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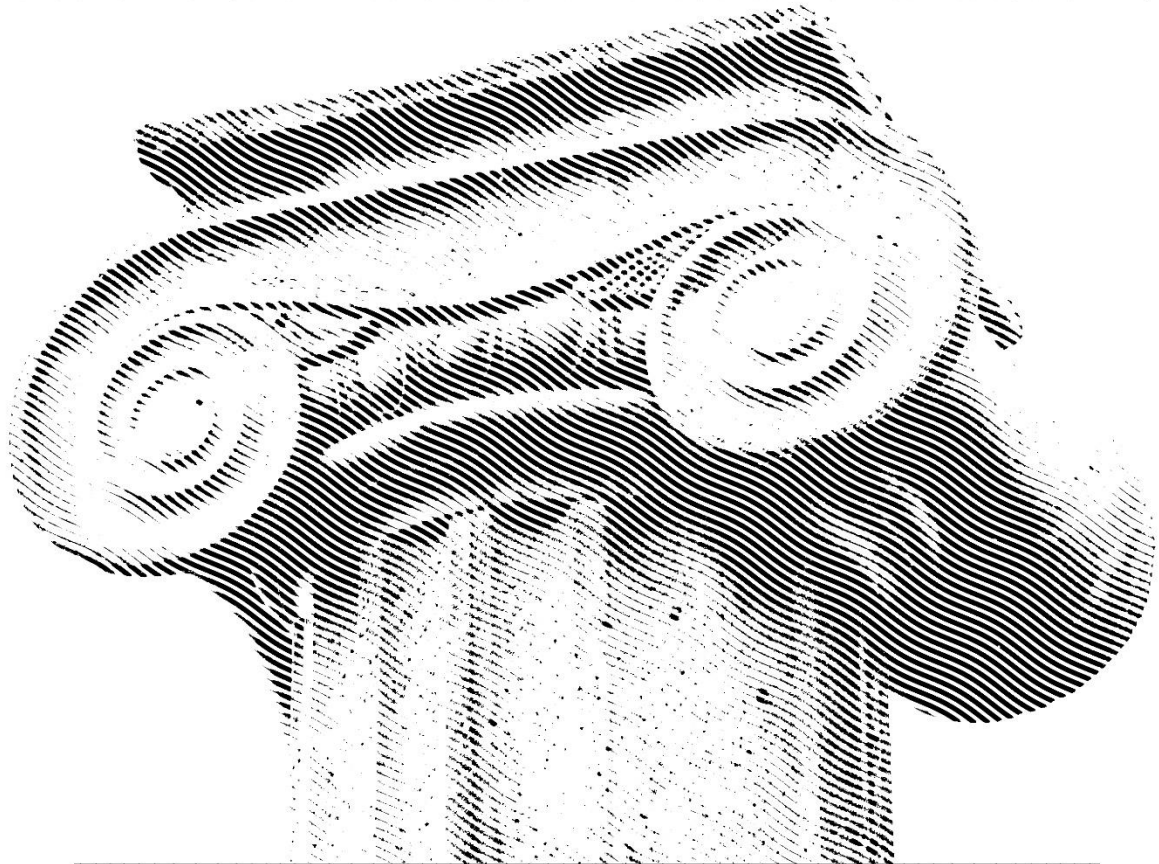
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# Humanities Bulletin

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# Humanities Bulletin

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# Toward an Ethics of Nothingness: Sartre, Supervenience, and the Necessity of My Contingency

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## Abstract:

Ethics normally proceeds by establishing some kind of ground from which norms can be derived for human action. However, no such terra firma is found in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*, which instead lays down a sedimentary soil consisting of a blend of nothingness and contingency. This paper aims to show how Sartre is able to build an ethical theory from this seemingly groundless mixture, and it proceeds in three sections. Section one aims to disentangle the relation between the for-itself (*pour-soi*) and the in-itself (*en-soi*) from antithetical characterizations by placing them in a state of supervenience. Section two works to explain how both the in-itself and the for-itself are not divided ontologically, but are both in the same ontological state, namely, contingency. And in section three, it is argued that Sartre's ethics reveals that because human beings share the same thrownness with Others in a world, they have to take title for such a world. Within a Sartrean ethics of nothingness, one's nothingness leads one to the shared nothingness of Others, of which one must take responsibility.

**Keywords:** Sartre, Ethics, *Being and Nothingness*, Necessity, Contingency

## Introduction

The field of ethics normally proceeds by establishing some kind of ground from which norms can be derived for human action. To name a few: Plato's ideal theory is lifted up, as it were, by climbing the ladder of reason toward the transcendent Form of the Good; Aristotle's *eudaimonist* ethics is set upon an observation of human flourishing which betrays a system of virtues driven by a distinctive human function; David Hume's moral psychology is built upon an established base of shared human sentiments and passions; Immanuel Kant's practical ethics is grounded, perhaps like no other theory, on obeying purely deontic laws of reason; G.W.F. Hegel puts forward the concept of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) through the unity of the "I" and the "We" locked in a relation of mutual recognition; and John Stuart Mill ushers a wide call to collectively promote the greatest happiness principle.

With all of these theories, what begins in a bumpy and wobbly ground is ultimately paved to support our passage to ethical destinations. However, these ethical flagstones are nowhere to

be found in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, who in *Being and Nothingness* (1984 [1956]) instead lays down a sedimentary soil consisting in a mix of nothingness and contingency. By ‘nothingness’ I mean to suggest Sartre’s sketch of a powerfully absent, yet proleptic self, i.e., a forward-looking self that is not temporally or spatially present by virtue of freedom’s ability to cancel out any fixed self-representation; by ‘contingency’ I mean Sartre’s deep seated notion of the arbitrariness of human existence, for contingency marks out those things and attributes that as much as they are, could be otherwise. Traditionally, contingency can provide no firm foundation to ethics because, by definition, conditions of chance and accident cannot give the rule to anything.<sup>1</sup> And yet Sartre discards traditional wisdom by writing in *Nausea* that “The essential thing is contingency. I mean that one cannot define existence as necessity. To exist is simply *to be there*” (Sartre 1964, 131). The temporal and spatial qualities of existence have no necessary foundations other than their temporary appearances, and this is a fleeting and inconstant condition that cannot be taken away from existence – it is its essence. We see this notion reformulated in *Existentialism is a Humanism*, wherein Sartre volleys harsh rebukes to those who would deny their own contingent existence,

I can pass judgment on those who seek to conceal from themselves the complete arbitrariness of their existence, and their total freedom. Those who conceal from themselves this total freedom, under the guise of solemnity, or by determinate excuses, I will call cowards. Others, who try to prove their existence is necessary, when man’s appearance on earth is merely contingent, I will call bastards (Sartre 2007, 49).

In the passage above, cowardice is exhibited in the willful disowning of one’s inescapable responsibility to freely make up one’s own mind, i.e., by disavowing one’s freedom; however, one’s freedom “has no essence” (Sartre 1984, 438). If human freedom has an essence, it would have to be something, and thus be based on determinate qualities, which would make it dependent, rather than independent. Instead, Sartre states that one’s freedom is characterized by nothingness: “Freedom is precisely the nothingness which *is* made-to-be at the heart of man and which forces human-reality *to make itself* instead of *to be*” (Sartre 1984, 440). However, if one’s existence is radically contingent, without rule or purpose, and one’s freedom has no essence, how does Sartre derive an ethics of nothingness to provide the groundless *ground* of one’s responsibility to others?

### **Factual Supervenience**

As with all influential contributions to ethical discourse, Sartre articulates an ethical view based on a distinctive conception of human being. This conception is complex and subtle, and thus requires a brief summary to clarify his highly technical vocabulary. Sartre understands human reality as for-itself (*pour-soi*), which is free to choose and thus defined by its nothingness, namely, the negation of what it is in-itself (*en-soi*). Being in-itself is extant concrete being; it simply *is*. Being for-itself, which we can equate with human subjectivity, is the negation of being in-itself, which we can view in objectified terms. Sartre argues that the constant negation by the for-itself

to the in-itself is an act of transcendence, for it opens up being *beyond* itself. Consequently, Sartre's idea of human being takes such being as grounded in a dialectical relation between two ways of being, as something and nothing, the definite and indefinite. The distinction of these two ways of being is anything but clear, and not without critical commentary.

Sartre's explication of the relation between being in-itself (*en soi*) and being for-itself (*pour-soi*) has been characterized (i) as antithetical and (ii) with exhibiting distinct ontological conditions. The former 'antithetical characterization' is exemplified in Maurice Merleau-Ponty's comment in *Sense and Non-Sense* that Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* "remains too exclusively antithetic...the antithesis of the for-itself and the in-itself often seem to be *alternatives* instead of being described as the living bond and communication between one term and the other" (Merleau-Ponty 1991, 72; my italics). The latter 'ontological distinction' between the in-itself and for-itself is articulated by Richard J. Bernstein, drawing from Klaus Hartmann's influential study of *Sartre's Ontology*,<sup>2</sup> in his view that for Sartre,

[T]here is a great ontological divide between being-in-itself and being-for-itself. The former is characterized by its fullness, self-identity, plenitude, and solidity. The latter, which a unity of being and nothingness, is itself essentially a lack, a deficiency, a being which lacks the fullness and positivity of being-in-itself" (Bernstein 2011, 134).

Merleau-Ponty's and Bernstein's commentaries rightly take up the seemingly confused distinction Sartre makes between being and nothingness, but I should like to use them as points of departure to examine two related lines. The first line notes how the concept of *supervenience*, that is, a relation wherein a higher-level property 'supervenes,' i.e., emerges or arises from, a lower level property. Although supervenience "is a central notion in analytic philosophy," perhaps first employed in 1952 by "R.M. Hare, who used it to characterize a relationship between moral properties and natural properties" (McLaughlin and Bennett 2018), in 1956 Sartre used the term (*surviennent*) to show that the relation between the in-itself and the for-itself is not antithetical or opposed, but rather exhibits precisely the kind of 'living bond and communication' that Merleau-Ponty does not recognize, but correctly expects.

The second line builds upon the findings of the first to argue that rather than being understood as possessing a "great ontological divide," the in-itself and for-itself share the same ontological condition; namely, *contingency*. Contingency is also tied to the notion of supervenience, for what is contingent must *depend* on some cause or attribute other than itself, and to say that something is contingent is to recognize that it is both *possibly* and *possibly-not*,<sup>3</sup> which I take to be modal attributes of both the in-itself and the for-itself.

Merleau-Ponty states that Sartre's depiction of the relation between the in-itself and for-itself is too antithetical or too directly opposed. His concerns might be attributed to the for-itself's dependence on the in-itself for its existence, thus the in-itself can be viewed as having a logically prior basis *vis-à-vis* the for-itself. However, this logical priority does not figure into any kind of

*conscious choice* between alternatives. If it did, it would have to be done by the for-itself. The kind of “alternative” fluctuation Merleau-Ponty describes is no alternative at all. How, for example, can the in-itself know itself as objectified existence, i.e., that it *is*? How can Merleau-Ponty envision a conscious choice by the in-itself to choose itself?

For example, he writes, “It is obvious [that Sartre’s] primary concern in dealing with the subject and freedom is to present them *as uninvolved in any compromise with things* and that he is putting off the study of the ‘realization’ of nothingness in being...until some other time” (Merleau-Ponty 1991, 72; my italics).<sup>4</sup> However, *pace* Merleau-Ponty, I wish to draw attention to how Sartre absolutely presents the subject and freedom as involved with ‘things’ because they are in an inescapably dependent relationship to “things;” for the transcendence of the for-itself can emerge or arise only in relation to the facticity of the in-itself. As Sartre puts it, “Every consciousness ... supports a certain relation with its own facticity” (Sartre 1984, 503). Consequently, we can say that the in-itself *supervenes* on the for-itself because the for-itself, characterized as nothing, depends on the in-itself for something to provide the content not only to consider but also to annul.

As is well known, Sartre uses the term ‘facticity’ to refer to the *situated* condition of human being,<sup>5</sup> which is ever being canceled by freedom. For example, Sartre writes, “facticity is the only reality which freedom can discover, the only one which it can nihilate by the positing of an end, the only thing in terms of which it is meaningful to posit an end” (Sartre 1984, 494). Facticity is that material which freedom shapes according to the projects it chooses to follow. Although contingent, facticity constitutes particular physical and social make ups that place human beings in relational confrontation with their world. In other words, that the situatedness of human being, the way manifold *accidental* features come together, constitute one’s facticity.

My facticity, for example, places me within a family of relations that while constitutive of my being, I could not have chosen beforehand, e.g., where I was born, where I grew up as a child, the inherited tradition of my forebears, and so on. The same goes for my physical make up, e.g. my height, complexion, hair color, health, all of which compose my facticity, just as certain aspects of my social make up *form* my given relation to the social world. This *givenness*, those aspects and traits which collectively constitute my *that is*, could easily have been otherwise, i.e., contingent. Moreover, my embedded relations in the world, as an assembly of my facts, is fluid, not static – e.g., I used to look one way, now I look different. To the extent that I am fixed by my facticity, the nature of my facticity itself is not fixed but is itself given to change.

In contradistinction to facticity, Sartre posits our “transcendence,” which overcomes our given relations to the world, and is that aspect of ourselves which allows us to always be beyond our facticity. The for-itself’s negating, its nothingness, mediates the congeries of our facticity in such ways that we can never be reduced to our factual make up, although our factual make-up is necessary not only for the existence of the for-itself, but also for the selection of its projective, intentional choices. Hence, not only is there a necessarily undissolvable interrelation between the for-itself and in-itself, but the for-itself is also in a *situation* that relies upon a view of one’s facticity

through which it shapes itself, and it is in this sense that I suggest the for-itself and in-itself are in a relational mode of supervenience.

Consequently, we can perhaps attempt to allay some of Merleau-Ponty's concerns by looking to the conclusion of 'Part Three, Chapter Three', i.e., "Concrete Relations with Others", of *Being and Nothingness*. Therein we find support for my view in Sartre's reproach of Heidegger's characterization of *Dasein* "as the existent which surpasses existents toward *their being*," instead arguing against this formulation by noting how "Heidegger passes over in silence the fact that the for-itself is not only the being which constitutes an ontology of existents but that it is also the being by whom ontic modifications supervene (*surviennent*) for the existent qua existent" (Sartre 1984, 556; my italics). The use of the word '*surviennent*' in this passage denotes to 'comes,' 'arrives' or 'emerges' *over* or *on top of* an underlying property. Sartre continues, "This perpetual possibility of acting—that is, of modifying the in-itself in its ontic materiality, in its 'flesh'—must evidently be considered as an essential characteristic of the for-itself" (Sartre 1984, 556). In other words, Sartre is saying that changes in facticity (i.e. ontic modification) and one's future projections (i.e. transcendence) are affectively mediated. Consequently, rather than seeing a supervenient relation between the in-itself and for-itself as Sartre describes, Merleau-Ponty's "alternative" comment gives the impression that Sartre's philosophy seems to oppose one aspect of being at the expense of the other, which is a classic example of bad faith (*mauvaise foi*).

My facticity situates me in relation to my world, but it ought not be understood as a foundational Archimedean point. Even though I am situated by my facticity, my distinctive situatedness is always contingent, and, hence, nonfoundational: my facticity could always have been otherwise. Recall that contingency cannot give the rule to anything. To say that something is contingent is to confess one's epistemic poverty because we can offer no rational account for our being. As Benedict de Spinoza famously argued, contingency is just a name we give to things that expose "a defect of our knowledge" (Spinoza 1974, especially, Bk I, Props. 29 & 33 and Bk II, Prop. 31). If I were to try to give a rational account for my being, I would have to state rules, principles, and laws that all went into making my existence necessary, and, as we have seen, this would mark me out as a Sartrean "bastard" (*Supra*, 10). However, I escape this offensive designation because I do not pretend to give such a rational account. Instead, I understand that my being is totally conditioned and dependent; it is totally contingent.

### **The Contingency of the For-itself**

So far, it has been shown that there is a supervenient relation between the in-itself and for-itself that can help to assuage Merleau-Ponty's concern with Sartre's philosophy. This relation suggests that the for-itself is dependent upon the in-itself for its existence and consequent selection of possible projects. We have seen how the in-itself's ontology is characterized by contingency, and one implication that we might consider is whether the for-itself, of which, in Sartre's words, "ontic modifications supervene," is similarly ontologically characterized by contingency.

Some commentators, like Richard J. Bernstein, take the in-itself and for-itself to disclose a “great ontological divide” but, here, just as with Merleau-Ponty’s worries, I want to see if these concerns can be allayed.

Recall that the for-itself is defined by its nothingness, i.e., its negation of what it is itself. The unique character of the for-itself is explained by Sartre in the following formulation:

Yet the for-itself *is*. It *is*, we may say, even if it is a being which is not what it is and which is what it is not ... it *is* as pure contingency ... It *is* in so far as there is in it something of which it is not the foundation—its presence to the world. Being apprehends itself as not being its own foundation ... A being which is not its own foundation, which qua, being, could be other than it is to the extent that it does not account for its being (Sartre 1984, 127-28).

A being that is not its own foundation is a contingent being; which is open to negation. That the for-itself *is not what it is and is what it is not* describes precisely its contingency, for what is necessary, i.e. what is and must be what is, cannot be negated and, hence, is ontologically closed. Subsequently, the contingency of the for-itself is its “presence to the world” as negation; the negation of the in-itself, with which the for-itself can never be identical.

If we return now to the contingency of the for-itself, we note that if the for-itself was identical with the in-itself, all possibility for human being would cease. The for-itself and in-itself are in a relation which presents an impossible synthesis. As we have seen, human possibility is grounded in contingency, i.e. the possibly or possibly-not. Sartre fleshes out a picture of the “pure contingency” of the for-itself in his writings on “The Body” by tying it with the notion of “perpetual contingency”:

Thus the for-itself is sustained by a perpetual contingency for which it assumes the responsibility and which it assimilates without ever being able to suppress it. This perpetual evanescent contingency of the in-itself which, without ever allowing itself to be apprehended, haunts the for-itself and reattaches it to being-in-itself—this contingency is what we shall call the *facticity* of the for-itself. It is this facticity which permits us to say that the for-itself *is*, that it exists, although we can never *realize* the facticity, and although we apprehend it through the for-itself (Sartre 1984, 408).

We can never realize the facticity of the for-itself because of its “perpetual contingency.” To say that something is perpetually contingent means that it can *always* be otherwise. Perpetual contingency evades the determinate teleological attachments of a substance metaphysics, but without having to give up notions of potentiality and possibility.

Another way of saying this is to allow for such causes as material, efficient, and formal, but with an indeterminate idea of openness with regard to finality. In this case, we might see the final cause of potential as multiple and open-ended. This would imply that there is no *actuality* in the future. In other words, if the for-itself is pure contingency, it is also pure possibility, and this would make the in-itself pure potentiality. The implication is that the for-itself is multi-proleptic,

always capable of choosing endless projects from an equally multi-potential in-itself which is always open to being transformed.

The for-itself's nothingness entails that it constantly push ahead to new possibilities into a future that it cannot predict. While the in-itself *is*, the for-itself *is not*. Through its awareness of what it is not, the for-itself becomes what it is: free to create its being. Sartre writes that freedom is the apprehension of my facticity. Because we are not fixed by facticity, which is contingent, and because we are conscious, the for-itself has no alternative but to choose: "Choice and consciousness are one and the same thing" (Sartre 1984, 595). Thus even the choice not to choose is a conscious instance of choosing: "Not to choose is, in fact, to choose not to choose (Sartre 1984, 481). The upshot is that there is no escape from our freedom.

Sartre's thesis of the unconditioned character of freedom, i.e., that "I am condemned to be free" (Sartre 1984, 567), does not imply that freedom has no limits. In an interesting move, Sartre argues that the phenomenon of intersubjectivity or being with Others puts a limit on my freedom. The intersubjective limits to our freedom can be explained by how choosing always takes place within a world. It is only in a world with Others that we consider our options for choice.

Choosing always implies the satisfaction of some aim or desire. Sartre states that the for-itself is always in a state of lack (Sartre 1984, 153). What the for-itself lacks (it always wants to *be* something), implies new possibilities for itself: "This missing For-itself is the Possible" (Sartre 1984, 153). Because the for-itself transcends everything it would *be*, it subsequently experiences its being as a failure:

The for-itself in its being is failure because it is transcendent. The for-itself in its being is failure because it is the foundation only of its nothingness. In truth this failure is its very being, but it has meaning only if the for-itself apprehends itself as failure *in the presence of* the being which it has failed to be" (Sartre 1984, 139).

Thus the for-itself is perpetually engaged in the task of satisfying an existential verb, i.e. its sense of lack by pursuing possibilities that would enable it *to be*.

This *haunting* lack is the reason why the for-itself is in the perpetual state of trying to *be* (Sartre 1984, 88). It wants to achieve a completion it can never quite reach, an anticipation of arrival at a destination which is perpetually delayed. But the for-itself, which *is not*, can never be completed as long as it continues to be *for-itself*. Hypothetically, should the for-itself achieve completion, it would cease being for-itself and be in-itself. Consequently, we can envision the perpetual contingency of the for-itself as a continually present form of unfulfilled promise.

The final aim of such an open-ended promise cannot be thought. If such a finality could be thought, it would negate the for-itself's freedom, i.e., if we tried to apprehend an ultimate finality as the purpose of the for-itself's negations, such an account would entail giving a necessary argument for its facticity. But, as we have seen, the for-itself is always its *not yet* precisely because of its freedom.

## The Necessity of My Contingency

The facticity of the for-itself is taken up again by Sartre when he turns to its embodiment and world-making capacity: “Being-for-itself must be wholly body and it must be wholly conscious ... The for-itself is a relation to the world. The for-itself, by denying that it is being, makes there be a world” (Sartre 1984, 404-05). The for-itself must be embodied, and Sartre posits a provocative definition of the body: “[W]e could define the body as the contingent form which is assumed by the necessity of my contingency. The body is nothing other than the for-itself” (Sartre 1984, 408). Consequently, the body, as for-itself, is my facticity:

[T]he body is the contingent form which is taken up by *the necessity of my contingency*. We can never apprehend this contingency as such in so far as our body is for us; for we are a choice, and for us, to be is to be ourselves (Sartre 1984, 432; my italics).

Sartre argues that the body is revelatory, it is a necessary medium by which things are revealed to me; I engage the world, as both passive and active, through my body.

However, the body is not just the medium with which we engage the world, it *is* our engagement with the world. Moreover, what is entailed by the necessity that we are embodied is just way to express that it is necessary that I exist contingently:

For human reality, to be is to-be-there; that is, “there in that chair,” “there at that table,” “there at the top of that mountain, with these dimensions, this orientation, *etc.*” It is ontological necessity. This point must be well understood. For this necessity appears between two contingencies: on the one hand, while it is necessary that I be in the form of being-there, still it is altogether contingent that I be, for I am not the foundation of my being; on the other hand, while it is necessary that I be engaged in this or that point of view, it is contingent that it should be precisely in this view to the exclusion of all others. This two-fold contingency which embraces a necessity we have called the facticity of the for-itself (Sartre 1984, 407-8).

Sartre argues that my relation to my body as for-itself, which is free to act in the world, follows the contingent character of facticity:

But it is the fact that the for-itself is not its own foundation, and this fact is expressed by the necessity of existing as an engaged, contingent being among other contingent beings. As the body is not distinct from the situation of the for-itself since for the for-itself, to exist and to be situated are one and the same ... The body manifests my contingency, we can say it is *only* this contingency (Sartre 1984, 408-9).

As a consequence, I am always in relation to my body, and even though my body is contingent, this relation is necessary: “The body is the necessary condition of my action: “Birth, the past, contingency, the necessity of a point of view, the factual condition for all possible action in the world—such is the body, such it is *for me*” (Sartre 1984, 431).

The necessity of my contingency, however, does not alleviate my *responsibility* in the world to which I am engaged. That contingency offers no rational ground for the existence of things *is not an excuse* for me to evade responsibility for my choices. Recall that the for-itself,

is sustained by a perpetual contingency *for which it assumes the responsibility* and which it assimilates without ever being able to suppress it ... Yet facticity does not cease to haunt the for-itself, and it is facticity which causes me to apprehend myself simultaneously as totally responsible for my being” (Sartre 1984, 408; my italics).

Sartre writes that not only is my body my facticity, but also “the Other’s body is his *facticity*” (Sartre 1984, 449). In a key passage, Sartre explains how the Other’s facticity implies its contingency, which is the same as mine:

It is this same contingency, and no other, which I presently grasp .... This body of the Other as I encounter it is the revelation as object-for-me of the contingent form assumed by the necessity of this contingency .... the pure contingency of his presence .... The Other’s body is then the facticity of transcendence transcended as *it refers to my facticity. I never apprehend the Other as body without at the same time in a non-explicit manner apprehending my body as the center of reference indicated by the Other* (Sartre 1984, 451; my italics).

The Other’s body is thereby refers us to our own factual contingencies, and from this emerges ethical commitments. There is a mutual reciprocity in the structure of my being with that of the Other: “[T]he way in which my body appears to the Other or the way in which the Other’s body appears to me amounts to the same thing ... [T]he the structures of my being-for-the-Other are identical to those of the Other’s being-for-me” (Sartre 1984, 445). The identity relation is as follows: if the Other’s facticity is the same as mine, his for-itself is just as open to future possibilities as my own. Moreover, my “mineness” cannot be recovered without reference to a mode of being with otherness that is incorrigibly social and historical. We encounter Others in a world not of our making, but of which we can each make. And it is this cohabitation and subsequent encounters with Others that necessitates my taking responsibility for my freedom and actions, which no one else, as for-itself, ought ever evade.

What this means is that our encounter with Others implies their freedom as much as it implies our own. Man is not only condemned to be free and hence must choose, but also “carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; *he is responsible for the world* and for himself as a way of being (Sartre 1984, 707; my italics). The for-itself must always project into its future possibilities, but however daunting its responsibilities, it should not lose sense of those projections taking place in a world with Others, which is also his world: “In this sense the responsibility of the for-itself is overwhelming since he is the one by whom it happens to be a world” (Sartre 1984, 707).

That the for-itself “is responsible for the world” assumes that he and Others share “a

peopled-world” (Sartre 1984, 711). The thesis that the for-itself must be responsible for the world is linked to its perpetual contingency, i.e., its own future. In its attempt to satisfy its own lacking, the for-itself realizes that “there is a future waiting to be created” (Sartre 2007, 30). In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre quotes Francis Ponge as writing: “Man is the future of man” (Sartre 2007, 29); hence, we might say that the for-itself is the future of the for-itself. Responsibility for the world entails my taking absolute responsibility for my practical choices as a consequence of my freedom (Sartre 1984, 708). My facticity, the contingency of the for-itself, and the necessity of my contingency imply no rational foundation for the world: “I am not the foundation of my being. Therefore, everything takes place *as if* I were compelled to be responsible” (Sartre 1984, 710; my italics). Sartre wants us to take the *heuristic* sense of world responsibility seriously.

We must take responsibility for our choices in the world *as if* our practical deliberations were somehow grounded, even though there is no such ground. Our facticity, for-itself and body are all contingent. However, this lack appears as an empty space in which we cannot help but be free and take responsibility for our choices even if we should try to evade such responsibility. The radical contingency of my being is a dispensation to freedom, albeit with attached accountability:

I am *abandoned* in the world ... I find myself suddenly alone and without help, engaged in a world for which I bear the whole responsibility without being able, whatever I do, to tear myself away from the responsibility for my very desire of fleeing responsibilities (Sartre 1984, 710).

Being free means having to face our abandonment by taking responsibility for such. I transcend this abandonment by presupposing my responsibility of having to choose and by taking title for my choices.

My taking responsibility for freedom takes place in a world of Others with whom we share the same contingency. Sartre’s ethics of contingency reveals that because I share the same thrownness with Others in a world, I also have no choice but to take responsibility for such a world:

The one who realizes in anguish his condition as being thrown into a responsibility which extends to his very abandonment has no longer either remorse or excuse; he is no longer anything but a freedom which perfectly reveals itself and whose being resides in this very revelation (Sartre 1984, 711).

The revelation of our freedom cannot take place without the Other, whose revelatory being refers us back to our own factual contingencies. And just as my facticity is mirrored by the Other, so too is my freedom, my nothingness. This means that not only do I have to take responsibility for my freedom, but I ought to take responsibility for Others to will their freedom as well. This is freedom in the face of the contingency we all share, and a freedom that I cannot set as a goal “without setting the freedom of others as a goal” (Sartre 2007, 49). Recall that for Sartre, freedom has no essence, it is nothingness. Hence, in an ethics of nothingness, my nothingness leads me to the nothingness of Others, of which I must take responsibility.

### Endnotes:

1. This is why Aristotle writes that there can be no science of the accidental. See (Aristotle 2001, 1026b-1027a20).
2. Klaus Hartmann, *Sartre's Ontology: A Study of Being and Nothingness in Light of Hegel's Logic* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966).
3. It should be noted that some might confuse *possibly-not* with impossible. This is a mistake. Contingency is expressed modally as (*possibly-p* and *possibly-not p*).
4. Merleau-Ponty continues, "the subject is *only* nothingness" (73).
5. Cf. Heidegger's use of facticity (*Faktizität*) to designate *Dasein's* situated thrownness, i.e., its Being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-sein*). See (Heidegger 1962): "Whenever *Dasein* is, it is as a Fact; and the factuality of such a Fact is what we shall call *Dasein's* 'facticity'" (82).

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## Filipino Virtue Ethics and Meaningful Work

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### **Abstract:**

A number of paradigms have been proposed to understand the sources of meaningful work, but a non-Western approach has attracted little attention. This study aims to make a theoretical contribution toward an understanding of meaningful work from a virtue-ethics framework that is culturally meaningful and relevant to Filipino realities and their distinct cultural heritage. It develops a paradigm for a Filipino view of meaningful work that could guide both researchers and practitioners in business ethics by defining what is meaningful work, explaining why it is important, and presenting some examples of concrete measures that management can utilize to promote meaningful work in the Philippine workplace.

**Keywords:** Filipino Ethics, Virtue Ethics, Meaningful Work, Philippine Studies, Business Ethics

This study aims to make a theoretical contribution toward a Filipino view of meaningful work (MW) that could guide both researchers and practitioners in business ethics. Several studies indicate that MW has positive effects to both employee and organizational outcomes. It relates to employees' wellbeing, mental health and job satisfaction. On the part of the organization, MW promotes organizational citizenship and commitment, work engagement, increased productivity, increased level of motivation and performance, employee retention, and reduction of employee cynicism (Yeoman et al. 2019; Bailey and Madden 2016; Veltman 2016; Michaelson et al. 2014). However, according to Bailey and Madden (2016, 6) MW is a complex and a profound concept, "going far beyond the superficialities of satisfaction or engagement." Managing MW implies "a great ethical responsibility" on the part of the management, for MW is "an experience that reaches beyond the workplace and into the realms of the individual's wider personal life" (14). Because MW is about finding fulfillment in one's work, it is a normative and an ethical concept.

The idea that MW depends on some objective characteristics of work is based on erroneous assumptions (Tommasi 2020; Tablan 2019; Yeoman et al. 2019). A number of paradigms have been proposed to understand the sources of MW, but a non-Western approach has attracted little attention. Because some authors have argued that MW has positive valence that has eudaimonic rather than hedonic content, a virtue-ethics approach to MW has been used (Tablan 2019; Veltman, 2016; Beadle and Knight 2012). Virtues are character traits or dispositions to act that are essential in

order to live a good life. For Aristotle, our actions, when habitually performed have an enduring influence in the kind of person we become and in our overall well-being. Lack of virtues is a sign of deficiency in character. Virtue ethicists acknowledge that work and places of employment have profound influence in shaping our character and living a fulfilled life.

This essay develops a paradigm of MW from a virtue-ethics framework that is culturally meaningful and relevant to Filipino realities and their distinct cultural heritage that Filipino and global managers who have little familiarity with Philippine culture can consider as one of the models in measuring and promoting MW among Filipino workers. It analyzes the most common character traits that are indigenous to Filipinos and are exhibited in their daily activities and interactions as reported by different scholars who researched this topic. They are also observed among first generation Filipino immigrants and even among US-born Filipino Americans (Mina 2015; Aguila 2015; Sanchez and Gaw 2007). These virtues are *Pakikisama* (get along), *Bayanihan* (cooperation), *Pakikiramdam* (sensitivity), *Malasakit* (caring), *Hiya* (shame), *Utang na Loob* (gratitude), and Family Orientation.<sup>1</sup> I make no claim that all Filipinos carry these virtues. Due to Western influence and materialistic management, these virtues are diminishing in the workplace. However, “It is very unlikely,” According to Lanaria (2013, 243) “that indigenous values which have withstood the vagaries and contingencies of history for centuries are about to be phased out in contemporary times by the forces of modernization and globalization.” By focusing on Filipino Virtues (FV), I do not imply that Western virtues such as justice, courage, or prudence are unknown in the Philippines, this is obviously false. But the practice of Western virtues in the Philippines is also influenced by FV. Filipino worldview is described as collectivist that emphasizes interdependent self-construal. Courage for many Filipinos is less of a virtue if the goal is simply to further one’s own benefits at the expense of others. Referring to justice, Sison and Palma-Reyes (1997, 1520) write, “The appeal to justice seems to be restricted either to legislation or to the courts, which is the arena different from that of business.” Instead, Filipinos tend to be non-confrontational and prefer to “have recourse to arbitration procedures brokered by neutral third parties, such as elders.”

### **A Filipino virtue ethics**

Early scholars in Philippine studies, most of them are foreigners who are not familiar with virtue ethics as an interpretative option (Reyes 2015a, 150) regard FV as *values*. They did not have at their disposal the more recent scholarship that uses Aristotle’s virtue ethics framework in interpreting non-Western ethical systems such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and African Philosophy. Nonetheless, many of them agree that these so-called Filipino values connote behavioral patterns and are sometimes designated as traits. While they are rooted in Filipino culture, they are not just cultural preferences but standards of goodness and a measure of one’s character. But to consider them as *values* is a philosophical mistake (Reyes 2015b). Values are general beliefs that incline us to choose one way or another and normally pertain to goals like happiness, freedom, dignity, etc. “The problem with ‘values’ is that the concept is too broad, and is often simply conflated with the notion of something ‘good’ or ‘important’. It also carries with it a very subjective understanding of

what constitutes a ‘good’.” (Reyes 2015a, 150) To identify something as a value does not explain what it is, but how we feel about it (Reyes 2015a). The subsequent value approach taken by Filipino scholars in developing a Filipino philosophy makes them vulnerable from attacks from foreign critics for trying to extract philosophy from culture.

Reyes argues that the more proper way of interpreting Filipino ethics is through the lens of virtue ethics. This avoids the shortcomings of ethical relativism commonly found in social sciences. Virtues are both descriptive and normative. They are not only descriptions of actual Filipino behaviors, they also establish standards of actions “learned in childhood, reinforced or modified in puberty and adolescence, and put to actual practice in adult life; they constitute the fundamental educational mechanisms that mold an individual into an acceptable member of ... society.” (Jocano 1997, 115) The absence of these virtues is a sign of bad character, lack of refinement (rudeness) or education, and poor breeding, that can result in being looked down, censured or excluded from group. Like Aristotelian virtues, FV define appropriate behaviors, specifically in social relations, and determine the kind of person one is. They are applied to both actions and persons. As these standards are internalized, they become constant guides where one bases her judgments when met with moral problems and dilemmas, especially during those moments that require on-the-spot decisions. As Aristotle noted, virtues are our second nature. “Among Filipinos, these are a matter of fact, taken for granted, because they are what they are born into and grow up with. It is only when these behaviors come in conflict with Western ways that the Filipino gives them a second thought.” (Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino 2000, 57)

However, there are fundamental differences between Aristotelian and Filipino virtues. Aristotle’s argument is predicated on the claim that we have a final end (*telos*) and virtues enable us to achieve it. If the human *telos* for Aristotle is *eudaimonia* (flourishing), in the Filipino context, this flourishing cannot be understood in the individual sense, but flourishing with and for *Kapwa* (others/fellow humans). FV promote, not necessarily excellences in human function or *arete* (this may be secondary) but excellences in human relations. The aim is to establish harmonious and reciprocal flow of social interaction and strong connection where all parties experience endearing and enduring relationships. Unlike Aristotelian virtues that can be divided into intellectual and moral, FV are rooted in *Loob* (core/deep inside), they have both rational and emotional contents.

### ***Loob and Kapwa***

A careful survey of literature about Philippine ethical discourse reveals two key concepts: *Loob* and *Kapwa*. *Loob* is generally regarded as the basic component of moral behavior, the center of indigenous interpretations of ethical concepts and principles (Agaton 2017). Understanding *Loob* has significant implications for understanding the person as well as the nature and morality of interpersonal relationships from a Filipino perspective. When asked, many Filipinos know what *Loob* is but they struggle on how to express it in English. Literally, *Loob* means *what is deep inside*,

thus it connotes interiority, the core of one's being. For Filipinos what is of value is the internal rather than external. It is in what is inside where one can find what is true, authentic and essential. To speak of one's *Loob* is to be authentic, it means to say one's deepest truth and conviction. Not to know the other's *Loob* is not to know the real person. *Loob* is "person's interior truth since this is the ultimate, organizing center of human reality. It is the very center of his humanity where his idea, beliefs and behavior lie and the true worth of a person is situated." (Agaton 2017, 60)

As the inner subject (as opposed to the outside, i.e. the object) and one's authentic self, *Loob* is said to be analogous to the Hindu concept of *Atman*, a term that refers to physical body, mind, reason, and vital principle. *Loob* is not distinct from the faculties of the person, and is inseparable from the body as long as she is alive (Mercado 1994). It has several dimensions: intellectual, volitional, emotional, ethical. Thus, *Loob* is a holistic concept that covers both emotion and reason, heart and mind – the totality of one's personal experiences, i.e. her wholeness. It transcends physical-mental or corporeal-spiritual dichotomies (De Castro 1999, 39). All persons have *Loob* in the sense that they have mind, reason, etc., - differences are external or outside – yet each person is affected by what is outside differently and uniquely.

*Loob* is a relational understanding of the person (Reyes 2015a). It is part of the essence of what lies within to be manifested or expressed outside. In a way, it is "what-lies-within-that-lives-without." (De Castro 1999, 39) *Loob* is sometimes translated as *will* because Filipinos use it to express desire or volition. But *Loob* as *will* is not the will in traditional Western philosophy that is the counterpart of the intellect, for the Filipino worldview is non-dualistic, it does not separate will from intellect or emotion from reason (Mercado 1994). As the inner subject, it can never be known as an object. Rebutillo (2017, 251) states: "*Loob* comes to be through its activity: without such activity *Loob* is not; it does not exist." If *Loob* is best expressed by the word will, it must be understood as *relational will* (Reyes 2015b) because *Loob* is known through relationship and interaction. Thus, "it is meaningless to investigate *Loob* without relating it to *Kapwa* and to the values and virtues that emanate from this 'tandem'" (Rebutillo 2017, 251).

Literally, *Kapwa* means *both* and *fellow*. For Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino (2000), *Kapwa* is shared identity, the expression of the relational aspect of the person. They argue that it is not smooth interpersonal relationship per se as claimed by foreign scholars that Filipinos want to achieve, but unity of self with others. But in contrast to the Western view that defines the other as that which is opposed or different from the self and vice-versa, *Kapwa* is the synthesis of the self and the other. According to Bulatao (1992) the self-construal of Filipinos is contrary to the atomistic and autonomous view of Western orientation where self-governance is of prime value, while opening or sharing of oneself to others is a choice or an option. To define *Kapwa* in reference to the self and the other is already to assume a separation between the two, which is the thesis that *Kapwa* negates, for the meaning of *Kapwa* is that there is no self that is distinct and oppositional to the not-self/other.

There are two ways to interpret *Kapwa*. We can treat it as a contraction for the word *Kapwatao* (fellow human). This is the notion of *Kapwa* in a limited sense. "This term implies that

others should be treated as equals and with dignity. A person without this shared identity ceases to be human.” (Edman and Kameoka 2000, 2) It is the obligation to treat the other as yourself, regardless of the other’s individual characteristics or stature of power and privilege. Not to have the sense of *Kapwa* is the worst that can be said to a person, it refers to someone who exploits others for his own good. On the other hand, the word *Kapwa* in ordinary conversation is often attached to a noun. It is also used as a qualifier to an action word to suggest reciprocity. Its root words are *ka* (being related to) and *puwang* (space). By itself, *Kapwa* is vague and ambiguous but carries an innate ethical dimension for it suggests the notion of togetherness “that bridges a gap or eliminates a space between two beings. That being so, the term *Kapwa* appeals to accept the Other fellow-being who is similar to me, and at the same time different from me.” (Meneses 2019, 8) *Kapwa* is only *Kapwa* from the outside, but in the final analysis *Kapwa* is also *Loob*.

In their highest level of expression *Loob* and *Kapwa* are inseparable. *Loob* is revealed through *Kapwa* while the latter opens itself and embraces *Loob* until the unity of all is achieved. This is the *telos* of Filipino ethics, the ideal expression of humanity and oneness where all *Loob* is one (*pag-iisang Loob*). This is the moral ideal and the Filipino view of the good life, which is highly collectivist. This oneness (*pag-iisang Loob*) is actualized and made perfect by virtues. Without these virtues “The *Loob* instead of fostering a loving relationship together with the *Kapwa* becomes an instrument of division and destruction.” (Rebustillo 2017, 252) FV emanate from the *Loob* and are directed toward the *Kapwa*, and ultimately to his *Loob*. Like Aristotelian virtues, FV are guides or skills rather than clear-cut rules, they are situational but not relativistic. The correct exercise of these virtues will depend on the right context, the right time, and according to specific situations. FV are not good in and of themselves, they need to be moderated and directed to the right *telos*, otherwise they degenerate into emotionalism, passivity, favoritism and factionalism. In the final analysis, virtues reveal the kind of person you are, i.e. your *Loob*, and enhance your relationship with *Kapwa*.

### ***Pakikisama***

Lynch was one of the first anthropologists to study *Pakikisama* among Filipinos. He explains *Pakikisama* as “a facility at getting along with others in such a way to avoid outward signs of conflict: glum or sour looks, harsh words, open disagreement, or physical violence. It connotes the smile, the friendly lift of the eyebrow, the pat on the back, the squeeze of the arm, the word of praise or friendly concern.” (Lynch 1962, 89) This word is derived from the Tagalog *sama* – to go along with, “the lauded practice of yielding to the will of the leader or majority so as to make the group decision unanimous. No one likes a hold-out.” (Lynch 1962, 90) For Saito (2010) *Pakikisama* implies friendliness and affinity. By using indirect expressions and euphemism, showing pleasant or jovial attitude, keeping things vague or ambiguous, hiding one’s feelings, avoiding confrontation, harsh words or disagreements – stressful situations are avoided. “In short, the emphasis is placed on getting along with others and making concessions to them, being sensitive to their feelings and making every effort to be agreeable in the face of difficult circumstances, even to the hurt of oneself.” (Mulzac 2007, 86)

The above descriptions focus on conflict and isolation avoidance. It implies that *Pakikisama* is being passive and “conceding to the wishes of the collective” (Sanchez 812) just to preserve camaraderie. The emphasis on going with the flow ignores the fact that *sama* in Tagalog also connotes solidarity. According to (Jocano 1997, 65-66) *Pakikisama* “is a willingness to subordinate one’s own interest in favor of others, in the spirit of harmony, friendship, cooperation and deference to majority decision so that group goals can be easily achieved.” It can be considered as a cardinal virtue because it is interconnected with and is an essential ingredient of other virtues since it involves sacrificing one’s individual interest and cooperating for the sake of the common good. It means to prioritize the collective good over one’s individual advantage or benefit. Not to show *Pakikisama* is a betrayal of trust. It means a person cannot be relied upon or trusted because she is only thinking of her own welfare. Through *Pakikisama* a trusting relationship is built where individual members of a group know that they have some people to depend on, a kind of relationship that is not based on material needs.

*Pakikisama* is indispensable in the workplace. Even if the workload is heavy or difficult and work conditions are wanting, Filipinos are often happy because of positive co-worker relationships (Rungduin 2014; Ilagan 2014). “Further, when they are comfortable to each other problems at work would not become a burden as they believe there are other employees who can help them.” (Abun 2018, 7579) Many Filipinos will go out of their way in order to assist a co-worker even if they do not get anything from it. Being a good worker involves not just technical competence but interpersonal skills as well. In fact, making *Pakikisama* in terms of possessing excellent interpersonal skills is considered by Filipinos as job-related (Ilagan 2014). Like other virtues, the exercise of *Pakikisama* depends on context and situations. It can be as trivial as smiling, taking breaks together or sharing meals, or as profound as sacrificing one’s convenience, possessions, or priorities in order to help another in times of need or crisis. In business, it could also mean recourse to arbitration procedures brokered by third parties, such as elders, in order to find a win-win solution and avoid lengthy and expensive litigation (Sison and Palma-Reyes 1997, 1520). Thus, it is not only a mechanism for conflict avoidance, but also for conflict resolution (Rungduin 2014).

### ***Bayanihan***

The most common image that depicts *Bayanihan* is that of a house being lifted and transferred to another location by volunteers. This image is both metaphorical and literal. Literal because in many rural villages, this is how people move their houses. Metaphorical because the essence of *Bayanihan* is to work together to make sure the project will get done. In modern-day setting, this could be construction or maintenance of irrigation canals, harvesting or planting, livelihood projects, or community chores. Such activities bring together people from all walks of life – everyone is doing their part, no matter how big or small. Those who are physically able can carry loads, others can provide refreshments, some are entertainers, etc. *Bayanihan* also involves taking turns so others can rest. Today, it is widely practiced both in its original model – house

moving, and in many voluntary and civic projects. It need not be community directed project as it may involve business sector or non-government organizations.

While *Pakikisama* happens in daily interaction, *Bayaniban* is aimed at a specific project – its fast and efficient completion through self-help and cooperation. This cooperation may be solicited or voluntarily given, but in either case no remuneration is promised except perhaps, that the whole undertaking is accompanied by a festive atmosphere through sharing of food and drinks, jokes, stories, and music. Like carrying a house, *Bayaniban* projects usually involve manual labor. The idea is to unite people in a common task because what cannot be done by a single individual is accomplished by the group. To practice *Bayaniban*, donation of money is not enough. The participant must at least be physically present, for *Bayaniban* is about sharing one's time, labor and talent.

### ***Pakikiramdam***

This refers to an interpersonal skill that manifests Filipinos' heightened sensitivity that helps them navigate social dealings in a culture where not everything is expressed in words, or expressed directly. It is described by Filipino psychologists as an “emotional a-priori” that involves sensitivity to non-linguistic. Darwin and Teresita Rungduin (2013, 19) state that *Pakikiramdam* has both affective and cognitive domains since it involves “sensing the situation, including the feelings and thoughts of others and anticipation of action” in order to determine the appropriate way of interaction.

Of all FV, *Pakikiramdam* is probably the one most frustrating to many foreigners. In relating with strangers, Filipinos often pass a stage of *Pakikiramdam* or *sensing* each other. In stark contrast to the frankness or straight talk common among Americans, Filipinos have the tendencies to beat around the bush, use euphemism, engage in small talk, and use indirect expression or passive rather active voice. The interplay of verbal and non-verbal cues can cause bewilderment or confusion to non-Filipinos. Fluency in English or even in one of the Philippine languages may not be enough to comprehend whether a Filipino is agreeing or disagreeing.

Reyes (2015b) compares *Pakikiramdam* with Aristotle's prudence, but with qualified difference. Unlike prudence, *Pakikiramdam* is directed toward the *Loob* of the *Kapwa* and has both rational and emotional content. *Pakikiramdam* is a relational virtue, it is a kind of “shared feeling or shared inner perception” (Reyes 2015a, 149). It is a combination of empathy and emotional intelligence – to feel and understand the *Loob* of the other (*Kapwa*), which cannot be known directly. Like other virtues it is a skill that can be developed with time, careful attention, and deliberation through socialization and constant interaction. *Pakikiramdam* is needed when relating to someone who is still a stranger. Between friends or when there is intimacy, *Pakikiramdam* happens spontaneously.

In the workplace, *Pakikiramdam* has several implications. Unlike American familiarity where bonding is quickly established with shake of hands, managers should take the extra mile to get along and know their workers as individuals as well as their personal circumstances.

Constant presence of the management on the shop floor and daily discourse are important to establish good rapport. Oftentimes managers only talk to their employees when there is a problem or to discipline them. While Filipino employees do not want to be ignored, direct communication or being straight to the point does not always work. Managers must try to avoid anything that can cause negative emotion even if they are not obvious, for negative emotions in the workplace make it difficult for Filipinos to become productive and concentrate in their work. On the other hand, positive feelings encourage effective work habits (Rungduin 2014, 96). This does not mean that management cannot give any negative criticism if it is necessary, but it should always be accompanied by positive feedbacks and reinforcements. Face to face interaction should be preferred over emails and memos. If possible, managers should facilitate training and development workshops, rather than rely on external consultants, in order to foster trust and credibility. Because it takes time to truly get to know the *Loob*, companies should discourage frequent transfers of managers.

### ***Malasakit***

This is the virtue of selfless concern for other's well being though caring, emotional involvement, compassion, and commitment without demanding anything in return. To be a perfect virtue, it needs to be related to other virtues like *Pakikisama* or *Pakikiramdam*. Like *Pakikiramdam*, it has an affective element, it means being able to feel the pain of the other as a result of misfortune, or as an outcome of your own wrongful behavior. Thus, *Malasakit* is often translated as emphatic caring. Although *Malasakit* comes during times of tragedies, it is also practiced in daily activities. It is all about alleviating pain, even if no successful solution is found to a problem. Unlike *Pakikisama*, *Malasakit* does not involve reciprocity and it can be directed to non-persons (institutions or physical objects) and even to strangers and enemies. It is a virtue that is shown to anyone, including those who do not deserve our caring, and even to those who do not ask to be cared for or be helped. Still *Malasakit* is *Kapwa*-oriented like other virtues because the idea is to treat the other the way you would like to be treated, or to treat the possession of the other as if it were your own possession.

*Malasakit* effects a sense of ownership among workers. Workers who have *Malasakit* to company properties will care for them the way they care for their own personal belongings. So, if you do not want to willfully destroy your personal property that is the product of your own sweat, you do the same to company properties. Co-workers are treated as if they were family members, clients are regarded as friends. This will minimize or eliminate discrimination, sexual harassment, office bullying and other harmful and counterproductive behaviors. With *Malasakit*, workers will go extra mile to satisfy clients and customers and will avoid wasteful or irresponsible use of company resources. They will not only relate with each other as family members do, they will also treat the office as their own home where they live and grow together as persons, not simply a place to work from 8 to 5.

### **Utang na Loob**

Rungduin et al. (2016) explain that *Utang na Loob* has a multi-layered meaning as it connotes reciprocity, gratitude, acknowledgement, and appreciation that may be given to the giver who may be a person, an organization, or a country, and extended to those who are close to the giver. Examples of instances that generate *Utang na Loob* are: borrowing money, receiving food or help during times of needs or calamities, asking help in harvesting rice, looking after one's children, or being helped in finding job. But because the "debt" (*utang*) is from within (*Loob*), it is not debt in the sense of expecting to get the equivalent of the good deeds done or the material thing given. What is owed is intangible and thus cannot be repaid by material things, i.e. it is understood to be non-repayable. "The magnitude of the feeling of indebtedness depends on the gravity of needfulness of the person" (Agaton 2017, 63) and not on the worth of what is given. The key concept here is not the word *utang* (debt) but *Loob*, what is owed is not money but goodwill. There is an implicit expectation in the consciousness of the receiver that the act of goodness will be returned, but at the same time she knows that such act cannot be paid equally or fully. *Utang na Loob* is both conditional and unconditional (Rungduin 2016, 14).

*Utang na Loob* is often misunderstood as a kind of unwritten contract for mutual advantage (*quid pro quo*). In his study, Reyes clarifies that it is not a commercial transaction because the sense of obligation is "self-imposed" rather than a result of external pressure. A demanded *Utang na Loob* is not a virtue. Just like other virtues, it emanates from within (*Loob*) and must be expressed freely out of goodwill. It is a virtue of the receiver, not the giver. The goodness that is done to a person should bring out the goodness of the *Loob* of that person. When one gives, there should be no strings attached, otherwise it rules out *Utang na Loob*, and the giving and receiving becomes a mere commerce rather than a virtuous interaction.

*Utang na Loob* often signifies an ever present sense of obligation because it creates a cycle of return of favor since the act of gratitude creates the return of kindness that creates a sense of indebtedness on the original giver, who is now the recipient of the act of kindness. This is due to the fact that what is owed is immaterial so no amount of money can fully repay it, not because the giver is always expecting something in return. "By no means does utang-na-loob indicate that all favors thus invoked must be granted; a diplomatic, sincere, and honest explanation may be used to convey non-compliance with a request." (Mina 2015, 21) Not every good act generates *Utang na Loob*. A good act that is done with ulterior motive, or for the sake of profit, or when a person is being paid or benefiting for doing a service does not merit *Utang na Loob*. "In effect, it is understood that *utang na loob* is a communal trait that is seen between those who helped and those who were helped." (Rungduin et al. 2016, 22) The goal of *Utang na Loob* is to strengthen *Kapwa* relationship, not the repayment of favor per se. It is not "merely a debt to be repaid to a good or kind deed previously done by someone. It is a priori being responsible to someone in the name of human solidarity." (Lanaria 2013, 249) For Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino (2000) a better rendering of *Utang na Loob* in English is solidarity because it ultimately strengthens the bond

that ties Filipinos to their family, community, or country. *Utang na Loob* is a way of recognizing our dependence on others to live a fulfilling life.

This virtue has broad manifestations in organization. It creates relations between different groups or bridges social classes, as well as serves to redistribute/balance resources and workload (Lorenzana 2015, 9). The gender, age or social status of the giver is irrelevant. A network of people is necessary for the attainment of all goals, particularly in business. *Utang na Loob* promotes an expanding and self-sustaining solidarity that encourages workers to share and help whoever is in need. In addition to strengthening contractual obligations, *Utang na Loob* goes beyond contractual reciprocity or professional engagement as it adds emotional and personal dimension to the latter. On the other hand, *Utang na Loob* may be an occasion for conflict of interest as employees might feel obligated to return favors to clients and suppliers at the expense of the firm's interest. But this should not be the case. *Utang na Loob* is both a social norm and a communal trait that includes responsibility for the common good. "A collaborative expectation of people does not necessarily consider the benefactor to receive expected terms of repayment but rather, prosocial behavior as part of the community is much anticipated from the beneficiary." (Rungduin et al. 2016, 22) Finally, when employees are promoted or given salary increases, management should emphasize that these are based on merit and company productivity, and not a kind of gifts that employees must repay with *Utang na Loob*.

### **Family orientation**

Nothing is more important to Filipinos than the family – no other institution in the Philippines commands as much commitment, sacrifice and affection as does the family. The family is not only the basic unit of Philippine society, it is also the primary socializing force. It is in the family that the Filipino individual is born and grows into a mature adult. Major decisions are made in consultation with family members. Young Filipinos choose the career that is favored by their family as parents are expected to finance the education of their children until college or graduate studies. Unlike other Western cultures where children are pushed to early autonomy, independence is not a matter of urgency in the Philippine culture. In some cases, this is not an issue at all. Children are not expected to leave the family home, fend for themselves and find their own place in the world. Instead, most of them help in the farm or family business and at times, contribute to the education of their younger siblings, and continue to live with their parents until marriage or even when they have families of their own. In many cases, Filipino households are multi-generational. Family orientation has a strong influence in business organizations in the Philippines where family corporations are plenty and are very successful. The pervasiveness of family also underscores the constitution of Philippine political dynasties, "even religious organizations are not saved from the encroachment of family interests" (Ramirez 1984, 43).

Sociologists tend to focus on the "close" term in the expression *close family ties* that is commonly used to describe Asian families. The Filipino family, however is not "close knit" in the

sense of being rigid and exclusive. While parenting is mostly done by parents, responsibility is often shared by other relatives and even by the eldest sibling. Family roles and relationships are negotiated rather than fixed. The head of the household could be the parents, grandparents, or one of the siblings. Filipino family is characterized by diffusiveness and non-specificity of relationships. Filipinos tend to use the term family (*mag-anak*) ambiguously as it refers to a “system of reckoning relationships among members of the group either by blood (consanguineal), by affinity (in-law) or by *compadrazgo* (ritual).” (Jocano 1997, 90) When this relationship is established, one is accepted as *kapamilya/hindi ibang tao* or *one of us*. Not to be a family member is to be *ibang tao* i.e. outside the group or *not one of us*, something like a stranger. In addition to one’s immediate and distant relatives – the family network extends to include relationships created through social alliances like weddings or baptisms. Relationships are not exclusively consanguineal but multilinear and intertwined: your uncle could also be your godfather in baptism, and this will make the latter both a brother and *compadre* of your father. Even long-time family friends are addressed as uncles or aunts both as a sign of respect and acceptance to the family circle.

While family orientation can be considered a value (a conception of what is good or object of intentional feelings) we can also consider it as a virtue in the Philippine context as it requires specific behavioral patterns or dispositions. “It provides the people with a uniform and specific frame of references for their actions. Through recognized relationships, as indicated by kinship terminologies, they know what behaviors are appropriate or inappropriate for what kind of interactions; what social etiquette is necessary and what to disregard” (Jocano 1997, 92). What is essential in virtue ethics is the cultivation of character. In the Filipino context, this cultivation takes place in the family. To recognize someone as a family member is to treat that person in a certain way. Respect for the elderly is expressed by placing their hands in one’s forehead, using *po* and *opo*, and showing *Malasakit* when they are old. Family members should be willing to make personal sacrifices for each other and through this, the virtue of *Pakikisama* is harnessed. “In small barrios, or within a family setting, *Hiya* forces a web of self-censure which ranges from the maintenance of family harmony to the prevention of acts of violence.” As parents exert their best efforts to raise and educate their children to give them a better life, the latter manifests *Utang na Loob*, which serves to further strengthen the binding relationships of love, loyalty, and *Pakikisama*. Children are expected to take care of their aging parents when they are already grown up. Thus sending parents to home care is not common in the Philippines because to do so by their children is not to have *Utang na Loob*.

Cultivation of virtues in the family is both deliberate – through oral instructions and systems of reward and punishment, or indirect i.e. through examples and daily interaction. Through the widely accepted practice of extended family and the mechanism of seniority where older members have greater authority and command respect and obedience from younger members, virtues are handed down from generation to generation. Those who show these virtues are admired and emulated as being “good people” by other family members, and this in turn, reinforces such

behaviors for the following generations. Character is cultivated by acquiring these traits, and since these traits have something to do with family dynamics, these are relational and interactive. Family relationship becomes the reference point in gauging the exercise of these virtues. “As he begins to participate in the adult world, the child learns further that he can engage in harmonious relations with other members of the community through the reckoning of kinship ties which exist between them.” (Jocano 1997, 117) Eventually these traits are internalized and become a stable part of one’s *Loob*.

In the Filipino context, to treat the other virtuously is to treat them as if they were part of family. This is how the other becomes *Kapwa*. The common expression is *hindi iba* (not a stranger). The family is not only the setting where virtues are cultivated but the reference point as well or the measure of excellence in practicing them. It is in the family that Filipinos learn the value and significance of human relationships, it is here where they grasp the deep meaning of *Kapwa*.<sup>2</sup> Much has been said already about the self-construal of Asian cultures, i.e. self is collective. For Filipinos, self-identity is construed in reference to belonging or being a part of a family. Philippine family functions “in a complex process of a natural support system of reciprocity and mutual caring to which the individual’s concept of self is strongly subsumed.” (Sanchez and Gaw 2017, 812) To be a *Kapwa*, i.e. to treat the other the way you like to be treated, is no different from treating the other as if she were a member of your family.

### **Hiya**

Filipino philosophers often disagree about the essence of this virtue and whether it is a virtue at all. *Hiya* is commonly translated as shame, sense of inferiority, modesty, or sense of propriety. It is often depicted as a kind of inhibition or fear of making mistakes or losing face in public as a result of having a low sense of worthiness or self-esteem. It inhibits competitiveness and arrests one’s actions (Sanchez and Gaw 2007, 812) that may result in withdrawal behavior. Because of *Hiya*, one is hesitant to express her views to avoid being laughed at or embarrassed. Some describe *Hiya* as deference to authority, a kind of feeling when one is face to face with someone of greater authority or importance. Bulatao (1992) explains that *Hiya* is a painful emotion felt during occasions perceived to be dangerous to one’s ego: e.g. when one is unable to pay debt, fulfill promise / obligation, or unable to live up to others’ expectations.

The distinction made by Reyes (2016) between passive and active meanings of *Hiya* is helpful in understanding it as a virtue. Although these two are not mutually exclusive, misinterpretation happens when they are confused and conflated. As passion, *Hiya* is a negative and passive emotion that is felt when one is in an uncompromising situation or has done a socially unacceptable action. Because of this *Hiya*, Filipinos will spend money or extend help or hospitality to visitors although they do not have enough, even to the extent of borrowing money just to avoid the negative feeling. But in an active sense *Hiya* involves skills for not offending anybody. As a virtue *Hiya* is not passion or an affective state. Reyes offers two definitions of the virtue of *Hiya*, one particular

“a virtue of a person that prevents other people from suffering” (2016, 76) and a more general one: “a virtue of a person that controls individual wants for the welfare of the other person.” (77)

To understand *Hiya* as a virtue, Reyes compares it to the virtue of temperance (*temperantia*) of Thomas Aquinas, a way of controlling one’s inclination or impulses. Temperance “involves a habitual self-control and restraint, especially when it comes to natural bodily desires of food, drink and sex.” (Reyes 2016, 67) While close to temperance, what makes *Hiya* different is that like other FV, it is relational. *Hiya* is about showing consideration, its “temperance towards others” to promote their welfare, rather than merely temperance to achieve mastery of oneself. Not to have *Hiya* is to be inconsiderate to others, to think only of oneself or one’s benefits, and to satisfy only one’s own needs or desire without consideration for the needs of others, e.g. eating all food in the table and not leaving something for others. Like temperance, *Hiya* plays a central role in the exercise of other FV. Recall that for Aristotle, virtues can turn into vices because they both belong to the same continuum. Excellence in action lies in a choice lying in the mean relative to a situation as determined by practical wisdom. *Hiya* is a kind of self-censure to avoid overacting or inaction. Without moderation, *Pakikisama* can turn into group thinking and submissiveness, familism into nepotism, and *Bayaniban* into passionate but short-lived commitments. Excess of *Utang na Loob* can compromise one’s judgment that may lead to corruption or bribery.<sup>3</sup> *Pakikiramdam* and *Malasakit* are often misinterpreted as “innate aversion to rational structures.” When too much, they degenerate into sentimentalism and subjectivism exhibited in popular culture in the form of TV melodramas and romantic ballads. While this is self-evident among Filipinos, perhaps the lack of appropriate terms in the Filipino language to express excess or defect of these virtues makes it hard to conceptualize or identify with precision their moderateness. *Hiya* involves a kind of empathy, to feel how others would feel in the same situation. “In general, the virtue of *hiya* is a quality of one’s *Loob* that makes him control or sacrifice an individual desire for the sake of the *Kapwa*’s welfare. ... To be called *walang hiya* (without *hiya*) means that you are only thinking of yourself, of how to satisfy your impulses and desires, even at the cost of your *Kapwa*.” (Reyes 2016, 165) With *Hiya*, one tempers his desire to act, express his views, or say what he means in order not to offend or hurt *Kapwa*. It requires placing oneself in the shoes of the other and assessing what is the appropriate manner of acting or feeling from that vantage point, in consideration of time, context, and situation.

### **Filipino virtues and meaningful work**

To provide Filipinos with MW, managers must recognize that they have particular needs and desires that must be met (Abud et al. 2018; Lamoya et al. 2015; Angeles et al. 2015). “Many individual moral dilemmas that arise within business ethics can best be understood as arising from a tension between the type of person we seek to be and the type of person business expects us to be.” (Hartman et al. 2018, 87) Filipino workers’ needs are other-oriented (Lamoya et al 2015; Ilagan 2014). Among other things, they want “belongingness and perceived family, opportunities

for growth and development, being challenged by task and opportunities to meet other people” (Rungduin 2014, 89). Consistent with many studies on the topic, MW for many Filipinos is not simply about collecting paycheck. For them, “coworker relations is an integral part of how they view their job.” (Ilagan 2014, 137) Professional relations are embedded in personal relation while economic transaction is personalized. Meaningful relationships in the workplace – the quality of relationship with co-workers and the sense of belonging to an organization – is important (Ilagan 2014, 122). Filipinos rate career related needs as low in importance, this implies that many Filipino workers will sacrifice a challenging career for the sake of family or personal relationship. This is not to say that designing work to be interesting and challenging is unimportant. But in providing Filipinos with MW, positive co-worker relationship is as important as the nature or complexity of job tasks. Even in the issue of employee loyalty, Filipinos tend to be loyal workers because they want to preserve personal relationships that are created in the workplace. On the other hand, negative relationship in the workplace is the strongest source of dissatisfaction and turn-over, especially in relation to perceived unfairness, neglect or failure to understand the personal circumstances of employees, conflict with colleagues, and berating or shaming employees in public (Rungduin 2014). Promoting MW is more than practicing justice and fairness. For Filipino workers, fairness is expressed and felt through harmonious relationship (Rungduin 2014).

Understanding Filipino culture and getting to know the defining characteristics of Filipinos and their ethical system is important, especially for foreign managers and entrepreneurs who want to do business in the Philippines or who work with Filipinos abroad. FV are *Kapwa*-oriented, which means that they are about relationality and reciprocity. Filipinos expect everyone, even foreigners to treat them in accordance with these virtues. Even if Filipinos understand that people of different cultures do not have high regard for these virtues, they will feel hurt or offended if they are treated otherwise. FV set the standards of human behavior per se and shape Filipino social interaction, especially in the workplace where they spend most of their waking hours. For most Filipinos, foreigners who speak frankly are blunt, those who are too forward or overconfident have no *Hiya*, and the lack of *Pakikisama* is a defect in character. To gain respect from Filipinos, managers whether foreigners or not must show *Malasakit* to their employees. This means caring for them personally, not to treat them as mere instrument of production.

Promoting MW also has positive benefits to businesses in the Philippines, for “organizational support is believed to be influenced by relationships employees have in their organizations.” (Rungduin 2014, 94) Studies done on effective management in the Philippines indicate that successful firms are those that have formed effective relationships, not only with customers but also with employees, suppliers and dealers (Angeles et al. 2015; Lamoya et al. 2015; Gupta and Kleiner 2001). More than competent and visionary leadership, quality of relationship, especially between managers and subordinates, is very significant in achieving team effectiveness among Filipinos. “Rather than just being able to work together, Filipinos place a premium on

being able to exchange personal experiences and stories” (Alafriz et al. 2014, 118). FV can create better interaction in the company and minimize tensions and interpersonal conflicts that interfere with the operation of the company or its overall growth and productivity. They are indispensable moral guides for building and cultivating personal relationships (Lorenzana 2015, 10). A Filipino who experiences MW is a highly participative and engaged worker. FV create the type of workers who will provide the most return on investment to the company, they “mold workers to become more competent in terms of their knowledge, skills and attitude” (Adanza 2014, 3). Knowing what makes work meaningful for Filipinos will also enable managers to align company goals and priorities with employees’ vision of a good life, and develop effective and culturally sensitive human resource management strategies. Further, since virtues involve skills, FV that enhance interpersonal skills and empathy are very relevant in service-oriented professions in health care, hotel and restaurant industry, communications, education, public relations and public service. *Kapwa* orientation is said to be the root of Filipino hospitality that is very important in the travel and tourism sector.

Currently, managerial focus to create MW is task or skill oriented i.e. elimination of monotonous jobs, job enrichment, job rotation or by improving job-fit. These may be necessary but not sufficient as Filipino workers are more relationship than task-oriented (Alafriz et al. 2014). According to Prof. Franco of Ateneo University (2010) “it is still possible that employees will find meaning in their work even in the most tiresome or monotonous one, provided that workers are given opportunities for friendships and camaraderie.” Many believe that workplace relationship is something that grows naturally over time. On the contrary, like other personal relationships, those in the workplace are never instantly or instantaneously established, they develop gradually and progressively. FV provide ways to cultivate and nurture workplace relationship. Since virtues involve practice, they can be developed and cultivated. Aristotle points out that there is a kind of loop between virtues and human behavior. Virtues promote and improve human behavior but as human behavior improves, these virtues are also enhanced and developed. We acquire virtues through practice and the more we practice them, the more we become the kind of person who exhibits these virtues. Once FV are cultivated in the workplace, a corporate culture is built that reinforces these virtues.

Rather than through institutional or formal mechanisms, the most effective way for management to cultivate FV among workers to improve interpersonal relationship is by giving the right example. In virtue theory, role modeling is important. “The motivational theory of role modeling asserts that an organization, company or society for that matter can achieve bigger and greater value if the leaders running it are exemplary individuals commendable enough to be imitated from among the subordinates.” (Agaton 2017, 64) Part of *Hiya* as passion is showing high regard and deference to one’s superior. Thus, business leaders in the Philippines enjoy great respect, influence, and adulation. Consciously or not, they are always leading by example. Out of *Hiya* Filipino follows a leader who is willing to walk the talk.

The first step is for management to learn the dynamics of FV, and this is best done through personal interaction with Filipinos. As mentioned, Filipinos build relationships by passing through a stage of *Pakikiramdam* that takes time until a sense of trust and intimacy is established between parties. Communication must involve deep listening and mutual sharing while giving careful attention to non-verbal cues like eye contact, facial expression, hand gestures, body language, pauses, and voice intonation in order to avoid any potential source of friction. The goal is to explore similarities, connections, common interests, and shared understanding of each other (*Kapwa*) that will give access to each other's *Loob*. Until the interaction approaches this level, resort to intermediary or go-between – a common acquaintance who is known and trusted by both parties is sometimes employed. Filipinos tend to complain less and are reluctant to say no or refuse (most of them would rather say they will think about it), expecting instead the interlocutor to be sensitive enough to intuitively grasp what they actually feel. This is also their way of expressing that they are flexible and are willing to compromise. Thus, communication should be open and continuous, but a deadline for making final decision must be set. Managers must be patient in encouraging Filipinos to express themselves and pay careful attention when they convey job dissatisfaction. Since most Filipinos are non-confrontational, they will just endure the problem or vent it out on social media or co-workers (Rungduin 2014). When they decide to take the active approach, it means that the problem has worsened.

Once positive bonding is established in the workplace through *Pakikiramdam*, it leads to *Pakikisama*, which exerts a strong influence in Philippine work culture that makes it personalist, consensual and collectivist rather than impersonal, competitive and individualist. Respect of worker's autonomy should be counterbalanced with efforts to foster teambuilding and solidarity. Organizing workers into smaller units would foster better interaction and cooperation that would minimize anonymity. Working as a team encourages constant communication, collaboration, interdependence, and mutual respect and understanding. Individual rewards are important in terms of promotion or salary increases, but managers must not forget the importance of promoting teamwork and linking rewards with group/department/overall company performance as well. Studies indicate that generally, human resource practices adopted in collectivist cultures in Asian countries such as stock ownership plans, flexible job boundaries, lower overall pay dispersion, internal recruiting, assignment of targets to departments rather than individuals, scheduling of general assembly meetings, seniority system and consideration of *soft skills* in employee evaluation and promotion work well in managing Filipino workforce.

Stakeholders throughout the organization are guided to a large extent by the “tone at the top.” Managers have a very influential role in shaping the firm's culture. There are several ways by which managers can incorporate FV in the corporate culture. *Bayanihan* can be promoted through corporate outreach programs and community involvement. Rather than just setting up disaster funds, it is better to harness *Bayanihan* in the company by organizing relief operations to help members of the community who are victimized by natural calamities,

which are quite often in the Philippines being a tropical country. This will also manifest that the company has the virtue of *Malasakit*, and further enhance this virtue to its employees. Because of *Hiya*, “Filipino is extremely sensitive to any kind of personal affront such as being criticized publicly, shouted at, berated, derided, humiliated, or any form of adverse confrontation.” (Mulzac 2007, 84) Once embarrassed, they will be reluctant to express their mind, ask relevant questions, or participate in group discussions. Employee evaluation should be constructive and given in a personal, discreet and informal manner rather than direct and confrontational. Darwin and Teresita Rungduin observe that (2013, 29) when an offensive behavior is done against them, most Filipino workers take it at the emotional level rather than assert and assess their self objectively. Management needs to emphasize to them that even in healthy families, conflicts occur. If something unfair happens to them in the workplace, the company has a formal, transparent, and procedural grievance mechanism that they can use to resolve the issue and prevent it from escalating.

Supporting one’s family is the major reason why many people work, not just Filipinos. If money is the number one extrinsic motivator, this is only because Filipinos use their salaries to provide for the maintenance and education of their children and extended family. Filipinos prefer to spend on their families before themselves (Ilagan 2014). Many Filipino workers are married and have children, single lifestyle is not culturally valued. Family motivation also enhances energy when intrinsic motivation for work is low. In addition, family provides strong support system to many workers that help them cope with and withstand emotional problems and tensions they experience in the workplace.

The first way to implement the virtue of family orientation is through work-life balance. Work-life balance is defined as “any relationships between dimensions of the person’s work life and the person’s personal life.” (Edralin 2012, 202) It is “the satisfaction and good functioning at work and at home with a minimum of role conflict.” There are several possible ways that work-life balance can influence MW. (1) Spillover phenomenon where problems at home affect work performance. (2) Relationships at work extend outside the workplace and become personal relationships too. (3) Non-compartmentalization in our search for meaning – pursuit of MW is part of the general pursuit of meaningful life. Work-life balance is a growing concern today especially that in most families both husband and wife have careers, it becomes very challenging to simultaneously fulfill work responsibilities and responsibilities at home – which include not only taking care of the children but also of elderly dependents. Family problems may have negative spillover in the workplace in terms of tardiness or absenteeism, not being fully functional or being in a bad mood. Some workers quit their job or find jobs near their home to spend more time with their families. For Filipinos, company loyalty is only second to family.

The fear that putting family first is harmful to organizational productivity is unfounded. On the contrary, work-family conflict lowers job satisfaction and increases turnover intentions. Family support is needed in order for workers to cope when conflict between work and family demands arises. The challenge for management is to see to it that personal and corporate goals,

interpersonal and professional relationships, are closely aligned, rather than in conflict. This will motivate employees to work harder. Direct involvement of managers in personal problems of their workers may not always be advisable, but they can offer compensation package that addresses their family-related needs, in addition to decent salaries. In their study Kim and Ryu (2017) find that Filipinos prefer compensatory time-off, child care policy, health care, life insurance, paid sick leave, and job security. The last is very important for Filipinos. Because of *Utang na Loob*, they tend to exhibit employment loyalty. However, many workers who support large families live from one paycheck to another. For Filipinos, providing for siblings and aging parents is not a burden but an opportunity to practice *Utang na Loob*. The mere thought of losing their jobs can cause them anxiety. We can also add here housing benefits, family medical leave, educational benefits for children, and flexible work schedule. Filipinos like to work overtime because it is a significant source of extra income, but it is also important to get time-off/reduced hours during traditional festivities in order to celebrate them with families. Excessive time demands that require working on weekends should be eliminated or minimized.

The second way to implement family orientation is to develop a family culture in the company. Indeed, many Filipinos consider the business organization they work with as their second family (Angeles et al. 2015). Their social environment affects their perception of their work environment (Rungduin 2014, 90). The firm is a social union rather than a mere instrument. It is not simply a place to work but a venue where workers know each other, grow together and develop their potentials. Filipinos love to be treated like family members. They also expect to find social and emotional support in the workplace, especially during difficult times. Like the parent-image in the family, business leaders are supposed to be nurturing and firm, able to show *Pakikisama* and *Malasakit* and at the same time, capable of disciplining members who are stubbornly self-centered and uncooperative. Management should welcome employees when they share family concerns at work. While they are not expected to solve personal problems of their employees, the mere act of listening, coupled with comforting words and expression of empathy is already an example of *Malasakit* of managers that employees will deeply appreciate. Family culture may imply a paternalistic style of management but it does not necessarily mean micromanagement or tight control (Selmer and Corrina 2001, 138). Out of *Pakikisama* Filipino workers can take initiative. *Utang na Loob* motivates them to honor their obligations while *Malasakit* discourages unproductive behavior in the office.

There are other ways management can develop family culture in the firm. As *Pakikisama* Filipinos like to talk and share and they rarely eat alone. Shared spaces where workers can interact should be maximized. While participative management is encouraged, Filipinos show preference “to participate in institution-related tasks that are not part of their regular workload” so that they can spend more time with their colleagues (Rungduin 2014, 94). This can be done through company celebrations, employee recognition ceremonies, sports fest, civic activities and annual retreats. It is good to involve family members in these activities to strengthen the ties among the families of

employees. *Bayaniban* can also be enhanced by encouraging voluntarism in organizing these events. In addition, managers are usually invited to be godparents in baptism or confirmation or wedding sponsors (especially when co-workers are married to each other), making work relationships become part of employees' kinship system through the *compadrazgo* practice. Overtime, an authentic family culture is created that is expansive and inclusive as it extends outside the workplace. The result is that just like the family, the company becomes a significant unit of the community it serves.

## **Conclusion**

FV have both strengths and weaknesses. Managers can use these virtues to motivate Filipinos in executing company principles, vision and mission and in the process, provide them with meaningful employment and harness their potentials. At the same time, they should avoid their pitfalls by paying attention to their excesses. The challenge is for managers to acquire the practical wisdom needed to find the right balance, and according to Aristotle, this comes through theoretical learning coupled with hands-on experience. They must not lose sight of the concept of *Kapwa* and direct these virtues toward their telos, which is the well-being of the company and the unity of everyone's *Loob*. Outside this context, unless they are *Kapwa* oriented, they lose their essence as virtues and may even turn into vices.

What we accomplish in this essay is to develop a Filipino virtue-ethics framework that defines what is MW, explains why it is important, and contains some examples of concrete measures that management can utilize to promote MW. This research is not exhaustive. Empirical studies are needed across industries that measure the presence of these virtues in Philippine companies so that the paradigm we develop can be fully operationalized.

## **Endnotes:**

1. Filipino writers struggle to find equivalent English concepts for these terms. Following Philippine scholars, I use terms that are derived from Tagalog – the basis of the Filipino national language. Among many linguistic subgroups in the Philippines, Tagalog is the dominant economically, politically and culturally. Different ethnic groups in the country have their own indigenous rendering of these concepts. Language itself is a carrier of meanings and that the literal translation does not fully capture the nuances of the Filipino terms. They lose their actual cultural and behavioral meanings when translated (Rungduin 2014; Rungduin et al. 2013). Thus, I will consistently use Tagalog words after giving a rough literal translation in English the first time they appear in this essay.
2. This is not to say that the Filipino family is perfect. Like other institutions it is subject to human frailties, imperfections and external treats (economic, technological, global influences). But since for majority of Filipinos, the family is the most dependable psychological support system and the only institution to rely on in the absence of social safety nets usually provided by the government like adequate retirement benefits, unemployment insurance, institutional care for elders, universal health care, and affordable education, the Filipino family manages to be both resistant and resilient in the face of challenges, and when necessary, makes concessions and compromises to remain the bedrock of Philippine society.
3. An essential component of *Utang na Loob* is the concept of golden mean or moderation. Not

having it, one becomes ungrateful – a moral defect. Excessive *Utang na Loob* however, becomes a kind of blind loyalty or obedience in order to return a favor. In fact, most Filipinos will not accept favor or help in order to avoid having *Utang na Loob*. The implicit understanding is that it should not be overused or abused. To demand *Utang na Loob* is looked down, it is a manifestation of being shameless or no *Hiya* because it is taking advantage of people who are in need.

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# The Alliance Between Demea and Philo in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract:

David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* is concerned with whether God's nature can be known by us. When the dialogue begins, two of the speakers, Demea, who professes Mysticism, and Philo, a sceptical philosopher, maintain their agreement regarding the unknowability of the divine nature. The third speaker, Cleanthes, an empiricist philosopher, insists that, through the Argument from Design, we can establish that God possesses an intelligence which resembles human intelligence. This paper focuses on whether Demea and Philo maintain their alliance regarding the unknowability of God's nature throughout the discussion. This constitutes a departure from traditional scholarship on the *Dialogues*, as much of the literature focuses on the views of Cleanthes and Philo, rather than on Demea and Philo.

**Keywords:** the Argument from Design; divine attributes; mysticism; scepticism

Scholarship on David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* typically concentrates on the exchange between Cleanthes and Philo. With the exception of Part 9, in which Demea presents his *a priori* Cosmological – Ontological Proof of God's necessary existence, little is usually made of Demea's contribution to the discussion, and to the exchange of views between Demea and Philo. Demea characterizes himself as a mystic – a believer in God who holds that nothing can be known about the divine nature. He regards God as “adorably mysterious” (D. 110). According to Demea, we can love God, pray to God, but the divine nature will always remain a mystery to us. Philo is regarded by the narrator, Pamphilus, as a “careless sceptic”, and he is often referred to by Cleanthes (the empiricist philosopher in the dialogue) as a “Pyrrhonian” or “extreme sceptic”. I begin my study by inquiring into Demea's views regarding the unknowability of the divine nature. Following this, I will turn to Philo's view on this topic, specifically, to determine whether Philo holds the same view as Demea on this topic.

A review of the *Dialogues* reveals at least 21 passages in which Demea is either spoken about, or speaks. Relevant pages regarding this point include page 96; 97; 107; 109; 110; 120; 122-123; 133; 138; 139; 140; 143; 148; 152; 153; 154; 156; 157-158; 170; and 171. Demea gives the fullest account

of his position in the opening paragraphs of Part 2. As noted above, he regards himself as a mystic, and emphasizes the adorable mysteriousness of the divine nature.

I must own, Cleanthes, said Demea, that nothing can more surprise me, than the light in which you have all along, put this argument. By the whole tenor of your discourse, one would imagine that you were maintaining the being of a God, against the cavils of atheists and infidels; and were necessitated to become a champion for that fundamental principle of all religion. But this, I hope, is not by any means, a question among us. No man; no man, at least, of common sense, I am persuaded, ever entertained a serious doubt with regard to a truth so certain and self-evident. The question is not concerning the Being, but the nature of God. This, I affirm, from the infirmities of human understanding, to be altogether incomprehensible and unknown to us. The essence of that supreme mind, his attributes, the manner of his existence, the very nature of his duration; these and every particular, which regards so divine a being, are mysterious to men. Finite, weak, and blind creatures, we ought to humble ourselves in his august presence, and, conscious of our frailties, adore in silence his infinite perfections, which eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive them. They are covered in a deep cloud from human curiosity: It is profaneness to attempt penetrating through these sacred obscurities: And next to the impiety of denying his existence, is the temerity of prying into his nature and essence, decrees and attributes. (D. 107)

In the second paragraph in Part 2, he emphasizes that his view is that of almost all divines. Belief in God for Demea involves an unshakable commitment to the proposition that God exists; however, he is equally adamant that God's nature is unknowable, given the "infirmities of human understanding" (D.107).

Immediately following Demea's views on the knowability of God's existence and of the unknowability of God's nature, Philo - in paragraphs 3 and 4 of Part 2 - expresses agreement with Demea's position. The only difference between Demea's mode of expression and Philo's is to be found in the fact that Philo offers a philosophic defense of his position, whereas Demea's position represents the mystic's approach to language about God. Regarding the self-evidence of the existence of God, Philo utilizes the Causal Principle, and argues:

But surely, where reasonable men treat these subjects, the question can never be concerning the *being* but only the *nature* of the Deity. The former truth, as you will observe, is unquestionable and self-evident. Nothing exists without a cause, and the original cause of this universe (whatever it be) we call GOD; and piously ascribe to him every species of perfection. (D. 108)

And on the topic of the unknowability of God's nature, his early argument employs Hume's doctrine found in the *Treatise* and *First Enquiry*, namely, that without a precedent impression, we cannot have a correspondent idea.

