ISSUE 4

EXPLORING THE INTERPLAY OF INTERMEDIALITY AND INTERTEXTUALITY IN SERIALISED NARRATIVES

AND

RHETORIC, MEDIA, AND THE FICTITIOUS REPRESENTATION OF REALITY IN TELEVISION AND PROPAGANDA

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Journal Editorial Board

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Editorial Note

Gabriele Biotti

With issue n. 4, *IDEA* proposes some readings and interpretation works on a relevant issue such as the media, in their relations with texts, textuality, and the strategies of construction of propaganda.

Based on two specific sections, *Exploring the Interplay of Intermediality and Intertextuality in Serialised Narratives* and *Rhetoric, Media, and the Fictitious Representation of Reality in Television and Propaganda*, this issue explores specifically two research trends about the media and Intermediality, proposing research questions on how the media, and the various representations they propose or make possible, are often problematically entangled with the proposal of ideas, ideologies, official discourses. If Intermediality explores the many ways in which communication and expression are in dialogue with the practices of discourses production, it is important to stress the fact that Intermediality is also proposing interesting questions to the nature of texts and the practice of writing or expressing meaning in a technologically-driven moment, where texts themselves are often questioned or modified by technology. This aspect leads us to formulate useful research questions about the nature of texts, to be seen as a changing and articulated series of discursive possibilities, in a system that puts in interaction the word, the writing practices, the media landscape, and the social and cultural background shaping ideas and trends of representation within the texts themselves.

Through the analysis of different types of works and texts, this issue aims at providing some itineraries to explore a dynamic and rich research context where specific forms of expression converge, interact, and sometimes also conflict. This space of reflexion is at the same time a symbolic, artistic, and social one: languages, contemporary thought, and forms of ideological discourse can be approached together to explore some peculiarities of the contemporary intertextual and technological panorama, that can be read as primary example of the changes happening in the interdisciplinary research context.

Issue n. 4 welcomes the contributions of scholars from different cultural and methodological perspectives, showing the richness and diversity of the subject analysed here.

In the first section, Tamar Mebuke's article *Intermediality in Electronic Literature* analyses how *Four Volumes of Electronic Literature Collection* (Washington State University 2006 –2022) reflect some principles of evolution of electronic fiction from the first hypertexts written in imitation of traditional style of writing by using a computer screen as a page, through searches of possibilities of composition provided by the net, to recent syncretic forms that incorporate graphics, colour, sound, animation and

other capabilities of the Web, that contribute to the creation of works of network fiction, installation pieces, locative narratives, and generative art. The analysis shows how different forms of Intermediality, based on the interaction of languages of various semiotic systems, may be used as a demarcation line for distinguishing works that may be attributed to traditional literary works from syncretic forms of computer art. Mebuke studies how these "hybrid forms" made perception of fictional works synaesthetic reflecting the principles of evolution in human communication by merging our reality with the virtual world, also stressing how, besides further experiments with the net, we come across works that evoke aesthetic experience mainly through language, as it is peculiar to traditional literary works, which tends to split electronic literature into subclasses distinguishing literary works created on a new platform from those that represent a combination of various semiotic systems contributing to the development of intermedial and transmedial computer-generated forms of art.

In *"A sentence is saved not any sentence no not any sentence at all not yet": Exploring the paratext in Suburbia through the constraints of Oulipo* Nandini Mukherjee and Nakshatra Sengupta show how Paul Fournel's novel *Suburbia*, with both plot and writing missing, can generate new interpretations through various reception performances. The authors analyse and explain how *Suburbia* emerges through all the violence inflicted upon it where the man-made violence becomes the new violence, which is inflicted by the reader. The text rises up with a bloody nose and stands eternal, while the footnotes present in the text add up to the paratextual quality of the writing, which makes the reader think between all the mist offered to us by the writer. The article shows how sentences acquire a sensible structure, where we have to trust their slippery nature. In *Suburbia*, we almost find the text talking to itself, tired, trying to put on some asterisks and phoney initials: the sentence becomes self-aware, almost like an animal. Mukherjee and Sengupta stress the fact that this novel emerges as a text that images post-war France, talking about the deprived communities who fail to speak about the mist that surrounds them: when the writing is read today, it becomes more than just a reaction but allows us to understand the essentialities of an ur-text, where the paratextual elements talk about a text that we, only through our supposition, can reach or form.

In her article *"You play fair with me, I'll play fair with you": Evaluating the erotic thriller and its potential as a bifocal lens into gender politics using Fatal Attraction (1987), Disclosure (1994) and Fair Play (2023)* Joanna Pinto writes about the "erotic thriller", a highly lucrative film genre in the 1980s and 1990s. After the popularity of the genre faded, often because of its lack of originality in its narrative, Pinto analyses the role played by Chloe Domont's debut film *Fair Play* (2023) that seems to have incited the resurgence of the erotic thriller, by incorporating the prevalent gender politics (including #MeToo and examining "male anxieties"). This begs the question: are erotic

thrillers the barometer of cultural, societal and especially, gender politics prevalent during its release? The author aims to establish erotic thrillers as reflections of audiences' desires and the evolution of gender politics Domont's film is dissected to discover the various elements that help define it as an erotic thriller and compare it to similarly themed predecessors such as Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and Barry Levinson's *Disclosure* (1994), which incorporate corporate settings, the femme fatale being a passionate career woman and personal stakes spilling over in the professional sphere.

In the second section, Tamanna Priya's article *Distorted Narratives and the Cinematic Form: A Study of Select Political Films* reflects on how Indian cinema has increasingly become a means of exploring untold stories and historical events while engaging audiences with compelling storytelling and drama, also stressing how for filmmakers, balancing authenticity and accuracy in social history films can be a complex challenge. The author's article examines three films, Vivek Agnihotri's *The Kashmir Files* (2022) and *The Tashkent Files* (2019) and Nagesh Bhat's *Hurdang* (2022) as texts exemplifying the working of a particular political narrative to establish and propagate socio-political ideology. These films are approached as notable results for their explicit acknowledgement of the subjective nature of representation and their narrative techniques to balance historical accuracy and dramatic impact. Priya identifies and analyses how these narratives are used to advance a particular political message and reinforce identity politics both on screen and off screen. In doing so, it can be showed how we can gain a deeper understanding of the role of cinema in representing and interpreting historical events, and the broader social and political implications of such representations, in the hope to promote a more open and inclusive dialogue around important issues in society, by exploring the complicated relationship between art and politics, based on relevant questions which are confluent on issues like nationalism, patriotism and political correctness.

In *The Logics of Ideology. Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau and the Rhetoricity of Social Being* Lukas C. Bartosch's compares critically two theoretical perspectives of ideology: on the one hand, orthodox Marxist ideology critique, presenting its specific relation to language, and to the poiesis of the social; on the other, the author approaches the Post-Marxist psychoanalytically informed rendering of ideology, and the displacement of ontological terrain at stake in this intervention, where politics, language, and representation, are entangled in a dynamic net of convergences in a dialogue where ideology, psychoanalytic theory, and philosophy, play and interact, based on the contributions from the Lacanian theory, Stuart Hall's theory, Ernesto Laclau's theoretical discourse, and Post-foundationalism as a general context of crisis and, also, of thought reformulation.

Intermediality in Electronic Literature

Tamar Mebuke

Introduction

Five hundred year-long history of print was connected with the evolution of book technology. Similarly, the history of electronic literature develops in parallel with the evolution in the field of digital technology, which engendered new ways of reading and writing, that also undergo rapid transformation, resulting in the creation of a wide range of innovative forms of computer-mediated literary works.

As Hayles argues, the questions that worried people at the dawn of the printing press are similar to the ones that are debated today. They are: whether electronic literature is truly literature; whether literary quality is possible in digital media, or whether electronic literature is obviously inferior to the print canon; if the dissemination methods of the Internet and World Wide Web, by opening possibilities of publication to everyone, will result in a flood of worthless drivel; what large-scale social and cultural changes are connected with the spread of digital culture, and how they will influence the future of writing. All these questions are connected with the essence of electronic literature, its relations to the print and other media, its significant properties, and their interpretation by users (Hayles, 2007: 4).

Created and performed on networked and programmable media, electronic literature incorporates elements of contemporary culture, such as computer games, digital arts, graphic design, films, animations, and a variety of other electronic visual effects. In this sense electronic literature is hybrid by nature, composed of parts taken from diverse traditions and semiotic systems. Abundant possibilities of the net encourage imagination and creative abilities of its users leading to a flood of innovative writings that reflect experiments with the net. Immediate access to textual material affects the principles of work with computers and influences the way literature evolves. As a net structure of computer-mediated texts allows every point of a text to be connected with any other point, it changes the role of the reader from interpretation to intervention with the aim to gain control of a narrative, turning passive readers into active users of a text. Theodor Nelson's term *hypertext* was coined for this innovative way of organizing a text that can be read in a sequence chosen by the reader, instead of following the sequence premeditated by the writer. Searching and finding likens the process of reading a hypertext to a game by adding to it a gambling element of excitement, as accessing the message is as important as the message itself. Such features as a hyperlink and a

feedback loop between the reader and the text are among the peculiarities of electronic fiction, (Eskelinen, 2012: 22) as well as a code (Hayles, 2008: 5) that needs to be activated in order to read the text and appreciate its peculiarities.

Another important feature of electronic literature is non-linear approach to time, the idea of which comes from Jorge Luis Borges`s short story *The Garden of Forking Paths* in which time is treated as a non-uniform, non-absolute notion, as "an infinite series of times, a growing, dizzying web of divergent, convergent, and parallel times." (Borges, 1999: 127) Authors of hypertext fiction use the idea of non-uniform time to show an overall picture of connected and parallel events with the purpose of creating an integrated picture of a fictional world, for the structure of a hypertext enables readers to link and access text fragments that are joined by a variety of types of association, or cause-effect relations to one another through a web of nodes. By making a choice from a number of available option of links, a reader makes a leap in time and, consequently, in space, that is changes a chronotope (Bakhtin, 1981: 425) - a constitutive unit of form and content which incorporates spatial and temporal parameters in a system of coordinates for a narrative action, and serves the background on which actions unfold and images are depicted.

As our research has shown (Mebuke, 2023), the notion of chronotope becomes particularly significant for hypertext fiction that exploits the method of changing chronotopes to show an integrated picture of narrative events. Organized into a network of fragments and connections between them, a linked structure of a hypertext at a static level resembles a mosaic of chronotopes. This feature distinguishes composition of paper based fictional works from works of electronic fiction. Anachronous nature of narration in hypertext fiction is characterized by constant changes of time dimension from present to flash forwards and flashbacks entailing changes of space dimension, and resulting in constant change of chronotopes. At the same time, changes of spatial dimension let authors show simultaneously actions happening at different locations. The process of reading a hypertext likens it to looking into a kaleidoscope, when at each turn a new picture is created from already available parts. As a result, instead of finishing reading a hypertext, *"the reader either exhausts the text, or the text exhausts the reader."* (Aarseth, 1997)

Evolution of Electronic Literature

The history of electronic literature proceeded from imitation and transposition of print practices to a computer screen. The first literary hypertext *afternoon, a story* by Michael Joyce (1987)*,* the initiator of this trend in literature, used a computer screen as a page to write a text that consists of blocks, or "lexias" (Barthes, 1974) and electronic links connecting them. As most works

of the first generation of hypertext fiction, it is written in Storyspace, the hypertext authoring programme. In further works of hyperfiction authors began to incorporate various sensory effects and combinations of various semiotic systems affordable for creative writing on computer. That led to creation of various combinations of intermedial works and the study of the phenomenon of intermediality in electronic literature.

In the online sketch *Lasting Image* by Carolyn Guyer and Michael Joyce (2000), *latent ambiguity, which is a hallmark of digital hypertexts,* is created by a combination of hidden and visual links. (Mangen, 2008: 410-412) The sketch is an example of a hypertext fiction the gamble effect of which depends on browsing the screen in search of hidden links. By clicking on arrows in the bottom right hand corner of a screen, a reader moves from one picture and an episode to another. Some links appear on the pages in a form of visual signposts, others can be found by moving the cursor across the entire screen. Reading the sketch resembles looking through a collection of photographs of different locations taken at different time and reading inscriptions that reflect associated with them recollections. That is the sketch is an early example of intermediality in electronic literature that uses a combination of linguistic and visual semiotic systems, which likens it to an illustrated, printed text.

A flow of associational thinking in *Twelve Blue* (1996), another hypertext by Michael Joyce, is expressed by surfing the Web. Here the author uses a more elaborated way of combining linguistic and visual signs of these semiotic systems. The hypertext contains 96 spaces with 269 links. A left-hand column on the screen features coloured threads indicating links in the network of the StorySpace that pass through eight points on a grid. These threads correspond to narrative lines of the main characters. The reader moves on by clicking on the threads, or on hyperlinks within the text, which appears in a form of light blue segments on a larger, dark blue part of the screen on the right. Each page is named dividing the story into separate poetic fragments, each repeating the word "blue".

The next hypertext by Michael Joyce, *Twilight, A Symphony* (1996) indicates to a shift toward virtual reality worlds of narrative storytelling, reflecting further experiments with the net, and besides linguistic and visual types of semiotic systems incorporates elements of an audio system. A more complex interconnection of the same semiotic systems is used by Stuart Moulthrop in the novel *Victory Garden* (1992). Narration in the novel is anachronous; time dimension constantly changes from present to flashbacks, or dreams that entail changes of space dimension, i.e. result in constant change of chronotopes. Each path the readers take brings them to different fragmented pieces of the story, or nodes, and by rereading different paths readers obtains different perspectives of different characters.

In all above discussed works of electronic fiction incorporation of elements of audio and visual semiotic systems has a complementary role that supplements the main function of a literary text – conveying a meaning through means of linguistic semiotic system. In further works of electronic literature, that are included in Volumes II and III of Electronic Literature Collection, composed at Washington State University (2011, 2016), we come across more daring experiments with the Net, in which elements of various semiotic system begin to acquire content-bearing character, and start to act as parts that have an equal role to elements of the linguistic system in transmitting a message, thus contributing to creation of a new, hybrid form of computer art.

Electronic literature changes together with the move to the Web. Authors start to use more fully the multi-modal capabilities of the Web, such as graphics, animation, colour and sound. If the distinguishing feature of the early works was the hypertext link, in later works authors began to use a wide variety of navigation schemes and interface metaphors that tend to de-emphasize the link as such. David Ciccoricco introduced the term "*network fiction*," for this type of digital fiction that "makes use of hypertext technology in order to create emergent and recombinatory narratives." (Ciccoricco, 2007: 7)

Interactive fiction, another form of electronic fiction, incorporates to a large extend game elements thus adding elements of another semiotic system – gestural. Works of interactive fiction also use a variety of other techniques, including graphics, animation, visual display, and "modifications of traditional literary devices." (Hayles, 2007: 7-8)

Modernization of cell phones led to literary forms based on mobile technologies. The range of their forms varies from short serial fiction works for cell phones, to location-specific narratives that are also called locative narratives. On the CAVE site for interactive literature and a creative writing the action is performed in a three-dimensional space where users wear virtual reality goggles and operate with wands. These works "enact literature as a full-body experience that combines kinetic, haptic, proprioceptive and dimensional perceptions" (Hayles, 2007: 10-11), that are included into the composition and performance of the works. The elements of the remaining gestural and spatial semiotic systems contribute to creation of even more complex, intermedial forms of computer art.

These "hybrid forms" of literature activate different forms of human perception, which may be explained by the role the computer has started to play in the life of man. As nowadays people spend more of their time in virtual reality than in the real world, where our perception of reality comes through our senses, inclusion of colour, sound and visual aids, expressed through signs of all semiotic systems, into electronic media, makes interaction with computer more natural and life less estranged from reality by activating the work of human senses while interacting with the Web. With creation of literary works for tablets and smartphones, that require a touchscreen, the third sense – touch was

added to the interaction between man and electronic media, thus activating three out of five basic human senses. Perception of such works becomes synaesthetic, merging both virtual and real worlds, and making the virtual world even more exciting by the possibilities it offers the users. That is, elements of all five main semiotic systems – linguistic, audio, visual, gestural and spatial start playing meaning bearing, constitutive role in creation of computer-mediated works of a new art.

However, as Hayles argues, this multimodality of digital works of art challenges writers, users, and critics to combine diverse expertise to interpret and understand the aesthetic strategies and possibilities of electronic literature. However, *when a work is reconceived to take advantage of the behavioral, visual, and/or sonic capabilities of the Web, the result is not a Web "version" but a completely different artistic form that should be evaluated in its own terms with a critical approach appropriate to the specificity of the medium.* The computational media, which is intrinsic to electronic literature, together with compositional practices continue to evolve as the technology changes at a breathtaking speed, which makes it difficult to attribute and evaluate appropriately innovative works, in *"which human thinking and machine execution collaborate to produce literary works."* (Hayles, 2007: 18-19)

Listed by Hayles forms of electronic literature: hypertext fiction, network fiction, interactive fiction, digital poetry, installation pieces, locative narratives and generative art do not form a complete list of the forms of electronic literature, though they illustrate the diversity of the field and complex relations between print and electronic literature, as well as the wide range of aesthetic strategies that digital literature employs. Most crucial, according to Hayles is the necessity to *"think digital,"* that is, to examine the specificity of networked and programmable media while still drawing on the rich traditions of print literature and criticism. Noticing the ways in which electronic literature simultaneously continues and disrupts print conventions should go along with seeing the differences that make it distinctive from print (Hayles, 2007: 24).

Media and Intermediality of Electronic Literature

One of the main differences is intermediality of electronic literature. Combinations of languages of different semiotic systems inevitably raises a question of multimodality of electronic literature, as well as questions if such works still belong to literature, or represent examples of new, emerging forms of computer culture. Though different meanings of the polysemantic word "media" are often used interchangeably in the studies of intermedia, we should start with clarification: in the present paper, which aims at studying structure and composition of narrative electronic fiction, the term *media* is used not as a material carrier of information, or a platform for creating and carrying a massage, but as a mode of artistic expression, a semiotic system.

As some researchers maintain, the notion of *intermediality* stems from the concept of *intertextuality*. Expanding Bakhtin's dialogical principle, the authors of the concept of intertextuality assume that intertextuality is a property of any discourse: every text is an intertext, other texts, texts of the previous culture and texts of the contemporary culture, are present in it in more or less recognizable forms. Each text is a new fabric woven from old quotes. Fragments of cultural codes, formulas, rhythmic structures, idioms, etc. are all absorbed by the text and mixed in it, since *language exists before the text* (Barthes, 1974). The very phenomenon of intertextuality indicates to intratextual connections that correspond to the concept of *polyglotism that is typical of any culture, any work of art, as all texts exist in the space of at least two semiotic systems* (Lotman, 1992).

The phenomenon of *intermediality* is viewed as the result of complex principles of organization of a literary text, which borrows and assimilates the properties of texts from other types of art. Intermediality, understood as *interaction of arts* presupposes their synthesis. In this connection Haminova and Zilberman (2014) mention the ideas expressed in the book by M.S. Kagan *Morphology of Art* (1972), in which the author outlines a way to understand the integral world of art not as a closed structure, but as an open system, branching and correlating within itself at different semantic levels. Noted by Lotman (1992) *multi-layered structure and semiotic heterogeneity of literary texts, their ability to enter into complex relationships with both the surrounding cultural context and the readers, reveal their ability not only to transmit, but also to transform, and most importantly, to generate new messages.* It follows, that intermediality was formed at the intersection of two conceptual areas -- *intertextuality* and *interaction of arts*, or *interart* (Rajevski, 2005).

However, as Haminova and Zilberman state, *intermediality cannot be reduced only to the problem of sources and influences, as it is rather a modification of various linguistic structures and forms that are included in a new linguistic and semantic context* (Haminova and Zilberman, 2014: 43). Thus, intermediality is not just a dialogue of arts, but their translation, understood as a metaphor denoting the process of interpretation. In intermedial works there is a special type of relationship between media, in which *contacting media are not simply connected in a single synthetic space (for example, theater as a combination of music, image and action), but are included in each other, crossing borders, exerting mutual influence, modifying and transforming each other* (Kattenbelt, 2008: 19-29). That is, the notion of intermediality defines interaction of sign systems (languages) of different arts that create the integrity of an artistic work.

