abundance of images and interface values as key image representations in cyberpunk cities. It will be argued that the plethora of images and interface values in cyberpunk cities is due to the convenience with which they provide the characters the opportunity to consume various commodities. The study believes that images and interface values of cyberpunk cities always fuse familiar and unfamiliar concept novelties, and the resulting items are presented to the characters in a safe and convenient manner. Furthermore, in such fusions, the characters are always reassured that the novelties presented to them through images and interface values are within scientific and rationalistic discourses. The presence of familiar concepts alongside unfamiliar novelties that reside within the rationalistic and logical discourses of science make the characters embrace the images and interface values of cyberpunk cities, resulting in a substantial increase in their production. Such features of images and interface values also make the characters deal with the overwhelming presence of technological, cybernetic advancements and their representations through taking shelter in other images and interface values. Identifying each other through technologically mediated images and profiles, spending leisure time in standardized and radically dwindled public spaces, and relying on images and interface values as the convenient and stereotypical means for knowledge acquisition are some of the usages of cybernetic capsules in cyberpunk cities.

This study uses theoretical conceptualizations of novum (plural form: nova) and capsules by Adam Roberts and Levian De Cauter, the two famous critics in science fiction and cyber cultural studies, to discuss the significance of images and interface values in cyberpunk fiction. In our analysis it will become apparent that the facilitation of consumption is the key reason why images and interface values become abundant in the cyberpunk city.<sup>1</sup> In the first section, the role of the fusion of the familiar and the unfamiliar in facilitating convenient consumption in cyberpunk cities will be identified. To support Roberts's ideas as the theoretical scaffold of the study, pertinent references to Sherryl Vint's "Cyberpunk and Commodification" and other anthologized critics in *Beyond Cyberpunk* will be made. In Vint's article, it is mentioned that any unfamiliar and unknown concept (either artistic or technological) needs to be blended in—even uneasily—with familiar and easily consumable concepts in cyberpunk fiction so that both the crude commodities and much more subtle and recondite concepts can be presented

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<sup>1</sup> The study uses "the cyberpunk city" and "cyberpunk cities" to refer to the represented cities and urban spaces in cyberpunk fiction.

in tandem with each other. Using Gibson's comments on the genre, she argues that "authentic art survives in the era of the culture industry in ways other than separating itself from the material world" (111). This insistence on the impossibility of the separation of nuanced/artistic and materialistic concepts from each other makes Roberts's idea of *nova* dialectic. The study prefers the dialectic nature of his idea since it does not naively see an idealistic possibility of dissidence in the genre and its novelties, and, as Vint believes, does not commit itself to a "recidivist" understanding in which the critic and the artist try heroically to "control art, to slice away the bad [in this case the consumable and material aspects of art] and leave only the good. [in this case the unfamiliar and recondite technological and artistic concepts]" (101). Such a perspective is also in line with Fredric Jameson's understanding of the genre as a late capitalist one which "grasps the spirit and the impulse of the imagination of the multinationals in postmodernism, which in new writing like cyberpunk determines an excess of representational consumption" (321). In Jameson's view, cyberpunk is simultaneously capitalist and postmodernist since the coupling of these two ideological and discursive tendencies helps "the migration of concepts towards representations, where the thrill of multinational business has an outweighing attraction" for the denizens of a consumptive world such as the cyberpunk world (321). Considering these theoretical standpoints, the study sees the coupling of the materialistically familiar and unfamiliar elements in *nova* as the ideal capitalist strategy with which the wildest novelties in this postmodernist and capitalist world are propagated and consumed.

In the second section, the role of images in curbing the shock of the overwhelming presence of images and interface values of cybernetic advancements in cyberpunk cities will be examined. In this section, the consequences of turning consumption into an ideological defense mechanism against the technological shock will be enumerated in four points, as well. To put its claims within a theoretical framework, Lieven De Cauter's concept of capsularization will be employed. He argues that the higher number of technological advancements will result in more intense utilizations of some of these advancements as protective capsules against the overwhelming presence of technological novelties most of whose nature is visual. He says, "the more physical and informational speed increases, the more man will need capsules" (95).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> It needs to be acknowledged that if a scholar decides to extend De Cauter's conceptualization of capsules into the study of the spatial aspects of cyberpunk cities, he/she may benefit from employing De Cauter's idea alongside the concept of the Metabolist architecture (which is a capsularized architectural scheme). For more details on the Metabolist architecture, refer to Regean Legault's *Anxious Modernisms* and William Gardner's upcoming *The Metabolist Imagination*.

The novels used to support the argument of the study are selected works by William Gibson (*Virtual Light*, 1993; *Idoru*, 1996; *All Tomorrow's Parties*, 1999) and Bruce Sterling (*Schismatrix Plus*, 1985; *Island in the Net*, 1988), two of the early and seminal cyberpunk writers, alongside Richard Morgan's *Altered Carbon* (2002). The reason for including these texts relates to the density of the cyberpunk genre and the fact that a study must consider the works of both the early and late cyberpunk writers in order to support its academic claims.

## IMAGES: THE CONVENIENT CONSUMPTIVE MEANS OF CYBERPUNK CITIES

We argue that the key reasons for the presence of images and interface values in cyberpunk cities is the convenience they provide for the characters' consumption of various types of new commodities. In order to investigate the facets of such a consumptive convenience, the study utilizes Adam Roberts's conceptualization on novum (plural form: nova).<sup>3</sup> Referencing Darko Suvin's terminology, Adam Roberts believes that the "point of difference, the thing or things that differentiate the world portrayed in science fiction from the world we recognize around us, is the crucial separator between science fiction and other forms of imaginative or fantastic literature" (6). Like Suvin, Roberts calls these points of difference "novum" (plural form: nova). Spaceships, interplanetary or interstellar travel, aliens and the encounter with aliens, mechanical robots, genetic engineering, biological robots ("androids"), computers, advanced technology, virtual reality, and images and interface values which represent these novelties are some of the instances of nova in science fiction. These nova defamiliarize the science fictional world from the mundane world for the characters. In Roberts's opinion, a novum has mundane and non-supernatural justification. The characters of a science fictional world should not seek refuge in unknown metaphysics in order to acknowledge a science fictional novum in the fiction. However, the justification and explanation around a novum should not be purely scientific and should be on the basis of a "discourse of science" (Roberts 9). According to Roberts, the science fictional devices and novelties of a particular short

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<sup>3</sup> It needs to be acknowledged that in "Towards a Poetics of Cyberpunk," while discussing cyberpunk fiction, Brain McHale did present the idea of an uneasy coexistence of rational and familiar extrapolation and unfamiliar and fantastic speculation in the genre. The present study prefers Roberts's conceptualization of nova since the idea can more efficiently discuss the consumptive significance of each and every novelty in the science fictional world of the genre.

story or a novel should not divulge the details of their rational or scientific functionality and should, at their surface levels, espouse rationality and scientism. The nova should never be so complicated as to hamper characters' understanding of their functionality and at the same time, are not turned into bland representations of our mundane world. In this sense, they situate themselves between "cognition and estrangement; they are both relevant and challenging to the ordinary world" (Roberts 16). This in-betweenness makes science fictional nova commodifiable and conveniently consumable for the characters of science fiction.

According to Roberts, then, there are two conditions that constitute a novum: being familiar and worldly and at the same time being unfamiliar and discontinuous with the ordinary surroundings of the world and having only a façade of scientism and rationalism. The two features of a novum are represented in the usage of stacks and sleeves in *Altered Carbon*. By ingraining people's memories in devices called stacks, the novel shows that these stacks can be implanted in various sleeves (pre-constructed bodies) as the stacks' interface values. The characters are not aware of the details of how these stacks function and if, on occasion, there is some technical talk, it is devised to give the coloring of scientism and rationality to the novel. Metaphorically speaking, the stacks are regarded as interface devices and means for accessing and actualizing all the behavioral and mental aspects of a human being in the novel that can be easily transferred to different bodies. The stacks are interface values for the chaotic and incomprehensible intricacies of a human being. Such values make the act of identification of spiritual and identity qualities convenient for the characters. The sleeves that can house the stacks are simultaneously different and similar to each other, since they are realized around a mental selection, gathered in the stack. The stack is just a selection and cannot give originality to all the sleeves. It is neither a reference point nor a deep structure; it is the raw, chaotic and randomized programming language around which a plethora of sleeves are constructed for people's consumption. The stack only parodies the differences between these sleeves, since all of them, although seeming different from each other, cannot escape the range of possibilities the stack has provided for them. Such parodistic reading of superficial differences between the stacks—as one of the nova of the novel—attests to their capitalist nature. This nature presents superficially devised differences and instances of unfamiliarity within the consumptive fabric—which is the only recognizable deep structure of the novum—of the stacks. In this sense, the characters of the novel do not expect the emergence of anything dissident or revolutionary from the strange novelties of the nova such as the stacks since their perspective is not, as



Vint believes, “recidivist”; the belief that insists on futilely “slicing away and controlling” something genuinely different and oppositional from the capitalist fabric of the cyberpunk world (101). In a discussion about the stacks, the protagonist of the novel, Tak, comments on the relation between sleeves and stacks as follows:

Most virtual systems recreate you from self images held in the memory, with a common-sense sub-routine to prevent your delusions from impinging too much. I generally come out a little taller and thinner in the face that I usually am. In this case, the system seemed to have scrambled a myriad of different perceptions from a long list of sleeves. I’d seen it done before, as a technique, but most of us grow rapidly attached to whatever sleeve we are living in, and that form blanks out previous incarnations. (Morgan 195)

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Sleeves and even stacks are temporary “incarnations” that are easily replaceable and at the same time are based on “a long list of [previously used] sleeves.” Such a characteristic of replaceability means that the novelty of a more technologically advanced sleeve should be established upon previous versions so that it can tempt users to use them. Sleeves exercise “discontinuity” (Roberts 210) in their relations to previous versions and at the same time, they have some “continuity” with them (210), and as a result users “grow rapidly attached to whatever [previous] sleeve [they] are living in” (Morgan 195). Even the brief preliminary explanation of how sleeve-making functions is devised to give the characters the vindication that the nova of the novel are “drained of transcendental or metaphysical aura and [need to be relocated] in the material world” (Roberts 170). The author does not intend to explain away the detailed workings of either stacks or sleeve-making, but rather intends to locate them between the familiar and unfamiliar worlds of the characters. As Jameson believes in the capitalist setting of the cyberpunk world, “what is at stake is knowhow and knowledge of the system itself, [and] and the knowledge is not particularly scientific, and merely involves initiation into the way the system functions” (352). In this novel, stacks as one of its science fictional nova carries such a representational connotation of scientism. In order to consume and trust the new technologies, offered by the new-sleeving facilities, the characters need to be assured within a pseudo-scientific discourse (also known as scientism) that despite the attractive improvements of the new technologies, there is still continuity between the new and old technologies, and yet they are charmingly different from the previous technologies.

The quality of the uneasy fusion of familiar and unfamiliar can also be seen in *Island in the Net*, in which the characters are faced with a strange image from their historical past. In this novel, the narrator discusses the

origins of the city name “Singapore” and how it denotes no originality and is realized through manipulation of mythological fragments. As he writes:

Singha Pura meant “Lion City.” But there had never been lions on Singapore island. The name had to make some kind. So local legend said the “lion” had been a sea monster. On the opposite side of Singapore’s National Stadium, a human sea lifted their flash cards and showed Laura their monster. The Singapore “merlion,” in a bright mosaic of cardboard squares. The merlion had a fish’s long, scaled body and the lion head of the old British Empire. They had a statue of it in Merlion Park at the mouth of the Singapore River. The thing was thirty feet high, a genuinely monstrous hybrid. East and West like cats and fishes—never the twain shall meet. Until some bright soul had simply chopped the fish’s head off and stuck the lion’s on: And there you had it: Singapore. (Sterling, *Island* 122–23)

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Even their mythological manipulation cannot be referred to a holistic and unique image and is a strange “monstrous hybrid” (122). This passage shows that the characters in the novel acquire some comprehension from the foundational myth of a city such as Singapore through the grotesque fusion of familiar mythological concepts and the unfamiliar nature of their manipulation. This image demonstrates that even the native citizens of a city cannot pinpoint a historical or cultural anchorage in the development of their city spaces and prefer to rely on an image. Singapore becomes a novum that, despite having some unknown aspects, becomes acceptable since it is put in a seemingly rational discourse with some tangential overtones of foundation myths and historical backgrounds of some well-known cities in mankind’s history.

In another example from *Schismatrix Plus*, one can observe how reference to ancient cultures can express a crude and inaccurate relativism that appoints tradition and culture only as the substance for the uneasy blend of familiar and unfamiliar. The conflict of this fusion can be seen in the conversation of Lindsay and Ryumin, two leading characters, regarding an adaptation of the story of Helen:

“I have the feeling I’ve heard this story before,” he said. He flipped through the printout’s pages. The margins were thick with cartoon stick figures scribbled there for the illiterate. “Let me see if I have it right. A group of pirates in the Trojan asteroids have kidnapped a Shaper woman. She’s some kind of weapons specialist, am I right?” . . . “The Shapers are terrified by what the pirates might do with her expertise. So they form an alliance and put the pirates under siege. Finally they trick their way in and burn the place out.” Lindsay looked up. “Did it really happen, or didn’t it?” “It’s an old story,” Ryumin said. “Something like that actually happened once;

I feel sure of it. But I filed off the serial numbers and made it my own.” (Sterling, *Schismatrix* 42)

The only reason that Ryumin wants to direct this script is to make money through the audience, who are pirates. They will recognize some of the maritime jargon in the play and enjoy consuming a cultural artifact of the ancient time in fragmented and commodified collection. Like the example from *Island in the Net* about Singapore, in *Schismatrix Plusit* it is observed that even the patriotic sense one gets out of a play or the mythological and historical background of a city is the result of imagistic and interface values. These values only facilitate convenient knowledge acquisition and acceptance for the characters, since they can easily accept and consume the strangeness of these values as well-packaged products that have some common denominators with their pre-defined knowledge. Using Jameson’s reasoning about late capitalism, one can see that only “an excess of representational consumption” is the impetus behind such unusual appropriation of mythic concepts in the name of a city and in the storyline of a dramatic adaptation (321). Through such an excess late capitalism can conveniently blend any unfamiliar peculiarity (e.g., cultural or scientific) with familiar representations whose nature is imagistic. In the example from *Island in the Net*, it can be argued that the wrongful re-contextualization of a mythological tale facilitates knowledge acquisition for a bunch of pirates, since Ryumin, the author of the play, does not intend to create a culturally diversified dialogue between a foreign culture and the native culture of pirates. Without engaging with the culture, he only wants to present his community with an instance of cybernetic/science fictional novelty, a novum, with which both their familiar and unfamiliar horizons of knowledge and expectations can be conveniently conflated.

The uneasy conflation of familiar and unfamiliar can also be seen in *Virtual Light*. In order to introduce the sprawling setting of the city, the novel utilizes the familiar framework of a bridge and yokes upon it the idea of sedimentation which is a foreign, heterogeneous and incompatible superimposition upon a bridge whose conventional function is to facilitate movement, flow and transit.<sup>4</sup> Although later in the novel, the narrator tends to see in the bridge an instance of Thomasson<sup>5</sup>—and justifies this

<sup>4</sup> By conventional function, the article refers to the discourse of bridge as a means of transportation which was established after the Industrial Revolution (Tatsumi 117).

<sup>5</sup> Thomasson or Hyperart Thomasson is a type of conceptual art named by the Japanese artist Akasegawa Genpei in the 1980s. It refers to a useless relic or structure that has been preserved as part of a building or the built environment, which has become a piece of art in itself. Identification of the artistic nature of the relic is determined by ordinary passersby rather than professional artists.

superimposition artistically—he does emphasize the commercial reason (“dreams of commerce”) for such an uneasy coupling of disparate elements on the bridge in his first description of it:

Its steel bones, its stranded tendons, were lost within an accretion of dreams: tattoo parlors, gaming arcades, dimly lit stalls stacked with decaying magazines, sellers of fireworks, of cut bait, betting shops, sushi bars, unlicensed pawnbrokers, herbalists, barbers, bars. Dreams of commerce, their locations generally corresponding with the decks that had once carried vehicular traffic; while above them, rising to the very peaks of the cable towers, lifted the intricately suspended barrio, with its unnumbered population and its zones of more private fantasy. (Gibson, *Virtual* 48)

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The accumulation of all such places of business with the excuse of creating a Thomasson curio in the middle of a city is an instance of the most covert strategy of capitalism to propagate consumption under the ruse of either an agendaless artistic creation upon the bridge—which can be identified by ordinary people—or a place of decadent and dissident experience (zones of private fantasy). In this sense, giving every denizen of the cyberpunk world of the novel the capability to be a connoisseur of art is the price which capitalism is prepared to pay for propagating the utmost consumption of the bridge as a novum. What matters is that this novum showcases its peculiarity within the familiar but appropriated setting of the bridge, and gains profit for the city. As Takayuki Tatsumi believes, “Gibson’s Bay Bridge becomes well known all over the [fictional] world of the novel and attracts many international sightseers eager to see its junk-artistic atmosphere” (113). Even if there are some elements of genuine art, as Tatsumi emphasizes, they need to be represented through a commercially driven tourist attraction. Acquiring such capitalist, nonromantic and dialectic understanding of the wildest artistic innovation brings us close to the non-recidivist understanding which Vint promotes about the genre and its capitalist nature. This non-recidivist understanding shows the capacity of capitalism to abide by a “self-recycling logic” that “jeopardizes the distinctions between technopolis and junkyard, city and bridge, the homeless and the Thomassonians,” and familiar and unfamiliar elements in the cyberpunk world, especially its cybernetic nova such as the bridge figure (Tatsumi 120).

The convenience of consumption of cyberpunk images and interface values is due to being science-fictional nova. These nova have an oscillating fluidity between familiar elements, on the one hand, and unfamiliar elements on the other. Such an oscillation allows them to function within a scientific discourse, and at the same time gives them a certain allure.

The characters need to feel certain of the convenience and safety of the represented technology (what we called *novum*) while being enticed with its attractive novelty. Under such circumstances, they know that the most unpredictable and implausible image or interface value in the cyberpunk world will eventually be embraced and consumed since it will be suitably explained through recognizable, familiar and plausible criteria.

## IMAGES: THE CONVENIENT MEANS AGAINST THE SHOCK OF CYBERNETIC ADVANCEMENTS

Apart from the consumptive convenience of images and interface values as the key constituents of cyberpunk *nova*, the convenience of these *nova* is due to their ability to contain the overwhelming assailment of all the technological and cybernetic advancements of cyberpunk cities and their interface-based, imagistic representations. It is as if cyberpunk interface values and images (i.e. *nova*) “capsulize” people against the initial shocking attack of all the images and interface values. According to Lieven De Caeter, with the increase in the demand for new technologies and their pertinent tools and devices both in the real and fictional worlds, mankind sees the necessity to “protect” itself against being overwhelmed by technological novelties and their imagistic impact (De Caeter 94). In order to acquire an understanding of all the technological advancements, mankind should enter the infinite world of technological novelties through devices and tools that De Caeter calls “capsules.” Capsules are mankind’s attempt, both in the real and fictional worlds, to tackle “shock.” Referencing critics such as McLuhan and Freud, De Caeter argues:

That modern man is under constant attack of an overload of stimuli (shocks), which induce a sort of defense mechanism. Therefore the more physical and informational speed increases, the more man will need capsules. . . . The convinced city dwellers have to fight the mechanism of the suburbanization of daily life: cars, telephones (mobile or fixed), televisions and computers (with Internet connection) are the basic tools (and causes) of this process. (De Caeter 95–96)

In his view capsules are the sign that mankind is attacked more and more by external forces of technological advancements and capsules are mankind’s last means of defense. Mankind is put in a position in which seeking help from imagistic capsules and *nova* become the only means of their survival and knowledge acquisition. As De Caeter believes, “when fear and the mechanism of defensible space takes over then we might see that this becomes another sort of iron law: Fear leads to capsularization

and capsularization enhances fear” which can only be assuaged through utilization of further capsules (96). Therefore, cyberpunk characters are made to think that capitalist features of the conveniences of technology are less significant than the protection they provide against the very technologies that have necessitated the usage of such capsules and nova. As De Cauter points out, such a fear of not having a capsule through which one can handle the daunting force of technology, turns one’s consumption into an ideology to which people will commit. People hate to be excluded from and remain dumbfounded by technology. Under such circumstances, all the blatant capitalist objectives behind the promotion of capsules will be covered up in the informational city and, consequently, in cyberpunk cities. Capsules present no utopian hope of dissidence to the denizens of the cyberpunk world. In this world, people become fully complicit in capitalist strategies. According to Tom Moylan, what they learn is to foster “a hope for [a set] of cultural practices that re-function the imposed technological harshness. What emerges is a way of using imposed systems that creates at least a certain play in that order, a space for maneuvers of unequal forces” (87). In the cyberpunk world, survival constitutes the heart of the “certain play” which people desperately seek, and they are aware that acknowledging the consumptive role of images and interface values in their lives is the first rule of even being included in the play.

In the cyberpunk world, the first consequence of the ideological need to consume through capsules is the fact that capsules become the only means of private and public discernment and knowledge acquisition. In *Idoru*, it is emphasized that people learn to be committed to the interface and imagistic values of celebrity culture. In order to identify criminals or locate their lost loved ones, they do not go to a sketch artist at the police station. They use the celebrity simulation technology. This technology presents the characters, who wanted to be alerted about the recognition of a wanted face (felon or family), with the nearest celebrity face they should identify. It is as if, in the midst of all the overwhelming images, advertisements and media propaganda in the novel, devising a capsule that can use familiar premises of science and cultural concepts, and the unexplainable, and recondite facial simulation technology becomes the only means for the characters’ return to having a discerning identification. In the novel, the narrator talks about how the characters are encouraged towards reliance upon this technology:

Laney noticed something then that he knew from his encounters with celebs at Slitscan: that binary flicker in his mind between image and reality, between the mediated face and the face there in front of you. He’d noticed how it always seemed to speed up, that alternation, until

the two somehow merged, the resulting composite becoming your new idea of the person. (Gibson, *Idoru* 128)

This “new idea,” Laney believes, is more convenient since “it is rounded; it is complete; it is retrievable and it is predictable in statistical terms” (Lyon, *Electronic Eye* 194). The recognition of the simulated image will give the characters the illusion that they still have the ability to identify a needle in the haystack of all the confusing images and interface values of the mediascape of the city. They think that, by identifying the celebrity figure, they are identifying an ordinary fellow in the midst of this saturation. However, what they do is take shelter in an instance of the imagistic culture that has made them doubt and question their cognition faculties. In *Idoru*, using the capsule of image simulation is a desperate means for the characters to get away from an indifferent celebrity culture and return to a means or strategy through which personal connection and identification can be made possible. Even the possibility of the materialization of such a strategy necessitates consumption of the celebrity culture and its imagistic interface values that have filled the cyberpunk world of the novel and *lobotomized* most of the characters’ faculties for recognizing, remembering and identifying ordinary faces. As Moylan argues, characters need to become helpers of (and complicit in) the system in order to “at least create a play in the order” (87). As his study acknowledges, the level of this playfulness is too minimal to even be noticed. In the novel, although characters’ attempt to use purely capitalist and indifferent celebrity culture for their very personal and intuitive act of facial identification of criminals is commendable and can be regarded as a bold instance of negotiating with a capitalist system, they become so accustomed to one of these constructed images that they forget its artificial nature and the lack of any original attachment to such images.

One of the key effects of acquiring knowledge only through capsules is that in cyberpunk cities, capsularization of everything “has dwindled the size of public spaces” (Featherstone 21). People tend to accustom themselves to a series of routine preferences, and even seek fulfillment of these routine habits and preferences in places that do not immediately seem suitable. In *Altered Carbon*, the narrator indicates that people go to a public platform such as an airport to spend their weekend leisure time. In this activity, the airport public space becomes a safe and contained space of recognizable and convenient surface values for easy consumption. They prefer to stay in such an indoor atmosphere rather than experiencing the novelty of such places:

People even go to airport terminals to experience climate zones. There are a bunch of zones of micro-climates where palms and other less

recognizable tropicalia made a bid for the massive glass ceiling. A misty rain drifted down from sprinkler systems, rendering the air pleasantly damp after the aridity outside. (Morgan 272)

The kind of represented airport with its simulation abilities of climate conditions is not only used as a terminal in which people are temporary sojourners, it is used as a place for leisure and experiences to which they do not have any direct access. The airport goes beyond its conventional consumptive objective and fulfills the ideology of consumption by creating the illusion of safety and convenience for its conventional and unconventional users. As De Cauter believes, “the economic logic of capsularization [turns] the outside world into [capsularized public spaces] unsafe and uncontrolled territory” (95). The quoted passage shows that people want to experience new exotic things such as different climate zones under the safe and commodified settings of a capsularized public space. This safe setting is capsularized in an airport whose conventional consumptive objectives have been radically changed. In such capsules, people do not expect “the diversity and unpredictability” that public spaces used to have and do not express any nostalgia (Davis 195). Yet, they know that their most personal and intimate cognition from a weather condition needs to be fulfilled in an airport, since it gives them the illusion of a confined place for convenient and safe consumption.

The second consequence of the ideological necessity to consume through capsules in cyberpunk cities is to appropriate the conventional consumptive intentions behind formerly devised commodities through imagistic and interface commodities. Youngquist believes that “the economic importance of the consensual hallucination” replaces the battlefield as the primary site of strategic engagement (202). In this sense, consumption, regardless of the primary consumptive intention of both the old and new products, becomes the key objective of the cyberpunk world. In Gibson’s *All Tomorrow’s Parties*, the narrator describes advertisement billboards of a casino and how they can be used in unintended ways:

There were Lucky Dragons all over America, all over the world for that matter, and to prove it you had your trademark Lucky Dragon Global Interactive Video Column outside. You had to pass it entering and leaving the store, so you’d see whichever dozen Lucky Dragons the Sunset franchise happened to be linked with at that particular moment: Paris or Houston or Brazzaville, wherever. These were shuffled, every three minutes, for the practical reason that it had been determined that if the maximum viewing time was any more, kids in the world’s duller suburbs would try to win bets by having sex on camera. (11)



The passage evokes the loss of conventionality of interface values and images of the cyberpunk world. In this world, in order to have the maximum level of profit, media outlets need to let go of their insistence on being used and consumed in regulated ways and show some flexibility towards being used in unintended ways. These unintended ways are the result of a loss of “rigid determination” in favor of diffused consumption, which is instable, chaotic and impulsive, and is regulated only for the sake of consumption. William Mitchell believes that, in cybercity spaces, everything can be regarded as pure white noise. He argues that “you can do things in irrelevant contexts and settings. In this sense, everything can be regarded as white noise” (*City of Bits* 31). In the very example from *All Tomorrow's Parties*, public intercourse is a white noise among all the other spewing images and advertisements of the city. It is not a dissident or a “situationalist act,” where people want to “re-enchant the ordinary with imposing unintended usage upon them” (Hubbard 108). The agenda of teenage couples’ dissident act of public intercourse may be different from the agenda of the advertising casino. However, both wish to be gazed upon and consumed as image. What is important is that they use the very capsule in the capitalist network for their so-called dissident act of public obscenity, and, by doing this, magnify the advertisement objective of the billboard since some people may gaze upon the billboard for the sake of the scene between the couples and consume its advertising objective. In this regard, “the degree of capsularization is directly proportional to the growth of [the capitalist] network” of the city (De Caeter 96). In the cyberpunk world—like any cybernetic/informational city—the growth of the number of capsules advances to the extent that no dissident act or radical transgression can be regarded as separate from the consumptive affinities of society. In this manner every image or icon helps “the expandable mutability” of their intended and regulated usages so that the supreme objective of consumption can be realized (Lyon, *Surveillance Society* 34). This objective is rendered differently in *Virtual Light*. In this novel, one may see the grotesque superimposition of the useless junk of the present and the past over the bridge (which, as we discussed, is regarded as being artistic and an instance of Thomasson by many characters of the novel) as an instance of “junkartistic Ludditism represented by bridgescape” (Tatsumi 114). However, when compared with the detailed simulations of the sunglass—a capsularized gadget which works on the basis of pictorial data and “can see virtually not just the scene around you but also vivid, simulated scenes from the past”—the oppositional heterogeneity of the bridge against the streamline technophilic city is mitigated substantially (114). As mentioned earlier, capitalism always finds a way to achieve “its dream of commerce” through packaging the most dissident elements in

conveniently devised packages. In *Virtual Light*, the nanotechnology objectives of the sunglasses to preserve a superficial image of the junkartistic Ludditism of the past and at the same time pursue the capitalist objectives of the novel's corporate powers is indicative of the appropriative power which it as a capsule has over the cyberpunk denizens of the novel. All the characters seek to find the sunglasses as the novel's key capsule since its version of the city is convenient, comprehensive and at the same time not overwhelming, and as a result annuls any possibility of commercially unwanted dissidence and genuine difference in the city.

The third consequence of a consumptive ideology in the cyberpunk world is to acquire a stereotypical and convenient tendency to communicate with people and things and categorize them. This tendency, as Mitchell believes, will show people's reliance on "standardized formats of fulfillment and consumption" (*Cyborg Self* 160). A critic such as Mitchell believes in cybernetic standardizations and sees the emergence of a cybernetic city as beneficial, culturally diversified, and inevitable. He thinks that, through such standardizations and capsules, cybercities will "make possible distance learning, telemedicine, telework, tele-mediated criminal justice systems and the replication of traditional urban structures and processes in cyberspace" (Warren et al. 51). In opposition to Mitchell, De Cauter's perspective on cybernetic advancements should be considered. He believes that, culturally, the plethora of imagistic capsules and their relative standardizations in informational cities only facilitate a higher degree of consumption at both the regional and international levels and have nothing to do with propagating culture or diversity.

According to such ideology, one can see in a novel such as *Schismatrix Plus* that the protagonist tends to think that a stereotypical understanding of Japanese is sufficient for everyday interaction, since it is the standardized version of the language used "without its unnecessary complicated honorific tenses" (9). What he calls complicated and unnecessary is the part of the Japanese language that is considered to be irrelevant since it cannot be marketed and put in convenient standardized capsules of a stereotypical "streamlined trade patois" for people to consume (9). In another example, even Laura, the dissident protagonist of *Island in the Net*, proves to have a shallow comprehension of other languages, since she has been raised in a corporate culture that is in touch with other communities only in order to sell more products to them. Her reaction to the way the couple speak in Hindi shows how clichéd and superficial her understanding of the Hindi language is:

He [Mr. Singh] and his wife began talking rapidly in Bengali or Hindi maybe, something incomprehensible, but speckled with English loan

words. Like fighter jet and television. Mrs. Singh, whose name was Aratavari or something vaguely similar, took Laura into the parental bedroom. (Sterling, *Island* 156)

Her understanding of the Hindi and Bengali languages in a city that is filled with people with diverse cultures and languages is blandly naïve and shows that only the utilitarian objective of having a functional command or even superficial recognition of other languages and cultures is the objective of a cybercity. In *All Tomorrow's Parties*, characters continue to even insult the Japanese names. In this novel, Loveless, the representative of the corporate power, has a shallow understanding of the pronunciation of a foreign name (Yamazaki) and says: "Something Japanese. Something zaki, something zuki. Some shit like that" (Gibson, *Parties* 93). In this manner, he defends his incorrect pronunciation of the word. In this novel, the characters' tendency to continue their conventionally stereotyped and limited understanding of foreignness and novelties attests that their understanding remains capsularized and limited. Having been bombarded by different cultural affinities through superficial imagistic and interface values, the characters find themselves incapable of having genuine understanding and dialogue with these affinities and abide by the same convenient strategies of capitalism, which have been envisaged in the capsularized understanding of a foreign language. Although reference to a critic such as Moylan may sway us to see the positive emergence of a certain kind of playfulness on the part of the dominant culture towards other cultures and languages, one cannot overlook the domineering presence of capitalism with its homogenizing tendencies towards all signs of genuine difference and otherness. As Veronica Hollinger believes, such a presence may have prompted Jameson to argue that "science fiction is never about the future, but instead functions to dramatize our incapacity to imagine the future. In this gloomy construction, science fiction is incapable of imagining futures that might be qualitatively different from the present" (199). This commentary is a testimony to the bland stereotypical tendency of any capsularized novelty in the capitalist world of cyberpunk fiction which only reflects superficial difference and cultural variance but never supports genuine understanding of otherness.

The absence of genuine engagement with cultures and languages materializes the fourth consequence of the ideological need to consume through capsules. Under such circumstances, one fails to see genuine differences amidst all these imagistic and interface values of a cyberpunk city. According to Diana Eck, a prominent scholar in pluralistic studies of cultures and religions, the abundance of images and surface values with seemingly different cultural origins does not necessarily result in the

presence of genuine pluralism. She states that a pluralistic community has four main features:

First, pluralism is not diversity alone, but the energetic engagement with diversity. . . . Mere diversity without real encounter and relationship will yield increasing tensions in our societies. Second, pluralism is not just tolerance, but the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference. . . . Third, pluralism is not relativism, but the encounter of commitments. It means holding our deepest differences not in isolation, but in relationship to one another. Fourth, pluralism is based on dialogue. . . . Dialogue means both speaking and listening, and that process reveals both common understandings and real differences. (Eck)

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Engagement with diversity, understanding of differences, and becoming committed to diversities and dialogue are the key concepts of pluralism. However, cyberpunk cities treat genuine differences and similarities of cultures and languages superficially and such a treatment results in simultaneous “boredom and anxiety,” according to the narrator in *Idoru*. He says: “[Through the combination] of boredom and anxiety, cities start to look the same. One hotel room after another. It’s a syndrome, is what it is” (Gibson, *Idoru* 80). According to Eck, this anxiety is due to the lack of genuine dialogue and commitment to understanding each other in imagistic cities such as cyberpunk cities. Such cities only yearn to present a workable version of pluralism, since it is the only practical and economic version through which either a bland, comfortable sameness or a safe, riskless difference can be commodified for both the regional and international users of our world. The idea behind standardizing hotels in key cities of the world is the corporate way to provide users with capsules with which they can protect themselves from overwhelming imagistic newness of today’s world. *Idoru* emphasizes that the excessive newness of the city is a tiresome reminder of each other. This tendency is not an indicator of a similar deep structure under the abundance of surface values, but is an indicator of minimal differential criteria on which these surface values and their differences are realized. It is minimal and imperceptible to the extent that their continuation may create boredom in the citizens of the represented city. The existence of minimal differences is represented in the similarities one can find between cyberpunk versions of Tokyo and Seattle in *Idoru*:

. . . [E]very little detail of Tokyo, was just different enough to create a kind of pressure, something that built up against her eyes, as though they’d grown tired of having to notice all the differences: a little sidewalk tree that was dressed up in a sort of woven basketwork jacket, the neon-avocado color of a payphone and a serious-looking girl with round

glasses. . . . She felt that if she squinted, maybe, just the right way, she could make all this turn back into Seattle, some downtown part she'd walked through with her mother. (Gibson, *Idoru* 107)

The icons and the signs, which are parts of Tokyo's unique urban identity, can also be applied to a city like Seattle with only a slight manipulation ("if she squints"). Finding this uniformity in the most different images and surface values creates straight jacket cultures which lack genuine differences. The lack of genuine differences causes such cultures to fail to have a pluralistic understanding of sameness and differences. Identification of such boring similarities in differences will only ease the level of tolerance people have with each other, which in Eck's terminology cannot be defined as a sign of a pluralistic society that can offer genuine cultural dialogue and social justice—the things that Mitchell thinks can be achieved in a cybercity with a "we-can-do-anything-digitally" motto.

Capsules of the cyberpunk city are successful in attaining their consumptive objective since they are represented as the only coping means against the shock of assailment of all the technological, cybernetic and cultural abundance of the cyberpunk world. Boring standardizations of the shocking plethora of newness in the city through superficial novelties; , the characters' inclination towards the acquisition of the superficial and surface knowledge from the represented cultures, allowing them to consume cyberpunk commodities in unintended ways, and making the emergence of genuine cultural dialogue and pluralism impossible for the sake of their convenient consumption: these are the consequences with which cyberpunk capsules add a sense of consumptive allure for themselves. With them, an informational city such as a cyberpunk city turns consumption of its soft capitals (e.g., image and interface values) into an ideological necessity for the characters.

## CONCLUSION

This study has argued that images and interface values are the nova of the cyberpunk world through which all the other novelties of this world are devised and presented. The study also showed that identifying images and interface values as the key nova of cyberpunk fiction acknowledges the late capitalist nature of the genre. This leads the genre towards relying on what Jameson believes to be the "excess of representation" through which the coupling of genuine thoughts and ideas with consumable commodities becomes possible (321). In other words, through blending unfamiliar concepts with familiar ones, cyberpunk fiction makes possible the survival

of both the nuanced and unfamiliar concepts, and the capitalistically familiar ones. Furthermore, this blend also causes the easy acceptance and consumption of all novelties of the cyberpunk world by its denizens, and as a result fulfils the objective of consumption as the only undeniable and unshakable deep structure of this world.

Alongside considering images and interface values as the nova of cyberpunk fiction, the study regarded them as science fictional capsules. This understanding showed us that most characters utilize the imagistic nova as protective capsules against the overwhelming presence of all the different kinds of nova and cybernetic advancements in the cyberpunk world. Although characters do get to manipulate the intended capitalist objectives of some of the nova and advancements through capsularizing them in their own favor, they fail to escape the conveniently standardized and capitalist deep structure of these capsules, whose key objective is to promote consumption among the denizens of the cyberpunk world. Such understanding of even the capsularized images and interface values of the cyberpunk world—as the key nova of this science fictional world—is dialectic (and, as mentioned earlier, not recidivist), and as a result does not see genuine dissidence and agency in their appropriations by characters or in their superficial display of otherness and pluralism. What it sees is a ludic playfulness which has been created by capsularized images and interface values against their own overabundance. The characters in the novels examined here can only deal with this overabundance when they choose some of these capsules and become involved in their playfulness and ultimately consumptive nature. In their absolute capitalist involvement, they may occasionally get the opportunity to exercise the most minimal and transient level of agency through capsularization of the consumptive and standardizing attack of images and interface values. However, due to the fact that images and interface values are the building blocks of the capsules, characters never get the chance to attain any vestige of true subjectivity, agency or dissidence. They only learn to survive by abiding and minimally manipulating the consumptive ideology of the dominant system.

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The Death of Language:  
Listening to the Echoes  
(of Georges Bataille) in *Star Wars: Knights  
of the Old Republic II—The Sith Lords*

## ABSTRACT

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This article is, firstly, an analysis of Kreia, a character from the *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II—The Sith Lords* video game, a character whose role in the game is pivotal: the conversations the player has with Kreia serve as the main narrative basis for the entire game experience. Secondly, on the basis of a collection of quotations from these conversations, this article juxtaposes Kreia and Georges Bataille. An intriguing variant of the blind seer trope is revealed in Kreia through studying the game's poetics, in which a focus on the sense of hearing is discerned. Kreia and Bataille are compared in their understandings of the universe, and a similarity between their ulterior motives is discovered: both of them struggled against something which was considered to be an inextricable element of their respective universes.

**Keywords:** Georges Bataille, Kreia, language, *Star Wars, Knights of the Old Republic*.

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“Can what is playing you make it to level 2?”  
(Land 456)

The galaxy whose stars shine far away, and the events of which happened a long, long time ago, has an even more ancient past buried in its own cosmic deep time. The narrative of the classic *Star Wars* trilogy and both its prequels and sequels (the time of the Republic, of the Empire, and of the First Order) is, fabula-wise, predated by the history of the Old Republic, at the time of which the very conflict on which the *Star Wars* universe is founded, the battle between the Jedi and the Sith, had already been going on for thousands of years.

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Before we move onwards—or, rather, backwards—into foreign space-times, we must establish the basic premises by which this article will be governed. It shall be devoted, firstly, to a particular instalment of the franchise in question, namely the video game produced by Obsidian Entertainment, released by LucasArts in 2005 (PC version), and entitled *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II—The Sith Lords*; secondly, it will be devoted to an even more particular character—Kreia, whose importance in the game experience is rivalled only by the (usually) necessary relevance of the player-controlled main character. From the beginning of the game, Kreia assumes the role of a mentor: she becomes the main character’s teacher, guiding them through the complexities of the galaxy, attempting to instil in them an independence of conviction and belief from the strict scriptures (strictures of thought, as it were) of the Jedi and Sith Codes, and helping them gain both an understanding and a connection to the Force (explanations are inbound). The purpose of this text is twofold: it is to be a collection, a kind of exposition, of some of Kreia’s in-game teachings, and it is to be a meeting place for Kreia and the thought of the French thinker Georges Bataille. In other words, the aim here is a simple juxtaposition of ways of thinking, a survey of the possible consonances vibrating between the philosophy bestowed upon Kreia by the game’s makers and the meditations of Bataille.

The first, preliminary task is to draw an outline of the context. There is, of course, an economic factor at work in the intra-franchise, inter-media movement of elements and themes within the copyrighted bounds of the *Star Wars* universe, with all the corporate machinery engineered to capitalize on consumerist nostalgia. Fortunately, many more factors are also at play in, firstly, the process of a story changing its medium, and, secondly, a situation in which a fictional timeline has its details gradually filled in by successive additions: prior to a certain corporation’s buyout of the franchise, the canonical timeline was composed of numerous creations made by a multitude of authors. *Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic*

(produced by BioWare, released by LucasArts in 2003) was the first video game positioned on that timeline, and it was followed by *Knights of the Old Republic II—The Sith Lords* (KOTOR II in short), the game we will focus on here.

To reiterate: we will not be discussing an adaptation, but rather an insertion, and a multimedia one at that—a “video game” is a complex, hybrid entity, a “ludo-narrative” work (Aarseth, “A Narrative Theory of Games” 133). Of course, given that the game positions its narrative within a universe already predefined by a set of rules, some measure of adaptation had to take place; the shift from portraying a mystical energy in a movie to basing a mechanics of gameplay upon it would perhaps merit a separate study. Nonetheless, as far as the technicalities of KOTOR II are concerned, let us simply say that it is what Espen Aarseth calls<sup>1</sup> a “‘creamy middle’ quest game” (the “creamy middle” referring to being able to make choices pertaining to both “kernels” and “satellites” of narrative structure) (Aarseth, “A Narrative Theory of Games” 131), one in which the quests are nested, concurrent, and place- and objective-oriented, and the spatial structure of which can be characterized as a “semi-open,” “star-shaped hub” (Aarseth, “Introduction to Quest Theory”); later on we will return to the significance of this shape and its influence on interpreting the game experience.

A ludo-narrative work is a (sometimes) clever contraption that allows the player to interact with the story being told. Even if the player’s part is to merely survive and therefore allow the story to continue being told, the player experiences that story in a specifically active way. But a ludo-narrative piece may also convey a philosophical conundrum, thus permitting the player to experience such a puzzle in the specifically active way characteristic of ludo-narrative works (cf. Kamps on *The Talos Principle*): we are here in line with the “sensemaking” “perspective of participation,” one which “enables us to analyze a videogame as a context that enhances a certain kind of experiences related to activities involving the interpretation of a role, fantasy, self-expression, etc.” (Pereira and Roque 9–10). Our reading of KOTOR II is the result of undergoing/-taking such an exercise in understanding.

Let us now move on to the main course. It seems only reasonable to carry on with our explanations by the use of quotations from Kreia’s in-game dialogue (which will later be compared with Bataille’s writings). All of these excerpts will be transcribed verbatim here from the version of

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<sup>1</sup> Though Aarseth writes about the first part of the series, the elements he analyzes have not undergone any changes that would undermine the adequacy of his analysis in reference to KOTOR II.

the game described in detail in the section listing cited works (quotations conjured from other sources will be marked as such). It goes without saying that there will be spoilers ahead.

In the world of *Star Wars*, the universe and everything that exists is intrinsically permeated with what is known as the Force, and what Kreia describes in the following way:

It is like a cloud, a mist that drifts from living creature to creature, set in motion by currents and eddies. It is the eye of the storm, the passions of all living things turned into energy, into a chorus. It is the rising swell at the end of life, the promise of new territories and new blood, the call of new mysteries in the dark.

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The Force seems to be a life-force, a fabric of energy woven into the matter of which all things are made, a rhizome of pangalactic proportions, the pulsations of which can be heard by those attuned to it—Force sensitives. It is not merely a stylistic choice to say that those sensitives can *hear* the Force: the sense most commonly used throughout the game to express experiences of the Force is precisely the sense of hearing. One’s lack of connection with the Force is presented through the metaphorical prism of deafness, of aural (both in the sense of aura and of pertaining to the ear) insulation: it is “like being unable to listen, being put into a deep sleep, unable to awaken to the galaxy around you.”

The player begins the game as a person devoid of the Force, cut off from it, an ex-Jedi exiled from the Jedi Order (an organization of Force users whose alignment lay on the Light Side of the Force, and whose conduct was regulated by the Jedi Code: “There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no chaos, there is harmony. There is no death, there is the Force”) for going to war and defending the Republic against a foreign threat in spite of the fact that the Order—and its ruling body, the Jedi Council—vehemently opposed joining the armed conflict. Upon finding the player’s character (from now on to be referred to as the Exile), who has spent years travelling across the peripheral regions of the Republic, Kreia, a Force user herself, takes the Exile under her tutoring wing. This results in the formation of a bond between Kreia and the Exile, a master-apprentice type of bond which allows the Exile to reach the Force again. In the words of Kreia herself: “You can hear the Force through me.”

As a character, Kreia is a variant of the blind seer archetype. The likes of Tiresias (“Thou knowest, though thy blinded eyes see naught . . .” [Sophocles]) often lose their physical sight involuntarily (by what usually seems to be an accident), or are bereft of their bio-vision (as opposed

to an inner vision, or a Shakespearean mind's eye) by an illumination that unveils too bright a fire (like staring at a god, at the sun, or into the maddening peristalsis of reality; incidentally, Bataille wrote of the pineal eye—the vestigial remnant of which sits firmly in our skulls in the form of the pineal gland—imagining it as a feature of a human being, the purpose of which would be to exult in the fiery gaze of the sun: “The eye . . . opening on the incandescent sun in order to contemplate it in a sinister solitude, is not a product of the understanding, but is instead an immediate existence; it opens and blinds itself like a conflagration . . .” [Bataille, “The Pineal Eye” 82]). Kreia, however, is a blind seer of a different kind: “her unused eyesight lies fallow as she relies on marathon meditations to penetrate the universe’s mysteries” (Thompson et al. 158). Her eyes have deteriorated from disuse—they were wilfully abandoned: “I see all that I need, though the seeing of things flesh and blood has failed me some time ago. They were distractions only”; a few lines of dialogue later Kreia gives the Player the following instruction:

If need be, I could heal them [her eyes], restore my sight, but sight can prove a distraction. When one relies on sight to perceive the world, it is like trying to stare at the galaxy through a crack in the door . . . You must learn to see crude matter for what it is before the veil is lifted.

Hence the emphasis placed on the sense of hearing within the poetics of the game’s dialogues. In a different conversation, for example, it is the Player who has the option to describe the experience of the Force as “hearing the heartbeat of the galaxy for the first time.” It is intriguing that, among the other options that the Player may choose from, two also refer to sensory experiences, but neither of them suggests that the Force may be *seen*. The two options are: “It is like a current that passes through you, and carries you with it to all the places it touches,” and “The warmth of the sun without the glare—you can feel its light and its heat, but there is no harshness to it” (like looking at the sun for the nth time, eyes blinded long ago? Or after an Oedipal enucleation?). Thus, assuming a perspective of sound studies allows one to discern within the game’s verbal poetics a critique of ocularcentrism.

Let us return to our analysis of Kreia: she cast her biological sight away willingly, finding it lacking when set against the in-sight provided by “marathon meditations.” She is not like the god-cursed Tiresias (as Ovid recounts, “Saturnia [Juno] . . . amned the one who had made the judgement [Tiresias] to eternal night”), but rather like Odin the god, whose quest for understanding (for, etymologically speaking, standing in the midst of things [Skeat 583], for discovering “the eye of the storm,” the

vantage point from which the thundery revolutions of the universe can be perceived as a shape, as a meaningful pattern) and hunger for epiphany led him to sacrifice one of his eyes in return for knowledge (Mortensen 44).

It is possible to make a connection between this committed attitude and Bataille's thought, but first let us introduce an intertext capable of enriching our experience of this connection. In the fifth instalment of *The Elder Scrolls* video game series (Bethesda Game Studios), *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*, the player ventures upon one of the eponymous Elder Scrolls, primordial and probably cosmogenic entities which manifest themselves to mortal beings in the shape of manuscripts (yet another variant of an ancient archetype). If the player attempts to read the Scroll, they will for a split second glimpse a mosaic of alien, incomprehensible signs and symbols, only to become temporarily blinded. Within the lore of the series, trying to read an Elder Scroll without adequate training results in loss of sight. In fact, even reading them while being familiarized with appropriate techniques takes away one's sight should the readings become a regular practice. This is evident in the fourth instalment of the series, *The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion*, in which the player has the possibility of visiting a secluded monastery of monks who have dedicated their lives to studying the mysteries of the Elder Scrolls—most of the anchorites are blind.

This particular incarnation of the blind seer trope—mystics losing their sight in the process of lifting the mystical veil—allows us to better comprehend the relentless resolve with which one *renounces seeing by seeing*: “I laugh when I think that my eyes persist in demanding objects that do not destroy them” (Bataille, “The Practice of Joy Before Death” 239). Her eyes already destroyed, Kreia listens, and thus hears and feels the fluctuations that agitate existence, her interiority itself exposed to the incessant fulguration of stimuli. Through meditative endeavours (which should not be confused here with the means intercepted in Western culture by the self-help industry), Bataille attained similarly altered states. By projecting oneself within one's interiority in the form of a dramatized “point”<sup>2</sup> (dramatized in the sense of inciting a tragic awareness of one's inescapable annihilation), one goes beyond, as it were, the projected oneself:

It is only in such a concentration—beyond itself—that existence has the leisure of perceiving, in the form of an inner flash of light, “that which it is”: the movement of painful communication which it is, which goes no

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<sup>2</sup> It has to be stated that although the poetics of *Knight of the Old Republic II* can be interpreted as a subversion of the cultural domination of the sense of sight, Bataille straightforwardly says of his method of the dramatized “point” “that it has given the optical form to experience”: “As soon as it admits the existence of the point, *the mind is an eye*” (Bataille, *Inner Experience* 118).

less from within to without, than from without to within. And no doubt it is a question of an arbitrary projection of oneself, but what appears in this way is the profound objectivity of existence, from the moment that the latter is no longer a little entity turned in on itself, but a wave of life losing itself. (Bataille, *Inner Experience* 118)

“A wave of life losing itself”—“Joy of the dying man, wave among waves” (Bataille, *Inner Experience* 51)—is there not a certain agreement between these images and the above-quoted “rising swell at the end of life, the promise of new territories and new blood, the call of new mysteries in the dark,” the latter being the way in which Kreia described the experience of the Force? Perhaps the Force can be likened to the dramatized “point” (given the mental malleability of Bataille’s method [*Inner Experience* 126]), since what it is fundamentally is a conceptualization of the connectedness of everything (shaped in accordance with the *Star Wars* universe, or shaped as it could possibly be shaped in the circumstances narrated in and through that universe), of not only the link between that which is surrounded and that which surrounds, but also of the ultimate oneness of the two: of the end of separateness, of the nameless continuity of death that encapsulates the discontinuous life (“Infinite foretime and / Infinite aftertime: above your head / They close like giant wings, and you are dead” [Nabokov, *Pale Fire* 30–31]; cf. Bataille, *Death and Sensuality*). Bearing in mind the constant tension between the domain of knowledge (of things, of operations, of distinctions) and the depth of non-knowledge (of anguish and ecstasy combined [Bataille, *Inner Experience* 58]), and of feeling that there “is, in us and in the world, something that reveals that knowledge was not given to us, and that situates itself uniquely as being unable to be attained by knowledge” (Bataille, “Nonknowledge, Laughter, and Tears” 135), the Force can be understood as an intrusion: a usurping force—the higher order of things—appearing in place of what Bataille signals below by the use of three periods (ellipsis *points* pointing to an absence):

He and I, having emerged without name from . . . without name, are for this . . . without name, just as two grains of sand are for the desert, or rather two waves losing themselves in two adjacent waves are for a sea. (Bataille, *Inner Experience* 50)

The Force is an intrusion in other ways as well—a skilled Force user can gain access to the thoughts of another. Kreia teaches the Exile how to make one’s listening so deep and so penetrating that the mental articulations and inner movements of others cannot but open before the attention (the stretching [Skeat 30]) of its tendrils (organs that stretch [Harper, “tendrils (n.)”]). She is, however, quick to point out to the Exile that one should be

careful not to fall prey to an illusion of power: “is such listening enough to perceive the world around you? It is not. Because to listen to the thoughts of another is much like attempting to see the universe only with your eyes. It is equally limiting.” Therefore, if one is to listen, then one has to listen in a way reminiscent of the listening described by Nabokov:

I am like one of those inflated pale spiders you see in old gardens. Sitting in the middle of a luminous web and giving little jerks to this or that strand. My web is spread all over the house as I listen from my chair where I sit like a wily wizard. Is Lo in her room? Gently I tug on the silk. She is not. Just heard the toilet paper cylinder make its staccato sound as it is turned; and no footfalls has my outflung filament traced from the bathroom back to her room. Is she still brushing her teeth . . . ? No. The bathroom door has just slammed, so one has to feel elsewhere about the house for the beautiful warm-colored prey. Let us have a strand of silk descend the stairs. I satisfy myself by this means that she is not in the kitchen—not banging the refrigerator door or screeching at her detested mamma . . . Raylike, I glide in thought to the parlor and find the radio silent . . . So my nymphet is not in the house at all! (*Lolita* 47–48)

Though the listening depicted above served the purpose of locating a particular person, what interests us is the mechanism, the metaphor of the spider listening *with* its web, feeling the tiniest, the most minute throbs and trembles of the environment *through* the silken extensions of the mind (cf. Japyassú and Laland on the subject of spider cognition in the context of web-building). One has to palpate, as it were, one’s surroundings with one’s ears—with the attentive tendrils of a tactile listening.