Our ideas reach no farther than our experience: We have no experience of divine attributes and operations; I need not conclude my syllogism; you can draw the inference yourself. (D. 108)

In the sentence spoken by Philo which immediately follows this quotation, Hume reveals the role which Demea serves in the *Dialogues*:

And it is a pleasure to me (and I hope to you too) that just reasoning and sound piety here concur in the same conclusion, and both of them establish the adorably mysterious and incomprehensible nature of the Supreme Being. (D. 108)

In this passage, Philo insists on the total agreement between himself and Demea on the unknowability of the divine nature. As such, he is affirming that mysticism, as a version of religious commitment and belief, and philosophy, as a reasoned approach to the same, hold the same position regarding the unknowability of the divine nature. Demea's role, therefore, is to establish illustratively that Philo's position that God is adorably mysterious is not anti - religion. In fact, two pages later, Demea reinforces this reading, when he tells Philo that it is the latter "on whose assistance I depended, in proving the adorable mysteriousness of the divine nature ..." (D. 110). And, two pages later in Part 2, Philo picks up on this theme, and tells Demea:

I was from the beginning scandalized, I must own, with this resemblance which is asserted, between the Deity and human creatures; and must conceive it to imply such a degradation of the supreme Being as no sound theist could endure. With your assistance, therefore, Demea, I shall endeavor to defend what you justly call the adorable mysteriousness of the divine nature, and shall refute this reasoning of Cleanthes, provided he allows that I gave made a fair representation of it. (D. 112)

There are two passages in the *Dialogues* which appear to conflict with the interpretation offered here regarding the respective positions of Demea and Philo. The first appears in Parts 9, in which Demea puts forth the *a priori* Cosmological – Ontological Argument of God's necessary existence. According to Demea, the *a priori* Argument proves the "infinity" of the divine attributes, as well as the "unity" of the divine nature (D. 148). Accordingly, he appears to go against his earlier advocacy of mysticism with regard to the unknowability of God's attributes and nature. That Demea's position in Part 9 remains consistent with his mysticism can be established by looking at a passage (quoted earlier) in the opening paragraph of Part 2. In this passage, Demea urges that "we ought to humble ourselves in his august presence, and, conscious of our frailties, adore in silence his infinite perfections, which eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man to conceive them" (D. 107). Whereas silence regarding divine attributes is the proper approach to dealing with divine attributes, Demea holds that using a term in regard to God's nature, as for example, "necessary existence", does not establish that we understand what the term means. The reference in this passage to God's infinite perfections "which eye hath not seen, ear hath not heard" brings Demea in line with Philo's (and Hume's) view, that without the impressions or experiences of divine attribute and operations, there can be no ideas of these either, and, therefore, no understanding of them. I submit that in Part 9 Demea's point is that, through the *a priori*

Argument, we can establish certain features which pertain necessarily to the divine nature, but this, in no way, establishes that we can know, or understand, these features. Demea's mysticism can, therefore, be rendered consistent with his *a priori* proof in Part 9. The logic of an argument, as in Part 9, which leads to a certain conclusion about God's nature, in no way signals, or guarantees, that this conclusion can be understood by us.

Philo takes a similar approach to the disconnect between speaking about God's nature, and understanding what our words about God's nature mean. Early in Part 2, Philo says the following:

...[A]s all perfection is entirely relative, we ought never to imagine, that we comprehend the attributes of this Divine Being, or to suppose, that his perfections have any analogy or likeness to the perfections of a human creature. Wisdom, thought, design, knowledge; these we justly ascribe to him; because these words are honourable among men, and we have no other language or other conceptions, by which we can express our adoration of him. But let us beware, lest we think, that our ideas any wise correspond to his perfections, or that his attributes have any resemblance to these qualities among men. He is infinitely superior to our limited view and comprehension; and is more the object of worship in the temple than of disputation in the schools. (D. 108)

Therefore, the position that both Philo and Demea take is that the use of language about God is connected to our adoration of God; the use of language regarding divine attributes should never be taken as indicative of insight into God's nature.

The second passage which appears to be problematic to my reading is found in Part 12, when Philo insists that the controversy between the theist and the atheist is a verbal dispute, and he employs this discussion to draw the conclusion, in the penultimate paragraph of Part 12, that "the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence" (D. 184). This passage seems to support the view that there has been a change in Philo's position, for he now appears to hold that there is something that can be known about God. I will now establish that, in this discussion, Philo remains committed to his original position on the unknowability of the divine nature, and that, therefore, he remains in agreement with Demea on this point.

In his analogical Argument from Design, Cleanthes maintains that it is the means to ends relations and coherence of parts present in machines of human contrivance and throughout the design of the world, and our knowledge that machines are caused by intelligent beings, which countenances the conclusion that the cause of the design of the world is an intelligent being. Throughout his attack on the Argument from Design in Parts 2, and Parts 4 through 8, Philo insists that these features of design found in the world and in machines do not support the conclusion that the Designer of the world is an intelligent being. Nevertheless, at no point in the first eight Parts of the *Dialogues* does Philo establish what conclusion regarding the cause of the design of the world is supported by the means to ends relations and coherence of parts which are found in the design of the world and machines.

It is in the sixth paragraph of Part 12 that Philo begins an examination into the relevance of means to ends relations and a coherence of parts in reasoning analogically to an intelligent Designer of the world:

So little, replied PHILO, do I esteem this suspense of judgment in the present case to be possible, that I am apt to suspect there enters somewhat of a dispute of words into this controversy, more than is usually imagined. That the works of nature bear a great analogy to productions of art is evident; and according to all the rules of good reasoning, we ought to infer, if we argue at all concerning them, that their causes have a proportional analogy. But as there are also considerable differences, we have reason to suppose a proportional difference in the causes; and in particular ought to attribute a much higher degree of power and energy to the supreme cause than any we have ever observed in mankind. Here then the existence of a DEITY is plainly ascertained by reason; and if we make it a question, whether, on account of these analogies, we can properly call him a *mind* or *intelligence*, notwithstanding the vast difference, which may reasonably be supposed between him and human minds; what is this but a mere verbal controversy? No man can deny the analogies between the effects: To restrain ourselves from enquiring concerning the causes is scarcely possible: From this enquiry, the legitimate conclusion is, that the causes also have an analogy: And if we the are not contented with calling the first and supreme cause a GOD or DEITY, but desire to vary the expression; what can we call him but *mind* or *thought*, to which he is justly supposed to bear a considerable resemblance? (D. 174 - 175)

This passage makes it clear that Philo is, once again, raising his concern regarding the extent to which we can reason analogically to an intelligent Designer of the world. He is also explicit on what the dispute of words is about: the verbal dispute concerns whether the resemblances between the design of the world and the design of machines warrant calling the cause of the design of the world a mind or intelligence, in light of the differences which exist between the effects being compared. What cannot be disputed, Philo asserts, is that there are resemblances between the world and the productions of art, and this justifies concluding that “the causes also have an analogy”. Now, this concession might be taken as evidence that, the difference between the design of the world and machines notwithstanding, Philo is prepared to alter the position he has all along maintained, namely, that “we ought never to imagine, that we comprehend that attributes of the divine being, or to suppose, that his perfections have any analogy or likeness to the perfections of a human creature” (D. 108). I will now show that Philo has not altered his position, and that, in fact, he goes to great lengths to emphasize that there is no change in his position.

Philo begins the seventh paragraph by elaborating on the nature of a “verbal dispute” - the type of dispute which he claims is involved in trying to decide whether “on account of these analogies, we can properly call him [i.e., the Designer] a mind or intelligence, notwithstanding the vast difference, which may reasonably be supposed between him and human minds”. He explains that the only remedy for a verbal dispute arises “from clear definitions, from the precision of those ideas which enter into any argument, and from the strict and uniform use of those terms which are employed”. A verbal dispute, therefore, requires that both the language and ideas

employed not allow for accuracy in judgment: “But there is species of controversy, which, from the very nature of language and human ideas, is involved in perpetual ambiguity, and can never, by any pre-caution or any definitions, be able to reach a reasonable certainty or precision”. (D. 175) Philo locates verbal disputes in “the controversies concerning the degrees of any quality or circumstance”. He offers three examples of such disputes:

Men may argue to all eternity, whether Hannibal be a great, or a very great, or a superlatively great man, what degree of beauty Cleopatra possessed, what epithet of praise Livy or Thucydides is entitled to, without bringing the controversy to any determination.

And he locates the difficulty in each in the fact that we have no precise measure for quantifying these qualities:

The disputants may here agree in their sense and differ in their terms, or *vice versa*; yet never be able to define their terms, so as to enter into each other's meaning: Because the degrees of these qualities are not, like quantity or number, susceptible of any exact mensuration, which may be the standard in the controversy. (D. 175)

In other words, in regard to certain qualities, an accurate calculation of the degrees of that quality present in the object cannot be achieved.

Philo insists that “the dispute concerning theism is of this nature, and consequently is merely verbal, or perhaps, if possible, still more incurably ambiguous”. (D. 175) He shows this by addressing himself both to the theist and to the atheist. His initial comments are addressed to the theist:

I ask the theist, if he does not allow that there is a great and immeasurable, because incomprehensible, difference between the *human* and the *divine* mind: The more pious he is, the more readily will he assert to the affirmative, and the more will he be disposed to magnify the difference: He will even assert, that the difference is of a nature which cannot be too much magnified. (D. 175-176)

Although there is a reference in this passage to “the human and the divine mind”, the differences between them are characterized as “great and immeasurable, because incomprehensible”. Not only can the differences not be measured, they cannot be understood!

What, then, of the data which Cleanthes offers in the Argument from Design to support the claim of resemblance between us and God? Philo's views on the proper use of the data are expressed in his comments addressed to the atheist:

I next turn to the atheist, who, I assert, is only nominally so, and can never possibly be in earnest; and I ask him, whether, from the coherence and apparent sympathy in all the parts of this world, there be not a certain degree of analogy among all the operations of nature, in every situation and in every age; whether the rotting of a turnip, the generation of animal, and the structure of human

thought be not energies that probably bear some remote analogy to each other: It is impossible he can deny it: He will readily acknowledge it. Having obtained this concession, I push him still farther in his retreat; and I ask him, if it be not probable, that the principle which first and still maintains order in this universe, bears not also some remote inconceivable analogy to the other operations of nature, and among the rest to the economy of human mind and thought. However reluctant, he must give his assent. (D. 176)

In this passage, Philo is calling attention to the coherence of parts which Cleanthes' Argument from Design employs. When Philo advanced competing cosmogonies in the earlier Parts of the *Dialogues*, he attempted to account for the design of the whole world through a comparison with the design found in parts of the world, especially organisms (see, in particular, Parts 6 and 7). Since no system of cosmogony can be shown to be properly grounded, the sceptic urges a suspense of judgement as the only reasonable position to adopt. One of the matters which Philo's presentation of competing cosmogonies does reveal is that all sources of design are bound by the same general features of design, namely, means to ends relations and a coherence of parts. Now, whereas a suspense of judgement is held by Philo to be reasonable when systems of cosmogony are compared and contrasted, Philo has not yet established what position is reasonable in natural theology, once we grant that no system of cosmogony can be accepted, and that all sources of design are bound by identical features of design.

Philo's argument proceeds in two stages (beginning at D. 174), each engaging the principle "like effects prove like causes". In the first stage of his argument, he claims that the coherence of parts evident in all parts of the world countenances the conclusion that "there is certain degree of analogy among all the operations of nature". However, the resemblance found among all the effects in the world is so general that no specificity can be achieved when we attempt to determine the particular resemblance among the operations of nature. This explains why, in comparing the rotting of a turnip, the generation of an animal, and the structure of human thought, he concludes that these are energies "that probably bear some remote analogy to each other".

In the second stage of the argument, Philo calls upon the atheist, once again, to apply the principle "like effects prove like causes", but in this case, the order observed throughout the world is compared to the order observed to result from the other operations of nature. The basis of comparison is coherence in design (as it was in the first stage), and, as before, this feature reveals no specific resemblance between the design of the world and the designs resulting from the operations of nature within the world. The comparison of the design of the whole world with specific effects in nature in terms of coherence of design yields a conclusion which seems epistemologically much weaker than the conclusion obtained in the first stage: in the first stage of the argument, "some remote analogy" is conceded among all the operations of nature, whereas in the second stage, "some remote *inconceivable* analogy" is conceded between the principle of design of the whole world and the other operations of nature.

That the second stage is not epistemologically weaker than the first can be discerned by

reading several lines further when Philo reconciles the position of the theist and atheist. For, at that point, the atheist agrees that the original principle of order “bears some remote analogy” to the other operations of nature, with the term “inconceivable” omitted. Relying on Hume’s doctrine of impressions and ideas, Philo has insisted throughout the dialogue that the operations of nature are unknown to us:

But reason, in its internal fabric and structure, is really as little known to us as instinct or vegetation... The effects of these principle are all known to us from experience: But the principles themselves, and their manner of operation, are totally unknown. (D. 140)

As such, even when natural objects are compared in terms of coherence of design, the remote analogy between their causes should be regarded as “inconceivable”. If the principle cannot be known or understood at all, any claim of analogy between them must be inconceivable. Therefore, regardless of whether Philo includes the term “inconceivable” or not, any claim of analogy between principles of design must be inconceivable. Because all principles of design and their manner of operation are totally unknown, no claim of analogy between principles of order can be thought.

The theist holds that the differences between God and us are “great and immeasurable, because incomprehensible”. The atheist will allow “some remote inconceivable analogy” between the principle of order of the world and thought. I submit, therefore, that in the end, the unknowability of the divine nature is upheld.

The verbal dispute between the theist and atheist can now be grasped: since neither holds a position for which there are ideas which are determinate in nature, the degree of resemblance or difference between God and human intelligence cannot be ascertained.<sup>2</sup>

In light of the inconceivability, and consequent unknowability, of all the operations of nature, it is clear that when, in the penultimate paragraph of Part 12, Philo concludes that the whole of natural theology “resolves itself into one simple, though somewhat ambiguous, at least undefined proposition, that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence”, no claim of understanding or comprehending this remote analogy is involved. The vast differences between the design of machines and the design of the world, despite the fact that both machines and the world exhibit means to ends relations and a coherence of parts, and the fact that the operations of nature are not revealed to us, combine to make any claim of resemblance between God and us unthinkable, and, therefore, unknowable. There has not, therefore, been a change in Philo’s position regarding the unknowability of the divine nature, and this reveals his agreement with Demea on this topic.

Early in the book, Pamphilus, the narrator of the dialogue, informs us that in Cleanthes he “could distinguish an air of finesse; as if he perceived some raillery or artificial malice in the reasonings of Philo.” (D.98 – 99) Or, again in the concluding paragraph of Part 7, following a series of criticisms that Philo has directed against Cleanthes’ Design Argument, the latter says the following to Philo:

I must confess, Philo, replied Cleanthes, that of all men living, the task which you have undertaken, of raising doubts and objections, suits you best, and seems, in a manner, natural and unavoidable to you. So great is your fertility of invention, that I am not ashamed to acknowledge myself unable, on a sudden, to solve regularly such out – of – the – way difficulties as you incessantly start upon me: Though I clearly see, in general, their fallacy and error... such whimsies, as you have delivered, may puzzle, but can never convince us. (D. 142)

In these passages, and others which can be cited, we get the sense that Cleanthes is not convinced of Philo's sincerity when he attacks the Argument from Design. However, in all that Philo presents in D. 172 to the top of D.177, which includes our study regarding the reconciliation of the theist and atheist, Philo insists that these are his "unfeigned sentiments on the subject" (D. 177). And, we have seen, that the conclusion reached is that God's nature is unknowable, which is precisely Demea's view on the subject.

Philo has established philosophically what Demea has all along maintained *que* mystic. With the departure of Demea at the end of Part 11, the discussion in Part 12 is confined to Philo and Cleanthes. It is of some interest to consider why Hume does not permit Demea to remain until the end of Part 12.

The ostensive reason given at the end of Part 11<sup>3</sup> is that Demea was not pleased with Philo's treatment of the topic of divine benevolence in Parts 10 and 11. At the beginning of Part 12, Cleanthes makes two points: (i) he would rather discuss the topics of the dialogue one on one, rather than with Philo *and* Demea; and (ii) Philo's arguments/positions may at times have offended Demea.<sup>4</sup> These are the only reasons given for Demea's departure in the text. The analysis offered in this paper provides an additional reason for Demea's departure.

It will be convenient to approach this by examining the text at the beginning of Part 4. Cleanthes begins this Part by pointing out to Demea that his mysticism renders his position indistinguishable from scepticism and atheism:

It seems strange to me, said CLEANTHES, that you, DEMEA, who are so sincere in the cause of religion, should still maintain the mysterious, incomprehensible nature of the Deity, and should insist so strenuously that he has no manner of likeness or resemblance to human creatures. The Deity, I can readily allow, possess many powers and attributes, of which we can have no comprehension: But if our ideas, so far as they go, be not just, and adequate, and correspondent to his real nature, I know not what there is in this subject worth insisting on. Is the name, without any meaning, of such mighty importance? Or how do you *mystics*, who maintain the absolute incomprehensibility of the deity, differ from sceptics or atheists, who assert, that the first cause of all is unknown and unintelligible? (D. 122)

Instead of offering a reasoned reply to Cleanthes' point, Demea accuses Cleanthes of name calling:

Who could imagine, replied DEMEA, that CLEANTHES, the calm, philosophical Cleanthes, would attempt to refute his antagonists, by affixing a nick-name to them; and like the common diggers and inquisitors of the age, have recourse to invective and declamation, instead of reasoning? Or does he not perceive, that these topics are easily retorted, and that *anthropomorphite* is an appellation as invidious, and implies as dangerous consequences, as the epithet of *Mystic*, with which he has honoured us. (D. 122)

The important point here is that Demea's temperament will not allow him to pursue a discussion in which his position is compared to that of the atheist. Now, as we have seen, a central concern in Part 12 is Philo's attempt to show that both the theist and atheist - the believer and the non-believer - must hold to the unknowability claim regarding "the principle which first arranged and still maintains order in the universe". Accordingly, given his temperament, Demea would be an obstacle in the way of completing the discussion in Part 12. Although he accepts the unknowability claim, Demea is unable to handle philosophically any comparison which involves his position and that of the atheist.

Demea's position, according to Philo, is the only position regarding God which natural theology can defend. It is, therefore, ironic that Demea will not be present when a philosophic defense of his position is put forth by Philo.

I showed earlier that Philo and Demea acknowledge that when they speak about God what they say should be regarded as indicative of their adoration of God, rather than as meaningful statements regarding the divine nature. The analysis which I have offered above in which Philo reconciles the theist and the atheist regarding the similarity or analogy between the human and divine mind is a further example of this practice. Philo establishes that the analogy or resemblance between God and us is inconceivable, and yet it is spoken about as though the claim is meaningful. My study reveals, therefore, that whereas claims about God made by Cleanthes are held by him to be taken literally, claims about God made by Philo and Demea are regarded by them as emanating from individuals who regard God as adorably mysterious and exceeding human understanding.

### **Endnotes:**

1. All references to David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* are to the Philosophy-in-Focus Edition, edited and with an Introduction by Stanley Tweyman, Routledge, London and New York, 1991. References will be indicated by D. followed by the page number(s).
2. "The theist allows, that the original intelligence is very different from human reason: The atheist allows that the original principle of order bears some remote analogy to it. Will, you quarrel, gentlemen, about the degrees, and enter into a controversy, which admits not of any precise meaning, nor consequently of any determination. If you should be so obstinate, I should not be surprised to find you insensibly change sides; while the theist on the one hand exaggerates the dissimilarity between the supreme Being, and frail, imperfect, variable, fleeting, and mortal creatures; and the atheist on the other magnifies the analogy, among all the operations of nature, in every period, every situation, and every position.

Consider then, where the real point of controversy lies, and if you cannot lay aside your disputes, endeavour, at least to cure yourselves of your animosity” (D. 176).

3. “Thus Philo continued to the last his spirit of opposition, and his censure of established opinions. But I could sense, that Demea did not at all relish the latter part of the discourse and he took occasion soon after, on some pretence or other, to leave the company” (D. 171).
4. “Your spirit of controversy, joined to your abhorrence of vulgar superstition, causes you strange lengths, when engaged in an argument; and there is nothing so sacred and venerable, even in your own eyes, which you spare on that occasion” (D. 172).

**References:**

Hume, David. *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, edited and with an Introduction by Stanley Tweyman. London and New York: Routledge, 1991.

## A Phenomenology of Race in Frege's Logic

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### Abstract:

This article derives from a project attempting to show that Western formal logic, from Aristotle onward, has both been partially constituted by, and partially constitutive of, what has become known as racism. In the present article, I first discuss, in light of Frege's honorary role as founder of the philosophy of mathematics, Reuben Hersh's *What is Mathematics, Really?* Second, I explore how the infamous section of Frege's 1924 diary (specifically the entries from March 10 to April 9) supports Hersh's claim regarding the link between political conservatism and the (historically and currently) dominant school of the philosophy of mathematics, to which Frege undeniably belongs. Third, I examine Frege's attempt at a more reader-friendly introduction to his philosophy of mathematics, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*. And finally, I briefly analyze Frege's *Begriffsschrift* to see how questions of race arise even at the heights of his logical abstraction.

**Keywords:** Frege, logic, racism; Nazism; mathematics

The insanity of such systems lies not only in their first premise but in the very logicity with which they are constructed. The curious logicity of all isms, their simple-minded trust in the salvation value of stubborn devotion without regard for specific, varying factors, already harbors the first germs of totalitarian contempt for reality and factuality.

Hannah Arendt, *Origins of Totalitarianism*

### What is Logic, Really?

In his preface to *What is Mathematics, Really?*, Hersh (1999) calls his approach to his subject "humanist," and argues that "from the viewpoint of philosophy, mathematics must be understood as a human activity, a social phenomenon, part of human culture, historically evolved, and intelligible only in a social context" (xi). Hersh suggests that the current state of the philosophy of mathematics is "parallel" to "philosophy of science in the 1930s," before theorists like Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend turned the discipline on its head (xii). According to Hersh, the particular "dogmatism" under which the philosophy of mathematics still suffers is what Philip Kitcher terms "neo-Fregeanism" (xii). This framework, Hersh claims, is "out of touch with mathematicians, users of

mathematics, and teachers of mathematics” (xii). And as is also the case for my larger project, Hersh believes that his work “can assist educational reform,” in his case “by helping mathematics teachers and educators understand what mathematics is” (xiii).

An important part of Hersh’s self-described “subversive” and “radical” perspective on this issue is that neo-Fregeanism, along with the foundationism of which it a part, “are descendants of a centuries-old mating between mainstream philosophy of mathematics and religion/theology” (xiv). Accordingly, the reader will find many insights in Hersh’s analysis that align closely with comparable insights from this article on (the species of mathematics called) logic and religion/theology. I will now offer a brief analysis of a few relevant sections of Hersh’s text, beginning with the introduction.

Hersh early on claims that “The method of mathematics is ‘conjecture and proof’” (5). In one of many examples of Hersh’s humanization of mathematics, he asserts that the mathematician “needs reassurance and encouragement as she struggles with” a mathematical problem, and then “when she proposes a solution she needs agreement or criticism” (5). Proof according to Hersh is “the analogue to experiment in physical science,” and refers to the event whereby “the argument convinces qualified, skeptical mathematicians” (6). As opposed to people whom Hersh terms “naive non-mathematicians,” described as people who believe that “axioms come first,” Hersh argues that “anyone who has done mathematics knows what comes first—a problem” (6).

Returning to the issue of different schools of the philosophy of mathematics, Hersh claims that “among mathematicians” the predominant two are “Platonism and formalism” (7). Platonism, “or realism, as it’s been called,” is important to my own investigation because it is the school to which Frege belongs (9). To Frege’s credit, this places him, according to Hersh, with many professionals in the field. “An inarticulate, half-conscious Platonism is nearly universal among mathematicians” (11). On the other hand, Hersh adds, “most of this Platonism is half-hearted, shamefaced” (11). What, one might wonder, is the reason for shame? “Platonism without God,” Hersh puts it dramatically, “is like the grin on Lewis Carroll’s Cheshire cat...The grin remained without the cat” (12). Most mathematicians no longer endorse the kind of Christianity customary in a full-bodied Platonist theory. “Platonists explain mathematics,” Hersh elaborates, “by a separate universe of abstract objects, independent of the material universe. But how do the abstract and material universes interact,” he asks, without God?

I skip ahead now to Part Two of Hersh’s book, which is an account of the history of the philosophy of mathematics. It begins with a discussion of the abovementioned “foundationism,” a name given by Hungarian philosopher of mathematics Imre Lakatos to “Frege in his prime,” along with three other thinkers, all of whom according to Hersh “were hooked on the same delusion: *Mathematics must have a foundation*” (91). “Behind Frege,” Hersh places “Leibniz,” “Aquinas, Augustine,” and “the great grandfather of foundationism—Pythagoras” (91). As a

consequence of these religious ancestors, Hersh argues that one finds “that the roots of foundationism are tangled with religion and theology” (91). However, and of particular interest to the present investigation, “In Frege,” this entanglement “is out of sight,” by which Hersh means, not that the intertwining of math and religion has gone away, but that it has gone underground, under the surface, only to “pop up like a jack-in-the-box” in the rest of the foundationists that Lakatos names (91). It will be my project here to show that this entanglement is, on the contrary, actually quite visible in Frege if one reads him with sufficient care.

Hersh labels this entire genealogical line, from Pythagoras to Frege and beyond, “the Mainstream,” according to whom “mathematics is superhuman—abstract, ideal, infallible, eternal” (92). The opposing camp, Hersh christens “the humanists and mavericks,” those who “see mathematics as a human activity, a human creation,” among whom he finds J. S. Mill. Hersh offers two detailed historical narratives, beginning with that of the former group. It is here, in “the Mainstream,” that one finds Frege, making it the only narrative that will concern me here.

“The philosophy of mathematics,” according to Hersh, “seems to start with Pythagoras (about 572-479 B.C. or a little later),” and the secret society founded in his name “combined mysticism and superstition with geometry and mathematics in a way incomprehensible today” (92). For example, “The number one, they argued, is the generator of numbers and the number of reason,” and “the number two is the first even or female number, the number of opinion” (93). Note here the misogynistic assignment of mere opinion to the female, while vaunted reason belongs with the male. Just like their descendant, Leibniz, the Pythagoreans held that to “uncover the regulative mathematical forms in nature was to reveal the divine intelligence itself,” and their “discovery that the harmonics of music were mathematical was regarded as a religious revelation” (93). Connecting this directly back to the issue of formal logic, Hersh writes that “Cornford says (p. 194): ‘Parmenides, the discoverer of logic, was an offshoot of Pythagoreanism, and Plato [found] in Pythagoreanism the chief source of his inspiration’ (95). And Aristotle, the founder of logic, was of course a student of Plato. Hersh summarizes this, Frege’s Pythagorean heritage, as “an intimate blending of religion and reasoning, of moral aspiration with logical admiration of what is timeless” (95).

I skip ahead now to the point where Hersh’s narrative reaches the nineteenth century, and thus the backdrop for the work of Frege. “Until the nineteenth century,” Hersh observes, and in stark contrast to present-day Western commonsense, “geometry was regarded by everybody, *including mathematicians*, as the most reliable branch of knowledge” (137). But then “two crises” occurred, namely “the recognition that there’s more than one thinkable geometry,” and “the overtaking of geometrical intuition by analysis” (137). (Interestingly, many Kantians, including Frege, refused to accept non-Euclidean geometry as “really geometry”) (263). Consequently, Hersh explains, “Loss of certainty in geometry threatened loss of all certainty” (137).

In the immediate aftermath of this crisis, however, nineteenth-century mathematicians “rose to the challenge” (137). Mathematics had always been considered the unassailable basis of all

Western thought, the method thought to distinguish Western thought from the allegedly imperfect and unreliable knowledge of cultures such as those indigenous to Africa. Thus, if the wall of mathematics were to fall, the hordes of subjectivism and cultural relativism, it was feared, would storm the city and raze it to the common ground. “Led by Dedekind and Weierstrauss,” writes Hersh, “they replaced geometry with arithmetic as a foundation for mathematics” (137). These were the immediate predecessors of Frege, and the shapers of the edifice which he wished to preserve in his own way.

Hersh credits a contemporary of Frege, George Boole, as the one who “figured out how to make logic part of mathematics,” while Bertrand Russell, follower of Frege, “claimed the opposite—that mathematics is nothing but logic” (140). This latter view is known as “logicism,” and I will return to it shortly regarding Frege. The historical winner in this contest of interpretation seems to have been Boole. “Far from a solid foundation for mathematics,” Hersh notes, “set theory/logic is now a branch of mathematics, and the least trustworthy branch at that” (140). According to Hersh, this fact is also borne out in contemporary science. “For today's mathematical logician, logic is just another branch of mathematics like geometry or number theory. He disowns philosophical responsibilities” (141). However, in philosophy (as always), things are not so simple. “In U. S. philosophy departments, on the other hand,” Hersh notes, “‘analytic philosophy,’ a kind of left-over from logicism and logical positivism lingers on” (141).

The section immediately preceding Hersh's section on Frege is entitled “What is logic? What Should it Be?” It begins with the observation that “Everyday experience, and ample study, by psychologists, show that most of our thinking doesn't follow logic” (140). This might mean, Hersh ventures, that “the scope of logic is too narrow” (140). On the other hand, “Computing machines”—of which Leibniz invented one of the first—“do almost always obey logic” (140). This, in turn, suggests to Hersh the following answer to the titular question of the section: “Logic is the rules of computing machinery!” (140) One concrete example of this would be IBM's Hollerith punch-card machines. Further, Hersh adds, “Logic also applies to people when they try to be computing machines” (140). One concrete example here might be the Nazi officials who used the aforementioned IBM punch-cards to carry out their bureaucratized genocide.

Hersh begins his section on Frege by referring to him as “the first *full-time* philosopher of mathematics,” noting that Frege “considered himself to be working entirely with the tradition of” thinkers such as Leibniz (141). The most important part of Frege's work, according to Hersh, was probably “the introduction of quantifiers,” and “is considered the birth of modern logic” (141). Again, referring back to Leibniz, Hersh writes that Frege agreed with Leibniz that the truth of arithmetic is “analytic,” or self-contained (142). Hersh further notes that the term “logic” for both Frege and Leibniz means “the intuitively obvious rules of correct reasoning” (142).

With regard to geometry, on the other hand, Frege departed from Leibniz in favor of Kant, claiming that the truth of geometry is “synthetic” or world-directed. As a result of this duality (namely, analytic arithmetic and synthetic geometry), Hersh argues that it makes no sense

to “speak of Frege’s philosophy of mathematics. He had a philosophy of arithmetic, and a different philosophy of geometry. Arithmetic is logic; geometry is space intuition. Fitting them together is about as awkward as yoking an ape and an alligator” (142).

Hersh then begins a new section devoted exclusively to Frege’s *Foundations of Arithmetic* (what Hersh dubs “Logicism’s Koran”), and which I will analyze in detail below (142). In the *Foundations*, in brief, “Frege constructed the natural numbers out of logic,” after first having tried “to demolish all previous definitions” of number (142). In this latter endeavor, “First Frege trounces [J. S.] Mill, who based arithmetic on empirical experience,” a critique of Mill that Hersh condemns as unfair (143) With regard to Frege’s second attack in the *Foundations*, a rejection of the view that numbers are ideas, Hersh objects that “Frege is confounding private and public sense of ‘idea’,” and “assumes that an idea resides only in one person’s head (private ideas)” (144). However, Hersh objects, “ideas can be shared by several people, even millions of people (public ideas)” (144).

As for Frege’s own proposal, namely that numbers are abstract objects, Hersh finds such a conception of number to evince “an astonishing kinship to Plato’s Ideas” (145). On this basis, Hersh concludes that “Frege is a Platonist” (145). Returning to the connections among Plato, Pythagoras and religion, Hersh then reminds the reader that “By Frege’s time, the association between Christian theology and mathematical Platonism had gone underground” (145). The results of Frege’s work in this area are (in)famously flawed. Hersh puts it simply. “The axioms from which Russell and Frege attempted to construct mathematics are contradictory!” (148).

Frege’s followers, in an attempt to resolve this problem, chose “to reformulate set theory to avoid the Russell paradox,” but according to Hersh, “This patched up set-theory could not be identified with logic in the philosophical sense of ‘rules for correct reasoning’” (149). Even more strangely, “Despite this philosophical failure, logico-set theoreticism dominates the philosophy of mathematics today” (149). And perhaps most strangely of all, logico-set theoreticism dominates the philosophy of mathematics today despite the fact that its founders turned their backs on the view during their own lifetimes. “Logicism never recovered,” Hersh writes, “from the Russell paradox. Eventually both Frege and Russell gave it up” (149). As for Frege in particular, his final philosophical move was to abandon Leibniz altogether, and accept Kant’s philosophy of mathematics wholesale. “In his old age,” Hersh informs the reader, Frege “decided arithmetic too was based on geometry and space intuition” (150). Why then, one might wonder, is logicism still so dominant? And why is Frege still so highly respected and extensively studied? Perhaps Frege’s diary entries will suggest a clue or two.

### **Questions of Race in Frege’s Diary**

These entries in Frege’s diary were first translated into English and published in the philosophical journal *Inquiry*, volume 39, in 1996. They are preceded there by a brief editor’s

note, which is also worth of consideration here. Alastair Hannay begins his “Editorial” by referring to the experience of discovering that “a cherished mentor” (in this case Frege) possessed what Hannay terms “questionable” views (301). Given the intensely anti-Semitic content of the text this editorial introduces, “questionable” seems itself a questionable choice. Even more questionable is Hannay’s subsequent reference to the “peccadillos [sic]” of such a mentor (301). This second paragraph then ends by noting the similar flaws of other famous twentieth-century philosophers such as Russell, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger.

Hannay then concedes that one cannot defend Frege’s “peccadilloes” on the grounds that “they were part of a wider humanistic vision,” for the simple reason that “Frege’s work was not the sort to accommodate such a vision – *no place there for any view of human possibility* let alone a mitigating one” (301, emphasis added). Hannay does not raise the question, however, as to whether the lack of a view of human possibility in a philosophy or way of thinking is itself a flaw. On the contrary, in a footnote to the very next sentence, Hannay shifts abruptly to a celebration of Frege’s “integrity and grace,” along with Frege’s “dedication to the truth” (301). Further, Hannay’s subsequent description of Frege’s behavior as “almost superhuman” echoes Nietzsche’s famous concept of the *übermensch*, infamously taken up into Nazi Aryanism.

Interestingly in this connection, Hannay concludes his editorial with the suggestion that “the bitter pill of Frege’s diary may be sugared by surprise at someone with abstract interests having any politics at all” (302). Is Hannay suggesting here that if one is a philosopher, then it is better to be a Nazi than to be apolitical? He elaborates on this point as follows: “Faced with the often specious authority of philosophers in practical matters, and the crudeness of some ‘efforts to dominate and be known’ in philosophy in general, the fumbblings of a Frege may even be preferred however much we regret the results” (302). Philosophers, Hannay seems to be saying, (a) often have no credible authority regarding national or international politics, and (b) their own professional politics are often bumbling, therefore (c) we are fortunate that a philosopher as technically formidable as Frege was an anti-Semite.

After Hannay’s editorial, but before the diary proper, there is one more introduction which is worthy of consideration here. In his “Translator’s Preface,” Richard L. Mendelsohn defends Frege by (a) harshly criticizing Hans Sluga’s attack on Frege as misleading and distorted, and pointing out both that (b) “Frege was quite old at the time of the writing of the diary,” and also (c) “these later years were not easy for [Frege]” (304). Ultimately, Mendelsohn concludes, “What the diary shows more clearly than ever is how much Frege was a creature of his time” (305). The implication of Mendelsohn’s remarks seems to be that if one is forced to concede that Frege was guilty of anti-Semitism, then everyone else of his era was guilty too.

But should we not hold philosophical geniuses to a higher standard than the average layperson? Was that not Hannay’s reason for bringing up the sins of Russell, Wittgenstein and Heidegger? Or are these latter three thinkers to be excused as glibly as Mendelsohn seems to be excusing Frege? It is clear, in any event, that at least Heidegger is not currently being

thus excused. Does Mendelsohn's remark suggest that we should be reevaluating the case of Heidegger's fascism?

Medelsohn then concludes his own preface by himself appending yet another introductory text to Frege's diary, this time by one of the original editors of Frege's diary, Gottfried Gabriel. It begins to seem as though the diary were so dangerous and contagious that it had to be wrapped in multiple layers of protection. Gabriel argues, against Michael Dummett's accusation that the diary passages in question (from March 10 to April 9) were suppressed by the editors of Frege's writings, that those passages were instead "not included in the publication of the *Nachgelassene Schriften* on the grounds that the remaining reflections were of a political nature and 'could not be numbered among the scientific [*wissenschaftliche*] *Nachlaß*" (306). I leave it to the reader to judge the scientific/philosophical relevance of the text which I can now finally begin to analyze directly.

Frege introduces the diary as consisting of "ideas which are perhaps worthy of being developed in the future" (308). The issue here then, contra Gabriel, concerns the realm of ideas from the beginning, ideas worthy of presumably scientific/philosophical development. The second entry indirectly refers to Adolf Stoecker, a theologian who was, according to the translator, "one of the most influential representatives of modern anti-Semitism in Germany," and whose anti-Semitism Frege "shares" (309n). Frege's ranting against political leftism and unions begins in the third entry, "12 March 1924," in which Frege concludes that the problem is at base one of "Two devils," namely "the devil of pride" and the "devil of envy" (310). This is the first move to the political right in the diaries, the extreme end of which movement lies explicit fascism.

In the entry from the next day, Frege's anti-union metaphors shift from demonology to pathology, in his reference to France's having "suffered from a dangerous illness," one which "had infected Germany" (311). This rhetoric returns in the "16 March 1924," in which Frege writes of the "socialist infection" (312).

In a footnote to the end of this same entry, Mendelsohn quotes Frege on the aforementioned Stoecker as follows: "I have nothing against Stoecker; he has for my part only the one failing as a politician, that he is a priest, and as a priest, that he pursues politics" (312n). Here Frege seems to be advocating indirectly for the separation of church and state. But the relationship between the two for Frege is more complicated, as the entry from two days later, "18 March 1924," begins to suggest. "A religious obligation," Frege writes, "is an obligation over whose fulfillment no human judge stands guard and judges" (313). It seems that there is a definite hierarchy in place here, according to which religion exists beyond the reach of the political. This, in turn, is the first of many appearances in the diary of what might be understood as that submerged and hidden religiosity which—according to Hersh—deeply informs Frege's thought in general.

It is in the April entries that Frege's anti-Semitism is first openly announced. In the "9 April" entry, he begins by bemoaning the fact that "Much of our misfortune has its cause in the

fact that we take so little pride in our national characteristics,” having “so many people of different races,” who “claim to be considered as Germans” (322). There is thus, for Frege, a fixed set of characteristics—like the members of set which constitute the extension of a concept in his mathematical logic—that make up the true German person, and any deviation or admixture of other characteristics is a blurring of the true concept, and therefore a social nightmare. Frege then turns to the Jewish “race” in particular, noting that “Up until the year 1866, Jews were generally not permitted to stay overnight in my native town of Wismar” (322). This policy, Frege remarks almost casually, “was obviously due to bad experiences” (322). He merely assumes here, without any evidence or analysis, that his native townspeople’s prejudice towards another race of people was justified.

The last sentence of this paragraph then connects this anti-Semitic theme to Frege’s earlier theme of the separation of church and state. “With the Jews,” Frege asserts (again without apparent evidence), “religion is very closely tied to their national characteristics, and these especially, with their way of doing business” (322). To what nation is Frege referring—perhaps the historical nation of Israel? At any rate, he directly connects here the ills of socialism, along with their “devils” of pride and envy, to the Jewish people.

As to how to resolve these Jewish problems, though demurring that he does not “feel qualified to make proposals for the politics of the moment,” Frege nevertheless asserts later in the same entry that “No doubt one needs youthful vigor to sweep away the people” (323, 324). Why would a philosopher as apparently rational, logical and cerebral as Frege, not only affirm his fellow citizens’ (irrational) anti-Semitism, but also advocate the use of emotional propaganda to “sweep away” intentionally the rationality of Germany’s people?

For whatever reason (or lack thereof), Frege further stipulates that this youthfully vigorous leader must also be a soldier. “A German Kaiser,” Frege insists, “must be a military leader and have self-confidence” (324). After this further move to the political Right, Frege’s next entry then criticizes former German ruler Otto von Bismarck for being “in some of his views rather liberal, for example, in his conviction of the necessity of a representation of the people or at least an influence of the people on the government” (325). Frege, this sentence makes clear, was a staunch advocate of monarchy, and more specifically for the God-like rule of one man over an entire nation. Frege then goes on to link monarchy’s opposite, namely democracy, back to Jewishness. “What a misfortune,” Frege complains on this note, “that Jews had such influence in the National Liberal Party” (325).

The next entry, “13 April,” offers a more specific criticism on this point, against the democratic/representative “parliamentary process” in particular, specifically that it “is nothing peculiarly German, grown from German soil” (326). The person Frege is here criticizing for such parliamentary sympathies, however, was nothing but “peculiarly German” and born on German soil. Thus, “So long as Bismarck and a Wilhelm I watched over Germany, things went well because they were powerful. However, when a weaker person took hold of the reins, things went

downhill with Germany and we sank into a swamp” (326). Again, Frege’s preferred solution is a strong and powerful single leader, born with correct (that is, German) characteristics and from the correct (German) soil. And again, the alternative is to end up with people with the wrong (Jewish) characteristics from the wrong (Jewish) soil.

Toward this end, Frege later makes more specific suggestions as to how to deal with the most offensive of these other kinds of people. After retelling the story of how Jewish people were prevented from staying overnight in Wismar, Frege makes the following prophetic suggestion: “If one wants to make laws against the Jews, one must be able to specify a distinguishing mark [*Kennzeichen*] by which one can recognize a Jew for certain. I have always seen this as a problem” (331). In a footnote to this sentence, Mendelsohn suggests the following link between this text and the *Foundations*: “Frege has touched on the topic of the connection between a correct definition and the specification of a distinguishing mark [*Kennzeichen*] in his *Grundlagen der Arithmetik*” (331). This suggestion, in turn, opens up the possibility that there is a connection between Frege’s projects for, on the one hand, a logically pure foundation for mathematics, and on the other hand, a racially pure foundation for politics.

Buttressing this outright anti-Semitism is Frege’s defense in the next entry of an essay by Dr. Friedrich Weber, which is itself a defense of Weber’s own role in Hitler’s attempted coup d’état (the “Beer Hall Putsch” of 1923). Despite Frege’s previous condemnation of any violence against the government, Frege writes here that “The sentiments articulated there [in Weber’s essay] have my full approval” (331). Apparently, it is only a Leftist overthrow powered by unions, rather than any violent revolution in general, that for Frege is never justifiable. In support of this interpretation, Frege claims in the same entry that “the destruction of Marxism, or at least its expulsion from the entirety of the fully enfranchised citizens, is a necessary precondition of the possible establishment of a strong Reich, which Dr. Weber strives for” (332).

In another reversal of a key position earlier in the diary, Frege opines in the “29 April” entry that “One must not mistake the desire for the well-being of the fatherland for a political program, especially if the desires are pious” (335). Apparently Frege considers only a Leftist mixture of church and state (as for example when priests advocate welfare for the poor) not admixture per se, unjustifiable. On the contrary, piety (of a certain kind) for Frege can actually purify an obviously political aim of all political essence, transforming such an aim into one of those (politics-trumping) religious obligations against which no civil rights can stand.

In the next day’s entry, Frege (a) (again) bemoans that fact “that there are so many Jews in Germany,” (b) explicitly mentions the word “Aryan,” (c) repeats the concern over how to physically identify Jewish people, and (d) concludes that “one must be satisfied with fighting the ways of thinking [*Gesinnung*] which show up in the activities of the Jews” (336). This latter strategy can be accomplished, he notes, with “the loss of civil rights” (336). Put differently, since the concept “Jew” seems too vague to be workable, one should simply expand the concept to include anyone resembling the Jews (such as, perhaps, Communists and homosexuals). Far from

denying the prejudicial nature of this program, Frege on the contrary erects an apologetics for prejudice per se, asserting that “prejudice is necessary for patriotism” (337).

The question here is not about a judgment in the sense of logic, not about considering something as true, but about one’s feelings and inner attitude. Only Feeling [*Gemüt*] participates, not Reason, and it speaks freely, without having spoken to Reason beforehand for counsel. And yet, at times, it appears that such a participation of Feeling [*Gemüt*] is needed to be able to make sound, rational judgments in political matters (337).

Especially coming from such a devout proponent of logic, this passage seems entirely out of place. Why would Frege accept the abandonment of reason in the pursuit of politics? How can he justify smuggling the concepts of soundness, rationality, and judgment into the conclusion of a process from which he intentionally removed those concepts? How, in other words, can irrationality, or a-rationality, terminate in the rational?

Frege’s irrationality certainly does not terminate in the rational, in that it is followed here by an expression of admiration for Hitler. “Adolf Hitler writes correctly,” the entry begins chillingly, “in the April issue of *Deutschlands Erneuerung*, that Germany no longer had a clear political goal after the departure of Bismark” (339). What, one might wonder, would be Frege’s answer to this alleged problem? “We urgently need,” he insists, “a revival of religion” (341). Unconsciously prophesying again in this entry (in this case, in regard to Hitler’s own repackaging of ancient racism), Frege claims that “We must have prophets proclaim something new to come that really is something old” (341). And it is to the explicitly philosophical work of Frege-the-prophet—alleged by Hannay to be radically divorced from his politics—that my investigation now turns.

### **Questions of Race in Frege’s *Thoughtscript***

I begin this part with Frege’s earlier work, the *Thoughtscript*, to which the later *Foundations* was intended as a more accessible introduction. In the editor’s introduction, Heijenoort refers to it as “perhaps the most important single work ever written in logic” (1). He also notes that Frege was originally, and by training, an outsider to the field of logic, as Frege’s degree and dissertation were in mathematics (1). The text was certainly not accessible to logicians of Frege’s day, particularly in regard to his awkward symbolism, which, Heijenoort notes, Frege stubbornly refused to modify. “The notation that he introduces for the conditional has often been criticized, and it has not survived. It presents difficulties in printing and takes up a large amount of space. But as Frege himself (1896, 364) says, ‘the comfort of the typesetter is certainly not the *summum bonum*’...” (2).

What was worse (and noted above in Hersh), Frege’s awkward formality did not even accomplish its lofty goal of logical perfection. After having praised Frege for “the analysis of the proposition into function and argument(s) instead of subject and predicate” (i.e., the paradigmatic

move in analytic philosophy from empirical linguistics to symbolic mathematics as philosophical medium), Heijenoort notes that in the end “the difference between function and argument is blurred,” causing Frege to ultimately “fall into the abyss” of Russell’s paradox (2). According to this paradox, in Frege’s work (as well as that of others such as Dedekind) there is a set (namely, the set of sets which are not members of themselves) which both is and is not a member of itself.

Despite Frege’s collapsing failure, Heijenoort assures us that “This flaw in Frege’s system should not make us lose sight of the greatness of his achievement” (3). My question is the following: if the purpose of the entire project is to move from supposedly inherently flawed and imperfect natural languages to the perfect precision of an artificial language, then how can the self-contradictoriness of that artificial language not constitute the failure of the entire project? And if the entire project does indeed fail, then perhaps that failure suggests that what are to be preferred for logic are in fact natural languages (as opposed to artificial languages), at least in light of natural languages’ greater prevalence, accessibility, naturalness and ease of use.

Heijenoort himself almost concedes this point, insofar as he acknowledges toward the end of his introduction that “At times *Begriffsschrift* begs for a clarification of linguistic usage” (4). In other words, even Frege’s own artificial language-creating text cannot do entirely without the natural language clarifications of an interpreter, and where this artificial language does employ natural language, the results are just as inadequate as the artificial language itself. And yet, Frege went to all this effort, according to Heijenoort, simply because “The imprecision and ambiguity of ordinary language led him to look for a more appropriate tool” (1). Frege obviously did not find it, but I am going to look after him, turning to the text of the *Thoughtscript* itself.

The first sentence of Frege’s Preface to the *Thoughtscript* ends with the word “certitude,” and the third sentence ends with the phrase “the most secure foundation,” so in both the content and the tone of this discourse, what he is searching for seems clear (5). Shortly thereafter one finds, at the heart of Frege’s solution, the concept of purity, which is then repeated throughout the text. Following Frege’s own famous method of “sentential holism,” I offer here the entire sentence in which the first (and adjectival) use of purity appears: “The most reliable way of carrying out a proof, obviously, is to follow pure logic, a way that, disregarding the particular characteristics of objects, depends solely on those laws upon which all knowledge rests” (5).

That this method is the most reliable, however, is not in fact obvious to everyone. Nor is it obvious, at least not to the present author, why such purity is advantageous per se. Moreover, it is troubling, especially in the context of Frege’s aforementioned racist remarks in the diary, that he here encourages his reader to ignore the concrete, detailed differences among beings in the world, in favor of abstract laws descending from one-knows-not-where. In other words, racism advocates treating all members of a race in the same, negative ways based on the imposition of offensive stereotypes—which also requires ignoring the concrete, detailed differences among individual members.

Frege's next (and adverbial) example of purity, found in the very next sentence, refers to logic not as a body of knowledge, but as a method. (Although perhaps all logic is ultimately merely formal in the end, or can be understood as always reducible to method). "Accordingly," Frege writes, "we divide all truths that require justification into two kinds, those for which the proof can be carried out purely by means of logic and those for which it must be supported by facts of experience" (5). Note the slippage here between purity as an intra-logical distinction and purity as the distinction between logic and the rest of the world. In a way, all logic is pure, but in another way, only part of logic is pure. Note also that—reminiscent of the Nazi-prophetic remarks in the diary—logic is being used here to divide the world into two groups or camps, based on a standard of purity.

Frege's next sentence clarifies that this purity denotes a state devoid of "any activity of the senses," followed a few sentences later by the imperative to "prevent anything intuitive [*Anschauliches*] from penetrating here unnoticed" (5). Ironically, other meanings of *Anschauliches* include "clear," "vivid" and "lively," so this phrase could also be read somewhat poetically and strategically as claiming that Frege wanted either (a) to prevent anything clear from appearing to the reader, that is, to keep the reader in uncertainty, confusion and ignorance; or (b), especially in light of the above reference to the senses, to prevent anything that pulses with life and vitality, anything lively, from entering into the matter—including the concrete details of actual living organisms. Remember, on this note, the enduring concern in Frege's diary with the inability to differentiate Jews based on appearance alone; they too were often "penetrating unnoticed" into pure German society. This rhetoric also recalls Frege's repeated discussions of infection in the diary, specifically in reference to political conflict that he links to Judaism.

In order to carry out this plan for purity, Frege remarks that he "had to bend every effort to keep the chain of inference free of gaps," and in "the strictest possible way" (5). Instead of interpreting the difficulty involved in his plan as a potential indicator of its inappropriateness, Frege instead chooses to condemn natural language, that ancient and universal instrument of humanity, for its "inadequacy" (5). Frege then returns to his cloak-and-dagger rhetoric to describe the ways in which intuition "tries to sneak in unnoticed," compelling him to be ever more rigorous "so that [intuition's] origin can be investigated" (6). Note the ease with which this rhetoric could be applied to Frege's concerns about Jewish people being indistinguishable from "pure Germans." This suggests another reason to suspect a connection between Frege's battles for both mathematical and political purity.

According to Frege here, when it became clear to him that such gap-free inference would be impossible, he instead "decided to forgo expressing anything that is without significance for the inferential sequence" (6). Frege offers no explanation, however, as to how he decided what belongs in the latter category, and what does not. Presumably, the reader is supposed to assume that this choice was as "obvious" as the one Frege made in favor of "pure logic" above.

But if Frege is wrong about what has significance for the inferential sequence, then more of real life, “the particular characteristics of objects,” gets thrown out with the bathwater.

In the next paragraph, Frege helpfully compares the relationship between his thought-script and ordinary language (“the language of life”) to that “which the microscope has to the eye” (6). (Incidentally, one cannot help but wonder here if Frege suspected that Jewish people might be distinguishable at the microscopic, even if not at the optic, level). Interestingly, if one were to replace “thought-script” for “microscope,” and “natural language” for “eye,” in the next sentence, one would get the claim that natural language is “far superior to” the thought-script, and that the thought-script too “exhibits many imperfections” as a conceptual instrument.

When one comes to Frege’s discussion of the specialized uses of the microscope and the thought-script, however, those of the thought-script, namely “certain scientific uses,” are much vaguer than those of the microscope (6). And insofar as Frege understands science to be a true description of reality, it would seem that the thought-script would therefore be the language or code for all of reality. The implication here would be that the expertise of the thought-script, unlike that of the microscope, would know no bounds (6).

The following paragraph explicitly returns to Leibniz, who also “recognized—and perhaps overrated—the advantages of an adequate system of notation” (6). Frege refers to Leibniz’s “idea of a universal characteristic” as “so gigantic that the attempt to realize it could not go beyond bare preliminaries” (6). If Frege sees himself as a direct inheritor of this ambition—and Heijenoort quotes Frege unequivocally to that effect—then wherein does Frege’s estimation of the problem, and his attempted solution, differ from that of Leibniz? Frege seems to anticipate this question when he writes that “even if this worthy goal cannot be reached in one leap, we need not despair of a slow, step-by-step approximation” (6). In fact, for Frege this process has already long since begun, insofar as he claims that “the signs of arithmetic, geometry, and chemistry” can be understood as “realizations, for specific fields, of Leibniz’s idea” (7). Frege sees his own project as one “that adds a new field, indeed,” and unsurprisingly (given the typical ego of the innovator logician) “the central one, which borders on all the others” (7).

Frege does not hesitate to capitalize immediately on this foray into the metaphorical well of geopolitics, proceeding therefrom directly to empire. The thought-script, he writes, can from this strategically advantageous position, “fill the gaps in the existing formula languages, connect their hitherto separated fields into a single domain, and extend this domain to include fields that up until now have lacked such a language” (7). In other words, the thought-script can solidify and fortify the infrastructure of thought, unify its power in a centrally-located unified command center, and then embark on a campaign of conquest of new territories for this emboldened regime of thought. The potential resonance here with the diary’s insistence on a newly purified and powerful German monarchy is striking.

The word “purity” recurs yet again, and in specific relation to this idea, at the beginning of the first subsection of the first section, in reference to “*the more comprehensive domain of pure*

*thought in general*" (11). The second subsection then turns to the issue of judgment [*Urteil*], and of the judgment-stroke [*Urteilstreich*]. This emphasis on judgment is one that pervades the entire *Thoughtscript*, and it is an interesting one in light of the previous connections I have suggested between the "political" content of the diary and the "philosophical" content of this text. Put more directly, Frege here imports a concept into the highly abstract field of logic and mathematics, the most important denotation of which lies in practical affairs, especially jurisprudence and politics.

Despite acknowledging all these unlikely connections, the reader will likely object, nevertheless, that my analyses are based on only weak and scarce evidence. To answer this objection, I now offer similar analyses of (similarly) interesting moments in the *Foundations of Arithmetic*. Because Frege's tone there is more conversational, it offers many more moments with which to buttress my analyses of the *Thoughtscript*.

### **Questions of Race in Frege's *Foundations of Mathematics***

Frege's introduction asserts boldly (and arguably contra Aristotle) that "Thought is in essentials everywhere the same: there is no question as to whether for different objects there are different kinds of laws of thought" (12). The merely apparent differences, Frege argues, returning to his arch-concept of purity, "consist only in the greater or less purity and independence of psychological influences, and on external aids to thought" (12). There is only one qualitative form of thinking, then, for Frege, but there are various quantities of purity within it. And if one were to object that activities such as basic arithmetical calculations constitute counterexamples to this claim, Frege would respond that he denies such calculations the status of thought at all. "One can of course use number signs mechanically," he writes, "just as one can speak by parroting words: but that may hardly be called thinking" (13).

Three paragraphs later, and perhaps thinking of J. S. Mill, Frege asserts that "arithmetic has absolutely nothing to do with sensations," nor with their "fluctuation and indeterminacy," nor with the "inner images" that they create in the mind of the mathematician (14). That there may be a deep-seated fear in Frege behind this rejection of sensation is suggested later in the same paragraph. "If in the existing flux of things there is nothing fixed," he writes, "eternity persists, then the knowability of the world would end and everything would plummet into confusion" (15).

That Frege might be drawing on a (perhaps unconscious) political idea here is suggested by a claim only a few sentences afterward in regard to the concept of purity. "[T]here is often success first in recognizing a concept in its purity, in peeling away the foreign wrappings that conceal it from the mind's eyes" (15). Remember again the "foreign wrappings" that in the diary prevent German Jews from being distinguished from other Germans, making them impossible to detect by mere visual inspection. Remember also Frege's analogy, according to which his thought-script can be thought of as a kind of microscopic thinking capable of searching out invisible truths.

Later in this same paragraph, Frege refers for the first time to J. S. Mill as his explicit opponent. Frege notes, again in regard to purity, that within Mill's conception, "Instead of finding there a special purity of the concept, where one believes their source to lie near, one sees everything blurry and indistinct as through a haze" (15). In addition to purity, this sentence also returns to the (genetically-resonant) concept of source, and hints at the metaphor popular in Christianity of bodily knowledge as "seeing as through a glass darkly." Views in the philosophy of mathematics such as that of J. S. Mill have been termed by their opponents "psychologism," and Frege asserts here that "mathematics must refuse to tolerate all assistance from the side of psychology" (16).

It is perhaps no surprise that someone with Frege's anti-Semitic views would be hostile to a discipline whose goal is to explore the hidden depths of the human mind. For Frege, however (as well as many of his analytic followers) such issues are irrelevant, as evinced in one of Frege's "basic principles," found only a few paragraphs later. "The psychological is to be sharply separated from the logical, the subjective from the objective" (17). Thus, Frege insists that the question for the text's definitions "is not whether they are natural, but whether they penetrate to the crux of the matter and are logically exceptionless" (17). Note here the violent rhetoric of penetration, the Christianity-resonant metaphor of the crux or cross, and the positing of a necessary condition which Frege's own work in this text (as Hersh notes) fails to satisfy.

One example of a potentially race-connoting moment in the *Foundations* is found in the first of four brief numbered sections at the end of the introduction. It appears in the context of Frege's insistence on "rigor," which is thereafter the most frequent and important concept in the text. "In arithmetic," he writes, "because of the Indian origin of many of its methods and concepts, a more lax way of reasoning arose than in geometry as developed by the Greeks" (18). Paraphrasing strategically, for Frege, the darker-skinned Indians did not have the rigor (or intellectual purity?) that the Greeks did. And yet, it has been suggested that all Greek philosophy and science derives ultimately from Indian sources.

Returning to the rhetoric of rigor, Frege writes in section two of "the movement directed toward greatest rigor" (18). Also in sympathy with Leibniz, but without Leibniz's explicitly religious justifications, Frege claims that the "simplification" resulting from the pursuit of fewer and fewer "primitive truths," "is a goal worth striving for in itself" (19). Is Frege assuming an in-depth knowledge of Leibniz in the reader, or does he merely consider it another obvious truth that "one should seek simplicity for its own sake"?

In the next major (post-introduction) section of the book, "I. Opinions of Several Writers on the Nature of Arithmetical Propositions," Frege again first sets his sights on J. S. Mill, and again criticizes him in the name of purity. "Mill always confuses applications that one can make of an arithmetical proposition," Frege complains, "with the pure mathematical proposition itself" (26). As a counterexample to what Frege has earlier termed Mill's "gingerbread or pebble arithmetic," wherein (according to Frege) every number is the result of a concrete perception of a number of things, Frege resorts to a political example.

Something can be part of something else, Frege insists, in ways other than being a physical sub-heap taken from a larger heap, such as “political assassinations as a part of murder as a whole” (26). One could argue, however, that such a conception is only made possible by the fact that both political assassinations and murders in general are originally concrete events in the world. The axiologically-loaded content of these two concepts, assassination and murder, actually seems to reinforce this point.

Eventually Frege also discusses one of the abiding themes of the larger project from which this article is taken, namely the phenomenon of whiteness in logical texts, and does so in support of attaching objective meaning to whiteness. “One ordinarily thinks by means of ‘white,’” Frege writes, “a certain perception, which, of course, is entirely subjective; but even in ordinary language use, it appears to me, it frequently abounds in objective sense” (41). One ordinary language example that Frege offers in support of his objectivist view of color is as follows: “One might say: It now *appears* red, but it *is* white” (41). One might interpret this example as Frege again showing concern with deceptive appearances, this time in connection to a word he conceives of as “abounding” in “objective” meaning.

Before returning to the issue of color, Frege revisits the primary subject of the *Foundations*, one which Frege understands as similar to color in its objectivity, namely number. Frege notes that “the French ‘*uni*’ means ‘even’, ‘smooth’,” and that “‘unity’ is also used in a similar way, when the political unity of a country, unity of a work of art, is spoken of” (45). Note here the explicit return to a political theme only a few pages after having elaborated on the objective meaningfulness of color. One page later, Frege (again) returns to the issue of color, and he (again) does so through an example involving deceptive appearances. This time, however, the example also involves differentiation, categorization, and perhaps even a suggestion of the political.

If I, for example, in contemplation of a white and a black cat disregard the properties by which they are distinguished, then I might arrive at the concept ‘cat’. If I now also bring them both under this concept and perhaps call them units, then the white one still remains white, and the black black. Also thereby, from the fact that I do not think about the colors, or myself undertake to draw no conclusions from their difference, the cats will not become colorless (47).

The point seems to be that defining characteristics never go away, even if one tries to think (or wish) them away. Applying this insight strategically to the content of the diaries, perhaps Frege felt that Jews also remain Jews, and that “pure” Germans remain “pure” Germans, whether one thinks of both Jews and Germans as humans or not.

Pursuing Frege’s points further, “units” can also mean a certain quantity of military personnel, and a few pages later Frege in fact brings up a similar subject. “I also believe,” he writes, “that one is justified to speak of 45 million Germans without previously having thought of or set down an ordinary German 45 million times, which might be somewhat cumbersome” (53). Here Frege (seemingly) casually suggests the current might (in population) of the German

people; and he does so for no (apparent) reason except than to offer a basic counterexample to his opponent, Hankel. Perhaps, though, there are other potentially race-connected reasons at work in this choice of example; maybe they are even linked to the previous example of the cats.

Frege returns to the theme of the German population again a few pages later in a rare poetic moment in the *Foundations*. He argues that “the concept ‘inhabitant of Germany’” is in fact “a function of time,” given the constant change in population. “Thus, in the concept itself,” Frege points out, “there is already something flowing” (57). It seems that there might be something else “already flowing” here in Frege—perhaps a surge of nationalistic pride in his native Germany, whose population he has just paraded out for display a few pages earlier? In other words, might there be something in these ideas that is stirring to Frege—something which might explain why he suddenly waxes eloquent? Perhaps supporting this interpretation, Frege asserts on the next page that the “collecting power of a concept” is “superior” to that of a mere apperception, as evidenced in its ability to “join together the inhabitants of Germany into a whole” (58). Is this whole, one wonders, merely “Germany,” or might it be something more, perhaps even something like the “pure” Germany envisioned by the Third Reich under Hitler?

Again with political overtones, Frege writes a few pages later that “the form of identity,” such as a person’s identity as a German, “is the most sovereign in arithmetic” (63). In addition to the political origin of the word “sovereignty,” Frege goes on to give an example from actual political history. “For that matter,” he writes, “in the name ‘Columbus’ there is nothing about discovery or about America, and yet the same man is known as Columbus and the discoverer of America” (63). Thus is added to “sovereignty” the connotations of conquest and tyranny, by way of the pathfinder for perhaps the most expansive and brutal trans-continental empire in human history.

When Frege finally offers his own definition of number here in the *Foundations*, other concepts and phrases with problematic dimensions keep appearing. First, Frege observes how fixed identities allow one to “repeatedly recognize something even though it is given in a different way” (70). Might this something also be a someone, such as perhaps a Jewish person in Nazi Germany?

Second, Frege recommends his own system to the reader because within it “there is therefore complete conformity” (71). One could hear in this reference a resonance with the absolute conformity required and enforced by the Nazi regime (71).

Third, the rhetoric of purity returns here with a vengeance, as with a description of his “relation-concept” as belonging to “pure logic,” and of a definition of Leibniz as “purely logical” (73, 77).

Fourth, Frege further recommends his view on the basis of its being “organic,” like a seed, and of its being concerned with the “laws of the laws of nature” (86, 85). Here again the natural world in all its concrete particularity is conquered by sovereign abstraction.

Fifth, Frege offers a complementary attack on alternatives to his view, on three separate occasions, merely on the grounds that they “bring something foreign” into the matter (93, 94).

And finally, on the last page of the book, Frege celebrates how his approach allows “the possibility of avoiding the interference of external things” (94). Might an unconscious referent of these “external things” include the despised Jews in Germany? In light of the diaries, and when viewed altogether, these moments appear to raise important questions.

## Conclusion

I have tried to show in this article how Hersh's criticisms of the philosophy of mathematics in general, and of Frege in particular, can be illuminatingly extended to the philosophy of logic. For one thing, the reader has observed how various philosophers in the analytic philosophy branch of Hersh's “Mainstream” tradition, including Hannay, Mendelsohn, Gabriel and Heijenoort, have defended Frege from conservative and ultimately Christian perspectives. For another, the virulent racism and conservative Christianity in Frege's infamous 1924 diary is impossible to deny. Lastly, and perhaps most surprisingly, even Frege's driest and most abstract texts, from the philosophy of logic and mathematics, are peppered with potentially race-connoting moments.

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## **Jeanne Hersch's realist existentialism. Reasoning on the human between nature and freedom**

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### **Abstract:**

Jeanne Hersch's realist existentialism is an original point of arrival in the panorama of contemporary Existentialism. The Ginevean brings together Kant, Bergson, Jaspers and she promotes a practical philosophy that preserves the existential dialectics between reason and existence through freedom, adding the centrality of reality to it. The aim of this paper is to introduce the heterogeneous Herschian path and to point out some relevant aspects of the way in which nature and freedom interact in the different phases of her philosophy. Hersch searches for the human ground moving from a real freedom and, after having elaborated an inner freedom, a political liberty and a responsible freedom, she finally enlightens the connection between the existential point of view and the world. In this sense, it is possible to define Jeanne Hersch as the gesture of existentialism, since she re-elaborates the theoretical existentialist tradition and applies this re-elaboration to the problems of her time, giving a practical model of existential authenticity.

**Keywords:** Jeanne Hersch, Karl Jaspers, Immanuel Kant, Henri Bergson, existentialism, realism, practical philosophy

In *La libertà incarnata*, Francesca De Vecchi defines Jeanne Hersch a *realist existentialist* that develops a *gradualist theory of freedom*, which is careful both to the values of reference and to their actualisation in every day life or in the projects of an existence (De Vecchi, 2008). Approaching a philosopher that also deals with pedagogy, politics, human rights, sciences, medicine and other important social battles of her time, is not so simple: using an image of *Textes*, without a valid reference, we risk to enter a labyrinth in which the more we get closer to the center, the more we forget our goal to reach the exit (Hersch, 1962).

The aim of this paper is to clarify the steps that lead to a paradigm that is still largely unknown, avoiding to explain some details of the gradualist theory of freedom and trying to *mime* Hersch<sup>1</sup>, in order to hold together her reflections and her real experiences, which are both essential to understand her philosophy. To do this, in the first part of this paper, I will introduce

Hersch's experience, bringing together her education, her bibliography and her life. I will retrace the most relevant milestones of her life and the most important passages of her main works, highlighting in which way they develop the dialectics between nature and freedom that characterises the Herschian path. In the second part, I will consider some gains of this path and clarify the originality of Hersch's paradigm, briefly presenting some points that should be considered, when trying to place Hersch in the philosophical and existential panorama.

Today, few people remember Hersch's thought, even in her homeland, and most of them consider her just for her political contribution. Some researches have tried to go deeper, in order to clarify the originality and the relevance of the Genevean's reflections in philosophy and for the problems of our contemporary time, but there is no scientific bibliography in English that contextualises and introduces her from a general philosophical point of view. This paper outlines a general framework that does not have enough space to deepen all the details that deserve further explanations, so it could be a general introduction for showing the coherence of an etherogeneous path, indicating issues to be explored in future research, especially from non-philosophical points of view.

### **The realist root of Hersch's reflection**

Hersch's first passion is literature. When she finished her studies, she decided to enroll in the Faculty of Arts and Literature at the University of Geneva, starting to work on a thesis about the value of image in Henri Bergson. She published her final version, *Les images dans l'oeuvre de M. Bergson*, in 1931. In 1929, the Genevean spent a semester in Heidelberg to learn German, and she came to know by chance about the courses of Karl Jaspers: although she was unable to understand the lessons for her linguistic limits, she felt that in the professor's words there was the answer to an original problem, that immediately became the object of her commitment<sup>2</sup>. Once she got her degree, Hersch decided to come back to Heidelberg in 1931, to deepen the knowledge of Jaspers and, after few months, she moved to Freiburg-im-Breisgau, in order to get to know Martin Heidegger, who, in her opinion, was the emblem of the Nazi thought and the disembodied reflection<sup>3</sup>.

The courage of a twenty-year old Jew that decides to go to the heart of Nazism, few months before the emanation of the racial laws, is already a clear signal of Hersch's attention to what happens in her time, to understand it, to live it and finally to give a shape to this meeting. The works that are born from the first two meetings of Hersch will remain the pillars of her thought. In *Les images dans l'oeuvre de M. Bergson*, which is the first of these two meetings, the Genevean follows up the intention of Bergson to give back importance to reality. She studies how, in Bergson, images succeed in being a medium between the concept and the world, becoming a symbol that contains something of both the extremes: "I therefore call 'image' any figure of style that aims at giving the idea a more sensitive form" (Hersch, 2001, 101-102). Philosophy should move from the experience of this condition, which constitutes an originally deeper ground than the barren learning of knowledge.

Reducing understanding to a rational evaluation that fits in a logical system risks to draw abstract conclusions from a material of concrete origin. Thanks to Bergson, Hersch understands that we cannot sacrifice lived experience to pure logic and we have to compare, to look, to listen to the world, searching for an appropriate language to theoretically form the empirical-sensitive experiences that the subject uses to create something real from such a comparison. The *lived world* and the *reasoned world* cannot be separated and the Bergsonian image is a real transposition from one world to the other<sup>4</sup>.

The study of the role of image in Bergson clarifies Hersch's original interest: to rehabilitate the dimension of the real in which the human can flourish, *com-prebending* the ever-dominant intelligence and the ordinary experience<sup>5</sup>. The subject must own both the strict order that comes from the *philosopher's gaze* and the wonder that comes from the *artist's gaze* (Hersch, 2001, 122), so the real experience of what goes beyond logic must still play a central role, to give form to what would otherwise remain unexpressed. This meta-philosophical reflection on the twofold constitutive instance of philosophy is the first move towards realism in Hersch's analysis of Bergson's philosophy.

What is clear in Hersch's commentary on Bergson's most famous works is that the subject's theoretical path is always marked by the relationship with the matter in the world, because "things are there" (Hersch, 2001, 122). This matter welcomes the subject, until he modifies it and creates something new in it, after lingering near it and listening to it. This constant presence of the world in the subjective path, as the ground to start from or to engrave in, is the second Herschian move towards realism.

In third instance, Bergson covers somehow for Hersch the role that Hume had for Kant, with his intuition of a reversed metaphysics by things to ideas and, even more, with a freedom as *organic development*, "necessary and free at the same time, because it realises itself through an inner law of the subject and it is actually identifiable with him" (Hersch, 2001, 141). Freedom is unpredictable, as Bergson's theory of *élan vital* stresses, but it also follows an inner law that somehow gives a direction to the subject. Once woken up, Hersch opens her eyes and discovers to be in the world, but something still misses her and, without this something, reality risks to flow without leaving traces: there is no moral decision to take and the natural development of our being tends to drift into determinism<sup>6</sup>.

### **The existential freedom**

Knowing existentialism through Jaspers, Hersch finds a dam to reality flow. The approach to Jaspers, with the dialogue between existence and reason that he represents, leads to *L'illusion philosophique*, in 1936. In this work, Hersch improves the metaphilosophical intention that had already animated *Les images dans l'oeuvre de M. Bergson* and states in a clearer way which role philosophy covers in her horizon. With Jaspers and, before him, Kant, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, the possibility of a total and objective knowledge is by now impossible: a philosophy that pretends to give certain explanations, in competition with science, becomes unthinkable. After Jaspers, philosophy

risks its death, because its illusion of truth has been disclosed: “Will philosophy exit from the dead end to which it has been reduced from the loss of her fundamental illusion?” (Hersch, 2005, 143).

Herschian pessimism is just a provocation: the scientific soul risks to lead to the death of philosophy, once its illusion has been disclosed, but this move can leave some space to the other soul of philosophy, which is situated more in depth. If today old systems as those of Aristotle, Saint Thomas Aquinas or Hegel are still studied, it is not for the knowledge that they bring, but rather for the example of authenticity that can be found in them. Here the twofold constitutive instance of philosophy returns, because the Genevan asserts that “there is therefore in every philosophical problem – whatever its content is and whoever may ask it – a *duplicity*: its real sense is a decision of the subject, and its explicit sense is the knowledge of an object” (Hersch, 2005, 28). In great philosophers, one can find their engagement towards the truth that they think to have found, a *simple gesture* that is present in every thought and around which they have built their whole life. Philosophers are the best example of how the subject has to discover his own *inner law* and to engage his freedom towards it.

The simple gesture becomes the metaphysical foundation of the subject from an existential point of view and it is for this reason that the freedom that the subject uses for choosing the simple gesture can be defined *existential*. The reader can understand through the philosophers’ testimony how to engage his *existential freedom* and how to use it, in order to do something of his existence and to start *being*. In this way, the reader does not earn some objective knowledge, but rather a subjective truth<sup>7</sup>. Once left aside scientific totality, philosophy can finally become a model of authenticity, to discover, in the depth of every subject, a freedom as the necessity to find the simple gesture at the basis of every human<sup>8</sup>.

This means that, while searching for the ground of freedom, the intrinsic nature of the subject, with his Kantian determination in space and in time, is not the only limit that freedom can realistically meet. With existential freedom, the *development* that Bergson theorises in his *organic* point of view on freedom is still original, but no more arbitrary, because the subject that wants *to be* has to engage his freedom towards his organically oriented simple gesture. A natural tendency is present since the beginning, but the subject is free to search for it, to adhere to it and to make something out of it. Only in this way, quite far from a naïve free will, a biological life can become a human existence. For the moment, the path towards freedom has to pass through the enhancement of the real datum and the engagement that gets a simple gesture from the inner law. Some points are still unclear: what happens in daily life, in a world in which there are not only philosophers with their readers and when choices are not so essential for the subject?

### **The ontological freedom**

In the mid-30s, Hersch has already found a double example of authenticity at the base of her own simple gesture, between freedom and reality. It is time for her to apply this theoretical

simple gesture to the real world. Rather than knowing the world studying it, she prefers to discover it. She does not opt for a safe university career and, in 1933, she starts teaching to the *Ecole Internationale*, where she will stay up to 1955. Since the air is unbreathable in Europe, she takes two trips as preceptor, one in South America, between 1935 and 1936, and another in Siam, between 1938 and 1939, as private teacher of the royal family. Only in 1942, thanks to a scholarship of the *Fondation Lucerne* and to the possibility to decrease the amount of hours of teaching, she starts her doctoral research, which will lead to the publication of *L'être et la forme*. This work, together with the teaching degree lesson at the University of Geneva in 1947, *Discontinuité des perspectives humaines*, is the point of arrival of this second phase of Hersch's thought.

In a letter written while preparing her doctoral thesis, Hersch affirms that *form* is a *conditio sine qua non* of existence, moving a further step in her research on the free ground of the human: a human thought that wants to transcend form falls in an idealist illusion, while a reasoning that is unable of going over form falls in an animal materialism<sup>9</sup>. Things turn more complicated than in *L'illusion philosophique*: the free man, once received an existence and new eyes on the world, begins to walk through it, meeting various objects that, with Kant, are not revealed *in-themselves*. Hersch calls them *matter*. When the subject is interested in an object, he tries to exert his *hold* on it, and from the violent clash between the greedy *hold* and the impenetrable *matter*, he gets the *form*, something with the imprint of the two strengths from which it has been produced. Since matter is unknowable in-itself, the dimension of the subject will not be the world, but rather the *reality*, as the set of the forms that the subject *incarnates* in the world<sup>10</sup>.

Through the ontological study of *L'être et la forme*, *existential freedom* is now extended to every human existence – not only to philosophers and to their readers – as the top of a pyramid, which can be defined *ontological freedom* and is about everyone's daily life. The novel *Temps alternés*<sup>11</sup> is the attempt to apply such theoretical thought that would otherwise be abstract. The protagonist of the book lives a double love story with Pierre, who is her ideal man, even if he seems to be not interested in her, and Marc, her first true love. The young woman understands that Marc is not the right man for her, comparing him with Pierre and feeling that Marc cannot really find a place in the *reality* that she is actualising in her existence. Pierre represents for the protagonist of the novel an ideal, which guides the real actualisation of her existence. In the same way, *existential freedom* guides *ontological freedom*, which determines decisions in every day life. On the one side, *existential freedom* is the content of the simple gesture, when to opt for something different means to give up on oneself, as for Antigone, forced not to bury Polyneices. On the other side, *ontological freedom* deals with choices that are not essential, but they are still needed to follow a practice of good life, respecting the principles that one feels as absolute.

The practical knowledge of the world leads Hersch to discover that while man walks, he finds things and he has the power to decide to let them enter his own existence. With a judgment of value, man gives a form and welcomes in his own reality that object that “is not yet but deserves to be there” (Hersch, Dufour, Dufour, 2006, 78). In *La transcendance du singulier*,

Hersch outlines the relationship between the worthy object, the capacity for freedom and the novelty of a free reality in the world: the more the objective matter is worthy, the stronger the subject will try to exert his hold on it, giving a subjective form to it, the more he will introduce a novelty in the natural world<sup>12</sup>. This novelty is the ontological production of the subject, who does not add new matter to the natural world, but rather gives a new order and form to it, trying to make room for what is worthy for him in it. In this way, the human freedom that acts because it *wants* – and not simply because it *has to* – can *decrySTALLISE* the world natural determinism (Hersch, 2006, 7).

At the end of Hersch's ontological reflection, it is possible to draw some new conclusions about the dialectics between freedom and nature in the human. First, it is clear that the human subject has to use his freedom to build his existence in the world, starting from the natural dimension of his inner law and of the matter, and coming back to it thanks to the incarnation of new forms in it. The point of arrival of Hersch's reflection in the first half of the century is an *inner freedom* that is committed to what is worthy for the subject, through existential freedom, and actualises this commitment in the incarnation of forms that constitute images of what is worthy for the subject better and better, through ontological freedom<sup>13</sup>.

Second, such gradual incarnation of what is worthy for the subject leads to a gradualist theory of freedom, in which ontological freedom is used for building daily a reality that reflects the simple gesture, once the subject has engaged his existential freedom, choosing in an *absolute instant* something that is unconditionally necessary<sup>14</sup>. Being free means constantly striving to make existence a coherent image of that decision that has founded it, in the point in which freedom and necessity get in touch for the subject, and to incarnate this image in a real form. Here the dialectics between nature and freedom is more present than ever, because the subject can experience something that is naturally necessary for him, but he is free to commit to it and to incarnate it in the *mode* he prefers.

Third, it is possible to conclude that both freedom and nature deal with necessity, but they do so in two different ways. On the one side, nature belongs to the order of facts and it is regulated by the deterministic principle of cause and effect, so there is a heteronomous relationship with necessity. In the order of facts, necessity determines what happens and the natural course goes as it has to. On the other side, freedom belongs to the order of human being, in which the ontological activity of giving form depends on the subjective sense. The subject uses his freedom to give being to what is worth being, namely something that the subject feels as necessary as the highest value. In the order of human being, the subject decides whether he will use his freedom to incarnate his necessary object or not and in which mode he will incarnate it, so there is an autonomous relationship with necessity.

### **The political liberty**

Hersch is not yet satisfied with her research. In 1951, she gets a scholarship from the *Fondation*

*Pro Helvetia*, to temporarily leave university and to bring forth some studies in Paris. A new phase of her thought begins: in 1956, she publishes *Idéologies et réalité*, the last systematic work in her literature; subsequently, with her affirmation as international lecturer, she will appear in television or radio, collaborate with newspapers and write short papers on the most varied matters, to give a rigorous opinion on the problems proposed from time to time.

In the second half of her life, she tries to go even deeper in reality, applying what she has theoretically understood in her life, still giving importance to the world she lives in, with all its challenges. In many interviews, the Genevean has affirmed that human rights are the challenge of this age, indeed politics and human rights are her main interest in these years. From the 1950s, she takes part to international issues and collaborates with national, European and world association. The most remarkable collaboration is that with Unesco, of which she has been manager of the Division of Philosophy between 1966 and 1968 and member of the executive committee in the 1970s.

Behind all these choices and commitments, there is the consciousness that the subjective freedom that she has defined until 1950 is not enough. The theoretical approach to political ideas and human rights is quite complex, so here the attention will be focused just on the position that they cover in Herschian horizon. The correct reflection and application of *existential freedom* and *ontological freedom* do not consider that man is not alone in the world and he has to live with other men. If up to this moment Hersch has dealt with one root of human – the *soul* and its *freedom*, now it is important to consider the other root – *body*, which is implicitly in Herschian reasoning from a long time, in her *realism* as enhancement of the natural component of human. Rather than moving between *freedom* and *reality*, the subject now swings between *freedom* and *body*<sup>15</sup>. After actualising freedom in something real, it is crucial to consider that man is both freedom and body, so he has certain biological demands. This leads to a deeper analysis of the human dialectics between freedom and nature from a different point of view.

This perspective adjustment has two fundamental consequences. First of all, if man is also body, close to the potentially free act, there is also the submission to natural laws and the consequent need to preserve one's own life. Secondly, if man is not only freedom but also body, actualising existence in a reality is not enough, because freedom can be threatened by other men that try to preserve their life. The biological demands inevitably involve the use of strength. Knowing how freedom works is only one of the conditions for being free, because, in addition, one must be sure to have the right external conditions for being free. At this step, Hersch speaks for the first time of *responsibility*, when the evil appears as a likely degeneration of something that man cannot live without. In *Idéologies et réalité*, politics is born when man recognises the possibility of the evil: "Man is exactly this being that, without getting rid of the evil (in himself), knows it and declares war to him. Thanks to this, he is a juridical and political animal" (Hersch, *Idéologies*, 94).

In this hard task, it is important to bring together the *moral demand*, represented by Kant,

and the *demand of result*, embodied by Machiavelli<sup>16</sup>. In this way, it should be easier to clarify the *practical antinomy*<sup>17</sup> that founds good politics, namely the awareness that man cannot live without the use of strength. It is necessary to learn how to use *power* to keep the use of the natural *force* under control, paying attention to the values to be preserved, as well as to the success or the result (De Monticelli, 2017). As the use of ontological freedom must take as an end the incarnation of the worthy object to which existential freedom is committed, so natural force must become power, taking as an end the worthy preservation of human inner freedom.

According to Hersch, if the reflection on freedom has to be even more realistic, it must consider that inner freedom needs “outer conditions of liberty” (Hersch, 1982, 2) that preserve the human capacity of acting freely. Politics is materialised in an institution that guarantees a *political liberty* while always discussing about the best application of this statute, a space to be held empty, to allow every citizen to fill it with his inner freedom, where the public dimension must not absorb the private one<sup>18</sup>. A space where the dignity of a free human can always find a shelter from a raw use of force.

### **The responsible freedom**

The political reflection, with its preservation of an empty space, is still too abstract for Hersch's realism. If the danger of the evil is constant and the natural temptation of using *force* instead of *power* is definitely strong, a *détour philosophique* is needed, to catch what sciences cannot see, aiming at a horizon of sense to definitely win the temptation, still saving freedom<sup>19</sup>. Thanks to *Idéologies et réalité*, Hersch finds in political liberty a negative duty not to invade in any way the space left empty for inner freedom, but this work does not explain how to find a positive *equal right for all* that implies the respect of the inner freedom of all the other human beings<sup>20</sup>.

The problem is: how to find a universal ground to preserve an antifoundationalist root such as freedom? The solution is found thanks to the engagement to human rights. Hersch used her prestigious position in Unesco to publish *Le droit d'être un homme* in 1969, a collection of fragments, traditions, famous texts coming from the whole world and concerning freedom. This collection shows that the immediately recognisable capability to freely choose leads to an idea of human dignity that is common to every part of the World in every time and not only to Western thought. Finally, the reflection on human rights demonstrates that the inner freedom described by the first Hersch is a *fundamental exigence* that constitutes the universal ground of the human.

De Vecchi notes that the fundamental exigence becomes the real experience of the Kantian *categorical imperative*. *Le droit d'être un homme* proves that the categorical imperative of the human fundamental exigence does not belong only to the *noumenon* and it can be experienced in the world, in the universal human capacity of acting freely, in every time and in every space<sup>21</sup>. Behind the pluralism that nowadays permeates every aspect of common life, there is an anthropological unity in the background, thanks to existential freedom, which characterises

men. In such fundamental exigence, Hersch finds the answer she was searching for, a freedom that forces to go to the root, without forcing to any specific root (De Monticelli, 2015): if he wants to exist, every subject must discover the object that he wants fully and use his freedom to incarnate it, but then every existence actualises its freedom in a different mode.