As Baetens and Martinez (2015: 289-304) state, the study if intermediality has revealed that each medium, be it verbal or nonverbal, is by definition plural. There are no "pure" media, all media, including writing, are intermedial. Being in direct or indirect contact with other media, each medium is influenced and transformed by them. At the same time each medium is itself a blend of several

media. The intermedial study of literature therefore does not only refer to the study of the relationships between the literary text and included into its composition forms of other media (e.g. the illustrations that accompany it), but also includes the study of the literary as a heterogeneous material that is characterized by a more or less evident "semiotic rupture" within itself. As mentioned by Lotman, *art, in general, is not homogeneous, it can be interpreted using several (at least two) codes* (Lotman (2001: 15).

Studies of multimodality of electronic literature therefore are naturally connected with medial border-crossing, hybridization, which merges them with the interart and intermediality studies. As mentioned by Rajewsky (2005: 44-46), *various terms, including multimediality, plurimediality, crossmediality, infra-mediality, media-convergence, media-integration, media-fusion, hybridization, and so forth have been used to describe the phenomenon, and the conception of intermediality, which has been specified through such epithets as transformational, discursive, synthetic, formal, transmedial, ontological, or genealogical intermediality, primary and secondary intermediality, or so-called intermedial figuration* (Spielmann,1998: 61-74).That is, intermediality is used as a generic term for all those phenomena that in some way cross borders between media and are differentiated from intramedial and transmedial phenomena (i.e. transmission of a certain motif, or discourse across a variety of different media, the mechanism or *process that adapts a work that exists in a given medium to another medium* (Baetens and Martinez, 2015: 297, 301)), which may be studied from synchronic, as well as diachronic approaches. This also presupposes studies of relationships between media involved, considering the fact that based on their intermediality, all media tend to be treated as "mixed media."

In literary criticism a medium is regarded as a carrier of content, or a means of expression, in which *the material-formal signifier indicates to the signified* (Verstraete, 2010: 8-10), and intermediality is viewed as the relationship between different arts and media within one object, leading to their transformation and to the emergence of a new form of art, or mediation. The term *intermediality* is also used to denote *the transparency of boundaries between different media* (Oosterling, 1998), their convergence, leading to studies of *intermedial relations between words, images, sound, and the convergence of films, television, radio, news reports, e-books, photography, etc. on the World Wide Web* (Verstraete, 2010: 7).

Considering various media configurations and their specific intermedial qualities, Rajewsky proposes three subcategories of intermediality: *1 medial transposition, i.e. transformation of a given media product or its substratum into another medium when the "original" text, film, etc. serves as the "source" for another media product created through a media – specific, obligatory intermedial transformation process. 2 Media combination, also known as multimedia, mixed*

media, or intermedia that form a medial constellation by combining several conventionally distinct media or medial forms of articulation. Each medial form of articulation is present in its own materiality and contributes to the constitution and signification of the entire product in its own specific way. In intermedial works of this subcategory material manifestations of different media may be in a mere contiguity or integrate into a form in which no constitutive elements prevail. Such configurations may form new, independent plurimedial genres (As our research has evidenced, most works of electronic literature belong to this subcategory of intermediality). 3 Intermedial references, e.g. reference to a film in a literary text through evocation of film techniques, musicalization of literature, references in film to painting, or in painting to photography, etc. Therefore, intermedial references act as meaning-constitutional strategies in the media product's overall signification. This way the r e s u l t i n g product constitutes itself partly or wholly in relation to the work, system, or subsystem to which it refers. In this case intermediality denotes a communicative-semiotic concept, but r e p r e s e n t s by definition just one medium—the referencing medium (as opposed to the medium referred to) that is materially present. Instead of combining different medial forms of articulation, such media-product thematizes, evokes, or imitates elements or structures of another, conventionally distinct medium through the use of its own media-specific means. Each intermedial work may represent any type of combination of these three subcategories, as any intermedial work implies crossing of media borders by incorporating, or imitating elements or structures of other media through its own, media-specific means (Rajewsky, 2005: 52).

As a new phenomenon, digital culture not only replaces old, non-digital, forms of writing with new, digital and multimedia forms, it also creates a mechanism of readaptation—a mechanism that Bolter and Grusin (1999) call *repurposing*: an "old" medium (in this case literature) reacts to a newer one (digital multimedia writing, transmedia storytelling, as one of its concrete manifestations) by incorporating elements of the new medium, i.e., elements that resist transmedialization (Baetens and Martinez, 2015: 297, 301).

Functions of Intermediality in Works of Narrative Hyperfiction

As digital technology allows to transfer any medium to another medium, the fusion of different types of art, of two or more media forms, that have historically developed independently, but are now united within a single space, became a common practice of creating works of electronic literature, resulting in their intermediality. As each resulting product is mixed in different ways, with different varieties and proportions of its constituent elements, each requires separate attention to its intermedial properties.

For a transfer of intermedial relations to virtual space, i.e. to another platform, Bolter and

Grusin (1999: 55), introduced the term *remediation*. They argue that *"all current media remediate,"* by both paying tribute to, and rivaling with earlier media by *"appropriating and refashioning the representational practices of these older forms."* (Bolter, 2014: 14) Therefore, remediation can be termed a *"defining characteristic of the new digital media"* (Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 45), which opens a possibility for a simulated, "virtual" intermediality. As Rajewsky puts it, *"digital media remediate remediation practices of earlier media, they remediate remediation."* (Rajewsky, 2005: 63) And the study of intermediality, that has gained prominence in modern humanities due to the active development of digital culture, allows for systematical presentation of *the complex processes of intersemiotic correlations* (Haminova,and Zilberman, 2014: 38) that characterize works of electronic literature.

The concept of intermediality and its different functions seems to be a relevant principle for delimitating a wide range of works of electronic literature. Transition of literary works from paper to a computer screen seems to be quite natural, as nowadays we all write on our computers, using it as a new platform for creating any types of written products. On the other hand, you cannot prevent creative minds from using various possibilities the Net provides, which, naturally leads to combining languages and possibilities of different semiotic systems. The questions are: what types of works do we get as a result? How do we qualify and attribute them? In this respect we suggest using two functions of intermediality – primary and complementary for analyzing composition of works of electronic literature. In case of a primary function of intermediality, languages of at least two different semiotic systems equally participate in the creation of a content of a literary work. In case of a complementary function of intermediality, languages others than a language of the linguistic semiotic system, play an auxiliary role in the composition of a text, comparable to illustrations and footnotes in printed literature.

To decide on attributing a work of electronic literature to a genre of narrative fiction, we should also consider its accepted properties, and the fact that though print literature existed as the only form of preserving and transmitting knowledge for five centuries, it had inherited ages long oral and written traditions of composing and telling stories of various genres, that are imprinted in texts and in our memory, and constitute the basis of our understanding of what literature is. That is the reason for which a work may be qualified as a literary narrative text if it satisfies some accepted requirements, such as a title, upper and lower borders, plot, characters, conflict, setting, theme, point of view and style. Both print and electronic narrative texts meet all these requirements, perhaps except the lower border, which is often missing in electronic fiction, though it often exists implicitly. But this may be the case with many experimental paper-based works as well. The medium used to create a text affects the way it is created. Another similarity of printed works of narrative fiction with the works of

narrative hyperfiction is the structure of plot lines that fall into *three basic categories: axial, arborescent, and networked* (Ciccoricco, 2007: 5). In multi-plot genres, in terms of formalists, plot lines have a chain, parallel, or circular organization (Mebuke, 2022, 2023: 22).

Possibilities of the new medium, the Net, encouraged writers to experiment in various ways with different kinds of writing, including combinations of various semiotic systems to create innovative works contributing to the development of computer culture. However, as our research has shown, after extensive experiments with the net, some authors begin to come back to composing their works either in the way peculiar to traditional literary works (the trend "Back to the Book"), also adding some compositional possibilities the net provides, while others continue to further experiment with syncretic, hybrid forms of computer art. Bolter and Joyce regard hypertext as a "new kind of flexible, interactive fiction, a continuation of the modern tradition of experimental literature in print." **(**Bolter and Joyce, 1987: 41) Hence, in spite of various differences, there are inevitable similarities in constructing narrative hypertexts and printed literature. Though all electronic works of all kinds and genres are together included into the Four Volumes of Electronic Literature Collection composed at Washington State University (2006 - 2022), (by the time our paper was written, the Fifth volume was released), for our analysis we have chosen works of narrative hyperfiction from the Fourth Volume, that, to our mind, contribute to continuity of tradition of narrative storytelling. They indicate to a return to traditional literary forms while including into their structure, besides affordable through techniques of the net possibilities of composition, combinations of several media, or semiotic systems, which contributes to intermedial character of these works.

My Dear CoUntess, a Letter to Lord Kelvin, a hypertext narrative by Danny Snelson (2007), is a multicoloured recomposition of a famous letter of Alfred Jarry to Lord Kelvin in *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician.* Every word of the text is differently colour-coded and serves as an indicator to a reference, a link to a source text that it opens, which is accompanied by a video fragment. There are 6 colours and 12 tones. Words of the same colour bring to the same fragments of the source text. In the accompanying section "about" the author gives a list of authors and their works from which excerpts are quoted. Colour codes and electronic way of accessing references are among the features that distinguish this hypertext from texts of printed literature.

The narrative hypertext *A Kiss* by Dan Waber (2013), as the prologue says, "… is a story that unfurls in many directions at once." It is a told in the third person love story about a happily married couple, their life, daily routine, relations, the house they live in and their memories. Featured on the webpage image depicts rays coming from all directions to the center, that symbolize biographical ruminations of the narrator, creating his self that is depicted as the center of the image. As we can guess, small squares at different distances from the central square of the narrator, correlate with

characters and episodes of life of the protagonist that had closer or more distant effect on the formation of his character and personality.

The content page shows a list of meaningful for the protagonist events in what the author of the hypertext called "a love letter" in his statement, thus giving another interpretation to the introductory image of the hypertext with a kiss as its central point:

the moment of: a kiss
a minute before the kiss
a minute after the kiss
to the left of the kiss
to the right of the kiss
zoom out from the kiss
zoom in to the kiss

The list of items on the content list are links that open a next list of titles for short episodes about the life and relations of the married couple, their children, cats, house and memories about close relatives. Some episodes represent reminiscences of the past, or reflections about connected with them events. Some links bring back to the content page of the novel where you click on the following link to continue reading the story.

A narrative hypertext *Novelling* (2016), created by Will Luers, Hazel Smith and Roger Dear is a combination of text, image/picture, audio and video. *Novelling* is about two couples, a young couple and an older one, that, on the one hand, tells a story about their relations through suggested connections between them, but on the other hand poses the question of whether any story is based on plot. The narrative parts, that appear on the screen every 30 seconds the interface changes, are displayed on the background of video depiction of the characters and sounds of whistling, music, nature, and outer world in general. The episodes are not interconnected thematically, and seem to be fragments of thoughts, activities, recollections, aspirations, worries and uncertainties of the characters. Reading and writing are among main occupations of the characters, who are deeply immersed into their isolated inner worlds. Another question *Novelling* poses is how our reading effects our thoughts, perception of the world and each other, and what and how we write. Video representation visualizes characters and their life, and inclusion of audio system into narration serves a connection between them and the outer world. Both visual and audio systems have a complementary function to a linguistic one, and objectify narration by the means of their expression.

Modern Ghost by Artemio Morales (2017) is a digital short story about a young boy who remembers his beloved one, and includes into its composition text, images/pictures and audio. The audio recording of music accompanies the flow of text and pictures that illustrate the scenes the boy recollects, likening the story to a remediated illustrated book. Both audio and visual systems have a complementary function to the printed text helping to more vividly perceive the romantic memories

of the protagonist.

Lynda Clark's *Writers Are Not Strangers* (2018) is an interactive short story created on a website in ChoiceScript as a type of generative narrative with elements of a literary game. Apocalyptic by content, it tells about Alix, a young writer, whose stories the reader can rate on a scale from 1 to 10. Interaction with this ChoiceScript work and reading comments allows readers to understand what it feels like to read other people's rankings and assessment of one's writing and get a sense of what it is to be a contemporary writer when your worth is partially determined by such rankings.

The story has several beginnings, endings, and differences in subsequent re-readings according to choices made by readers. The combination of the literary with structural and computational techniques of videogames adds an element of excitement to the process of reading. However addition of a gambling element to the text introduces no significant changes to the construction of the main plot line. Substitution of one word for another, or choices of options the reader makes, though introduce some differences into reading, do not affect the way narration unfolds. The story is an example of a hypertext that is created on the border of traditional storytelling and a computer game.

Although it is mainly a story about authoring in the age of social media and quantification, at the same time it is a story about modern life that goes on in both virtual and real worlds. The main plot line unfolds in the real world and tells a story of Alix's anxieties, friendship with Billie, previously superficial relations with her mother Annie, children's grievances against her, and their final reconciliation. At the time of the story Annie is in the David Jones Memorial Hospital. Receiving the news of the worsening state of Annie's health, Alix rushes to the hospital in spite of falling meteors to be with her mother at her last moments, manages to get there overcoming various difficulties, and stays with her until her end.

The Data Souls, a narrative hypertext by David Thomas Henry Write (2019) is a kind of science fiction set in a distant future. It is an imaginary story about the discovery by our descendants of seven rusted data storage devices, each defining different aspects of our contemporary reality. By clicking on avatars of ancient Egyptian gods, readers get access to the data fragments. This method is a metaphorical representation of the distance that separates us, with "our reverence for quantified data and measuring even things that seem inimical to quantification, such as spirituality and social well-being," from our future descendants, as well as from our ancient Egyptian ancestors.

Parts of the text are transformed: some words are substituted by synonyms in other languages, on another page some words just disappear leaving blank spaces. All pages are accompanied by beautiful illustration, some of the pictures move or rotate. Some pictures are downloadable. By clicking on red arrows in the top right hand corner we hear sounds associated with described information. The ingenuity of the author seems to be boundless as he invents unprecedented ways of

composing the text. However all these examples of intermediality, that contribute to an amazing novelty and excitement of reading the text, have a complementary, illustrative function that does not contribute to the conveyance of the content, which is expressed through a linguistic system.

Subcutanean, a novel by Aaron A. Reed (2020), attributed to a non-interactive, generative, narrative genre, exists as both a printed book and an e-book. This electronic hypertext with a branching narrative is transformed into a linear text that may be printed out. As an e-book it includes audio and images besides the text, and allows possibilities of multiple possible permutations. It represents a mixture of several practices and genres of electronic and print literature, i.e. it serves as an example of both intermedial and transmedial work.

In the story a coming-of-age queer finds himself in a house similar to *House of Leaves by* Mark Z. Danielewski. Exploration of the basement of parallel realities with infinite variety of space transformations and expansions symbolizes the protagonist's exploration of a mysterious labyrinthine space of fear and uncertainty of his own sub-consciousness. Electronic Literature Collection authors stress the contribution of the author to "proliferation across mainstream platforms with a text that is both deeply co-authored by human and machine yet absolutely accessible to the wider reading public, which places Subcutanean in territory that few works of elite have attempted, in trying to break into book publishing as opposed to games distributors." Praising the sheer artistry of the narrative and the code, they qualify Subcutanean "as a quintessential work of this particular era of elite."

Annie Grosshans's hypertext essay *The World Is Not Done Yet* (2018, 2020) was created on a website. It represents another example of intermedial work that incorporates a text, audio and images. It seems to be the most appropriate text for our paper as its content is attributed to theoretical poetics and it primarily deals with the theme of the end of paper based literature and our transition to computer mediated texts and virtual, digital reality.

In the Author's Statement Annie Grosshans describes *The World Is Not Done Yet* as a personal narrative in multiple voices woven from print practices and memories and by authorial choices determined by the opportunities of the cyber as a creative medium. In the Editorial Statement the essay is described as a cross-perspective memoir and narrative, a tapestry of familial and community storytelling that pays tribute to print literacies while remediating them in the digital context. It portrays the way we inherit both memory and connection, and makes us think about the ways in which we learn to share meaning.

This digital-born "weblication" is a transitional hybrid that cannot be reproduced on a printed page. Parts of a text appear on pages as we read them. At the bottom of some pages are loudspeakers and by turning them on we hear the author's voice as she ruminates about the fate of our changing world. Buttons appear on some pages, and by pressing on them we can read additional

information or relevant quotations from various books. Chapbooks appear on the screen as images of their covers, and by scrolling on them we can read short episodes written by Annie. However, all these examples of intermediality have a complementary function in relation to narration and correspond to illustrations and footnotes in a printed book.

One of the main points Annie Grosshans makes is connected with the continuity of literary tradition: "the Cyber, by promising to broaden our mind through interconnection with the screen, releases us from the misleading idea that books equal literacy. Instead of paper, we now have discs of memory. But that does not mean that we are released from learning to read meaning. In fact, the feeling of responsibility is deepening as we try to comprehend what it means to be a literate being."

Conclusion

What strikes most in reading all above discussed works of narrative hyperfiction, and electronic literature in general, is not their exceptional merit compared to the best examples of paper-based fictional works (though they are definitely of literary merit as well), but the ingenuity of the authors, limitless abilities of human mind and imagination, daring experiments that assure one of the great potential of human brain for creativeness, including creation of future masterpieces of electronic literature.

Examples of hypertext narrative fiction, in spite of varying in types of composition, structure and incorporation of elements of various semiotic systems, still indicate to continuity of age long tradition of storytelling, and seem to suggest that there is still room for renewed forms of literary narrative in the treasury of world literature. They reflect inventive ways of using new media for creative writing. Inventions of new technologies have always been accompanied by investigations and exploitations of new possibilities these technologies provide. As N.K. Hayles wrote, "the evolution of Homo sapiens has co-developed with technologies." (Hayles, 2008: 112) Possibilities of combining in a limitless variety of forms different semiotic systems while creating texts lead to intermedial forms of literature and computer-generated art (or, in terms of Rayewsky (2005), independent plurimedial genres).

However, after numerous experiments with computer-generated hybrid literary forms, that by now have lasted for almost forty years, as our research has evidenced, in the Fourth Volume of Electronic Literature Collection, besides further experiments with the net, we again come across works that evoke aesthetic experience mainly through expressive use of language, as it is peculiar to traditional literary works and was peculiar to the first generation of electronic literature. As it seems, syncretic forms of computer-generated literary texts tend to split into subclasses differentiating

literary works created on a new platform from those that represent hybrid forms, a combination of various semiotic systems, new plurimedial genres. Though all works of electronic literature, as well as all works of literature and art in general, are intermedial by nature, it seems possible to draw a demarcation line between forms of intermediality based on the primary, and complementary function intermediality has in the composition of a literary text. When structural units from several semiotic systems play equal role in the composition of a text, they all naturally have primary functions in the composition of the whole. In case of electronic literature, such works may be attributed to a new form of computer-generated art and one of its yet unnamed, plurimedial genres. When a literary work is written by using mainly a linguistic semiotic system with inclusion of elements of other semiotic systems that play an auxiliary, complementary role in the composition of a text by visualizing, or otherwise objectifying content with the help of different forms of synesthesia, expressed through signs of others than linguistic semiotic system, and are used as a literary device, such literary work should be attributed to a traditional form of literature. That is why, while electronic literature still continues to evolve, and *"none dares imagine what answers the passing of time will bring,"* (Hayles, 2008: 2) nevertheless, it seems likely that literature in the form of age-long tradition of narrative storytelling will continue to live, combining, as usual, *"tradition and individual talent,"* including the talent to introduce into a narrative structure of a text innovative ways of combining elements of various semiotic systems. And it is likely to suppose that narrative storytelling will continue to exist, though not always printed and bound. As it is, nowadays we all write on our computers. Tempora mutantur et nos mutamur in illis.

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Tamar Mebuke, Professor at the Department of Foreign Languages at Georgian State Technical University, graduated from the Georgian State Institute of Foreign Languages in 1981. Obtained her MA in Text Linguistics in 1985 and Ph.D. in the Theory of Literature in 2006 at Georgian State University. She has to date 114 publications to her credit, including five books on the Theory of Prose Genres, Mythological Archetypes in Literature, Reader in Text Linguistics and Discourse Analysis, and has participated in 55 International Conferences. She is currently a member of Editorial Board and reviewer for six International peer-reviewed journals.

