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# When "Knowing How to Read Texts" Means Understanding and Inferring Meanings

by

**Antonella Nuzzaci**
University of L'Aquila, Italy

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# When "Knowing How to Read Texts" Means Understanding and Inferring Meanings

Antonella Nuzzaci

Associate Professor of Experimental Pedagogy,
University of L'Aquila, Italy
antonella.nuzzaci@univaq.it

**Abstract.** The essay aims to explore the nature of reading as a multidimensional and dynamic competence and to identify the teaching strategies necessary to put students to read successfully. His main purpose is to focus on relationships between text comprehension, skills and inferential processes and to examine the positive association between understanding reading, morphological awareness and construction of meanings, also in reference the ability to make inferences. The paper proposes a vision of reading comprehension as a dynamic process of decoding and linguistic understanding, which suggests how the relationship between decoding and linguistic understanding should be integrative rather than additional. The interconnection between the multiple linguistic-cognitive processes involved in reading implies the use of interpretative approaches belonging to different disciplinary areas. For this reason, this contribution goes precisely in the direction to look at the phenomenon of reading by combining the tools of linguistics, cognitive psychology and pedagogy, indispensable to reveal its features.

**Keywords:** reading, comprehension, morphological awareness, inference, reading skills

## 1. Introduction

All national and international studies over the last twenty years have supported the importance of guaranteeing all sections of the population (children, young people and adults) have adequate language skills, writing and reading skills and qualified education to ensure positive learning and literacy experiences. The latter is understood by the OECD (2013 59) as the ability to understand, evaluate, use and interact with written texts in order to participate

in society, to achieve its goals and to develop its knowledge and potential". Since the mid-seventies, Italy has participated in comparative investigations of the *International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement* (IEA), which, in later stages, gave rise to explorations such as the *Reading Literacy Study* (1992; Ferreri & Lucisano 1996). From another point of view the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS 1994; 1997; 1998) emphasized the importance of reading skills for active participation in society and stressed that, among the alphabetic skills (Lucisano 1994), those of reading are indispensable for the interconnection with the multiple linguistic-cognitive processes involved (Britt, Goldman, & Rouet 2013; Kamil et al. 2000; Perfetti 2007; Rayner & Reichle 2010) and with understanding of speech (Zwaan & Singer 2003) etc.

The IALS Survey has for the first time detected the ability to produce written information, while the Adult Literacy and Life Skills (ALL) has extended the scope of observation of skills to the use of formalized languages. Compared to the latter, the International Program for Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) - *Survey of Adult Skills* has been designed to be connected, from a psychometric point of view, with IALS since the pilot investigation to verify that all three detections (IALS, ALL and PIAAC), produced results expressed on the same scale of measurement of scores for comparability problems (ISFOL 2014).

PIAAC (2013) collected a series of representative samples of the resident population aged between 16 and 64 in each participating country, showing how too many adults are not yet able to acquire basic reading skills (reading components).

This negatively affects their individual life and their economic and social well-being (OECD 2013).

It is also noted that the reading skills of Italian adults are among the lowest in the OECD countries and their performances seem to vary with reference to the socio-demographic characteristics, even if these differences remain almost similar to those found on average in the participating countries at the studio.

In detail, the report highlights how higher levels of education and literacy are associated with higher chances of individuals to participate in the job market and be employed, but also to obtain higher wages.

Equally unexciting results are also noted in the surveys on young fifteen-year-olds, whose literacy in reading was the main domain assessed during the PISA investigation cycles (PISA 2000), revisited over time with the development of new tools, up to the seventh PISA cycle (2018).

The PISA framework for assessing students' reading ability towards the end of compulsory school focuses on reading skills which include research, selection, interpretation, integration and evaluation of information ranging from the whole range of texts associated with situations that extend beyond the classroom.

The literacy framework for reading PISA 2018 follows some aspects of the 2009 and 2015 surveys and incorporates constructs, such as fluent reading, literal interpretation, integration between sentences, extraction of central themes and inferences, which are skills criticism for processing complex or multiple texts for specific purposes. It highlights how the problem is for students not to be able to perform higher-level text processing functions.

In subsequent phases and from different points of view, the development of comparative surveys between the years 1997-2018, which assessed the results and performances regarding the literacy of both students at school and the adult population, marks an important step for the description of the changes that have affected the European population, especially in the last two decades, also following the increasingly massive introduction of digital texts.

These occasions represented for Italy the opportunity to also reach unedited population shares, such as immigrants, with the aim of studying key skills (literacy, numeracy and problem solving), for life (life skills), social and multiply competencies. However, these investigations have seen language and reading skills always at the centre of the debate. This demonstrates how this kind of skills play an important role in the daily lives of individuals, influencing their

health, political awareness, participation in social activities and a sense of trust in others.

## 2. Decoding and understanding

Poor reading skills have seen the gap between poor and excellent readers grow progressively, which has been marked over time, highlighting the need to change the approach to the training of alphabetic skills.

Learning to read is a complex process. Cognitive and linguistic factors are, as is known, one of the most important elements in the acquisition of reading (Verhoeven, Reitsma, & Siegel 2011).

If it is true then that reading and writing are complex facts, it is equally true that they are essential skills in the life of each individual and, which, when they are lacking or absent, create problems of management of existence. They remain basic skills in learning all disciplines and their mastery is an essential condition for good social and professional integration. In fact, there are many studies that continue to emphasize the loss of these kinds of competence, a loss that is taking on ever more unprecedented characters and inventing new forms of illiteracy, such as the return and functional one (Nuzzaci 2019).

Many processes, such as those of word recognition and speech decoding and language understanding (such as spoken vocabulary, semantic and syntactic processes), are crucial to making an individual an expert reader (Stuart, Stainthorp, & Snowling 2008).

In the simple vision of reading, understanding can be seen as the product of word decoding and oral understanding (Hoover & Gough 1990). There are various models that describe the reading process, but, due to space limitations, they cannot be discussed in depth here (bottom-up models, which describe lower-order reading processes - word recognition; top models-down, which describe higher-order reading processes - text comprehension -; interactive

models, which are a combination of bottom-up and top-down models) (Rayner et al. 2012; Verhoeven, Reitsma, & Siegel 2011).

Studies indicate that reading comprehension depends on the reader's ability to decode words accurately, smoothly and effortlessly (LaBerge & Samuels 1974) but, at the same time, it cannot be considered a concluded learning process when the child shows to be able to read accurately and correctly aloud, since this operation is not enough to try to understand if he can infer the meaning of what he has read. The ability to understand a text is generally based above all on the mastery of decoding (García & Cain 2014), in terms of accuracy and speed, and writing, in terms of spelling and punctuation. These are skills that allow the individual to connect the letters to the sounds and meanings of the corresponding speech, which involve interdependent operations and processes of a different nature not attributable to a single processor.

Understanding texts is a complex cognitive activity that requires mastery of the linguistic code, but also the implementation of general cognitive processes, such as the activation of knowledge in memory, the ability to establish inferences and to mobilize attentional processes.

With regard to the first (*decoding*), it is necessary to remember how it is configured as a kind of skill that allows, starting from the use of precise rules, to translate the grapheme into the corresponding phoneme.

The second *(lexical coding*) intervenes when the stimulus has already been decoded. Thus, the meaning is sought by examining all the possible meanings of the word until the correct one is identified.

This can also occur for direct access, speeding up the process, without going through all the meanings, even if this activation mechanism of one network is considered simultaneous with the deactivation of another, as a consequence derived from the attentional focus determined by the context.

A further step in this process is given by automation, which intervenes in the recognition of words, frees cognitive resources for

understanding and, in processes underway in the calculation and processing of meanings, increases the reader's ability to manipulate the text.

The semantic level, on the other hand, goes beyond the meaning of the single word to search for the meaning of the entire text, which is obtained through a process of continuous construction.

Understanding reading can also be defined as a process by which the reader constructs the meaning of the text by combining his previous knowledge with the information contained in the text (Samuels 2002; 1979; Samuels, Schermer, & Reinking 1992).

If the reader was able, after reading, to identify the meaning of what was read, but the latter was not consistent with the written text, this could lead him to re-read it and find a new meaning.

The syntactic level concerns the understanding of the relationships between the constituent elements of simple and complex sentences and allows you to segment them in their grammatical constituents, as well as establish links that bind them and trace the order of words, the grammatical class, the function words, the prefixes and suffixes and punctuation marks.

Considering the relationship between words, sentences and successive periods, the textual level instead regards the relationships between the various parts of the text with reference to the elements of cohesion and the temporal sequences, while the pragmatic-communicative one is linked to the more general ability to understand the objective pursued by the author of the text (implicitly defined in the content) and the context. This is to build a coherent and meaningful representation of the content, integrating new information with old one and solve, update or modify the problems concerning the representation of the text in the event that information enters into contradiction.

At these levels, reading, therefore, presents itself as a dynamic process whose goal is the construction of a representation (sometimes called situation model), which must respect what the author of the text has actually written, requiring the reader to use his conceptual and linguistic knowledge to interpret its meaning.

In this sense, understanding the text as a dynamic "situation model" (Kintsch 1998) is based on two processes: the construction of representation in memory of the literal meaning of the text and the integration of the contents of the text with one's previous knowledge through mapping and inference processes (McNamara & Magliano 2009).

This character requires that the construction of understanding takes place continuously, through an uninterrupted development of interpretation, as new information is introduced (words, sentences, etc.).

In this sense, understanding the text - as a constructive, active and interrogative activity - requires the integration of new information, contained in the text, within the knowledge structures possessed by the reader (De Beni & Pazzaglia 1995; De Beni, Cisotto, & Carretti 2001) and is characterized as a cognitive activity that is expressed in the interrelation between several variables.

However, the simplest interpretative approach to reading by literature is that which provides an organizational framework to understand how the corresponding skills and related to the different components that make up it contribute to supporting this kind of skills (Francis et al. 2005; 2006).

This approach promotes a vision that sees mainly interrelated, but separable, two components, the decoding and the linguistic understanding, which allow in a decisive and "multiplicative" way to come to understand a text.

Decoding, in particular, asserts itself as the ability to quickly access a mental representation of the text, relying on phonetic decoding and automatic recognition of words, while linguistic understanding, which constitutes lexical information, represents meaning and syntax (knowledge of vocabulary and syntax) and can also be assessed in oral comprehension (Kendeou et al. 2009b), also because reading comprehension is intimately linked to oral understanding.

Research in L2 shows how decoding and linguistic comprehension skills explain a substantial difference in the

development of reading comprehension itself and that, consistent with the studies conducted on monolingual speakers, for those who do not have reading difficulties, decoding skills they seem to become less predictive of understanding than linguistic understanding with advancing age and school level.

There is also convincing evidence that the contribution that decoding and linguistic understanding gives to reading comprehension may differ among those who show a poor understanding of texts (Lervåg & Aukrust 2010), although this result is not always consistent with that obtained through some longitudinal studies (Johnston & Kirby 2006; Keenan, Betjemann, & Olson 2008). Although therefore there is evidence that indicates how the understanding of the language plays a crucial role in the understanding of reading, it is not clear if the components of linguistic understanding (such as the breadth and depth of the vocabulary, syntax, morphology and understanding of listening) must be considered as interchangeable proxies of a general construction of understanding.

Studies of young English monolinguals have shown that, once inserted in the model simultaneously, the listening comprehension and vocabulary measured in kindergarten act as the only predictors of reading comprehension two years later (Kendeou et al. 2009b). It is unclear, however, whether the components of language comprehension unambiguously preach the reading comprehension of older students, for example, and whether they increase in higher students.

## 3. The relationship between reading comprehension and morphological awareness

Although there is a widely shared view that there is a strong relationship between decoding and reading comprehension, substantial differences have been found in the percentage of variance explained in reading comprehension by different decoding

measures (Cutting & Scarborough 2006; Keenan, Betjemann, & Olson 2008), even when, for some researchers, the latter's contribution to reading comprehension appears negligible, with R2 values in the .0001 or .0005 region (Berninger et al. 2006).

Other research suggests that decoding ability more or less completely preaches reading comprehension performance, with R2 values in the range of .90 (Katzir et al. 2006). Decoding accuracy is also often used to identify texts of different levels that have been appropriately chosen or selected for the assessment of reading ability at different levels of competence (Mesmer 2007).

At the same time, however, research has also shown how the nature of predictors and reading comprehension changes over time. Specifically, it is the longitudinal studies conducted on monolingual children that have supported the hypothesis that reading performance in early school years preaches a considerable amount of variance in reading comprehension in later life.

However, it is clear that - over the years - as reading skills become more consolidated, language skills become more reliable predictors of understanding (Catts et al. 1999; Cutting & Scarborough 2006; Francis et al. 2005; Storch & Whitehurst 2002).

This general observation is also supported by studies conducted on L2 (Geva & Farnia 2012; Verhoeven & van Leeuwe 2012).

Kern (1989) argues in this regard that, unlike native speakers, second language individuals are less likely to automatically acquire word recognition and need to pay attention to morphology.

Kuo and Anderson (2006) put forward the idea that L2 students, who have more solid morphological knowledge, including knowledge of word formation through the combination of prefixes, suffixes and roots, have a more enriched vocabulary and enjoy a better understanding of reading. According to Deacon and Kirby (2004), there is in fact a correlation between morphological awareness and reading comprehension, as revealed by a four-year longitudinal study conducted by them (Deacon & Kirby 2004).

In the same direction, Maag (2007) underlines how explicit knowledge of morphological awareness contributes to

strengthening the understanding of texts and how the best readers of L1 and those with wider ranges of vocabulary have overall a greater metalinguistic awareness than less able readers.

Still, other studies (Kieffer & Lesaux 2008), examining the relationship between morphological awareness and understanding of the English language between fourth and fifth grade English and Spanish-speaking students, indicate that morphological awareness is a significant predictive factor in understanding reading, thus supporting the inclusion of derivational morphology in the understanding of the English language by Spanish-speaking students. Siegel (2008), then, starting from the examination of the relationship between morphological awareness and spelling and reading comprehension in children with dyslexia, typical readers and young English-speaking students, underlines the contributory role of derivational morphology on reading and spelling skills of students, noting that those with reading difficulties obtain lower scores than "normal" readers, precisely in reference to the measure of morphological awareness (Ramírez et al. 2010).

This confirms the role assumed by morphological awareness, as the ability to reflect and manipulate small units of meaning, and how it contributes to the decoding, recognition of words and understanding of reading, performing a vital function in the acquisition of literacy. We think, in this sense, of when young readers have to overcome some difficulties in learning to read about the internalization of unknown and very long words. As a necessity of teaching and learning, morphological awareness, therefore, becomes a vital dimension that contributes to training the "competent reader" and helping teachers to face the difficulties of those who have reading problems and who need specific interventions, especially in the early years of primary school. These are the moments, more than others, in which it is necessary to support the learning process to reach a competent reading, error-free and linked to a correct ability to decode, recognize words and understand reading.