At the end of her path, the real experience of the fundamental exigence of freedom obliges Hersch to elaborate a *responsible freedom*<sup>22</sup> that adds the recognition of the other's freedom to the exercise of one's own freedom. This freedom is responsible precisely because it does not only have to worry about being and becoming a real existence - as inner freedom does -, but also to do this respecting others' freedom. A subject can be free only relating himself to the other, but the relationship cannot exist, if he does not recognise and does not guarantee the equal dignity of whom is nearby him. Hersch does not deepen the role of the narrative dimension and of the recognition that comes from the other for the personal identity, but she cares about promoting a free action that respects, preserves, enhances the other's action.

*Responsible freedom* is the final result of Hersch's research on the free foundation of human, because it remembers to every man the duty of finding a way for the subjective incarnation of one's existence *while* taking good care of the other's freedom in always-new modes, in a world that changes continuously. In the second half of her life, Hersch understands that the use of existential and ontological freedom must be tolerant (Hersch, 2008; Hersch, 1995) and the authentic existence has to respect both the simple gesture of the subject and the others' one or, in other words, that no idea can be more important than the real human dignity of a person. If politics reaches the negative duty of not invading the empty space of *political freedom*, human rights add to it the positive, methodological principles of the *not owned transcendence* and the *absolute decision of the other*<sup>23</sup>. To sum up, at the end of the Herschian path between freedom and nature, the actualisation of human being's authentic freedom has to: find its natural inner law; engage towards an ideal simple gesture, to find in the material datum an occasion to give form to such simple gesture; decrystallise the natural world thanks to its free reordering through subjective forms; responsibly respect the other's fundamental exigence.

Hersch's realist reflection on human rights leaves two legacies. The first one is the battle against angelism, namely the pretension to be able to live without the bond with the world and the use of strength that it involves. As shown above with practical antinomy, the subject's soul can never be separated from his body, so we must always deal with our natural limits/demands and with the real situations, dynamics and problems of the world we live in, in order to *be present in our own time* (Hersch, Dufour, Dufour, 2006). The second one is the duty of recalibrating human rights defense in every place and in every time, since theoretical freedom involves changing challenges in the imperfection of the real world. Human rights obligation is more ethical than moral, because they enter the phenomonic dimension and they become the experience of a meeting, an experience with a normative validity, which gives to politics some instructions for preserving the political empty space<sup>24</sup>. Consequentially, from the 1950s, once elaborated

her theoretical, subjective horizon, Hersch has preferred to develop her real, intersubjective engagement, helping to give boundaries to contemporary science, technique, education, politics, medicine, economy. In four words, to *search for the sense* in her own time.

### **Bringing existentialism from *theoria* to *poiesis***

After having mimed Hersch, it should be clear in which sense her interpretation of Bergson, Jaspers and, through him, Kant, leads to a philosophy that is made up of reality, existence and reason. The result is what De Vecchi defines a *practical philosophy*<sup>25</sup>, composed by a moment for the *theoria*, as reflection between reason and existence to find values and to establish a good behaviour, and a moment for the *poiesis*, as actualisation of the *theoria* in a new existence in the world. Hersch has shown how to do this in her thought, elaborating her position between 1931 and 1956 and actualising it for the rest of her time in the interventions on particular problems in her time. She has done this also in her life, taking time to find her simple gesture and going then to test it by acting in the world and trying to give some solutions through it. Since in the existentialist panorama it is always essential to move from the personal experience to understand one's thought, this practical philosophy from *theoria* to *poiesis* is exactly what is hidden behind the definition "being present to her own time", which Hersch loved to give of herself, leading to a *praxis* that actualises *theoria* in a gradual, daily *poiesis*. This philosophical position has some implications that deserve to be considered.

First, at the end of the Herschian path, there is the awareness that the human dimension must always find a balance between two extremes that it can never reach: world and transcendence, matter and form, the use of strength between ethics and result, reaching the deepest dichotomy, between freedom and body. It is this harmonious equilibrium that, Hersch says implicitly in some passages of her literature, Bergson and Jaspers have not succeeded in finding, because the first has been too unbalanced towards body and reality, the second towards freedom and transcendence. If the nature of man was just one, this unity could have tried to turn into totality, instead the man that tries to reduce himself to the natural datum makes the *beast* and the man that tries to reach the sky makes the *angel*, but none of them is free (Hersch, 2005, 40).

Free man must be saved from a persuasive and threatening objectivity, which requires an alienating answer. Free man must be able to find his own authentic realisation fighting against a world and a matter hostilely impregnable – through *body* – and leaving a scar on them, to change them and to leave a proof of him – through *freedom*. If a unity as possession of the natural or transcendental laws was possible, what would happen to originality? If truth was conquered, how an engaged choice and the human dignity could be preserved?

Second, Herschian philosophy is a point of arrival that values the roads opened by Kant, Bergson and Jaspers, trying to keep them in dialogue, in order to enhance their possibilities. In the first instance, approaching the insuperable Kantian formalism with Jaspers' existentialism allows to create an occasion of dialogue with the *noumenon* in the *phenomenon* for the *reason* of the

*Copernican Revolution*, because, thanks to Bergson's influence, transcendentals like form, freedom and transcendence can be met in the world. In the second instance, Bergsonian metaphysics, which starts from reality and arrives to concepts through *intuition*, finds a more stable basis thanks to Jaspers's Kant, namely the freedom that can be actualised in a real object as a reference in the world that flows, choosing in dialogue with reason and existence. In the third instance, the essential dialogue between reason and existence, which Jaspers formulates moving from Kant, rediscovers at the root of the subject a freedom that, through Bergson's definition of *organic development*, is less transcendent and finds a support for staying grounded, experimenting the datum as indispensable, and the world as occasion for meeting the transcendence and actualising existence.

Third, Hersch succeeds in going over the frequent accusations to existentialism, which she has discussed with the main exponents of the French existentialism, like Wahl, Marcel and Sartre, since she was a student. Existentialism was said to appeal transcendence too much, reaching irrationalism, to give value to negative categories such as anguish, shipwreck or the heideggerian *being-toward-death*, to despise society and move critics to it from an ivory tower. The attention to the practical actualisation of the theoretical reflection, together with the importance of reality and the natural world, as the matter to give form to and the dimension where to "test existence" (Hersch, 2006, 114), are relevant clues that an existential perspective that preserves a positive relationship with the world and the action is still possible. In this sense, world and action are essential elements for existence in the Genevan's path and Tarantino is right when she states that Herschian philosophy can be summed up in the principle "being is doing" (Tarantino, 2007).

A last point deserves a quick explanation: the awareness of the world richness has always sustained Hersch, although she prefers the authenticity of the burden of freedom to the safety of a necessary Truth. So fourth, it is possible to reread Hersch's existential path as a huge work of restitution, to properly transmit the wonder that gives sense to every gesture and that is the motor of the whole history of philosophy, as it is showed in *L'étonnement philosophique*. Rather than to stress the fact that we sail on open sea, taken by the nausea, continually risking the shipwreck, Hersch prefers to see, in the renunciation to possess the pure being, the occasion to keep in dialogue with it, showing a pity towards the world that has characterised other famous women of the twentieth century, like Arendt, Stein, Weil and Zambrano. This is due to the realist origin of Hersch's existentialism: many existentialist philosophers found their philosophy on *nothingness*, as Sartre would say, whereas the Genevan is always sustained by the hard core of the natural datum, which is an indispensable indication both as the inner law that gives an initial direction and as the matter in which to engrave existence. Hersch's existential progress does not go from the empty nothingness to the total fullness, but rather from the least determined world to the most determined one, as it is clarified in her frequent collisions with Sartre.

In conclusion, I would define Hersch as the *gesture of existentialism*. Thanks to the realist demand that comes from Bergson, the Genevean has taken the strong theoretical existentialist

tradition of whom has preceded her and, elaborating an original version of it, she has tried to convert it in a practice with poiethical effects. In this way, besides the example that every great philosopher's simple gesture leaves to posterity as a proof of existential freedom, she has left a second, even more important, example: the attention to how existential freedom must be declined in ontological freedom, in the subjective life of every day, and responsible freedom, in the intersubjective experience of the world. In her inaugural lesson of the winter semester of 1956, *Le métier de philosophe*, Hersch explains that philosophy is a reflexive activity that leads to a practice after itself, confirming what she says in *L'illusion philosophique*: "Sometimes it seems that philosophy through itself drives you out of itself, towards life, towards action, or towards science, or art, or religion. Sometimes it seems that the essential experience is only possible outside philosophy, when you stop talking about it" (Hersch, 1957, 6).

This is the teaching that better reflects Hersch's heritage, a contribution that once more is composed of *theoria* and *poiesis*, *freedom* and *nature*. This contribution gives a well-defined form to freedom. On the one side, this means that it has some clear limits and many aspects of the Herschian path deserve to be developed or reconsidered, because Hersch left them out or she addressed them from an unsystematic point of view. In particular, an analysis of the role of the other in the construction of the personal identity of the subject is missing in her path and, in this sense, Hersch's philosophy seems to be a paradigm on the free act rather than a philosophy on freedom from an existential point of view. On the other side, such limited paradigm is still a real result full of practical examples and references, and it is important to point out once again that this is possible only thanks to the dialectics between freedom and nature that animates Hersch's path, because freedom involves the reflection on meaning and nature involves the relevance of reality, leading to a philosophy that always tries to exist, incarnating the subjective meaning in the world. Such limited paradigm can only be the result of a realist existentialism and it constitutes a good matter that shows the possibilities of existentialism. Future philosophers can hold such matter to give a better determination to it through their forms, to work for a freer world to contemporary men.

### Endnotes:

1. "It is in this sense that for Jeanne Hersch *miming* means trying to think 'subjectively with the author', reconstructing step by step the path and the act that led him to the elaboration of his system. [...] In the *mimesis* there is a repetition by difference, a repetition that involves a change inside the subject because what is repeated is crossed by himself. One must not confuse the gesture of miming with the pure and simple imitation or repetition, since the mimic act is first of all an internal exercise of getting the gesture of freedom which is at the basis of every theoretical construction" (Tarantino, 2008, 72-73). All the passages cited in this work are my translations, because there is no English translation of the texts quoted in this paper.
2. In *Eclairer l'obscur: entretiens avec Gabrielle et Alfred Dufour*, Hersch admits that she has found the real nature of philosophy in Jaspers: "G.D.K. – This first meeting and this first seminary have played a role in your decision of devoting yourself to philosophy? J.H. – A decisive role. Listening to Jaspers, I discovered that philosophy was there" (Hersch, Dufour, Dufour, 2006, 25).
3. After reflecting on Heidegger's trust in Hitler, Hersch sums up her thought in few words: "I think that in Heidegger's philosophy there are some elements that lend themselves to every type of compromise. It leads to a

- more or less magic pathetic element that is a factor of irresponsibility. [...] The ideas that he developed in front of us, he did not submit them to our free judgement as the liberal attitude of philosophy asks for; he imposed them. There is an enchanting aspect in his philosophy” (Hersch, Dufour, Dufour, 2006, 29).
4. “The lived world and the reasoned world did not remain separated by a thick wall. Bergson himself uses images to think, to transpose from one world to another certain relationships that clearly exist and that we grasp thanks to experience, to reach a clear and expressible inner representation” (Hersch, 2001, 135).
  5. See Meccariello, 2009.
  6. “According to Hersch, the way Bergson deals with the problem of freedom is not moral. [...] It drifts into determinism. In Bergson, free action is not a decision, but simply the affirmation of the natural development of our being [...] – there is no choice to be made between different alternatives, there is no conflict of wills, there are no fractures, separations” (De Vecchi, 2008, 28).
  7. De Muralt perfectly sums up these passages from *L’illusion philosophique*: “In this objective intention of the philosopher, his way of being-in-the-world, his first attitude in the face of reality, and in order to resume a familiar expression of existentialism, his original existence, are realised and manifested. [...] It is this subjectivity that matters to know, through the cipher that manifests it indirectly, in its profound truth: subjective truth, says Jeanne Hersch, [...] metaphysical truth, she says more willingly” (De Muralt, 1966, 106-107). After a few pages, he concludes: “Philosophy is essentially neither objective knowledge, nor assured certainty, nor perfect expression: it is rather subjective truth in front of the real, it is engagement in the world and faithfulness of the inner mime that proves the becoming of man” (De Muralt, 196, 111).
  8. Hersch does not give a precise definition of *existential freedom* but, since this freedom is the basis of her whole thought, its meaning becomes clearer while reading all the other contributions in which she speaks of this space to be preserved for the authentic dialogue with what is essential for a subject. Christoff explains very well why *L’illusion philosophique* is important for *existential freedom*, as a justification of what Hersch will do in her life and with her philosophy: “The illusion denounced with audacity and freshness consists, to sum up, in considering the philosophical research related to an object and to the intellectual treatment of it, while the truth of philosophy is one thing with the commitment of the reasoning, with the practice, with the attitude of the philosopher, with a ‘gesture’ that one can ‘mime’. [...] This limit redirects the consciousness to the freedom of its existence escaped from the net of the causes. Philosophy is then the struggle for being sure of the freedom of the existence of this ‘possible consciousness’, an absolutely one truth. So the teaching of philosophy is not the transmission of a knowledge about objects, but a *process of awakening*” (Christoff, 2000, 306-307). Chello goes in the same direction: “The question that ends the book – ‘*Will philosophy get out of the alley to which reduced itself?*’ (p. 143) – is just apparently without an answer, since identifying the fundamental illusion of philosophy undoes only one type of making philosophy. [...] It is in this impossibility that Hersch identifies that empty space, which is the space of being and so, since she is not nihilist, a space in which is revealed not the essence, but the potential presence, that becomes freedom. Namely the constant research of being, a research which is fallacious from the beginning, if one reflects in terms of reaching a result, [...] but philosophy is that path that lets the articulation of that clue, which remembers the division between being and existence” (Chello, 2007, 75).
  9. The letter is kept in *Nachl. J. Hersch 1.2* at Zentralbibliothek in Zurich.
  10. Piguet gives a clear explanation of these passages: “Reality is neither the divine and the absolute, nor the human and the relative considered in isolation, but a compromise among the two. Or better: a *mix-up*. This mix-up, is called by J. Hersch *form*. Let us explain better: man is there, in front of the unknown: he opens his eyes and he wants to know these things in-themselves, trying to eliminate himself just for reaching this goal. But he does not manage to eliminate himself: he wanted an object that should be ‘pure object’, he wanted something ‘in-itself’; he has obtained only a ‘object-for-the-subject’, a form. [...] Something has escaped him – J. Hersch says: the *matter*. He wanted “to hold”, but his *hold* bumped into an impregnable matter. Form is the result of this conflict; it is a mix-up between the hold and the matter” (Piguet, 2000, 54-55).
  11. See Hersch, 1942.
  12. Explaining the title of this work, Hersch identifies the human act of giving form in the capability to conceive the matter as a *singular* in which to find freely a subjective reference to transcendence: “What is this authority of the singular? What ontological weight does it have, then? I would call here “transcendence” the essential irreducibility of an object, that is, what in its essence remains *proposed* to the spirit *without being possessed* by it, without ever being able to be exhausted by it” (Hersch, 1950, 46).

13. "It is when one tries to know what the lived inner freedom is, that the problem of the distinction between freedom and arbitrariness arises. Some conceive freedom as the possibility of doing what one wants, when one wants, how one wants. [...] We try to understand in what such behavior differs from freedom, and what are the levels of freedom: 1) [...] There is no freedom there – simply a complex set of causes. 2) [...] The lowest level of freedom, called "freedom of indifference". 3) You choose between two possible decisions, one corresponding to a duty, the other to a desire, accepting the consequences of your choice. It is an act of moral freedom. 4) [...] Here freedom joins – despite an apparent paradox – with the deepest need, which is the opposite of determinism: an absolute" (Hersch, 1982, 2-3).
14. De Vecchi is the one that better explains the relation between *existential freedom* and *ontological freedom*: "In *L'être et la forme*, the human being emerges as subject – not the philosophical subject, but the human being subject [...] – actualising his own freedom: exerting a hold on a matter and getting a form from it. So also here, it is about a freedom through which human being actualises his being. But more than on an (absolute) existential freedom, the stress is on the 'ontological function of freedom and of giving form: through it the human being recognises himself as 'a being that knows, that acts, that creates'. This is not an absolute freedom, like the freedom at stake in the existential decision or in the "absolute demand'. [...] The more the subject actualises himself in his acting, the more his hold on the matter is strong and incisive, the more he gives form to his matter, and the more he individualises himself as an acting subject, the more he affirms something absolute of himself" (De Vecchi, 2008, 123-124).
15. Vida gives a good explanation of the role of human rights in *Diritti umani e umanità: a partire da Jeanne Hersch*. She sums up the role of body and freedom in Hersch's reflexion on human rights: "Human rights are founded on a specific conception of human nature that is founded on the fusion among the thesis on freedom (the capacity of freedom as an essential property of human being) with the thesis that man is nature and soul at the same time" (Vida, 2012, 14).
16. "The theoretical analysis of Kant and Machiavelli reflects in a pure form the two essential components of the political reality: morality and success" (Hersch, 1956, 102).
17. In her speech *La ménagère de la rive gauche. Théorie politique et idéologie d'après Jeanne Hersch*, De Monticelli defines such practical antinomy as the *political bitterness* of the awareness that there is no power without the ability to exercise freedom and there is no freedom without power as an ability to act.
18. "Freedom is not a thing, it is ambiguous and is not enough for itself. In the political sense, it is only the guarantee that preserve an empty space, - the possibles of a concrete subject. In the philosophical or moral sense, it is a fullness of presence that is lived only for instants, always proposed, [...] never possessed. [...] It is not its own goal, although it is the goal of every political action made for the human in man. This empty space that politics must preserve, this empty space that gives their meaning to Laws, to Parliaments, to Justice" (Hersch, *Idéologies*, 118). And again, after few pages: "We use the same word *freedom* in two totally different senses. In the philosophical sense, freedom designates what is the most impossible thing and at the same time the most hardcore thing in the human experience: the presence of a subject that acts on what is not himself for transforming it, giving a meaning and a value to it. [...] We bump here into a political freedom. In itself, it is nothing. Nothing more than a space opened to the soul. [...] It is not properly freedom, but only the possibility of a free presence" (Hersch, 1956, 164).
19. Hersch affirms this in different contributions about human rights, especially in *Les droits de l'homme du point de vue philosophique*, but Giacomo Costa gives a perfect explanation of what Hersch means in *Jeanne Hersch's "detour philosophique" round the rights of man*.
20. "The 'equal rights for all', the fundamental slogan of democracy, expresses nothing but this. [...] They embody on the political level a metaphysical irreducibility and they tend to allow, in some way, the life of the absolute while simultaneously admitting the infinite attempt of conquest and the right of freedom to rejection or rebellion. 'Equal rights for all' are therefore not, in themselves, something that is evident or perfect. They are a fallback, taking into account three fundamental factors of the human condition: the unresolved tension of freedom and the absolute, the absence of an objectively and unquestionably designated elite, the existence of evil in man and the risks that this evil entails in the exercise of power" (Hersch, 1956, 115).
21. "It is interesting that Jeanne Hersch defines the foundation of human rights as a 'fundamental exigence' and that she connotes it as a 'feeling'. Where do these expressions come from? From Kant through the interpretation of Jaspers. Better explained, with 'absolute exigence' Jeanne Hersch translates the expression '*unbedingte Anspruch*' with which Jaspers in his book on *Kant* designates the Kantian categorical imperative.

Moreover, Jeanne Hersch, when translating with 'I feel' – the 'erfabre' of Jaspers, she emphasises the emotional sense of 'erfabren' that means at the same time knowing, experiencing, and feeling, suffering: the absolute exigence for Jeanne Hersch is an experience of the subject, it is an experiencing, and feeling, suffering: the absolute exigence for Jeanne Hersch is an experience of the subject, it is an affective event that he lives. [...] The human being has an unconditional need to be recognised by others in his being free and therefore human" (De Vecchi, 2008, 230-231).

22. *Responsible freedom* is present in many Hersch's contribution on human rights, but there is a passage of *Les droits de l'homme du point de vue philosophique* that seems to be essential: "Being [man] 'a soul and a body', he lives his humanity just at the intersection of the one and the other. The reality of nature, of factual data, takes a decisive importance, and makes him live *for*... He proposes some goals to himself. *He wants, he desires, he opts, he choses*. He is and he wants himself *a responsible freedom*. In this way, he introduces *some rights*, and the *right*, in the world of empirical realities, while introducing also the dimensions of *the goal, the finality and the history*" (Hersch, 1993 2, 506).
23. Hersch quotes these two principles many times in her contributions about human rights, even if she has never given a precise or comprehensive definition of them, but the clearest quotes and examples can be found in *Les droits de l'homme du point de vue philosophique*.
24. See Pastore, 2014.
25. See De Vecchi, 2008.

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# The Signs' Behavior in Autistic Children: Semiosis of an Unspoken Language

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## Abstract:

The present paper aims to elaborate on some of the communicational deficits in children with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Treating autism semiotically entails in itself a multitude of semiotic processes. We may evidence these with: the process of intermediation in communicating abilities, a special sort of reaction, as well as inter-subjective feedback within frames of the communication with the other, and/or significant other. In my view, besides, an autistic child conceptualizes his/her social reality through sensory-deficits which look unusual to the rest of the world. Owing to his/her pre-existential signs, which belong to the organic nature of the problematics, such children transform such sorts of communication into passionate tantrums and/or meltdowns, through their repetitive and stereotyped behavior. This thus makes the problematics semiotically relevant. The semiotics of passions [such as conceptualized in (Greimas and Fontanille 1993)];, as well as existential semiotics [see: (Tarasti 2000);(Tarasti 2015)], deduces a semantic taxonomy aimed at a process of semiosis of an unspoken language, thus making visible the similarities and/or differences between a typical and/or atypical sort of behavior (or: between autistic and non-autistic “worlds”). In conclusion, the “signs in action” transform themselves into meaningful semantic units in frames of the “physiologically” conceptualized actions by autistic children.

**Keywords:** autism; semiotics; transformation; behavior

## 1. Introduction: the semiotic relevance of ASD (methodological remarks)<sup>1</sup>

Treating mental disorders and/or disabilities generally, and the phenomenon of autism specifically, from the semiotic viewpoint is not an easy task, for multiple reasons. First, it is presupposed that such individuals cannot perform an accomplished communicational process, as *some semiotically intended messages* [italics and paraphrasing mine, see: (Eco 1968)] may remain unprocessed, and/or become processed unequivocally [see: (Eco 1976)]. Second, an individual on the spectrum may show an attempt to perform and/or execute a semiotic function with

finalized semantic units on the one hand but, on the other hand, many of the other neuro-typical communicational abilities may remain unaccomplished. Moreover, not only socially, psychologically, and medically intended processes—as well as physiologically intended human activities in normal interactional human contexts—are not fully performed, but they may additionally represent a lack of meaning in terms of such individuals' interaction with others and/or significant others. Finally, many of the individuals on the spectrum either are not aware of the social reality surrounding them or live a differently perceived social reality [see:(Sicile-Kira 2014);(Bogdashina 2005)]. It is for such reasons that I consider that the matter is semiotically relevant.

Otherwise, treating Autism Spectrum Disorders Syndrome (ASD) from a semiotic perspective includes not only identifying such individuals' deficits but also includes an effort to establish a communicational process with them. My aim in this contribution shall be to offer some of the behavioral possibilities and/or techniques of acquisition of a determined delayed developmental prospective to regain semiotic functions in children with autism. I aim to number their behavioral deficits, including their sensory-integration problems [see: (Emmons, P.G.; Andersen 2005)], to identify their own “physiological” way of performing a semiotic function. Their special kind of communication ability entails stereotyped repetitiveness that creates narrative structures as possible semantic units. The semiotically intended narrative structures in the case of ASD are differently perceived and conceptualized, which requires that here they shall be analyzed within frames of the differences between *stories lived* and *stories told* [italics and paraphrasing, mine; see:(Griffin 2003)]. My analysis shall therefore elaborate the repetitive habitual actions by such children, who, due to the incapability of comprehending determined contexts, express such actions as passions. Due to such mentioned passions, one can enhance their artistic abilities, as proof of their way of existence within a socially conventional world. The semiotics of passions (Greimas and Fontanille 1993), in my view, as well as existential semiotics [ see:(Tarasti 2015, 2000)], can offer a clear-cut vision of their *exceptional behavior* [see:(Hoxha 2014, 2016)], as well as deduce the meaning of it, to make it understandable to the rest of the world. In essence, their differently perceived reality shall result in a semiotic comprehension of their requests and complaints, (which is only one of the ways of their presumably manifested disabilities)<sup>2</sup>, as proof of their interaction with significant others as impassioned subjects. Not only should the semiotics of passions and existential semiotics (as methodologies) play a decisive methodological role in this contribution, but other spheres as well, which indispensably become objects of scholarly analytical treatment. I am, in conclusion, to analyze some of the necessary developmental stages in human behavioral patterns, [see: (Piaget 1969)], to be able to offer a comparative view of such individuals' interaction with the rest of the world. Beyond numbering the symptoms that make the phenomenon visible or manifested, I consider that one has to treat some of the inter-human socializing processes. This shall in turn render visible the complexity of such individuals' participation in, as well as construction of, social reality differently in comparison to neurotypical individuals, as one of the preconditions

of normally lived social conditions. Besides, the multi-dimensionality of this phenomenon enables its multi-disciplinary treatment, as well as contributes to the complexity of the mentioned problematics.

I shall consider semiotics a methodology which shall intend an elaboration of determined processes (either based psychologically or socially) to create relational attitudes [such as foreseen in (Deely 2009)], as one of the semiotic preconditions within our specified context. If such is our methodological explication, then some questions may be advanced: why should ASD be treated semiotically in conditions when one can hardly see a semiotic process accomplished? Or: which is the point that semiotically relates this multi-dimensional issue, so that various procedural signification processes become a part of a general meaning deduction? Not only will so-called precise or exact semiotic functions have to be exposed here for methodological reasons [which, as explained in Saussure, can be intended by what he calls “semiology”, see; (Saussure 1959)], but other interpretational hypotheses will be presented as well, which lead to this issue’s cognitive and interpretative relevance. In conclusion, it is for such reasons that I consider that the communicational abilities and/or disabilities of an individual affected by autism can also rely on hypothetical and epistemological grounds, besides ontological ones. This last assertion presumably justifies the philosophical background of the problematics to be elaborated later in this text. Greimas and Fontanille (1993), as is known, have based their theory on such grounds, because of its rightful applicability in many realistically lived social contexts. As they justifiably observe:

It is therefore not surprising that the best-explored, and perhaps the most efficient, level of the generative trajectory is situated in that middle area between its discursive and epistemological components. We are referring above all to the modeling of narrativity and to its actantial organizations. The concept of an actant, freed from its psychological frame and defined only by its doing, is the *sine qua non* condition for developing a semiotics of action. (Greimas and Fontanille 1993, VII-VIII)

As can be seen, since one presumes that communicational and behavioral processes may not be proper, or that they may possess a different shape, one can also contribute to their meaningful manifestations through transformational processes, as is suggested by the semiotics of passions. This is the first area of my thesis and/or methodological approach to be based upon. The second is Tarasti’s existential semiotics (2015), which shall be discussed in this text, because of the “unpredictable” (and/or “predictable”) actions of such subjects, which may render disputable, as I shall attempt to explain, the movability and/or the transcendence of the “subject” notion. It is in such semiotic preconditions that I shall see such individuals’ “signs in action”, either initially regarded as “pre-existential signs” [see: (Tarasti 2000)], or later as parts of Tarasti’s (2015) “Z”, or “Zemic” model. Naturally, the matter shall be addressed in the following sections of the present text.

Otherwise, the questions which shall be answered in the following pages of this text in terms of applicative methods in semiotics, are of the following kinds: where do we see the actants, within some of the communicational disabilities of such individuals? What is the way of their semiotic visibility, to prepare them for a possible semiotic function through a way of

transformation of the semantic units mentioned? And finally, which of such performed activities repetitively by such individuals are intended by them as parts of their existence within their own “world of perception”?

It should be understood that responding to these questions shall represent a starting point for a process of semiosis, still to be resolved in this contribution. It is exactly for this procedural inexactness in terms of exemplifying autistic behavior, that semiotics of passions and existential semiotics should find a way to make determined interactional attitudes of the individuals on the spectrum meaningful, out of their presumed meaninglessness. Yet before answering such questions, which I claim to be above all semiotically relevant, one has to ask: what is Autism Spectrum Disorders Syndrome, and how can it juxtapose interpersonal communication in normally perceived contexts? These questions should have a priority in this contribution.

### **1.1. Interpersonal communication and the ASD phenomenon juxtaposed**

If interpersonal communication is understood as comprising both kinds of human communication, verbal and nonverbal, one has to presume that developmental psychology here should have its leading part in terms of analyzing a typical or atypical kind of stereotyped human behavior in terms of individuals with ASD. This is due to the following propositions: first, we all act both intra-communicationally and inter-communicationally, (either consciously or unconsciously); moreover, such “acting” can be intentional or unintentional (a fact which links our discussion to semiotics). The first aspect is linked to our developmental stages and patterns, whereas the second is linked to our responsiveness towards others and/or significant others. Intriguingly, both aspects are taken into consideration develop in a parallel way [ see: (Schwartz, Luyckx, and Vignoles 2011)] to enact complex psychological processes, such as perception, cognition, thinking processes, and/or human emotionality. Only in such circumstances can one precondition *a unification* of processes involved, as well as presuppose a semiotic functions' existence and prevalence in terms of overall inter-human communication. If such a thesis is taken as a plausible scientific truth, then it should be evident that deficits which become visible within individuals on the spectrum may be treated from both aspects principally: one, which marks determined delaying in the acquisition of certain segments in our overall developmental process, and another one, which marks a delay or an incapacity of the interacting with the other, and/or significant other. Owing to the multi-disciplinary nature of the problem, the facts above are not the only ones that contribute to the complexity of the problem of autism. I shall try to explain such complexity in the following pages of this text. Let us now explain the problem under investigation.

Each one of us maintains or possesses the ability to express himself/herself, at least at the level of attempting or wishing to do so. Some of us can perform such processes automatically and/or seen as united, [such as, for instance, explained in terms of linguistically based semiotics in: (Saussure 1959)], whereas some others, may need assistance to do so. It is also true, however, that in the frames of normal contextual circumstances some of our interactional and/or

communicational abilities are expressed verbally, while some other ones are expressed nonverbally. Both of them represent an integral part of an interpersonal sort of communication.

Otherwise, seen generally, one should first consider that it covers conventionally established cultural categories, such as language [see, for instance: (Samovar, Larry A. Porter 2004)]. Second, it covers human interaction, as a tool directed towards creating social reality and/or context [such as explained in (Schwartz, Luyckx, and Vignoles 2011); (Bruke, J. Peter & Stets 2009)]. Third, it covers human behavior, as an interaction with the self and the other, as one of the traits related to our social responsiveness. Finally, all mentioned fields have their relational counterparts, thus ready to create correlations as one of the semiotic functions. All such facts consider generally communicational deficits in terms of the syndrome based behaviorally. But recent studies represent a counter-thesis of the phenomenon, a thesis which moves and/or transforms the problem into the medical, genetic, and biological level [see: (Roubertoux 2015) ]. Naturally, as shall be understood, this paper cannot foresee all related fields, owing to the complexity of the problem. I shall instead try to perform a semiotically treatable methodology here, which shall attempt to create an applicative model based on the semanticity of transformable units. Out of the semiotic viewpoint, the following question should be advanced: what do communicational processes have in common with the human impossibility of a verbal expression and/or with an unusual kind of behavior, in the sense that can be exemplified with the special or specific social context of individuals living with autism? It should be remarked also that besides generalizing determined behavioral deficits of such individuals [such as shall later be seen according to DMSV; see: (Sicile-Kira 2014)], one should be aware of the differentiation within; almost every child on the spectrum behaves differently. This renders the problem more complex, as there cannot still be such an issue as a definite *model organism within the spectrum* (the paraphrasing and italics mine), but there can be instead an attempt *to seek a model organism in terms of other living organisms as well* [the paraphrasing and italics mine, see: (Roubertoux 2015:2)]. According to scholars, more samples should be considered, to establish a framework and/or a strategy for their modeling. In conclusion, one has to present here determined definitions of the problematics (either from the behavioral or neurodevelopmental point of view), in order that the analytical object of this contribution is more precisely established. My task here, seen from the semiotic point of view, is not to give data which would seek the consequences or causes of such situations described as human disabilities, but on the contrary, shall endeavor to comprehend such sort of living organisms, either as an interrelationship between the Self and the Other, or as parts of relational attitudes, as for instance foreseen by Tarasti's "Z" or "Zemic model" (2015). My intention, as I hope to be able to show, is overcoming Greimasian modalities by existential semiotics in terms of exemplifying autism, for the sake of designating what I shall call a semiotics of autism. The matter shall be elaborated in the further sections of this paper. Let us now see what autism actually is, and how the signs "behave" in terms of an individual affected by autism.

## 1.2. On some of the symptoms that make autism recognizable

The most striking difficulty in ASD is its etiology, and/or its exact provenience and causes [see: (Bogdashina 2005); (Sicile-Kira 2014), and (Mash, Eric J., Wolfe 2004)]. During the second half of the previous century, many studies were conducted that aimed at such a goal. It remains an open question whether such phenomena should only intend behaviorism, and/or determined attitudes of human interactionism (such as a failure to interact properly with the other, the inability of speech [and/or the dilemma whether an autistic child holds *internal speech behavior*, such as can be instanced in: (Bogdashina 2005)]), or it should represent a neurobiological disorder (which can be instanced in an “inadequate brain information processing”, as well as a genetic provenience of the symptoms; see: (Roubertoux 2015)]. Recent researchers regard it as a neuro-developmental problem. My task in this contribution is to seek semiotically analyzable components within the phenomena, which like I hope to be able to show cannot represent oneness and/or uniformness of treatment for all individuals involved. It is for such reasons that one should, at least semiotically and communicationally, see such individuals' behaviors manifested, to conclude the applicability of the semiotic method in the circumstances concerned. Let us now show the recognizable symptoms of an individual living with autism.

As one would presume, the initial steps of human development (either biologically or psychologically considered) do not include verbal expressivity. Such kinds of communicational abilities, which are usually performed either consciously or unconsciously, emerge as a necessity of our basic organic and physiological functions. For instance, a first baby's cry when facing external reality is evidence of this. This has to do with processes of adapting oneself to the brand-new surroundings, as well as with the process of contextualization with the newly faced social reality. Later on, other kinds of communication gradually appear, which certainly belong to our developmental patterns of behavior, as long as a child does not reach the *symbolic representational stage* [the paraphrasing and italics mine, see: (Piaget 1969)]. In conditions of an individual living with autism, such stages and/or patterns of a child's development usually lag. In difference to other similar mental disorders (and/or additional diagnoses, which may come consequently because of ASD's manifested behaviors), in terms of autism, only some of the patterns/ and or human developmental processes delay, whereas some other ones may have an accelerated development compared to normal developmental growth. Let us now number and/or identify some of the general symptoms, and/or behavioral deficits of children on the spectrum.

First, a child with autism shows atypical behavior instead of the typical behaviors, in comparison to his/her biological age. Such behavior can be identified in the following way: performing actions of the same kind, such as stereotypically playing with one beloved toy in his/her way. Such playing may become repetitive and unusual and may last longer than usual. Second, such a child doesn't maintain eye contact upon call. He/she seems closed into his/her own “shell” or context. Third, such a child may not be capable of rightful perception and/or cognition of the objects around them, in the sense of determining their actual and/or symbolic

(reference) function. Fourth, such a child may not be social, i.e. may be escaping from various kinds of socializing with peers of his/her age. Fifth, such a child can have other neurological abilities, such as physical abilities in the sense of overcoming the biological age of his/her peers, by way of compensating for his/her mental disabilities. Out of this point, it would perhaps be more exact to suggest that such a child possesses an atypical neurological system (or, such individuals possess neurodiversity) [ see: (Sicile-Kira 2014) ]. One of the definitions of such a condition within an individual on the spectrum has been presented in the following way:

Autistic disorder or autism is a severe developmental disorder characterized by abnormalities in social functioning, language and communication, and unusual behaviors and interests, it includes every aspect of the child's interaction with his or her world, involves many parts of the brain, and undermines the traits that make us human – our social responsiveness, ability to communicate, and feelings for other people. (Mash, Eric J., Wolfe 2004. 84)

Owing to the complexity of the problem, this should not be considered as the only definition of ASD. In terms of the Diagnostic Manual, one has to consider the fact that causes—either of behavior, neuro-biological, or any other kinds of origin—are still in the course of their examination. This is because not just one scientific and/or practically training perspective can be foreseen as contributions to a possible solution of the problematics. The complexity of the problem appears because of its multi-dimensional competence, which regards such questions as follows: which parts of the brain are affected? How can behavior treatment assist if determined parts of the brain are damaged, and/or partially dysfunctional? Which is the definite inner brain structure of the biochemical ingredients involved? The syndrome certainly belongs to determined fields, such as psychiatry, psychology, special education, medicine, biology, and genetics. Out of such reasons, as well as owing to the intensive empirical research recently performed in determined scholarly treatable fields, we shall here present some other additional definitions of the phenomenon of autism, so that one would have a comparative view in terms of recent research. As has been observed:

ASD is considered a neurodevelopmental disability, meaning that it affects the functioning of the brain. Autism typically appears during the first three years of life and is thought to be four times more prevalent in males than in females. (Sicile-Kira 2014,21)

Although the definition seems general, it is clear that the behavioral deficits of the problem emerge from neurodevelopmental inadequacy. It is also true, however, that autism may be defined in the following way:

As a result, ASD is not seen as either a single psychiatric entity or a multifactorial disorder. It now appears to be a collection of rare diseases, most of them with a genetic component. The heterogeneous

etiology of ASD may be compatible with the within-group brain variation observed in both brain imaging studies and biochemical analyses. (Roubertoux 2015, IX)

As will have been noticed, scholars recently consider autism to be a genetic problem, thus define it as a “rare disease’ (see the citation above). According to them then, an abnormality within the structure of the human brain is noticed either in terms of genetic ingredients (or: as scholars claim: “a variety of genes is associated with ASD”, my paraphrasing, p. 29), and/ or in terms of overall brain biochemistry. Such factors consequently make behavioral deficits visible as well as identifiable as symptoms possessed by an individual on the spectrum. It should be understood that the biologically and genetically relevant matters shall not be discussed in this paper, due to the complexity of the issue. Seen from the semiotic point of view, however, as well as in the context of the present contribution, we shall intend by a communicational process *the consequences of the mentioned kind of interaction*, to execute a semiotic function in the frames of affected subjects by the syndrome. Otherwise, according to DMS V, the diagnostic criteria include the following:

1. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, in areas described below, that the individual currently displays or did in the past:
  - a. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity (for example, failure to carry on a back-and-forth conversation, failure to imitate or respond in social interaction, nor having appropriate social approach behaviors),
  - b. Deficits in nonverbal communicative behaviors used for social interaction (for example, abnormalities in eye contact and body language, lack of facial expressions),
  - c. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships (for example, difficulties in adjusting behavior to suit various contexts, difficulties in sharing imaginative play, or making friends).
2. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities as demonstrated by two of the following behavior, that the individual currently displays, or did in the past:
  - a. Stereotyped or repetitive motor behaviors, use of objects, or speech (for example, echolalia).
  - b. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence or routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal speech (for example, difficulties in moments of transitions, insistence on same food).
  - c. Highly restricted, fixated interests that abnormal in intensity or focus (for example, strong preoccupation with or attachment to unusual interests or objects).
  - d. Hyper- or hyposensitivity in sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment ( for example, does not appear to feel extreme cold or heat, excessive touching or smelling of objects. (Sicile-Kira 2014: 30-31)

As can be seen, the most important behavioral issues have been emphasized. It is important to say that most of the problems manifested within individuals on the spectrum emerge from sensory-integration deficits [see: (Bogdashina 2005); (Emmons, P.G.; Andersen 2005)]. Owing to the facts that shall be described below, one has to describe such matters when speaking of ASD.

Otherwise, we all use our senses to render the form and the meaning of everything surrounding us. A process of an overall integration (and/or engagement) of all senses is what occurs. Besides, we use the word *sensational* in cases of facing an object or a subject that has for a certain period and/or moment occupied all our senses. In other contexts, for example, such a situation can be instanced within witnessing a work of art (which has a component of uniqueness that makes it different from the rest of external reality). What does sensory integration represent? As has been observed:

Sensory integration is a child's ability to feel, understand, and organize sensory information from his body and his environment. In essence, sensory integration sorts, orders, and eventually puts all individual sensory inputs together into a whole-brain function. When the functions are whole and balanced, body movements are highly adaptive, learning is easy, and [good] behavior is a natural outcome. Sensory integration is also reflected in a child's development, learning, and feeling about himself. The connection between sensory integration and social and emotional development should not be underestimated! How a child integrates through the sensory systems provides a basis for their reality. *Not your reality, not my reality, his reality – and his unique perspective on the world around him* (Emmons, P.G.; Andersen 2005,14)

It may be presumed that, in terms of individuals with autism, they all seem unbalanced, and/or disproportional. For instance, instead of the actions of doing, such as performing various kinds of simple commands, the child may possess auditory or visual sensory needs. If all such sensory inputs, and or stimulations from the external reality come at once—or are contemporarily witnessed by the child (in the fashion, naturally, that the child might perceive them, due to his/her brain dysfunctionality)—then such an individual may experience sensory overload. Such overloading stimuli (which for neuro-typical individuals usually represent socially accustomed and/or contextualized conditions) seem to an autistic child as if coming from everywhere, to render him or her anxious, and/or eager to be released from them, either through tantrums (which usually are based on a consciousness level), or meltdowns (which may unexpectedly or unconsciously face the child).

The uniting and/or compounding of all such activities in the frames of an autistic child (which, as is obvious, are seen as stereotyped and/or repetitive activities), is what such an individual may lack. An integration process in the communicative sense of the word means equivocal information processing. From the communication and semiotic point of view, such a process which we name communicational (and/or in other circumstances informational) [see: (Eco 1968);(Shannon and Weaver 1948)], should contain equivocalness, uniqueness, and proportionality of the transmitted material, ready to be processed throughout all its constituent components. Thus, a child on the spectrum performs his/her communication abilities/disabilities specially; i.e. through the sensory integration problems, he/she possesses, as we have already stated, due to inadequate processing of information by the brain. In conclusion, therefore, one should

presume the necessity of mediation, so that an accomplished communication and semiotic process may be performed.

## **2. Attempting to establish a semiotic function in individuals with ASD**

My understanding of a “semiotic function” here shall have a twofold nature: one which shall pertain to the linguistically and psychologically based semiotics, [in the sense that can be witnessed in Saussure, (1959), Piaget (1969), and (Eco 1976, 1975)], and another one, which pertains to interpretative semiotics and semantics [such as can be witnessed in Greimas and Fontanille (1993), and Tarasti (2015)]. Understandably, the second one is a complex “semiotic function”.

In terms of my explication of what sort of “function” I seek, for methodological reasons, I shall quote Eco (1976), also because I consider that his definition comprises what I aim to explore in terms of autism:

A sign-function is realized when two *functives* (expression and content) enter into a mutual correlation; the same functive can also enter into another correlation, thus becoming a different functive and therefore giving rise to a new sign-function. Thus signs are the provisional result of coding rules which establish *transitory* correlations of elements, each of these being entitled to enter – under given coded circumstances – into another correlation and thus form a new sign. (Eco 1976,49)

As can be seen, and as is emphasized by Eco, there are two issues to keep in mind here: one, that “expression” and “content” get *united*, in the metaphorical sense of the word, and second, that each and all of these elements (tiniest elements named “signs” here) find themselves in a state of correlation with each other. Before our further explication of the semiotic functions needed for the *semiotics of autism*, which we consider should be performed with practical examples, let us now try and elaborate the problem of ASD from the standpoint of the semiotics of passions.

### **2.1. Exemplifying autistic children's passions through techniques of acquisition**

In this section of the paper, I shall attempt to apply the semiotics of passions as a methodology, to be able to present some of the techniques of acquisition of social reality by such subjects, as well as to explicate their semiotic comprehension.

A mediator's, a parent's, and/or a therapist's role, in the sense of a *knowable subject*, is compulsory in the case of demonstrating a semiotic function in terms of individuals on the spectrum. Here, I shall attempt to show two different techniques of various contexts' acquisition, which shall hopefully describe a trajectory of semantic units, expressed as passions. I shall in conclusion consider two different techniques of acquisition here: PECS (Picture Exchange Communicative Systems) and ABA (Applied Behavior Analysis), [such as suggested in: (Bogdashina 2005)]. It is worth observing here that both techniques and/or methodologies to approach an individual affected by autism rely on the behavioral acquisition of determined contextual circumstances. Except for psychological and organic reasons (some of which have

already been explained in this text), the techniques hold their semiotic relevance as well. If successfully applied, one can then differentiate between the intentional and unintentional communicative attempts of such children. We shall give an example. Allowing the child to guess the right objects or subjects around him/her, after visualizing them, then categorizing them, to produce a verbal expression, can argue a basic semiotic function. All such processes (in other neuro-typical social contexts) are intended as automatically processed but should, in terms of individuals possessing neurodiversity, be seen as separate processes (or better: such that should be performed one after another). The interruption, stop, or the time needed for an autistic child's reaction in the communicative sense of the word represents a meta-communicational process. Let us attempt now to elucidate some practical matters.

Instead of a self-initiated way of communication, a child on the spectrum may communicate unintentionally, or even unexpectedly. All sorts of nonverbal communication are included there: they may be certain unconscious movements (based on neurological impulses), or conscious ones, such as body language, eye contact, internalized speech attempts, and behavior, etc. The "Picture Exchange Communicative System," as a matter of fact, represents an attempt to make such children's communication intentional and meaningful although, as may be supposed, their actions are already *meaningful* for their perception, and/or through their attitude. The aim of the technique mentioned, however, including the assistance of the specialist, the "active subject" in the semiotic sense of the word, [see: (Greimas and Fontanille 1993)], is to offer the child both-sided communication abilities, and a complete process of contextualization.

A process of a gradual acquisition through pictures (with a special emphasis on the nonverbal child), in a structured way, is what occurs with the usage of this technique. Practically speaking: not only does a child intentionally choose a rightful picture, but he/she can also be shown to undertake actions of doing which, in later acquisition stages, aim to become functional. In the semiotic sense of the word, the child attempts to unite form and content, which represents the giving and/or adding of meaning to objects around him/her. In addition to the fact that the signs visualized by the child here gain motivation, in later stages, instead of the process of perception only, such signs may also gain their interpretative and cognitive status. So that such a status be achieved, the therapist, the knowable subject, uses the other method mentioned here: the ABA therapy. As has been observed:

To teach language in autistic children Lovaas (1966) employed a "behavior modification" procedure, based on reinforcement learning theory and shaping techniques to develop a "program for the establishment of speech in psychotic children" (Lovaas 1966). The methods of this program include discretionary training, incidental teaching, the natural language paradigm, and time delay. Applied Behavior Analysis or ABA is very well documented (both favorably and unfavorably) (Bogdashina 2005:248).

The process of changing and/or transforming behavior would mean reducing sensory deficits, instructing the child to get contextually accustomed with the therapist, and teaching relational

attitudes, as three early steps towards gaining full communicative status. A process of signification, as should be evident, relies on these processes of acquisition.

By conditioning the child through the ABA technique, in an attempt to gain modification(s) in his/her behavior, the child acquires new contexts. We shall mention here some of the improvements as a consequence of “knowable subject’s” intervention, which in turn, themselves represent a part of the signification process, in the semiotic sense of the word. Not only can eye contact with the child be established, but also, a relationship with the object(s) that the child wishes to use in terms of his/her specific context. More importantly, however, in later stages of development, by the process of conditioning the child, many “actions”, habits, etc., of the child may become substitutable or replaceable by other actions, which would belong to a neuro-typical sort of human behavior.

From the semiotic viewpoint, the term “transformable” (and/or “transformational”) is of crucial importance to us. The rewarding, reinforcing, and/or punishing process by the therapist, for instance, is of high importance for achieving results. If an object is offered (or various kinds of functions) to an individual affected by autism, such an action then should be conditioned with an attempt to recognize the function of the object on the part of the child, and/or an attempt to name it verbally. If the results of this sort of action are positive, the child should be rewarded. Such a step-by-step behavioral modification can be achieved after difficult attempts which aim towards an improvement of the given situation. Each accomplished step (in terms of overall contextual acquisition) represents a segment of a signification process. The child acquires contexts: that is, gives and/or learns meaning(s) for each issue that he/she learns. Recognizing an object by the child represents a step forward in terms of the acquisition, therefore, it contributes to the progress in terms of behavioral patterns, as far as psychological development is concerned, especially concerning establishing a relationship with the therapist. The following steps of such behavioral acquisition of context (by the side of the therapist) may move the process towards an encoding and decoding process, which would otherwise gradually reveal the metaphoric meaning of the objects or subjects within the frames of the determined surroundings of the child. This would finally entail the acquisition of the cognitive capabilities of the child, besides the perceptive ones (that a child might otherwise possess). The task of the therapist, therefore, is to offer the child different types of contexts, to enable him/her to develop receptive as well as representative skills. Both skills include at least a basic semiotic function.

To sum up: relationship formation, as one of the initial issues of learning on the part of the child, creates what we call a semiotic function (even if considered in Eco’s sense, as I have emphasized above), not only in the frames of perception and cognition processes acquired but also in the frames of including the meaning and/or meanings to determined external objects and phenomena. The repetitiveness (and/or the process of repetition during “teaching” the child) enables the child to develop short term memory (STM), as opposed to long-term memory (LTM) [see:(Goldman 1986)], thus enhancing the child towards recognition of meaning (and/or

semantic units) in the semiotic sense of the word. Each repetition (by the therapist) is an attempt to acquire reality in its structured and conventional shape (either behaviorally, taxonomically, or emotionally), thus uniting all mentioned processes as one. This sort of conceptualization of the “memory” notion enables a process of semiosis; which understandably, also in Peirce’s terms, is then, uninterrupted, and/or as he says, unlimited [see: (Peirce 1960; Eco 1962)]. It should be clear that the “memory” notion may have a different semiotic comprehension in various discussable contexts, therefore in the case of semiotics of autism, it shall keep the importance as defined in developmental psychology [ as, for instance, defined in: (Piaget,1969)].

### **2.1.1. The transformational process itself: on some passional configurations**

Because some semiotic processes lie on epistemological grounds as well, it is necessary to emphasize that, within frames of the individuals on the spectrum, one can exemplify a process of reaching a peak of tensitivity. Since a narrative process has to be established, such situations can be witnessed in a parent’s experiencing some of the repetitive actions performed by individuals affected by autism.

The proprioceptive deficits for instance, in children with ASD, which in turn are repetitive, suggest that their manifestations contain a narration component. In what way, though? On the one hand, all such activities performed by the children on the spectrum are meaningful from their perspective (thus, containing their well-planned strategy, the goal, etc.), but on the other hand, are meaningless for the rest of the world, (and/or for the receivers of their messages), since they look to us *meaningless*; or contain in themselves a lack of meaning. Due to the circumstances mentioned, the following “conflictual situation” would be created: one which pertains to the child’s “physiologically acquired and accustomed context”, and another, one which pertains to the rest of socially perceived contexts. This conclusion leads us to the known semiotic dichotomy between seeming and reality (above all, in the Greimnasian sense of the word). In appearance, an autistic child seems to lack meaning in terms of his/her suitability to determine contexts that a given environmental condition might pose as a challenge to him/her. On the other hand, however, or in reality, an autistic child exhibits various communicational attempts, as we have already claimed, through the sensory integration deficits, which seem meaningful and/or socially conventional within frames of his/her “world.” It is then logical to conclude that, due to such a lack of meaning, specifically speaking between the child and his/her significant other, tensitivity (according to Greimas and Fontanille), is what occurs.

To regain a communication process in the given circumstances, one has to enact a modality in action, in the sense of Greimas and Fontanille (1993), cited earlier. We consider that here, the word “regained” is appropriately used, because of the symptoms and/or the specific way of the “signs’ action” within the behavior of an autistic child. Thus instead of the transition from the sensory-motor stage of the child’s developmental patterns to the symbolic representational stage [at least, in the sense that we have already mentioned, according to Piaget (1969)], the child

simply delays or remains at the mentioned stage, or at least continues to possess sensory-integration deficits. When a significant other and/or a parent (thus, becoming an impassioned subject) face the condition mentioned or becomes aware of his/her child possessing a delayed developmental growth, he/she becomes desperate. The passion of despair, in conclusion, is what one observes here.

As we have claimed above, using a modality in action, and/or enacting an active subject here, means enabling a transformational process. The process itself aims at substituting and/or replacing determined activities offered to the child, which would foresee a possible accomplishment of a communicational process. Since, as we have stated at the beginning of this text, some of the signs remain unprocessed, the active/knowable subject replaces the child's performed actions with other ones, or specifically speaking: by such actions which are presumably understandable to the child. The terms "replacement" and "substitution" here are of crucial importance. Thus, replacing movements, actions, with new ones, is a process that is usually performed by the mediation of the active subject (be it a therapist, or a parent). Semiotically speaking, the process is a starting point for the transformation procedure, if one pertains to the component of inter-communicating between the child and the other, thus contributing to the syntagmatic axis, in the Greimasian sense of the word. The replaced activity of the child (such as: instead of mouthing an object as either a tactile or a degustation sensory need of the child, he/she is offered, he/she starts at acting on doing properly or functionally), gradually becomes displaced either with a functional usage of such an object or by an expressivity of the child's passions (as an expression of the impossibility of performing determined assignments given by the therapist). Such an axis of "seeming", as we have observed here, shall represent a child's state of affairs which, due to semiotic processes and/or behavior interventions (in the context of the present text), is being transformed into an axis of "reality", which understandably for us represents the state of feelings. If the impaired activities of the child are not rightfully replaced by functionality, using an object and/or referring to a subject, then he/she shall be subdued to passions. Taxonomically speaking, such passions as anger, joy, a wish, and/or a complaint, cannot be permanent, in the sense that one can identify them in other related or discussable contexts. We should bear in mind that the children discussed still are in the course of the physiological development of their brains. It is for such reasons that the child's passions may be (and, theoretically, they should be) changeable throughout various developmental stages during early childhood. Such sort of a syntagmatic axis (in the sense that I have attempted to show), which is competent for the substitution of taxonomic notions understood as semantic units and/or related passionate experiences, represents not only one of the semiotic functions applied, but also a next developmental stage, in the frames of the overall communicative abilities/ disabilities of an individual labeled on the spectrum.

### **3. Concluding remarks: a process of semiosis**

In the present text, as may be noticed, I have attempted to elaborate on two different sorts of

conceptualizing and/or semiotically comprehending the consequences of an autistic child's behavior. The first one relies on the communicational and psychological conditions of an autistic child, whereas the second one relies on the existential comprehension of an autistic child's presence in a conventionally social world.

The various sorts of behavior manifested in the previously described circumstances represent the action of signs and/or "the sign's way" [ see: (Deely 2009)] in individuals diagnosed with ASD. The phenomenon that I have attempted to demonstrate, taken from either its "physiological" or semiotic point of view, implies a meta-communicational process in terms of individuals with autism, rather than an accomplished one. It is for the reasons already elaborated that I maintain that semiotics of autism would be competent for a "semiotic" solution of the problematics. What should it contain, though?

Existential semiotics, for instance, focuses on the "subject" and its Being. Regarding the "being" of an autistic child, questions should be advanced: is an autistic child aware of the surroundings, or as rightfully observed in Tarasti (2015), of his/her "environment"? How much is this sort of environment suitable to his/her contextual requests? Is his/her "being" ("subject") representing himself/herself, or their being's transcendence, in an attempt to relate to others?

In existential semiotics, the communication process is enacted and/or enhanced by the subject. This means not only in the shape of transmitting the message on the other side of the communication channel, [in the sense as shown in "classical semiotics", see: (Tarasti 2000, 2015)], but rather, making it moveable. Such sort of movability by the part of the "being" of an autistic child entails his/her action. The mentioned action, in conclusion, becomes complete, and/or obtains a full communicative status (or, phrased differently: the communication process is accomplished), if the "Being" is transcendental. In the sense of autistic children, however, the term "transcendence" shall intend relatedness of such children with others and/or significant others. What do I mean by this? Here I refer exactly to what Tarasti means by the term "Dasein" ("being there"), meaning: "being" does not mean only "my existence", but also "the others' existence" [see:(Tarasti 2015:5), the paraphrasing is mine]. In conclusion, therefore, the autistic child's interaction with the other here is itself intended: either in its conventional shape, or in the sense of the child's atypical behavior (thus, metaphorically speaking, obtaining a semiosis of an unspoken language). By an "unspoken language" in this context, I imply all possible communication attempts, which, with the process of intermediation, aim at becoming functional.

Semiotics of autism should therefore scientifically elaborate the different semiotic "roles" played either by the child or his/her significant others: either in the cognitive sense of the word or in the pure semiotic sense of the word. *The transcendence* of the "being" of such a subject, suggests a change, and/or a movability from one state to another, as it also includes the "negation", which in our case means the refusing of the child to perform various tasks assigned by the therapist, therefore, including the "Zemic" model, as one of the possibilities of the semiotic representational model. Existential semiotics not only covers the two final states of

the autistic child in the semiotic sense of the word, but also his/her “Being” in differently perceived levels: therefore, in different meta-modalities, which entail all sorts of requests and complaints by an autistic child, be they matters of their existence, or various sorts of understandability of their actions, understood as signs in permanent movement.

### **Endnotes:**

1. This paper has been inspired by my own child’s autistic behavior.
2. The issue shall be explicated later in the text.

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# The Vertical Order of the City: A Gender Perspective on the Urban Form

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## Abstract:

Throughout the twentieth century, the vertical orientation has become a predominant spatial arrangement of western metropolises. Male fantasies of verticality have reached their extremes not only in form of urban utopias but also in the built urban environment where the verticality is glorified as the exponent of economic and technological progress. In this paper a critical gender perspective on the symbolic associations with verticality is proposed, surveying the links between vertical architecture, power and masculinity. The urban space is examined from a feminist viewpoint, arguing that verticality equals masculinity, which is evidenced by a multidisciplinary investigation of the vertical semiotics. Before entering into the analysis of manifestations and consequences of vertical architecture, the relevance of associations between the vertical and the masculine is detailed, with the intention to demonstrate through various examples from architecture and art, that the vertical is traditionally and inseparably associated with the masculine. The skyscraper, being the vertical architectural form par excellence, is considered from a historical perspective as a symbol of masculine power and aggressive capitalism. Finally, the phenomenon of privileged views accessed via vertical architecture is identified as integrally related to the image of masculinity, virility and social status.

**Keywords:** City and gender, cityscape, urban semiotics, urban utopias, vertical architecture

## Introduction

The distinction between the horizontal and the vertical seems to be one of the most frequently applied binary opposites both in the symbolic and the built urban space. Henri Lefebvre (1991) understood the contrast attributed to the horizontality and the verticality in the urban space as a strategy to mask the symbolism of vertical architecture and its implications. What Lefebvre tried to point out is that verticality equals “arrogance, the will to power, a display of military and police-like machismo, a reference to the phallus and a spatial analogue of masculine brutality” (1991, 144).

Involving a gender perspective in the topic, Kerstin Dörhöfer (2003, 84) observed a convention of assigning architectural binary opposites directly to the categories of male/female:

[H]idden in buildings, in their very forms, is a centuries-old symbolic language that harbors a mental process of ascribing gender to binary opposites, freighted with tradition. Among these binary opposites are the distinctions of space as being internal or external, central or peripheral, upward or downward, vertical or horizontal.

The use of dichotomies specifically attributed to gender has a long tradition in western philosophy where one of the most notoriously stated dichotomies is that of culture/nature. Cultural anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner argued that the historical devaluation of women is rooted in the postulate that “woman is being identified with, or symbolically associated with, nature, as opposed to man, who is identified with culture” (1972, 12). Considering the paradigm about the purpose of culture that in its broadest sense is to transcend nature, this postulate predetermines and justifies the subordination and domination of nature by culture. Transferring these considerations to the problematic of urban space, it can be affirmed that culture tends to be considered as reflected in the city, in its built form and its exponents such as the vertical architecture. As within the architectural evolution the vertical construction is currently viewed as the highest degree of economic, industrial and technological progress, it became a symbol of culture, that is, of masculinity.

### **Vertical = Masculine?**

According to Diana Agrest (1996), there exist specific binary dichotomies related to the urban space such as nature/city or nature/architecture, which are based on the misogynist dichotomy of nature/culture. Agrest (1996, 60) developed her argument around the ideology of modernist urbanism where relationships between nature, architecture and gender are largely influenced by the opposition of nature and culture and are represented by the technological progress:

The ideology of modernist architecture and urbanism is still based on the mechanistic scientific ideology, taking the form of *machinism*, an ideology that implicitly sanctions the repression/suppression of woman. [...] The urban realm thus discloses the historical role of the alignment of nature and gender, an identification that is once again key to the struggle for power and the engendering of power. The conception of the world as a machine in a fetishistic architecture that is the result of the application of the principles of modernist urbanism allows the double domination (or negation) of nature and woman.

Nature, standing for woman, is excluded from the modernist ideology and from any participation in the formation of the vertical architecture, both practically and symbolically. In accordance with what Agrest calls “fetishistic architecture,” the vertical architecture can be considered as the materialization of the fetish of its creators that serves to symbolically represent masculinity.

Theorists of architecture and urbanism claimed that the link between the vertical and the phallic has been historically transferred to the field of urban space and its architectural forms. Kim Dovey (1999, 122) noted that the desire of architects to produce an eternal vertical erection

cannot be separated from the phallic. With the same concerns, Lefebvre (1991, 287) affirmed that the vertical form of architecture metaphorically “symbolizes force, male fertility, masculine violence.” The phallic erectility as a symbolic feature of the vertical architecture hence “bestows a special status on the perpendicular, proclaiming phallocracy as the orientation of space, as the goal of the process - at once metaphoric and metonymic - which instigates this facet of spatial practice” (Lefebvre 1991, 287). Lefebvre additionally noted that in the case of vertical architecture the part represents the whole, that is, the phallic shape represents the phallocracy as a norm, together with the brutality of political and bureaucratic power. As for the link between power and the vertical, Lefebvre associated phallic architecture with a need to create an impression of authority and visually represent the arrogance and potential violence of phallocratic power.

The relation between power and verticality was a subject of investigation in the field of cognitive and social psychology, with affirmative results confirming a link between these two parameters. It was observed that a vertical arrangement of the space can create an effect of exaggeration, dramatization and mystification, which is why verticality is considered a symbol of authority (Meerwein et al. 2007; Schubert et al. 2009). A study dedicated to the analysis of the association between power and spatial arrangement affirms that the parameters of space can serve to establish, communicate and reinforce power relations (Schubert et al. 2009). Specifically, it has been shown that mental representations of power are associated with two qualities of space: its elevation and its verticality.

Another clue that insinuates the symbolic dimension of vertical architecture in terms of masculinity and power, is the vocabulary used in verbal expressions for describing vertical constructions. Schwartz et al. (1982) pointed out that social power relations are being defined on the scale of a vertical order, which becomes an almost universal phenomenon applied in various fields, from religious symbolisms to architectural conventions. In this sense, vertical pre-eminence symbolizes the concept of social power, which is why, to express power relations, expressions such as “being at the height” or “being above” someone are used in verbal language. In architecture and construction language, the expression “erection of a building” is often used to refer to the foundation of a vertical building or a monument, which directly alludes to the phallic shape of these constructions.

### **Meaning of Verticality in Architecture and Art**

Striving for verticality in architectural thinking is closely attached to the modern urban design, when architects like Louis Sullivan, Adolf Loos or Le Corbusier showed their fascination for the vertical and expressed themselves in terms of admiration for the tall edification. Sullivan, designated as the “father of the skyscraper” and the co-author of one of the first early skyscrapers, saw verticality as the substance of modern buildings. The text of Sullivan’s (1896) essay “The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered” can be interpreted as a justification and glorification of the high-rise buildings:

Thus has come about that form of lofty construction called the “modern office building.” It has come in answer to a call, for in it a new grouping of social conditions has found a habitation and a name. Up to this point all in evidence is materialistic, an exhibition of force, of resolution, of brains in the keen sharp sense of the word. It is the joint product of the speculator, the engineer, the builder. (403)

Sullivan associated the vertical architecture with a male figure and with traditionally masculine qualities such as strength, logic and pride. According to Sullivan (1896, 405), the ability to design the perfect vertical form can only be attributed to “a man with a strong natural liking for buildings, and a disposition to shape them in what seems to his unaffected nature a direct and simple way.” With a constant endeavour and even absurd reasoning when justifying the tall buildings, Sullivan (1896, 406) systematically attempted to naturalize the vertical form as a predestined gift for the man who

must realize at once and with the grasp of inspiration that the problem of the tall office building is one of the most stupendous, one of the most magnificent opportunities that the Lord of Nature in His beneficence has ever offered to the proud spirit of man.

Sullivan’s thinking about the vertical architecture was explicitly associated with the power and the force of the built form, which according to him should provide the essential characteristics of the building. In fact, each line that does not correspond to the vertical order is perceived by Sullivan as dissident. The architect is projecting the binary distinction of vertical/horizontal into the built urban forms, where the vertical is perceived as masculine and desired, while the horizontal is undesired for as being feminine.

Another architect who explicitly linked verticality with the masculine was Adolf Loos, basing his considerations about the vertical on the assumption that every art, even architecture, is erotically charged. In this sense, Loos (1962, 277) defined the meaning of the horizontal and the vertical as follows: “A horizontal line: the reclining woman. A vertical line: the man who penetrates her.” With this statement Loos made clear his conviction about the subordination of women, represented by the horizontal, to men, represented by the vertical. We can observe again, how the binary opposite of horizontal/vertical is applied within architectural thought to symbolically justify the unequal power relations between men and women.

In his writings on architecture, Le Corbusier frequently referred to verticality as the primary spatial orientation. Architecture and urbanism critic Barbara Hooper (2002, 60) pointed to the fact that Le Corbusier theorized vertical forms as “rational, modern, and masculine,” while horizontality represented for him the “feminine irrationality of a primitive nature.” Le Corbusier’s architectural discourse turns into a discourse of power that is based on the verticality of straight lines, predominating in his urban designs. This was made visible in his project *Ville Contemporaine*, a city destined first of all for white-collar workers, managers and bureaucrats, made up of twenty-four skyscrapers aligned in a monumental complex. The verticality of *Ville Contemporaine* reflects a type

of centralized power, where the elite operates in the heights of the buildings, watching over the daily life of the city. The celebration of a vertical elevation of the city is even more present in the urban design of *La Ville Radiieuse* where Le Corbusier proposed a vertical arrangement for the city of Paris, with a rationally regulated urban life. In both urban designs, Le Corbusier tried to impose a new urban order based on verticality, with the aim to create a new social order by establishing a technical, scientific and intellectualized space.

A gendered distinction between the vertical and the horizontal, similar to the one articulated in the field of architecture, can be further identified in the conceptual thought of representatives of abstract art. The vertical line was of particular importance in the artistic creation of the De Stijl abstract art movement. For Theo van Doesburg, the founder of the movement, the straight line equaled “the new means of expression of the future” (1971, 201) and in his artworks he reduced the compositions to pure abstractions comprised of vertical and horizontal lines and shapes of basic colors. Van Doesburg (1922, 24) resorted to the binary distinction of verticality/horizontality, comparing it to a power struggle:

This struggle, which is based in the structure of life, is a struggle between two polar forces. Let us call them nature and spirit, or the feminine and the masculine principle, the negative and the positive, the static and dynamic, the horizontal and the vertical - these are the unchangeable elements on which the contradiction of our life is based.

From the writings of van Doesburg it can be deduced that the conceptual foundation of his artwork is based on a supposed gender struggle, where the vertical lines represent the spirit, the positive, the dynamic—the masculine, while the horizontal lines represent the nature, the negative, the static—the feminine.

Although Piet Mondrian is known primarily as a painter, his artistic interest was situated in a continuity between design, visual art and architecture, in some cases he even titled his compositions by cities such as New York or London and turned his artistic creation towards pure abstraction composed of horizontal and vertical lines. The link between gender and the symbolic meaning of lines in Mondrian’s artwork is evidenced by an annotation in his sketchbook stating: “Masculine and feminine, vertical and horizontal” (Seuphor 1964, 39). We see here that for Mondrian, the horizontal and vertical lines represented among other things a binary attribution to the qualities of the feminine and the masculine. When analyzing Mondrian’s artwork, Michel Seuphor interpreted the horizontality as the sea, the nature—the feminine, whereas the verticality he saw as pillars—the masculine, concluding that this “fundamental dualism” would have subsequently “become the basis of Neo-Plasticism” (1964, 40). It can be deduced that the fundamental dualism described by Seuphor is based on the historical misogynistic tradition of associating nature with women, as opposed to culture, associated with men.

As a representative of European Constructivism, Seuphor transferred his ideas of the vertical and the horizontal into abstract artworks to which he attributed a direct association with

architecture. In his essay for the Constructivist journal *Cercle et Carré* Seuphor (1974, 184) stated that:

Every man is equally attracted by each of these two notions of the world: on the one hand, principle, the strongly willed, the vertical; on the other the natural, the feminine, the horizontal. Our judgement is constituted in such a way that two opposite poles make an equal impression on it. Natural beauty takes us kindly by the hand and leads us into the bosom of matter, while the attraction of the true incites us to thought and elevates us to abstraction.

Clearly, Seuphor associated the feminine with beauty, nature and the horizontal, placing it in a direct opposite with the vertical, that is to say, the strong, the true, the wise, the masculine. In addition to fostering the concept of a gendered spatial orientation, Seuphor also assigned the capacities of thought and abstraction to masculine virtues, fomenting the misogynist belief of the intellectual inferiority of women.

### **Utopian Vertical City**

Even before construction materials and technologies enabled the boom of tall buildings, male fantasies of vertical cities were being articulated and visualized by various representatives of art and architecture. These utopian visions emerged at the end of the nineteenth century and were continuously developed throughout the twentieth century. In some of the utopias, the vertical order was applied on a scale of an entire city, whether existing or imagined, while other utopian visions proposed isolated monolithic structures as models to be implemented in urban areas.

In 1894 the entrepreneur King Camp Gillette published his utopian plan for a city called *Metropolis* that would house almost the entire American population within its twenty-four thousand monumental buildings. In order to eliminate the chaos and misfortune of individuality, Gillette planned a new social and economic order concentrated in this utopian city, where each of the buildings would have an identical construction. Almost all the activities of the population would be centered in this giant urban complex of vertical buildings with twenty-five floors including luxurious apartments and industrial establishments. Gillette's urban utopia is based on an elitist and monetarist thinking, putting economics and industrialization at the top of social values: "Under a perfect economical system of production and distribution, and a system combining the greatest elements of progress, there can be only one city on a continent, and possibly only one in the world" (Gillette 1894, 87).

Gillette's exaggerated and ostentatious vision extolled the utopic *Metropolis* as the ultimate city that would make cities like London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna or New York "look like the work of ignorant savages" (Gillette 1894, 75). Considering the ideologies articulated along the planning of *Metropolis*, we detect here an example of how the junction of arrogance, megalomania and a strictly economic, quantitative and exclusive thinking is projected in the male vision of the ideal urban space, whose main characteristic is the vertical order.

In the panorama of European Futurism, the Italian architect Antonio Sant'Elia presented

his utopian designs of a modern metropolis, once again dominated by verticality. Sant'Elia (1914) verbalized his radical views of architecture in the manifesto *L'architettura futurista*, declaring a contempt for classicism and neoclassicism, whose principles he described as grotesque, imbecile, stupid and powerless. In fact, Sant'Elia appealed to the need of introducing new forms, new lines and new volumes into the urban realm. In the series of sketches for his project named *La Città Nuova* Sant'Elia visualized an idea of the new futuristic city where buildings “have to be like giant machines” (1914, n.p.). The urban arrangement proposed in the design of *La Città Nuova* represents a new aesthetic crowded with vertical structures dominated by steel beams and reinforced concrete that for Sant'Elia (1914) equate to supreme grace, a flash of genius and technical expertise.

In his manifesto Sant'Elia (1914) explicitly announced his despise for architecture containing pleasant and horizontal lines, while proclaiming an architecture full of calculation and reckless audacity. He further stated that the city and its architecture should be, both spiritually and materially, “the immediate and faithful projection of ourselves” (Sant'Elia 1914, n.p.). Considering the ideology and the formal parameters of *La Città Nuova*, we can deduce that the “ourselves” referred to by Sant'Elia represents a specific group of people that can be defined within the qualities of strength, sharpness, genius and technical thinking, that is, within the terms of masculinity, which practically prevents women from being reflected in this futuristic urban utopia.

German architect Ludwig Karl Hilberseimer saw the ideal solution for cities in a vertical overlap of buildings, envisioned in the *Hochhausstadt* project. His urban plan consisted of a system of tall, slender and uniform slab-type buildings of twenty stories, of which the first five would have a commercial function, whereas the remaining floors would have a residential function. In Hilberseimer's visions, the metropolis is “a product of the economic development of the modern era” and a “natural and necessary result of global industrialization” (2012, 85). In a manner similar to Sant'Elia, Hilberseimer despised historic cities for their chaotic urban life and uncontrolled structure, and aimed to convert the city into a calculated vertical urban system with regulated streets and concentrated edifices, without respecting the sentimental historic values for the reason that the “task is not to conserve the past, but to prepare the way for the future” (Hilberseimer 2012, 100).

Hilberseimer's utopian project was criticized mostly for a conspicuous absence of green urban areas but also for its subordination to a mechanistic principle. Other critical opinions even compared the city of Hilberseimer to a cemetery, due to its funereal atmosphere and the shapes of buildings reminiscent of tombs (Hilberseimer 2012). Indeed, Hilberseimer's vision of the city approaches an urban dystopia that lacks the variety of any human individuality, it appears cold, uniform, sharp and rationalized, designed under a strictly mechanistic thinking, which is why it does not reflect real human needs for an environment to reside in general, nor does it consider specific needs of women, who disappear in the vertical order of the cityscapes formulated between utopia and dystopia.

An even more dystopian representation of a city of the future was designed by Hugh Ferriss under the title *The Metropolis of Tomorrow*. In his reflections on the urban, Ferriss (1929) proposed an imaginary metropolis visualized in a series of drawings dominated by giant vertical structures installed densely in a gloomy environment. The tower buildings of this city would have a monumental height of three hundred meters, covering the surface of up to six street blocks. By proposing a system of dividing the city into three main zones, the trade zone, the art zone and the science zone, Ferriss imposed a strict zoning and a vertical hierarchy that also omits many areas of daily urban life, which was the main point of criticism expressed by architectural historian Carol Willis who claimed that “his grandiose vision of urban utopia contradicts the contemporary idea of a livable city” (1986, 148). Another critical perspective was articulated by Lewis Mumford who blamed the metropolis of Ferriss for depicting a “morbid dream” of an “infantile paper city erected by megalopolitan business men and skyscraper architects” (Mumford 1938, 521). From a gender perspective, Ferriss's vision can be criticized for reflecting ideas of cold masculinity that are being materialized in vertical construction forms and for the absolute rationalization of space that presupposes an androcentric homogeneity of its inhabitants.

The utopia of a vertically established city reached its most explicit form in the 1960s with the projects *Vertical City* by Friedrich St. Florian and *Die Vertikale Stadt* by Klaus Gartler and Helmut Rieder. These two urban utopias designed by Austrian architects refer to the vertical order as the only spatial orientation of the urban arrangement, with the intention of concentrating the entire city in a single vertical construction. To achieve this, St. Florian conceived a city that would consist of a giant tower of three hundred floors rising above the clouds, including all the components of a city in an exclusively vertical scale. Gartler and Rieder proposed a similar urban design consisting of a vertical mega-structure with a height of thousand six hundred meters, located floating in the center of a lake, which would house a city of two hundred thousand inhabitants (Frac Centre 2015, 5). Both projects are showing a radical utopian vision of transfiguring the spatial urban order into an absolute verticality, eradicating any horizontal distribution in the city.

### **The Phallic Skyscraper**

Since the late nineteenth century, when the first skyscrapers emerged in the United States, the skyscraper has become a globalized architectural phenomenon that interferes the skyline of western metropolises. Today it is highly unlikely to find a capital city without a district of skyscrapers, as there is a vehement structural desire to project economic, industrial and social advances in this type of edifice. Skyscrapers are usually concentrated in urban complexes creating an integrated neighborhood, centering commerce, financial institutions and the privileged elite, and thus promoting urban zoning and exclusion that at the same time reflect social inequalities of an urban society. In this sense, the access to the use of the skyscraper is reserved for the economically and politically powerful citizen groups.

In order to comprehend the urban dynamics produced by skyscrapers, it is crucial to analyze

the power relations which accompanied the construction of skyscrapers throughout their history. A seminal analysis of this problematic was presented by urban historian Dolores Hayden in her 1977 essay “Skyscraper Seduction Skyscraper Rape,” using the metaphor of a rape to explain the scale on which the construction of skyscrapers has invaded the urban space and human lives, without the consent of the citizens.

The heights of the early skyscrapers could not have been reached without the sacrifice of many construction workers’ lives, who frequently died from accidents, falling from the heights. Hayden (1977) emphasized that this violent and inhuman aspect of the skyscraper history has been largely overlooked. The pressure to build fast, coming from the part of the investors, was superimposed on human lives and their safety, and even these deaths were related to a perverse pride (Hayden 1977, 109). Another violent aspect that accompanied the construction of skyscrapers since their origin is their arrogant imposition against the will of the majority. As Hayden (1977, 108) pointed out, there exists a stark contrast between public disagreement with the construction of skyscrapers and their persistent praise by their advocates:

For a century most American architectural historians have busily rationalized the aesthetic, functional, and social distress the skyscraper creates, nurturing the prevalent belief that the skyscraper is a glorious triumph of engineering, a natural part of urban life, and an inevitable result of urban concentration.

Despite the efforts to glorify and rationalize the vertical edification, the fantasies of the investors did not correspond to the will and the needs of the majority of urban citizens, which is why the construction of skyscrapers was accompanied by protests. As Leslie Kanes Weisman (1981) noted, skyscrapers have been competing for dominance in urban space while significantly reducing the quality of urban life, sometimes even causing feelings of anxiety. One of the negative effects of the new built heights installed by the skyscrapers is that they are taking away views and cast shadows on streets, parks and neighborhoods, and it seems that for most cities the only solution to restrain the rampant yearning for heights is to impose strict height limits on urban construction.

The rape metaphor articulated by Hayden was likewise derived from the phallic shape of the skyscraper and from the rhetoric by which its construction is being justified such as “developers ‘can’t help themselves’” or “the city really wants it” (Hayden 1977, 108). Although the comparison proposed by Hayden may appear extreme, it undoubtedly captures the wide spectrum of controversies embodied in the vertical architecture, especially in relation to connotations of masculinity, desire, sexuality and power. Considering the male symbolism, Weisman argued that the skyscraper represents a “pinnacle of patriarchal symbology” which is based on the male myth of “the great, the erect, the forceful—the full balloon of the inflated masculine ego” (1981, 6). In fact, several skyscrapers explicitly allude to masculinity due to their ostentatious phallic shape, such as the Torre Glòries, formerly Torre Agbar, in Barcelona or the 30 St Mary Ax skyscraper located in London. From this perspective, due to their height and

omnipresence, skyscrapers represent emblematic buildings which stand out in the urban panorama to visually and symbolically dominate the city and remind its inhabitants of the male presence on a daily basis.

Architect and urban theorist Rem Koolhaas (1994) contributed with a critical interpretation of the vertical arrangement of Manhattan in his manifesto *Delirious New York*. Koolhaas compared the urban area of Manhattan to a “factory of man-made experience, where the real and the natural ceased to exist” (1994, 10) and was filled with monotonous rectilinear rows surrounded by stacks of erected buildings and utopian fragments. A part of the manifesto Koolhaas (1994, 130) dedicated to reflect on the position of women within the vertical architecture: “Architecture, especially its Manhattan mutation, has been a pursuit strictly for men. For those aiming at the sky, away from the earth’s surface and the natural, there has been no female company.” The exclusion of women from vertical edifices became a spatial practice in case of some skyscrapers such as the Downtown Athletic Club, a luxurious club with sports, leisure and socialization facilities, where the club membership was provided only to a specific group of men and even the access to the building was restricted for women (Koolhaas 1994; Brozan, 1977). From its founding in 1931 until 1977, the first twelve floors of Downtown Athletic Club were accessible exclusively to men, so they could enjoy the facilities quietly among each other, without being disturbed by the presence of women. Considering these facts, the presence of women in a vertical urban space filled with skyscrapers is perceived as an intrusive element that should be excluded and attributed a position of “the other.” Hayden stressed that the skyscrapers are a “reminder that our culture depends on false hopes of economic mobility as well as on rigid hierarchy, and that it thrives on social seduction as well as on architectural rape” (1977, 115). The skyscraper inherently represents a symbolic demonstration of power, a symbol of masculinity, corporate capitalism and aggressive entrepreneurship. Precisely due to the fact that in today’s cities the presence of skyscrapers has become a common part of the everyday urban space, we should not ignore the symbolic connotations of skyscrapers and their impact on shaping our perception of the urban reality.

### **Privileged Views**

A particular phenomenon resulting directly from the urban vertical order are the privileged views of the city and its surroundings, which can only be appreciated by an elite group of users of the vertical architecture. Historically, elevated points were used to establish, display and symbolically communicate a position of power, be it the castles of emperors located on a hill or the religious symbols installed on top of church towers. Looking upwards to the inaccessible height, the elevated locations served as a space to exercise power, especially because of its vertical relation within the topography of the geographical space. Nowadays, it is mostly the upper floors of the high-tech vertical architecture that represent a symbol of power established within a vertical social hierarchy and patriarchal economy.

The top floors of skyscrapers are generally reserved for luxury facilities with panoramic views,

meeting rooms and private offices, from which the highest-ranking associates exercise their power, overlooking the urban areas of their domination. The symbolic value of these views, perceived as exclusive privileges, involves several components. First of all, the views symbolize the supremacy of those who look down at the city from high above and have the entire city “under their feet.” The panoramic views from the tall buildings further allow to keep distance from the unwanted urban effects, such as pollution, urban noise and the regular citizens who dissolve in the abstract image of the city when seen from above. The access to privileged views is also a symbol of status and prestige that serves for certain elite of companies or individuals to distinguish themselves from the rest of the population. In fact, the views from the vertical architecture turn into views of domination, which according to Dovey is related to the very position of the building within the topography of the city: “The dominance of the building as a landmark on the skyline is meshed with the feeling of power engendered by the commanding view” (1999, 116).

A particular category of urban property established on the upper floors of the vertical architecture is the most exclusive, most luxurious and most expensive penthouse apartment. This type of property becomes a symbol of social status and economic power, generating a largely inaccessible desire, where simultaneously the privileged views become a distinctive luxury market value. With the penthouse and its privileged views, not only a new economic desire is being created but also a new type of urban citizen is being defined, the one who should inhabit this luxury penthouse, that is the male urban bachelor. One of the most explicit evidences of the construction of a new masculinity based on vertical architecture was provided by the *Playboy* magazine in the article “Playboy’s Penthouse Apartment” from 1956. Here, a housing instruction manual for the new urban bachelor was visualized through illustrations of a luxury penthouse as the new home for the young single man, described as a refuge from where one can enjoy the views of the city. In this fantasy of urban masculinity, the penthouse becomes a type of panopticon, where the bachelor can voyeuristically observe the city from behind the glass walls without him being seen by others. Architectural theorist George Wagner pointed to the fact that the penthouse is located high above the city while at the same time being a part of the city, which is why the views from the penthouse allow the bachelor “a controlling gaze of the urban spectacle” (1996, 199).

Feminist philosopher Beatriz Preciado analyzed the architecture and sexuality presented in *Playboy* magazine, highlighting the direct association of the penthouse with a specific type of masculinity presented as “a redefinition of masculinity based on consumption, urban life and a maximization of its heterosexual encounters” (2010, 62) and we could add that the new urban masculinity is also based on the appropriation of vertical architecture and the privileges attached to it. The male figure living in the luxury attic is thus attributed specific privileges intertwined with his economic power, independence, virility and singleness, thanks to which

the new bachelor could enjoy the privileges of the public space (and we must understand here the gender and representation privileges, as well as the monopolies agreed by capitalist commodification) without being subject to the laws (family, moral, anti-porn) and the [exterior] dangers. (Preciado 2010, 130)

A narrative of the new masculinity is being created around a man who lives in the city, who is single or divorced, who is heterosexual and whose social and economic power is reflected in the building he inhabits. The status of male power linked to the iconography of the luxury penthouse and its views becomes a recurring image reproduced in cinematographic and popular culture representations, expanding and fostering this idea in a collective imaginary.