"A sentence is saved not any sentence no not any sentence at all not yet": Exploring the paratext in Suburbia through the constraints of Oulipo

Nandini Mukherjee and Nakshatra Sengupta

"[....] The classical author who writes a tragedy following a certain number of rules with which he's familiar is more free than the poet who writes down whatever comes into his head and is the slave of other rules of which he is unaware." (Calvino, 1981: v)

- Raymond Queneau

It was in the year 1960, after his "Neo-French"(Calvino,1981: viii)-- a concrete bridge that the engineer had thought would close the straits of spoken French with its innumerable inflections and written French with its cauterised grammar– had turned out to be little more than a pole, Raymond Queneau decided, together with the fellow who was sharing his table at Café de Flore – Francois Le Lionnais, that it was finally the time to solidify their rudimentary oppositions to surrealism and establish a counter-movement. Thus, Ouvroir de littérature potentielle, or the Workshop of Potential Literature (Oulipo) was founded.

As a neonate, Oulipo existed as a sub-commission to the College de Pataphysics but later developed to be an independent body, and it was in the Dossier 17 of the College of Pataphysics that the First Manifesto of Oulipo came out. This manifesto is important to be touched upon as it serves the double purpose of clarifying the aspirations of Oulipo and indirectly helping us situate our chosen text, *Suburbia*, in the Oulipan "tradition". In the First Manifesto, Lionnais argues that all literature is subject to "constraints" and "procedures" and in keeping with this belief he declares that the aim of Oulipo would be "to explore and discover new possibilities for writing in this domain with the aid of computers and mathematics." (Lionnais, 1961)

Further, the word 'potentielle' assumes supreme importance in trying to define the activities of the group. In the introduction to the *Penguin Book Of Oulipo*, Philip Terry writes, 'Firstly, and most simply, "potential literature" can be distinguished from literature in that, fundamentally, Oulipo invents or rediscovers constraints rather than writes literature.'(Terry,2019: xxx) The activities of Oulipo, thus, continued in two directions– a. the discovery of old constrained writings (sometimes, within this were included works for their strange wordplays, close to Queneau's "Neo-French"), and b. the creation of new ones. These older writings that became a research topic for the Oulipo became

what is now known as "anticipatory plagiarism". One particular constraint, the lipogram, which is easily associated with Oulipo, and is the major constraint in our chosen text, has a long history, going back to the *grands rhetoriquers* of 16th century France, and even older, to the rhetorical games played by the Early Christian writers. (In the aforementioned anthology, the editor has also included Fagle's translation of Homer's *Illiad*, which serves to show that Oulipianism predates Oulipo.) These constraints, as was pointed out in the manifesto, were closely linked to mathematics, although some were not mathematical at all, for instance, the already mentioned lipogram, where a text is constructed with the deliberate omission of certain predetermined letters.

The recent developments in mathematics in France can be held partially responsible for the establishment of Oulipo. After the First World War, primarily due to a dearth of introductory mathematics textbooks in France, a group of mathematicians, mostly French professors and lecturers from École Normale Supérieure decided to rewrite mathematics and introduce a more rigorous approach to the understanding of mathematical statements. They published their works under a collective pseudonym– Nicolas Bourbaki. Mathematician-poet Jacques Roubaud, a member of Oulipo, saw in Bourbaki and mathematics the tools with which to replace the unconscious automatic writings of the surrealists. Roubaud writes in an essay entitled "The Oulipo and Combinative Art" that, "There can be no doubt that, when they founded Oulipo, Queneau and Le Lionnais, amateur mathematicians as they were, had this group in mind." (Roubaud,1994: 6)

Georges Perec, a French author, contributed significantly to the Oulipian repertoire both as a writer and as an innovator of literary constraints. His void is an exceptional use case of lipogram, where the whole novel is written without the letter "e". The constraints of n+7, "texte à démarreur", Queneau numbers($2q+1= p$), of X takes Y for Z, etc. all add to the potentiality that is at the heart of Oulipo. These constraints produce bizarre aesthetic effects in which the work of the reader is increased to that of a joint creator in the creative process. But constraints must not be considered as machines that have the potential to produce literary-anthropomorphic effects; rather, in keeping with Queneau's vision, the constraints are to be treated as prompts supplied to the "textual machine" that produce, in accordance with its combinatorial capacity, aesthetic delight. Thus, such a poem as "A hundred billion poems" by Queneau becomes, through its inherent combinatorial "prompts", 10^{14} sonnets, which no reader in their mortal life can complete.

Excellent academic books have already discussed in great detail the variety and scope of Oulipian constraints. A reproduction– however partial – of these constraints will not augment the purpose of clarifying the idea behind the usage of these constraints in order to produce texts; therefore,

discussions on the exotic and involute constraints in this essay will only be limited to a few. But the word "constraint" is, to some members of the Oulipo, an inadequate term to encapsulate the diverse literary/mathematical devices that the writers use to produce their texts. Ian Monk writes in *The noulipian Analects* that "personally I dislike the word 'constraint' which to me sounds too negative given that the general aim of the group's writers is to find ways to extend their artistic possibilities, not just to pull off extraordinary verbal stunts, which is more the domain of various loose groups who orbit around us." (Monk, 2007: 189-190) In the Second Manifesto of Oulipo, the words such as "structure", or "form", were advocated instead of "constraints".

As already mentioned, the purpose of these constraints is to find the artistic potential of the written language and the constraint to which the words are put to use, but in addition to this use-case, constraints become a tool for the reader to "write" the text for themselves. The readers of *Suburbia* invent or discover the novel by following the paratextual guides to the lost urtext where the constraints do not serve as a hindrance for the creation of the absent urtext but allow the text to have a dynamic form.

The absence of the urtext allows us to suppose multiple sentences. It was Gertrude Stein who, affected by the romance of the sentence, said, "A sentence has wishes as they decide". "A sentence is saved not any sentence no not any sentence at all not yet".(Dillon,2023: 74-76) Supposition arises through both absence and presence but it strikingly arises in Paul Fournel's *Suburbia*. "Supposing" is referred to here as "inventing", to invent or forge our narrative. *Suburbia* is a reminder of reading being a personal experience, not just that it reminds you of the sentence that swerves, letting loose the grip of meaning in a space that is devoid of any narrative interest, but a way to invent your own narrative. *Suburbia* consists of an extremely extensive list of elements: i. a title page ii. a copyright notice iii. a legal disclaimer iv. an epigraph v. a dedication vi. A note from the fictional publisher vii. a foreword (written by Marguerite Duras) viii. an introductory note by the author (a fictional version of Paul Fournel himself) ix. an afterword allegedly written by Francois Caradec x. annotations and educational supplements by Maurice Garin (a fictional inspector of the Ministry of Education).(Enns,2019: 9) These elements serve as "paratexts" that are considered to "accompany" the text, but right here we find that the paratext evolves and takes the shape of the urtext itself, when the latter is absent throughout the novel.

The footnotes have been considered either "a vehicle for displaying the critic's taste and breeding" or "a quasi-scientific system for displaying the vicissitudes of textual transmission,"(Dworkin, 2013: 44-45), here in *Suburbia*, it becomes the place of regeneration of the absent urtext.

In Fournel's *Suburbia* along with the mentioned elements, we find the footnotes which allow us to create our version of the urtext. Here the lack of the urtext leads to creation and destruction, making violence the central theme of the text - "They sure kicked me around. They gave me a bloody nose. I'm ten miles down the road and still rubbing my bruises"(Terry, 2019: 40). The publisher's note present in the text reveals that there was a scandal surrounding the book's original publication ten years earlier, although the details of the scandal are not explained and the publisher promises that "the quality of this little novel, now that passions have subsided, has emerged ever more forcefully"(Terry, 2019: 39). And quite here, we understand the parallel of both creation and incalculable destruction. The text *Suburbia* represents the paratextual elements of a fictional autobiography that was previously rejected, yet it gets written again - "I am back in business"(Terry, 2019: 40).

In the foreword written by Marguerite Duras, she explains that the scandal surrounding the book's original publication was the result of a lawsuit filed by "hypocrites,"(Terry, 2019: 41) who were afraid of "reading what is true,"(Terry, 2019: 41) yet they ultimately failed to suppress this truth, as the book is now once again being exposed to "the light of day"(Terry, 2019: 41). Duras, thus, seems to suggest a possible parallel between the content of the book, which concerns the physical attacks that the writer sustained while growing up in the suburbs, and the scandal, which concerns the legal attacks that he sustained following the book's publication. - "To write or read about suburbia, we must now look to Fournel. Invariably, Fournel."(Terry, 2019: 41)The writer's introduction similarly notes that the book describes various beatings he received as a young man, yet because of its placement immediately following the foreword it is unclear whether the opening sentence, "they sure kicked me around" refers to physical assaults from neighbours or verbal assaults from critics. This underlies the two kinds of violence mentioned above, one being physical violence and the other discursive violence. As Fournel rises up and attempts his act of vindication, so does the sentence in the barren landscape and leaves. The sentence by itself takes note, being tired of multiple figurative adventures, attempting to mean what the writer wanted or what the critics felt it to be. The readers entrust to the slippery sentences and all we are left with is "the tranquil certainty that beneath the transitory scandal eternal literature lay slumbering"(Terry, 2019: 39). The footnotes carry several examples of spoonerisms such as including several incorrect literary references (citing Jean Racine's Phèdre instead of Pierre Corneille's Le Cid) (Terry, 2019: 46) and typos (writing "clockwise orange" instead of "clockwork orange" in a reference to Anthony Burgess' 1962 novel of that name)(Terry, 2019: 48), allowing another layer of ambiguity along with the list of errata.

The writing serves as a vindication and in the section where we find the passage which stands as the word from the publisher, we find the writer who has previously refused to let his word get

reprinted for the fear of critics, rise again. The text decides to write itself, leaving immense space for the critics to make comments but still leaves no mark on *Suburbia*, it remains empty. The open provocation that the text carries leads to the creation of a metaphorical Suburbia. But along with this, we find another form of violence, the footnotes become a definition of the physical violence present in the landscape of the Parisian suburbs. Footnotes existed since the early dawn of printing but it was only in the late eleventh century that the practice of linking notes to texts appeared in the glossed books of that age. And later as we move to the sixteenth century we find the footnotes to be extremely crowded and in need of some difference so "printers employed a series of letters in alphabetical sequence as *signes de renvoi* to link the notes to the text."(Dworkin,2019: 47) In the late seventeenth century we find the gradual shift of the footnote from the side to the bottom of the page as the typical number of glosses began to decrease by then.

The "note" has evolved according to its usefulness over the years but by obviating the intended communicative value of the notes in their original context and frustrating their functional utility within the system of the book machine, Suburbia leans toward the *mention* and moves away from the *use* of the footnote.

Gérard Genette argues that "a text without a paratext does not exist,"(Genette,1991: 263) but he also mentions, in passing, that "paratexts without texts do exist, if only by accident."(Genette,1991: 263). Paratexts without a text—paratexts as texts, one might put it—have also been written quite intentionally, however, and they constitute a remarkable trend in contemporary writing and Suburbia is an example of that. He famously described the paratext as the "threshold…between the inside and the outside"(Genette,1991: 261) of a text, and this threshold represents "a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that…is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it"(Genette,1991: 262). That is the purpose of the paratext is to - "supplement, support and displace the body of the text"(Dworkin,2013: 44).

Suburbia remains a place that could be easily interpreted and critiqued as the footnotes act as the topographic map for the text, allowing the style to engage with the text. But the invention of sentences that attempt to fill the barren landscape form a funeral procession of their own kind, keeping the landscape barren and untouched.

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Nandini Mukherjee is pursuing his B.A in the department of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University. He has previously worked with TTIS (The Telegraph in Schools) as a junior journalist. He has previously presented a paper at the International Conference on ' " Strength Lies in Differences": Exploring Alternative Modes Of Expression in Latin America and South Asia from 20th Century Onwards', organized by the Centre For Studies In Latin American Literatures And Cultures (CSLALC), Jadavpur University, on 19th April, 2023.

Nakshatra Sengupta is pursuing his B.A in the department of Comparative Literature at Jadavpur University. He has previously presented a paper at the International Conference on ' " Strength Lies in Differences": Exploring Alternative Modes Of Expression in Latin America and South Asia from 20th Century Onwards', organized by the Centre For Studies In Latin American Literatures And Cultures (CSLALC), Jadavpur University, on 19th April, 2023.

"You play fair with me, I'll play fair with you": Evaluating the erotic thriller and its potential as a bifocal lens into gender politics using *Fatal Attraction* (1987), *Disclosure* (1994) and *Fair Play* (2023)

Joanna Pinto

Erotic thrillers, according to Beatrice Loayza, have been summarized as "the love child of porno chic and film noir", as these films repackaged elements of soft-core porn (slow panning, silk sheets, and bare bodies in soft focus) and the conventions of noir (femmes fatales, murder plots, and relentless scamming) in varying proportions (Loayza, 2023). Linda Ruth Williams argues that erotic thrillers were "noirish stories of sexual intrigue incorporating some form of criminality or duplicity, often as the flimsy framework for on-screen softcore sex" (Williams, 2005: 1). Eventually, the erotic thriller dissipated from mainstream cinema, likely because of its lack of originality in its narrative, which were formed on three basic plot points: crossing moral boundaries, be it in the professional and/or personal realm; an imbalance of power between the core couple with attempts to reclaim this through physical violence or accusations which could affect social standing; and the infamous *femme fatale* who by the film's climax, is either subdued or destroyed to reassert the traditional family unit.

This all changed when *Fair Play* (Chloe Domont, 2023), premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2023, and soon reviews and first reactions named the film as the resurrection of the erotic thriller. The questions that came about were based on the fact that after so many attempts to revive the erotic thriller which includes remaking iconic erotic thrillers as TV series,[i] and readapting novels or the basic premise of well-known classics as erotic thrillers,[ii] *Fair Play* became a worthy addition to the genre and as to what could be the reasons for classifying it as an erotic thriller. Was it because it provided a feminine perspective to a genre predominantly formed to appease the male gaze and unlike its predecessors, it provided more than just an excuse to enjoy softcore sex by incorporating Fourth Wave feminism and the zeitgeist of the 2020s, which includes dismantling the subtle presence of toxic masculinity?

In this article, I attempt to analyse whether *Fair Play* provides the opportunity to revive the erotic thriller genre by becoming a "revisionist" erotic thriller (Henry, 2014) through common factors in its mainstream predecessors *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987) and *Disclosure* (Barry Levinson, 1994). I will then analyse *Fair Play* as a case study of gender politics, comparing it with the same predecessors through factors such as the political eras and gender politics prevalent during the films' release, and the character archetype popularized by Michael Douglas in comparison with the archetype encapsulated by *Fair Play*'s male protagonist.

Literature Review

This literature review will be divided into three main sections: it first focuses on the studies surrounding the erotic thriller as a film genre. I will first examine the erotic thriller and its evolution from the 1980s to 1990s as evident from certain factors, which includes the *femme fatale*. The second section focuses on the gender politics shaped by "Reaganism" in the 1980s as well as a backlash against feminism perpetuated by earlier generations, which then influenced Hollywood media, and this includes erotic thrillers. The third section then dissects Chloe Domont's *Fair Play* in terms of its core elements and themes which seemingly line with the erotic thriller genre as well as the gender politics perpetuated by #MeToo and the recent interest and subsequent debate in decoding toxic masculinity and male anxieties.

When it comes to research on the erotic thriller, I have chosen Linda Ruth Williams' *The Erotic Thriller in Contemporary Cinema* because it traces not only popular entries in the genre that entered mainstream media but also nontheatrical releases. It also allows her understanding of this genre which imparts "distinct ideas of gender, sexuality, and power", through empirical claims that stress the role of contextual factors in determining texts and their receptions by competing groups of producers, distributors, feminists, conservatives, and fans (Andrews, 2007: 49). I have decided to focus on a culturally renowned figure found in the erotic thriller and that is the *femme fatale*; according to Katherine Farrimond, the *femme fatale* is an important figure for a feminist understanding of contemporary popular culture because of her complex relationship with patriarchal and feminist understandings of female power (Farrimond, 2018: 1). In her book *The Contemporary Femme Fatale: Gender, Genre and American Cinema*, Farrimond attempts to establish this archetype as "an emblem of postfeminist empowerment and crisis in cinemas of girlhood" (Farrimond, 2018: 1) rather than "a film noir stalwart and manipulative dominatrix into whose trap the duped hero falls." (Williams, 2005: 30). I also attempt to apply the principles of "revisionism" to the erotic thriller that Claire Henry analysed in *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre*, given that many attempts have been made to revive the erotic thriller, but *Fair Play* seems to closely align with the principles detailed by Henry. I have chosen *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987) and *Disclosure* (Barry Levinson, 1994) as audiovisual texts to compare with *Fair Play*, and along with it, certain journal articles that analyse the themes of power imbalance as seen in *Disclosure* (Camille Nurka analyses the book on which *Disclosure* is based on), the feminist reactions to *Fatal Attraction* (The Winter 1992 edition of *the Journal of Popular Culture* focused on the film), and other relevant material.

My article focuses on analysing the chosen erotic thrillers, using research on the political eras in which they were released: while *Fatal Attraction* was released during the 1980s which perpetuated

"Reaganism", a form of conservation which criticized liberalism propagated by the 1960s and 1970s, *Disclosure* was released following Anita Hill's testimony against Clarence Thomas and post 1992, dubbed as "the Year of the Woman". Nevertheless, despite the difference between both political eras, both *Fatal Attraction* and *Disclosure* typified the male resentment towards working women, as seen through the archetype perpetuated by the films' male protagonists, played by Michael Douglas. To better understand the "backlash" culture of the 1980s, I used Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, given that it was highly praised for understanding the backlash against feminism, and writing a detailed yet effective analysis on this backlash through seemingly innocuous media like advertisements, *Fatal Attraction* itself, or myths supposedly based on psychological research polls that women wanted domesticity and the working woman was a hindrance as evidenced through Alex's portrayal of the single career women who attempts to destroy the American family. While it did not provide a solution to reverse this backlash, it does make readers aware that be it domesticity or an advancement in career, women want to feel equality in a sense where they aren't judged for wanting an equal measure of both.

Given that current gender politics have been shaped by the #MeToo movement, I used Karen Boyle's *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism*, Mark McGlashan and John Mercer's *Toxic Masculinity: Men, Meaning and Digital Media*, and *Flirting in the Era of #MeToo: Negotiating Intimacy* (Bartlett et al., 2019) to set up my analysis, as I believed that all three books attempted the define #MeToo as a "networking" feminism using social media as a channel, as well as unravelling toxic masculinity that subtly permeated media prior to this movement, and how with this movement, intimacy was filtered with a new set of rules in order to uproot the male gaze and rape culture that dictated media. It is also important to note that has been a newfound interest in the "nice guy"- a character which were seemingly reliable for women, but were agents of sexism and misogyny; this has been studied using *Promising Young Women* (Emerald Fennell, 2020) as a revisionist rape-revenge by Zsófia O. Réti, and in 2023, there has been a collection of movies that attempt to examine this archetype, which has yet to enter in an academic context, hence my interest in incorporating an understanding of this archetype in my essay.

I attempt to study *Fair Play* as related to the erotic thriller as a genre as well as a mirror reflecting postfeminism post #MeToo. I decided to use secondary material related to the film in the form of interviews with director Chloe Domont, given that it operates as director's commentary with her thorough analysis of the characters, themes and scenes of the film. I also have used opinion pieces on the film, which helped me understand the audiences' perception of the film.

Through this literature review, I have outlined the different texts of three independent areas: the erotic thriller as a genre, the political eras that influenced the gender politics which in turn

informed media, and *Fair Play* where both these areas intersect. Through the gaps formed in each area, I intend to formulate the core of my article: erotic thrillers have more potential than being a "flimsy excuse for viewing softcore sex" (Loayza, 2023) and "sexist schlock" (Bender, 2022), as seen through *Fair Play*'s popular label as the contemporary erotic thriller; the question remains as to whether it is more of a revisionist erotic thriller, or whether it is merely a case study for unravelling a toxic romance.