The game provides us with an appropriate example. The Exile and Kreia (and their other companions) travel to a moon called Nar Shaddaa, a completely urbanized world of typically dystopian characteristics: sky-high architecture (as one of the Exile’s companions declares, it would take hours to fall from one of the walkways to the actual ground), metallic materials, black markets, mobs, assassins, and of course walled-off ghettos in which war refugees (most of them human) are kept, harassed, and exploited by the alien races who are a dominant force on Nar Shaddaa. After a short time spent on the moon, Kreia remarks that the Exile’s thoughts are perturbed, to which the Exile responds: “I feel this background noise, like a vibration.” This triggers a conversation which we must reproduce here (with a small omission):

Kreia: It is Nar Shaddaa, the true Nar Shaddaa, that you feel around you. It is this moon, with the metal and machines stripped away and the currents of the Force laid bare.



The Exile: The sound . . . the vibration is strange, tense.

Kreia: . . . What you feel is the echo of the minds of these creatures within the Force. Their anger . . . their greed . . . their desperation. It is life.

The Exile: Is it possible for me to manipulate it? To control these people?

Kreia: One might as well move the universe . . . but such manipulation is possible, yes. It requires that one be able to feel the critical point within the fractured mass . . . and know how to strike it in such a way that the echoes travel to your intended destination.

The Exile: This feeling . . . how long can I feel these echoes around me?

Kreia: For as long as it lasts. Like life, such waking moments within the Force are rare, waiting for the right moment when the critical point is struck, and the sound rises . . . But let us be silent . . . words and thoughts are distractions. Feel this moment, for as long as it will last. Feel life, as it is, with the crude matter stripped away.

The conversation may take a different shape if the player chooses other dialogue options, but the ones used here are the ones Kreia approves of. Nevertheless, this is a moment in which the Exile truly listens, sits like the spider upon an undulating web of echoes, of waves, of inner movements. What we have here is a perfect exemplification of the all-encompassing listening: one in which it is no longer the audible manifestation, sound, that matters, but rather the basest level of vibration—thought, inner states themselves are here implicitly understood as, to use Kreia’s words, “oscillations of energy” (cf. Goodman 81–98 in reference to vibrational ontology); one is tempted to think of one of the four fundamental forces, gravity: the mutual pull exerted by everything on everything, the infinitely complex network of connections both inter- and intra-, the bond between every single body in the universe: no matter how weak the gravitational pull between any two objects is, *it is there*. To truly hear the Force would perhaps be similar to feeling the gravity of all the galaxies and all the atoms.

There is more to be unravelled out of that conversation. An apparent incongruity, for instance, between Kreia and Bataille must be eliminated. What Kreia seems to be, philosophically speaking, is a sort of idealist, whereas Bataille associated himself with materialism. On the one hand, he wrote of what he called base materialism, a materialism which would avoid the trap of treating matter as an idea: “Base matter is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations” (“Base Materialism and Gnosticism” 51). On the other hand, however, the Force—as it is experienced by Kreia—is not an idea abstracted out of reality and elevated onto a pedestal beyond matter. It is, by all means, an integral part of matter, just like the intangible interactions of physics; it is immanent (literally, dwelling in [Harper, “immanent (adj.)”] matter),

not transcendent. The rhetorical line Kreia draws between “crude matter” and “life, as it is” is in truth rather resembling the way in which Bataille writes of his method of the dramatized “point” in “The Practice of Joy Before Death”: “it is necessary to strip away all external representations from what is there, until it is nothing but a pure violence, an interiority, a pure inner fall into a limitless abyss” (238). This interiority is connected with the continuity of life (as a grandiose, seamless process of there being life, not the discontinuous, particular lives):

I wish to emphasize a basic fact: The separation of beings is limited to the real order. It is only if I remain attached to the order of *things* that the separation is *real*. It *is* in fact *real*, but what is real is *external*. “Intimately, all men are one.” (Bataille, *The Accursed Share* 192)

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“All men are one”—“Every human is connected to other humans, is only the expression of others” (Bataille, “Notebook for ‘Pure Happiness’” 236). This is the interiority where it would be conceivable to listen through the Force, if, instead of the “. . . without name,” our universe had the Force.

So everything and everyone is connected, yet we should not be misled into thinking that the recognition of this blossoms by default into an attitude of care or altruism. The socioeconomic conditions on Nar Shaddaa being harsh, it does not take long for the Exile (who is obviously well-to-do) to be approached by beggars or people who are otherwise challenged by adversities. If the player makes the Exile help them, Kreia reprimands the Exile for robbing these people of their opportunity for growth, of their own tests of strength, the trials and tribulations of their destinies. For her, confrontation is the only soil fertile enough for people—and peoples—to bear fruit: “a culture’s teachings, and most importantly, the nature of its people, achieve definition in conflict.” Elsewhere, she says: “It is only through interactions, through decision and choice,<sup>3</sup> through confrontation, physical or mental, that the Force can grow within you.”

“Physical or mental”—this appreciation of conflict is by no means a glorification of senseless brutality: “To best one in battle is one thing. To defeat them without striking a blow—that was my hope”; “It is a far greater victory to make another see through your eyes than to close them forever.” Nevertheless, her outlook is indeed quite Heraclitean: “War . . . is justice, because everything comes into being through War” (Heraclitus qtd. in Fowles 203). This, in turn, is elucidated by Bataille in his “Heraclitean

<sup>3</sup> “. . . desire and decision (the two things that create a live world) . . .” (Nabokov, *Lolita* 67)

Meditation,” in which he gives a verbal, articulated form to the cry that comes from the river which is in no two instants the same:

Before the terrestrial world whose summer and winter order the agony of all living things, before the universe composed of innumerable turning stars, limitlessly losing and consuming themselves, I can only perceive a succession of cruel splendors whose very movement requires that I die: this death is only the exploding consumption of all that was, the joy of existence of all that comes into the world; even my own life demands that everything that exists, everywhere, ceaselessly give itself and be annihilated. (“The Practice of Joy Before Death” 239)

In Hopkins’s succinct, yet succulent, words: “Million-fueled, nature’s bonfire burns on” (66). Change is the prime Heraclitean principle, and the “keraunos [the thunderbolt, chaos, hazard] steers all things” (Heraclitus qtd. in Fowles 203, the translation in brackets is part of the quotation).

“In the fabric of chance, dark interlinks with light” (Bataille, *Guilty* 72)—“The true war is waged in the hearts of all living things, against our own natures, light or dark. That is what shapes and binds the galaxy, not . . . creations of men,” says Kreia, who, in the end, turns out to have an ulterior motive in training the Exile.

Kreia was once a Jedi, but she was a Sith, too (the Sith are those who oppose the Jedi Order and its doctrines of serenity, and whose conduct may be summarized by their code: “Peace is a lie, there is only passion. Through passion, I gain strength. Through strength, I gain power. Through power, I gain victory. Through victory, my chains are broken. The Force shall free me.”). By the time she travels with the Exile, however, she is no longer either of those, seeing the factions for what they are—sides of a coin, parts of a whole pretending to be the whole.

In other words, Kreia, too, is an exile. She and the Exile were both expelled from orders whose rules they failed to adhere to. How fitting, then, that the paths of these two characters—repelled by others and thus drawn to each other—meet in the so-called Outer Rim Territories, far from the centre of the known galaxy. And how suitable that—as we have already mentioned—the spatial structure of KOTOR II can be characterized as a “semi-open,” “star-shaped hub,” for this means—given that “quest and space are intrinsically linked” (Aarseth, “Introduction to Quest Theory”)—that as the game is played, the Exile along with Kreia and their other companions, enact the pattern of attraction and repulsion (cf. Bataille, “Attraction and Repulsion I,” “Attraction and Repulsion II”), of appropriation and excretion (cf. Bataille “The Use Value of D. A. F. de Sade”): the player ventures into various wildernesses (arms of the star-

hub) from demarcated, more or less “civilized” spaces (centres of the star-hub) in which bargains can be struck and quests are received. The ordeals ordained by the quests are faced in the various wildernesses, while the rewards are reaped in the “civilized” spaces, which alternately appropriate and excrete the Exile, who always, however, ends up excreted by a space, an order, the galaxy.

The significance of the star-shaped hub is that it is homologous with anthropological models that divide societies into centres and peripheries: the basic apparatus of inclusion and separation finds itself reconstituted within the mechanics of ludo-narrative works (doubtless, a phenomenon connected with the tightly-wound interplay between culture and play, cf. Caillois 57–67, 81–97). Aarseth states: “What is common for all computer games with virtual environments is that they are based on a simulation, a dynamic model/rule set” (“Introduction to Quest Theory”). The same could be said about all games, and not just games, for is language not precisely “a simulation, a dynamic model/rule set”? Intersubjectivity—a simulation—takes shape through articulations: “Language is not life; it gives life orders” (Deleuze and Guattari 76).

Before we follow this train of thought, let us refocus on Kreia. Her real struggle, the one into which she tries to entangle the Exile throughout the game, is the fight against the Force itself. In a final conversation with the Exile, who is revealed to be a wound in the Force due to the carnage perpetrated at the summit of the war that resulted in his exile, Kreia speaks of her true conviction:

It is said that the Force has a will, it has a destiny for us all. I wield it, but it uses us all, and that is abhorrent to me. Because I hate the Force. I hate that it seems to have a will, that it would control us to achieve some measure of balance, when countless lives are lost. But in you . . . I see the potential to see the Force die, to turn away from its will. And that is what pleases me. You are beautiful to me, Exile. A dead spot in the Force, an emptiness in which its will might be denied.

Kreia wished for the Force to die, because it is a principle of instrumentalization under which every living creature serves a higher purpose, is manipulated into harmony. It is as if instead of the Force, the usurper, Kreia would want the “. . . without name,” the freedom to be disharmonious, *out of sync with the universe* (to be in our universe).

Language “seems to have a will,” too: “Language speaks. Man speaks in that he responds to language” (Heidegger 207). Not only that, language, along with its entire semiotic setup of rules, boundaries, constraints, bears within itself the principle of servility: “I succumb to the use of words like *to*

*be, effect, succumb, use*. In being assembled together, these words, through the very process that links them, announce my servitude” (Bataille, “Surrealism and God” 183). “The elementary unit of language—the statement—is the order-word” (Deleuze and Guattari 76), the order-word being

. . . the relation of every word or every statement to implicit presuppositions, in other words, to speech acts that are, and can only be, accomplished in the statement. Order-words do not concern commands only, but every act that is linked to statements by a “social obligation.” (Deleuze and Guattari 79)

Language is part of the machinery that turns human beings into slaves, subduing and subordinating them to (higher) orders, the grander schemes of things, *to things* (Bataille, “The Sovereign” 185–95). Kreia desired the death of the Force, and Bataille desired the death of language, silence: “. . . to find that which reintroduces—in a point—the sovereign silence that interrupts articulated language” (“Method of Meditation” 90).

“With any tangible reality, for each being, you have to find the place of sacrifice, the wound. A being can only be touched where it yields” (Bataille, *Guilty* 26). Kreia has found the Exile, the wound through which the Force could have been touched and hurt. Her plan, though finally rendered unsuccessful by the Exile, was to multiply and concatenate echoes of this wound, thus lacerating the Force to the point of its nullification. But what of Bataille’s silence?

NON-KNOWLEDGE COMMUNICATES ECSTASY. Non-knowledge is ANGUISH before all else. In anguish, there appears a nudity which puts one into ecstasy. But ecstasy itself (nudity, communication) is elusive if anguish is elusive. Thus ecstasy only remains possible in the anguish of ecstasy, in this sense, that it cannot be satisfaction, *grasped knowledge*. (Bataille, *Inner Experience* 52)

If “[t]he defeat of thought is ecstasy” (Bataille, “Nonknowledge” 203), if this anguished ecstasy heralds non-knowledge, renounces certainty, suspends one in a state of being unable to speak, then the effort put by Bataille into writing about his ecstatic methods and disseminating these writings is visible in new light: what we see in this light is a crusade for the death of language.

Let us conclude with the following remarks. A similarity between language and Aarseth’s definition of a game has been suggested above. What was meant to be implied is not that our current affair with language is in fact and in its entirety a game, but rather that there is a possibility towards which certain strains of poetry (or wordplay) seem to point—a possibility

that language could be the ludo-narrative dwelling *par excellence* (consider as an example Borges's "The Lottery in Babylon" as read by Baudrillard [150–53]). Let us assume that this possibility is actualized in various degrees and on different levels throughout our relationship with language—that we are indeed playing some sort of game, and that we are thus necessarily played (Aarseth, "I Fought the Law" 130). If we consider in this context Bataille's description of "silence" as a "slipping word" (*Inner Experience* 16)—a word that twists language into contradiction, giving way to true silence—then it begins to resemble a cheat, a method of exploiting a bug in the system, of glitching your way out of the map. Given Bataille's engagement with transgression, it is only fitting to redirect Aarseth's notion of "transgressive play" (Aarseth, "I Fought the Law" 132–33) back onto the transgressor-extraordinaire: just as Kreia played the game of the Force in order to destroy it, Bataille played the game of language to subvert it, to access . . .

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## Online Humour, Cartoons, Videos, Memes, Jokes and Laughter in the Epoch<sup>1</sup> of the Coronavirus

# ABSTRACT

From the onset of the indefinite deferral of our previously taken-for-granted lives, an abundance of humorous online cartoons, jokes, memes, videos and other satirical material relating to the COVID-19 outbreak—and its consequences—has emerged. Humorous responses to this dire global pandemic proliferate irrespective of location, nationality, ethnicity, age, gender and/or socio-political affiliations. Against a background of enforced lockdowns, quarantine, and sometimes gross political ineptitude, with a mounting daily global death toll, humour referencing this scourge continues to blossom. This may seem counterintuitive or inappropriate at a time of heightened anxiety and fear apropos of an invisible killer-virus, known only in diagrammatic—and, ironically, aesthetically pleasing—visual form. Online humour evoking the COVID-19 crisis is expressed recursively via intertextuality referencing literary, visual, written, oral or other “texts.” Interpictoriality is evident with memes that reconfigure renowned visual artworks. The internet enables copious discourse related to the COVID-19 eruption/disruption.

Embedded in this article are examples to support the article’s theoretical basis, with intertextuality its major focus. Discussion follows, with speculation as to why humour, absurdity and wit are able to prosper in an environment of radical uncertainty and why joking about our parlous global predicament acts as a vital coping mechanism.

**Keywords:** viral humour, COVID-19 quarantine, online exemplars, analysis of specific works, validity of humorous discourse amidst a global pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> I have used the word “epoch” throughout this article in reference to the SARS-CoV-2 virus outbreak because medical and scientific evidence points to the fact that this is only the beginning of a protracted period of time during which humanity will be living under the shadow of this pandemic.

## INTRODUCTION: A BRIEF TYPOLOGY OF HUMOUR THEORIES, STYLES AND GENRES

A brief summary of the major theories and genres of humour needs to be broached prior to discussion and analysis of the plethora of COVID-19 humour on the World Wide Web. For the most part, these theories and styles should not be regarded as discrete categories, but rather as intersecting one another in complexly ambiguous ways. In the final analysis, humour resists all attempts at definitive accounts or explanation.

It is largely accepted that humour, joking and comedy fall into four or five major theoretical categories, styles, genres, modes or approaches (see Venn Diagram for some of the major scholars and theorists in this field). The first of these is the Superiority theory in which people laugh at the presumed deficiencies and/or deformities of others. In the case of people with disabilities such “humour” can be toxic. The Superiority theory is one of the oldest (Western) theories of humour going back to Plato (thought to have lived c. 428/427 or 424/423–348/347 BC), later taken up by the Englishman Hobbes (1588–1679) and into the present day, often grafted onto the Incongruity theory.

Relevant here is also the German concept of Schadenfreude, a portmanteau word signifying the derivation of pleasure from someone else’s or a group’s misery, pain or misfortune.<sup>2</sup> As with all of these theories, superiority and Schadenfreude are not necessarily humorous, but can often be malicious and very unfunny, especially from the target’s perspective. Sadly, this kind of humour has become increasingly prevalent. Such humour often overlaps with the Incongruity theory, discussed below.

There are numerous Australian examples of sexist and racist jokes that fall into the Superiority grouping. In jesting mode sexist jokes can be ways of “taking the mickey”<sup>3</sup> out of the other gender. Such joking has been described as an “acculturating ritual” for some Australian men and women.<sup>4</sup> Here is an example of a riddle posed by an Australian man to his mate, with three possible responses. The following discourse is underpinned by the unquestioned assumption of male supremacy and the objectification of women by some, but not all, Australian men:<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Translation: Schadenfreude—from Schaden: “harm” and Freude: “joy.”

<sup>3</sup> The concept of “taking the mickey,” derived from the British colonists, means teasing or (usually lightly) ridiculing another person or group. “Mickey” (sometimes “Micky”) also has multiple different meanings.

<sup>4</sup> For more on Australian humour as an acculturating ritual, see Milner Davis’s “‘Aussie’ Humour and Laughter: Joking as an Acculturating Ritual.”

<sup>5</sup> In relation to early colonial Australia, male convicts, soldiers and settlers overwhelmingly outnumbered women in the colony. The gendered nature of Australian colonial society continued as male convicts were emancipated and more (mostly) male free

Q: "Why is having a beer better than having a wife?"

A1: "Because you can enjoy a beer all month long."

OR:

A2: "Because hangovers go away."

OR:

A3: "Because beers always go down easy."

Often overlapping the **Superiority theory** is the **Incongruity theory**. As is the case with the Superiority theory it has a lengthy history in Western thought, from Aristotle through to Schopenhauer and Kant, and into the present day. It is based on the dissonance that exists between reality and/or what listener/s or viewer/s expect to hear, see or experience. The juxtaposition of two or more dissimilar phenomena sometimes occasions a pleasurable cognitive shift, often leading to laughter. An Australian example follows, largely founded on incongruity, the charm of which is enhanced by a childlike sense of playfulness:

An Aussie bloke was standing on a busy street corner in Melbourne, right next to the city's major train station. He'd tied a small rock onto a piece of string, which he was repeatedly twirling around his head. Another man walked up to the bloke and said, "What yer doing mate?" The man, who continued spinning the rock, replied, "I'm keeping the elephants away." The other man commented, "But mate, we don't have any elephants in Australia."

"I know," said the first bloke. "Effective, isn't it, mate?"

First related to me about a decade ago by an Australian friend (a woman), this joke attests to the Australian larrikin streak. Originally used as a term of abuse, nowadays "larrikin" has positive connotations, valorizing disdain of authority and social conventions. Larrikinism is widely regarded as a dimension of "the" Australian identity, mainly used as a descriptor for men, and occasionally for women.

The Englishman Terry Eagleton's point about incongruity humour that "the comic and the serious are clashing modes of cognition, competing versions of the nature of reality, not just alternative moods or discursive

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settlers arrived, no doubt engendering the concept of mateship, which was from the outset an entirely male phenomenon. In recent years this has begun to change, but in Australian society a good deal more than vestiges of male supremacy remain evident. Further to this, the Australian Government Report of 2018–19 states that based on 2017 statistics, one woman was killed by her male partner per nine days and one woman in sixteen was subject to emotional abuse (also known as "coercive control") by her partner. This is undoubtedly an underestimation of the actual statistics in that many cases go unreported as a result of women's fear of retribution if they speak out. More recent statistics have emerged, showing that these figures have increased considerably as a result of the COVID-19 quarantine and lockdown restrictions.

modes” (33) is alive in this joke. Humour is a breaker of conventions. In contemporary humour studies, it would be fair to say that for many humour scholars Incongruity theory has become a major focus.

**Black humour**, also known as **Gallows humour**, is by definition incongruous, in that it retails jokes alluding to persons dying violent deaths or similarly dark subject matter. Sometimes, but not always, these so-called “jokes” are offensive and inappropriate. While often off-limits, they continue to proliferate.

Here is a nasty example. After it became known that Australia’s “backpacker murderer,” Ivan Milat, had sadistically killed numerous young foreign backpackers hitchhiking around Australia, a swathe of jokes emerged based on his cruel and horrific crimes. After slaughtering his victims in the densely wooded Belanglo State Forest, Milat buried their remains at that site. It took considerable time for these burial sites to be discovered, and much longer to identify and charge Milat.

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Offensive jokes came thick and fast. Here is one that was popular at that time:

Ivan Milat is driving through the Belanglo State Forest at twilight. Two British backpackers are sitting beside him on the front seat of his ute. The young women sense that something terrible is about to happen. Beside themselves, the girls begin to shake with fear. One says, “Ooh, we really don’t like this place . . . It’s dark, it’s cold, and I don’t know why you’ve driven off the road into this horribly gloomy, dank forest.” Milat responds, “Well, how do you think *I* feel? I’m going to have to drive out of here alone.”

Apart from the callous incongruity and apparent lack of fellow feeling displayed in this “joke,” it also has an existential dimension, in that we all must accept the reality of eventual death. To laugh at death is to realize that we have escaped it, at the same time discharging our disquiet on that subject, because we haven’t crossed the finishing line—yet.

There is also a psychological dimension evident in the previous example, connected to what is known, *inter alia*, as the **Release** or **Relief theory** of humour (see diagram below), which holds that dark humour involves psychological release or relief. Those of us who are capable of laughing at this joke have fortunately avoided the fate of the young men and women killed by this monster; our relief as survivors of such horror is expressed through the conduit of laughter. Freud distinguishes between innocuous joking and tendentious jokes, to which latter category the Milat example unequivocally belongs.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For an expansion of the concept of tendentious joking, refer to the linguist Don L. F. Nilsen’s article (see reference list).

This brings us to a range of **Psychological theories** more generally, encompassing catharsis, relief and the release of pent-up emotion via humour that gives way to laughter, thus—in theory at least—reducing stress and saving psychic energy. As Eagleton writes, “The seventeenth-century philosopher the Earl of Shaftesbury sees comedy as releasing our constrained but naturally free spirits” (10). Although Shaftesbury published his essay in 1709, it retains traction in the field of humour studies to this day. Shaftesbury coined the felicitous term “defensive raillery” in relation to such humour. Herewith is a contemporary exemplar leading into the influence of Freud whose cognate theoretical framework remains prominent. Two people of Jewish faith are chatting, when one man asks the other:

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Q: Why do Jews always answer a question with a question?  
To which his friend replies:  
A: I don't know, why?

A version of the release theory was later proposed and popularized by Freud, whose 1905 book *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (originally published in German as *Der Witz und Beziehung zum Unbewußten*), continues to exert considerable influence on humour theory to this day.

So why laugh? As Eagleton neatly puts it, “since humour involves a gratifying release of tension, which mimes the event of orgasm, even non-sexual varieties have subdued sexual overtones” (19). Laughter is thus also conceptualized as releasing sexual energy.

Returning to humour more generally, there is also a grouping around **Existential** and other **Philosophical theories** and beliefs that deal with the meaning of life—or its meaninglessness. For the most part, these are not “theories” per se, but reflect beliefs and each philosopher’s attitudinal stance. For an example of existential humour, it is hard to go past this—possibly apocryphal—exchange between Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus at their favourite Parisian restaurant, Les Deux Magots. They were discussing Camus’s recently published book, *Le mythe de Sisyphe*, translated later as “The Myth of Sisyphus.” The unfortunate Sisyphus offended the gods and was condemned to spend eternity pushing a large rock up to the summit of a hill only for it to roll down again immediately.

Sartre (reputedly) asked Camus, “When the Gods condemned Sisyphus to Hades to roll his rock up a hill eternally, was Sisyphus permitted to listen to music?”

Camus’s (apparent) response was, “Yes! Rock and Roll, of course.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> This is a summary of Madame Irene Gausson’s account of this interchange. I do not know the source of this knowledge—it was delivered anecdotally along with the proviso that it may or may not have been authentic.

We must not forget humour as a form of **Play**—linguistic play, visual play, mime, video play, sonic play, games, or sheer silliness. Play may encompass satire, or parody, or just plain good fun. Play can take the form of play on words, including slips of the tongue such as “Freudian slips” (Freud; Fromkin). There seems to be a level of inadvertency in some word play.

Spoonerisms (similar to “metatheses”) exemplify word play, albeit inadvertently. The Reverend Spooner, a Christian minister and Oxford don (1844–1930) was said to transpose initial consonants of words in single sentences, thereby changing the sentence’s meaning with humorous results. One example is “Work is the curse of the drinking classes” instead of “Drinking is the curse of the working classes.” Another Spooner example replaces what was clearly intended to pay homage to the “Dear Old Queen,” but was transposed to the “queer old Dean.” While many Spoonerisms may be apocryphal, most of us will know someone who has done something similar and, when this happens, we try not to laugh.<sup>8</sup>

“Silliness” can also be a significant constituent of play, whether physical, cognitive, visual, oral or written. As Timms writes,

Silliness is a slippery concept: messy, unsettling and difficult to pin down. Its childish anarchy, its wilful disregard of social proprieties and constant frustration of our need for order put it outside of our accustomed way of perceiving the world, and thus dangerously in the orbit of anxiety, nihilism, and the grotesque.  
Yet, for all that, it can be great fun. (1)

The emergence of the coronavirus has thrust humanity into that orbit, and in many of the examples of COVID-19 related humour there is a dimension of anarchic silliness, which acts as a salve, albeit temporarily. “Silliness” also has an existential and philosophical dimension, in that existentialism focuses on the liminal, including the nature of being and identity, anxiety and death. These are matters that underlie much of the humour under discussion in this article.

The porous nature of *all* of these quasi-artificial boundaries is noteworthy; more often than not they overlap. There are also semantic theories of humour—although it could be argued that there is necessarily a semantic element in *all* humour. Above all, to take liberties with Coleridge’s dictum, humour requires a “willing suspension of humourlessness.”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For more on the possible underlying causes of this refer to Fromkin.

<sup>9</sup> Coleridge’s original statement alluded to literary works, including poetry, when he wrote of a “willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.” Here Coleridge was specifically referring to works of fantasy or the supernatural. Norman N. Holland, in an article in which he revisits the same concept, provides an example of

Intertextuality, too, matters in humour. Norrick, writing in 1989 before the internet loomed large, defined intertextuality as occurring “any time one text suggests or requires reference to some other identifiable text or stretch of discourse, spoken or written” (117). The now-omnipresent World Wide Web enabled an explosion of intertextuality, although this well and truly preceded the immense social change resulting from digital technology.<sup>10</sup>

A cautionary note is needed. Despite the globalization of humour in our increasingly interconnected world, which has become evident during the global spread of COVID-19, Bremmer and Roodenburg repudiate attempts by scholars who endeavour to create overarching macro-theories to explain the aetiology of humour and laughter. They write that

a mistake common to all these attempts is the tacit assumption that there exists something like an “ontology of laughter,” that humour and laughter are transcultural and ahistorical. However, laughter is just as much a culturally determined phenomenon as humour. (3)

The flawed assumption to which Bremmer and Roodenburg refer came into high relief in the case of the murders of staff working for the French satirical weekly, *Charlie Hebdo*. In January 2015 two Islamists fired on and killed twelve people employed by the weekly, injuring eleven others. *Charlie Hebdo* had a long history of robustly satirizing political and religious figures and events. The two murderers objected sufficiently to a depiction on the newspaper’s front cover—a satirical cartoon featuring the Prophet Mohammed—to commit this barbarous act.<sup>11</sup>

The *Charlie Hebdo* incident exposed the accuracy of Bremmer and Roodenburg’s prescient article while also speaking to the limits of satiric licence in our interconnected world. In the following section, examples of humour in this epoch of COVID-19 will be discussed, as will the question of the limits of humour. Is it true that in most of the Western world there is no subject matter too serious to become the theme of a joke? Many people seek to mitigate what could be interpreted as hostile joking by saying, “Well, it’s just a joke.” This leads us into examples of humour, to be discussed soon, as a global phenomenon that has become the strange but often entertaining bedfellow of the killer virus.

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a humorous exchange in which he draws a specific parallel with humour as being subject to similar circumstances (1–3).

<sup>10</sup> See Margaret A. Rose’s excellent publication *Pictorial Irony* for more on pre-internet iterations of intertextuality.

<sup>11</sup> For further information and analysis, see, for example, Połowska-Kimunguyi and Gillespie.



It needs to be observed that, taken collectively, *any* and indeed *all* of these humour theories and attempts to generate a general, all-encompassing, humour theory is simply pie in the sky. Synthesizing all of these accounts of humour and factoring in the functions of humour and laughter will probably bring us as close as possible to achieving that elusive goal.

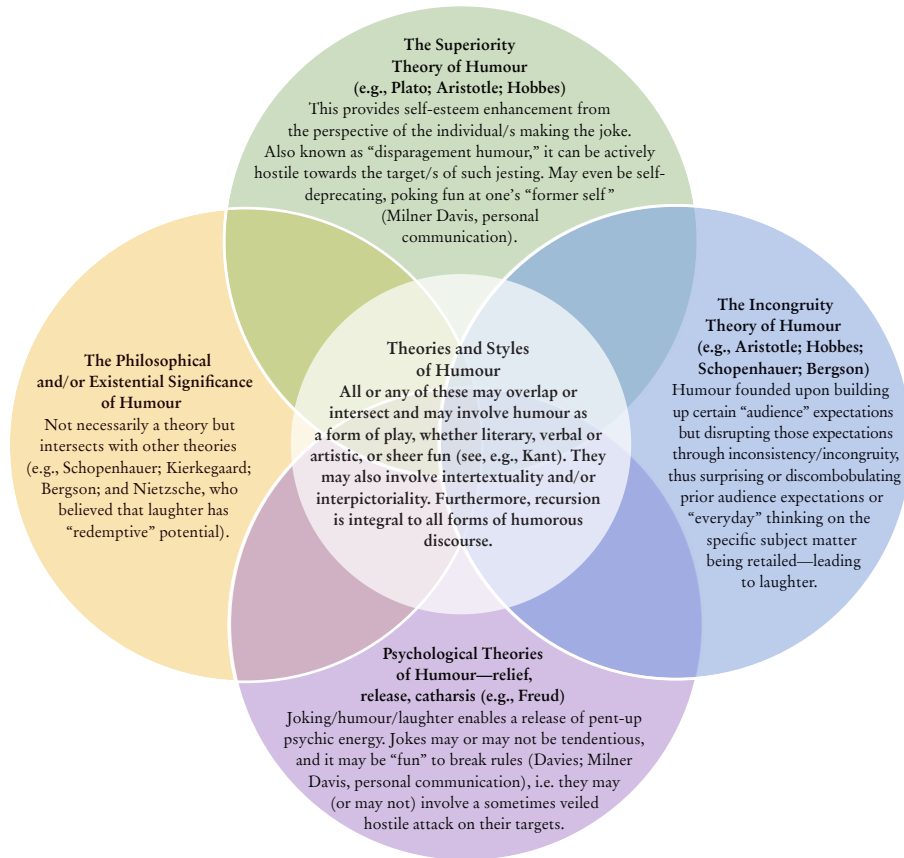


Fig. 1. Venn diagram. © Christine Nicholls, with thanks to Jessica Milner Davis.

Here the relationship of humour to laughter needs to be canvassed in brief. Laughing is not an undifferentiated phenomenon. As Eagleton writes, in the English language a range of different words distinguish modes of laughter.<sup>12</sup> He supplies examples that include, *inter alia*, cackling, chortling, snickering, guffawing, giggling, sniggering, chuckling and roaring

<sup>12</sup> Note that is also the case with many world languages. For example, in French there are words including “rire” (a generic word meaning “to laugh”), “rigoler” (to joke), “glousser” (to chuckle or chortle), “ricaner” (to snicker or to snigger), and “caqueter” (to cackle)—and more.

[with laughter] (Eagleton 1–5). For example, in Schadenfreude jokes, laughter-related words with derisory connotations, such as “sniggering” or “snickering,” would normally be more apt descriptors than “giggling.”

Given that the subject matter of the humorous examples in the next section relate to COVID-19, a global pandemic that could extinguish most or even all homo sapiens (respected scientists have stated that is entirely possible that an effective vaccine will never become available; see Bienkov) it becomes clear that the Incongruity and Release theories both play major roles, without necessarily precluding other humour theories or styles. For more on this, refer to Fig. 1 (see previous page) indicating the deep imbrication of *all* humour theories and styles.

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## PART ONE: ANALYSIS OF CARTOONS FOCUSING ON THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

While this article features a selection of online humour, including jokes, memes, videos and cartoons in the epoch of COVID-19, the focus here is on cartoons. These exemplars are not only in recursive relationship/s with respect to the coronavirus itself and its ramifications, but recursion is integral to all humour, in that it needs an identifiable subject or a target. This is equally applicable to inter- and/or intra-textual or inter-pictorial joking, whether of a political or other nature, or makes reference to literary or visual artworks, specific events, modes of discourse, or to several fields simultaneously. As the mathematician David J. Hunter so felicitously puts it: “Recursion, *see Recursion*” (494).

### EXAMPLE 1: DAMIEN GLEZ’S CORONAVIRUS BIENFAITS (CORONAVIRUS BENEFITS)



Cartoon published on Jeuneafrique.com, Burkina Faso. Published 26 March 2020, accompanied by an article written by Glez, titled “[Chronique] Top 10 des bénéfices inattendus du coronavirus” (“Top 10 Unexpected Benefits of the Coronavirus”). © Damien Glez and Jeune Afrique.

Damien Glez is a professional cartoonist and writer who lives and works in Ouagadougou,<sup>13</sup> the capital of Burkina Faso, an impoverished country in west Africa, currently on the brink of an inter-ethnic war (Malley), adding to the ironic poignancy of the “joke’s” setting. In his intertextual, indeed, trans-textual cartoon *Coronavirus Bienfaits* (*Coronavirus Benefits*), Glez ingeniously filters the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic through the pre-existing model of the Nobel Peace Prize ceremonial awards evening.

Deploying darkly satirical irony, Glez depicts the victorious coronavirus hovering over the podium, addressing the assembled audience from a microphone. The virus declares that it “would like to express my appreciation to the bats without whom I wouldn’t have been able to teach humanity so many things” (“Je remercie les chauves-souris sans qui je n’aurais pas pu apprendre tant de choses aux humains”). A tuxedo-wearing bat looks on admiringly, as does the small, clearly enthralled, African audience standing behind him.

The award of the Nobel Peace Prize to the coronavirus is an inspired example of merging trans-textuality with the incongruity theory of humour: Glez’s cartoon challenges largely untested assumptions that there are only negative aspects of this virus. There *have been* benefits from the coronavirus, ranging from the lowering of toxic emissions that lead to climate change, the temporary reduction in aviation and certain long-running international combat, and in some cases, a greater sense of our global interdependence and citizenship, although there is also evidence of the intensification of some pre-existing divisions.

Why base the cartoon on the structure and rituals of the Nobel Peace Prize? To begin, it is an event of global significance. Acceptance speeches for major prizes have been described as “mediated rituals” (see, for example, Dayan and Katz; Haastrup 127, 132). In the second chapter of their book, Dayan and Katz offer a typology of high-end, live media events that are broadcast widely, discussing these mediated rituals in terms of contests, conquests and coronations. The borders of these three types are to a considerable extent porous. The element of coronation, or “*corona*-tion” (groan!) is paramount in relation to Glez’s choice of the Nobel Prize winner 2021.

What supports Glez’s choice of the coronavirus as the winner? For starters, the pandemic is undoubtedly “winning” as it is nowhere near under control. Mass shutdowns in some parts of the world have tended

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<sup>13</sup> The link to this article is as follows: <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/914768/societe/chronique-top-10-des-benefices-inattendus-du-coronavirus/> (Society/Chronicle-Top 10 Unexpected Benefits of the Coronavirus). The article itself is also worth reading, with sub-headings including “Ralentissement du réchauffement climatique” (“The Slowing of Global Warming”) and “Introspection philosophique et culturelle” (“Philosophical and Cultural Introspection”).

to suspend rivalries and hostilities amongst groups within some nations, at least temporarily. For many individuals this continues to be a time of self-reflection and for stronger focus on our most important values, which have been forcibly downplayed to some extent over the years in our economically-obsessed, sell-sell workaday Western world. On the other hand, politicians who have lost traction as a result of being unable or unwilling to control the spread of the virus have fomented greater aggression. This has already become apparent in the political leadership of the United States, the increasingly dis-United Kingdom, China and Brazil (*inter alia*), whose political leaders have been lambasted via satirical or caricatural memes, cartoons and articles.

Humour and parody have the capacity to act as vehicles that undermine previously underexplored dominant beliefs and, on occasion, give voice to new and often uncomfortable truths that lead to positive change. In the Western world in particular, self-satisfaction and complacency about our—mostly—relatively comfortable ways of life, have been tested and challenged by the virus, owing to the need for quarantine and lockdowns. Paradigm shifts, for the most part, need a catalyst. This pandemic has already activated many of us to “differently think” about many things, and for some, this will continue post-pandemic. Glez’s cartoon speaks truth to power: his neat reversal of everyday thinking about the coronavirus has been turned on its head.

EXAMPLE 2: ANDRZEJ MILEWSKI’S *KOSTUCHA MAŁA*  
(*THE ITSY-BITSY GRIM REAPER*)<sup>14</sup>



Andrzej Milewski’s *Kostucha mała* (*The Itsy-Bitsy Grim Reaper*).  
© Andrzej Milewski, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Sourced from his website at [www.andrzejrysuje.pl](http://www.andrzejrysuje.pl) (“Andrzej Draws”) published on 20 Mar. 2020.

In contrast with Glez's hard-hitting framing of the COVID-19 virus, the Polish cartoonist Andrzej Milewski offers, at least superficially, an apolitical, whimsical and lightly humorous take on the pandemic in his *Kostucha mała* (*The Itsy-Bitsy Grim Reaper*). In the first of the two frames, the diminutive Grim Reaper is recognizable by his symbolic cloak. This anthropomorphic version of a childlike Bearer of Death, depicted in a domestic setting, relaxed and comfortable, feet up on a sofa with laptop balanced on outstretched belly, downplays the seriousness of the pandemic. A scythe, the accoutrement denoting the Grim Reaper's *metier* of harvesting Death, is balanced on one side of the couch. It seems that the protagonist's work has now been initiated, and all that's necessary is to let it rip.

In the first frame, the itsy-bitsy Grim Reaper brags that he "work[s] remotely." In the second frame, Kostucha's right hand clutches *Dżuma* (the title of the Polish translation of Albert Camus's *The Plague*). "I've [now] got time [to catch up on] books and games" ("Mam czas na zaległe książki, gry"), the little fellow avows in the next frame bubble.

In his left hand the wee Grim Reaper clutches a tablet or iPhone with the word *Plaga* written on it (the video game *Plague Inc.*) In terms of depiction, it is important to note that cartoons and other representational artworks both portray and betray not only the material circumstances of individuals, but also their psychological conditions. In this cartoon plague-related, death-themed reading matter and video games are sources of entertainment for the Grim Reaper. As Stephen Totilo puts it,

Plague Inc. is a sufficiently disturbing variation of the world we all live in now, if only we were the ones controlling the disease rather than fighting it . . .

[T]he game's difficulty is determined by a complex algorithm that factors in, among other things, how frequently people in its virtual world wash their hands. Players win if humanity is extinguished. They lose if humanity finds a cure.

Many of us will find this not only morally deplorable, but given present circumstances, also an unhealthy form of entertainment, particularly for the young. On the other hand, Milewski's cartoon, seemingly focusing on confinement as a time of relaxation, consumerism, rest and recreation, underpinned by material prosperity, is no doubt comforting to children who may otherwise fear coronavirus.

It thus lacks the critical edge of Glez's work. Furthermore, there appears to be nil self-reflexivity in popularizing a game in which the ultimate

objective is to wipe out humanity in entirety: gallows humour at its worst or best, dependent upon which side you sit in relation to the virus.

Unsurprisingly, China banned Plague Inc. in late February 2020, after the coronavirus had taken hold in Wuhan Province and had begun spreading far afield, describing its contents as “illegal,” no doubt in retaliation to Trump’s obdurate description of the virus as the “Chinese virus,” and more recently as “Kung Flu.” While the game has its strong detractors elsewhere in the world, there are also supporters, of whom a considerable number put forward a persuasive case for its “consciousness raising” dimension.

In part, the joke lies in the fact that the Grim Reaper may now stay at home and relax for an indefinite period of time. There is an element of irony in the joke, in that he’s acting just like many of “us,” staying at home during lockdown, taking it easy, entertaining ourselves. Moreover, while people are quarantined for safety reasons, they’re still being scythed down: death’s work is now carried out remotely, which is very handy for our little hero. Playing Plague Inc. as a relaxing “killing game,” Mała Kostucha keeps his hand in for the time when he’ll need to resume *his* daily work.

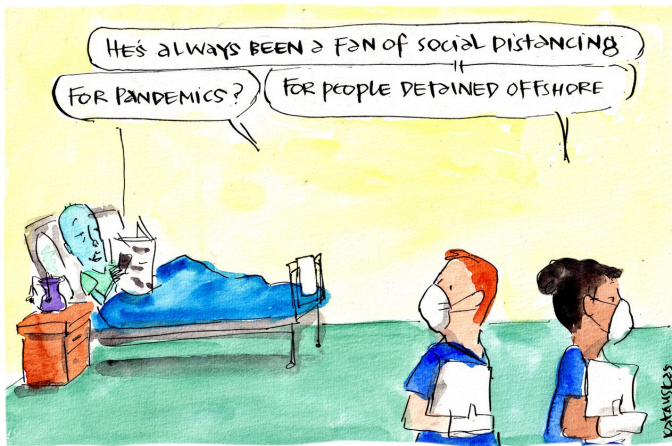
This cartoon clearly fits into the category of dark humour. Death preceded by horrendous sickness and existential terror blends conceptually with what on the surface appears to be lightly entertaining discourse. As such, it takes considerable cognitive work to unpack the seemingly incompatible elements of this cartoon.

Suls offers an “incongruity-resolution model” of humour based on the idea that it is subject to a two-stage problem-solving process. Writing that if an individual is unable to identify what he describes as semantic, logical or experiential “rules” or dimensions (88) then s/he may miss the punchline and find the joke puzzling (or, I suggest, completely unintelligible). To this Suls further states that

in the ideal case, the problem solving will be successful and will retrieve the relevant rule that reconciles the joke parts. The punch line is then perceived to make sense, and the person “gets” the joke. When the apparent incongruity has been made congruous, the program has succeeded and will terminate; the humor has been understood. (88)

### EXAMPLE 3: FIONA KATAUSKAS’S CARTOON *SOCIAL DISTANCING*

Fiona Katauskas, resident cartoonist for the liberal-minded Jesuit online Australian publication *Eureka Street*, whacks her audience with a double whammy of issues in her cartoon *Social Distancing*, a superficially tame but sharply satirical work. It is another case of the viewer/reader’s expectations being dashed, insofar as the title leads one to anticipate a punchline relating exclusively to the coronavirus.



Published 17 March 2020, Eureka Street, [www.eurekastreet.com.au](http://www.eurekastreet.com.au).  
© Fiona Katauskas and Eureka Street.

But no; in her written text, Katauskas skilfully and seamlessly turns the tables by referencing another form of confinement. Successive Australian Federal Governments have targeted refugees who arrive by boat. Some are sent back home to face almost certain death in the dangerous places from which they have fled, and others, lacking acceptable documentation, are placed on offshore islands in Nauru or New Guinea in prison conditions. Many incarcerated adults and children remain there indefinitely, presumably to live out their days.

A considerable number of detainees have been murdered or have committed suicide inside these detention centres. There is evidence that their jailers, a private company contracted by the Australian government, do not treat the internees with respect. Almost all inmates have mental health problems (see Glendinning for more on this).

The blue-faced man lying in bed is Peter Dutton, presently Australia's Federal Minister of Home Affairs, and arguably the country's most despised politician. A former policeman, Dutton is currently responsible for enforcing Australia's offshore detention laws. On the 13 March 2020 he was hospitalized with COVID-19. His distinctive elongated face, somewhat akin to the concave side of a spoon, with small, slitty eyes punched in, is a cartoonist's dream.

Katauskas's cartoons in general reflect Bergson's theory of humour as a social corrective, as does this one. But this cartoon also transcends that idea. Its brilliance arises from the sheer originality of the *double entendre* of the written text and its semantic ambiguity coupled with an inspired zeugmatic twist.

## PART TWO: ANALYSIS OF ONLINE VIDEOS RELATED TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

### EXAMPLE 1: ANDREW COTTER'S OLIVE AND MABEL SERIES: *GAME OF BONES*



Video Still of Olive and Mabel. © Andrew Cotter. For full video, see: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f2BZNwCXws>

For many years, Andrew Cotter has been a professional television broadcaster and sports commentator. For Australians, he is undoubtedly best known for his commentary on the Wimbledon tennis tournament, cancelled this year owing to COVID-19 restrictions. This has presumably led to a degree of ennui at home, as is the case with many of us. But Cotter's playful and obviously beloved dogs, Olive, a Labrador and the elder of the two, and Mabel, Olive's Golden Retriever playmate, came to the rescue, as did his own well-honed skills as a broadcaster.

These serve him well in the Olive and Mabel series. Cotter utilizes aural and visual techniques similar to those used in games played on courts or tables, that is, sports that take place between just two or four players in tightly circumscribed spaces—differing, for example, from golf, rugby or football, which are played by numerous players in larger spaces.

The patterns underpinning Cotter's Olive and Mabel's game evince a degree of similitude with tennis, badminton and table tennis, each of which are played as singles or doubles. While only a single camera is needed to cover an entire "court," this has changed in recent times to the use of several cameras, in order to track the trajectory of the ball, as well as closeups of the players' faces, or for event detection. The latter includes filming young and immature (mostly male) players throwing tantrums and destroying their rackets by smashing them into concertinaed wrecks. Olive and Mabel are much better behaved. In terms of the visuals in tennis and



table tennis, there is a mixture of player close-ups, mid-views and “whole court” views, in other words an aerial view encompassing the entirety of the site, including spectators. Court commentary differs from that of soccer, rugby or hockey, which need more commentators and cameras to cover the number of players and the larger arenas.

Andrew Cotter’s humorous videos—part parody, part pastiche—would not have succeeded without his in-depth skillset, experience and expertise as a professional broadcaster along with his insider knowledge of this specific form of discourse. The tone of Cotter’s commentary on the antics of Olive and Mabel is consistent with his live sporting commentaries, never deviating from the formulaic aspects of sports broadcasting techniques. This intimate, ostensibly deadpan quality plays a significant part in the humour in these doggie masterpieces. There is also an element of self-satire in Cotter’s observations of his beloved dogs, and from this intertextuality the humour emerges. Another dimension of intertextuality is evident in Cotter’s title: *Game of Bones* is a direct reference to *Game of Thrones*, in which epic battles are played out, although in this case the protagonists Olive and Mabel are literally only “playing.”

Cotter’s Olive and Mabel commentaries use the identical syntactic, lexical, semantic and thematic staples of his sports commentary. These short videos are simulacra of the “real thing.” While the videos exist within a play-frame, there is no dumbing or “species-ism” evident in Cotter’s discourse. He refrains from “targeting” the dogs, who emerge as intelligent beings with individual characteristics. He clearly respects his canine companions.

As is common in the sports broadcasting genre, Cotter alleviates “duller moments” by introducing information or gossip about individual players. For instance, Olive’s ability to outfox young Mabel is declining, and thus her competitive edge and playing career may—sadly—be drawing to an end.

Cotter’s voice rises with unexpected turns of events, interspersed with equally urgent *sotto voce* remarks, changes in cadence, intonation and pitch, reaching a crescendo when the game swings from Olive’s seemingly certain victory to a knife-edge situation. Cotter’s charismatic commentary carries his enthralled audience towards the thrilling outcome. This is not a case of “playing” the audience: broadcasters of Cotter’s ilk have played the specific sports/game/s themselves, enriching their *métiers* via intimate personal knowledge of specific skills, triumphs, troughs, hazards, and players’ rapidly see-sawing emotions.

Tennis commentary conventionally remarks on moments when a player “wanders,” losing concentration for a spell. This is evident in Cotter’s commentary when the game nears the end, with an intensity of focus on the controlled rivalry of the two dogs over the coveted orange bone. Eventually Olive relaxes and releases her mouth-hold, giving the younger

Mabel the edge to “win,” with Olive clinching defeat from the jaws of victory. A previously mentioned feature of *Game of Bones* is the reference to the *Game of Thrones*. The latter’s first story focuses on claimants competing for succession. Owing to its global success and formidably large and admiring fanbase, the *Game of Thrones* is now deployed by the media and others as a figure of speech relating to conflicts in various arenas. Given the equability and good-naturedness of both Olive and Mabel, this is another source of ironic humour in this online masterpiece.

Cotter’s captivating Olive and Mabel videos provide viewers with an innocent and pleasurable release from the boredom of quarantine or lockdown as a result of the coronavirus. My response to these videos, along with many other dog lovers I know, accords with Samuel Johnson’s definition of laughter as “convulsive merriment” (qtd. in Boston 61).

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EXAMPLE 2: *WILSON THE SHEEPDOG*

**This is Wilson. He is now  
working from home 😊**



Courtesy Aussies Doing Things: @aussiesdothings. To view the video go to <https://youtu.be/ixZBzU9xghQ>, “Sheep Dog Works from Home,” @Obi.wong.kenobi.

It is timely to introduce Wilson the Sheepdog, currently working from home and doing equally well as Olive and Mabel during confinement. Unlike many, he has retained his job. Not only that, Wilson has developed newly-acquired high-level IT skills.

Although not as conceptually complex nor as skills-based as Cotter’s Olive and Mabel series, this short video, which embraces a decidedly

anthropocentric philosophical view of judging animals' worth based on what they are able to do for humans, either as workers or food, the charismatic canine protagonist in this photograph and video provides a counterpoint to Cotter's canine-themed virtuosity. The humorous incongruity in *Wilson* arising from this amusing one-liner is based on the impossibility of carrying out certain kinds of work from home amidst a pandemic.

EXAMPLE 3: A PRESCIENT VIDEO CLIP FROM *YES MINISTER*



Image courtesy of YouTube. Full video available at: <https://youtu.be/EcqIC5LT6f0>

This satirical excerpt from the *Yes Minister* series showing British politicians bumbling their way through stages of a crisis—in an episode made decades before the onset of the COVID-19—provides an uncannily well-matched account of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's extemporaneous responses to coronavirus in the UK, while also providing insight into the functioning of successive British governments when difficulties arise, regardless of political persuasion.

In this episode and in real life as COVID-19 emerged there was almost total political inaction on the part of senior members of the current British government, including the Prime Minister. This prolonged period of improvisation, stasis and inertia has now marginally improved, but the dithering, the denials, and the Tory government's erratic approach to the virus and their abrupt flip-flopping continue. This highlights their chronic inconsistency of approach. A seeming lack of foresight and failure to take the current pandemic seriously (initially at least, and to some extent, still the case) amounts to a denial of the possible catastrophic consequences of the virus, which has given rise to a death toll of over 50,000 British people at the time of writing.

The remainder of this brief *Yes Minister* clip—a stage-by-stage revelation of a serious mishandling of an unnamed crisis—closely resonates with what has been unfolding in the UK apropos of the coronavirus. The dialogue is a very British form of conversational humour, offering those who viewed this *Yes Minister* episode years ago a strange sense of *déjà vu* as we witness similar political stuff-ups today and, worse, law-breaking on the part of the current Prime Minister’s Chief Adviser, Dominic Cummings. This was followed by the hypocritical disavowal of Cummings of any personal malfeasance when it was revealed that he had blatantly breached the quarantine and lockdown regulations issued by the government.

In this irony-laden short video clip of a humorous verbal exchange between the British Prime Minister and his staffer, the scriptwriters were dead accurate. It is an example of life following art, reversing the norm. A satirical meme (see Example 4 in the following section on memes) of Boris Johnson’s front-page photograph on the fictional magazine *Vague* exemplifies Johnson’s dilly-dallying and frequently changing positions in his public pronouncements on how the British citizenry ought to behave apropos of coronavirus restrictions. This testifies to his indecisive and extemporizing approach, leaving lives at risk and NHS medical staff working in unacceptable conditions without sufficient PPE (personal protective equipment, including masks and so on) (Lintern). The situation in Trump’s America is even more dangerous for Americans in general and specifically for health professionals (Farmer).<sup>15</sup>

#### EXAMPLE 4: DAY 6 IN QUARANTINE



With thanks to Jill Rendell. For full video, go to: <https://youtu.be/7Ateq6AhuvA>

<sup>15</sup> Note that while both the Lintern and Farmer articles cited were published earlier in 2020, the same situation continues to apply in the USA and UK at the time of writing (August 2020).

This simple but effective video might be dubbed “Horse-Play,” because exuberant “play” and joyous silliness (Timms) is at its heart. Exemplifying the critically-endangered art of “making one’s own fun,” this ability has been a game-changer, enabling people to function optimally during quarantine or the lockdowns imposed by the pandemic, both physically and psychologically.

An important point to be made here is that there is only a thin line between everyday life and play, humorous or not. This young couple are getting on with their lives during quarantine while playing.

Play enters our lives in multiple ways. It ranges from playing sports, board games or chess, music, playing with our children, grandchildren, friends or pets, or by simply playing the fool, and “love” and sexual play, when mutual and non-coercive. Play is an integral part of human life, and also the case for animals (de Waal). It appears to have a biological basis (see, for example, Groos, “The Psychology of Animal Play”). For the most part the word “play” connotes entertainment, leisure and pleasure.

Playing begins in early childhood; it is a means of self-expression and a way of learning how to impose and follow rules, while developing cognitive and motor abilities (Groos, *The Play of Man*),<sup>16</sup> along with perseverance. Most parents are delighted to see their children happily absorbed in playing games that they’ve dreamed up. It not only enhances children’s academic learning, but enhances their socio-emotional growth and ability to form positive relationships (Ginsburg). Importantly, the ability to play in childhood becomes a habit that serves us well in adulthood, as does a sense of humour. There is also evidence that habitual play provides children with the ability to cope with past and present problems, building resilience, a critical factor into adult life, which is definitely required in the present circumstances.

Another significant attribute of play is interactivity with others—its social dimension (Ginsburg). According to Orthner, play also relieves tension, while enhancing intimacy between partners (also see Betcher). This is congruent with the Freudian concept of humour as a means of releasing apprehension or tension.