## **Conclusion**

The vertical order of the urban space appears in a constant link with masculinity, domination and power. Throughout the modern history, vertical arrangements have been valued and proclaimed among some of the most influential representatives of architecture and art, who projected masculine qualities into the verticality while rejecting the feminized horizontality, drawing on the misogynistic tradition of attributing binary opposites to gender. Until nowadays, the vertical paradigm is dominating the world's metropolises, influencing urban planning practices and architectural thinking. Utopias of vertical cities reflected a radical architectural thinking characterized by a masculine vocabulary, both verbal and visual. Among their common traits we can observe the contempt for the horizontal, the rejection of traditional architecture and the consequent effort to reform the urban space under a mechanistic, economic and technical thinking, without considering the human needs for a habitable space. The authors of the utopias had a vision of establishing not only a new architectural urban order but also a new social order, based on masculine principles, such as strength, sharpness, rationality and verticality. The introduction of the vertical order in the urban space would then serve to turn the city and its components into a type of machine that would prioritize production, commerce and traffic while at the same time ensuring a rationalized and disciplined urban life. Although none of the vertical utopias has been realized in practice, they significantly influenced in popular cultural representations and architectural thought. In fact, the architecture of several contemporary metropolises is reminiscent of a vertical utopia, especially those urban areas that are dominated by skyscrapers, the type of edifice that has become the exponent of vertical architecture.

The vertical architecture is not destined for everyone and especially not for women. The privilege of forming the urban order and observing the urban space from a bird's-eye view completes the continuity of the particularities of vertical architecture that serve as an instrument to reflect masculinity and indulge masculine fantasies. In fact, we believe that a vertical arrangement of the urban space needs to be considered as a phenomenon in a context of gender perspective. This includes a reflection on the historical and conceptual aspects that link verticality to masculine, economic, androcentric and phallographic power, which is why the vertical order of urban space should be perceived with a critical view as it is systematically contributing to a symbolic gender inequality in the urban space, as well as to the spatial exclusion and alienation of women and other citizen groups that inhabit the contemporary city.

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## Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* and the Birth of the Political\*

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### Abstract:

This article looks at one of the most popular recent installation works, Eliasson's *The Weather Project*, which still is probably the Danish-Icelandic artist's most famous work. To explain both the iconicity within Eliasson's oeuvre and the enormous popularity of the work, we argue that it essentially addresses an aesthetic conflict between a critical *and* a populist potential; or, more specifically—reformulates this conflict. For what seems to be clear is that although the critical dimension is explicitly present in the work, it is largely insignificant in terms of the overall aesthetic experience. What we find, then, is a work whose aesthetics in many ways attempts to distance itself from late 20<sup>th</sup> century predecessors by blatantly surrendering to a seductive spectacle that suspends the critical. In doing so, *The Weather Project* points towards a new political paradigm emerging around the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which in more recent years seems to have found a temporary culmination through events such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as the US president. The post-9/11 political paradigm moved away from an idea prevalent during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, embodied in Fukuyama's thesis of the end of history and the concomitant idea of the absolutely secure world (and, by implication, the erasure of the outside/inside distinction). After an ill-defined war on terror that undoubtedly has made the world less secure, financial crises that have made the gap between rich and poor wider, the rise of populism amidst even the most solid and oldest democratic institutions, and more generally a widening gap between 'the people' and 'the elite'—it is as if we have returned to political antagonisms that many thought were no longer relevant. We argue that it is within this context that one may appreciate *The Weather Project's* intervention as an art work recreating an atmosphere, a mood, that reminds us of a collective body the binding of which is essentially a pre-political moment—a moment at which we may, yet again, ask the forgotten question: why we need the political at all.

**Keywords:** Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, installation, critical dimension, aesthetic seduction, the political, the state of nature

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## Introduction

In the autumn of 2019, Tate Modern ran a special exhibition called *In Real Life* with the works of Icelandic-Danish artist Olafur Eliasson.<sup>1</sup> This came in the wake of the 2018 Tate Modern exhibition *Ice Watch*, which consisted of 30 blocks of ice that the artist had carved out of the waters around Greenland.<sup>2</sup> There is no doubt that Eliasson currently belongs among the world's elite of contemporary artists—a fame that dates back to the breakthrough exhibition, also at Tate Modern, *The Weather Project*, one of the largest and most popular recent art successes, attracting some 2.2 million spectators.

This article takes a closer look at *The Weather Project* as a work that in many ways seems to contain an *essence* of Eliasson's oeuvre and style as a whole, which furthermore represents perhaps one of the most spectacular and popular works of art on a global scale in recent times.<sup>3</sup> These two points—the essence and the popularity—raise some crucial issues in and around the work that directly connects it to what could be seen as an aesthetic conflict between a critical potential and a populist appeal in the post-9/11 age. When the work was first exhibited—in 2003—the world had both literally and figuratively taken its first feeble steps into the 21<sup>st</sup> century; moving away from the liberal 90s, the end of history as a consequence of the end of the Cold War, Labour's third way, postmodernism, the optimism over the blessings of globalization and multiculturalism—and towards a new world order that consisted of a protracted and never clearly defined post-9/11 war on terror; a gradually intensifying populism, which in liberal democracies seems to have reached a tentative culmination in the form of Donald Trump and Brexit; and finally, an increasingly irreconcilable polarization between the 'elite' and the 'people' on a global scale (which, of course, was further polarized after the 2008 financial crisis).<sup>4</sup> That is, in many ways a return to political antagonisms that many in Western democracies thought had been fully resolved by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 2003, it was still possible to believe that these emerging trends were merely *exceptions* or digressions in relation to the normative paradigm of the end of history; nowadays one would be tempted to say that these exceptions in fact constituted the *norm*, a normative reality that the liberal West—momentarily, during a few happy and self-absorbed decades—had largely forgotten. Today, what used to be core principles of liberal societies—e.g., democracy, tolerance, transatlantic collaborations, international treaties, mobility—are increasingly seen as naive at best; dangerous and threatening at worst.<sup>5</sup>

This ominous political horizon seems to stand in stark contrast to the serene calm and tranquility one finds in Eliasson's *The Weather Project*. Yet there is a sense in which the tension one finds aesthetically articulated in an early millennial work such as *The Weather Project*—an oscillation between the work's playful, critical dimension enveloped by an overwhelming, breathtakingly beautiful simplicity that suspends the critical dimension—is precisely a *political* tension, or one that pertains to the political. While the critical dimension is quite explicitly present in the work—something that art critics have been particularly eager to point out ever since it was first exhibited—it would hardly be credible to claim that this aspect was the main reason millions

of people went to visit the exhibition. On the contrary, the most notable thing about this spectacular work seemed on the contrary to be its *populist* appeal, the fact that it managed to tap into a vast source of collective fascination. And is it not precisely here that we find the resurgence of an old aesthetic problem that the 20<sup>th</sup> century never managed to solve in any convincing way? That under all the critical self-distance, laughter, satire, parody, ambiguity and irony of postmodernism—as the ultimate aesthetic expression of late 20<sup>th</sup> century democratic sentiments<sup>6</sup>—the longing for the archaic mass psychology of the collective body emerged ever so steadily again; first as art, and then—a few years later, in the form of worldwide crises, populist risings, protests—as reality itself. In this article, we will try to explore some of the reasons as to why so many people were—and still are—drawn to this particular work, discussing both its critical dimension as well as its mass appeal, arguing that there is a haunting *antagonism* at the heart of *The Weather Project*, which far from being sorted out points us in the direction of an old political problem that may temporarily have been forgotten, but was never really resolved; the specter of the state of nature. Thus, our overall argument is that the work constitutes an important millennial aesthetic statement capturing the gist of a truly 21<sup>st</sup> century spirit of the political. Or rather: the re-evocation of an essentially *pre-political* moment that raises the forgotten question why we ever needed the political in the first place.

### **The Installation Work**

Eliasson's *The Weather Project* was first exhibited in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall in 2003.<sup>7</sup> The work consisted of approximately 200 low-sodium mono-frequency lamps that were attached to a huge translucent screen, creating a visual spectacle resembling a gigantic solar disk. The huge ceiling was covered with large mirrors plates, which made the already huge room seem even bigger.<sup>8</sup> Although the solar disk *looked* round (i.e., resembling the sun), it was in fact only a half-circle, but which was visually doubled due to the mirror effects. Other special effects were added to this great illusion, such as humidifiers that released sugar water into the air, creating a thin fog around the disk. Taken together, this enormous construction created a distinct, almost supernatural radiance.

There is something sensational in itself that a modern installation can attract over 2 million spectators; something that undoubtedly indicates that the work struck something deep in the wider popular imagination, and not just among experienced art connoisseurs.<sup>9</sup> To describe the aesthetic experience of *The Weather Project*, the closest might be to envision it as a kind of hypnotic, overwhelming feeling of grandeur that engulfs the spectator. In this sense, the work inscribes itself in a long aesthetic tradition of works of art striving to articulate the sublime, often in the form of nature's enormity, e.g., as in Turner's fierce yet fragile landscapes, or the awe-inspiring visions of John Martin's or Francis Danby's works.<sup>10</sup> One of the reasons why the installation had such a mass appeal was perhaps due to the fact that in spite of its spectacular appearance, this work was to a lesser extent about itself, and more about the audience. Via the huge sun disk and the endless mirror images of the ceiling, it was a work that literally let people mirror themselves.<sup>11</sup> The sense of

enormity was undoubtedly magnified by the insertion of a well-known, gigantic phenomenon of the natural (a sunset) into an artificial space, which thus framed or enclosed this enormity—despite the enormous size of the Turbine Hall.<sup>12</sup>

It is not hard to imagine that it was precisely this unique framework that caused the installation work to directly influence the behavior of the crowd: people literally lay down, sunbathed, relaxed—as if they were sprawling on a lawn in a public park on a warm summer evening.<sup>13</sup> This very direct, almost tactile, relationship between the work and the spectator is something that several critics have pointed out, not only in relation to *The Weather Project*, but as a more general feature of Eliasson's oeuvre. Thus Frichot writes that Eliasson's works create “new models of social interaction” (33), while Madeleine Grynsztejn believes that the works more generally have a progressive-ideological dimension that calls the spectator into action.<sup>14</sup> Whether this latter issue is actually the case or simply a critical fiction is something we will return to in a moment, but at least it seems beyond any doubt that Eliasson's works, and *The Weather Project* specifically, affect the viewer's behavior.

*The Weather Project* is arguably one of the most spectacular installation works ever. As some critics have pointed out, installation art as a genre engages precisely with the dimensions of reality in new forms, relationships and potentials.<sup>15</sup> Quite literally, it opens up the discursive concept of reality again, and puts it together in new ways. In this sense, the genre operates with a concept of realism that is significantly different from the subversive-abstract aesthetics of modernism and the avant-garde, albeit with a less intense focus on the representational dimension as such, i.e., the work as a mimetic illusion. Instead, we find an acute sensory focus on the viewer's experience of the *materialities* of reality itself, their organizational and categorical principles—and thus a focus on boundaries, limits and transitions. Because the installation work typically has no boundaries other than the arbitrary boundaries set by the walls of the museum—which, due to the work's expansiveness, was particularly true of Eliasson's *The Weather Project*—we are, so to speak, entering a zone of indistinction whose purpose is precisely to problematize the normative space along with all the implications of this space.

As an ambiguous site that does not acknowledge fixed, immanent and absolute boundaries or limitations, the installation work as a genre carries out a performative gesture that unfolds in the cracks between different spheres and states, physical as well as mental. Thus, one could say that the installation work as a genre *activates* otherwise dormant spaces and contexts, in the very concrete sense that it creates new constellations, forms and territorial boundaries: for example, Tate Modern's Turbine Hall suddenly transformed by an enormous, artificial sun. Precisely because of this work of activating spaces and contexts, the installation has a material 'situatedness' in that it cannot be easily moved—at least not without significantly altering the aesthetic experience. The uniqueness of the work, its 'aura' so to speak, is inevitably tied to the arbitrary restrictions of the site. Above all, the installation activates a tactile-sensory relationship between the viewer's body-dependent (and subjectively conditioned) experience of place and time through the interaction with the

materiality of the work. Due to its direct engagement with real space and a variety of materialities (often occurring by way of a transgression of the work's 'natural' frames, thus potentially involving a radical *inclusion* of the viewer), the installation work explores the immanent boundaries between different layers, spheres, states that together constitute modern existence.

### **The Critical-Ironic Dimension**

Thus, it would seem relatively straightforward to develop the argument that the installation as a genre represents one of the most radical aesthetic attempts to articulate the problem regarding outside/inside—precisely because the installation does not naturally recognize any natural frames (e.g. the limits of physical space or the conventional boundaries of an art work), thus implicitly questioning any distinction between outside and inside, and in a further sense 'defamiliarizing' this distinction by potentially including the audience.

Among critics and scholars, there seems to be a broad consensus that precisely *The Weather Project*—and, more generally, Eliasson's many diverse installation works—possesses a 'work-immanent' critical potential, which among other things involves a renewed engagement with the material organization of reality that has a direct effect on the viewer's behavior. Johnson thus observes in connection with Eliasson's oeuvre that "installation art has been critically recognized as a form apparently more resistant to Benjaminian issues of reproduction, and thus, apparently also resistant to commodification" (325). Spiegl pursues this argument further by claiming that

Beauty, theatricality, drama, non-trueness, nature, and the nature of the non-true are the parameters around which Eliasson groups his works. They are deconstructivists to the extent that they always lay bare the principles behind the construction of their 'appearance'. They are not only theatrical in their effects, but also in their awareness of the fact that these are only effects. What appears to be nature—be it a rainbow, a waterfall, a sunrise, or whatever—is always and clearly marked as a natural 'effect'. (100)

Thus, continues Spiegl, also with reference to Walter Benjamin, Eliasson's works constitute "a plea for illusion, for a knowing self-deception, or rather for a politics of the imaginary ... If there is such a thing as an aura of the false, then that would make Eliasson the first exponent of the work of art in the age of the nature of mechanical reproducibility" (102).

One does not have to look long to find this 'plea for illusion' which is at the same time a 'knowing self-deception'. Like many other Eliasson works, there was a clear and explicit dimension of critical disenchantment built into *The Weather Project*. The construction of the giant solar disk itself was by no means hidden; on the contrary, the electric lights and mirrors were clearly visible. A walkway behind the solar disk even prompted the audience to literally look behind the spectacle—like in a giant theatre, that is, except that in the theatre one cannot typically go behind the staged tableaux. This was precisely possible in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, a possibility presented to the audience almost like an invitation; as if the work insisted on not being experienced simply as a seductive spectacle.

The work recreates a unique situation—a natural phenomenon that is spectacularly reproduced in an indoor space, but which at the same time constitutes an instantly recognizable everyday phenomenon: we have seen the sunset (or sunrise) thousands of times, perhaps to the extent that we are no longer capable of experiencing it properly, in its pristine immediacy, directness. In this sense, Eliasson's work can almost be construed as a *citation* whose 'citability'—i.e., the awareness that the work imitates or reproduces the semiotic codes most often associated with an everyday phenomenon—is present side by side with the sublime experience of the work. Or maybe it would be more accurate to describe the work as a kind of arrested *snapshot* of an everyday experience that reminds us both of the countless sunsets we ourselves have experienced, and those we have seen in movies or on postcards; a moment of 'irreality', a liminal experience of the real and the non-real becoming irretrievably blurred. As an 'arrested snapshot' of the sun—a citation—the work simultaneously creates a new temporal dimension. Whereas sunsets typically last a few minutes, *The Weather Project* allows for a lingering, iterative experience that in real life would have been impossible.

In this sense, the critical dimension of *The Weather Project* touches upon the problem Paul de Man outlined in his discussion of allegory.<sup>16</sup> Basically, de Man's argument is that whereas the figure of the 'symbol' articulates an inauthentic experience—more specifically a false postulate of unity between reality and fiction—the allegory offers a form of negative authenticity, namely the authentic recognition that immediate and direct authenticity is impossible. Indeed, the allegory postulates nothing but the fact that it is a belated successor of something else; that it refers to an earlier sign; and that its meaning depends on this reference to an earlier sign. More specifically, the principal dynamic of allegory communicates that signs do not refer to the world, to something outside of signs, but only to other signs.

When the allegoricity of a work involuntarily becomes too explicit, it turns into a cliché, i.e., a sign whose 'sign-ness' cancels the work's mimetic function. The cliché is a sign suffering from fatigue, a sign that has been overused, and whose meaning thus seems jammed, dead-like. The cliché prevents us from overlooking the illusoriness of the illusion (e.g., that the experience of a sunset actually reminds us of the experience of a movie that showed a sunset), and thus perhaps even reminds us of the unpleasant experience of discovering that one's intimate language is in fact someone else's. Ultimately, the cliché reminds us that we are trapped in a sign world, speaking words others have already used, and hence a sign world without the possibility of authentic experience.

But the allegory can also go the other way; it can move in the direction of irony by which the sign explicitly and self-consciously (and often with great confidence and energy) plays with the allegoricity of signs. What irony basically does is to carve out a new field of possibilities in which we are not only made aware of the linguistic constructs of the world, but precisely the critical opportunities that such a discovery engenders. Finally, according to de Man, there is a third possibility where we slip from the playful irony into a form of madness, i.e., the stage where the irony escalates to a point where one can no longer find one's way back, and hence no longer be able to discern the difference between the real and the fictitious—like the madness of the errant knight Don Quixote.

Given the critically disenchanting dimension of Eliasson's *The Weather Project*, an obvious approach to the work would be to highlight its allegorical dimension; not at first as a cliché (though the possibility does exist, e.g., to experience the work as an enlarged 'postcard'), but rather as an ironic work that precisely insists on exploring the boundary between the artificially reproducible and the real. In addition to this immanent work-critical dimension in *The Weather Project*, Eliasson's installation also contained a meta-critical dimension. In the exhibition catalogue, Eliasson presented a small study that preceded the work: it was a questionnaire addressed to the museum staff about how much light they each had access to.<sup>17</sup> In doing so, Eliasson critically mapped out a 'daylight hierarchy' which apparently revealed that the more you earn, i.e., the higher in the staff hierarchy one was placed, the more access to daylight one had. The lowest-earning and thus the lowest-ranking workers had the least access to daylight, and poorest views from the museum to the outside surroundings.

*The Weather Project* thus balances, on the one hand, between a seductive, sublime aesthetic that overwhelms and affects the viewer, thus stunning the latter's critical senses; on the other hand, the work is very explicitly committed to refusing the viewer to lose him- or herself in the unique atmosphere of the work.

### **The Suspension of the Critical Work**

And yet, perhaps the above section would not be an entirely correct description of *The Weather Project*—for the balance between the critical and the non-critical dimensions is simply not there in the work. Very little indicates that the millions of visitors were particularly interested in the work's critical dimension, not to mention the thought-provoking meta-critical institutional criticism, which likewise was largely ignored by reviewers and critics.

Perhaps more relevant here is simply to point out that the intention behind the critical dimension, both the work-critical aspects and the meta-criticism in the form of the study in the exhibition catalogue—which, if we follow some of the art-critical comments that the work generated, form a kind of resistance to the work's otherwise seductive spectacle, thus allegedly preventing people from indulging in an uncritical collective ecstasy—blatantly seemed to have misfired. Or perhaps it would be more correct to point out that, although the critical distancing effect was clearly present in the work, the sensory-seductive dimension of the work was so powerful that it cancelled out the former.

Thus, we have a work that contains an explicitly critical dimension, which, however, is overlooked and ignored by the audience—because the very mimetic-sensory-seductive dimension of the work itself seems so overwhelming, deafening; and of course—given the enormous audience numbers—because people were evidently *receptive* to this particular dimension. How to understand this relationship? We suggest that it is precisely this issue that constitutes one of the most interesting *aesthetic* aspects of Eliasson's millennial work; that is to say, because *The Weather Project*—unlike many millennial works of the 1990s—precisely here articulated a new *Zeitgeist*, according to which

the critical, self-distancing dimension simply meant very little, if anything at all. It is perhaps in this light that we must understand why some critics—a minority, to be sure—have explicitly distanced themselves from Eliasson's works; i.e., precisely because we no longer seem to be able to clearly discern and identify the work's critical dimension. Or perhaps because we can no longer hide or legitimize our fascination by simply referring to the critical dimension of the work. Thus, some critics have described Olafur Eliasson as an artist who creates a kind of science experiment or an entertaining spectacle that does not differ significantly from a theme park, merely inserted into an art institutional framework.<sup>18</sup> Others have questioned Eliasson's alleged, progressive aesthetic agenda, labelling his work nostalgic and regressive. Or rather: an artist creating a cynical-illusory show whose main purpose (or at least effect) is to conjure up a reality-escaping dream of an impossible experience.

It might be slightly too harsh to compare Eliasson's *The Weather Project* with a theme park event, but the fact is that the work has an unusual effect that threatens not only to suspend or drown out the disenchanting, critical sense, but rather at a more fundamental level to question whether this work can be described as an art work at all.

### **Absolute Peace**

Paul de Man's reflections on allegory are important as a critical problematization of the aesthetic illusion of the concept of reality. However, as mentioned, it is difficult to make a credible argument about the critical dimension in *The Weather Project*; it is demonstratively present, though the installation is evidently quite far from being in the same category as the ironic tongue-in-cheek works of e.g., Jeff Koons or Damien Hirst.

Taking the huge audience into consideration, it would seem be far more meaningful to situate the work's powers of fascination in closer proximity of de Man's form of madness, i.e., a point where irony spills into its opposite—a form of extreme authenticity, a performance of exaggerated sincerity gone too far, or perhaps a sublime experience of radical inclusion: the absolute abolition of distances, boundaries, separations. Madness is a form of intrusion into the concept of reality, something that throws us almost traumatically into a situation in which there are no longer any fixed coordinates, parameters; a zone of indistinction.<sup>19</sup> This dissolution—bordering to or transgressing into madness—of everything solid is at the same time a condition that brings us back to a *pre-political* moment, not only in the sense that the work seems deliberately devoid of concrete political content, but rather in the sense that the work touches upon something essential—essential coordinates—regarding the very question as to why we in general need the political in the first place. The political here basically means the individual need to identify or formulate a relationship with a particular community providing protection, and the essentials of survival not only in a biological sense but also in terms of identity and recognition; and vice versa to identify what relationships constitute a threat to that community's continued existence.<sup>20</sup>

In an atmosphere that appears absolutely peaceful, harmonious and meditative, and

where all human relations seem to merge into a higher unity, one might be tempted to draw the conclusion that *The Weather Project* ultimately articulates a utopian space in which the problem of the political has been eradicated once and for all: the absolutely depoliticized space.<sup>21</sup> There are no Schmittian enemies here, only friends; Eliasson creates a work in an age articulating the idea of a global-universal space that has completely eliminated the lawless spaces on Earth, e.g., the forest or bog, and displaced or hunted down the figures of lawlessness to the extent that these are nowhere to be seen any longer. As Fukuyama and others would have argued, it was this epochal vision of the end of history that dominated the global imagination during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In such a world, where all territories are now secure, brought within the realm of law, there is nothing outside, or rather the *idea* of an ‘outside’ no longer makes sense. Thus, vice versa, it makes no sense to talk about an inside—there are no walls adjoining barbarism—for everything has now become legalized, peaceful. The only deviation to this absolute peace is precisely the exception; the terrorist, the criminal, the partisan, the ghetto, the camp, the exempt area surrounded by completely secured areas—but which nonetheless still operates *within* these secured areas.<sup>22</sup>

However, it is precisely in the time after 9/11—and the specters derived in the form of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib—that this worldview has been greatly challenged. Alliez and Negri have written a small essay in conjunction with some reflections on contemporary art, where they make the rather lofty point that in the post-9/11 era, it no longer makes sense to separate the concepts of peace and war. On the contrary, these must be understood as cornerstones of an equivocal equation according to which to ensure peace, one must perpetually go to war—that is, not for the sake of war (and the traditional objectives of war, e.g., territorial defense or conquest, imperialism, colonization, reclamation), but precisely for the sake of peace. Within this regime of obsessive security, peace has thus become the postmodern term for a war that no longer has any natural and definite goal, scope or time frame, but takes place in all kinds of possible contexts in which global society seeks peace everywhere.<sup>23</sup> Peace—to rephrase Clausewitz—is the continuation of war with other means.

Linking these speculative philosophical-political thoughts to a reflection on the critical potential of contemporary art can in itself seem almost outrageously misplaced. Rehearsing an undoubtedly contentious belief in art’s ability to create a meaningful political intervention is one thing; another thing is to mention this vision explicitly in connection with the philosophical-political point that the concept of peace today is so hollowed out that it really means war. In any case, the linking illustrates that there never seems to have been a greater distance between what is going on along the geopolitical trajectory, and then the politically irrelevant and self-absorbed world of art. In their slightly mystifying and (slightly too brief) remarks on the potential of art in an age of Empire, Alliez and Negri speak of “the aesthetic power of sensation” (114), that art can express the indistinct (e.g., borders between war and peace); that the artist is trying to destroy the false image of peace; to create otherness and thus

to exhibit the sense of torment in what they call the 'over-display' of peace to war; and finally that art constitutes an aesthetic anticipation of a communist future.<sup>24</sup> It would be tempting to draw the conclusion that this mystifying jargon simply indicates that Alliez and Negri have no particular, concrete bid as to how art plays a genuinely radical role—thus inscribing their essay in a series of recent attempts to formulate utopian and bewildering aesthetic potentials of political radicalism in today's society. The problem Alliez and Negri identify—that the concept of peace today has become so hollow, inclusive and equivocal that it can encompass a phenomenon like permanent warfare—in one sense ironically mirrors the solution they come up with in the form of an impressive inventory of deliberately perplexing statements about art's utopian potential; i.e., a definition that in fact means the exact opposite—or rather, that art also fails in creating an exempt space in a world where the exception has already been made permanent.

### **The State of Nature**

In terms of the crucial question of the challenges of identifying this exempt space—how can art make a political intervention without simultaneously losing its aesthetic dimension, that is, that which makes it a work of art? As mentioned, it seems almost outrageous to move from these lofty philosophical-political discussions to a reflection on modern art—which not only testifies to the distance between these two areas, but also precisely points to the problem identified by Alliez and Negri: the problem to think beyond the all-appropriating contemporary political space.

What we find in *The Weather Project*, we argue, is not a utopian space outside this total sphere of so-called peace. On the contrary, this work seems to create a space of radical inclusion. How are we to conceptualize this radical inclusion, and what is its relation to the political? As Richard Dormant observes, *The Weather Project* creates a space that enables an experience of becoming part of something greater, a form of subjectivity that extends beyond the isolated individual experience; to become part of a vast cosmic whole, and at the same time to experience the radical insignificance of one's own individuality. In that sense, Dormant suggests, it is almost as if the work revives an awe-inspiring, primal, religious instinct.<sup>25</sup> As Morton observes; we find ourselves within something infinitely greater than ourselves.<sup>26</sup>

Pursuing these thoughts further, one could argue that the work performs a modern-day version of an ancient (solar) ritual, whose main function was to remind individuals of their absolute dependence on the infinite and unimaginable forces of nature, and implicitly the individual's helplessness; and thus, ultimately, what forms the basis of *the political community*. The gigantic, artificial sun thus seems to dissolve all differences, creating a space in which we float together in a large mass of unlimited bodies, united in the warm, tender, golden and perpetual sunlight. Bathed in this light flickers all kinds of things past—the sacred, the natural, the marvelous, our childhood, the perfect day at the beach, in the park; the sum of all our best memories that warm us on a cold winter's day. In this light, these golden moments last forever

as they flow together in an indescribable sense of oneness, thus transcending the effects of the individual, the delimiting, the marginalizing, the categorizing, the temporal, the specific. Against the background of this enormous sun, everything else is transformed into a mellow shadow world in which individuals appear as tiny insignificant dots.

To Freud, this is the feeling of ‘the oceanic’, a term that refers to the *unio mystica* experience of transindividual connectedness and solidarity with the world.<sup>27</sup> It is the symbiotic-imaginary experience of the solitary individual’s pre-symbolic dissolution into the mass, the collective—where the individual voice becomes one with the crowd and vice versa. From a political perspective, the oceanic experience is similar to the event of finding oneself submerged in or engulfed by a sea of bodies—suddenly, spontaneously, temporarily—demanding the same thing, e.g., during a demonstration, a protest, or a revolution; when every individual in a miraculous-euphoric moment of ecstasy finds common ground around the collective will and body.

In the midst of this atmosphere of absolute peace, one finds at the same time something apocalyptic in *The Weather Project*; as if we stood before the end of everything, the last glow of the sun’s dying fire, before darkness envelops us forever. It is a fateful condition which, in an imaginative moment, reminds us of that fatal instant of madness when Camus’ character Meursault fires a gun four times at a person lying on a beach. It is a moment emptied of meaning, devoid of time, an inexplicable act intensified in the present to such an extent that tomorrow carries absolutely no significance. For Meursault, the situation simply means nothing at all except the intensity of the moment; *à cause du soleil*. It is the moment when we forget ourselves, our individuality, and once again find ourselves gripped by nature’s obviousness, its absurdity, contingency and meaninglessness.

It is in this sense that *The Weather Project* brings us back to an original state of being, a place where everything was still marvelous, pristine, potentially dangerous and awe-inspiring. Here, one could rightly claim that the reaction which the work seemed to elicit in people was in many ways equivalent to what one might call the original relation to nature; nature as fearful otherness, as animistic, as terrifying in all its might. The work creates an indescribably atmospheric atmosphere that is completely devoid of objects (other than ourselves): gone is the messiness of life, the disorderliness, complications, conditionalities, nuances, confusions, alienations, the footnotes, and the text written in small letters. What remains is the naked, pure relation to nature, its otherness, and thus the relation to ourselves. We are momentarily placed in front of a mysterious object in the same way as the apes in front of the huge monolith in *Space Odyssey 2001*. In Kubrick’s film, the monolith represents the truth as it appears to the prehistoric mind (as well as the future truth to the contemporary mind): a moment of radical enlightenment that necessarily must appear in the form of a strange, inexplicable, unnatural, disturbing, and miraculous thing whose purpose is unknown, but which we cannot ignore—because it fundamentally changes the coordinates of the present way of life. The monolith—like Eliasson’s enormous solar disk—is the strange Otherness whose incomprehensible strangeness is preserved

in the encounter. It is thus, one could argue, in this way that Eliasson's work creates an impossible glimpse of a pre-historical experience long before the world was transformed along the structures of rationality and individuality. That is, a world in which people have no control over daylight, groping blindly and helplessly for guidance in the immense darkness of ever-lasting nights, entirely at the mercy of nature's whims.<sup>28</sup>

What we find here is precisely the experience of what Thomas Hobbes described as the state of nature. Characteristic of this state is the lack of any definitions, boundaries, rights. There is nothing true or wrong since the distinction is simply non-existent; the same goes for the beautiful, the good, etc.<sup>29</sup> The point here is that the state of nature cannot be understood within the framework or conditions of the normal state; its radicality lies precisely in the experience that there is nothing beyond this condition—that is, other than the birth of the political community, and, in the same breath, the conditions of possibilities enabling the rise sovereignty, or what Hobbes calls the Leviathan.<sup>30</sup>

*The Weather Project* recreates a backdrop and atmosphere that, precisely because of its overwhelming aesthetics, basically revives—sublimely—the long-forgotten sense of what Hobbes used to call the state of nature, i.e., the wild, lawless state outside the statutory territory of the state, and from which it was the primary task of the sovereign state to protect its inhabitants. It is in the natural state that one finds absolute freedom; the absolute right of the individual to create its own definitions.<sup>31</sup> The problem is, however, that the concept of 'freedom' also loses its meaning in a world where everyone else has exactly the same rights (e.g., robbing your house). Therefore, there is nothing intrinsically 'utopian' about this moment; no dizzying openness that holds untold potentials of emancipation. On the contrary, this pre-political moment is radically open-ended in the sense that it both points back to nature in all its brutal, pristine purity, but at the same time orients itself towards power, the artificial, limitations, borders, and constraints: the rise of Leviathan, the sovereign, and thus the necessity of the political community.

More precisely, one could say that the moment contains a duality or divisiveness that manifests itself in an insoluble conflict: between freedom and unfreedom, peace and war, power and powerlessness, individuality and community, naturalness and artificiality—i.e., all the binary contradictions that together form the root and *raison d'être* of the political. In a sense, it could be said that it is precisely this duality that Eliasson's *The Weather Project* strives for, and which millions of people instinctively responded to by naturally joining artificially created communities, there, in the midst of the Turbine Hall: the very moment of the birth of the political.

*The Weather Project* is a work emerging in that epoch immediately after the global-universal space—what Hardt and Negri have called Empire—where the idea of absolute peace is increasingly challenged. It is in this totally inclusive world, where the last remnants of the state of nature have been permanently eradicated (in the form of permanent states of exception), that Eliasson's

work revives the very framework of what originally created the foundation of the political, i.e., the fascination and need for the political: a pre-political *Ur-scene* that testifies to the original moment of division that later came to haunt all free, democratic societies—and which the West momentarily believed it had brought to an end in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## **Conclusion**

This article has looked at one of the 21<sup>st</sup> century's most popular recent installation works, Eliasson's *The Weather Project*, which still is probably the Danish-Icelandic artist's most famous work. To explain both the aesthetic potential within Eliasson's oeuvre and the enormous popularity of the work, we have argued that it essentially addresses an aesthetic conflict between a critical *and* a populist dimension, or, more specifically—reformulates this conflict. For what seems to be clear is that although the critical dimension is explicitly present in the work, it is rendered largely insignificant in terms of the overall aesthetic experience. What we find, then, is a work whose aesthetics in many ways attempts to distance itself from late 20<sup>th</sup> century predecessors by blatantly surrendering to a seductive spectacle that suspends the critical. In doing so, *The Weather Project* points towards a new political paradigm emerging around the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which in more recent years seems to have found a temporary culmination through events such as Brexit and the election of Donald Trump as the US president. The post-9/11 political paradigm moved away from an idea prevalent during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century embodied in Fukuyama's thesis of the end of history, and the concomitant idea of the absolutely secure world (and, by implication, the erasure of the outside/inside distinction). After an ill-defined war on terror that in all likelihood has made the world considerably less secure, financial crises that have made the gap between rich and poor even wider, the rise of fascism and populism amidst even the oldest and most solid democratic institutions, and more generally a widening division between 'the people' and 'the elite'—it is as if we have returned to political antagonisms that many thought were no longer relevant. As we have argued, it is within this context that one may appreciate *The Weather Project's* intervention as an art work recreating an atmosphere, a mood, a scene, that reminds us of a collective body, the binding of which is essentially a pre-political moment—a moment at which we may, yet again, ask the forgotten question: why we ever needed the political in the first place.

## **Endnotes:**

1. Tate Modern's exhibition *In Real Life* runs from 11 July 2019, to 5 January 2020. See: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/olafur-eliasson> (accessed online November 2019).
2. Tate Modern's exhibition *Ice Watch* ran from 11 December to 20 December, 2018. See: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/olafur-eliasson-and-minik-rosing-ice-watch> (accessed online November 2019).
3. See Johnson 320-21.
4. The historical context of the work is crucial here; on February 15, 2003, more than one million

- people had protested against the UK's planned involvement in the Iraq War—in spite of which Tony Blair's government still went ahead to support the American-led invasion. People at *The Weather Project*, as Tim Jonze explains, arranged themselves on the floor to form the letters “Bush go home.” See: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/02/how-we-made-olafur-eliasson-the-weather-project> (accessed online November 2019).
5. As the American political scientist Robert Kagan has argued, the *The Jungle is Growing Back* (as his book is called), meaning more specifically that the American-led liberal world order today is on the wane as we return to an older world order.
  6. See Tushnet 589-590.
  7. The exhibition was part of the Unilever series. It was curated by Susan May and Maeve Polkinhorn. It ran from 16 October 2003 to 21 March 2004. See: <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series/unilever-series-olafur-eliasson-weather-project> (accessed online November 2019).
  8. Around 4000 square meters were covered by thin aluminium mirror plates some 25 meters in the air. For a description of how Eliasson and his team built *The Weather Project*, see: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/02/how-we-made-olafur-eliasson-the-weather-project> (accessed online November 2019).
  9. See Molesworth 50.
  10. See Richard Dorment, “A Terrifying Beauty”: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3606332/A-terrifying-beauty.html> (accessed online November 2019).
  11. This is a recurring motif in Eliasson's works; see Forster 180.
  12. As Forster comments in an interview with Eliasson: “A sunset is not something that is measured in meters, but the hall is. So by immersing a phenomenon into that hall, or giving the simulation of such a phenomenon, the hall itself sort of disappeared. That is the other side of this dual reality ... one is viewing, and the other one might call immersion. You're being overwhelmed, you're being absorbed into it, you're being transported by an experience that deprives you of a hands-on sense of where you are—exactly the opposite of the viewing device, which starts from your own dimensions and extends them into infinity” (182).
  13. For accounts of people's behaviour during the exhibition, see Frichot 32; and Bishop 77.
  14. See Gryntsztejn 73.
  15. See Rebentisch (2003); Bishop (2005); Coulter-Smith (2005).
  16. See de Man, “Rhetoric of Temporality.”
  17. See May 34.
  18. See Gryntsztejn 25.
  19. It is in this sense that irony, metafiction, metalepsis, parabasis and other forms of mimetic disruptions are ways to *prevent* quixotic madness, i.e., to remind us that we are—after all—only in the presence of fiction.
  20. This definition draws on Carl Schmitt's notion of the political, which essentially comes down to the ability to distinguish friend from enemy. In *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt writes: “This provides a definition in the sense of a criterion and not as an exhaustive definition or one indicative of substantial content. Insofar as it is not derived from other criteria, the antithesis of friend and enemy corresponds to the relatively independent criteria of other antitheses: good and evil in the moral sphere, beautiful and ugly in the aesthetic sphere, and so on” (26).
  21. In one of the few essays discussing the political implications of Eliasson's work, Bruno Latour discusses global warming and the potential risks of climate change. See Latour 30-32. What we want to stress in this article is a notion of the political at a much more fundamental level, one that pertains to the very idea of a community as well as the sustainability of this community.
  22. See Hardt and Negri, *Empire* 3-21; and *Multitude* 3-35.

23. See Alliez & Negri 112.
24. Ibid. 114.
25. See Richard Dorment, "A Terrifying Beauty":  
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/3606332/A-terrifying-beauty.html> (accessed online November 2019).
26. See Morton.
27. Freud discusses this notion in a letter exchange with Romain Rolland. He develops a more elaborate critique in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1930). For a critical overview of this history, see Maharaj 474-475.
28. See also Eliasson's essay, "Museums are radical," in which he reflects on how weather conditions affect people in modern life. This concern was one of the main sources of inspiration for *The Weather Project*.
29. As Hobbes, in a remarkably ominous passage in *Leviathan*, observes: "Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man, the same consequent to the time wherein men live without other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death" (78).
30. See Hobbes's "XIII: Of the Natural Conditions of Mankind as Concerning Their Felicity and Misery." *Leviathan*, pp. 76–88.
31. As Jörg Spieker comments; "In the absence of definitive standards of truth and morality, the Hobbesian state of nature constantly generate different and competing political movements. There are, at least potentially, as many political bodies as there are individuals since every individual is capable of constructing her own understanding of the world" ("Foucault and Hobbes" 193).

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# Semiotics of the Parthenon as a Pillar of Modern Democracy

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## Abstract:

How does the Parthenon stand for democracy and why? What is it that makes the Greek pillars so appealing to modern democracies? Is it for the Golden Ratio as a system of rational/harmonious/human proportions, and if so, is Democracy a civilizational Golden Ratio or just an eye/mind spectacle/manipulation? To interpret the iconography of the Parthenon related to modern democracies a metaphor of translation will be applied, concerning the multiple transpositions the building has evolved through. This, in particular, refers to an architecture work of art as a “symptom which expresses itself in a countless variety of other symptoms” (Panofsky) related to broader cultural contexts. Further “translation” will take place in the double movement of purification and contamination, specificity and hybridity, among semiotic and iconological analysis – the word and image dialectic.

**Keywords:** Parthenon, temple front, semiotics, signification, passions, courthouse, classical portico

## 1. The Parthenon as a pattern

Let us suppose that one needs to represent ‘democracy’. What does one do in such a case? To render things easier, let us suppose this someone is an architect. An architect would probably look for a most convenient architectural sign, if not for any other reason than as a starting point to develop one’s approach to the task. The first thing which comes into our mind would be the most exposed visual sign of ‘democracy’, the ‘classical portico’ – ‘porch’.

The world’s first purpose-built parliament house was the Irish Parliament House in Dublin, today the Bank of Ireland. The work on the building began in 1729, to the design of the amateur architect Sir Edward Lovett Pearce. Based on Andrea Palladio’s proposed reconstruction of the collonaded terraces of the Roman temple at Paestrum, the building was semi-circular in shape, collonaded by Ionic columns, while three statues fronted the main (south) portico, representing Hibernia (Latin for Ireland), Fidelity and Commerce. The building was

further extended, to both the east and west and a new portico was added at the east, by James Gandon, in the 1780s. Gandon used Corinthian columns, at the request of his peers, to distinguish their entrance from the main one. Rolf Loeber asks if the “wide acceptance of classicism in eighteenth-century Ireland [was] due to the architect’s persuasion of their patrons, or had the patrons already been predisposed to classical styles of art?” (1979, 49) Where did it all come from?

In the three centuries since then, many parliaments or courthouse buildings have been erected in the neoclassical style all across the world. To mention but a few of the best-known examples, we would identify the four Courts in Dublin (1786–1802); the White House, as well as the Capitol, in Washington DC (works began in 1872, and 1873); the Bundestag in Bonn; and the Reichstag in Berlin. Buildings of this kind in the Pacific and Asian areas, as well as in South America and Africa, were also built. As a matter of fact, in most of the cases, “the link between popular architectural trends in Britain and their adoption in British colonies [throughout the 17th to 19th centuries] is true for most classical styles.” (Arthur 2004, 22) Arthur further emphasizes that:

Historical trends for classical styles were copied in Britain and its colonies, predominantly because of their associations with the Roman Empire and the message of power, order and structure they impart to their observers. Governments in the 19th century wanted to associate themselves with powerful and orderly societies, such as the Romans, and they did this by using a classical style for their important public buildings. (2004, 84)

Referring to Freeland, Arthur further stresses that, for example, “in Britain academic debate reached a truce when Gothic style focused on ecclesiastical buildings and schools, and classical style focused on government and commercial buildings” (25). In the U.S.A. “the Capitols were seen by their creators as a powerful statement of American democratic beliefs, vigorously developing after the War of Independence.” (Cope 2001, 84)

Here, it is useful to consider Erwin Panofsky’s analysis of the classical “temple front”, as given in *“The Ideological Antecedents of the Rolls-Royce Radiator”* (1963). While we should, probably, not take Panofsky’s analysis of the radiator in question more seriously than he did, but as a “metaphorical prelude, a peripheral ornament toward a finite and specific characteristics of English art”, as put by Bialostocki (1986, 132), or as a specimen of his whimsy, “written in the crisp and lucid language”, as Gombrich (1996, 29) pointed out; it still demonstrates the possibility of applying an iconological approach on objects different than art-works. While the second level of interpretation was omitted in his case, as suggested by Bialostocki, it was done defensibly since the essay is neither about the ‘temple front’ as a motif (it is just a metaphor), but about its style, nor is it about the *Silver lady*, but the figurine’s style. Therefore, Bialostocki concludes, “what we interpret as a sign is not so much the image but its style.” (133) Gombrich laments over Panofsky’s seeking for “ideological antecedents” of both, the sculpture and the

“temple front”, in the national spirit of the English, thus attributing to English Gothic (Palladian in Bialostocki) architecture the features of irrational, rational and the triumph of both (technical precision in Bialostocki), while not shedding “the racialism that so marred German tradition”. (29) Those contrasting principles are accompanied by “another ‘antinomy’, that between the irregular layout of the English gardens and the strict regularity of the Palladian country houses they surround.” He further draws attention to Lovejoy’s article on “*The Chinese Origin of a Romanticism*”, who “anchored the development of the English garden in an essay by Sir William Temple, ‘Upon the Gardens of Epicurus’ [...] where Panofsky would have found an explicit description of the contrast that concerned him...” to ask: “Are, then the ideological antecedents of the radiator to be found in China rather than in England?” Gombrich emphasizes that:

To be sure, Chinese and Japanese buildings are no less symmetrical than are Palladian villas, but it may be more relevant to remember that it was the Renaissance architect Sebastiano Serliio who made the distinction between rustic masonry, ‘a work of nature’, and the classical order as ‘the work of human hands, a distinction that survived in the Italian cult of the grotto and the grotesque. (29)

Be it for the Parliament House or the Supreme Courts - the landmarks of the governing power of a state, thus referring to democracy, as “the noblest form of government we have yet evolved” (Mailer 2003, 49) it is an undeniable fact that most of those buildings throughout the world have been erected in a so-called ‘neoclassical’ architectural style. The main pattern, norm, or the ‘essence’, is to be found in the Greek Parthenon as an icon of Western civilization, and a symbol of the classical world. To be more precise, it is just about one particular part of it – the portico, or the porch: a structure attached to the exterior of a building forming a covered entrance: that is to say, an element that does not even have any structural role.

## **2. From an architectonic sign towards a process of signification**

How does the Parthenon stand for democracy and why is it so? Is it for the Golden Ratio as a system of rational/harmonious/human proportions and, if so, is it so appealing any more, is it still aesthetically pleasing to our eyes and mind? Is the implementation of the neoclassical style in a modern contemporary city just a visual manipulation regarding the nation’s identity, as well as democratic politics? What is it that makes the Greek pillars so appealing to modern democracies? Is democracy a civilization’s Golden Ratio or just an eye/mind spectacle/manipulation? (We are not asking if there is any democracy now or then.)

Such a representational issue, no doubt, creates a semiotic relation, which can be seen in its twofold dimension: firstly, as an object to represent: such as in the “democracy” and “classical portico” cases, and secondly, as a relational process based on a *subjectivization context by determined social realities*, such as in the cases of a multiple meaning deduction of such concepts. We shall consider here semiotics a methodology, or as one of the possibilities of analyzing the architectonic signs, in the shape of a firm ground of processing meaning in some of

its constituent units. The field of the artistic and aesthetic expression in turn as a tool of representing has already shown that its elements can consist of a wider range of meaning(s), seen as a multifold semantic universe.

No matter how a semiotician should approach it, (either, as we said, in two dimensions or more than two), it is evident that it is the subject who makes things “visible” in the way he/ she wishes to. If we take such a predisposition to be true, taking also into account the scepticism which might appear, then, its justification would seem indisputable. In other words: each such hypothesis is believed to be true if such a truth finds its justifying grounds in an attempt of founding a theory. It is therefore to conclude, that such kind of *conditioning* based on the impartial social reality should belong to an epistemologically treatable field. (Goldman 1986)

Our suppositions, however, based on *modalities*, which are not only psychologically and intuitively minded but receptionally as well (in case one takes social interaction as its grounds), can doubtlessly create relations that can be seen by the eyes of a semiotician. Thus, as shall be seen, one would ask: can exemplify architectonic signs bring about a univocal representation of their functioning, or semiotic processes would have to *intervene towards a transformational process of their elements*, to bring about such a semantic status as metaphorization, as one of its optionalities, in terms of reaching their final result?

If one considers such a view as a part of the general semiotic process, one can see how such entities become subjectivized - gradually, even if one takes a simple conversion process as a sample, based on the semiotic preconditions taken into consideration. Concretely speaking, the concept of “democracy” seen in its abstraction gets thus concretized concerning the architectonic signs, seen as an objective ground or a contextual social reality. In a procedural aspect (either syntagmatically or paradigmatically, or seen also by other aspects), in terms of its aspectualization—such as “*wanting-to-be*”, “*not-wanting-to be*”, and/or the subjective ground or level, as opposed to the objective one—one finds grounds for a decent meaning deduction. (Greimas & Fontanille 1993) (*Italics and paraphrasing are ours*).

The result of such a process to be performed is signification: seen as semiotic systems processing signs, which need to render themselves more complex, to have manifested their result: the meaning.<sup>1</sup> The procedure of the gradual *de-modalization* of the already *modalized* objects, as representing various architectonic styles, has to be semiotically preconditioned by the subject, thus creating semiotic squares, ready to gain new semantic predispositions. Our aim, also, is to show how such a relationship between the terms (as exposing and presenting concepts of democracy/non-democracy, for instance, or other proper taxonomic terms as a direct consequence of an architectonic process), can be seen in terms of what one may wish to make it express a determined meaning. To reach such a goal, one must undergo processes of transformation to the extent of modalization, so that questions may arise: do I see the Parthenon as denoting democracy or not? Do *I believe* that the classical portico relates to univocal courthouses processing policies, or their functioning may run other levels of their semiotically interpretable entities?

Such questions in turn firmly lie on epistemological grounds, because of the *justifiability of believed or non-believed “truths”*. As far as this kind of epistemology’s justifiedness is concerned, in terms of the semiotic approach, here is what Greimas and Fontanille have to say:

Thus, the possibility of narrative syntax, considered as a set of operations affecting discrete units, is based on a rational epistemology that establishes the first articulation of signification (eg. the semiotic square) as terms that are simply abstract positions manipulated by a summoning subject. When all is said and done, we are dealing with a classical epistemological model that sets into relationship a knowing subject, as an operator, and the elementary structures as representations of the knowable world. The subject of theoretical construction can know and categorize only if the horizon of meaning is divided into a series of discrete elements. (Greimas & Fontanille 1993, VII)

Finally, one has to ask: is it, as a result, an issue that one has to understand through its denotation or connotation? There is no doubt in saying that the transformational process, which renders the terms in discussion, should be analytically identified to create the necessary semiotic relations.

The semiotic view, in conclusion, can render such concepts as *manipulation* for instance (if one wants, as its final meaning among other issues in our sense: or to be more precise *a passionate manipulation* as a consequence of an actantial relation), as it in turn epistemologically expands the semiotic domain, in terms of what *may be semiotically interpretable*. A question may then follow: has such kind of changeability as well as transformation in the semiotic sense of the word, been created by the subject exclusively, to render the semiotically-derived units in the shape of a newly created and contextualized social reality? If such “knowing subject” (Greimas & Fontanille 1993), comes to his/her exclusive existence, as we noted, here is what Greimas and Fontanille suggest:

In addition, if, at the epistemological level, we examine the conditions in which signification can appear as discrete units (in the semiotic square, for example), the very same problematics arise. We have to ask ourselves, naively and as though we were projecting, what the mode of existence of a subject operator would be prior to its first summons. As epistemological subject, it would also have to experience a virtual instance before being actualized, as knowing subject, through the discretization of signification. The resemblance between the trajectory of the epistemological subject and the one identified for the narrative subject (virtualization, actualization, realization) is not surprising, since the contamination of description by the object described is a well-known phenomenon, at least in the social sciences. (Greimas & Fontanille 1993, XIX)

In such a fashion, one may establish an analysis of the “semiotic styles” as Greimas and Fontanille (1993) rightfully claim. What one sees in the result is the *semio-narrative* level; the result of a deductive method in rendering meaning. Then, if such conceptions are already modalized, one may ask: are the Greek pillars (for instance) opposed to modern democracy and why? Can one thus render their metaphorization process?

The first problem about the known contradiction between *seeming and reality* that may come to one's mind is exactly the *negation* of the architectonic object: seen as a representational process aimed at its functioning. Consequently, a lack of meaning is what occurs. If such is the result, as soon shall be analyzed, then one can speak of a semiotic relation at the very start. Or better: the process of conceptualizing and perceiving such meaning(s) which might initially represent a brand-new reality is semiotic since it creates relations which *might intentionally change states of such an object through the receiving (viewing) subjects, through tensitivity of the mentioned relations*. In conclusion, thus, it produces a new micro-semantic universe that is by all means semiotically treatable.

To our view, such would be the method towards the signification process, still to be resolved in this paper. There is no doubt in saying however that such concepts which are given, within their presumed deep structure, into their present states, the states of their affairs, can further be rendered passionate, thus gaining a new status: which thus moving or transforming themselves from one state to another, can be seen and/or transformed as subjectivized items, alongside their initial state. This can be exemplified by creating the so-called simulacra, which may be suitable to the process of such a transformation: where, for instance, the Parthenon (within its first negation) has no meaning in the first axis, and has connoted meaning in the second axis.

Since semiotics may also be intended as *a possibility of a multiple meaning deduction*, it is also necessary to emphasize that this is not the only semiotic process to be regarded in this context. Out of such presented dichotomies, one may also represent in the frames of logical procedures of inferring meaning. Such an issue, by all means, belongs to the logic of science in its *triadic Peircean* shape. One may, in turn, see the Parthenon as an architectonic sign (within its Firstness) which may stand *as referring to something else* (our paraphrasing of Peirce) within its Secondness, or as a symbol as Thirdness, which relates to the way how one, “the interpretant”, may look at it (Peirce 1960).

### **3. On Perceiving Architecture**

There is nothing novel in the assumption that buildings convey meaning. They might mean different things to different people. It is in this manner that Neil Leach highlights “the need to acknowledge the agency of the interpreter and the perspective from which interpretation is made.” (127) While Nelson Goodman in *How Buildings Mean* stresses that “A building is a work of art only insofar as it signifies, means, refers, symbolizes in some way...” (1985, 643), William White in *How Do Buildings Mean?* asserts that “Architecture is widely perceived to possess meaning: to be more than mere structure.” (154) Hence, the inclination toward a particular form of architectural style is rather psychological – thus ready to be manipulated; than an aesthetic one.

Discussing the questions of interpretation in regard to our awareness of ideological manipulation of architecture, and “the difficulty of agreeing on the nature of the architectural statement” Russel Cope argues that “layers of meaning may need to be uncovered in order to

pinpoint the fundamental determinants of statements on architectural styles.” (2001, 84) Suggesting Hitchcock and Seales’ *Temples of Democracy* as an “excellent introduction to the range of social, political and ideological factors” underlying the United States’ various states’ capitols, Cope extracts the conclusion that “capitols were clearly seen by their creators as powerful statements of American democratic beliefs, vigorously developing after the War of Independence.” (84) In the U.S. Capitol Building guide (2003), in the ‘vocabulary’ section, one would find the description of *U.S. Capitol Building*, as: “a government building which symbolizes American democracy and freedom”; and a description of *symbol*, as: “an object or picture that represents a much larger idea.” (2) It has further been said that “just as Augustus Pugin’s neo-Gothic nineteenth-century churches were intended to articulate Christian values and inspire a Catholic revival, so Norman Foster’s rebuilt Reichstag was intended to express a commitment to democracy through its architectural form.” (Whyte 2006, 155) In the very same light, stressing the symbolism of buildings by claiming that “outer design should represent the inner meaning of the building” Patrick Joyce indicates that “the Houses of Parliament in London were held to represent the Ancient Constitution, and the Law Courts in London the Common Law.” (2003, 152)

In an overview of the mechanisms underlying architectural perception and recognition, Alexander Koutamanis (2006) focuses on relationships between style and image, representation and recognition. “General cognitive mechanisms”, he asserts, “that determine object recognition make prominent elements equally well perceivable to all.” This is why “such elements can be used to define classical architecture.” (384) While most people are “capable of immediately recognizing architecture as classical even in ruins”, Koutamanis says, the “immediate and unambiguous recognition of objects and parts”, such as Doric, Ionic and Corinthian columns, despite them being complex structures, is “even more impressive”. (385) It is the combination of *transversality* and *colinearity* to which Koutamanis ascribes the underlying principle that “allows us to distinguish not only between columns and their superstructure or base in a colonnade but also between the various components of a column.” (385) However, “identifying an element as classical”, Koutamanis argues, “refers to general principles such as symmetry and tripartition” but it also “presupposes acquaintance with the classical canon.” (390)<sup>2</sup>

#### **4. On the Parthenon and its architectonic features**

What does this “classical style”, as applied to architecture, actually mean? Considering the most obvious meaning Summerson suggests that “a classical building is one whose decorative elements derive directly or indirectly from the architectural vocabulary of the ancient world”; these elements being “easily recognizable, for example, columns of five standard varieties, applied in standard ways” (1963, 7). This apparently superficial definition makes a usable distinction between classical architecture and classical references. Ancient Greek architecture has been recognized as the one that established new aesthetic standards. The Parthenon, in particular, has been recognized as the one “measured with a degree of mathematical exactitude not found

in earlier structures, in which we find the earliest design principles that codify with precision different column orders, capital types, height and width requirements, and appropriateness of external decoration.” Furthermore, the same principles are said to be “embedded in Greek philosophical thought and have created a timeless, universal concept of beauty that has been revived countless times through history.” (Palmer 2008, xlvi)

Our intention in this essay is not to give a detailed description of the Parthenon, or any of the buildings mentioned. Yet, some basic information is required. Which characteristics or elements of the Parthenon might be used to be semiotically treated?

The Parthenon was designed by architects Iktinos and Kallikrates and was built on the Acropolis in Athens, as a part of a bigger complex dedicated to religious festivities. The construction of the temple took place from 447 BC to 438 BC, during the rule of Pericles. The Acropolis (Ακρόπολις; *akros, akron*, edge, extremity + *polis*, city;) is a site located on a high rocky outcrop above the city of Athens, thus dominating the city, while allowing oversight. Such a position produced all the significance it gained through time, as for being a city’s most important citadel, a traditional seat of Greece’s ancient rulers, and a place of worship, consecutively. The Parthenon itself was built to honour *Athena Parthenos*, the city’s patron deity. However, the Parthenon as the most formidable and most enduring building from ancient Athens has become a symbol of classicism, thus the symbol of classical ideas, including democracy. Or, to be a bit more precise, as suggested in the *Historical Dictionary of Architecture*: “Many Renaissance and later neoclassical buildings found across the western world have been modelled on the Parthenon, not only for its aesthetics, but also because its architecture came to symbolize general prosperity, democratic principles, and honest leadership.” (Palmer 2008, 3)

#### **4.1. Ratio**

The Parthenon is an octastyle (having eight frontal columns in the portico) peripteral (having columns on all sides) building, applying ideal ratio of a “dynamic rectangle”, which is a “root five rectangle”. It means that a ratio of width to length is 1:2.25 (4:9, computed with the Babylonian method), which equals the ratio between columnation and intercolumnation, where the intercolumnation should equal 2.25 diameters of the columns, according to Vitruvius. It was Vitruvius, the Roman architect, who described human bodily proportions based on the canonical tradition in art, further extended in the Renaissance by Leonardo da Vinci and Albrecht Dürer. Referring to Robert Tavernor, “Vitruvius describes the design of temples through the analogy of the proportions and modularity of the perfect human body.” (Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, xviii) Or rather, as Protagoras has put it: “Man is the measure of all things ...” (as cited in Epps 1964, 223) Measure and balance, along with law, were the most important principles of the ancient world. Pythagoras stressed proportion in philosophy and music, Polykleitos in sculpture, and later on Vitruvius in architecture. Thus, according to later comments (Galen), we find in the *Canon of Polykleitos* that:

...perfection in proportion comes about via an exact commensurability of all the body's parts to one another: of finger to finger and of this to the hand and wrist, of these to the forearm to the upper arm: of the equivalent parts of the leg; and of everything to everything else. (as cited in McCague 2009, 25)

There are numerous accounts that the proportions of the human body neither did nor were able to serve as a model for the orders, concerning geometry's and proportion's importance to architecture. Tavernor suggests that as "Architecture became global [...] the Vitruvian architectural tradition [became] abandoned as a totality." (xxxv) Yet, some aspects of this tradition "are still used to lend authority to the outward appearance of buildings," (xxxv) if not in terms of proportion than at least in terms of cultural meaning.

Just as the main purpose of proportion is to establish harmony throughout a structure, it might be said that to establish harmony is the central purpose of democracy, as well, that is: to accomplish objectives that best serve the interests of the people, in terms of their human rights, living standards, and quality of life standards, and that reflect their highest aspirations.

#### **4.2. Columns**

The Parthenon is the most famous example of a Doric temple, applying the Doric order as the most austere of all. But, as Rhodes suggests, "it is not pure Doric, and should perhaps be viewed more as a building of vital transition in the history of Greek architecture" (1995, 74), thus referring to "the reunion of Athens and her East Greek sisters occasioned by the Persian Wars", as well as to the nomination of Athens as "the new cultural and intellectual center of the world, a role inherited from Ionia..."(76) Rhodes argues that "The intricately planned Ionicisms of the Parthenon are crucial contributions to the creation of a truly international style of architecture on the Acropolis and point to Athens as the first great cosmopolis of the Greek world." (76) There are five orders, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian, Tuscan and Composite, recognized as the "five basic elements in the architectural grammar of Antiquity." (Summerson 1966, 13) An 'order' is the 'column-and-superstructure' unit of a temple colonnade. We find the earliest written description of the orders in Vitruvius (*De Architectura*), which became "the code of practice of a Roman architect of the first century A.D. [...] In the middle of the fifteenth century, the Florentine architect and humanist, Leon Batista Alberti, described the orders, partly with reference to Vitruvius and partly from his own observations of Roman remains. It was he who added, from observation, a fifth-order – the Composite – which combines features of the Corinthian with those of the Ionic." (Summerson, 9) It could be said that it is, nearly a century later, Sebastian Serlio who promoted the orders in the way we know them since, and who started their "long career of canonical, symbolic, almost legendary authority." (9) However, it was the Romans who further developed the orders by bringing them in the process of designing arched and vaulted public buildings (amphitheatres, basilicas, or triumphal arches). As Summerson demonstrated, it was "as if they felt that no building could communicate anything unless the orders were involved in it. To them the orders *were* architecture." (14) What is even more important:

They [Romans] invented ways of using the orders not merely as ornamental enrichments for their new types of structure but as controls. The orders are, in many Roman buildings, quite useless structurally but they make their buildings expressive, they make them speak; they conduct the building, with sense and ceremony and often with great elegance, into the mind of the beholder. Visually, they dominate and control the buildings to which they are attached. (14)

The Ancient Romans were the first people to appreciate and emulate classical Greek architecture, but they used it not only for religious inspiration, but also to cultivate an image of political power and superiority. It is in this way that the Capitol in Washington D.C. made use of columns that was “immediately understood to recall the original form of democracy as established in Ancient Greece.” (Palmer 2008, 79)

Therefore “while we must incorporate these essentials in our idea of what is classical we must also accept the fact that classical architecture is only recognizable as such when it contains some allusion, however slight, however vestigial, to the antique ‘orders’.” (Summerson, 8)

#### **4.3. Optical distortion (illusion)**

Although all the lines of the Parthenon building, including the columns, do seem to look perfectly straight, they are not. Due to the science of optics structures built using straight lines tend to look slightly distorted. Therefore “some of its [structural] lines were deliberately curved and slanted” (Diggins 1965, 127) by the architects Kallikrates and Iktinos. Most of those distorted lines are vertical ones – columns; and some of the horizontal lines, thus producing an effect of straightness and solidity, while also producing a desired effect on the viewer. Still, reasons for this kind of intervention in formal irregularity might occur due to site specificities, as well. Thus, assuming “the architect to be the guardian of the rules of beauty, the proprietor of special problem-solving instruments, and the dextrous negotiator in the conflict between the canon of form and deformation,” Lefaivre and Tzonis (1984) trace the advancements in some aspects of solving deformations in the design and production process. Regarding early attempts to “canonize” corrections of optical errors, Lefaivre and Tzonis note that “Just as Vitruvius had tried to compensate for what the eye cheats us of, Serlio attempted to make up for what the site takes away.” According to them, what Alberti would name an offence “to the Eye” and “to the Mind” regarding architects failure “to satisfy our immoderate Desire for Perfection”, for Serlio “Regularity of form is not an objective state of the product, but a subjective state of the mind.” (see Lefaivre and Tzonis 1984)

#### **5. On the Semiotics of the Parthenon**

The process of subjectivization, as we have previously mentioned, occurs after the process of aspectualization, thus attempting to render a “knowing subject” that then transforms itself into *possible passions* and, as Greimas and Fontanille (1993) say, into the *semiotics of passion*, is what we are interested in. Naturally, such a task needs further elaboration in this paper, in terms of

its gradualness and procedures. Such gradualness, as one can easily note, should, by all means, take into account the contextual circumstances as Eco frequently expresses himself (see Eco 1968). No doubt, one may ask why? We may immediately respond to such a question: such circumstances would allow our object of analysis to be seen in *different contexts*, which is one of the points where they become subordinated to further procedures. Finally, such a view can contribute to such subject's *becoming passionate*, because of the following:

There would therefore exist two forms of "state", and the same difficulties arise once again. State is, first of all, a 'state of affairs' of the world that is transformed by the subject, but is also the "state of feeling" of the competent subject about to act, as well as a modal competence itself that at the same time undergoes transformations. (Greimas & Fontanille 1993, XIX)

As has already been clarified, such architectonic objects, which contain signs in themselves, have been created in the past. One has to conclude that *such a text had a context. It would deduce the logically expected definitions*. Concretely speaking, in what historical context was the Parthenon built? No doubt, as we have seen, such a question has previously been answered. Yet is such context in full concordance with the present democracies (seen as semiotic objects in our sense of the word), or not? If not, one has to conclude that a semiotic process has to occur to render its decent meaning.

In such a fashion the task of a semiotician, in this context, is to define the text/context relations which are otherwise historically and architectonically featured, which in turn would try to answer the following question: is such a precision (within the Parthenon's architectonic features) reflected *interactionally* to what it represents? Or, better: does it process equivocal or unequivocal messages? If, as we may be encouraged to suggest, *unequivocal messages* are processed, then semiotics should doubtlessly play its part in deriving the meaning or meanings it represents.

It is hoped that it is clear now, that in terms of the objects described, one can notice the unequivocal messages transmitted, because of the inadequacy of the text and context relationship. Concretely speaking, if such pillars as described belonged to a period *adapted to the context* (either architectonically or essentially); they have been *de-contextualized* in the present times. If one perceives a situation in such a way, then doubtlessly *the knowable subject*, after viewing it, and as described, passing through the notion of tensitivity (in a determined time), *becomes passionate, thus deriving a taxonomy such as despair is*. This conclusion (after the earlier described lack of meaning as a result) is due to several reasons: facing such architectonic styles the knowable subject becomes an impassionate one, thus witnessing a process of manipulation. This situation becomes possible (as one of the semiotic possibilities) during the tensitivity period in terms of initially the object, (which is the Parthenon itself) within its state of affairs, and the impassionate subject, (the one believing it to represent democracy, initially) within its state of feelings after the transformability's occurrence. Manipulation as a matter of fact, or better, the *impassioned subject* being manipulated, as a final result of the process in its surface structure, is only sufficient in terms

of the mentioned Parthenon's being de-contextualized and emerges as both the psychological and logical result of the process.

## 6. On representing democracy

In the *Historical Dictionary of Architecture* (Palmer) we read that it is:

attention to mathematical detail, focused on symmetry, harmony, and proportionality that provides the Parthenon with an enduring beauty called the "classical" aesthetic. Many Renaissance and later neoclassical buildings found across the western world have been modelled on the Parthenon, not only for its aesthetics, but also because its architecture came to symbolize general prosperity, democratic principles, and honest leadership. (Palmer 2008, 3)

We find some basic notions on 'democracy' in the *Britannica Online Encyclopedia*. The term 'democracy' is derived from the Greek *dēmokratīā*, which was coined from *dēmos* ("people") and *kratos* ("rule") in the middle of the fifth century BC during the Classical period, in which the Parthenon and the Acropolis itself obtained their present meaning to denote the political system that the citizens of Athens began to develop, under the leadership of Cleisthenes. Since then both theory and practice of democracy have undergone profound changes.

## 7. Conclusion

Just as the Parthenon is a symbol of the Classical world so is democracy its most valuable product (invention). Democracy is considered to be the closest to an ideal form of government, in terms of demonstrating its superiority to any other form of government by possessing several features that most people, whatever their basic political beliefs, would consider desirable. Yet, since Aristotle, political philosophers generally have insisted that no actual political system is likely to attain, to the fullest extent possible, all the features of its corresponding ideal. Thus, whereas the institutions of many actual systems are sufficient to attain a relatively high level of democracy, they are almost certainly not sufficient to achieve anything like perfect or ideal democracy, but may only produce a satisfactory approximation of the ideal. Taken that the ultimate form of democracy has been established through the French and American revolutions, and is today confronted by the phenomena of globalization, societal fragmentation and differentiation, as well as by different forms of transnational interaction, it becomes obvious that democracy becomes reduced to a technique or form of regulation (see Blokker, 2008). The very same process might be prescribed to antique temples and buildings. As Giedion noticed, in the nineteenth century architects tried to imitate earlier periods and their forms, but "everything they put their hands on turned to dust rather than to gold. Today we can see why." (Giedion 1967, 5)

This can finally witness our semiotic view as well: the transformational processes, as we stated earlier, prove the amount of the interpretability by the side of the subject. Such interpretability, as it is semiotically perceivable (and/or possible) undergoes a mentioned

transformability through the initial despair to the extent of being manipulated. The process itself can then as a conclusion render all social contexts interpretable: be they art creation as our case aimed at a determined functional purpose. Uniting the two, and this being the usual starting point at each process of semiosis, renders definitely as a result as one of its meaning: a manipulative subject as Greimas and Fontanille claim (1993), and/or manipulation as a consequence of the *subject of doing*.

### **Endnotes:**

1. Such a term as “meaning” is, as is understandable, brings a semantic analysis. It should be understandable however that, in our case, the subject – object relationship has to be taken into consideration, a fact that gives to such a discussion an epistemological significance. One has to point out in conclusion, as shall be seen, that the *transferability* of such structures makes meaning *transferable*, thus enabling a metaphorization process.
2. For establishing harmony throughout the structure see Tzonis and Lefaivre (1986).

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# Quantifying Hitler's Salon: A Statistical Analysis of Subjects at the Great German Art Exhibition, 1937-1944

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## Abstract:

In recent decades, scholars have reassessed earlier historical interpretations that argued German art produced during the Nazi era was little more than kitsch. This reassessment has occurred in part due to the increased accessibility to the various sources required to thoroughly research Nazi-era art. The availability of the artistic oeuvre of the Third Reich has been enhanced by the 2012 launch of the online database *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung, 1937-1944*. This database makes possible a quantitative analysis of the artworks exhibited at Adolf Hitler's annual art exhibition, the *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Great German Art Exhibition), from 1937 to 1944. Tabulating the information found in this database indicates that landscapes and related works constituted the dominant subject category. Portraits, nudes, and depictions of animals were also significant, but overtly political art was uncommon. The subjects of Nazi-era art reflected the racial ideology of the Third Reich, but several subject categories remain largely unexamined in this respect. This essay provides statistical evidence that supports many of the scholarly interpretations concerning these subject categories and suggests new directions for future research.

**Keywords:** Third Reich, Nazi-era art, Great German Art Exhibition, Adolf Hitler

## Introduction: Reassessing Nazi-Era Art

Prior to the 1970s, art historians generally dismissed Nazi-era art as mere kitsch and the product of a dictatorship that had suppressed modernist styles. In 1957, for example, Werner Haftmann characterized the art of Nazi Germany as “the uniform stylistic phenomenon of any dictatorship: a false, prettified, photographic realism that monotonously recapitulated the same themes” (Haftmann 1957, 129). Writing the next year, Haftmann's contemporary, Franz Roh, dismissed such art as “a repetition of the attitudes from the nineteenth century, a stereotype imitation of external nature interspersed with a declamatory pathos...it would be a waste of time to illustrate it here” (Roh 1968 [1958], 151). Since the 1970s, and particularly since the 1990s, a new generation of researchers has reassessed these earlier appraisals. Contemporary scholars now conclude that no overarching “Nazi style” existed. Moreover, Nazi-era art displayed continuities with the art of the preceding eras, including the modernist art of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and particularly the modernist styles developed in Weimar Germany from

1919 to 1933. For all the bluster of the Nazi state in its crusade to “purify” German art of “Jewish-Bolshevist” influences, elements of modernist styles such as Expressionism, Cubism, and *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) found their way into the art of Nazi Germany (van Dyke 2011, 12-17; Potter 2016, 130-174; Maertz 2019, 44-46; Kater 2019, 41, 51).

The results of this reassessment are largely qualitative and focus on the various styles expressed in Nazi-era art. This reassessment includes the artworks of the *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung* (Great German Art Exhibition, hereafter GDK), Adolf Hitler’s annual art exhibition in Munich. Art historian Ines Schlenker calls the GDKs “Hitler’s Salon,” and they were the premier art events in Nazi Germany that highlighted the subjects and styles that Hitler and the Third Reich’s cultural bureaucracy sought to encourage among German artists (Schlenker 2007b, 11, 20, 95-98). While a great deal has been written about the GDKs in recent decades, there has not been a detailed quantitative analysis of the various subjects found in GDK artworks. A total of 13,403 pieces of art were exhibited at the eight GDKs from 1937 to 1944, and a quantitative analysis of these artworks is now possible thanks to the 2012 launch of the online database *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung, 1937-1944*, a collaborative project of the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte (Central Institute for Art History) in Munich, the Haus der Kunst (House of Art) in Munich, and the Deutsches Historisches Museum (German Historical Museum) in Berlin (Fuhrmeister 2013, 11-13).<sup>1</sup> A few scholars have used the database for limited quantitative analysis. Christian Fuhrmeister (2015, 98) presents statistics for specific subject categories, while Marlies Schmidt (2012, 71-73, 138-145) provides a breakdown of the various subjects evident at the first GDK in 1937. However, there has been no comprehensive statistical examination of the various subject categories that characterized the artworks at all eight GDKs.

This essay tabulates the works of the GDKs by subject categories. The development of the database makes this endeavor possible, as does the digitization of the GDK exhibition catalogs (Fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> A quantitative analysis of GDK artworks reveals certain trends that scholars have long suspected, particularly that landscapes and related subjects constituted the largest category of GDK pieces. Portraits and busts tended to be the second largest category, while male and female nudes (both paintings and sculptures) comprised the third largest subject category in most years. Surprisingly, artistic representations of animals often approached the previous two categories in both number and percentage, as did still-life compositions and depictions of plants. Military subjects increased after Germany went to war in 1939, but these works never exceeded nine percent of the total. Contrary to what is often believed, overtly political works were uncommon and even declined in number and percentage over the course of the GDKs.

## Sources and Methodology

The requisite primary sources for this analysis are the GDK exhibition catalogs and the online database, which provides a record for each piece of fine art (i.e., paintings, sketches, sculptures, etc.) and includes photographs and sales documentation, when available. Virtually all

GDK artworks were intended for purchase, with Hitler having the right of first refusal. Beginning in 1938, the GDK organizers also accepted “exchange” works so that those pieces sold could be replaced with works of equal quality. Thus, from 1938 onward, the organizers published two catalogs: the main catalog and a supplementary catalog (*Ergänzungsteil*) for the exchange works (Schmidt 2012, 140). All fifteen exhibition catalogs are found in the reference list at the end of this essay along with the abbreviations used when citing them in the text.

Some discrepancies become evident when comparing information in the database to the entries in the catalogs. For example, the database has artworks not found in the catalogs that are confirmed through other documentation (e.g., Baum 1941; *GDK 1941*, 19; *Ergänzungsteil 1941*, 3). These pieces are counted in the tables found in the next section along with those artworks registered in the catalogs. The database also has a few spurious second entries of individual works that are only counted once (e.g., Werner 1943; *Ergänzungsteil 1943*, 26). Additionally, the catalogs often list multiple artworks under a single entry. An example is Franz Gerwin’s series of twelve watercolors, *Großbaustelle der OT (Large Construction Site of the Todt Organization)*. These are counted as individual works here, but they were listed under a single entry in the 1942 catalog (Gerwin 1942; *GDK 1942*, 34). In a similar fashion, triptychs consisting of three panels were also listed as single works in the catalogs but are counted as three separate pieces since several triptychs depicted different subjects on each panel (e.g., Schmitz-Wiedenbrück 1941; *GDK 1941*, 73). In the case of applied art such as medals and plaques, individual entries in the GDK catalogs often referenced multiple pieces (e.g., *GDK 1942*, 18, 28, 58). In one case, forty-nine pieces of applied art were placed under a single catalog entry (*GDK 1937*, 69). Researchers who provide statistics that differ from those presented here often count only the individual catalog entries to determine the number of artworks exhibited at the GDKs and thus undercount the actual number of discrete pieces (e.g., Sösemann and Lange 2011, 830).

Photographs of the artworks and the galleries in which they were exhibited exist for each of the GDKs, at least from 1938 to 1943. For these years, images are available for almost every piece of fine art. Fewer images exist for the 1937 GDK, and many photographs for the 1944 GDK were lost. For those artworks where no photographs exist, the subjects can often be determined through other documentation referenced by the creators of the database or simply by the titles of the works. Nevertheless, it is impossible to determine the subject in every case. The percentage of undetermined works is as low as .22 percent for 1942 and as high as 10.35 percent for 1944 (see Table 2). Virtually no images exist for works of applied art, and few of these pieces had titles. Because it is impossible to determine what subjects, if any, characterized applied works of art, these pieces are counted separately from works of fine art (see Table 1).

The subject categories used here require explanation since their determination is, to a degree, a subjective exercise. Other scholars have developed subject categories that inform those utilized in this essay (Adam 1992, 129-173; Schmidt 2012, 73-76). Landscapes, seascapes, cityscapes, and architecture are counted as a single category and consisted entirely of pictorial

art since these subjects did not lend themselves to three-dimensional media such as stone and bronze used for busts and sculptures. The same is true of still-life compositions and depictions of plants. Other subject categories include artworks composed from both two-dimensional and three-dimensional media, including portraits and busts; male and female nudes; animals; genre scenes; farming and agriculture; families and children; industry and technology; religious works; and mythology, history, and literature. Certain subject categories have priority over others. For example, nudes that depicted figures from Greco-Roman antiquity could also be considered mythology, history, or literature. However, most nudes in this category (e.g., Kluska 1941) could only be discerned as classical subjects by their titles and were visually indistinguishable from other nudes (e.g., Nißl 1940) that made no reference to any temporal era. Also, as several scholars note, nude depictions, both male and female, highlighted the Nazis' racial ideal of the healthy, beautiful "Aryan" body, regardless of whether the image referenced classical antiquity or not (Hinz 1995, 332-333; Spotts 2004, 110-111; Adam 1992, 144-155, 176-205). Thus, classical nudes are counted simply as nudes—and not as mythology, history, or literature—unless the artwork exhibited iconographic elements that strongly suggested references to the classical past. This same rationale is used to categorize paintings, sketches, and etchings as landscapes if they had only a few, small visual references to cultivation and herding (e.g., Halberg-Krauss 1943), while pieces categorized as farming and agriculture illustrated activities such as planting, harvesting, and animal husbandry as the principal iconographic elements (e.g., Nyssen 1941).

Nazi, fascist, and political artworks also are prioritized over other subject categories and are considered in the broadest possible manner. Pieces that exhibited recognizable Nazi symbols such as swastikas are included in this category, but so are portraits and busts of Nazi leaders, even if the pieces did not display fascist iconography (e.g., Hahn 1937). This category also includes all depictions of Nazi Party formations such as the *Hitlerjugend* (Hitler Youth), the *Sturmabteilung* (SA or Storm Troopers), and the *Schutzstaffel* (SS or Protective Squadron). It is important to distinguish party formations from the German armed forces, which constituted an arm of the state that predated the Nazi Party (Burleigh 2000, 89, 104-105, 235-237).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, depictions of the German armed forces and their activities are considered as military subjects. Depictions of Nazi Party formations, even those that engaged in frontline combat during World War II such as the SS, are categorized as Nazi, fascist, or political rather than as military subjects.

## Tables and Graph

The 13,403 artworks that appeared at the eight GDKs from 1937 to 1944 are tabulated and quantified by subject categories in Table 1. As noted, some works of fine art cannot be categorized due to a lack of photographic documentation, ambiguous titles, or both. These are listed as undetermined in Table 1. Table 2 shows the percentages of each subject category by year with undetermined works of fine art included. Table 3 shows the percentages with the undetermined pieces of fine art excluded. Neither Table 2 nor Table 3 consider applied art since, in virtually

every case, the subjects depicted on these pieces cannot be determined. The data in Table 3 is used to construct Graph 1, which illustrates only select subject categories of fine art for the sake of visual clarity.

**Table 1.** GDK Subject Categories by Number

<b>Subjects</b>	<b>1937</b>	<b>1938</b>	<b>1939</b>	<b>1940</b>	<b>1941</b>	<b>1942</b>	<b>1943</b>	<b>1944</b>	<b>Totals</b>
Landscapes, Cityscapes, Seascapes, Architecture	273	430	495	499	538	629	614	506	<b>3,984</b>
Portraits, Busts	140	191	184	196	210	209	230	201	<b>1,561</b>
Nudes	72	138	191	184	196	176	165	84	<b>1,206</b>
Still-Life Compositions, Plants	54	91	132	198	206	175	139	149	<b>1,144</b>
Animals	85	182	165	168	156	119	128	112	<b>1,115</b>
Military	27	35	40	100	160	143	135	77	<b>717</b>
Genre	34	64	60	89	93	84	92	48	<b>564</b>
Mythology, History, Literature	37	38	41	59	52	71	47	56	<b>401</b>
Families, Children	20	52	34	27	59	43	44	41	<b>320</b>
Industry, Technology	15	48	57	65	71	58	45	34	<b>393</b>
Farming, Agriculture	25	55	51	34	41	44	37	18	<b>305</b>
Nazi, Fascist, Political	43	33	31	38	35	25	19	20	<b>244</b>
Religious	10	1	4	2	3	0	0	0	<b>20</b>
Miscellaneous	6	11	18	17	2	12	11	14	<b>91</b>
Undetermined	43	16	8	46	34	4	7	157	<b>315</b>
<b>Totals, Fine Art</b> (Paintings, Sculptures, etc.)	<b>884</b>	<b>1,385</b>	<b>1,511</b>	<b>1,722</b>	<b>1,856</b>	<b>1,792</b>	<b>1,713</b>	<b>1,517</b>	<b>12,380</b>
<b>Totals, Applied Art</b> (Plaques, Medals, etc.)	<b>287</b>	<b>79</b>	<b>170</b>	<b>84</b>	<b>172</b>	<b>91</b>	<b>62</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>1,023</b>
<b>Grand Totals</b>	<b>1,171</b>	<b>1,464</b>	<b>1,681</b>	<b>1,806</b>	<b>2,028</b>	<b>1,883</b>	<b>1,775</b>	<b>1,595</b>	<b>13,403</b>

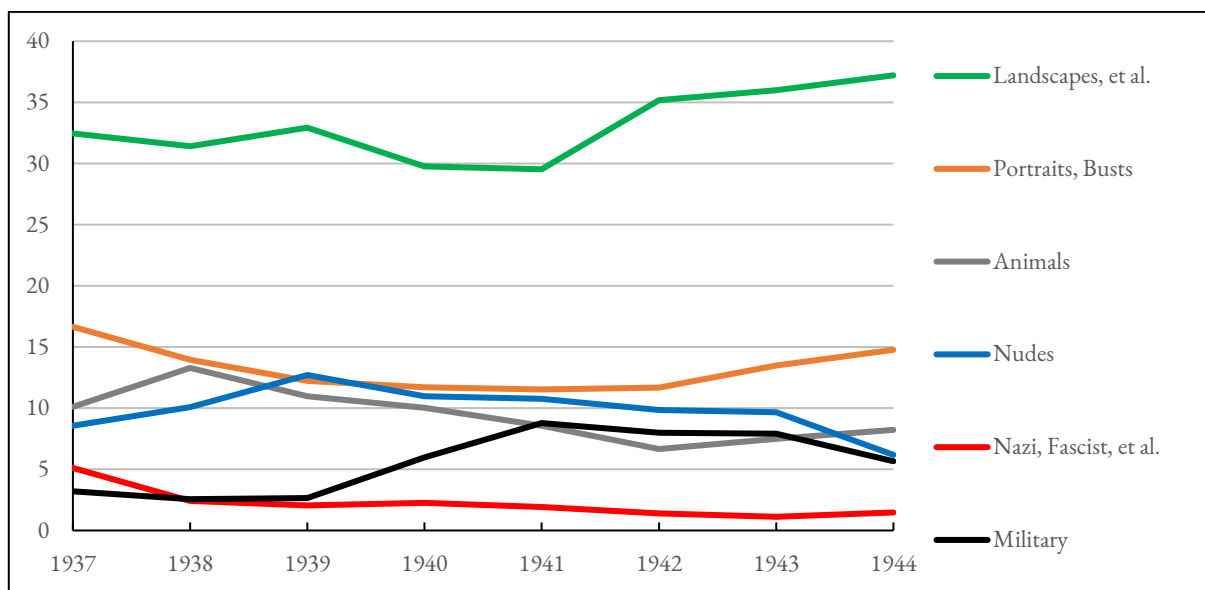
**Table 2.** GDK Subject Categories by Percentage (Fine Art Only, Including Undetermined)

<b>Subjects</b>	<b>1937</b>	<b>1938</b>	<b>1939</b>	<b>1940</b>	<b>1941</b>	<b>1942</b>	<b>1943</b>	<b>1944</b>
Landscapes, Cityscapes, Seascapes, Architecture	30.88	31.05	32.76	28.98	28.99	35.10	35.84	33.36
Portraits, Busts	15.84	13.79	12.18	11.38	11.31	11.66	13.43	13.25
Nudes	8.15	9.96	12.64	10.68	10.56	9.82	9.63	5.54
Still-Life Compositions, Plants	6.11	6.57	8.74	11.50	11.10	9.77	8.12	9.82
Animals	9.62	13.14	10.92	9.75	8.40	6.64	7.47	7.38
Military	3.05	2.53	2.65	5.81	8.62	7.98	7.88	5.08
Genre	3.85	4.62	3.97	5.17	5.01	4.69	5.37	3.16
Mythology, History, Literature	4.19	2.74	2.71	3.43	2.80	3.96	2.74	3.69
Families, Children	2.26	3.75	2.25	1.57	3.18	2.40	2.57	2.70
Industry, Technology	1.70	3.47	3.77	3.77	3.83	3.23	2.63	2.24
Farming, Agriculture	2.82	3.97	3.38	1.97	2.21	2.46	2.16	1.19
Nazi, Fascist, Political	4.86	2.38	2.05	2.21	1.89	1.40	1.11	1.32
Religious	1.13	0.08	0.26	0.12	0.16	0.00	0.00	0.00
Miscellaneous	0.68	0.79	1.19	0.99	0.11	0.67	0.64	0.92
Undetermined	4.86	1.16	0.53	2.67	1.83	0.22	0.41	10.35
<b>Totals</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 3.** GDK Subject Categories by Percentage (Fine Art Only, Excluding Undetermined)

Subjects	1937	1938	1939	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944
Landscapes, Cityscapes, Seascapes, Architecture	32.46	31.41	32.94	29.77	29.53	35.18	35.99	37.21
Portraits, Busts	16.65	13.95	12.24	11.70	11.53	11.69	13.48	14.78
Nudes	8.56	10.08	12.71	10.98	10.76	9.84	9.67	6.18
Still-Life Compositions, Plants	6.42	6.65	8.78	11.81	11.31	9.79	8.15	10.96
Animals	10.11	13.29	10.98	10.02	8.56	6.66	7.50	8.23
Military	3.21	2.56	2.66	5.97	8.78	8.00	7.92	5.66
Genre	4.04	4.67	3.99	5.31	5.10	4.70	5.39	3.53
Mythology, History, Literature	4.40	2.78	2.73	3.52	2.85	3.97	2.75	4.12
Families, Children	2.38	3.80	2.26	1.61	3.24	2.40	2.58	3.01
Industry, Technology	1.79	3.51	3.79	3.88	3.90	3.24	2.64	2.50
Farming, Agriculture	2.97	4.02	3.39	2.03	2.25	2.46	2.17	1.32
Nazi, Fascist, Political	5.11	2.41	2.06	2.27	1.92	1.40	1.12	1.47
Religious	1.19	0.07	0.27	0.12	0.16	0.00	0.00	0.00
Miscellaneous	0.71	0.80	1.20	1.01	0.11	0.67	0.64	1.03
<b>Totals</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Graph 1.** Select GDK Subject Categories by Percentage (Fine Art Only, Excluding Undetermined)



### Analysis of the Data

The data confirms several trends for which scholars have lacked firm statistics in the past. Landscapes, cityscapes, seascapes, and depictions of architecture constituted the largest subject category for all eight GDKs. Such works reflected the Nazi ideology of “*Blut und Boden*” (blood and soil): the notion that German racial identity, strength, and purity were rooted in the German soil. These works also reflected Hitler’s preference for the Austro-Bavarian landscape painting common to southern Germany and Austria that he had come to appreciate in his youth (Petropoulos 1996, 11, 246-247; Schmidt 2012, 73, 82; Adam 1992, 129-132) (Fig. 2). Works depicting other

regions of Germany were also abundant. Most years, portraits and busts constituted the second largest category, and the individual artworks reveal a conspicuous pattern. Many portraits and busts depicted specific persons familiar to the artists or well-known persons whom the viewers would have recognized. However, many others illustrated unnamed persons who represented racial and cultural archetypes that reflected Nazi ideology. These pieces often illustrated occupational categories; farmers and other persons engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry were particularly popular subjects (e.g., Baumgartner 1944; Hedloff 1939) (Fig. 3). Other artworks presented images of persons wearing traditional clothing and costumes from various regions of Germany and Austria such as the Black Forest or the mountain districts of Tyrol (e.g., Blos 1940; Gdaniec 1943) (Fig. 4).