Fair Play as an erotic thriller: Comparing the narratives found in its predecessors

While there is no concrete definition for the erotic thriller, it is important to note that it isn't a "generic hyphenate" (Maltby as cited in Williams, 2005: 22) and that the erotic thriller is a textbook case of a form which 'participate[s]… in… several [genres] at once'. In particular, the term 'erotic' taken as an adjective is itself highly promiscuous and resonantly trans-generic (Williams, 2005: 23). It functions in some ways like the term 'adult', but in practice, 'erotic' as a genre term has meant something less explicit than 'adult', with the former frequently standing in for 'softcore' and the latter doing service for 'hardcore' (Williams, 2005: 25). If we were to use a definition that combines both Loayza and Williams' perspective of the erotic thriller, *Fair Play* both aligns with and subverts the definition, because according to Domont, she "set out to make a thriller about power dynamics within a relationship," which just so happens to be "highly sexual" (Taylor, 2023).

The synopsis for *Fair Play* follows a simple structure as its early erotic thrillers: the film follows two ambitious Wall Street analysts, Luke and Emily, who are in a relationship that breaks a non-fraternizing policy at the hedge fund firm they both work at, and are hoping for a promotion that will alleviate their relationship going public following their engagement. However, a promotion that is rumoured to be Luke's goes to Emily, and their relationship slowly but surely begins to deteriorate due to the unexpected power imbalance in the relationship.

Fair Play seemingly blends the plot points of Adrian Lyne's *Fatal Attraction* as evident from the relationship between Michael Douglas's Dan Gallagher and Glenn Close's iconic villain Alex Forrest as well as Barry Levinson's *Disclosure* evident from *Fair Play*'s setting in the corporate world as well as the power dynamics between a male subordinate and a past lover as his manager. However, a core difference is that *Fair Play* is written and directed from a female perspective, and this is seen from the main elements shared between all three texts, which we will discuss in detail. These elements include: the *femme fatale* as a career woman, a corporate setting as the playground for higher stakes as well as the consequences when personal boundaries mix with professional, and the use of onscreen intimacy to establish the core couple's relationship and internal conflict.

The *femme fatale*, according to Katherine Farrimond, resists clear definition, as the term is connected with sexuality, femininity, danger, violence and deceit, but these connections are slippery, as many of those characters popularly associated with the term do not fit a coherent pattern (Farrimond, 2017: 2). This holds true for Emily, given that she may be first introduced as a quintessential *femme fatale* using auditory and visual imagery, with Donna Summer's *Love to Love You Baby*[iii] (a song which seems diegetic for an erotic thriller) and Emily standing with her back to the camera wearing a trench coat as people weave in and out, presumably ignored by others, but then from a side angle, is revealed to be alone on a balcony, smoking a cigarette (Domont, 2023: 00:00:57-00:01:20). But the film establishes her as a career woman working in a male-dominated workplace, and the elements that highlights this besides her gender, are her red hair and her clothes that often incorporate a few frills to assert her femininity (Vadnal, 2023) among her (mostly) male colleagues. In *Fatal Attraction* and *Disclosure*, both Alex Forrest and Demi Moore's Meredith Johnson are established as part of the certain subculture of femme fatales being career women, with the former working in a publishing industry and the latter promoted over a man to break the glass ceiling, and both of them using their power over "an initially hapless but finally revengeful dupe" (Williams, 2005: 148), an archetype originated by Michael Douglas with his characters Dan Gallagher and Tom Sanders.

But while Farrimond argues that such women are "ultimately not evil or deadly" (Farrimond, 2017: 30), Alex and Meredith are portrayed as part of a trope that was largely written by men as an embodiment of fears around powerful women (Bender, 2022), as seen when they're killed or neutralized at the end for their role in attempting to destroy a seemingly innocent man. Emily emulates Farrimond's argument, given that we see her fear in breaking the news that she in fact has been promoted over Luke, and reluctant attempts to downplay her success in favour of pacifying Luke's ego. While the audience receives clues that Emily has genuinely earned the promotion, with her hard work and impressive educational background (Domont, 2023: 00:19:33-00:21:03), she is established as a *femme fatale* (Farrimond, 2017: 30), via codes of performance such as Emily's ease with Campbell, the firm's CEO (Domont, 2023: 00:41:36), visual style (Emily's alternating knee-length skirts with trousers) and extratextual information (verbal suggestions that Emily used her sexuality to gain a promotion) from other male analysts' and eventually Luke's perspectives (Domont, 2023: 00:24:42-00:24:48). Another example that highlights this visual coding is later in the film, when Emily visits a strip club with other male executives and is forced to ingratiate herself into a group who are cunningly sexist, and when she returns drunk, Luke insults her for seemingly thinking that she "belongs", when she visually resembles a hooker, and the next morning, Emily's male colleagues are heard jeering over photos of her from the previous evening, calling her a "freak" and "an animal"

(Domont, 2023: 01:04:33-01:10:48). Domont argues that this scene

> show(s) what women have to do to keep their seat at the table [..] we have to play ugly to survive. And in some ways, there was no winning out of that situation for Emily. If she had not participated, then the next day, her colleagues would have accused her of having no sense of humour or being uncool; you would see them ostracise her. But then by participating in the debauchery and the degrading of her own gender, it prompts her colleagues to start calling her names. It shows how thin the margin of error is for women in that environment (Petter, 2023).

In this way, while the *femme fatale* is not an easy figure for feminism, the range and complexity of her representations, and the quantities in which such representations are still appearing, mean that her potential for challenging simplistic understandings of the depiction of female power in mainstream contemporary cinema cannot be ignored (Farrimond, 2017: 170). This is proven from Emily's character arc in comparison to her predecessors Alex and Meredith, where we may not label her as a *femme fatale*, but rather what I would term as 'a culpable heroine', where we see her navigate complex gray areas in ways that make her humane than antagonistic.

Corporate settings are used in both *Fair Play* and *Disclosure*, as a way to amplify pressure for individual workers due to the high stakes nature that presumably originates from the idea that failures were of a more permanent nature than just a misstep when climbing the ladder, as well as the unspoken moral that professional integrity must trump corporate greed. This is evident when Emily follows Luke's tips on a certain deal which leads to a huge loss, but instead of being punished because of bad judgement, Emily is punished because she's a woman, as seen when Campbell, her boss, calls her a "dumb f***** bitch" (Domont, 2023: 00:48:54-00:51:42). However, she remedies this when instead of following up on Luke's tip which has a basis in insider trading, she takes a riskier yet legal approach which is twice as successful; however, instead of a formal apology, she is given a hefty commission (Domont, 2023: 00:53:53-00:54:32 and 01:00:50-01:02:30).

Another reason for using a corporate setting, is because it is an area where power has a corrupting influence,[iv] especially when gained in a high managerial position, and in *Disclosure*, it puts forth the idea that women could misuse this power over men through sexual harassment. Sexual harassment in the workplace, became an important prerogative for women in the 1980s, and in *Disclosure*, it is tied into culturally produced knowledges of truth, power and visibility (Nurka, 2002: 159). This is evident when Meredith Johnson uses her position to file a sexual harassment complaint against Tom, the man who she actively seduced. This is also seen in *Fair Play*, where Emily does make a few suggestive *quid pro quo* comments to Luke, the audience may not perceive it as sexual harassment because she doesn't implicitly intend to, but it is evidence of the consequences of blurring the line between personal and professional boundaries. It is also important to note that it's Luke as a

male subordinate, who wields sexual harassment as a weapon, when at the climax of the film, while he's inebriated and completely seething from his emasculation, he accuses Emily of breaking company policy and sexual harassment, using her earlier comments (Domont, 2023: 01:26:20-01:26:32). This scene highlights that while women use sexual harassment as a weapon when they are the height of their power, men could use this weapon when they are on the other spectrum of power.

It is believed that the economic potential of the erotic thriller lies in its combination of sexual mystification and conservatism and that the genre promises a dual spectacle: sexual action and violent suspense (Andrews, 2006: 59). This is seen in all three texts, but while *Fatal Attraction* and *Disclosure* use sexual acts as the inciting points for the entire narrative, (a weekend fling and a casual sex encounter respectively), *Fair Play* uses sexual acts and eventual lack of, as a barometer for the core couple's relationship and internal conflict. This is seen from the opening scene which establishes the couple's sexual intimacy, as well as their comfort with being each other as equals. But following Emily's promotion, which is symbolic of an imbalance of power in their relationship, Luke's resentment manifests in impotence, later in the power of withholding sex against Emily who inversely experiences an increase in her libido. This is established from one pivotal sex scene when Emily attempts to assert her power and Luke stops completely. But the final act of Emily and Luke's relationship is shown to disintegrate through sexual assault, which complies to both sexual action and violent suspense at the same time. According to Domont, "sexual assault isn't about sex, it's about power. That is the only way at that point for Luke to reclaim the power from her because he's physically stronger" (Dockterman, 2023). In previous erotic thrillers, charges of rape and domestic violence were usually revealed to be the manipulations of wicked women, making them well suited to an era characterized by a sharp increase in wounded male egos (Loayza, 2023). But in *Fair Play*, it is used as a motif for reclaiming masculinity rather than a manipulation, that coexists with the presence of a fragile male ego. It is important to note that Emily and Luke's final confrontation mirrors *Fatal Attraction*'s penultimate confrontation between Dan and Alex, as seen with the use of a knife which references Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*. But while Alex uses the knife as a symbol of her unreluctance to let go of Dan, Emily uses the knife to reclaim the power that Luke takes away from her when he sexually assaulted her.

Another important iconography of the erotic thriller is the coexistence of sexual acts with violence; according to Williams, the combination of sex, flesh, gun, fabric and colour is a classic erotic thriller conjunction (Williams, 2005: 18). Another idea was that the sexual act as seen in the opening scenes of *Sister, Sister* (Bill Condon, 1987)[v], and *Dressed to Kill* (Brian de Palma, 1980)[vi] was used as a tactic to lull a sense of security but actually preceded an act of violence, then revealed as a subconscious fantasy, but would be then used as a forewarning to audiences (Loayza, 2023). *Fair*

Play integrates both these thoughts, as evident when it uses a period sex to establish the main's couple comfort with each other, but also toys with the idea that whoever is bleeding at any given moment is the weaker sex, regardless of gender (Bergeson, 2023). Through the visual imagery of blood, *Fair Play* subverts the idea that the erotic thriller's economic potential lies in its combination of sexual mystification and conservatism (Andrews, 2006: 59); here, blood is not only a cornerstone of femininity, but also indicative of who is not in control (Bergeson, 2023).

To conclude from all three elements, *Fair Play* could be considered as a "revisionist" opportunity to the erotic thriller, given that it succeeds in reworking, refining, or reinstating the erotic thriller genre's codes and conventions (Henry, 2014: 5). If we were to consider "revisionist" as "an evocative and potentially provocative label", and "revisionism" to describe shifts such as the postfeminist rather than feminist engagement with (in this case) gender politics (Henry, 2014: 5), let us now analyse *Fair Play* as a case study in gender politics, in the following section.

Fair Play as a case study in gender politics: Comparing the political eras in which its predecessors were released through audience reception and character archetype

It has been said that while the erotic thriller was the most lucrative genre of the 1980s and 1990s, given that entries, such as *Fatal Attraction*, *Basic Instinct* (Paul Verhoeven, 1992), and *Disclosure* were the highest-grossing blockbusters, it could also be used as mirrors reflecting the gender politics prevalent during the 1980s and 1990s. This is evident from the cultural impact of *Fatal Attraction*, as it is part of the pop culture lexicon, be it through Alex Forrest's iconic villain, it's climactic ending, as well as the introduction of "bunny boiler". In this section, I debate whether *Fair Play* can be viewed along with *Fatal Attraction* and *Disclosure* as mirrors of the political eras in which they were released, through certain elements that reflected the perspectives perpetuated by gender politics within each era. These elements include audience reaction towards these films and the character archetype of Michael Douglas' characters in erotic thrillers which Williams coins as the contemporary 'Cain male' (Williams, 2005: 148) in comparison with Alden Ehrenreich's character as part of a certain archetype of men that I would like to coin as "crybaby men" (Winkelman, 2023).

Upon reading various records of audience reception towards the chosen texts, I found that both *Fatal Attraction* and *Fair Play* had similar reactions. *Fatal Attraction*, according to Williams, was characterized by the "anxiety [...] of the power of an audience out of control", but it was also one of the most controversial talking-point films of recent times, a major cultural and sexual milestone (Williams, 2005: 49). It has been claimed that many reviewers uniformly considered that the core message of the film included "the vilification of the single career woman and the sanctification of

motherhood and the traditional family structure" (Bromley and Hewitt, 1992: 18). Williams analyses the film through audiences' reaction to the original, later revised ending,[vii] with

> critics [...] discussing the discussions, and becoming the hysterical audience's audience. The cultural meanings of *Fatal Attraction* were debated so explicitly that in effect the writers themselves became their own historical reception critics. [...] But perhaps more than anything its title, [...] could have advertised subject matter appropriate to the AIDS age, when sex could well mean death. [...] Though the film does not mention AIDS, it dramatizes the consequences of sex, and as an anti-sex sex thriller *Fatal Attraction* spoke to a number of positions (Williams, 2005: 50).

It can also be considered that *Fatal Attraction* was released during a time where feminism itself was being criticized; according to Susan Faludi, the 1980s had

> seen a powerful counterassault on women's rights, (as) an attempt to retract the handful of small and hard-won victories that the feminist movement did manage to win for women. This counterassault is largely insidious: in a kind of pop-culture version of the Big Lie, it stands the truth boldly on its head and proclaims that the very steps that have elevated women's position have actually led to their downfall. The backlash is at once sophisticated and banal, deceptively "progressive" and proudly backward. [...] The backlash has succeeded in framing virtually the whole issue of women's rights in its own language. Just as Reaganism shifted political discourse far to the right and demonized liberalism, so the backlash convinced the public that women's "liberation" was the [...] source of an endless laundry list of personal, social, and economic problems (Faludi, 1991: 9-10).

On the other hand, *Fair Play* has been released in a time, where #MeToo, a "networked feminism" (Boyle, 2019: 3) has been active since 2017 following allegations against film producer Harvey Weinstein. The #MeToo movement, according to O. Réti, not only reflected on the situation of women within the film industry, but it also functioned as an incentive to revisit how stories about women and by women are being told in film and as a result, in line with the zeitgeist, new perspectives are shown and new narratives are told in cinema; narratives, which, so far, have only ever been presented from and for the point of view of the male gaze (O. Réti, 2023: 189-90). This can act as a counterpoint to backlash periods where efforts to hush the female voice in American films have been a perennial feature of cinema in such periods (Faludi, 1991: 127). Audience reception towards the film has been unofficially recorded through word-of-mouth information found in tweets, Chloe Domont detailing how she saw audiences across all ages and gender, watch the film and connect with the subject matter on a deeper level (McPherson, 2023 Collider). An excerpt from Esquire has Domont detail these reactions as

people [...] on the edge of their seats. [...] But on a more important level, women have come up to me saying they've felt deeply seen by the film in a way that they haven't before. People are questioning things they've done in their past. It stirred a lot of reflection, and caused people to be open about their own experiences in relationships with these kinds of dynamics. The conversations that are coming out of that are incredibly exciting (McNeal, 2023).

Thus, it can be said with conviction that *Fair Play* has stirred a lot of conversations akin to when *Fatal Attraction* was released in 1987, which highlights the possibility that the film could potentially enter the cultural lexicon as a powerful study of unravelling gender dynamics in relationships. It also highlights the difference between male and female viewers in the 1980s with male and female viewers in the 2020s, given that when watching the theatrical cut of *Fatal Attraction*, male viewers could "slip into a dream state where it was permissible to express deep-seated resentments and fears about women" and the "silent and impassive" female viewers were serving as exemplary models of the "feminine" women that Lyne most favoured onscreen in his previous films[viii] (Faludi 1991: 126-127); whereas with *Fair Play*, women have complimented the film because they felt they were "being seen" while men's reaction have been varied, with younger men "feeling a bit shaken" and older men being "more open" and even sharing their experiences (Petter 2023). Nevertheless, the result has been same- while *Fatal Attraction* had been labelled as "America's favourite nightmare" (Bygrave 1987) as evident that it "saved marriages" or taken as "a warning not to engage with strangers" (Yahr, 2023), *Fair Play* has been labelled as "the date movie from hell" with the intention to reevaluate toxic relationships and "break people up" (Greenblatt, 2023).

As aforementioned, both *Disclosure* and *Fair Play* use corporate workplaces as part of the narrative, and this could be because such professional spaces were male-dominated and eventually when women entered the workforce, their persona as ambitious career women were considered as threats. This is seen through *Disclosure* which typified a growing white male resentment toward the visibility of feminist discourses (and other discourses that could be said to be 'marginal') in the public consciousness and Camille Nurka argues that *Disclosure* even taps into those discourses that see increased numbers of professional women in the workforce as a threat to male power (Nurka, 2002: 159). *Fair Play* attempts to display this resentment in the form of entrenched beliefs and hangups which are slow to evaporate (Mechling, 2023) in a postfeminist era, where women continue to be a threat to male power, but also underscores this reality with the fact that masculinism is a reactionary justification for patriarchy (Bergeson, 2023). This was also confirmed by Domont that "for the most part, we raise boys to believe that masculinity is an identity when it's not. It's an energy" (McNeal, 2023). To conclude, while *Fatal Attraction* was "anti-feminist" and *Disclosure* was "anti-powerful

women" (Williams, 2005: 177), *Fair Play* is "anti-patriarchy" but with an emphasis on male fragility.

Another aspect that could provide a deeper context of the prevalent gender politics presented in all three texts, is the male protagonist and the archetype they perpetuate. While *Fatal Attraction* and *Disclosure* employed a male protagonist known as "the yuppie", which is also played by the same actor, i.e. Michael Douglas, *Fair Play* capitalises on the recent archetype of critiquing Hollywood's myth of "nice guys"- "white, urban, well-groomed, educated people, reliable-looking enough for anyone to ask for their help" (O. Réti, 2023: 195). While there hasn't been an official term to coin the archetype that Luke exhibits in *Fair Play*, for this article, I will term this archetype as "crybaby men" (Winkelman, 2023). It can be said that both these archetypes are formed from toxic masculinity which has been used to describe (and account for) a range of behaviours and performances of masculinity which perpetuate sexism, racism and homophobia and are associated with a disparate group ranging from politicians and industrialists to religious fundamentalists, alt-right extremists and incels that cause harm not only to men themselves but also to those around them (McGlashan and Mercer, 2023: 1).

As mentioned earlier, Michael Douglas' characters in *Fatal Attraction* and *Disclosures* were embodiments of the yuppie, a cultural figure that originated in the 1980s. A yuppie, according to Dylan Gottlieb were "real, living young urban professionals" who

> were at the forefront of the concentration of capital and brainpower in a handful of cities and embodied the split of what was once a broad middle class in two: an upwardly mobile, college-educated metropolitan class, on the one hand, and a downwardly mobile class of workers on the other. Ultimately, yuppies were able to reshape American politics—and with it, American economic and social life (Gottlieb, 2021: 962).

However, Douglas provides a deeper truth underneath the seemingly harmless yuppie with his character arcs in erotic thrillers. This is compounded by Williams, who believes that Douglas's characters are often figured as the representation of "flawed, crisis-ridden masculinity and the concomitant decline of male cultural and social authority" and the male counterpart of *femme attrapée* (Wager, 1999 in Williams 2005: 177). Douglas, according to Williams, is a contemporary incarnation of the 'Cain male' victim of desire epitomised by the men of hardboiled writer James M. Cain (Willams, 2005: 179), where Douglas' characters

> struggle(s) to survive the desires of women either to have him or to destroy him, desires which are only sometimes matched by his own. But he is not a Cain male primarily because of desire, but because of his pathological lack of control. Douglas's characters are ruined by, and predicated upon, lack in its various forms: incompetence, ignorance, impotence – symbolic forms of castration which mark him as damaged (Williams, 2005: 180).

This lack of control is epitomized by making Douglas' characters as a father and husband, and the family, especially the relationship between husband and wife is the final sanctum, which is jeopardized by the femme fatale in both *Fatal Attraction* and *Disclosure*, with the goal of revenge in the former, and the sake of corporate ambition in the latter (Williams, 2005: 181). This can also prove that such men's biggest fear is not the woman who preys on him, but rather his wife. This archetype's passive complacency highlights the antithetical archetype of "Prince of Darkness"- male characters with sovereign power that Douglas perpetuated in the same era (1980s-1990s), as seen in *Wall Street* (Oliver Stone, 1987), *The Game* (David Fincher, 1997), and *A Perfect Murder* (Andrew Davis, 1998).