For this reason, a large part of the efforts carried out by those

who play an educational role must go towards building, encouraging use and implementing these kinds of skills in the context of education. The degree of penetrability of a text by more or less expert readers also depends on the adequacy of a text with respect to a specific reader. The reflection on these aspects must be both linguistic and cognitive, in the twofold sense of identifying and recognizing the linguistic peculiarities that each text presents and of making hypotheses on the possible paths of understanding. This translates for teachers into the need to study, analyse and filter texts to be able to structure teaching/learning sequences aimed at activating comprehension processes. This function should be widely increased in teachers initial and continuous training, to prepare them to understand pupils' differences also in terms of preferences and motivation, in order to make reading a valuable tool to make the curricular path more precious and incisive. This would offer teachers the opportunity to reflect on the importance of adopting strategies and ways adequate to increase the ability of students to read. Starting from an assumption of responsibility and strong methodological-didactic skills (Nuzzaci 2016), the teachers, in a perspective of integration and interconnection with teaching-learning processes and didactic planning (Nuzzaci, 2015), they must take charge of considering reading a key skill and transversal from the disciplinary point of view. This is because the latter can be understood as a "foundation variable" which in teaching-learning processes can be able to change the course of the didactic action.

Indeed, the school is obliged to train "literatus" by equipping students with reading skills that enable them to transform themselves into competent readers, that is, capable of providing interpretative approaches to texts, even the most complex ones. This requires cultural mediation activity that leads them to carefully and correctly interpret a text, to understand it in depth by analysing its significant, significant elements and the connections between them. Readers, in fact, while reading the text enter into relationship with all this using their experiences and ideas, as well as their own interpretive and reflective structure. The teacher has the task of

leading all students to acquire a form of individual awareness that requires, for the reception and processing of information, adequate reading tools to promote fruition of the texts focused both on adequate language education and the variety of languages of the language and on the ability to place texts in their historical context, cultural history, etc., obtaining the result of making readers express a critical opinion (attention to the work in its production context) and a personal opinion (opinion of the reader on the work) in terms of responsibility and cognitive and interpretative autonomy (Nuzzaci, Nirchi, and Luciani 2016).

## 4. Building and interpreting as dynamic processes of cognition

In light of the importance attributed to the ability to decode (understood in its components of accuracy and speed) and to write (concerning the orthographic component and the transcription process, *i.e.* the correct use of graphic and punctuation marks), it naturally arises to ask why is the understanding process still underestimated in a school context, which, as demonstrated, influences skills of different nature such as the understanding of specialized languages (understanding a math problem for example).

One of these neglected aspects is the inferential capacity. One wonders why the school sometimes prefers to push the student to improve their ability to read a text correctly and quickly, neglecting instead the ability to grasp its content and stimulate the inferential processes.

The term *inference* refers to information that is activated during reading, but not explicitly stated in the text and the cognitive process necessary to obtain it (Van den Broek 1994). Contrary to a merely traditional point of view, it is known that learning is not considered concluded when the child proves to be able to read accurately and accurately aloud, because the end is to infer the meaning than reading. The marked attention to this component of reading can be explained with its greater visibility and specificity, required in the

early stages of learning to read and often characterized by continuous checks by the teacher on the level of precision and speed, but which lose having regard to the estimate of the level of understanding, which sees the young reader called to put forward hypotheses of meaning and submit them, and a process of verification or textual refutation. Those who read a text are, in fact, continually called to make interpretations on the meaning to be attributed to the text in front of them.

Research on the understanding of reading, in the context of cognitive psychology, has also turned to the development of cognitive functioning models of the skilled reader, which describe the different stages of processing and connect the perception of the written trace to the recognition of words.

Due to its multifunctional nature which simultaneously involves operations and skills of various kinds, understanding the text is certainly a complex cognitive task, not attributable to a single information processor, as it depends on factors and processes that are highly interdependent between them. It is important to specify, in fact, how this understanding in children with specific difficulties, for example, becomes problematic and it is not possible to identify a single cognitive etiological factor capable of accounting for it. The data was also confirmed by the numerous empirical evidence that testifies how we can find ourselves in front of subjects who, although presenting a specific disturbance in understanding the text, actually show highly individual and peculiar profiles. This leads to an interest in a second level of analysis, in which cognitive and metacognitive skills intervene, among which the ability to make correct predictions and inferences on the content of the text and the ability to generate new information.

The latter, starting from the interpretive universe held by the student as a patrimony of codes necessary to understand its content, is intended as the ability to use adequate strategies to identify and select relevant information in the text, to exclude marginal information and, as the ability to reflect on their performance, knowledge and control processes activated, in an attempt to

monitor the progress of the acquisition process and proceed to subsequent verification. If understanding a text then also means understanding and reconstructing its "legitimate" meaning, the level of analysis inherent in the process of understanding, often underestimated, is precisely what consists in evaluating, or rather, interpreting what has been read.

This is a level that allows the reader to attribute a further, deeper and more personal meaning, which does not depend exclusively on what the text literally describes, but on how much the reader projects himself in reading, both as regards previous knowledge and as regards the conceptions of the world that it possesses. Precisely for this reason, we are faced with something that concerns the field of memorization, the processing of knowledge, as well as the ability to re-use the meanings of reading.

In essence, all proposed models agree that processing a text is an active process of construction of meanings, therefore dependent not only on the information contained in the text but also on the knowledge possessed by the reader. Literature now classic (Kintsch & Van Dijk 1978; Johnson-Laird 1983) has highlighted how the lack of interaction between the two levels of knowledge, those internal to the text and those of the reader, while leading to a superficial understanding of the text, does not allow us to grasp its profound meaning due to a lack of construction of a coherent mental representation.

In general, the models arise from specific theories and focus on specific aspects of reading comprehension, such as the recognition of words or their global nature and cognition in general. The example of the dual-route model (Coltheart, Curtis, Atkins, & Haller 1993), interested in the recognition of specific words or linguistic models (Athey 1985), deal with syntax and semantics but exclude phonology. In accordance with the dual-route model, the overall architecture of the cognitive system that processes the written words is defined, most of the time, in terms of two-way coexistence, which allow accessing the mental lexicon, *i.e.* the set of words known to the reader (*personal lexicon*).

The first way, the indirect one, uses phonological mediation, and the second one, the direct one, allows a recognition without conversions of the written word in an oral word. From a broad perspective, the connectionist models are mainly concerned with describing parallel network operations, within which some propagation systems lead to the activation of certain configurations and the inhibition of others. In the Seidenberg and McClelland (1989) model these networks involve orthographic, phonological and semantic knowledge, which interact with each other, and transformation processes that allow the transmission of excitations and inhibitions between the units of knowledge. The system is active when the reader is reading, but also when listening or thinking about a word. Recognizing a word, therefore, does not mean having found an element by drawing on a "mental dictionary" but having activated a certain configuration of knowledge (orthographic, phonological and semantic) which corresponds to a single word.

In this regard, a particularly productive way of teaching seems to be based on the acquisition by the learner of adequate learning strategies to be used in a flexible and thoughtful way (McKeown, Beck, & Blake 2009; Michalsky et al. 2009; Spiker et al. 2009). Given the importance of reading comprehension skills, the failure to use effective activation strategies, based on students' needs, becomes detrimental to future learning. Within this strand, we remember all those studies (for example Samuels, Shermer, & Reinking 1999) that highlighted the influence of memory as an important factor for the construction of lexical repertoires, which also affect students' understanding of all types of text. Studies on the effects of vocabulary development on reading comprehension have shown that students with limited knowledge of vocabulary also presented comprehension problems (even with respect to specific texts such as manuals) (Intarasombat 2002; Tanghirunwat 2003), to specialized texts and technical vocabularies.

## 5. Reading as a multidimensional and dynamic competence

Is there a model reader? The model reader of narrative texts, wrote Umberto Eco, is the "set of conditions of happiness, textually established, which must be satisfied for the text to be fully updated in its potential content" (Eco 1979, 62), while the model author it is the textual strategy used by the empirical author to direct the reader's cooperative activity in the desired direction. It is clear from Eco's assertion that reading is a multidimensional skill consisting of a complicated mixture of linguistic, non-linguistic and cognitive skills, ranging from low-level processing skills to high-level textual knowledge (Nassaji 2003).

Knowledge necessary for the understanding of reading is basically attributed to two types: the first is related to form and has a linguistic nature and the second one concerns substance, involving pragmatic and cultural knowledge (Eskey 1986). Among the factors that influence reading comprehension ability, one is fluidity, which is enucleated by literature as a key factor on which an improvement in learning to read at adequate levels depends (Snow, Burns, & Griffith 1998). Another factor is word recognition, which sees students who read faster have more opportunities to understand the meaning of the text as their automatic recognition of words improves. When a reader stops to decipher unfamiliar words, understanding is interrupted because the reader has to create links between ideas within a text. The knowledge and skills that students need to learn to read fluently and comprehensively are related to fluency in oral expression, previous knowledge, experiences, familiarity with the concepts associated with the written word, phonemic awareness, knowledge of the correspondence between letters and sounds, basic vocabulary, notions of semantics and syntax, metacognitive and higher-order skills, all these elements, interrelated and complementary, which reinforce each other and on which the teacher must leverage to build the teaching proposal.

Fluency in reading the text - that is, the ability to read quickly, accurately and with natural intonation - has been proposed as a

predictor of reading comprehension. The role of fluency in reading the oral text (defined as reading speed and reading prosody), together with that of decoding efficiency and understanding of language, vocabulary, syntactic ability, fluent reading and skills of understanding, can contribute to clarifying the mechanisms of understanding reading.

The literature shows how prosody and not the speed of reading the text explains variations in reading comprehension performance for the control of efficiency and understanding of the language. This result suggests that prosody, as an aspect of fluent reading of the text and natural intonation are associated with a better understanding of what is read. Here the fact that the appreciation of texts is conveyed and taught through the reading of stories, poems and works aloud is fundamental. Reading aloud can tell us something about reading comprehension (Gough & Tunmer 1986; Hoover & Gough 1990). However, it is also argued that fluent reading of the oral text or the ability to read quickly, accurately and with natural intonation contributes to the success of understanding. Two issues make it difficult to interpret the results.

Firstly, it should be remembered that studies so far have used many definitions of fluent reading. Secondly, when evaluating the latter's contribution to reading comprehension performance, other predictors (decoding and understanding of the language) intervening were not taken into consideration. Fluency in oral reading, defined as the speed of reading the text and prosody of reading the text, predicts reading comprehension performances above the predictors specified by the simple reading vision. When children start reading, their reading will not be fluent and flowing. The child must first learn to decode the written words, that is, to link the appropriate sounds to the letter combinations. Only when children become more experienced in decoding and learn to recognize words quickly, will their reading performance begin to become more fluent. The ultimate goal of the development of reading is precisely the understanding of the text. Some classical studies on literacy have shown that decoding skills constitute an

important basis for understanding reading (LaBerge & Samuels 1974; Perfetti 1985), which, together with the understanding of language (vocabulary and syntactic skills), they are the best predictors, alongside the supplementary predictor of (Kuhn & Stahl 2003).

A factor that complicates the interpretation and comparison of these results is the role played by fluent reading in children's understanding of reading, of which different definitions and assessments have been given, both in terms of automaticity (LaBerge & Samuels 1974) and verbal efficiency (Perfetti 1985). More recent evidence confirms that when word reading processes become automatic, cognitive resources become available for understanding purposes (LaBerge & Samuels 1974; Perfetti 1985). Specific studies focusing on the correlation between word count and text comprehension have shown different results. Cutting et al. (2009) showed how children with specific reading comprehension deficits behaved similarly to children in the control group when reading word lists but did get results. worse in terms of fluidity in reading. It was then shown that fluent reading of the text uniquely predicts reading comprehension, unlike word lists (Jenkins et al. 2003). If the reading speed is too slow, it becomes difficult to make connections. Therefore, the accurate recognition of words must be fast in order for there to be fluidity during reading (Stricker, Roser, & Martinez 1998), as is observed in children with specific problems of understanding the text which, however, do not have manifest deficits in any of the remaining cognitive abilities. According to other authors (Stothard & Hulme 1992; Keenan, Betjemann, & Olson 2008; Kendeou et al. 2009) among the cognitive skills more intrinsically linked to the comprehension of the text, the ability to understand the oral language plays a primary role and decoding skills.

When even one of these components is damaged, the reading process will inevitably result in a deficit. Wanting to go into the specifics of the abilities mentioned above, among the characteristics that appear most incisive is the understanding of the syntax, which

is most strongly associated with the understanding of the text (Stothard & Hulme 1992; Carretti et. al. 2002; Padovani 2006). Oakhill et al. (2003) have for example administered numerous cognitive tests to children with normal development from 7 to 9 years (intellectual functioning, decoding and reading comprehension, lexical amplitude, phonological awareness, verbal working memory, syntactic understanding, ability to make inferences), but only one of all the tests used by the authors, that of syntactic understanding, was predictive of both the comprehension of the written text and the accuracy of the reading. Confirmation of these data comes from the studies of Nation et al. (2004), also longitudinal (Nation et al. 2010), who found that children between 8 and 10 years of age with poor text comprehension skills exhibited significantly worse syntax understanding performance than peers. From these results, it is clear that the subjects show good phonological skills, with normal levels of decoding at all ages, even when there are insufficient performances in tasks that investigate the non-phonological aspects of language (especially inferential skills and morphosyntactic understanding of the sentence), already present at the time of entry to school and persistent at a later age. These data have made it possible to better understand how the early weaknesses in oral language, observed in bad readers, are not a consequence of their comprehension disorder, on the contrary, being present early, they expose them more to the risk of developing a consequent deficit of understanding. It is clear that these children demonstrate difficulty with a wide range of language skills (Hulme & Snowling 2009).

The relationship between decoding skills and text comprehension also appears somewhat problematic, as can be seen from the literature (Catts et al. 2006; Keenan, Betjemann, & Olson 2008; Kendeou et al. 2009; Nation et al. 2010), which attempts to explain how the deficit of understanding is not associated with low skills in decoding. Independence or dependence between the two variables? It seems obvious from what has been said, how, for a child who learns to read, the ability to decode is instrumental to that

of understanding, otherwise there could be no acquisition of meanings if the reader was not able to decipher correctly a text. Conversely, understanding facilitates decoding, if you think that reading will, in fact, be faster and more correct in the presence of a text whose words and/or contents are known, and if you think that the automation of the decoding process makes more resources available to the understanding process. However, there are pathological conditions in developmental age that clearly show how these two abilities are partially independent. On the one hand, we find children with dyslexia who show a slow, tiring reading, marked by grapheme-phoneme conversion errors, but who maintain the ability to understand the general sense of the written text.