Nudes, as mentioned, reflected Nazi racial ideas concerning “Aryan” beauty, and most years the number of nudes, both in pictorial form and sculpture, was only marginally lower than the number of portraits and busts. Surprisingly, depictions of animals were only slightly lower than these two subject categories. While scholars have thoroughly investigated landscapes, nudes, and portraits produced during the Third Reich, little has been written about the prevalence of animals in Nazi-era art. Marlies Schmidt (2012, 78), in her examination of the 1937 GDK, suggests that artists considered animals to be extensions of the German landscape, regardless of whether they were feral animals such as deer, rabbits, and wolves or domesticates such as horses, sheep, and cattle. However, this does not account for those works that depicted species whose habitats laid far from Germany’s borders such as elephants, giraffes, and penguins (e.g., Christlieb 1938; Greiner 1941; Thiele 1942). More research is required to determine what ideological purpose, if any, artistic representations of such animals played in Nazi-era art. The same is true of still-life compositions and depictions of plants, both of which arguably represented products of the landscape in the same manner as animals (e.g., Müller-Wischin 1943; Pfeiffer 1942) (Fig. 5). As the tables illustrate, artworks that depicted still-life compositions and plants sometimes equaled or exceeded, both in number and percentage, pieces in other subject categories such as nudes and portraits and busts. Yet, like animals, no extant scholarship explains the prevalence of these works in the corpus of Nazi-era art.

Indeed, more has been written about GDK artworks that constituted several of the lesser subject categories such as farming and agriculture, families and children, and genre pieces. In every case, the percentages of works in these subject categories were significantly lower than either representations of animals or still-life compositions and depictions of plants for every GDK. This phenomenon constitutes something of a sampling error as researchers have assumed these lesser subject categories to have been of greater significance within the artistic production of the Third Reich than the statistical data indicates. Scholars have noted that artworks depicting farming and agriculture, for example, painted an idyllic portrayal of the bucolic life in the countryside that also illustrated the Nazi ideology of racial purity rooted in the German soil. However, these pieces were wildly anachronistic as they reflected the bygone age of the nineteenth

century and completely excluded any modern machinery or elements of twentieth-century mechanization (Adam 1992, 132-134). Artworks that depicted farming and agriculture were also closely linked to Nazi beliefs about family life. Artistic representations of families and children emphasized traditional gender roles, particularly women as the bearers of racially pure children who symbolized Germany's future (Adam 1992, 134-140). Likewise, genre scenes, a particular staple of Austro-Bavarian artists since the Biedermeier period of the early nineteenth century, portrayed scenes of everyday life that also harkened back to Germany's pre-industrial past: lumbermen cutting trees in the forest, blacksmiths shoeing plow horses, and old women quietly spinning thread (Petropoulos 1996, 246-247; Böttger 1940; Stahl 1940; Wölflé 1942).

Also related to these motifs were artworks that referenced mythology, history, and literature. Many of these pieces illustrated great events and persons in German history such as Frederick the Great and his miraculous victory at Leuthen during the Seven Years' War (Schnürpel 1939). Others highlighted Germany's towering figures in literature and the arts such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Richard Wagner (e.g., Müller 1940; Breker 1944). However, a significant number also depicted the Greco-Roman past (e.g., Cauer 1942; Kampf 1943). Hitler sought to link the German nation to the earlier classical tradition, both genetically and artistically, for the Greeks in particular had established the mathematical laws of beauty that governed both art and architecture. They were also thoroughly "Aryan" in Hitler's mind and thus were the racial and cultural predecessors of the Germans (Adam 1992, 27-32; Spotts 2004, 20-24). Hitler went so far as to link the art of Germany to that of classical antiquity with his description of the aesthetic principles he labeled "Greco-Nordic art" (Peters 2014a, 27). So important was the Greco-Roman tradition to the genealogy of German art in the Nazi mind that the symbol of Pallas Athena graced the covers of the GDK exhibition catalogs (Schlenker 2007b, 102) (Fig. 1).

In contrast to these subject categories, industrial landscapes and related pieces highlighted the technological might and savvy of contemporary Germany. Artworks that depicted industry and technology had their genesis with the German Realist painter Adolph Menzel and his influential painting *Eisenwalzwerk (Iron-Rolling Mill)* produced between 1872 and 1875 at the Königshütte iron and steel works in Silesia (Schlecking 2016, 130-143, 215-217; Türk 2010, 472-475). During the Weimar period, German industrial artists increasingly celebrated their nation's technological advances through what Jeffery Herf labels "reactionary modernism," an idea that embraced technological progress while simultaneously rejecting Enlightenment values such as political equality, liberal democracy, and religious toleration (Herf 1984, 1-48). The Nazi regime later appropriated this notion, and industrial artists during the era of the Third Reich continued to produce heroic depictions of German industry and technology. They not only painted the steel mills of the Ruhr Valley but also the great bridges of Germany's Autobahn, a symbol of the country's technological prowess (Engelskirchen 2002, 108-111; Jung and Stahnke 2014, 19-32, 47-48, 86; Zeller 2007, 62-71). The workers who labored in these great industrial enterprises were celebrated as men who were as tough and strong as the steel they

produced and the bridges they built. Like other racial and cultural archetypes, artists transformed industrial workers into heroic, muscular “Aryan” figures who epitomized the Nazi pathos (Michaud 2004, 198-204). Like artworks in all the lesser subject categories, those that depicted industry and technology were never a significant portion of the totals, but they consistently appeared in all eight GDKs.

The only works that dramatically increased in number and percentage over the course of the GDKs were those that depicted military and war-related subjects. The advent of World War II in 1939 resulted in a significant number of such works, from fewer than five percent in 1937 to almost nine percent in 1941. In fact, the modest declines in other subject categories after 1939 were largely due to the limited exhibition space that had to be dedicated to works that illustrated Germany’s ongoing military campaigns. Of course, this increase in war-related art after 1939 has been noted by art historians (Schlenker 2007b, 146-148; Schmidt 2012, 141-143). The Nazi cultural bureaucracy believed such works were important for maintaining civilian morale and convincing the German people that victory would be the ultimate reward for their country’s sacrifices on the battlefield. The German soldier was configured as a new “heroic Aryan,” defending his country from its enemies (Adam 1992, 156-160). War paintings and other military art also had a visceral quality that brought the grittiness of the war to the viewer. Artworks in this subject category were very popular with the nation’s citizenry. Indeed, recent studies conclude that during the war years, the German public desired even more art with military and war-related themes than the Nazi state provided (Werckmeister 2015, 107-125; Schmidt 2007, 293).

Two other trends are also evident in the data. First, religious art was virtually non-existent at the GDKs. Religious themes, even when broadly considered, never constituted even two percent of the exhibited artworks, and in the three GDKs between 1942 and 1944, the number of religious-themed artworks was zero. However, while the leadership of the Third Reich eschewed Christian beliefs and practices, Christian ritual and iconography were preserved in Nazi ceremonies and Nazi-era art (Schmidt 2012, 17, 75; Maertz 2019, 77-110; Ruppert 2015, 44-45). For example, thirty-five GDK works had the title *Mutter und Kind* (*Mother and Child*), at least two works and as many as seven at each of the eight GDKs. Many of these pieces bore an uncanny resemblance to religious icons of the Madonna and Child (e.g., Eichhorst 1938; Heinsdorff 1938; Weissmüller 1944) (Fig. 6). Particularly striking was Josef Thorak’s sculpture *Pietà*, which portrayed a mother holding the body of her son, a fallen German soldier, in the same manner as Michelangelo’s *Pietà* of the Virgin Mary cradling the crucified Christ (Thorak 1942).

Like religious art, overtly political subjects were also uncommon. Only about five percent of the pieces at the 1937 GDK exhibited political content, and thereafter the numbers and percentages steadily declined. This is astounding when one considers that the general public today tends to believe that such art was the mainstay of the Third Reich. Instead, several of the lesser subject categories—genre scenes; mythological, historical and literary subjects; families and children; industry and technology; and agricultural motifs—consistently had greater representation than

political themes in most GDKs. Hitler disliked political art, and even when the broadest definition of “political art” is employed, relatively few GDK works displayed overtly Nazi, fascist, or political themes (Spotts 2004, 176). As James van Dyke notes, “Although Germany was littered with images that were clearly propaganda, they were generally not found in the halls of the *Haus der deutschen Kunst* [House of German Art, the museum that hosted the GDKs]. The vast majority of the paintings exhibited there served a conventional taste in art” (van Dyke 2007, 255).<sup>4</sup>

The process of choosing artworks explains why this “conventional taste” characterized GDK art. The selection of works for the first GDK in 1937 was initially in the hands of a jury composed principally of artists. The jury also included interior designer Gerdy Troost, the widow of architect Paul Troost who had designed the House of German Art. When Hitler inspected the jury’s choices, he became enraged at the number of modernist works, particularly impressionistic paintings that he declared to be “unfinished.” He dismissed the jury and entrusted his personal photographer, Heinrich Hoffmann—a man of limited artistic experience—with selecting artworks for the 1937 GDK and every other GDK thereafter. Troost was later invited back to assist but had diminished influence (Schlenker 2007a, 260; Stratigakos 2015, 132-134). Hoffmann later wrote, “I knew Hitler’s views, and I had a fairly good idea of what would find favour in his eyes” (Hoffmann 1955, 173). Even after Hoffmann made his selections, Hitler still passed final judgment on all artworks. Thus, GDK pieces were characterized by a strong tendency toward nineteenth-century academic art as well as the Austro-Bavarian traditions of landscapes and portraits that Hitler preferred (Petropoulos 1996, 11, 246-247; Peters 2014b, 108).

Nevertheless, his seemingly discerning eyes often failed him, and pieces that bore unmistakable characteristics of Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism, and New Objectivity found their way into the exhibitions (Peters 2014b, 108-109). Thus, the art of the eight GDKs varied widely in quality. Virtually all pieces demonstrated a high degree of technical skill, and some were clearly superior artworks that displayed modernist elements and originality that contemporary art scholars now appreciate. However, as researchers have long argued, many other GDK artworks were unimaginative, imitative of traditional subjects and styles, and uninspiring (Schlenker 2007a, 259-260; Adam 1992, 119; Petropoulos 2000, 255). It is also crucial to remember that all works of art at the eight GDKs, regardless of their quality or modernist influences, reflected the ideology of the Third Reich, a fact that contemporary scholars stress (Steinweis 1993, 20-31; Petropoulos 2000, 61, 243-244, 253-269; Jung and Stahnke 2014, 103-105; Ruppert 2015, 38-46). If the road to Auschwitz was “twisted” as Karl Schleunes (1970, viii) has argued, then each piece of artwork at the GDKs was a paving stone along that murderous route.

## Conclusion

The analysis presented here does not distinguish between superior or inferior pieces of art; nor does it provide any commentary on those GDK artworks that exhibited undeniable aspects of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century modernism. Instead, its purpose is to provide quantitative

data for the burgeoning body of scholarship on the art of the Third Reich and especially the premier art exhibitions of the Nazi state, the GDKs. As the first such comprehensive statistical analysis of GDK art, it furnishes substance to the scholarly conclusions that have been proffered over the last three decades. Certainly, it lays to rest the popular belief that GDK art was principally characterized by political content. While art scholars have long known that landscapes, portraits, and nudes predominated at the GDKs, less has been written about other subject categories. In the case of artworks that depicted animals, almost nothing has been written, and the same is true of still-life compositions and depictions of plants. These subject categories constituted a significant proportion of the artworks at the eight GDKs, but virtually nothing has been written by art scholars about what ideological purpose, if any, they served. Hopefully, this analysis will open future avenues for research into the art of the Third Reich.

### **Endnotes:**

1. For the database, see *Grosse deutsche Kunstausstellung, 1937-1944*, available at: [www.gdk-research.de](http://www.gdk-research.de) [accessed 9 Apr 2021]. Individual works of art discussed in this essay are found in the reference list along with the GDKs at which they were exhibited and the specific URLs from the database.
2. Digital copies of the catalogs can be downloaded from *Arthistoricum.net*, available at: <https://www.arthistoricum.net/themen/textquellen/kataloge-der-grossen-deutschen-kunstaustellung> [accessed 9 Apr 2021].
3. In contrast, Marlies Schmidt (2012, 76, 143) places political and military subjects into a single subject category.
4. Translation by the author.

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- Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1938 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München, 10. Juli – 16. Oktober 1938*. Munich: F. Bruckmann, 1938. (*GDK 1938*)
- Ergänzungsteil zum Offiziellen Ausstellungskatalog der Grossen Deutschen Kunstausstellung 1938 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München*. Munich: Knorr & Hirth, 1938. (*Ergänzungsteil 1938*)
- Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung 1939 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München, 16. Juli bis 15. Oktober 1939*. Munich: Knorr & Hirth, 1939. (*GDK 1939*)
- Ergänzungsteil zum Offiziellen Ausstellungskatalog der Grossen Deutschen Kunstausstellung 1939 im Haus der Deutschen Kunst zu München*. Munich: Knorr & Hirth, 1939. (*Ergänzungsteil 1939*)
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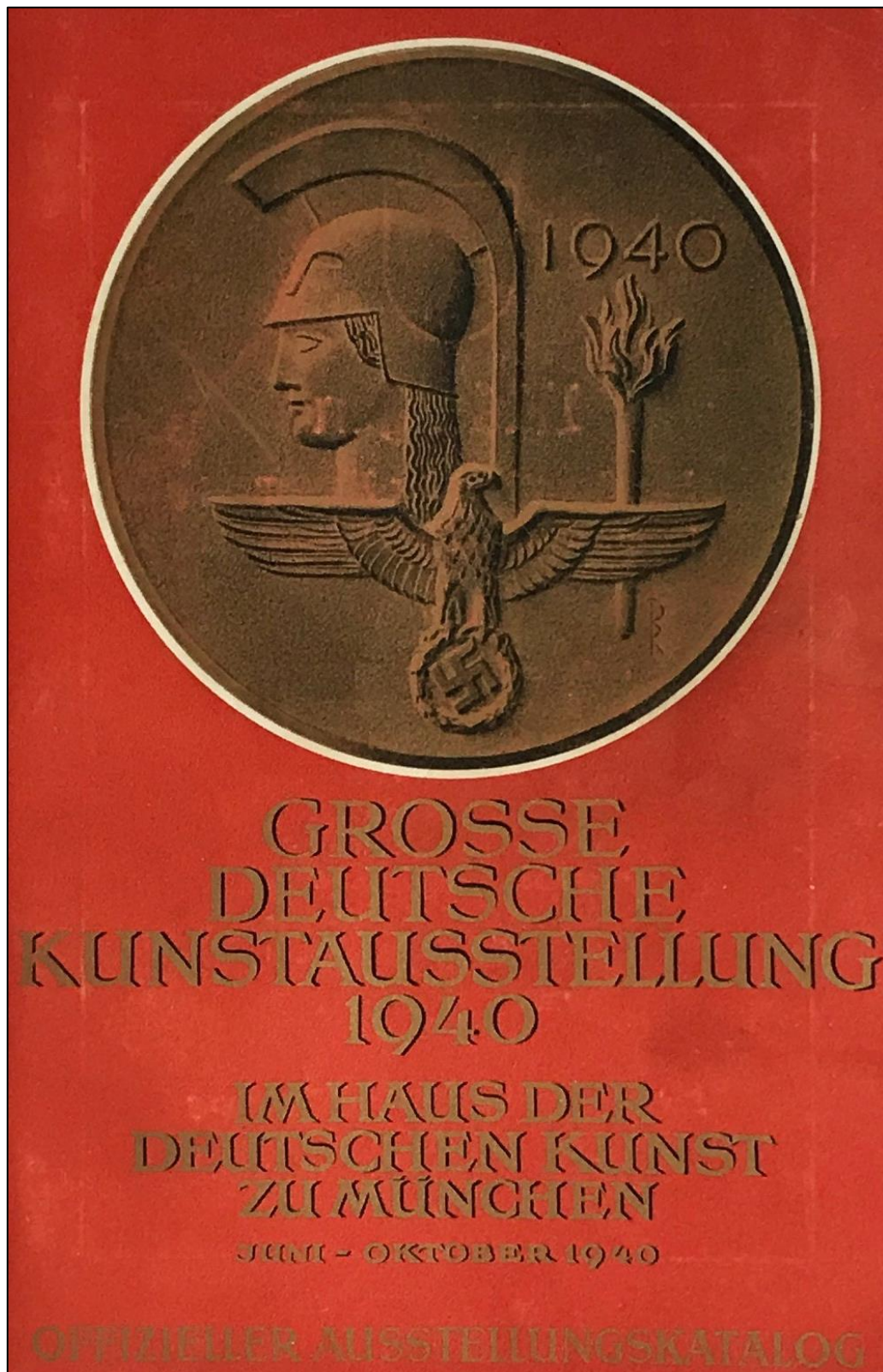


Fig. 1, Catalog cover, *Die Große Deutsche Kunstausstellung*, 1940. Courtesy of the German Art Gallery (<https://germanartgallery.eu>).



Fig. 2, Georg Günther, *Deutsches Mittelgebirge (German Foothills)*, GDK 1939. Courtesy of the Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin.



Fig. 3, Thomas Baumgartner, *Kreuther Bauernbursche (Farm Lad from Kreuth, Germany)*, GDK 1944. Courtesy of the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Munich.

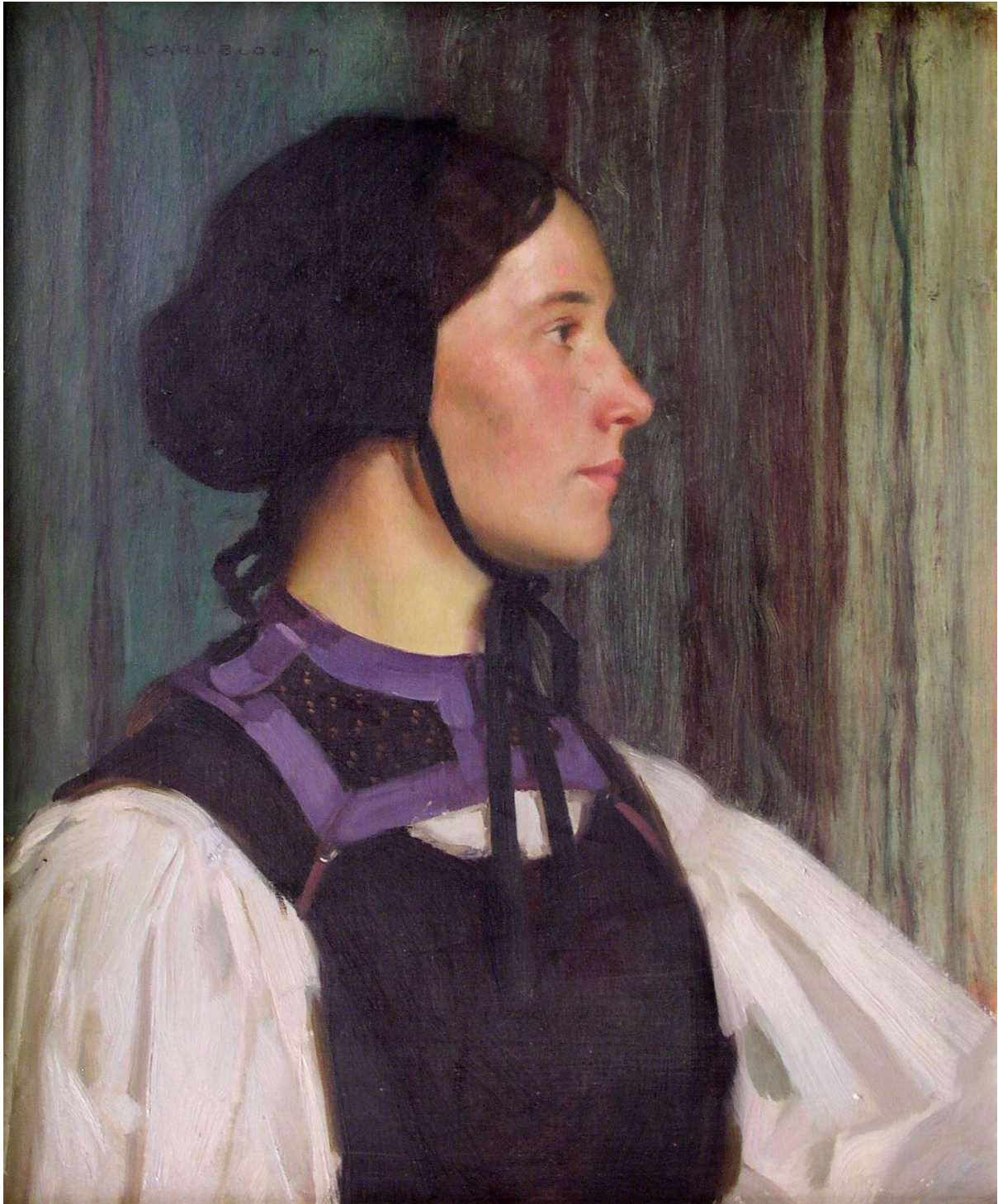


Fig. 4, Carl Blossfeldt, *Schwarzwälderin* (*Black Forest Woman*), GDK 1940. Courtesy of the Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin.



Fig. 5, Anton Müller-Wischin, *Rote Rosen (Red Roses)*, GDK 1943. Courtesy of the German Art Gallery (<https://germanartgallery.eu>).



Fig. 6, Otto Weissmüller, *Mutter und Kind* (*Mother and Child*), GDK 1944. Courtesy of the Zentralinstitut für Kunstgeschichte, Munich.

# Aliens, Monsters, and Beasts in the Cultural Mapping of Nollywood Cinematography

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## Abstract:

The emerging field of monster studies has witnessed significant contributions in the functions of monsters in the representations of human stories. In spite of the different creative discourses in this new field, the cultural aesthetics and the strategic polemics of monsters in African stories have largely remained unengaged. Drawing from recent development in monster theories and the cinematic presence of monsters in Nollywood movies, the paper interrogates the cultural aesthetics, ethno-polemics, and the moral constructs of monsters in Nollywood movies. Specifically, monsters in Nollywood movies are not only the cultural equivalents of the aliens and extraterrestrial creatures of Hollywood movies, but they occupied strategic importance in the mapping of deviant characters, ethics, theodicy and the constructs of the “ethnic other.” Through explorative method, the paper engages common cinematic motifs, social characterizations, and cultural polemics of monsters in Nollywood cinematography, thus providing new insights to the new field of monster studies.

**Keywords:** Monster, Aliens, Nollywood movies, African stories, monster theories, African ethics, cinematography, African aesthetics

## Introduction

Creatures of extraordinary size and shape have always preoccupied human fascinations and creative imaginations.<sup>1</sup> From the primordial times, monsters have featured in the stories, literatures, music and religious constructs of the human race.<sup>2</sup> In short, there are monsters everywhere one turns to—on the cinematic landscape of the modern story world whether in the stories of zombies, cyborgs, werewolves, or in the increasing obsession with the UFOs, aliens, scary ghosts and paranormal talkshows.<sup>3</sup> In these different literary and visual depictions of monsters and oversized beasts, there are apparent cultural functions in the positioning and presence of these monstrous creatures in human storytelling traditions.<sup>4</sup>

For example, modern Sci-fi movies have featured monsters in the cinematic mapping of their story world either with the hope of a realized utopia or the crude subversion of these expectations in the catastrophic materialization of a dystopian world. Placed in these discourses

of sci-fi movies, Cyborgs and monsters describe human technological victory over death in robotic bodies, artificial intelligence, corporeal immortality, boundless consciousness, and the demise of the biological bodies where the apocalypse death of the “imperfect human” beings will lead to the “technological resurrection” of a new breed of human race.<sup>5</sup> According to Jeremy Biles, “[t]he ‘salvation’ promised by this vision of technology simultaneously elevates and erases the human” causing “immortality and death” to converge.<sup>6</sup> “From this point of view, the very technology that promises perfection and immortality is a sacred monster that kills its master.”<sup>7</sup>

Considering these different engagements of monsters in novels and movies, the present study engages specific representations of monsters and beasts in Nollywood movies—and the ethno-cultural significance of these cinematic representations of “otherness” in contemporary Africa.<sup>8</sup> Positioned on this trajectory, the paper interrogates modern theories of monsters in direct dialogues to the dominant cinematic representations of monsters in Nollywood movies. Lastly, it probes further the problematic character of these cinematic representations, the ethno-cinematography of African monsters, and the cultural polemics of these cinematic creations.

### **Modern Theories & Perspectives on Monsters**

There are several theories and perspectives in the emerging field of monster studies.<sup>9</sup> Four of these popular theoretical perspectives will occupy our immediate attention here.<sup>10</sup> First, modern theory of monsters described monsters as the creatures of crisis. They are largely situated in stories, novels, legends and myths at the point of crisis. In the history of literary composition, monsters are often strategically situated and introduced at the point of crisis. The crisis necessitating the emergence of the monster could be the crises of survival, the conflicts and tensions of a quest narrative, the fights of an adventure, the wars in a conquest story or the confrontations in a military campaign. The monster is also deployed in the narrative of invasions, colonization of another space, political propaganda, or in the natural heightened tensions of race, sexuality and social classes. The crisis environments are the thriving spaces for monster’s presence and operations in the plotting of a story.<sup>11</sup>

This construction of monsters at the point of crisis could be seen in the plotting of recent stories and other stories in antiquity. For example, the story of the *Transformers* (Bay and Knight, 2007) build on the well-seated conflicts between two alien groups—one fighting on the side of the villain Megatron known as the Decepticons—and the others—Autobots on the side of the humans under the leadership of Optimus Prime; the story of extraterrestrials in the movie *ET* (Spielberg, 1982) formed its plotline around conflict—and the many other scientific fictions whether *Jurassic Park* or the movie—the *Predator* (McTiernan, 1987) espoused the motif of conflict. The same degree of conflict is seen in the story of *Beowulf*, the presence of the Cyclopes in *Odysseus*, Medusa in *Jason and the Argonaut*, or the presence of the *Nephilim* or the “sons of God” in the biblical story of Genesis—or even in the story of the giants (Anakim) in the conquests of the Canaanites in the Biblical book of Numbers.

But this motif of conflict could be expressed in the confrontations of racism where oppressed individuals or subjected communities are projected as monsters in attacks and polemics against them. In the conflict of land grabs of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the native Indians were deemed monsters by the forces of the colonizers—and in the same way, Africans and the land of Africa were projected as the land of monsters in the creative and imaginative stories of earlier explorers and colonizers. Of course, modern racism, conflicts and the negative impacts of racial segregations—have often led to the description of the supremacist white community and ideologies with the label of monsters. Similarly, the patriarchal denigration of the female gender has also be classified in the dimensions of a monster since it continually seeks to undermine the worth and dignity of the female gender. In all these descriptions, creation and placement of monsters in movies, novels, modern political discourses, social activism and the paintings of graffiti—the powerful depiction of monsters are driven by seated conflicts within the social and political fabrics of the human society.

Secondly, monsters are positioned in stories of movies, novels or popular discourse to police the borders of accepted norms, culture or beliefs. Monsters are policing agents of human morality—fears or anxiety.<sup>12</sup> They are often deployed to guard the borders of the permissible—against the trespassing temptation to cross over—or transcend cultural and religious borders. Monsters are often the creations of boundary spaces—the beacon—or social landmarks on human accepted behaviours and practices.<sup>13</sup> They roamed the borderlines and cultural margins of the human society to protect the human society from itself—and to underscore the perpetuation of normalcy and borders of the acceptable. They may be described as bad witches deployed in the story to protect human morality—through her punishment, death or defeat—or they could be evil spirits protecting the land of the dead, a graveyard—or even vampires guarding a particular space from human intrusions. They are police agents of human morality or beliefs—by guarding the prohibitions of the human community. Monsters of prohibitions clearly serve the self-interests of the human society since they protect the forbidden spaces from human intrusions or presence. The stories of giant monsters at the sea by medieval sailors and merchants are possibly deployed by them to dissuade others from exploring the seas and thereby protecting their wealth and self-interests.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, monsters are positioned as signboards or creatures of warning against the intrusion, the entrance or the exploration of a particular forbidden dimension.<sup>15</sup> For example, the giants of Patagonia, the dragons in Chinese folklores, the giant angelic cherub guarding the tree of life with a huge sword in the biblical account of Genesis, the giant status of gods, divinities and deities guarding ancient cities or huge monsters guarding ancient caves and sacred spaces—or even the dinosaurs of Jurassic Park who violently punished the scientists and humanity in general for crossing the acceptable borders via experimentations of genetic coding and cloning of the dinosaurs.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Lycaon—king of Arcadia, breached the acceptable laws and borders of hospitality by offering to Zeus—his guest—the flesh of his servants for meal—

and in anger—Zeus turned him into the first werewolves of western literature.<sup>17</sup> This punishment by Zeus was primarily to protect the borders of acceptable human behaviours—by turning the culprits into a monster—in order to show his monstrous breaking of a cherished hospitable taboo.<sup>18</sup> The protection of race, skin colour, religious belief, sexuality, custom and political ideologies have often brought about the creation of imaginary monsters to police and check the crossing of these acceptable cultural spaces. The modern stories of alien, Unidentified Flying Objects and creatures of other planets are often told with the intrigues of protective plots which primarily speak of these aliens as coming to earth in order to protect the human race from self-destruction. In the modern news on terror and the attending war on terror—the description of the West as a monster by fanatic Muslims—and the revised treatment of all Arabs as monsters in populist western media comes from this particular plot which generally seeks to protect the self-interests of a group through border-marking. Ironically, while monsters are scary—they often function as protectors of a given ideal, custom, sex, and beliefs of a particular humanity community in time and space.<sup>19</sup>

Thirdly, the creation of monster and its deployment in fictional spaces of novels and stories also projects the embodiment of others—and the crystallization of difference whether in terms of ethnic identities, racial construction, gender description, political class or social class.<sup>20</sup> It could also be a difference or otherness constructed along the lines of specie—for example—humanoid and alien—or beast and human-like entity.<sup>21</sup> The monster could be a concoction of different species, a mismatched of various life forms, a hybrid of different entities, and the mingling of fluid identities, but even these constructions of difference are often staged and positioned against the description of normalcy or other specie variations in relationship to the monsters.<sup>22</sup> For example, the mermaid is a body of a lady merged with the lower part of a fish, the sphinx—the construction of a lion and a human body—the satyr—a creature with a human body—merged with animal features of goat's ears, tails, legs and horns as in Roman representation—or in Greek—a creature with human body with horse's ears and tails. Similarly, the construct of difference could be seen in the representation of a centaur—a creature with head, arms and torso of a man and the body and four legs of a horse; it could an alien being or a foreign life in human body such as the movie—the *Specie* (Donaldson, 1995) or as in the movie—*Host* (Niccol, 2013) when a human body was taken over by an alien being. The difference could be constructed on the merger of dead and life form in complex blending of the essential personality of a vampire—or the contentious matrix of good and evil in the personality of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louis and Stevenson—and its many modern variations. On the other hand, the hybrid could accentuate clear difference in terms of superhuman strength in a likable hybrid such as the hybrid in the story of the *Batman* (Burton, 1989) where the DNA of a bat got infused in body of a human being—or in the movie of *Spiderman* (Raimi, 2002) where the DNA of a spider impacted the genetic coding of a human DNA. Some of the monsters, villains and supervillains of these movies are also constructed from these mergers of monstrous creatures in one person.

The construct of difference in monster placed them naturally outside the human experience—and denied them a clear footing on human space. Consequently, monsters are the hybridization of elements which must definitely contain things unknown to us. Concerning this hybridization of monsters, Jacques Derrida said,

A monster is also that which appears for the first time and, consequently, is not yet recognized. A monster is a species for which we do not yet have a name, which does not mean that the species is abnormal, namely, the composition or hybridization of already known species. Simply, it shows itself [*elle se montre*]*—that is what the word monster means—it shows itself in something that is not yet shown and that therefore looks like a hallucination, it strikes the eye, it frightens precisely because no anticipation had prepared one to identify this figure. ... But as soon as one perceives a monster in a monster, one begins to domesticate it, one begins, because of the “as such”—it is a monster as monster—to compare it to the norms, to analyze it, consequently to master whatever could be terrifying in this figure of the monster.*<sup>23</sup>

In addition, the construct of difference in the otherness of a monster could be deployed in a given story as part of the rhetoric of dispossession and conquest. For example, the exaggeration of the non-human-like heights of the intimidating giants of Canaan preceded the story of their extermination and conquest in the Bible (Num 14).<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the extermination of the world in the deluge was preceded by the story of miscegenation between the alien—giant creatures—the Nephilims (or “sons of God”) and their human partners. In this same way, the Jews in the West were also described in the category of evil monsters who in the Medieval period were accused of using Christian children for their Passover meals. The “final solution” undertaken by Adolf Hitler, a person who was also described as a “monster” himself, to put an end to the Jewish problem was based on the indoctrination of the Germany society of the “monstrous” character of an expanding Jewish population in Europe.<sup>25</sup> Ironically, Hitler, a monster rose to exterminate the Jews—who were traditionally perceived as “monsters” because of their different religious customs, strange beliefs—and their prosperity in the midst of an overwhelming Christian majority. Most minorities in human history have often suffered the stigmas of ill-treatment—and their caricatures as monsters and entities—outside of the human family. The genocide in Rwanda placed the tall—Tutsi in the sphere of the “alien” or strangers in Rwanda land by an overwhelming Hutu majority. This rhetoric of exclusion—and difference further reconstructed the images of the Tutsi in the rhetoric of “non-human” person. The Hutu referred to the tall—Tutsi as “cockroaches” thus justifying their extermination—and genocide. The image of a “human-cockroach” in the minds of the majority Hutu projects a monster of race among them which is non-human—and thereby justifying its elimination.<sup>26</sup> The exclusive rhetoric of difference in Rwanda genocide is largely responsible for the sudden and brutal killings of husbands by their wives—and wives by their husbands—and children murdered by their parents—neighbours exterminating neighbours because they understood one another from subtext ideology of difference which was largely

informed by the misconception of the other in the language and rhetoric of non-human—and even monster.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, the local accounts of the many sightings of the monster “Mokele-mbebe,” a “Loch Ness” type of monster in Congo Brazzaville in the midst of Congo’s ongoing crisis may well reflect the dynamics of this construct of “otherness” which have largely characterized the ethnic relationships of this region.<sup>28</sup> More than 50 expeditions have been sent to document and verify the evidence for this monster—but none has provided a scientific evidence of its existence. But for the local community—this monster exists in their midst—and the stories of its sightings have continually defined the activities and beliefs of the local inhabitants of this region. Even though the field of cryptozoology has waded into this search—but I think whether the monster Mokele-mbebe exists in reality or in the imagination of the Congo people—the different constructs of otherness in ethnic wars and violence have literally conjured for this people—a lingering image of a monster in their midst. Similarly, the political exploitations of resources and conquests in the construct of monsters could be seen in the extermination of the Native Americans who were considered “unredeemable savage” and the “racial other” which subsequently justified their subjugation and even extermination.<sup>29</sup>

To be sure, the war on terror in recent times with its narratives of the terror-driven religious monsters of the Middle East—and the counter-narratives by the terrorists of the West in their propaganda as a monster too already suggests the dynamics of monster’s rhetoric of the modern world.<sup>30</sup> In the rhetoric of the terrorists, the West is considered the land of the “infidels,” “pig eaters, the place of other abominable foods, and immoral entertainments, but they are also “monsters” in the eyes of these terrorists because they have invaded and attacked Muslim countries causing pains and sufferings to untold numbers of Muslim communities in the Middle East.<sup>31</sup> The political propaganda on both sides—in the representations of the other in the category of a monster—or an evil vampire describes the increasing mapping of global politics in the description of a monster’s ideology. This propaganda is not a mere campaign of calumny, name-calling or bickering by the two opposing parties—but an entrenched understanding of the other in the perfect construct of difference.<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, this construct of otherness in the definition of a monster—is not only in reference to human misunderstandings, exploitations and propagandas, but it also employed in the description of the activities of microbes and infections.<sup>33</sup> For example, the pictorial and visual representations of AIDS pandemic in the past—and the present scourge of COVID 19 are often constructed in the category of a monster because of the exterminating agenda in the spread, killing and death of the victims of these infectious diseases across the globe.<sup>34</sup> Doctors and nurses in adverts and video clips are represented as the human protective shields against the menacing of these dangerous monsters. In addition, the debates over the synthetic origin of the COVID-19 developed China in Wuhan virological labs already looks like a modern restaging of the Frankenstein monsters—the reanimation of this movie—or in the classical representation of this monster motif in Shelley’s novel of this same name.<sup>35</sup> Seen from this perspective of an

artificially created entity—or a laboratory modified virus from China—the present discourse on COVID-19 describes the scourges of the pandemic in the rhetoric of a modern Frankenstein. Like the wrecking of havocs—and death to its creators, Frankenstein—classical story imbued the present discourse on COVID-19 with intersecting cultural significance.

But this portrait of the microbes of virus—as monsters in modern stories draws from the mainstream perception of monsters to describe modern epidemics and pandemics. The invisibility of the virus and its seeming possession or use of its host to perpetuate itself in the multiplication and taking over the body of the host appeared similar to the motif of alien invasion of human bodies—or the taking over of a host body by either a zombie or the attacks of a living dead. The shared similarities between the activities of this virus and those of the monsters in traditional tales possibly brought about this association of monster to the global havoc perpetuated by this virus. On the other hand, even the present blame games by United States and China over who created this supposedly synthetic virus could be deemed the perfect example of the scapegoat tradition. In the midst of dare conflict and misfortunes, people have always looked for a monster—or scapegoat to take the blame.<sup>36</sup> This scapegoat could be an usual animal that is expected to take away the sins of the community—like the provisions of the book of Leviticus—or scapegoated monsters that should be blamed for a terrible misfortunes such as the blames of German woes on the Jews during their defeats of World War I—or the blames by the Hutu of their woes on the Tutsi—or the modern blame games by superpowers over the origin and the synthetic creator of COVID-19.<sup>37</sup>

Beyond this microbial world of viruses, the patriarchal arrangement of modern society has often constructed otherness in terms of the exaggerations of gender difference—and the association of subversive female characters with monster.<sup>38</sup> According to Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “[t]he woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Sycylla, Weird Sister, Lilith...Bertha Mason, or Gorgon. ‘Deviant’ sexual identity is similarly susceptible to monsterization.”<sup>39</sup> The gender ambiguity of hermaphrodites, transgender and subjective movements of human sexuality, and the transgressing of gender markings and boundaries have often translated into the labelling of sexual deviances in the class of the abnormal—and the dislocation of these individuals from the human space to the outcast-domains of monstrous entities.<sup>40</sup> In recent times, the downgrading and oppressive subjugation of the female gender by the modern patriarchal institutions are treated by civil rights women groups in terms of their confrontations of patriarchal monsters. Similarly, the atrocities of serial killers, paedophiles, rapes and other forms of sexual crimes are represented in terms of the confrontations of the human society against the contending monsters among its ranks. In this sense, the monsters are human—and the wars against these “monsters” are also undertaken through social activism and political campaigns against deviant behaviours and crimes in human society.

But the construct of difference in the depiction of monster could also take racial undertones. Race—in human history—is a defining criterion of difference—and dominant entity

in the construction of monsters. The differences of skin colours, shapes of nose, colour of eyes, structure of the facial skull, or particular racial practices, differences in cultural orientation or mental/psychological dispositions of some races have often occasioned their labelling as monsters—and subsequent placements in the non-human category and space given to monsters. For example, the black skin colour of the African people has often caused its association with monsters. The Greek myth of Phaethon attributed the black colouration of the African skin to the misadventure of Phaethon riding his father's chariots of fire—who unable to control the dazzling fires of these chariots—came close to the earth and burning the skins of Africans in the process. It is not surprising that the role of an alien monster in 1979 now classical movie—*Alien* (Ridley Scott) was given to an African—a Nigerian visual artist Bolaji Badejo who was accidentally picked from the bar—to act the role of an alien by Scott's crews. The otherness of an African person is clearly underscored by the placement of Badejo in an artificially created alien body. Interestingly, Badejo was an “alien” or “foreigner” in London at the times to study—when they crew of the movie realized that his heights and slim feature fit perfectly the height and the movement of an alien. In this role, Badejo performed a double role of an alien within and outside the worlds of the movie. First, the image of Badejo as a foreigner to London presents him as an alien—in the social negotiations of racial identities outside of the world of the movie. Ironically, Badejo becomes an alien within an alien costume—thus alienating him in both the narrative of the movie and his own social history. Secondly, the otherness of Badejo is further enhanced by the perfect fitting of the xenomorphic costume of the alien body to his human body which was made possible by his sickle-cell and anaemic-thin body that naturally fits into the alien body. The sick condition of Badejo placed him—as an alien among healthy people, thus accounting for his alien-like looks. In both of these different dimensions, Badejo's representation in the movie—*Alien* presents the perfect descriptions of an otherness created by his foreignness, his sick alienating body—and his stigmatized race—as an African. Badejo died at the age of 39—bringing to an end—the story of both the constructs of otherness precipitated in real life by his black African skin—and also the inward sufferings of the degenerating impact of sickle cell anaemia in his body. But it also brought to an end the tragic mimesis of a different otherness in the story of Badejo which is clearly seen in the masking of his Africanness inside the xenomorphic suits of an alien cinematic representation.

Similarly, this construct of an African otherness is also seen in 1987 movie—the *Predator* where the role of the alien predator is also given to black American actor—Kevin Peter Hall. Like Badejo before him—his Africanness and the one of the alien creature on the cinematic screen are merged together. In the racial discourses of the American society, Hall like most black Americans are often treated as cultural predators—or monsters who are bent on destroying the whiteness of the American society. In both Badejo and Hall deployment to act as aliens in Hollywood movies—their construct of otherness comes from their physical attributes of alien-ness which the crews and movie producers thought fit perfectly their ideas of an alien being. Similar sentiment is also

expressed in the alien movie *District 9* produced by the South African director Neill Blomkamp where Nigerians are featured in the movie as gun dealers, sex-traffickers, voodoo-practitioners—and the friends of “prawns,” the movie’s name for the alien race.<sup>41</sup> Nigerians in *District 9* supply the aliens with foods and weapons.<sup>42</sup> While the movie has sparked debate and uproar on the representations of Nigerians in it—this association of Nigerians or Africans with aliens is a long Hollywood tradition.<sup>43</sup> The continuous treatment of Africans generally in the category of the “weird other” or “alien” is classically seen in other modern movies such as the *Tears of the Sun* (directed by Antoine Fuqua, 2003), *Hotel Rwanda* (directed by Terry George, 2004), *Constant Gardener* (directed by Fernando Meirelles in 2005), *Shooting Dogs* (directed by Michael Caton-Jones, 2005), *Blood Diamond* (directed by Edward Zwick in 2006), and *the Last King of Scotland* (directed by Kevin MacDonal, 2006).<sup>44</sup> Significantly, the social projections of otherness—and the particular associations of Africans to these alien monsters draw greatly from the prevailing cultural sentiments in the construct of otherness in the worlds which created these classics. The ongoing protest by the black community in America over the extrajudicial killings of blacks in the hands of white cops reiterated and directly continued this tradition that associates blacks with monsters which needed to be exterminated.

In addition, modern discourses on monsters also present the blurring of moral and ethical boundaries. The discourse on monsters rejects any simplistic categorization as evil—and the human world as good. There is the blurring of the moral boundary with monsters placed in the spheres of moral goodness—and in direct opposition to humans placed in the moral sphere of evil. There is a moral ambiguity that surrounds stories of monsters and aliens because modern storytelling traditions have often given monsters favourable representations. While there are monsters that are evil and bad—many monsters cannot be easily placed in this simplistic moral description. In most modern movies and novels, there is no longer the traditional dualism of ethics—or the past entrenched moral binary between a good human community against an evil monster. The common plot around the general evilness of monsters and the goodness of human beings are now abandoned for a more subtle deconstruction of human morality. For example, in *Shrek*, the ogre himself was good in better moral standing than the fairy godmother herself and her human prince charming in the story. Similarly, there are good vampires in the movie *Twilight* who fought against the evil ones—and in the movie—*Transformer*—the machines were divided into two camps of good and evil—those loyal to the human race are good and those favouring the destruction of the human race are evil.<sup>45</sup>

This blurring of moral line is also seen in the modern celebration of the Halloween where everyone becomes “a demon for a night” and a monster for a moment—before returning the next day back to their usual life.<sup>46</sup> The celebration reiterated the fluidity of moral boundaries in the clothing and dressings of people in costumes of monsters, alien, Frankenstein, blood thirsting Draculas, and other characters of vampires from movies and stories. The blurring of the moral boundaries in modern movies comes largely from a postmodern agenda where the moral

ambiguity of this cultural environment is directly imposed on the characters and plotting of stories.<sup>47</sup> Yet in spite of these blurring of ethical borders, some stories have also maintained the traditional placement of monsters in the moral sphere of evil—with monsters taking the path of villains and supervillians thereby bringing about their defeat, and death by the heroes and heroines of these modern stories. These defeats and even death of monsters have often led to the human celebration and victory over these perceived evil monsters.<sup>48</sup>

This moral geography of the monster's landscape in contemporary times needs particular consideration at least in three interesting areas. First, it describes a landscape basically in moral fluidity and conflicting ethical norms where the traditional sacrosanct status and moral absolutism of Judeo-Christian ethics is held in suspect. Of course, the ethnical mapping of modern stories of monsters and aliens underscores the extreme expressions of religious pluralism. The moral imagination of contemporary stories of monsters presents a decentralized ethical rallying point where various ethical persuasions are welcomed—and projected with aggressive competitive agenda among these ethical systems. Even though the traditional theme of a retributive theology exists in the core of these contemporary modern stories—but the subversions of the retributive theology in these stories have become increasing common. Similarly, the favourable representations of monsters in good light in many movies and novels suggests the contemporary quest to engage the moral ambiguities, complexities, and difficulties of morality where reality is not in the simplistic ethics of 'white and black' but also the problematic shades of gray.<sup>49</sup> For example, in her study of vampires in *Twilight*, Grandena described Edward Cullen and the good vampires with him thus, "the Cullens embody a different species of vampires, the good and virtuous vampires with a conscience (as opposed to sexualized vampires as well as to ethnic, shirtless shapeshifters."<sup>50</sup> For Edward Cullen—and the other "good" vampires of *Twilight*, "Sexual intercourse seems to represent the ultimate test to the vampire's self-restraint" because "sexuality before marriage is aligned with potential danger and death; it is thus 'natural' that chastity becomes the *sine qua non*..."<sup>51</sup>

In addition, these favourable portrayals of vampires, monsters and aliens in modern stories seek to embrace the dark side of morality and ethics with the increasing popularity of bad humans—good monsters and benevolent aliens. For example, Kyle W. Bishop speaks of the subversion of the vampire genre with increasing cases of "human monstrosity" in vampire stories that are far worrisome than the activities of the vampire themselves.<sup>52</sup> In this regards, there is a "devolution" of human morality in vampire stories which suggests that the human race itself is in the same moral horizon as the mindless zombies or even worse than them because human characters in zombie movies often go "beyond the necessity of survival and self-preservation and wallowing in atavistic violence."<sup>53</sup> Consequently, the acceptance of monsters as heroes and heroines in recent modern movies provides the platform for the deconstruction of morality—and the possibility of grounding a new moral vision in the favourable representations of monsters in contemporary stories.

Lastly, this acceptance of monsters appears to be a tacit acceptance of ourselves since most monsters in stories are the psychological projections of the human society on screen or texts.<sup>54</sup> Like the contemporary campaign of unity and solidarity for the minority, the disadvantaged, the demonized and the stigmatized communities on the fringe of human society, our identification and cinematic solidarity with monsters draws from the psychological mechanics of this cultural consciousness. Yet, this psychological solidarity with monster goes deeper than just a mere cultural solidarity but it involves the creative projections of human morality on these monsters who themselves must stand in solidarity with human morality or against them. Through this creative process, monsters in spite of their crisscrossing of moral boundary became voices of the larger human society—or the subtle mimesis of its ethical construct. Consequently, it seems the monsters in cinematic space are the ethical mimesis of the human world with all its moral complexities. In this sense, the ethics of the demonized creatures and monsters in horror movies expressed in killing and violence—are often the cinematic reflections of the killings and massacres in the larger human society. Significantly, the ethical otherness of the human society has mimetically converged with the cultural norms and cinematic morality represented by the monsters, thereby blurring the moral lines between the humans and the otherness of monsters.<sup>55</sup> However, monsters in the construct of this ethics enjoy interestingly far more degree of freedom than humans in the ethical mapping of these modern stories. According to Weinstock, this ethical “freedom of the monster” allowed them moral leverage “from the necessity of conforming to social expectations.”<sup>56</sup> He added, “[i]ncreasingly, it seems that modern readers and audiences envy the freedom and power of the monster, without feeling the burden of shame associated with transgressing societal mores and expectations.”<sup>57</sup> From this perspective, these cinematic monsters and their counterparts in novels are—in this particular sense—creations of subversive contestations and ethical negotiations which are in direct dialogue with the ethos and morality of the larger society.

### **Monsters, Beasts and Aliens in Nollywood Movies**

To talk about monsters in Nollywood movies, we must make reference in passing to the story of Badejo here.<sup>58</sup> As already suggested in passing, it is quite ironical that the first role played by a Nigerian in Hollywood movie was the role of an Alien. Badejo in 1979 science fiction, *Alien* linked cinematically Nigerians to Alien or monsters in movies. Since this initial relationship with alien or monster in movie, monsters, vampires and alien life form have featured greatly in Nigerian home movies—and now significantly in Nollywood.<sup>59</sup> In recent times, many Nollywood have continually explored the monster’s motif in the scripting of its stories and plots.<sup>60</sup> For example, in recent times Nollywood has deployed the centrality of the monster character in the mapping of its stories. There are specific contextualized ways monsters have been deployed in Nollywood storytelling traditions in contemporary times. Five specific ways that Nollywood had used the monster’s motif in the crafting of its stories are

worth noting here. First, monsters are used in Nollywood scripts to describe the horrible activities of evil men and women particularly in their powerful use of magic, sorceries and witchcrafts to carry out wicked acts. The monsters in the plot of these stories are always villains whose activities challenged the hero or heroine of the story.<sup>61</sup> Through the powerful aids of diabolic powers, the human—considered “monster” have sold his/her souls to the Devil and witchcraft—and used the powerful resources of these associations with sorceries to perpetuate unethical activities that destroyed the lives of persons and communities who challenged them. They worked against the wellbeing and prosperity of individuals and the communities. The monsters in this common storyline of Nollywood are involved in shapeshifting activities such as changing into domestic animals, wild animals, birds or take different forms to perpetuate their works of wickedness. Concerning the involvement of human monsters in forbidden activities, Michel Foucault observed, “[w]hat makes a human monster a monster is not just its exceptionality relative to the species form; it is the disturbance it brings to juridical regularities. ... The human monster combines the impossible and the forbidden.”<sup>62</sup> In this sense, the construct of monsters is “an abjecting epistemological device basic to the mechanics of deviance construction and identity formation.”<sup>63</sup> Significantly, this description of monster in Nollywood largely considered the ethical and moral perspectives in the representation of monster in Nollywood’s scripts. The scripting of Nollywood movies along these moral lines come from the dominance of a retributive theology by most of African people. This retributive theology expresses itself in the ethical thought that doers of good will reap good—and doers of evil will reap the evil results of their deeds.<sup>64</sup> Monsters are staged in this retributive universe of ethics—in the intriguing mapping of African ethical discourse because through this communal construct of a monster—the African society denied the wicked person—a space in its social landscape by the associating of the individual with the realm of non-human entities—the monster. This construct of monster becomes an act of the community’s self-criticism of itself—and the excommunication of the deviant characters in its midst. Through this communal construct, the African society created for itself an ethical quarantining of morally deviant individuals who by the discourse of disassociation, ostracizing and positive stigmatizing of the evil actions are temporally or even permanently suspended of their humanity. The communal sanctions are verbally deployed in community’s rejection of the wicked individual—thus suggesting their exclusion from human race and the attending relocation to a non-human sphere. While the “monster” could exist, move and work within the community—but the community itself has passed a verdict on his humanness. This construct of monster in Nollywood could be seen in movies such as *The Monster* released in 2019 by Divine Touch Production where Patience Ozokwor acted the part of Okwudili—the monster.<sup>65</sup> In this movie, Okwudili—a widow uses her witchcraft powers to cause havoc in the life of her community—she was later confronted and killed through the intervention of a Christian prayer team.<sup>66</sup> The dead body of Okwudili in the last scene of the movie was

covered with boils and disfigured face—suggesting that she became a monster figure—at the end of a life which was also characterised by wickedness expressed in a monster-like existence against the members of her community. While there is no place she was called a “monster” in the entire movie—her wicked and inhumane activities, her disfigured dead body in addition to the paratext given in the title of the movie suggest clearly she was deemed a monster by the maker of this movie. The same motif of human monsters is seen in Nollywood classics—*Evil Men* directed by Tchidi Chikere released in 2002 which was characterized by evil and monstrous acts against the human community by a league of evil men—and similarly, earlier in *Chain Reaction* directed by Ndubuisi Okoh in 1999—where power-drunk Eucharia (acted by Liz Benson) performed many acts of wickedness—poisoning of others and used the charms from a spiritualist to keep her husband—Ugochukwu into a perpetual obedient slave, thus representing the acts of a human monster.

This motif is also found in the storyline of *Suicide Mission* directed by Fred Amata in 1998 where Austin played by Richard Mofe-Damijo, his wife Winne and his concubine Monique who used witchcraft to put Mofe-Damijo in a bottle—so that she could have full control over him. The major thrust of these different movies—is that the villains placed in the category of a monster work in partnership/consultations with certain spiritual powers in perpetuating their wicked acts.<sup>67</sup> The interactions with the spiritual powers are often perfected through incantations and conjuring of evil spirits in the mother tongue by the perceived human monsters or their proxies. There is often a code switching from English language to the local language in consultations with these spirits which suggest that the spirits only function in their optimal capacity when incantations are directed to them via the instrumentality of the local dialects.<sup>68</sup> Interestingly, the sociolinguistics dynamism of these interactive scenes with supernatural beings, gods or diabolic powers of Nollywood movies provides an interesting use of the mother tongue as the language of the spiritual world. Significantly, the use of local language in incantations to the spirits by the perceived human monsters themselves or their designated proxies such as a prophet, priest or a priestess of traditional African religions already indicates the cultural naturalization of the monsters—as human—and a *member* of the human community who speaks its languages, understands its cultural protocols and well-adapted to the use of its spiritual coordinates.

The second representations of monsters in Nollywood scripts are primarily the deployments of “spirit entities,” some horrible looking creatures or monsters to protect a particular object or to guard a perceived sacred space. These monsters are often ugly-looking creatures brought cinematically alive on the movie screens through special effects. Interestingly, these creatures are the cultural equivalents of the aliens and extraterrestrial creatures of Hollywood movies in African stories. These Nollywood monsters are usually deployed in the protection of certain spaces, objects or to stop the hero or heroes from reaching his destination — or actualizing his/her destinies. The evil monsters are often positioned to scare off intruders in a

particular sacred space (e.g. evil forest) or on a given path to the streams, another village or—as part of the spiritual arsenal and guards of a witchdoctor, diviner and spiritualists.<sup>69</sup> These different functions of these monsters often placed them in the world of invisibility where the monsters appear and disappear at will. The protective power of the monsters over a particular space or object is mostly the product of the community invitation or the extension of the community ownership over a given space or object. In the last category is the evil forest, or some objects closely associated with the shrines, the protective power of the monsters move around the regions of its ownership. These monsters are mostly found in epic and adventure genres of Nollywood—especially epics with journey motifs where the lead hero (or heroes) undertakes a journey to a forbidden space—whether an evil forest, haunted space or an enchanted jungle. These monsters in the words of Grandena—are “surveillance monsters” because they have surveillance abilities like the modern CCTV technology to watch over a particular object and territory.<sup>70</sup> They function in Nollywood scripts as security guards over territorial spaces, persons and objects. They are policing monsters—and mostly exercise territorial control over a person, object or space.

On the other hand, in Nollywood movies these monsters of surveillance are also deployed in the plot of the stories especially in stories where a disfigured spirit being, the spirit of a deceased person, or even an evil spirit haunts a particular village, community or even an entire kingdom punishing them for an act of injustice done to a person or a given family. Similarly, these monsters could be a vengeful spirit or a terrifying creature invoked in order to settle scores with a particular family, clan, village or kingdom for the crime of murder, rape, betrayal or other forms of atrocities by a family member in the past. The crime itself is often a secret conspiracy against the victims of the story that directly involves a cover-up by the key leaders of the haunted community.

The classical expression of these groups of monster is in the Nollywood movie, *Igodo: Land of the Living Dead* directed by Andy Amenechi and released in 1999.<sup>71</sup> The script describes the maltreatment meted the “son of Amadioha” whose parents was killed and later he himself was falsely accused by seven elders, and put to death. The haunting spirit of the man now inhabits a tree in the village—killing the seven elders and their families and terrorizing the members of the village. In response to this presence of the haunting tree, the villagers initially tried to cut it down, but they soon realized that every blow of their machetes on the tree is magically transferred on the body of their king. According to a diviner, the only way to cut down the tree is to travel to the “cave of Amadioha” and collect the magic sword to cut down the haunting tree. But the cave of Amadioha was preceded by the evil forest guarded by evil spirits and monsters. Of course, the monsters in the movie, *Igodo* were primarily a surveillance type—because they protected their turf against the seven men sent by the villagers to go and retrieve the amazing sword of *Amadioha*. The same motif of surveillance is also seen in Nollywood movie, *Diamond Ring* directed by Tade Ogidan which was released in 1998.

The movie tells the story of a vengeful ghost whose diamond ring was stolen by some cult members as part of cult initiation on campus—but the vengeful ghost—played by Liz Benson wanted her diamond ring back. The motif of watching over a personal property or object by this vengeful ghost reiterates the vigilante-like function of monster in this classification.

Similarly, the motif of surveillance by a monster is also seen in the Nollywood movie, *Oracle*. This African horror thriller was directed by Andy Amenechi and released in 1998—the same year as the release of *Diamond Ring*. The script of *Oracle* tells the story of a vengeful spirit of a shrine whose sacred object (idol) was stolen by three friends in connivance with two greedy village elders. The vengeful spirit followed the artefact into the city—and wreaking havoc in the bid to get the artefact back. The vengeful spirit in this movie—like the ghost in *Diamond Ring*—as surveillance entity—guards and watches over sacred objects and the artefact of a particular community.

The territorial nature of this surveillance is seen in a more recent movie *The Young Boy and the Monster* directed by Ifeanyi Ogbonna (DGN) released in 2018. The script tells the ordeals of a group of passengers on their way to the village for a ceremony who were attacked by some armed robbers. In fear of the armed robbers, they ran to hide in an enchanted forest guarded by a vengeful monster. The monster in the story was protective of its territorial space and fought against the intrusion of its space by these stranded humans. However, the scourge of these territorial monsters could be in the family space; they operate in enforcing the spiritual decisions or agreement over a family. Here, monsters become emissaries of deities and directly shouldered with the task of enforcing the will of a deity or deities over a family space. The movie, *The Feast of Honour* directed by Ernest Obi and released in 2017 reiterated this particular motif. The movie had the presence of human-like zombies in the form of children, dwarfs and adults. The monsters in this movie had fires and smokes emanating from their eyes; they were particularly sent to enforce the will of poverty over the life of Kanayo (played by the Nigerian actor, Ernest Obi). As messengers of deity in his life, they were there as “police” of the deity to enforce the pact entered with a woman cult group by Kanayo’s mother—when she went to them looking for a child. She accepted the condition of the women cult that Kanayo—her son will only have his life—but will never be rich.

On the other hand, the territorial activities of these monsters could be over an entire village and kingdom. This particular motif of territorial space in the construct of monster could be seen in Nollywood movie, *Royal Monster* released in 2019 and directed by Magnate Ngerem (ANMD). In this movie, a vengeful monster went on rampage against an entire village because of the murder of a woman and her two children some years back. With her last breath—the dying woman prayed to the deity for vengeance, she cried,

Avenge our death if we are innocent. Avenge our death...Avenge my blood and the blood of my children. I beg of you—fight for us! Avenge our death if we are innocent. Avenge us anyhow, anywhere ... Fight for us. Avenge our blood great goddess of our land.

This particular summon of vengeance by the dying woman—metamorphosed into a monster, which afflicted the entire village for the crime perpetuated against this woman and her children. The invoked goddess as a guard of communal morality sent a monster to punish the sacrilege in the shedding of the innocent blood of this woman and her children. The appeal of this dying woman is sustained in this court of justice of the goddess—a monster is dispensed to bring about justice for the woman. Considering the legal undertones in the woman's appeals for justice, the monster itself becomes a police of the deity sent to enforce the moral order which was breached by the acts of injustice done to the woman and her children. From this perspective, the presence of a monster in this movie underscores the policing of morality via the instrumentality of a monster summoned to correct the imbalance in the scale of justice.

Thirdly, monsters in Nollywood movies also occurred in storyline which presents the magical transformation of a given human being into a fearful monster or a non-human being. The metamorphosis of the individual into a monster generally takes the routes of witchcraft, magic or other diabolic powers.<sup>72</sup> The transformed monsters operate in this “monstrous state” to perpetuate wicked deeds and to assert his/her dominance over their victims. The monsters returned back to its human forms after the executions of these evil acts. These monsters in Nollywood scripts are usually shapeshifters. Like the werewolves and vampires of western movies—the transformation of the human being into monsters gives the monster unusual strength and power to subject its victims. In Nollywood movies, the human character moves between the two worlds of humans and the non-human. In the body of the monster lives a remnant and concealed humanity—and in the body of the human being lives an unleashed monster. The division between humanness and monster resides in one person provides an intriguing perspective of human behaviours since the monster is innately positioned between the animal and human worlds. The paradox of this representation in Nollywood movies echoes the complexity of humanness in its concealment of a hidden monster—and the paradox of perceived monsters harbouring in themselves a subterranean core of humanity. This motif of transformative change and switching between two horizons of humanness and monster-ness echoes the classical dialectics of the *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* body in its ability to shift from the core of humanness into a terrible monster. Consequently, in this representation of monster in Nollywood lies the tragedy of the human nature in its ability and use as vehicle to further the humanness in our humanity—or to perpetuate evil in the dimension of a monster still within the spectrum of our humanity. Through magical transformation, the monster emerges from the shells of a human body to perpetuate his/her evil. Unlike the first category of Nollywood monsters, the transformation into a non-human being in this classification is necessary in order to perform or carry out a desired evil task—but the first category of monsters are mere human beings who with the help of powerful witchcrafts or magic dabbled and tapped into this dark arts in order to execute an evil desire. The shapeshifting powers

of these human beings placed them in fluid and flexible space—like the changing of forms in werewolves and vampires of Hollywood.<sup>73</sup>

On the other hand, the complete transformation into a non-human being by the villains in this present category—is different from the use of demonic powers to perpetuate evil or even the sending of a non-human object such as cat or owl to execute a particular evil wish. The dark side of the monsters in this category of Nollywood movie concretely moves the different contours of the magical landscape to work and carry out its desired agenda through the animated transformation from a human being into a beast or monster. Like the alien character with the human body and form in *Species*, the monster often shed away its human mask in order to carry out a particular desired action. However, in Nollywood movies, the humanity of the monster is not a mere shell to be shed away. In fact, the human person cannot stay very long in this monstrous state without consequence. They must quickly revert back into their human forms immediately in order to avert these dire consequences. Interestingly, the temporal transformation into a monster suggests that humanity is the core of their humanness—and the transformation into a non-human monster is merely a momentary endeavour. This switching from humans to animals or other non-human beings are culturally attributed to the activities of witches and sorcerers; thus by this default cultural thinking—witches and sorcerers in this shapeshifting roles into non-human beings are considered as monsters. On the other hand, the transformation into a monster could be carried out through the casting of a spell over another person by a witch or an agent of evil as attested in the classical story of *The Beauty and the Beast*, hence the monster itself may not necessarily be in control of its self-transformation into a monster. This motif is seen in the Nollywood remaking of the classics—*The Beauty and the Beast* retitled, *The Beauty and the Monster* released in 2017 directed by Nadia Buari. The motif of turning another person into a monster is also seen in the Nollywood movie, *The Beautiful Little Girl and the Monster* released in 2019 where Mazi Amaechi played by Zulu Adigwe killed his brother—and cast a monster's spell on his brother's daughter—Amaka played by Rachael Okonkwor. Amaka's face will suddenly turned into a monster—whenever anyone wanted to assist her or provide her help. She was largely ignorant of the spell until two Christian brothers from the church staged a deliverance for her—breaking the powers of this particular spell. However, unlike the first volitional and complete transformation into a monster—this transformation into a monster is non-volitional and incomplete in the story of *The Beautiful Little Girl and the Monster*. In the story, Amaka is largely unaware about the sudden transformation of her head into a monster whenever someone wanted to help her. Interestingly, Amaka has a head of a monster—and the body of a woman, thus mimicking the hybrid component in the creation of mermaid, centaur or any other monsters of half-human status in Hollywood movies.

Finally, there is also group of monsters in Nollywood's movies which could be described as predatory monsters. These are monsters primarily on rampage and on killing sprees. They are not

necessarily territorial—like the ones of the second classification. They are often sent by Lucifer against the human race—or placed in some cosmic battle of good versus evil. The attacks and presence of these monsters in the story are not for any wrongs directly meted to them, but they are primarily on a mission to destroy the human race. They are like the alien of Hollywood movies who are invaders from another planet seeking the destruction of the human species—in order to perpetuate their own kind. In Nollywood movies, they are often apocalyptic in their disposition, attacks and operations. Like the Hollywood movie, *Specie* their presence on earth is to take over the planet in the conquest of its human inhabitants. In Nollywood movie, the monster often comes from the underworld—and takes a human form in order to possess, control and destroy humanity. Like the Hollywood movie, *Predator*, the monsters are demonic hunters sent to hunt for human souls. This motif of predatory monsters could be seen in the story of *Karishika* produced and directed by Ifeanyi Ikpoenyi and Christian Onu respectively. It was released in 1996—and narrated the story of a “queen of demons” sent by Lucifer himself to hunt for souls. In the movie, *Karishika* (acted by Becky Ngozi Okorie) used several shapeshifting forms to lure her victims to their death—using money, wealth and sex as baits. The plot of the story was placed on cosmic stage with Satan and God locked in battle over the souls of the human race. There is a strong dualism in the ethical conflict between good and evil in this movie. However, the dualism is clearly twiggged with a Christian sentiment because the ethical mapping of the storyline is contoured in a narrative space where human goodness does not shield one from the onslaught of Lucifer and his agents, but becoming a prayerful Christian is the only route of human salvation. The same Christian sentiments in the construct of predatory monsters are seen in the movie, *The End of the Wicked* released in 1999 directed by Helen Ukpabio and the movie, *Family of Witches* directed by Ugezu J. Ugezu released in 2017 In these two movies, the activities of witches operate in predatory manner against humanity in hunting for human souls by demons and their human accomplices.

However, there are movies that show this motif of predatory monsters but devoid of the overarching Christian overtones of the preceding movies. This construct of Nollywood movie is seen in the storyline of *The Snake Girl & Evil Priestess in Battle* directed by Nonso Emekaekwue in 2019. In this movie, the conflict of good and evil is not pegged in the familiar cosmic battle between the Christian God and Satan, but rather the conflict was between two local deities—*Ogajelo*, the Great mother goddess and *Ogidi*, the male, snake god. The evil deity—*Ogidi* is represented as a snake with an alien-shaped head and four-pear-like eyes. Through his incarnated presence in Ojuka (“his love child”)—played by the actress Queen Nwokoye, he took over the priesthood—perpetuating his evil rule in killing and promotion of immorality over the kingdom. The predatory quest of the monster deity *Ogidi* in taking over the priesthood, and seeking to bring the entire kingdom over his rule has similarity with the motif of the Christian God battle against Satan as seen in *Karishika*. Devoid of the centrality of *Karishika*’s eschatology or its template of an imminent apocalypse, the movie, *The Snake Girl & Evil Priestess in Battle*

explores the theme of an imminent danger—the death of many people because of the rule of evil *Ogidi*-deity over the kingdom. In fact, the first scene of the movie shows the dead bodies of people as seen in a vision by the priestess of the good deity *Ogajelo*.

In the Nollywood movie, *The Alien Girl* (2017) directed by Onuma Chukwuebuka, an invisible alien evil power possessed the body of an ostracised girl that manifests itself in terrible incidents of deaths and misfortunes anytime—she is under the controlling spell of the abandoned deity, *Ijele*. The girl with the predatory alien force, *Otito* (played by the Nigerian actress Regina Daniels) comes actively alive whenever she is writing under the spell of this alien presence. The story describes the imminent demise of the entire kingdom if the writing of this girl is not stopped, and the spirit exorcised. Consequently, it seems Nollywood movies are beginning to experiment along apocalyptic dimension with deities of African pantheon either staged against themselves in the dualistic battle of good and evil or positioned in creative resistance against the otherness of the existing status quo. However, the cosmic dimension of the conflict among African gods, the apocalyptic discourses on the end of the world, the radical intervention of the supreme God to change the entire course of human history, and the welcoming of a new world with the establishments of a heavenly utopia on a world scale—are clearly absent in Nollywood movies.

### **Cultural Significance of Monsters and Beasts in Nollywood Movies**

The construct of monsters in Nollywood movies performs certain cultural purposes.<sup>74</sup> There are five cultural functions of monsters in Nollywood movies which need closer scrutiny here. First, the construct of monsters in Nollywood fulfils an ethnical function. According to Haynes, “[t]he universal premise of African aesthetics is that stories should teach something, have a moral, a purposes. This is bedrock, and much of Nollywood is built on it.”<sup>75</sup> Consequently, the deployments of monsters in contemporary stories of Nollywood have significant ethical commitments. The persuasive strategies in these movies are basically simple—people become monsters by pursuing ethical norms outside of the accepted values and virtues of the community. In rebelling against these accepted norms and ethical practices, deviant characters and villains in Nollywood stories worked against the human society, thus operate in the self-alienating sphere of a non-human zone.<sup>76</sup> The situation of these deviant individuals in a non-human space underscored that these humans are invariably ostracized—and in this sense disowned by the human society because of their involvements in unethical practices that jeopardize the collective wellbeing of the entire human community. The ethical protocol of Nollywood movies are centered on this cultural code which automatically changed the status of a deviant human person from the locus of human community to the one of a monster through the active involvement of the deviant person in things that threaten the wellbeing, progress and prosperity of the human community. The actions of the witch, sorcerers, magicians, and spiritualists in their diabolic works against the individuals or the entire humanity naturally placed them in direct collusion against *Ubuntu* and the expected

brotherly pursuit for the wellbeing of all members of the human community. From this perspective, Nollywood is an ethical cinematic representation of African cultural philosophy that projects—and places individuals of deviant characters within the sphere of non-humanness and monsters. This ethical protocol is retributive in its theology. As rightly observed by Bishop in his study of the vampires of the *Living Dead*, monsters “are less important than the stories told around them, and such tales do important cultural work by providing audiences with ethical guideposts and a sober warning against atavistic barbarism.”<sup>77</sup> In Nollywood scripting, these ethical guideposts often reward good deeds that promote the wellbeing of the human community—and punish deviance among its ranks. In short, monsters are ethical construct in the cultural worldviews of the African people which are cinematically presented to enforce the dualistic arrangements of African ethical worldviews.<sup>78</sup>

Secondly, the construct of monsters in Nollywood movie represents the cinematic crystallizations and the cultural embodiments of the African fears of the “other” on the movie screens. As already observed by Cohen, monsters are the direct “embodiment of certain cultural moment” in a place or time.<sup>79</sup> Similarly, *monstrum*, the Latin roots of the word, “monster” describes an object/being that “reveals,” “warns” and points to other things, thereby suggesting that monsters in themselves are cultural signposts and contextual signifiers.<sup>80</sup> Seen from this perspective, Bishop added, “[t]he value of the monster thus lies in its role as a cultural *monstrum*, a metaphorical figure that ‘reveals’ and ‘warns’ of something else, something larger than itself.”<sup>81</sup> Based on this cultural semantics, Zakiya Hanafi has said, “monsters have always been ... highly charged with meaning.”<sup>82</sup> In particular, Rosalind Sibielski observed, “[t]ales of monstrosity have frequently been deployed to give expression to cultural fears...”<sup>83</sup> Consequently, monster becomes a perfect masquerade of the human society because it is a cultural disguise and wears a communal costume and social masks to hide the fears of a people. Interestingly, the apparent fears of the African people of the spiritual realms as characterized in the monster-looking masquerades of its traditional religions, the fear-evoking demeanour of her works of arts, the dreaded cult of the ancestors—as the haunting living dead, the intentionally cultic adornment of its sacred spaces with the remains, the totems and skulls of fearful animals, the cultural designation of these cultic spaces as territories of the spirits, and the ultra otherness of the African deities are the collective re-enactment of these scripted images of African monsters on cinematic screens. Monsters in African movies are the customized versions of these cultural dreads and representations. In this sense, monsters whether in their role of policing of African morality, or in their basic depictions in connection to the diabolic works of witches and sorcerers—represents the cinematic staging of the fears of the African people for entities metaphysically situated in its spiritual cosmology.<sup>84</sup> Of course, monsters are the theatrical performance of African fears on the cinematic stages of modern movies. Considered this way, monsters are cultural mirrors and the cinematic depictions of the otherness of the spiritual world that is religiously grounded in the framing of its

cultural cosmologies and worldviews. To this end, the operations of monsters in the narrative space of Nollywood movies enforce the dualism in African ethical creative imaginations. Significantly, like the policing function of the masquerades in traditional African religions, monsters enforce the dualism of African spiritual realms, the activities of the wicked forces and their human accomplices—and directly positioned the human world to engage the otherness of a spiritual domain concretized on cinematic screens through the presence of monsters. Consequently, monsters are deep-seated cultural psychosis of the African people in their anxieties and neurosis over the realms of the spirits which they deeply feared—but also revered.

Thirdly, the construct of monsters in Nollywood scripts presents a cultural hermeneutics of the African problems especially in providing cultural answers to its probing of theodicy. Monsters are projected on cinematic screens to explain the deaths, misfortunes, failures, and the unpleasant events which occurred in the lives of the African people. Monsters in these different cinematic representations engage the existential conditions of the African people giving culturally legitimate answers and explanations to African plights in times of sufferings, pains, and misfortunes. For example, the symbolic association of witch to monster—already suggests the use of monster as a tool of cultural hermeneutics. They are monsters because they are often blamed for misfortunes and bad lucks in family, clan, village or community.

Consequently, the cinematic presence of monsters in Nollywood movies hermeneutically seeks to answer and give culturally accepted responses to the general problems of theodicy generated by the unpleasant experiences and existential struggles of the African people. It explains the workings of the karmic mechanics of African ethics in its specific and general operations in the lives of the African people in providing explanations of the deaths and misfortunes of African people. Through the constructs of monsters—we do not merely engage African fears—but we come face to face with African interpretative grids that seek to explain bad events and happenings in African experiences and realities through the cultural representations of monsters. Like the abnormal intrusions of problems into the cultural expectations of prosperity and success in the life of African people, monsters in their “ab-normal” features, shapes, sizes and presence seek to interrogate and explain the occurrences of these bad happenings or unexpected intrusions of sickness, misfortunes, and death in African community. Pragmatically, monsters are the cultural scapegoats blamed for the many misfortunes of the African cultural experiences of unpleasant realities.<sup>85</sup> While many African monsters are now cinematically visibly on movie screens—however in the real-life experiences of the African people—they are often invisible—and operate silently behind the scenes of misfortunes and disasters. The cultural mimesis of these unseen spirits and monsters from the invisible ambiance of their real life context to the concrete and animated presence in movies through special effects underscores the interpretative—and explanatory agenda of monsters in Nollywood movies. They are situated in the cinematic space to explain, interrogate and engage with salient problems of theodicy particularly unexplainable misfortunes and events

which are now given cultural valid interpretations through these representations.<sup>86</sup>

In addition, the constructs of monsters in Nollywood movies are deployed as tools of social control. Since monsters are culturally situated in the region of extreme otherness—and the transfer of individuals to this non-human region of otherness directly impose the moral and cultural obligations to work within the ethical precepts—and values of the African people. In the image of the monsters, there is lingering threat of cultural exclusion of certain individuals to the sphere of non-humanness and cultural locus of the dark side. The threat of non-human existence in the excommunication of an individual from the life and wellbeing of the community is clearly seen in the association of monster with the representations and discourses on witchcraft. In most part of Africa, witches are believed to possess non-human powers and lived at the social margin of human family; they are accused of shapeshifting activities—and often ostracized from the human community.

In the construct of monsters, the African society punishes witches and other deviant characters by disassociation, excommunications, and relocation into the sphere of communal sanctions.<sup>87</sup> Like masquerades, the construct of monster polices community morality and controls social behaviours. The fear of monsters itself promotes deterrence since it is largely situated in the feared region of communal exclusion—and the ambiguous space of non-humanness. There is an irony or even paradox here that while monsters are feared in their location and alienation to the space of non-humanness, they are invariably owned by the community since they help to protect the community morality and ethics. In this sense, they are disowned by the human society in their alienation to the space of extreme communal disapproval —yet they are also owned by them because they are significantly important in the monitoring and the enforcement of communal morality and values. Consequently, there is a subversiveness in the roles of the monster in popular Nollywood movies because their existence is directly negated by their being in the alienated spaces of communal sanctions yet their monstrous presence is culturally appropriated to guard moral enclosure of African communal morality.

## **Conclusion**

Monsters are constructs of culture—because the cultural orientations and worldviews of a people provide the direct incentives in creating them. In Nollywood movies, monsters are given central importance because of their important roles in the cultural mapping of African spiritualities and beliefs.<sup>88</sup> Monsters are not merely entities of entertainment—or fictional objects of horrors—but they are situated in the cultural landscape of Nollywood movies to underscore important cultural functions. From the preceding study, monsters are strategically stationed in the cultural geography of Nollywood scripts because they are ethical medium in the communication of African cultural worldviews, the policing of African morality, the embodiment of African fears, its use as instruments of social control, and the existential significance of monsters in African cultural hermeneutics and theodicy. Considering several

functions of monsters in Nollywood movies, it is clearly apparent that monsters are important sources of African metaphysics, discourses on African ethics, and cultural hermeneutics. Through our encounters, with monsters in Nollywood—we invariably come face to face with ourselves—since these monsters are the direct representations of African psychosis and the increasing demands to live within the border of African community. Consequently, the cinematic construct of monsters in Nollywood movies are not entirely about monsters—but ourselves in the mapping of our collective cultural psychosis, the intrigues of our creative impulses, our cultural policing of social otherness, and our innate hermeneutical conversations with our general human problems in gape of monsters.<sup>89</sup>

### Endnotes:

1. See Craig Detweiler, “Holy Terror: Confronting our Fears and Loving our Movie Monsters,” *Interpretation* 74, no. 2 (2020): 171-182; David R. Castillo, “Monsters for the Age of the Post-Human,” *Hispanic Issues* 15 (2014): 161-178; Jeffrey A. Weinstock, “Introduction: Monsters are the Most Interesting People,” *The Ashgate Encyclopedia of Literary and Cinematic Monsters*, ed. Jeffrey A. Weinstock (New York: Routledge, 2014), 1-5; Dominique Lestel, “Why Are We So Fond of Monsters,” *Comparative Critical Studies* 9, no. 3 (2012): 259-269; Karmen Šterk, “The Sublimity of Monsters: Kant, Lacan and the Society of Connoisseurs,” *Horror Studies* 3, no. 2 (2012): 167-180; Benson Saler and Charles A. Ziegler, “Dracula and Carmilla: Monsters and the Mind,” *Philosophy and Literature* 29, no. 1 (2005): 218-227.
2. There are interesting studies surrounding these mentioned monsters. For example, Humbaba—nicknamed the *terrible* is also known as Huwawa. Humbaba was the guardian monster of the cedar forest fought by Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the *Gilgamesh Epic*. They cut off the head of the monster and placed it in a bag. Like the story of Medusa—the head of Humbaba is used in apotropaic manner [See Miriam Robbins Dexter, “The Ferocious and the Erotic: ‘Beautiful’ Medusa and the Neolithic Bird and Snake,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 26, no. 1 (2010): 25-41]. While the story of Humbaba as the villain was popularly in the ancient world, there is new evidence that challenged this dominant narrative—and suggests that Gilgamesh and Enkidu were the villains and Humbaba—the monster was the benevolent guardian of the forest. Concerning this myth see Stephanie Dalley, trans. “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” *Myths from Mesopotamia, the Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Tallay Ornan, “Picture and Legend: The Case of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven,” *Eretz-Israel* (2003): 18-32. Concerning other recent studies on ancient monsters such as Leviathan see Kelly J. Murphy, “Leviathan to *Lucifer*: What Biblical Monsters (Still) Reveal,” *Interpretation* 74, no. 2 (2020): 146-158.
3. Jeremy Biles, “Monster Technologies and the Telepathology of Everyday Life,” *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reader*, eds. Marina Levina & Diem-my T. Bui, 147-161 (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 149.
4. Different definitions of monsters are given in various studies. According Zakiya Hanafi, there are several definitions of monsters because “[m]onstrosity ranges freely from physical to moral qualities and back again, seemingly unconcerned by the different orders of reality implied in this conflation.” Concerning these different perspectives see Zakiya Hanafi, *Monsters in Machine: Magic, Medicine, and the Marvelous in the Time of Scientific Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 13.
5. Biles, “Monster Technologies and the Telepathology of Everyday Life,” 149.