In *Fatal Attraction*, Douglas' Dan Gallagher is the ideal poster boy yuppie, with a wife and child, a wonderful home in New York, and a cushy job as a lawyer and yet audiences wonder as to what made him undertake an affair with Alex, thus underscoring the reality that just as feminism failed to ensure that women "could have it all", conservatism propagated by Reaganism failed to ensure a man, and by extension, his family's safety and happiness. But it also highlights that in favour of this conservatism, audiences were more sympathetic to Dan's plight as seen through reactions to the original ending as well as the need to see Alex punished, but through Beth's hand, because it aligns with the fact that Dan's passivity is wholly attributed to the presence of women (Williams, 2005: 184).

It has been claimed that yuppie fashion has resurfaced in the 2020s (McDonald and Nersgaard 2023), and is referenced in *Fair Play*, through the men's fashion worn by Luke, other male analysts and executives, as well as the CEO Campbell. But while Dan seems comfortable in his passivity towards and fear of women, even though misogyny, self-pity and redundancy still mark his response to his own victimhood and impotence (Williams, 2005: 180), Luke becomes uncomfortable with this sudden impotence, and like Dan, uses similar responses to this impotence, as seen when he uses a self-help guru based off Jordan Peterson, his implicit yet cunningly cutting remarks towards Emily, which becomes explicit at the height of his inferiority. This highlights the deeply rooted influence of traditional masculinity which continues to permeate men, irrespective of the political era and feminism evolving to suit the needs of the generation it resides in.

In *Disclosure*, while Douglas' Tom Sanders may win externally against *femme fatale* Meredith, his character and performance are framed by an ambivalence towards personal authority (Williams, 2005: 189). This may be considered as the commencement of "victimised but avenging white masculinity" (Williams, 2005: 190) which porously resurfaces into an era where *Fair Play*'s Luke resides, given that Luke feels that he is a victim for losing out on a job that was always framed as his first but now given to a woman, and he avenges this, by asserting himself to Campbell when

another job position opens (Domont, 2023: 01:10:50-01:15:10) and then when he is at his lowest point of self-confidence, he accuses Campbell of denying him a job and attempts to reclaim his power by accusing Emily of sexual harassment (Domont, 2023:). This can be used reflexively, in response to *Disclosure* establishing sexual harassment as a symbol of power that Meredith has and Tom doesn't. But while Tom's ignorance is at the crux of his impotence, which is underpinned by his lack of knowledge (Williams, 2005: 190), Luke's entitlement is at the crux of his impotence, underpinned by his refusal to acknowledge his shortcomings, as seen when he screams at Emily, "You stole my f****** job" (Domont, 2023: 01:19:30-01:19:32), even though the audience subtly knows his work ethic, as seen through amount of losses Luke incurs for the company and then using insider information. Tom's excuse for being unable to first reject Meredith's advances is attributed to a lack of self-control (Williams, 2005: 193), but Luke's excuse is his impotence as seen when he reacts with a lack of interest when a newly promoted Emily attempts to cajole him (Domont, 2023: 00:39:48-00:40:30), and then later with disgust when a drunk Emily playfully propositions him (Domont, 2023: 01:08:32-01:08:46).

Disclosure ends, not with Tom reclaiming his power through winning the lawsuit case over Meredith, but being passed over in favour of another female boss. The camera intentionally focuses on Douglas's face, operating as the public gaze becoming an agent of male shame (Williams, 2005: 193), and the audience left to presume that Tom is complacent with such a humiliation, given that his new boss could be more benign than Meredith. But *Fair Play* ends with the same intentions behind *Fatal Attraction*'s original ending: holding a man accountable for his crimes. Luke, having reclaimed his power by sexually assaulting Emily, becomes seemingly normal as evident from his relaxed demeanour when Emily encounters him, and him casually revealing that he has a few job opportunities lined up in San Francisco. But Emily having reached the point where she has been emotionally and physically traumatized, Luke's inability to own up to his crimes becomes the impetus for her decision to reclaim her own power. According to Domont, Luke's behaviour has been "normalized in many ways, and they shouldn't be" and that the whole movie builds up to the line: "I'm nothing" (Gonzalez, 2023). To conclude, if Tom can endure humiliation while acknowledging that he will never receive a promotion because of his impotence, Luke is forced to learn this the hard way, first through the reality that "no firm will touch him" (Domont, 2023: 01:39:17) after the aforementioned blowout and then with his former fiancée making him own up to his impotence at knifepoint (Domont, 2023: 01:44:40-01:46:18).

While Luke can be characterized as a "nice guy" for the audience, through visual cues such as Alden Ehrenreich who has played laidback yet reliable characters in his filmography[ix], and verbal details like an education at an Ivy League (Domont, 2023: 00:01:55), and an employee with nepotistic

origins (Domont, 2023: 00:36:20-00:36:25) to name a few. But because *Fair Play* has been released in a year where films such as *Barbie* (Greta Gerwig, 2023), *Poor Things* (Yorgos Lanthimos, 2023), *Anatomy of a Fall* (Justine Triet, 2023) have chosen to examine and decode "nice guys" who complain when women assert their power through independence, but portrayed with a more sympathetic and subtle approach (Barber, 2023). These men are labelled as "crybaby" as evident from the way they reacted to "feminist" women, and could falsely be branded as antagonistic, much like the *femme fatale*. However, they are positioned in their respective films as victims of traditional patriarchy that may appear alluring (as seen in *Barbie*), or too ingrained to coexist with current feminism (as seen in *Fair Play*) but are eventually harrowing to abide by its principles, and like Douglas' Cain male archetype which coexisted with Douglas' Prince of Darkness archetype, "crybaby men" can serve as a counterpoint to "shitty media men" which had originated from the #MeToo movement (Perbedy, 2023). Even Domont expresses that Luke "represents a certain generation of men caught between wanting to adhere to [the principles of] a modern, feminist society [and] still having been raised on traditional ideas of masculinity." To conclude, "crybaby men" may seem to be similar to "Cain male victims" as perpetuated by Douglas' roles in the erotic thriller, given that they both show men to be struggling with their impotence (Williams, 2005: 194), but while the latter fails to overcome this impotence because it is perceived as innate, the former must take the effort to understand that this impotence originates from a mindset that is learned.

Conclusion

In this article, I attempt to understand how gender politics can influence media narratives, using the erotic thriller, a genre which can be easily overlooked and underestimated because of the implications behind its label. While erotic thrillers could be relics of a bygone era, I have found that they reflect the cultural and political norms prevalent during their release, which in turn had influenced the perspectives towards feminism and masculinity. In today's generation, it has become evident that remaking material from such era with a postfeminist perspective is not the solution, but rather reevaluating/revisioning the genres which have been perpetuated to serve the male gaze, as seen in the case of *Fair Play*, where it may reference the iconography of previous erotic thrillers, but instead of forewarning audiences that "sex is dangerous" especially with powerful women, it provides a social commentary that in a society which is deemed progressive, women and men fail to understand that the real enemy is not each other, but the systemic patriarchal mindset that they are still attuned to.

Notes

[i] The most notable examples are *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987) and *American Gigolo* (Paul Shrader, 1980) which are classified as thrillers, but often referred to as noteworthy entries to the erotic thriller genre.

[ii] This is in reference to *Deep Water* (Adrian Lyne, 2022), which is an adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's novel of the same name and *The Voyeurs* (Michael Mohan, 2021), which uses the basic premise of *Rear Window* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1954) but is repackaged as an erotic thriller.

[iii] *Love to Love You Baby* was Donna Summer's breakthrough entry; however, as revealed in a documentary of the same name, Summer felt the song would be better suited to another singer and for that reason, she approached her performance in the song as an actor rather than a singer. Once Giorgio Moroder heard her very convincing moans in the demo, however, he persuaded her to let it be released as a single (Farber 2023).

[iv] *Wall Street* (Oliver Stone, 1987), *The Wolf of Wall Street* (Martin Scorsese, 2013) and *AMC's Mad Men* (2007-2015) have explored corporate greed as a theme.

[v] Jennifer Jason Leigh's character is shown to be having sex in a candlelit room but the room starts flooding and she is unable to warn her lover and just as she drowns, wakes up in the same room intact

[vi] Angie Dickinson's character attempts to sexually stimulate herself in the shower, before she is raped by an unknown stranger as she watches her husband shaving, which is revealed to be a rape fantasy to alleviate her sexual frustration

[vii] Fatal Attraction's original ending decided to have Alex commit suicide while listening to *Madame Butterfly*, an opera which serves as a motif in the film, with police arresting Dan because his fingerprints are found on the knife which Alex uses to slit her throat. Due to the negative reactions to that original ending, the makers created the theatrical ending where Alex is shot in self-defence by Beth. However, it has been reported that director Adrian Lyne, producer Sherry Lansing, and actress Glenn Close hated the new ending (Desta 2017), and that the original ending was used for the film's first theatrical release in Japan (Harmetz 1987).

[viii] This is in reference to *Flashdance* (1983) 9½ Weeks (1986).

[ix] Ehrenreich's filmography includes *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (Ron Howard, 2018) where he played a younger version of Han Solo, an archetypal nice guy, Hail, *Caesar* (The Coen Brothers, 2016), *Cocaine Bear* (Elizabeth Banks, 2023).

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Joanna Pinto is a recent graduate of the University of Glasgow in an MLitt in Film and Television Studies; her current focus is on gender studies; especially works on the depiction of femininity and masculinity in contemporary media. She hopes to expand her PhD studies on the same in the distant future; outside of her research, Joanna loves to read dystopian fiction and write her own stories based on what she has learnt in her programme.

Distorted Narratives and the Cinematic Form: A Study of Select Political Films

Tamanna Priya

In India, cinema has long been a powerful tool for political expression. Even in the pre-independence era, filmmakers used cinema to propagate Hindu Indian culture and national pride, with the aim of inspiring revolutionary feelings against colonial rule. Films like *Bhakta Bidur* (1921), *Wrath* (1930), *Raithu Bidda* (1938), and *Kismet* (1942) were made with this intention, but many were banned at the time. After independence, films like *Mother India* (1957), *Manthan* (1976), and *Mrigya* (1976) carried Marxist-Socialist ideology and criticized India's progress. Although parallel cinema continued alongside commercial films, its dominance in conception, execution, and reception has given way to a more blurred line between commercial and parallel cinema in recent years. This has allowed corporate and elitist filmmakers who once filled Hindu Indian cultural pride through films, and later shifted to commercial cinema, to again enter the field of politically-charged cinema in pursuit of profit.

Throughout India's history of cinema, politics have played a major role in shaping the industry. From nationalist propaganda films to socialist critiques of the government, cinema has served as a platform for expression and influence. In the South Indian film industry, Dravidian politics replaced elitist Hindu cultural films and elevated many mainstream political figures in Tamil Nadu. However, the dominance of parallel cinema has waned in recent years, as commercialization has created a more blurred line between the two. While parallel cinema continues to exist, many corporate and elitist filmmakers have returned to making politically-charged films in the hope of financial gain. The changing nature of Indian cinema reflects wider changes in the country's political and social landscape. As India continues to develop and evolve, so does the role of cinema in reflecting, shaping, and commenting on society. While the dominance of parallel cinema has waned, the tradition of a cinema with a political identity remains alive in India, showcasing diverse world views and opinions.

Leonard W. Dobb states that propaganda is a conscious attempt by an individual to exert influence over others and control their behavior by suggesting certain ideas that serve the propagandist's interests. Over time, cinema has emerged as a powerful tool to shape the ideology of the masses and promote hyper-nationalism, often catering to specific socio-political ideologies and agendas. It is this socio-political partisanship of the cinematic stage that I will examine in this paper.

Joseph Nye's (1990) concept of 'soft power' recommends it is a weapon that a nation uses to enhance its interests and outcomes and more particularly the ability to achieve them through persuasion rather than coercion and economic embargos. This is where I attempt to show how soft power can serve as a powerful tool for promoting hegemonic cultural structures and reinforcing dominant national narratives, by cultivating a fertile field for their growth and development.

Nye also proclaims that "the universalism of a country's culture and its ability to establish a set of favorable rules and institutions that govern areas of international activity are critical sources of power" '(2004a: 57). However, this universalism becomes very problematic when it is applied to Indian scenario-an innately multi-ethnic, polyglot and multi-cultural nation. While considering Indian Cinema, *Bollywood* is regarded as India's transglobal cinematic platform and a key narrative space that explores broader socio-political and cultural practices, sensibilities, and discourses. Hence, soft power here becomes a mechanism to construct, reinforce , and naturalize endogenous structures of cultural hierarchy and hegemony. This paper will delineate the machinations of India's dominant mainstream film industry-Bollywood and its systemic role as a national soft power brand by discursive agents including the state, corporations and mainstream media. From the beginning of independent India, the media has consistently been viewed as a symbol of freedom and democracy. With the advent of newspapers, radio, television, and other forms of media in India, there was hope that these platforms would promote democracy by enabling citizens to overcome spatial and temporal barriers and create public spheres that provided information and fostered emancipatory interests.

 The princely states of India gained independence from British rule on August 15, 1947, when India and Pakistan were created as two separate countries. The British allowed the princely states, which made up around 40% of the country, to choose whether to join India, Pakistan or to become independent. While some princely states chose independence, most joined either India or Pakistan, which marked the beginning of a new phase in Indian history as the country moved towards consolidation and nation-building. A significant aspect of the integration process was the Vilay Patra or Instrument of Accession, a document signed by princely states that agreed to join India. Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel played a key role in the integration process, which succeeded in bringing most of the princely states into the Indian union. Princely states were persuaded to accede to India through a combination of persuasion and coercion with the exception of Junagarh, Hyderabad, and Jammu and Kashmir.

The political scenario in the princely state of Jammu & Kashmir was complex. The state had a Muslim majority but was ruled by a Hindu king, Raja Hari Singh, who was reluctant to give up his throne. Jinnah wanted a plebiscite to be held in Jammu and Kashmir, much like the one held in

Junagarh, to decide its fate. However, Singh's options were limited and fraught with difficulties. If he joined Pakistan, it would be challenging for a Hindu king to survive there. If he joined India, he might lose his throne in democratic elections dominated by Muslim voters. If he stayed independent, the state would face multiple problems as it became sandwiched between India and Pakistan.

With increasing time, the obsession of Pakistan to acquire Kashmir was also increasing. Pakistan was unable to attack Kashmir because its army remained under British control. Therefore, Pakistan created a force of around ten thousand people disguised as civilians, called the "Azaad Kashmir Fauj," to implement their plan. Raja Hari Singh, the ruler of Kashmir, was confident of winning against this force, despite warnings from his army chief Rajendra Singh that Muslim soldiers in their army could join Pakistan. However, Rajendra Singh's fears proved correct, resulting in the ultimate loss of some parts of Kashmir to Pakistan and an ongoing conflict over the region. The defence of Pakistan was under the control of Britishers. Likewise, the defence of India was also in the hands of the Britishers. It was impossible to make *azaad* (Independent) army in just a day. As a result, Pakistan requested help from Mountbatten, but he refused to provide assistance for an attack. Mountbatten made it clear that the army would only defend themselves in case of an attack and since Kashmir was not part of India at that time, he did not agree to help. When Pakistan's army was advancing towards Srinagar, Maharaja Hari Singh, the ruler of the state sought assistance from India (Srinagar was the capital of Jammu and Kashmir, and was only 50kms away). In response, India sent V.P. Menon, the secretary of the Ministry of States with a document to Raja Hari Singh. Eventually, Hari Singh signed an Instrument of Accession, which made Jammu and Kashmir part of India. This was the same document that was signed by the other princely states when they agreed to join India after the country's independence from British rule in 1947. It is important to note that the Instrument of Accession was a temporary agreement, and it was agreed that a referendum would be held in Jammu and Kashmir to determine its future. However, the referendum was never held, and the legitimacy of the Instrument of Accession has been a subject of controversy and conflict.

The history of Kashmir's accession to India and the subsequent conflicts highlights the challenges of establishing and maintaining a democratic system in a divided society. The struggle for control over the region has resulted in human rights violations, political instability, and loss of lives on both sides. It is essential to acknowledge the complexity of the Kashmir conflict and recognize the human cost of the ongoing struggle. The people of Kashmir have suffered greatly, and a peaceful resolution is imperative to establish political stability and secure the human rights of the region's population. Democracy is not a simple or easy solution and its implementation requires careful consideration of historical, political, and cultural factors. The establishment of democracy in Kashmir, as in any other region, requires a commitment to peace, justice, and human rights. Nevertheless, it is

also important to note that despite the raging patriotism that catches us when viewing partisan films that pose patriotism, these silenced histories live within the memories of people. In addition, it is necessary to understand the cinematic canvas of such films. *The Kashmir Files* failure to offer a comprehensive look at the situation before independence raises questions about its accuracy and potential biases.

The Kashmiri Pandit Genocide (the seventh genocide of the Kashmiri Hindus committed by the Islamic Terrorists that started in January 1990) was a difficult chapter of the history of India, as were the Operation Blue Star (1984) in Amritsar and the Godra Riots (2002) in Guajrat. The systemic forgetting of selected issues is already a problem that has prevented the people's voices from reaching the majority of the population. In this scenario, another partisan film helps no one. The right way to share the pains of the Kashmiri Pandits and discuss a noble cause is seen (to some extent) in the film *Shikara* (2020). However, the trouble with *Shikara* is that it fails to address the issues of the violence faced by the Kashmiri Pandits and loses itself in eulogizing a privileged version of resistance.

Creating films is a business involving both directors and producers. While directors are responsible for the creative and artistic decisions during the filmmaking process, producers manage the logistical and financial aspects of producing a movie. Film producers work behind the scenes to ensure that every aspect of the production runs smoothly. They are responsible for assembling the necessary talent and crew, securing financing, negotiating with distributors and studios, and overseeing the production from start to finish. In short, the producer's job is to ensure that the director's creative vision is executed on time and within budget. Directors, on the other hand, are responsible for translating the script into a visual language. They work closely with actors, cinematographers, and editors to create a coherent and captivating film. Filmmaking is a collaborative effort that involves not only directors and producers but also a range of other creative professionals, such as screenwriters, cinematographers, editors, and sound designers with an ultimate aim to turn the profit. That a particular political party was out and calling for a tax free run of the film all over India suggests that the film was made to shape public opinions and advance political goals. Political parties seek to capitalize on movies that align with their political views by offering tax exemptions or promoting them at political rallies.

Louis Althusser, a French philosopher and Marxist theorist, challenges the idea that media can bring about true freedom. Instead, he argues that the concept of freedom is a constructed ideology used by both the ruling class and the oppressed to justify their positions. According to Althusser, the idea that everyone is equally free is a false construct that serves to 'mystify 'the oppressed and promote the power of the ruling class. He believes that ideology is primarily reproduced through the

Ideological State Apparatuses, which include cultural institutions like schools, churches, cinema, media, and other popular culture. These institutions exert a powerful influence over our beliefs and interests, shaping perceptions and limiting the possibilities for social change. By selectively highlighting certain experiences and images while suppressing others, they reinforce a particular vision of society and individual place within it. There can be a disconnect between representation and lived experience due to the formation of imaginary depictions during the representation process. This can result in a misalignment of real-life practices, emotions, and experiences on the cinematic screen or other forms of media. It is essential to comprehend the relationship between representation and lived experience, since one is often manifested while the other is obscured. According to Stuart Hall, the visible and invisible elements in media create a complex relationship between presence and absence, which are interconnected and conjectural.

It is also crucial to understand that many of Vivek Agnihotri's films break into monologues and the multi-faceted dimensions of Kashmiri Hindus 'history are collated and presented in a categorical and monolithic manner. Krishna Pundit's characterization may strike a chord because it is reminiscent of Agnihotri's prior work in *Buddha in a Traffic Jam* (2016). The latter film, much like this one, utilized a similar approach to denounce 'anti-national 'communists and their supposed violent and harmful intentions. Krishna Pundit is strong-armed by the character of a communist professor Radhika Menon, played by Pallavi Joshi Agnihotri, wife of Vivek Agnihotri, into shouting "azaadi" (freedom) for the sake of it, while Menon herself is depicted as an exaggerated caricature who unhesitatingly labels her group of like-minded sympathisers as an 'ecosystem'.