On the other hand, we find ourselves in front of children with an exactly opposite reading skills profile: good decoding ability (fluent, error-free reading) in the presence of very little efficiency of the comprehension process (Cain & Oakhill 2006). The lack of a direct influence between a decoding deficit and a deficit of understanding is also confirmed by the fact that the treatment experiences focused only on the ability to decode, in order to improve the understanding ability, do not produce positive results. In this regard, Edmonds et al. (2009) report the synthesis of various interventions carried out in several years of research (between 1994 and 2004) with school students of various degrees who had difficulties in reading. Among the numerous interventions carried out on different areas (decoding, vocabulary and comprehension) reference is made here to those relating to the sphere of oral comprehension. The results indicate that students with reading difficulties can improve their understanding if they are given training that focuses specifically on this area. In fact, interventions limited only to speech (ie, working only on decoding, fluency or vocabulary) have slight and in any case not significant effects on understanding. So, from these data, it is clear that bad readers can improve their comprehension skills only if one intervenes on the specific components of this competence; while there are no correlations between an intervention specifically aimed at decoding processes

and expectations of strengthening in the sphere of understanding. These results agree with those obtained by other researchers (De Beni et al. 2003), in which it is clear that training that aims to intervene on the ability to understand must focus on the recovery of all those components that are inevitably implicated in it (structure, characteristics of the text, ability to identify the most important information, ability to draw inferences, activate knowledge already possessed, logically order events in a space-time frame etc.). The usefulness of combining this type of intervention with exquisitely metacognitive training, based on the explicit teaching of strategies, on the reflection of the knowledge that the reader has about the objectives of reading, on the importance of the texts, also emerges. These are all objectives that are part of education, at least at a basic level.

If, as has been said above, reading fluently recognizing words quickly and doing it with a certain expression is important, avoiding the child stumbling on unknown words that put him in difficulty, without having the necessary support in education, becomes a very problematic aspect.

As reading becomes more fluid, children develop their ability to read more expressively, taking appropriate breaks, which allow them to better understand the meaning of a text and to avoid it being processed at a low reading level (Healy 1994). At this level is added, for children, the development of a certain degree of automaticity in reading, which is considered essential for the development of understanding, before higher-order processes can be performed precisely (Samuel & Flor 1997). Students must understand the sentences and have an adequate vocabulary and learn how to use these skills to understand the written language (Carroll 1986), since mainly understanding reading is understanding the relationship between words, sentences, elements, inside of the text and between the text and the information that the reader possesses, and implies the ability to extract the message from a text, reflect on it and draw conclusions from it. This requires effective support in the education phase, which is based on previous knowledge, life experiences,

language skills and high thinking skills, especially in weaker subjects. In this process, the motivation to read can be considered one of the key elements of the students' involvement in reading and also what stimulates and feeds their passion.

But there are some components, knowledge and skills to be considered central in the understanding of reading, ranging from oral expression to previous knowledge and experience, from concepts associated with writing to phonemic awareness, from the correspondence between letters and sounds, from the enrichment of vocabulary on semantics, syntax and pragmatics, from metacognition to understanding strategies, from basic and higher-order skills and thinking skills.

## 6. What strategies?

In the school context, students must be placed in the immersive conditions in which carefully selected texts may strengthen comprehension activities:

*- at the micro-process level:*

- understanding of the information contained in a sentence (recognition of words, reading by groups of words, identification of important information of the sentence);
- integration process (create links between sentences);
- formulation of inferences, mastery of replacement words,
- connecting words.

*- at the macro-process level:*

- towards global understanding of text so that it is coherent (recognition of text ideas, development of summaries, use of text structure.
- development process: going beyond the text, making inferences, making predictions, forming a mental image, reacting in an emotional way, integrating new information within the interpretative repertoire of his previous knowledge,

reasoning about the text,

- metacognitive processes: managing understanding, adapting to the text and the situation, managing the loss of understanding, strategies for solving them. From the point of view of didactic strategies, many can be those to be used in teaching-learning processes in order to make the student aware of the learning path.

Reading requires control of a range of skills and strategies. Let's see some:

- *strategies to plan reading* (activate previous knowledge, make predictions, clarify the intention to read, be aware of the context and the task etc.);
- *strategies for reading words whose meaning is familiar with respect to the spoken word* (recognize frequently read words, use context and graph-phonetic indications, etc.);
- *strategies to understand the meaning of uncommon expressions and words* (analyse the grapho-phonetic indices, interpret prefixes and suffixes, analyse the syntactic indices, use the context to give meaning to a new word, etc.);
- *strategies for creating links in the sentence* (use punctuation, use grammatical clues, interpret the meaning of relationships, etc.);
- *strategies for connecting sentences* (interpreting the meaning of explicit and implicit relationships, making inferences, using context to make sense of a new word, deducing links between sentences when information is implicit, etc.);
- *strategies to create links on larger segments* (paragraph) (identify the main topic, identify the main idea explicit or implicit etc.);
- *management strategies* (highlight parts of the text, detect a loss of understanding, recover the meaning of the text after a loss of understanding, create a link between knowledge and information read, ask for help, retrace steps in the micro-texts, take notes, write down etc.);
- *comprehension strategies* (identify the explicit and implicit main

idea, identify secondary ideas, identify the narrative structure, create connections between clues in the text and previous knowledge, organize the relevant information in the networks, etc.);

- *strategies for information compensation* (highlighting the important passages of the text, checking the relevance of its hypotheses, establishing links between information read and previous knowledge, using analogy etc.);
- *strategies for organizing information* (summarizing text, organizing information in a conceptual diagram, organizing a semantic map or graph, schematizing text structures, schematizing narrative, using semantic maps, etc.);
- *strategies to react to the text to stimulate reflection* (react to texts, evaluate the information contained in a text, etc.).

With different levels of reading comprehension, students must use different strategies to understand their reading, to extract the necessary information or to react and reflect on the text. The student can use these different strategies at different points in the reading process and become aware of the strategies they use, how they are used and then return to their reading process. The strategies that allow a return to the learning process are metacognitive strategies.

It is, therefore, necessary to align the difficulties of texts and objectives pursued.

Understanding a written text requires, therefore, the deliberate implementation of strategies for planning and controlling appropriate cognitive treatments and organizing the information stored in long-term memory. These different types of treatments and strategies, responsible for understanding, allow to identify multiple sources of difficulty that may concern:

- understanding of the language, mastery of linguistic knowledge (vocabulary, writing syntax, etc.);
- the ability to identify the main ideas of a text, to identify

relevant information, to use this information to answer questions, to solve problems;
- the ability to link scattered information, to understand the sequences between different text elements to produce link inferences;
- the ability to link information in the text with its knowledge to produce interpretative inferences;
- the ability to understand the overall organization of the text.

But problems don't stop there. Numerous studies have allowed us to show how the quality of the reader's control over his reading activity affects the quality of his understanding. Weak readers essentially perform a comprehension check at a propositional level but little at a local (inter-phrasal) and global (textual) level: they use each word, massively word for word, like so many isolated sentences that deprive them of being able to check the consistency of the information throughout the text, do not include the usefulness of the semantic integration process during reading or the need to make inferences to correlate the various data of the text, do not ask questions about representations or interpretations from the beginning of the text.

Weaker students find it difficult to find important information to understand how the new information is connected to what they already know, what they have already read above, to detect the inconsistencies of a passage or to pay attention to syntactic and semantic constraints or to evaluate if they understood the content. It is difficult to understand how the usefulness of semantic integration processes in the reading process implies the need to make inferences to relate the various data of the text.

These strategies are linked to the coordinated objectives to be achieved. Children must first understand the mechanisms of reading and its usefulness, that is, realize that the words spoken by someone can be written and read by someone else. As a first step, the teaching of reading at school is used to provide students with specific knowledge of speech and vocabulary, to make them understand

how writing works and to lead them to make connections between writing and the sounds or words of the spoken language. Once the students have grasped this knowledge, the focus is on fluency in reading. At this stage, this fluidity manifests itself mainly through the rapid and spontaneous recognition of some words in a text. Then they move on to reading with increasing pleasure, increasingly understanding the different contents of their readings. Current or easy reading is essential for the step of learning to read and for learning by reading. Teachers have the role of leading students from the first form of awareness of the written word to the stage of learning that proceeds by reading, where their transformation will take place from dependent readers to autonomous, qualified and motivated readers, also through contextual facilitation. Understanding is a dynamic controlled activity that connotes a "good reader" and that sets the regulatory procedures (slows down, goes back etc.) and, from the cognitive point of view, it passes through the construction of the representation of the message (what does the phrase mean ), which must transform into a sequence of words which is called proposition (symbolic form).

## 7. Poor readers and excellent readers

The issues examined above, wrongly overlooked by the school, push to clarify the relationship between decoding and reading comprehension, not forgetting that the latter and its development depend heavily on the reader's ability to read words written accurately and fluently. In fact, the didactic mediation can look at this relationship by working on the process of understanding with tools that enable the student to work on the processes of decoding and recognizing the characteristics of a text, processually reconstructing those mental operations that are needed to understand it. Decoding and understanding reading will also influence the strength of their own relationship. It is therefore important to combine different decoding measures, different

materials and procedures to help students acquire the ability to understand texts, especially on the inferential level. Furthermore, it becomes appropriate, in the explanation of the components that concern the understanding of written texts, to take into account the reflection on the functioning of the underlying cognitive processes, which has important implications in the educational field and which requires adequate and diversified forms of planning and intervention.

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# *The Individual*, *Society* and *the Mask* in the Paintings of Chaya Agur[1]

Bina Nir

Department of Communication,
Director - Honours B.A. Program,
The Academic College of Emek Yezreel, Israel
binan@yvc.ac.il

**Abstract.** The culture of consumer capitalism encourages authentic individualism on the one hand, but, on the other, also promotes the tendency towards conformity. "Identity", has never been so "fashionable". Consumer society allows us to change identities in an instant and, as a result, any identity we assume is subjected to a constant onslaught of scepticism and uncertainty. Consumerism puts at our disposal such a wide range of possible identities as the whole question of identity seem almost arbitrary. In this article, I will examine various examples of simulated identity, as expressed in the paintings of the contemporary artist Chaya Agur. The discussion on the role of the "mask", as "persona" will be critical.

**Keywords:** mask, persona, loneliness, identity

## Introduction

The social group is a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it gives us a frame of belonging and provides us with womblike protection and a sense of security; on the other hand, it deprives us of the independence, uniqueness, and richness of being alone (Fromm 1977). Belonging and fitting in with others is important to us for survival and, therefore, the rise of the individual as distinct from the tribe throughout the cultural history of the West has created conscious tension between the individual and society.

Although scholarly consensus credits the Renaissance with the birth of modern individualism in the West (see Burckhardt 1944), in the sense of humanity emerging from a state of pre-unitary existence

to a state of full self-awareness of the human being as a distinct entity (Fromm 1977; Debord 1995), we must insist, along the lines laid out by Shanahan (1992), that the Renaissance saw the renewal – rather than the invention – of individualism and humanism. There is evidence of personality being viewed as distinct throughout the Middle Ages (see for example Arbel 2002); in fact, signs of individualism can be traced as far back as antiquity.

Since the advent of individualism in its modern incarnation, human beings have become freer, but also lonelier. Many are still willing to sacrifice their privacy, liberty, independence, and right to free thought and self-determination, all for the sake of a perceived sense of identity and belonging to the herd, rather than suffer loneliness (Fromm 1977). Humans are constantly in search of simulated identity, argues Sartre, out of the fear of singularity – they are creatures of the masses. No matter how low he has to stop, man will take every measure so as not to stand out from the crowd, else he might find himself facing his own image (Sartre 1956).

Individualism is generally considered a central component of Western culture (Huntington 1997). Nevertheless, despite the value attached to individualism, people cannot completely separate themselves from the collective consciousness, for only in relation to the social framework can they understand their world and themselves. Therefore, the struggle to become a self-conscious being with a high level of personal and social awareness often generates significant tension between the individual and society. In fact, we could say that an individual is a person who sees themselves as responsible for analysing and privately or publically reformulating the basic scientific, political and sociological assumptions they are exposed to. This person's individual stances are not necessarily aligned with the precepts of their social group and they might agree with society's political and religious worldviews or, on the contrary, oppose them (Raby 2009). However, even a self-aware mind has, according to Jung, unconscious underpinnings. The individual never exists as an entirely separate entity; we are social creatures, and therefore, the mind is as much a collective as an individual

phenomenon (Jung 1916).

With the democratization of political regimes in the West, a process which has anchored anthropocentrism as the dominant worldview in Western culture, the question arises whether individualism is a true expression of freedom, allowing each person to fully experience their uniqueness; or whether it is a mere illusion, an example of wishful thinking, or an unconscious mask we do to protect ourselves from loneliness. In today's capitalist society, with social networks giving us endless possibilities for self-expression, the individual claims to strive towards self-actualization. Eva Illouz argues that we are, in fact, actualizing a kind of "generalized self" that is not really us. The culture of consumer capitalism encourages authentic individualism, but at the same time promotes a tendency towards conformity. "Identity" has never been so "fashionable". Consumer society allows us to change identities in an instant and, as a result, any identity we assume is subjected to a constant onslaught of scepticism and uncertainty. Consumerism puts at our disposal such a wide range of possible identities as the whole question of identity seem almost arbitrary (Illouz 2002). In this article, I will examine various examples of simulated identity, focusing on the role of the "mask" (the image we strive to present to the world) as a shield against loneliness – as expressed in the paintings of contemporary artist Chaya Agur.

## Loneliness, The Individual and Society

Loneliness is generally perceived as a psychological state of sadness and melancholy due to a lack of company. Robert Weiss points out that loneliness is not caused by one's state of solitude, but by a life that lacks fulfilling social relationships (Weiss 1975). Loneliness is a subjective experience that is not paramount to social isolation; rather it stems from a deficiency in the individual's social connections. Solitude can be good when it is intermittent, when this private domain exists alongside friendship ties, when it does not take

over a person's life but is rather a coveted and voluntarily chosen part of it.

In contrast, Schopenhauer takes the extreme view, ignoring our social need to belong and presenting solitude in a positive light: in his eyes, only when man is alone can he be wholly himself. Man is only free when he is alone. From this radical position, Schopenhauer views social man as dull-witted, spiritually sterile, and boorish (Schopenhauer 1969).

Nietzsche is another avid proponent of extensive solitude. To lead a full inner life, one has to retire from the herd into individuality: "Would you go into isolation, my brother? Would you seek the way to yourself?" (Nietzsche 2003, 47). However, the way to the self is anything but straightforward: "But the worst enemy you can meet will always be yourself; you lie in wait for yourself in caves and forests… You must be willing to burn in your own flame: how could you become new unless you had first become ashes?" (48–49).

Unlike Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, who disregard the social need to belong and instead advocate creative solitude, Spinoza argues that the worthy life is one that maintains an equilibrium between the two. As long as man inhabits the solitary realm of the self while belonging in parallel to the realm of the many, taking responsibility for his actions, operating out of full awareness, and leading productive, collaborative, and creative discourse with his social group, his solitude will be a tonic to him, with no loss of freedom or identity (Harpaz 2013).

Like Spinoza, Russell teaches that a proper balance must be found between belonging and separateness, or aloneness, rather than a clear-cut decision in favour of one or the other. He writes that human life must contain a wide space which is ruled by what is known as the "herd instinct", but it also must delimit a narrow space where this instinct is barred from entering (Russell 1996). This narrow space belongs to the private domain. It is not only an intellectual domain but also a physical and emotional one. Only through the fully led "me-life", through the hours of aloneness and

separateness, through opening up to the rich spheres of existence, through creativity and imagination, through personal pleasures of the body and the mind – only through these can man glimpse the full scope of his personality, and with it the need to discover and fulfil himself.