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century Swiss scholar Groos, whose scholarship is particularly relevant to this video, viewed humour as based on either superiority or “contradiction,” which I understand to be synonymous with incongruity. Distinguishing between receptive play and productive play, Groos focused specifically on sound, including rhythm and pitch.

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<sup>16</sup> Groos also wrote extensively about the play of other animals, although most humans reject the idea of being animals, believing this is to be an erroneous belief (“The Psychology of Animal Play”).

He noted that playing certain games “excites laughter in all beholders” (Groos, *The Play of Man* 85).

In a section titled “Playful movement of the bodily organs” Groos wrote that when dancing is accompanied by music, and especially when related to courtship or love, “an exciting movement-play . . . possesses . . . the magic power of abstracting us from commonplace existence and transports us to a self-created world of dreams” (*The Play of Man* 91). He commented explicitly on the “intoxicating power of [rhythmic] movement” in dance (*The Play of Man* 91). Groos also made the point that when the tempo quickens in dance or music it becomes more exciting, a phenomenon that is experienced even in infancy. Groos further explained that when babies and children, who love repetition, hear the same word pronounced differently they will laugh. The young couple’s productive bodily play combined with the music and variations thereof, are crucial to the success of this simple idea.

Their video also evokes a rich and established tradition in vaudeville in which two actors perform in horse costume.<sup>17</sup> The young “stars” of this homemade video draw upon this tradition, knowingly or not.

Extraordinarily, this young couple have created their video wearing their own clothes while exercising their bodies within a confined space. At the end of their gig, the young woman, whose long, thick hair represents the horse’s rhythmically swishing tail, collapses into contagious laughter, bringing a smile to her partner’s face (see Provine for more on contagious laughter). Most important is their self-sufficiency and creativity in improvising their way through what for many people is regarded as a boring loss of time. Their anarchic silliness should inspire others to “loosen up.”

### PART THREE: MEMES: FROM POSTER ART TO MEMES

The word “meme” was coined by Richard Dawkins in pre-internet days (1976). Akin to genes, memes self-replicate, sometimes exponentially, but Dawkins defined them as being culturally transmitted and replicated, not genetically. Since the advent of meme-generators, memes have been mutating uncontrollably, sometimes into their thousands or millions.

Online memes are arguably the offspring of poster art, an earlier form, a populist democratic art including printed lithographs or screen-prints. Two-dimensional poster art is traceable as far back as Japanese woodblock prints, originally popularized by Hokusai (1760–1840). In Europe, printed lithographs

<sup>17</sup> Among the most celebrated were Morton and Mayo, who performed between the 1920s and into the 1940s. *Pansy the Dancing Horse* was a—if not *the*—crowd pleasing act. They used an elaborate costume and a “sidekick” presenter, usually an attractive young woman. See *Pansy the Dancing Horse*, Vimeo (Amy Savarese), 5 Dec. 2015.

from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> and into the 20<sup>th</sup> century ranged from reproductions of fine artworks through to rhetorical and/or humorous subject matter, including sexualized imagery. In many cases, poster art images were appropriated from European Old Masters, to then be sold in large numbers and hung in living rooms around the world. Poster art was typically used for advertising films, sports events and disseminating political views. Posters also began to become a common form of street art. In the western world, political posters came to the fore during the First and Second World Wars.

In the Australian context, there is general consensus that political poster art had its heyday in the 1960s, continuing into the late 1980s.<sup>18</sup> In 1970s, Australian posters proliferated during the Vietnam War. Young men (often still in their teens) were conscripted and forced to participate on the side of the United States; some died and others became invalids. Conscientious objectors were jailed.

Anti-war posters began to appear on buildings.<sup>19</sup> State governments responded with their own posted message “BILL POSTERS WILL BE PROSECUTED,” issuing fines to offenders. Young protesters created a humorous riposte, going out in the middle of the night with paintbrushes, writing “WHO IS BILL POSTERS?,” also a play on Ayn Rand’s repeated refrain in her capitalist diatribe *Atlas Shrugged*, “Who is John Galt?,” turning the tables on those they viewed as oppressors with blood on their hands.

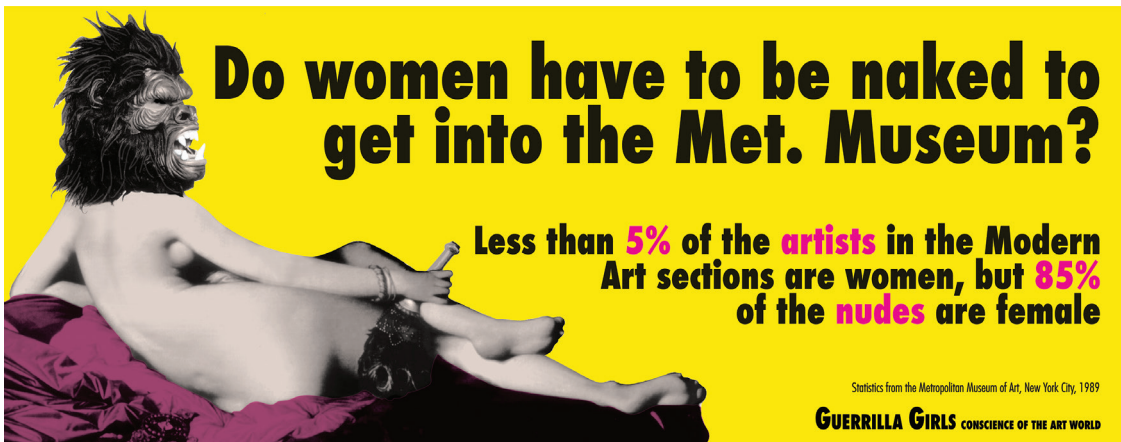


Fig. 2. *Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?* Digital print, size variable, 1989. Copyright © Guerrilla Girls, courtesy guerrillagirls.com.

<sup>18</sup> As discussed, there were also many posters created during WW1 and WW2 supporting the war effort, with a smaller number critiquing it.

<sup>19</sup> I was living in Sydney at that time and this political action was an exciting time for a young person.

From the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century, poster art became increasingly assertive in its political messaging. In the early days of Gay Liberation, and throughout Second Wave feminism, poster art flourished. While virtuoso artworks by the Guerilla Girls (see previous page) were influenced by advertising and street art, now they are being acquired by many of the world's major art galleries, museums and private collectors.<sup>20</sup>

The internet has largely, although not entirely, replaced poster art, usually taking the form of memes. The contemporary, everyday use of “meme” has come to mean the reproduced and captioned images created and posted on the internet *en masse* daily.

As Shifman writes, “defined as cultural units that spread from person to person, memes were debated long before the digital era. Yet the Internet turned the spread of memes into a highly visible practice, and the term has become an integral part of the netizen vernacular” (362). The spread of memes is like the diffusion of the coronavirus itself. They “go viral.”

Like genes, memes undergo “mutations” over time. But, as William McGrew writes in a review of Susan Blackmore’s *The Meme Machine*, there are “obvious differences” between memes and genes. McGrew demonstrates that genes and memes are not strict analogues when he writes that “genes (apart from viruses) move only vertically, from one generation to the next, via meiosis. Memes also move vertically, but more often horizontally, within generations. (Lamarckian as well as Darwinian evolution!)” (23).

Examples follow, each closely related to two of the world’s most famous and recognizable classical artworks. Both artworks were extensively caricatured prior to onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### EXAMPLE 1: “MUTATING MEMES” RELATED TO CLASSICAL ARTWORKS

Transforming great artworks into humorous memes relating to the coronavirus aligns with Freud’s view of humour as a psychological coping mechanism and a means of controlling a fear response. In the case of both of the memes discussed here, Munch’s *The Scream* has been domesticated, which could be regarded as a form of epistemological violence.<sup>21</sup>

Laughing at something that may well wipe all of us off the planet is also incongruous—if not downright inappropriate and tasteless—but laugh

<sup>20</sup> Note that “Guerrilla Girls works are not limited editions, [but] are reproduced at sizes from 8 inches [20.3 centimetres] to 100 feet [30.5 metres]. They are in hundreds of museums, owned by thousands of individuals” (personal communication with Kath Kollwitz on behalf of Guerilla Girls, 3 Jun. 2020).

<sup>21</sup> As a result of meme generators, people can now add to or alter the original image and/or text, further modifying the original work, in ways that may not meet (or in the case of deceased artists, may not have met) the approval of the work’s creator.



we do. Admittedly, *The Scream*, of which Munch created four versions, is underpinned by a nightmarish vision which resonates to some extent with our current global circumstances.



1a. Meme based on the Norwegian Expressionist Edvard Munch's 1893 *The Scream*, originally titled in German as *Der Schrei der Natur* (*The Scream of Nature*) and known as *Skrik* (*Shriek*) in Norwegian. Many thanks to Gail Carnes for assistance with IT. Original meme courtesy Chapman<sup>22</sup> and boredpanda.com.



1b. A parody meme by Chapman of *The Scream*, modified (dialogue added; anonymous).

<sup>22</sup> This meme is signed "Chapman," to whom I have gone to great lengths to contact, without success. It was uploaded onto the boredpanda.com website in early April 2020.

Analogously to genes, memes range from harmless to noxious and are able to proliferate exponentially but, in contrast to genes, memes also often function as effectual rhetorical devices, as shown by the examples below.

EXAMPLES 2A AND 2B: *THE CREATION OF ADAM*



2a. *Untitled*, God Providing Adam with Hand Sanitizer, courtesy boredpanda.com.



2b. *Untitled*, anonymous (this meme appears to have been partially imitated and modified from the previous example).

These witty, ironic and allusive memes are coronavirus-themed adaptations of Michelangelo's *The Creation of Adam* (*Creazione di Adamo*, 1512), a fresco on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Rome. The proximity of the almost-touching hands of God and Adam caused consternation at that time.

In the first, God is providing Adam with a “helping hand,” offering him hand sanitizer—a delectably humorous act of kindness, befitting the

Almighty. But from a contemporary Christian standpoint, some viewers may regard this second intertextual meme as a tad more tendentious in terms of its subject matter, despite the fact that it was probably plundered from the previous “God and Adam” meme, then doctored by a meme generator.

To adumbrate on the possible reason why many renowned classical artworks have become subject to “meme-ification,” it could be surmised that use of celebrated, instantly recognizable and populist images has the capacity to bring reflected glory to the meme creators or Instagrammers: a kind of celebrity by proxy.

EXAMPLES 3A AND 3B: *IF TRUMP HAD BEEN CAPTAIN OF THE TITANIC*



3a. Original meme: *If Trump Had Been Captain of the Titanic*, early March 2020. Image courtesy of Occupy Democrats, courtesy Omar Rivero, Cornell University, Founder at Occupy Democrats.

While this meme focuses primarily on Trump’s braggadocio, bluster, self-contradictory messaging and his habitual resort to obfuscation, the meme that follows, a modified appropriation of the above, amplifies the original by explicit reference to Trump’s policy reversals and blathering talk in his mostly abstruse, semi-literate tweets, often virulently attacking individuals and groups that are not regarded as fellow travellers. This often comprises bitter streams of invective, leading to greater social polarization within his nation.

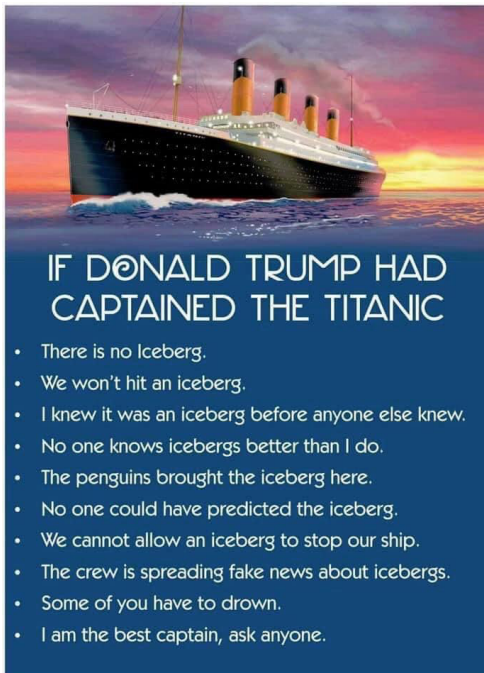
The second meme (see below), a more sophisticated modification of the previous example is also a veiled topical allusion to his presidential style, covering similar territory as the first, but focusing more sharply on the erratic nature of and the glaring inconsistencies in Trump’s jibber-

jabber and the perilous capriciousness that sullies the man's capability for authentic leadership, i.e. Trump's Erratica.

While both memes are underpinned by rhetorical purpose, satirizing Trump's self-serving farrago of excuses and his tendency to escape criticism by befuddling his "followers," neither meme is as lightly amusing and benign as they may seem. Trump's self-serving, see-sawing *modus operandi* is designed to divide and conquer. The majority of his pronouncements are divisive in nature; he works on an "us" and "them" basis, and has no problem with being hated. That is used to entrench and shore up his support, a tactic used to split the nation and demonize the Democrats. Trump thrives on oppositional politics, the more hostile the better because he uses it to solidify his political base and to metaphorically snuff out adversaries.

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Neither meme vilifies Trump. Instead of hurling direct abuse at him as per many Facebook and Twitter posts, these memes *ridicule* him. It could be argued that holding him up as an object of ridicule has a greater capacity to damage Trump and his devotees than "hating" him, which is more easily dismissed. On the other hand, ridiculing him transforms him into an incompetent and mendacious "target" (Davies), by way of attacking his selfhood, his *being*. Narcissists don't like personal attacks, veiled or otherwise.



3b. *If Trump Had Captained the Titanic* (modified by anonymous "memester"). Reddit, April 2020.

These metonymic representations of Trump as the incompetent captain of a doomed and ultimately sinking ship is a wonderful sleight of hand on the part of their creators, and a clever means of sidestepping backlash from the thin-skinned, litigious subject of this meme. In the United States, the spread of the coronavirus and its death toll have a good deal less to do with the virus itself, but is the consequence of ill-considered human behaviour, including Trump's. It is the direct result of his wayward, authoritarian stance. While both memes are amusingly satiric in nature, the humour is unlikely to fuel real social change: his minders will undoubtedly ensure that these don't reach Trump's desk.

EXAMPLE 4: BORIS JOHNSON MEME



Boris Johnson on the front cover of *Vague*, May 2020. Anonymous. Please note that the author has made extensive efforts to establish the provenance of this meme without success.

The ironic meme above appropriates and riffs on the high-end *Vogue* fashion magazine's front cover pages, featuring Boris Johnson as "vague." It appeared in May 2020. At that time EuroNews reported that "Boris Johnson [had been] grilled on [his] 'vague' UK coronavirus lockdown advice."<sup>23</sup> It

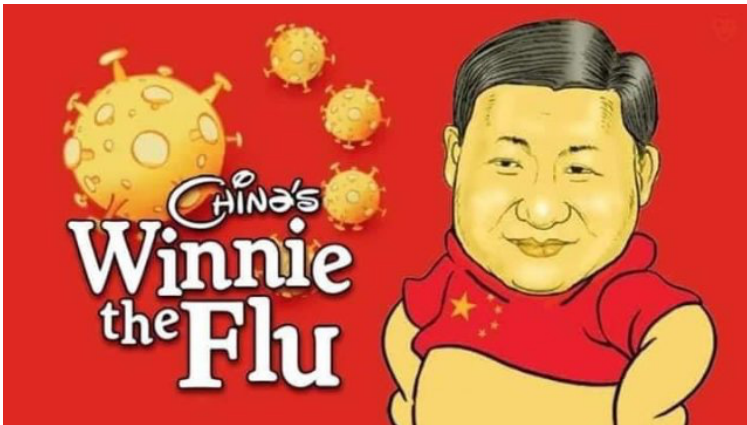
<sup>23</sup> See Sandford and Hurst "Boris Johnson Grilled on 'Vague' UK Coronavirus Lockdown Advice." The British prime minister's "stay alert" message has been criticized by politicians and members of the public and caused tension with UK nations.

represents Johnson's shilly-shallying and frequently changing positions in his public pronouncements about how the British citizenry ought to conduct themselves during coronavirus restrictions. This image presents Johnson as smartly-attired and unusually well groomed, which is rarely the case.

In a December 2006 edition of *The New York Times* Caroline Weber described *Vogue* as "the world's most influential fashion magazine."<sup>24</sup> *Vogue* is pitched at an aspirational audience with a desire for wealth, luxury, style, fashion and, ultimately, celebrity. This intertextual meme's incongruity not only satirizes Johnson's scattergun, less-than-ideal approach to curbing the coronavirus ("Trump-lite"), but also provides a witty commentary on his frequently scruffy appearance, and less-than-prime-ministerial vestimentary code—he often appears in obviously unironed or ill-fitting suits, the lapels of which sometimes exhibit visible dandruff—topped off by a shaggy mop of unkempt hair.<sup>25</sup>

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EXAMPLE 5: WINNIE THE FLU



*Winnie the Flu*, 9 April 2020, from Weibo (anonymous). Reproduced by Technology and Social Change (TaSC) Research Project—at the @ShorensteinCtr. on Media, Politics and Public Policy (Harvard University), "As When Memes Go Viral," *Winnie the Flu—When Memes Go Global* by TaSC, <https://link.medium.com/Ac3CNhY1g7>, 24 March 2020 (accessed the same day).

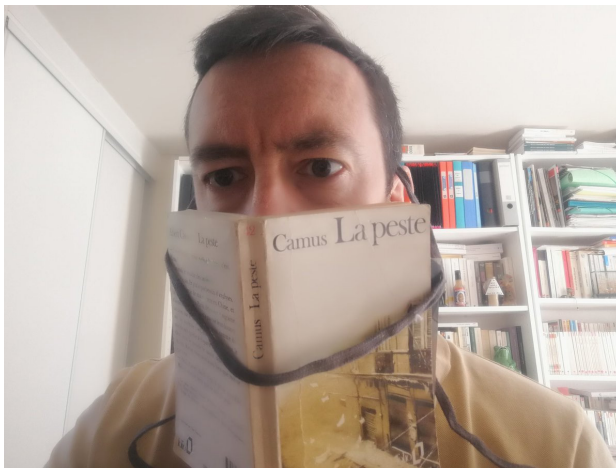
<sup>24</sup> See Weber.

<sup>25</sup> Ordinarily I would not bring this to readers' attention, but felt it necessary in this case because women holding political (or other high-profile leadership positions) would never escape negative commentary were they to adopt Johnson's sloppily insouciant approach to personal grooming and fail to adhere to a standard of dress code befitting a Prime Minister. In this regard, politics and society in general are riddled with hypocrisy.

The following meme shows President Xi standing in front of a Chinese flag on which its sparkling golden stars have been transformed into the instantly discernible imagery of the coronavirus. President Xi's apparently benign smile along with his rather round, fleshy face, and jowl and neck laxity, brought about his nickname "Winnie the Pooh," which has stuck for some years now, although it is now illegal to use it in China (Halfpenny).

While the repression of the negative handling of "foreign" coronavirus-related media coverage in China is extreme, in equal measure the American President, Donald Trump, the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, and the Brazilian President, Jair Bolsonaro, also do their utmost to obfuscate, minimize or outlaw negative media coverage of their own inadequate practices to contain the coronavirus. Trump and Bolsonaro (in particular) have suppressed the truth of the effects of the virus on their populace to the maximum extent possible in their so-called democratic nations. When ridiculed or satirized, they are equally as thin-skinned and touchy as the powerful Chinese President Xi Jinping.

EXAMPLE 6: JEAN-CHARLES GESLOT'S *LA PESTE* (*THE PLAGUE*)



Jean-Charles Geslot's *La peste*. © Jean-Charles Geslot.

Geslot's *La peste* is a decidedly cerebral intertextual meme which, by contrast with the preceding examples, manifests no political partisanship. This inter-discursive meme is the most sophisticated—while at first sight, modest—meme in this section. It comprises a “selfie” of Geslot, who works in the Contemporary History Department at the UVSQ in France.

In this wryly entertaining, philosophical meme, Geslot has donned a copy of the book *La peste* (Camus) to wear as a face mask, apparently to ward off the coronavirus. While there is a dimension of humorous self-deprecation in this image, that is transcended by the image's implicit critique and subversion of magical thinking based on the relationship between the COVID-19 virus, its causes, potential antidotes, and death rates.<sup>26</sup> This has resulted in some individuals and groups taking absurd "preventative" measures in the hope of obviating the risk of contagion.

The largest group of "addressees"<sup>27</sup> of Geslot's meme most likely belong to a specific (global) humour community, which includes classically educated readers. That group will appreciate this as parody, partly based on the sheer lunacy of using *any* book as a facial mask.<sup>28</sup> The inappropriate use of any book for this purpose, regardless of its content, unequivocally places this meme within the incongruity theory of humour. The appreciative laughter that follows is also undoubtedly cathartic.

Norrick asserts that there are

fundamental differences between witty allusions and parody as traditionally defined. In alluding, the performer challenges the audience to recognise the source text, so intertextual jokes are aggressive toward the audience . . . Allusive jokes use a brief intertextual reference

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<sup>26</sup> As Jacqueline Rose wrote: "By the end of March [2020], monthly sales of the UK Penguin Classics edition [of *The Plague*] had grown from the low hundreds to the mid-thousands and were rising (they are now up 1000 per cent) . . . One of the things *The Plague* conveys is that, at the very moment we appear to be taking the grimmest reality on board, we might also be deluding ourselves. Counting is at once a scientific endeavour and a form of magical thinking. It can be a way of bracing ourselves for and confronting an onslaught, and at the same time a doomed attempt at omnipotence, a system for classifying the horror and bundling it away . . . We take all the measures there are to be taken, adequate and inadequate according to where and who we are. And we wait."

In Camus's novel, it is only when men start dying, as opposed to hundreds of rats, that the public begins to understand. And even then, only slowly. The announcement of 302 dead citizens in the third week of the epidemic does not speak to the public imagination: "The plague was unimaginable, or rather it was being imagined in the wrong way" (qtd. in J. Rose). As Camus had put it in his composition notebook of 1938, the people are "lacking in imagination . . . They don't think on the right scale for plagues. And the remedies they think up are barely suitable for a cold in the nose. They will die" (qtd. in J. Rose). Rose further emphasizes the notion of magical thinking in relation to *The Plague*.

<sup>27</sup> See later discussion on Bakhtin's concept of addressivity, which is relevant here, and to many other parts of this article.

<sup>28</sup> Research shows that even surgical masks are to some degree ineffective. As Natasha Turak writes, "[e]xperiments by a team in Hong Kong found that the coronavirus' transmission rate via respiratory droplets or airborne particles dropped by as much as 75% when surgical masks were used." This research was undertaken by leading microbiologists at the University of Hong Kong. Cloth masks are less effective. See Turak.



concentrated in a punchline, to which the audience must respond with laughter, whereas parody presents an extended caricature of some source text, which evokes a play frame conducive to but not requiring laughter. So parody cannot be viewed as an expanded allusive joke. (Norrick 117)

Apropos of this delightful and timely meme, I would dispute Norrick's hardline differentiation of parody and allusion. Geslot's self-parody (using a book as a mask to dispel infection) and his "witty allusion" in merging the subject matter of Camus's masterpiece with the COVID-19 outbreak are not at odds with one another, but rather, reinforce the multiple layers of humour in this splendid example. The book's title, *La peste* (*The Plague*) obviates any ambiguity with regard to the literary allusion, with Geslot's self-parody drawing attention to the non-efficacy of *any* book as an effective mask. Hence there is no "hostile challenge" on the part of the "performer" towards the audience to recognize the source or subject matter of the text, regardless of whether they have read it or not. Thus, allusion seamlessly merges with parody. The result affords this meme with a triple-barrelled impact, comprising allusion and self-parody cocooned within a play-frame (dressing up at home and taking a selfie).

While some may not recognize the parodic layering of Geslot's meme, those who do will understand what Nash describes as "parodic intention" (89). As Michael Clark writes,

The question "What is humour?" has exercised in varying degrees such philosophers as Aristotle, Hobbes, Hume, Kant, Schopenhauer and Bergson and has traditionally been regarded as a philosophical question. And surely it must still be regarded as a philosophical question at least insofar as it is treated as a conceptual one. (Clark 20)

Finally, as one reviewer of this article commented,

[t]he demeanour of the masked man, particularly the sombre gaze of his averted eyes, conveys unease. This is seemingly underpinned by the realisation that the relationship between fiction and reality has become, at best, tenuous, and at worst, no longer exists. In these extraordinary times fiction has become reality and contemporary "reality" is akin to fiction.<sup>29</sup>

The source of the man's presumed anxiety is the fact that we can no longer hide behind the "cover" of fiction. This is a parody of the increasingly unstable relationship between "reality" and the current plethora of

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<sup>29</sup> Colette Mrowa-Hopkins, personal communication with the author, 3 Jul. 2020. Also see Totilo.

spurious or illusory understandings of what constitutes reality or what used to be called “truth,” fuelled by certain political leaders (see Rabin and Cameron; Kessler; Jackson) and widely disseminated by particular media corporations. The man behind the mask is well-aware that hiding behind this book *won't* fend off the coronavirus, accounting for his palpable angst. By this means Geslot's brilliant use of satiric irony humorously subverts the artistic endeavour of humankind.<sup>30</sup>

The mask thus acts as a metaphor, representing the contradictions that arise between reliable medical and scientific know-how about the coronavirus and its implications for society, as opposed to fallacious ideation that has little or nil basis in reality (see forthwith *Trump's Happy Hour*). It accords with Camus's comments on the plague cited by Jacqueline Rose in footnote 26, and has been borne out by President Trump's 4 July 2020 previously cited mendacious speech, stating that 99% of coronavirus cases are totally harmless, and his more recent statement (7 August 2020), claiming that children are virtually immune to coronavirus (Jackson).

EXAMPLE 7: TRUMP'S WALL



*Trump's Wall*, meme, March 2020, courtesy rofl (“Roll on the floor laughing”).<sup>31</sup> English translation: “200,000 cases in the USA . . . Mexico asks Trump to get cracking on building his wall!” Please note that since the appearance of this meme the number of cases of coronavirus and the death toll in the US has burgeoned.

This text-only meme is more typical of memes generally. Like jokes and, to some extent, riddles, memes are frequently comprised of two parts: a “set-up”

<sup>30</sup> For more on ironic subversion in humour, see Veale.

<sup>31</sup> Available at <https://rofl.fr/le-mexique-demande-a-trump-daccelerer-la-construction-du-mur/>

scenario describing a specific event, situation or widely known fact, followed by a punchline,<sup>32</sup> often unexpectedly incongruous, as evinced by this first-rate French meme.

Cleverly, this trans-textual meme also draws attention to 'Trump's numerous ego-inflating thought bubbles, in this case his desire to build an impenetrable wall designed to keep Mexicans out of the United States.

EXAMPLE 8: *TRUMP'S HAPPY HOUR*

## Ce soir c'est apéroTrump



*Ce soir c'est apéro Trump* (English translation: *Trump's Aperitif Tonight* or *Trump's Happy Hour Tonight*). Belén Rivas, courtesy Raoul Hedebouw.

With narcissistic fervour, Donald Trump, an individual with nil background in science or medicine, has been providing gratuitous advice to the masses, recommending medicines and folk cures that he wrongly believes will provide protection against the coronavirus. Among these transgressions, he has strongly promoted hydroxychloroquine, an ineffective, dangerous and potentially fatal drug when taken by healthy people, many of whom are unaware of its dangers. Trump claimed to be taking a course of this drug himself, an assertion to be taken with a grain of salt. Worse still, he

<sup>32</sup> This applies to many memes, including visual and verbal jokes. Sherzer defines a joke as “a discourse unit consisting of two parts, the set up and the punch line” (216).

advocated that people inject household disinfectants containing bleach into their bodies as a form of immunization.<sup>33</sup>

The Deutsch Presse-Agentur (DPA) global news agency reported that ingestions of bleach dramatically increased after Trump publicly advocated these poisons as a means of eluding the virus. As DPA reported,

Concerns about the ingestion of household cleaning products spiked in April when President Donald Trump during a news briefing that disinfectants, “by injections inside or almost a cleaning,” could some day be used to clean the lungs of people infected with COVID-19. (DPA 8)

The DPA further reported that a survey found “a staggering 18 per cent of participants confessed that they had applied cleaning agents to their skin,” and 4 per cent admitted that they had either actually drunk or gargled bleach (DPA 8).

This background provides added piquancy to the meme, the dark humour of which at first sight seems merely absurd. Underlying it is a hostile, targeted parody of the conduct of a powerful and dangerously out-of-control individual.

#### EXAMPLE 9: SNOW WHITE AND THE SIX DWARFS

**Varför umgås Snövit bara med sex dvärgar just nu?**

**Prosit sitter i karantän...**

**English Translation:**

Why is Snow White now only looking after six dwarfs?

Because Sneezy is in quarantine...

Meme courtesy of Humorbibeln, <https://www.humorbibeln.se/>, with thanks to Ann-Britt Sand, Jane Mears and Christopher Marcatili. Note that originally the dwarf named here was “Wheezy,” more recently “Disney-fied” as “Sneezy.” In actual fact in this context the Swedish word “Prosit” is a metonym, meaning something close to the German expression “Gesundheit,” a way of wishing good health to a person who sneezes in one’s presence.

<sup>33</sup> Note that after the backlash to Trump’s so-called “advice” to inject bleach as a prophylactic measure, he tweeted that he was only being “sarcastic.” For more information, see “Coronavirus: Outcry after Trump Suggests Injecting Disinfectant as Treatment,” <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52407177>

This Swedish example of a text-only meme has emerged from the oral tradition of the riddle, with its question and answer structure, and reprised as a meme by the addition of its veiled reference to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is one of only a handful of coronavirus memes suitable for young children.

As Georges and Dundes state,

in order to define the riddle structurally, it is first necessary to delineate a minimum unit of analysis. It is here proposed that the unit be termed descriptive element . . . A descriptive element consists of both a topic and a comment. (113)

Enunciating this, a riddle almost invariably introduces a topic in the form of a question and an answer that may be deduced via specific reference to the topic/comment and/or a response that sometimes, but not always, takes the addressee into an entirely different domain. Georges and Dundes further classify riddles as oppositional or non-oppositional, writing that “in literal non-oppositional riddles, the riddle referent and the topic(s) of the descriptive element(s) are identical” (113–14). This applies to the Snövit meme, with one exception, in that the answer requires the addressee to infer an additional topic (the coronavirus) which, while topical, is quasi-non-oppositional, in that COVID-19 is not explicitly stated in the answer.

As stated earlier, many examples of humorous memes that make reference to human behaviour during the pandemic are simply better-dressed jokes, one-liners followed by a punchline. As such, many do not bear over-analysis. It is also the case that for “consumers” of humorous memes, specific social, political or literary knowledge, or expertise in the visual arts, are *de rigueur* for the reader/viewer’s comprehension and/or appreciation of their humour. In this regard all joking is subject to semantic limits.

As Giseline Kuipers avers, rather than examining the formalist characteristics of jokes, humour needs to be understood as “primarily . . . a social phenomenon”; Kuipers therefore proposes “a working definition of humor in which the social aspect is prominent: I see humor as the successful exchange of joking and laughter. Humor in this definition is viewed as an exchange involving a number of people” (7).

This approach to humour and joking as social phenomena is one that I strongly endorse: but where does it leave us as isolated individuals in lockdown or quarantine who are able to laugh out loud at humorous memes or other forms of humour? The answer to this is, I believe, that we

feel that we belong to an “imagined community”<sup>34</sup> of like-minded people who similarly delight in the joke’s relevance.

The Bakhtinian concept of addressivity is significant here, and in all examples provided in this article. Bakhtin writes that,

An essential (constitutive) marker of the utterance is its quality of being directed to someone, its *addressivity*. As distinct from the signifying units of a language—words and sentences—that are impersonal, belonging to nobody and addressed to nobody, the utterance has both an author (and, consequently, expression, which we have already discussed) and an addressee. This addressee can be an immediate participant-interlocutor in an everyday dialogue, a differentiated collective of specialists in some particular area of cultural communication, a more or less differentiated public, ethnic group, contemporaries, like-minded people, opponents and enemies, a subordinate, a superior, someone who is lower, higher, familiar, foreign, and so forth. And it can also be an indefinite, unconcretized *other* (with various kinds of monological utterances of an emotional type). All these varieties and conceptions of the addressee are determined by that area of human activity and everyday life to which the given utterance is related. Both the composition and, particularly, the style of the utterance depend on those to whom the utterance is addressed, how the speaker (or writer) senses and imagines his addressees, and the force of their effect on the utterance. Each speech genre in each area of speech communication has its own typical conception of the addressee, and this defines it as a genre. (95)

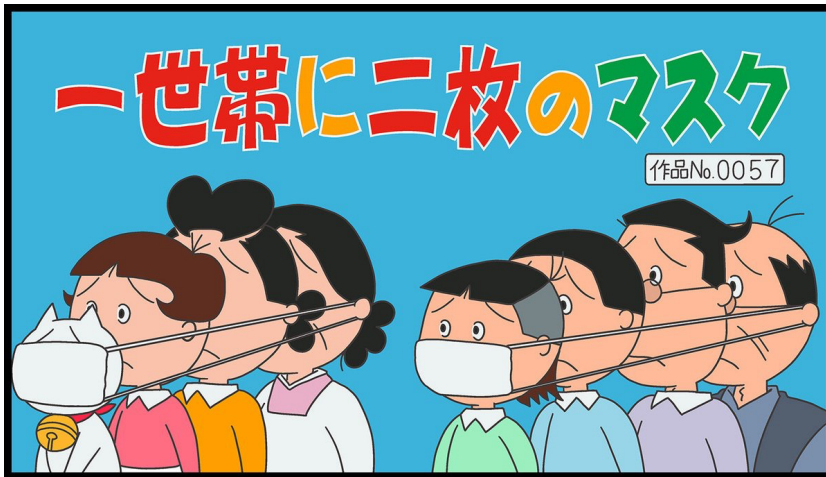
In the case of internet memes and other forms of visual or oral humour, addressivity is not exclusively oriented to listeners, but also to readers or viewers. Such addressees need to be glossed collectively as a more or less differentiated public, or as an *indefinite, unconcretized other* as per Bakhtin’s account. Parenthetically, this also explains why the internet is inclined to degenerate into a site of struggle and divisiveness, as often the identities of the addressees and their opinions are an unknown quantity.

#### EXAMPLE 10: FORMER JAPANESE PRIME MINISTER SHINZŌ ABE ALLOWED ONLY TWO MASKS PER HOUSEHOLD

Japanese politicians have access to as many masks as they want or need. So the former Prime Minister Abe’s announcement that only two masks would be allowed per household did not go down well with ordinary Japanese people, especially given that many Japanese live in multigenerational

<sup>34</sup> This expression was coined by Benedict Anderson in a different context; see Anderson.

households. Social media spawns a profusion of successful and humorously hostile memes targeting politicians or other social power-brokers, and this case is no exception. As Knight writes, “Satire is not, on the whole, private and domestic. It tends to be concerned with public issues and public examples of those issues” (7).



English translation of Japanese caption: “Two masks per household.” Credits: Tomohiro Osaki, “Abenomask? Prime Minister’s ‘Two Masks per Household’ Policy Spawns Memes on Social Media,” Japan Times, Tokyo: <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/04/02/national/abe-two-masks-social-media/#.XuYKy3L2L8>, accessed 16 June 2020. With thanks to Adrian Francis, Australian documentary filmmaker living in Tokyo.

In relation to Abe’s policy, Adrian Francis explains that

The two-mask decision was widely condemned on social media as tone-deaf and ineffectual. I’m a one-person household and received two masks. Multiple-person households received the same. [This meme] is [also] funny because the family featured is from the long-running Japanese animation *Sazae-san*. They are a seven-person and one cat household. Someone on social media (Twitter?) created this meme to show how ridiculous the whole thing is. (personal communication with the author, 17 June 2020)

Such social inequity is equally applicable to hospitals and aged-care homes elsewhere in the world where masks were or still are in short supply, including in Australia for a lengthy period of time, where masks were shared between two or three patients (personal communication from an Australian aged-care manager) and the same applies in India up to and including the present day.

## EXAMPLE 11: SWEDISH BUS STATION

**SWEDISH BUS STATION BEFORE CORONAVIRUS****SWEDISH BUS STATION AFTER CORONAVIRUS**

Creator unknown, provenance Sweden, with thanks to Gunbritt Sandström, Roger Sellgren, with special thanks to Jane Mears and to Gail Carnes.

As Lisa Bjurwald has written, “Swedes . . . like to keep a remarkably wide so-called interpersonal distance.” This is evident in this deceptively simple but brilliant meme, which so economically encapsulates the unwritten rule regarding appropriate Swedish socio-spatial proximity.

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUMOUR AND LAUGHTER IN RELATION TO THIS PANDEMIC

There is another side to the coin, too, that has potential ramifications for this article, but is equally valid for all humour. Zhao et al. have demonstrated through wide-ranging research on adults quantifying the effects of humour and laughter, also taking into account the quality of sleep, “that laughter and humour interventions are effective in relieving depression, anxiety, and improve sleep quality in adults” (2435). Their research project, which involved 814 people in ten studies, “showed that . . . [humour and laughter] significantly decreased adults’ depression, anxiety, and improved their sleep quality. The results of subgroup analysis showed that



depression benefits more from long-term laughter intervention” (2435). At this time of confusion and major changes in people’s routines resulting from this deadly pandemic, the importance of such research shouldn’t be underestimated.

During this current crisis humour is our indispensable ally. While jokes and humour have the capacity to divide, by attacking other people’s cherished beliefs, they also have the power to bind us more closely.

## CONCLUSION

Love it or loathe it, for many people globally the internet has been, for the most part, a liberating force during this prolonged time of confinement. The fact is that in the absence of our usual face-to-face interactions, aside from our immediate families or loved ones—from whom we may now sometimes feel we need a break—online humour, absurdity and wit, along with cartoons or memes revealing the nonsense and grotesquery on the part of our Dear Leaders act as a source of minor, temporary, salvation. We laugh when authoritarian bureaucrats and self-admiring politicians set themselves above us, because in doing so they also set themselves above common sense in their handling of this deadly pandemic.

In terms of the most significant styles of humour that are at play during the COVID-19 epoch (success being gauged by the extent that *any* humorous discourse that distracts us from the pandemic’s downside has an upside), this study indicates that the various psychological explanations of humour—relief, release and catharsis—spliced onto existential humour and the incongruity theory seem the most relevant. The best coronavirus humour provides people with light-hearted fun; brief interludes in otherwise virtually indistinguishable days for those of us who are house-bound and waiting.

Our collective condition of waiting brings to mind Samuel Beckett’s tragi-comic masterpiece *Waiting for Godot* (*En attendant Godot*), itself a work of existential humour. This is a dark humour that resonates with our current collective human condition during the pandemic. In this play two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, are waiting for a man called Godot, who never turns up. Day after day while waiting for something to happen the pair engages in banter; they quarrel; they urinate; they take off their shoes and hats; they put them back on again; they spend time musing on metaphysical topics. Every now and then a boy comes to tell the pair that Godot won’t be coming on that day. It is uncertain that Godot even exists. The meaning, absurdity, and lack of intrinsic purpose of human life are traversed in this play, but nevertheless Vladimir and Estragon continue to

wait . . . and wait for Godot . . . but their hopes are never realized. While we, absurdly self-described as homo sapiens, wait for the coronavirus pandemic to go.

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# LITERAR(T)Y MATTERS

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## Sensorial Aesthetics: Cross-Modal Stylistics in Modernist Fiction

# ABSTRACT

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This article argues that modernist fiction pointedly involves all our senses as part of its reaction to the project of modernity and progress, as well as to Victorian realism; it is not just a response to a heightened sensibility towards new soundscapes, new perceptions of motion and new olfactory experiences in the aftermath of industrialization and modernization. This “rebellion” involves a shift of focus from outer, rational and objective reality to inner, irrational and subjective consciousness, which drives the emphasis on emotional and sensational experience. The article suggests that in light of recent important developments in cognitive, psychological and neurological research, as well as in affect studies and intermedial and multimodal studies, there is reason to revise modernist stylistics. This could predominantly be done within the theoretical field and taxonomy of intermediality, as proposed by Lars Elleström. The latter half of the article discusses some textual modernist samples to more convincingly establish a theory of modernist sensorial aesthetics.

**Keywords:** modernism, sensorial aesthetics, cross-modal iconicity, senses.

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## INTRODUCTION

In William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, there is the recurring smell of honeysuckle, the "saddest odour of all" (143). Quentin associates this peculiar smell with the August night when Caddy loses her virginity and it thus symbolizes sexuality, and particularly Quentin's disgust for, or fear of, female sexuality. It is also the decisive smell of Faulkner's romanticized South, adding local colour and atmosphere to his narrative. Its recurrence becomes part of the structuring of themes and symbols throughout the novel. The smell of honeysuckle has a forefronted position in the reading experience, but it is just one out of Faulkner's many references to sensations other than the visual. Faulkner's novel includes excessive descriptions of a variety of sensations, primarily the olfactory and the auditory. This is obviously no news to critics of Faulkner, but could Faulkner's desire to describe sensations other than the visual be part of a more general stylistic tendency and ambition in modernist fiction? Could this attention given to sensorial descriptions even be part of a deliberate sensorial aesthetic?

Modernist fiction occupies an ambiguous space between a desire to be considered monomedial and a desire to be considered multimedial. Modernist authors' search for a pure, absolute literary form has been well documented since Clive Bell's *Art* (1914). Since the publication of Bell's aesthetic criticism, as Sara Danus states, there has been a desire among modernist writers "to project themselves as literary equivalents of Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk*, as synaesthetic works of art seeking to transcend genre" (3). A Wagner opera is composed of words, music, acting and staging and as such can definitely be considered truly multimedial, whereas a modernist literary work consists of words and words only. Or does it?

This article argues that modernist fiction pointedly involves all our senses as part of its reaction to the project of modernity and progress, as well as to Victorian realism; it is not just a response to a heightened sensibility towards new soundscapes, new perceptions of motion and new olfactory experiences in the aftermath of industrialization and modernization. This "rebellion" involves a shift of focus from outer, rational and objective reality to inner, irrational and subjective consciousness, which drives the emphasis on emotional and sensational experience. In light of recent important developments in cognitive, psychological and neurological research, as well as in affect studies and intermedial and multimodal studies, there is reason to revise modernist stylistics. Re-examining modernist fiction through the prism of perceptions and sensations is a way of understanding this particular period's stylistic and political significance and its blatant critique of Victorian realism. This article, first, aims for a more general discussion,

situating modernism within ideas about multimodal media products as developed primarily by intermedialist Lars Elleström. It will then discuss some textual modernist samples in order to more convincingly establish a theory of modernist sensorial aesthetics.

## MULTIMODALITY AND CROSS-MODAL STYLISTICS

A modernist conception of literary text as having a purity of form is deceptive and false; the act of reading triggers auditory sensations through the use of phonemes. This is why we laugh at Mr. Bloom's cat in *Ulysses* when she makes the noise "Mrkgnao" (106) and we interpret it as both *meow* and *milk now*. At first, this has no textual meaning but is purely sensational and something that has been created by our hearing faculties. The semiotic reflection comes when we perceive that the sensation is indeed similar to the signified sound of the cat and something similar to English: milk now! In the end, all meaning is semiotic (at least when meaning is identifiable), but the initial phase of sensations that lead to perception varies. There is quite a difference between writing "Mrkgnao" and "The cat meowed as if it wanted milk."

Even if literature on paper is a medium of symbolic images, and hence visual, sound is an active part of literature's realization: when we read, we utter sounds, either explicitly or quietly within our brain. If the book is one medium, the medium of realizing it is our body. Quite extensive critical work in the 1920s and onwards has been dedicated to what is sometimes referred to as sound symbolism, such as onomatopoeia, different functions of ascending and descending sound patterns, and ideophones (Ahlner and Zlatev 305–10). Ahlner and Zlatev propose calling these phenomena *cross-modal iconicity* since they are based, they argue, on the Peircian concept of similarity (312). Ramachandran and Hubbard even argue that reading text evokes haptic sensations through "certain lip and tongue movements" which might have consequences for spatial perception of certain sounds (10).

With the exception of haptic experiences of forming sounds in the body, matters become much more complicated when we discuss the other parts of the sensorium—the olfactory, the gustatory and the somatic—since they cannot, directly and explicitly, be triggered by the text itself. Sensational feelings linked to smell, taste and touch are not immediately linked to the medium of literature. In short, the medium *literature* does not consist of the olfactory, gustatory and somatic modalities (unless we include the very materiality of the book—touching the book, smelling it, turning the pages, etc.). Instead, these modalities are triggered by words and sounds and, for lack of a better term, simulated through the

sense organs of seeing and hearing. This process resembles the sense of tactility that viewing a statue without touching it still evokes. It seems, as Elleström confirms, that sensations can be triggered and *reactivated* in a complex manner: “This is because our mind, to a certain extent, has the ability to perceive resemblances not only within the same but also across different sensory areas and different mental realms” (“Identifying” 25). Thus, the visual receptors trigger personal tactile memories that relate to the information that is provided visually and, to some extent, sonically. Obviously, research has shown that sense organs do not operate in isolation from each other. Elleström exemplifies by explaining how vibrations can be both heard (as sound vibrations) and felt (25). Furthermore, Elleström claims, drawing from research by Calvert, Spence and Stein (2004), as well as Martino and Marks (2000), that “[t]he perception of one sense faculty may be different if combined with perception from another,” which means that senses can fortify each other (25). There also appears to be a certain habituation involved. Therefore, even if not *every* reader experiences similar cross-modal sensations, one can conclude that more often than not, readers might share such experiences depending on their biographical similarities and experiences.

The sense of perceiving a sensational effect through similarities in sensations that cross sensory borders is what can truly be called multimodality. In linguistic terms, according to Charles Forceville, the modes of multimodality refer to different communicative types such as written language, music, visuals, gestures, smells and touch (21–23). A multimodal media product is thus a product that uses more than one type, such as opera, film or dance in contrast to a monomodal product such as a novel (written language) or a song played on the radio (music). Elleström’s significant contribution to the study of multimodality in media products is his division of media into four modalities: the material, the spatiotemporal, the sensorial and the semiotic modality (“The Modalities” 17–24). These modalities include several modes. For example, the modality that concerns us, the sensorial modality, includes the modes of smell, touch, taste, vision and sound. In Elleström’s scheme, and in line with Bruhn’s definition of heteromediality (Bruhn 27), all media products are in fact multimodal—they all comprise the four modalities, but the modes within these modalities are what separate one media product from another. In “Bridging the Gap Between Image and Metaphor Through Cross-Modal Iconicity: An Interdisciplinary Model,” Elleström advances Ahlner and Zlatev’s term *cross-modal iconicity* to include not only linguistic crossings but also C. S. Peirce’s concepts of semiotics overall. By looking in particular at the icon and how it is transported through different sensorial modes, Elleström creates an understanding of how media products can

utilize sensorial modes that are not really part of their medium. “Cross-modal iconicity,” writes Elleström, “is iconicity that crosses the borders of different kinds of material, spatiotemporal, and sensorial modes—and between sensory structures and cognitive configurations” (“Bridging the Gap” 167).

Hence, studying the representation of sensations and the sensational effect they have on readers is a complicated matter. Sensational effects can be considered pre-mediated, low-cognitive, affective effects, but in order to create a coherent theory of these differentiated approaches, I suggest the following oppositional paradigm: mediation (sensation/affect)—representation (perception/emotion). There is a fine line between mediation and representation, and the two concepts are defined by Elleström as follows:

Mediation, as I define it, is a pre-semiotic, physical realization of entities (with material, sensorial, and spatiotemporal qualities, as well as semiotic potential) perceived by human sense receptors within a communication context. . . . Representation, as discussed here, is the creation of meaning in the perceptual and cognitive acts of reception. (“Transfer of Media” 668–69)

This division, to me, supports the separation of sensation and perception, even if Elleström indicates that the mediation also involves a “semiotic potential.” Much recent research on emotions has argued that emotions are cognitively wired (Lyons, de Sousa, Solomon). Noël Carroll, however, prefers to see emotions as

made up of at least two components: a cognitive component, such as a belief or a thought about some person, place, or thing, real or imagined; and a feeling component (a bodily change and/or a phenomenological experience), where, additionally, the feeling state has been caused by the relevant cognitive state. (196)

Similarly, Derek Matravers contends that emotions have “both cognitive and affective components” (4). Affect theory invites a more nuanced analysis of emotions by relating emotions as cognitive and semiotic, whereas affect consists of embodied feelings in a pre-semiotic, pre-perceptive context involving, in Elleström’s words, different types of receptors: “Exteroceptors register changes in the external environment, interoceptors are sensible to the internal conditions, and proprioceptors give us information regarding length and tension in muscle fibers and sinews” (“Bridging the Gap” 171). Marta Figlerowicz describes this distinction precisely:

I can become angry at or attracted to another person without knowing that my attitude toward her has changed. This is to experience an affect un- or preconsciously. I can also be aware of my anger or attraction and weigh it as a potentially reliable phenomenology, as a potentially true indication of what this other person is like and how I should treat her. This experience is what most theorists understand under the term emotion. (5)

Most studies of the sensorium *and* modernism that have been published in the last decade have been occupied with representation rather than sensation. The description of how Babbitt's "relationship with women . . . are mediated through the touch of his hand" in Abbie Garrington's *Haptic Modernism* (3) does not reveal anything about whether this description of the tactile transfers to the reader or not. As Elleström acknowledges, "it is difficult to separate sense perceptions from cognitive operations" ("Bridging the Gap" 185). In the process of triggering sense impressions through similarities or memory banks, both perceptive and cognitive actions might be present and affect each other. Cross-modal stylistics, for me, is not representation, it is affect. Representation, however, can lead to affect and sensorial reactivation. Sara Crangle writes in *A Handbook for Modernist Studies* about modernist affect and sulking in "Phenomenology and Affect: Modernist Sulking" but does not emphasize how the sensorium is operating in terms of the affect and the phenomenology of readers. Similarly, Vicki Mahaffey in the same anthology fails to incorporate the radical approach to sensorial impressions that the modernist stream of consciousness is receptive to. The essays in Julie Taylor's (ed.) *Modernism and Affect* display considerable wealth in their discussion of modernism and affect in historical, social and psychological conditions but do not discuss senses beyond representations of them to any greater extent. Correspondingly, brilliant analyses that more explicitly engage in discussing modernism and the sensorium are not occupied with the sensorial impression that modernist aesthetics have on readers; examples of such analyses are Louise Westling's "Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World" (1999), Brad Bucknell's *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics: Pater, Pound, Joyce and Stein* (2002), Jed Rasula's "Listening to Incense: Melomania & the Pathos of Emancipation" (2007), Angela Frattarola's "Developing an Ear for the Modernist Novel: Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson and James Joyce" (2009), and Michel Delville's *Food, Poetry, and the Aesthetics of Consumption: Eating the Avant-Garde* (2008). Consequently, this essay attempts to discuss a particular approach to cross-modal stylistics in modern fiction that is less focused on representation and more on mediation and sensing.

## CROSS-MODAL STYLISTICS IN MODERNISM

Cross-modality was perhaps not what Viktor Shklovsky had in mind when he wrote almost one hundred years ago that some art makes one “recover the sensation of life” (12). His famous remark that art exists “to make the stone *stony*” (12) refers, in my mind, to the very concept of a sensorial aesthetic; objects should be described as they are sensed, not as they are perceived. This in itself signals a departure from more realistic aesthetics to more phenomenological ones that are part of the development of style in modernist writing, and this is demonstrated in Joseph Conrad’s famous preface to *The Nigger of Narcissus*: “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel” (xiv). This seminal line suggests a change in attitude towards the function of prose that is echoed in Shklovsky’s remark. Conrad’s “magic suggestiveness” inspires a reaction, perhaps not towards realism as a concept, but as a literary movement. His emphasis on sensations signals a transition from outer to inner reality, from perception to sensation, and a need for the multisensory in order to grasp the emotional, subjective experience, a process that had already been initiated by the French symbolists. For Baudelaire, there had to be a mingling between the interior and exterior world in poetic language. His exacerbated sensibility, his ecstasy, impelled future poets to use excessive emotional and sensational poetic language as a means to understand the relationship between interior and the exterior worlds. This change of perspective, which also includes a destabilization of normative distanced objectivity, suggests Marcus Bullock, is why Walter Benjamin considers Baudelaire to be an aesthetic that marks “the essential break of modernism with the previous tradition of literary aesthetics” (62). Baudelaire and Rimbaud created a poetic language that lent itself very well to the explorations of inner consciousness that became a trademark of high modernism not only in the obvious examples of Gertrude Stein and James Joyce but also in prose that has less evidently engaged in cross-modal sensory triggering.

In her essay “Modern Fiction” Virginia Woolf claims that “[l]ife is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (160). This truly Bergsonian concept of duration and flux is a harsh critique of the realist tradition, the ideas about progress and clock time, and the focus on consciousness also suggests a focus on the complete sensorium of *a* consciousness. This is an attitude that Merleau-Ponty would later describe as *being in the world*—the “primacy of perception”: we first perceive the world (221). One could add, though, that we first sense the world before we perceive it. In any case, these sentiments call

Cartesian dualism into question, as well as general Enlightenment ideas about rationality and objectivity. Consciousness becomes the dominant idea regarding how the world is perceived and should be described.

These ideas are of course not unique to the French symbolists, nor to high modernism, but are symptomatic of a whole change of “world order” that is in concordance with the then new scientific and philosophical approaches, such as phenomenology and gestalt theory, of Bergson, Freud, Nietzsche and Einstein, to name a few. This transition also gives emotions a renewed status. In the rational post-revolutionary world, there was just not space for emotions; encouraging them was another “mutiny” against the captaincy of rationality.

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### ANGLO-AMERICAN HIGH MODERNISM AND SENSATIONS

Anglo-American high modernism (as opposed to futurism or surrealism) seems unenthusiastic about the time it existed in, the Great War serving as a symbolic rupture between a utopian past and a disturbing present. There are many examples from high modernism in which the olfactory and auditory senses are used to enhance the phenomenological experience of a doomed present and a likewise idealized past as a strategy to convey an inner experience and manifest a critique against progress and modernity. The simultaneous effect of these two strategies is a reading experience that is more sensational, physical and personal. The use of cross-modal sensorial aesthetics elucidates a more subjective involvement in the fictional experience.