It is not uncommon for movies to explore complex and divisive themes involving differing ideologies, and for filmmakers to use specific characters as mouthpieces for a particular political narrative to establish and propagate socio-political ideology. Ultimately, the extent to which it is showcased through certain characters depends on the specific film and the director's intent. Audience members may interpret and respond to this approach differently depending on their own perspectives and beliefs. For example, in *The Tashkent Files*, Mithun Chakraborty's character, a politician looking for 'mudda'[i] to win the upcoming election seems to speak on behalf of a particular political ideology when he labels historians 'liberal terrorists', NGOs 'social terrorists', judges 'judicial terrorists' and media 'TRP terrorists'.

In order to uncover and evaluate the societal, political, and cultural factors that contribute to the (mis)representation and stereotyping in the cinematic medium, it is valuable to consider the post-Gramscian theory of populism developed by political philosopher Ernesto Laclau. Laclau suggested that hegemony was the presupposed medium through which populism unfolds and expands, and that

empty signifiers deferring signification towards universalities such as 'truth 'and 'justice 'are consistently reiterated to symbolically structure the hallowed self-legitimising sphere of a hegemony's operations. In *The Kashmir Files*, filmmaker Vivek Agnihotri appears to be motivated by his hegemonic positions as he seeks to 'manufacture' narrative in his quest to 'curate 'and impart 'truth' and 'justice' (the tagline of the film is 'Right to Justice') upon those that history seemingly forgot.

Despite presenting itself as a pioneering investigative film, *The Tashkent Files* relies on unchecked sources of information and presents partial falsehoods. This mixture of falsehood and selective facts, presented alongside catchy and controversial labels, can distort reality and masquerade as truth. Such tactics may be used to sway those who are receptive to a given message, but they ultimately undermine critical analysis and promote confirmation bias. By sidestepping the complexities of genuine debate, this approach only serves to polarize and diminish the value of open dialogue. Ultimately, its real intention becomes clear: to promote the idea of a strong nationalist leader who can defeat Pakistan militarily (as he did in 1965 war), which seems to be the only thing that truly interests the filmmaker. The film uses democratic principles as a fig leaf to mask its true intention of promoting muscular majoritarianism. Through the characterization of a young truth-seeker and a committee tasked with investigating Shastri's death, it presents a plethora of terms such as nationalism, secularism, globalization, corporate slavery, and terrorism, but fails to articulate a comprehensive understanding of these ideas. The film uses these terms but it fails to provide a thorough analysis of them.

In *The Kashmir Files*, there is this conversion of a self-oriented and thinking Krishna to a Krishna who has switched sides but is at the same time misappropriating history to oppose liberal humanism. The filmmaker ignores the fact that a misuse of history to justify Hindutva is a problematic stand to take. The film neglects the effects of militarization in Kashmir, including the significant challenges it poses to Kashmiris living in other parts of India. Additionally, the film glosses over another disturbing fact that merits further examination. The film is made in a way that it pretends to be re-awakening the nationalist consciousness which is actually the consciousness of a Hindu Rashtra[ii] posing itself as an ideology inclusive of all faiths. This cultural violence is strongly regressive. While reflecting on the pre-colonial era may be informative, it is not a viable solution for addressing the contemporary issues that have arisen in recent years. It is therefore easy to see that the flashback to Airaki to forget the secular culture of post-independence India helps only to radicalize the masses on the grounds of religion.

A very poignant scene in *The Kashmir Files* where Pushkar implores his grandson not to align

with the "azaadi" movement is significant. In one violent sweep, Vivek Agnihotri portrays every instance of the word 'azaadi 'as inherently hostile to both Hinduism and India - whether it is uttered by student activists protesting an elected government or militants who commit heinous acts of violence. Despite the repeated clarifications that "azaadi" represents a cry for liberation within India, rather than from India, Agnihotri has Pushkar conclude his sentence by cautioning, 'These people want 'azaadi' from Bharat'.

This outright conflates and distorts the true meaning of the word as well as the true account of history. It is very problematic to look at the entitled use of the classic poem 'Hum Dekhenge 'by Faiz Ahmed Faiz. The orchestrated controversy around the song tries to snatch the secular nature of this protest song and conspires to paint the song as a radicalist's Islamic conspiracy. The irony is that the song is recorded along the shouts of 'azaadi'[iii] in the film. In limiting the meaning of the term azaadi to Kashmir, the film is committing the same error of asynchrony. The pseudo-religious outlook that feeds into the systemic oppression of the outcastes is supported by an alpha-religious ideology concocted and presented as the 'true Hindu nationalism'. It is for this reason that politics must be separated from religion. To look at An-Al-Haq as a call to conversion is a simplistic reading of a humanist ideology. The pattern here is also starkly similar- a smear campaign of the fanciful past to validate the actions in the present and the future.

The Tashkent Files very categorically picks up a piece of history that is in the dark and attempts to find a solution to a problem that it also claims to have (re)discovered. The film very easily breaks down into a mundane debate about nationalism and anti-nationalism. How socialism is presented as a conspiracy in the film is significant. The movie ' *The Tashkent Files* 'centers around the demise of Lal Bahadur Shastri and explores possible reasons behind it, including those associated with the former opposition party, the Indian National Congress (INC). The movie complies with the agenda of 'truth is a luxury 'where all the nine characters, six men and three women in 12 Angry Men (1957) style, participate with each other on an argumentative stand on Lal Bahadur Shastri's death in a room. These characters include: a historian, a journalist, a judge, a woman with multiple NGOs on her CV, a former intelligence operative, a scientist, an industrialist and two politicians. The image of this room serves as a striking example of the consequences that can arise when fact and fiction are intentionally blurred together in service of an undisclosed political agenda. By obscuring the lines between truth and fiction, this form of narrative aims to manipulate public opinion and advance hidden objectives, often at the expense of vulnerable communities or marginalized groups. The politician PKR Natrajan, played by Naseeruddin Shah claims 'only idiots are afraid of the truth. One should be scared of rumors because if they are not stopped, they become such irrefutable truth that even truth start looking like lies'. The author concurs with Foucault that persistent dissemination of lies and rumors, accompanied

by intense emotional investment, can lead to the blurring of truth and fiction, ultimately causing falsehoods to be perceived as fact. For instance, declaring certain movies to screen tax-free so that more people may consume it serves the purpose of feeding into a one-sided perspective, in an already polarising time. Today, symbolism has overtaken truth as a prevailing force in our society. In this era, symbols carry more significance than raw facts or objective reality. We have entered an age in which it is not uncommon for people to prioritize meaning over accuracy, leaving one to question whether we still value truth at all.

The production of *The Tashkent Files* has brought attention to a disturbing trend in Indian filmmaking. Increasingly, films have employed documentaries to push a particular political message and reinforce identity politics both on screen and off screen disguised as an objective account of events. These oversimplified, one-sided narratives lack both artistic creativity and factual validation. Filmmaking must undergo rigorous research and validation of its subject matter to establish credibility. Only by testing and cross-checking data can subjective perspectives be nurtured by reliable information. Unfortunately, this is not the case with productions such as *The Kashmir Files*, which presents a skewed narrative that overlooks the complexity of the situation in order to create a memoir for Kashmiri Hindus. Films that rely on the "cardboard politics" approach tend to reinforce untruths instead of offering valuable perspectives. In effect, this approach may undermine the potential of cinema to provide informed commentary on complex social and political issues.

Vivek Agnihotri's *The Tashkent Files* and *The Kashmir Files* end by stating one-sided facts on screen. The liberty to make a pseudo-documentary in the guise of creative cinema allows for the manipulation of facts and the erasure of the other side of the narrative. *The Tashkent Files* shows the inclusion of the word socialist in the constitution, the rise of a secret intelligence service and the death of Lal Bahadur Shastri as connected events. The method is simple- a smart believable fracture and mixup of history does the trick.

Let us now look at Nagesh Bhatt's *Hurdang* (2022). The film promotes the idea that reservations are detrimental to those belonging to the upper castes and that resistance against them is necessary. In current times, when a handful individuals from lower castes in India begin to progress, educated individuals belonging to upper castes believe that their rights are being compromised due to the reservations implemented in education and employment based on caste. Suraj Yengde says:

> Many a time, a student is victimised because the professors have a historical memory of violence that they want to impose again, and there is this tenacity of having an attitude of jealousy and incompetence looked through, especially, Dalits and Adivasis and in many

cases now students from the other backward classes as well.'

Affirmative action is currently a topic of heated debate due to the limited availability of job opportunities, as well as the government's inaction in addressing the struggles of underprivileged communities, regardless of their caste identity. In this context, the idea of sameness, which promotes merit and condemns discrimination based on reservation policies, has gained widespread acceptance. The demand for meritocracy is largely championed by educated upper-caste, advocating that the eligibility for educational and occupational opportunities should be determined by factors such as individual ability, hard work, and merit. However, this argument makes the latent Brahminism apparent if one understands how the dominant classes' 'affirmation of sameness 'occludes the development of Dalits by replacing caste with the 'language of liberal individualism, equality of opportunity and free choice'. It is noteworthy that *Hurdang* actively condemns the still-existing caste discrimination in contemporary India. Cinema as a medium has effects in constructing, reinforcing, naturalizing, and even resisting social differences and hierarchies. However, the deliberate stand to create an impression that caste is a matter of the past, that it has no more a realist dimension in the contemporary India, is a casteist move:

We're going to hostels, arranged according to caste groups; roll numbers are allocated
according to the caste criteria. That itself is much harsher, it's not a democratic   experiment.
Its already distinguishing, and then the atrocities of hostile professors – the   Dronacharyas
looking for their next Eklavya to be sacrificed – who mock the students   and don't encourage
them. (Krishna and Yengde, 2021)

The author argues that *Hurdang* may have been created with good or progressive intentions, it is limited in its ability to challenge the dominant ideological discourse due to its reliance on a Brahminical perspective. Consequently, the author maintains that the film is unable to generate significant transformative impact. Different identity and subject positions are reiterated in highly complex ways by the cinematic medium. Meaning is made with them, from them, against them, and by particular people in particular places. *Hurdang* appears to be a movie made by an upper- caste or *savarna* gaze. The Indian film industry is influenced by higher castes, which results in their 'version' of caste-related issues being prioritized in films. As a consequence, their perspective becomes the prevailing tone in the industry for addressing caste-related concerns.

The masculine hero, Daddu Thakur, is presented as physically strong but intellectually deficient. The movie portrays the anti-reservation movement as a crusade to save the country's future, depicting caste differences without acknowledging the historical biases that exist. The upper castes are portrayed as the oppressed, without addressing the injustices inflicted upon OBCs (Other Backward Classes), Dalits and other lower-castes. This film has received severe criticism from multiple critics who have gone so far as to called it 'vile 'for its distorted portrayal of the reservation system as the root cause of social and economic problems, rather than acknowledging the persistence of caste discrimination. The decision of a youth to become an IAS officer, only to become disillusioned with the proposed caste-based reservations by the Mandal Commission or the Socially and Educationally Backward Classes Commission (SEBC), runs contrary to the constitutional guarantee of affirmative action until equality is achieved. The characterization of the alpha male protagonist in the film reflects a hyper-masculine mindset that is perpetuated by the filmmakers. Despite their attempts to distract from these biases with impressive visuals, the prejudice remains plainly evident. The use of quotas for genuine social equity is lost when they are co-opted for other purposes, perpetuating a cycle of public positions that only serve to further muddy the waters.

Hurdang glorifies a character who uses democratic tools meant to protect minority rights to instead further oppress them. This blatant manipulation of state machinery creates a misguided image of the oppressor as oppressed. The film fails to acknowledge the historical existence and impact of caste-based discrimination and the evolution of reservation policies in India, which have contributed to reinforcing a divided society. The movie advocates for an economy-based approach to reservations but fails to consider the social and economic injustices faced by OBCs, Dalits, and other lower-castes even currently, which affects their access to opportunities, including education. The film is devoid of any perspective or representation from supporters of reservation. The film portrays that suffering, trauma, and the loss of dreams and opportunities as are exclusive to upper-caste characters, completely overlooking the experiences of other castes and communities. It is only in a single sentence in the final scene that the movie acknowledges the prolonged oppression of lower-caste individuals- just one sentence in the entire two-hour movie. The creative freedom that allows filmmakers to create a *'hurdang '* (hubbub) has unfortunately become a tool to manipulate facts and silence alternative perspectives not represented in the narrative. This perverts political correctness and creates displaced political derangement. Films that expose the work-pay-power politics of the upper castes towards lower castes are shunned by those same castes, who also invest social capital in countering anti-caste narratives. This undermines efforts to promote social change and counter-awareness. One major issue with caste-centric films is the fear of narratives being overtaken by ideologies, as can be seen in contemporary films like *Hurdang* that prioritize machismo over

necessary and important narratives.

The Mandal Commission protests represent an important era in Indian history that is often overlooked. While Nagesh Bhat had the opportunity to depict this era in a non-partisan manner, he failed to do so in his film. For example, the protagonist argues that both a Brahmin and a Yadav can be poor and therefore should have equal employment opportunities once reservation policies are eliminated. However, this argument overlooks the fact that, according to the Multidimensional Poverty Index Report of 2021, five out of six poverty-stricken individuals in India still come from the very communities for whom reservation policies were introduced. By not recognizing this reality, the movie reinforces an incomplete understanding of the issue at hand, which is problematic.

All India Survey of Higher Education (AISHE), conducted online by the Department of Higher Education (2019-20), provides additional evidence to support the argument of this paper. This extensive survey covered 633 universities (both public and private), 24,120 colleges, and 6,772 standalone institutions, revealing that the percentage of Muslims, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes in teaching positions within higher education institutions is significantly lower than their proportion of the population. These findings demonstrate a significant lack of diversity among individuals in teaching positions within higher education, with certain groups being vastly underrepresented. Furthermore, Kritika Sharma's article in *The Print* (2018), suggests that as many as 57% of faculty positions in government educational institutions are filled with candidates from the general category, increasing the severity of this issue.

Cinema can become a tool to promote political ideologies through subjective narratives and misinformation when there is a lack of proper research and statistics, leading to the distortion of truth and manipulation of public opinion. It is crucial for individuals to stay aware of reality and identify imaginative political propaganda. During the 1950s in India, commercial cinema was undervalued compared to art cinema, leading to a lack of discussion in discursive forums until the 1980s. The rise of capitalism and the growth of the 'film business 'demand that we regard cinema as a superstructure that constructs illusions to advance political objectives while informing the masses. Agnihotri's film *The Kashmir Files* presents an India where one is either a fervent believer in his and the government's narrative or viewed as a traitorous enemy intent on destroying the sovereignty of the nation. The film takes an unwavering stance, refusing to consider any nuances of truth and generating feelings of existential dread. By positioning itself as the sole bastion of truth, the film constructs a flimsy opposition to its own ideas.

The Tashkent Files and *The Kashmir Files* call themselves 'files 'of the respective moments of unrest in Indian history but they document an alarmingly one-sided view that is then promoted as

the public opinion. After closely examining the plot and narratology of all three films, it becomes apparent that despite their focus on grand moral messages for society, the films themselves display an overt promotion of biased and ultra-nationalistic themes. Hindi cinema has long been a popular form of entertainment in India, and it is considered a critical space for representing socio-cultural practices, discourses, and sensibilities. However, this film industry has historically misrepresented and appropriated the experiences and identities of lower castes, relegating their voices to the margins. While the parallel cinema of the mid-1970s did address caste-based violence, it simultaneously reinforced and perpetuated the widespread stereotypes of lower castes as being weak, oppressed, and at the mercy of the dominant upper castes. Even today, the mainstream cinema continue to explore themes relevant to the social and economic struggles faced by lower-caste communities. However, these films remain limited by the pervasive stereotypes and still fall short in fully capturing the vibrant and assertive consciousness of lower castes, despite their attempts to raise awareness and spark discourse. The entrenched monopoly of Brahminical worldviews, combined with the pressures of a neoliberal economy, continues to hinder the film industry's ability to effectively represent the identities, consciousness, and lived experiences of lower castes. This reflects the appropriateness of Dr Ambedkar's description of Hindu society as a tower where 'one was to die in the storey one was born'.

The storyboards of *The Kahmir Files*, *The Tashkent Files*, and *Hurdang* adopt a starkly polarized view, which can easily manipulate and mislead the uninformed audience into forming aggressive and politically misplaced opinions. When social history is portrayed on the screen, authenticity and accuracy are essential to maintain the film's integrity. Through the deliberate use of biased shots and trailers that appeal to our most primal and jingoistic attitudes, these films have weaponized the power of cinema, thereby marginalizing already vulnerable communities. By peddling sensationalized pseudo-nationalist dialogues that discredit dissenting views as anti-national, these films manipulate our emotions and distort the truth. Employing emotionally manipulative techniques in cinema has been a longstanding practice, still prevalent today. Thus, filmmakers must carefully consider ethical concerns before venturing into sensitive subject matter in their films. Some important questions to ponder include: What responsibilities do we have towards the victims? How can we effectively convey their stories without appropriating or misrepresenting them, or using the stories for personal gain? How do we factor in our own involvement in the aftermath of crimes that we did not personally witness? Last but not the least, how significant is our role in presenting and (re)presenting histories from below? To combat the distortion of important narratives, it is crucial that we challenge dominant systems of knowledge production and seek out alternative perspectives. Ultimately, the authorship of a story matters, and so it is vital that we position ourselves in ways that

facilitate the telling of narratives that are inclusive, diverse, and accurate.

Notes

[i] Agenda
[ii] The Bhartiya Janta Party's ideology of India being a Hindu nation.
[iii] Freedom

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Tamanna Priya is a Junior Research Fellow in the Department of English at Banaras Hindu University. Her research work inquires Dalit experiences, the (re)presentation and (mis)representation of Dalit identity in evolving mediums and their subjection to restructured-modernized forms of discrimination in contemporary India. She has four international publications to her credit and was invited to present a paper at NeMLA 2022. She was also invited to deliver a talk on Political Cinema at English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad, India. She has chaired a panel session titled, *Who Dalit? Why Dalit? How Dalit?: Reading Mediums of the Caste Phenomenon* at NeMLA 2023. She has presented papers at the University of Delhi, the Shivaji University, and the LNMIIT among others. Her upcoming project is a book publication with Vernon Press, a chapter publication with Authorspress and a presentation at IIT Madras, India.

The Logics of Ideology. Stuart Hall, Ernesto Laclau and the Rhetoricity of Social Being

Lukas C. Bartosch

Method, Research-Topic and Introduction

The objective will be to show why authors like Laclau or Hall reject a "rationalist conception of ideology" as a calculatory approach to political interests, and why any notion of self-coherent or metaphysically essentialized subjectivity is irrelevant to what is going on in political action. The consequences of this shift (contextualized through the Lacanian intervention, Althusser, Žižek, Lefort, etc.) are often neglected or misconstrued, but involves the limits of political philosophy and social theory respectively.

The method will be a comparing and contrasting effort to identify the main problem and innovation on the perspective of language and the philosophy of language vis-à-vis ideology studies. The relation of ideology and social crisis will be especially probed in its radical trajectory to establish a locus of a research gap for contemporary ideology-critique and research on populism, that lingers on as surplus of theoretical baggage, namely the problematic essentialist 'legacy' of Marxist language theory. A special focus will be given to a contemporary focus on the rhetoricity of social relations (Laclau 1990; Laclau 1996a). The paper will circumscribe a tension and incommensurability between the rhetorical dimensions of metaphor and metonymy, as they refer to the two ways or axes on which social meaning-creation can fail, while retaining a certain productivity through this failure.