In summary, just as individuals need the public domain in numerous aspects of their lives, they also need the private domain for other aspects. However, the encounter with the other is also important for the creation of the individual self. Emanuel Levinas emphasizes the importance of this relationship between individual and society for self-development. He defines the self as a subjectivity, as a subject, an "I", precisely because it is exposed to the other (Levinas 1986). In his conception, it is impossible to create a deep bond of sharing and openness with the other unless we undertake the voyage into the depths of our own souls (Levinas and Melville 1978). The process of revealing one's self to the other is accompanied by discomfort and sometimes pain. The other is not just another person located outside of the self, but the internalized other who resides in the hidden regions of the I-experience. The interaction created between the "I" and the "other" begins with recognizing the "I" as an individual, as the self. The general mechanism through which the self can develop is reflexive – it is the ability to examine one's self through the eyes of others (Hollis 1993; Ritzer and Goodman 2003).

Existentialism, on the other hand, tends to regard the tension between individual and society as a healthy one that we as humans must learn to navigate, a tension between our cultural heritage and our capacity to reflect upon it with a critical eye (Strenger 2010). Human individuality is the result of internalizing these tensions and attempting to live them in a fulfilling and meaningful way. Nevertheless, the reflexivity essential to the individual's development is often accompanied by shame, anxiety, and struggle, which may lead to self-alienation, disingenuousness, and an unhealthy dependence on the "mask".

THE INDIVIDUAL, SOCIETY AND THE MASK

Jung utilizes the term "persona", which in Latin designated a theatrical mask, to refer to the social face that an individual presents to the world. The persona, he argues, is but a fragment of the collective mind that one puts on (and struggles to remove) in order to create a false impression of individuality. The persona is not real – it is a compromise between the individual and the way society dictates a person should appear (Jung 1916). People rely on the mask of the persona to play their social role. The mask allows them to be part of society and to escape loneliness. Similarly, existentialist philosophy deals with self-alienation and the masks that individuals don in society out of shame and out of fear of the gaze of the other, as Sartre illustrates in his play *No Exit* (1989).

Jung warns against overreliance on the persona device, which could lead to the loss of an individual's true personality in favour of their persona. That individual risks being swallowed up by this simulated image and becoming an artificial being, a victim of his own undoing. Those who are too good at fabricating their persona doom themselves to living with a conflicted soul (Jung 1916). From early childhood we learn to wear masks, to hide our true or imagined weaknesses in order to protect ourselves from rejection by others. Although at times we might mistake our persona for our true selves, just a passing glimpse of what's behind the mask elicits a sense of meaning. Such revelations can happen when we take the time to look inwards, when we are exposed to the ideas of great thinkers or even during an honest conversation with another individual (Cohen 2005). These revelations relate to our inner strength: the more we learn to see individuality as an expression of our uniqueness, the more we can become ourselves.

The mask also protects us from the fear of emptiness and meaninglessness. This cold shadow of existential dread sometimes manifests itself as a loss of interest in life, brought on by such causes as a crisis of faith, a shattered dream or a romantic breakup. The sense of emptiness hangs over and threatens our existence (Tillich

1952, ch. 2). One of the ways of escaping this void is to assume an identity, a protective persona that gradually solidifies and becomes permanent. According to Jeansen, as long as the social "actor" wearing an artificial mask is aware they are playing a role, everything is ostensibly fine. However, if the person underneath forgets that the mask is a fiction, they will no longer be able to fully grasp or fulfil themselves, and over time will come to realize their fundamental loneliness and – even more so – their falseness (Jeansen 1960).

## The Mask in the Paintings of Chaya Agur

Art, according to Nietzsche, protects man from existential dread and the horror of dealing with an absurd reality. The artistic act is also the mark of the authentic person – the one who inhabits, creates, and refines themselves. In this act of creating one's self, the creator and the work merge and there is no more distance between them. The role of art is therefore not merely to imitate nature or reality, but to serve as a metaphysical complement to this reality and to overcome it (Nietzsche 1999). Similarly, Marcuse views art as having the power to negate the given reality; as such, it has an important place in the expression of social criticism, one of the drivers of individual consciousness. This recognizes the political potential of art: any authentic work of art constitutes a questioning of perception and understanding, a denunciation of institutionalized reality, and therefore could be considered revolutionary. The negation Marcuse speaks of is, in fact, the contrast between the autonomous world of art and the existing reality (Marcuse 1977).

The "Masks" series, produced by painter Chaya Agur between 2001 and 2004, addresses the intricate relationship between the individual's inner personality and their social mask by exploring, with a critical eye, the wide variety of "masks" used in different social situations; they are in fact images of the "masks of the soul" donned by the individual (Jennings and Minde 1993). The mask, as

depicted in ten works from Agur's "Masks" series, represents the simulated identity behind which the individual is hiding, having lost sight of their authentic identity. Through these works, Agur issues criticism of contemporary society and cautions against overusing the persona device, which, echoing Jung's warning, could cause us to lose our true personality and become an artificial being.

*"Expensive Hat", collage and oil paints, 30x40*

This painting depicts a woman whose face is partially obscured by the titular "expensive hat", representing capitalism. The image criticizes the overabundance of identities proffered to us in the age of consumerism – identity becomes yet another product for people to consume. In some senses, individualism too has fallen victim to the influence of the identity market in which the "I" is traded like so many other consumer goods (Strenger 2010, 42). The person becomes a brand, and identity becomes a "false need" that the person assimilates without even realizing it. In his critique of consumerist ideology in the capitalist age, Marcuse argues that manufacturers no longer address people's real needs; instead, advertising creates the illusion of necessity in order to persuade people to buy products they do not actually need. These "false

needs" perpetuate injustice, aggression, wastefulness, and obsession with work. They prevent change from happening because change is only driven by real needs (Marcuse [1964] 2006, Ch. 1).

These needs have societal content and function, and it does not matter how much they have been internalized by the individual, nor how much that person truly identifies with them or finds personal fulfilment in their satisfaction – "they continue to be what they were from the beginning—products of a society whose dominant interest demands repression"(7). In the past, Marcuse contends, human freedom was limited by a lack of means to satisfy basic needs. Nowadays, however, just as the exercise of freedom is so readily within reach, it is curbed by the framework of modern capitalist society, which manages to suppress even the potential of liberation. When there is no true critical dimension, man finds himself living a "one-dimensional" existence. "One-dimensional" denotes a situation in which negation is rooted out of the forces that are supposed to oppose the existing system. For all intents and purposes, it consists of the disappearance of the private, subjective dimension (12–13). The "one-dimensional" man is trapped in a state of false consciousness and in the race for social success and achievement.

Horkheimer and Adorno also see the race for external capitalist success as today's only measure of self-existence. They maintain that the agencies of cultural production are particularly adept at impressing "standardized behaviour on the individual as the only natural, decent, and rational one. Individuals define themselves now only as things, statistical elements, successes or failures" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 21). Slavoj Zizek presents an even more extreme position with regard to the individual's behaviour in capitalist society. In his view, today's accepted cultural norms have a tinge of social imperative that can sometimes border on the totalitarian. "You can" becomes "you must", an imperative that ignores true needs and demands compliance (Zizek 2000, 44). By choosing not to follow the norms, which have become totalitarian, the individual may pay the heavy price of social loneliness and

therefore prefers to adopt the accepted values – represented in the painting as a hat made of banknotes – at the cost of losing identity (the faceless woman).

*"Variations on Zoomorphism" (Cow-man), black and white drawing (46x33)*

This humorous study by Agur is the visual interpretation of the literary device of "zoomorphism" – or "rhinomorphism" as it appears in Eugène Ionesco's *Rhinocéros* ([1962] 2014), a play that focuses on the scientifically proven phenomenon of conformity (Allen and Levine 1969). Ionesco expresses his dread of ideological conformity by presenting it in its extreme with his theatre of the absurd. The play portrays a society that causes people to voluntarily relinquish independent thought, to assimilate in order to belong rather than feel excluded. Agur, in turn, presents a visual criticism of this modern herd mentality. Conformism can cause a person with a "human" face – a face that represents humanist values – to undergo a gradual and imperceptible metamorphosis into a cow (or a rhino…). As Zizek warns, contemporary society, which is based on market forces rather than humanist values, can only move in the direction of easy, animal-like pleasures, and therefore its values are bound to degenerate (Zizek 2002).

This criticism of the herd mentality is nothing new; it was already masterfully expressed by the Roman philosopher Lucius Seneca in the first century AD:

> You ask me to say what you should consider it particularly important to avoid. My answer is this: a mass crowd… I never come back home with quite the same moral character I went out with; something or other becomes unsettled where I had achieved internal peace, some one or other of the things I had put to flight reappears on the scene... Associating with people in large numbers is actually harmful... The larger the size of the crowd we mingle with, the greater the danger. (Seneca 1969, Letter VII)

To retain a fragment of individuality, Seneca encourages us to embrace positive solitude and to withdraw from the crowd once in a while. He advises against following the crowd but also against despising the crowd, and suggests that we look inwards as much as possible and consort with people who have a positive effect on our virtues (Seneca 1969, Letter VII).

This, then, raises the question of whether today, in the age of social networks, it is still possible to detach from the collective, "inclusive" element of our natures; and whether the possibility for individuals to define themselves separately from the herd still exists.

For Eran Kimchi, social network users tend to believe it is possible to become fully acquainted with another person based on a concise list of their basic characteristics (Kimchi 2010). Today we find ourselves in a new social state called "alone-together". This is a social illusion which allows the individual to feel connected to society when in fact this connection is superficial and vague – a substitute for authentic and intimate interpersonal conversation. The individual chooses the precise extent to which they reveal themselves (Turkle 2011).

*"Every fisherman has his fish", watercolours (40x50)*

This humorous visual criticism also relates to modern consumerism. The

old adage "you are what you eat" is transformed into a metaphorical commentary on the consumption of social and cultural content. The "individual" chooses or "fishes" his food without realizing he is internalizing the "mask" of the thought habits he is taking in. The critique places the responsibility on the shoulders of the person who consumes content indiscriminately and internalizes it as if it had been self-created – social content becomes part of the person's identity and a delusional shield against singularity and loneliness. The implication of this responsibility is best summarized by Sartre, for whom man is nothing but what he makes of himself. Man is free. Man is freedom (Sartre 1973).

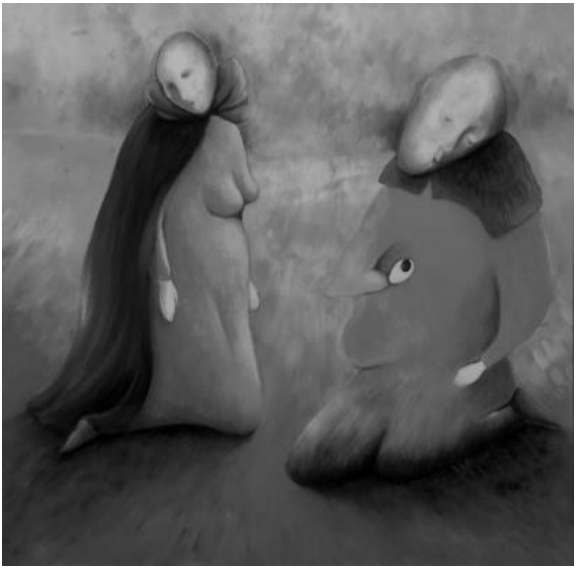
*"Carnival", oil on canvas 40x60*

In this diptych, both the woman and the man are dressed in Renaissance clothing. The eye masks they hold are typical of the Venetian carnival. When the masks are removed, they have no face

– the eyes continue to look at the world through the perspective of the artificial persona. The masks, therefore, represent the element of the assumed persona – made to impress and meet social expectations. For Agur, the faceless figure behind the fixed, simulated identity of the mask is a recurring motif. The mask is personality, but it is also the illusion of identity, as revealed by Luigi Pirandello in the series of plays entitled *Naked Masks* (1957). For the Italian playwright, man is always wearing a mask, without meaning to and without being aware of it, yet the mask itself is naked because nothing about it is real (Pirandello 2005).

"Carnival" expresses the idea that society gives us the mask, but also the chance to escape by means of the carnival, an event celebrated all over the world. The carnival allows the individual to step out of their everyday personality in order to identify with that which they are not – it is a game in the theatre of life. The struggle for survival makes life oppressive, while the carnival offers relief from the stress of it all. It is liberation, Nietzsche's Dionysus. The carnival in Venice and other places is not a religious holiday so much as it is a response to a human need. This temporary transformation of life into art corresponds to Nietzsche's insistence that the principle of creativity is what gives life value (Nietzsche 1974).

Cited by the Greeks as the dual-source for their art, Apollo and Dionysus represent opposing styles engaged in almost constant conflict: "In order to gain a closer understanding of these two drives, let us think of them in the first place as the separate art-worlds of *dream* and *intoxication*. Between these two physiological phenomena, an opposition can be observed which corresponds to that between the Apolline and the Dionysiac" (Nietzsche 1999, 14–15). Apollo is "the magnificent divine image" – the supreme truth, the god of true recognition (17). Dionysian art, in contrast, is based on fun, intoxication, and ecstasy: "we catch a glimpse of the essence of the Dionysiac, which is best conveyed by the analogy of intoxication. These Dionysiac stirrings, which, as they grow in intensity, cause subjectivity to vanish to the point of complete self-forgetting" (17).



*"Body Language", oil on canvas, 50x60*

In this painting, Agur explores the truth of the body as opposed to that of the conscious mind – the human body can express nature's "truth" even when our consciousness attempts to hide it. Our basic survival impulses, or the vulnerability of our subconscious when it feels threatened, express themselves in uncontrolled emotions such as anger, shame, and lack of confidence, all of which burst out into the open as "body language", sometimes betraying the mask we wear on our faces. As Samy Molcho points out, we have control over our faces and our speech (for instance, we can smile while we are angry), but the body is the reflection of the soul and its language speaks from the heart. Our inner feelings, emotions, and desires are expressed through our bodies. We immediately respond physically to the difference between desired value and actual value without our conscious intervention. Molcho also notes that people from all walks of life and social circles react similarly, if not identically, to stimuli at the primal level of physical signals (Molcho 1985). This is unlike the persona, which varies across cultures, social classes and individual personalities. In the painting, this idea is expressed through the bodies depicted as the actual true "face" of the person, speaking its own language, while the faces on the couple's heads are drooping, lifeless masks. Any real communication between the two takes place by way of their bodies.

*"The Mask as an Escape from the Other's Gaze", oil on canvas, 50x70*

The couple in the painting are acutely aware of the existence of the giant masks they are hiding behind. Their real identities are purposefully concealed at the moment of contact because they are afraid to reveal their true selves. As Jung has argued, the persona is a complicated relationship between individual consciousness and society, a kind of mask to impress those around us, on the one hand, and to hide our true natures, on the other (Jung 1916). Our intense desire to belong to the other in a meaningful relationship makes us afraid of revealing our true identities and causes us to hide behind a giant mask that we wield like a shield against loneliness. An egg – an emblematic and recurring symbol for the painter – is poised at the top of each mask as a metaphor for the delicate balancing act required to prevent the fragile load from falling and breaking, while an additional egg between the two figures symbolizes the relationship they seek to found and fertilize. Both partake in the finest of social mannerisms, represented by the glass of wine and the cigar; however, the concealment of their selves remains complete. Social interactions require people to act out a variety of roles on a variety of stages. Goffman terms this phenomenon "audience segregation", referring to a situation in which an "actor" has to present different but coherent self-images to different audiences (Goffman 1956).