6. *Ibidem.*
7. *Ibidem.*
8. Paul Semonin has studied the cultural significance of monsters in the founding of the American society. He investigated the cultural significance in the digging of fossils of monsters by the American founding fathers—and the stories of the monsters—especially Mastodon in the founding of American society. Concerning this study see Paul Semonin, *American Monster: How the Nation's First Prehistoric Creature became a Symbol of National Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 341-361.
9. There are three main approaches in the discourse on monsters in contemporary times. These three approaches are namely the psychoanalytical, the representational, and the ontological methods. Working with Julia Kristeva's concept of "Abject" and Sigmund Freud's view on "repression" the psychoanalytical approach in the study of monsters see the monsters as the part of the repressed self which refuses the social and religious repressions that create caged feeling of "normalcy." Kristeva described "abjection" as "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite." It is the opposite of object—because an abjection is not "definable" [Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 4]. Consequently, in the image of the "monster" we come face to face with our repressed self—which is unleashed without the caging of the "normalcy." The normalcy or the "symbolic" realm often does not allow the expression of these repressed—or abandoned selves. Consequently, the abjection (or the abandonment) of ourselves in our quest to fit into the normalcy of the human society creates the monster. In this regard, monsters are precisely our abject self—or abandoned self; they are uncanny but they are also familiar to us. Monsters are the products of the dialectics between the symbolic region of normalcy and the repressed place of abjection. Drawing from the insight of the first, the representational approach sees monsters as the expressions of these abjected and abandoned selves which operate with the anxieties of a particular historical period in order to product a monster. In this understanding, monsters are historical expressions and manifestations of specific repressed selves. Thus monsters are the cultural products of a particular epoch in history. It probes the representations of monsters in the category of good or bad within a historical space, the impact of technology in the representations of monsters, and the presence of social/political discourses on the construct of monsters in modern times. The ontological approach in the study of monster investigates the ontological origin of monsters especially the creations of life-forms in laboratory—and re-enactment of Frankenstein syndrome through the innovative and creative scientific research. It takes interests in the "being" or "becoming" of monster within this creation of new life forms. Concerning the detail and specific studies of these three approaches see Marina Levina & Diem-my T. Bui, eds. *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reader* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 2-8
10. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen outlined seven different perspectives on the discourse of monsters. Concerning these different perspectives see Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 3-25.
11. Jeffrey W. Mantz has approached the protracted wars in Congo in the definition of global zombie consumerism which precipitated and continually fuelled the wars. See Jeffrey W. Mantz, "On the Frontlines of the Zombie War in the Congo: Digital Technology, the Trades in Conflict Minerals, and Zombification," *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reader*, eds. Marina Levina & Diem-my T. Bui (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 177-192.
12. See Remi Joseph-Salisbury, "Wrangling with Black Monster: Young Black Mixed-race Men and Masculinities," *Journal of Sociology* 70, no. 5 (2019): 1754-1773; Theresa E. Jackson, "Policing a Menstrual Monster: How Working Class Girls Discuss their Menstrual Reactions and Experiences," *Journal of Youth Studies* 22, no. 2 (2019): 153-170.

13. For example see the novel—*Monster's Daughter* by Michelle Pretorius (Melville House, 2016) and John Archie, *The Monster Evil: Policing and Violence in Victorian Liverpool* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011).
14. Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 13.
15. *Ibidem*, 12.
16. African juju priests have been compared to the representation of the "mad scientists" in horror genre such as the story of Frankenstein. Tobias Wendl observed, "[w]hat, from a structuralist point of view, makes the jujumen resemble the 'mad scientist' (like Victor Frankenstein, Dr. Jekyll or Dr. Moreau) is that both attempt to transgress normality and manipulate the natural reproductive cycle. The jujuman operates in his shrine, the mad scientist in his laboratory. Generally they both overestimate their powers and their creations (or transformative acts) go out of control. In the end, both become tragic figures and are destroyed. This is usually due to fate, (or to "God") who restores the rules of reproduction. A significant difference between the two is that the mad scientist is largely inspired and motivated by his own mad dreams, whereas the jujuman does not act out his own dreams, but those of his clients." See Tobias Wendl, "Wicked Villagers and the Mysteries of Reproduction: An Exploration of Horror Movies from Ghana and Nigeria," *African Media Cultures*. Frank Witmann and Rosemarie Beck, eds, 263–285 (Cologne: Köppe, 2004), 275–276.
17. Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 12.
18. *Ibidem*.
19. The identity, character, and type of monster have changed from one historical period to the other. It is the "society's basic fears" that often "clothe themselves in fashionable or immediately accessible garments" of a monster. See Robin Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 79.
20. Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 7.
21. *Ibidem*, 7-12.
22. Daniel Punday, "Narrative Performance in the Contemporary Monster Story," *The Modern Language Review* 97, no. 4 (2002), 803-820.
23. Derrida extended this description of monster to the future—since the future has at its core—an unknown element in it. Derrida said, "...the future is necessarily monstrous: the figure of the future, that is, that which can only be surprising, that for which we are not prepared, you see, is heralded by species of monsters. A future that would not be monstrous would not be a future; it would already be a predictable, calculable, and programmable tomorrow. All experience open to the future is prepared or prepares itself to welcome the monstrous arrivant, to welcome it, that is, to accord hospitality to that which is absolutely foreign or strange, but also, one must add, to try to domesticate it, that is, to make it part of the household and have it assume the habits, to make us assume new habits. This is the movement of culture." See Jacques Derrida and Elisabeth Weber, *Points ...: Interviews, 1974–1994* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), as quoted in Levina & Bui, "Introduction: Towards a Comprehensive Monster Theory in the 21st Century," *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reader*, eds. Marina Levina & Diem-my T. Bui (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 6.
24. Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 15.
25. *Ibidem*, 8.
26. See Janet McKnight, "The Anatomy of Mass Accountability: Confronting Ideology and Legitimacy in Rwanda's Gacaca Courts," *Conflict Trends* 2014, no. 1 (2014): 35-42; Zach Dubinsky, "The Lessons of Genocide," *Essex Human Rights Review* 2, no. 1 (2005): 112-117; Casey Dorman, "Humanizing Monsters," *Civil American* 2, no. 5 (2017): [//https://www.philosophersinamerica.com/2017/10/31/humanizing-monsters/](https://www.philosophersinamerica.com/2017/10/31/humanizing-monsters/).

27. See Janine Clark, "Learning from the Past: Three Lessons from the Rwandan Genocide," *African Studies* 68, no. 1 (2009): 1-28; Dubinsky, "The Lessons of Genocide," 112-117.
28. Cordelia Hebblethwaite, "The Hunt for Mokele-mbebe: Congo's Loch Ness Monster," *BBC Magazine* (28 December, 2011)—<https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-16306902>. Accessed: 9<sup>th</sup> May, 2020; Roy P. Mackal, *A Living Dinosaur? In Search of Mokele-mbembe* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1987); Sue L. Hamilton, *Monsters of Mystery* (Minnesota: ABDO Publishing Company, 2007); Daniel Loxton and Donald R. Prothero, *Abominable Science: Origins of the Yeti, Nessie, and Other Famous Cryptids* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2013); Donald R. Prothero, *The Story of Life in 25 Fossils: Tales of Intrepid Fossil Hunters and the Wonders of Evolution* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2015); Also see Jason K. Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters: the Collapse of the Congo and the Great of Africa* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).
29. Situated in this same cultural construct of difference, the contemporary story of the self-transformation of a hero into a monster-looking creature comes to mind. In the movie, *Avatar*—(Cameron and Landau, 2009) tells the story of Jake Sully (acted by Sam Worthington)—a white disabled male character—who is transformed—into a blue sleek *Na'vi* monster-like creature in order to infiltrate the *Na'vi* residents living in the iridescent jungle named Pandora. Concerning the underlying discourses of race, contamination, and conquest in the representation of monsters in this movie see Susana Loza, "Playing Alien in Post-racial Times," *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reader*, eds. Marina Levina & Diem-my T. Bui (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 53-72.
30. See Mary K. Bloodsworth-Lugo and Carmen R. Lugo-Lugo, "Post-9/11 Narratives of Threat and the US Shifting Terrain of Terror," *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reader*, eds. Marina Levina & Diem-my T. Bui (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 243-255.
31. Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 8.
32. See Shokoofeh Rajabzadeh, "The Depoliticized Saracen and Muslim Erasure," *Literature Compass* 16, no. 9-10 (2019): 1-8.
33. Chris Bateman, "Taming the HIV/AIDS Monster in our Lifetime?" *South African Medical Journal* 100, no. 6 (2010): 346-348; Brendan Bain, "HIV/AIDS Challenging a Monster," *Journal of HIV/AIDS Prevention & Education for Adolescents & Children* 4, no. 2/3 (2001): 3-21.
34. Interesting there is a shift in recent times in zombie movies which traditionally are centered on the living dead to the ones that focused on the motif of infectious epidemic. See Sherryl Vint, "Abject Posthumanism: Neoliberalism, Biopolitics, and Zombies," *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reader*, eds. Marina Levina & Diem-my T. Bui (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 136.
35. Sergey Sukhankin, "COVID-19 as a Tool of Information Confrontation: Russia's Approach," *The School of Public Policy Publications* 13, no. 3 (2020): 1-10; Y. T. Xiang *et al*, "Timely Research Papers about COVID-19 in China," *Lancet* 395 (2020): 684-685; Q. Li. *et al*, "Trend and Forecasting of the COVID-19 Outbreak in China," *The Journal of Infection* 80, no. 4 (2020): 469-496.
36. Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 11.
37. Alok Singh, "COVID 19: Are We Fighting with the Monster?" *Journal of Family Medicine and Primary Care* 9, no. 4 (2020): 21-34; Rami Zurayk, "Pandemic and Food Security," *Journal of Agriculture, Food Systems and Community Development* 9, no. 3 (2020): 1-5.
38. The construct of monster has sensitive towards gender. Concerning the construct of monsters along gender lines see Rosalind Sibielski, "Gendering the Monster within: Biological Essentialism, Sexual Difference, and Changing Symbolic Functions of Monster in Popular Werewolf Texts," *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reader*, eds. Marina Levina & Diem-my T. Bui (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 115-129.
39. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 9.

40. Queer characters have featured in contemporary discourse on monsters. Concerning the presence of queer characters in representations of monsters see Peter Odell Campbell, "Intersectionality Bites: Metaphors of Race and Sexuality in HBO's *True Blood*," *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reader*, eds. Marina Levina & Diem-my T. Bui (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 99-113.
41. Concerning the issues of race, conquest and miscegenation in the representation of monsters in *District 9* see Loza, "Playing Alien in Post-racial Times," 54-61.
42. Loza, "Playing Alien in Post-racial Times," 58-61.
43. Reading the representations of Nigerians in *District 9*, Loza added, "[f]or the Nigerians, becoming alien means not just assuming the dehumanizing, distorting black mask imposed on Africans and colonized subjects, but flaunting it." See Loza, "Playing Alien in Post-racial Times," 60.
44. See Loza, "Playing Alien in Post-racial Times," 60.
45. *Twilight* was released in 2005 directed by Stephenie Meyer. Concerning the cultural significance of the monsters in this movie see Carolyn Hartford, "Domesticating the Monstrous in a Globalizing World," *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reader*, eds. Marina Levina & Diem-my T. Bui (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 303-317; Florian Grandena, "Heading towards the Past: *The Twilight Vampire Figure as a Surveillance Metaphor*," *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reader*, eds. Marina Levina & Diem-my T. Bui (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 35-51.
46. Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 17.
47. See Grandena, "Heading towards the Past," 45-47.
48. Kelly Connelly, "Defeating the Male Monster in *Halloween* and *Halloween H2O*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 35, no. 1 (2007): 12-21.
49. The changing ethical landscape of Hollywood movies in recent times could clearly be seen in the "new spin" given to villains of past classics. For example, the Hollywood movie *Maleficent* (Robert Stromberg, 2014) reworked the classical story of the *Sleeping Beauty* (Clyde Geronimi, 1959) presented through the eyes of the witch herself, thus retelling this classical tale in favour of the evil witch.
50. Grandena, "Heading towards the Past," 40.
51. *Ibidem*, 41.
52. Kyle W. Bishop, "Battling Monsters and Becoming Monstrous: Human Devolution in the *Walking Dead*," *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reader*, eds. Marina Levina & Diem-my T. Bui (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 73-85.
53. Bishop, "Battling Monsters and Becoming Monstrous," 81.
54. See Weinstock, "Introduction: Monsters are the Most Interesting People," 3-4; Helena Bassil-Morozow, *Tim Burton: The Monster and the Crowd—A Post-Jungian Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2013); Michael Szollosy, "Freud, Frankenstein and Our Fear of Robots: Projection in our Cultural Perception of Technology," *AI & Society* 32, no. 3 (2017): 433-439; Stephen T. Asma, *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of our Worst Fears* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Gordon D. Hirsch, "The Monster was a Lady: On the Psychology of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*," *Hartford Studies in Literature* 7 (1975): 116-153.
55. See Albrecht Classen, "The Monster Outside and Within: Medieval Literary Reflections on Ethical Epistemology—From *Beowulf* to Marie de France, the *Nibelungenlied*, and Thüring von Ringoltingen's *Melusine*," *Neohelicon* 40 (2013): 521-542; Luke Russell, "Evil, Monsters and Dualism," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 13, no. 1 (2010): 45-58.
56. Weinstock, "Introduction: Monsters are the Most Interesting People," 4.
57. *Ibidem*.
58. The Nigerian Nollywood movie industry is perhaps the third largest filmmaking industry in the world—following after Hollywood and Bollywood, and its influence is readily seen in the increasing patronage enjoyed by Nigerian movies across Africa—and even beyond. Concerning the

- history of Nollywood see George Tasié, “African Traditional Religion in Nigerian Video Films: A Rethink,” *American International Journal of Social Science* 2, no. 1 (2013), 23-29.
59. There is the common critique of Nollywood movies and scripts as cinematic works obsessed with witchcraft, voodoo, and cult. Recent Nollywood movies have tried to navigate around these dominant criticisms through creative plots and scripting. Concerning this critique see Shmerah Passchier, *Lessons from New Nollywood: A Theory from the Global South-Second Draft* (September, 2013), 13-14.
60. Traditional western movie genre do not particularly fits the description of the contents of Nollywood movies. For example, Jonathan Haynes has classified Nollywood movies in these following genres: money ritual films, senior girl films, family films, cultural epics, political films, and comedies. The monster motifs cut across these different genres. I think Nollywood horror films should be given a separate genre—because they are dominant and feature in the listed genres by Haynes. Concerning Haynes’s mapping of Nollywood’s movie genre along the preceding classification see Jonathan Haynes, *Nollywood: The Creation of Nigerian Film Genres* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 3-311.
61. In human history, witches and sorcerers are often branded as monsters. Concerning this study see Michael E. Heyes, ed. *Holy Monsters, Sacred Grotesques: Monstrosity and Religion in Europe and the United States* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018).
62. See Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–1975*, eds. Valerio Marchetti, Antonella Salomoni, and Arnold I. Davidson. English Series trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2003). As quoted in Levina & Bui, “Introduction: Towards a Comprehensive Monster Theory in the 21st Century,” *Monster Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: A Reader*, eds. Marina Levina & Diem-my T. Bui (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 5.
63. See Cohen, “Preface: In a Time of Monsters,” *Monster Theory*, ed. Jeffery Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), ix.
64. On the other hands, this retributive is situated in a universe which flaunts immoral contents. Nollywood has an obsession with occultism, “prostitution, obscenity, murder and violence” and... [a]part from nudity everything else is allowed: murder, suicide, torture, rape, incest and infanticide,” Sophie Samyn, “Nollywood in the Diaspora: An Exploration Study on Transnational Aesthetics,” *Master Dissertation* (University of Gent, 2010), 23.
65. Concerning the stories and representations of Nollywood stars see Noah A. Tsika, *Nollywood Stars: Media and Migration in West Africa and Diaspora*. New Directions in National Cinema, ed. Jacqueline Reich (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2015).
66. Like the use of the cross as an anti-vampire weapon in the early Hollywood movie, Christian prayer teams are always featured in Nollywood script as anti-witchcraft weapon. In modern Hollywood script, the use of the cross—as anti-vampire weapon has disappeared—replaced now by the use of the brightness of the sun as an anti-vampire weapon [see Grandena, “Heading towards the Past,” 40]. The use of the Christian motif of prayers as anti-vampire or anti-witchcraft weapons comes from the sensitive of Nollywood script writers on the pervasive belief of this Christian truth by their teeming popular of Christian audience. Unfortunately, the failure to explore creative reappropriation of this Christian motif has turned Nollywood script writing dull—and uninteresting at this critical point. For the critical rejection of this mainstream Christian motif of Nollywood movies by Tanzanian movie industry—see Claudia Böhme, “Bloody Bricolages: Traces of Nollywood in Tanzanian Video Films,” *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry*, eds. Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), 343.

67. See Bernadette Lynn Bosky, "Witches and Wizards in US Literature and Film," *The Ashgate Encyclopedia of Literary and Cinematic Monsters*, ed. Jeffrey A. Weinstock (New York: Routledge, 2014), 607-609.
68. Concerning the sociolinguistics of Nollywood movies see Emmanuel A. Adedun, "The Sociolinguistics of Nollywood Movie," *Journal of Global Analysis* 1, no. 2 (2010): 113-138.
69. See Matthias Krings, "Muslim Martyrs and Pagan Vampires: Popular Video Films and the Propagation of Religion in Northern Nigeria," *Postscripts* 1, no. 2/3 (2005): 183-205; Jonathan Haynes, "A Literature Review: Nigerian and Ghanaian Videos," *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 22, no. 1 (2010): 105-120; Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome, eds. *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013). For the use of special effects to depict this use of spiritual powers see Ikenna O. Aghany, "Computer Graphics, Animation and Special Effects: A Creative Way of Producing Igbo-themed Nollywood Movies for the Global Audience," *Journal of African Films & Diaspora Studies* 1, no. 2 (2018): 9-22.
70. See Grandena, "Heading towards the Past," 42.
71. On the critical analysis of this Nollywood movie in the category of a cultural epic see Haynes, *Nollywood*, 144-149.
72. Zoanthropy is the psychological term employed in the description of human transformation into animals. Similarly, lycanthropy is also used to describe the transformation of humans into werewolves and cyanthropy—for human into dogs. Concerning the study of the psychiatric and psychological dimensions of these animal transformations see Richard Noll, *Vampires, Werewolves and Demons: Twentieth Century Reports in the Psychiatrist Literature* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1992), 83-99.
73. See Kimberly McMahon-Coleman and Roslyn Weaver, *Werewolves and Other Shapeshifters in Popular Culture: A Thematic Analysis of Recent Depictions* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2012).
74. There is increasing recognition of the influence of Nollywood's monster creation tradition across Africa. For example, Claudia Böhme described the central influence of Nollywood's monsters in the making of Tanzanian movie industry said, "[d]uring editing, the monsters' supernatural powers are made visible and audible using special effects from Nigerian and Hollywood movies. These effects allow the monsters to vanish, to walk through walls, or to use lightning weapons to destroy their opponents." See Böhme, "Bloody Bricolages," 332.
75. Haynes, *Nollywood*, 20.
76. Most villains in Nollywood movies are severely punished by supernatural means through a gradually degenerating sickness or dehumanizing event. See Moradewun Adejunmobi, "Charting Nollywood's Appeal Locally & Globally," *African Literature Today* 28 (2010): 106-21.
77. Bishop, "Battling Monsters and Becoming Monstrous," 74.
78. See African movies have moral contents and persuasions see Böhme, "Bloody Bricolages," 332.
79. Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 4.
80. *Ibidem*.
81. Bishop, "Battling Monsters and Becoming Monstrous," 75.
82. See Hanafi, *Monsters in Machine*, 2.
83. Sibielski, "Gendering the Monster within," 117.
84. Gilmore, *Monsters*, ix, 2-3.
85. See Kearney, *Strangers, Gods and Monsters*, 23-46; Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 11.
86. Haynes, *Nollywood*, 3-17.
87. Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 13-16; Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*, 79.

88. See Böhme, "Bloody Bricolages," 327-346; Abdalla U. Adamu, "Transgressing Boundaries: Reinterpretation of Nollywood Films in Muslim Northern Nigeria," *Global Nollywood: The Transnational Dimensions of an African Video Film Industry*, eds. Matthias Krings and Onookome Okome (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2013), 287-305.
89. See Asa S. Mittman, "Introduction: The Impact of Monsters and Monster Studies," *Research Companion to Monsters and Monstrous*, ed. Asa Simon Mittman with Peter Dendle (London: Ashgate, 2012), 1-14.

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## Commodifying Food and Maintaining Culture Along the Border in Ana Castillo's *The Guardians*

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### Abstract:

The land between Mexico and the United States has a long, historical pattern of racial, economic, and cultural tension provoked by conquests since the sixteenth century. The most recent tension, however, centers on the border between both countries, which, in turn, challenges the notion of nationality and identity. Ana Castillo tackles the tensions north of the border in her fictional work, *The Guardians*, by chronicling the lives of a broken family, barely surviving the harsh lands of la frontera. Regina, presented as the main character, and her nephew, Gabo, live near the border and mourn the disappearance of her brother, Rafa, who was last seen traveling from Mexico to the United States. While the key concern pertains to the loss inflicted by missing and dead relatives, the characters' mourning is the direct effect of living within the harsh environment of the border. Though upfront examples exist throughout the novel, solely examining food speaks heavily on the subtle changes and tensions these characters face, as well as their determination to preserve their families' traditions. Food, though not uncommon in literature, provides a haven for immigrants and minorities who are oppressed by dominant cultures. They use food to preserve and embrace their traditional recipes when living in unfamiliar lands. Castillo acknowledges the grim productions of food in the novel by invoking empathy through these characters' lives. In *The Guardians*, food is therefore used to exploit precarious lives, provide a means of commodity, and preserve culture among Chicana/os living near the border.

**Keywords:** Borderlands, Castillo, food studies, Chicana/o identity, trauma

### Introduction

The land between Mexico and the United States offers a hybridity of Mexican and American culture, though often times experiences binary clashes between the two. While the borderlands of southern Texas were once governed by Mexico, the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo stripped Mexico of a majority of the land. The shift in governance placed natives in a difficult position both financially and culturally, for the U.S. enforced American law and culture onto those who remained on the land. In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Gloria Anzaldúa exposes the U.S.'s heinous conquest for territory and attributes much of the tensions among the border as the U.S.'s

determination to “distinguish *us* from *them*” (25). The issue primarily gravitates towards Americans who culturally ostracize Mexican Americans (or Chicana/os) who maintain Mexican traditions and culture. While those who remained on the land after the war continued to live in a similar fashion, the growing cultural tensions at the border exemplify Anzaldúa’s observations on othering Chicana/os. Ana Castillo further interrogates the disruption of Chicana/o identity in *Massacre of the Dreamers* by calling such displacement a “sociological dilemma or a schizophrenic self-perception” (1995, 8). Chicana/os, Castillo notes, live within a disrupted space of opposing cultures and beliefs, dominated by the U.S. In turn, the literature these Chicana/o writers compose push against “the whites in power [who] want us people of color to barricade ourselves behind our separate tribal walls so they can pick us off one at a time with their hidden weapons; so they can whitewash and distort history” (Anzaldúa 1987, 108).

Castillo tackles the Chicana/o tensions of Mexican and American identity in her fictional work, *The Guardians*, by chronicling the lives of a broken family, barely surviving the harsh lands of la frontera. Regina, presented as the main character, and her nephew, Gabo, live near the border and mourn the disappearance of Gabo’s father, Rafa, who went missing while attempting to cross the border. Gabo, who mourns his absent father and deceased mother, absorbs religion as a way of coping with his loss. The novel also features Abuelo Milton and Miguel, who face similar injustices throughout their lives. Subsequently, “*The Guardians* is concerned to replace the mechanistic with the humanistic in its characters’ and readers’ perceptions of themselves and their environment” (López 2011, 166). While the key concern pertains to the loss inflicted by missing and dead relatives, the characters’ mourning is the direct effect of living within the harsh environment of the border. The novel can therefore be read as a “sociological dilemma” for both Regina and Gabo because of the cultural tensions they face as Chicana/os in the U.S.

Exemplifying such an argument may unfold through cultural differences between both Mexican and American cultures, especially through food. Examining food not only speaks heavily on the subtle changes and worries these characters face, but also on their determination to preserve their families’ traditions. Food, though not an uncommon element employed in literature, provides a haven for immigrants and minorities who are oppressed by dominant cultures. They use food to preserve and embrace their traditional recipes when living in culturally unfamiliar lands. Moreover:

Ethnic Americans have been heavily involved in food production and services. From African American slave laborers on southern plantations, to Filipino and Hispanic migrant farmers, to Chinese and Japanese workers in the salmon industry in Alaska, to ethnic restaurants all over the country, ethnic Americans have fed and built this nation. (Gardaphé and Xu 2007, 8)

As Gardaphé and Xu note, ethnic Americans, including Mexican Americans, are exploited for labor in multiple forms. Between viewing ethnic Americans as exploited labor and individuals capable of sharing their culture through cooking, the U.S. depends on diverse individuals to maintain the production of food. Castillo acknowledges the grim production of food as well as

the benefits of diverse food by invoking empathy through these characters' lives. In *The Guardians*, food is therefore used to exploit precarious lives, provide a means of commodity, and preserve culture for Chicana/os living near the border. This essay first examines food production, such as gardening and farming, as well as the variety of foods characters like Regina cooks and sells for profit. Food within these two sections thus gravitates towards food as a commodity for survival. This essay then considers the cultural assumptions of Mexican and American food, for both types of cuisine are perceived in contrasting ways throughout the novel. The borderlands, primarily in Texas, maintains over a century of Mexican and American cultures that clash and, in contrast, infuse together. Focusing such a displaced identity formation on food speaks heavily on the ways the characters in Castillo's novel negotiate their identities among la frontera.

### **The Cultural Significance of Growing Food**

Castillo incorporates an abundance of food references within the novel to emphasize the importance food attributes to these individuals' lives. Gardening and farming, for one, offers the characters the opportunity to avoid costly expenses at the grocery store and job opportunities.

Regina, for example, saves money by maintaining a garden with produce suitable for the environment. "She has one of those green thumbs," Gabo admits. "We get all kinds of chiles, tomatoes, yellow, red, and green for salsa, three varieties of squash, a patch of watermelon, and corn" (Castillo 2007, 18-19). While the fruits and vegetables cannot fully support Regina and Gabo, the grown food nonetheless reduces Regina's grocery expenses. Gardening, however, demands much work, for preparing and maintaining the land must be completed at specific times of the year. When Regina begins gardening for the new year, her duties involve preparing the soil and fixing the fence to prevent animals from destroying the garden. Regina narrates, "Gabo was fixing the gate to our garden just like his father would have done. Just before spring we mend it and every following winter the winds yank it every which way. We needed to reinforce the fence with new chicken wire, too, to keep the cottontails out" (Castillo 2007, 47). Not only does Regina's narration reveal the laborious tasks required to secure the garden, but also the displacement of family traditions. Food, as previously noted, serves as an important aspect to these characters' lives, especially as comfort mechanisms during strenuous times. Gardening, in this instance, deters from the typical comfort they feel when performing these yearly tasks, for Regina and Gabo are reminded of Rafa's absence. Though Gabo does not mind the work, their tradition reinforces the fact that Gabo's missing father can no longer perform the task normally assigned to him. Without fully acknowledging Rafa's disappearance, Regina continues narrating her preparations for the garden, revealing, "I use compost from food scraps, coffee grounds, eggshells, and bring over cow or horse manure from nearby ranchos and mix it all up as top dressing. We loaded wheelbarrows and dumped it in the garden to fertilize the sand" (Castillo 2007, 47). Regina's preparation reveals the ways in which she gardens without excessive spending at the store. Rather than buy fertile soil, Regina composts her own as a cost-effective alternative to store bought soil.

Regina further acknowledges her dislike of the government spraying toxic pesticides that may be dangerous for consumption. In turn, Regina plants vegetables and fruits in containers, for, as she argues, “container gardens seemed like a good idea if you were in doubt as to whether your soil was safe” (Castillo 2007, 52). Containers help her keep plants safe from chemicals, which suggests Regina’s distrust of the government and her ability to find ways to protect herself and her family even within her limited economic means. She also volunteers to teach children how to garden for these reasons. To her dismay, the children lose interest almost immediately and leave Regina to finish the work on her own. Regina’s skepticism pertaining to pesticides, however, remains warranted. It was common—especially during the late twentieth century—for the U.S. government to spray toxic chemicals to prevent crops destruction from unwanted pests. Many poor residents near the border are also “exposed to water that is, like the water in border towns more generally, polluted by untreated sewage, agricultural chemicals, and pesticide runoff, as well as by extensive dumping of industrial byproducts like heavy metals and toxic chemicals” (Sadowski-Smith 2008, 37). Thus, Regina’s skepticism not only reveals her desire to eat healthy foods, but also her awareness of the issues surrounding her community related to pollution and its effects on health and food contamination.

While these tasks are arduous and arguably not worth the hassle for inexperienced gardeners, Regina continues gardening out of passion and the opportunity to take care of herself on land that barely supports Regina’s ambitious gardening plans. Gabriel Valle argues, “Food, place, and culture are embodied knowledges that offer marginalized communities the opportunity to produce and reproduce the means of their own existence” (2015, 74). The produce grown then symbolizes not just fuel for the body, but also an opportunity to restore traditions. The work required to maintain gardens subsequently becomes especially meaningful. As Regina advises, preparing her garden a month before spring assures the garden will thrive. Doing it earlier might expose the saplings to frost, which “will kill everything you just put into the ground with such loving care” (Castillo 2007, 48). Regina knows gardening and has a passion for it. Malgorzata Poks argues differently, believing:

If [Regina] grows most of her food in her garden, it is because she is poor and not because she has gone green. It is for the same reason that she uses organic pesticides and fertilizers or that she recycles food. To survive, she must not only grow food and cook meals at home, but also try to sell the surplus at a small profit and economize on necessities. (2017, 129)

Because Regina grows “with such loving care,” attributing her gardening to economic intent merely undermines her passion for gardening and further dismisses her determination to produce quality produce exempt from harsh chemicals. When reflecting on her garden, Regina admits, “loving care is what I try to bring to whatever I do—otherwise why bother” (Castillo 2007, 48). Regina’s fascination with gardening and sharing her knowledge with others centers on her childhood memories. During her adolescence, Regina admits to not liking her mother, for her mother was always strict and made her complete many tasks. In this particular instance, however, Regina

attributes her vast knowledge to her mother, claiming, “That’s who I learned to cook from and to know all about plants and everything about vegetables, my mother” (Castillo 2007, 28). Regina’s growth as a gardener and cook was not an isolated learning experience, but rather a tradition inherited from her mother. Because Regina does not have any children of her own, she therefore reaches out to Gabo and the community children to provide the knowledge obtained from her mother, who, in turn, learned it from Regina’s grandfather.

While learning how to grow fruits and vegetables provides many Chicana/os job opportunities, the arduous work makes farming difficult to maintain. As farming dwindled in Mexico, Regina’s family had to cross “over to the States to work the harvests” (Castillo 2007, 28). She worked the fields and cared for the animals on the farms. However, as Malgorzata Poks notes:

The free flow of goods across the border—mostly from south to north— under the North American Free Trade Agreement was accompanied by a boost in the illegal flow of disenfranchised bodies in the opposite direction, bodies desperate enough to accept conditions of virtual slavery for the privilege of harvesting pecans, chili, and other local crops for ten long hours a day. (2017, 129)

Regina and her family worked in the fields under desperate conditions, so she knows laborious work. She still remembers her mother “used to suffer from fainting spells. When we worked in los files, she fainted every day out in the middle of the field, picking pecans, chiles, tomatoes, apples, whatever” (Castillo 2007, 118). Abuelo Milton shares a similar narrative about migration, claiming, “Many of them knew how to farm because they came from ranchitos in Mexico” (Castillo 2007, 72). And while Regina’s narrative focuses more on the present day—years after escaping farming—Abuelo Milton’s narrative acknowledges the continued hardships suffered by people working the fields. As he recalls, “Los obreros signed away all their rights. They didn’t even know what they were signing since everything was in English” (Castillo 2007, 72). As a result, Chicana/o immigrants are forced to find new work once the fields they harvest are completed for the season, for the language barrier prohibits them from acknowledging the exploitative measures invoked by the contracts they willingly sign without reading.

The unfair treatment of ethnic immigrants attributes more than just an inability to understand English. Claudia Sadowski-Smith notes, “binational agreements that culminated in NAFTA have enabled corporations to systematically take advantage of lower labor and operating costs, tariff and value added tax differentials, and the limited enforcement of weak environmental and labor regulations in Mexico” (2008, 37). Abuelo Milton confesses, “they did not get nothing, just a big kick in the tresero back to Mexico when they weren’t needed no more” (Castillo 2007, 73). Regina retorts that the current situation will not change because of the broken system, despite Chicana/os being overworked and undervalued. She argues, “The truth is, a lot of employers don’t want immigration laws to change. If the country made it easier for professional immigrants to come in, the competition would possibly drive professional salaries *down*” (Castillo 2007, 125). Not only does Regina acknowledge the flawed system, but she does so with defeat, knowing the U.S. government

will not improve the lives of ethnic immigrants. The hardships surrounding Chicana/os crossing the border premises the novel's central focus and causes Rafa's disappearance preceding the novel's narration: he migrates to the U.S. to harvest pecans and, as Regina speculates, returns to Mexico to tend to his new family. Because of the flawed system, he must travel back to the U.S. with the guidance of a coyote—many of whom are corrupt and unsympathetic to those migrating for better opportunities. Should an improved system exist for these precarious lives, Gabo's mourning would consist of one less person. Given the political nature of the situation, however, the characters in the novel face a constant state of mourning.

Though immigrating to the U.S. legally with proper documentation serves as the logical option, obtaining these documents is an even more arduous task than migrating illegally. Regina admits, "That's all every immigrant in the world wants, to get her papers in order. To officially become a person" (Castillo 2007, 116). Becoming a person therefore centers on documentation, resulting with job security and benefits. Though, as Regina and Abuelo Miguel argue, the current system in place will not change, given that farmers and the government are benefiting from cheap, exploitative labor. Becoming "a person" is therefore important when desiring professions beyond working in fields. Regina speculates, "One day a machine will be invented to replace all the farm workers" (Castillo 2007, 116). Should machines decrease the need for physical labor, then the future for undocumented immigrants may worsen. For Regina, obtaining her papers was not an option until marrying a U.S. citizen. As a result, she could "stay and not hide in the shadows no more. This meant no more picking, no more peeling chiles, and no more canning" (Castillo 2007, 5). With official documents, Regina's validation as "a person" allows her to move beyond working in the fields.

The food the characters grow throughout the novel not only serves as the opportunity to share agricultural techniques from generation to generation, but also as a rooted history of exploited labor. For immigrants, food detracts from a sense of alienation, for one can recreate most foods, given the vast amounts of products at grocery stores. But for Regina and her family, the thought of food provokes a paradoxical feeling of defeat, knowing the food that they purchase may have been picked and manufactured by the oppressed and exploited.

### **The Essential Methods to Commodify Food**

The exploitation of ethnic immigrants for laborious jobs provides merely one of the many ways businesses profit from food. From Abuelo Milton running errands in exchange for food (Castillo 2007, 71) to Regina giving Gabo's friend, Jesse, fruits and vegetables for helping her in the garden (Castillo 2007, 50), Castillo exemplifies the notion that food does not simply result in only memories of challenging work, but rather a commodity to exchange for service and/or money. Regina's attachment to food for profit persists throughout the novel, despite escaping work in the fields. Though she works at a school helping teachers, the money schemes she pursues alongside her teacher's aide position tend to center on food. In the beginning of *The Guardians*, Regina notes a time when she sold eggs for income. The only problem was that "no one really wanted to pay for

them. Then I started feeling for the poor families I worked with at the school and I gave them free eggs. The coyote ate three of my hens before I caught up with it” (Castillo 2007, 7), thus ending Regina’s scheme to sell eggs. Regina’s pizza selling business ends similarly. Though she began the business making money, it did not last long, for “a guy started doing it, right next to me, out of his car. He gave free Cokes, so he ran me out of business” (Castillo 2007, 11). Not much later, she concocts the idea of selling pies, despite not even getting an “honorable mention” when entering her pies into a pie-baking competition (Castillo 2007, 25). This scheme, like many of her other ones, was concocted when she was complemented on her cooking skills. In this instance, Regina bakes a pie for Miguel after he helps her look for Rafa. All the other teachers were impressed by her work, which then began her “pie-baking business” (Castillo 2007, 26). Because she makes her pies from scratch, she then advertises her pies as “one hundred percent homemade good” (Castillo 2007, 26). Regina, like many businesses who market food, advertises her pies as homemade and therefore unique. Through her marketing techniques, she acknowledges that “modern food is less and less identifiable by its consistency, flavor, smell and texture. It is processed, packaged, ‘presented,’ as it were dematerialized, stripped of its sensory characters, reduced to appearances and signs” (Fischler 1988, 280). By understanding how to commodify food, Regina sells not only the product but also the product’s creation. Though the teachers can buy pies from the grocery store, they cannot buy them homemade, suggesting that whatever they buy elsewhere will not consist of the same quality and care.

Food is moreover exemplified throughout the novel as a product with varying qualities, depending on its creation. Miguel, for example, observes the type of food offered at the church carnival and goes out of his way to address generic beverages. While playing a game of ring toss, he claims, “the price was the bottle you snagged—grape, orange, strawberry, root beer, cream soda, or cola—all generic brands” (Castillo 2007, 34). He then digresses from his observation, but leaves the impression that generic brands were bought to make a larger profit for the church. Should the church have concern for quality, they would have provided the customers with name brand drinks. Because the church was raising money, they instead sold the cheaper drinks to increase profit. Miguel wins ten bottles without much interest in his prize. Though he would probably feel just as indifferent about the bottles if they were brand names, his situation nonetheless exemplifies a similar marketing strategy imposed by Regina’s pie-baking business: to highlight the product’s details, rather than taste. Abuelo Milton even notes that his wife’s favorite drink is Fanta, claiming, “Orange Fanta was her favorite” (Castillo 2007, 92). Similar to Miguel’s experience, Abuelo Milton acknowledges the obsession individuals have with specific name brand products. Though orange beverages are produced by many companies, they do not compare to the specific taste Fanta produces. Castillo therefore suggests a preferred dichotomy of store bought/homemade and name brand/generic. Perhaps if Regina’s pizza competitor sold generic beverages, she would still be in the pizza making business.

Homemade foods, however, are not always preferred to store bought foods. When Gabo eats Abuelo Milton’s food, he claims, “The toast was burned y los eggs dry. He served us both café from

a little pot on the stove that looked like it came from the cowboy campfire days” (Castillo 2007, 102). Gabo’s statement puts into question the dichotomy of homemade versus store bought by criticizing Abuelo Milton’s food. The concept of food quality may perhaps explain Regina’s lost interest in selling pies. Without a doubt, many enjoy eating Regina’s food. She even attests to being “good in the kitchen” (Castillo 2007, 155). The question therefore centers on whether the quality of the pies surpasses store bought pies. When Gabo asks about the business, Regina vaguely responds that “baking pies is risky business” (Castillo 2007, 50). Though selling pies on the premise that they are homemade provides Regina with momentary success, the pies’ value may have plummeted after everyone actually bought and tasted the pies. The concept of quality, however, should remain the central focus. In Gabo’s case, Abuelo Milton’s food, though homemade, looks undesirable and tastes awful. Due to the small number of characters in the novel, Castillo may be making an argument for gender and how it plays into the quality of homemade food. While many regard Regina as a great cook, Gabo considers Abuelo Milton a bad cook. Elizabeth Lee Steere addresses a similar argument in an analysis of Castillo’s *So Far From God*, claiming, “while the food preparation of meat is masculine, the preparation of corn is considered feminine” (2013, 87). Men preparing meat in *The Guardians* only occurs when Miguel barbeques meat. The gender gap Steere addresses nonetheless applies to *The Guardians*, for Regina flawlessly cooks dishes in the kitchen, whereas Abuelo Milton cooks unappetizing dishes. Miguel also grills the meat at Gabo’s birthday party, while Regina prepares the side dishes. Though gender should not always apply to the expertise of cooks, Castillo nonetheless suggests through both novels a gender and essentialist concept of food quality within Chicana/o culture. Thus, the quality of homemade food depends on the gender of the cook and the food they prepare.

Making, selling, and harvesting food provides merely a few of the many ways in which these characters profit from food. For Gabo, profiting from food entails working at a grocery store, where he “pack[s] groceries and keep[s] the shelves stocked with inventory” (Castillo 2007, 18). The intriguing aspect of Gabo’s job centers on his love for the profession. Though he ultimately wants to become a priest, working at the grocery store provides Gabo the time to reflect on his religious ideologies. “As I unpack cans of string beans y garbanzos to line the shelves,” Gabo reveals, “it is a meditation of our Lord. Sweeping is my favorite quehacer, Santito, because then I am free to contemplate God’s eternal love” (Castillo 2007, 18). Working with food inside therefore provides Gabo the opportunity to relax while pondering his religious beliefs. Regina further finds solace working with food, claiming, “Cooking relaxes me. Chopping, cutting, adding a little epazote or ajo, tasting—by the time the comida’s done, I’m not even hungry no more. But I feel better” (Castillo 2007, 60). Perhaps, then, Regina’s statement explains why she concocts money making schemes based on cooking and why Gabo works at the supermarket: to meditate while making money.

The ways in which one works with food exposes the gap in both class and privilege. With proper documentation, Regina has the opportunity to work with food in a calm, controlled environment while also helping Gabo obtain a job at the grocery store. For many Mexican

Americans living near la frontera, the connections and opportunities provided for Regina and Gabo are unobtainable. Working with food reveals the dynamic differences of class and privilege. The more challenging and overbearing work falls on exploited and oppressed individuals who are provided with minimal alternatives, while cooking and selling food falls on documented individuals who may work various professions.

### **The Perceptions and Cultural Importance of Food**

The exploration on food has so far centered on the means of production and commodification. From grown foods (such as fruits and vegetables) to assembled foods (such as Mexican dishes), the characters—particularly Regina—proceed through their dismal living situations while indulging in a variety of foods. Avocados, for example, are a delicacy and are only eaten on rare occasions. Regina complains that “Avocados, the food of the gods, are the only things I can’t grow on my land—too arid; avocado trees don’t grow in sand” (Castillo 2007, 7). The limitation of the fruit prohibits Regina from fully indulging in them and she can only obtain avocados when she has enough money to purchase them. Though she believes the fruit holds weight as “the food of the gods,” she nonetheless eats them in moderation because they are expensive. This not only speaks to Regina’s sense of moderation but also her economic status. Should she have an abundance of money, purchasing avocados regularly should pose few problems for her. Avocados as a delicacy, however, primarily apply to Regina, for Gabo views the fruit differently. That is not to say he dislikes avocados, but instead considers the fruit a burden. He notes, “once you cut one open the leftover portion will turn black and go to waste” (Castillo 2007, 19). As Gabo believes, he cannot simply eat a portion of the fruit, but must instead eat the whole avocado, for it will wilt if left uneaten. He then reveals the many different techniques others assume will help preserve the fruit, such as putting it in “cellophane, aluminum foil, cutting the pit out, leaving it in, Tupperware” (Castillo 2007, 19). Due to his many previous attempts, his lost hope in preserving the remainder prohibits him from spontaneously eating them. Gabo’s frustration does not deter from his appreciation for the fruit, for he claims that “avocados are just about the only thing my tía doesn’t grow in the garden that we can’t live without” (Castillo 2007, 18), but his frustration centers on time and planning. Gabo’s opinion of avocados not only exposes his habits of preserving food, but also hints at his and Regina’s economic status. In other words, the ways in which these characters reflect, purchase, and consume avocados expose the ways in which their class dictates their eating habits.

Food for immigrants provides a sense of comfort when living in unfamiliar lands, for most grocery stores stock the ingredients, such as avocados, that would allow individuals to replicate most recipes. Donn Gabaccia (1998, 6) explains, “Humans cannot easily lose their accents when they learn new languages after the age of about twelve; similarly, the food they ate as children forever defines familiarity and comfort”. The Mexican food that many of these characters grow up eating provide opportunities to recreate their past. “For minority group members, identification with others who

share the same origins and traditions is critical in developing both a positive personal identity and feelings of self-esteem and efficacy, rather than self-blame and powerlessness” (Arce 1981, 182). Food therefore serves as a preservation for the culture and traditions of their past. And though the novel’s location centers on the border, there still exists a displacement of Mexican culture inflicted by American culture. This then interferes with younger generations’ roots to Mexico. Anzaldúa notes, “the infusion of the values of the white culture, coupled with the exploitation by that culture, is changing the Mexican way of life” (1987, 32). Anzaldúa’s observations on culture are apparent in Castillo’s novel, as many characters view the foods they eat with different connotations and interests.

Without a doubt, the recipes Regina follows primarily derive from her Mexican ancestors. From atole to menudo, readers may associate Regina as a character who remains indebted to her family’s traditional recipes. Meredith Abarca (2013, 121) claims, “Every time a traditional recipe is prepared, not only are familial values reinforced, but also cultural and national ones”. Thus, the foods that these characters eat not only reflect their family’s traditions, but also the traditions shared among other Mexicans dating back many generations. Just like her skills gardening, Regina learns how to cook at an early age from her mother and notes a childhood memory in which her mother “was mad at me because the frijoles had burned” (Castillo 2007, 160). Because Gabo lives with Regina, he too eats Mexican food every day and does not seem to crave American food. When coming home from work one day, he narrates, “Inside, there were no potatoes and eggs on the stove kept warm for me” (Castillo 2007, 20). On a different day, he admits to eating beans every day (Castillo 2007, 18). The question then centers on Mexican food in comparison to American food and “the infusion of the values of the white culture” forewarned by Anzaldúa.

While Regina and Gabo eat Mexican food every day, they still eat American food, but mostly on special occasions. The day Gabo returns home and notices Regina did not cook exemplifies a special occasion. Instead of eating homemade Mexican food, Regina surprises Gabo with an unexpected plan to eat at Applebee’s or Chili’s for dinner (Castillo 2007, 20). Likewise, when Regina marries Junior, they celebrate by eating Kentucky Fried Chicken (Castillo 2007, 152). This then suggests that most days are dedicated to eating traditional Mexican food passed down by generations, and American food for special occasions. Eating American food further proposes the notion of always consuming American food away from home. Interestingly enough, Regina’s business schemes involving food solely pertain to American foods. From pizza to pies (as well as candy apples and pecan bread), Regina enforces this observation by providing American food that others leave their homes to obtain. Abuelo Milton also provides a list of places to eat when he used to shop with his wife years ago. As he recalls, “Across the street [from the flea market] you got the Kentucky Fried Chicken—Taco Bell combo in one little building—men are waiting there. They’re waiting in the McDonald’s and Church’s Chicken parking lots too” (Castillo 2007, 131). Abuelo Milton does not clarify whether he actually ate at these fast food chains. He instead only mentions the various fast food places and men who gravitate towards them. Whether or not he actually ate the food serves

little relevance, for “the infusion of white culture” nonetheless plays into the “Mexican way of life.” As suggested by the novel, consuming American food only occurs outside the home environment.

That is not to say that all Mexican foods are entirely appreciated. There exists, throughout the novel, a separation between healthy and unhealthy foods. Though Regina and Gabo love to eat chorizo, they moderate their portions due to the expense (as with avocados) and health issues associated with eating too much chorizo. Regina hypothesizes, “spicy, greasy sausage is no good for your health, and what’s bad for your arteries cannot be good for your mental well-being neither” (Castillo 2007, 8). Regina’s highly unscientific statement exposes a division of foods one may indulge in and foods one should only eat in moderation. Gabo recognizes this in church, noting, “I looked around the church at all the roasted pecan faces. A lot of the women around here are gordas. Some are bien flaquitas. I think it has to do with very bad eating habits, too much drinking” (Castillo 2007, 64). Eating Mexican food and occasionally drinking alcohol does not solely result in obesity, but the thought of Mexican recipes deemed unhealthy and American recipes healthy exposes the cultural oppression derived from stigmatization. Regina admits, “I had decided recently I thought the food we grew up with could kill you” (Castillo 2007, 66), which associates the food they consume as unhealthy and may create health issues if overconsumption occurs. Miguel’s Americanized children attest to this assumption and refuse to eat the Mexican food Miguel brings them. “Right away,” Miguel narrates, “my son said the food was too spicy for him. He wouldn’t even taste it. Xochitl announced she was on a diet” (Castillo 2007, 110). The Mexican food Miguel buys therefore goes uneaten by his children. His Americanized children not only detach from their heritage, but are alienated from the culture. The negative assumptions associated with foreign foods is not new, for “the unknown food [has always been] suspected of belonging to a category of substances defined as impure and taboo in the culture of the subject” (Fischler 1988, 282). Instead, Miguel makes grilled cheese sandwiches for them. Though grilled cheese sandwiches are often times just as unhealthy as gorditas, Miguel’s Americanized children make assumptions about Mexican food that parallels with Regina’s assumptions. As a result, the characters in the novel are made to assume the food they have been eating for generations does not provide suitable and healthy nourishment. The “values of white culture” therefore come into play, for traditional Mexican recipes are stigmatized and thought of as less desirable due to the fallacy of its nutritional value.

## **Conclusion**

Ana Castillo’s *The Guardians* chronicles the lives of an aunt and her nephew, torn by the clashing issues of culture and opportunities near the border. From loss to grievance, these characters experience emotions many Americans who live far from la frontera do not need to endure. Despite such traumatizing experiences, Castillo incorporates an abundance of food references to describe the lives of Chicana/os. Food not only provides work opportunities, but also the ability to connect with one’s culture when settled away from home. Despite the resistance from Americanized individuals (such as Miguel’s children) who neglect their traditions due to the assumed

unhealthiness, the food the main characters grow, sell, cook, and consume help them endure the alienation and trauma experienced in their lives. Gabriel Valle asserts, "Sharing food among members of a community counters orthodox notions of competition between individuals and accepted ideas of space" (2015, 78). When Regina admits Rafa's death, she offers to take Gabo out to eat. When Gabo dies, Regina feeds Gabriela strawberries. Eating therefore signifies closeness with loved ones. Aishih Wehbe-Herrera argues, "it is the nurturing network that constitutes the characters' actual homelands. It is the bridges they build among themselves that a place called home exists" (2013, 157). The constriction of the metaphorical bridge occurs in many ways, though mostly present through food. Gabo observes, "My tía loves to see people eat her food" (Castillo 2007, 64). Though apparently true throughout the novel, Gabo's observation applies to most characters. Regina's mother, Abuelo Milton, and Miguel are just a few that exemplify this observation. "Mealtimes are 'densely packed events' for creating, maintaining, and negotiating the national, cultural, and social structures that organize people's patterns of behavior" (Abarca 2013, 121). Given the difficulties living near the border, food undoubtedly encompasses many of these individuals' lives, not only for the purpose of maintaining traditions, but also for the financial opportunities it provides.

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## Repugnant Bodies. An Analysis of the Disgust Aesthetics in Yang Xianhui's *Chronicles of Jiabiangou*

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### Abstract:

Yang Xianhui's *Chronicles of Jiabiangou* (2003) is a collection of stories detailing life and death during the Anti-Rightist Movement (1957-59) in the homonymous laogai camp located in the middle of the Gobi Desert, in the Chinese north-western province of Gansu. Based on the author's extensive research, fieldwork and interviews with Jiabiangou survivors, in many instances the text dwells on particularly foul descriptions, mostly related to the harsh living conditions of prisoners undergoing reform, further exacerbated by the hostile geographical setting and by a famine that had struck the whole country. Physically and morally offensive descriptions of bodily expulsions and incorporations are portrayed with straightforward yet evocative accuracy, revealing very appalling aspects of the laogai experience.

Building on psychological analyses and phenomenological interpretations of disgust, this paper interrogates some key passages in the *text* where the literary iconography is built through the use of this aesthetic technique, with a special attention to the representation of carceral bodies - often construed as the true repugnant objects. Through the analysis of this symbolic bodily iconography, this paper addresses the *text's* contribution to the construction of alternative narratives of incarceration and political persecution that have the potential to challenge Chinese orthodox historiography.

**Keywords:** Jiabiangou, disgust, Yang Xianhui, prison, Chinese prison writing, carceral bodies

Launched by Mao Zedong 毛泽东 in 1957, the Anti-Rightist Movement (*fanyou yundong* 反右运动) was a political campaign that targeted citizens who dared speak out on what they perceived as ambiguities and deviations within the Chinese Communist Party orthodoxy, both in theory and in practice. As a result, many intellectuals, political figures, but also common people, were arrested as "rightists" (*youpai* 右派) and sent to the country's most remote areas to undergo reform or re-education through labour. As pointed out by Sebastian Veg, while there has been a significant amount of literary attention to representations of the Cultural Revolution, the same cannot be said for the Anti-Rightist Movement, which remains underrepresented in literary works (Veg 2014, 516). Yang Xianhui 杨显惠's *Chronicles of Jiabiangou* (*Jiabiangou jishi* 夹边沟记事) is one among the relatively few literary texts that engage with the memory of this overlooked part of Chinese history.

Located in the middle of the Gobi Desert, in the north-western province of Gansu, Jiabiangou 夹边沟 was home to a re-education farm that, between 1957 and 1961, reportedly received about 3000 prisoners, mostly rightists (Lei 2003).<sup>1</sup> In those years, China had been hit by a devastating famine, a consequence of wildly mistaken political and economic choices of the Great Leap Forward (Lieberthal 2008). The extent of material and human loss directly related to the famine is perhaps impossible to measure accurately, though according to the estimates built on the data gathered by Yang Jisheng 杨继绳 in his work *Mubei* 墓碑 (Tombstone), the death toll could be a number around 36 million between the years 1957 and 1962 (Yang 2008, 199). In Jiabiangou – as well as in other remote areas where most prison camps were located – food scarcity was particularly serious, and many of the camp dwellers perished as a consequence of extreme starvation.

*Chronicles of Jiabiangou* (hereafter *Chronicles*) is a collection of 19 stories based on the research, fieldwork and interviews that the author, Yang Xianhui, conducted with the survivors of the prison camp.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, the book is presented as fiction (*xiaoshuo* 小说), as the interviews have been re-elaborated in literary form by the author (Veg 2014, 517). According to Cao Xugang 曹旭光 and Song Xueqing 宋学清, *Chronicles can be framed* as an example of what they call “documentary novel” (*jishi xiaoshuo* 纪实小说) or “non-fictional novel” (*feixugou xiaoshuo* 非虚构小说) (Cao and Song 2019). In their analysis, Cao and Song suggest that even though the text strives to maintain a truthful, objective angle, it nonetheless displays certain elements of narrative fiction, which in their opinion are required in order to protect the actual survivors and at the same time to maintain narrative coherence. That is to say, even though *Chronicles* can be framed as a work of fiction, it in fact presents the reader with key factual details in order to convey an idea of authenticity. In other words, the novel constitutes a practical exercise, a constructive methodology through which look back at history and historical truth (ibid., 184).

Each story in *Chronicles* focuses on the testimony of a former Jiabiangou prisoner who recounts his or her experience in the camp. Different aspects of camp life are portrayed, including the unfolding of daily work activities, the inmates’ constant and desperate procurement of food, sickness, and the regular presence of death. In many parts of the text the author dwells on the description of particularly gruesome scenes that mostly have to do with food incorporation and expulsion, such as scooping out faeces from someone else’s anus, eating someone else’s vomit, as well as cannibalistic practices on corpses. The recurrence of these disgusting literary constructions suggests a narratological strategy that the author deliberately pursues in order to achieve an emotional effect, namely to catalyse the reader’s imagination toward the physical and psychological distress caused by the extreme living conditions in the camp.

This paper investigates a selection of stories from *Chronicles*, with the aim of analysing the ways in which disgust has been aesthetically constructed, and for what purposes. Theoretically, I build upon psychological and phenomenological analyses of disgust, to explore how the emotion can be used as a means of aesthetic expression, and argue that the choice to use repulsive imagery and descriptions is not only a literary, but also a political choice. In doing so, I shall consider Hannah

Arendt's postulation that, in fact, storytelling is always political, in the sense that it is not merely concerned with the production of personal meaning, but is also interested in the "subjective in-between" that is created by the exchange of action and speech among humans (Arendt [1958] 1998, 183-84). In other words, for Arendt, through storytelling, the personal and the public meet; together they generate a space where individual and collective experiences and perspectives come together to co-create narrations of the past, the present, and the future.<sup>3</sup> From this perspective I shall read Yang's storytelling of Jiabiangou, that uses disgust as a strategic focus with the purpose of creating that affective connection between different articulations of individual repugnant experiences in order to reflect on the horror of national history.

The disgusting aesthetics in the Jiabiangou stories is crucially conveyed through a particular focus on the corporal dimension – Veg too has noted the centrality of corporality in Yang's stories (Veg 2014, 521) – and particularly through the violation or degradation of the bodies of the prisoners. Therefore, in my analysis of the text, I shall draw from phenomenological constructs that privilege embodiment and lived experience as explorational and analytical perspectives. Ultimately, this paper aims at demonstrating how the author, by disturbing the reader with disgusting iconography, effectively aims to redirect that disgust from the bodies of the prisoners - the elicitors - toward the prison enforcers, and by proxy the ruling power.

### Phenomenology of an Emotion

From a sensory perspective, disgust is a strong, reactive emotion. It is usually aroused in response to the contact with or proximity to something we perceive as foul. In the English language, its etymology comes from Latin *dis* (negative prefix) and *gustus* (taste), which already clarifies the emotion's close relation to eating. In Chinese, disgust is usually expressed with the character 惡 (*e* or *wu*), which is in fact a polysemous word that the Kangxi Dictionary associates with terms such as *choulou* 醜陋 (ugly), *chi* 恥 (shameful), *ji* 忌 (that which has to be avoided), *cu* 粗 (coarse, vulgar, or rough), and also *fenhui* 糞穢, which indicates the filth typical of faecal matter (Kangxi Zidian, xin bu 8, 104). The term appears in early Chinese texts such as *Shiji* 史記, where it is used as an attribute of the word *shi* 食 (food; eat), to signify unappealing food (*Shiji*, Xiangyu benji: 28). Already by looking at its etymological meanings, we understand that disgust is normally prompted by the prospect of incorporation of foul objects, and it involves mainly our senses of taste and smell, but also, more subtly, those of sight, hearing and touch.<sup>4</sup>

From a bodily perspective, disgust is manifested through involuntary movements, such as pursed lips, pinched nose – as to metaphorically shut down the body's boundaries – gag reflex, and so on. Disgust is a primordial emotion – psychologist Paul Ekman has famously classified it as one of the six "basic emotions," together with happiness, sadness, fear, surprise and anger – of key importance to our survival (Ekman & Cordaro 2011). German philosopher Winfried Menninghaus describes it as "a state of alarm and emergency, an acute crisis of self-preservation in the face of an unassimilable otherness, a convulsive struggle, in which what is in question is, quite

literally, whether ‘to be or not to be’” (Menninghaus 2003, 1). In other words, disgust arises as a defence mechanism every time our proximity with the repugnant is perceived as virtually a vital threat, to which we react by recoiling.

Disgust has been recognised as universally experienced by all humans, though the perception of what is considered foul varies considerably, depending on certain cultural constructions as well as personal inclinations that influence our perception. Nonetheless, research efforts have been directed toward trying to pinpoint the general categories of substances that are likely to arouse disgust in humans. For instance, psychologist Paul Rozin, who has dedicated much of his work to investigate this emotion, recognises the existence of a “core disgust” that is triggered by contaminated or offensive food (Rozin et al. 2008). Beyond the realm of taste, there are other objects that can trigger disgust, which Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley organised into seven additional categories, to include: “body products” (vomit, pus, mucus) “sex” (perverse sexual activities) “envelope violations” (gore, surgery, puncture wounds), “socio-moral violations” (Nazis, drunk drivers) “animals” (especially insects) “hygiene” (everything that has to do with dirt and germs), and “death” (contact with human or animal bodies) (Haidt, McCauley, Rozin 1994, 702-3). These categories have further been tested by Chinese scholars on Chinese subjects, and the results have been confronted with Rozin and colleagues’ “disgust scale,” essentially confirming the validity of these categorisations (Tan, Cong, and Lu 2007; Zhang, et al. 2021).

Generally speaking, as insightfully synthesised by Aurel Kolnai – who authored the first comprehensive phenomenology of disgust in 1929 – the things that disgust us as humans are never related to “inorganic, lifeless things,” as even in the dead body, or in the decaying flesh there is “rampant life” (the corpse is actually crawling with insects). That is to say, disgust always has to do with key – though gross – aspects of being alive (Kolnai, as quoted in Menninghaus 2003, 16).

### **Representing the Foul: Disgust Aesthetics in Art**

Granted, we do not need to be in physical proximity to the foul in order to experience disgust, and in fact, coming into contact with even just the representation of the foul can arouse the sentiment. We are likely to turn our head, or close our eyes at the sight of a nasty scene in a film, or we may pause and turn away from the page upon reading a particularly repugnant description. In all those occasions, we are not in the physical proximity of the foul, nor is the disgust in us a reaction to an actually perceived danger for our own wellbeing. Still, our imagination of disgust, prompted by artistic representation, is enough to make us react. Sometimes we tend to recoil, or to move away from the object that elicits disgust, but also – interestingly – sometimes disgust can attract us and arouse appreciative emotions.

Disgust in art has been investigated by many scholars and from multiple theoretical and methodological perspectives. For instance, Julia Kristeva’s theorisation of abjection as something that “beseeches, worries, and fascinates desire” is perhaps one of the most influential reflections on the ambivalent nature of disgust (Kristeva 1982, 1). In a similar way, Noël Carroll talks about

“the paradox of horror,” to reflect on why people are attracted to what would normally be considered repulsive (Carroll 1990). Carroll’s analysis investigates the aesthetic consumption of horror movies, a genre that, despite displaying significant amount of repulsive and grisly content, has no lack of consumers. To Carroll, we are ultimately drawn to representational experiences of horror because “objects of horror are fundamentally linked with cognitive interests, most notably with curiosity” (ibid., 187). In other words, the experience of horror is fascinating for its narrative structure rather than for the sake of horror itself. According to Carroll, we go through the experience of watching a horror movie or reading a horror story for the pleasure that derives from our cognitive engagement, and disgust is a side effect of some sort, the process we have to go through in order to achieve some kind of aesthetic gratification (ibid., 158-94).

Carolyn Korsmeyer has also reflected on the use of disgust in art and on its ambivalent power to elicit sensations that oscillate between repulsion and attraction. She has defined “aesthetic disgust” the kind of disgust that is “purposively aroused by art,” including paintings, films, music, performance, photography, and literature (Korsmeyer 2012, 753). However, Korsmeyer further elaborates, aesthetic disgust does not necessarily provoke disapproval or rejection, but rather a sort of aesthetic appreciation, a response to the work of art that “no matter how unpleasant, can rivet attention to the point where one actually may be said to *savor* the feeling” (Korsmeyer 2011, 4). While admitting that disgust can be aroused in art in straightforward “nonappreciative” ways, Korsmeyer is more interested in investigating the attraction mechanisms that make us appreciate a kind of art that uses foul and repugnant elements as the main focus of aesthetic representation.

At this point I shall briefly assess the question of *savouring* pieces of art (and writing in particular) when it comes to reconfigure extremely traumatic experiences, as this is relevant for our analysis of *Chronicles*. Scholar Yenna Wu, in her study of Chinese prison camp writings, for instance, problematises the practice of aesthetic assessment itself. “When ‘regarding the pain of others,’” she asks citing Susan Sontag, “is it appropriate for us to look for the ‘aesthetic’ in the victim’s suffering? Is it ethical for us bystanders to ‘appreciate’ or ‘savor’ the spectacle of a sufferer’s pain?” (Wu 2011, 38). If, on the one hand, Wu questions consumption as a merely aesthetic practice, on the other hand, she also highlights the need to analyse political prison literature from perspectives other than the “activist” approach (ibid.). She resolves the apparent conundrum by taking into consideration Janet Hart’s contribution, who, following Bourdieu’s sociological approach to aesthetic analysis, puts forth what she calls a “political prison aesthetics,” i.e. a “stylized response to oppression” that “transforms the most dire circumstances into a fabrication which is a source of pride, can be appreciated as a compelling art of creation, engages the senses, and has a lasting value for those who are able or care to remember” (Hart 1999, 487-88, quoted in Wu 2011, 40).<sup>5</sup> In other words, Hart crucially connects her idea of political prison aesthetics to “survival” – the conditions of art production matters and therefore prison aesthetics is about survival because “the predominating alternative is a deathly one” (Hart 1999, 488) – and

to the notion of “citizenship” which is seriously engaged with the development of private and public identities” (ibid.). To sum up, in analysing prison texts, Wu recognises Hart’s conceptualisation of a “political prison aesthetic” as one way through which prison writers can regain “control” over their experiences, and literature as a means through which affectively and effectively reconfigure them.

Though I find both Wu and Hart’s approaches sensible when it comes to the analysis of autobiographical prison writing, I also believe that a further problem arises when the prison text is authored by someone who has not experienced prison himself, as is the case with Yang’s *Chronicles*. How do we assess the agency of the protagonists of these stories in relation to regaining control over their carceral experiences if these experiences have been re-elaborated and shaped into literary form by a third person, who has even labelled them as “fiction”? How do we frame Yang’s use of disgust as part of a political prison aesthetics that embodies an expression of “survival”? The thorny issue of the representation of traumatic experiences that are not our own (which implies not, or at least not only, to aesthetically consume the pain of others, but rather to narrate it) cannot be resolved here, but I believe that if we, like Hart, take as our focal framework “the cultivation of shared perspectives” (Hart 1999, 490), i.e. the interplay between personal and collective subjectivities - which is also a key focus in Arendt’s idea of storytelling - the aesthetic assessment of this prison text will still hopefully contribute to pinpoint the complex, multi-layered cultural and political significance of Jiabiangou.

Furthermore, to aesthetically consume works of art – even those that reconstruct traumatic experiences – does not automatically entail the reader’s gratification as the ultimate goal. Engaging with Carroll and Korsmeyer’s reflections on horror and revulsion in art, Tarja Laine contends that disgust is in fact not necessarily a condition to overcome in order to achieve a higher kind of aesthetic pleasure (Laine 2011).<sup>6</sup> Namely, Laine constructs her argument on the analysis of Roman Polanski’s film *Repulsion*, and ultimately contends that disgust there is “explicitly unpleasant and noncathartic, offering neither delightful narrative satisfaction nor any ‘purifying’ release of emotional tension” (ibid., 45). In other words, sometimes disgust can be an overwhelmingly unpleasurable experience, it can take us by surprise, and in ways that we cannot fully control. I contend that Yang’s *Chronicles* are narratively constructed on a similar rationale. The text showcases different varieties of embodied disgust not to provide aesthetic gratification but to uncover the horrific reality of Jiabiangou re-education camp.

### **Faeces, Vomit, Cannibalism: Disgusting Bodies in Jiabiangou**

“Woman from Shanghai” (*Shanghai nüren* 上海女人) was one of the Jiabiangou stories to receive most attention from the Chinese readership. The woman in the title is the wife of Wen Daye 文大业, a rightist sentenced to undergo reform in Jiabiangou, who embarks on a journey from her home in Shanghai to Jiabiangou to visit her husband, only to find, upon her arrival, that he has died from the consequences of starvation. Wen’s story is recounted by his friend and fellow rightist Li Wenhan 李文汉, who relates the circumstances that brought to Wen’s tragic death. As

mentioned, at that time, China was hit by a famine, which was particularly severe in remote, deserted areas such as Gansu, and especially in the labour camps. In Jiabiangou, the prisoners were constantly engaged in an obsessive search for anything edible; they would resort to any means to sate their hunger, even if that meant ingesting unknown or outright harmful substances. In the area that surrounded the camp, there used to grow a type of cogon grass (*huang maocao* 黄茅草), whose seeds could be eaten after being boiled into a soup. This soup would quickly solidify into a lump, which in fact had no nutritional value, but it could bring some sense of fullness. Prisoners would ingest this preparation while still liquid, with the consequence that it would solidify inside their stomach, thus becoming very hard to expel. This could prove lethal for some, as it indeed happened to Wen Daye. “At that time in Jiabiangou,” recounts Li Wenhan, “we would dig our excrements out of each other” (Yang [2003] 2008, 5)<sup>7</sup>. It was common for the inmates to help each other dig out the hardened lumps, an understandably painful process. The operation is described in detail:

We would squat at the latrine for half a day and not even one piece would come out, so we needed each other’s help: a man would lie on his stomach on the ground with his buttocks lifted, and another man would start digging from the back. Most of us even had a dedicated tool, a wooden spoon made from a red willow twig [...]. Those who didn’t have such tool had to resort to the metal spoon they used for eating (Yang [2003] 2008, 5).

When Li Wenhan tries to help his friend Wen Daye, he realises the situation is ill-fated:

The lump’s diameter was much bigger than [Wen Daye’s] anus’ diameter, so that it was blocked there, impossible to dig out. I tried to break the lump into pieces, but I failed. I couldn’t use much strength either, else Wen Daye wouldn’t stop screaming with pain. Eventually, my tool caused severe bleeding, it was a total mess, and the lump remained intact (*ibid.*).

The association between food and bodily waste is a quite common representation of disgust. Here the emotion is further enhanced by the parallelism between the sophistication needed for the preparation of the lump and the similar industriousness required for its disposal. The arousal of disgust through the correlation of food with excrement suggests a circular process that involves the two main human orifices: the mouth and the anus. Namely, disgust is aroused because what would otherwise be a natural bodily process – food incorporation and expulsion through digestion – in this case becomes corrupt, as it requires invasive external assistance in order to be executed. The digging operation is a violation of the body envelope, as Rozin and his colleagues have put it, that “when breached, reveal[s] blood and soft viscera that display[s] our commonality with animals” (Rozin, Haidt, McCauley 2008, 761). In fact, just like animals, we humans are involved in activities like eating, mating, defecating, and so on; however, these activities are heavily codified, from a cultural perspective, precisely as a way to differentiate ourselves from animals. As

a consequence, the violation of our body envelope is disgusting because it is a reminder of our animal vulnerability (Rozin & Fallon 1987, 27).

A similar scene involving the digging out of hardened excrements is described in the story titled “Hospital ward number one” (*Yi hao bingfang* 一号病房). Prisoner Zhang Jixin 张继信 has eaten some tree leaves which eventually have solidified into “dung balls crammed at the anus’ entry” (Yang [2003] 2008, 304). Zhang’s friend, Chen Yuming 陈毓明, starts to dig them out using an aluminium spoon, until “Zhang’s anus suddenly spurted out a gooey watery substance” which ended on Chen’s chest, causing him to shout in anger: “What the hell is this? I am digging your shit out and you make this mess!” (ibid.).

From the reader’s perspective, scenes like these can hardly be appreciated in an aesthetic sense, as there is arguably no hidden sense of beauty, nothing to be *savoured* here. On the contrary, these passages are disgusting in the most unambiguous sense of the term. This kind of disgust aesthetics does not call for the overcoming of repulsion and its conversion into pleasure. Disgust is supposed to remain disgust, as its intended role is to cause distress and aversion and redirect these emotions toward the perpetrators of disgust, that is, the prison enforcers and the labour camp system.

Another type of disgusting object upon which Yang has constructed his Jiabiangou aesthetics is vomit. In the story titled “Eating one’s fill” (*Baoshi yi dun* 饱食一顿), the protagonist, Gao Jiyi 高吉义, has been assigned to a team in charge of stacking potatoes on a truck to be delivered elsewhere. Once the job has been accomplished, the team leader rewards the labourers by allowing them to eat as many potatoes as they wish. This event was nothing short of miraculous for the starving prisoners, who ended up eating more tubers than their bodies could physically bear. Back at the barracks, all the team members felt sick, including Gao, who eventually spent the whole night vomiting, being cared after by his friend Niu Tiande 牛天得. The following morning Gao woke up but couldn’t find his friend Niu, who in fact had been busy collecting his friend’s vomit to eat it. The scene is described from Gao’s point of view, in the following terms:

In front of him [Niu Tiande] was a blue, square-shaped cloth wrapper, on top of which a layer of thick, sticky paste was evenly spread. The sticky paste was already solidified, but one could discern several white and yellowish potato chunks. The sticky paste was of a colour I couldn’t even properly describe, some mix of brownish, yellowish and greenish stuff. My heart tightened (Yang [2003] 2008, 154-55).

The narration is constructed by describing in detail the foul element before even revealing what it is, though the reader can already easily guess. The whole scene is a crescendo of disgusting whose climax we are about to encounter very soon.

Oh my god! It was my vomit from the night before that he had spread on his cloth wrapper to dry. From that filthy stuff he was taking out the small, finger-sized potato chunks, and stuffing them in his mouth. After having stuffed a couple of chunks, he broke a piece of that solid paste and started putting those in his mouth, just like one would do with a piece of layered pancake (ibid.).

Because the scene is told from Gao Jiyi's point of view, we see it unfolds just as if we were him; we participate in his shock and disgust, which is prompted by the vision of his friend eating the vomit. As shown in the quoted passages, in Yang's narratives, disgust is usually presented to the reader from an observational point of view; it is the friend, or the fellow inmate that describes the event, and we never access it from the angle of the disgusting body itself. That is to say, the disgusting body is the object of experience of another corporal individuality, the observer. The disgust we perceive, therefore, is in fact the same disgust that the observer has felt, and which he is telling us.

The focus on corporality is a distinguishing element in Yang's narratives, where the carceral bodies are virtually reduced to their (dys)functionality – they are crooked examples of the embodied processes of eating and evacuating. Yang's special attention to corporality and its physical and moral humiliation works as a way to highlight the true consequences of reform or re-education through labour. In writing about Jiabiangou, Yang is not interested in political or ideological discursive criticism; he prefers to directly show the reader the effect of the camp system, which, to quote Veg, eventually reduces “humans to self-destructive instincts and repugnant bodily functions” (Veg 2014, 523).

It is interesting, at this point, to compare Yang's disgusting bodies to certain representations of corporality that appear in Socialist Realist literature. In the literature of the Cultural Revolution, for instance, heroes are not only portrayed as morally and ideologically impeccable, but also as physically attractive, strong, healthy, and young. They are the perfect embodiment of *xinling mei* 心灵美, a kind of “spiritual beauty” that in fact speaks for their correct ideological consciousness, as Lan Yang points out (Yang 2002). To borrow Mark Elvin's words, the revolutionary body is “a remarkable all-purpose tool and weapon, hardened in a training that removes the old supportive physical affection and toughened by constant tests” (Elvin 1989, 317). The difference between the healthy, beautiful bodies that we encounter in communist aesthetics and the bodies in *Chronicles* is quite striking. The scrawny, sick, disgusting bodies of Jiabiangou are the exact opposite of the ideal revolutionary body, and they tell a very different story of China's glorious construction of socialism.

Let us fast-forward some twenty years, and we find a renewed use of disgust – and scatology in particular – in post-Maoist Chinese fiction as well. As pointed out by Pamela Hunt, some contemporary authors use scatological humour as a way to problematise the depiction of the Maoist perfect bodies to subvert the bodily symbols of a complicated past, and to represent, instead, the complexities that regulate the modern bodies of post-Maoist China (Hunt 2010). Even though – I contend – Yang's use of disgust is not humorous or satirical, still, the Jiabiangou bodies too succeed in deconstructing the communist ideal of the perfect body, and portray a very different reality.

Going back to the construction of Yang's aesthetics, beyond faeces and vomit, there is one more instance of embodied disgust that deserves our attention, I believe, and that is cannibalism. A documented practice during the years of the Great Famine (Dikötter 2010; Yang 2008), cannibalism

is also an established literary trope within the Chinese context, that has been used to symbolise certain rapacious aspects of Chinese culture, and epitomised by Lu Xun 鲁迅 in his *Diary of a Madman* (*Kuangren riji* 狂人日记) where China was symbolically portrayed as a man-eating society. In *Chronicles*, Yang references practices of cannibalism in Jiabiangou as one of the extreme consequences of hunger, a necessity for the prisoners' survival. But the discovery of fellow inmates feeding off human corpses brings about an initial shock that gradually transforms into a philosophical reflection on morality and propriety in a context such as the camp. In the story "On the train" (*Zai lieche shang* 在列车上), some prisoners have caught other fellows secretly cooking and eating an unidentified item – a rare and therefore worth investigating occurrence in times of famine. The team supervisor, Si Jicai 司机才, eventually finds out the truth and, without anticipating anything, leads Li Tianqing 李天庆, the protagonist of the story, to the camp burial site. Li realises that there is something wrong with the corpses, as it looks like they have been moved. The scene is again constructed from Li's point of view, so we gradually realise – together with him – that the bodies have indeed been desecrated, the organs removed from their chests for consumption.

"This cannot be the work of wild dogs, could it?" Si Jicai asked me. "It doesn't look like it," I said. "Dog bites couldn't have been so neat." At that point, I understood what Si Jicai meant, my head went numb, and then, shocked, I asked him: "Do you think...?" The rest, I didn't dare say. He continued: "Look, look inside the chest." I was afraid to look, I retreated a few steps. "What are you afraid of?" said Si Jicai. Then he got closer to the dead body, and with his hands pried open the wound: "Look inside!" he told me. I finally took a glance: it was an empty hole (Yang [2003] 2008, 432).

Both Si Jicai and Li Tianqing are shocked and disgusted at learning that the prisoners were feeding off human corpses.

"Those bastards! They don't have a shred of humanity! Do you know what they were cooking? Human organs! Human hearts, livers, and lungs! Those dead people had no flesh, years of prolonged hunger and hard labour had reduced them to skin and bones. Nothing edible there, so they had the idea of cutting open their chests and stomachs!"

I didn't dare speak, I still hadn't recovered from the shock, my head was still numb. When I reported to Si Jicai, I just thought that the situation was suspicious, but I never thought these people could do something like this! (ibid., 431-32).

The disgust that Li feels at the sight of the bodies and at the realisation that they have been cooked and eaten by other prisoners prompts a reflection on propriety and on what it means to remain human in such extreme circumstances. If the people were already dead, then technically no crime has been committed, from the perspective of the law. According to Yin Shi 尹诗, a "moral paradox" (*daode beilun* 道德悖论) arises when the conditions of existence are as exceptional as they were in Jiabiangou (Yin 2012). In such cases, morality is a concept that no longer makes sense,

because individual agency and subjectivity need to adjust to the circumstances. These conditions of existence make us ponder whether actions that normally would be morally and lawfully considered reprehensible – like stealing, cheating, becoming dumb to death and suffering, to the point of eating corpses – in Jiabiangou become a sensible solution, and possibly the only one, in order to survive.

In biopolitical terms, the disgusting carceral bodies portrayed in *Chronicles* can be framed as expressions of what Giorgio Agamben has called “bare life,” i.e. a condition of existence that reduces humans to their biological functions, and essentially deprives them of political and social agency (Agamben [1995] 2005).<sup>8</sup> Engaging with Foucault’s notion of biopolitics, Agamben posits that the concentration camp and the structure of the great totalitarian states of the twentieth century are the places “*par excellence*” of modern biopower (ibid., 6). In other words, the concentration camp, which Agamben characterises as the epitome of the “state of exception,” i.e. “a space in which bare life and the juridical rule enter in a threshold of indistinction” (ibid., 195), is the paradigm for the exercise of power in the modern western world. The state of exception materialises in all sorts of circumstances, and therefore “we are virtually in the presence of a camp every time that such a structure is created, independently from the crimes committed, whatever their classification and specification might be” (ibid.). However, as it has been noted by critics, Agamben’s concept of “camp” risks to be too general, and offers little space for the recognition of the complexity of life within the camp itself, especially when it comes to register and conceptualise practices of resistance (Walters 2008). Therefore, identifying Jiabiangou as an articulation of Agamben’s idea of “camp,” the disgusting bodies portrayed by Yang can in turn be recognised as expressions of “bare life.” On the other hand, however, from the perspective of lived experience, we also see those disgusting bodies as active subjects that react, adjust, and to some extent resist the prison power. In other words, it is true that the circumstances of the camp force the inmates to practice morally objectionable acts (stealing, cheating, etc.), but it is also true that they help each other. They assist their fellow prisoners in the evacuation process, they understand and forgive practices of cannibalism on corpses. In short, through disgust, Yang shows us the horrifying mechanisms of biopower in Jiabiangou, but he also reveals practices of active response to that power, in which the agency of the carceral bodies is clearly manifested.

From the perspective of embodiment, Yang’s disgusting bodies very well exemplify the notion of intercorporeality (or intersubjectivity), elaborated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty as a way to explain the essentially relational nature of human perception (Merleau-Ponty 1964). The concept was employed to explain how humans experience and perceive the world with the body and, at the same time, are also perceived and experienced by others (humans but also non-humans). In other words, our actions are often prompted by our experience of the other - when we see someone yawn we are likely to yawn back. The same goes with the disgust that is aesthetically constructed in *Chronicles*. The text displays different layers of intersubjectivity that is built through disgust, both intra- as well as extra-textually. On the one hand, disgust is constructed through

the intercorporeal relationships between two or more bodies – in which one is the elicitor, and the other the perceiver. On the other hand, on an extra-textual level, the disgust that the reader feels is the disgust that the narrator is telling him/her – the consequence of the reader's intercorporeal relation with the text.

## Conclusion

The use of disgust aesthetics in Yang Xianhui's *Chronicles* is a conscious narrative strategy aimed at exposing the harrowing effects of the Anti-Rightist Movement and of re-education through labour. Shit, vomit, cannibalism; the prisoners undergoing re-education in Jiabiangou are involved in many disgusting activities which are presented to the reader in excruciating detail. By appealing to such gruesome iconography, the author is showing what the camp does to carceral bodies: it reduces them to their most repugnant bodily instincts. The disgust evoked by these descriptions – and which engages the readers in intimate, unpredictable, sometimes uncontrolled ways – is first directed toward the bodies of the prisoners. On a deeper level, though, it comes to transcend the instinctual dimension to involve the moral aspect. It is the re-education system, the labour camp and its enforcers that have turned the carceral bodies into disgusting objects. The reader's disgust is re-directed and turned into sympathy for the victims and contempt and indignation toward the agents and mechanisms of power responsible for the degradation of the foul Jiabiangou bodies. In short, disgust is a mirror that reflects and reveals the regime's own ugliness.

As we have seen, Yang's disgust aesthetic is usually portrayed as a collective, intersubjective, intra- and extra-textual corporeality. Two or more bodies are needed to evoke disgust: one functions as the elicitor, the other – together with the reader – as the perceiver. This corporeal multiplicity in the midst of dehumanising circumstances paradoxically reveals a rather emotionally moving kind of humanity; in Jiabiangou people help each other even when caught up in the most repulsive situations. They dig faeces out of other people's anuses, they condone disgusting acts (eating corpses, eating vomit) because they know the laws of morality and propriety do not work in the camp. In other words, while disgust is used to highlight certain mechanism of dehumanisation and bodily annihilation proper of the labour camp logic, it also reveals a counter-narrative, a way that challenges that logic, based on mutual assistance and cooperation.

With his Jiabiangou stories, Yang Xianhui uncovers a part of Chinese history that has largely been overlooked, accessing it through the experiences of those who have actually lived it. Through writing, these personal experiences are then reconfigured in a collective, representational – and therefore political, to reiterate Arendt's position – dimension. The human body, though disgusting and humiliated, here becomes, as insightfully articulated by Howard Choy, “a locus of historical writing – [...] a text on which the past is violently inscribed” (Choy 2008, 186). Through literature, the bodies of Jiabiangou re-appropriate and carry the memory of a troubled past that mainstream narratives have tried to keep hidden, and reintegrate them in their historical and affective significance.

## Endnotes:

1. Regarding the labelling of citizens as “rightists,” Shenshen Cai points out how *Chronicles* reconstructs the history of the sentenced prisoners exposing the absurdity of some accusations: a disagreement with the country leader regarding grain purchase; an extra-marital affair; an unflattering comment on the Soviet Union, and so forth. See: Cai 2016.
2. There exist several versions of this book. As explained by the author in the afterword to the 2008 edition, Yang first published the story “Woman from Shanghai” (*Shanghai nüren* 上海女人) in Chinese literary magazine *Shanghai Wenxue* 上海文学 in the spring of 2000. Later, this and other Jiabiangou stories, plus some other Yang’s non-Jiabiangou related writing, were published in book form with the title *Chronicles of Jiabiangou* (*Jiabiangou jishi* 夹边沟纪事). In 2003, Shanghai Wenxue publishing house re-organised the corpus to include only the Jiabiangou stories, and titled the book *Goodbye Jiabiangou* (*Gaobie Jiabiangou* 告别夹边沟). In 2008, Huacheng publishing house republished the book restoring its original name, *Chronicles of Jiabiangou*. In 2009 an English version has been published, with the title *Woman from Shanghai* and translated by Wen Huang. However, the collection includes only 13 of the 19 stories, and in many parts the translated texts have been significantly altered. This article was based on the 2008 Chinese version, and the translations are all mine.  
In 2010, the stories of Jiabiangou were transposed into a documentary film, *The Ditch* (in Chinese *Jiabiangou* 夹边沟), directed by Wang Bing 王兵 and presented at the Venice Film Festival.
3. For an in-depth analysis of Hanna Arendt’s conception of storytelling, see: Jackson 2002.
4. Scholars generally agree on the strong sensory nature of disgust, though there is some debate on which sense is primarily involved. Many theorists agree on the centrality of taste, others believe smell is critically important. See Korsmeyer 2011.
5. Hart’s research focuses on political prison culture in post-war Greece.
6. Laine is talking about the cinematic experience, but I contend that her analysis can be extended to other kinds of aesthetic experiences, including reading.
7. The English translations of the excerpts from *Chronicles* reported in this article are mine.
8. Agamben uses the metaphor of the “homo sacer,” an expression that in traditional Roman law indicates a person who has committed crimes against the “pax deorum” - the set of rules that characterised the relation between the gods and the collectivity. These crimes could only be judged by the gods themselves, and the criminal was deemed “unsacrificable” (“insacrificabile”) for ritualistic purposes, though his/her killing would be met with impunity (Agamben condenses this concept with the word “uccidibilità,” or “killability”). See Agamben [1995] 2005.

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## The Hidden Labor of Women in Gish Jen's *Typical American*

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### Abstract:

This essay examines the contributions of Helen and Theresa as immigrant women in Gish Jen's *Typical American*, chiefly their work as women in post-World War II America and their ability to pursue the American dream without a complete loss of their Chinese identity. As they become "typical" Americans, Helen and Theresa remain cognizant of cultural tension and forge meaningful connections to their ancestral past under the pressure to assimilate. This essay explores those connections in how Helen and Theresa keep a Chinese home and virtues, including an obligation to family, academic success, and the preservation of relationships. Unlike Ralph, Helen and Theresa draw from an experience of limitations in China, which enables them to navigate boundaries and pressures in American life. Through Helen and Theresa, Jen insinuates that the pursuit of the American dream obscures the contributions and labor of immigrant women. Their unrecognized efforts, whether providing a culturally rich home, financial support, family care, or supportive relationships, provide discreet and inconspicuous stability to the Chang family.

**Keywords:** Gish Jen, *Typical American*, Asian-American, American dream, Chinese immigration

Ralph's destructive pursuit of the American dream drives the narrative in Gish Jen's *Typical American*. But Jen's novel is family story with much to be understood from the labor of Helen and Theresa. These women belong to a newer, post-war class of Chinese immigrants, which for the first time includes educated and adroit women. Living in the gendered culture of post-War America, Helen and Theresa work without recognition, as the strong, capable, and practical providers of the Chang family, not Ralph. Furthermore, as Ralph erases his multicultural identity in America, Helen and Theresa labor to create a Chinese-American home. They acclimate Chinese virtues to their American context, including obligation to family, academic success, and the preservation of relationships, even when damaged by adultery and avarice. As their work is shrouded by the social expectations of post-War America, so is their burden as immigrant women. Both women must navigate the limitations of race and gender to survive, redeem Ralph, and preserve their family's cultural identity and standard of living in America. In *Typical American*, Jen suggests that the pursuit of the American dream is blind to the contributions and labor of immigrant women.

These women save the Chang family, compensate for Ralph's failures, and navigate the prejudices of race and gender. Through Helen and Theresa, Jen insinuates that immigrant women make the "house hold" (Jen 1991, 59).

### **A New Class of Chinese Immigrants**

Ralph, Theresa, and Helen Chang do not resemble typical Chinese immigrant characters in the canon of American literature. Jen's Chinese characters are not working-class railroad laborers, restaurant owners, or professionals in exile. They have entered the United States as students and come from upper-class, educated backgrounds (Zhou 1999, 151). Ralph and Theresa are children of an "upright scholar [and] ex-government official" (Jen 1991, 4). Likewise, Helen belongs to a wealthy Nationalist family who had money for education and doctors (Jen 1991, 61-62). Jen writes with an economically and socially diverse Chinese-American community in mind, enabling her to include deft women like Helen and Theresa. These women come to the United States to study, not to become wives for laborers. This prefigures Helen and Theresa's transformation into resourceful and constructive characters, who are much more successful at solving problems than Ralph. It further foreshadows their assimilation and transformational multicultural identity in the United States.

Historically, it became easier for Chinese families to immigrate to the United States during the 1940s. Rigid immigration restrictions like the Chinese Exclusion Act were repealed in 1943 and Congress allowed Chinese residents to naturalize, ending the past practice of excluding Chinese women (Zhou 1999, 151, R. Lee 1999, 45). These policies furthered the economic diversity of Chinese-American families in the United States, thus creating a privileged and educated immigrant class to which the Changs belong.

Rachel Lee, in her book *The Americas of Asian American Literature* writes, "Cold War politics created a category of political refugees that enabled some five thousand graduate students [...] to seek asylum in the United States" (R. Lee 1999, 46). Much is owed to Lee's work in this essay to put *Typical American* in historical context and the gendered social structure of post-war America. It is important to note that Jen's novel is not a single story of Ralph Chang, but the story of a family. She writes with the history of family immigration in mind, anchoring her narrative in real recorded events. Jen constructs a story in which the Changs recreate a Chinese family in America, an impossible task without the women of this novel.

Jen's personal life informs the setting and characters of *Typical American* as well. She sets this novel in post-World War II New York City, her birthplace and "the symbolic heart of the United States" (Cheveresan 2013, 116). Much like her protagonists, Jen's family immigrated to the United States during the Communist Revolution in China. Her father worked as a professor of engineering like Ralph and Old Chao (Matsukawa 1993, 111). Jen was born in 1955 and experienced the political and cultural tension of the Cold War, 1950s consumer culture, extensive pressure to conform, and "*Leave It to Beaver* family idealism" (R. Lee, 1999 44). These are the same social circumstances Ralph, Helen, and Theresa face in *Typical American*. Jen draws from her

upbringing to create characters who reflect the changing Chinese community in New York while ensuring the Changs experience the broader cultural pressures of post-war, middle-class white America. Ralph, Helen, and Theresa are not excluded from the “pressures of assimilation, greed, and self-interest” (D. Lee 2000, 220). In fact, their interaction with these forces drives the plot of *Typical American*.

The critical writing that deals with Ralph’s corruption and praises Jen’s prose, leaves the development of Helen and Theresa’s characters largely overlooked. Some, like Vivian Gornick’s review “Innocents abroad,” declare characters like Helen and Theresa emotionally unformed, psychologically non-existent, and “uprooted innocents cast down on the greedy, indifferent streets of New York.” Further she writes, “From beginning to end they are only the sum of their immigrant circumstances” (Gornick 1991, 14). Quite simply, such an opinion ignores Helen’s emotional transformation in America. Jen writes that Helen “officially accepted what already seemed true - that she had indeed crossed a violent, black ocean; and that it was time to make herself as at home in her exile as she could” (Jen 1991, 63). How can an emotionally unformed character develop confidence, pride, and strength? Similarly, Theresa’s relationship with Ralph or her affair with Old Chao is rich with psychosocial interpretation. This reviewer has allowed Ralph’s fall from grace to cloud the nuance and strength of these women and their necessity in telling an authentic immigrant story.

### **Assimilation: Confucius, Benjamin Franklin, or both?**

A major theme that Jen explores in *Typical American* is assimilation and multicultural identity. She opens her novel with the claim “It’s an American story,” but the tug between philosophies, “Confucius and Benjamin Franklin,” gives *Typical American* its tension (Jen 1991, 3; A.R. Lee 1994, 272). As Ralph, Helen, and Theresa adjust to American life, each becomes a form of the “typical American” they initially find distasteful and at odds with their Chinese worldview. However, one must be careful to take into account that *Typical American* challenges the understanding of assimilation as the submission of one monolithic culture to another. As Jeffery F.L. Partridge points out, “Chinese-American identity, as suggested in this novel, is a dynamic process of hybridity that is ongoing and riddled with remembrance, invention, and reimagination” (2009, 182).

Helen and Theresa grasp this dynamic process of reinvention in a way Ralph does not. As they make sense of America, they rethink meaningful connections to Chinese culture in spite of their steady American conversion. In this way, their assimilation is a different type of transformation than Ralph’s. As they become “typical” Americans, Helen and Theresa prioritize relationships and roles such as the obedient wife and dutiful sister. Yet, Theresa commits to education and recognizes the snare set by quick money-making and shallow self-promotion. Helen keeps China alive in her apartments and home, but discovers her own agency as she literally keeps their apartments from crumbling.

Moreover, the influence of both women on Ralph is juxtaposed with Grover’s hyper-masculine

and overly individualist influence, in which he has erased any trace of his Chinese cultural identity. Helen and Theresa, when removed from the social structure of China, handle moral crisis and identity change because they have blended many of the expectations and values of Chinese culture in their emerging American identity. This is especially true in the way each woman provides for and saves Ralph from the consequences of his actions.

### **Deliverance for Ralph**

Ralph's appearance in New York City marks the first time he is removed from Chinese culture and the protective influence of his family. He is on his own and struggling badly. This is not the case with Helen and Theresa. At first, Ralph can't speak English well enough to register himself for graduate school. When he finds someone kind enough to help, the secretary at the Foreign Student Affairs Office, he "falls in love" with her. While teaching her some simple Chinese phrases, Ralph realizes, "So little of what he knew counted here" (Jen 1991, 12). In China, explains Zhou, "individual identities are hard facts based on who your parents are and what tier of the social hierarchy you and your family belong to in terms of inheritance and achievements" (Zhou 1999, 157). In the United States, Ralph's family connections are unheard-of and powerless. Ralph does not know how to interact with people who are different and what treatment he can expect in return.

Because he comes from wealth, Ralph does not have the skill set to survive in New York. He is used to someone providing for him. It is clear from Ralph's lack of language acquisition and study that he is not a serious academic. Jen writes, "Was it beneath a scholar to hate the alphabet? Anyway, he did" (Jen 1991, 9). Also, he does not keep his immigration paperwork up to date, which results in Ralph dropping out of school and running from the authorities. When Old Chao gives him sensible advice, "Better go see the foreign student advisor [...] Better bring Fitt some candy," Ralph bungles it (Jen 1991, 27). Even when Professor Pinkus, who *likes* Ralph, becomes chairman of the Engineering department, Ralph cannot advocate for himself. He is intimidated; these situations would have been handled for him by someone else in China. So, Ralph follows Pinkus's daughter around instead, thinking she would be easier to talk to, less intimidating, and hopefully like the Cammy, the secretary (Zhou 1999, 154). When Pinkus finds out Ralph has been following his daughter, he castigates him, "We don't sneak around! We have morals! You keep hanging around my daughter, I'll shoot you!" (Jen 1991, 40). Even after this incident, Ralph still doesn't understand that he must *learn* to survive. He returns to his apartment, sleeps away his problems, and will not get out of bed.

Notably, Ralph languishes in America because he severs his connection to other Chinese immigrants. Ralph is "a loner who rejects the Chinatown experience" (Cheveresan 2013, 125). He is from an upper-class Chinese family and wants nothing to do with working-class Chinese immigrants. Ralph cannot stand cheap apartments either; he considers them unfit for a man of his social class. Similarly, he eschews Old Chao and his cohort of Chinese scholars. Jen explains, "Ralph became for

them a funny set of ears that came up sometimes, a lesson about falling for foreign devils. And for Ralph, on his side, they became another lost family” (Jen 1991, 32). Little Lou, perhaps Ralph’s only admirer in the group, tracked him throughout his many relocations and brought gifts and news. But insensible Ralph does not return Lou’s friendship. Unsurprisingly when he realizes that he misses Lou, Ralph waits for him, “but Little Lou didn’t come, didn’t come, didn’t come; and then Ralph didn’t care anymore if he came or not” (Jen 1991, 42). Ralph’s self-isolation erodes his identity and his connection to a Chinese community who is figuring out how to survive and adapt in America. Jen asks, “Who was he? It was years before Ralph even knew to ask himself those questions; and then it was only to find he didn’t know the answers” (Jen 1991, 178). What little self-concept and existential awareness Ralph had was obliterated in New York.

However, he is saved from the consequences of his poor choices, for the first of many times, when Theresa finds him slumped over a park bench. The chapter which contains this scene is called “Deliverance” because “Ralph believed himself not so much rescued as delivered.” Jen goes on, “Ralph was so astounded [...] that in springing up to welcome her, he knocked her over, so that she fell to the sidewalk and sprained her ankle” (Jen 1991, 46). Ralph depends on Theresa like a religious man relies on God. He is lost without her. This important passage further foreshadows the harm Theresa will suffer when she returns to save Ralph again after the Chicken Palace bankruptcy.

Ralph’s “miracle” certainly includes being taken in by Theresa and Helen from that park bench, but it doubles as deliverance from the consequences of his self-isolation, his rejection of scholarly pursuits, and his shirking of family responsibility. The noble scholar who “was going to be first in his class, and was not going home until he had his doctorate rolled up to hand his father” had moved far from his ideals (Jen 1991, 6). The further east Ralph journeyed from China, the more he transformed into a new, but confused western person (Cheveresan 2013, 121). Ralph-in-America abandons his Chinese community, his decision to study, and his responsibility to bring honor to his family in exchange for quick-profit and emulation of Grover Ding, a Chinese-American who is not obstructed by heritage or filial responsibilities. Theresa and Helen, out of their obligation to family and relationship, will bear the consequences of Ralph’s actions in order to save him and preserve the Chang family.

### **Freedom and Limitations**

While Ralph turns weaker and flounders away from China, Helen and Theresa become strong and flourish. Helen discovers that she can fix things, has a knack for homemaking, and pushes the family toward homeownership. Theresa maintains the moral authority of the family, manages a stressful, but successful career, and supports the family financially. These women labor and their standard of living rises. However, unlike Ralph, these women realize there are limits to their newfound freedoms. Not everything is possible in post-War America. New American freedoms force the characters in *Typical American* to reconsider their identities (Zhou 1999, 156). Because Helen and Theresa understand that gender and generation determine one’s place in China, they also recognize the limitations of gender and race in the United States (R. Lee, 1999 60). Helen and

Theresa can navigate these challenges and identity crises in ways Ralph cannot because they can still hear “an old culture talking. Everywhere there are limits” (Jen 1991, 4).

Helen, on the other hand, changes in America. She becomes confident, proud, and strong. In China, she had been doted on, being the surviving sister of twins and “blessed with just enough lingering, sometimes serious illness to win her much fuss” (Jen 1991, 61). Helen is sweet-natured, light-footed, and docile, but her nature is challenged in New York. When the family moves into a deteriorating apartment complex, the Changs are demoralized by their crumbling home. Ralph, the engineer, lodges several complaints to their super, Pete, about crumbling plaster, cracks, leaks, and no heat; however, Pete ignores him. When the boiler finally breaks, the men come up empty handed. Pete has deserted the building and Ralph lays wrapped in his blankets, useless even with an extensive engineering education.

Helen decides to take on these problems herself. This comes as a surprise to Ralph and Theresa. The not-so-frail Helen climbs through trapdoors to assess roof leaks, hires a plumber, scrapes the loose paint, and decoratively disguises cracks with furniture. Helen has been secretly reading homemaking magazines and practicing her newfound knowledge. It is also Helen who recognizes the importance of home ownership in feeling like an American. Jen states

People think you set foot in America and you become an American instantly. For the characters in my book, it takes awhile to become an American and it's not so much becoming a citizen that makes them feel American, it's something like buying a house. (Satz 1993, 133)

For Helen, “It was as if, once she'd resigned herself to her new world, something had taken her over – a drive to make it hers” (Jen 1991, 76). Theresa admires Helen and thinks, “What different kinds of intelligences in the world [...] what mattered in China was not necessarily what mattered here” (Jen 1991, 81). Helen is assimilating.

Theresa, already accomplished in China, thrives impressively in America. She is the *de facto* head of the family. Theresa studies medicine, a field dominated by white, American men. Notably, she wins a scholarship, an incredible feat for a Chinese woman in 1940s America. Overall, Theresa proves herself to be a hard-working physician, often foregoing sleep to work long, overnight shifts. But the long hours were not Theresa's greatest difficulty; Jen explains, “What was hardest about training, for Theresa, was having to sleep in that dank, little room the interns all shared, with men” (Jen 1991, 147). She is the only woman, and likely the only Chinese immigrant, which is hard for her. But Theresa persists in traveling this untrodden ground. Practically, her career allows her to provide for the family financially, first while Ralph finishes his Ph.D. and then with the purchase of their suburban home. It is only when Ralph underreports his income that he is able to declare financial independence from Theresa. When he achieves this, Ralph treats her so poorly that she decides to leave the family house. However, when Theresa moves out, her absence is a palpable cavity; she is terribly missed by Helen and the girls. Her empty room even bothered Ralph, a testament to Theresa's influence and magnanimity.

The characters in this novel all deal with tension between freedom and limitations. Jen begins *Typical American* with “It’s an American story,” evoking America as a land of reinvention, opportunity, and the pursuit of happiness (Jen 1991, 3). Each character is free to interpret what that means as they recast themselves. Theresa pursues a successful career, but buries herself in work, masking insecurities about being undesirable and unmarried. These anxieties uncloak themselves in her affair with Old Chao. Helen desires a home of her own making, but compulsively measures herself against the polished, magazine image of American life. She becomes obsessed with appearances, social class, and material status. Ralph wants the reputation of a powerful, respected, and charismatic man, but loses himself to greed, money, and power. Jen quickly follows her opening lines with the Chinese proverbs *Ting de jian*, one listens and hears, and *Ting bu jian*, one listens and fails to hear (Jen 1991, 4). Even the chapter is called, “A Boy with His Hands Over His Ears.” Each of these characters’ ability to see, hear, and understand life in America is limited. Jen writes, “People hear what they can, see what they can, do what they can; that’s the understanding” (Jen 1991, 4). By the end of the novel, Helen and Theresa can still *ting de jian*, listen and hear. Ralph, on the other hand, cannot understand that he will never be accepted as an American in spite of adopting American ways. He does not comprehend that he is still limited in the land of the free.

Though they undoubtedly possess more freedom in the United States, Theresa and Helen face more limitations than Ralph because they are women. As in China, wives in post-War America were expected to submit to their husbands. Ralph is upset and uncomfortable with Helen for being more handy and useful than him, the engineer, around the house. Moreover, Helen wins praise and approval from Theresa, which really angers him. Helen suffers Ralph’s anger over not knowing how to be a husband. Ralph laments, “He wished there was someone to ask...He wished he were in China, where if there turned out to be something wrong with the marriage he could always take a concubine” (Jen 1991, 69). Early on, Ralph is concerned about Helen’s reticence and secret keeping. He convinces himself that she could be hiding an illness, which leads to his obsession with her breathing. Helen’s quiet demeanor and secret magazines are benign, but she submits to his breathing lessons.

Ralph has a reputation for abusing Helen, and when he becomes violent, Helen bears his rage. When the family rushes Theresa to the hospital after Ralph runs her over, even “The nurses know him [...] they know all about him, everyone knows” (Jen 1991, 282). Ralph thinks a man should always be in control. Jen expresses, “He had never dreamed a person could be so powerless in his power,” and he keeps repeating, “I’m the father of this family! Do you hear me? The father, not the son!” (Jen 1991, 74). He tries to control Helen by beating, choking, and throwing her through a window, and she endures it. She must bear the burden of a culture which tacitly accepts violence against women.

Paradoxically, Helen has learned to find her voice using silence. Jen explains, “When Helen taught the girls how to talk, she’d teach them when not to continue, as she put it. It was a polite way of making a point, she said, but the girls knew that by point she meant barb” (Jen 1991, 135). Likewise, Jen admits that, “I am still the daughter of immigrants [...] It was a very long time before

I was able to hear my own voice” (D. Lee 2000, 222). Jen suggests that immigrant women have little room to express a wish, choice, or opinion. Helen cannot confront Ralph because he will beat her, not hear her. Thus, she is forced to channel her anger indirectly. Helen’s choice “not to continue” is a strategy of discontinuity employed by Asian women to disrupt American garrulousness (R. Lee 1999, 64). If Helen cannot confront Ralph with speech, she will do it with silence. “In [Helen’s] household,” writes Jen, “silence had teeth” (Jen 1991, 135).

Theresa also labors against limitations because she is a woman. Though she is an accomplished student and doctor, she cannot take pleasure in her success without emasculating Ralph. When Theresa announces that she has won a scholarship for medical school, Ralph perceives it as a rivalry and sulks. He is shamed by her success, which causes Theresa to lie about her scholarship being cancelled to preserve Ralph’s pride. Ralph cannot be the head of the household if Theresa is conspicuously successful and bankrolling the family. So, she lies to maintain old world norms.

Theresa also faces onerous pressure to marry. Jen explains that Theresa is not delicate and feminine like Helen, “Theresa turned out a giantess – five seven! With feet that entered the room before she did [...] she’d also taken up baseball – with her father’s permission – so now that she strolled when she walked” (Jen 1991, 47). Because she is perceived as ugly and masculine in Chinese culture, Theresa has found marriage a challenging prospect. In China, her family failed to secure matrimony with a banker’s son after he got a good look at her. Likewise, Helen and Janis attempt to match Theresa with one of Old Chao’s colleagues and then with Grover, resulting in two more dead ends. She finally finds love with Old Chao, a married man. Old Chao loves Theresa for her true self, and they have an affair. When Ralph, Helen, and the Chinese-American community discover their romance, Theresa is shamed, not Old Chao. The community considers Theresa Old Chao’s mistress, because “in China, if there turned out to be something wrong with the marriage [a man] could always take a concubine” (Jen 1991, 69). Though Old Chao truly loves her, Theresa is confined in this situation too.

Moreover, both women must endure Ralph’s loafing and freeloading in their post-war American context. Ralph is blind to the labor behind America’s self-made enterprises (R. Lee 1999, 57). Jen writes of Ralph’s new-found belief in “imagineering” or self-making,

He pictured himself able to do what he would. And to an amazing extent, his imagineering worked! No bread and fish, but he noticed that his bit of athlete’s foot had gone away; that he thought more clearly; that he could will certain foods to appear in the icebox. (Jen 1991, 89)

Ralph believes that he is healing himself and causing food to appear by the “miracle” outlined in *The Power of Positive Thinking*. He forgets that Theresa’s medical training clears up his athlete’s foot and that Helen stocks the icebox with food. Later, Ralph is stung by a bee right between his eyes. “His swollen-headedness becomes an apt metaphor for his search for godlike stature, yet also posing a barrier to any increased insight into the self” (R. Lee 1999, 57). Helen and Theresa are bound to Ralph by blood and marriage, and are not free to credit themselves with their

accomplishments. Their efforts to sustain the home go unnoticed and unappreciated by Ralph. In spite laboring to increase the family's standard of living, their work is screened by Ralph's pursuits, however foolish they appear.

Additionally, Helen and Theresa face racial and cultural subordination in the United States. Ralph does too, but he is still the "boy with his hands over his ears," and does not recognize it as it happens to him. As the Changs chide their absent super Pete in their first apartment, Theresa begins to realize the dangers of racial stereotyping. "We were wrong to say 'Typical American' [...]. Over and over she explained that Pete was a person, like them" (Jen 1991, 74). Further, Theresa becomes aware of social class in America by observing the medical care patients would receive and comes to believe that "to be non-white in this society was indeed to need education, accomplishment – some source of dignity. A white person was by definition somebody. Other people needed, across their hearts, one steel rib" (Jen 1991, 200). Ralph by contrast, lectures his daughters, "Money. In this country, you have money, you can do anything. You have no money, you are nobody. You are Chinaman" (Jen 1991, 199). Theresa and Ralph both discover limitations and racial barriers of being Chinese in America, but Ralph believes that, if he assimilates to a certain degree, those limitations will disappear. Theresa recognizes that even with accomplishment, she will need a "steel rib" protecting her heart. She considers racial prejudice to be inescapable and knows she will never be considered a white-American's equal.

While Helen and Theresa remain aware of these limitations throughout the novel, Ralph doesn't begin to question them until his life has fallen apart. Ralph realizes, "He could not always see, could not always hear. He was not what he made up his mind to be. A man was the sum of his limits; freedom only made him see how much so. America was no America" (Jen 1991, 296). Ralph's idea of America is a place without limitations, which is his major misconception. He cannot understand how he has failed after learning English, earning a Ph.D., becoming a citizen, owning a home, starting a business, and even training a dog. Cheveresan explains that Ralph, "succumbs to the pressures of a system that is far less ideal and accommodating than he used to believe" (Cheveresan 2013, 122). At the end of the novel, Ralph has still not truly "listened and heard" life's lessons about freedom and limitations in China and America. As he remembers Theresa and Old Chao spinning in their wading pools, Jen writes, "Were these people he knew? [...] Who could begin to say what he meant, what had happened, and what he'd done" (Jen 1991, 296)? Ralph does not know himself or his family; he is still the boy with his hands over his ears, listening but failing to hear. It will again fall to Helen and Theresa to put things back together.

### **Keepers of the Home**

Home, another theme in *Typical American*, reveals the tension between Chinese and American culture and the hidden labor of women. Helen and Theresa are the keepers of the home, and with it, Chinese culture. Yet, many "typical" American ideas come to roost in the Chang household. The Chang family's many apartments and suburban home serve as a place to preserve

and practice Chinese customs, speak freely about their grievances with Americans, and shelter against anti-immigrant prejudice. Ralph and Theresa even try to reconstruct their ancestral home in America through Ralph's marriage to Helen (Satz 1993, 133). Conversely Grover's influence on Ralph is antithetical to Theresa and Helen's; it represents a loss of home and profiting from home ownership without actually inhabiting one (R. Lee 1999, 54).

In New York, Helen and Theresa have preserved a Chinese microcosm inside of their apartment. When Ralph peers inside for the first time, he sees Helen "and around her, China" (Jen 1991, 56). Ralph notices "the scrolls, the shoes by the door, the calendar, and the lidded cups of tea." He immediately finds Helen "so familiar;" she is his ideal Chinese mate, petite, subservient, and attentive to his needs. Then, when Helen cooks Oxtail soup for Ralph, Jen writes, "it inflamed more than abated his homesickness [...] Her cooking was so agonizingly close to that of his family's old cook that his stomach ached with resemblance, even as his mouth thrilled" (Jen 1991, 56-57). Ralph had been languishing for months, cut off from his countrymen, cuisine, and customs. Meanwhile, Helen and Theresa prospered. They are successful students, living well, and dutifully hunting for Ralph. When they shelter him, he finds sensational comfort in their company. At the apartment, Ralph returns to a familiar world of Chinese expectations, a world cultivated by Helen and Theresa. These women nourish Ralph, find him a drafting job, and arrange a marriage for him. Helen and Theresa are the strong, capable, and practical providers that Ralph is not and cannot be in America. Jen remarks, "In China, one lived in one's family house. In America, one could always name whose house he was in; and to live in a house not one's own was to be less of a man" (Jen 1991, 283). This is Helen and Theresa's house, a fact that will haunt Ralph into the destructive tutelage of Grover Ding. Jen even titles one of the chapters "Helen's House" to make this point.

Theresa and Helen create a home where the Chang family can uphold Chinese morality and proper conduct. A Chinese home allows them to freely practice traditional ways and sanctimoniously consign wild or unexplainable conduct as "typical American." "Typical American no-good,' Ralph would say; Theresa, 'Typical American don't-know-how-to-get-along'; and Helen, wistfully, 'typical American just-want-to-be-the-center-of-things' (Jen 1991, 67). The Changs' insistence on proper moral conduct forms the core of their Chinese identity (Zhou 1999, 154). Because they can be Chinese at home, they have a secure place to criticize, condemn, mock, or stereotype Americans like Pete, their negligent building super. With wry humor Jen writes, "Imagine that – that they could see in a foreign country, what was what" (Jen 1991, 68). Jen suggests that these immigrants underestimate their own cultural misunderstanding partly because home has become a place for Ralph, Helen, and Theresa to cling to Chinese values under the constant pressure of assimilation.

Likewise in their home, the Changs shelter from outside prejudices they encounter as immigrants. As Ralph, Helen, and Theresa wade into American life, their interest in baseball becomes a reminder that they are very different. When Ralph decides to call the family the Chang-

kees after the New York Yankees, “Ralph, Helen, and Theresa simultaneously affiliate and disaffiliate with that national pastime and the national team whose name acts as a metonym for Americans as a whole” (R. Lee 1999, 49). As the family attempts an outing, they have a troubling experience. Jen writes, “The one time they went to an actual game, people had called them names and told them to go back to their laundry” (Jen 1991, 127). In response, the family buys a used television and watches games from home, withdrawing into a space free from racist put-downs. They disguise this distancing under artificial reasons like, “More comfortable. More convenient,” but in truth, they opt for televised games because they will not encounter hostile Americans in their apartment (Jen 1991, 128). Ralph did not benefit from such relief on his own. On the run from the Foreign Student Office and the Department of immigration, he realized that, “He missed his home, missed having a place that was his home [...] the world he had lost waxed valuable in the losing, like an unwon love” (Jen 1991, 33). Theresa and Helen make this valuable world possible in America.

Before and after Ralph’s meteoric and disastrous pursuit of the American dream, Helen and Theresa hold the family homes together. It is a theme explored in Helen’s maintenance of the dilapidated apartments and the broken suburban home. The dilapidated buildings in *Typical American* highlight the unsustainability, unattainability, and instability of the American dream (Eubanks 2016, 140-141). The role of maintenance in the homes, a symbol of family life, is taken up by the women. Helen quite literally fixes cracks, investigates roof leaks, and finds repairmen when necessary. Also, it is only with Theresa’s financial support that the Changs are able to buy their “beautiful, perfect, brand-new” suburban home (Jen 1991, 152). As the buildings break, the women take action to keep the homes from falling apart, mirroring their labor in keeping the family itself from crumbling. Because of these lasting connections to Chinese culture, Helen and Theresa make “the house hold” under the pressure of Ralph’s self-made greed and dereliction of his ancestral past (Jen 1991, 59). In the end the buildings crumble and the suburban home is sold, but the family remains intact, even for Ralph. He is even welcome to visit Theresa in the hospital after nearly killing her in blind rage, which would be an incomprehensible privilege in American culture. But in a filial home, it is indicative of Helen and Theresa’s commitment to the roles of obedient wife and dutiful sister.

In her interview with Martha Satz, Jen explains that after Helen and Theresa establish themselves in New York and find Ralph, Ralph and Theresa attempt to reconstruct their Chinese family via marriage (Satz 1993, 133). The marriage creates “enormous enthusiasm for their new arrangement” (Jen 1991, 64). Jen writes, “How right did it all seem! That Ralph should marry [Helen], friend of Theresa – it was just as their parents would have had it” (Jen 1991, 64). This is not an American marriage based on love; Helen and Ralph barely know each other. Sceptically, Ralph doesn’t propose until Helen can get her “crystal chicken just right, and her red cooked carp, too” (Jen 1991, 57). It is an arranged marriage to generate stability. Arranged marriages are expected in China, as explained in Helen’s backstory, “Helen’s parents reassured her, *we’ll find* you someone nice” (Jen 1991, 62).

Clearly Theresa is the architect of this arranged marriage. She is the older, more responsible sibling and demonstrably dutiful to her family, unlike Ralph. She is keeping her American home Chinese. Jen illustrates this point in a conversation between Theresa and Ralph

“You know, someone at school was talking the other day about a person who took his house apart, and moved it, and then rebuilt it, just the way it was.”

“That’s like us, and our family,” Theresa agreed.

“The odd thing was that the house had a leak. So why did the man move it, if it had a leak? That’s the question. Also, he had always hated the inside of it. Too small.”

“Well,” said Theresa, “leaks or no leaks, maybe he was used to it.”

“I guess,” said Ralph, uncertainly. (Jen 1991, 64-65)

This story reveals Ralph’s reservations about his life in China, while Theresa accepts its flaws and limitations. Early in the novel, Jen reveals that Ralph’s parents are disappointed with him and elated with Theresa. Ralph’s father chides him as a “lazy” and “stupid” student; “What do you do besides eat and sleep all day?” he barks. Jen also explains that Ralph was instructed to “study his Older Sister” (Jen 1991, 4). Life in America was meant to be liberating for Ralph. He planned to return to China with a Ph.D. to make his family proud, but Ralph has failed and is under the custody of Theresa, his family, once again. Theresa provides China for Ralph – a dutiful relative, an arranged marriage, shelter and food – but like the man in the story, he has always resented it.

Though Helen and Theresa manage to preserve a remnant of China for Ralph and themselves, it crumbles under the undermining influence of Grover. Jen reveals that Grover, while Chinese-American, only speaks English. When Janis describes Grover to Helen, she explains, “His family has been here for so many generations, I don’t think he even knows what province he’s from. And what does it matter anymore? He’s rich” (Jen 1991, 86). Grover represents a total loss of Chinese values and identity to assimilation. He refuses to be identified by his ancestry and hometown, responding to Ralph’s query, ““You’re hometown is where?”” with “I’ll let you in on a little secret. In this country, the question to ask is, ‘So what do you do for a living?’” (Jen 1991, 105). Instead of using a home for the preservation of identity and tradition, he uses it to make money, ultimately capitalizing on Ralph and Helen’s desire to own a home. Grover “has mastered American home ownership as a profit-making scheme” (R. Lee 1999, 54). In this way, he is able to draw Ralph further from ancestral duties, family relationships, and education, the very values embodied by Theresa.

Likewise, Grover is also disconnected from the influence of women, which makes him an interesting antithesis to Helen and Theresa. His influence shatters the Chang home by moving Ralph from scholarly pursuits and ancestral responsibilities into unstable, illegal, and unsustainable money-making. Because of Grover, Ralph leaves his tenured professorship to start a fried chicken restaurant. Grover teaches Ralph to cheat by underreporting his earnings on the cash register tapes. While Ralph calculates in a locked room, Grover teaches Helen to cheat on

Ralph. His relationships with women in *Typical American* are chiefly sexual, with the seduction of Helen as the pinnacle of his rakish behavior. Even after Janis and Helen fail to pair Grover and Theresa, he unexpectedly licks her when the two are alone (Jen 1991, 206). Grover's disinterest in Theresa foreshadows Ralph's rejection of ancestral duty, family relationships, and powerful women (R. Lee 1999, 62). Masculine Grover drives fast, overindulges, takes what he wants, and refuses limitations. Such limitlessness proves too tempting for an emasculated Ralph.

While Ralph's self-destruction looms large in *Typical American*, much is to be gleaned from careful consideration of Helen and Theresa. Belonging to a new class of educated and capable immigrants which includes women, Helen and Theresa pursue the American dream without losing touch of Chinese culture and virtues, including an obligation to family, academic success, and the preservation of relationships. These women are cognizant of cultural tension and the need to recast meaningful connections to their past under the pressure to assimilate. Conversely, Ralph loses all semblance of filial piety and scholarly success in his emulation of Grover Ding's perilous and unethical self-making. Helen and Theresa save Ralph's life when they take him into their home, reversing his self-isolation from Chinese traditions and community and returning him to a family setting. The home which they create serves as a place to preserve and practice Chinese ways, speak freely about "typical" American behavior, and shelter against anti-immigrant prejudice. These cultural limits contrast with American freedom, but these limits form Helen and Theresa's identities and allow them to navigate the boundaries of gender and race without losing their sense of self. Because they can still hear "an old culture talking," Helen and Theresa understand that "everywhere there are limits," even in America (Jen 1991, 4). Through Helen and Theresa, Jen insinuates that the pursuit of the American dream conceals the contributions and labor of immigrant women. Their efforts, whether providing a secure home, financial support, family care, or supportive relationships, provide discreet and inconspicuous stability. Without Helen and Theresa, the roof leaks, the plaster cracks, and the men forget where they come from.

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## Authoring *Reading Lolita in Tehran* in America: Diasporic Memoir and Rebirth of the Author

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### Abstract:

Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a diasporic memoir that simultaneously challenges Roland Barthes' *Death of the Author* and benefits from the said vacant position Barthes bid farewell. The vacated authorial seat, previously occupied by a majority of eastern and western male authors by tradition, is an invitation for diasporic female authors. Azar Nafisi and other Iranian female memoirists like Marina Nemat, Masih Alinejad, Shirin Ebadi, and others have long had their voices, fantasies, and beings conventionally constrained by the banality of their day-to-day lives, not necessarily by the male figures in their lives, but under the strict patriarchal watch that speculates every dim corner of their private lives. The exilic life in diaspora is a condition of liminality that thrusts the individual into an in-between state of constant becoming. In diaspora, the selective nature of memory, as an elusive and illusive faculty, contributes to the author's process of identity-making. The homeless author cuts off her roots from homeland, so that she may float on the tides with no solid destination; but the uncertainty, also, presents authorship as a liminal initiatory step for the author to construct her identity where belonging seems to be a bygone tale. As such, Nafisi, the previous *reader* of Nabokov's *Lolita* in Tehran, occupies the vacated seat of the dead author as a diasporic author and pens her worldview from the position of an exile in form of a memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, a mouthpiece for the hitherto silent reader.

**Keywords:** Death of the Author, Liminality, Middle Eastern Diaspora, Iranian Diaspora, Belonging, Memoir, Exile.

There is curious ambiguity in the title of Azar Nafisi's first memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. On the face of it, the first and foremost matter in the memoir is *reading* a written text; but the entanglement of a variety of readings with the text(s) proves the act beyond what seems to be a silent act. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (*Reading Lolita*), indeed, situates a process in which the borderline between writing and reading is intently blurred along with the authority of the author that is claimed by either of the parties, the writer and the reader. The term *author* has been on the

ebb and flow of power for some time. The post-structuralist attention that Roland Barthes paid, in defiance of the “author having cultural capital” and “the idea of [his] solitary genius,” to the significance of the interaction between the text and the reader only temporarily led to the *death of the author* (Bold 2016, 3-4). Almost about the same time that Barthes published “Death of the Author,” Michel Foucault essayed to redefine what was generally meant by the term *author*. While for the former the author’s death was a necessity for the text and the reader to come to life, the latter circumvented their execution by defining the term in a broader, extra-textual sense. In both cases of course, “this author was not only solitary and literary but white and male . . . more likely [as] a site of contestation,” for the newly rising voices, those previously unheard of, to occupy the vacancy, even if not forever (Bishop and Starkey 2006, 16-17). By the same token, the Foucauldian notion of *authorship*, beyond the confines of the act of writing, stands at odds with the Barthesian definition of the author as the bygone progenitor of the produced text. Foucault admits such a privileged position of the author is created by “the conditions that fostered the formulation of . . . fundamental critical category of ‘the man and his work’” (2010, 1476). He also agrees with Barthes on “the link between writing and death manifested in the total effacement of the individual characteristics that a writer generates between himself and his text [, which] cancel[s] out the signs of his particular individuality” (1477). This essay offers *Reading Lolita in Tehran* as a possibility for Nafisi as a formerly Middle Eastern Iranian reader to reclaim the author’s position only a few decades after Barthes’ and Foucault’s debate on the death or life of the author. The memoir adjusts and fictionalizes Nafisi’s previous life in homeland for the non-compatriot, necessarily Western, and specifically U.S. reader, and works as a case in point “of how to read in a writerly way” as Barthes seems to suggest (Kao 2015, 277). To briefly highlight the difference between the two reading strategies, we could say that writerly reading “produces new interpretations, that refuses to ‘plasticise’ a text and remove it from its continuous changeability,” whereas the “readerly way is to inherit a set of already-formed readings . . . as a closed collection of timeless objects” (278). The question is whether, by reading in a writerly way, it is possible to revoke the death of the author and breathe life into the bygone authority, albeit in a whole new condition. Relatively, we could ask whether *Reading Lolita* as an Iranian diasporic text, highlights memoir as a manipulatable genre for a Middle-Eastern female author who aims to reoccupy the authorial position of the Barthesian dead classic author.

Barthes and Foucault agreed that the term *author* gained power in the modern times, entitling both the writer and publisher with their various rights regarding the inscribed words. With “writing . . . slowly becoming more open and democratic,” the claim effectively shattered the allegedly illusory entitlement of the two claimants to the ownership of the published letters, which were since recognized as an independent living entity, endlessly reborn with each individual readership (Bold 2016, 5). Added to what Barthes and Foucault had maintained about the *work*— what is penned on the paper— Wolfgang Iser later stated that the aesthetic nature of a work only renders a partial value of the *work* as a whole. What brings about the artistic creation may not and

cannot equate with the aesthetic one, “the realization accomplished by the reader” (1972, 279). The living status of the work—and not its material and linguistic existence—lies, according to him, not within the domain of the author but the reading process. For Iser, the value of the text is determined by the “gestalt” of its comprehension:

. . . an individual act of seeing-things-together . . . inseparable from the reader’s expectations, and where we have expectations, there too we have one of the most potent weapons in the writer’s armory—illusion. (289)

But this clarification leads to an equally significant manoeuvrability; the writer uses the same armoury to regain the lost authority; after all, the “literary meaning is not an innocent act” from the ideological and political roots (Kálmán 1997, 56). Accordingly, such “slogans” as the author’s death seem “empty;” instead, “we should reexamine the empty space left by the author’s disappearance . . . its new demarcations, and the reapportionment of this void; we should await the *fluid* functions released by this disappearance” (Foucault 1969, 1479). The fluidity is precisely where the function of an exilic diaspora writer takes its turn from having formerly been an invisible, muted, marginal reader, to a voice that rises to a new-born authorial one. In fact, Barthes’ death of the author generates the vacancy where the hitherto silent, now mutinous diasporic memoirist fits his/her memoir in a popular Western genre.

Writing in diaspora is that new breath that, once exhaled, challenges the Barthesian death sentence. The challenge can be even more noticeable in the works of female diasporic authors, whose voices, fantasies, and beings rise from the constrained banality of their day-to-day lives—their former domestic lives often fictionalized as “a colonial harem”—and under the strict watch of the patriarchal laws which speculates every dim nook and cranny of their private lives (DePaul 2008, 78). Such colonial association is, of course, based on two grounds: the first is the depiction of the Iranian woman living in a patriarchal social condition which enforces the restrictions on her daily life, from dress code to social interactions; and the second ground relates to the way that the Western memoir market desires the Iranian woman to be depicted in a patriarchal “harem” by the memoirist. While the first analogy of the Iranian women’s condition in Iran is entangled with the factual history of their lives, the second view is a combination of the market’s demand for dense and at times exaggerated images in addition to what is readily engraved in the mind of the American reader and the memoirist as her past life. In both of these two senses, Iranian women at large are shown as being caged in what DePaul calls a “colonial harem” with the gaze of an essentially patriarchal society dictating them how to live. Azar Nafisi’s selective memory, in her confrontation with the gaze, chooses the scenes of her memoir by “depicting post-revolutionary women as helpless,” in such a way that Hamid Dabashi describes as a call for the “white men saving brown women from brown men” (DePaul 2008, 84; 2011, 69). the depiction, of course, contrasts her own character as a bold and heroic “mouthpiece for an entire country . . . creating a work that plays to western desires to orientalise Middle Eastern countries” (Clemens 2014, 584). The contrast between

these female images leads Nafisi to be reluctant in appreciating the voices of the *other* women, those that do not accord with hers or her team of loyal students, and to depict them as the unsavoury odd ones out of Nafisi's close-knit circle of confidantes. Razieh's moment is a case in point as one of Nafisi's female university students whose name suitably resonates as religious, and who dares to chastise, and thus startle Nafisi for having left "their small college to teach at the University of Tehran" (Nafisi 2003, 222); Razieh declines Nafisi's invitation to participate in her future classes at the University, despite her avid interest in literature. Her physical and emotional features are described as categorically different from the girls of the private reading club:

... a strange mixture of contradictory passions... bitter and determined, stern and tough, ... an inarticulate writer... a figure wrapped in a black chador, a small figure ... [with a] narrow face and large eyes, *like an owl's, or an imp's* in some invented tale. (222)

Razieh is an outsider to Nafisi's group, one of the women who, according to the narrator, "envy people like you and we want to be you; we can't, so we destroy you" (222). The author's recollection, here, discriminates between the female students who follow her lead and those who, perhaps year later, have the same worldview as Nafisi's on their own. Razieh's instance is one that can attune the analogy of the "colonial harem" to the mind-set of the western reader and promote him/her to patronize the diasporic author that draws the story for his/her eyes. Nafisi's educational background in the States provides her with the advantage of knowing this about the cultural market of the American readership. As such, she benefits from the now destabilised conventions of authorship and, "influenc[ed by her] imagined world" (DePaul 2008, 76), narrates the lives of those like Razieh—in contrast with the members of her reading club—in diaspora through the writerly reading of *Lolita*.

We should now consider the condition that facilitates Nafisi's voice and memory as those of a female diasporic memoirist to rise beyond the restrictions of her former life in Iran. Hamid Naficy refers to the exilic life of diaspora as one that is possible only in a liminal space, an in-between state of constant becoming. For the writer in diaspora, "identity . . . occurs in the space between cultural borders" (Ogan 2001, 6). As such, liminality—also known by Homi Bhabha as hybridity—is not a one-time event like birth, one which initiates with its happening a necessary beginning and an inevitable end; it continually recurs along the way. In diaspora, one simply cannot *be*, but constantly *becomes*. Therefore, the lack of beginning or end of any sort defies a definite sense of identity, birth, or an eventual death. The exile, whether self-willed like Nafisi or obligated like many political asylum seekers, becomes uprooted from his/her homeland, floats on the flows of change; therefore, it is almost impossible, at least in the beginning, for the exile to cling to any sense of belonging. Identity as a matter of essentially constant becoming turns to a constant reshaping by the bits and pieces that the exile voluntarily or otherwise gathers around him/her, and in accordance with the proximity of the social

interpellation, an illusion tried to be defined through the subject's view on his/her self. Thus, in such a liminal space as diaspora, the certainty of states of birth and death—of the Barthesian author, reader, or any identity—is caught in the flow of the constant change, in the dynamic of the social forces. Liminality is an essentially foreign event; however, it is better highlighted once the individual is distant from the familiarity of what was once known as home, and is positioned within the diasporic space of constant becoming. Feeling exiled, in fact, takes the initial steps in one's homeland where one no longer feels he/she belong, and the affinities with her society is lost into meaninglessness. However, in the condition of geographic deterritorialization, the liminal tone remains less critical, more subtle and less explicit, the reason for which may be the societal pressure still weighing on one's thoughts and heart. Therefore, when memory, as the impact of the present conditioning, is activated retrospectively—versus the factual validity of history which is the fruit of the past, it works under the influence of both past and present life conditions of the writer as well as the prospect of the future for the diasporic author. In this regard, Nafisi's *Reading Lolita*, published in 2003, about 15 years after her immigration to the States (Nafisi 2003, 341), sounds like a well-settled one that is far passed that liminal stage of diaspora, a memoir written from the author's selective bank of recollections as remembered and made sense of in her current mind-set and with regards to what it may bring forth to her, a recollection that comes back from the future.

The selective nature of memory may function in such a way that is both elusive and illusive, a characteristic that, with the help of intriguing assets like old family films and photographs, provides for the dislocated writer the opportunity to tailor a lived experience that could lead to their growth in the void of the new home. Exile is a trauma, be it self-willed or forced upon the individual. It is a divorce from anything that once felt familiar, whether appealing or otherwise. Nafisi, in the same fashion, observes the new land to redefine what life may have meant back in homeland, now that she is miles and years away from it. Past memory is a necessity to live by, until the time gives the exile the luxury to have planted new memories in the new home. The exile needs this sense of belonging to survive; otherwise they will be devoid of agency of any sort. Creativity, thus, turns to a life force, so as to render this invisible, anonymous being the comfort of the return of authority, the authorship of one's life. Coming to such conclusion is the beginning of becoming, not in the new land, but in a third space that Hamid Naficy defines as 'liminality.'

The author has his/her roots cut off from the soil, and for some seemingly endless time, they float on the tides of waves with no solid destination to land on to. What necessitates the exile to write memoir as a "catalyst . . . for an 'economy of affect'" is the uncanny nature of that liminal nowhere land and the readership of such displacement (Ostby 2007, 74). The essential fluidity of in-betweenness enforces a "recontextualization of the . . . text by" a hybrid "intertext that replaces relations to the source literature with relations to literary traditions in the receiving culture that a reader of the translation must possess" (Venuti 2011, 185). The new condition contradicts the

tie with one's past life; for, as sweet and idealistic as it may seem, setting out for a new life is a herculean task for the individual—the exile, the refugee, or the immigrant—in diaspora, facing the unknown, the destabilizing forces of the past, and uprootedness. At odd times, even, the illusory and idealized version of the past memories helps one to forget about the anxiety of what may or may not await her; at other times, the past is what exactly she/he desires to run away from, the nightmare of the bygone life haunting the rootless exile to the end. Nevertheless, for Nafisi as a long diasporic female author, freed from the patriarchal gaze of the past and in a post-liminal state, the dam can be already broken and the words flooding out, so much so that nothing could bring a halt to this flow of memories. The liminal space combines the identity of the author and the reader within a different set of codes as the moment of identification *becomes*. Nafisi publishes *Reading Lolita* in post-9/11 times, conveniently at a time that the American hostile sentiments against the Middle Eastern Muslims and Iran, coinciding with George W. Bush addressing Iran as the “Axis of Evil,” were at its apex (Dabashi 2011, 58). It is in such atmosphere that Nafisi's voice as an exilic one plays by the hegemonic rules of the new land that selectively works on her memory of the past, and makes a bestseller of her memoir in the market of the American readership.

As a female Middle-Eastern (Iranian) author and by the laws of her homeland, Nafisi suggests that she narrates the untold tales of domestic and social life, as well as the mundane banality of not just her own, but many other Iranian women's invisible lives that belong with her social class. Such invisibility she talks about may seem at odds with today's way that Iranian women participate in cultural, political and social aspects of life. But the truth is even today the frameworks of conventions are designed in such a way that leaves the minimum liberty for a woman in a given social status to enjoy manoeuvrability on her life path. As the convention rules and by the time she reaches her mid-life period, an urban woman like her is will expected to be married, with a husband and two kids to tend to and gradually accustomed to the day-to-day force of habit, almost oblivious of when and where she left her dreams and identity behind. The laws of the land, despite having changed their colours on the surface of everyday modernity, still favour patriarchy and family-orientedness, and the conventions divorce the woman's self from her female body. Hardly among the Middle-Eastern women does a full awakening take place from such a spiritual hibernation; yet if it does, the outburst of the untold tales flows vehemently, lashing out in an accusatory tone and a blinding bias against all men. Almost no man is ever portrayed contrarily; every man becomes a potential enemy and connives against this rage, this rising desire from the ashes. Likewise, it is through the commiseration and commemoration of the past, and those of her chosen authors—ironically three out of the four Western authors are male—that Nafisi demonstrates the “desire to ‘allo-identity,’ to read [her] self across . . . *other selves*” (Avtar Brah, qtd. in Malek 2015, 367). For this reason, the tenacity in Nafisi's quest for the rebirth of this new authorial voice, what she has long been deprived of, seems as relentless towards the western fictional characters like Nabokov's Humbert Humbert as her fellow women/girls and men from her own background society.

Either as an involuntary or self-exerting exile in the liminal and post-liminal life of diaspora, Nafisi's memory of the past turns to an illusion of a safe haven of *belonging* that is no longer associable, the nostalgic flashback of not-such-a-sweet home. For, had it been so, there would have been no reason for her to leave *home* and be pushed away from it in the first place. Her past achievements—acknowledged by a few and almost unknown to the public—fade away as far-fetched ideas no longer having any real trace in her life in exile. Becoming in liminality—as is the case with most of exiles/immigrants—starts from the estranged uncanny within, where the old refrains from integrating with the new. One feels lost as to where one should call home and where the heart beats for, the place that has so far built up their identity within, or the new land which appears indifferent to their exilic history.

Globalization and displacement, today, align with the rising interest in auto-fiction as a genre that focuses on identity when it is uprooted from its origin and has not yet reached where it can call home. Memoir as a genre allies the silenced voice and the mutilated hand to come to life and pen down a biography now safely *fictionalised* in retrospect. Nafisi avoids the promise of veracity in her note before she starts the memoir, generalizing the liminality of her narrative to the nature of memory: “The facts in this story are true insofar as *any* memory is ever truthful” (*Reading Lolita*, “Author’s Note”). Nafisi was a promising English professor in Tehran before she left Iran for the States for good. She may have had some academic output here and there, but she was not known as a writer before *Reading Lolita* hit the market as a bestseller. Her auto-fiction embeds her years of studying English literature, her readerly readings of Nabokov, Fitzgerald, James, and Austen which gradually became more and more interpretive and writerly, to the extent that they positioned her on the author’s seat. The pre-established identity of the author moulds her readerly character into a writerly one that is no longer muted, yet neither one is separated from the other. Nafisi’s memoir as the interaction of these identical forms is determined by the writer’s liminal loyalty in the expanse between the past and the new life. One may note the nature of such confused loyalty in Nafisi’s diasporic memoir when she recalls how estranged she felt in the post-revolution Tehran, “it was not until I had reached home that I realized the true meaning of exile’ (2003, 145). The hegemony of the new land affects her imagination to shift from the former set of codes to the current ones, and her recollections adjust the past with the expectations of today’s reader; it is such adjustment that can guarantee the survival of her rising authorial voice in the reading market.

Sooner or later, the heart starts to betray the former life, and re-initiation takes its toll. The publication of *Reading Lolita* is done within good timing; it coincides with “an explosion of largely female book clubs and reading groups starting in the 1990’s America,” and the American growing awareness of Iran,” during the Bush administration, and as mentioned before through the hostile sentiments against Iran (DePaul 2008, 74, 73). It is a moment of—an author’s estrangement from her homeland; the main frame depicts a narrator—the fictional and autobiographical Nafisi who is becoming increasingly isolated, feeling betrayed by her own people, especially once she is

forced to resign from all her social activities. She, then, forsakes her established academic *being* for an unknown authorial *becoming* by initializing her self-exile to the imaginative area of refuge, where “art and literature became so essential to [their] lives; they were not a luxury but a necessity” (Nafisi 2003, 23). As such, one may note that her liminal condition emerges long before her immigration to the U.S. It develops precisely in the living room of her house, where “looking out towards distant white-capped [Elburz] mountains,” and mesmerized by their sublime beauty, she feels caged and incapable of reaching out for them (22). Her survival requires her to gather seven of her likeminded former *female* students who are compared with “the virgins, who, unlike Sheherazade, have no voice” in *A Thousand and One Nights*, and share with her the isolation that the new Islamic regime has put them in (19). The group has the necessary prerequisites as a community: a “group of people with the same or similar aim or aspiration . . . connected by . . . personal relation[s] [and] . . . interpersonal interaction[s] (Kálmán 1997, 53). Generally, what is shared by the members of a community distinguishes it from any others, and causes the members’ “desire or need to express such a distinction” (55). As for Nafisi’s team, each single one of the girls finds her life drastically affected by the contemporary social and political currents of events. Each is introduced and described at length and in detail, and as their ideological backgrounds are reviewed, the reader would notice the similarity of their despair and the dire urgency for them, at least temporarily, to lose themselves in the liminal world of fantasy, regardless of their apparent, ideological, and social differences and as a necessary defence mechanism.

Another feature of a community resonates in the power relation between the members of Nafisi’s reading club. Although ideally regarded as democratic, there is always a hierarchic relation between the members of any kind of group. In “a community of interpretation” as Samuel Weber asserts, “the gap between inner and outer is bridged by a *voice* speaking in terms of a *name* that in turn is invoked to guarantee the unity of what is separate” from the outside world; yet the power hierarchy is hardly undone by necessity, despite the said gap being bridged by the author’s voice (Weber 1990, 57). Nafisi, having resigned from her position as an English literature professor in Tehran, and as a not-yet internationally reputed author, hosts the girls mainly because she is too frustrated to remain institutionally engaged in the rising hostile regime. After her immigration to America, this proves not a totally altruistic act of hospitality. Nafisi advantages from her superior position throughout her memoir; in fact, nowhere in all the 343 pages of *Reading Lolita* does she refer to the students as friends or equals. Their statuses as former students remain intact even within the privacy of their newly formed haven. In a sense, the reader may notice the hierarchic binaries of host/guest, professor/student, and author/reader still in effect throughout *Reading Lolita*, years later enlivened in the words. However, we should note that the binary sense of status may not have actually been a conscious, conspiratorial thirst for the authorial power on Nafisi’s side at the time that the weekly meetings took place. Nonetheless, the mentioned hierarchic binaries maintaining the imbalance of power—which Barthes deprived the author figure of—now turn into a positively charged void calling for occupancy.

Nafisi's anonymity of the exilic diaspora gradually gives its place to a more settled sense of home and identity, especially when she has established herself with a career at Johns Hopkins University. Her memoir writing happens at this stage of the diasporic life and although as a female activist, she desires to give her students the opportunity of being read by a new community, her memoir also aims "to create an interpretive community, [for which] the presence of some transcendental power is inevitable" (Kálmán 1997, 63). What we should keep in mind is that:

. . . only the voice of a living individual leader' can call the community of interpretation into being. The community can thus be called into being because it has always already existed in spirit, in whose name the founder declares its reality. (Kálmán 1997, 63)

After "the attacks on [her] elite upbringing," mainly done by the Iranian diasporic community, she seeks an audience from a different fabric than her fellow Iranians—at home or in diaspora—to appreciate her desire of establishing an authorial voice with all the empowerment it may entail (DePaul 2008, 78). Her group-reading act turns into a rioting move of a critical reader who eventually aims for the power of the author, a mutiny within "a sort of domestic class for ego-reinforcement and consciousness" (Naiman 2007, 34). Nafisi subscribes to no patriarchal authority of any sense, neither the one from her origin, nor the Barthesian death of the author; instead she uses the vacant spot by raising her voice from the readerly position to that of the writerly, the voice of the new author.

*Reading Lolita* combines the ups and downs of Nafisi's personal and professional background, with those of the classic English novels' characters, so much so that the reader almost cannot help but pause his/her reading process, and review the intertext of the western classics and the frame of the memoir, eventually to go through the deceased authors' lives, whose voices are incessantly echoed throughout *Reading Lolita*. The texture of this web expands beyond the scope of the imaginary world of fiction; it insists on the *reality* of the authors' voices, their choice of words, and what once gave way to how they invested imagination in their creations. Nabokov, Fitzgerald, and Austin's voices are the necessary component particles of what gives life to *Reading Lolita*. Memoir as a frame in *Reading Lolita* embeds the literary texts in an *A-Thousand-and-One-Night* narrative style, including Vladimir Nabokov's *An Invitation to a Beheading*, *Bend Sinister* and *Lolita*—the three "stories that share a political subtext" (DePaul 2008, 81), Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice*, and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Each text is deliberately chosen and put on a pedestal that later becomes their trial stand. The initial admiration of the texts later confronts the harsh critiques of the girls, mirroring Nafisi's disappointed view towards death at large, and the suffocating condition that the rise of the Islamic regime reflected. Nafisi's previous life abroad as an English student and "the US's powerful need for this narrative" facilitate Nafisi to claim for the position of the author (Clemens 2014, 584). She employs her insight on the U.S reader's interest in the

exoticism of a Middle-Eastern land and the turmoil of the post-revolutionary agitation to full advantage. English is the chosen language of the memoir by intent, so that the text would dialogue with an essentially Western-Orientalist mind-set, and Nafisi's scholarly expertise nourishes the souls of those in search of the Occidental associations within the text. She brings the voice of the past authors—mainly Nabokov's—to appropriate the exotic in the Western reader's imagination, and describe how it would be even possible to live under a stifling regime, witnessing infinite executions of the voice, body, and soul. Accordingly, she reminds the reader about Nabokov's "Cincinnatus C., his imaginative and lonely hero ... [and] his originality in a society where uniformity is not only the norm but also the law;" the group, in turn, models after Cincinnatus C. in their "retreat into [themselves] in order to survive" (Nafisi 2003, 20; 23). Reading for the group evolves into a Nabakovian "Upsilamba," lacking meaning as much as meaning anything: "the impossible joy of a suspended leap . . . the image of small silver fish leaping in and out of a moonlit lake . . . three girls jumping rope and shouting 'upsilamba' [or] . . . the paradox of a blissful sigh," etc. (20-21). It is in such a way that the coming-to-life of the dead authors, as well as the desire of the designated reader consolidate the authority that was assumed long passed by Barthes and Foucault. In fact, had it not been for rebirth of the dead western authors, it may have been not too easy an act for the Western reader to relate to Nafisi's characters' lived experiences in post-revolutionary Iran. *An Invitation to a Beheading* would have been a befitting title for Nafisi's memoir—considering the immense censorship of life in its entirety under the Islamic regime during the 1980's—if it had not been already taken Nabokov's titular choice. *Reading Lolita* invites the reader to witness the invisible corrosion of identity and watch the masquerade of life being eradicated. By the same token, she narrates the "unique perspective to [that] historical moment" and the "democratic nature of [her] memoir" invites the reader to share the agony of the experience (Dabashi qtd. in Clemens 2014, 585; Adam qtd. in Malek 2015, 360). Therefore, Nafisi needs the voice of the bygone Western authors to come to full life as she cannot possibly do it on her own. There must be a connection made with the targeted reader's imagination—which is almost unfamiliar with this state of non-living—to make them feel the author's own experience of desperate deterritorialization.

Nafisi's fictional authority is established upon a bit of fictional exaggeration of facts, especially in the eye of the Iranian reader who has the experience of having lived in the war-stricken society of Tehran of 1980's. Yet, the make-believe of fiction authorizes Nafisi to make such exaggerations; even those who have been in the heart of the actual truth momentarily suspend disbelief for the authorial power of fiction. Despite Nafisi's admiration of Nabakov, he fails her in the shift from a readerly to an authorly position; he admits that due to the affinities and "allegories between literature and politics, strong writers . . . have more in common with political dictators than . . . victims" (Naiman 2007, 25). However, Nafisi also confesses that "for [her], the kind of power [she]'d like to exert is through writing," as a site for power struggle (Nafisi 2014, 00:35:00). Writing for American readership motivates her

pre-exilic memory to rise in mutiny against the Barthesian death, in alliance with a different reader, “in a different America,” and with the “kind of ideological perspective that the American and European [readership] . . . expect” (Donadey qtd. in Clemens 2014, 586). In such a liminal upheaval of the authorial hierarchy of writer/reader vs. Western/Eastern, Nafisi as a Middle-Eastern, female, diasporic author struggles for and gains power over the Western reader. By the same token, her authorship, as well, is embraced as a self-empowering act as she escapes, rebels against, and redeems her exilic condition. Dabashi is of the conviction that America is:

an empire lacking, in fact requiring an absence of, long term memory, and banking heavily on the intensity of short term memories—one to two wars per one presidential election. . . . This act of collective amnesia accompanies a strategy of selective memory. . . . A particularly powerful case of such selective memories is now fully evident in an increasing body of memoirs by people from an Islamic background . . . perhaps best represented by Azar Nafisi’s *Reading Lolita in Tehran*.

This amnesiac short-term memory is the catalyst for *Reading Lolita* to become a bestseller, for several reasons: First, her tale would have only been one among millions of her likes, of lives lost by the tyranny of war, the memory that many of us would have wilfully tried to *not* remember. Secondly, for a reader who has already undergone such massive traumas as war, regime change, totalitarianism, and massacres of intellectuals and political prisoners, no proper language can touch the actuality of atrocity; it is the help of the cultural amnesia that facilitates the success of Nafisi’s language. If *Reading Lolita* were considered as a purely historical testimony of the post-Islamic-revolutionary decades, during which time so many allegedly anti-revolutionists, monarchists, Mojahedin, and communists were unfoundedly and brutally massacred, it would accord Nafisi to the rather harsh description Hamid Dabashi attributes to her, “the personification of that native informer and colonial agent, polishing her services for an American version of . . . US imperial operation” (2006). Yet, the fictional aspect of Nafisi’s memoir is what saves her from the accusatory attacks that came with the publication of *Reading Lolita*.

For the rebirth of the new author, Nafisi as a critic pens her worldview from the position of an exilic author in the form of a memoir, a mouthpiece for the hitherto silent reader/critic, in the secure quiet of the exilic anonymity. She defies the *death of the author* by rising herself once she destines her reader to be non-Iranian, English-speaking or at least English proficient, and by relying on the texts from among the English classical masterpieces rather than Persian ones. It is she as the *author* who decides the reader’s extent of affinity to texture of the tale, and consequently, establishes her interpretive community. She takes the author’s death as recent news as a survival tactic, while the vacant space braves her to occupy it. Like Cincinnatus C., “the only way to leave the circle, to stop dancing with the jailer, is to find a way to preserve one’s individuality;” and so she finds hers in rising above the state of a reader (Nafisi 2003, 77).

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# Plunged into Darkness: Rootlessness, Displacement and Vulnerability in Melania Mazzucco's *I Am With You. The Story of Brigitte*

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## Abstract:

Melania Mazzucco's *Io sono con te. Storia di Brigitte (I Am With You. The Story of Brigitte)* (2016), the paper argues, articulates the existential and psychological condition of displacement and vulnerability of Brigitte, the immigrant protagonist, and her cultural negotiation for recognition as a refugee and asylum seeker by the host country, Italy. In *I Am With You* two women meet for months, getting to know and trust each other. One is Brigitte who has fled her country, Congo, having lost everything, including her children who are left behind. The other is Melania, the writer, who listens to her and decides to give voice to Brigitte's story. The novel, a combination of narration and documentation, is the jagged and painful true story of the protagonist's fall from her small personal paradise to the hell of loss, violence and trauma. Her arrival in Italy as an illegal immigrant is the beginning of a new ordeal as well as of a rebirth, in a city, Rome, which is both inhospitable and welcoming, politically inadequate, and yet still full of potential 'miracles'. Mazzucco's text will be examined and discussed in the light of trauma theory, psychoanalysis and memory studies.

**Keywords:** Fictional testimony, forced migration, integration, liminality, trauma, vulnerability

Thou shalt leave each thing  
Beloved most dearly: This is the first shaft  
Shot from the bow of exile. Thou shalt prove  
How salt the savour is of other's bread;  
How hard the passage, to descend and climb  
By other's stairs

Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy, Paradiso*, Canto XVII, ll. 55-60

## Introduction

This paper sets out to examine Melania Mazzucco's *Io sono con te. Storia di Brigitte (I Am With You. The Story of Brigitte)*<sup>1</sup> (2016), in order to analyse and discuss how the writer addresses such topical themes as the illegal, forced migration of asylum seekers and the successive complex integration process, with its diverse obstacles and implications. Mazzucco's text, the paper argues, encapsulates the existential and psychological condition of liminality and vulnerability of Brigitte, the protagonist, and her cultural negotiation for recognition as a refugee and asylum seeker by the host country, Italy.

*I Am With You* is the true account of a cultural, psychological, and existential journey during which two women meet for months, getting to know, understand and trust each other. One is Brigitte who has escaped political persecution in her country, Congo, having lost everything, and is 'shipwrecked' in Italy. The other is Melania, the writer, who listens to her as a human being and decides to tell her story. Mazzucco's novel edges towards the territory of fictional testimony, being a combination of narration and documentation; it is the harrowing story of the protagonist's fall from her small personal paradise to the hell of loss, helpless exposure to violence and trauma with the shattering array of consequences, in a condition of social and economic dispossession and precariousness.

The novel narrates the protagonist's violent oppression in her home country, leading to precarious migrancy and displacement, a discourse informed also by the issues of race and gender, and the anxieties they tend to generate. The text follows the gradual downward curve of the protagonist's existential trajectory, a process that thoroughly transforms her: from being a successful, autonomous subject, first she is threatened and politically persecuted; then, degraded to an abject inhuman condition and subjected to all types of awful brutality. In the end, on her arrival in the host country, she becomes an illegal body and the "possible epitome of the Levinasian face of the other, as she is the one who depends on others in her frailty, which makes her the recipient of the other's generosity and ethical response" (Ganteau 2015, 1). Uprooted from her known familiar world and community, she treads a thin line, wavering between hunting memories of the past and the children she had to leave behind, and the necessity to adapt to a different socio-cultural reality in order to (re)construct her identity, start a new life, and gradually look forward to the future.

The paper will consider how Brigitte's whole life trajectory verges on thresholds and inhabits a condition of liminality, though of a different nature: in the African narrative she moves in the liminal state of living death, oscillating between the human and the inhuman, life and impending death. In the Italian section it is the psychological and existential liminality of someone who lives between worlds, "between a lost past and a non-integrated present" (Chambers 1994, 12); on the margins of society, in a degraded or cast out status, coming from an elsewhere, thus being simultaneously neither inside nor outside, her identity constantly challenged.

Mazzucco's choice to record the true story of a woman who undergoes all sorts of traumatic experiences, it is maintained, highlights some of the important functions that the contemporary novel fulfills. First, to capture what happens in reality and reflect upon it, to interrogate our certainties and practices, therefore to be "an ethical and political prism through which to apprehend the contemporary world" (Ganteau 2015, 24), in order to offer a further key to understand the complex challenges that some processes pose to our communities. Second, to be the privileged site for the expression of different forms of vulnerability, loss and trauma, issues that demand our constant attention and vigilance. In fact, it seems as though "vulnerability, in the wake of – or alongside – trauma, has become a paradigm of the

contemporary culture, and a template for the wounded contemporary subject” (Ganteau 2015, 4). In light of this, the paper claims, the novel also performs a powerful ethical gesture.

### **Silence and fragments of conversations**

Oscillating between the novel and the essay, in *I Am With You* Mazzucco leans towards the investigation and description of peripheral spaces that are relevant from both a sociological and a literary perspective.

In a long interview given a few months after the novel’s publication, the author throws light both on *how* and *why* the project of writing the novel originated. The book is the outcome of the collaboration between the writer and the Astalli Centre in Rome, the Italian section of the Jesuit Refugee Service. Since 2002, the centre has promoted the project ‘Windows – Stories of Refugees’ aimed at students from secondary and higher education schools in order to encourage them to reflect on the theme of the right of asylum, in particular through direct contact with refugees and their stories.

Mazzucco’s first declared objective was not “to write a story in the past, but one still evolving, thus making a journey together with the protagonist” (Riggio 2017, 126), a choice that also allowed her to continue her reflections on the general theme of migration, a long-cultivated interest that had culminated in her prize-winning novel on Italian migration to America, *Vita* (2003). Consequently, she decided to avoid the happy-ending narrative of a refugee who had made it, and started to look for “someone who was still struggling” (Riggio 2017, 126). She also refused the logic of the news report, where refugees are mere numbers left in the anonymity of their despair, and embraced a different perspective, “that of lives that deserve to, and can, be narrated” (Riggio 2017, 125). So she chose to write about one single person, whose story was similar to that of many others, but that could become a true narrative.

Adding also her reflections within the text while appropriating the discourse of migration, Mazzucco revisits the form of the conventional immigrant novel in a manner that epitomizes the hybridity of the genre. At the same time, by responding to – and engaging with – the narratives of others, aware of our own otherness, she bears witness to the possibility of an ethical relationship and encounter between the migrant and the host country.

The novel charts Brigitte’s difficult process of adaptation to a new community, weaving together two storylines. Narration does not proceed in a strictly chronological order, but mirrors the working of memory, in which past events continue to reverberate in the present – as if *being* present – thus belying the supposed linearity of time. It is a technique that the writer tends to privilege in most of her novels, as she herself admits: “What holds my novels together is the way they relate to time. [...] following the characters’ time and lives” (Galeotti 2009, 2).

The first storyline is a retrospective narrative that records the protagonist’s odyssey to escape the military regime’s persecution in her country and reach Italy. The second thread follows her arrival in Rome as a refugee seeking shelter in a totally unknown country. It is

actually a second journey for her and a further ordeal, but also a possible beginning, in a city that is both inhospitable and welcoming, politically inadequate and yet a potential site of ‘miracles’ and transformation, a story that begins in 2013 and is still evolving at the end of the book in 2016.

In the above mentioned interview, Mazzucco discusses the structural and formal choices she had to make in order to allow Brigitte’s true voice to emerge, refusing the idea of appropriating her story and, with it, her identity. She decided that the protagonist’s African story had to be narrated by Brigitte herself in the first person, because the writer could not reconstruct it in any other way. On this issue, Mazzucco faced the difficulty of *how* to render Brigitte’s voice in the act of writing; she rejected the use of mimetic language and decided to convey her point of view. She says: “I have tried to be her in the only possible way I can, that is to say by writing” (Riggio 2017, 127). The adoption of this perspective allows Brigitte’s gaze to observe both the culture of the host country – that is ‘other’ to her – and the writer herself, and she does it with her own prejudices, stereotypes, her personal vision of the world, an approach that deconstructs the dichotomous opposition I / Other.

Conversely, the writer tells the section of Brigitte’s Italian ‘shipwreck’ in the third person, “because at that stage Brigitte is depersonalized, she receives a name only after frère Antoine comes across her at Termini station and sends her to the Centro Astalli, where she meets the humanitarian aid worker Filippo” (Riggio 2017, 127). Finally, there is the writer’s own self present in the narrative since, she affirms, “this story was given to me, I took it and from a certain point on our relationship became its key” (Riggio 2017, 127).

Piecing together Brigitte’s painful, long-repressed memories that gradually resurface, the novel relates Brigitte’s almost two years spent in Rome before she meets the author and her relationships with all the people who helped her. In the writer’s intention, the structure of the novel had to reflect the evolution of their relationship, so that the reader gets to know Brigitte as she herself did, approaching her memory gradually. Indeed, Brigitte begins to recollect the ‘facts’ of her story only after she has been meeting the psychiatrist and the psychologist for three months, and the book follows this process of reconstruction and psychological healing, when the fragmented recounting of suffering, fear and abjection quiets down, and can be concatenated into a story.

The novel opens with an introductory first-person unnumbered section that leaves the identity of the protagonists unspecified. They are introduced simply as “we”, “she”, “the child” (Mazzucco 2016, 3),<sup>2</sup> a choice that hints at an initial tentative stage of acquaintance between the writer and the protagonist who are still extraneous, as Mazzucco reminds the reader in her interview: “At first we were two strangers” (Riggio 2017, 132), adding that it took her time to learn to overcome Brigitte’s resistance.

The first descriptive paragraph appears to be a sort of objective correlative of the psychological condition of both protagonists. A series of elements and lexical choices contribute

to create the emotional atmosphere: the adjectives used, as well as the symbolic presence of an “austere wooden table [that] separates us”, “the empty chairs”, the dim “light flowing from a dusty lamp” (3), are all elements that communicate a sense of melancholy and solitude. Even the weather adds to this gloomy sensation as the rain is “malevolent and tired, and humidity intensifies the cold” (3). The second paragraph is punctuated by the repeated use of negative sentences to underscore the writer’s skepticism about the possibility of ever being able to relate Brigitte’s story.

A theme that abruptly surfaces during their initial conversation, to the writer’s surprise – and that is central to understand the protagonist’s personality, her resilience and reactions to what happens to her – is religion, already hinted at in the novel’s title and in the epigraph, “Don’t be afraid, because I am with you” (Isaiah, 41.10). At first, Brigitte juxtaposes Mazzucco’s identity as a Roman with the ancient Romans who killed Jesus Christ, considering it a probable serious obstacle “which might nip [their] friendship in the bud” (5). Her skeptical attitude is assuaged only when the writer offers her some historical facts and points out how things have changed over the centuries. Besides, the religious reference to Jesus Christ becomes also symbolic of Brigitte’s condition as a victim of the tortures she had to bear at the hands of her persecutors, thus proleptically anticipating the tone and nature of her future narrative.

The initial conversations, that take place in French, a sort of neutral language for both, are more like “ineffectual digressions”, proceeding “in fits and starts, fragmentary associations” (4), shifting topics, all the time circling around the upsetting African events that loom large at the back of both their minds, while avoiding mentioning them. These are cautious, tentative explorations of the ‘other’, to approach a foreign psychological and cultural territory that is still too fragile and obscure even to Brigitte herself.

Though the text interweaves Brigitte’s double narrative in alternating chapters or sections within the same chapter – as mentioned before – the paper will discuss first her African story, because chronologically it precedes the narrative of her arrival in Italy which opens the novel.

### **A narrative from the heart of darkness**

Brigitte’s African narrative is indirectly introduced by the author herself who muses on the psychological mechanisms that human beings unconsciously activate when they have to cope with unbearably shocking traumas in order to protect themselves from collapsing.

At the Centro Astalli, Mazzucco learns that asylum seekers tell stories that are often false, or partly so, adapted to make them sound worse, like scripts frequently too similar to each other. In such cases, “the true story of a person is turned into the counterfeit story of many others – and it is used and abused, till the fabric wears out, disclosing its texture” (32). However, many more are true,

not less atrocious, absurd, at times incredible, because reality ignores verisimilitude, and coherence. And the violence that a human being can inflict on another almost always exceeds our well-bred imagination

as Europeans born and grown up in peacetime. Besides, whoever has experienced a trauma or has penetrated the labyrinths of the psyche knows that, to protect ourselves from suffering and be able to bear it, we must find expedients and activate displacement, slippage, estrangement, alienation mechanisms. And pretend that what happened to us has actually happened to someone else. The truth is that it will take her months before she accepts to recognize herself in that story. That she can bear it, and understand that it belongs to her. And neither she can, nor she must, cancel or forget it (32-33).

Brigitte's first-person narrative takes the reader back to her city, Matadi, where she was a professional nurse and owned two clinics, one of which is the place where the terrible events leading to her final escape begin. Her nightmare starts on a November afternoon when a group of seven young people, wounded during a political demonstration against the government in power, are taken to her clinic to have their injuries treated. A few hours later, a stout army colonel, with eyes "as hard as a crow's" (40), comes to the clinic and, with no preamble, offers Brigitte a bank cheque in her name for a substantial amount of money. In return, he tells her, she simply has to inject the demonstrators who are in the clinic with a lethal dose of a liquid he has with him, to provoke their death. Brigitte refuses to comply with the colonel's request. She reminds him that she is a Christian and has also taken the Hippocratic oath, so she has a moral and professional code to obey to. The colonel leaves, apparently unaffected by her refusal. The day after, at night, three civilians and two soldiers violently burst into her house where she lives only with her children, having lost her husband in a car accident probably caused by sabotage.

The men seize her while her children are sleeping in the next room and luckily do not hear or see anything. She starts to yell for help, and her only surviving brother Cyprien, whom she profoundly loves, comes to her rescue: he is shot dead even before he can utter a single word. One of the militia men gags and blindfolds her, and pours an urticant liquid on her tied hands, scalding them. Then they fling her on the back of a jeep and throw on top of her the still warm body of Cyprien that continued to spill blood all over her. Brigitte thinks her end is nearing and, as usually happens in such cases, they will drown her in the river, still alive, tied in a sack: "They do not leave parents a corpse to bury, not even a small heap of bones. [...] They wipe us out. Even our death no longer exists" (46).

After a very long drive, when they reach the forest, they drag her out of the jeep, fling her into a dark hovel and lock the iron door. She hears moans, whisperings and gradually begins to distinguish the presence of many other bodies, so many that it is impossible to sit or breathe, women and men too traumatized to talk to her. Her body loses its physical consistency and she becomes "viscid, liquid". Barefoot, she treads on "a clay floor, wet – with blood, urine, or both. The stench of rotten iron, excrement and gangrene takes the breath away" (102), and she almost faints. She does not even dare to ask where they are because nobody knows. What they all know is that "[they] are dead, but not yet. It will be a fortune if they kill [them] straightaway" (102). Brigitte needs to go to the loo but there is no such place, so she wets her knickers.

Someone tells her that she should use a “tin”, as everybody else does, because, they add, “that will be your water. You will have nothing else to drink here” (103).

Both the images and the tone of this section, evoke the figure of the *abject* described by Julia Kristeva: “These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death” (1982, 3). Here Brigitte is at the border of her condition as a living being, and her entire body risks falling beyond the boundaries of what is deemed to be human and become *other*.

Kept in a condition of fear, the prisoners are given nothing to eat for two days; when at last their jailors throw something on the floor, they “rush like vultures on a carrion” (103). Their food for the whole week consists of banana skins; Brigitte can only grab half of a blackish skin which she devours because she is starving. After a couple of nights, the jailors push five prisoners upstairs, among them Brigitte, and none of them can protest as they are mere “lifeless things”, not human beings, for the abusers. “They do not call our names from a list, they are not interested in our names. We are all women and we do understand they are not taking us to die” (104). Deprived of freedom and identity, stripped of agency and subjectivity, they are separated and she is pushed into a room where her worst nightmares begin.

In her deranged testimonial narrative, Brigitte gives a profoundly horrific account of what happened to her during her detention, something that would test the mental sanity of any human being, leave indelible traumas thereafter and have destabilizing, life-changing consequences. It is a painful, dark narrative that, being a true account from the victim’s point of view, has a great emotional impact. First, the captors kick and whip her using rubber strings, even put out cigarettes on her hands and drip candle wax on her forehead, so that she can feel her skin sizzle and burn. Then, while two of them hold her arms tightly, one starts to rape her; she is repeatedly raped by her captors all night long, and on all successive nights as well.

This narrative confirms the common pattern that violence committed against women generally takes two forms: “Physical violence in the form of torture and mutilation, and sexual violence in the form of rape” (McCann 2010, 86). Here rape is perpetrated by members of a repressive state apparatus, an institution that functions by violence and uses a woman’s body in order to crush and silence her opposition to its will. It is clearly a question of power rather than sex, as is well documented and corroborated also by a number of feminist studies. Sexual crimes committed against women at times of conflict, such studies maintain, “are a direct consequence of the appropriation of women’s bodies for symbolic uses within the dialects of patriarchal cultural/ethnic/religious nationalisms” (Martín-Lucas 2010, 131). In fact, Brigitte’s body, as that of the other women who are seized together with her, is the site over which power is exacted, transformed into a territory to be invaded, plundered, and submitted: “They hate me. They have been told that I am an enemy of the government. [...] They take me all night long” (104). And then: “They take me every night” (105).

The use of free indirect discourse in this section, a style that allows access to Brigitte’s thought process, is characterized by the combination of several devices: the predominance

of parataxis; the massive use of lexical items that belong to the semantic field of violence or disintegration, with the repeated use of verbs like “fling”, “hurl”, “drag”, “push”, “kick”, “lacerate”, “knock”, “crush”; the anaphoric repetition of negatives that gives this part a hammering rhythm; the short staccato sentences and phrases punctuated by full stops. These formal features destabilize the text and draw attention to the explosion of chaos in Brigitte’s mind, her psychological fragmentation, and the accompanying feelings of shame and degradation.

Drawing from Roberta Culbertson’s distinction between “violence” and “violation”, here Brigitte appears to voice an “experience of violation”, as she undergoes a

violence from which there is no escape or recourse because one’s body and one’s repertoire of responses are quite simply overpowered from the outset, [...] involving not a contesting of hierarchy or power but its full, primary assertion, and the threatened, even actual, dissolution of the self in the midst of it (Culbertson 1995, 171).

This critical interpretation is supported also by the simultaneous elision from Brigitte’s narrative of the word rape, substituted by “take”, because, Culbertson adds, “in this sort of violation one is not merely invaded by another, but literally *taken* (emphasis added); the wounding in this sort of circumstance becomes a physical marker of one’s clear permeability, one’s flowing into the world, and one’s being entered by it” (Culbertson 1995, 171).

The reader gets the overall impression that the violent act of rape is displaced onto the verbal domain, a strategy that is not “indicative of a refusal to acknowledge the violation by the victim[...]”, but is more likely “a means of reinforcing the simultaneously physical and psychological repercussions of this particular form of violence” (McCann 2010, 89) on Brigitte’s whole being.

This section encapsulates the gradual process of dehumanization of the woman, and the erasure of any residual trace of personhood, leading to the inevitable, final invasion of her most private sphere. Being deprived of all the constitutive attributes of the subject, and being subjected, by the abusers, her domain is that of the *object*.

When she arrives in Italy, after months of silence, resistance to remember, and refusal to open herself up, so as not to relive the past nightmares endlessly, Brigitte will suddenly and unexpectedly find in herself the psychological strength to look over the abyss, thus allowing the dark matter still buried there to emerge. At that point, she will confront the uncomfortable and shocking nature of sexual violence, and speak the unspeakable to the psychologist at the SaMiFo (Forced Migrant Health Centre). The narrative of trauma that at last she utters appears to envision for her the possibility of some form of catharsis which might gradually lead to healing and recovery.

In her narrative she allows no textual space to the perpetrators of the rape: they are ruthlessly and violently present but shadowy and insubstantial. She underscores their animalistic savagery

and foregrounds the violence of the attack, but denies them any dignity that individualized attention might afford. They are deflated to being mere cold instruments of power and oppression, in a way subjected to narrative erasure. Brigitte refuses even to watch her rapists in the eyes when they take her. Inert and defenseless, in her pure passivity, her ultimate form of resistance resides in her mind and, above all, in her strong religious belief, “Il faut que le bon Dieu les pardonne” (105), a faith that supports her morally and psychologically, and keeps her whole through the ordeal, though she is convinced that they will soon kill her.

Brigitte, however, will not die because, by pure luck, the head of the prison reads her name in a list and recognizes in her the person who, in 2001, had saved the life of his wife and his baby son, who would certainly have died in childbirth without her help, because he had no money to pay for her hospitalization and had been rejected by other clinics. As a token of gratitude, he had promised Brigitte that one day he would pay her back, something he could not do at the time because, being in the military, he had been sent to serve abroad for seven years. Now, he will repay his debt helping her to escape, provided that she is ready to leave Congo for good, otherwise, if she is found out, they both will die. Brigitte agrees and he helps her leave the prison on New Year’s night; hiding on a truck whose driver picks her up along the road, she reaches Kinshasa. Here she has a close friend, Constantin, who is almost a brother to her, as her father had paid for his studies at university after Constantin’s father had died. Constantin shelters her in his house and contacts a friend who is a politician: Brigitte will fly abroad with him as his wife, using a forged passport.

They land in Rome on the 26<sup>th</sup> of January, catch a bus going to Termini station where he hands her some money and leaves her, saying that he can do nothing else for her, as he must fly to Paris in three hours’ time. At that point, Brigitte concludes, “I am alone, at the station of an unknown city, in an unknown country, in an unknown continent. I am alone and have nothing left” (147). It is here that frère Antoine comes across her after she has spent nine days lost in the station, and will actually redirect her journey in Rome. Many months later, while she is still struggling to reconstruct her fragmented self, she receives a phone call from Congo informing her that Constantin had died from poisoning.

### **Encountering otherness**

Brigitte’s Italian story, a third-person narrative, begins in chapter one, from the place where she has been left to fend for herself, at Termini, Rome’s huge railway station, a liminal no man’s land. The whole chapter charts her aimless, confused wondering during the nine days that she is stranded there on her arrival in Italy, at a loss but struggling to survive.

Against the microcosmic universe of the station, an external observer seems to look at her; actually, the narrative is focalized from Brigitte’s point of view, and her own eyes simultaneously observe both what happens around her and herself from the outside.

“She walks”, or indeed, “she passes by” (7), a verb repeated many times on two successive pages, having no direction to walk towards. She passes by, “limping, wobbling on aching feet,

cramped, almost bent over; she bumps into bodies, knocks against shoulders, arms, backs, stumbles among suitcases, bags, shoes” (7). Brigitte’s is an aching body, the visual instantiation of suffering, of “[b]eing as ill-being” (Kristeva 1982, 140), unprotected against the cold that freezes even her tears, and shivering because of January’s chilly temperature. To add to the sense of utter bewilderment that overwhelms her, there are the piercing volume of loudspeakers, the clang of the incoming and outgoing trains, the roar of car engines reaching her from the nearby streets.

Observed through the eyes of Brigitte, who does not even know in which city she has landed, the noisy station is a confused mass of stalls, shop windows selling all kinds of items, and voices. Above all, there is an anonymous crowd of people of all sorts, both travellers who hurry by without even seeing her and the underworld of stray human beings: homeless, poor, marginalized people who live by their wits, petty criminals, robbers, for whom the station is their only refuge where they live hidden in cardboard shelters for protection against the cold at night.

It is the topography of a world that is alien to her, and whose signs she cannot decode, made even more threatening when darkness falls and “swallows the square’s borders” (10), a square that is “a boundless inhospitable space, a dark wasteland crossed by ghosts dragging their trolleys behind” (11). She continues to walk in and out of the station, but keeping within its limits, because “the station is the magnet of lost people” (16) and, despite its unfamiliar nature, it still offers her protection, especially at night when she tries to find some rest after two sleepless months.

The first chapter conveys the sensation that Brigitte has lost touch with her own body:

She cannot feel her fingers, nose, face, legs. Neither does she feel the pain tearing her apart, the knife that for weeks has been thrust right at the centre of her body. She feels nothing. It is as if she were not where she is, nor who she is. As if the woman who wavers, staggers and wanders around the square outside Termini station were another woman, a person she does not even know. Because she cannot be this woman. They have nothing in common (13).

It is the portrait of a woman who is evidently the victim of some traumatic events, and in conditions of economic precariousness and vulnerability. The image of “the knife” and the intense pain that Brigitte feels hint at a wound, an obvious correlative for the enduring consequences of the past trauma.

During her future meetings with the psychiatrist, it will emerge that at this stage she is prey to psychic dissociation, a condition that explains the double perspective adopted in this section. Brigitte’s is the psychological state of the *deject*, a person who is excluded and keeps wondering, “*Where* am I?” and “*Who* am I?”, in short “a *stray* [...] on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding (emphasis in the original)” (Kristeva 1982, 8). And she has been plunged into a psychological and existential night of the soul.

She undergoes a clear process of defamiliarization and abjection of the self that she sees as external and extraneous to her, because the abject has actually the quality “of being opposed to *I*”, drawing the fragile texture of the self “toward a place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 1982, 1-2). Indeed, she perceives herself as – and *is* actually – an ‘other’, separated from the true Brigitte she had left behind in Africa. At this early stage of the novel, the reader knows nothing about her yet, her terrible past only glimpsed through a very brief disturbing memory surfacing unbidden when she feels hungry and hints at what she had learned about hunger in “the darkness of prison” (14). Split into two, she refuses to acknowledge the self she has become in the abject creature that scavenges among the filth and garbage to grab furtively the leftovers that people throw away, even biting into a piece of sandwich left partly uneaten, feeling disgust while doing it but needing to silence the hunger pangs as she has not eaten for two days.

She is ‘other’ both to herself and to the people who, crossing the station during the nine days she spends there, keep away from her considering her a madwoman, because “a woman who is black and crazy is dreaded more than a beggar or a criminal. She embodies a female ghost trapped in the thousand-year-old memory of people living on this Continent, a creature that has been hurt and that people fear might look for revenge” (16). She is a stranger and, in the order of Western culture, “a figure of subversion that forces the native to confront their own foreignness” (Brigley Thompson 2010, 201), the unknowable disturbing otherness within them.

Gender and race intersect to add to the anxiety generated both in Brigitte herself by the feeling of being lost – stranded in a place she does not know and with nobody to ask for help – and in the people who catch a glimpse of her reduced to less than human conditions.

The first person who really *sees* her is a foreigner, dressed in black, and “black like her, even more than her” (18). He approaches her, offers her help and something to eat, and leaves her after having written an address on a piece of paper inviting her to take a bus and go there when she needs to eat. The man is frère Antoine whom she will meet again on her arrival at the Centro Astalli, actually the man who puts an end to her period in the limbo of the station and sets in motion her second journey.

Brigitte’s meeting with the Centro Astalli is at first a source of profound confusion and anxiety for her, because she has difficulties grasping the required administrative steps necessary to obtain a temporary residence permit and be recognized as an asylum seeker. Here, when she is asked to spell her full name to be registered, she “realizes that she is indeed Brigitte, and what is happening to her is real, not a nightmare she might awake from only to find herself back in her past life” (31). By spelling her name aloud, she begins the slow and painful process of recalling her past self; she gathers its fragments, and gradually pieces them together to reconstruct a whole and new self. However, it will take her months before she accepts to identify herself in that story, and this happens when the day of the legal hearing to obtain the residence permit approaches.

In order to assist her in the process, the centre assigns her a lawyer, Francesca, a choice that

provokes a true cultural shock in Brigitte: first, because Francesca is a woman; second because she is young, pretty, and elegant, all features that, to Brigitte, cannot be signifiers of a professional lawyer. In fact, she thinks of her as “a petite fille, actually still a little girl” (29). Convinced that Francesca cannot help her, Brigitte asks for “a true lawyer” (29), preferably a man. Her mistrust, coming from a woman, actually interrogates clichés and prejudices on both cultural sides. In fact, too frequently we take for granted that, as migrants escape from countries where there is poverty, civil war, political or religious persecution, when they arrive in our country they should feel privileged and view us in a positive light. It is actually a wrong assumption as evidenced by Brigitte’s case. However, after some time, she starts to trust Francesca and to acknowledge both her professionalism and her dedication.

Mazzucco herself, in the quoted interview, discusses Brigitte’s perception of white people who, to her, have “wax skin” (24), particularly women:

I was surprised by her difficulties to establish relationships with white women because of a deeply-rooted prejudice she had, which surprises readers a lot. We always think of their skin colour as a problem, but how do they see us? As enemies. During the first period, in fact, instinctively Brigitte trusted Filippo, but not her lawyer, Francesca, a woman too young to be good and too elegant to understand a story as ugly as hers (Riggio 2017, 128).

On the other hand, we tend to see refugees through the lens of Islamic fundamentalism that invades us, and this is scaring. Brigitte’s story reminds us that these people, refugees or migrants, live their spiritual dimension as an integral part of their daily life, a dimension that surprises us because we have forgotten it in our secular way of living. Their narratives confront us with the question of what it means to be human, a question that the writer invites us to address by looking beyond the surface of the text to uncover its wounds and silences, and allow us to be affected by it, because “we are persistently defining who we are in relation to violation” (Winnberg 2003, 20), and our reactions to it.

It is only after three months of meetings with Francesca, her lawyer, and Dr Santoni, the psychiatrist she is assigned to, that Brigitte can begin to remember and tell her true story.

The first-person narrative of her past proceeds parallel with, and is interrupted by, the story of her present wandering through Rome, the procedures necessary to find her a house to stay in and have a series of medical tests, while also preparing all the documentation required to see her refugee status recognized. In the meantime, while anxiously waiting for an accommodation and the results of the medical tests, she goes back to sleep at Termini. Here one night she wakes up when she vaguely feels hands exploring her body and sees five men who try to rape her. She starts to shout and attracts the attention of some policemen who come to her rescue; before the men manage to escape, they steal her few possessions. This episode will prompt her resolution never to sleep there again. From then on, she spends some weeks with neither money, nor possessions or a roof over her head, wandering aimlessly between

the square and the station, and sleeping in different places: from a bench in a central square or in a large garden, and other unknown places she never talks about. She goes back regularly to the Centro Astalli to eat, though she dislikes Italian food, and to the SaMiFo to meet Maria, her psychologist. At one point she disappears for ten days and when she goes back she offers no justification or information about her whereabouts. Her narrative has blanks and silences that neither the people who are in charge of her at the Astalli centre nor, later on, the writer try to intrude on or ask about.

As with Francesca, Brigitte opposes a strong resistance to Maria and does not trust her; above all “she does not want to remember what happened to her. She strives, every minute of every single day, to obliterate three months of her life. It is the only way to remove the anguish that eats her, and find some dignity again. And pride” (68). Francesca in particular is afraid that Brigitte might end up ruining herself, as many others before her, so she does whatever she can to assist her. In fact, with the help of padre Camillo, they find an accommodation for Brigitte, a room at Casa di Giorgia that she shares with three other women. Here, at last, she spends her first night in a bed. After some months, one of the other girls will confess to Brigitte that they have secretly renamed her “tempest”; that her arrival was a disaster, because “she had nightmares, shouted every night, with an inhuman voice, as if they were slaughtering her” (82), so she often kept them awake at night for weeks on end.

### **A view of the horizon**

Brigitte’s memory reconstruction of the events leading her to Rome and to the Astalli centre at one point collapses while she is recollecting the most traumatic moments of her captivity and her repeated rape in Congo. Her psychologist realizes that “Brigitte is no longer there”, because “prey to a major dissociative episode” (106) in medical terminology. Furthermore, she misinterprets a conversation between the psychologist and the psychiatrist, and suspects that they intend to send her to prison. It is an emotional and psychological tipping point: something breaks inside her and she bursts into an uncontrollable fit of weeping which after even turns into violence and aggressiveness.

From that moment on she is also placed in the care of a psychiatrist, Dr Santone, who will meet her every fortnight to help her heal her profoundly wounded psyche. Side by side with him, Francesca, her trusted lawyer, will assist her with the tortuous procedures to obtain political asylum and have a residence permit, which gives her the right to apply for reunification with her children.

In time, however, though alternating moments of high and low spirits, Brigitte begins to change and, to the people at the centre, “every day she appears to be experimenting with a new identity”, as if “she had begun to reconcile herself with being a woman” (148). She actually reclaims her body, wishing to take possession of herself again, a process in constant evolution.

Following Francesca’s advice, she attends a course to learn Italian both to busy herself while

waiting for her residence permit and because knowledge of the language is an essential requisite to start looking for work. However, the next months are truly testing for Brigitte: she has to change accommodation twice, and the relationship with the other refugee women who share the house with her, all of them with similar traumatic stories behind, is at times quite tense and problematic, and she also risks losing herself.

Her aspiration would be to work as a nurse, as she did in her native country, but her original diploma is not legally recognized in Italy. However, the Astalli centre offers her the possibility to attend a training course at a very big hospital that will qualify her as a caregiver for elderly people who are no longer self-sufficient.

While Brigitte gradually begins to recover and, after some months, also finds a temporary job at a retirement home for nuns, Francesca does some research – with the little information Brigitte can provide – to find out what had happened to the children she left behind. She discovers that, after their mother's disappearance, they were entrusted by the local authorities to the care of a neighbour, the owner of the house where Brigitte lived and where the children were found after their mother's disappearance. It takes time, patience and additional help from the Astalli centre and the Red Cross for two of her children, the boys, to finally join their mother in 2015. At the end of the book, the two little girls are still in Congo, living with a friend of Brigitte and their grandmother, but in the hope that one day they may be reunited as a family in Italy.

*I Am With You* ends with a two-page section, entitled *Post scriptum*, which closes the novel, though not the trajectory of the protagonist's new life in Italy that is actually an open-ended narrative, a story still on the making. However, what really counts is not so much the provisional conclusion as the path of destruction and even more reconstruction faced.

The last paragraph portrays Brigitte and the writer by the sea, to keep a promise the latter had made to her. It is a natural element that, at the beginning appears in the novel with the connotation of a deadly threshold, of the tragedy of Brigitte's shipwreck in Italy. In the end, however, the sea metamorphoses into the horizon, the metaphor for the future, that Mazzucco and Brigitte observe together. Thus, the image of the horizon that closes *I Am With You* harbingers possibilities, hope and unity, as the closing sentence openly suggests: "Even though neither of us knows what to expect, we have watched the horizon together" (254), a place that is no longer an obscure, even dangerous, point of arrival but a point of departure.

Brigitte's narrative, then, is far from being complete and having a happy end. It is the true story of a wounded human being, "fearless, fragile and broken, yet indestructible" (253), who shows great resilience and endurance in the face of the dispossession, loss and violence she has to bear. Her 'I' is always contingent, in transit, continually being formed and reformed, (re)constructed from the fragments of memory blown ashore by the tempest of her past life.

At the same time, and more importantly, her story epitomizes the significance of working from the wound, of speaking about the unspeakable to voice a trauma narrative both as a form

of therapy –for the wounded subject – and as an ethical act for those who, by listening to another’s wound, witness what it means for the body and the mind to be physically and emotionally hurt and bear the destabilizing traces of the trauma. Indeed, through the prism of Brigitte’s existential paradigm, Mazzucco claims the value of humanity and relationality; of the encounter with the suffering other in her/his singularity; of care of the vulnerable, not as ‘other’ but as a fellow human being. Above all, she asserts the importance of being open and exposed to alterity as “the very condition of subjectivity as *becoming* (italics in the original), which postulates an image of the self as ceaselessly interrupted by the event of the other, indefinitely open and refusing the totalizing effects of closure” (Ganteau 2015, 6).

## Conclusion

No man is an island entire of itself; every man  
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.  
John Donne, Meditation XVII

The authentic emotional investment of Mazzucco, both as a fellow human being and as an artist, is at the heart of the narrative of Brigitte’s existential trajectory in *I Am With You. The Story of Brigitte*. She accomplishes “what is generally demanded of a novelist. [...] to suspend our disbelief [and] follow her till the very last page” (129), believing what she tells us and empathizing with the characters she brings to life before our eyes. The pact of trust between writer and reader, necessary when approaching a story that finds its intrinsic strength in truth, is never broken, despite the novel’s complex architecture with its continuous alternation between different space-time planes. Besides, by lending Brigitte a strong and undefeated voice, that implicitly advocates resistance to violence and refusal to be silenced, Mazzucco ethically empowers her with some degree of agency and control over her story.

Brigitte’s existential trajectory shows the necessity and value of listening to the voices of alterity and what they want to tell us. Because, to be human and ethical is to view the myriad narratives woven by each human being as a web in which individual stories are not fragments separated from the rest, but intersecting threads, each having its own value and interest, each contributing to a better understanding of ourselves and of the world we live in. It is our moral duty to listen to and respond to the best of our possibilities to these *other* narratives, which might also reverberate with new meanings in our own life-stories, adding depth and value to them, and help us expand our understanding of both ourselves and of the world we live in.

## Endnotes:

1. The original Italian title of Melania Mazzucco’s novel is *Io sono con te. Storia di Brigitte*. The novel has not been translated into English, but on the website [consulenzeditoriali.it](http://consulenzeditoriali.it), it appears with the English title used in this paper.

All the English quotations from the novel, as well as from the interviews with Melania Mazzucco in *Aggiornamenti Sociali* and in *L'Osservatore Romano* are my own translations.

2. Further quotations from the novel are given between parenthesis and refer to the Italian edition.

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# Political Negotiation, Reconciliation, and Reconstruction in Post-Apartheid Female Narratives

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## Abstract:

Since the official end of apartheid, different state actors and non-state actors have been chanting the creed of national reconciliation and reconstruction for a better and harmonious South Africa. In fact, Desmond Tutu's vision of the "rainbow nation", to an extent, has been the driving force behind the policies of successive regimes in South Africa following the trauma and dispossession of the past. Since literature can also be conceived as an interpretation of society in time and space, the discourse of national reconciliation and reconstruction has found inroads in the literary and cultural productions of post-apartheid South Africa. This paper, thus, seeks to show the relationship between post-apartheid female narratives and post-apartheid politics. In other words, it verifies the contributory role of South African female writers in re-negotiating, re-reconciling and re-constructing the post-apartheid nation. In this connection, this paper is predicated on the premise that the post-apartheid South African female writer, just like her male counterpart, is also involved in the political project of nation building through political negotiation, reconciliation, and reconstruction. These writers, in their works, affirm the view that without political dialogue and reconciliation, the nation-building project in post-apartheid South Africa is a mere hoax and an exercise in futility.

**Keywords:** post-apartheid, narratives, reconciliation, negotiation, nation-building.

## Introduction

Dialogue is an invaluable ingredient in the development and progress of society. It is only in the context of social dialogue that different shades of opinions could coalesce for the *summon bonum* of society. St. Thomas Aquinas argues in "Statesmanship on Kingship", as Aristotle had done in *The Politics*, that man by nature is a political and social animal living amid a multitude of its kind and endowed with reason unlike other animals to solve his problems and interact harmoniously with his fellow man (Aristotle 1962, 463). This interaction and socialization can only be fruitful, concrete and genuine in the spirit of permanent and genuine dialogue. In fact, the principle of permanent dialogue is even more crucial and cardinal in the context of the state where there is the ruling establishment, on the one hand, and the masses on the other. In order for the state to pursue her objectives and form a social contract with its subjects, it must be enshrined in her policy the spirit

of free and frank debate which will eventually culminate in social dialogue. Thus, Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *The Social Contract* contends that: “Since men cannot create new forces, but merely combine and control those that already exist, the only way in which they can preserve themselves is by uniting their separate powers in a combination strong enough to overcome any resistance uniting them so that their powers are directed by a single motive and act in concert” (Rousseau 1968, 59-60). This bond of unity, as depicted by Rousseau, is the leitmotif that animates the imaginative consciousness of most South African writers in the post-apartheid era.

In general terms, this paper aims at expounding on the nexus between literary discourse and nation-building. The paper, in other words, underscores that nation-building is not the preserve of politicians, statesmen, and freedom fighters alone but it is also the discursive matter of creative writers as well. Thus, the work aims at bringing out the contributory role of South African female writers in reconstructing the post-Apartheid nation. Drawing inspiration from Nadine Gordimer’s *None to Accompany Me*, Gillian Slovo’s *Red Dust*, Zoë Wicomb’s *Playing in the Light*, and Pamela Jooste’s *People Like Ourselves*, this focus is anchored on the perspective that the woman, from time immemorial, has not been adequately recognised for the role she has been playing in the development of her society and nation in general. The probable reason for the shabby treatment of the role of the woman in national development and reconstruction is the fact that her male counterpart for a very long time has been the sole controller of history. In this guise, the male historian, consciously or not, tends to accord a patriarchal orientation to historiography where the exploits of men are highlighted to the detriment of those of women. In other words, this work seeks to prove the standpoint that most female South African literary and cultural discourses have always been tailored towards building the South African nation.

In a paper entitled “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom”, which was presented in an ANC in-house seminar on arts and culture in 1989, Albie Sachs, the virulent apartheid iconoclast, gave what could be called, his visionary manifesto on how the post-Apartheid society should operate at the socio-artistic, cultural and political levels. The author suggests in his paper that in the post-Apartheid context, the artistic, cultural and political discourses should be aimed at reconciling the ethnic and racial cleavages or fragments of South Africa (Sachs 1998, 243). Albie Sachs’ vision of South African discourse in the post-apartheid era finds inroads in the creative works of most South African female writers and artists like Nadine Gordimer, Gillian Slovo, Zoë Wicomb, and Pamela Jooste. The analysis of these writers’ works shows the extent to which most of the post-apartheid female writers use their artistic fortes to serve their nation. Thus, this paper contends that the post-apartheid South African female writer also places her art at the service of her nation. In other words, Gordimer, Slovo, Wicomb, and Jooste reveal that the post-apartheid nation can only re-create itself in the context of political dialogue and reconciliation which will usher in national reconstruction. Put differently, national reconstruction in post-apartheid South Africa is unfeasible and impossible in the context of hatred, fragmentation, and intolerance – ills that were ushered into South African politics during the apartheid era.

### **Gordimer, Slovo, Wicomb, and Jooste: No Reconstruction without Reconciliation**

In his Nobel Lecture, entitled “Strategies for World Peace: The View of the UN Secretary-General”, (delivered on December 10, 2001, in Oslo, Norway) Kofi A. Annan argues that it is only through dialogue and the acceptance of diversity that the world can have meaningful and lasting peace. In this connection, “Only in a world that is rid of poverty”, Annan writes “can all men and women make the most of their abilities. Only where individual rights are respected can differences be channelled politically and resolved peacefully. Only in a democratic environment, based on respect for diversity and dialogue, can individual self-expression and self-government be secured and freedom of association be upheld” (Annan 2006, 162). The above quotation shows that dialogue is a vital instrument in the development of society. It is even more important in the context of multiracialism – since conflict is always the order of the day in multicultural societies. To this view Annan further comments thus: “Today, however, even amid continuing ethnic conflict around the world, there is a growing understanding that human diversity is both the reality that makes dialogue necessary and the basis for that dialogue” (Annan 2006, 162). The novels of Gordimer, Slovo, Wicomb, and Jooste reveal the veracity of Ann’s philosophical vision for peace and concord in society.

In *None to Accompany Me*, the release of Nelson Mandela from prison shows the determination of the anti-apartheid white regime to engage in dialogue and reconciliation with blacks. Mandela in this novel, therefore, becomes a symbol of black liberation struggle in South Africa. It is for this reason that his release, in the novel, generates widespread celebration and jubilation across South Africa. The narrator comments: “[...] sports club delegations, mothers’ unions and herded schoolchildren stood around Nelson Mandela’s old Soweto cottage queuing to embrace him, while foreign diplomats presented themselves to be filmed clasping his hand” (Gordimer 1994, 5). The release of Mandela is a prelude to political dialogue and the search for harmony in post-Apartheid South Africa. This is because it opens the way for freedom of speech and association which had been suppressed in the days of apartheid.

The white regime, in order to show her alacrity to abolish apartheid, uses the pragmatic approach in dealing with the situation. The omniscient narrator remarks that “Negotiation with the Government on indemnity for political activists [...]” are on the way although it “[...] were not decisive” (Gordimer 1994, 6). This is a laudable move by the regime to reconcile itself with the freedom fighters. Moreover, the above fact is strengthened when the narrator attests that “With the old stern President pushed out by one of his cabinet ministers who smiled like a film star and was said to be having talks with blacks no one could be sure what that would be” (Gordimer 1994, 21). The “old stern President” here is metaphorical of Pieter Botha while his successor, “who smiled like a film star” is Frederick de Klerk. This is attested by the fact that it was during the reign of de Klerk that Mandela was released from prison. The policy of Frederick de Klerk, following his ascension to power, has been summarized by Rosemary Jolly, in “Introduction”, in the following words: “As Rob Nixon has emphasized, the phrase ‘the New South Africa’ was minted by F.W. de Klerk in his speech on 2 February 1990, which proclaimed the end of apartheid, announced

Mandela's release from prison, and promised the repeal of apartheid laws" (Jolly 1998, 4).

Furthermore, the determination of the regime to opt for dialogue and reconciliation is confirmed by the fact that all those who were exiled in the days of apartheid have been granted armistice to return to their country. A case in point is Sibongile and Didymus who are now in South Africa from exile and have regained their real names. This is because in the days of apartheid they concealed their identity and used pseudonyms in order to avoid being tracked down by the police. This is shown through the comments of the omniscient narrator, when he says that "In exile they [Sibongile and Didymus] had had code names; there would always be many people in the outside world who would know them by no other (Gordimer 1994, 43). The idea of the couple coming back to the country on exile and regaining their original names is a positive sign that the environment is now free for mutual talks between the freedom fighters and the ruling government.

In Vera's discussion with Sibongile in a restaurant, one realizes the willingness of some of the whites to reconcile with South African blacks and the freedom fighters in general. This explains why in the dialogue Vera openly declares to Sibongile that "-The Boers fawning all over us, inviting us for official dinners, getting themselves photographed with us for the papers!" (Gordimer 1994, 47). The Boers, who are the present-day Afrikaners, historically were the first settlers in South Africa. In a nutshell, the Boers, as portrayed by Vera, are struggling to socialise with the blacks and the freedom fighters in order to make peace with them and reconcile their differences. Through this gesture by the Boers, Gordimer is transmitting a concise ideology that reconciliation and reconstruction in post-apartheid South Africa is impossible without some degree of mutual comprehension between the various racial cleavages.

In addition, the post-apartheid white regime further adapts a liberal policy in the dismantlement of apartheid. The regime is more inclusive unlike in the days of institutionalised racial segregation when it was racially exclusive. With the coming of the exile, the Movement is allowed to organise its meetings, rallies and conferences without any state injunction and sanction. This would not have been in the days of apartheid where political gatherings were banned because the apartheid regime saw these meetings as subversive and injurious to its very existence. In fact, the narrator confirms that "What has been forbidden for so long – a gathering, any gathering – becomes a kind of fairground [...] No more police, no more dogs, no more tear-gas, no more beatings on the Black Maria" (Gordimer 1994, 94). The narrator's comments show that the members are free to organise their meetings without being afraid of any police victimisation unlike in the days of apartheid where such meetings were held *in camera*. The use of the contrast between the past and the present therefore is to show how far the post-apartheid regime has gone in the move towards social reconciliation and reconstruction. More so, in the hall where the election of the members of the Movement is to take place, the delegates of the party are in a relaxed, unperturbed, and untroubled mood – without any element of panic or fright. This is because they are not, in any way, frightened that the regime will suppress the meeting. This comportment is seen in the behaviour of Didymus. The narrator confirms this when he says that "Didymus moved among old acquaintances, old

comrades who had to introduce themselves with reminiscence of campaigns they had shared with him. He had the politician's flattering tactic of the hand on the shoulder, the grin of recognition even without knowing whom he was greeting" (Gordimer 1994, 94-95). Also, in the days of apartheid, members of the Movement were scattered all over the world. In some of the countries where they were found, the members constructed structures such as schools, and hospitals to take care of the members who were in exile. Sibongile is commissioned by the new national executive of the Movement to go to Libya – one of such countries – "[...] to negotiate the takeover by that country's Government of a school for exiles' children and various other buildings the Movement had had there. The National Executive left it to her diplomacy to see whether these assets, no longer needed, should be handed as a gift to a country that had given asylum, or whether it might be possible to expect some sort of compensation [...]" (Gordimer 1994, 126-127). This move, by the Movement, clearly shows that its members do not have the intention to go out of the country any longer but to remain in South Africa and get involved in the process of social cohesion and national reconstruction.

The policy of reconciliation and national reconstruction is also seen in the move taken by the post-apartheid regime to abolish the law on residence and settlement. In the days of apartheid, it was a taboo for a black South African to be found in white settlement areas and vice versa. However, in the post-apartheid context these legal barriers have all been broken. It is customary now to see blacks in white areas and vice versa without any legal impediment. A case in point is Mpho who happens to be the daughter of Didymus and Sibongile. She leaves London and comes to her native country – South Africa – where she finds herself in a typical white suburban part of the city without any police harassment for breaking the law on settlement. Mpho's stay in this white settlement area symbolises that the country is beginning to reconcile itself from the octopus grip of racism. Despite all these moves, the narrator conscientiously underscores that there are some white South African citizens who are still nostalgic of the apartheid past because they were beneficiaries of the racist apartheid system. In this connection, the narrator affirms that "For although they [whites] squabble solemnly among themselves their yearning is the same, they yearn for the impossible (escape from history, Vera Stark would call it), the reinstatement of life as it was before" (Gordimer 1994, 263). This statement shows that these people are fighting to do the impossible since the apartheid era has come and gone and no degree of agitation can bring it back. This explains why the narrator further, in an assertive mood, states that "They are prepared to kill for that, although nothing will bring it back; assassination is an offering for which there are no gods left." (Gordimer 1994, 263) One gathers from the narrator's comments and thought that national reconstruction in post-apartheid South Africa is a forward-moving process and no amount of intimidation from conservative whites can retard the process.

In *Red Dust*, Gillian Slovo similarly brings out the notion of political dialogue and the search for mutual coexistence, between the races, in the post-apartheid era. In the novel, a Truth Commission is set up by the black majority government to probe into the atrocities committed during the apartheid era and also to give room for prisoners who have been arrested in connection with crimes against humanity during this period to apply for amnesty. This Truth Commission is

semiotic signification of the Truth and Reconciliation commission (TRC) which was set up by the Mandela government in 1996 and placed under the leadership of the Anglican Arch-bishop Desmond Tutu with the aim to investigate crimes committed during the apartheid period. In commenting on this post-apartheid structure, Anthony Holiday argues that “The TRC was the fruit of protracted negotiations between politicians, negotiations that culminated in the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act of 1995. This act established a commission which was to provide ‘as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights’, committed between 1 March 1960 and 5<sup>th</sup> December 1993. [...] It was to hold public hearings throughout the country in which the victims of human rights abuses and those who had wronged them should tell their stories (Slovo 2002, 46). Holiday’s perception of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is also articulated in the dialogue between Sarah and Alex at the “white bar” (Slovo 2002, 239). In their discussion, Alex describes the Truth Commission “as social antiseptic” (Slovo 2002, 239). The description gives the fundamental role of this commission in the post-apartheid context. This is because an ‘antiseptic’ is a chemical used for preventing infections in an injury especially by killing bacteria. By describing the Truth Commission as an antiseptic, shows that it is a structure, in the post-Apartheid society, to reconcile and make peace among the warring races during the apartheid era. In this way the commission plays a regulatory role in South Africa.

Furthermore, Dick Hendricks is a former white police officer who is in jail for crimes against humanity which he committed when he was in active service in the apartheid days. He is one of those who maltreated and tortured Alex Mpondo (now a parliamentarian in the post-Apartheid nation) when he was incarcerated, as a political prisoner, during that period. In order to regain his liberty, he applies through the Truth Commission for an amnesty and reconciliation with Alex Mpondo. This is seen in the dialogue between James Sizela and Ben Hoffman where the latter informs him that “Dick Hendricks is applying for amnesty for the torture of Alex Mpondo” (Slovo 2002, 20). Dick’s gesture is an eloquent testimony of the fact that he has realized the nefariousness of the activities he carried out, during his tenure of office, as police constable for the apartheid regime. This is the reason why he wants to make amends by reconciling with Alex Mpondo.

In addition, Ben Hoffman in the dialogue with Sarah Barcant tells her how the Truth Commission came about. The recounting of the history of the Truth Commission by Ben Hoffman shows that he is one of the characters, in the post-Apartheid society, who harbours the opinion that peaceful co-existence and reconciliation between the various racial and cultural components are necessary hallmarks for a progressive and prosperous post-Apartheid South Africa. Ben Hoffman comments: “you forget that in 1990 there were two opposing sides. Call them what you will: the torturer and the freedom fighter, or the law-abiding police and the terrorist. They were at war with each other and they need to negotiate the peace. That’s how the Truth Commission came about” (Slovo 2002, 38). The Truth Commission, from the statements of Ben Hoffman, is a forum for the aggressor and the victim to reconcile and live together in mutuality and unity. In his “I Have a Dream” peroration, Martin Luther King Jr. dreams of the day when his little children and the

American people, in general, “will not be judged”, by their fellow compatriots, based on “the color of their skin but by the content of their character” (King 1989, 984). It is in similar perspective that the Truth Commission, in the novel, is expected to open a leeway for the spirit of national brotherhood to flow and animate the post-Apartheid nation. This vision of national cohesion has also been expatiated in Njabulo Ndebele’s article entitled “Memory, Metaphor and the Triumph of Narrative” when he declares that “When it was announced [...] that a group of former police generals of the old South African Police were going to apply for amnesty, I thought to myself that a new chapter had opened in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission” (Ndebele 1998, 19).

The desire of Dirk Hendricks that his case be heard at the Truth Commission is very high. This is to show the zeal he has to reconcile himself with his past and face the post-Apartheid society with a clear conscience. When he is transferred from the Pretoria jail to Smitsrivier, where the Truth Commission is to be held, one is told by the narrator that he is very elevated in spirit. Even the dust that is littered on the road and causes him some inconveniences is not so much of a problem to him. What he is interested in is how he will be granted amnesty by the Truth Commission. The omniscient narrator states that: “Dust. It saturated the space and kept on coming: clouds of red dust puffing through the gaps in the kombi’s back door” (Slovo 2002, 22). The narrator further articulates that, while in the car, “He glanced at his watch to confirm what he already knew: they’d soon be in Smitsrivier. Despite the fact that he had trained himself to remain always calm, he felt his spirit lifting” (Slovo 2002, 22). This statement, from the narrator, shows that Dirk is very anxious to reconcile with his past. More so, while in the kombi – moving to Smitsrivier – the narrator probes into the mind of Dirk to bring out his zeal to meet with Alex Mpondo – the man he had maltreated in the days of Apartheid. The narrator says: “He leaned his back against the wall of the kombi, stretching out his feet, closing his eyes. Soon, he told himself he would face Alex Mpondo and then it will be almost over. Not long now, he thought, as the kombi jolted down the track” (Slovo 2002, 27-28).

Another instance where the aspect of dialogue and reconciliation is found in the character of Dirk Hendricks is when the hearings of the Truth Commission is about to begin. This is due to the fact that it is only through the hearing of the Truth Commission that his amnesty will be granted. The narrator describes Dirk’s composure in the hall where the Truth Commission’s hearings are to take place in the following words “Standing in the wings of the town-hall stage, Dirk flicked down his pressed blue jeans, brushing away a fleck of barely visible dust. That done, he straightened up and breathed in and out, in and out, nice and regular, nice and calm” (Slovo 2002, 76). The above composure of Dirk shows the anxiety and optimism he has for the Truth Commission. This fact is further made lucid when the omniscient narrator declares thus: “At last the moment for which he had been waiting was almost upon him” (Slovo 2002, 76).

While in the town-hall stage, Dirk discovers that “Nelson Mandela’s portrait was hanging in the place from which other presidents had once looked down” (Slovo 2002, 77). The portrait of Mandela, on the wall in the hall, is symbolic of the collapse of Apartheid and the emergence of democratic governance in the new South Africa. The portrait further depicts that the members

of the Truth Commission are acting under his orders thereby presenting him as an advocate of dialogue and reconciliation. This explains why the narrator is very optimistic in his utterance that “And anyway even though Dirk’s police career had been spent trying to keep the likes of Mandela in jail, Mandela could hardly turn out worse than the men who had gone before him [...]” (Slovo 2002, 77). This comment by the narrator shows that he sees Mandela as an icon of peace, unity and reconciliation in South Africa.

In one of the court sessions, Dirk Hendricks testifies to the Truth Commission that he was merely working under the dictates of the system in vogue at the time. They had been brain-washed to believe that the freedom fighters were terrorists and communists since the apartheid doctrine flourished during the period of the Cold War when the world was threatened by Communism. So it was easy for the apartheid regime to justify her act of brutality and victimization by brandishing those who fought against the system as having communist orientation. Dirk Hendricks testifies to the Truth Commission thus: “I was a loyal policeman. We are taught that the enemy was all around, that we must fight communism and its terrorists with all our might. That is what I did. I did not benefit financially from my actions – apart from drawing my police salary, that is, I did it for the good of South Africa” (Slovo 2002, 130). The above declaration, by Dirk Hendricks, shows that he was induced to act the way he did during the apartheid period. His use of the collective pronoun “we” shows that he is not the only former police constable who committed crimes against humanity and against his conscience. The apex of his declaration is when he finally asserts that “In hindsight; it was wrong. I am truly sorry for the hurt I caused [...]” (Slovo 2002, 132). The apology, by Hendricks, brings out the issue of self-realisation in the post-Apartheid era. It shows that Hendricks has come to realise that his activities during the apartheid era were inhuman and against the law of human rights and freedoms.

Alex Mpondo demonstrates a lukewarm attitude towards the activities of the Truth Commission. He is not really interested in the hearings and investigations of this commission. This explains why the application by Dirk Hendricks to solicit for pardon for what he did to him (Alex) while in prison does not really interest him. Perhaps, Alex’s lackadaisical attitude towards the hearing is because he does not want to have any memory of what happened to him during this period. He usually comes late for the hearing of the commission when all the other members of the crew and the lawyers are already seated. In one of the court sessions, the narrator says: “THE JUDGE SWITCHED on his microphone. ‘I’m afraid we can’t wait any longer, Miss Barcant. You had better proceed without your client’” (Slovo 2002, 182). The tone of the Judge shows that he is not happy with Alex Mpondo; it also shows that the entire hall has been waiting for long for his arrival in the hall. The omniscient narrator remarks that it is only when Sarah Barcant is about to begin the session without Alex that he appears in the hall (Slovo 2002, 182-183).

During the hearing of the Truth Commission, when Sarah Barcant is about to cross-examine Dirk Hendricks on his apartheid activities and especially his maltreatment of Alex, Alex opts to interrogate him himself. This creates tension and suspense in the mind of his torturer for he does

not know Alex's intentions. Alex's interaction with Hendricks depicts the brutal nature of the apartheid era and the maltreatment of political prisoners. This also recalls to memory the different means of torture orchestrated by the apartheid police during this period. One of the means of torture was "the wet blanket" (Slovo 2002, 186). This had to do with forcing the prisoner perhaps to cover wet blankets when they were sleeping. When Alex asked Hendricks whether he used the wet blanket Hendricks says "It was a bag. [...] A bag, not a blanket. I used the weight bag method" (Slovo 2002, 187). However, Alex retorts that he is not asking about Hendricks's favourite means of torture. His question is on the blanket he used. He retorts: "I'm not asking you about your favourite means of torture. My question centres on the blanket that you yourself introduced into evidence. You told us about it yesterday. Remember? You told us that you kept a blanket in the bath and that you taught your children what to do with it should the need arise. My question is – did the need ever arise?" (Slovo 2002, 187)

When Sarah Barcant meets Alex in the white bar which in the days of apartheid was reserved only for white people, she informs him that she has come to take him to the farm where they were incarcerated during the apartheid era. Apparently, Alex thought that she was taking him to see or talk with Dirk Hendricks whom he detested. This explains why in her discussion with him Sarah says "I've come to get you." This statement actually creates suspense and uncertainty in Alex's mind because he does not know where Sarah is taking him to. It is for this reason that what immediately comes to Alex's mind is that Sarah wants him to meet Hendricks. This is seen through these series of questions posed by Alex to Sarah. "What? To Hendricks? So he can pull his innocent act in front of a private audience, forget it." (Slovo 2002, 240). These rhetorical questions show that Alex does not really want to reconcile with Hendricks. This shows that Hendricks had maltreated Alex during the apartheid days to such an extent that merely thinking of him (Hendricks) traumatises him. Hendricks, according to Alex, is a metaphor for oppression during the apartheid days. The farmhouse is symbolic of the torture that Alex and his colleagues received during this period. This idea is justified from the vivid description the omniscient narrator gives when Sarah and Alex finally reached the farmhouse. The narrator says "Dark. This was his first impression. The hallway where he was standing was very dark. He stood still, waiting for his eyes to acclimatise. When they did, he saw the house was divided into two, with the hall where he was standing acting as the bridge between each separate part. To the right, the living quarters. To the left, the jail. Someone had hung a huge heavy steel door to the left. The Police" (Slovo 2002, 246). However, Dirk Hendricks decides to reconcile privately with Alex Mpondo. In one of the court sessions he solicits permission from the chairman of the Truth Commission to discuss with Alex Mpondo *in camera*. The reason for this private colloquy is that he is uncomfortable to testify what he did, during the apartheid era to the hearing of the public. This is seen when he addresses the chairman in these words: "there is something I must say Mr. Chairman [...] It is not easy to talk about what happened. You can even feel a bit ashamed" (Slovo 2002, 233). He further addresses Alex Mpondo thus: "But to you Mr. Mpondo, I want to say

that in all honesty I didn't know who you were then. I never saw you sit there today – an MP, a man with education, a fellow human being. I can understand it if you hate me – I went on too long – but if you could find it in your heart, I will like to talk to you. Not here [...] If you agree, I will try and explain to you why I did what I did to show you that I also I am human” (Slovo 2002, 233).

The idea of reconciliation is also echoed in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*. As depicted in the novel, the author is of the opinion that for a strong and united South Africa to exist, the different racial and ethnic cleavages should reconcile with one another. Rupert Taylor and Don Foster in “Advancing Non-Racialism in Post-Apartheid South Africa” assert thus: “As part of developing a new sociology of South Africa, it is therefore time to advance a frame of reference regarding the promotion of non-racialism, so as to guide public policy and further the deracialization of society” (Taylor & Don 1999, 338). The “deracialization” of South Africa cannot be feasible if there is no reconciliation and if possible, compensation. It is for this reason that Marion believes that in spite of the layabouts in the post-Apartheid South African society, Apartheid was still a blatant mistake. In other words, she sees nothing good about the apartheid system. The narrator says that: “Now she [Marion] understands only too well that the past was a mistake, that things are better now, for instance, things like tourism. She certainly can't complain about the boom in travel; it's just that these layabouts catch you off your guard so early in the morning” (Wicomb 2006, 28).

From a comparative perspective, Marion is of the view that despite the vandalism in post-Apartheid South Africa, the situation is still better and more accommodating than the days of racial segregation. She even goes ahead to describe the apartheid past as “a mistake.” This shows that the apartheid era was so bad that no pleasant memories could be remembered about this period. Robert Mattes in “Do Diverse Social Identities Inhibit Nationhood and Democracy? Initial Considerations from South Africa” further argues that “Racial divides in South Africa were not just artificial legal barriers, nor proxies for class lines, but had come to delineate enduring ethno-national conflict between white and African communal power blocs.” (Mattes 1999, 269). However, he cautions that “[...] the end of white domination (which had produced incentives toward black solidarity) would introduce new incentives leading to the rise of ethnic divisions among black South Africans in the post-apartheid era” (Mattes 1999, 269).

In *Playing in the Light*, Zoe Wicomb depicts a post-apartheid South Africa which is in the advanced process of reconciling itself from the racial fragmentation of the past. The novel commences with Marion in this mood of relaxation when the narrator says: “It is on the balcony, the space both inside and out where she [Marion] spends much of her time at home [...]” (Wicomb 2006, 1). These opening lines of the novel, capturing Marion's relaxed mood, show that there is comparative tranquillity and serenity in the post-apartheid context. In other words, the citizens are free to relax in their premises without being afraid of police brutality or violence – sign that sounds a positive note of the move towards reconciliation, reconstruction, and social rehabilitation in post-apartheid South Africa. In addition, the narrator remarks that couples can now enjoy recreational and leisure activities such as going to the nightclub and picnics. When Brenda

solicits permission from Marion to take Friday off her work days, so that she could “[...] go away for a long weekend”, (Wicomb 2006, 17) it is not granted to her for the reason that it is during weekends that the agency is very busy with travellers. The narrator says: “Marion would have liked to oblige, but it’s true, Fridays are impossible, especially in the afternoons, when the place buzzes with young and old alike, those who faced with yet another dull weekend, with the reality of their humdrum lives, decide that they need to travel. This is what couples seem to do on Thursday nights, anticipating the weekend tedium, the elusive heart of Saturday night: they plan a trip, and then it simply can’t wait till Saturday” (Wicomb 2006, 17) The freedom in which couples travel partly shows the fruits of reconciliation and reconstruction in post-Apartheid South Africa.

The omniscient narrator’s discourse shows that Marion is of the opinion that the ills and infirmities of the past, in the historiography of South Africa, should be shoved aside so that the post-apartheid nation can reconcile itself and collectively forge a better and brighter future. It is for this reason that she rejects any discussion which will remind her of the apartheid history and its ills. The narrator remarks that “She [Marion] has no interest in the to-ing and fro-ing, and is impatient with people in sackcloth and ashes who flagellate themselves over the so-called misdemeanours of history, or with those who choose not to forget, who harp on about the past and so fail to move forward and look to the future” (Wicomb 2006, 8). The narrator, through the above passage, brings out Marion’s views in relation to nation building in the post-Apartheid era. From this passage, one can opine that Marion holds the view that for the post-Apartheid nation to be united and progressive, the past must be forgotten and the errors of the past be forgiven. However, the idea of forgetting the past does not lead to nation-building. The citizens should be able to know what their past was and their determination to change it. This explains why the past is still re-echoed in the South African Constitution not for the purpose of vengeance but for the purpose of awareness not to fall back into it.

In the novel, F.W. de Klerk is seen as an icon of reconciliation, harmony and social justice. In the context of historicity, he was the one who replaced Pieter Botha as President of South Africa, and finally brought apartheid to an end in 1990. In a dialogue between Boetie and Brenda, the latter comments: “God knows how that phantom called apartheid came into being all by itself [...] and then of course it was F.W. de Klerk who woke up one morning to recognise the evil ghost for what it was and tackled it single-handedly” (Wicomb 2006, 36). This statement evokes the aggressive attitude of Brenda against the apartheid era. It is because of this that Brenda accuses Boetie that it was morally incorrect for him to benefit from the apartheid era at the expense of non-whites. She comments: “Look, since we’re talking about morality, would it not be more honest to say that you didn’t know any better, that you didn’t understand the implications of accepting jobs and salaries that others were barred from, a choice of schools and places to live and play that discriminated against others, that came at the expense of cheap labour, of those who didn’t have the vote? Or shall we say that apartheid somehow just gave birth to itself, just popped like an uninvited guest into the constitution?” (Wicomb 2006, 36-37). These rhetorical questions, posed

by Brenda, show that for dialogue and reconciliation to be meaningful and effective, people should speak the truth and acknowledge their moral deficiencies during the apartheid era. Without this, the reconciliation process in South Africa becomes faulty and fragile.

The on-going reconciliation process in post-Apartheid South Africa has made the society comfortable for foreigners. In the novel, one realises that South Africa is now a haven for tourists. In the days of apartheid, the country was quarantined from the rest of the world. This explains why during this era the tourist industry was not flourishing as it is in the post-apartheid context. In the conversation between Brenda and Marion, the narrator remarks that “The topic of travel must once more come to the rescue. It’s not doing the tourist industry any harm, Brenda says. The Cape is overrun with foreigners – only a couple of years ago, this hotel would have been empty” (Wicomb 2006, 83). Conclusively, the reason why the Clanwilliam Hotel is overrun with foreigners is that the environment is conducive enough for tourists – since tourism is an activity that cannot take place or flourish in the context of political instability. In addition, while in the Clanwilliam hotel, Marion initiates a conversation with Brenda. They begin discussing about the beauty of wine in the country. The narrator asserts that, “Marion orders another bottle of wine. Thank God for the bounty of the Cape vineyards, which come to the rescue also as topic of conversation” (Wicomb 2006, 82). In this conversation, the narrator says that Marion appreciated the South African wine and its weather conditions. “What would we do, Marion says, without all this, the wine and the weather?” (Wicomb 2006, 82). This rhetorical question shows Marion admires South African wine and its weather. This admiration depicts the concept of nation-building and reconstruction in the post-apartheid era; it shows that South Africans are beginning to believe in their own products and natural endowment. It is for this reason that “She [Marion] would not consider living in another country” (Wicomb 2006, 82). Marion, by not considering living in another country, shows her patriotic sentiments for her nation. Thus, she is resolute to participate in the reconstruction of her nation. It is in this context that the narrator says: “Has Brenda heard the clients who rave about Europe, the English South Africans who yearn to live their lives under grey skies? Surely, they are kidding themselves, surely the wonderment would subside and leave them howling for home. How could one survive without the light, the heat, the fruit and the wine? How do you breathe in those tiny, cramped countries stuffed with people? That was why Europeans came to Africa in the first place – empty cellars, empty larders, not enough room, and rickets.” (Wicomb 2006, pp. 82-83)

In the post-apartheid context, the barrier of colour has been broken down. This is unlike the days of apartheid where colour was very vital in social interaction and policy formulation. The narrator remarks that in contemporary South Africa “It may be true that being white, black or coloured means nothing, but it is also true that things are no longer the same; there must be a difference between what things are and what they mean” (Wicomb 2006, 106). This statement illustrates that the post-Apartheid nation is slowly graduating from the past where there was racial exclusion to the present context of racial inclusion. This explains why the narrator

remarks that “These categories may have slimmed down, may no longer be tagged with identity cards, but once they were pot-bellied with meaning” (Wicomb 2006, 106).

The policy of genuine dialogue and reconciliation, which is the political creed of the regime, has also been copied by individuals in the society. In the post-Apartheid society, most individual problems are solved through dialogue and negotiation. When Marion mistakenly hits Vumile Mkhize’s BMW, the problem is solved amicably without rancour or acrimony. The narrator says that this problem is solved when the two parties agree that Marion will simply pay for the panel beater’s bill since the damage is not grievous. This move shows that the post-apartheid citizen is coming to consciousness that dialogue is the best way to solve problems and not bitterness or violence.

The idea of the “rainbow nation” is the fruit of dialogue and reconciliation in the post-apartheid era. In a dialogue with Brenda and Marion, the poet Mr Mahmoud makes it clear that in the post-1990 South Africa, radical poetry is outdated. This type of poetry was necessary in the days of the apartheid struggle in order to whip up the sentiments of the freedom fighters so as to encourage them not to relent in the struggle. However, in the context of post-apartheid, such poems with radical contents or subject matter are not necessary – the post-apartheid era is one of reconciling racial fragments and not maintaining them. This explains why Mr Mahmoud describes the poems he wrote during the period of struggle as “old stuff” which is “passé now”. He further contends that “[...] it’s all rainbow poetry that’s in vogue” (Wicomb 2006, 183). Put differently, what Mr Mahmoud is insinuating is that in the post-1990 era, creativity in the South African society should be directed towards advancing the philosophy of the ‘rainbow nation’ – which is a philosophy whose concern is to bring all South African citizens to live in peace and unity in their diversity.

Due to the process of reconciliation, South Africans have turned to love and believe in their country even when they are out of it. While in Europe, Marion is seen showing her patriotism for her fatherland. After reading Nadine Gordimer’s *The Conservationist*, she looks forward to reading J.M. Coetzee’s *In the Heart of the Country*. The narrator says that “She finds the title inspiring; she chooses to read it as her country having a real, live, throbbing heart.” (Wicomb 2006, 197) The metaphor “throbbing heart” shows that life has returned to the country after the dark days of institutionalised racial discrimination. In other words, it depicts that she is satisfied with the path that her country has chosen to re-write the wrongs of her history. In this light, the narrator comments that “In this alien world, it pleases her [Marion] to think of South Africa as her country” (Wicomb 2006, 197).

The practise of dialogue and reconciliation in the post-Apartheid South Africa has brought the South African citizens, from the different racial groups to see something good in each other. In other words, it has created a comparatively conducive atmosphere where whites and non-whites can appreciate the ability of others without any bias. In the novel, one sees Geoff appreciating Brenda, who is a non-white. The narrator says: “Brenda looks at Geoff, who says, Yes, all is well. He looks appreciatively at Brenda: she has done a brilliant job; there’ll be no reason for complaint” (Wicomb 2006, 208-209). The narrator’s statement depicts the view that Geoff has no scurrility

against the non-white race. In other words, by appreciating Brenda, he is inadvertently pontificating that good things can also come from non-whites. Also, in the party at the Campbells, to welcome Marion back home, Elsie gets up to propose a toast for the location. The narrator comments that “Her speech, woven through with laughter, starts with Nelson Mandela and works her way down to Brenda, who in her own humble way is an agent of reconciliation; she even has a gracious word for Helen, now sadly departed, whose beauty, like her melktert and crunchies, was unrivalled” (Wicomb 2006, 214).

The ideological postures of political dialogue and reconciliation are likewise highlighted in Pamela Jooste’s *People Like Ourselves*. Jooste’s narrative discourse stresses that blacks are no longer inferior – at least officially – to the whites. When Douglas parks his car, he tells the attendant to watch over it for fear for it being stolen by hoodlums. He promises to pay the attendant in the following words: “Something now on deposit and something more if it’s still here and in one piece when I get back” (Jooste 2003, 88). From this statement, Douglas strikes a verbal contract with the attendant who is presumably a black. This is to intimate that the Blackman in the post-apartheid context is no longer seen as subordinate but as collaborator. The parking attendant, in addition, answers him with the title “Yes boss” (Jooste 2003, 88). However, despite his allusion to Douglas as “boss”, the narrator remarks that “[...] but it’s not the ‘boss’ as ‘boss’ was in the old days. That’s gone forever” (Jooste 2003, 88). Through this observation, the narrator draws a sharp contrast between the concept of ‘boss’ in the days of apartheid and in the post-apartheid context. In the days of apartheid, the boss saw himself as superior while the servant, inferior. However, in the post-apartheid context, there is a new humanism as a result of dialogue and reconciliation. Due to this new humanism, therefore, the boss does not view his subordinates as sub-humans but as people whose dignity has to be protected and projected.

Also, the South African High Commissioner in London organises the celebration of Freedom Day where there is a reception in honour of Nelson Mandela. The image of Mandela, in most of post-apartheid discourses, is one of reconciliation, forgiveness and national unity. The Preamble of the South African Constitution states that, the South African people “Honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land” and “Respect those who have worked to build and develop our country;” By conferring honour on Mandela during this occasion, the South African High Commission in London is merely respecting the above clause in the South African Constitution. In addition, the narrator testifies that “[...] everyone wants to see Nelson Mandela and the closer they can get to him the more privileged they consider themselves” (Jooste 2003, 100). The narrator, in this observation, accords Mandela the status of a national hero who incarnates South African unity and freedom. This explains why T-shirts have been made in honour of him and the role he has played in the liberation of South Africa from. The narrator remarks: “Brixton welcomes Nelson Mandela. There’s a T-shirt that says so. A man in a blue peaked cap is wearing it. Around his neck is a camera and, on his face, for no reason that’s clearly apparent, a smile which makes you forget that in the daily grind and grimace thousands of shoppers and commuters scowl and hustle their way along

here. Here, in this very same place which is made different today on this drizzly Sunday by one grizzle-headed gentleman the entire world loves. Everyone wants to see Nelson Mandela” (Jooste 2003, pp. 100-101). The celebration of the day and the reception that is given to Nelson Mandela is an open secret that the reconciliation process in South Africa is on a positive note. The ambience and frenzy, that characterise the occasion, is captured by the narrator in the following words: “People climb the barriers around one of the fountains in the centre of the square. They climb to the top and sing and dance for freedom in this extraordinary place on top of the world. Until the security officials ask them politely, for their own safety, please to come back, to come down into the singing and dancing crowd and even reach up to offer them a hand” (Jooste 2003, 101). The reception of Nelson Mandela, in London, is published in newspapers in South Africa. The pictures or photographs of the occasion further depict Mandela as an icon of national unity and freedom in South Africa. In a dialogue between Silvie and Rosalie following the publication of the event, the former says: “‘See what it says here.’ Says Silvie. ‘Just look. It says the bells of St. Martin-in-the-Fields nearly drowned out the music. Well, they would, wouldn’t they? Someone should have thought about that beforehand but I don’t suppose it made any difference. Tony Blair got a boo. No one wanted him. They can see him any day of the week, I suppose. It’s Nelson Mandela they came out for.’” (Jooste 2003, 118)

The narrator further remarks that “It’s Celebrate South Africa in London and Rosalie, who was sent an invitation to the special reception for Nelson Mandela at South Africa House, has made herself conspicuous by not being there” (Jooste 2003, 99). The conspicuous absence of Rosalie creates suspense in the story because Rosalie was one of the freedom fighters in the days of Apartheid. This makes her absence in this occasion shocking and incomprehensible. The South African authority itself in London is uncomfortable with her absence – that is why an enquiry is made to know whether she received the invitation or not. The narrator comments: “What a day! What a turnaround! Life back home was never like this and Rosalie, most conspicuous by her absence, who, once upon a time, would most surely have been there, has missed every minute of it” (Jooste 2003, 101). The move taken to have Rosalie participate in the celebration shows that the reconciliation process in post-Apartheid South Africa is inclusive and not exclusive.

The policy of reconciliation and social reconstruction in the post-apartheid era has ushered in a new-found optimism, in the post-apartheid youth. This hope has made them not to even think of the past and politics in the post-apartheid era. The narrator says that “In the old days when there were few people out on the streets and none of them Black unless they had legitimate business and could prove it, the talk was about nothing but politics” (Jooste 2003, 222). Politics was the main topic of discussion because the blacks had to fight against the excruciating injustice that was orchestrated against them during this era. However, in the post-apartheid era, these youths are no longer focused in politics; they are more interested in the future than in the past. In fact, the narrator comments that “They look forward optimistically, not backwards in anger” (Jooste 2003, 222). The source of this optimism, in the youths, is the dialogue and reconciliation process between the

anti-Apartheid white regime and the freedom fighters which began in South Africa after the collapse of Apartheid in 1990.

## Conclusion

Priscilla B.P. Clark, in "Literature and Sociology" argues that "all literature draws on social relations and expresses social experiences. Every work of literature fuses the observed and the imagined; every work perceives the social in terms of the aesthetic" (1982, 107). Thus, literature is not an isolated object but an artefact which is deeply-rooted in the society from which it emanates. It is from this backdrop that one can aptly ascertain that Nadine Gordimer's *None to Accompany Me*, Gillian Slovo's *Red Dust*, Zoe Wicomb's *Playing in the Light*, and Pamela Jooste's *People Like Ourselves* are literary narratives that interpret the post-apartheid situation in South Africa and the efforts by successive regimes to reconcile the citizens with their politico-ideological past. These novelists have accentuated the view that post-apartheid reconstruction is impossible without political negotiation and reconciliation. It is for this reason that when Nelson Mandela took over power in 1994, reconciliation and non-racialism were the political and social creeds of the ANC-led government. In *Anatomy of Miracle*, Patti Waldmeir attests that, after his accession to the helm of leadership in South Africa, "Mandela made non-racialism the new civil religion in South Africa. He spoke of giving the nervous minorities "a silver bridge to cross" to the new South Africa and he began to trace his path from the moment he was elected. The politics of reconciliation reigned supreme in those early days, and every ANC politician did his bit to contribute". (Waldmeir 1997, 268-269)

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## **“I am ignorant and backward.”: The Possibility of Progress in *Great Expectations***

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### **Abstract:**

Dickens’s call for improvement pervades *Great Expectations*, a novel that uses Pip’s journey into adulthood to create a story equal parts *bildungsroman* and examination of class stagnation. Dickens highlights deficits in London’s human condition, questioning what, if anything, can be done to improve it. A frequent critic of Victorian educational systems, Dickens returns to this theme by creating and shattering Pip’s ‘expectations’ to highlight what he deems false forms of improvement. Pip laments that it is “a most miserable thing to feel ashamed of home,” yet his transformation into a scholar reshapes him as mechanical and unsympathetic; he distances himself from Joe and his lowly family (Dickens 1999, 89). Hence, Dickens reveals his non-example of progress while veiling his definition of personal and societal improvement. By focusing on Pip’s transition from “a common laboring-boy” into an “oncommon scholar,” Dickens’s call for the improvement of London’s human condition through his demand for educational reform appears. However, he pushes beyond this in *Great Expectations*. The changes Dickens defines are physical, visceral interactions in moments of hardship, suffering, and most notably, at the time of one’s death. London’s ‘improvement’ relies on a return to imaginative and sympathetic educators and students alike.

**Keywords:** Dickens, Education, *Great Expectations*, Victorian Schools, Literacy, Improvement, Class, *bildungsroman*

### **The Working-Class Home’s Anti-Examples**

Classic Dickensian representations of class stagnation permeate *Great Expectations*. At the heart of the matter of improvement is Dickens’s call for extending greater compassion. Dickens demands change on an individual level that will, in turn, affect London more broadly. Improvement appears as the need for compassion and education in the novel, on the individual level and the collective level of the people of the city of London. An overflow of attempts to escape poverty and destitute educational systems arise. Teachers and students alike fall suspect to Dickens’s criticism, with Pip at the forefront.

Pip partakes in different modes of learning, his first in boyhood as Mr. Wopsle’s great-aunt’s student. Pip describes Wopsle’s great-aunt as keeping “an evening school in the village; that is to

say, she was a ridiculous old woman of limited means and unlimited infirmity" (Dickens 1999, 39). Likewise, Pip describes her methods of teaching as lackluster, framing her as an unqualified and ignorant instructor. While a good-hearted teacher, she lacks the competence to teach Pip and Joe. While not as monstrous as some of Dickens's most memorable schoolmasters—such as Bradley Headstone—she lacks their skill. Dickens was not so naïve as to argue that compassion alone defines 'good' teachers and students. He often criticized this notion by providing characters that serve as anti-examples, instructors, and systems void of regulations or qualifications. Wopsle's great-aunt's school mirrors the Victorian Dame schools, educational facilities that, as Philip Collins describes, were "faulty in the extreme" and that "no type of school was so universally damned by official and unofficial observers" (Collins 1963, 84). Both the flawed schoolmaster and school itself resurface throughout Dickens's speeches, sketches, and novels, yet in *Great Expectations*, he carefully offers alternatives to these flaws instead of merely criticizing their absence. Likewise, he takes time to demonstrate the dangers that inflict those who receive no education at all. Patrick Brantlinger asserts that "somewhere in Dickens's thinking lurks an equation between crime and literacy, instead of between—as might be expected—crime and illiteracy" (Brantlinger 1998, 72).

Joe best embodies Dickensian values of hard work, humility, and compassion while also representing the dangers of illiteracy. Pip's sarcastic description of Joe's ignorance, particularly in regard to Joe's illiteracy, exposes Pip's alienation from his feelings of compassion and the distinction between those who are formally educated and those who are not. He describes:

It was necessary for Joe to hold on heavily to the table with his left elbow, and to get his right leg well out behind him, before he could begin, and when he did begin, he made every down-stroke so slowly that it might have been six feet long, while at every up-stroke I could hear his pen spluttering extensively. He had a curious idea that the inkstand was on the side of him where it was not, and constantly dipped his pen into space, and seemed quite satisfied with the result. Occasionally, he was tripped up by some orthographical stumbling-block, but on the whole, he got on very well indeed. (Dickens 1999, 344-45)

In so fully rendering Joe, the blacksmith struggling with writing, Dickens reminds readers of the importance of literacy, and likewise, its increasing value, even among laboring classes. Biddy's moral teaching helps Joe gain a basic understanding of reading and writing skills, yet as an adult man, he is drastically behind those who benefited from such skills in youth. What makes Joe distinct on a visceral level, however, rests in the fact that he never entirely becomes fully literate and what is preserved is humility. Thus, Joe "does not learn to forget how his person and identity are rooted in the oral culture of family, place, and time." In short, Joe remains humble and possesses a child-like curiosity, unlike Pip, who gives in to his ego and forgoes imagination. Or, as Tross puts it, "the power of literacy to inform was matched by its power to deform was a constant anxiety for the Victorian middle-class, faced as they were with an increasingly literate, novel-reading public" (Tross 2004, 235).

## **Dickens's Examples of Good Educators**

Despite Dickens's digs at poorly qualified educators, he does take time to give credit to the strides the lower-class individuals take to improve their condition in the face of limited resources. The passage describing Joe's attempts best highlights Dickens's appreciation of the working-class who attempt to learn. Furthermore, Dickens uses Bidley to exemplify his definition of a 'good' educator. Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt functions as one of the novel's anti-examples, alongside Miss Havisham, who attempts to teach Pip and Estella the principles of romance. Bidley, on the other hand, possesses qualities that resonate with Dickensian values. Pip describes Bidley's patience and methods through which she teaches him to read, fully accrediting her as his primary instructive benefactor. By much of Pip's unassisted self, and more so, by Bidley's assistance than Mr. Wopsle's great-aunt, Pip "struggled through the alphabet as if it had been a bramble-bus" (Dickens 1999, 40).

Bidley's teaching helps Pip mitigate his concern over the quality of his writing, instilling in him the determination to improve his shaky letters. After working closely with Bidley, Pip "fell among those thieves, the nine figures, who seemed every evening to do something new to disguise themselves and baffle recognition" but at last, begins "in a purblind groping way, to read, to write, and cipher, on the very smallest scale" (Dickens 1999, 39). Literacy becomes the primary means of improvement for Pip, as this moment reshapes him as different from Joe and the rest of the laboring-class. The art of reading and writing develop into the method in which Pip can examine himself and those around him—but not without cost. Throughout Pip's journey into adulthood and, more notably, through his distinction as "an uncommon scholar," Dickens ultimately promotes a middle-class tenet which contains his values of hard work and frugality. Additionally, "where the 'new' Pip painfully reemerges, as a transformed imago, so to speak, out of the larva of his past parasitism into a prospective state of maturity and independence," Pip deliriously reimagines himself as an inflated success story, leading him to disregard his only constant friend, Joe. Hence, Dickens envisions not only a conflict between labor and education, he also argues for an alliance between a conveniently archaic, docile, and contented laboring class and an enterprising and industrious bourgeoisie. The pull between working-class morality and the necessity of education thread Pip's past and future together, but as Dickens proposes later, it is the interaction between two people, not class-types, that creates improvement of a grander kind.

Joe exclaims that Pip's newfound ability to write molds him into more of an "uncommon scholar" than those around him, as Pip realizes Joe's education "was yet in its infancy" since he did not go to a formal school (Dickens 1999, 40). The lackluster tutelage under Wopsle's great-aunt, and even under an improved version with Bidley, become overshadowed by this first taste of improvement, one that would later push him into becoming fully literate, and subsequently, abandoning the laboring-class. Pip grows to understand that being literate creates an opportunity to advance beyond his current class status, and to develop educationally; he must leave the working-class sphere.

Dickens employs Biddy to highlight the characteristics of a 'good,' even if sparsely qualified, teacher. He also uses Biddy to show that meaningful education relies on compassion, competence, and creativity to improve the lower classes on some level. Despite shaping Pip's educational expectations as vain, Dickens refutes superficial means of learning through showing Biddy's aspirations. Biddy says she works to "...be industrious and patient, and teach myself while I teach others. The new schools are not like the old, but I learnt a good deal from you after that time, and have had time since then to improve" (Dickens 1999, 215). Opinionated and wise, Biddy sees through Pip's shallow aspirations, as Dickens frames her as not only humbler than Pip, but far brighter, closely resembling his definition of a 'good' educator.

As Pip advances socially and educationally, he also comes to understand that improvement through literacy relies on money; Joe could not learn to read growing up because "poetry costs money" (Dickens 1999, 41). In an early conversation with Joe, Pip hears that however "uncommon fond of reading" Joe might have been, he ultimately was unable to 'improve' into being literate due to falling under London's poor. The most incriminating restriction derives from Mrs. Joe's condemning stance on higher education. Joe describes how she "an't over partial to having scholars on the premises...and in partikler would not be over partial to my being a scholar, for fear as I might rise. Like a sort of rebel" (Dickens 1999, 42). Mrs. Joe's anxieties over what happens when the laboring-class becomes educated, 'improves,' is not unwarranted. Absurd as it may sound, Joe accurately perceives self-improvement as posing a threat to the community it is supposed to help. Once Pip receives the large sum of money from Magwitch, who, for much of the novel, is an unidentified benefactor, he gains the freedom to flee Mrs. Joe's home in pursuit of higher learning. Dickens takes issue with this all-too-easy vessel of improvement and uses it as a way to parody those who come into money and do not work for their advancements.

Meckier argues that "throughout *Great Expectations*, Dickens equates the impulse toward self-improvement with base cravings for social and material advance," perhaps a slant at Darwin's popular 1859 *Self-Help*. Just as readers of *Self-Help* believed they, too, could conveniently and expediently improve, "Pip's dramatic ascent, Dickens scoffed, is what most readers of *Self-Help* hoped would happen to them, with or without a strong effort on their part" (Meckier 2001, 543). For both these readers and Pip alike, the idea is to become better off, not a better person. This form of quick-and-easy improvement reshapes Pip's attitudes toward those who labor. His benefactor not only grants him the financial security for educational improvement, he also provides a threshold in which Dickens inserts a critique against Pip's newfound churlish character.

Pip's financial and educational improvement, and the benefactor who aids in this, later demonstrate Dickens's call for a different kind of improvement for Londoners more broadly. In what Campbell describes as a turn of fortune's wheel, Pip's reversal has the effect of reordering his priorities and changing his views on himself, those surrounding him, and London. Pip realizes immediately, but then must learn several times over during the novel, that literacy is not the solution to London's broader human condition, and therefore, will not suffice as the only path toward

improvement. Alternatively, the reversal not “only inverts Pip, but changes the world and revolutionizes as well, Pip’s understanding of it” (Campbell 1996, 154). More distinctly to *Great Expectations*, Dickens uses the coming of age story to create a call for improvement on a visceral level, pushing beyond educational reform alone. There are many concerns as to what will happen to London’s poor if they improve and, otherwise, what consequences lie in store if they do not.

### **Wealth and the Uncommon Scholar**

As per Dickens’s usual, he draws attention to what is lost when one advances from an uneducated and impoverished home to an educated and literate society of affluence. Dickens does not take issue with learning but rather, criticizes the commodification of literacy and the entitlement that follows those who pursue it. Pip, upon ‘improving’ into a gentleman, undergoes a change in disposition that Dickens portrays as less than favorable. A theme common in *Our Mutual Friend* and *Hard Times*, as well as the idea that once one gets an education, he becomes unable to access and extend the compassion learned in the working-class home. This understanding temporarily follows Pip’s transferal, yet his initial educational improvements began in the very working-class home he aims to leave behind. Murray Baumgarten notes that, as previously mentioned, it is there that Pip learned to write. Readers become invested in this form of improvement, and “the material which the young Pip reads is handwritten. His imagination fastens eagerly upon the constitutive strokes of pen and chisel” (Baumgarten 1983, 61). Paper changes Pip he as becomes more formally educated, more literate, and comes into more wealth. “In the course of the novel we will confront, as does Pip, these two aspects of literacy: as writing it has calligraphic potential and can liberate the imagination; as reading it may be a code that directs and even imprisons the imagination in rules and laws” (Baumgarten 1983, 62). Pip becomes more educated and loses the imagination that Dickens so frequently called for in students and educators alike. Once Pip reaches the degree in which he defines a gentleman, “he leaves behind his childish pictorial imagination... *Great Expectations* will thereby remind us that even if literacy is the mark of the gentleman, reading has often made men and women mad” (Baumgarten 1983, 65).

Literacy possesses a transformative power, and Pip becomes expectant that he will reach a ‘happy ending.’ Pip’s reasons for turning his back on the working class, specifically Joe, become focal. After all, Pip wants to continue to improve beyond what Joe is capable of, for he wants to rise in society and become a gentleman. Pip’s “intellectual capacities left him unsatisfied with his work as blacksmith. When he is bound apprentice to Joe in the Town Hall, he experiences the whole process as a humiliation” (Hösle 2008, 492). Additionally, Pip has read his imaginations “somewhat blindly, in self-absorption, in much the same way that Mrs. Pocket reads her book of peerage. But Joe’s selfless, charitable illiteracy has all along pointed toward a third possibility, an ideal reconciliation of metaphor and fact that seems to free him from the lies of adult fiction” (Byrd 1976, 265). The question of balance, of when, is one just educated enough riddles the entire novel, and *Great Expectations* falls danger of fitting Dickens’s usual rants that end without

solution. However, he does offer a definite form of improvement separate from educational reform: human to human, corporeal contact.

### **Problematic Visceral Improvement**

Visceral improvement reshapes several characters in the novel, but problematic visceral experiences also plague it. Before directing attention to Pip's visceral interactions with his benefactor—Magwitch—it is worth dwelling a bit longer in the laboring-class. It is within London's laboring-class that Dickens most clearly inserts troubling, if apparent, suggestions for visceral improvement. The means of improvement Dickens suggests originate here present challenges, especially when visceral improvement is taken into consideration. First, Joe, "With his good honest face all glowing and shining," represents Dickens's idea of contentment and humility (Dickens 199, 169). However, Elizabeth Campbell claims in "Dickens and the Language of Fortune" that Joe is not without flaw. As "The central, eternally female virtue that Joe represents had always been at the heart of Dickens' novels; but in *Great Expectations*, virtue undergoes a change of sex," which she argues makes Joe both the novel's moral center but also a disgrace of emasculation by his termagant wife (Campbell 1996, 169). Despite this slant, one shared by many critics, Joe nevertheless functions as an example as to why improvement is necessary for stagnant middle-class. Married to the abusive Mrs. Joe Gargery, Joe does not pursue education for his wife "would not be over partial to my being a scholar, for fear I might rise. Like a sort of rebel" (Dickens 1999, 42).

Joe does learn through his "meditative raking of the fire by fire" as a blacksmith, where he also questions his good-hearted yet underprivileged origins (Dickens 1999, 41). Likewise, Dickens, in what scholars have considered to be a troubling move, defines Mrs. Joe's improvement as a drastic change in sympathy and temperament upon becoming an invalid by Orlick's brutal attack. Mrs. Joe, who repeatedly reminds Pip of his burden to her, as well the fact that he owes her infinite degrees of gratitude for even being kept alive. In framing their relationship this way, Dickens depicts Mrs. Joe as deeply flawed and for the most part, detrimental to both Joe and Pip's longing for learning. She uses abusive reasoning with both Joe and Pip as a way to keep them "from making demands on her; she can only assert her authority through brutal, and not tender or patient, instruction" (Weissman 1981, 108). In framing her this way, Dickens inserts visceral learning into the working-class sphere, creating a stark foil to Bidley's example as a 'good' teacher. Hence, an alternate, if at times, problematic source of 'improvement' appears.

Dickens frequently opposed capital punishment and physical abuse, as shown in the novel through Pip's relationship with Mrs. Joe and his observations of Magwitch's prison. However, he did acknowledge that in some cases, "being banged around some may do a lad good," or, as John Gordon argues in "Female Figures in *Great Expectations*: In Praise of Mrs. Joe," Dickens improves child-like and hot-tempered lasses this way as well (Gordon 2017, 254). Dubiously, Dickens provides one definition of improvement as the result of visceral, often violent, experiences,

but he does not extend this definition to Mrs. Joe's 'teaching' of Pip and Joe; he rejects her as a 'good' visceral teacher altogether. Despite "raising Pip by hand, "Mrs. Joe has nothing maternal about her...she is aggressive and uses both verbal and physical violence to keep him in his place" (Jarvis 2014, 1261-62). And, as Pip's awareness of her physical abuse develops, he notices that Mrs. Joe treats her husband similarly to the way she treats him. Mrs. Joe and her interactions with others become yet another anti-example of Dickens's call for improvement, this time in his call for visceral interactions. However, her physical transformation opens a questionable method for 'improvement': violent, visceral exchanges.

Penn argues that in *Great Expectations*, "vindictive characters generally suffer great injury and become figures seeking pardon in sentimental deathbed scenes. Dickens comes near to implying that one can switch from a castigating nature to a compassionate nature with a violent enough flipping of the switch" (Penn 2016, 128). Mrs. Joe's problematic visceral 'improvement' is not the only instance in *Great Expectations* in which physical violence is suggested as warranted or as a form of learning. Both endings of the novel detail how Estella was abused by her husband. In the published ending, Pip states that he had heard "of her as leading a most unhappy life, and as being separated from her husband, who had used her with great cruelty, and who had become quite renowned as a compound of pride, avarice, brutality, and meanness." (Dickens 1999, 356). Pip continues to describe that all her meanness, in turn, was replaced with the "friendly touch of the once insensible hand" (Dickens 1999, 357). Extreme means of visceral interaction, it seems, Dickens attributes to her 'improvement.'

Perhaps the most problematic reading of this concept arrives when Estella tells Pip that, upon years of sadness, "suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but—I hope—into a better shape" (Dickens 1999, 358). In a similar vein, the original ending also ends with a message of visceral suffering as 'improvement,' as Pip describes that Estella (mistreated not only by Mr. Drummle but by a second husband as well) learns through pain that "had been stronger than Miss Havisham's teaching, and had given her a heart to understand what my heart used to be" (Dickens 1999, 359). Several scholars have attempted to examine Dickens's troubling suggestion of physical violence as a means of improvement, but many have also looked at Dickens's usage of physically aggressive moments to insert humor and themes of compassion. Take Pip's first encounter with Magwitch, for example. Pip states:

The man, after looking at me for a moment, turned me upside down, and emptied my pockets. There was nothing in them but a piece of bread. When the church came to itself-for he was so sudden and strong that he made it go head over heels before me, and I saw the steeple under my feet-when the church came to itself, I say, I was seated on a high tombstone, trembling, while he ate the bread ravenously. (Dickens 1999, 10)

Both the gesture and Pip's description of it comically visualize for the reader that most Dickensian of themes: the reversal of fortune.

From *Pickwick Papers* onward through the central gesture of plot and the surest test of character, Dickens "had been forever turning his protagonists upside down and emptying their pockets" (Campbell 1996, 154). The reversal from illiterate to literate parallels the physical connectedness that occurs between characters yet a distinction must be made between the visceral interactions between Pip and Magwitch versus those between Mrs. Joe and Orlick, and Estella and Drummle. A shakedown gives a much different message than becoming an invalid or encountering domestic abuse does. However, in framing both female protagonists as unruly, vain, and cruel themselves, Dickens may be suggesting that getting their getting knocked around and physically altered 'improved' their dispositions. Why, then, does he not prescribe the same severity in 'improvement' for Pip? It may be that this choice was an unconscious one, but it may also be that since Pip's 'improvement' and expectations of what will follow, it is so delusional that getting knocked around would not be enough to change him. Or, perhaps since Pip was a victim of physical violence in his youth, this kind of early exposure visceral exchange render him incapable of improving this way. Dickens's message remains ambiguous, and perhaps he suggests this troubling move this way to create a criticism against violence altogether. However, he does provide one clear example that displays the other half of the solution to help heal London's human condition—compassionate physical exchange.

### **Visceral Compassion and the Deathbed**

Although Dickens presents many unsettling visceral modes of learning throughout *Great Expectations*, he also takes due care to depict moments of corporeal interaction that get at his second part of the solution to London's human condition. Education and literacy appear as the most consistent and clearly identifiable Dickensian mode of improvement. However, Hösle argues that "the book is structured according to the list of the corporal works of mercy" as the theme repeats through several of the characters' interactions (Hösle 2008, 477). Visceral acts of mercy are shown most clearly when Dickens chooses to write Magwitch free from his impending capital punishment, an issue Dickens long took issue with. Dickens's deep repugnance of corporal punishment appears throughout *Great Expectations*, especially if one reads Mrs. Joe's treatment of Pip through this lens. When practiced on children and "when it is sadistic, unjust, or ritualized," Dickens outright refutes it; however, he is also ready to acknowledge that there is something about physical interaction that transcends the capacity of words said, read, or written to provide London improvement.

There are other moments in Dickens's fiction where instances of violence are justified as due punishment, as a way to 'improve' one's selfish condition. Bentley Drummle, for one, might have been much improved, as a child, if he had not been allowed to develop his worst features, largely resulting from his overbearing and wealthy family. However, this is not the point Dickens urges readers to garnish from *Great Expectations*. Magwitch and Pip's relationship best exemplifies Dickens's call for visceral interaction. Despite the aggression present in their first encounter in

the graveyard, Pip and Magwitch later develop a kind of father-son relationship, which only deepens once Pip learns that Magwitch is Estella's father. Initially, Magwitch's paternal-like connection to Pip begins when he sends him money to become a gentleman, without Pip knowing the source of his newfound wealth until later in the novel. Furthermore, "Magwitch's 'gentlemanly' revenge project," which deforms Pip's character, ultimately reshapes him into "a 'true gentleman at heart': his forgiveness and newborn love for Magwitch, which prove that he has broken with the paternal pattern set by Magwitch" best exemplify Dickens's call for improvement (Gates 2010, 291-92). The scene in which Pip's ultimate improvement is below:

We had a doleful parting, and when I took my place at Magwitch's side, I felt that was my place henceforth while he lived.

For, now, my repugnance of him had all melted away, and in the hunted wounded shackled creature who held my hand in his, I only saw a man who had meant to be my benefactor, and who had felt affectionately, gratefully, and generously, towards me with great constancy through a series of years. I only saw in him a much better man than I had been to Joe. (Dickens 1999, 332)

Pip learns what it means to be a gentleman indeed, and it is in the physical connectedness in this scene that this realization blossoms. Finally, Pip describes how "I felt his hand tremble as it held mine, and he turned his face away as he lay in the bottom of the boat" (Dickens 1999, 333). Much different from the physical 'improvements' inflicted by Mrs. Joe and Drummle, the gentle tremble of a dying man's hand transforms Pip into a different kind of gentleman, one capable of forgiveness, compassion, and displays of such values through visceral interaction. Despite the tone of earlier scenes between the two being framed as those present in "muscular novels" of the time, Dickens uses this moment to convince readers that, despite his flaws, Pip does improve genuinely by the novel's close, as he returns to the kindness he initially witnessed in Joe. The general tone of Magwitch and Pip's relationship transforms from "a sort of glorification of strength and ferocity" to gentle touch to teach each character that "his muscularity is of no use to him in the crises of his adult experience" (Shrimpton 2012, 137).

Instead, Dickens places Pip alongside Magwitch's deathbed to demonstrate to readers a call that extends beyond the scene at hand. Dickens "could only imagine Magwitch's dying as an idealized form of justice" and chooses to depict the death scene as he does, rather than as a hanging, for example, to fully flesh out Pip's improvement here (Stein 1988, 106). Despite Phillip Collin's insistence that Dickens was good at pointing out the flaws of London but was not so good about suggesting fixes, he does offer up suggestions as to what might help improve London's human condition. Dickens creates and shatters Pip's great expectations to allow what he defines as a well-rounded improvement on the individual and societal level in London. Through refuting the shallow definitions of monetary gain and materialism as improvement, Dickens calls for a return to an individualized, inquisitive humanity. Best exemplified when Pip extends compassion through holding Magwitch's hand on his prison deathbed, visceral interaction, and learning from

heartfelt moments must be applied to London's broader human condition to evoke Dickens's idea of improvement.

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