My hypothesis is that the non-terrain between these, entails a certain locus of dynamics, subjectivity politics (broadly speaking): if there could only be an always-already *failed* encounter or an asymptotic tension and never a true rhetorical mediation between these dimensions (akin to the difference between 'mind' and 'outside-world', or 'signified' and 'signifier', etc.) to be effective/affective, they would have to become 'represented' in a remainder, not assimilatable through ideology, in excess of both dimensions respectively – and that a name of this excess is 'crisis' that is the horizon of any ordinarily ideological, beatific, utopian etc. social-narrative. This representation (or incarnation) would entail a subversion of identity that incarnates the impossibility but necessity of 'society' (Laclau 1990; Laclau 1996a; Laclau 1996b). Laclau attempts to grasp this through his focus on the figures of catachresis, topological displacement, synecdoche and the heteronomy of

social actors. I will articulate this to the political angle of this problem, namely to the tension between universality and singularity (or between the logics of difference and the logics of equivalence). The hypothesis points to the proposition that this tension is what is necessarily concealed, but also indicated in ideological (totalizing speech-acts, naturalizing contingency) and performative dimensions of the social-bond - in grappling with saying the unsayable, while keeping open a sense of the withdrawal of universality this entails a mimetic resonance and affective investment, not a mediation.

I will locate this tension in the relation between crisis representation and an ontological dimension of crisis, via two case examples. The case examples will concern ideological scenarios, social demands and quasi-transcendental signifiers (like "the American people") in speeches by Robert F. Kennedy (1968) called "On the mindless menace of violence" and the presidential-announcement speech by RFK Jr. (2023) to isolate and compare ideological elements of crisis representation. In keeping with the hypothesis, the expectation is to see specific weightings of logics (equivalential or differential) due to a change in crisis representation.

The introductory question would be: to what political speeches refer to, as it cannot be a positivist objectivity? The problem becomes obvious: that the signified of the signifier "the people" (and other empty signifiers like 'nation', 'state', 'justice' etc.) are subject to dispersion as well as potential and radical *contestability*. We thus have to account for an essential sliding of meaning of these concepts *and* a preliminary halting, or precarious stabilization of this radical contestation. My claim beyond the paper is that there is a considerable theoretical blind spot and a research gap at stake concerning utilization of post-foundational and psychoanalytic insights as they are used for ideology and (anti)populism-studies. Especially when it comes to problems of leadership, social cathexis (see i.e. the 'teflon-totem' and 'bad leader' problematics), and the puzzles of voting against one´s class, or being affectively invested - even against better knowledge - in what others deem "consiracy theories" or "misinformation", while transgressing considerations of wellbeing, social standing, economic interest, social-identity, social ideals etc. Or put differently: the problem of ideological-resilience.

From this, blindspot propaganda and ideology would be acknowledged as necessary misrecognition of the undecidable and conflictual nature of the social, but shifting the focus to the question of how any specific naturalization of this radically contingent poiesis comes to be prevalent (preventing any transcendental or immanentist hard generalization of case-examples etc.). Propaganda not as deliberate lying but stemming from the essentialist propagation of the one true faith of the catholic church, today seen from the shifting perspective of theory and the primacy of the political, entails a sense of simplification, totalization and politisation, but at the same time shields

narratives from political contenstation in public discourse (see Marchart's works). More accurately figured as ideological (implying a certain logic), these processes are necessary to be confronted with a coherent social structure in the first place and not with a multiplicity of social struggles (see Žižek´s notion that ideology is situated at the level of the eyes not glasses that are deliberately, utilitarian, practical or commercial etc. or a product of a *ratio*).

We will see how this necessitates politically setting a limit of social objectivity (marking a severe departure from Marxist conceptions of ideology), which brings our attention to modern political theory after the 'psychoanalytic turn' among others figures through the notion of the social fantasy, but also through the notion of rhetoricity of social relations. The question to case-examples considering this internal displacement of the meaning of ideology becomes how they achieve a naturalization of contingent narratives, how they win large scale suppport, negotiate these narratives into collective meaning, turn social demands, grievances into (quasi-)universal claims akin to 'human rights', or how they frame the goals, problems, obstacles of the 'nation', the 'West' or 'democracy' while politically constituting their meaning-complexes and accordingly convince parts of their opposition of their cause etc. (which can be reflected on through various theoretical/empirical angles).

While some narratives acquire hegemonic, unreflected, and stabilizing status, others are openly contested and in competition with those of antagonistic political projects. Various ideological narratives that point to this limit of social objectivity are at any time widely purveyed mainly through mass-media, and through their repetitive invoking of the traumatic rutpture, the internal limit of society, help to establish and hold in place a hegemonic formation through a fantasmatic object that is never mere threat but also holds an enticing sway in essentially paradoxical ways via the inflection point of social fantasy.

I will now outline this shift in the notion of ideology from Marxist theory and then establish the proximity of psychoanalytic intervention and the rhetorics-approach vis-à-vis this shift.

The Marxist Concept of Ideology

In the context of Marxist social-theory, the concept of ideology had an ambigous career. Ideology is from an orthodoxical perspective and understood as misrepresentation or misrecognition of a true foundation of society which according to Marx, is deterministic, material and rooted in the contradiction or separation of labour and capital (a theoretical move to be read in the context of his critique of Hegel and the legitimation of ruling practices through philosophical abstraction). For

Marx, it is a reversal of the actual life-processes with a fictitious, merely abstract or representational rendering of these processes, which for him is characterized by a obfuscation of the real contradiction at work in social-processes. This pertains to an illusion but albeit a necessary one for modern society´s functioning. Ideological-processes of representation are thus like all theory, philosophy, science, language etc secondary-processes, that imply a becoming-conscious (*Bewusst-sein* or consciousness is here a *Bewusst-werden* or becoming-conscious) of the lived economic-reality qua lived-experience of materialist struggle – only if theory, philosophy, science etc. are rendered as derivatives of the processes of concrete-social-being, they can become more than mere illusory beliefs, but 'theoretical categories' qua representations that do not disawove this material-infrastructure (see Marx/Engels, "*Die deutsche Ideologie*" p.46).

The reality of social-relations for Marx, is its economic-materialistic mode-of-production (*Produktionsweise*), which enables on one hand the ideological-move of lived-practice into abstraction veiling this material-reality, and on the other a 'categorization' that can emancipate, i.e. in the category of the 'worker' as bearer of proletariat consciousness as it conforms to and operationalizes this material reality. The ideological here is the mis-recognition of primary material-needs: in the sense of veiling them they are to be derivable from a point of "spirit" (*Geist* or *Begriff*), "ratio" or "cogito", while regarding their emancipation would relate to the ability to exert "interference" on materialistic-economical reality, from which social antagonism in turn would be derived. With Gramsci and later Hall, Laclau, but also Žižek etc. this relation is displaced into a political and thus an anti-essentialst reimagining, build upon by Laclau and rendering it as 'primacy of the political'.

The understanding of the category of ideology after Marx did remain suspended between two main routes, which as in Marx are characterized by presupposing a final-foundation of society that is to be misrecognized (like in Hegel there is a presupposition of an actually achievable point of intelligibility of society, which is implicated in it). Phrased differently from the perspective of Discourse-Theory there are two essentialistic/foundational vantage points of this mis-recognition, one implying a hypostatization of agency, one of structure: 1) the false consciousness approach (associated with Georg Lukasć) presupposing a coherent and willful subject as a ground that is structuring society and 2) a view of ideology as a structural effect of social totality, i.e. qua relational totality that is implied in the base/superstructure model that would serve as the ground for the apparitions of contingent social relations (Laclau 1983).

Ideology and Language

I now want to clarify the problems of essentializing-approaches to either structure or human agency from a place that accounts for the discursivity of social relations by approaching the paradoxicality inherent in legitimacy and authority - through problematizing the relavance of ideological-closures for what can be called crisis of meaning-production.

If we want to state for example, that a statement is *referring to some non-ideological point of discourse*, or a point of social-truth, the legitimacy of this very statement always implies another temporally (necessarily) removed layer, level or round of justificatory reasoning as to why this statement and not another would itself be an accurate or trustworthy statement about the social, as we cannot prevent counter-propositions from being issued. When we try to legitimize our speech through codes of conduct or self-rationalization, we immediately enter into a kind of infinite regress as the difference, irreducibility between ontology and ontics cannot become something ontically graspable. From the time of Aristotelian-ethics this also brings with it the problem of unilaterally/ontically collapsing the non-ideological or true, effectively with social tradition or social order as conflating the ethical and thus (emancipative) social-action with what is preceeding it (Marx' contribution was also a critique of this perspective).

Ludwig Wittgenstein´s highlighting of this problematic and concerning rule-application (*Regelfolge*) points in the same direction as we derive the way of applying a certain rule by another rule that retroactively contextualizes the one before etc., which is also the supposed mainspring of the practice of law or science. For him the rule is not an external center but involves a setting of a limit (*Setzung*) which implies a subjective intervention (which is thus part of the process of rule-following as it radically subverts or defers the meaning of the "rule") and the consequent "generalization" of other applications guaranteeing the grammar of a syntactic signifying-chain through what Hall would call *de-articulation* (but unlike the earlier Wittgenstein, this implies for him also an equivalential logic that fragments this limit and thematizes its contestability). We have here a naturalizing-concealment of the contingency of its process of constitution – "true" and "proposition" hence can be part of the grammar of the same space opened up as a language-game (*Sprach-spiel*).

On the contrary, to aquire a truly certain and apriori legitimacy (not a quasi-apriori one as through a moment of *Setzung*) for our statement about society or in fact for any legitimate-difference in a certain social-space or public discourse, we would have to identify a last/final ground for both (be it a transcendental or immanent ground), yielding notions of self-caused causes that Heidegger was so eager to destruct in his critique of onto-theology. Here the source of legitimacy would be a point of (societal) fullness, set apart from inquiry, debate or the content expressing this originary locus

(like the divine-creator as source of scholastic-law). This in turn (as in Marx) just passes the problem of legitimacy to a removed vantage point from which a non-ideological statement (about society) could be seen as recognizable *as* true knowledge about society or social-order, which then would allow the establishment of a dichotomic framework enabling us to discern non-ideological from ideological and act accordingly – the infinite regress persists as we now have to justify an *external* or transcendental foundation. The same problematic emerges when thematizing the universal actor, or the willful, individual qua apolitical subject as origin point of true statements about "society" as in various constructivist approaches.

In looking at anti-essentialist approaches like Laclau, it becomes clear why the relevance of ideology (relating to a renewed understanding of social-crisis qua sliding of societal meaning) cannot be overstated: ideology as radical misrecognition or obfuscation of a social-totality (that only is feasible if it were at some level a part of discourse) necessarily distorts any 'empirical fact' that would come to *hold-in-place the contingent building-blocks of society itself* (and vice versa). This in turn is the condition-of-possibility *disawoved* in any notion of a final foundation of the social, be it qua immanent or transcendental grounding of society, even if this center is deemed to be stratified, compartmentalized, non-uniform or relational as in the Marxian base-superstructure model of society. These foundations at work in certain approaches to social-theory and practice, presume a center of a principle of intelligibility from which society could be known *in its positivity and totality* which would entail the possibility of a non-contestable and positively attainable position of truth as adequation, granting legitimacy and authority to the statements one could make about it. In turn this infers that statements about society could be grounded in a true foundation, principle or rule. We encounter a truly circular logic, (see i.e. Cicero´s notion of Principium as a point of origin supposing a teleological sense in nature, society etc), which we just demonstrated imports debilitating problems plaguing essentialist approaches in general.

Discourse-Theory´s solution pertains to the notion that the condition-of-possibility of hegemonic articulation is the antagonistic relation (referring to a conflictory interruption of social-being), while its ideological and representational dimension actualizes this relation and thus entailing the originary dimension of the social (making society as such in Laclau's sense 'impossible but necessary'). The ideological content represents something un-representable and subversive (Laclau 1996), namely the moment of *political* subjectivity (the point of the impossibility of ideology). This in turn *radically* contaminates all the elements that could become involved in the hegemonic grounding of social space*s* (in the plural) through virtualities of incompletion and inattainability (see the case-examples). These are not merely like in the Gramscian sense competing social myths pointing to a concrete image of unity, but a *logic of syncopation* yielding constitutively faltering

identifications, as this "grounding" articulates *and* metaphorizes them into precarious and fragmenting formations, problematics, ideologies etc. overdetermined by multiple antagonistic frontiers.

The Post-Marxist move beyond Marxist notions of ideology

'Logic' and 'problematic' in their relation have in this sense to be understood in such a radical precariously 'grounding' or ontologically political fashion. According to Laclau "problematic" is "a *coherent* system of questions constituting the ground upon which the debate between radically different perspectives takes place" (Laclau 1990: 162), implying a reach farther than discourse and ideology narrowly understood, as well as a move beyond abstraction at stake in the discursivity of the social.[i]

Ideology for Laclau translates into a *constitutive* notion of distortion implicating the deferral of subjectivity qua Otherness overdeterminating all social representations - only by investing an universality incommensurable with the particularity of elements that receive this investment they can function as screens for projecting social imaginaries. 'Logics' is here as well, to be understood in Laclauian sense not as the classical, generalized logic of Greco-Roman classical-philosophy, but context dependent and constantly being set up as a corridor or horizon to the various ways to relate the discursive differences of a systemic articulation vis-à-vis the ways that are negated as valid options of engaging differences within said systemic edifice. It is in this sense an ontological condition to an entity seen as legitimate difference regarding the possibility of the actual rules regulating a system.

Logics to Laclau is not the general substance of ancient-thought, but a context-dependend unreflected grammar that is socially (politically) constituted as it is normative, capturing and engaging. Logics is a "rarefied system of objects governed by a cluster of rules [a grammar] making some combinations and substitutions possible excluding others" (Laclau, 2004: 305). In "On Populist Reason" he further explains how this necessitates a projective point or equivalential moment that "presupposes the constitution of a global political subject bringing together a plurality of social demands [… which] in turn involves, […] the construction of internal frontiers and the identification of an institutionalized 'other'" (Laclau 2005: 117). This means that the unreflected rules and norms have a fantasmatic *as well as a* political dimension, as they are constituted by concealing their obscene backside of social-being namely through a political logic: "I see social logics as involving a rarefied

system of statements - that is to say, a system of rules drawing a horizon within which some objects are representable while others are excluded" (Laclau 2005: ibid.).

The consequence is that tropes like logics of competition or commodification are only ever effective for those that become subjects through a unrepresentable political moment that solders them to this specific radically historical grammar. Logics are at the same time relying on the cathexis of objects as it is on expulsing and drawing a boundery against what is excessive to any logics and regarded as a threat to its existance (the Aristocratic plot for Jacobinism, or the spectre of "socialism" in post-war America).

This is homologous to the establishment of what Žižek calls a social-fantasy in relating a divided-subject to an absent-fullness (split between a global subject and institutionalized 'other' in Laclau´s sense but also akin to Hall´s and Žižek´s approaches) via a grammar of tropes or unacknowledged, unwritten rules and failed encounters with *jouissance* as a fantasmatic and paradoxically satisfying moment of subjective lacunae (where the subject becomes objected to a knowledge, beholden to signifiers that it cannot grasp that drive its actions beyond its control – like "justice", "nation", "freedom" etc. – which as we will see becomes attributed to the 'other').

The logic of the signifier is separated but intertwined with the logic of the subject. Their intertwining results in identifications only achievable by subtracting the very point of view (from which we are seen, that after its internalization is rendered qua 'internal-outside', a signifying cut), only precariously guaranteeing the identity with one´s self. Before its emergence in the field of the Other there is technically no subject. The subject is place of paradoxicality in a series of (un)intentional meanings or meaningful ciphers and we acquire the ability to make propositions about "self" and "world" only by repressing (incompletely), but also accounting for, marking or circumscribing *the regressive aspect of social-identification and subjectivity*. All representations fail in this sense, but do so *constitutively*.

This implies interpellation through a locus-of-authority that is always-already at stake in our discourse: the Other qua field of intelligibility[ii] into which the subject aspires to inscribe itself to have its speech appear coherent. Through it we are spoken between/exceeding the articulations of differential (semantic) positions as the remainder of the Other´s interpellation or demand to submit to social-norms, the law. Subjectivity is conditioned in this sense by an interdiction that creates the desire to transgress the same law – but of what nature is what is prohibited in law? We will take a detour through Heidegger to elaborate.

Late Heidegger and the Freudian Scene

Here we have the chance to recognize an equivalence to the functioning of the ontological-difference as difference, Heidegger circumscribes in the notion of "*gründender Abgrund"* (grounding abyss). In psychoanalytic social theory, this relates to the radical withdrawal of a signifier that would define fundamentally the meaning of the subject in the social-realm, but also of absolute-satisfaction attainable in it.

This in turn allows its substitution that yields not only preliminary systemic-closure, but a constant force of urgency (partly unconscious) animating horizons of social-struggle. The relation between subject/structure, like between the ideological/the material that comes to incarnate social-closure, is beyond transcendentalist (Marx) or immanentist (Hegel) notions of social-being. Akin to later Heidegger´s notion of *Anwesenheit/Abwesenheit* (presencing/unpresencing) these couplets are not in a relation of juxtaposition (apparental or external), but account for a paradoxical relationship of language and Being that points to a representation of a *radical* impossibility. The presencing-of-beings only becomes possible through unpresencing or Being´s withdrawal (*Versagung*) in beings: as one cannot heed, make sense of the call-of-Being (*Zuruf, Zuspruch-des-Seins*), this introduces always-already an impossibility into the world of beings (since our answer by mapping "us" and "the world" in our sketch, devising-outline (*Entwurf*) qua answering to Being´s pretencious appeal (*Anspruch*) will inevitably end in failure).

Akin to Heidegger´s thinking of "the fourfold" (das *Geviert*) there is an effective-void where the principle-of-unicity should have been. Only by referring to a internal foreigness (*Fremde*) or farness (*Ferne*), beings, things and spaces can be referred to in a quasi-holistical sense, not to each other but by mirroring (*Spiegelung*) of all others, granting a groundless-ground to their possible concatenations based on reference or *Verweisung* (constitutively establishing belonging-togetherness, cohesion by supplementing this differentiality) *through what the differences are not* - by inclusion of a present-absence. Not unlike the unconscious, this kind of "evental thinking" after Heidegger´s *Kehre* (turning) is hence constitutive *beyond* the actual understanding of *Dasein*.

The psychoanalytic intervention is based around problematics of this present-absence, but emerging in relation to questions of representing the subject, namely as lack-in-being, 'surfacing' in faltering-actions, lapses, compulsions due to its primal-repression (*Urverdrängtes*) in the unconscious – thus acquiring a certain discursivity. What is interdicted is precisely an impossibility – the constitutive alienation into law (the paternal metaphor), and consequently ideology points to what

symbolization processes bequeath as radically unrenderable locus in the egoic-imaginary or signification of self reference: As speaking-being (*parlêtre*), the subject is not a foundation or individual essence, but lack of essence in search of what would grant it a definitive place in the symbolic-order: This entails a paradoxical subjectivity that includes and depends on the expulsion and concealment of its point of failure (Hall´s "ritualized expulsion") and impossibility of full determination of our being, either by the unicity of the mirror-image or the laws of language qua social-norms. We only become subjects through our alienation into these, but they radically split subjectivity between discursive elements that come to represent this division and the division itself, irretrievable in language.

The void as a place is only retrospectively supposed by language as some *thing* (the Freudian *Ding*), which only exists (stands out) as a 'lost' moment of fullness-of-being repressed by a metonymical deferring-dimension and operationalized by a retroactive-metaphorical or substitutional-one. Interdiction is its index: The prohibition of something that is effectively an impossibility (of pure-satisfaction or in formal terms the total closure of structure), is what turns this socalled loss of a 'place prior to speech' *into a signifier of the symbolic-order´s structural lack* that indicates the 'beyond' of signification, introducing play and motivation of identificatory processes. Language in its operation of nullfying or mortification of the subject (that can only emerge qua rupture-of or excess-to discourse) leaves as a remainder this quasi-place of absent nondivision (*das Ding*) only rendered retrospectively from 'inside' language as what is 'beyond'/'prior-to' it. Hall by referring to Lacan makes this point for cultural identification[iii]: The symbolic-order of culture includes what it cannot render semiotically (only discursively), namely the subjective point of diegesis (being spoken and viewed from the empty place of the Other).[iv] There is a hole, a non-place in the symbolic-order, social-meanings etc. where the subject should be (but is not) – condemning subjectivity to be instantiated as pulsation between two sides: a present-absence or division qua lack-in-being (*manqué-à-être*) *and* inassimilable traumatic surplus.