In conjunction with their nostalgic sentiments, the proximate senses are more than useful to recreate a sensorial modality that longs back. Olfactory sensations more than others seem to be profoundly connected with memory. There are neurological explanations for this: the relationship between our olfactory sense and our memories is complicated. The recent consensus among neuroscientists is that the olfactory “bulb” is situated next to our limbic system, which is responsible for memory and emotions. Smells, particularly new scents, are linked directly and strongly to an event or person through a conditioned response. These smells then become associated with that event or person and once we are exposed to a similar scent or odour we remember the past event and person. The proximity between the olfactory centre in the brain and our memory functions would explain why the olfactory sense is strongly related to memory functions. Hans J. Rindisbacher provides an additional textual reason for this in his book *The Smell of Books*: “Smell’s very linguistic structure brings



up an Other, a reference to the outside” (15). Thus, the lack of abstract terminology for the olfactory and avoiding a linguistic structure such as “it smells like” invite external personal associations. These associations, in turn, pull the reader into the textual atmosphere of the setting.

The olfactory strategy, though, can also be found in earlier modernist fiction. Willa Cather, for example, writes in *O Pioneers!* (1913) about “spring plowing” and how “the brown earth, with such a strong, clean smell, and such a power of growth and fertility in it, yields itself eagerly to the plow” (29). In this remarkable memoir of the prairie, the clean smell of earth, a smell we can all relate to, stands out. Olfactory sensations, as just mentioned, seem to be profoundly connected with memory. Hence the imagination of past autumns in Evelyn Waugh’s *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) is strongly built up around the scent of the gillyflowers that “yielded to the damp leaves” (95). Smell can be activated less explicitly through associations with smell rather than descriptions of the smell itself. Such is the case in the description of the orchard in *O Pioneers!* where the enumeration of flowers also forcefully conveys olfactory aspects of summer (58). Although this could be considered pure representation, its sensorial, phenomenological impact lies in the enumeration—its quantity and repetition. This is similar to the opening of Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). Hemingway’s barren and repetitious style actually reinforces the sense of cold autumn weather by stressing words that are associated with landscape and weather. Feelings of being freezing, hungry and tired are usually conveyed. In the opening paragraph we encounter the words “dust” and “leaves” with such regularity that these keywords are hammered into our reading consciousness (3). We not only read about autumn, we feel it. And feeling it allows us to emotionally connect this literary autumn with any strong memory of our own past autumns. Similarly, the presence of rain and fog in chapter twenty-four, when Henry spends a last evening with Catherine before boarding the train to the front, reinforces how this event becomes a particularly emotional one. Hemingway manages to allow the reader to share his characters’ longing for a time and space outside war and winter through his physical prose, and this longing inhabits the nostalgia for the future in an almost ontological way.

In Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* (1947), we can identify a strategy that uses a romantic, nostalgic trope, the ruin, as a prime symbol of decay and past time in addition to a potent sensorial aesthetic to develop a phenomenological experience of decay. In the first chapter we are thrown into an atmosphere of decay and ruin. This chapter forms the springboard for past times since it is the last segment of the story and describes remembering but also wanting to forget the events that took place exactly one year previously. M. Laurelle walks around “deserted

swimming pools” (10), “dead tennis courts” (11), a sleeping platform (13) and “a faded blue Ford, a total wreck” (19). The desolation is further enhanced by “small, black, ugly birds” (19), “[w]indy shadows [sweeping] the pavements” (29) and a “crash of thunder” which switches off the street lights (30). These ruins, gloomy images and sounds contain the sentiment of change and something lost but they also illustrate metaphorically the destruction of a man, Geoffrey Firmin. The perception of this angst reaches a climax in two images: a deserted plough and an abandoned palace. The image of the plough, more emblematic in its presentation as a silhouette, clearly indicates the decayed spirit of the consul through its allusion to a human form: “there was a row of dead trees. An abandoned plough, silhouetted against the sky, raised its arms to heaven in mute supplication” (15). The deserted palace creates an even stronger sense of decay through the heavy use of negative adjectives and a prose that primarily stimulates the olfactory senses:

The broken pink pillars, in the half-light, might have been waiting to fall down on him: the pool, covered with green scum, its steps torn away and hanging by one rotting clamp, to close over his head. The shattered evil-smelling chapel, overgrown with weeds, the crumbling walls, splashed with urine, on which scorpions lurked—wrecked entablature, sad archivolt, slippery stones covered with excreta—this place, where love had once brooded, seemed part of a nightmare. (20)

The insertion of the positive, past love, is an effective juxtaposition and accentuates the decay which becomes a more pleasant alternative to the present. It reinforces the nostalgia by creating alternatives to the unpleasant present. The use of binaries and the sensorial modality focus on the decay and make it darker and stronger. This can be read as *one* man’s recollection of a utopian ideal, but it can also be interpreted as a general critique of the modern world.

Returning to Faulkner, a modernist emphasis on sensorial experience and the flux of modern consciousness become evident in the use of stream of consciousness, particularly in Quentin’s section. The lack of punctuation, capitalization, indentations and apostrophes seems to be “indicative of Quentin’s fractured narrative control” (128). For once, the term *stream of consciousness* seems highly appropriate, since it is a flow of emotions, sensations, flashes of memories, poetic images and allusions that forcefully propels the reader into the same dream world of involuntary memory that Quentin experiences phenomenologically.

This technique allows for the inclusion of the olfactory and auditory senses. For instance, in the phrase “crickets sawing away in the grass,”

the image and the sound of the crickets seem to constantly interfere with Quentin's memory, like some reminder of the past in its symbolic value of childhood summers. It is a sound that neither comforts nor troubles Quentin, but reminds the reader of the physicality of memory through its recurrence. It is in the way it addresses primarily the senses of the reader that it constitutes the possibilities of transporting the readers into their own pasts. As we see with the crickets, it is mainly their sound that creeps into the text: the crickets are "sawing," and later "... I could hear the crickets watching us in a circle" (130) and "I got up and followed we went up the hill the crickets hushing before us" (129). If we study the latter part of Quentin's section, we find that it is constantly charged with auditive references; sometimes simple auditive verbs like "hear," "sound" or "singing" are used, but more often it is onomatopoeic verbs that are charged with an action that makes sounds, such as in descriptions like "she rose her skirt **flopped** against her draining" (126, emphasis mine), "the water **sucked** and **gurgled** across the sand spit" (126, emphasis mine) and "her clothes **rustled**" (132, emphasis mine). These sounds, as recognized by Karl F. Zender in "Faulkner and the Power of Sound," seem to produce "a heightened awareness of the destructive power of time. Implicit in his effort at preserving the vanishing world of his youth is a sense of the evanescence of reconciliation" (91). Quentin's memories are also crammed with the smell of "damp clothes" (Faulkner 129), "damp grass and leaves" (130) and the "odour of summer and darkness" (143). This last example is especially interesting in its non-specific quality, which encourages the reader to fill in his own smells of summer and his interpretation of darkness into his experience of the narrative.

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In the opening of *Lord Jim*, Conrad writes: "He was an inch, perhaps two, under six feet" (1). This early modernist narrative's uncertainty emblemizes the whole project of modernity and its reluctance to use rational thought and objective reality. Unreliable narration and variable focalizations in Conrad; psychoanalytical, inner landscapes in Lawrence; free indirect discourse in Woolf; interior monologues in Joyce; stream of consciousness in Faulkner; the death of authority in Nietzsche; Bergsonian *durée*; and Einsteinian relativity all point to a distrust of the project of describing *one* reality. Objective reality lacks emotions and discourages subjectivity and sensations. Our experience of the world cannot be satisfied or complete by only addressing one or two senses. As Per Bäckström writes, it is a combination of "senses that makes the world

more magically complete than either of the senses could accomplish alone. Life is a whole before the ‘fragmented bits’ are given sense by the senses” (98). It is true that we are all multisensory creatures; our phenomenological experiences are constructed by our five senses unless our senses have been incapacitated. Cross-modal stylistics in modernist fiction is thus, in a paradoxical way, a step towards realism rather than a step away from it. The higher the number of sensorial modes that are activated, the richer the representation and experience of reality becomes. The choice of modernist fiction to favour a phenomenological, inner experience of the world in which all five senses are involved renders more objective analysis impossible but yields what could be termed a more *sensorial realism*. The use of a cross-modal sensorial aesthetics also makes the overt critique of progress more emotional for the readership.

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## Between Poetic Voice and Silence: Hart Crane, Yvor Winters, Metapoetics and Emily Dickinson's Legacy

# ABSTRACT

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The article is a comparative study of the ways in which two American modernist poets bound by a literary and human connection, Hart Crane and Yvor Winters, dealt with Emily Dickinson's legacy in their own works. My study is an attempt to place Crane within the legacy of the American Renaissance as represented not by Walt Whitman, with whom he is customarily associated, but by Dickinson, and to examine the special place she holds in Crane's poetry and in his thinking about poetry and the world at large. Crane's poetic take on the Amherst poet is set against and complemented by his friend Yvor Winters's ambiguous relationship with Dickinson's heritage: troubled by an anxiety of influence, Winters, the poet-critic, vacillates between his reverence for the female poet and his skepticism about certain aspects of her *œuvre*. In the close readings of the poems in question undertaken in my study, the focus is on their metapoetic dimension. Particular emphasis is laid on the dialectics of silence, which plays a key role in both Crane's and Winters's works under discussion, as well as on the related themes of blankness and absence, poetic plenitude and perfection. Attention is also given to the problematics of death, time and timelessness. While Winters concentrates mostly on metapoetics in his exploration of the Dickinsonian tradition, Crane goes further, considering the fate of female artists and gender issues, thereby transcending poetic self-reflexiveness and addressing farther-reaching community concerns, with particular emphasis on anti-patriarchal and feminist ones.

**Keywords:** Hart Crane, Yvor Winters, Emily Dickinson, metapoetics, silence, gender.

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The list of poets or, more broadly speaking, writers whom the American modernist Hart Crane was interested in, inspired by or even identified with is considerable. Additionally, it is worth noting that these fascinations did not preclude him from being intimidated by at least some of them. Crane scholarship abounds in references to such authors, the household names which commonly appear on such occasions being Shakespeare and other poets and playwrights of the Elizabethan age, William Blake, Edgar Allan Poe, Walt Whitman, Ezra Pound and the imagists, T. S. Eliot, Allen Tate, Yvor Winters and, outside the boundaries of the English language, Arthur Rimbaud and the French symbolists in general. The order is, of course, chronological, and is not necessarily the order of importance. On this map of literary fascinations, idolatries, mentorships, influences and connections, Emily Dickinson occupies a special place.

It is not an overstatement to say that Crane's affinity with American Romanticism is universally acknowledged. In fact, the critical tendency to see Crane as an heir of early and mid-nineteenth-century US poetry has even come under scrutiny in recent decades. Already in 1989, Warner Berthoff chastised a fellow scholar for his "unwillingness . . . to give up his own binding fiction of Hart Crane as a sort of last poet—our great post-romantic, post-symbolist, perhaps even post-poetic figure of self-willed exhaustion and defeat" (72). Closer to the present day, Brian M. Reed deplors "the common, lingering stereotype of Crane as a belated romantic" (42). Reed holds Yvor Winters and, in our time, Harold Bloom responsible for such a state of affairs (19–20). The latter's "deep, abiding interest in the U.S. romantic tradition has caused him to overemphasize the tie between Whitman and Crane" (20), and his authority and übercritic status have contributed to the setting of a key trend in Crane scholarship (19–20). However, while referring to Crane as a Whitmanian poet may have become something of a critical cliché, his indebtedness to the other half of the great poetic duo of the American Renaissance remains more problematic.

A review of the literature on Crane reveals that the poet's leading monographers tend to recognize his connection to Dickinson, but give rather limited attention to it, often restricting themselves to brief mentions. And yet, as Reed reminds us, even Bloom, writing about Crane on the eve of the twenty-first century,

both restates the link to Whitman and strangely complicates the plot. He claims that Crane's express antagonist in *The Bridge*, T. S. Eliot, is in fact more Whitmanian than Crane himself, which means that, if he wishes to "win autonomy," he has to look elsewhere, namely, to "Emily Dickinson as prime American ancestor." (249)

Strikingly enough, as John P. Wargacki observes, “[w]ith the exception of Hart Crane, no modernist American poet acknowledges the deep influence of Emily Dickinson in terms of both themes and rhetoric” (90), despite the fact that “Dickinson’s substantial force upon the modernist poets, conscious or otherwise, cannot be underestimated” (90). Such is the strength of this influence, coupled with a seeming dearth of book-length studies of the subject, that it leads to somewhat paradoxical situations. For example, Lee Edelman, the author of a book on Crane which has become a reference for the poet’s scholars, praises Sharon Cameron for “her brief but extraordinarily subtle comments on Crane in her study of Emily Dickinson, *Lyric Time*” (65). More recently, this state of affairs has showed some signs of improvement, with the publication of Michael D. Snediker’s *Queer Optimism: Lyric Personhood and Other Felicitous Persuasions*, a four-chapter scholarly work dealing with four American poets, including Dickinson and Crane, albeit discussed separately, in one chapter each.

There are three instances of Crane referencing the Belle of Amherst in his own verse: the sonnet “To Emily Dickinson” and “Quaker Hill,” Part VI of *The Bridge*, which not only contains an invocation to her, but is also preceded by an epigraph taken from one of her lyrics. To this could be added the mentions Dickinson receives in Crane’s correspondence. The aim of the present article is to examine those direct traces of America’s greatest female poet in Crane’s *œuvre* and the modernist poet’s perception of Dickinson’s legacy and her persona. I propose to do so in light of a sonnet by Crane’s contemporary and, for a time, friend Yvor Winters, whose title is the same as that of the aforementioned sonnet by Crane. The underlying aim of my analysis and interpretation of the works in question is to delve into their metapoetic dimension, uncovering how Crane and Winters, who was also a recognized literary scholar and critic writing about, among others, Dickinson, perceived not only their eminent predecessor, but also their own condition as poets living during the first decades of the twentieth century. This brief study is something of an introduction and encouragement to further and, as the preceding paragraph suggests, worthwhile exploration of the connection between Dickinson and Crane, whose work I am primarily interested in as a scholar of American modernism. Its main aim is to demonstrate not only what views the two modernists of my choosing held on a major nineteenth-century poet and her poetry, but also what views they held on poetry and poets *tout court*.

It is worth remembering that the 1920s, the decade during which most of Crane’s adult life was played out and most of his poetry written, was also the decade which saw a revival of interest in Dickinson’s *œuvre* and the beginning of her rediscovery and critical ascension. As Betsy Erkkila

points out, Dickinson's unorthodox form alienated her early critics, but the "volumes of poems [published in the 1890s] . . . were also radical enough to make Dickinson a cultural icon among several modernists, including most notably Amy Lowell, Conrad Aiken, Hart Crane, Yvor Winters, John Crowe Ransome, and Allen Tate" (14). Clive Fisher, Crane's latest biographer, reminds us how the revised literary canon was formed: "Thus the excavations began—to continue throughout Crane's literary career—among the forgotten monuments of nineteenth-century American fiction and poetry" (42). Fisher also observes:

The idols of Gentility—Longfellow, James Fenimore Cooper, Washington Irving and others too Anglophile for their own good—were cast out and a new pantheon constructed: the achievements of Poe, Melville, Hawthorne, Thoreau and Emily Dickinson were reassessed and over a quarter-century interval American literature acquired an altogether darker lineage. (42)

The letters Crane wrote to his friends confirm Fisher's claim that "this recreation of the past was a significant literary enterprise, and one which had profound implications for Crane's later career" (42). They also confirm Brian M. Reed's claim that "Crane venerated [Dickinson] fulsomely, without qualification" (191). Such ardent admiration was by no means self-evident. Despite Dickinson's newly gained status, "[i]t was Walt Whitman, instead, who seemed, to the poets and novelists of the 1920s, the lyrical liberator who, with his expansive lines and explosive social philosophy, had heroically slipped the yoke of European convention" (Benfey 33). Moreover, "[e]ven those [modernist] poets [such as Eliot or Pound] who leaned towards a more cryptic phrasing and a smaller canvas looked less often to Dickinson than one might suppose" (33).

Crane's correspondence betrays a fierce loyalty to his female predecessor, whom he refers to as one of several "late' enthusiasms of [his]" (473). This allegiance manifests itself in, *inter alia*, the belief that Dickinson's legacy set a benchmark for poets to come, is ahead of its time and as such does not lose its topicality. Consequently, an awareness of her achievement is, for Crane, a measure of how knowledgeable and sophisticated critics and readers of poetry are. In a 1925 letter to Waldo Frank, the American poet thus comments on the initial reception of *White Buildings*, his debut poetry collection and the only volume apart from *The Bridge* he published in his lifetime:

At any rate your sanguine hopes for "White Buildings" warms [sic] me. It came back from Harcourt yesterday. They couldn't make anything out of most of the poems. My "obscurity" is a mystery to me, and I cant

[sic] help thinking that publishers and their readers have never heard the mention of Sir Thomas Davies, Donne, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Valery [sic] or even Emily Dickinson. (411–12)

Writing to Gorham Munson three years later, Crane notes: “I still stake some claims on the pertinence of the intuitions; indeed some of Blake’s poems and Emily Dickinson’s seem more incontrovertible than ever since Relativity and a host of other ideologies, since evolved, have come into recognition” (585). Moreover, the fact that in his 1927–28 correspondence with Winters Crane calls Dickinson by her first name only shows that he perceives their literary connection as an intimate one. Among the “forthcoming articles in the *Outlook*” Crane recommends “I ate on Emily” (593). When he gives Winters feedback on “the three sonnets [the latter] sent,” the poet of *The Bridge* states, “So I can only give you my preferences: the Emily one first, the one ending—‘I’m dead, I’m dead’ next” (598), the former being Winters’s “To Emily Dickinson,” one of the poems I am concerned with in this article.

As has been mentioned earlier, Winters gave voice to his interest in Dickinson not only in his own poetry, but also in his criticism. Intriguingly enough, the latter does not seem entirely compatible with the reverence expressed in his sonnet addressed to the Amherst poet. In Winters’s essays published in the 1940s and 1950s, his approbation of her *œuvre* is far from unconditional. One possible and rather commonsensical explanation may be that Winters’s critical writings on Dickinson postdate his poetic tribute to her by two decades or more, and as such are the fruit of years of scholarly work and the product of the kind of intellectual maturity that comes in the latter half of life. In a single word, it is a Winters equipped with a sharpened critical awareness—in both senses of the word *critical*—who points out certain weaknesses of Dickinson’s verse in his well-known essay “Emily Dickinson and the Limits of Judgement”:

The problem of judging [Dickinson’s] better poems is much of the time a subtle one. Her meter, at its worse—that is, most of the time—is a kind of stiff sing-song; her diction, at its worst, is a kind of poetic nursery jargon; and there is a remarkable continuity of manner, of a kind nearly indescribable, between her worst and her best poems. (*In Defense* 283)

Importantly, however, Winters is fully aware of the ambivalence which marks his attitude to Dickinson and admits that formulating a critical assessment of her legacy is doomed to become a disquieting experience:

The difficulty is this: that even in her most nearly perfect poems, even in those poems in which the defects do not intrude momentarily in

a crudely obvious form, one is likely to feel a fine trace of her countrified eccentricity; there is nearly always a margin of ambiguity in our final estimate of even her most extraordinary work, and though the margin may appear to diminish or disappear in a given reading of a favorite poem, one feels no certainty that it will not reappear more obviously with the next reading. Her best poems, quite unlike the best poems of Ben Jonson, of George Herbert, or of Thomas Hardy, can never be isolated certainly and defensibly from her defects; yet she is a poetic genius of the highest order, and this ambiguity in one's feeling about her is profoundly disturbing. (283)

Winters wrote "To Emily Dickinson" two years before the publication of *The Bridge*, authored by Crane and reviewed by Winters, over which the two poets quarreled irreparably. The correspondence between them ceased with Crane's famous letter of 4 June 4 1930. Long-lost, it remained unpublished until the late 1970s, when Vivian H. Pemberton's 1978 article "Hart Crane and Yvor Winters, Rebuttal and Review: A New Crane Letter" appeared. That same year, Thomas Parkinson published his edition of the Crane-Winters epistolary exchange. In light of the fact that Winters claimed to have burned Crane's side of the correspondence (Parkinson xviii), it is striking that Winters's tribute to Dickinson opens with fire imagery. It also opens like a letter, with the salutation "Dear Emily." The structure of the poem seems to follow the epistolary mode, too. In the first of the sonnet's two stanzas, the speaker, presumably a man, focuses on himself, as if he wanted to give the recipient his news:

Dear Emily, my tears would burn your page,  
 But for the fire-dry line that makes them burn—  
 Burning my eyes, my fingers, while I turn  
 Singly the words that crease me heart with age.  
 If I could make some tortured pilgrimage  
 Through words or Time or the blank pain of Doom  
 And kneel before you as you found your tomb,  
 Then I might rise to face my heritage. (Winters, *Collected Poems* 49)

Stanza one contains only two direct addresses to Dickinson, in lines one and seven. By contrast, the second stanza revolves almost exclusively around Dickinson, while the speaker seemingly recedes into the background. The standard letter structure is thus preserved in the poem: like a traditional epistle, it describes the speaker's/author's situation before enquiring or speculating about that of the addressee. Unlike a typical letter, however, Winters's sonnet lacks a conclusion, or the poetic equivalent of closing epistolary formulas:

Yours was an empty upland solitude  
 Bleached to the powder of a dying name;  
 The mind, lost in a word's lost certitude  
 That faded as the fading footsteps came  
 To trace an epilogue to words grown odd  
 In that hard argument which led to God. (49)

The most obvious first impression one has upon reading Winters's sonnet is that the page in question is one containing a Dickinsonian text. However, the Amherst poet's legacy may also have been extended to encompass the work of her successors, including Winters: "your page" may in fact be "my page," the speaker's own poetic output, inevitably influenced by Dickinson. The sonnet's opening lines associate the textual with the corporeal, with "eyes" and "fingers." While these somatic references may, of course, be read as metaphors, they nevertheless ground the creative process in the body, as well as the mind and soul. The act of writing is the act of seeing, since there can be no writing without reading, both in the literal and figurative senses: reading also means absorbing and relating to the literary heritage of past masters, seeing means being aware of the influence of the past, but also being able to see beyond it in order to create a new literary work. Writing and reading become almost manual tasks in—no pun intended—the speaker's hands: "the words" are "turn[ed]," and the task is slow and painstaking, each word being dealt with individually. The physical exhaustion signaled stands for the mental and emotional exhaustion the creative process involves.

The painfulness of the process is also emphasized by the verb *crease*. The mention of "the words that crease [the speaker's] heart with age" opens up an interesting interpretative path. First of all, it reinforces the corporeal dimension of the creative act as presented in Winters's sonnet: the heart is pointed to as another site of literary creation. Secondly, it introduces the notion of the passage of time. The fact that Winters was in his late twenties when he wrote "To Emily Dickinson" makes the image of the aging heart seem somewhat surprising. One could, of course, counterargue that T. S. Eliot was even younger when he wrote "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," a poem which, in one of its many layers, may be read as a statement on the anguish of the midlife crisis. However, given the fact that Winters's relationship to Eliot and even to New Criticism, of which he is often believed to be an exponent, is a rather problematic one (Makaryk 495), we should not perhaps make too much of the analogy. "The Love Song" being a dramatic monologue written by an advocate of poetic impersonality, it would be far-fetched to identify Prufrock with Eliot. However, we can, I believe, identify the speaker of Winters's "To Emily

Dickinson” with Winters himself. It was following this line of thinking that I assumed at the beginning of the present analysis that the speaker was male. We may thus conclude that the lyric “I” of Winters’s sonnet is a young poet who feels the burden of time, not because he is growing old or even anticipates aging, but because he has to position himself *vis-à-vis* time as a realm which holds and carries the verbal legacy with which he should deal. Additionally, the fact that not only human skin, but also paper can be subjected to creasing sends the reader back to the mention of the “page,” with which the sonnet opens.

A crease is a line and, as such, it echoes the “fire-dry line that makes them burn.” Arguably the most mysterious phrase in the entire sonnet, it contains the lexical coinage “fire-dry” and the personal pronoun *them*. The referent of the latter may seem slightly problematic: the pronoun may hark back to “tears,” but perhaps also to the “eyes” and “fingers” of line three. The poem’s first three lines revolve around the idea of burning or being burned. The fire imagery used in the first three lines of the poem is also an example of paradoxical imagery, since the notion of burning is combined with the motif of tears. In Winters’s world, tears—and thus water—have the power to burn. While it is thinkable that crying may “[b]urn [your] eyes” or even other body parts, that is cause a burning sensation, the idea that it could result in “burn[ing] your page” is hardly plausible. Tears can, of course, damage paper and, more importantly, destroy the text written on it by washing it out. However, destruction by fire is more dramatic and irreversible, and its suggestion seems to introduce the reference to “Doom,” and thus to ultimate destruction, in stanza two.

The second line of the sonnet further complicates things by introducing the neologism *fire-dry*, not to be found in any dictionary. The noun-adjective combination sends us to school dilemmas, such as “Is water wet?” and “Is fire dry?,” but also to a philosopher who was important to Winters: Thomas Aquinas. Encouraged by his Stanford professor William Dinsmore Briggs, the addressee, like Dickinson, of poetic tributes by Winters, the latter familiarized himself with Aquinas’ thought and became an exponent of Thomism (Parkinson 137, Makaryk 494). Aquinas’ theory of the elements may account for the somewhat cryptic neologism in Winters’s sonnet:

The substantial forms of the elements are determined according to the primary qualities to which all other qualities are to be traced back. The primary qualities are passive or active. The passive ones are the wet and the dry; the active ones are the hot and the cold (*De Generatione et corruptione* [sic], II, Lect. 2). Out of these four qualities result four possible combinations of opposed qualities and, correspondingly, four

elements: dry heat (fire), wet heat (air), wet cold (water), and dry cold (earth). Should one of these qualities take the place of another, then the element transforms itself into another. From fire (dry heat)—when the dry is changed to wet—there arises air (wet heat); from air—when the hot is changed to cold—there arises water (wet cold); and from water—when the wet is changed to dry—there arises earth (dry cold). (Freudenthal 116)

What seems to be a Thomistic allusion made by Winters, that is the evocation of fire, which is by definition dry, is also an allusion to the fundamental or elemental nature of things. It is, moreover, an allusion to the idea of transformation, represented by the water which acquires some of the properties of fire in Winters's poem, the act of acquisition being perhaps a reference to the transmutation of fire into water via air laid out by Aquinas. The notion of transformation—or its impossibility—is also central to what constitutes the poem's essential dilemma: the way a twentieth-century poet deals with the heritage of the preceding century and that of a great predecessor, hesitating perhaps between imitation, appropriation, adaptation, rejection and resistance.

Winters identifies a factor crucial to the problem of influence: the passage of time, which seemingly creates distance between the mentor and the heir, but does not altogether obliterate the deceptive closeness the latter feels. Winters's sonnet is permeated by a sense of impossibility and of the hypothetical. Twice in the first stanza does the American poet use conditional constructions: the burning of the page would be possible if it were not for "the fire-dry line"; similarly hypothetical is the "tortured pilgrimage / Through words or Time." In addition, Winters evokes the suffering the whole process entails, bringing to mind "the blank pain of Doom." The end of the second stanza shows the speaker helpless, almost impotent, unable to "rise to face [his] heritage." Inherent in this sense of impossibility is the idea of taking back time, of reversing its passage. The hypothetical peregrination is verbal, as well as temporal and as such it inscribes itself into what is the subject of the poem, namely literary legacy. To the notion of a poetic voice Winters opposes that of blankness, which could be the unknown that separates the present from the past and the living from the dead, but which could also be read simply as the lack of expression, the silence which could signify artistic impotence, the silenced artist or the artist who is unable to speak. Moreover, the idea of burning a page in the sonnet's first line also brings to mind the idea of silencing someone, of obliterating the textual, of cutting oneself off from someone else's expression.

The motif of destruction, crucial to Winters's sonnet, is reinforced by the allusions to Judgment Day and to Dickinson's death. This brings us to the paradox at the heart of the poem: on the one hand, the speaker



is full of reverence for his eminent predecessor; on the other, he seems to feel the urge to resist her influence, to “burn [her] page” lest it should become “[his] page.” The “I” of Winters’s poem is visibly in two minds about dealing with his poetic patrimony, torn between a gesture of rejection symbolized by the ultimate destruction evoked in the opening line and a gesture of compliance and submission evoked in the last line of stanza one. The sonnet’s most enigmatic line is the one containing the reference to “the fire-dry line.” The line is what prevents the speaker from destroying the emblematic Dickinsonian page. The process of elemental transformation, as described by Aquinas, is not retroactive in Winters’s poem: fire may ultimately become water, but tears cannot fully acquire the destructive properties of fire. The line in question may have something to do with the temporal gap that separates the speaker from the poets of the past, with the passage of time which empowers giants such as Dickinson, but renders the speaker-poet powerless. “[T]he fire-dry line,” or the irreversibility of the influence, is what “makes [the speaker’s tears] burn,” what causes his torment and his dilemmas.

Having dealt—for better or worse—with his own creative predicament, the speaker goes on to focus—seemingly, at least—on the figure of Emily Dickinson. The second part of the poem strikes the reader as more accessible than the first one, perhaps because of the apparent familiarity of both Dickinson’s *œuvre* and her life story. This familiarity is, however, misleading; no matter how knowledgeable we are about the Amherst poet, a certain elusiveness is inevitable. This is perhaps one of the reasons why the entire stanza revolves around the ideas of confusion and uncertainty, inherent in the images of discolouredness, invisibility, reduction and disappearance which permeate it. Dickinson’s loneliness is “[b]leached” and reduced to powdery form, “certitude” is “lost” and “fade[s],” accompanied by “fading footsteps.” Finally, the mention of “an epilogue to words grown odd” suggests an ending preceded by disorientation. The sense of helplessness evoked is intensified by the sonnet’s conclusion, which links the poetic dilemma, with all the suffering it involves, to the metaphysical and inscribes it into the realm of infinity, since the “hard argument [turns out to lead] to God.”

One may wonder about the extent to which the latter part of Winters’s poem celebrates Dickinson. While the lyric pays homage to the female poet’s greatness, its tone can hardly be called triumphant. Central to the last four lines are three repetitions: those of the verbs *lose* and *fade*, and of the noun *word* in both singular and plural form, both forms being homophones because of the use of the Saxon genitive in one case. Winters’s sonnet certainly contains several biographical or mythographic allusions, and the Amherst poet’s alienation—in both personal and artistic terms—is pointed

out. However, what may be a reference to both the existence of an unmarried woman who ultimately opted for self-chosen seclusion and the lack of literary recognition which befell her in her lifetime is also an emblem of her stature. Isolation is an existential and social condition, but it may also be a measure of greatness. Dickinson's elevated position, her "upland solitude," is symbolic of her being artistically superior to others; her loneliness and the existence of the "empty" realm over which she presides result from her having no equals. Blankness, nothingness, non-existence are again given prominence in Winters's poem in a way which reveals considerable ambiguity. On the one hand, they appear to have the usual negative connotations. "[T]he powder of a dying name" is suggestive of the oblivion Dickinson might have sunk into if it had not been for Mabel Loomis Todd's and Thomas Wentworth Higginson's efforts. It also reinforces the motif of death present in the sonnet, the mention of powder bringing to mind the biblical formula "Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust." On the other hand, the themes of absence and emptiness may connote plenitude and excellence.

Two years before he expressed his appreciation of Winters's tribute to the Lady in White, Crane had composed his own poem of the same name, using, like Winters, "the very un-Dickinsonian form of the sonnet" (Benfey 35). One of Crane's 1927 letters to Winters ends with the sentence: "I enclose a little poem written lately to 'our Emily'" (506). As Parkinson states in his annotations of the correspondence between the two poets, "[t]he poem to Emily Dickinson was to be the subject of dour comments by Winters later, but he framed the holograph copy of it by Crane and kept in his his [sic] study" (28).

Crane's sonnet "To Emily Dickinson" remains unexplored by the poet's monographers and underappreciated by those Crane critics who make mention of it. The lack of extensive scholarly discussions of the lyric makes the present analysis particularly worthwhile. "To Emily Dickinson" is one of the poems intended for publication in *Key West: An Island Sheaf*, a volume which Crane planned but failed to bring out in his lifetime. The sonnet also shares the fate of some of the Crane lyrics which, before their author's death, had appeared in magazines only or which were first published posthumously. Lesser-known and—for a time at least—uncollected, such works do not generally receive as much critical attention as his magnum opus, *The Bridge*, or the poems included in *White Buildings*. Samuel Hazo, an early Crane scholar, dismisses the tribute to Dickinson and "To the Cloud Juggler," another underestimated elegy by Crane,<sup>1</sup> as "elegiac

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<sup>1</sup> For an extensive reading of "To the Cloud Juggler" which counters such dismissive views of the poem, see my article "Black Suns of Melancholy: Hart Crane's Treatment of the Sun Motif in the Light of Mircea Eliade's Study of Solar Cults."

memoirs” which at best “challenge but do not surpass the excellence of some of the best short lyrics in *White Buildings*” (124). In a similar vein, Berthoff categorizes the two Crane elegies in question as “memorial poems . . . that may not be called perfunctory but are of interest now mainly for what they show of Crane’s performative resources” (53). The monographer singles out the sonnet’s penultimate stanza, which “works to classify the properties of thought regulating Dickinson’s deceptively small-scale achievement, [and] may be taken as demonstrating the critical and analytic intelligence that supported Crane’s deeply traditional conception of poetic making” (53). A closer examination of the elegy for Dickinson reveals that such critical repudiations fall short of doing it justice.

Described as a sonnet “which hailed as a fellow visionary with similarly heroic ambition the prolific Amherst poet who published so little” (Fisher 326) or one of Crane’s “encounters with the spirits of other poets” (Brunner 239), “To Emily Dickinson” may easily seem to be an instance of metapoetic spiritualism and thus risk accusations of pretentiousness. Yet, as Edward J. Brunner explains, it is mostly “an attempt to communicate with another individual,” one of the “late poems [which] may be modest simply because they are Crane’s realization of how little he has” (239). The lyrics in question are particularly “dismaying” because in them “he is speaking either to those who are dead or who are beyond his hearing in some other way, asleep or indifferent” (239). As a result, “he is doomed to speak from isolation” (239). It is from such a standpoint that the lyric “I” of the poem addresses Dickinson directly:

You who desired so much—in vain to ask—  
 Yet fed your hunger like an endless task,  
 Dared dignify the labor, bless the quest—  
 Achieved that stillness ultimately best,

Being, of all, least sought for: Emily, hear!  
 O sweet, dead Silencer, most suddenly clear  
 When singing that Eternity possessed  
 And plundered momentarily in every breast;

—Truly no flower yet withers in your hand.  
 The harvest you descried and understand  
 Needs more than wit to gather, love to bind.  
 Some reconciliation of remotest mind—

Leaves Ormus ruyless, and Ophir chill.  
 Else tears heap all within one clay-cold hill. (Crane 87)

Crane begins his eulogy for the New England Mystic by opposing the impossibility of her aspirations, both artistic and spiritual ones, to what, at the most basic level at least, the world had to offer her in return. The female poet's desire is equated with the hunger that became her lot in metaphorical terms. As her modernist adulator sees it, the seeming futility of her efforts did not prevent Dickinson from performing her "endless task" of satisfying her hunger, from continuing her literary and transcendent pursuits, which gives rise to another opposition in the poem, indicated by the conjunction "yet." The insatiability and unfulfillment evoked in the opening lines may thus be only apparent because what mattered most to Dickinson—and what should perhaps matter most to anybody who is a true poet—may have been the creative process itself, coupled with the emotional and spiritual processes that accompany it. The real meaning of the poet's life may in fact lie in the ostensible thanklessness of the never-ending poetic endeavour, gruelling on the surface but ultimately elevating and almost mystical, and not merely in how the world responds to it. In the sonnet's first quatrain, the Belle of Amherst is celebrated as the one who "[d]ared dignify the labor, bless the quest" and—importantly, as we shall see—"[a]chieved that stillness ultimately best." Paradoxically, Crane's tribute to Dickinson eulogizes greatness not by foregrounding notions such as fullness and fulfillment, but by giving prominence to a sense of lack which larger-than-life creative goals inevitably entail. Among the paucities and absences the opening stanza of Crane's poem evokes is silence, though the word itself is not actually used. Silence—the "stillness" of the stanza's last line—is presented as something positive, the result of a quest for poetic identity, a devotion to the poetic craft and the pursuit of poetic perfection.

The author subsequently emphasizes the motif of silence in his poem. In the second stanza, Dickinson is referred to as a "sweet, dead Silencer." The phrase implies that she is a representative of the past, of the poetic tradition her young heir has to face. However, final though it seems, her death is only relative, as she remains a "Silencer" in the eyes of posterity. The noun is—in the context of Crane's poem at least—polysemous, and its denotations and connotations are worth considering, for, as R. W. B. Lewis aptly remarks, "it is always a sounder policy with Crane to assume that he knew what he was doing in his selection of words" (49). On the most basic lexical level, a silencer is someone who silences someone else, in this case successive generations of poets, intimidated by Dickinson's legacy and feeling the pressure resulting from their recognition of her greatness. This meaning of the word may thus have negative connotations, suggesting the kind of impotence and helplessness that is signaled in Winters's poem. The most direct address to Dickinson in the sonnet,

“Emily, hear!”, expresses his desperation to, metaphorically speaking, make contact with his eminent predecessor and, at the same time, break the silence which plays such a significant role in the poem. Still, Crane’s Dickinson is a “sweet . . . Silencer,” which introduces a sense of ambiguity, again sending us back to the dilemmas voiced by Winters, who addresses the poet as “Dear Emily,” yet has to struggle with the burden of her artistic heritage. The speaker of Crane’s poem, meanwhile, seems to believe that the intergenerational, metapoetic and, so to speak, interpoetic connection is possible and, ultimately, brings peace rather than unease. This is indicated by the phrase “Some reconciliation of remotest mind,” suggestive, as Langdon Hammer notes, of “the [postmortal] mode of address Crane shares with Dickinson [which] is strangely private or elite” (163) or of the fact that “Crane saw Dickinson as a reconciler of opposites” (Benfey 35), and thus, despite the evocations of lack with which the poem opens, an agent of plenitude.

While the word *silencer* is not of his own coinage, neologisms are not uncommon in Crane’s poetic repertoire. Consequently, one is tempted to go beyond the exact definitions of this lexeme one may find in a dictionary and to ascribe various layers of meaning to it. Although some of them may not be entirely compatible with the word’s grammatical form, such a hermeneutic transgression is perhaps forgivable given Crane’s penchant for solecisms. Furthermore, if one takes a closer look at the suffix -er, which may refer to somebody being an agent, but also to a person’s qualities, place of origin or residence or the object of their preoccupations, one cannot be entirely sure that the poet himself did not intend to neologize by giving the word *silencer* additional meanings. Crane’s Dickinson is not only a silencing force because she intimidates other poets; she is herself subjected to silencing by being virtually unpublished in her lifetime and unappreciated or, at best, underappreciated in the decades immediately following her death. She is, in other words, one who lived in silence, whose abode was silence, who was marked and characterized by silence, for whom silence became an attribute. Crane’s explicit reference to Dickinson not being in demand, “[b]eing, of all, least sought for,” is a sad constatation of her fate and early reception. It may also be a more personal and even individualistic statement on the American modernist’s part, which sums up his own situation as man and poet, as well as the literary climate of the day and contemporary gauges of literary status:

Clearly, an unusually perceptive temperament was needed to find in Dickinson’s work, during the 1920s, a heroism comparable to Whitman’s noisier, self-celebrating “barbaric yawp.” Hart Crane, who himself knew something about “starving of passion” in his father’s garden, had such

a temperament. Mulling over his own outsider status, as a homosexual amid masculinist poets like Williams and Ezra Pound, Crane had already, in his great poem “The Bridge,” revealed a more vulnerable side of Whitman than the bluff caricature of many 1920s evocations. (Benfey 34–35)

It is not entirely clear, as is often the case in Crane’s solecistic verse, whether the past participle of the verb *seek*, somewhat idiosyncratically followed by the preposition *for* while the preposition *after* would be more expectable, refers, as I have suggested in the previous paragraph, to Dickinson herself or the “stillness” or silence which is associated with her. This dual, ambiguous phrasing may be suggestive of the fact that the poet known as the Woman in White is enveloped in silence, that silence and her persona merge.

Dickinson is a “Silencer,” one that makes silence, in yet another sense of the word: she is a past master of silence, one who gravitates towards silence, seen as a symbol of the poetic absolute. Such a perception of silence permeates Crane’s poetry, whether it refers to Dickinson, with her love of ellipsis, blank spaces and anything that connotes muteness, or the French symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé. Ultimately, silence in poetry is akin to the music of the spheres, perfect heavenly music, superior to earthly music and inaudible to mortal ears.<sup>2</sup> In his analysis of selected poems from the *White Buildings* collection, Gordon A. Tapper points out the importance of purity to Crane (13–68). What the critic refers to as “Crane’s poetics of difficulty,” solecistic, catachrestic and neologistic (9), is aimed at achieving linguistic purity, transcending language and approaching “a pure language of silence” (15). Such a chimera seemingly creates a contradiction, since a poet’s material is language and the realm of wordlessness and soundlessness “is not a place where any poet can truly go, and remain a poet” (16), especially if one creates, as Crane does, elaborate soundscapes. For Crane, however, the two opposites are not necessarily unreconcilable:

It is as if the optative language of silence is the essentialized spirit of the verse; the sensuous aurality, its body. We are not meant to choose one over the other, just as Crane does not. We are meant to savor the disorienting effect of a style based in patterns of sound but premised on a phenomenology of silence, of purity. (16)

<sup>2</sup> For a study of Crane’s and Mallarmé’s exploration of the connection between poetry and silence in the context of the concept of *musica universalis*, see my article “The Sound of Silence: Saint Cecilia and Celestial Music in Hart Crane and Stéphane Mallarmé.”

Unsurprisingly, “silence as a poetic ideal recurs over and over again as an analogue for purity” (16) in Crane’s *œuvre*. One example is “his reverent epithet for Emily Dickinson” (16), contained in a poem which Tapper fails to analyze, but which, as I have demonstrated, equates her with silence and the process of silencing and being silenced. In poetry, the missing link between more traditional works and silence, which is, simultaneously and paradoxically, the ultimate poetic ideal and the poet’s dead-end alley suggested by Tapper, is verse which is self-referential or non-referential and abstract. This is perhaps what is at the back of Crane’s mind when, in the sonnet’s penultimate line, he refers to Ormus and Ophir. They are, as Hammer reminds us in the notes accompanying the poem, an “island in the Strait of Hormuz, the site of an important Arab emporium for the Chinese and Indian trade in the thirteenth century” and a “[r]egion mentioned in the Old Testament as famous for its gold and other expensive commodities” (Crane 802), respectively. According to Benfey, in the poem’s coda, the American modernist salutes “Dickinson’s genius in the use of abstractions and exotic diction” (35).<sup>3</sup>

Similarly to Winters, Crane employs the motif of tears, with which his sonnet ends. It is combined with the motif of the “clay-cold hill,” which recalls the “upland solitude” mentioned in Winters’s poem. Here too the image of an elevated place may connote Dickinson’s artistic superiority as well as her isolation. On a more literal plane, it may also be a reference to a burial mound, the tears being an emblem of mourning. This evocation of death dovetails with the theme of temporality inscribed into Crane’s tribute to Dickinson. The Amherst poet is “most suddenly clear / When singing that Eternity possessed / And plundered momentarily in every breast.” The connection between the nineteenth-century poet and eternity is later strengthened by the declaration: “Truly no flower yet withers in your hand,” both statements, with their explicit references to body parts, sending the reader back to the corporeal imagery used in Winters’s sonnet and to its emphasis on the somatic dimension of poetry. At the most basic level, Crane notes the fact that Dickinson, unappreciated by her contemporaries, was ahead of her time, a forerunner of modernist and modern poetry: born out of time, she produced poetry which has a timeless quality. Her greatness thus consists in, among other things, her having the key to timelessness, of which most human beings get only a glimpse. As always, however, Crane is unwilling to oversimplify his poetic message: unsurprisingly, stanza two evokes the complex and unobvious interplay

<sup>3</sup> For an analysis of the connection between self-referentiality, non-referentiality and abstraction in Crane’s poetry, see my article “Art (and) Criticism: Hart Crane and David Siqueiros.”

between time and timelessness. The adverb *momently*, classified in some dictionaries as an archaism, a lexical device appreciated and used by Crane,<sup>4</sup> may describe an activity which lasts for a short time, as well as one which can happen any time or which lasts all the time. In the modernist poet's vision, the boundaries between the temporal and the eternal are blurred or at least relativized. At once "possessed / And plundered," eternity, capitalized in Crane's poem in what may seem to be a gesture of reverence for Dickinson's unorthodox punctuation, which includes the overuse of capitalization, is elusive. If, as we have seen, in Crane's tribute to Dickinson, silence and blankness stand for the pure, the ideal and the spiritual, eternity plays an equally symbolic and metaliterary role. Paradoxical and ambiguous, immutable and intangible, it also becomes the locus of poetic ambiguity and open-endedness. While by no means devoid of its mystical dimension, in purely self-referential terms, it stands, being itself endless and imponderable, for a multiplicity of meanings and infinite lyric, as well as interpretative possibilities.

One respect in which Winters's sonnet dedicated to Dickinson differs from its counterpart in Crane's *œuvre* is that the former does not seem to take account of its addressee's sex. By contrast, in Crane's "To Emily Dickinson," America's greatest female poet is presented as not only poet, but also woman. A depiction of her holding a flower in her hand, albeit metaphorical, does, nevertheless, bring to mind several biographical, cultural and literary associations, which are perhaps worth considering. A keen gardener and amateur botanist, Dickinson transmuted her passion for flowers into textual expression in both her poetry and correspondence. She was also known for making herbaria, which at least partially prevented the plants she loved from withering in a sense that is more literal than the one evoked in Crane's poem.<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, this was a passion Dickinson shared with Crane, whose letters, particularly those written during his Mexican period, testify to the attention he paid to flowers and the joy he found in contemplating them. Besides playing a non-negligible role in

<sup>4</sup> Commenting on the differences between Crane's and Gerard Manley Hopkins's poetics, Brian M. Reed observes that "[t]he two poets also disagreed sharply over the utility of archaisms in poetry. Hopkins sternly disapproves of archaism . . . whereas Crane was a self-declared 'Elizabethan fanatic'" (249).

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed exploration of Dickinson's personal and literary relationship with flowers and gardening, see Judith Farr's monograph *The Gardens of Emily Dickinson*. In her monograph *Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet*, Paula Bennett discusses the erotic aspect of Dickinson's poetry. Interestingly, Bennett suggests an analogy between Dickinson's flowers and female genitals, exploring the homosexual dimension of the poet's use of floral imagery. Such a homoerotic reading of Dickinson's *œuvre* places her in the same line as Crane. For an insightful queer reading of Crane's *œuvre*, see Thomas E. Yingling's monograph *Hart Crane and the Homosexual Text: New Thresholds, New Anatomies*.



Dickinson's and Crane's lives and writings, flowers are conventionalized symbols of beauty, femininity, love and the passage of time. Associable with woman, sexuality and temporality, the floral motif in the sonnet connotes fertility, birth and death, as well as reproductive faculties, which, given the identity of the poem's addressee, are likely to be female.

As such, the motif of Dickinson's unwithering flower sends the reader back to the mention of "labor" in stanza one: though most likely to denote the creative process and the poet's painstaking and painful task, it inevitably brings to mind the other meaning of the word *labor*, namely "childbirth." This reinforces the somatic dimension of Crane's sonnet, which, though not as prominent as the analogical dimension of Winters's poem, is not ignorable either. Importantly, however, what may be read as a reference to female fertility and motherhood makes the reader think about Dickinson's life story, the myth surrounding her persona and the way in which the circumstances of her existence and her personal choices influenced others' perception of her as not only a woman, but also a poet, the two spheres tending to mingle unjustifiably. Her literary status and reception were tainted by patriarchal and sexist stereotypes, which Crane, a gay man and queer poet, visibly wishes to undermine in his lyric dedicated to her. As Benfey rightly points out, in stanza three, "he [Crane] answered the bloomless flower claim of Williams and Aiken" (35). What the American scholar alludes to are Conrad Aiken's and William Carlos Williams's parallel views of the Amherst poet as a sterile spinster, sexually frustrated, childless and bizarre (33–34). While Aiken refers to Dickinson as "the most perfect flower of New England Transcendentalism" (qtd. in Benfey 33), he still blames her marital status for what he sees as the failings of her poetry. Williams goes even further, presenting her as the one who "starv[ed] of passion in her father's garden" and was "[n]ever a woman: never a poet" (qtd. in Benfey 34), thereby indulging in floral and horticultural metaphors while denigrating "American women poets generally, and Dickinson in particular" (Benfey 34).

Stanza three of Crane's "To Emily Dickinson" consistently—and in accordance with the cycle of the seasons—develops the vegetal metaphor it opens with: the image of the perpetually blossoming flower is followed by that of the harvest, which represents fruition in every sense of the word. The verbs *gather* and *bind*, reference work in the field, which is physical and, as such, is in keeping with the corporeal aspect of Crane's, and, for that matter, Winters's poem. Another pair of verbs which precedes the above-mentioned two, *descry* and *understand*, emphasizes the creative, intellectual and visionary capacities which make Dickinson a literary trailblazer, the present tense form of the latter verb underscoring the timelessness of her poetic *œuvre*. Furthermore, it is suggested that neither "wit" nor

“love”—incidentally, two qualities which gender stereotyping dissociates, conventionally ascribing reason to men and emotion to women—are sufficient to produce a poetic genius: someone like Dickinson combines both with yet another quality, which remains largely impenetrable and indescribable, but enables the artist to approach perfection.

When Crane wrote “To Emily Dickinson,” work on *The Bridge*, his best-known and most ambitious work, published in 1930, was already in progress. The sixth of the epic poem’s eight numbered sections, “Quaker Hill,” is prefaced by two epigraphs. The first of them is a quotation from Isadora Duncan: “*I see only the ideal. But no ideals have ever been successful on this earth*” (Crane 64). The citation is a fragment from *My Life*, the celebrated dancer and choreographer’s autobiography, which appeared posthumously in 1927, the year of her death and the year in which Crane composed his sonnet to Dickinson. The second epigraph is taken from Dickinson’s poem XLVII. Crane uses its first two lines to introduce his own poetic text: “*The gentian weaves her fringes, / The maple’s loom is red*” (64). The presence of the two female artists, so to speak, hovers over “Quaker Hill,” references to them acting as an intertextual brace, which consists of the mottoes *loco citato* and a line which appears towards the end of this part of *The Bridge*:

So, must we from the hawk’s far stemming view,  
 Must we descend as worm’s eye to construe  
 Our love of all we touch, and take it to the Gate  
 As humbly as a guest who knows himself too late,  
 His news already told? Yes, while the heart is wrung,  
 Arise—yes, take this sheaf of dust upon your tongue!  
 In one last angelus lift throbbing throat—  
 Listen, transmuting silence with that stilly note

Of pain that Emily, that Isadora knew!  
 While high, from dim elm-chancels hung with dew,  
 That triple-noted clause of moonlight—  
 Yes, whip-poor-will, unhusks the heart of fright,  
 Breaks us and saves, yes, breaks the heart, yet yields  
 That patience that is armour and that shields  
 Love from despair—when love foresees the end—  
 Leaf after autumnal leaf

break off,

descend—

descend— (Crane 65–66)

“Quaker Hill” was written in the late summer and autumn of 1929, a time of the year which, as the passage quoted above demonstrates,

finds its reflection in the very text of Crane's lyric. It is also compatible with what constitutes the main theme of the epic poem's sixth section, which juxtaposes America's glorious past with a disenchanting present, the lofty ideals of yesteryear with early twentieth-century realities, down-to-earth, materialistic and business-oriented. Dickinson's poem XLVII captures exactly the same moment: the passage of summer into autumn. The speaker observes her "departing blossoms" (Dickinson 33) before engaging in funeral rites performed in honour of the deceased season, the mourners including birds and insects:

We trust that she was willing—  
 We ask that we may be—  
 Summer—Sister—Seraph!  
 Let us go with thee!

In the name of the Bee—  
 And of the Butterfly—  
 And of the Breeze—Amen! (33)

Importantly in the context of the present article, Dickinson's lyric dovetails not only with the part of *The Bridge* for which it provides the epigraph, but also with the poem by Crane previously discussed in this article. The Dickinson work in question, as its two lines selected by the modernist with "Quaker Hill" in view illustrate, is also an example of how she translates her interest in botany into verse. Evocations of death and the seasonal cycle, accompanied by religious and metaphysical—or perhaps, in Dickinson's case, mock religious and mock metaphysical—overtones, are present in both "The Gentian weaves her fringes" and Crane's sonnet dedicated to the Amherst poet. Interestingly, the poet emphasizes the presence of the female element in her lyric. The gentian is a woman, since she "weaves *her* fringes" (*italics mine*), and weaving itself, the motif of which is reinforced in the poem by the mention of "[t]he maple's loom," is typically believed to be a female occupation. Summer, the dead season, is feminized, as is indicated by both the use of the personal pronoun *she* and the fact that the deceased is referred to as "Sister." Such a lexical choice, highlighted by the alliterative phrase of which it is part, implies female comradeship and solidarity, making one think of the way the word *sister* was employed by feminists.

In "Quaker Hill," Crane foregrounds, albeit not ostentatiously so, two outstanding, creative women, one known as the Mother of Modern Dance and the other commonly seen as the mother of modern and modernist poetry. Both may be regarded as feminists or at least profeminists, despite Dickinson's famous refusal to officially support the women's

rights cause and in keeping with the emancipated views on women's condition and status in society expressed in some of her poems. Both may also be associated with liberation, having freed their respective artistic disciplines from time-honoured constraints by going against conventions. Duncan was as liberated in her private life as she was in her art. Despite the lingering stereotype of an inhibited spinsterly eccentric attached to her, the infinitely more discreet Dickinson may also be considered an exemplar of inner liberation, intellectual, psychological and spiritual if not sexual or public. Famously, she never married, started a family or led a conventional social life. It is, of course, open to debate whether the circumstances of Dickinson's private life were the result of conscious personal choices or her inner psychological constitution. If we assume the former, her lifestyle may seem quite progressive by the standards of her time, her self-chosen seclusion being perhaps an emblem of modern female independence *avant la lettre* rather than an extreme case of outré behaviour.

What is more, the title of Part VI of *The Bridge*—as well as references to the Society of Friends within the section itself—encourages a reflection on the link between Quakerism and women's emancipation. Favourable to individual freedom in general, the Quakers, champions of social justice, tolerance and equality, promoted both abolitionism and women's rights, and a number of leading American feminist activists of the first wave, namely Lucretia Mott, Susan B. Anthony and Alice Paul, came from Quaker backgrounds. With these considerations in mind, the gender and profemale dimension of "Quaker Hill" must probably be seen as stronger than it seems at first glance. Additionally, gender problematics are often interconnected with queer problematics, and Crane's fascination with Isadora Duncan may be a good case in point. Not only does Crane honour a remarkable woman, but he also sees her art as relevant to dilemmas generated by his own sexual orientation. The emphasis the American dancer placed on naturalness and freedom of the body and its movements, the fact that she danced barefoot and in loose clothes, which provoked accusations of her being half-naked and, consequently, immoral, was particularly important to Crane for two reasons, as Tapper explains:

On one level, Crane's enthusiasm for Duncan echoes the reactions of the Greenwich Village radicals during the 1910s, who perceived her dancing as a symbol of artistic and social freedom and therefore embraced Duncan as a co-conspirator in their quarrel with the genteel tradition. . . . Duncan's defiant celebration of the unencumbered body was [also] particularly meaningful for Crane because his perspective as a gay man sensitized him to social constraints imposed upon the body and, more specifically, to normative definitions of sexuality. (2)

“Crane’s indignation [at the audience’s rejection and misunderstanding of Duncan’s art] demonstrates,” Tapper also observes, “that he identifies with Duncan as the cosmopolitan artist, the agent of high culture in confrontation with a philistine bourgeois public” (3).

The references to Emily Dickinson and Isadora Duncan contained in “Quaker Hill” are generally interpreted by the modernist poet’s monographers along similar lines and rather briefly. They are described as part of Crane’s endeavour to convey “the condition of artists in a mercantile world and to idealize those figures he considered his fellow outlaws” (Fisher 416), “[b]oth epigraphs represent[ing] the artist speaking to herself” and constituting “not so much a criticism of society as a personal meditation on futility” (Combs 157). However, what tends to be largely ignored is the gender dimension of these references. John T. Irwin hints at it when he notes that Dickinson and Duncan “represent a shift in the female archetype from being the passive object of desire to being the active subject of desire as artists . . . embody[ing] . . . a form of the artist’s active passivity, the suffering the serious artist must endure” (124). The “patient endurance of Emily Dickinson and Isadora Duncan in ‘Quaker Hill’” shows

that in elaborating the feminine ideal in *The Bridge*, in building the virgin on this strange shore, Crane was not simply recreating a symbol of that American ideal of the motherland’s inexhaustible virginity but also creating the figure of the “motherly type” artist for whom this symbolic woman serves as muse. (124)

The gender aspect of “Quaker Hill” becomes clearer and more conspicuous when set against the two lyrical examinations of Dickinson’s legacy and her persona explored in the present article. When the speaker of Crane’s poem encourages the unnamed addressee, who may be none other than himself, to “[l]isten, transmuting silence with that stilly note / Of pain that Emily, that Isadora knew!”, he plays out all the intricacies and nuances of silence. He also explores its complex and inevitably paradoxical relationship to poetic expression, which, as discussed earlier, are central not only to his, but also to Winters’s reflection on Dickinson’s literary heritage. While some exegetes of *The Bridge* single out the motif of pain when scrutinizing the couplet from “Quaker Hill” quoted above, associating it, inevitably, with the artist’s eternal martyrdom, it seems to me that the motif of silence is the one that should be foregrounded in the first place. The first of the two lines in question is a nearly oxymoronic amalgam of sound (“Listen”) and soundlessness (“silence,” “stilly”), further complicated by the fact that silence is, paradoxically, to be transformed by means of “that stilly note,” and thus by means of silence itself.

While we have already seen the poetic implications of silence as identified by Crane, namely the state of being suspended between a poetic impasse and a poetic absolute, the gender implications of the phenomenon are worth noting, as well. In her seminal essay “The Laugh of the Medusa,” French feminist theorist Hélène Cixous expounds her concept of *écriture féminine*, a kind of writing which is “female,” but by no means the preserve of women, into which, it may be argued, Dickinson’s unorthodox, subversive, open-ended poetics inscribes itself. “Write your self. Your body must be heard,” urges Cixous, advocating the need for “woman’s *seizing* the occasion to *speak*” and pointing out “how great a transgression it is for a woman to speak—even just open her mouth—in public” (880). “[E]ven if,” the French critic adds, “she transgresses, her words fall almost always upon the deaf male ear” (880–81). The corporeal aspect of *écriture féminine* is manifested, among other things, when Cixous observes that when some women speak, they do so with their whole bodies. This interlink between the somatic, the intellectual, the creative and the textual sends us back to Crane’s and Winters’s reflections on the same subject, as well as the former’s belief in the importance of Duncan’s liberation of the body. The French theorist, meanwhile, combines reflections on corporeality with those on the ambiguousness silence unavoidably entails:

Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word “silence,” the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops short before the word “impossible” and writes it as “the end.” (886)

Anticipating the advent of a new, “speaking” femininity, Cixous celebrates, somewhat surprisingly, Dora, Sigmund Freud’s aphonic patient, seeing her silence as a sign of resistance which foreshadows triumph: “You, Dora, you the indomitable, the poetic body, you are the true ‘mistress’ of the Signifier. Before long your efficacy will be seen at work when your speech is no longer suppressed, its point turned in against your breast, but written out over against the other” (886). It is hard not to read the theme of aphonia in “The Laugh of the Medusa” and, by extension and analogy, the dialectics of silence in Crane’s poetic references to Dickinson as a statement on the erasure of women from artistic, cultural and literary history, a consequence, obviously, of their being disempowered and sidelined in social and political terms. The modernist poet’s reflection on silence may also be a reflection on female voicelessness, resulting from three factors. First of all, women were reticent to speak in the metaphorical

and public senses of the verb. When they did pluck up the courage to do so, they were either disheartened or even prevented from speaking up, both on the socio-political and artistic levels. When they did resist all forms of intimidation, their voice was ignored or underplayed. Crane's is a poetic statement on the painful void all this has created over centuries. Female artists were doubly vulnerable: because they were artists, and thus likely to be victimized and to suffer, and because they were women. The implications of this double exposure must have been particularly resonant for someone like Crane, whose predicament was also twofold, being that of an artist and of a homosexual,<sup>6</sup> and therefore a representative of a group prone, like women, to marginalization, being treated as other and, consequently, silenced, made invisible and effectively absent.

One quality which is accentuated in both "Quaker Hill" itself and the poem by Dickinson from which the epigraph to that part of *The Bridge* is derived is patience. In "The Gentian weaves her fringes," the feminized summer dies after "[a] brief, but patient illness" (Dickinson 33). In the closing lines of "Quaker Hill," Crane mentions "[t]hat patience that is armour and that shields / Love from despair." The prominence given to this particular virtue is perhaps not coincidental in a poetic text whose gender dimension is strong. Believed to be a typically feminine trait, patience is a quality women have to develop even if they are not naturally endowed with it, because this is what society expects of them and what they need to be equipped with in a patriarchal world in which, because of their sex, they face more prohibitions and less forgiveness. As Irwin perceptively reminds us, the very etymology of the word *patience* connotes suffering (76), but, as an "armour . . . that shields," it also contains a promise of victory. As such, this almost proverbially female attribute, which all artists, regardless of sex and sexual orientation, need to possess in order to survive creatively, psychologically and socially, reveals itself to be as equivocal as the many facets of silence explored by both Crane and Winters in the poems discussed in the present article. Like silence, patience implies both weakness and strength, and promises both defeat and victory. Simply put, "Isadora Duncan danced, oblivious to the catcalls of her disapproving audience; Emily Dickinson wrote, indifferent to whether anyone read or not" (Brunner 225), both of them "retir[ing] to an inner world of individual excellence" (224). Art becomes a feminized, patient force, fragile, but perhaps able to oppose, in the long run and by means of

<sup>6</sup> Langdon Hammer suggests that Crane's "To Emily Dickinson" is encoded with a homoerotic message, the mention of Ophir, the land of gold, being "a pun on the name of Emil Opffer" (Crane 802), a golden-haired Danish-born sailor who was, arguably, the love of Crane's life and the inspiration behind *Voyages*, Crane's cycle of six love poems. Interestingly, Opffer also happened to be Emily Dickinson's namesake.

love, the brutal forces of capitalism, industrialism and imperialism, which Crane denounces in “Quaker Hill.” Almost a century after *The Bridge* was published, the latter must still be seen as predominantly male and predatory, the patriarchal violators of America, the once-innocent land which was the poet’s motherland.

Crane’s and Winters’s poetic tributes to Dickinson, which overlap, differ and complement each other, turn out to be voices in a metapoetic discussion. Its implications, contrary to what one may initially expect, transcend the realm of a poet’s self-reflexive or even individual dilemmas, as exemplified largely by Winters’s sonnet, and come to encompass, in Crane’s vision, community issues which concern the world at large. For the two American modernists, Dickinson is a major point of reference, representing not just herself and her *œuvre*, but poetry at large. While Crane’s allegiance to the Amherst poet and his recognition of the universality of her achievement are unconditional, Winters, especially in his capacity as a critic, has reservations about the quality of her poetic output, which, however, does not prevent him from seeing her as a literary giant. Ambivalence marks not only Winters’s attitude to Dickinson, but also the way he feels about literary legacy in general. Aware of the value, as well as the weight and problematic nature of Dickinson’s and, for that matter, all poetic influence, Winters seems to be torn between a strong sense of his artistic heritage and a desire to resist what is revered.

Both Crane and Winters thoroughly explore the far-reaching implications of silence and its complex relationship to poetic expression, as well as the related tropes of emptiness and blankness. Both also argue that, despite their frequently negative connotations, all three may be associated with plenitude and perfection. This is also the case with Dickinson’s alienation, perceived by her two modernist successors as a sign of her artistic and spiritual superiority. Crane celebrates the fact that Dickinson’s larger-than-life creative aspirations and her dedication to her art were more important to her than worldly applause. Like Winters, he realizes that suffering is inextricably linked with creation, which, Crane suggests, is ultimately a source of elevation and fulfillment. The nineteenth-century poet is found to be intimidating by Crane and Winters alike, but the former appears to accept it more easily, identifying with Dickinson, the poet of silence, which plays an important role in his own poetics as an emblem of the absolute, the pure and the ideal. Crane examines the complexities of time, death and eternity, presenting the Belle of Amherst as a timeless poet. Time and death also constitute a significant part of Winters’s poetic meditation on the problematics of literary legacy. In addition, the corporeal dimension of creation is pointed out by Winters and, to a lesser extent, by Crane.



Importantly, in his poems referring to Dickinson, Crane, unlike Winters, addresses gender and women's issues, to which, as a queer poet, he is naturally more sensitive. Foregrounding the figures of Emily Dickinson and Isadora Duncan, artistic innovators and feminist icons, and using floral and vegetal imagery, Crane reflects on femininity and the condition of female artists. In doing so, he underlines the feminine and feminist dimensions of silence and the patriarchal erasure of women from social and cultural life, identifying suffering and patience, fragility, but also, somewhat paradoxically, strength, as the attributes of women and artists of either sex.

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## “Our Eyes Adjust to the Dark”:<sup>1</sup> The Cosmic Sublime in Tracy K. Smith’s *Life on Mars*

# ABSTRACT

The cosmic sublime, as the most spectacular manifestation of the natural sublime, offers rich stimuli for the literary imagination, as well as for various interactions between science, culture and art. In her book of poetry *Life on Mars* (2011), Tracy K. Smith uses tropes of cosmic perspective, scientific gaze and interplanetary travel to problematize the relationship between human finitude and the boundless unknown of the universe. Written after the death of her father, who was one of the engineers of the Hubble telescope, the volume links personal elegy and the work of mourning with philosophical questions about the relationship between the self and scientifically framed visions of the cosmos. The primary intention of my study is to examine the strategies and implications of the poet’s revisionary engagement with the aesthetics, rhetoric, popular mythology and mysticism of the spatial infinite. Smith employs the cosmic sublime not only as a spatial mode of perception but also as a metaphor of the emotional response to death. Her adaptation of the category expands the frame of reference for the purposes of an existential inquiry into the nature of humanity and transcendence. The celebration of imaginative freedom and modern science’s command of nature is further linked to constant apprehension about the human abuse of power and to anxieties triggered by the sublime mythology of transcendence, informed by a desire for dominating the other to the point of possession.

**Keywords:** Tracy K. Smith, American poetry, the cosmic sublime, the postmodern sublime, elegy.

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<sup>1</sup> The quotation comes from Tracy K. Smith’s poem “My God, It’s Full of Stars” (*Life* 9).

## INTRODUCTION

The cosmic sublime is the most pervasive manifestation of the natural sublime, offering rich stimuli for the literary imagination, as well as for various interactions between science, culture and art. Analyzing the relations between the cosmic sublime and American geography, Daniel Sage observes that “[c]osmology offers thought an intensely transcendental experience” (1). “Space,” the critic continues,

has always enabled new opportunities to look back on Earth, to look back at ourselves, as much as out and beyond us. The disorientation, infinitude and timelessness of the cosmic matter at once release us from socio-spatial points, mappings, hierarchies, human productivities and relations and forces us to appraise them in new ways. (1)

In his study, Sage evokes Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who refer to cosmic space briefly in *A Thousand Plateaus*, seeing it as a sphere marked by interwoven processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization. According to the philosophers,

[s]pace is replete with emergent lines of flight, where coherent subjects and objects become imperceptible from each other in emergent, indeterminate movements: these flows of thought, matter and energy are excessive to our attempts to render them visible, whether the initial singularity, moments before the Big Bang, when space and time (and all life) did not yet exist, to the celestial transcendence of an omnipotent and omnipresent God of Judeo-Christian cosmologies. But Space is also occupied by “molar” reterritorializing practices that organize it by drawing lines between fixed points. (Deleuze and Guattari 480)

This continuous movement between deterritorialization and reterritorialization is reflected in Deleuze and Guattari’s models of smooth and striated space which can be applied to outer space, as well. The former model is best exemplified by the desert or the sea, with movements of people, water, sand and matter remaining unmapped and free; whereas the latter corresponds to the desert town or oasis, where movements are more constrained and fixed. Space can thus be classified broadly as “a threshold of deterritorialization, of smoothing” which subsequently undergoes the processes of reterritorialization (Sage 5).

It is precisely this double and “Janus-faced” (Parks 158–59) nature of the cosmic sublime—along with the tension between smooth and striated spaces as philosophical and existential categories—that Tracy K. Smith explores in her Pulitzer winning book of poems *Life on Mars* (2011).

Preceded by *The Bodies of Question* (2003) and *Duende* (2007), Smith's third book of poetry was written in response to the death of her father, one of the engineers of the Hubble Space Telescope. The volume links personal elegy and the work of mourning with philosophical questions concerning the relationship between the self and scientifically framed visions of the cosmos. As in her previous poetic work, Smith touches here upon existential and metaphysical questions as she probes the mind's confrontations with the experience of loss, emptiness, alienation and mortality. This time, however, her perspective oscillates between the intimate, private, at times even confessional mode, and the social one, broadening the spectrum of her philosophical explorations.

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The primary intention of my study is to examine the strategies and implications of the poet's revisionary engagement with the aesthetics, rhetoric, popular mythology and mysticism of the spatial infinite. The focus is on the functions and uses of the cosmic sublime in Smith's volume, including the spatial tropes employed to represent it. As I argue below, the poet summons the stock repertoire of sublime cosmology—including the cosmic perspective, telescoping, the scientific gaze and interplanetary travel—so as to problematize the relationship between human finitude and the boundless unknown of the universe. In *Life on Mars*, the cosmic sublime is not only a spatial mode of perception but also a metaphor for the emotional response to death. Another dimension subjected to inquiry is the socio-ethical one, as the poet reverses the extraterrestrial direction of her gaze to reflect back on the human implications of traditional and contemporary discourses of the cosmic sublime. The celebration of imaginative freedom and modern science's command of nature entailed in the experience of the sublime is linked to the continuous apprehension about human abuse of power and anxieties triggered by the sublime mythologies of transcendence. Those mythologies, as revealed in Smith's texts, are informed not only by a desire to understand the unknown but also by a need to dominate the other to the point of possession. Thus, on the one hand, interstellar travel and the cosmic gaze become Smith's tropes of desire for unfixing the horizons of human possibility and pushing towards new metaphysical, existential and epistemological frontiers. On the other hand, this desire, often fueled by scientific, technological and military developments, cannot be separated from ideologies of power, hegemonic control and our propensity for paternalism, aggression and violence.

Interestingly, in her considerations, Smith references pop cultural representations of the cosmos, including David Bowie's albums *Space Oddity* (1969), *Hunky Dory* (1971), and *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972), as well as Stanley Kubrick's

film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), based on Arthur C. Clarke's script. I claim that those intertexts, woven into a web of scientific, science-fictional and philosophical discourses, serve the poet to problematize the limitations of the anthropocentric perspective which informs our thinking about the universe. At the same time, they reveal the unboundedness of the human imagination, which, in striving for transcendence, tries to articulate different possibilities and desirable futures for humanity. By absorbing iconic pop cultural images and reinterpretations of outer space into the texture of her work, the poet also addresses the role of mediation in contemporary discourses of the cosmic sublime.

What follows is a close reading of Smith's poems through the lens of contemporary approaches to the cosmic sublime, including Deleuze and Guattari's notions of striated space, and postmodern reconceptualizations of the sublime by Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard, as well as Jean-Luc Nancy's, James Elkins's and Michel Deguy's respective revisions of the Kantian negative sublime. I also evoke David E. Nye's influential theory of the technological sublime to address the problem of mediated perceptions of the cosmos.

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## THE POSTMODERN SUBLIME: BASIC PHILOSOPHICAL AND AESTHETIC CONSIDERATIONS

Drawing on diverse aspects of philosophy, theology, aesthetics and literary criticism, the sublime becomes a useful interdisciplinary tool for probing artistic confrontations with human and non-human realities. Defined first by Pseudo-Longinus as a rhetorical mode designed to move an audience, it has since been used to interrogate diverse issues, including transcendental conditions of thought, metaphysical uncertainties, indeterminacy and contingency of experience, the relation between the human and the inhuman, the loss of ego, and the representational insufficiency of art. In Thomas Weiskel's apt words,

[s]ublime is one of those terms like inspiration, vision, apocalypse, imagination, the daemonic—and, of course, transcendence—whose continual sublimation into metaphor makes thought possible by enabling us to grasp experience in terms sanctioned by the past—the essential critical gesture, already sophisticated in antiquity. (4)

The question arises, however, as to how this capacious aesthetic category functions under current cultural conditions and how it has evolved to respond to the representational, as well as existential concerns of today.

A term “beyond definition” and theoretization,<sup>2</sup> as Philip Shaw contends in his monograph *The Sublime* (2006), it has played a critical role in contemporary philosophical, literary and artistic discourses, challenging theoreticians and stimulating debates in diverse areas across the humanities (1–13). Stephen K. Land argues that “the sublime is an elusive and fluid concept which cannot be confined to either the word or the mind or the world but which is somehow realized in the meeting of all three” (38). It should not be seen so much as a “conceptual entity capable of succinct definition,” Vincent Arthur De Luca observes, “but rather . . . a field, like the force fields of physics—a region of indeterminate boundaries” (4). However, the field has been “carved up into distinct emphases upon ‘rhetorical,’ ‘the natural,’ ‘religious’ sublime and others” (Weiskel 5), which continue to influence contemporary reconceptualizations. The foundation of the sublime aesthetics for contemporary philosophers—including Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Rancière and Jacques Derrida—is Immanuel Kant’s theory of the sublime, formulated in his *Critique of Judgment*. The German philosopher employs the concept of the sublime to explore the transcendental aspect of aesthetic experience, as well as to problematize the relations between sensations, feelings, imagination and thought. Importantly, for Kant the sublime is not an attribute of nature: “[s]ublimity, therefore does not reside in any of the things of nature, but only in our own mind, insofar as we may become conscious of our superiority over nature within, and thus also over nature without us” (Kant 504). The Kantian sublime conceptualizes an experience of the transcendental beyond, revealing the ways in which imagination and emotions respond to great, extraordinary, incomprehensible and inconceivable phenomena. The discord at the core of the self produced by the sublime judgment results from the rupture between the imagination and reason upon their confrontation with the unrepresentable—the “sublime object”—that shatters human expectations and norms. Linked to aesthetic and moral value, the Kantian sublime has remained of particular interest to ethically inclined philosophy and art, and, consequently, it has been adapted, revised or deconstructed in contemporary philosophical discourses.

The persistence of the concept derives not so much from its universality, as the term has a long history of reinterpretations, but rather, as Judy Lochhead claims, from its absorption by postmodern thought and the semiotic economy of our times (63). Favoring the ineffable, the apocalyptic and the unrepresentable, postmodern thinkers see the sublime as a bridge

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Forsey similarly problematizes the concept’s resistance to theory in an essay provocatively titled “Is a Theory of the Sublime Possible?” (381–89).



between the universal and the new, reflecting also modern man's need to redefine her/himself outside existing conventions and traditions. Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson (in, respectively, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* and *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*) have revived both the rhetoric and the aesthetic of the sublime to address the increasingly confusing phenomenological and experiential reality of the postmodern era. Linking it to a more general crisis of representation (Lyotard, "Question" 77), as well as a "waning of affect" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 11), both recognize the potential of the term to articulate the growing sense of disparity between form and content. In his essay "Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?", Lyotard defined this crisis as follows:

The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable. ("Question" 81)

Jameson goes so far as to postulate that the sublime is the very condition of postmodernity, its chief philosophical and cognitive mood, linking it to the growing incomprehensibility of the social, technological and economic experience. For the philosopher, the Burkean and Kantian natural Sublime has been replaced by the "hysterical" or "camp" sublime, a "new depthlessness" (Jameson, *Postmodernism* 6), born out of the uncontrollable forces of late capitalism's omnipresent technologies. As a global and pervasive "network of power and control," this system is "even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp" (35, 38). The effusive sources of infinitude, channeled into the "Capital," a new global Deity, have produced "a euphoric-anxious" self (Jameson, "Postmodernism" 76–79), at once ecstatic and drained by the exaggerated, hallucinatory gleaming surfaces of ever-present and ever-new commodity signs. Jameson further links the postmodern sublime to "the decentering of the formerly centered subject or psyche," which results in the collapse of the "autonomous bourgeois ego" (*Postmodernism* 15), no longer capable of comprehending its own surroundings. Anxiety—"a hermeneutic emotion, expressing an underlying nightmare state of the world," which was the dominant affective mode in the modernist period, has given way to more "free-floating" and "impersonal" feelings or "intensities" (16). This postmodern self of the sublime, Rob Wilson contends,

is expanded into an infinitude of ungrounded images, as a simulacrous self emerges into a “schizoid text” of fragmented flows: one commodity sign among billion; the self absorbed not into a natural godhead but into a gigantic simulacrous order that one can only hail, mock, demystify, distance, abjure, worship, “map,” as the *telos* of Advanced-Late-Global-Capital. (“The American Sublime” 524)

In addition to its convenient critical adaptability and inclusivity, the concept of the sublime also satiated the period’s repressed longing for lost absolutes. According to Lyotard,

The universe is not demonstrable; neither is humanity, the end of history, the moment, the species, the good, the just, etc.—or, according to Kant, absolutes in general—because to represent is to make relative, to place in context within conditions of representation. Therefore one cannot represent the absolute, but one can demonstrate that the absolute exists—through “negative representation,” which Kant called the “abstract.” (“Presenting” 68)

In his *Lessons on the Analytic of the Sublime*, Lyotard further foregrounds this aspect of the phenomenon, defining it as an absence produced by the imagination to indicate the presence of the absolute. “In excluding itself from its own limits of presentation,” Lyotard proposes, “the imagination suggests the presence of what it cannot present. It unbinds itself from its finality and thus annihilates itself according to this finality” (Lyotard, *Lessons* 152). This violence to the norms of the imagination is a crucial element of sublime “ex-stasis” as the intensity disrupts all expectations and conditions of human experience. In the philosopher’s words, “[i]t is a sort of spasm in which what has been done does not govern what is yet to be done” (Lyotard, “On What Is Art” 345),

a conflict brought to the point of rupture where the proliferating network of imaginary possibilities becomes shredded and the act or comprehension appears as it truly is in its princely principle: not the rule of knowledge but the law of transcendence and the unknowable, the event itself and the act that is incomparable to any regularity [and regulation]. (347)

In this rupture Lyotard sees the political potential of the sublime, as it encourages heterogeneity and “dissensus” (Lyotard, *Differend* 44).

There are, however, more skeptical approaches to the aesthetics of the sublime which include Derrida’s deflation of its metaphysical ambitions in his essay *Truth in Painting* and Paul De Man’s deconstructive reading of Kant’s Third Critique in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*. Both philosophers

foreground the inherent undecidability of language which undermines the metaphysical conditions of the sublime, along with its rhetoric of transcendence. In his study of the Romantic sublime, Thomas Weiskel argues that we have lost our capacity for this variety of wonder and are no longer astonished by nature's grandeur: "[t]he infinite spaces are no longer astonishing; still less do they terrify. They pique our curiosity, but we have lost the obsession, so fundamental to the Romantic sublime, with natural infinitude" (6). Clearly critical of the contemporary abuse of its rhetoric, art historian James Elkins goes even further, finding the sublime an altogether irrelevant, ineffable and confounding category. What is more, the critic sees "the postmodern sublimines" (note the plural form) as "positing a sense of presence and a non-verbal immediacy that short-circuits the principal interest of theorizing on art in the last thirty years" (76):

The concept has also been criticized because it leads scholars (like myself!) to focus on images of things that are incomprehensibly vast, or unimaginably small, or frighteningly blank, dark, blurred, smeared, pixilated, or otherwise illegible. The sublime, so it is said, takes people away from the real world of politics and society, of meaning and narrative, of culture and value. Poor anemic sublime. Poor elitist concept, born in the leisured classes of eighteenth-century Europe, lingering on into the twenty-first century as an academic hothouse plant. (79)

"One should see the quest for the sublime," Elkins adds, citing Richard Rorty, "as one of the prettier unforced blue flowers of bourgeois culture" (88). Clearly critical of the contemporary abuse of the sublime rhetoric, Elkins betrays a strong desire to abandon the concept altogether, seeing it as weak, elitist and irrelevant to the spiritually lacking and differentiated contemporaneity. Similarly appraising the current relevance of the category in his essay "The Sublime Offering" (1988), Jean-Luc Nancy reaches into the term's past to speak of a certain "fashion" for the sublime, as well as its residual presence in Western philosophical and aesthetic thought:

[T]he sublime forms a fashion that has persisted uninterruptedly into our own time from the beginning of modernity, a fashion at once continuous and discontinuous, monotonous and spasmodic. The "sublime" has not always taken this name, but it has always been present. It has always been a fashion because it has always concerned a break with or from aesthetics. (25)

Further in his essay, the French philosopher evokes the eighteenth-century aestheticians' concerns with the limited nature of the self in confrontation with extreme experiences and the incommensurability of the sensible with the metaphysical. Namely, he argues, "[i]t does not consist by itself

in a delimitation, even if negative, for the latter would still be, precisely, a delimitation, and the unlimited would end up having its proper form—say, the form of the infinite” (36). Focusing on the notion of the infinite and its representations, Nancy translates the Kantian concept of the sublime into the movement of figuration: hence the sublime occurs when “the unlimited gets carried away with delimiting” (36). According to the scholar, “[t]he sublime is: *that* there is an image, hence a limit, along whose edge unlimitation makes itself felt” (38).

Naturally, this brief overview of the current conditions, selected reconceptualizations and uses of the sublime does not exhaust its rich resonance for contemporary theory, philosophy, literature and art. However, the philosophical debates evoked above attest to the persistence of sublime aesthetics in postmodern thought, preparing the ground for the main thrust of this inquiry: the poetic representations of the cosmic sublime in Tracy K. Smith’s *Life on Mars*. Thus, in the next section I shall contextualize this particular variety of the sublime as it relates to the problem of representation.

## THE COSMIC SUBLIME IN PHILOSOPHY AND POPULAR CULTURE

The cosmic sublime is an integral part of the Western sublime discourse. Mingjun Lu argues the following:

As an aesthetic category, the cosmic sublime provides a vantage point from which to view how the human mind confronts and conceptualizes grandeur of an infinite dimension. The cosmic sublime bears on at once man’s sense of his position in relation to a universe whose grandeur tends to overwhelm the “little fire” he kindles for himself and the imaginative flights to grasp and comprehend that grandeur. Experience of the sublime could be evoked by a variety of different objects, but that triggered by cosmic infinity has the power to exercise “the speculative intelligence of human thought,” prompting it to meditate on metaphysical truths that “often pass beyond the limits that confine us.” (695)

The vast impenetrability and depthlessness of cosmic space have captured the attention of philosophers, scientists and artists, inspiring diverse narratives of our civilization and of the universe, and proving a fertile ground for critical inquiry. The early thinkers of the sublime—such as Pseudo-Longinus, Joseph Addison, John Dennis, Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant—included cosmic infinitude, with its overpowering darkness, solitude, silence and emptiness, among their concepts of

the natural sublime, finding in it a perfect exemplification of the unrepresentable. As noted by Weiskel, the first development of the natural sublime in the seventeenth century “was the identification of the Deity’s traditional attributes—infinity, immensity, coexistence—with the vastness of space newly discovered by an emergent astronomy” (14). Equipped with the discoveries of the Apollo lunar program, NASA’s “most spiritually charged mission” (Sage 49),<sup>3</sup> the explorations of Mars and the impactful imaging of the Hubble telescope, contemporary philosophers likewise delve into the philosophical and cultural resonance of the cosmic sublime. Apart from Deleuze and Guattari, with their aforementioned conceptualization of the cosmos as a tension between territory and the forces of deterritorialization, a philosopher who has engaged the topic more directly is Lyotard. In his essays on Jacques Monory’s paintings for the 1981 exhibition *Skies, Nebulae and Galaxies, 1978–1981*, Lyotard discusses the cosmic vistas shown in the artist’s work as a form of nihilistic sublime, a negative presentation reflective of “a discrepancy between presence and infinity, between existence and meaning” (“Assassination” 192). According to the French philosopher, Monory’s paintings, which show—for example—images of stars and galactic events mediated by the telescopic gaze, turn the Ideal into the real, negation into reality, whereby the absolute incarnated in the photographic image “expose[s] its [own] nullity” (Lyotard, “Assassination” 192). An aspect particularly relevant for the present discussion is Lyotard’s problematizing of the role played by new technologies in artistic mediations of the cosmic sublime. Namely, the philosopher contends that “[t]he cosmological infinite seems to be effaced behind the technological infinite” (“Assassination” 195). The symbolic unboundedness and immensity have been re-located from intuition to technological powers and mass media representations, thus changing the cultural poetics of the sublime. Photography, whose abstracting powers exceed the faculties of the mind, is figured here as a murderous “assassin” that threatens the world of human meaning and reveals “what life is in the absence of any experience that can be shared” (Lyotard, “Assassination” 196). This abstracting inhuman vision of the absolute, a vision “without a subject” and without time, nevertheless has an affirmative dimension. As argued by the French philosopher, upon a realization that the conditions of the absolute experience are technological and ultimately constructed, we are pulled by two contradictory feelings: “the melancholy of not being

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<sup>3</sup> As noted by Sage, “Apollo 8 was also significant because of the images it relayed back of the Earth rising over the lunar surface, as the capsule passed within seventy-one miles of the lunar surface: the most well-known of which was the image *Earthrise*. This image has regularly been praised for its sublime beauty, its uniqueness, and its capacity to denote the fragility of the Earth and humanity” (49).

able to experience the absolute accompanied by the joy of being able to conceive of it. This state of sublimity . . . is not ecstasy, but it is at least half-grace” (Lyotard “Assassination” 209).

The sense of awe and the attendant existential concerns inspired by the technologically mediated cosmic absolute have found their reflection in contemporary literature and art. Both high and popular genres were employed by artists to represent the radical inhumanity of outer space and to investigate ethical questions provoked by the extraterrestrial perspective. Numerous novels and science fiction films have explored the cosmic through experimental uses of perspective, defamiliarization, an apocalyptic tone, technically complex special effects, exploitation of scale and distance through dynamic camera movement, neo-Baroque distortions of visual planes, religious architecture, imagery and discourse (Tashiro 38). J. G. Ballard’s haunting vision of the imminent end of the cosmos, conceptualized in his “Voices of Time” as an unwound clock, or Stanisław Lem’s *Solaris*, where interplanetary travel leads to a confrontation with the radically non-human Other, capture some of the postmodern concerns related to the cosmological infinite. Although Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, based on Arthur C. Clarke’s futurist short stories, is the most provocative, ground-breaking and influential cinematic example, one should also include George Lucas’s *Star Wars* series, Fred Wilcox’s *Forbidden Planet* or Gene Roddenberry’s and Robert Wise’s *Star Trek* series, all of which tried to merge the cosmic and the cinematic. The airless void of intergalactic space was here translated into a rich cultural imaginary, also inspiring contemporary writers. It was, however, Kubrick’s radically alienating “technical virtuosity” and his creative use of “nonverbal experience” (Benson 8)<sup>4</sup> that established the new representational paradigm for the cosmic space which proved stimulating for many artists, including Tracy K. Smith.

Space exploration has also inspired musicians, including David Bowie, who employed the motif of space travel and the extraterrestrial gaze in his now iconic albums *Space Oddity* (1969), *Hunky Dory* (1971) and *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars* (1972).<sup>5</sup> In the latter

<sup>4</sup> Alexander Walker has observed that “[b]y suppressing the directness the spoken word, by breaking with narrative logic, Kubrick has insured that watching his film requires an act of continuous inference on the part of viewers to fill in the field of attention by making their own imaginative connections. Though as rigorously conceived as any of Kubrick’s major films, the whole work leaves the densest impression of images which are free to imply much more than eye and mind take in” (267).

<sup>5</sup> Bowie himself admitted the significance of Kubrick’s *2001* for his generation and for his song “Space Oddity”: “For me and several of my friends, the seventies were the start of the twenty-first century. It was Kubrick’s doing on the whole. With the release

concept album, Bowie took on the persona of an alien omnisexual rock star, the eponymous Ziggy Stardust, who comes to Earth to bring hope to the earthlings, whose world is about to end. “For here am I sitting on a tin can / far above the world / Planet Earth is blue / and there’s nothing I can do,” ponders another interplanetary traveler, the fictional astronaut Major Tom, who features in Bowie’s “Space Oddity” (Bowie, *Space*). From the vantage point of the artist’s entire career, Major Tom, drifting into the sublime cosmic space, beyond human control, can be read as the artist’s vision of his own alienated position as a stylistic “drifter,” transgressing genres, conventions and forms. Indeed, Bowie is himself a sublime figure, a metaphor of discontinuity, of infinite metamorphosis and theatrical excess, a myth of the self pushed to its limit, escaping categorizations and boundaries.

The philosophical and scientific conceptualizations of the cosmic sublime alongside their technological and pop cultural representations are what underlies Smith’s poems in *Life on Mars*. The poet taps into the intermedial and intertextual richness of popular and scientifically mediated cosmic tropes through direct and indirect citations of iconic images and texts, the use of shifting perspectives and abstract spatial imagery inspired by the cinematic and techno-scientific gaze. Her evocations of Bowie’s lyrics and Kubrick’s signature cinematography reveal an attempt at re-reading and recontextualizing the cosmic sublime to invest it with personal significance, and to translate the metaphysics of loss into the metaphysics of melancholic return. The speaker of her poems, as demonstrated below, searches the sublime imagery for a spatial and temporal fissure, a passage outside human time and memory, which will help her deal with the unrepresentable event of her father’s death. The motif of cosmic travel opens her poems up to a melancholic affective dimension—the persistence of an engulfing personal pain that cannot be sublimated. At the same time, the lyrical voice invites us to reflect on the ethics of the human quest for the higher order and the mediated aspects of the postmodern sublime.

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### “THERE WILL BE NO EDGES, BUT CURVES”: TRACY K. SMITH’S REVISION OF THE COSMIC SUBLIME

The tropes of the Kantian sublime resonate already in Smith’s opening piece “Sci-Fi,” in which the poet introduces the tension between a limit and the lack thereof:

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of two magnificent films, *2001* and *A Clockwork Orange*, within a short period, he pulled together all the unarticulated loose ends of the past five years into a desire of unstoppable momentum” (Bowie and Rock 12).

There will be no edges, but curves.  
Clean lines pointing only forward.

History, with its hard spine & dog-eared  
Corners, will be replaced with nuance,

Just like the dinosaurs gave way  
To mounds and mounds of ice.

Women will still be women, but  
The distinction will be empty.

...                   Weightless, unhinged,

Eons from even our own moon, we'll drift  
In the haze of space, which will be, once

And for all, scrutable and safe. (7)

The utopian “science-fiction” vision of the future reality, clearly echoing technological representations of the cosmos, is replete with a Deleuzian interplay between smoothness and striation, embracing and destabilizing categories of space, time and body. In the transcendent outer space, the poet imagines a future free of limits, with the edges released from the regime of sharp angles, suggestive of instrumental “striations”—mappings, divisions and possessions—and softened into elusive “curves,” leaving “clean lines pointing only forward” (Smith, *Life* 7). Those “lines of flight,” to borrow from Deleuze and Guattari again, pointing in the direction of futurity, work to disentangle the self from the linear progress of time and the human narratives evoked in the second stanza through the spatial images of the “hard spine” and “dog-eared corners” of history. Those “textured” and textual material realities will also be transformed, cleansed and smoothed out, allowing the body to escape the past, and become liberated from gravity, mechanisms of control and social labels, “unhinged” to “drift” freely in the indefinable, a-textual “haze of space” (Smith, *Life* 7). This escape fantasy of the space which is thus de-schematized and detemporalized—“once / And for all, scrutable and safe” (7)—is as seductive as it is unstable, leaving the reader uneasy, given the paradoxical “spacelessness” and haziness of disembodied drifting. Furthermore, the drift carries a threat to the subject’s unity as the borders of his/her existence dissolve, and the mind becomes “unplugged” from the known perimeters of human existence. The faintly ironic tone of the final line also echoes Deleuze and Guattari’s skeptical



observation about the human dream of the ultimate deterritorialization and annihilation of the historical self in the silent vastness of Cosmos: “Never believe that a smooth space will suffice to save us” (500).

Thus conceived, the cosmic deterritorialization, and travelling outside any recognizable perimeters of time and space, prepares the ground for another thematic layer, namely the death of Smith's father. As the poet admitted in an interview, the book emerged in the shadow of her father's terminal illness and his subsequent demise:

I wrote a poem called “Sci-Fi” several years ago that offered a clean and glamorous vision of the distant future. . . . Then my father was diagnosed with a terminal illness. My sense of the future became very personal. *Life on Mars* became a way to move towards my father, to try to understand some part of the mystery of death. (Smith, “Space Poet” 477)

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*Life on Mars* can thus be read as an elegy, where death becomes the true unknown, the true dark matter with which Smith confronts us through her cosmic tropes. The stellar landscape and the technological gaze are employed as a tribute to her father, Floyd William Smith, one of the Hubble Telescope engineers. Designed in 1990, the Hubble Space Telescope, orbiting the Earth, brought a revolutionary view of the cosmos, allowing astronauts to observe it with unprecedented clarity and detail, shaping the popular images and representations of Space (Kessler 4). One of the most iconic images from the telescope, “Cone Nebula Close Up,” adorns the cover of Smith's book, further linking its thematic concerns. Among other things, the cover problematizes the mediated perception of the cosmic sublime, which takes us outside the conditions of human experience.

In the poem “My God, It's Full of Stars,” whose title is borrowed from Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the poet refers directly to her father's technologically enhanced “star-gazing”:

When my father worked on the Hubble Telescope, he said  
They operated like surgeons: scrubbed and sheathed  
In papery green, the room a clean cold, and bright white.

. . . . . My father spent whole seasons  
Bowling before the oracle-eye, hungry for what it would find.  
His face lit-up whenever anyone asked, and his arms would rise

As if he were weightless, perfectly at ease in the never-ending  
Night of space.

...

The first few pictures came back blurred, and I felt ashamed  
 For all the cheerful engineers, my father and his tribe. The second time,  
 The optics jibed. We saw to the edge of all there is—

So brutal and alive it seemed to comprehend us back. (Smith, *Life* 12)

The evocation of her father's relentless, "surgical" efforts to penetrate and reterritorialize the smooth space of the universe, by pushing the boundaries of human vision and knowledge, serves Smith to connect the experience of the cosmic sublime with the experience of death. The Hubble Telescope becomes a vehicle for a desire to carry oneself to the position from which one can attain a totalizing, near-divine perspective of the universe. The sublime, as argued by Michel Deguy in his rereading of Pseudo-Longinus, always brings to view the question of our mortal condition. In his words, the sublime is "the concentration, the start of the startling that weighs in speech against death. . . . The sublime is the ephemeral immortality of the point gained, adverse speech snatched from death where the totality of becoming-and-passing-away concentrates itself" (11). Focusing on the relationship between cognition and affect, David E. Nye sees the sublime as a "broken figure of thought, which permitted both the imagination of an ineffable surplus of emotion and its recontainment" (282). Given its ephemerality, the sublime opens an unbridgeable gap between the experience and the senses, but its true nature can be grasped only through the failure to represent. In Deguy's apt words, "[the] sublime measures our failure," showing our distance from the sacred, "our incapacity to navigate through the straits of difference between immortal and mortal" (7).

Smith's recourse to the sublime tropes in her grappling with mortality seems to fulfill a similar role: the topoi try to capture her response to the absolute emotion grounded in her anxiety of a nothingness at once physical, metaphysical, and spiritual. Her father's ease in "the never-ending / Night of space" and the metonymic telescope image, which can take us to "the edge of all there is— / So brutal and alive it seemed to comprehend us back" (Smith, *Life* 12), become part of the elegiac movement away from the excesses of grief, through the recognition of loss, towards a possibility of consolation. This elegiac process of grieving and the search for solace that allows the self to "recontain" the surplus of feeling, to bring the excessive into view, informs all of the poet's subsequent inquiries into the nature and mysteries of Space.

Further in the poem "My God, It's Full of Stars," the poet repopulates her earlier "clean" and "smooth" sci-fi vision, as if reflecting back on her own "fearlessness" (Smith, "Space Poet" 477), as well as an overconfident belief in transcendence and the cosmic space's security, totality, weightlessness

and “smoothness.” The disquieting image of Kubrick’s protagonist, the astronaut Dave Bowman, “whisked into the center of space,” “across the wide-screen of unparceled time” (Smith, *Life* 11), takes on a double significance in Smith’s poem. It indicates a liberation from the constraints of gravity and human perceptions of time; simultaneously, however, it uncovers a dissolution of the self. Furthermore, the image of the “wide-screen” introduces a tension between the sublime moment and its aesthetic framing. The screen undermines the representational efficacy of the mind striving to grasp the scale of infinitude, threatening the sublime with stasis and fixation. In a Lyotardian sense, the sublime collapses, for the self’s leap outside time requires a mediating intervention, “a screen,” and as such it is always already at a second remove. The timeless emptiness and lack of “anchor” in her “sanitized,” bodiless futuristic metaphysics is replaced by a fractured, striated earthly landscape. The shift is enacted through a series of anguished questions concerning the body’s physical demise and dissolution (Smith, “Space Poet” 477). This earthbound fall expresses the speaker’s doubt about her father’s final journeying “toward the ecstatic light” (Smith, *Life* 27). “What happens when the body goes slack? / When what anchors us just drifts off toward . . .,” the speaker anxiously asks, adding: “You stepped out of the body. Unzipped it like a coat / And will it drag you back / as flesh, voice, scent?” (Smith, *Life* 33). Confronted with the absolute fact of death, symbolized by the silence, quietude, materiality and stillness of the dead body in the funeral parlor, the poet’s imagination begins to “replenish” the cosmic void, as if to clip its previous “lawlessness” and utopian weightlessness. Groping its way out of the dark matter of a terrifying absence, its absolute mystery, the speaker’s mind remains uneasy with its own abstract appropriations of the sublime, and produces a very physical and energetic image of the “humanized” space “choc-full of traffic”:

Perhaps the great error is believing  
 we’re alone,  
 That the others have come and gone—  
 a momentary blip—  
 When all along, space might be choc-full of traffic,  
 Bursting at the seams with energy we neither feel  
 Nor see, flush against us, living, dying, deciding,  
 Setting solid feet down on planets everywhere,  
 Bowing to the great stars that command, pitching stones  
 At whatever are their moons. They live wondering  
 If they are the only ones, knowing only the wish to know,  
 And the great black distance they—we  
 —flicker in. (Smith, *Life* 10)

The image of the alien beings, “setting solid feet down on planets everywhere / Bowing to the great stars that command, pitching stones / At whatever are their moons” again references the central scene from Kubrick’s *Odyssey*, in which the alien super-race steps down from their galaxy to intervene in the Earth’s affairs. The rectangular black monolith left behind by the God-like visitors proves a turning point in the history of our planet. As observed by Benson, this “totemic extraterrestrial artifact . . . channels the species toward survival, success—and, eventually, technologically mediated global domination” (2).

The cinematic contexts of Smith’s poetic glimpses beyond the earthly limits are rich in significance. In an interview for *Nature*, Smith acknowledges her interest in popular sci-fi movies of the 1960s and 70s:

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In Stanley Kubrick’s majestic film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, his most suspenseful moments are the slowest and quietest, and his associative leaps have been instructive. I have been influenced by the visual sensibilities of classic 1970s sci-fi films, such as *The Andromeda Strain* and *The Omega Man*.” (Smith, “Space Poet” 477)

Kubrick’s odyssey “beyond the infinite” and his stellar gaze inform *Life on Mars*, as they represent the consciousness and the body released into spaces of imagination. The film’s narrative, as noted by Michelson, “becomes a voyage of discovery, a progress toward disembodiment, [and] explores . . . the structural potentialities of haptic disorientation as agent of cognition” (56). However, the epistemological confusion and displacement of the body do not exhaust the movie’s philosophical concerns, inspiring Smith’s own grappling with existential mysteries. The adopted cosmic view allows Kubrick to reconsider the Western civilization’s values of progress and humanism, which, as suggested by the film’s plot, have their dark undercurrent, as they have always been coupled with violence, conquest and destruction. Interestingly for Smith, Kubrick also addresses the question of art’s role in the explorations of the sublime, using the black monolith trope as an ambiguous symbol of the sublime which connects the mythological past and the metaphysical future, while defying human comprehension and interpretation. Sensitive to those darker psychological tones of Kubrick’s interstellar dystopias, Smith’s verses resonate with a similar sense of fragility, isolation and uncertainty. As Robert Kolker observes, “Kubrick’s narratives are about the lack of cohesion, center, community, about people caught up in a process that has become so rigid that it can be neither escaped nor mitigated—a stability that destroys” (110). Evoking the mystical aura of Kubrick’s central scenes, Smith at once displaces her anguish onto the medial “other” and self-reflexively signals the intertext’s mediating

aspect—the constructed nature of the cosmic sublime, whose absolute, as Lyotard observes, is nullified by any mediation. The references to Kubrick's classic, which fuse poetry with cinematic language, hint at humanity's endless efforts at representing the unknown, uncovering the paradoxical nature of sublime aesthetics. The conditional qualifiers "perhaps," "might" and "as if" in Smith's text further distance the poetic image from the "truth" of the sublime experience and foreground doubt at the core of the postmodern sublime.

In subsequent poems, the speaker tries to shorten the "great black distance" between the universe and the self by resorting to various discourses and codes. In the poem titled "The Universe: Original Motion Picture Soundtrack," the space becomes "a soundtrack," with "synthesized strings. Then something like cellophane / Breaking in as if snagged to a shoe. Crinkle and drag. White noise, / Black noise" (*Life* 24), until the "dark we've only ever imagined" becomes "audible, thrumming" and "Everything that disappears / Disappears as if returning somewhere" (24). In another poem, the Universe is a "house party," with "postcards / And panties, bottles with lipstick on the rim" and "radio waves from a generation ago / Drifting to the edge of what doesn't end" (Smith, *Life* 13). The speaker is clearly back in the loop of human perceptions, enmeshed in a powerful sensory influx which is thrown against the incomprehensible and infinite expansion of the cosmos. The final phrase, "we flicker in," however, carries an undertone of ambiguity—a fear of instability and of the potential disappearance of our visual trace in the vastness of the universe.

In the poem "Don't you Wonder, Sometimes," whose title is another borrowing from Bowie, Smith builds on that anguish as she asks:

And what would we do, you and I, if we could know for sure  
That someone was there squinting through the dust.  
Saying nothing is lost, that everything lives on waiting only  
To be wanted back badly enough? Would you go then,  
Even for a few nights, into that other life where you  
And that first she loved, blind to the future once, and happy?  
Would I put on my coat and return to the kitchen where my  
Mother and father sit waiting, dinner keeping warm on  
the stove? (*Life* 19)

In his study of the sublime as an offering, Jean-Luc Nancy repeats the Kantian claim that the sublime, as "the passage to the limit" (Nancy 52), can only be *presented*, never *represented* (28), as it will always "overflow" the image or form that tries to contain it. Similarly, Jacob Rogozinski, echoing Lyotard's notion of negative presentation, observes that the sublime ultimately reveals nothing (145). It is the striving towards the

limit, “a continuous effort” as “the continuous displacement of a limit” that lies at the heart of the sublime feeling (Nancy 53). In Nancy’s words, “[s]triving and exertion transport the limit into themselves: it becomes their structure” (53). The imagination at the limit, Nancy continues, finds itself in “extreme tension and distention (‘overflowing’ and ‘abyss’)” (46). Smith’s adoption of the Hubble Telescope’s perspective and the scientific lens reflects the subject’s position at the limit. The technological gaze keeps us at “the outer perimeter of everyday visibilities” (Parks 7), allowing us to “see both further and better than the human eye,” and thus “threaten[ing] to undermine the authority of the scientist-viewer” (Parks 150). Nevertheless, it becomes the poet’s way of confronting the unrepresentable limit—the event of her father’s death, more poignantly felt when the speaker is pulled back to the familiar spaces of her childhood, now haunted by her father’s absence. The form of questions without answers enhances the psychological gravity of the poet’s loss, while the echoes of Eliot’s “Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in the tentative invitation to join the poet on her spatio-temporal travel (“Would you go then . . . / into that other life?”) imply a limited human trajectory and a dead end beyond that escapist version of her dream.

Science and its mythology of reason, clarity, efficiency and control, driven further by a hunger for answers, truth claims and precise delimitations, fails the poet as it once failed her father and his team when “the first pictures came blurred” (Smith, *Life* 12).<sup>6</sup> Thus, the poet, in her quest for meaning, reaches for popular mythology and the science-fiction tropes of space travel. In “My God, It’s Full of Stars,” the poet again ponders the possibility of transcendence as she imagines an afterlife as a form of travelling and “seeing” across space and time:

Maybe the dead know, their eyes widening at last.  
 Seeing the high beams of a million galaxies flick on  
 At twilight. Hearing the engines flare, the horns  
 Not letting up, the frenzy of being. I want it to be  
 One notch below bedlam, like a radio without a dial.  
 Wide open, so everything floods in at once.

<sup>6</sup> Sage quotes the Hubble Heritage Team’s mythologizations of the telescope’s first photographs of the cosmos as the new American frontier: “Objects imaged by Hubble are often impossibly vast and amorphous—as unearthly as can be. Yet the compositions captured by the Hubble Heritage Team and others tend to evoke landscapes. The press release for the Eagle Nebula compared the gaseous columns to ‘towering buttes and spires in the deserts of the American southwest.’ Other Hubble images have been likened to roughhewn mounts of gas and dust. This allusion to landscape art connects the Hubble images to the romantic frontier art and artists of the 19th century who celebrate the majesty of the American West” (116).

And sealed tight, so nothing escapes. Not even time.  
Which should curl in on itself and loop around like smoke.  
So that I might be sitting now beside my father  
As he raises a lit match to the bowl of his pipe  
For the first time in the winter of 1959. (Smith, *Life* 12)

The transcendental trope of the cosmic, ever-widening gaze allows the poet to displace, for a moment, the painful experience of death, and reimagine afterlife as a black hole, an infinite void or abyss into which “everything floods in at once . . . so nothing escapes / Not even time.” The imagined obliteration of any definite temporality pulls the reader into an illegible non-atmosphere, a temporal chasm bypassing history and human measurements of life’s relentless flux. And yet, the sublime image of time “curling in on itself” reestablishes the earthly perspective through another specific childhood memory, of the winter of 1959, a moment mappable in the family time and space which reunites the speaker with her father. In the (a)temporal “loop” of images, the outer space, with its mythologies of timelessness and transcendence, becomes imaginatively entangled with the intimate habitat of the poet’s memory.

Probing the cultural imaginary for an idiom best suited to speaking about the absolute of death, Smith resorts also to the medium frequently linked to the metaphysical undercurrent of the sublime, namely music. In the poems cited above, the cosmic space is often imagined as silent, but in a few other pieces it has its own “soundtrack,” again referencing Smith’s cinematic inspirations.<sup>7</sup> This soundtrack comprises noise “one notch below bedlam, like a radio without a dial” (12). Noise, argues Josh Epstein in his study *Sublime Noise*, as “a species of expression” resistant to mimetic claims and easy interpretation, becomes a symbol of otherness, non-identity and subversion—it “invades the autonomous sanctum of music, it comes to represent not just a (nebulous) category of sound, but a way of scapegoating sounds as unwanted” (11, 2). In Smith’s text, it functions as an interference or rupture in the sublime fiction about the absolute silence (or music) of the spheres, along with its divine communications. What is more, noise is also associated with technology, which opens up the poetic text further to the pressures and the destabilizing forces of mediation.

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<sup>7</sup> Notably, Kubrick’s *Odyssey* is famous for its eclectic soundtrack and its rich metaphoric potential. Kubrick employs both tonal and atonal music to capture the ineffable order of the cosmos, including Richard Strauss’s symphonic poem *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, Johann Strauss’s iconic *Blue Danube Waltz*, György Ligeti’s atonal *Lux Aeterna*, *Requiem* and *Atmospheres*, and the “Adagio” from Aram Khachaturian’s *Gayane*. For an in-depth study of the soundtrack, see David W. Patterson’s essay “Music, Structure and Metaphor in Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*” (2004).

Noise, thus, seems to be “roughing up” the totalizing and often mute texture of the cosmic sublime, working to contaminate the purity of its aesthetic scripts.

This penchant for the granular otherness and deconstructive aspects of sublime tropes is visible also in Smith’s decision to borrow the protean persona of Ziggy Stardust and the escapist narratives of David Bowie’s songs. Both the lyrics and the cosmic imagery employed by the British artist become her “lines of flight” from the circumscriptions of her own mind and the uneasy questions of mortality. Claiming discontinuity, difference and endless metamorphosis as his defining characteristics, Bowie himself embodies the postmodern sublime, marked by the “collapse of the ego.” The hybrid personas created by the artist resist totalizing dynamics and serve to deconstruct Smith’s own quest for a higher order, adding a dimension of otherness to the philosophical scripts of the cosmic unknown. “To reduce Bowie’s most unique quality to a single word,” Ian Chapman observes, “he is inherently *other*” (16, emphasis original). In Smith’s words, Bowie “leaves no tracks / Slips past, quick as a cat”; he is like a comet that “burns bright / Dragging a tail of white-hot matter” (Smith, *Life* 19–20).

The transgressive Stardust, whose chameleonic, postmodern nature is, as Chapman notes, “calculatedly assembled from an amalgam of references from popular culture and borrowings from art history, film, literature, and other sources” (14), is also shaped by diverse musical styles<sup>8</sup> and shifting perspectives within individual songs. For instance, in “Moonage Daydream,” Ziggy Stardust appears directly, introducing himself as an “alligator” and alien “space invader,” “mama-papa coming for [mankind]”; in “Starman,” Bowie uses the vantage point of a child receiving messages from an alien messiah, the eponymous Starman, who “is waiting in the sky” and “would like to come and meet us,” while in “Five Years,” desperate earthlings on the brink of destruction start an apocalyptic countdown; in “Lady Stardust,” the perspective is that of a fan of Ziggy’s rock band besotted with his idol’s “animal grace” and hypnotized by his “songs of darkness and dismay” (Bowie, *Ziggy*). In the already mentioned “Space Oddity,” which does not belong to the Ziggy Stardust mythos but can be linked to it by the motif of the cosmic

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<sup>8</sup> Musically, the albums feature elements of jazz, folk, gospel, hard and glam rock, classical music, pop and disco, and anticipations of punk rock (Perone 27). Bowie’s eclectic musical taste was also described in Decca Record Company’s press release for the album *David Bowie*: “He loves to sit amidst a bank of column speakers listening to Stravinsky, usually ‘Ragtime for Eleven Instruments.’ He adores Vaughan Williams, Dvořák, Elgar and Holst. His extensive record collection includes lots of Glenn Miller, Stan Kenton and Gary McFarland” (qtd. in Johnson 58).



gaze, the focus shifts between the earthly view of “Ground Control” and that of Major Tom, an astronaut released into Space and endowed with a detached God-like perspective which enables a magisterial look upon the planet (Bowie, *Space*). The changing points of view, the flamboyant narratives confusing fantasy and reality, and the transgressive nature of Bowie’s songs question the ideal of music as the voice of the sublime and the ineffable which seamlessly integrates form and content. The rich, multi-layered and ragged tapestry of Bowie’s music and imagery pushes aesthetic conventions to their “overflow,” implying that there is no proper form that could contain the infinite. For Smith, inspired by Bowie’s genre-bending, the protagonist of Bowie’s album additionally embodies the complexity of a diffused “hysterical” identity struggling to “delimit” itself and find its “place on Earth.” In Simon Critchley’s words,

As fragile and inauthentic as our identities are, Bowie let us (and still lets us) believe that we can reinvent ourselves. In fact, we can reinvent ourselves because our identities are so fragile and inauthentic. Just as Bowie seemingly reinvented himself without limits, he allowed us to believe that our own capacity for changes was limitless. Of course, there are limits—profound limits, mortal limits—in reshaping who we are. (54)

A similar hope for art’s power to reshape and reinvent identities reverberates in Smith’s poems. “Bowie will never die,” the poet asserts in “Don’t You Wonder, Sometimes?,” being “Not God exactly—a Starman / Or cosmic ace hovering, swaying, aching to make us see” (*Life* 19). Those intertextual references allow Smith to shed the romantic longings for sublime epiphanies and script emptiness back into fullness, silence into sound, and absence into presence. Thus, Bowie’s deity refuses to congeal into a monolithic absolute; being born afresh with each newly created self, he teaches us how to see ourselves from outside and “reshape who we are.” As a fiction invented through absorption and recycling of pop cultural texts and codes, Ziggy Stardust implies the fictionality of transcendence—the sublime as the supreme fiction of the imagination. Just like Kubrick’s *Odyssey*, Bowie’s artistic creations help the poet see the cosmic sublime as one of the mythologies of the self, invented by myth-makers wishing to come to terms with humanity’s uncertain future.

The postmodern sublime, nebulous and ineffable from the proliferation of selves and signs, also uncovers its social dimension. Ziggy Stardust’s chameleonic transformations and disjunctive narratives expose darker psychological and social scenes: in “Five Years,” the opening song of *Ziggy Stardust*, Bowie draws an apocalyptic vision of the dying earth, with

violence on the streets, personal alienation and attendant disintegration of norms and social ties.<sup>9</sup> Bowie oscillates between the threats of stabilized and destabilized selves, using the outer space to address the anxieties of the inner self, including the dread of passing time, mortality, alienation and material dissolution, and to reflect upon the social and cultural milieus which often fail to provide adequate responses to those anxieties.

Tapping into the ironic and ambiguous attitudes of her pop cultural intertexts, Smith likewise tries to venture beyond the romanticized versions of the sublime rhetoric, transgressing the intimate confessional mode of her diction<sup>10</sup> and reclaiming the sublime as a mode of bearing witness to violence. In the second half of the volume, the poet pulls the discourse back from her elegiac longing of the private self and from metaphysical questions of transcendence to the social and political dimension, which reveals the sublime as informed by discourses of power and hegemony. “What if dark matter is like the space between people / When what holds them together isn’t exactly love?”, the poet asks in the eponymous piece “Life on Mars” (37). In their recent study *Cosmic Society*, sociologists Peter Dickens and James Ormond argue that our dream about transcendence of the Self in Space “operates as a childish narcissistic fantasy—‘A God Complex’—undertaken by a, usually Western, male, and rich, cosmic elite who aggrandize their sense of Self in dreams of being ‘intermediaries,’ or ‘demi-Gods,’ in a ‘New Chain of Being’” (qtd. in Sage 455). Rob Wilson similarly observes that the sublime “‘overbelief’ in power and grandeur enables the further production of power and grandeur” (*The American Sublime* 13). Smith evokes this God Complex and the human dream of dominance in a series of headline news dealing with abuses of power, such as child rape and incest, torture, racially motivated murders, where dominance translates into nightmarish violence. Smith’s examples include “a father in the news who kept his daughter / Locked in a cell for decades,” “[l]ike a god / Moving through a world where every face looked furtively into his” (Smith, *Life* 39), or the prisoners at Abu Ghraib “strung like beef / From the ceilings of their cells” by their guards who were just “blowing off steam” (40). The God-like ability to wield power divorces

<sup>9</sup> Bowie himself has admitted that the alien characters of his early songs are metaphors for his own inner space: “They were metaphysically in place to suggest that I felt alienated, that I felt distanced from society and that I was really in search of some kind of connection” (qtd. in Pegg 23).

<sup>10</sup> In an interview with Charles H. Ryan, the poet explains the shifts from the personal to the social in her work as follows: “Now that American poetry is very good at being deeply aware of and awake to the private, I think it is important to use these tools to locate and explore material that engages and implicates the self in ways that extend beyond the private. We are certainly living in a historical moment where it would be criminal to recoil too deeply into the private” (Smith, “Something” 861).

men from their humanity. The earth, “[n]icked and sliced into territory. / Hacked and hollowed,” “ticking with mines” and plundered by humans (41), uncovers the dark inscriptions and results of human presence and scientific development, linking human dreams of power and hegemony to the initial metaphysical questions about God. “Is God being or pure force?”, the speaker asks in the opening poem “The Weather in Space” (Smith, *Life* 3), but in the second part of the volume, the word “force” resonates ominously, implying violence, conquest, terror and oppression. Smith’s intermedial probings into the cultural imaginary of the American sublime seem to convey also her resistance to its re-theologizing. Evoking the popular dreams and anxieties related to space exploration and alien encounters, the poet implies that humans can become aliens to themselves, as the expansion of the self, yielding to sublime yearnings and egotistic ideologies, often happens at the cost of the other.

Given the above, the enigmatic poem “It & Co.,” which seems to take us back to the “limit” by pointing to the indefinable sublime—the “It,” “vast and unreadable,” the It “we have gone looking for everywhere” (Smith, *Life* 17)—resounds with a disquieting ambiguity. The opening line of this piece, “We are a part of It. Not guests / is It us, or what contains us?” (17), echoes the egotistic Sublime of the Romantics as much as it points to human complicity in the structures of oppression informing the discourse, imaginings and tropes of the cosmic sublime. Furthermore, the question could be interpreted as Smith’s concern with American mythologies of the sublime, which, as argued by Parks, fostered American paternalism and geopolitical power, serving as “an agent of Western cultural imperialism and neo-colonial control” (73).

Exploring diverse categories of the sublime in his seminal study *The Romantic Sublime* (1976), Thomas Weiskel contended that “humanist sublime is an oxymoron” (3). As if echoing this statement, Smith writes in “It & Co.”: “It is elegant / But coy. / It avoids the blunt ends / Of our fingers as we point” (*Life* 17). The sublime in Smith’s poems escapes attempts at tracing it to a definite, “elegant” conclusion, refusing to become a palpable, fully reterritorialized design of the self; and yet it is somewhat humanized by the very gesture of pointing, reflecting the logic of the sublime sentiment which “touches presentation on its limit” (Nancy 52). Smith employs the inherited tropes of the cosmic sublime, summoning up their aesthetic and philosophical implications, but her relation to the sublime rhetoric is profoundly uneasy, self-conscious and revisionist, mirroring the changed and widening cultural contexts of postmodernity. The eclectic and intermedial texture of her poems shows the cosmic sublime as primarily textual—a disintegrating amalgam of myths, mass-mediated fantasies, desires and aspirations grounded in multiplicitous imaging and idioms. The

seductive dreams of an originating plenitude, that void-cum-plenum, and deceptive pretensions to totality inscribed in the sublime topoi are revealed in her poems as haunted by loss, abuse of power, spiritual anguish, and human suffering. Resisting the absolute reign of the sublime ideology, including American nationalistic cosmography (Sage 8), Smith's engagement with its discourse, mediated tropes, effects and popular mythologies produces emotion "without complacency, without satisfaction" (Nancy 52) that reaches to the depths of the human darkness. This darkness will not be illuminated; rather, our eyes will have to adjust to it, and confront the ethical and moral questions informing the sublime discourse today.

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## “By [some] other means”: Talking (about) Racism and Race through Visual Arts in Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen. An American Lyric*

# ABSTRACT

Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen. An American Lyric* is a perplexing work of literature both because of its original presentation of the issue of racism in the US today and the original formal ways through which its message is communicated. It is formally innovative and technically experimental in an unusual “average reader”-friendly manner, situating itself a world apart from postmodern “poetics of interruption and illegibility” (Davidson 602). Paradoxically, being almost a poem with a purpose, it expands existing categories. Its sociological orientation and emphasis on poetic language’s capacity to inform, instruct, emotionally move and morally engage the reader goes together with activating more experimental formal strategies, as it merges a variety of media: there are examples of spectacular instances of racism, represented by the photographs, and in a series of scripts for Situation videos made by the author in collaboration with her husband John Lucas. This article demonstrates how formal engagement with the visual arts may serve the purpose of stigmatizing racism and making poetry matter within the field of current public debate on important cultural, social and political problems discussed in historical contexts of racism-cum-race. The conceptualization of the issues discussed here is based on the notion of “seeing through race” (introduced into the field of study of the visual arts and literature by W. J. T. Mitchell in 2012), which has changed the perception of the relationship between race and racism.

**Keywords:** African American poetry, Claudia Rankine, racism, race, visual arts.



The aim of this article is to demonstrate how formal involvement and interplay of literature/poetry with visual arts helps serve the purpose of stigmatizing racism as a means for production of race, and makes poetry matter within the field of the ongoing public debate(s). For this purpose I will draw on W. J. T. Mitchell's concept of "seeing through race" in my discussion of Claudia Rankine's poetic volume entitled *Citizen. An American Lyric*. In my reading of Rankine's work I am going to implement the categories of race/racism as defined by Mitchell with an intention to discuss the poet's explorations of the insidiousness of American present-day racism. In particular I will focus on the function given to the photographs and Situation videos, which are analyzed in parts III and IV of this article.

## I.

Rankine's volume expresses vital and unpleasant things about race relationships in the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when, to quote Hortense J. Spillers's ironic observation, "we are confronted, from time to time, with almost-evidence that the age of the postrace subject is upon us" (379). In this respect it evokes two milestone sociological studies of American racism published in the first decade of the new century (i.e. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's *Racism without Racists* and Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*), which painstakingly demonstrate how racism functions today in America, and reveal a stubbornness of racist attitudes held by people who would never call themselves racists. Rankine's volume provides ample evidence that despite the scholarly questioning of the very existence of race, initiated by Anthony Appiah in his groundbreaking argument that "the truth is that there are no races" (35), racism in America is as alive and kicking as ever; only its manifestations take less overt forms than in the past. *Citizen* describes with precision discreet cases of racist microaggressions, which take place regularly in public and semi-private situations, collected from the stories told by her friends and acquaintances. Rankine looks behind the facade of middle-class and academic standards and norms, and registers the moments when the individuals regularly transgress the new norm. As Rob Bryan puts it, "[h]er setting is not the blighted inner-city ghetto or the prison, but the manicured lawns of white suburbia and the genteel interactions of the academy." Racism as the race-producing act in its multifarious forms is the subject of Rankine's book.

Two vignettes in which the persona makes appointments through the phone (with a therapist and at the bank) provide proper exemplification on the subject:

The new therapist specializes in trauma counseling. You have only ever spoken on the phone. Her house has a side gate that leads to a back entrance she uses for patients. You walk down a path bordered on both sides with deer grass and rosemary to the gate, which turns out to be locked.

At the front door the bell is a small round disc that you press firmly. When the door finally opens, the woman standing there yells, at the top of her lungs, Get away from my house. What are you doing in my yard? It's as if a wounded Doberman pincher or a German shepherd has gained the power of speech. And though you back up a few steps, you manage to tell her you have an appointment. You have an appointment? she spits back. Then she pauses. Everything pauses. Oh, she says, followed by, oh, yes, that's right. I am sorry.

I am so sorry, so, so sorry. (Rankine 18)

At the end of a brief phone conversation, you tell the manager you are speaking with that you will come by his office to sign the form. When you arrive and announce yourself, he blurts out, I didn't know you were black!

I didn't mean to say that, he then says.

Aloud, you say.

You didn't mean to say that aloud.

Your transaction goes swiftly after that. (44)

In both situations the *you* is accepted on the phone *as a client*, but at the same time treated not seriously enough—or even aggressively rejected—when met face to face *as a black person*. Those unacquainted with the insidiousness of racism in the US must be astonished at the peculiarity of such reactions as they are utterly irrational, especially from a strictly pragmatic point of view (the bank manager and the therapist may lose their clients). However, these must not be regarded as merely individual reactions, but as culturally-programmed responses to people of skin color other than white. In her essay entitled “The Whiteness Question,” Linda Alcoff argues that “whiteness” is inseparable from the denigration, reification, repudiation and subjection of those who are perceived as non-white, and makes a claim that “the very genealogy of whiteness was entwined from the beginning with a racial hierarchy, which can be found in every major cultural narrative” (217).

In order to make the sickening cases of racism work more powerfully on her readers, Rankine combines her poetic/verbal accounts with the works of the visual arts. The collection of vignettes documenting cases of racist microaggressions (in parts one and three of the volume) interacts with Adrian Piper's calling cards, a conceptual/visual art project from the mid-1980s. Piper, a very light-skinned black woman, would, whenever racially discriminatory comments were made in her presence, distribute

cards announcing “I am black” with a brief explanation of her reason for doing so. However, there are also two striking differences between Piper’s project and what Rankine does in *Citizen*: first, the racial identity of the addressed *you* in *Citizen* is assumed rather than stated (with a very few exceptions), whereas the purpose of Piper’s cards was to reveal it from the very start; and second, Piper’s work establishes an identification of the physical body of a person giving out the cards and the moral first-person subject who demonstrates their will through and in the discourse (“I am black”), whereas Rankine implements the pronoun *you* which does not refer to any concrete person in her text and demonstrates how that *you* is constructed in those situations against their will. This textual strategy is related to Judith Butler’s concept of “addressability” directly mentioned in *Citizen*:

[S]omeone asks the philosopher . . . what makes language hurtful. You can feel everyone lean in. Our very being exposes us to the address of another, she answers. We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness, she adds, is carried by our addressability. Language navigates this.

For so long you thought the ambition of racist language was to denigrate and erase you as a person. After considering Butler’s remarks, you begin to understand yourself as rendered hypervisible in the face of such language acts. Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present. (Rankine 49)

“Addressability,” a quasi-Lévinasian philosophical notion which establishes a profoundly ethical relationship between the two people who participate in a situation that involves one who addresses and the other who is addressed, is fully explored by Butler in her *Precarious Life*, where the philosopher states:

The structure of address is important for understanding how moral authority is introduced and sustained if we accept that we address not only others when we speak, but that in some way we come to exist, as it were in the moment of being addressed, and something about our existence proves precarious when that address fails. More emphatically, however, what binds us morally has to do with how we are addressed by others in ways that we cannot avert or avoid; this impingement by the other’s address constitutes us first and foremost against our will or, perhaps put more appropriately, prior to the formation of our will. So if we think that moral authority is about finding one’s will and standing by it, stamping one’s name upon one’s will, it may be that we miss the very mode by which moral demands are relayed. That is, we miss the situation

of being addressed, the demand that comes from elsewhere, sometimes a nameless elsewhere, by which our obligations are articulated and pressed upon us. (130)

Two levels of “addressability” can be identified in *Citizen:you* addressed as the target or, more often, as an untargeted recipient of racist comments and remarks which are not necessarily directed at them in the situations presented in the form of vignettes; and *you* as an “addressee within the text,” addressed by the persona/narrator (Rankine supposedly includes herself in this category). Simply put: *you* is everybody who recognizes her/his own experience in situations involving racism on the receiving end. Nonetheless, the category does not apply only to African Americans, at least theoretically. The strategy of using the “lyric-*You*” allows Rankine to achieve a “full-throated polyvocality . . . that thrusts every reader into the position of speaker and addressee simultaneously” (Shockley). Moreover, even though in most vignettes the racial identities of the participants remain unspoken, at the same time they are somehow absolutely clear. Obviously, a black reader will identify her/himself with the *You-as-the-addressee* of a racist remark or gesture, whereas the emotional situation of a white reader is more complex as they have to *choose* between two kinds of discomfort: EITHER they respond positively to the address and vicariously experience what it means to be a “black citizen in the US of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century” OR allow the address to fail and “reject the invitation of the lyric-*You* and remain white-identified” (Shockley) and, by extension, become accomplices in an act of racism. In this way Rankine achieves the same goal as Piper did with her calling cards—she confronts the white reader with present-day American racial positioning and demonstrates how racist microaggressions affect individuals on the level of personhood and citizenship, turning them into raced subjects.

## II.

To disclose and understand the complex relationships between a poetic text and works of visual art and the overlapping categories of racism/race, in my further argument on Rankine’s *Citizen* I am going to draw on W. J. T. Mitchell’s theory of race, which explores the notion of race in terms of its visual quality, bio-discursive encoding, racist acts and resulting materiality. Mitchell’s theory of race represents a powerful argument which is polemical not only in relation to the claims of Appiah’s classic 1985 essay, but also challenges quite recent re-conceptualization of race by Joshua Glasgow, who has completely erased the biological discourse from

the race debate. In Mitchell's view, Glasgow's move "eliminates one of the key features of race-talk as a practice" (185).

The point of departure for Mitchell in his probing into the notion of race at the moment when "[t]he idea that racial identity corresponds to some real substance in the physical world" is thoroughly negated or questioned, is the realization of the fact that "racism persists" (xi), and this persistence takes place in the world in which an acute observer can spot the "dominance of visual images and metaphors in racial discourse" (xiii), the situation which favors seeing over other strategies of understanding. The critic's proposal is to perceive race as a medium, an "intervening substance' that both enables and obstructs social relationships" (4). Mitchell comes forward with an assertion that race "is *both* an illusion *and* a reality that resists critical demolition or replacement by other terms such as ethnicity" (14). Such a positioning of the category of race as simultaneously a myth (which "has a powerful afterlife that continues to structure perception, experience, and thought" and is a "subject to endless interpretation and reenactment for new historical situations" [22]) AND a "political and economic issue" (22), makes it necessary to be cautious not to dismiss it or pretend it is not there, but to analyze it on multiple levels and see it from different angles. Mitchell states that

race is not merely a content to be mediated, an object to be represented visually or verbally, or a thing to be depicted in a likeness or image, but race is itself a medium in its iconic form—not simply something to be seen, but itself a framework for seeing through. (13)

"The model of race as a symbolic-imaginary, verbal-visual complex is . . . not merely a psychological matter, but a public and palpable feature of the material world, of the epistemological and historical field in which knowledge is constructed" (20). Conceptualized in this manner, the "racial medium is . . . a prosthesis that produces invisibility and hypervisibility simultaneously" (13), a "vehicle for both fantasy and reality" (14). The ontological doubt that pertains to race makes it pointless to choose between the alternatives. Still, it remains a feature of but also a vehicle for reality, which suggests that race is only related to reality in a cause-and-effect fashion, and is not its essential, palpable component.

Mitchell supports his concept of race as medium by applying to it Lacan's "triad of psychological and semiotic 'registers,'" which he modifies by adding to them the fourth element to distinguish between race and racism. Thus, except for the Symbolic (the realm of language, law, negation and prohibition), the Imaginary (the location of fantasy, images, illusions and visual, non-verbal experiences) and the Real (the

wild zone of trauma), in order to place race as medium on the Lacanian map, the critic introduces a category that he labels “Reality.” Mitchell’s modification of Lacan’s categories has a mind-opening effect and testifies to the originality of the concept. Racism as the “brute fact, the bodily reality” (19), a phenomenon from the wild zone of Agambenian “bare life,” is situated in the Real. Race, on the other hand, as a construct made out of the elements of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, “the derivative term” (19), a “matter of constructed, mediated, represented ‘reality’—visible, audible, and legible” (17), and thus disembodied in a profound sense of the word, is relegated by Mitchell to the newly established Reality. Mitchell presents the relationship between race and racism in a non-standard way as interdependent and inseparable in a reversed cause-and-effect manner, as he states that “[r]ace is not the cause of racism but its excuse, alibi, explanation, or reaction formation” (19).

Thus, two inferences may be drawn from this: first, that race is definitely less tangible than it seemed before, and second, that both phenomena are not related in a conventional manner, where racism depends on the existence of race. On the contrary, Mitchell’s explication makes it possible for us to see that race is a product of acts of racism, and that only without those acts might it cease to exist and vanish from sight. Nevertheless, as long as racism is practiced in the real world, race has a subservient role to perform—to justify or rationalize the horrors of racism. To rephrase it through Lacanian categories once again, we may say after Mitchell that “[r]ace is the Symbolic-Imaginary construction of the fragile ‘reality’ to explain, contain, and manage the Real known as racism” (19). Mitchell maintains that if we think of race as a medium, as “something we see through, like a frame, a window, a screen or a lens, rather than something we look at” (xii), we begin to perceive the discreet-yet-stubborn presence of this interfering filter added to our perceptions of the components of the external world.

Marjorie Perloff’s statement in the back cover blurb of *Citizen* immediately identifies the interplay between race/racism in the sense that the latter pre-conditions the former:

What does it mean to be a black citizen in the US of the early twenty-first century? Claudia Rankine’s brilliant, terse, and parabolic prose poems have a shock value rarely found in poetry. These tales of everyday life . . . dwell on . . . the most ordinary of daily situations so as to expose what is really there: a racism so guarded and carefully masked as to make it all the more insidious.

The “shock value rarely found in poetry,” which determines the power of Rankine’s volume, arguably results from the intuitive realization

that race (and “black citizenship”) is generated by the horrors of racism represented by the “tales of everyday life,” which come out of “the most ordinary of daily situations.”

### III.

How difficult it is for a black person in America to separate themselves from “bodily positivity” and gain personhood is illustrated by part II of *Citizen*, which contains an essay on Serena Williams, a tennis superstar who, throughout her career, has regularly experienced discrimination against her from the umpires on the court and from sport commentators on TV. Her story leads Rankine to asking a key question concerning the black body’s positivity: “What does a victorious or defeated black woman’s body in a historically white space look like?” (25). This question is intertwined in the volume with Zora Neale Hurston’s statement “I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background,” a sentence stenciled on canvas and twinned with another canvas on its left which reads “I do not always feel colored” by Glenn Ligon (52–53).

The tennis court provides such a “sharp white background” for a black player. In December 2012, soon after Serena was named WTA Player of the Year, the Dane Caroline Wozniacki, a former number one player, parodied Serena at an exhibition match by stuffing padding down her top and up her skirt (to make her bosom and buttocks grotesquely big), “all in good fun” (36). Rankine ironizes about the mass-media reaction, asking a rhetorical question: “Racist? CNN wants to know if outrage is the proper response” (36). Not only CNN. For instance, Oliver Brown of *The Telegraph* gives Wozniacki his absolution and finds her impersonation justified “a bit silly and sophomoric,” adding that “on no sober analysis does it betray a more sinister motive.” So no, for sure it is by no means racist, although it may be a “crime against comedy.”<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly, Brown maintains his “sobriety” throughout his article, rejecting most “radical” standpoints: “Racist! Or so the easily outraged cried. Hyper-sexualising! Or so those with a slightly larger feminist dictionary screamed.” The point is that Brown’s comments themselves are examples of covert racism and, as such, could be used in *Citizen*, a work which demonstrates that a racist act or comment does not necessarily have to result from intention. To think of Wozniacki’s performance as non-racist and non-sexist, one needs, for instance, to (intentionally) forget about Saartjie Baartman—the Hotentot

<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/sport/tennis/9741118/Its-not-racist-but-Caroline-Wozniackis-impersonation-of-Serena-Williams-is-a-crime-against-comedy.html>

Venus, and her story of being exposed on freak shows in London and Paris as an anatomical curiosity at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, the parody can even have a positive aspect—doesn't Rankine herself point out, albeit ironically, that "Wozniacki . . . finally gives the people what they have wanted all along by embodying Serena's attributes while leaving Serena's 'angry nigger exterior' behind" (36)? Here is the "image of smiling blond goodness posing as the best female tennis player of all time" (36). When in 2015 Serena Williams became *Sports Illustrated's* athlete of the year, the *LA Times* put out a cover for its sports magazine asking the question if Serena Williams deserves sportsperson of the year more than a horse? (The horse in question was Kentucky Derby winner American Pharoah.) The *LA Times* is the same paper that made *Citizen* one of its books of the year in 2014.

Wozniacki posing as Williams is not the only photograph in Rankine's volume. The very first photographic image which appears in *Citizen* is a picture of a place called Jim Crow Road. Rankine uses the strategy of defamiliarization here. In the photograph, the archetypal suburban street strikes us with its disquieting emptiness and somehow sinister whiteness, as if its message was once again: "no blacks, whites only." The name of the deserted street, together with its larger than life appearance in terms of racial encoding: the spotless whiteness of a car parked in the driveway, snow white houses, the blue, cloudless sky, and the shadow of a Stop road sign, bring to mind a freeze frame from, say, *Blue Velvet* and simultaneously make you disbelieve what you see, and suspect that the picture has been photoshopped. But Jim Crow Road exists in the real world—the picture was made in Flowery Branch, Georgia, in 2007 by a photographer Michael David Murphy. Asked about it in an interview, Rankine says that "according to local lore" the road was named "after a James Crow" (qtd. in Berlant), which leaves the question, why "James Crow Road" was not good enough, without an answer. To make things even more suspicious and uncomfortable for the inhabitants, the surrounding Forsyth County was known for its infamous "sundown town" which, as Murphy claims "existed well until '80s." It is doubtful that the people who live in Flowery Branch are white supremacists who find perverted pleasure in the telling name of the road as a nostalgic commemoration of "them good ole days" in the gallant South when strange trees bore strange fruit, yet the sign may be treated as a visible proof that Jim Crow attitudes and practices die hard. That is the reason why the place is completely deserted in the picture. Symbolically the absence of white people—and, arguably, the reduction of the black presence to a shadow—communicates the point that nowadays racism exists in the US by itself, without declared believers and defenders, and without support of the ideology of race. Flowery Branch stands here for a place where the



“white good American lives”; “the white fantasy (which insists that black subjects have good manners and remain convenient)” (Rankine qtd. in Berlant), in practice meaning black invisibility is lived undisturbed.

Another photograph, this time conspicuously related to the subject of racism, is a picture taken at a lynching, which features in *Citizen* as “Public Lynching. Date: August 30. 1930,” although it is better known as “Lynching of Thomas Shipp and Abram Smith, 1930.” The difference between this photograph and the original is that the mutilated bodies of the two young blacks were removed from the picture by John Lucas: we can see a group of white people under a tree on whose bough the two black men were hanged. Since the picture was taken in the late evening or even at night, the crowd is lit by the flash whereas the background is pitch black. A middle-aged man is pointing with his tattooed left arm at the bodies which are not there. So his gesture seems surprising and absurd, as if he was asking: where have they gone? In this case Rankine uses the altered photograph to foreground her strategy of “redirecting the gaze on the spectator,” which is about “observing the people who would normally not claim racism as their thing” (Rankine qtd. in Asokan). The function of this method is to defamiliarize racist reality in America, to problematize, enhance and question the viewer’s or reader’s perception of something which is familiar (or even familial) to the white people who, assumingly, “are not supremacists and yet they will step into this moment, find it funny, and in doing so, they willingly disconnect themselves from the histories and realities of black people and the treatment of black . . . people in this country” (Rankine qtd. in Asokan). The altered photograph disturbs the viewer with the inexplicable strangeness of the behavior of the mob in the picture and amusement beaming from their faces, as the reason for their high excitement is unclear. And since most viewers know the original photograph, we suddenly realize how well-accustomed we have become to acts of racism in the form of objectification and victimization of the black body and, simultaneously, to the white privilege of spectatorship and entertainment. Here Rankine addresses the white crowd by turning the lens of the camera on them (rather than on the lynched black bodies which were removed from the original picture) and making them hyper-visible in their *whiteness thrown against a black background*.

#### IV.

As Catherine Wagner puts it, Rankine’s *Citizen* “insistently returns to scenes in which a distressing racial imaginary erupts into polite ordinary life” and consistently “theatricalize[s] interaction, drawing attention to

all participants' positions in the social field," hence intervening into the socio-political here and now. Arguably, the core of this racial imaginary in the volume is a permanent oscillation between black hypervisibility and invisibility, which remains one of the key tropes in critical reflection on African American literature from Dunbar to DuBois to Baraka, with Ralph Ellison giving it the most powerful expression in his *Invisible Man*. However, the instances of racism in the volume must not be regarded as caused by rational or even individual reactions, but as culturally-programmed responses to people of different skin color.

The insightful presentation of the problem of hypervisibility of black Americans, connected with invisibility and acts of racism, appears to be the key issue addressed in the Situation videos whose scripts are printed in *Citizen* (on the Internet we can find their complete text-cum-video versions in which the scripts are read out loud in a solemn tone by Rankine, while her reading is accompanied by visual materials shot by John Lucas). Four of them are of particular interest as they touch upon various aspects of racism in the world today: "Stop-and-Frisk," "Making Room," "In Memory of Trayvon Martin" and "In Memory of James Craig Anderson." All four focus on the experiences of young black men as targets of various forms of violence, brutality and discrimination.

In a conversation with the poet, Lauren Berlant talks on the subject of Rankine's interest in and reasons for implementation of visualities *in the text* and for situating video materials *outside the text*. She says:

I had wondered whether you thought something like that—that the images in *Citizen* could show what was exhausting/unbearable to witness once more in speech about the ordinary violence and world-shaping activity of American racism. A desperate desire is at work there for *something* to be self-evident, the force of which would change a situation. But *Citizen* lives meditatively enraged in a world where truth cannot be spoken to a structure. (Berlant)

John Lucas's Situation videos are the most daring attempts within/without the volume of demonstrating the exhausting/unbearable quality and collectively unconscious brutality of racist attitudes and practices in the US. Nevertheless, the striking self-evidence of racist practices, as well as the helplessness of changing the world in this respect, make the message communicated in *Citizen* profoundly pessimistic and spiritually paralyzing, especially since rational arguments do not work in confrontation with the concealed emotions within the social/political structure, which support white privilege and racism. In this respect Rankine's volume testifies to the fact that America represents a solipsistic society contrasted with a theoretical model of ideal pluralistic society, the model already challenged

by Craig Werner who has argued that present-day America is a society whose foundations are oppression and repression of its non-white citizens.

One of the aspects of the co-operation of oppression with repression in keeping blacks in their places is racial positioning and its sub-category: police racial profiling. Martha C. Nussbaum draws our attention to the fact that profiling is probably fair as long as it is done “by age and by type of vehicle . . . [b]ut when profiling tracks existing social stigma, a grave issue of fairness is raised . . . since it denies people an important sort of equality before the law on grounds of race” (289). Nussbaum distinguishes between profiling which is “unobjectionable, because it begins from a committed crime and works backward” and a “far more troubling . . . kind of profiling that *precedes crime* . . . using other traits as proxies for (alleged) criminal intent or activity” (288). It is the latter kind of profiling (i.e. profiling as an act of racism that produces race) which becomes a topic of “Stop-and-Frisk,” the only difference being that the (white) viewers themselves are doing their profiling alongside the traffic police.

That’s how it works in the video. In the footage we can see a few young black men in a shop trying on various items of clothes. There are flashing beacons reflected in the shop’s windows, and in voiceover we can hear a report of the arrest on the road. The direct effect of such a juxtaposition of parallel events is that when watching the film we experience some kind of tension, feeling some sort of dread, and expect that in a moment we are going to witness a crime committed by the youngsters in the shop or that some of them will be arrested for a crime committed earlier. But nothing of this sort happens; no drama takes place in front of us. Yet, we can hear a repeated phrase, over and over again, like a refrain: “And you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description” (Rankine 105–09). The *you* is always a young black man, which provides a judgement on this sort of profiling.

The second Situation video I would like to comment on is entitled “Making Room.” It concentrates on a train episode in which a young black man is sitting at the window seat, gazing out into the darkness. The text of the script opens with a paragraph that sets up the scene and introduces the topic of racism without mentioning it openly. Moreover, further on there are also no references to the color of the passengers either, as for Rankine race is immaterial—as in Mitchell’s understanding, race is an idea about the body and not the body itself:

On the train the woman standing makes you understand there are no seats available. And, in fact, there is one. Is the woman getting off at the next stop? No, she would rather stand all the way to Union Station.

The space next to the man is the pause in a conversation you are suddenly rushing to fill. You step quickly over the woman's fear, the fear she shares. You let her have it.

The man doesn't acknowledge you as you sit down because the man knows more about the unoccupied seat than you do. For him, you imagine, it is more like breath than wonder; he has had to think about it so much you wouldn't call it thought. (131)

With no direct reference to the racial identity of the people involved in the situation on the train, Rankine manages to suggest who is who, as it would be thoroughly unbelievable if anyone questioned the color line divide: the man sitting at the window must be black, the woman standing her racism out is obviously white, whereas the narrator or her *alter ego*—the lyrical *You*, is also black. Here, like everywhere in Rankine's volume, race functions as "a snow-globe fantasy" (Berlant), a product of imagination that extrapolates white (self-)hatred and embodies it in blackness. However, it might be the young man's masculinity that causes the fear of the unoccupied seat, experienced by the white woman. As Nussbaum argues:

[t]he stigmatizing of African-American men as criminals is one of the ugliest and most invidious aspects of American racism, closely linked to the racially skewed disenfranchisement of convicted felons. . . . African-American intellectuals . . . have written eloquently about the pain and isolation inflicted by society's immediate perception of the black man as criminal. (289)

In the "Making Room" video the black man on the train experiences pain mixed with shame, which is a result of isolation he must have suffered when among white people. In the past, the law would have demanded that he stand up from his seat in order to vacate it for the white woman who feels disgust even at the thought (although it cannot be called a thought) of sitting next to a black man. The real problem of the young black man, which results from this very form of racism, is that situations like the one on the train are quite ordinary and common to American everyday social interactions rather than an exception to the rule:

Where he goes the space follows him. If the man left his seat before Union Station you would simply be a person in a seat on the train. You would cease to struggle against the unoccupied seat when where why the space won't lose its meaning. (Rankine 132)

"The space follows him" wherever he goes. Translated into the black histories and realities (both collective and individual), it means that there

is no escape from sheer racism, whose excuse and alibi is a person's skin color and (fictitious) race identity.

At the end of the script, after the narrator-persona has taken the empty seat when she sees that another white woman is looking for a seat because she wants to have a place next to her children and asks passengers to switch seats, the *You* experiences a sort of a panic and says: "You hear but you don't hear. You can't see" (133). The final segment of "Making Room" reads: "It's then the man next to you turns to you. And as if from inside your own head you agree that if anyone asks you to move, you'll tell them we are traveling as a family" (133). The family excuse is more than just an expression of solidarity with a young black man. It is a sign of bonding of a person of color with another person of color when confronting the oppressor.

"In Memory of Trayvon Martin" is another Situation video of interest for me. Its location is again a train, which suggests a necessity for blacks to move on, to never find stability or establish a home. The text read by the author (in voiceover) does not comment on the very situation we are watching, which may be contrasted with the next Situation video in the volume, entitled "In Memory of James Craig Anderson," where we have Rankine reconstructing the killing of the black man by "just a teen . . . with straggly blond hair" (94). In her reconstruction she mentions the killer's first name Dedmon, reveals the circumstances of his driving over Anderson on a "hot June day in the twenty-first century," and quotes the ultimately incriminating phrase since Dedmon says: "I ran that nigger over" (94), using the n-word just like that, as a precise phrase to identify his victim, which simultaneously places Anderson's body in the long history of American racism, violence and brutality. That is also the point made by Rankine in the Trayvon Martin video where the phrases she uses pinpoint the causes of—if not the reasons for—this racism-motivated crime by placing it in "the years of passage, plantation, migration, of Jim Crow segregation, of poverty, inner cities, profiling, of one in three, two jobs," all of which "accumulate into the hours inside our lives where we are caught hanging, the rope inside us, the tree inside us, its root our limbs" (89–90).

In order to draw the reader's attention to a social context of racist practices, Rankine in *Citizen* employs photographs and Situation videos in two complementary ways: (1) by taking racism away from the textual reality into the material world, and (2) by creating a strict connection between, to use Mitchell's categories, the Real of racism and Reality of race. The visual arts demonstrate the mechanism of production of race out of elements taken from the sphere of the Symbolic and the Imaginary, making us see how it combines particles of the socio-historical and the fantastic. *Citizen* manages to provide a multilayered and in-depth poetic/visual analysis of the phenomenon of present-day racism in the US with

its “various realities” (Hilton Als in the blurb), as well as its covert or indirect manifestations which make for its insidiousness. The power of this volume resides in its “capacity to make so many different versions of American life proper to itself, to instruct [American readers] in the depth and variety of [their] participation in a narrative of race that [they] recount and reinstate, even when [they] speak as though it weren’t there” (Jonathan Farmer in the blurb). Nonetheless, as the visual components of the volume demonstrate by turning the reader into a modest eye witness, there is still a racism-generated narrative of race in America.

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## Frances Wright's America: A 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Utopia

# ABSTRACT

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Frances Wright, a British social reformer and feminist, published an account of her American travels: *Views of Society and Manners in America* in 1821. Wright founded an experimental community in Nashoba, Tennessee, whose aim was to buy black slaves, educate them, and then liberate them. Even though the enterprise turned out to be a failure, the author continued to fight for the cause of black emancipation.

My paper examines Wright's portrayal of America in *Views*, which, compared to most other early 19<sup>th</sup>-century British travel accounts, is surprisingly enthusiastic. Wright idealizes the young republic, seeing it as a perfect embodiment of her ideals. I argue that Wright's vision of the young republic is utopian, and it prevents her from seeing any flaws in the American system. This is especially pronounced in the case of the central problem posed by British travelogues of the era, slavery, which troubles her not so much on moral grounds, but as a blemish on the character of the country of freedom and equality.

**Keywords:** antebellum USA, utopia, slavery, travel writing.

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## 19<sup>TH</sup>-CENTURY BRITISH TRAVELERS ON AMERICA

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time when travel writing became an extremely popular genre in Europe, as the Industrial Revolution introduced new means of transport allowing fast and cheap locomotion (Blanton 19). The USA was one of the most interesting destinations for British travelers in that period: first, as a former colony, and second, as a laboratory of democracy, showing Europeans its potential threats or promises, depending on the author's political views. Remarks recorded in British travelogues on America share the peculiar features of the genre of travel writing, being suspended between fact and fiction, or the objective and the subjective. On the one hand, travel texts describe events which really happened and one of their professed purposes is conveying to the readers factual information about a foreign country. On the other hand, as Thompson argues, travel writers do not reconstruct but rather construct their experiences, as well as their personas, creating an illusion of factuality (27–30). Moreover, no matter how objective the authors attempt to be, travel-writing is also a highly personal genre, often revealing more about the traveler than about the visited country. As Laurie Langbauer puts it, “[t]ravelers don't really see the countries they visit but bring instead expectations about them, like so much extra baggage” (5). A particularly important bias is the ideological or political one, as the travelogue reflects the traveler's conditions (Youngs 2), as well as prior opinions.

19<sup>th</sup>-century British travelers visiting America were in most cases quite critical of the young republic, especially at the beginning of the 1800s. This attitude stemmed from a few factors: first, it was a matter of literary convention. A critical description of the Americans' apparent lack of refinement was what travelogue readers expected; what at the time they considered entertaining (Wheatley 63, 75). Second, anti-Americanism was an intellectual trend popular all over 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe, not only in Britain, helping the Old Continent to forge a sense of common identity by fashioning itself as the opposite of America (Gulddal 494). Then, there were political reasons: for instance, Frances Trollope, whose *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832) was one of the most critical and at the same time the most popular British books about America, was encouraged by her publisher and by Basil Hall (another famous and conservative author of an American travelogue) to make the message of her book support the Tory cause against the British Reform Act of 1832 (Kisiel 66). The idea did work to the extent that Tories used Trollope's account of the supposed dangers of democracy as a proof of their arguments against the reform (Deis and Frye 131).

British travelers criticized everything about America, from its landscapes to its political system. In early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain “democracy” was not

a positive term; it evoked French terror and mob rule (Campbell 91). Thus, also in travel writing it was a target of mockery, as a system propagating equality beyond reason. Captain Basil Hall writes of a judge who, “by bringing the heels on a level with, or rather higher than, the head, affords not a bad illustration of the principle as well as the practice of Democracy” (Hall 408). For Hall the system is a topsy-turvy political arrangement, which not only brings “naturally” unequal people on par, but apparently makes superior those who should be inferior. The result of democracy is an array of minor evils experienced by conservative travelers: they complain about American materialism, pointing out that, since Americans have no other way to feel better than their neighbors, they seek distinction through wealth (Mesick 66, 309–10). Travel writers look down upon American art and literature: Frances Trollope declares that an “obvious cause of inferiority in the national literature, is the very slight acquaintance with the best models of composition, which is thought necessary for persons called well educated” (Trollope 244), while Frances Kemble exclaims:

where are the picture-galleries—the sculptures—the works of art and science—the countless wonders of human ingenuity and skill—the cultivated and refined society—the intercourse with men of genius, literature, scientific knowledge—where are all the sources from which I am to draw my recreation? (85)

One important problem generated by democracy, according to the travelers, is a chronic lack of good servants. Most British authors complain about Americans’ disdain of the very name of “servants,” as they associate it with slavery. Instead, they want to be called “help” and insist on being treated as equals. For conservatives such as Trollope this is as comical as it is tedious.

However, the most famous, and most amusing, critical passages of the said travelogues refer to American manners: Americans eat their meals hastily and in complete silence, they rigidly separate men and women at social events, talk too much or too little, always about business and without the slightest shade of wit. The habit that seems to annoy British travelers most and whose descriptions appear over and over again in subsequent books is one of tobacco chewing and spitting. This is how Charles Dickens describes his experience of American manners:

In the courts of law, the judge has his spittoon, the crier his, the witness his, and the prisoner his; while the jurymen and spectators are provided for, as so many men who in the course of nature must desire to spit incessantly. In the hospitals, the students of medicine are requested, by notices upon the wall, to eject their tobacco juice into the boxes provided

for that purpose, and not to discolour the stairs. In public buildings, visitors are implored, through the same agency, to squirt the essence of their quids, or “plugs,” as I have heard them called by gentlemen learned in this kind of sweetmeat, into the national spittoons, and not about the bases of the marble columns. (273)

The passage goes on; the feeling is as if British authors tried to outdo one another in this peculiar sub-genre of spitting descriptions.

Finally, what British travelers are particularly critical of is American slavery. This was especially the case after 1833 when slavery was abolished in the British Empire—thus, British visitors exhibited a strong sense of moral superiority and felt obliged, regardless of their degree of sympathy for the US as a whole, to express unequivocal criticism of the South’s “peculiar institution.”

Seen against this background, Frances Wright’s *Views of Society and Manners in America* (1821) seems surprisingly enthusiastic about American democracy, even given her reformist views. She is far from being the only British traveler to have appreciated America: progressives such as Harriet Martineau, James Silk Buckingham and George Combe were quite in favor of American democracy (Berger 107); in general, travelers coming from the middle class were far more open to the American political system (Berger 21). Yet, few of these writers were as enthusiastic about the young republic as Wright. Dickens, while placing great hopes in America’s political system and praising the country’s prisons, insane asylums and facilities for the blind, was appalled not only by the lack of manners, but mostly by slavery and the treatment of Native Americans. Harriet Martineau too found a lot to criticize in the New World: above all the situation of people of color, but also American imitateness in art, the country’s expansionist appetites on the eve of the War with Mexico, and the “political non-existence of women” (I.102). Wright, on the other hand, seemed to praise exactly the things other travelers tended to criticize, finding absolutely no fault in her beloved republic. Even given the abovementioned subjective and fictitious elements characteristic for travel writing, Wright was quite unique in not trying to come across as unbiased, but rather consistently building her utopia.

## WRIGHT’S AMERICA

Frances Wright (1795–1852) was a social reformer, feminist and abolitionist, the first Englishwoman to have written a travel account of America (Mesick 12). She was born in Dundee, Scotland, and she traveled to America for the first time in 1818. After her return to Britain in 1821 she wrote the book that brought her renown (even though by that time

she had already been a published author): *Views of Society and Manners in America*—the travelogue this essay discusses. Upon her second visit to America in 1825, Wright founded a settlement in Nashoba, Tennessee, the idea behind which was buying out slaves, educating them and finally letting them earn their freedom. Her “experiment” was designed to show that, given the chance, blacks could attain the same level of intellectual cultivation as whites—a view seen at the time as quite progressive. Moreover, Nashoba was supposed to be a transition point for former slaves to other territories: Haiti, Texas, or beyond the Rocky Mountains. As critical as Wright was of colonization, she knew it was a necessary condition of her plan’s gaining wider (most importantly financial) support (Kisiel 58). The enterprise ended up a complete fiasco, with Wright being absent for a long time from Nashoba, and the commune becoming too controversial due to allegedly allowing interracial marriages.

As highlighted by Bederman, “[a]lthough Nashoba, as Wright originally planned it, was grandiose in scope, it was not itself a utopia. Rather, Nashoba was a scheme to abolish all US slavery in order to save Wright’s true utopia, the United States” (447).<sup>1</sup> The traveler’s vision of America is utopian in both senses of the word “utopia”: as *ou topos*—no place, as well as *eu topos*—good place (Elliott 85). Wright’s America is an ideal space, the “good” country where human institutions have achieved near perfection. But it is also a non-existent place, since the America she describes has never been, and probably never will be. Her enthusiasm makes her blind to everything that is less than perfect in the young democracy. Additionally, her book shares one more common feature with all literary utopias; as Robert C. Elliott points out, one of the goals of texts belonging to the genre is criticizing current society by comparing it with an ideal (22). This also seems to be one of the purposes behind Wright’s *Views of Society and Manners in America*: by showing what is wonderful about the US, she at the same time points to what, in her opinion, is wrong with England.

Wright is so enthusiastic about the US that she praises everything other travelers criticize: society, art, political life. She believes the image most Europeans have of Americans, as “in a sort of middle state between barbarism and refinement,” is completely mistaken (Wright 162). When she does agree with popular British charges against America, she quickly

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<sup>1</sup> Wright was by no means the only one to create a utopian vision of America; rather, “Early America was both eutopia and dystopia, and became the site for any utopian dreams. As a result, the USA has been the source of more utopias and communitarian experiments (once called utopian societies or utopian experiments) than any other country” (Sargent 94). Immigrants from Europe treated the country as an empty space where humanity could begin anew, while American authors believed in the utopian vision of their homeland’s greatness, in the style of Manifest Destiny.

offers excuses or explanations. Thus she admits that American literature is inferior to its European counterpart, but she believes this to be the result of America's finest minds being employed as statesmen (166). In other words, what could be seen as a disadvantage and sign of cultural paucity is turned by her into an asset: America knows how to use its most talented intellectuals who, in their turn, choose their patriotic duty over aesthetic pleasures.

Part of Wright's delight with America seems to be rooted in her seeing the New World as a perfect habitat of the Rousseauvian "noble savage," a view going back to Locke's description of America as close to the "state of nature" (Brooks 8). She criticizes civilization, claiming that in the Old World most of education "consists of unlearning": one needs to forget "the false notions which had been implanted in our young minds" (Wright 217). Americans are superior to Europeans, since they do not have to "unlearn" the harmful and distorting lessons of their culture—not yet having produced any substantial lessons. Where other British travelers perceive an American lack of manners and cultivation, she sees people unspoiled by the stale habits of Europe. But Wright does not stop at this; she also states that in America, one is bound to discover with surprise that ordinary people have "that intelligence and those sentiments which he [the foreigner] had been accustomed to seek in the writings of philosophers and the conversation of the most enlightened" (217). Americans seem to have an innate wisdom rivalling the one found in European books. Had we read this in Transcendentalist essays, such as Emerson's poetically phrased writings, the claim would have sounded acceptable. However, in Wright's case, as she authors a travel account stylistically aspiring to factuality, this level of praise seems unintentionally absurd and bordering on the ridiculous.

As has been mentioned before, one of the most common criticisms levelled at America by British travelers is the impossibility of finding good servants. Here again Wright's opinion differs from those of many of her countrymen and women: she claims that the reports of other travelers must be unjust, and that probably both parties must be responsible for conflicts between masters and servants. Instead of focusing on native-born American servants, she chooses to warn her readers against bringing servants from Europe as they soon become a burden, refusing to work on the same terms as they did in the Old World. She believes that this shows "how an uneducated mind is likely to misconstrue the nature of that equality which a democracy imparts to all men" (237), implying that Americans are better prepared for equality, as they understand that it does not necessarily mean anarchy. The real problem are immigrants who believe in a degree of equality not attainable and not expected by Americans.

Wright's idealism extends also to her understanding of American foreign policy. She strongly believes that democracy is by nature a pacifist

system, which means that there is no chance of America waging a war other than a defensive one: “All here breathes of peace, as well as freedom. American freedom, founded upon the broad basis of the rights of man, is friendly to the freedom of all nations” (82). This, according to her, stems from the fact that “[t]he army is the people, and the people must be at home” (83). She realizes that other countries’ histories testify to the contrary, but she believes America to be unique: “It has no ambitious rulers, no distinguished classes . . . no colonies, no foreign possessions” (83). In a way she believes that the conditions she describes are eternal, that they originate from the very system, and that America, being a democracy, can never have ambitious rulers or foreign possessions. Her optimism might be justified by the historical moment in which her book was written: this is still before the annexation of Texas, so before American expansionist ambitions became evident. Yet it may be argued that she could have referred to the Louisiana Purchase—a controversial move from the British point of view, which will be criticized by, for example, Thomas Colley Grattan in his 1859 *Civilized America*. In that travelogue, Grattan sees the Louisiana Purchase as a testimony of American greed and expansionism, stressing the fact that Jefferson had no legal power to effect it, and criticizing the ideological explanation of the territory having once been American and of Americans possessing some sort of historical right to it (II.283). Even though Grattan’s travelogue was written over thirty years after Wright’s, the events he writes about could have been as known to her as they were to him. It seems that Wright simply does not see the Louisiana Purchase as a fact possibly auguring American expansionism of the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Her view of American foreign policy may also be explained through a reference to two further typical features of the utopia. Firstly, as Elliott shows, utopia eliminates all conflict, aiming towards a static state of full bliss (104); the second feature follows from the first one: utopia is “necessarily transhistoric” (9), as this static state of perfection may exist only outside the normal conflicting forces of history. Wright’s vision bears strong resemblance to this idea: for her, the US has attained its perfection, which makes international conflicts impossible. It is her early version of an “end of history”: the final stage of human development.

## WRIGHT’S VIEW ON SLAVERY

As can be seen by now, Wright often glorifies America so much that she becomes unable to perceive it as anything other than perfect. However, the most interesting part of Wright’s description of America is the issue of slavery. Being a reformist, she has strongly abolitionist views; therefore,

the existence of slavery in the American South could be expected to be a major challenge to her rosy view of the republic. And this is certainly the case: Wright struggles to keep her vision of America unblemished while she realizes how far from perfection it is with regards to the professed ideals of liberty and equality for all. In fact, during her travels she never goes South of Virginia, presenting it as a conscious decision: "The sight of slavery is revolting everywhere, but to inhale the impure breath of its pestilence in the free winds of America is odious beyond all that the imagination can conceive" (267). Thus she decides not to witness the face of America that contradicts her idealized preconceptions.

Moreover, Wright's problem with slavery does not seem to be mainly a question of compassion or empathy for slaves themselves. Rather, slavery makes her image of America less perfect;<sup>2</sup> it is a "stain" on the American character (270)—it is not an inherent characteristic of the system, or a large portion of America's social construction, but just a blemish that the country should eliminate as soon as possible. Unlike other travelers, Wright believes that slavery is not peculiar to the US, but that it is shared with most "civilized" countries (when she writes the book, published in 1821, slavery has not yet been abolished in the British Empire, as the Abolition Act was passed in 1833). Thus, in her view, the "disgrace" of slavery is widespread, while the "honor" of abolitionism is typically American: Wright stresses that America was the first country to abolish the slave trade (38), failing to mention the economic reasons behind this abolition—the fact that it resulted in an increase in the price of slaves, actually working out to the benefit of slaveholders. Also, while speaking of American history she presents an image of American colonists before the Revolutionary War as craving the end of slavery but being forbidden from abolishing it by the evil British crown (39). The fact that in the 1820s, way into America's self-rule, slavery still existed in the South is presented as a negligible detail and a simple question of time: "the evil needs years of patience, the more perfect understanding of the mischief to the master, or the more universal feeling of the injustice to the slave" (39). It looks like the problem is going to solve itself on its own; the "understanding" will simply and inevitably come, proceeding naturally from the good of the American character.

Besides presenting America as an ardently abolitionist country, Wright defends and justifies Southern slaveholders, pointing to their patriotism and zeal in fighting for America's independence, ignoring the fact that there is no logical connection between one problem and the other (42). As Bederman points out, "Wright seems to have taken literally planters'

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<sup>2</sup> This is an impression shared by Caroline M. Kiesel (57).

hyperbolic protestations that they wished slavery would disappear,” and “convinced herself that Southerners longed desperately for a plan to abolish slavery before race war broke out and their slave property became worthless” (447). She portrays them as “cursed with [the] institution”, that is, victims of the system and of circumstance rather than its perpetrators. She adds that the free states have a responsibility to “relieve their sister states from this crime and calamity” (42); thus, slavery is presented as a burden or a disease—something that one gets against one’s will and that apparently does not yield any profit to the party involved. According to her portrayal, the South must be saved rather than judged.

It is surprising to what lengths the self-professed reformist and abolitionist goes in order to excuse America for the existence of slavery. Given the fact that Wright is seriously invested in ameliorating the fate of black slaves, the amount of empathy she has for their masters is rather unexpected. She also downplays the difficulties blacks face in the North, painting an idyllic (and false) picture of their lives: “Everywhere are schools open for his [the black’s] instruction. In small towns, we will find him taught by the same master and attending the same church with the white population” (42).<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, that she needs to stress and praise the fact that in some places, when forced by circumstances, whites do not introduce segregation, tells a lot about the unequal situation of the two races. On the other hand, when in cities “Africans have churches as well as preachers of their own,” in Wright’s opinion it testifies to “their rapid advance in situation and knowledge” (42). In other words, anything that happens in America is a positive phenomenon: where there is no segregation, this supposedly shows the lack of prejudice of whites towards blacks; where there is one, it is a proof of blacks being educated enough to serve as ministers.

According to her, Northern blacks enjoy equal protection by the law, and have the same political rights as whites (44)—claims obviously untrue in the 1820s, given that even those Northern states which granted blacks the right to vote after the Revolutionary War were taking it away throughout the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (see Litwack 5, 65–66). The fact that they do not participate in political life is attributed by her to their deficiency in “political ambition” that needs to be “awakened” (44). At the same time, using a self-contradictory logic she admits that in some Northern states blacks do not have the right to vote, but, according to her, this is the right decision, since they are “ill fitted to exercise it” (44). Once again, it turns

<sup>3</sup> In reality, in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “[i]n most . . . parts of the North and the West, black children attended segregated schools when schools for them existed at all” and tended to be self-educated (Painter 73).



out that whatever America is doing must be good, regardless of whether it decides to grant voting rights or withdraw them from blacks. Moreover, she claims that if blacks are discriminated against, it is not because of their skin color but of “the greater laxity of their morals” (43–44)—so her glorification of Northern tolerance is supported by her own prejudice. Here Wright does not differ from American 19<sup>th</sup>-century intellectuals who, observing free blacks in the North, believed them to be “degraded,” suggesting that “there was some ideal of manhood from which the Negro had fallen” (Fredrickson 5).

Wright often defends American racism, blaming it on the country's history and adding that Europeans are just as unwilling to treat blacks as equals. She seems to believe that a discriminatory reaction against blacks is something natural in whites: “Nature has stamped a mark upon the unhappy African which, though the more cultivated and liberal will account an accidental distinction, the vulgar will regard as a symbol of inferiority” (42). On the one hand, she points to the fact that skin color is accidental; on the other, she employs the rhetoric associated with the “mark of Cain.” That blacks are “unhappy” stems from “nature,” so it is apparently hard to blame some whites for seeing in their skin color a symbol of inferiority. One needs to be “cultivated and liberal” to be able to rise above such distinctions; this is almost like saying that the natural reaction of a white person is a feeling of disdain for blacks, and those whose intellect allows them to counter this visceral response should be praised for their magnanimity—but that it cannot be expected from everyone. Ostensibly, given Wright's plans for Nashoba and her ability to phrase the question as she does, she would have counted herself among those more “cultivated and liberal.”

## NATIVE AMERICANS AS SEEN BY WRIGHT

Wright's opinions about Native Americans are a broad subject, deserving its own separate study.<sup>4</sup> For the purpose of this essay, let us focus on her vision of Native American history, which once again shows her idealizing

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<sup>4</sup> In general, Wright tends to express a belief in Indian inferiority to a much greater extent than other progressive writers, such as Martineau or Dickens. This is one more technique which allows her to praise the moral character of white Americans, who come across in her text as simply keeping in check a degenerate race rather than exploiting the native inhabitants of the continent. At the same time, it must be stressed that Wright is not the only thinker denigrating Native Americans in order to extol whites; already in the 18<sup>th</sup> century British Whigs who sympathized with the revolting colonies spread stories of Indians as “savage beasts” to justify the colonists' violence against them (Fulford 58).

attitude towards (white) Americans. She admits that Native Americans have been historically mistreated by whites; however, she believes the colonists' only fault was forcing Indians<sup>5</sup> to sell them land. She does not speak of pushing Native Americans westwards and of expropriating them, but simply of peaceful (albeit coerced) commerce.

In Wright's opinion, problems between the settlers and Indians started when the latter became jealous of the colonists' prosperity and superiority (107)—this in itself is a racist and very biased version of history. Because of this “jealousy” Indians began attacking white settlers and taking against them “savage measures.” In response, whites started to feel hostile, as well; the way Wright presents this sequence of events suggests that the wars between whites and Indians were the Indians' fault. She even comments that in this early history of settlement one would “find more cause to charge the natives with cruelty and treachery than the European settlers with injustice,” were it not for the extenuating circumstance of jealousy being a feeling common to all men, and “wild passions”—typical of all “savages” (107). At the same time, Wright uses this opportunity to praise the settlers who were ready to bravely confront animals and Indians—the latter getting enumerated in the same breath with the fauna.

After the Revolutionary war, Wright continues, “the Indians soon felt the effect of the wise and humane system of policy adopted by the federal government. The treaties entered into with the natives have never been violated by her sanction or connivance” (108).<sup>6</sup> In her opinion, even though Indians did not deserve it, the American government decided to protect them. All circumstances of whites treating Native Americans fairly seem to testify to white Americans' generosity. Wright believes it to be a token of their mercy rather than their duty towards fellow human beings. Her logic is that Americans could profit economically from the Indians' destruction, and yet they choose not to wipe them out completely. She believes “it is highly to the credit of their government” to do anything for Native Americans (108), as it testifies to their “humane policy” (109).

Finally, in Wright's vision it is the Native Americans themselves who are chiefly responsible for their demise: the wars they wage among themselves decimate them, “massacring whole families of women, children, and infants at the breast” (109). She does partially acknowledge the role

<sup>5</sup> I use the terms “Native Americans” and “Indians” interchangeably, the former reflecting current terminology, the latter being the word widely used in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It seems justifiable to accept this as a linguistic habit of Wright and her contemporaries, reflecting also to an extent their state of consciousness and policy towards ethnic Others.

<sup>6</sup> A claim that is obviously untrue, since for example in 1783 the US went back on its promise not to settle beyond the Ohio River (Fulford 55), while the treaties with the Creek had been violated by 1813, which resulted in the outbreak of the Creek War.

of whites in this process of Native Americans' gradual disappearance,<sup>7</sup> especially through the sale of alcohol, but she attributes it to Canadians, not to Americans (108). Moreover, when she writes about the alcohol problem affecting the Native American population, she adds: "Intoxication has proved a yet worse scourge to the wild natives than the smallpox. It not only whets their ferocity, but hurries them into the worst vices, and consequently the worst diseases" (108). Thus it is hard to tell whether she really presents Native Americans as victims of alcohol addiction, as it rather seems that alcohol intensifies their natural "wildness" and vices; it exposes what has already been present in their character. This makes whites selling alcohol to Native Americans seem less culpable, as the focus of Wright's discussion is transferred from white responsibility onto Indian "savagery."<sup>8</sup> Additionally, the division into "good Americans" and "bad Canadians" allows her to retain her idealized vision of the United States and shift the blame of white imperialist policies onto a people loyal to the British. Thus Americans are described as trading with Indians mostly in blankets and clothes, whereas Canadians sell them alcohol and weapons, which provokes unsuccessful and decimating wars with whites and with other tribes. Wright quite unequivocally declares that Indian wars are never provoked by Americans but always by "the machinations of Florida or Canadian traders, or of European emissaries" (109).

## CONCLUSION

Seen against the background of most 19<sup>th</sup>-century British travel accounts, Frances Wright's *Views of Society and Manners in America* appears as exceedingly optimistic, and in fact quite naïve and unrealistic. She idealizes America to the point of not being able to see any drawbacks of its system. She paints a vision of a transhistoric utopia, suspended in history thanks to its inherently pacifist character. One could argue that factual precision is not a feature characteristic of and necessary in utopian writing; it makes use of "demonstration rather than . . . reasoned argument" which gets replaced by "symbols, inversions, and the all-powerful *reductio ad absurdum*" (Goodwin 5). Yet Wright's book, belonging to the genre of travel writing, does not have the literary freedom that typical utopias possess. Suspended between subjectivity and objectivity, as has been argued above, the travelogue is still expected to be factual and does not

<sup>7</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup>-century vision of Native Americans as a "vanishing race" has been fascinatingly discussed by Brian W. Dippie in his *Vanishing American*.

<sup>8</sup> The belief that alcoholism was simply a manifestation of Native Americans being doomed to extinction was a popular opinion in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (Dippie 35).

allow a great degree of exaggeration. What is more, typical utopias may constitute a source of political hope, being prescriptive and presenting a “hypothetical society” (Goodwin 11). Wright’s *Views* is indeed prescriptive in the sense of presenting a model for Great Britain to emulate, but at the same time claims to describe a real place. The utopian energies contained in the book are at odds with its genre, resulting in a narrative which seems more untrustworthy than travel writing by necessity already is.

Wright’s enthusiasm is particularly puzzling when it comes to her treatment of black slaves. On the one hand, she is a fervent abolitionist not only in theory but also in practice, later establishing the Nashoba commune in order to contribute to the liberation of at least a number of slaves. On the other hand, she paints a picture of Northern blacks living a perfectly happy existence, which testifies to either lack of information or of empathy on her part. She portrays America as a strongly abolitionist country, while exhibiting compassion for rather than criticism of slaveholders. Moreover, she describes the white-Indian relations in a distorted manner, making Native Americans responsible for their own demise and picturing the American government as a benevolent institution, taking under its parental wing all of its ethnic children. It seems that her desire to see America as a fulfilled utopia overshadows her other ideals and makes her see the American system as she would want it to be rather than as it truly is.

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The Poetic Bliss of  
the Re-described Reality:  
*Wallace Stevens: Poetry, Philosophy,  
and the Figurative Language*

## ABSTRACT

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The article addresses the issue of the intimate but troublesome liaison between philosophy and literature—referred to in scholarship as “the ancient quarrel between poets and philosophers.” Its aim is double-fold. First, it traces the interweaving paths of philosophical and literary discourse on the example of Wallace Stevens’s *oeuvre*. It demonstrates that this great American modernist advocates a clear distinction between poetry and philosophy on the one hand, but draws on and dramatizes philosophical ideas in his poems on the other. The vexing character of his poetic works exemplifies the convoluted and inescapable connections between philosophy and poetry. Second, it discusses various approaches to metaphor, highlighting Stevens’s inimitable take on it. The diverse ways of tackling metaphorical language cognize metaphor’s re-descriptive and reconfiguring character. They embrace e.g., Stevens’s concept of metaphor as *metamorphosis*, or as “resemblance rather than imitation.” The to date interpretations of Stevens’s poetry in the light of a whole host of philosophies yield important insights into the meaningful interconnections between poetry and philosophy. However, rather than offering another interpretation of his poems from a given philosophical angle, the versatile voices presented here interrogate what poetry consists in.

**Keywords:** metaphor, philosophy, poetry, re-configuration, Wallace Stevens.

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*Wallace Stevens: Poetry, Philosophy, and the Figurative Language* is a groundbreaking collection of essays investigating the output of one of America's most highly acclaimed twentieth-century poets. The abstract poetry of Wallace Stevens, which eschews any easy classifications, continues to attract new and versatile critical approaches, of which the present volume is a superb example. The poet's preoccupation with reality as blending with creative imagination led to works whose profound insightfulness into "what is" inspires us to interrogate both their philosophical tenor, as well as their affinities with the philosophical thought they seem to contain. As the editors themselves stress, Stevens's poetry has to date been interpreted through the lens of a whole panoply of philosophers: Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida, William James and George Santayana. Interestingly, instead of offering another interpretation of Stevens's *oeuvre* in the light of a particular philosophy, the present volume proposes a perspicacious exploration into the very nature of poetry.

The division of the book into two parts is dictated by a clear differentiation between issues of a general nature and the more detailed analysis of Stevens's use of figurative language. Part One partakes in a discussion of the nourishing connections between poetry and philosophy as evinced in Stevens's works. This far more-inclusive attitude to his poetic and prose writings shifts in Part Two to a nuanced examination of one concept in particular. Here, the essays are grouped around various understandings of the phenomenon of metaphor. Placing Stevens within a wider modernist artistic and philosophical milieu, the editors/authors of this volume posit that he is not to be pigeonholed too hastily simply as a philosophizing poet, but much more profoundly as a poet whose stanzas are expressive of the intimate interrelationship of poetry and philosophical thought. Asserting this, they endorse Charles Altieri's seminal words that Stevens's poetry "gives a pulse to philosophical thinking" (38). The admirable, intricate and debatable (as regards the issue of its philosophical intent) character of Stevens's poems is already signaled in the Introduction, where we read that Stevens "imbibed an intuitive sense of how the being of the poem as a beautiful aesthetic object corresponds with and thrives in close proximity to the movement of thought" (12). The question of the being of the poem seems to be the guiding thread of the book's miscellaneous contributions. They demonstrate that Stevens's keen interest in reality and the interrelations between reality and imagination, which we commonly deem philosophical matters, bespeaks the reflective nature of his works.

In Part One's opening essay, Charles Altieri argues that Stevens's poem "Of Modern Poetry" is a dramatization of the powers of the human mind, as well as an intriguing model of Hegel's concept of inner sensuousness. As the author reveals, inner sensuousness "refers to how



states of self-consciousness are embodied as conditions of feeling rooted in one's sense of one's own subjective relations to an object world" (27). Altieri elucidates the fact that Stevens's recourse to inner sensuousness was necessitated by an attempt to use a language appropriate to express "states of self-consciousness of one's own constructive acts" (28). According to the critic, addressing those dimensions of creation which are not confined to an individual subject, Stevens finds a pathway which affords the transition from the personal to the transpersonal. One might venture the thesis that Stevens's poem, framed with two similar sentences evocative of the contiguity between poetic activity and the human being's intellectual prowess—"The poem of the mind" and "The poem of the act of the mind," as well as Altieri's exhaustive meditation on it—stantiate a hermeneutic search for understanding. Ending up with a whole host of questions, this essay proves that Stevens's poetry can be understood as a proxy of philosophical pondering. Entertaining a similar thought to Czesław Miłosz's idea of "the invincible mind," encapsulated in his 1968 poem "Incantation" (210), Stevens's poetry heralds a human being's ability to traverse that which has not been dreamed of.

The next essay by Wit Pietrzak, "They Will Get it Straight One Day at the Sorbonne": Wallace Stevens's Intimidating Thesis," involves us in a differently angled but equally exhilarating dialogue between poetry and philosophy. The author reflects on Simon Critchley's Heideggerian reading of Stevens, of which he is critical. In the later part of the essay, he also discusses the influence of Santayana's philosophy on Stevens's poetry. Exploring the edgy (dis)connectivity between poetry and philosophy, the author highlights Stevens's propounding of the chasm between the two disciplines, and elaborates his skepticism about associating "with philosophy of whatever ilk" (34). The controversy which shrouds the pervasive perception of Stevens's poetry as philosophical and his own denial of having much to do with philosophy is straightened out via a detailed study of his poems ("Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," in particular), as well as his prose works. Apparently, Stevens's own provocative words—"Perhaps it is of more value to infuriate philosophers than to go along with them" (34)—can be seen to shed light on the perturbed liaison.

Pietrzak's reflection clearly shows that it is creative imagination which constitutes a portentous terrain for the perichoretic encounters between poetry and philosophy. He muses on Stevens's understanding of imagination and philosophy thus:

what Stevens desires is "to regard imagination as metaphysics," which means "to think of it as part of life, and to think of it as part of life is to realize the extent of artifice" (NA: 140). If anything, Stevens wanted

philosophy to leave logic and its investigations into the truth content of propositions in favour of explorations of the illogicalities of imagination, or what a decade earlier he had called “the irrational element in poetry” (see Stevens, 1989/90, 226). (34)

Stevens’s inimitable take on imagination is what persuades us to think that, for him, the real and the imagined feed one another or even seem to be co-substantial. Furthermore, his appeal for philosophy’s engagement with the “illogicalities of imagination” indicates that he purports to negotiate between the terse boundaries of what we deem reality and imagination.

As already mentioned, probing the perplexing connection between poetry and philosophy, Pietrzak expresses his distrust of Critchley’s deployment of a Heideggerian perspective in an analysis of Stevens’s poetry (35–37). One of the main points that Critchley seems to miss, according to Pietrzak, is that for Stevens “poetry is not just a way of uttering the perception of reality but of shaping ever new perceptions that derive not so much from a hard reality but from prior poetic utterances” (36). Thus, we can gather that Stevens’s stance on poetry as participating in a meaningful dialogue with the cache of previous poetic utterances expands the view of what reality is. Pietrzak’s critique of Critchley’s stance becomes even more explicit in the later part of the essay, in which he writes: “Quick to derive Heideggerian motifs from Stevens’s idiosyncrasies, Critchley ventriloquizes “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” saying that “words of the world are the life of the world and poetry is the highest use of those words” (2005, 54)” (36).

However, the disavowal of Critchley’s viewpoint does not exhaust this essay’s examination of the philosophical aptitude of Stevens’s poetry. If his poetic works can be viewed as elucidating philosophical ideas, the following quotation from Pietrzak’s essay, which is also an endorsement of Altieri’s reflection, takes us to the very heart of poetry and philosophy belonging together:

“Stevens gives a pulse to philosophical thinking . . . by inviting his audience to share the pleasure and the excitement of states in which we momentarily resolve tensions and manage to change our angle of vision.” This change of angle of vision, the Stevensian “new bearing in a new reality,” results, for Altieri, in the creation of values “as small ecstasies where managing to correlate mind and world affords charged moment in which one feels at home in imaginative activity” (Altieri 2013, 7). (38)

Thus, we may infer, following Pietrzak and Altieri, that the epiphanic moments disclosing the real in Stevens’s poetry are also the locus of the philosophical unveiling of reality.

Karl-Friedrich Kiesow's "The Kinship of Poetry and Philosophy. Reflections on W. Stevens and P. Weiss," is a deft reinvigoration of the discussion of the affinities between poetry and philosophy, instantiated via a close examination of the intellectual relationship between Stevens, the poet, and Weiss, the philosopher. Kiesow avers that the Stevensian poetic vision, which saw human dignity as having the potential to replace traditional faith, is a stance endorsed in Weiss's philosophy. Through a detailed analysis of "Men Made out of Words," "Three Philosophical Poets," "The Anatomy of Monotony" and Stevens's other poems, the critic claims that the poet conceives a particular brand of cosmology. The intersections between the two intellectuals, encompass much more, though. Inspired by Duns Scotus, Weiss shifts his interest from the idea of a general man to an individual human being. His initial anthropology of the human being as a fallible and imperfect creature transforms into an ardent interest in the human as a capable being. As Kiesow argues, the latter attitude coalesces with Stevens's concepts of the "central man," the "human globe," and the "impossible possible philosopher's man" (52), as well as the idea of a human person stranded between constancy and diversity. The final sentences of this essay emphasize that the conviction of the ambiguous nature of the interconnections between poetry and philosophy is shared by both Stevens and Weiss.

In the last essay of Part One: "Reality Is Not a Solid. Poetic Transfigurations of Stevens' Fluid Concept of Reality," Jakub Mácha addresses the concept of the fluidity of reality in Stevens's poetic work. This delightfully meticulous study of the many realities that Stevens's poetry embodies: "initial reality (the external world of the common sense), imagined reality (a fiction, a product of one's mind), final reality (the object of a philosopher's and a poet's search) and total reality (the sum of all realities, Being)" (61), through its commitment to the poet's contemplation of Being, is also, finally, an acknowledgement of the value of employing Heidegger's perspective to interpret Stevensian poetic output. Whilst perhaps an unintended result, it is exceptionally meaningful as from the outset Mácha situates himself contra Simon Critchley (a zealous Heideggerian critic). Tracing the cornerstones of Stevens's poetics, Mácha's unrivalled precis of the many realities his poetry captures also embraces a study of the interlocking character of reality and imagination accomplished via an investigation of the analogies between the poet in question and Schelling. Pinpointing the closeness between Schelling's and Stevens's notions of imagination and reason, Mácha convinces us that Stevensian poetry can be viewed as an apt elucidation of Schelling's transcendental idealism (67). Expanding its already wide-ranging scope, Mácha's compelling survey also refers to S. T. Coleridge's poetry—the

critic notices the distinction between imagination and fancy that Stevens employs after Coleridge (70).

Part Two opens with Chris Genovesi's contribution: "Au Pays de la Métaphore: Wallace Stevens and Interaction Theory." Spanning an impressive assemblage of thinkers, from Aristotle, Kant, Locke and Hobbes, to Max Blank, Paul Ricœur and Carl R. Hausman, the essay tackles the issue of metaphor's capacity for creating meaning. This remarkably thorough account of the varied philosophical positions at play here culminates in a reflection on Stevens's definition of metaphor as *metamorphosis*. Genovesi makes it clear that the acquiescing of resemblance to the benefit of reality's transformation is the crux of Stevens's take on metaphor: "Through metaphor, reality is transformed and enhanced. It is made 'brilliant.' Importantly, Stevens notes that resemblance is a desire 'to enjoy reality' and that this desire is 'the desire for elegance' (Stevens 1960, 78)" (104). Although Genovesi does not allocate much space to Ricœur's philosophical interrogation of metaphorical language, this part of the essay seems to be outstandingly illuminative in terms of the transition element in Stevens's outlining of metaphor. Ricœur's in-depth analysis, hinging upon the word's etymology (*meta-phora*, "*phora*" meaning movement) (Ricœur 18), contributes to the conceptualization of metaphor as a vehicle taking us to a reconfigured reality. Genovesi's engaging explication of metaphor's transformative power demonstrates that the gist of its functioning lies in a capability to re-describe, reconfigure, and reshape our reality.

In "Resemblance and Identity in Wallace Stevens' Conception of Metaphor," Richmond Kwesi maintains that Stevens's concept of metaphor is predicated on resemblance rather than identity. He introduces us to Stevens's short but telling rendering of metaphor as "[c]reation of resemblance by the imagination" (113). Situating Kwesi's essay at this point in the book is definitely a well-grounded move. Kwesi picks up where Genovesi, the previous contributor, left off. For Kwesi, the Stevensian conceptualization of metaphor as metamorphosis offers a possibility to grasp the movement which occurs in it. The interplay of resemblance and identity in metaphor that Stevens advocates is spelled out by Kwesi in the following manner: "rather than thinking of the 'is' (identity) of metaphor as an 'as' (resemblance), for Stevens, the 'as' (resemblance) of metaphor metamorphosize into an 'is' (identity)" (113). Significantly, the critic highlights Stevens's proclivity to include unlikeness and dissimilarity as legitimate constituents of metaphor, and explicates their import in the following way:

Stevens' emphasis on the creation of resemblances by the imagination locates metaphor within the creative industry: metaphor is a cognitive phenomenon. As much as metaphor trades on similarities, often it is the

case that metaphor also reflects dissimilarities between things, or allows us to “create similarities” (Black 1962: 37) where none has hitherto been recognized. (118)

In this thorough investigation of metaphor’s “resourcefulness,” Kwesi refers to numerous critics, including Max Black, David Punter and Dawn G. Blasko. Inasmuch as his account stresses the poet’s avowal of metaphor’s innovatory power, it does justice to his passion for metaphor’s freedom. He writes that, for Stevens, “poetry does not proscribe certain metaphorical expressions; poetry does not set out rules to distinguish the use and abuses of metaphors; poetry does not determine the aptness and correctness of metaphors” (119).

Ondrej Beran’s essay, entitled “Metaphor as That Which Makes us See,” sensitizes us to an apparently facile but exceptionally significant truth. Following Iris Murdoch’s conviction that “art awakens us to the reality we tend to overlook, engaged as we are with our fantasies” (139), the critic asserts Stevens’s conception of metaphor as that which aligns the seemingly unlikely and invites to see differently. Undoubtedly, the newness of seeing is the product of imagination, and thus the creative process that is triggered expands our understanding of reality. The freshness of seeing, which is accomplished through metaphorical language, alerts us to the wholly unexpected. The salient contention of seeing-as (seeing anew) is also prompted here by recourse to Wittgenstein. Beran stresses metaphor’s potential for rendering that which is overlooked, and for making us marvel at the new connections expressive of resemblance rather than imitation: “Metaphor then consists in finding, to put it in Wittgenstein’s (1980: I., § 72, 73) words, a ‘fitting word’ (*zutreffendes Wort*) that would convey the import to a person who doesn’t see and that would make her see” (151). The fittingness conveys the capacity of metaphor to transcend the barrier of the cursory, in which the play of imagination begets a new, but also more adequate, comprehension of reality.

The book is rounded off with Kacper Bartczak’s “Wallace Stevens’s Spirituality of the Metaphorical Inhabitation of the World.” This essay scrutinizes the interconnections between Stevens’s poetic activity as an exploration of reality and his attitude to religion. Bartczak reminds us that Stevens’s poetics was “developed in part as a response to a religious crisis that he experienced as a young man, more or less at the beginning of his poetic road” (159). The poet’s waning belief in a religious explanation of the world, viewed as a meaningful catalyst for the creation of poetry, inspires Bartczak to interrogate the Stevensian take on metaphor as “a space of epistemological and spiritual risk” (160). The poet’s own words, “Men feel that the imagination is the next greatest power to faith” (161), illuminate

the import of his shift from the doxa of traditional religion to poetry's creative propensity. However, the reshaped religious motifs can be traced, for instance, in Stevens's poem "The Rock," in which, as Bartczak explains, "the initial examination of the ruin leads to a resuscitation of a power that is central to any religious project and is perceived as a renewable resource" (166). With the backdrop of Daniel Davidson's critical reflection, encapsulated in his "What Metaphor Means," Bartczak makes the inseparability of spirituality and metaphorical language in Stevens clear and engrossing. He writes:

Let us pause at the "new account" trope. This kind of knowledge is at the heart of Stevens's achieved synthesis of rhetoric and spirituality: it is a regained, actively developed sense of one's real that is inseparable from the rhetorical force with which the poem shifts the earlier cognitive structures. For Stevens, to be alive means to inhabit one's space through a rhetorically active gesture of re-description. (168)

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Employing diverse critical voices—Davidson, Rorty, Wheeler, to mention just a few—the book's final paper deepens the analysis of metaphor conducted here. It manifests Part Two's extensive and coherent inquest into what constitutes metaphorical language.

In lieu of a conclusion, one must emphasize that *Wallace Stevens: Poetry, Philosophy, and the Figurative Language* is an enriching intellectual journey into the intersections and cross-fertilizations of poetry and philosophy. This volume provides a convincing account of the two sides of the issue of the proximity between poetic and philosophical discourse in Stevens's works. Despite its profound interest in the matters of reality, human beings and Being, on the basis of which Stevens's poetry might be viewed as philosophically oriented and suffused, the poet himself advocates that a stark distinction be made between poetry and philosophy. On the other hand, the various critical perspectives presented here demonstrate the distinctly philosophical character of his poetic works, even if avowing their vexing genesis and *telos*.

The philosophically and poetically underwritten standpoint—Ricoeur's definition of metaphor as "a microcosm of poetic discourse" (104) which can be seen as Stevens's poetic dictum, too—provides a noteworthy transition between the two parts of the volume. The centrality of metaphor to Stevens's understanding of poetry prompts a continuous exploration of the nooks and crannies of metaphor's phenomenal nature. Riveting in its sweep and meticulous in its survey, Part Two extends the usual spectrum of the linguistic research into metaphor as a rhetoric device, by bringing phenomenological and hermeneutic

approaches into play. This impressive and capacious inquiry illustrates the riches of the imaginative potential of metaphor in an accessible way, as well as the vicissitudes of researching it.

Unquestionably, the essays selected for the two parts of the book are prescient contributions to Stevensian scholarship, and, by extension, to an ongoing debate about the poetry and philosophy belonging together. Inspiring us to probe deeply into Stevens's poems, and to discover and re-discover the beauty and fullness of metaphorical language, *Wallace Stevens: Poetry, Philosophy, and the Figurative Language* is indispensable reading for anyone drawn to poetry's captivating ways of unveiling unexpected realities.

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## Systemic Intertextuality. A Morphogenetic Perspective

# ABSTRACT

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If late modern literary production is structured by any principles rendering order to the otherwise nebular character of the process, this is the idea of intertextuality that paves the way for the dissolution of well entrenched structures, literary conventions and institutionalized canons. By fostering and facilitating the erosion of boundaries between elite and popular culture, mechanisms of intertextuality show that literature is not only a fixed collection of texts, but also a dynamic social system including structured practices of production and reception together with their institutional, cultural and technological determinants. The paper aims to provide a sociologically-oriented model of intertextual relations taking place within the social system of literature. In this context, circulation, dissemination, and recycling of literary motifs is viewed from a perspective of morphogenetic processes which result in the structural elaboration and systemic change due to the mobilization of social, cultural, and economic capitals in an effort to alter pre-existent practices of signification. Consequently, literature is discussed as an intertextual system *in statu nascendi*, a sphere of social practices that knows no sense of institutional boundaries or structural constraints.

**Keywords:** intertextuality, system theory, structuration, morphogenesis, social capital, cultural capital.

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## INTRODUCTION: METASTASIS AND MORPHOGENESIS

The notion of intertextuality has enjoyed a long history of academic interest in the fields of literary theory, cultural studies, and sociology of literature. With its origins in the writings of Russian Formalists, the term reverberated in Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of dialogism, as well as late structuralist writings of Gérard Genette, just to be explicitly voiced in Julia Kristeva's poststructuralist re-conceptualization. Regardless of its intellectual origins, the notion of intertextuality is always deployed in order to conceptualize the literary text as a nebular collection of citations and cross-references to other works of culture. Consequently, rather than perceiving it as a finished product, the text is conceived of as an open-ended system *in statu nascendi*.

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When expressed in sociological terms, our idea of intertextuality gestures towards the networked nature of social-cultural reality, and the intertext itself may be a shorthand term “for culture of endless deconstruction and reconstruction; for polity geared towards the instant processing of new values and public moods; and for a social organisation aiming at the suppression of space and the annihilation of time” (Castells, *The Rise of Network Society* 501–02). This is not to postulate that the said terms could be used interchangeably, but merely to signal—in a very Bakhtinian fashion—that intertextual relations are inherently historical; namely, embedded within specific forms of social systems, such as network society. In other words, intertextuality is a concept that aims to explain the late modern culture of endless recycling and repetition in which all fixed distinctions, including traditional boundaries between elite and popular culture, are no longer functional or legitimate.

Following Bakhtin's theory, this article wishes to put forward a sociologically-oriented model of intertextual processes that may be deployed in order to characterize the circulation of literary motifs in highly networked societies. Although providing a fully-fledged taxonomy of all conceptualizations of intertextuality goes well beyond the scope of this paper, our argument focuses on the distinction between structural and systemic conceptualizations. Following the aforementioned dichotomy, one is able to observe that our understanding of intertextual relationships involves seeing them either as semiotic cross-references rooted in the synchronic system of language or, conversely, in terms of human experiences and sensibilities that clash and blend in the changeable realities of dialogical networks.

The structural (or structural-metastatic) conceptualization focuses on the capacity of language structures to produce signifying chains

that render the formation of intertextual relationships possible: “the signifying chain produces texts which carry with them the recollection of the intertextuality which nourishes them” (Eco 24). In other words, the conceptualization is based on the idea of intertextuality as a semiotic potentiality whereby the solid structure of language supplies rules and resources for the circulation of isolated signs and entire literary motifs. Such a possibilistic viewpoint inevitably involves seeing the literary text as a “differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces” (Derrida 81). This differential network is viewed as a disembodied site of textual interrelations, a structure in the strong (i.e. Durkheimian and de Saussurean) meaning of the term. One is, therefore, able to perceive intertextuality as a feature of the language code rooted in the distribution of symbolic relationships that happens objectively; namely, without the reader’s conscious participation in the process. “The structure of an organism exists independently of its functioning in a certain specific sense: the parts of the body can be studied when the organism dies, that is, when it has stopped ‘functioning’” (Giddens, *Central Problems in Social Theory* 61). The same observation may apply to the structural perspective on intertextuality: intertextual relations are perceived to dwell in the space of textual potentialities; that is, to exist independently of their actual functioning in the dialogical sphere of human communication and association.

Following the aforementioned postulates, one is tempted to observe that the circulation of textual resources is of a somewhat metastatic character, producing an impression that the flow of literary motifs takes place within the otherwise solid character of language structures. As derived from the Proto-Indo-European root “sta-“ (i.e. to stand, to be firm, to be still), an oncological concept of metastasis seems most adequate to metaphorically render the paradox of intertextuality. The oxymoronic combination of *meta* + *stasis* (i.e. beyond stillness) shows that—though conceptualized as a solid structure—the differential network of signifying chains produces movement as if literary traces were granted an innate power to migrate from one text to another.

On the other hand, one may refer to the systemic-morphogenetic conceptualization in which it is postulated that societal mechanisms of communication produce the effect of intertextuality. Rather than perceiving them as a potentiality of communication code, the systemic-morphogenetic perspective shows that intertextual relations evolve as a network of actual interactions in which, to use Bakhtin’s terminology, “a word is a bridge thrown between myself and another” (Bakhtin and Voloshinov 20). In this specific context, the stress is laid on the societal actuality of human communication which produces chains of dialogical

interactions. "All utterances are responses to previous utterances and are addressed to specific addressees. It is this addressivity of the word and utterance . . . which must be the central focus of the study of language" (Allen 20).

This particular understanding gestures towards an idea of morphogenesis; namely, a process of systemic changes due the reoccurrence of individual practices (Archer). In this specific case, "the use of the term 'morphogenesis' to describe the process of *social structuring*; 'morpho' indicating shape, and 'genesis' signalling that the shaping is the product of *social relations*" (Archer 166, emphasis mine). When observed from a perspective of intertextuality, the addressivity of language makes sense only when one sees the interconnectivity of literary motifs in the context of individual actions that produce social systems of dialogic communication. Relational signification chains that pave the way for intertextual relations must be elaborated in social processes of communication, involving knowledge and experience sharing, formation of dialogic communities, and horizontal structures of interpersonal interaction. If it was not for the practice of everyday communication, textual possibilities would be left dormant in the potentially infinite reservoir of language.

Concluding these introductory remarks, one could observe that literary metastasis is a logical precondition for literary morphogenesis as the terms represent the dual nature of intertextual processes. Interaction, dialogue, circulation of literary motifs depend on the existence of shared communication codes which, in turn, are not given any other conceivable mode of existence apart from the actuality of social communication.

If we think of any empirical event or phenomenon in a society, anything that is actually happening, is it not always, without exception, a fusion of structures and agents, of operation and action? Show me an agent who is not enmeshed in some structure. Show me a structure which exists apart from individuals. Show me an action which does not participate in societal operation. Show me societal operation not resolving into action. There are neither structureless agents nor agentless structures. (Sztompka, *Society in Action* 92)

This duality focuses on our idea of intertextuality as an interplay between textual potentialities and their selective usage (or distribution) in actual communication. The latter understanding seems especially conducive for analyses focusing on the role of extra-textual factors (e.g., social networks, financial resources, etc.) in fostering intertextual relations, as it is the case when symbolic resources are breaking the boundaries that used to separate elite and popular culture. In the reality of network society, elite institutions, grass-roots movements (e.g., subcultures), and culture

industry are mere nodes in the system of flows, including literary themes, capital, and human resources. The underlying “politics of circulation” (Beer) cannot be effectively explored by researching into the model of intertextuality based on purely structural relations. Consequently, one has to refer to more sociologically-oriented conceptualizations to provide a topography of networked intertextuality. The conspicuous predecessor for such a model of intertextual relations is Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism.

## ON THE SHOULDERS OF BAKHTIN

The morphogenetic perspective on intertextuality drives us away from the Durkheimian understanding of the literary text as a social fact *sui generis*; that is, a product of culture that originates in “a relation between two or more texts established through their origins in common codes or through references, echoes or traces” (Kalaga 61). Therefore, one could say that a sociologically-oriented perspective on intertextuality involves interpreting the notion in terms of dialogical practices of literary interpretation and production. In this specific sense, the literary text is a product of social processes of conflict and negotiation that take place in the public sphere understood as a deliberative space of communication, an arena of thought in which different voices come to create the polyphony of cultural production (Habermas). Historically speaking, such a conceptualization is greatly indebted to Bakhtin’s persistence in conceptualizing the literary text from a perspective of the historicity of communication systems:

Not only the meaning of the utterance but also the very fact of its performance is of historical and social significance, as, in general, is the fact of its realization in the here and now, in given circumstances, at a certain historical moment, under the conditions of the given social situation. The very presence of the utterance is historically and socially significant. (Bakhtin and Medvedev 120)

Dialogism, stressing the social situatedness of meaningful interactions, is a prerequisite for our systemic-morphogenetic understanding of intertextuality. Even the simplest utterance, not to mention a literary work of art, is given meaning within a specified time-space; it is intertwined within a significant network of social practices and contextual circumstances, including a plethora of political, economic or ideological considerations. More significantly, texts are dialogic, which means that words are given meaning only as a part of everyday practices comprising the flow of the

social *Lebenswelt*: “Language acquires life and historically evolves . . . in concrete verbal communication, and not in the abstract linguistic system of language, nor in the individual psyche of speakers” (Bakhtin and Voloshinov 19).

As opposed to the structuralist conceptualization, in which the system of language is given an abstract status of a social fact *sui generis*, the Bakhtinian understanding of language assumes the societal properties of reciprocity and dialogism as a foundation of communication system that paves the way for literary production:

the word is not a material thing but rather the eternally mobile, eternally fickle medium of dialogic interaction. It never gravitates toward a single consciousness or a single voice. The life of the word is contained in its transfer from one mouth to another, from one context to another context, from one social collective to another, from one generation to another generation. In this process the word does not forget its own path and cannot completely free itself from the power of those concrete contexts into which it has entered. When a member of a speaking collective comes upon a word, it is not as a neutral word of language, not as a word free from the aspirations and evaluations of others, uninhabited by others’ voices. No, he receives the word from another’s voice and filled with that other voice. The word enters his context from another context, permeated with the interpretations of others. His own thought finds the word already inhabited. (Bakhtin 201)

The qualities of reciprocity and dialogism logically presuppose a system whose function is to foster and facilitate the repeatable, institutional character of symbolic communication. Words are shared, meanings are dispersed and distributed across the social tissue, providing individuals and collective agents with texts (i.e. textual forms of expression) that can never be seen as their own appropriations since they all reside in the shared system of communication and exchange (Burzyński, *Between the Stage and the Text*).

When seen from a perspective of Bakhtin’s theory, the system of language is viewed as an entity *in statu nascendi* due to its historical situatedness in the changeable flow of communicative practices. This form of transformability occurs as morphogenetic processes of systemic elaboration and transformation due to organized social practices. The same could be said of intertextuality: rather than being anchored in the abstract properties of the language structure, the term is conceived of as a coefficient to the evolving network of interpersonal communication in which the exchange of texts is a matter of agential participation in the system of reciprocal interaction.

## LITERATURE AS A SOCIAL SYSTEM

Bakhtin's understanding of dialogism as a quality shrouded in historicity and reciprocity of interpersonal interaction paves the way for our attempt to conceptualize literature in terms of its systemic nature. The systemic perspective is based on an assumption that literature is not only a collection of self-contained texts, but it also comprises a plethora of mediatory mechanisms whose existence renders intertextual relationships possible. The mediatory mechanisms—such as communication technologies, marketing and advertising, political ideologies—facilitate the circulation of literary motifs, forming symbolic relationships between key institutions of late modern society; namely, the citizen-state, the market, and the sphere of public communication (Lee and LiPuma).

Understanding literature in terms of a social system pays its intellectual debts to Jürgen Habermas's conceptualization of the literary public sphere as an inclusive space of unrestricted debate in which participants are in a position to take part in discussions of art and literature, exercising their right to associate in a form of grass-roots organizations (Habermas). Rules of interpersonal communication (i.e. communicative rationality), or patterns of meaning negotiation are not superimposed upon the participants: on the contrary, as predicted by Archer's theory of morphogenesis, they emerge spontaneously as by-products of repeatable, routinized interactions. Consequently, to refer to Bakhtin's viewpoint one more time, one can observe that the circulation of interpretations comes in the wake of the shared axiology that facilitates reciprocity, trust and an attitude of benevolence towards the Other. "The words we select in any specific situation have an 'otherness' about them: they belong to specific speech genres, they bear the traces of previous utterances. They are also directed towards specific 'others,' specific addressees" (Allen 21).

The social system, as Giddens puts it in *The Constitution of Society*, could be understood in terms of a structured organization of social practices that are reproduced in time and space. Our intention is to deploy a similar methodology and to see literature in terms of social practices of signification that bind time and space by means of subsuming individuals (e.g., artists, literary critics, readers), social groups (e.g., social movements, avant-garde movements) and institutions (e.g., educational institutions, publishing houses) within the shared spectrum of practices aiming at the creation and dissemination of artistic and cognitive values. Thusly understood, the social system of literature focuses on both isolated social practices and systemic processes of their reproduction. Moreover, the same qualities render a morphogenetic understanding of intertextuality possible.

Firstly, the notion of intertextuality draws our attention to social practices by which diversified literary texts are engaged in the network of social associations that bind past readings (or interpretations) and present activities within the shared interpretative horizon. In this sense, literary texts are symbolic resources deployed by individuals (and social groups) in their daily exercise of participation in culture. Systemic intertextuality is understood in a purely processual manner as mutually oriented social practices that engage individuals of diversified social backgrounds into relationships of conflict and negotiations in which literary texts are used as symbolic tokens mobilized to create new artistic qualities or achieve other social values.

Secondly, the practice-related nature of the literary social system underscores the role of reproduction processes in recognizing its dynamic character. If our idea of intertextuality preserves a sense of continuity between a number of texts, it is also evident that this sort of continuity must be elaborated upon, worked out in a series of meaning-formation practices. Consequently, the systemic-morphogenetic perspective on intertextuality gestures towards the dilemma of agency and structure, continuity and change, tradition and innovation in the existence of culture conceived of as a sphere of organized human practices (Burzyński, “The Surplus of Structure”). On the one hand, social practices of signification do not take place in a symbolic void but, contrariwise, are immersed in the shared universe of literary motifs, symbols, themes, or clichés. In this sense, Roland Barthes’s postulate of the literary text as a “tissue of past citations” pays homage to the spirit of continuity. On the other hand, however, practices of signification are concerned with the societal actuality of communication practices “in which both the debate of the subject and the Other, and the social context, are invested in the same movement” (Barthes 36). In the context of intertextual processes, agents who produce cultural texts are simultaneously structured (or produced) by the very act of their participation in the shared socio-cultural reality. The latter observation brings about the idea of culture as shrouded in duality:

it may be said that from the vantage point of action there exists a parallel “duality of culture.” On the one hand, culture provides a pool of resources of action that draws from it the values to set its goals, the norms to specify the means, the symbols to furnish it with meaning, the codes to express its cognitive content, the frames to order its components, the rituals to provide it with continuity and sequence and so forth. In brief culture supplies action with axiological, normative and cognitive orientation. . . . On the other hand, action is at the same time creatively shaping and reshaping culture, which is not God-given, constant, but rather must be seen as an accumulated product, or preserved sediment of earlier individual and collective action. (Sztompka, *Trust* 3–4)



The systemic-morphogenetic perspective shows that intertextual processes bridge the gap between the subjectivity of one's actions and the objective character of literary heritage understood as a pool of already published resources. In other words, intertextuality, as it were, stands astride between the creativeness of interpretation, as well as the rigidity of language and cultural structures.

## HIGH CULTURE GOES POP. A MORPHOGENETIC PERSPECTIVE

The systemic-morphogenetic perspective shows that intertextuality is not merely a "tissue of past quotations," but a tissue of conflicting human experiences, sensibilities and interests given shape in the medium of language. As a result of ongoing social practices, intertextual processes engages both texts and agents who deploy their resources in order to orchestrate the circulation of literary motifs within or between established systems of signification, such as high and popular culture.

Dissolving the boundaries between systems of signification is far from being a purely semiotic process as it involves conflicts and negotiations in which agents struggle to mobilize resources in order to interfere into the existing system of intertextual relations. This postulate supplies the systemic-morphogenetic perspective with yet another observation: the tissue of intertextual relations is hierarchized, which means that certain quotations are repeated more frequently than other references. Nevertheless, this form of hierarchization cannot be derived directly from the shared communication code as it has no innate power to determine the distribution of symbolic resources in the actual use of language. Logically, intertextual processes are orchestrated by the fact that agents participating in the literary social system are granted uneven capacities to mobilize textual and extra-textual resources. Agents involved in the social system of literature deploy resources in order to take part in processes of converting certain values into different ones, as it is the case with converting texts of elite culture into egalitarian products associated with the existence of mass-mediated forms of pop culture. Given the transformational character of the system, it seems that the notion of capital best renders its dynamic capacities (as in the case of converting human labor into economic surplus). In their efforts to influence the distribution of textual references, actors (i.e. individuals and institutions) may deploy three types of resources: financial capital (the market), cultural capital (educational institutions, government regulatory bodies, etc.), social capital (social movements, grass-roots organizations, etc.).

When intertextuality is perceived from a perspective of diminishing boundaries between high and popular culture, the element of financial capital is of primary importance as it responds to the marketability of mass-mediated forms of art. In this case, one is able to address, as it were, “predatory intertextuality” in which patterns of elite culture are becoming captured, simplified and subsequently re-introduced as homogenized products of mass culture. Predictably, the role of the culture industry is concerned with exerting control over those communication technologies that function as mediatory mechanisms of intertextuality. As opposed to local folk cultures, whose existence is based on exchanging ideas by means of horizontal social ties, the corporate culture industry promotes a hierarchical model of circulation in which the global supply of standardized mass products is fostering the one-to-many model of communication that leaves individuals utterly deprived of opportunities to creatively engage into the circulation of symbolic goods.

In the reality of networkable technologies, social capital proves itself to be a type of resource that may equally enable the demise of boundaries between already existing forms of culture, facilitating the development of intertextual and inter-media processes. Understood as norms and values that propel grass-roots associations (Putnam), social capital is most evident in forms of spontaneous cultural production in which groups of independent artists participate in creating works of literature via the medium of the Internet. This is especially conducive for literary genres that involve collaborative writing (e.g., digital poetry, literary blogosphere, interactive fiction), fostering the formation of online literary communities. Due to the unprecedented capacity of networkable communities to address global audiences, online artists are able to popularize their projects without being forced to invest considerable financial resources into the process. By fostering global online communities, viral spreading of literary texts or themes, spontaneous grass-roots activities may challenge publishing and broadcasting corporations by converting elite texts into more popular narratives that circulate in cyberspace, inspiring myriads of elite and popular artists.

The significance of finances and social capital for the formation of intertextual relationships increases concomitantly with the decrease in the role of cultural capital in reinforcing the traditional boundaries between elite and popular culture. When defined in terms of material and symbolic assets which are conventionally valued as factors promoting social mobility (Bourdieu), institutional cultural capital is observable as the authority of institutions that seek to exert influence on the distribution of cultural goods by evoking the aura of tradition, good taste or a notion of artistic canon. The dissolution of cultural capital occurs most conspicuously in

the reality of post-traditional culture in which “social forms (structures that limit individual choices, institutions that guard repetitions of routines, patterns of acceptable behavior) can no longer (and are not expected) to keep their shape for long, because they decompose and melt faster than the time it takes to cast them” (Bauman 1). This openly mercurial reality privileges the mobilization of economic and social capital over the stillness of institutional authorities embodied by literary canons or other forms of limitation set upon the system of literature.

## IN PLACE OF CONCLUSIONS

Ours is a dynamic, changeable world in which traditional forms of cultural production are subject to metamorphic transformations (Beck) due to the still increasing supply of networkable technologies, globalization, and growing skepticism in metanarratives. Culture, as Manuel Castells aptly concludes,

was historically produced by symbolic interaction in a given space/time. With time being annihilated and space becoming a space of flows, where all symbols coexist without reference to experience, culture becomes . . . an interactive network in the electronic hypertext, mixing everything, and voiding the meaning of any specific message out of this context. (“Materials” 21)

This paves the way for a paradigm shift in the field of theorizing intertextuality, a movement from the structural-metastatic conceptualization towards a systemic-morphogenetic notion. In the latter understanding, intertextuality is an effect of networked practices of signification that constitute the social system of literature. Following Bakhtin’s formative theory, it shows that intertextuality is a matter of historically-specific interactions, conflicts and negotiations that bind agents who perform their roles in the social system of literature by means of drawing from the multiplicity of textual resources and navigating across spatial, temporal and virtual topographies of social life.

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## “Sardoodledom” on the English Stage: T. W. Robertson and the Assimilation of Well-Made Play into the English Theatre

# ABSTRACT

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The article discusses a vital figure in the development of modern English theatre, Thomas William Robertson, in the context of his borrowings, inspirations, translations and adaptations of the French dramatic formula *pièce bien faite* (well-made play). The paper gives the definition and enumerates features of the formula created with great success by the French dramatist Eugène Scribe. Presenting the figure of Thomas William Robertson, the father of theatre management and realism in Victorian theatre, the focus is placed on his adaptations of French plays and his incorporation of the formula of the well-made play and its conventional dramatic devices into his original, and most successful, plays, *Society* and *Caste*. The paper also examines the critical response to the well-made play in England and dramatists who use its formula, especially from the point of view of George Bernard Shaw, who famously called the French plays of Scribe and Victorien Sardou—“Sardoodledom.”

**Keywords:** Thomas William Robertson, well-made play, Eugène Scribe, *pièce bien faite*, Shaw.

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Thomas William Robertson has gone down in the history of English theatre as the father of early realistic plays, later mockingly called “cup-and-saucer” dramas for their exaggerated, from a modern perspective, attention to details in the set design. Most critics consider him to be the first *modern* English dramatist, viewing his collaboration with the Bancrofts’ company as marking a new era in English theatre (Rowell 75). As some critics point out, before Robertson no one had “a governing idea of a play in the mind of one person” (Barrett qtd. in Epplett 167). It was unprecedented for an artistic director (who was not an actor in the play) to devote himself entirely to the observation and management of the rehearsals. It was his based on mutual understanding and highly successful collaboration with the Bancrofts<sup>1</sup> at the Prince of Wales’s Theatre which enabled the development of stage management in England (Epplett 167–68). With Robertson the great era of dramatist-directors, such as Gilbert, Pinero and Shaw, who dominated the late Victorian theatre, was initiated. What is more, as now critics are more likely to remember than they did in the past, it was Robertson, even before Ibsen’s influence, who brought realism (although in a different sense from our contemporary one) into a theatre dominated by melodrama, burlesque, French plays and the well-made play framework (Epplett 154).

Although it is acknowledged by critics and students that his plays do not have a deep intellectual quality, Robertson is remembered and appreciated for his significant contribution to English drama. However, not everyone knows that the great figure of Victorian realistic theatre is also responsible for bringing yet another disdainful term to English literary criticism, namely: “Sardoodledom.” It was created by George Bernard Shaw (*Our Theatres* 133), who was known for his scorn of so many nineteenth-century writers modelling themselves on Eugène Scribe’s and his disciple, Victorien Sardou’s formula of *pièce bien faite*. Shaw railed against the phenomenon:

Why the devil should a man write like Scribe when he can write like Shakespeare or Molière, Aristophanes or Euripides? Who was Scribe that he should dictate to me or anyone else how a play should be written? (qtd. in Stanton, “Shaw’s Debt to Scribe” 575)

Answering Shaw’s question, the French term, known to the researchers of English theatre as the well-made play, is a 19<sup>th</sup>-century French invention, which dominated their national theatre, and later had a huge impact on

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<sup>1</sup> Sir Squire Bancroft and his wife Marie Effie Wilton (Lady Bancroft) were both very famous actors and managers of the Prince of Wales’s Theatre and later the Haymarket Theatre.

the English one. In *The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama* under the entry “Well-made play” we read that it is a term “given to problem dramas, comedies of manners or farces written since about 1825 in France, England, the United States, and some other countries, which combine certain specific features in a seemingly logical and plausible manner of construction” (912–13).

The inventor and “father” of the form of *pièce bien faite* is Eugène Scribe (1791–1861). He was very successful in his day, while later the response to his plays was rather unfavourable. Most critics praised his technical skill, but his main aim—entertaining the audience—was often scorned (Gillespie 313). His first play appeared in 1815 and throughout his life he was persistent in concentrating on writing well-told stories that held audiences’ attention, producing around various 500 plays, his last in 1860s (Taylor 11).

One of the best known analyses of the formula of the well-made play is the one by Stephen S. Stanton. He puts forward the famous “seven structural features” of the well-made play:

- [1] a lively plot based on a secret which is withheld from most of the characters (but known to the audience) until the climactic scene . . . ;
- [2] a pattern of action and suspense, increasingly intensified . . . ;
- [3] a sustained conflict between the hero and his adversary, punctuated by a series of ups and downs in the hero’s fortunes; [4] the end of the conflict, marked by two sharply contrasted scenes, known as the peripeteia and the obligatory scene . . . ; [5] a central misunderstanding or *quiproquo*, made obvious to the spectator but kept from the participants; [6] logical and plausible dénouement; and [7] the reproduction of this overall action pattern in each individual act of the play. (“Scribe’s *Bertrand Et Raton*” 59)

Each act of the well-made play was produced according to these elements, in fact “each act of a well-made play is constructed like a miniature well-made play; that is, it passes from exposition to action, to seesaw and suspense, to reversal, *coup de theatre*, and resolution” (Stanton, “Shaw’s Debt to Scribe” 577).

Frequently, in well-made plays, the hero experiences a conflict between love and duty. He usually wants to marry a pretty but naïve girl and has some problems due to his entanglement with “an older and more wordly” woman with whom he wishes to break connections. The obligatory scene, named by the critic Francisque Sarcey *scène à faire*, represents the ups and downs of the hero’s fortunes; it is effected by a disclosure of the withheld secret and contains a usually quite trivial moral judgement in accordance with the standards of right and wrong that the audience believes in (“Well-made play” 912–13).



As for the action of the well-made play, it consists of attempts to overcome numerous obstacles, which are arranged “in ascending order of difficulty.” Each obstacle has two reversals, one favourable, the other unfavourable to the character; there are sometimes also near-solutions, which intensify the suspense in the play (Cardwell 878). In the course of action, there are also the so-called *scènes à faire*: that is, situations which are a direct confrontation between the protagonist and antagonist. They usually concern the decisive communication of a key piece of information. As Cardwell points out, the scene “is carefully prepared, highly dramatic, and, despite its structural importance, designed primarily for the emotional satisfaction of the audience” (878). In fact, as the well-made play authors from Scribe’s school admitted, the *scène à faire* was the point when writing a well-made play began, it was the “destination toward which the entire design of the play has been pointing” (Mazer 71). The *scène à faire* also has to contain moral judgement, which in the case of Scribe and his followers was quite trivial. Among the lessons that the audience could get from the well-made plays were for instance the notions that “marriages of convenience bring unhappiness,” “corruption and self-interest are ignoble,” “honesty and hard work are the keys to personal success” (Stanton, “Shaw’s Debt to Scribe” 578).

The common feature of his plays is plausibility, and a great deal of realism. The characters, the setting and the topics are all taken from the society of the time, and only the plot remains fictional. Among the “suspense-building devices of which he makes a skilful use” is the employment of many details from reality, contemporary manners, life-style and surroundings, and thus the great use of real stage properties, something that was an important innovation in stagecraft. Douglas Cardwell notices that Scribe corresponded closely to the actual spoken language of the day, and was transferring a part of reality to the stage in order to maintain plausibility and hold the spectators’ interest (881–84).

Scribe died in 1861, but his plays were still very popular in France and abroad, especially in Britain. Scribe’s disciples and followers such as Sardou or Labiche were still producing successful *pièces bien faites*, which English writers willingly translated and adapted. Describing the state of mid-Victorian theatre in his book about Thomas William Robertson, Maynard Savin states that

[i]t was Eugene Scribe who more than any other single person straitjacketed the English theater. His conspicuous success, based on a ratiocinative technique allied to bourgeois themes, convinced every dramatist that *la pièce bien faite* contained the secret of playwriting. Scribe’s enviable mastery of technique produced an eager school of followers, ready to

turn the Scribian formula to their own advantage . . . Thus Gallic example encouraged reliance on stock types and the mechanical manipulation of action to produce suspense. The resulting blight on the English stage lasted long. Translations and adaptations followed pell-mell. (5)

The young Thomas William Robertson was present on the English stage at this time. He came from a family strongly linked to theatre. He was the oldest son of William Robertson, an actor and theatre manager. His mother was also an actress. At the age of seven, in 1836, he was sent to Henry Young's Academy at Spaulding, and often tried his hand at acting, debuting with the role of Hamish in *Rob Roy* (Savin 20). He did not achieve much success as an actor. He debuted as a playwright in 1851 with *A Night's Adventure*, but it was only in 1864 when he staged *David Garrick* that he became popular, reaching the peak of popularity with the plays produced together with the Bancrofts for the Prince of Wales's Theatre (Rowell 75). The plays he wrote in the time of his mature career are referred to as the "big six" and include: *Society* (1865), *Ours* (1866), *Caste* (1867), *Play* (1868), *School* (1869), and *M. P.* (1870).

Before Robertson became a famous manager and playwright who had a great impact on the English stage, in the first phase of his career he devoted himself to the translation of French plays as "a last resort [to make money] and apprenticeship in dramaturgy" (Epplert 156). As Maynard Savin notes:

Robertson began by writing within the framework of the dominating tradition which in his time happened to consist of *la pièce bien faite*. Although he never abandoned the Scribian framework, from total subservience to foreign influence, he developed into a writer of native comedies through which ran a fragile vein of naturalness. (45)

Adapting the French plays of Scribe and his followers gave Robertson a good schooling in the well-made play formula. One of his first adaptations was *Chevalier de St. George* by Mélesville and Roger de Beauvoir, performed in 1845. Another of his famous translations was *Noémie*, a French play by Adolphe Dennery and Clément, performed in 1845. In 1851 Robertson translated Eugène Scribe and Ernest Legouvé's *Bataille de Dames*, the play which, often performed in England and America in the late nineteenth century, became a favourite of Scribe's plays and a vital source for many writers (Stanton, "Shaw's Debt to Scribe" 578).

He continued writing adaptations of French plays, gradually showing more and more creativity and developing his own style, and, as Savin notes, "unlike the vast number of his contemporaries . . . Robertson did develop from sheer acceptance of convention to original experimentation" (45). Working for dramatic publisher William Hailes Lacy he is believed to

have translated at least 16 plays (Epplett 155–56). In 1867 he adapted Victorien Sardou’s *Le Dégel*, and in 1869 he translated Émile Augier’s *L’Aventurière* and Sardou’s *Les Ganaches*. The adaptations were written in a conventional manner, on purpose not getting away from “the prevailing vogue” (Savin 57).

The first play for which he became known to a wider audience was still an adaptation of a French play, yet with noticeable alterations by the author. It is *David Garrick* (1864), a story about the famous eighteenth-century actor and theatre manager, strongly based on *Sullivan*, a three-act comedy by Méléville. After this commercial success he proceeded to writing his original plays, which made history for introducing the realism of middle class life and drawing room reality of the nineteenth century.

Robertson’s first play created in collaboration with the Bancrofts was *Society* (1865). As John Russell Taylor points out, “the great success of *Society* went far to type Robertson as writer of the sort of play by which he is now (if at all) remembered: the romantic comedy-drama of middle-class life” (23). Alfred Darbyshire, a Victorian architect, writing forty years after the premiere of the play, saw this as the beginning of a new era in the theatre:

The eleventh of November, 1865, was a memorable day in the history of the art of the English Stage. . . . A complete change was created in dramatic material, and a new order of actors was cast for its exposition. On that memorable night in November . . . a new order of histrionic art was established, which carried English men and women along like a torrent, and brought a financial reward to its struggling author and to those responsible for a plucky theatrical venture. The dramatic work of Robertson was the death blow to that conventionality which lingered as a legacy of the old school; henceforth, all was to be a reflex of human nature, in its joys and sorrows, framed in beautiful “mounting” and expounded by a new order of histrionic genius. (138–39)

The story is strongly based on the well-made play’s devices: a plot based on a secret and misunderstanding, a common melodramatic love-triangle and stereotyped characters, the *scène à faire*, use of curtain tableau and classic denouement with common *deus ex machina* solution. As the title of the play suggests it tells the story of a family who wants to gain social advancement. In order to do that John Chodd Junior runs in an election to Parliament and hires a barrister, Sidney Daryl, to conduct his “campaign.” He becomes interested in Daryl’s love interest, Maud Hetherington, much to the pleasure of Maud’s aunt, Lady Ptarmigan, who is in favour of the wealthier candidate. Due to a misunderstanding Maud also starts to doubt Daryl as she thinks that the child he takes care

of is in fact his own. Daryl hears at a gathering in Owls' Roots parlour that she is engaged to Chodd, and after a moment of despair confronts her at a ball at Lady Ptarmigant's. He also enters the Parliament election and wins over Chodd. In the final scenes the misunderstanding is resolved. Daryl's ward turns out to be Lady Ptarmigant's reckless son's child. Additionally, he suddenly comes into the inheritance of a substantial sum of money and is happily able to marry Maud.

With so many elements taken from standard French plays, Robertson nevertheless created an original and unprecedented play, mostly regarding dialogues, setting and acting. The dialogues were in opposition to the dominating style of rhetoric. Robertson's dialogues are characterized by unheard-before naturalness, however not without many soliloquies and asides (Taylor 21–22). The use of puns (the one on printer's devil in Act II scene I and the word "regalia" in scene II), allusions and contemporary slang, taken for instance from current newspaper issues, is a novelty. The deliberate misquotations from Tennyson and Shakespeare are proof of Robertson's attention to nuances of real speech and characters' behaviour (Hudston 226).

In connection with more naturalistic dialogues comes a more naturalistic way of acting. Robertson was strongly opposed to the previously dominant exaggerated style of actors like Irving and Tree (Rowell 82). His natural gift for guiding the actors can be observed in the memoirs of John Hare, himself an actor and theatre manager:

He had a gift peculiar to himself, and which I have never seen in any other author, of conveying by some rapid and almost electrical suggestion to the actor an insight into the character assigned to him. As nature was the basis of his own work, so he sought to make actors understand it should be theirs. He thus founded a school of natural acting which completely revolutionized the then existing methods, and by so doing did incalculable good to the stage. (Pemberton xxxi)

He was also aware of the non-verbal exposition of the actors and its role in the play. An example of that is the character of Sidney who enters the stage in Act II with a loose cuff link (which is specified in stage directions) which he fastens before the meeting with Chodd Junior. It makes a seemingly trifling comment on society, marriage and social class (Hudston 226).

Robertson also completely revolutionized the set of the play, insisting on truth to nature. Madge Kendal, Robertson's sister, recalls a situation connected with preparing the set for Owl's Roost, a public house in *Society*. Regardless of his father's critical opinion, Robertson insisted upon real hooks being screwed into the walls of the room onstage for the

actors to hang their coats (Savin 66). Despite some mixed reviews around the time of the première, in the long run the novelties drew the attention of audiences who were “accustomed to bombastic acting and furniture painted onto backdrops” (Epplett 166).

*Society* was the play with which Robertson achieved his first great success and made his name known in British theatre of the time. But it was *Caste* that made his name memorable in the whole history of theatre. It is because of the play’s incredibly detailed stage directions describing Polly preparing afternoon tea that Robertson’s plays earned the name “teacup-and-saucer.” Mr. Bancroft himself stated that “it was in *Caste* that we made a distinct stride towards realistic scenery. The rooms, for the first time, had ceilings, while such details as locks to doors, and similar matters, had never before been seen upon the stage” (qtd. in Pemberton 206).

*Caste* was based on a short story, “The Poor Rate unfolds a Tale,” written by Robertson in 1866 for a Christmas volume *Rates and Taxes* edited by Tom Hood (Pemberton 201). Its plot revolves around one of Robertson’s stock motifs—*mésalliance*—and some of his favorite characters: soldiers. Young officer George D’Alroy falls in love with a beautiful but poor ballet dancer Esther Eccles. Despite the warnings of his friend Captain Hawtree against “the inexorable law of caste” that “forbids a giraffe to fall in love with a squirrel” he marries Esther. Because of their poverty and the fact that Esther’s father is a drunkard, the young couple worries about the reaction of D’Alroy’s mother, the aristocrat Marquise De St. Maur, to their marriage. Not long after their marriage, George is sent to the front and killed. Esther comes back to her family house and struggles to take care of her child. She rejects the Marquise’s offer of taking the child away from her. In the last act it turns out that George was not killed and the play ends by happily bringing together two young couples: Esther and George, and Esther’s sister Polly with Sam Gerridge.

The play is a mixture of comedy and melodrama praised by most critics for “the air of naturalness” (Taylor 25). Robertson achieved this not only by using real and detailed scenery of a drawing room, but mostly by, even more skillful than in *Society*, handling of the dialogues and characters. In the dialogues we can find many strokes of irony; they are mostly short, the utterances are straightforward, but again not without quite a few asides and soliloquies. The portrayal of characters from *Caste* is probably the most successful element of the play. Inspired by the French play *Noémie*, Robertson took the idea of two contrasting feminine roles, one romantic and the other more bold, and made them two sisters in *Caste*: Esther Eccles is delicate and sentimental, while Polly Eccles gives the impression of a simple, but good-hearted, country girl, more straightforward and brusque. The heads of the two families are also very sharply contrasted.

On the one side we find Eccles, the drunkard who avoids work as much as he can. He was played by George Honey—an actor of the old school of acting, which Robertson opposed; however, he adjusted the role specifically for Honey as he often did when the actors wanted to contribute to the part in their own way (Donohue 19–20). Eccles turned out to be one of the most successful and remembered of Robertson’s characters. On the other side there is Marquise De St. Maur, a dignified lady, terrified at the prospect of her son going down the social ladder by his marriage. They are both united by a certain comic spirit and exaggeration of a kind: Eccles, with his persistent efforts to get money for drinking without work, and Marquise, with her persistence in talking about her family roots and often quoting “The Chronicles of Froissart.”

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In terms of construction *Caste* has a standard well-made structure. It has three acts, each ending with a very significant event in the characters’ lives presented in a highly emotional way, and opening with a totally different situation showing a reversal in the characters’ lives, presented by an opening tableau. The use of sentimental tableau is very common in Robertson’s works, as Anthony Jenkins notices, they “present a gallery of Academy genre painting . . . conducive to tears and gentle laughter” (88).

The play opens with an exposition: D’Alroy and Hawtree’s visit to Esther’s house. There is the withheld secret when the audience learns from George’s asides and his conversation with Hawtree a piece of information that Esther is not aware of yet—that her husband is going to India. In Act III the scenes of *peripeteia*, *scène à faire* and denouement are combined. At the beginning of Act III the audience immediately learns about the reversal in Esther’s fortunes. She is back in her family house with her baby, in mourning, because her husband is dead. The *scène à faire* happens completely unexpectedly and in Robertson’s style of “cup-and-saucer drama.” While drinking tea Polly realizes that there is no milk in the house, but fortunately there comes a milkman, who turns out to be the allegedly dead George. To increase tension in the viewers the moment before Esther learns about her husband’s arrival is prolonged. The denouement and the final scene is highly melodramatic and idyllic. All the characters who had been adversaries throughout the whole play are reconciled in a “forget-and-forgive” manner. Hawtree and Gerridge shake hands, the Marquise forgives Esther and finally calls her daughter, George and Esther embrace and kiss while Polly plays the piano, and George throws away Esther’s mourning cap.

Robertson’s achievements were viewed in an ambiguous way shortly after his death and this attitude has not changed much over the years. He had an undeniable flair for what he was doing and wanted to breathe some fresh air into the theatre of his times. Anthony Jenkins evokes

the author’s request at the premiere of *Dreams* (1869) for his play not to be staged “after the manner of Melodrama” when in fact it is a melodrama similar to the plays of the past thirty years in Victorian theatre. Robertson’s characters are “theatrical types . . . but their muted dialogue allows the actors scope for invention and psychological surprise as together they recreate a seemingly accidental and everyday flow within the old fabric of climactic tableaux, dramatic confrontations, and thunderous revelations” (Jenkins 73–74). In fact, Jenkins admits that Robertson’s plays

look backward across thirty-five years of moving pictures and heroic idealism. Robertson’s lasting reputation rests on *Caste*, whose characters do occasionally behave as they might in the southern suburbs, and on his revolutionary influence upon the actors and actresses of his day. He helped them break free of the theatre’s own conventions and the star system, opened them to new ways of looking at character, and taught them how much of a play’s meaning lay between the lines of dialogue. (92)

In 1897 George Bernard Shaw had the opportunity to see the revival of Robertson’s *Caste* and wrote a review of the piece. He takes the critical position of “enjoying the play, but not defending it” (“Robertson Redivivus” 229). He calls *Caste* “an epoch-making play,” “a very little epoch and a very little play” yet not without serious significance (228). Shaw recalls the eagerness with which *Caste* was received at the time of its first production, and pinpoints that “after years of sham heroics and superhuman balderdash, *Caste* delighted every one by its freshness, its nature, its humanity” (229). Then, he points out the change of perception of the play in more “modern” times:

“Nature! Freshness!” you will exclaim. “In Heaven’s name (if you are not too modern to have heard of Heaven) where is there a touch of nature in *Caste*?” I reply, “In the windows, in the doors, in the walls, in the carpet, in the ceiling, in the kettle, in the fireplace, in the ham, in the tea, in the bread and butter, in the bassinet, in the hats and sticks and clothes, in the familiar phrases, the quiet, unpumped, everyday utterance: in short, the common-places that are now spumed because they are common-places, and were then inexpressibly welcome because they were the most unexpected of novelties.” (“Robertson Redivivus” 229)

Shaw was aware that his critical contemporaries saw Robertson as the fountainhead in English drama responsible for reduction of exaggerative and rhetorical conventions in drama (Meisel 71). Analyzing Shaw’s critical works from the nineties Martin Meisel points out that for Shaw

the reduction of drama to “sentimental conversations in drawing room” was not satisfactory. What he mostly faults Robertson and his followers (mainly Pinero) for is “a method of disguising pure conventionality by an increase in superficial naturalness” (72).

Shaw analyzes the portrayal of Robertson’s characters in *Caste*, stating that they are “old stagers, very thinly ‘humanized’”:

Eccles and Gerridge together epitomize mid-century Victorian shabby-genteel ignorance of the working classes. Polly is comic relief pure and simple; George and Esther have nothing but a milkcan to differentiate them from the heroes and heroines of a thousand sentimental dramas; and though Robertson happens to be quite right . . . in representing the “Marquizzy” as insisting openly and jealously on her rank . . . yet it is quite evident that she is not an original study from life, but simply a ladyfication of the conventional haughty mother. (“Robertson Redivivus” 230)

Meisel notices that for Shaw the humanization “made scarcely any difference in the conventionality of situation, relationships, or the background of values and assumptions. Robertson provided a conventional action for conventional types, methodically toned down to harmonize with the genuine furnishings of his elegant interiors” (73). He gives examples from Robertson’s *War* (1871) where actors are instructed to use only slight German and French accents and in this superficial way they are made more “humanized.” Also, he states that the use of dialogues in the form of short, linked speeches, often taking place two at the same time (usually for some amusing effect), only “gives an effect of business, movement, and keeps audience, actors, and stage from setting into the earnest, static, more profound concentration of rhetorical drama” (73–74).

He saw that changing times and an air of modernity in theatre made the formula outdated. He noticed that “[the] formula grew up in the days when the spread of elementary schooling produced a huge mass of playgoers sufficiently educated to want plays instead of dog-fights, but not educated enough to enjoy or understand the masterpieces of dramatic art” (Shaw, Preface xxi). Shaw objected mostly to the elements that were the basis for nineteenth-century writers, that is “a neat, well-made construction à la Sardou and the appearance of verisimilitude in handling domestic relations à la Robertson” (Taylor 84).

Being an active adversary of Ibsen and completing his revised version of *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* in 1913 he was aware that the origin of the new drama was based on the old conventions. The new form of discussion play proposed by the works of Ibsen and continued by Shaw and his contemporaries was, in Shaw’s simplified but accurate observation,



a well-made play with the addition of a famous last, discussion scene, as in *A Doll's House*. Of course it "has been developed well beyond the last ten minutes of a play to become a whole new type of drama" (Templeton 300–01). Concluding his criticism in 1913 he remarked that the discussion play with its serious subjects, cases and arguments by its very nature eliminated the old conventions of clear moral distinctions of right and wrong and made people aware that the well-made plays might be entertaining, but are not regarded "as anything other than a commercial product" (qtd. in Templeton 301).

Shaw thought that the rules created by Scribe and his followers inhibited the free development of the subject (something he deemed a very important factor of a good play). He also objected to the excessive realism that created the illusion of real life by using "irrelevant details" that distracted the eye, ear, and the mind of the spectator from the action (Taylor 84). The things praised by the early nineteenth-century writers combined together created, according to Shaw, "that curious hybrid, the well-made English drawing-room drama" (Taylor 84). It is also noticed by modern critic Martin Meisel that by the end of the nineteenth century French influence upon English theatre finally ceased to dominate due to "assimilation and international copyright laws, to the point where an ideal, the ideal of the 'well-made' play, was much more significant than actual imports and adaptations" (78). He states that through the works of such figures as Pinero or the Bancrofts and their Anglo-French repertoire "there had been a native fusion of 'drawing room' and 'well-made' traditions, one concerned with surface, and the other with 'construction'" (78).

John Russell Taylor states that Robertson himself viewed his plays as "a brusque English answer to the *pièce bien faite* as established by Sardou" (28). In his plays he applied the Scribean construction, using its established devices such as *scènes à faire*, *tableau*, *quiproquos*, and plausible dénouement. But unlike Scribe he tried to stay away from melodrama and its stock characters and focused all his writings on "contemporary middle-class British life for subject matter," making the plot, setting and acting naturalistic for the audience to see their lives mirrored on the stage; it led to the creation of a new genre: "the British realistic well-made play" (Taylor 28). Undoubtedly, in an early Victorian theatre ruled by melodrama, Robertson, with his flair for theatre management and play directing, made a long-lasting change that enabled later writers, Shaw among them, to create plays of more complicated ideas and greater literary merit. While his own plays have not withstood the test of time, Robertson clearly had a flair for taking a successful foreign dramatic formula and adapting it to the English stage.

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## Wartime Propaganda and Gender in Ahmad Mahmoud's *The Scorched Earth*: A Dissident Reading

# ABSTRACT

The Iran-Iraq War (1980–88) has been the subject of many aesthetic productions in contemporary Persian literature. The Iranian mass media during the war with Iraq described the armed conflict as holy and masculine, and propagated the replacement of the word “war” with “sacred defense” to urge authors to write within this established framework and reflect the ideals of the State. Opposed to such an ideological view of the war, the prominent Iranian novelist Ahmad Mahmoud began to express dissent in his works of fiction such as *The Scorched Earth* (1982). This study, therefore, analyzes Mahmoud’s scope of dissidence toward wartime propaganda and gender in the above mentioned novel to articulate how Mahmoud raises important questions regarding the State’s view of war and the established gender norms in Iran at war. It uses cultural materialist dissident reading and textual analysis to study Mahmoud’s contempt for wartime propaganda through the text’s portrayal of desperate people in Khorramshahr in the southwest of Iran caught between Iraqi airstrikes and artillery fires, and domestic problems including inflation, looting and mismanagement.

**Keywords:** Ahmad Mahmoud, *The Scorched Earth*, Persian fiction, Iran-Iraq War, gender dissidence, propaganda.

## INTRODUCTION

On 22 September 1980, Saddam Hussein's MiG 21s and 23s bombed Tehran's Mehrabad International Airport and at the same time his troops marched towards the southern cities of Iran such as Khorramshahr in Khuzestan province; officially an all-out war against Iran was launched. The Iran-Iraq War, as Karsh describes, is "one of the longest, bloodiest and costliest Third World armed conflicts in the twentieth-century" (83). Axworthy states that the reasons behind Saddam Hussein's attack on Iran are still arguable (267). However, it was most likely that Saddam Hussein wanted to replace Iran in the region as the mightiest military power, and put an end to Iran's influence on the majority Iraqi Shiite population who were sponsored by Iran to overthrow Saddam's Ba'ath Party and assassinate top Iraqi officials such as the failed assassination attempt on Tariq Aziz, Saddam's then Deputy Premier (Karsh 13).

When the war broke out, Iranian officials initiated several schemes for instrumental use of the conflict; ideologically committed to the ideals of the 1979 Revolution, these were aimed at fulfilling multiple sociopolitical ends such as providing adequate justification of war and hence the necessity of its continuation, and the purging of counter-revolutionaries and dissenters (Keddie 251). To that end, new vocabulary for the war with Iraq was introduced by government officials, including the use of "sacred defense" instead of "war." The officials described the conflict, Shams argues, "as a holy crusade against the sources of corruption and impiety" (175). Axworthy maintains that the Shiite theological beliefs such as *Ashura* (680 CE)—the day on which Hussein ibn Ali, the third Imam of Shias, was martyred in the Battle of Karbala—were used by the Iranian State to justify war and arouse people's passion for enlisting. In this way, the war is viewed as divine and having close affinity with the above historical event (268).

In the realm of art and literature of the war period, the Sacred Defense Cinema was established in 1981, and a considerable number of war films appeared on the Iranian screen. Moreover, the revolutionaries established the Centre for Islamic Art and Thoughts in the same year to feature the word commitment as the main responsibility of Iranian artists and authors. The Centre, as Shams explains, defined a committed artist as "a pious, loyal Muslim with artistic interests, whose works were in line with the ideals of the revolutionary promises" (169). The majority of Iranian film directors, screenwriters, artists and authors attempted to hold out those promises. It was in the early 1980s that the term "sacred defense literature" (also called resistance literature) was applied to works of fiction and non-fiction depicting the Iran-Iraq War and anti-Western ideals of the 1979 Revolution

(Shams 176). The literature of sacred defense is ideologically in line with the State; it interprets the war with Iraq, apart from propagation of being sacred, in terms of hostility of Western powers toward Iran's Revolution, and committed artists must arouse people's revolutionary and "religious fervor" to confront the West (Farrokh 369).

However, in the case of texts with oppositional ideas, the State has applied two approaches to contain them: censorship and interpellation. Firstly, those literary works that are not considered politically subversive may receive print permission after their oppositional and sensitive ideas are censored (Haddadian-Moghaddam 121).<sup>1</sup> For example, Esmail Fasih's war-centred fiction *The Winter of 1983* (1985) was banned from being reprinted for eighteen years because several sentences had to be removed from the text (Shahnahpur x). Interpellation is the other approach adopted by the State, and the term was coined and expounded by the influential French thinker Louis Althusser in the 1970s. He defines it as the process by which the dominant ideology "hails or interpolates individuals as subjects" in an attempt to make them agreeable with its own values (173). It can be said that this is a form of containment through which the dominant power contains the dissident text and uses it to disseminate ideological messages. This is how the war novel *The Scorched Earth* (1982), written by Ahmad Mahmoud (1931–2002), the prominent Iranian novelist from Khuzestan province, has been interpreted in post-revolutionary Iranian literary studies. Some state critics and scholars have described the above work as one of the most important texts in sacred defense literature. Such key figures include Torkamani-Barandouzi, who has identified the novel as the first work of fiction in the field of resistance literature (212), and Belghays Soleimani who praises Mahmoud's representation of revolutionary zeal and commitment to the Revolution (45). These critics have disregarded the novel's censure against the State's weak performance in time of war and its propaganda that the armed conflict is divine and embodies masculine virtues (De Groot 152).

Following Mikhail Bakhtin, Mahmoud produces a heteroglossiac novel (262) in which different points of view about war, people's resistance against Iraq's invasion in the absence of Iranian army and government, and their discontent over the ideals of the Revolution are represented. *The Scorched Earth* represents the first three months of war in the city of Khorramshahr with a linear narrative in five chapters. Mahmoud vividly depicts the horrors of war and the fall of a prosperous city to a derelict land piled up with dismembered human bodies and dead animals. Ardalani expresses that Mahmoud's fiction is regarded as one of the masterpieces of contemporary Persian literature and the first fictional text about the

<sup>1</sup> All the translations from the Persian primary and secondary sources are by the author.

Iran-Iraq War and its devastating effects on Iranians (31). The celebrated dissident critic and writer Hooshang Golshiri contends that the strength of Mahmoud's novel is its detailed and realistic descriptions of a war-torn city on the verge of ruin and destruction (208). The prime objective of this study, therefore, is to explore Mahmoud's disapproval of wartime propaganda and his gender dissident discourse in his anti-war fiction *The Scorched Earth* by using cultural materialist dissident reading, particularly the critical ideas of Sinfield and Dollimore, in the following sections.

## CULTURAL MATERIALISM AND READING DISSIDENCE

Alan Sinfield, Jonathan Dollimore and Catherine Belsey—disciples of the celebrated cultural thinker Raymond Williams—are recognized as the founders of cultural materialist theory in Britain in the 1980s (Robson 26). Their critical practice aims to explore literary texts in terms of historical-political context, marginalization and discursive power. The central aim of cultural materialists is to challenge traditional or conservative criticism that, in his *Faultlines* (1992), Sinfield defines as the process by which literary texts are interpreted in a way to be “politically agreeable” with the dominant ideology (21). This means that conservative readings aim to contain dissenting views from literary works. Considering Iran's post-revolutionary literary context, as noted above, the State has attempted to read dissident works, including Mahmoud's *The Scorched Earth*, as texts that espouse its ideology. Nonetheless, Dollimore holds that literary texts are usually inclined to resist this ideological agreement by indicating that there are contradictions or faultlines within the dominant ideology, and dissident readings can reveal them and undermine the effects of ideology (*Sexual* 121).

For Sinfield and Dollimore, dissidence is at the centre of their critical theory since it is informed by “the conflicts and contradictions within power” (Brannigan 111). For Sinfield, dissidence is a way of resisting an “exploitative social order” (*On Sexuality* 51); it is an opposition to official policy. To show an example, in his reading Shakespeare's *Othello* (c. 1603), Sinfield argues that the play presents two conflicting views on marriage simultaneously: individualism and patriarchal domination (*Faultlines* 42–44). On the one hand, Renaissance humanism places emphasis on individualism or the freedom of action and thought, and in the play Desdemona uses this principle and defies Venetian courtiers (patriarchal system) to express her autonomy in choosing Othello. On the other hand, at that time marital bonds, especially among nobles and high ranking courtiers, were pre-arranged by the male heads of the households (46). In *Othello*, Brabantio, Desdemona's father, shows his seething resentment

at his daughter's secret marriage since he was the guardian of his daughter and arrangement of Desdemona's marriage is his responsibility. The occurrence of such internal conflict within the dominant ideology enables a dissident author such as Shakespeare to articulate his dissident attitude that may destabilize the effects of ideology (Brannigan 174).

Drawing upon political theory, feminism, gender and sexual studies, queer studies, and social history, cultural materialist theory adopts a multidisciplinary approach to examine the confrontation between the dominant and the marginalized or dissident groups (Milner 151). When the mode of resistance adopted by the dissident identities has its basis in gender, Dollimore calls it gender or "sexual dissidence" (*Sexual* 21). Sexual dissidence seeks to identify and challenge oppressive discursive power that misrepresents and excludes gender identities. This form of dissidence constitutes resistance based on destabilizing the repressive order through "transgression" which is an act of deconstruction and "underpinning and endorsing the philosophy of individualism" (325). Stated differently, this means that gender dissidence is a way of re-discovering the self within the structures of discursive power by transgressing established norms.

Regarding Iran's post-revolutionary literature, Afary contends that cases of sexual and gender dissidence have arisen due to the State's enactment of discriminatory and stringent laws on Iranian women and their rights from the 1980s onward (2). Najmabadi argues that Iran's Constitution is founded upon conservatively religious principles that restrict sharply personal freedom and rights, particularly for women; compulsory veiling, unjust laws regarding divorce and child custody regulations are notable cases in point (8). One important faultline related to Iran in the 1980s, to quote Paidar, was that the State recalled Iranian women to participate in all sociopolitical events of the country, from presidential and parliamentary elections to mass demonstration against some Western powers like the US and the UK, at the same time as it imposed severe constraints on women including compulsory veiling (323). During the war, another contradictory policy was that the Iranian State launched different training programs for women to use weapons, yet there was no intention of dispatching female soldiers to front lines due to the masculinization of such places and the patriarchal culture of the country. Paidar goes on to say that it is expected of women to be mothers of the nation and bring up revolutionary children (262). Given this fact, Mahmoud's *The Scorched Earth* is significant because of its inclusion of major female characters including Naneh Baran and Golabetun's sister who challenge gender discrimination and the patriarchal society of Iran in the 1980s. In the novel, there are examples of female objections to the conservative view of women and their public roles, such as a stranger who questions: "why they don't want to hear the names of the women?" (Mahmoud 50).



## WAR, HORROR AND DEATH

*The Scorched Earth* is distinguished from other Persian literary works with the *topoi* of war in that it expresses disapproval of the State's sponsored programs designed to associate war with notions like sacredness, spirituality, masculinity, and the burning desire for martyrdom on the front lines. The martyrs can enjoy the companionship of Husayn ibn Ali whose death has been commemorated annually by the Shiite population in Muharram the first month in the Islamic calendar. Mahmoud's novel questions such a propagandistic view of war and martyrdom by representing the death, destruction, and violence caused by external forces (the Iraqis) concurrent with the shameless exploitations of self-seekers and opportunists in the domestic context. The novel represents internal problems such as high inflation, looting and rape in Khorramshahr as the catastrophic effects of war have been amplified in war-torn regions (Buroumand 438). Mahmoud deconstructs the spiritualization of war, and his prediction that the military conflict with Iraq will be long has its basis in the evidence founded in Iranian mass media and government officials' remarks. Notably, as the eminent Iranian historian Parsadoost writes, the speech of Iran's then President Mohammad-Ali Rajai (1980–81) in the United Nations Security Council Meeting on 17 October 1980 indicated the continuation of war: "The war will be long and people-oriented" (598). One ideological justification for the continuation of war was that defeating Saddam Hussein's army would form a Shiite imperial power extending from Iran to Iraq for the purpose of liberating Palestine from Israel (Hiro 64). As Abrahamian states, a motto was also created by the revolutionaries: "The Road to Jerusalem Goes Through Baghdad" (*History* 161).

Told by an unnamed male narrator, the novel begins with the news coming from Baghdad Radio that Saddam Hussein's military forces are on the verge of a full-scale attack on Khorramshahr and other border cities of Iran. The Radio announces the deployment of hundreds of Iraqi tanks on the borderline, causing fear among the citizens of Khorramshahr, as well as the narrator's brother, Saber who is critical of Iranian media that are totally silent about the news of war, causing great anxiety for the people. Saber laments: "why the government, the President, or the country's officials are all silent about the Iraq's tank regiments ready to attack; why they aren't saying anything?" (Mahmoud 8). The novel's criticism of the silent Iranian officials and their lack of attention to the rising tensions with Iraq weeks before the war can also be traced in the writing of Parsadoost criticizing the State's reluctance in confrontation with Iraq's repeated airspace violation by its highly supersonic Soviet fighter aircraft MiG-25 the Foxbat, along with several other reported serious border conflicts

between the two nations just a few weeks before the full-scale invasion of Iraq (293). At the outset, the novel presents a climate of distrust in State affairs and policies about the war and people's sense of despair and desolation in Khorramshahr.

The novel's narration captures every single detail of quotidian life in Khorramshahr. Dastgheyb argues that the realistic descriptions of the local people, situations, and events powerfully convey the sense of life in the city before the war (32). The novel's first pages, in addition to the grim news of the deployment of Iraqi troops near the border, focus mainly on the peacefulness of the city. The narrator describes the convivial atmosphere of Khorramshahr as he walks around the city and observes people's various activities such as "a wedding ceremony, children's playing games, and the zigzag movements of powerboats in Karun River" (Mahmoud 14). However, from the spread of the news of the invasion, anxiety surrounds the city and it gradually sinks into chaos and destruction by the eruption of war. Karsh writes that it was reported that around 7,000 people were killed in Khorramshahr in the early weeks of war, due to which the Iranian media changed the name of Khorramshahr to *Khunin-shahr* or "City of Blood" (27).

Reflection of Iran's political events in the 1980s can be seen in Mahmoud's text; specifically, it points to the policy of purging the Army after the 1979 Revolution by sacking or executing high ranked officers. The narrator catches a conversation among some strangers in which one of them expresses his regret that "our Army is disbanded" (Mahmoud 15). In this regard, Kamrava writes that according to official reports of Amnesty International between 1979 and 1981 "some 2,444 executions" were carried out by the revolutionaries, and the news of the executions became an everyday reality on Iranian National Television (18). Many high ranked officers were executed and around 12,000 personnel were sacked. The weakened state of the Iranian Army and the silence of Iranian media including the local radio stations forced the people of Khorramshahr to remain in the city and react promptly by building bunkers and setting up patrol posts in the streets to confront the invaders (Mahmoud 28–30). Distrust in the State's performance and management in war-torn regions is expressed by the citizens who have to take matters into their own hands, including confronting criminals and lawbreakers. In truth, the revolutionary State did broadcast a great deal of propaganda against the Pahlavi monarchy and sponsored its radical views, from purging political dissenters to official censorship of books; it underestimated Iraq's full-scaled invasion from the southwestern to western borders of Iran, actually a length of 900 hundred miles (Parsadoost 81).

The novel graphically portrays the adverse outcomes of war in Khorramshahr, such as the eruption of chaos and horrified civilians rushing

to escape the city. The narrator reflects people's conversations from different backgrounds and attitudes; however, they are all unanimously in agreement that their city is forsaken by the government and the Army cannot defend them against the invasion (Mahmoud 17). This is an important reason why Mahmoud gives very minor roles to government officials and military personnel in his fiction. What can be understood from the first chapter is the distantiation of the people from the State, and Mahmoud reflects this public discontent as the narrator's brother laments: "The State? What can I say? I think it's deep asleep!" (35).

The narrative becomes much darker and gloomier especially in the second chapter. The descriptions of death and destruction, as well as the sheer horror of the characters' experiences, are the focus in this section. The psychological trauma experienced after airstrikes or artillery bombardments almost cripples everyone in their homes: "Suddenly a blast wave shook the building . . . The lights went off and everyone was shocked" (40). The narrator decides to stay in Khorramshahr together with his two brothers, Khaled and Shahed, whereas his other family members have left the city. Khaled is later killed during an airstrike, and Shahed, suffering from PTSD, is sent to Tehran to be hospitalized in a mental institution. The sounds of the blasts at nights, the news of the deaths of the narrator's friends and acquaintances, and the dispersion of dismembered bodies all over the streets create a deep sense of despair and horror for the characters and readers even. At the end, Mahmoud demonstrates that Khorramshahr has fallen from a cheerful and bustling city to a ruined one:

Large numbers of people are trying to leave their places, to go out of the city by every possible transport means. Many have also left the city on foot. . . . The news of the missile strike on the city of Dezful which buried the people under ruined buildings has brought a sense of violence, ruthlessness and unfairness to Baghdad Radio's threat. Tehran Radio has announced that 70 people have been martyred and over 300 injured during the missile attack on Dezful. (75)

There are, as the above passage shows, many moving portrayals of death and ruin. The descriptions of the dead and the demolished buildings challenge the wartime propaganda that, as Axworthy maintains, front lines are sacred places of "Shi'a martyrdom" and purgation of the soul (268). This indicates the novelist's oppositional stance, which deconstructs the spiritual image of the military lines propagandized by the State. According to Sinfield, dissidence works within power structures and is inseparable from them (*Faultlines* 47). In the novel, wherever there is a description of religious and spiritual fervor for war, it is immediately interrupted by moving portrayals of death and despair. The text draws attention to the disturbing aspects of

war, for example prolonged blackouts, desolate streets and desperate people living in their dark basements listening to Khorramshahr Radio, a station which, instead of giving the news of war, plays religious, propagandist-based songs about the scared defense, as it celebrates the martyrdom in the front lines: “Martyrs of Khuzestan . . . The day of Khorramshahr, the day of City of Blood, the day of Faith” (Mahmoud 103). At the end of the novel, all the houses on the narrator’s alley are destroyed by a missile strike, including that of Naneh Baran, the Mechanic Mohammad, an enlightened dissident factory worker and the narrator’s friend, with his family. The narrator recounts the death of many citizens, whether strangers or acquaintances; thus, more than several hundred deaths are narrated which shows a preoccupation with death and destruction.

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### THE CRACK IN SOCIAL ORDER: THE RISE OF NANEH BARAN

As has been argued earlier, after the 1979 Revolution the social standing of Iranian women has been diminished due to the State’s significant amendment of the Constitution in which many new articles based on the Islamic viewpoints were added, including Islamization of the country and imposition on male-female clothing (Saikal 89). The second half of the novel reflects on such key issues and opposes the masculinization of the Iran-Iraq War through representation of dissident gender politics. As such, the text raises important questions on gender roles and the status of Iranian women in the post-revolutionary era. The female characters, such as the mother of the narrator and Golabetun, a young, peaceful wife, are represented as enlightened and caring mothers in contrast to male opportunism. Almost all the female figures in the text show their objections to the patriarchal culture of Iran; for instance, Golabetun’s teenage sister defies a conservative society by her appearance in public: i.e. wearing tight jeans and having unveiled hair.

The most fascinating female character in the novel is Naneh Baran—a middle-aged widow—who transgresses the boundaries of the society and challenges the State’s definition of female roles and duties in a time of conflict. As the war escalates and there is no government interference, she takes the matters of her neighbourhood into her own hands by patrolling the streets, wearing military uniform, fastening an ammunition belt around herself, and holding a powerful G3 rifle manufactured and used by the Iranian Army. Here, cross-dressing has been used for the purpose of changing gender roles and subverting traditional views on women. As Dollimore points out, it is an act of defying societies

that have been founded on religious and male-dominated principles (*Radical* lxv). Naneh Baran's cross-dressing urges the re-evaluation and re-definition of female rights and responsibilities, as well as a deconstruction of the masculinization of war.

The war almost destroyed Iran's social-economic structures and caused inflated prices, the formation of black markets, and mass unemployment in many cities and towns (Amirahmadi 173–74). It also seriously challenged the stability of ruling clerical power and undermined the male authority in Iranian society. Mahmoud reflects these issues throughout his text by showing the decline of social system, male authority, and the aggravation of the chaotic situation in Khorramshahr. In the second half of the text, it is women, mainly housewives and widows, who are engaging in earning money from different occupations to protect their families, characters such as Um-e Mossadegh—a wife whose husband is dispatched to the military line—working as a cleaning woman (Mahmoud 194). The narrator variously describes the utter chaos in the city, and one important scene is when thousands of people are stuck at the train station. He is contemptuous of the station staff giving the tickets to their own families and acquaintances, or selling them with much higher prices; he also witnesses people's involvement in all-out brawls over boarding the train and how many individuals are injured because of the stampede (68–70).

Lack of order and legal enforcement leads to an exponential increase in the number of crimes and offences in war-torn regions such as the narrator's city. Different crimes such as theft, looting, robbery, and the rape of young women are major issues addressed by Mahmoud. This is an important reason that female characters articulate themselves and that their presence in public expands further, in contrast to the patriarchal belief that women's responsibilities are recognized only in the domestic sphere. Mahmoud shows that the increase in the crime rate encourages women's participation in restoring order in the neighbourhood. The narrator retells several accounts of house burglary in daylight and the indifference of various forms of law enforcement to take action, including revolutionary armed forces patrolling the streets (153–54). He is critical of their engagement in identifying counter-revolutionaries instead of offering protection. The novel illustrates that real crimes remain unpunished while alleged misconduct or conspiracy is confronted. The narrator's car, for instance, is stopped by a young Revolutionary Guard to be investigated in this respect:

He bends to search the stuff in my luggage . . . It was evident that I had no control of my temper. I, unconsciously, stretched out my arm to grab his handgun, yet I controlled myself, clenched my fist, lowered my arm, and took it behind myself. (152)

The novel includes an account of civilians being stopped on the streets by the Revolutionary Committees (established in 1979 to suppress counter-revolutionaries and dissenters), and when the narrator's neighbourhood reports the hoarding of food products by the greedy shopkeeper Kal Sha'ban, their complaint is dismissed by the law enforcement officers. Overall, following Brannigan, the novel is a place of struggle between power structures and discontented people (111).

Kal Sha'ban is an opportunist exploiting the chaotic situation of his city, and in spite of his family's departure, he has decided to stay and accumulate his capital by hoarding, and overcharging for, food products. He justifies his actions by stating that he is a committed revolutionary who has participated in all state-sponsored demonstrations to date. In fact, he is the antithesis of Naneh Baran and Mechanic Mohammad who have focused on the improvement of the living condition in their neighbourhood. Unlike Kal Sha'ban and his discreditable conduct, Naneh Baran tries to maintain the fading order by confronting illegal acts. She and Mechanic Mohammad encourage others to put an end to Kal Sha'ban's opportunism without seeking help from the law enforcement forces; they finally loot Kal Sha'ban's warehouse and shop (Mahmoud 202). The indifferent behavior of government officials is telling even when Kal Sha'ban himself sues the looters and demands justice.

Before the rise of Naneh Baran as the watchwoman of the neighbourhood, chaos, disorder and male indifference are central in the second and third chapters (Eshaghian 166). Here, both war and internal problems have created chaos. Mismanagement and inefficient organization loom large when groups of escaped people return from makeshift camps set up on the plains outside the city. The contradiction is that the State has advertised the safety and suitability of the makeshift camps, yet the reality completely contradicts this: "The government has set up many small camps near the towns, villages, and roads with a few tents and a water tanks. They are not enough!" (Mahmoud 88). The people's decision to return to Khorramshahr is affected by improper facilities and poor living condition, mainly due to the fact that "Baghdad was buoyed up by accounts of rapid military, political and economic decline in Iran" (Hiro 36). In short, Mahmoud's making use of faultlines is aimed at undermining the authority of the dominant ideology by highlighting the fact that inconsistency and contradiction are revealed within it (Sinfield, *Shakespeare* 10).

As the narrative progresses, crisis becomes dominant and existing laws are totally ineffective in governing the city. The narrator retells the words of different individuals in Mahdi Papati's coffeehouse, a friend of the narrator, arguing and objecting that the Government is incapable of running the nation in such dire circumstances; as a result, the rate of crime and people's

confrontations with criminals have sped up: “Here in Ahwaz, day by day, theft and robbery are increasing . . . even in the daylight!” (Mahmoud 231). For this reason, the narrator’s neighbourhood attempts to fight criminal acts, and the novel’s reflection of street execution is a reference to real events of executions held by the revolutionaries in Tehran and other major cities in the early 1980s. In this connection, Dabashi writes that, with the aid of radical supporters and without initiating legal prosecutions, several cases of executions of the alleged counter-revolutionaries were carried out in the streets (3). Public executions were very rare in the history of Iran, yet after 1979 they were performed at an elevated rate and between 1979 and 1982 many individuals were executed in order that the newly established State be protected (Abrahamian, *Tortured* 126).

Owing to the high number of lawbreakers, and the government and military officials’ inability to stop them, Yusef Bi’ar, a house burglar, and his accomplice Ahmad Feri are executed by Naneh Baran and a young boy accompanying her. The angry people seize them as they are committing burglary and loading their truck with another’s furniture. They, then, become the jury, with Naneh Baran as the judge and executioner. After the incident, Naneh Baran is apprehended by the revolutionaries and kept as a prisoner in a mosque. Due to the pressure of the people and the moving speech of the Mechanic Mohammad about the necessity of social justice and the fact that the execution was people’s unanimous verdict, she is finally released. The street execution of two burglars can also be understood as a reference to Iran’s government officials who, because of the sensitive circumstances of the country, had announced that criminals must be executed immediately (Akhavan 85).

The execution scene in the novel echoes such governmental announcements. Given the absent government, Naneh Baran rises to restore the order and confront illegal acts. During the trial and execution of the burglars, the narrator’s description of Golabetun’s sister is interesting. She openly defies the compulsory veiling law: “She is wearing jeans and her long hair is falling over shoulders” (Mahmoud 239). In 1980, the new Iranian Parliament passed strict regulations on veiling and clothing. According to new articles, wearing clothes such as jeans, short-sleeved shirts, ties and skirts were banned in public, with the justification that those pieces of clothing, as Najmabadi puts it, are “cultural markers” of the West and the Pahlavi regime, entirely in disconformity with the Islamic viewpoints (242). The sister’s appearance catches people’s attention, and at the moment of the execution of the burglars, the narrator describes the wrathful look of some strangers concerning the girl’s clothing. Following Dollimore, her freedom of clothing in a conservative and male-dominated society is a transgression of existing constraints, and an expression of personal freedom (*Sexual* 117).

Mahmoud's gender dissidence pushes forth the idea of re-definition and re-examination of female responsibilities in the country at war. According to conservative Iranian society, the main responsibilities of women are recognized indoors to bring up and nurture children in the home environment. The ruling clerics were not tolerant of those attitudes towards women and their roles outside the framework of the established principles and the Islamic laws. Panah contends that, for them, "the idea of gender equality" was considered "a Western plot" (59). On the contrary, Mahmoud shows that Naneh Baran is always present in public; indeed, there are few scenes in the novel in which she is indoors. She not only patrols the streets at nights, but also runs a household of homeless women and war widows, like Golabetun and her sister, who have lost their house during airstrikes and artillery fires. As an older woman, Naneh Baran rejects the accepted conventions on gender roles and dress code. She also has socialist tendencies and proudly proclaims to a group of men: "Law? . . . The people and their opinions are the law!" (Mahmoud 270). The novel's oppositional view of gender consists of changing gender roles in a way that Naneh Baran with her G3 rifle and military uniform appears as a militia to maintain order in her neighbourhood. It is evident that Mahmoud's view of a mainstream society is based on the active participation and cooperation of both sexes (Torkamani-Barandouzi and Kabiri 64); in this manner, his attitude is in disconformity with the exclusion of women due to the rise of religious conservatism as the significant consequence of the Revolution.

Male characters such as Kal Sha'ban and Yusef Bi'ar are portrayed as exploitative and as criminals, and this policy of misrepresentation also seems true to revolutionary forces whom Fazel, the narrator's close friend, accuses of confiscating the personal properties of the citizens labelled as counter-revolutionaries (Mahmoud 207). On the other hand, there is no misrepresentation of women in the text; all female characters are shown as caring and confident figures whose sense of responsibility falls on the betterment of social life. The novel's representation of gender openly questions conservative point of view of women in public. A woman like Naneh Baran comes into view when the male social order collapses. Mahmoud represents gender dissidence that transgresses the established norms in the Iranian society and creates "a sense of social decline and disorder" during the war (Dollimore, *Death* 77); he also holds that active participation of women is required for the progress and development of Iran which is faced with external and internal difficulties.

All in all, *The Scorched Earth* begins with people's peaceful daily routines and activities in Khorramshahr and ends with the fall of that city and the destruction of its houses and buildings. In the alley where the narrator and



other important characters live, a missile attack destroys all the houses. Naneh Baran, the Mechanic Mohammad with his family, Golabetun's sister and even Kal Sha'ban are among the victims of the massive blast. Mahmoud's fiction represents all types of characters with different classes and attitudes. What they have in common is that they are all victims of war, whether good or bad, rich or poor. The use of journalistic narration to accurately portray their struggle to survive in a war-torn and forsaken city is Mahmoud's distinctive style of documentary realism in Iran's historical fiction writing. *The Scorched Earth* questions wartime propaganda and its cover-up of the brutal realities of war such as death, violence, exploitation, and eruption of chaos in Southern provinces (Buroumand 438). The novel emphasizes that Khorramshahr is ruined because of Iraq's military invasion, and of domestic conflict with exploiters and opportunists, as well as the State's weak performance during the war.

## CONCLUSION

Ahmad Mahmoud's anti-war novel *The Scorched Earth* (1982) holds a prominent place in the post-revolutionary literature. The novel, as discussed in this study, questions the wartime propaganda of the Iranian State and its perpetuation of gender inequality in Iranian society. It represents the struggles of citizens of Khorramshahr with Iraq's invasion and internal problems such as exploitation, theft, looting and high inflation that crippled the city. Quite contrary to the spiritual image of war cultivated by the State, Mahmoud captures sinister aspects of war such as its excessive violence and destructive impact on Iranians. A dissident reading of Mahmoud's fictional work indicates that the novel challenges a conservative view of women and the embodiment of war in masculinity by changing gender roles. The novel represents Naneh Baran as a concerned watchwoman seeking to preserve order in her neighbourhood by wearing military costume and carrying an automatic rifle. The text's gender dissidence also consists of showing female appearance in public, especially the case of Golabetun's sister whose every appearance in the neighbourhood generates criticism and unease from the male characters due to her western style clothing and unveiled hair.

This form of representation appears transgressive especially in a society under a clerical government which has imposed draconian restrictions on personal freedom and expression. Mahmoud's characterization is a constitutive part of his dissident view in the way that he gives very minor roles to government and military officials; in contrast, he dedicates the majority of dialogues and narrated scenes to ordinary characters who are

mainly from the working and middle classes. In short, in post-revolutionary literary studies, reading dissidence is an important task because these texts are sites of the encounter between discursive power and oppositional discourse that can cast light on the potentiality of dissidence in Iranian literary texts, especially those written during the wartime period.

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