Social psychologist Mark Snyder also found interpersonal differences in the extent to which we change our behaviours to suit the various audiences in our social circle – a phenomenon he calls "self-monitoring". Someone with a high degree of self-monitoring will adapt their behaviour to the given situation, acting in

accordance with the impression they are trying to give. Such individuals, he continues, are highly motivated to behave in a way that is perceived as appropriate by others (Snyder 1974).

The fear of potential loneliness is not the only emotion an individual experiences in the encounter with the other; shame too is a sensation inextricably linked with the other's gaze. It is the discomfort created when a person feels themselves transformed into an object. According to Sartre, the man who is ashamed is stripped of his humanity because he is denied the independence of being the looking subject rather than the looked-upon object (Sartre 1956, 287–289), an idea which also appears in his famed play *No Exit* (1989). The play takes place in a room which, as it turns out, is located in hell. The three characters are led into the room at different points in time. The door is then locked and all three of them expect their torturer to arrive imminently – however, no one else enters the room. As their conversation evolves, it becomes clear that their vastly different worldviews and value systems make them insufferable company for one another. The unrelenting gaze of the others makes this situation a hell because of the fear of being exposed. For a real human connection to be established, we must reveal our real selves, the inner part of ourselves of which we are often ashamed. We are terrified by the thought that there might be something about us which, when seen or discovered by others, will make us unworthy of human bonding.

*"Face Fan", oil on canvas, 50x70*

In this painting, the mask, the fan, and the traditional Japanese costume represent a highly polite and ritualized culture, one that prescribes

strict rules of behaviour in all aspects of life, which is why the persona appears attached to the fan. The mask here illustrates the ritual dimension of society. In this critique, Chaya Agur represents a faceless figure under the mask, a figure devoid of a unique identity, signifying that in a society which imposes its rules on the individual, it is challenging for the individual to make the distinction between societal and personal values.

*"Eve", oil on canvas, 50x70*

Eve is a universal symbol – she represents the primordial shame of being aware of one's genitals, which in this case, are symbolic of personal exposure. The figure in the painting is a modern Eve (judging by her hairstyle and hat) hiding her nakedness with a mask of personality rather than a fig leaf. Here, the painter makes the distinction between physical nudity, which can be concealed with a garment or a fig leaf, and our primal need to conceal our inner nudity from the world with a protective persona. The Garden of Eden is a formative myth in Western culture; it symbolizes the beginning and the aftermath, the origin of foundational patterns and their violation, the space of sin, retribution, and longing. Moreover, this myth touches upon basic universal questions, including that of the relationship between the individual and society, and the process of revealing one's self to the other, which is always accompanied by discomfort and even pain (Ritzer and Goodman 2003). This painting depicts, on the one hand, the origin of shame as bound up with self-knowledge, the same knowledge that is the source of pain in life outside the Garden: "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying: of every tree of

the garden thou mayest freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Genesis 2:16–17). On the other hand, with her modern-day styling, Eve in the painting represents sexual liberation and freedom from the need to hide one's nudity. And yet, for Agur, despite being free of the requirement for bodily concealment, the persona is more indispensable than ever. Modern Eve represents the awareness of nudity in its inner sense, the exposure of one's soul that no clothes can hide.

*"Changing Faces", oil on canvas, 60x80*

This painting represents our ability to adapt to our surroundings and the general flexibility of our psyche. While some identities are fixed around a central trait that precludes adaptability (such as power, control, etc.), posing a challenge both for the individual and for the outside world, the fact remains that our psyche has a great capacity for flexibility, which can widen the rigid borders of the "self". This is evident in relations based on love and mutual trust.

In "Changing Faces", Agur presents a comical depiction of a cat and its owner as a couple who have adapted to each other. A couple often creates a common identity that includes identical social preferences, reactions, values, tastes, and lifestyles – all of which attest to a deep physical and mental adaptation to each other, but at

the same time a loss of individual identity. The man trains the cat to act more human, while he takes on catlike traits. Both are depicted eating the same food, which happens to be raw meat.

## Epilogue

In ancient Greece, the mask was a requisite theatrical convention that visually symbolized the art of disguising one's self as another. This phenomenon was also prevalent in theatres of the Far East. Masks had a social, ritual, and theatrical role in the cultural history of different regions around the world (Mack 1994; Hershman 2014). Today, the mask is still a staple of global culture in theatre, festivals, and holidays, but over the years it has also become a metaphor for the variety of roles humans assume in society. As Jung argues, the social mask is what one dons in order to play a social role successfully (1916). In the social context, it is difficult for a person to be entirely their "true self" and so they adopt a "persona" which is, in fact, a "false self". Every person has a set of masks through which they live. These are different types of roles that allow them to adapt to a particular social environment, and perhaps there is nothing wrong with that – that is until the mask takes over. The "false self" – the "social self" – may become dominant if the "true self" is neglected long enough.

In this article, we examined ten paintings by artist Chaya Agur in order to find a contemporary, critical outlook on the role of the mask in the relationship between the individual and society, focusing in particular on modern humanity's alienation from the "self". As we saw, the faceless face and the perpetual mask are recurrent motifs in Agur's paintings. The mask meant to serve individuals only in their relations with others ends up becoming part of their personality, to the point where they have no idea who they are behind the mask. Agur covers the faceless face of a woman with a hat made out of banknotes as a criticism of borrowed identity in the capitalist age, where the only success is financial success. In today's herd mentality, made ever stronger by social networks,

individuals are "zoomorphized" by Agur's brush, echoing Ionesco's "rhinomorphism". In the sketch in question, humanity is a conformist herd of identical members devoid of any uniqueness or authenticity; just like the man who "fishes" his values indiscriminately and whose face becomes identical to the fish, symbolizing the fact that his values are those of the herd.

In "Body Language", the painter locates our true selves on our bodies rather than on the masks we put on our faces. The human body has its own "truth", and it cannot hide it the way we can hide our faces or act a part by controlling our facial expressions. "The Mask as an Escape from the Other's Gaze" likewise depicts a man and a woman who are hiding their true identities. If, in this painting, the couple are aware that they are putting on masks, the couple in "Carnival" are oblivious to their disguises, which become their unconscious identity (symbolized by the faceless faces). In the next painting, the Japanese fan-mask highlights the universality of social masks across different cultures. Agur is suggesting that the more institutional and cultural restrictions prevent the individual from freely creating their true authentic self, the more permanent the persona becomes. Eve too represents universality as well as the concealment of one's inner being. The fig leaf symbolizing bodily concealment cannot cover our souls from society, and we instead use the persona to place a protective barrier between ourselves and others. Finally, "Changing Faces" represents an alternative to the "fear from the other's gaze". Mutual trust made the partners undergo a loss of their unique identity and widen their "self's" borders to include the other within it. We all suffer from the same "human condition", with its unavoidable fears of loneliness and meaninglessness. If human society could embrace the humanist way and learn to lessen the pain by developing a wider "self-identity", we would no longer be limited within the borders of an individual "self", fighting a losing battle to keep wearing the masks of an illusionary, naked personality.

NOTES

1. The painter Chaya Agur was born in Israel and lived in the Netherlands for 35 years. Since 1978, she has exhibited her paintings regularly in the Netherlands (Amsterdam, The Hague and Rosendale) and throughout Europe (Paris: The World Center for Contemporary Art, Nancy: Galerie Poirel, Barcelona: Marlborough Art Gallery). In Israel, Agur exhibited at the Municipal Gallery in Afula in 2009 and at the Jerusalem Theater for the Performing Arts in 2010. From 2002 to 2007, she ran a private gallery in central Amsterdam, "The Crane", and taught painting and drawing in her private studio in The Hague for many years. Agur uses mixed techniques, oil paints, watercolours and drawings. Her art is influenced by Dali and Chagall and her style can be called symbolic surrealism.

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# Toward a Cartography of Domestic Violence: A Deleuze-Guattarian Schizoanalysis on the Matter and Function of Domestic Violence Regimes

Paddy Farr

Independent Researcher,
Oregon, USA
pmfarr@email.arizona.edu

**Abstract.** The theory and praxis of domestic violence were developed by feminists firstly, to describe conditions of violence within the patriarchal family and, secondly, to prescribe a means for women's liberation. However, although the theory and praxis of domestic violence are conceptualized through a feminist lens, the anti-violence movement has served to strengthen the carceral state. Intersectional and queer theorists have criticized the role of anti-violence in the carceral system and expanded the theory and praxis of domestic violence. As a means to grasp the insights of intersectional and queer theorists on the critique of state violence, the following paper develops Deleuze and Guattari's schizoanalysis of the four regimes of violence. These regimes include ritualized violence and struggle, criminal violence, state violence, and war violence. Where ritualized, violence and struggle represent the foundational theory of domestic violence, criminal and state violence provide two sides of a bifurcated cooptation of feminist theory. In order to turn anti-violence against the state, war violence as linked to the war machine provides a schizoanalytic frame for anti-violence praxis.

**Keywords:** domestic violence, feminism, queer theory, schizoanalysis, assemblage theory

## Introduction

The paradigmatic expression of domestic violence is "a pattern of abusive behaviour in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner" (Domestic Violence n.d.). This definition of domestic violence derives from radical feminist theory wherein power and control are

manifestations of the dialectic between men and women with patriarchy (Schechter 1982; Dobash and Dobash 1992; Lehrner and Allen 2009; Bailey 2010; Cohn 2010; Farr 2019). As primary authors of its current conceptualization, Lenore Walker and the Duluth group developed the theory of domestic violence to explain both the dynamics of abuse and the struggle for liberation from patriarchal conditions (Walker 1979; Cohn 2010; Farr 2019). However, the definition goes beyond a feminist dialect, and intersectional and queer theorists have expanded the conceptualization of domestic violence to include power and control as the manifestation of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy (Crenshaw 1991; Tomer and Busha 2000; Sokoloff 2005; Incite 2006; n.d.; Ahmed et al. 2015; Jindasurat et al. 2015; Farr 2019). In its expanded conceptualization, the concept of power and control centres violence between oppressors and the oppressed as a variable manifestation of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy within violent institutional, social, cultural and interpersonal relationships (Incite 2006; n.d.; Chen 2016; Farr 2019). In short, as stated by Lavina Tomer and Cathy Busha of the Wingspan Anti-Violence Project, "violence occurs when one person, one group, one country believes that she/he/it has the right to control the body, the land, the religion, the lives, the free will of another person, group, country, and so on" (Tomer & Busha, 2000, 1).

From its roots in radical feminism through its revisions within intersectional and queer theory, anti-violence praxis posits that "the personal is political" (Hanisch 1969; Farr 2019) and the goal of anti-violence activism is survivor empowerment (Schechter 1982; Dobash and Dobash 1992; Tomer and Busha 2000; Sokoloff 2005; Incite 2006; n.d.; Lehrner and Allen 2009; Bailey 2010; Cohn 2010; Chen et al. 2016). Taking shape within grassroots community organizations sheltering domestic violence survivors, the anti-violence movement was built on radical community organizing principles. And yet, while the anti-violence movement is rooted in feminist, queer and anti-racist activism, the movement against domestic violence is largely dominated by a movement for criminal

justice solutions to domestic violence (Farr 2019). Andrea Smith argues that "the co-optation of the anti-violence movement can be traced in part to when the anti-violence movement chose to argue that domestic violence was a 'crime'" (Smith, 2007, 49).

In the US, the struggle to establish legal rights protecting a person from domestic violence was incomplete until 1994 when US Congress passed the Violence against Women Act (VAWA 1994, 40002.a.8). This congressional act put domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking at the forefront of US policy for the first time, however, simultaneous to strengthening a person's rights protecting them from violence, the Violence against Women Act established these rights primarily through the establishment of criminal prosecutorial solutions (Farr 2019). Rather than focus on the dynamics of power and control between oppressor and oppressed, the Violence against Women Act states that "the term 'domestic violence' includes felony or misdemeanour crimes of violence" (VAWA 1994, 40002.a.8). Although feminists and anti-violence activists have generally lauded this development, intersectional theorists have pointed to how the criminal justice system unequally targets black, indigenous and communities of colour (Sokoloff 2005; Incite 2006; n.d.; Chen et al. 2016), and queer theorists have pointed to the exclusivity of protection for cis-gender women (Ahmed et al. 2015; Jindasurat et al. 2015; Farr 2016; 2019;). Hence, through the codification of criminal law, "the State, rather than being recognized for its complicity in gender violence, became the institution promising to protect women from domestic and sexual violence by providing a provisional 'sanctuary' of sorts from the now criminally defined 'other'" (Smith, 2007, 49).

While the anti-violence movement has focused on dismantling oppression, it has simultaneously helped to create a strengthened system of oppression (Incite 2006; n.d.; Smith 2007; Chen 2016; Farr 2019). This has resulted in an ironic state of affairs: from the split between a movement for liberation and a movement for carcerality, the anti-violence movement has created a crisis for survivors and activists alike wherein the personal-political

aspirations for social change have translated into a repressive state:

> Anti-violence advocates have regularly responded to these epidemic rates of domestic and sexual violence by partnering with police and district attorneys—both to try to find protection for survivors, and to empower the criminal legal system to intervene in gender violence by treating it as a crime. However, over the past four decades, this strategy has not only failed to significantly curb gender violence; it has reinforced the systemic roots of gender violence. In aligning themselves with a deadly and racist legal system, anti-violence advocates have sought safety from the most regular purveyors of insecurity and violence against marginalized people. The consequences of this now a deeply-entrenched alliance between anti-violence advocates and the criminal legal system have fallen most harmfully on the shoulders of Black, immigrant, women of colour, trans, queer, disabled and poor survivors (Bierria et al. 2017, 6).

In order to explain the mechanism in which this state of affairs manifests from a social movement, the following paper implements a Deleuze-Guattarian schizoanalysis of domestic violence. In this endeavour, the paper begins by describing domestic violence as an assemblage constructed through signification and materiality that is transformed as it is plugged into alternate abstract machines defining its matter and function. These abstract machines produce what Deleuze and Guattari describe as four types of violence: ritualized violence and struggle, war, criminal violence, and state violence. These four types of violence are attached to the abstract machines of the micromachine of the family institution, the nomadic war machine, and the mega-machine of the state apparatus. The paper moves on to describe how domestic violence, in particular, is transformed according to the machine under consideration. As the assemblage of domestic violence is run through each machine, domestic violence is transformed according to the matter and function of that machine. Finally, as a conclusion, the anti-violence movement is described as a potential war machine that holds the potential to create a global personal-political change. As a line of flight of pure deterritorialization, the anti-violence war machine becomes an insurrectionary force against violence as such.

## Assemblage to Abstract Machine

In "Thousand Plateaus", Deleuze and Guattari explain that the assemblage is constructed along two axes (Deleuze and Guattari 1980; Delanda 2006). Along the "first, horizontal, axis, an assemblage comprises two segments, one of content, the other of expression" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 88). Here, these segments of discourse and material constitute "on the one hand it is a machinic assemblage of bodies, of actions and passions, an intermingling of bodies reacting to one another [and] on the other hand it is a collective assemblage of enunciation, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 88). Breaking the dichotomy between structuralism and materialism, the first of the two segments constitute discourses and significations that produce the ways in which things are spoken of while the second of the two segments constitute the material world in which bodies interact. However, the processes which these discourses and materials are forced require a second "vertical axis, [wherein] the assemblage has both territorial sides, or reterritorialized sides" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 88). Here, the "cutting edge of deterritorialization" produces the process of change disrupts the first axis and the reterritorializations "stabilize it" and produce the territories over the line segments (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 88).

Domestic violence has a correlate within Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of the two axes of the assemblage and the deterritorializing instances assemblages transform through. First, domestic violence as "a pattern of abusive behaviour in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner" (Domestic Violence n.d.) is an expression in that it is a definition and signification. From the definition and signification, there is attached discursive formations that extend in multiple directions toward feminist theory, queer theory, intersectionality and criminal legal theory. However, as a discursivity, domestic violence is about nothing more

than the collective assemblage of enunciation. Thus, second, domestic violence as "a pattern of abusive behaviour in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner" (Domestic Violence n.d.) is a content in that it regards acts on and against material bodies. And yet, nevertheless, whether particular acts on bodies are included within the extension depends upon the discursive formation that the definition is placed within: while within feminist, queer and intersectional discursive formation may include a set of events as domestic violence, within the discursive formation of criminal legal theory the same set of events may not meet the requirement for inclusion within the extension.

To explain how such breaks occur, Deleuze and Guattari posit that "the abstract machine is like the diagram of an assemblage" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 100) as "a display of the relations between forces which constitute power" (Deleuze 1986, 36). Deleuze asks, "What is a diagram?" (Deleuze 1986, 36). He replies that "it is a display of the relations between forces which constitute power" (Deleuze 1986, 36). Accordingly, the abstract machine has a cartographical matter and function for an assemblage, and thus, "the diagram or abstract machine is the map of relations between forces, a map of destiny, or intensity, which proceeds by primary non-localizable relations and at every moment passes through every point" (Deleuze 1986, 36). Deleuze and Guattari remark:

> Defined diagrammatically in this way, an abstract machine is neither an infrastructure that is determining in the last instance nor a transcendental Idea that is determining in the supreme instance. Rather, it plays a piloting role. The diagrammatic or abstract machine does not function to represent, even something real, but rather constructs a real that is yet to come, a new type of reality. Thus when it constitutes points of creation or potentiality it does not stand outside history but is instead always 'prior to' history. Everything escapes, everything creates—never alone, but through an abstract machine that produces continuums of intensity, effects conjunctions of deterritorialization, and extracts expressions and contents… [I]t is always a question of a conjunction of Matter and Function (Deleuze & Guattari 1980, 142).

Depending upon the matter and function of the diagram, domestic violence transforms into something new. In this sense, the Turing Machine is an abstract machine, an artificial hard-drive or operating system placed within a larger system. As such, where an assemblage is an intersection of line segments and territorialities, abstract machines diagram the pattern of the assemblage thereby coding, decoding and recoding the assemblage into new outputs. The abstract machine is the abstracted character of the line segments and territories that constitute an assemblage, and in this way, the abstract machine concerns both the matter and function of the assemblage within the various operating systems that the assemblage is plugged into. Where the assemblage "is in touch with the plane of consistency" as connection and double articulation (Deleuze & Guattari 1980, 71), the assemblage plugs into the abstract machine and the hard-drive becomes activated as a system for the program to run. This has an important role within the assemblage of domestic violence. Here, domestic violence is transformed depending upon the diagram that it is placed within. For instance, the diagram of domestic violence as drawn by the feminist movement has a significantly different matter and function to that of the diagram as drawn by the state.

## Domestic Violence and the Four Regimes

As an assemblage, domestic violence is conditioned through abstract machines in the conjunction of matter and function simultaneously. According to this presentation of the assemblage and the abstract machine, "the problem then becomes one of distinguishing between regimes of violence [of which] we can draw a distinction between struggle, war, crime and policing as so many regimes of violence" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 447). Each of these four regimes of violence diagram a particular form of violence as an abstract machine that transforms an assemblage, and as such, marks off the points at which violence is processed. All of these are

abstract machines in their own right and construct the cartography of an assemblage theory of violence. And each of these four types of violence is dependent upon the relation of power in question at their respective level of organization and describes the violence of different types of aggressors against different types of victims. These four types of violence are described in the following paragraphs.

Firstly, Deleuze and Guattari explain that "struggle would be like the regime of primitive violence (including primitive 'wars')" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 447), and as such describes violence at the level of the basic social organization of family, clan and community. As a form of violence exercised as the outcome of a particular power relation, "it is a blow-by-blow violence, which is not without its code, since the value of the blows is fixed according to the law of the series, as a function of the value of the last exchangeable blow, or of the last woman to conquer, etc." (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 447). "Thus," explain Deleuze and Guattari, "there is a certain ritualization of violence" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 447). The violence involved at this level is significant of pre or para industrial arrangements of social hierarchies, and thus the arrangement at this level is horizontal rather than vertical in its ability to commit violence and oppression.

Secondly, Deleuze and Guattari discuss violence as war. War, unlike struggle, is a type of abstract machine in which the assemblage of moving parts within a particular society becomes focused on the destruction of assemblages, the deterritorialization of territorialities without reterritorialization. Deleuze and Guattari explain that "war, at least when linked to the war machine, is another regime, because it implies the mobilization and automatization of violence directed first and essentially against the State apparatus" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 447). Hence, according to the abstract violence of war, the war machine is, even if under the control of a state, a directed attack on the state through which states are dematerialized as such in a process of destruction. And thus, "the war machine is in this sense the invention of a primary nomadic

organization that turns against the State" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 447).

Thirdly, Deleuze and Guattari discuss the violence of crime. Deleuze and Guattari explain that "crime is something else, because it is a violence of illegality that consists in taking possession of something to which one has no 'right,' in capturing something one does not have a 'right' to capture" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 447). Hence, explain Deleuze and Guattari, "state policing or lawful violence is something else again [from struggle, war and criminal violence] because it consists in capturing while simultaneously constituting a right to capture" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 447).

Finally, Deleuze and Guattari discuss the most powerful of the abstract machines of violence: state violence. State violence is the exercise of law and it is this abstract machine which defines the state as such through violence. Hence, "the State has often been defined by a 'monopoly of violence,' but this definition leads back to another definition that describes the State as a 'state of Law' (*Rechtsstaat*)" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 448). The very existence of the state rests on this right to violence, this right to establishing and maintaining law and order through violence. Because of this right, Deleuze and Guattari explain that state violence "is an incorporated, structural violence distinct from every kind of direct violence" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 448).

Each of these represents a particular set of circumstances wherein the abstract machine defines the assemblage of domestic violence in its own particular way, and as it is plugged into different machines, the assemblage transforms. The diagram that domestic violence resides within outlines how it is defined and how the material is transformed. Thus, by analysing how domestic violence is constructed within the four regimes of violence, the theory of domestic violence is provided texture and critique that is otherwise confused. Where domestic violence crosses the boundary from ritualized violence and struggle to criminal and state violence, the problem faced by anti-violence activism is explained as a problem of assemblages transformed within alternate diagrams thereby

producing different regimes of violence. Through the conjunction of matter and function within the state, the ritualized violence of the family becomes a matter and function that can be enforced as a regime of criminal violence.

Domestic violence enforcement policies become a new regime of violence as the assemblage becomes a diagram of the state apparatus. From this analysis, the regime of state violence becomes the enforcement of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy wherein queer, trans, black indigenous, people of colour become matter and form for criminal prosecution. Below, these four regimes of violence demonstrate how the abstract machines decode and recode the assemblage of domestic violence according to a matter and function. Of particular importance are first the theories of domestic violence as established through radical feminism and expanded through intersectional and queer theory, and second, the intersectional and queer critique of the anti-violence movement as coopted by the state (Schechter 1982; Crenshaw 1991; Dobash and Dobash 1992; Tomer and Busha 2000; Sokoloff 2005; Incite 2006; n.d.; Lehrner and Allen 2009; Bailey 2010; Cohn 2010; Ahmed et al. 2015; Jindasurat et al. 2015; Farr 2019). These two directions of domestic violence theory establish the assemblages of domestic violence as they are presented within regimes of ritualized violence and struggle on the one hand, and state violence on the other.

## Regimes of Domestic Violence

As should be expected, because domestic violence plays out within domestic space and the private sphere, first and foremost, domestic violence in its most basic form manifests within the regime of ritualized violence and struggle. As a manifestation of the regime of primitive ritualized violence, the definition of domestic violence as "a pattern of abusive behaviour in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner" (Domestic Violence n.d.) represents a formulation

for the dynamics within domestic space. The normative character of the ritualized violence and primitive domestic struggle is between men and women within the heteropatriarchal family, however, this is not necessarily the case. Following the normative character, radical feminists initially developed the theory of domestic violence as a concrete personal-political manifestation of women's oppression within domestic space (Schechter 1982; Dobash and Dobash 1992; Lehrner and Allen 2009; Bailey 2010; Cohn 2010; Farr 2019). From this theory, intersectional and queer theorists expanded the theory of domestic violence to include aspects of domestic oppression that are outside of the scope of the one-dimensional binary gender roles (Crenshaw 1991; Tomer and Busha 2000; Sokoloff 2005; Incite 2006; n.d.; Ahmed et al. 2015; Jindasurat et al. 2015; Farr 2019).

Together, from radical feminism, intersectionality and queer theory, the theory of domestic violence grew to describe how domestic violence takes shape within the frameworks established by domesticity. As such, the theory of domestic violence reoriented critique toward domesticity itself as a regime of violence. Because "a pattern of abusive behaviour in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner" (Domestic Violence n.d.), domesticity becomes the regime of violence that bolsters heteropatriarchy and white supremacy within the home. As such, domesticity is a power relation and a violent struggle, and the manifestation of power relations within ritualized violence and struggle is the fundamental organizing principle within the domestic and the family. Hence, where the violence of the family and domesticity becomes the maintenance of gender roles, sexual superiority-inferiority and hierarchical relations, domestic violence manifests within heteropatriarchal structures within the domestic space. The question facing the anti-violence movement is then: how can activists confront domestic violence in order to make interventions?

The anti-violence movement has sought to solve the problem of domestic violence largely through criminal justice reforms that

provide legal avenues for survivors of violence (Schechter 1982; Dobash and Dobash 1992; Lehrner and Allen 2009; Bailey 2010; Cohn 2010; Farr 2019). This direction of reform transforms domestic violence into the regime of criminal violence as defined by the state and policed through the regime of state violence. As such, the ritualized violence within and struggle over domesticity is conditioned through the state, for only under conditions marking an act illegal domestic violence does such an act become processed as criminal domestic violence. As a manifestation of the assemblage within the regimes of criminal and state violence, the federal law prohibiting domestic violence defines violence in terms of the felony.

> The term "domestic violence" includes felony or misdemeanour crimes of violence committed by a current or former spouse or intimate partner of the victim, by a person with whom the victim shares a child in common, by a person who is cohabitating with or has cohabitated with the victim as a spouse or intimate partner, by a person similarly situated to a spouse of the victim under the domestic or family violence laws of the jurisdiction receiving grant monies, or by any other person against an adult or youth victim who is protected from that person's acts under the domestic or family violence laws of the jurisdiction (Domestic Violence n.d.b; VAWA 1994, 40002.a.8).

Since April of 2018, the Office of Violence against Women has embraced this statutory definition over the earlier feminist-oriented definition, and while on its surface this appears as an attack on the Violence against Women Act by the Trump administration, this is the logical outcome of state cooptation (Farr 2019). The criminal justice strategy has a counterproductive effect wherein domestic violence becomes institutionalized and the anti-violence movement is coopted by statism (Incite 2006; n.d.; Smith 2007; Bierria et al. 2017). Hence, within the analysis of domestic violence as delineated through the Violence against Women Act, violence as such becomes an abstract machine which diagrams an assemblage on particular bodies under particular situations. Intersectional and queer theorists have criticized this strategy taking note of how domestic violence,

when applied through the lens of the criminal justice system, further harms survivors of domestic violence and oppressed communities (Crenshaw 1991; Tomer and Busha 2000; Incite 2006; n.d.; Ahmed et al. 2015; Jindasurat et al. 2015; Sokoloff 2005; Farr 2019; Farr 2016). As haecceity of the regimes of criminal and state violence, Deleuze and Guattari elaborate that "state overcoding is precisely this structural violence that defines the law, [and] 'police' violence" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 448).

In Deleuze-Guattarian terms, the policing of criminal domestic violence through the arrest and prosecution of domestic violence perpetrators establishes an apparatus of capture focused on processing criminals through the regime of state violence as a juridical assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 80-81, 446-447). Deleuze and Guattari explain this strange occurrence of "lawful violence wherever violence contributes to the creation of that which it is used against, or as Marx says, wherever capture contributes to the creation of that which it captures" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 448). Hence, while the state apparatus determines the boundaries of criminal violence, state violence "is very different from criminal violence" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 448) because it is marked by a right to violence that supersedes all other forms of violence. Domestic violence is thus criminal violence, but only in so far as it is deemed as conflicting with the right of the state to violence. The state grows in opposition to the regime of ritualized violence and struggle, but the state simultaneously uses this struggle as a means for policing social ordering of the family, the community and the clan. As such, heteropatriarchy, private property, and community affiliations thereby maintain the social order through the regime of ritualized violence and struggle as policed through the state. And yet, when the regime ritualized violence and struggle illegitimate, ritualized violence and struggle is criminalized through the regime of state violence. Deleuze and Guattari delineate these points when they explain:

> In contradistinction to primitive violence, State or lawful violence always seems to presuppose itself, for it preexists its own use: the State can in this

> way say that violence is 'primal,' that it is simply a natural phenomenon the responsibility for which does not lie with the State, which uses violence only against the violent, against "criminals"—against primitives, against nomads—in order that peace may reign" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 447-448).

## Toward an Anti-Violence War Machine

As an expression of the feminist movement, Lenore Walker and the Duluth group authored the fundamental principles that resulted in the theory of domestic violence through firstly the dynamics of abuse and secondly the struggle for liberation from patriarchal conditions (Walker 1979; Cohn 2010; Farr 2019). Initially, this theory was extracted from a radical feminist analysis, but subsequently, the theory was translated into intersectional and queer theory. Within the radical feminist analysis of domestic violence, the primary consideration is the oppression of women by men in which the resolution of radical opposition requires the elimination of patriarchal relationships (Schechter 1982; Dobash and Dobash 1992; Lehrner and Allen 2009; Bailey 2010; Cohn 2010; Farr 2019). The feminist analysis of patriarchy is extended within intersectional critique to include an analysis of white power wherein a radical opposition requires the elimination of white supremacy, and within queer critique to include an analysis of heterosexism wherein a radical opposition requires the elimination of heteronormativity (Crenshaw 1991; Tomer and Busha 2000; Sokoloff 2005; Incite 2006; n.d.; Ahmed et al. 2015; Jindasurat et al. 2015; Farr 2019). Accordingly, within radical feminist, intersectional, and queer analyses, the elimination of domestic violence means a feminist revolution wherein heteropatriarchal and white power is eliminated. It is in this way, as a revolutionary and insurrectionary force, that the anti-violence movement should be grasped in both theory and praxis.

It is here that the entirety of the anti-violence movement develops a critical unification of theory and praxis, and yet, as

elaborated above, the regime of state violence of anti-violence activism has reterritorialized anti-violence as a means to carcerality and police violence. While turning toward the state apparatus provided the anti-violence movement with the power to punish perpetrators of domestic violence and make inroads toward the elimination of ritualized violence and struggle within domesticity, the result was not revolutionary but rather a cooptation that provides the regime of state violence a new direction of policing and prosecution. The question becomes, how can the anti-violence movement renew itself as a revolutionary force against the regime of state violence?

Deleuze and Guattari provide an answer in the regime of war violence. They state that the regime of war violence, when linked to the war machine, "implies the mobilization and autonomization of a violence directed first and essentially against the State apparatus," and thus "the war machine is in this sense the invention of a primary nomadic organization that turns against the State" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 448). The war machine grows independently of the state and on a regime separate from that of the state thus leading to such machinic outgrowths as the guerrilla war and insurrectionary moments. Deleuze and Guattari explain that war is not the object of the war machine but rather:

> To the extent that war (with or without the battle) aims for the annihilation or capitulation of enemy forces, the war machine does not necessarily have war as its object (for example, the raid can be seen as another object, rather than as a particular form of war). But more generally, we have seen that the war machine was the invention of the nomad, because it is in its essence the constitutive element of smooth space, the occupation of this space, displacement within this space, and the corresponding composition of people: this is its sole and veritable positive object (nomos). Make the desert, the steppe, grow; do not depopulate it, quite the contrary. If war necessarily results, it is because the war machine collides with States and cities, as forces (of striation) opposing its positive object: from then on, the war machine has as its enemy the State, the city, the state and urban phenomenon, and adopts as its objective their annihilation. It is at this point that the war machine becomes war: annihilate the forces of the State, destroy the State-form. The

> Attila, or Genghis Khan, adventure clearly illustrates this progression from the positive object to the negative object (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 417).

It may appear ironic that the model for anti-violence is the war machine, and yet, like the anti-violence aspiration for the elimination of violence through revolutionary acts, at the level of the regime of war violence, the territorialities establishing power and control are wrecked and destroyed. As a war machine, when the anti-violence movement defines domestic violence as "a pattern of abusive behaviour in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner" (Domestic Violence n.d.), the movement explicitly directs its practice toward an attack on power and control. And because power and control develop along lines of both ritualized violence and struggle, and state violence, it is essential that any intervention into domestic violence targets the regimes of domestic violence manifesting within both domesticity and the state apparatus. As an anti-violence principle, the dynamic of power is the central target that holds together the symmetries of heteropatriarchy, white supremacy, and the state apparatus.

The war machine becomes the engine that propels a deterritorialization without reterritorialization of heteropatriarchal hierarchies, of racial inequality and colonization. Involved within this destruction are not necessarily bodies committing violence on other bodies, for unlike the ritualized violence and struggle and of state violence, the war machine does not attempt to hold together the symmetry of power that makes up a social group. Hence, the war machine of anti-violence activism deterritorializes all bonds which stand in opposition. And as such, where anti-violence becomes a war machine, it takes "shape against the apparatuses that appropriate the machine" thereby making war on heteropatriarchy, white supremacy and the state apparatus "their affair and their object" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 423). The war machine takes on a character of emancipation from the bonds holding the assemblage together. Where the war machine deterritorializes all

territories and takes an absolute line of flight which must remain in flux in order to thrive, the war machine holds within it the potential to also oppose violence and oppression as it is manifested through the state: "they bring connections to bear against the great conjunction of the apparatuses of capture or domination" (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 423).

## Conclusion

As "a site at which a discursive formation intersects with material processes" (Crary 1990, 30-31), the assemblages of violence can become rhizomatic of domination or liberation. The assemblage growing from the war machine provides both a framework for interpreting the dynamic conditions of survivorship as critical theory and the framework of praxis for insurrectionary action. Whereas ideological bases for social movements describe the discursive formation(s) that a particular movement encapsulates its ideas about itself, the assemblage describes what the output of a particular discursive formation is as it intersects with material processes. As argued through the previous sections, the manifestation of the assemblage depends on which abstract machine it has been plugged into and from which regime of violence it emerges.

The reorientation from power relations within domesticity toward power relations between the state and criminal is still the same assemblage of domestic violence, but as the assemblage is plugged into the regimes of criminal and state violence, it becomes hierarchical. And yet, domestic violence within each of the four regimes are manifestations of the same assemblage plugged into a different abstract machine. The power relations within this assemblage involve the same significations and bodies as those manifesting within the regime of ritualized violence and struggle, but the resulting violence manifests instead from the regime of state violence over the criminal. And as such, although criminal domestic

violence is still violence in that it is a crash of forces through the relations of power within domestic space, the violence committed through legal violence against criminals charges the relations of forces between state and criminal rather than intimate partners. The regime of state violence thus provides the direction of movement that the assemblages of domestic violence within the Violence against Women Act transition particular acts of violence into criminality.

In the regime of state violence, the state holds power over the movement of assemblages. For domestic violence, both the struggle of primitive violence, and criminal violence are conditioned through the Violence against Women Act and its associated measures which include the state's right to violence through policing, through the biopolitical, through policy, and legal procedure. Where the violence of primitive struggle, and criminal violence each function as independent operating systems through which the violence of domesticity and crime must pass, cutting across each of these regimes is the state as the arrangement of violence as such. Thus, in order to map the directions of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, to elaborate the cartography of violence, the state becomes the point at which the cartographer must begin within the current set of abstract machines.

If the anti-violence movement wishes to accomplish its goals then anti-violence advocates must become anti-violence insurrectionaries. As a war machine, anti-violence passes through the regime of war violence to begin "the long road toward hegemony" (Spivak 1999, 310). Organizers, advocates and survivors together become insurrectionaries and revolutionaries. Through the activation of multiplicities into a united movement against domination and oppression, the anti-violence movement becomes machinic. Through schizoanalytic insurrection, anti-violence activism deterritorializes and reterritorializes anti-violence neoliberalism. Through the seizing of agency as a force to destroy oppression, the anti-violence movement can end violence. As such, schizoanalysis provides a radical critique of society and a critical

foundation for the anti-violence movement thereby beginning an absolute line of flight toward anti-violence insurrection.

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# Representations of the Deviant Monstrous Mother in Contemporary American Poetry

Najoua Stambouli

Faculty of Arts and Humanities,
University of Sousse, Tunisia
najoua.stambouli@gmail.com

**Abstract.** The paper aims to characterize the image of the unconventional mother in Western culture; in other words, the bad mother as it is coined and defined by discourses of maternal deviancy. The article provides illustrations of absent, single, and monstrous mothers in contemporary American poetry. It studies how female parents subvert traditional icons of motherhood, either through being an absent or a single mom, and spotlights how such representations correlate with portraits of monstrous mothers and victimized children as well. In this vein, basing on Diana Gustafson's view that the mother could be absent emotionally as well as physically from her children, my study gives accounts of both physical and emotional maternal absence. While Anne Sexton's "The Children" and "The Witch's Life" and Sharon Olds's "Satan Says" and "I go back to May 1937" describe the image of the absent monstrous mother, Olds's "The Victims" and Plath's "Three Women" deal with the figure of the single child-bearer who breaks away from the principles of the institution of motherhood, particularly the ideals of the traditional nuclear family.

**Keywords:** bad mother, deviant mother, absent mother, single mother, monstrous mother, the traditional institution of motherhood

The myth of the perfect mother has been a symbol to embody and a model to follow by many mothers who are devoted to the standards of self-sacrifice, unshakable maternal love to their children, and domesticity. The good mother, the epitome of the nineteenth-century ideals of femininity and motherhood in Western society, has been valued and celebrated not only by mothers themselves but also by theorists and critics. Yet, women who do not adhere to the image of the domestic, economically dependent, and unconditionally and unambivalently loving mother are supposed to

be beyond the norms of maternal idealism. Western culture, indeed, creates the dichotomy of the good/bad mother and makes up discourses of the good mother as well as discourses of maternal deviancy not only as forms of guidance but also restriction. Along these lines, it has been maintained that

> (…) discourses of maternal deviancy are targeted, albeit differentially, at mothers who do not conform to the script of full-time motherhood and violate the dictated social characteristics, for whatever reason or reasons. Thus, deviancy discourses serve as a means of social control, stigmatizing and punishing women who violate the norms of hegemonic[1] motherhood. (Arendell 1999, 4)

Once she violates the common script, the mother is labelled as deviant and transgressive and even represented as monstrous. In *The Monster Within: The Hidden Side of Motherhood*, Barbara Almond argues that "we need mothers so badly, so deeply, that the idea of an unnatural mother is, literally, monstrous" (Almond 2010, 22). In "Monstrous Mothers and the Media", Nicola Goc declares that "mothers continue to be categorised, idealised, and demonised and (…) deviant mothers are understood as monstrous" (Goc 2007, 249). It has been considered since ancient times to the contemporary ones that the ideal traditional mother is associated with images of the Mother-Nature and the angel of the house while the unconventional mother is stereotyped as the monster and the witch.

Yet, the main question that arises at this point is who the deviant mother is. While good mother discourses associate good mothering with "intensive mothering"[2], as it is coined by the American sociologist Sharon Hays in her book *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996), and particularly with maternal continual presence, discourses of maternal deviancy, however, equate bad mothering with maternal absence. In *Unbecoming Mothers: The Social Production of Maternal Ambivalence*, Diana Gustafson defines "the bad mother [as] the absent mother—absent emotionally or absent physically from her children (…) a woman who lives apart from her birth children

would seem to be the epitome of the bad mother—an unnatural, aberrant women [sic]" (Gustafson 2005, 28). In *Mother Without Child: Contemporary Fiction and the Crisis of Motherhood* (1977), Elaine Tuttle Hansen interprets this notion as follows:

> The literary theme of absence, or "mother without child", [is] an expansive term encompassing "nontraditional mothers and bad mothers" such as "lesbians, and slave mothers; women who have abortions and miscarriages; women who refuse to bear children, or whose children are stolen from them; and mothers who are . . . sometimes criminals, murderous, prisoners, suicides, time travellers, tricksters, or ghosts". (qtd. in Podnieks and O'Reilly 2010, 13)

Still, it has been established that the image of the bad mother correlates equally with single motherhood generally through the representation of divorced mothers or mothers without marriage. This is mainly due to the fact that single mother family structures contradict with the prevalent prototypical family form where the mother is the basic caregiver and the father is the primary breadwinner. It has been viewed in this vein that "over the last century women classed as 'bad' mothers have fallen into three general groups [including] those who did not live in a traditional nuclear family, which is considered as the most remarked upon and the most clearly unjust" (Taylor and Umansky 1998, 3). Indeed, "women who did not fit the middle-class family ideal of breadwinning father and stay-at-home mother have born the brunt of mother-blaming throughout most of American history" (Taylor and Umansky 1998, 3) for the expected harm they may cause. In "The Construction of Maternal Deviancy in the Context of Divorce", Martha Albertson Fineman hints to the drawbacks of single motherhood on family and society:

> Legal and professional discourses speculate freely about the impact of single motherhood on the institution of the family and ultimately on the fate of our society. We speak of the broken family, the disintegration of the family, the crisis in the family, the unstable family, the decline of the family, and, perhaps inevitably from some perspectives, the death of the family. (Fineman 1995, 124)

Motherhood without men or outside marriage has been commonly viewed as a serious threat to the children's psychological well development and family unity and stability. The absence of the father would deprive him of valuable experiences with his children and weaken their bonds of love and affection, and would instead make the children in full dependence on the mother to serve their demands. Even though it has been widely believed that "as the primary caregiver, the mother is ideally best suited to comprehend her children's needs, to interpret, and respond to their needs intuitively" (qtd. in Kohlman 2013, 213), the role and the presence of the father are still indispensable. As it has been expressed by Fineman, the exclusion of the male parent from family life would lead to its decline and even death. Because the nuclear family constitutes a pillar of society, the mutilation of family ties would result in the dissolution of social connections and ethics.

Images of the absent, as well as single mother, correlate with representations of the bad mother in the Western culture and literary discourse. "The 'Cruel Mother' motif has been a recurrent representation in plays, ballads, poems, and novels for centuries and continues to survive" (Goc 2007, 1). The contemporary American poets Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, and Sharon Olds use such a motif in their confessional narrative poetic structures. Yet, while Sexton and Plath provide their readers with authentic accounts of their lives as absent mothers who are subject to emotional illness and recurrent hospitalizations, Olds discloses some facts about her mother's attempts to abuse her children and traumatize their childhoods. In contrast to her "weak [and] complicit mother" (Johnson 2002, 157), Olds "reconstruct[s] herself into a fiercely aware and attentive" (Johnson 2002, 156) parent. This woman goes beyond her past trauma and chooses to be "a good-enough mother" (Spurling 1). Still, it would be also crucial to mention that Sexton and Plath have never chosen to be absent; they were rather trapped by emotional imbalance and, subsequently, suicidal fantasies and attempts that distract their attention from their children. The frequent hospitalizations they had for the sake of emotional recovery render

them absent physically and emotionally and, consequently, prevent them from being conventional mothers.

To speak about experiences of maternal deviancy was supposed to be a cultural and topical taboo in the Western society. Sentimentalized images of motherhood and of quintessential maternal love have been constantly publicized, celebrated, and canonized whether in media or literary discourse. Yet, as poets belonging to the confessional school Sexton, Plath, and Olds dared to challenge not only the stylistic conventions of poetry writing that pervaded during the nineteenth and early twentieth century but also the thematic notions of their time through disclosing experiences of bad mothering. They sought to unmask motherhood through their confessional art used as "a means of killing the beasts which are within them, those dreadful dragons of dreams and experiences that must be haunted down, cornered, and exposed in order to be destroyed" (Cribbs 2003, 2). Using an emotional tone and autobiographical content, they intended to confide "those 'very difficult feelings' best designated, in the language of psychology, as traumas" (Horvath 2005, 14). These confessionals find in their free-verse lyrics a nest for the display of their traumatic experiences and its accompanying feelings of guilt, regret, shame, and blame for being the absent mother or the victimized child.

As she personally experienced an imbalanced relationship with her daughter, she sought to delineate the outcomes of this inadequate inharmonious bond on children. Sexton's "The Children", from *The Awful Rowing toward God* (1975), illustrates the negative effects of maternal absence and humiliation primarily through the motif of crying. The agonised children, including the persona, are represented as furious alienated creatures who "are all crying in their pens" so that "the surf carries their cries away" but then "pushes [them] back". This highlights the extent to which children's shouts are inescapable and their suffering is unstoppable. Still, the representation of children as devourers through the visual imagery of the "immense" "mouths" that "are swallowing monster hearts" aims to accent how victimisation makes them revenge

against their mothers' atrociousness. To further underline the impact of maternal absence on the emotional and psychological state of children, the latter are depicted as "dying in their pens". In fact, "their bodies are crumbling" and "their tongues are twisting backwards". The kinaesthetic imageries portraying their decayed bodies, curled tongues, and disintegrated thoughts conceive a tragic disconsolate childhood world. Neglected and alienated, they become "old men who have seen too much" of maternal indifference. This poem, loaded with feelings of anguish and destruction, is dedicated by Sexton to herself and other children in order to "stop dying in the little ways" that "murder in the temple". Because the home, supposed to be the natural sphere where mother and child immure together bonded by mutual love and understanding, was a "temple" and a "maze", Sexton "ke[pt] seeking / the exit or the home".

The aberrance and evilness of the maternal figure are depicted through the lexical register of monstrosity suggested not only in "monster hearts" but similarly in "bewitched", "elf", and "awful". The female parent, who is supposed to be the intrinsic source of everlasting instinctive pure love from a traditional perspective of motherhood, is strikingly endowed with uncanny features and weird abilities. The metaphor of the mother as a supernatural being is notably illustrated in the following verses:

> They are bewitched.
> They are writing down their life
> on the wings of an elf
> who then dissolves. (8-11)

The absent monstrous mother is represented as a "witch" and an "elf" that disappears. It has been claimed that just like the dwarf, the elf is "a symbol of ambivalent meaning" (Cirlot 2013). In some cultures, it stands for "mischief" (Olderr 2012, 79). For instance, it has been contended that "the dark elf [is] generally unfavourable and may [even] kill babies" (Olderr 2012, 79). This is more accentuated through the poetic device of rhyme in "life" and "elf".

These words rhyme to produce a harmonious sound effect that counteracts with the harmfulness of the deed. The fanciful mischievous world of fairy tale and witchcraft drawn by the poet seeks to depict the grotesque appearance of the mother in her children's imagination. She is visualised as an outlandish creature that absorbs their thought and drains their energy and life.

Sexton's "The Witch's Life", from *The Awful Rowing toward God* (1975), embodies the devouring mother archetype that is usually depicted in the Greek mythology in images of animals of feminine nature. The poem, indeed, represents the bad mother as "a hermit, / opening the door for only / a few special animals". The metaphor of the hermit is striking in the way it compares the absent mother to an alienated creature living in seclusion. Such a woman accepts only mothers of her kind; which means solitary ones who adopt the hermit life and create their unique isolated world. Indeed, "only [her] books anoint [her], / and a few friends, / those who reach into [her] veins" (17-19). These verses call forth Sylvia Plath's revolutionary words in "Three Women", "it is so beautiful to have no attachments! I am solitary as grass". Because she chooses writing over mothering, she keeps "shovelling the children out, / scoop after scoop" (15-16) and "yell[ing]: Get out of my life!" (7). The poetic persona epitomises the image of the self-interested mother who sacrifices her family for the sake of her own personal and intellectual life, particularly her writing aspirations and friends. The poem spotlights one of the inner conflicts contemporary women often experience, which is that battle between the dualities of creation and procreation, books and babies, and artists and mothers. The poet's entanglement in "the logic of guilt" (Forbes 2004, 231) for the preference of an independent autonomous self and a free-child world is explicitly displayed through the title "The Witches' Life".

Inconspicuously, the image of the wicked mother which contradicts with the legendary figure of Mother Earth is unveiled through the negative stereotype of the witch. Still, the diction of monstrosity in the poem is also conveyed through a list of similes

including, " she had hair like kelp / and a voice like a boulder". The direct comparison of the mother's hair to kelp, defined as "a mass of large seaweeds" (Merriam Webster), and voice to a "boulder", described as a "much-worn mass of rock" (Merriam Webster), evokes an appalling image of hers in the reader's mind. The elements of nature attributed to the mother's body parts and language are ironically used to mock her unnatural savage picture. Still, this aberrant depiction is further accented through these subsequent comparisons:

> Maybe, although my heart
> is a kitten of butter
> I am blowing it up like a zeppelin
> Yes. It is the witch's life. (29-32)

Even though her heart is intrinsically tender and delicate, she blows it up fiercely like a zeppelin, "a rigid airship" (Merriam Webster). The last declarative line is a straightforward affirmation of the persona's awareness of the type of life she lives. It is an assertion filled with regret. Internal self-blame is apparent in the use of the plosives "p", "t", "k", and "b" in "kitten", "butter", "blowing", and "zeppelin", which conveys the speaker's suffocation and uneasiness. In addition, the cheerless monotonous melodic effect, brought through the use of consonance in these words, projects self-indictment. It becomes noticeable how the language of remorse pervades the poem:

> I think of her sometimes now
> and wonder if I am becoming her
> My shoes turn up like a jester's
> clumps of my hair, as I write this,
> curl up individually like toes. (11-15)

The thought that "she is becoming her", the witch, irritates and perplexes her. The kinaesthetic imageries in "the shoes turn[ing] up like a jester's" and "the clumps of hair curl[ing] up individually like toes" further highlight the persona's distress for not being the good

mother she is supposed to be. The verbs "turn up" and "curl up", which denote the abrupt motion of the shoes and hair, connote the unexpected conversion of the mother to a devilish woman and unmask the penance accompanying to that character twist. Although she chooses to be a hermit and to lead a witch's life, she implies self-guilt and blame throughout the lines.

In "I Go Back to May 1937", from *Strike Sparks: Selected Poems 1980-2002*, Sharon Olds goes back to an old picture of her parents before marriage in May 1937 when they were students about to graduate. The mother at that time, before marriage, was described as "dumb" and "innocent". The daughter adores her mom's bygone "hungry pretty face" and "pitiful beautiful untouched body". Yet, once married she is turned into a bad character; an abuser. The speaker in the poem seeks to block the image at that time, May 1937, in order not to witness her mother's transformative behaviours and attitudes toward her new marital life and her descendants. Indeed, the mother is depicted as "the wrong woman" her father is going to marry. She is "going to do bad things to children" that one "cannot imagine [she] would ever do". Here, Olds means by "bad things" those traumatic experiences of her childhood including physical and sexual abuse.

The dual symbolism of stones in the poem is used ironically. In the lines, "see my mother with a few light books at her hip / standing at the pillar made of tiny bricks", the meaning of the "pillar" and "tiny bricks" "centres on ideas of endurance, stability, and permanence [as] they represent the ability to be grounded and connected with the earth" (Morley). This emblem of Mother-Nature, or the mother of humanity, is later mocked in the following lines through an opposing conception:

> take them up like the male and female
> paper dolls and bang them together
> at the hips, like chips of flint, as if to
> strike sparks from them. (25-29)

The mother, who is conventionally perceived and appreciated as the pillar of the family and the angel of the house, is envisaged as an evil destructive force. The theme of monstrosity in the poem is revealed through the lexical terminology of fire suggested in "sparks", "light", "bang", and "flint". The comparison of the mother to "a chip of flint" that once rubbed with the father makes "a bang" and "strike[s] sparks" does not only intend to objectify her to flammable material, such as metal or stone, but equally to evoke images of unnaturalness and wickedness. This is likewise plainly visualised through the equation of the mother to an ignitable "paper doll" which defies the traditional archetype of "passive femininity", usually "projected onto female porcelain dolls . . . [or] female paper dolls" (Pavlik-Malone 2018, 9). Through its figures of speech, "I Go Back to May 1937" deconstructs the prevailing version of the unflagging passive, submissive, and doting mother.

The principal character of Satan in Olds's "Satan Says" (1980), which is an incarnation of sin and evil, is a negative image of the bad mother. In addition to the allusions suggested by the title, the deviancy of the mother is hinted to through the diction. She is, indeed, disparagingly designated as a "pimp" and a "cunt". "Satan Says" tells a lot about Olds's tormented experiences of child abuse and her mother's promiscuity. Via her confessional mode, she seeks to go beyond those childhood traumatic incidents. In other terms, she tries to exteriorize "the pains of the lost past and to break the oppression of silence" (Johnson 2002, 158). Yet, her deeply entrenched internalised trauma still confines her in the "closed box redolent of cedar" that has "a gold, heart-shaped lock and no key" and subjugates her to the control and manipulation of the physical and spiritual presence of Satan. The daughter is overwhelmed by the recurrent appearance of the monstrous mother in her mind, epitomised in the poem by Satan. She is affected by his declarations and orders which conjure up ugly memories and stimulate despicable confessions. The lexical register of trauma suggested in "locked past", "lost past", "picture", and "magic", complemented with the terminology of suffering revealed in "sorrow", "dark",

"blackness", and "torture", and the diction of death manifested in "cedar", "wood", "death", and "coffin" emphasise the effects of maternal deviancy on the daughter's psychological balance. She is tortured to death in the cage of distressing retrospection.

Olds's "The Victims", *The Dead and the Living* (1989), encodes a discourse of maternal deviancy as it illustrates instances of mother blame from the perspective of the daughter. The opening lines of the poem, "when Mother divorced you, we were glad. She took it and / took it in silence, all those years and then / kicked you out, suddenly" (1-3), are "references to an act of abuse whether it is physical or verbal or even total silence" (The Victims). The impetuous decision of the mother to divorce the father and to kick him out, which envisages her in the image of an abuser, contradicts with the ideals of marriage and the heterosexual institution of motherhood. By challenging the normative constructions of the traditional nuclear family, the mother is condemned to be deviant for different reasons. The poet delineates how the mother's abrupt preference of single motherhood marks the fate and makes the drama of the whole family. Through "The Victims", Olds underscores the ostensible dangers of divorce including creating crisis of communication between the father and his children. The latter, unaware of the possible threats of their parents' separation on their family cohesion, "loved" and welcomed their mother's alternative in the beginning. They "grinned inside, the way people grinned when / Nixon's helicopter lifted off the south/lawn for the last time". They showed hatred and indifference toward their father as the mother "had taught [them] to take it, to hate [him] and take it / until [they] pricked with her for his / annihilation". Through the representation of the mother not only as an abuser but also a conspirator, Olds intends to underline how deviancy may lead to the victimisation of the children and the father alike, and accordingly to the distortion of the exemplar of the unified nuclear family in Western society. The term "annihilation" plainly stresses Fineman's view of the decline and even the death of the family in the context of divorce.

Like Olds's "The Victims", the third voice in Plath's "Three Women" illustrates the impact of single motherhood on the institution of the family. Yet, while the mother in Olds's "The Victims" decides to exclude the father from family life and to lead it alone, the single progenitor in Plath's "Three Women", the victim of motherhood without marriage, prefers to free the self from all the restraining shackles, and accordingly to quit her offspring. Moments before delivery, she acknowledges that "[she] [is] not ready for anything to happen" and that "[she] should have murdered this, that murders [her]". The following lines further spotlight the image of the unconventional mother:

> I am a wound walking out of the hospital.
> I am a wound that they are letting go.
> I leave my health behind. I leave someone
> who would adhere to me: I undo her fingers like bandages: I go. (271-274)

Nevertheless, the theme of maternal absence conveyed through the list of verbs "walking out", "letting go", "leave", and "go", is enmeshed with self-blame. The child-bearer accuses herself of not being the good mother and of abandoning her newly born baby, which is suggested through the repetition of "I am a wound" twice. Still, self-accusation is intensified in the poem through the metaphor of the mother as a "white ship hooting: goodbye, goodbye" in opposition to the comparison of the child to "a small island, asleep and peaceful". These contrastive images attempt to accentuate the motif of monstrosity. The poetic persona becomes a hooting owl, a symbol of horror and evil. In this vein, it is worth noting that such a symbolism has been interpreted differently. It has been claimed that Babylonians describe the hooting owls as "the souls of dead mothers crying for their children" (Conway 2015, 177) while Romans believe that they are "associated with witches because of their . . . haunting cry" (Webster 2008, 192). Indeed, the Romans assume that "witches could change into the form of owls, and in this guise, drank the blood of babies" (Webster 2008, 192). The hooting owl generally presages the "unhappy life" of the child and

"signals [his/her] cries of desperation" (Owl Meaning 2019). The antagonism between the monstrous mother and the innocent victimised baby is later stressed through the metaphor of the latter as "a bird that cries". Despite the fact that she detaches herself physically from her infant, she is still haunted by the "dream of an island, red with cries":

> It is so beautiful to have no attachments!
> I am solitary as grass. What is it I miss?
> Shall I ever find it, whatever it is?
>
> What is that bird that cries
> with such sorrow in its voice?
> I am young as ever? It says. What is it I miss? (433-435, 440-442)

Even though she directly acknowledges the beauty of a child-free world, the list of interrogative questions seeks to emphasise internalised maternal guilt. The frequent use of monosyllabic words such as "so", "no", "grass", "what", "miss", "find", "bird", "cries", "voice", and "ever" project the short intermittent breath of the crying suffocating baby. The third voice in Plath's "Three Women" displays the image of the single absent monstrous mother and elucidates the miserable fate of the child.

In brief, the research paper explores how the maternal personae in contemporary American poetry subvert the traditional norms of the institution of motherhood and represent themselves, according to discourses of maternal deviancy, as deviant either through images of the absent mother, physically and / or emotionally, or images of the single mother who breaks away from the model of the ideal nuclear family. Yet, the third persona in Plath's "Three Women" echoes the voice of the single mother who chooses to be absent both physically and emotionally. Because she could not bear the burden of single motherhood, she abandons her child and prefers to have no attachments. Overall, the representations of unnatural mothers in Plath's, Sexton's, and Olds's poems imply feelings of guilt and remorse and correlate with images of monstrous mothers.

The deviant mother is imaged as a "monster", "elf", "witch", "paper doll", and a "hooting" owl. The devouring mother, the mother-monster, and the witch figure in the studied poems confront the mythical icons of the Virgin Mary and Mother Nature, revealing by that the different maternal representations and mothering ideologies of the poets' times. The maternal personae "are reflective of the larger cultural context, with its unresolved contradictions [and] tensions" (Arendell 8) and their own emotional dilemma within such a context.

NOTES

1. *Hegemonic motherhood* is defined by Teresa Arendell as a "patriarchal construction: it ties women's identities to their roles as child raisers and nurtures of others, more generally (…) hegemonic motherhood remains subordinated to and under the force of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987,1992; see also Arendell, 1995). Hegemonic motherhood regulates and controls women's lives. One avenue for such control is the construction and operation of deviancy discourses (Fineman, 1995; Rothman, 1994; Teghtsoonian, 1996, 1997). (Arendell 1999, 4)
2. Intensive mothering: "As sociologist Hays (1996) articulated, the dominant motherhood ideology in the modern United States is that of intensive mothering. The good mother is focused exclusively on mothering her children and is child-centred, committed to her children in time, energy, and affection (see Benjamin, 1990, 1994; Berry, 1993; Tuominen, 1992, 1994). Self-sacrificing, such a mother is 'not a subject with her own needs and interests'" (Bassin et al., 1994b: 2). (Arendell 1999, 2-3)

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