Hall sees the splitting condition as socially constitutive as "political identification and subjectivity are inherently fragmented", they generate social identities as "representations which can never be adequate to the subject-processes that are temporarily invested in them".[v] We can only perceive/act as precipitations of radical lack-in-being translating insufficiently into social positionalities as condition and product of collective decisions, frontier-effects etc.- this is what Laclau emphasizes with social identification only yielding "deficient being" or "failed identity" *and* an aspiration, anticipation of achieving some thing beyond this deficiency, to overcome the radical cleavage of the social (what Derrida would call "fullness-to-come", but entailing conversely the janus-face of ideology: a partial projection, subtraction of the lack/subject or the contingency of social

beings and the recalcitrant remainder of this process).

The Problem of Subjectivity

As I see it, the *quasi*-ontological shift in perspective regarding the understanding of ideology in contemporary political theory at stake in the work of Hall, Laclau, Žižek and others, is mainly indexed by the import of a specifically psychoanalytic logic of subjectivity. But we cannot take the subject here as willful actor, idividual intentionality, rational chooser, etc..

As the tendential emptiness of the signifier refers to incomplete withdrawal of meaning at particular sites of social-discourse that then function as conditioning distinction as such in giving the subject a place in the world, it also condemns the subject to be an introduction of selfreflexivity of a lack *in meaning:* Subjectivity is in excess of structure and unsettling it while forming it anew trying to contain this subversion in self-referential acts of identifying between the limit-cases of alienation-into-ideals and a separational dimension in naming-of-being as self-intertwining ways of how to give a sense of coherence where there is only division or Being´s withdrawal. For Hall and Laclau this notion of subjectivity involves the political moment of exclusion, which necessarily entails ideological-misrecognition – a positing and subtraction of an illusory original-essence to society - its loss or privation due to the presence of antagonistic forces.

The subject's being which Laclau thus terms deficient is the result of being *parlêtre* (a "speaking being" only a being due to the deferral of speech) - social-actors 'are' only as quasi-fixated actors, investments involving identification, through a particularity that turned into a locus of universality or transcendence. This investment is localizing a 'transgression' or 'entropy' of discursive meaning and can only result from signification´s non-coincidence with itself, generating a constitutive and necessary subversion and distortion of the partiality of the invested, making up a logic of mis-recognizing our own self-alterity. Hall makes this point with his theory of representation and stereotyping. Ideology translates into a *constitutive* notion of distortion implicating the deferral of subjectivity qua Otherness overdetermining all social components - only by investing an universality incommensurable with the particularity of elements that receive this investment they can function as screens for projecting social identity. Fantasy as limit-point of ideology is the framing and stabilization of a signifying cut (what Lacan calls trace of absolute signification) by the empty-signifier in a process that separates the (political) subject from being determined by the discourse of the Other (the symbolic-order or symbolic register of those unwritten rules or tropes that the subject

searches in vain for legitimation which has no order in the strong sense but only as grammar in the Derridian sense of *spacing*) and gives political subjects a space of possible emergence.

As Laclau emphasizes, in the social 'realm' is this subject the name for a gap, for the actualization of a lack-of-being or impossibility of the absolute ideological closure of the social-realm, emanating from its ruptures (irrespective in which sectors they might show themselves – economy, religion, culture etc.- promting protests or demands framing grievances about policies, shortages, oppressive structural conditions etc) and requiring the ideological-content in which this ungrammatical point (akin to the point beyond the power of semantic reintegration Paul de Man calls the „anacoluthon") in the hence „totalized grammar" can make itself present as subversion (as Laclau phrases it, the gap has to mean „something" as it is not a Kantian thing-in-itself or pure-void or Hegelian immanent, panlogicistic fullness).

The problem that underlies the Freudian intervention in this sense is the what he calls the economical problem (*das ökonomische Problem*) of the death drive that knots pleasure and displeasure or turns something rendered as pain, tension or loss into a paradoxical unconscious satisfaction that is not felt but designated retroactively as place of ephemeral subjectivity. Freud saw his patients repeat over and over not a specific meaning but enacted in changing narratives a painful loss that held a unfathomable sway over their actions – a symptomal surplus-pleasure, a *Mehrlust* that made itself felt and works by punctuating any notion of individual wellbeing and rationalist cost-benefit model. Here Hall's critique of "rationalist" notions of ideology have to be given their full weight especially regarding the radicality of the dislocation involved. In this context Marx' structural privation of the surplus value can not be seen as something that can be overcome by the infrastructural life processes or the satisfaction of the subject's primary material needs. Contrary to the equation of language with ideology common after Marx (although not adequatly describing his own position) Hall insists that "ideology is the *thing* that cuts language" (italics BL) that is itself blurred and thus instates what Lacan would call an extimate relation between structure and subject, where "a part of us is already on the other side of the barricades" (66)[vii].

Fantasmatic logics are never an abstract affair, but an enactment, that is fantasmatic in the sense that it defers the realization of unconscious desire and prolongs itself as subject of lack/division. With Laclau we would say that the antagonism indefinately defers the advent of a social fullness, a harmonious society etc. and thus enables the constitution of social spaces through the only thing that is then common to all social differences in this formation: the fantasmatic 'privation' this very impossible 'fullnes' at the hands of the antagonist. It is through the loss or threat of loss of itself as object, that the subjects are implicated *as subjects* into the symbolic order and engage in the chase of

something supposedly beyond its grasp.

In this sense we attach systemic differences by inscribing them into a horizon of non-being which only becomes actualized and effective by circumscribing a place separate from social-reality, enabling us to posit the latter through a reduction of the radical contingency of the *real* (in the Lacanian sense) of the social and its elements, turning them into differences from the perspective of a hegemonic reading-princple or myth in the Laclauian sense.

The actualization of the impossibility, but necessity of this object of systemic fullness implies a radical concealment, a syncopation, a logic of interruption and systemic failure that is the obscene side to representation as it is homologous to the effectivity of the lacking of any principle of unicity we saw with Heidegger and Lacan, which Claude Lefort figures as the productivity of the "empty place of power". This fragments every element of the symbolic and representation splitting them between the ideological-, representational-, etc. content they come to acquire and the radicality of the split itself (that empty-signifiers indicate *and* attempt to obfuscate). Hall et. al´s essay-title "Living with the Crisis" (1988) should be understood as referring to something that is the obverse side of ideology at any times, namely crisis. This is the point in giving the "troubling split or division within subjectivity" a possibility to show up in discourse – or with Laclau: "an empty signifier to remain signicative must mean something: a gap that has emerged within signification, which as a result, does not have a signification of its own, but which nevertheless has to be named, because it is the condition of any signifying process" (Laclau 2014, p. 119).

I will now try to establish this insghts in a contrasting reading of two political speeches from two different periods of American political articulation and ideologico-historical representation of crisis.

Case Examples: Rhetorical Speech Analysis

Case-Example 1: Robert F. Kennedy:On the mindless menace of violence" (April 5th 1968)

In this speech, RFK Sen. on one hand drew an equivalency between the violence of the american-elites and the violence of the rioters, but centered on a call to overcoming differences and a way to live together as Americans and human-beings.

His first focus was on the victims of violence (be it race related riots or otherwise as „[i]t´s

not the concern of any one race"), which are "black and white, rich and poor, young and old, famous and unknown". In the context of this paper, the internal outside or the political logic RFK´s discourse was implicated with, was the logic of the syntagm, what Laclau calls the logic of difference, or "democratic logic", where no antagonism between "the people" and "the elite" is articulated. It opens up a relation of difference between "elites", establishment and "the people", who all suffer from the same bane.

The internal outside is (for RFK) a highly abstract one, namely violence as such, and "Americans" as a totality are afflicted by it – or put differently it constructs a totality a whole, that is not a synecdoche, a part that stands in for the whole, but a whole made from a manifold of differential elements i.e. "Americans". He identifies a degradation of the nation as a whole, when „unnecessarily" depriving „another American" of his life, by one or by many, "in cold blood or in passion", etc. - here lies the metonymic dimension of RFK´s speech, that encompasses the contingency, and continuity of every person deemed an "American" (we can add as many differential elements as we want to this articulation which will, in its logic encompass them all through setting up the set through a common law or social logic or norm, that forbids "unnecessary" bloodshed among its members).

Nevertheless if we constitute a set on the basis on differential logic and the metonymical trope, a kind of infinite regress is on the horizon as nothing keeps the set from infinitly expanding. That is why certain transcendental halting points like "free men" or "common humanity" as a negative reverse of "violence" as such have to delimit the set, which would not only (as intended by RFK) encompass the opposing parties of the cold war, but those that engage in the degradation of humanity. So it is not those who are willing to build their own lives on the shattered dreams of other human beings" that are necessarily to blame but violence itself which infinitely perpetuates as violence breeds violence, repression breeds retaliation and only a cleansing of our whole society can remove this sickness from our souls". So it is clear that the whole of "humanity" is implicated in this logic, as violence acquires a (quasi)transcendental status, which like „evil" of scholasticism is something to become removed from "the soul" or portrayed in a clinical, medicinal discourse, with the result that politics are build on the prospect of achieving the common goal of overcoming "violence", and achieving "justice".

We are working ourselves through to the political core of the speech, namely and although RFK chastizes scapegoating the paragraph before, for him the tolerance of violence, the in-action, passivity, in the face of institutional violence is not only to blame, but it is also violence itself: "For there is another kind of violence, slower but just as deadly, destructive as the shot or the bomb in the night. This is the violence of institutions–indifference, inaction, and decay."

RFK Sen.´s speech articulates a certain discourse of culpability and responsibility[viii] to on the one hand to the question of the empty signifiers of "race" and "violence" and on the other to the whole of the American citizenry as a space of pure tolerance: "And this too afflicts us all. […] For when you teach a man to hate and to fear his brother, when you teach that he is a lesser man because of his color or his beliefs or the policies that he pursues […] then you also learn to confront others not as fellow citizens but as enemies."

It is important to point to the originary conflict this logic glosses over, the ensuing problems to either define "democracy" as the specfic content of a political project or the meaning of these empty signifiers, that is at stake when invoking a third term as placeholder of this impossible totality. For all this there are no final answers for those of us who are American citizens. Yet we know what we must do, and that is to achieve true justice among all of our fellow citizens." Although almost acknowledging the inability to achive final answers in democracy, the speech does point to the fantasmatic goal of "true justice", which can never be taken over to the actual, ontic level as any "justice" can only be administered by taking into account social struggle and politics i.e. power, mutiple goals and interests. Even when there are reparations paid to Indigenous-Americans for the genocide commited under the banner of "manifest destiny" or African-Americans for the atrocities of slavery, these cannot but be contingent outcomes and always falling short of filling out the meaning of "justice" (which can always become contested) at any historical period or for any social formation.

The meaning of "justice" rhetorically and discursively speaking, is precisely such outcomes becoming anchorage points of a political project, discourse etc. through synecdochal attempts at representing "justice". But it only is achieved through positing a certain totality qua materiality *and* horizon standing for a negative reversal of a discursive projective point echoing a Hobbesian 'natural state', of "violence", of a state where we "look at our brothers as alien" where we "learn to share only a common fear – only a common desire to retreat from each other – only a common impulse to meet disagreement with force", that are at stake in any political logic, be it in populist or non-populist speeches. RFK legitimizes his own discourse in this speech through standing in as the one that stands against the infestation of this transcedentalized "spirit" of "violence", "hatred" and "revenge" as he comes to stand for the urgency of this epic endeavor that encompasses the listener fantasmatically by beatific and horrific projection and a sense of inevitable guilt: "[o]ur lives on this planet are too short, the work to be done is too great to let this spirit flourish any longer in this land of ours". From a logics-perspective we would say that his discourse becomes (for his followers) invested with the value of reversing this existential crisis.

As speeches from US politicians in the late 60s did not come out of a progressing or severe organic (ideological) crisis or degradation of hegemony and stabilzed social meaning, they tend to favor the logic of difference and not populist logics in their speeches. The belief of people like MLK or RFK Sen. (even with the rise of the military industrial complex, perpetual war, racial segragation etc.) was an insulating teleological believe in transcendental notions, laws that everyone is privy to, from which a "bond of common fate" or "bond of common goals" could derive from, and which did imply a hegemonic consensus about the basic notions of what it means to have a "sovereign state" a (heteronormative) "family" or a Christian "believe in god", humanistic, enlightenment values, etc.. The terrible truth of existence is that we can only have a stable sense of "common goals" or become "brothers and countrymen" through concealing the impossibility of "society" as a totality and "true justice" as social meaning or actuality.

This is only achieved precariously and temporarily by excluding alternatives or the ontological difference in actual political decisions, laws, metaphorical renderings of reality etc. and by partially effacing the traces of *their own contingent construction*. When this concealment fails (also partially so) not only will the reactivation of the political dimension of complexes of social meanings become apparant, but the traumatic surplus, the impossibility of societal closure and thus of the irreducibility of social crisis become painfully obvious – with all its socially debilitating and anxiety-inducing consequences.

We will now look at another speech by the son of RFK Sen., that thoroughly reflects and/or emanates from the latter contextuality.

Case-Example 2: Robert F. Kennedy Jr´s presidential announcement-speech

This speech with which RFK Jr. announced his presidential campaign on the 19th of April, 2023 began by invoking the times of the American revolution and the English king, who had "shares in the companies" excempt from the new tax on tea, framing the complexities of the historical conjunction as driven by the "speartip of the rebelion" against corrupt merger of state and corporate power". This trope served as the main achorage point of the speech which got repeated at various times and implicates the political logic of populism and the "delegitimized elite". While this logic was not prevalent in the speech above - merely hinted at which gave it a radical edge for its time – here it is much more visible: the elite have stolen a treasure of social being and further "threaten to impose new corporate feudalism, monetize children […] poison our people, children with chemicals,

pharamceutical drugs, hollow the middle class and keep us in constant state of war". He opens up a logic of difference on the question of the "good people" in the elite in big tech, corporate media or the CIA, but "those that rise in the agency are in the tank with big industry".

It is important to point out that RFK Jr.´s presidental project intends to "end division in the country" by "telling the American people the truth". This "truth" only acquires meaning by working against a background of non-being as seen above, only here acquiring a more intense level of incarnation, urgency, materiality etc.: "when Blacks fight against Whites, Republicans against Democrats, rural fights urban, the people, that merger of of corporate power that sits at the top is loving the fighting betwen us so that they can stripmine our country". Those "at the top" are a much more materialized social construct than the referral to an ephemeral "spirit of hatred" and transcendental "violence" in his father´s speech.

We see clearly why Lacan called this constitutive operation of the fantasy tied to a "theft of jouissance" or Laclau as "antagonism" (reference). To generate a concept of "us" or "the American people" means constructing an open set under threat of some entity, through something that stole its social fullness, absolute satisfaction etc. (which was a retrospective illusion from the beginning) and 'explains', circumscribes, gives empty form to its inability of forming a harmonious society- by giving a metaphorical name to an impossibility, which involves the operation of catachresis, we construct not only the enemy as tendentially global adversary, but "the people" as retroactive counting to "the multitudes of social actors, protesters against government policies, but also their heterogenous social positions, demands etc.". This is what I referred to in the previous chapter by stating that it is through the loss or threat of loss of itself as object, that political subjects are implicated *as subjects* into the symbolic order and engage in the chase of something supposedly beyond its grasp.

In RFK Jr.´s section on his environmental efforts this operation becomes obvious: "pollution is a subsidy to the rich and act of theft", "stealing of our children" who will "never know the species that go extinct". Akin to his father´s speech here he invokes a transcendental dimension (but contrastingly this is here the only, sparse instantiation): "when we destroy a species we diminish our capacity to sense the divine".

Akin to Trump, which he criticizes for not having stood up to the bureaucracy, RFK Jr. generates this set of "the people" by opposing it to an equivalency of "the elite", "big tech" and "the media" working together to apply i.e. "censorship". Here we see how the outlines of a crystallized continuum of radical politics in North-America cannot go back to a time before the Trump-moment (of which "Trump" may be associated with but is much larger than himself). New social actors have to adhere to a certain populist grammar and its signifiers to mobilize desires that shifted to a radical

form (not essentially pegged to content but to grammar and formal rhetorics). RFK Jr. thus terms the lockdowns the "coup de gras" in the problem of the "death of the middle class", which he terms an "economic cataclysm" that "transferred four trillion dollars from the middle class to the super rich" while „big tech conspired with Trump´s white house to censor the people" (like RFK Jr. himself). He further states that "instead of fixing the problem they cover it up", while invoking the proximity to his job as environmental lawyer taking big polluters to court.

In his discourse RFK Jr. draws an equivalence between various crisis, social grievances and dislocations from the environmental pollution of the Hudson River by General Electric to the lockdowns of the pandemic etc. by stating that we (America) "have money for wars and bailout bankers and lockdowns but what happens when the American people when they are on hard times?". The juxtaposition with the trope that "the worst health care system [is] in the USA" this weighs heavy as this situation supposedly produced the "sickest children in the history of the country". He followed with a pledge for his presidency namely „when president" he would „end the chronic disease epidemic in this country". Again by using our rhetorical devices honed over this paper, the meaning of this would only ever be the negative reversal of a situation represented as "crisis", due to the fact that we only ever find horizons of withdrawal or entropy of "social being" or "public health" in the ontological dimension.

Conclusion

To now reformulate the thesis for the second part: the shift in the understanding of ideological resilience and social crisis hinges on the logic of the signifier, which requires to become effective, an investment of subjectivity in therefore essentially anamorphotic or internally split representations (deconstructing the separation of metaphor-metonymy by including the signifier of a failed totality) qua intransitive points taking up the function of materializing the impossibility of society. There is a logic to the engagement and capture which thus depends on a constitutive alienation into an all pervasive web of signification, rhetoricity or discourse (from whichever angle one looks at the same problem) through the passage of its internal limitation – this logic entails a sustenance of social negativity characteristic for psychoanalytical perspectives on social life from the baseline of fantasy and ideology.

Since this approach entails a paradoxical relation between structure and agency, any politics

that works through this logic involves the ideological containment of the contingency (metonymyical contiguity of social meaning) implied. As with Lacan, the foreign locus of speech qua deferral of being only retroactive becomes internalized (ie. qua prospect and failure to completely adhere to ideals of this order), while turning this relation to the lack in the social-order as such, into a logical one it is bringing with it an impossibility to discern ontologically between viewer and viewed as well as the need to tie down this paradoxical status of the vacillating, pluralized, multiple or hybrid border of human and world in language. This turns the synecdochal representation and the nomination of the radical exteriority of the subject in contingent partialities of politics into a necessary condition for any social space and entails a relation qua social struggle.

Hence a contingent social grievenace like for example "lockdowns", can come to signify (beyond semiotic-content) all that is wrong with the current politico-economic system. Not only is this underlining articulation, metaphorization and persuation in politics in their function of actualizing political exclusions, as constitutive while rendering the total exit from ideology or discourse a fallacy, it also figures that 'social identity' is a battleground where there is no total outside. This is what Laclau means by "rhetoricity" of all social life and formations as the impossibility/loss of a fullness of social being at the center of society overdetermines all elements of a discursive system. Not only does this mean that there is no total outside to the status quo discourse since any anti-status quo project is made up of elements of the former which are also undecidable or constitutively split between potentiality and actuality, but also that there is no absolute internal coherence to any political project.

Structural gaps are constantly sutured in signification via its representation, but leave traces seen in the subversion or syncope, which is the real face of the synecdoche of particularities taking on quasi-universal value, which are always subjected to the tension of social struggle and radical investment. What or who comes to embody such gaps is the outcome of this struggle.

Notes

i Taking account of something traumatic which is beyond the semiotical dimension.
ii Relating, an "inter-textuality" (Ibid., 232).
iii Hall, *Fateful Triangle*, 130.
iv Hall, *Spectacle*, 237.
v Hall, *Fantasy, Identity, Politics,* 63, 65.
vi Hall, *Fantasy*, 66.
vii "work a little harder to bind up the wounds among us and to become in our hearts brothers and countrymen once again".

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Lukas C. Bartosch is a doctoral student and full-scholarship recipient at the Corvinus University of Budapest where he is currently writing his dissertation on the relation of ideology and crisis from the perspective of psychoanalytically oriented political theory. His focus is on the works of Stuart Hall, Claude Lefort, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek.