POPULAR INQUIRY

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NARRATIVE MODES: CONSPIRACY THEORIES, FAKE NEWS, POST-TRUTHS, NEW WORLD ORDERS, NEGATION THEORIES AND INFODEMICS

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EDITORIAL

Paco Barragán

Popular Inquiry and I are very happy to present to you this fascinating issue titled *Storytelling and its Narrative Modes: Conspiracy Theories, Fake News, Post-Truths, New World Orders, Negationist Theories and Infodemics*. We sincerely think the topic is not only timely but challenging and mandatory in a time characterized by an exacerbated narrativity fueled precisely by post-truths, fake news, conspiracy and negationist theories and infodemics. The outstanding feature of today's society, where telecommunications networks, information systems, mass and social media coalesce, is that we're all potential producers, manipulators and distributors of alternative narratives able to challenge official statements and commonly accepted truths.

In *Storytelling and its Narrative Modes…* we address this beginning of the century's *Zeitgeist* which, we feel, manifests a strong desire by human beings—be it a celebrity, a politician, or a normal citizen—to deliver a logical and comforting explanation for the origin of a virus or the supposed control that the elites want to impose through vaccines on the world population.

The first two essays are of an introductory and contextualizing nature: while Andrea Mecacci takes a philosophical stand by analyzing the close relationship between postmodernism and hypernarrativity, Paco Barragán looks at its political origins and suggest a communications theory based on the concept of "credibility" as filter or counterpower.

The second block of essays delves straight into the heart of today's fake news and conspiracy theories with a set of recent examples of how these (new) narrative modes compete with and de-stabilize traditional media by offering alternative stories. Roman Horbyk, Isabel Löfgren, Yana Prymachenko and Cheryll Soriano address the fascinating and widespread proliferation of fake news in Brazil (Bolsonaro), the Philippines (Duterte), Russia (Putin) and Ukraine (Zelenksy) and how "mainstream media storytelling is hacked, imitated and hijacked." On his turn, Siim Sorokin analyzes the crisis of trust in our contemporary societies, that has brought about a "malleable reality and a fluidity of truth," by looking into the historical, etymological, and epistemological nature of conspiracy and conspiracy theory (CT) and illustrating it with a close reading of the conspiracy forum *Para-Web*.

The third part reflects on the augmented need and pressure of narrating the self and the office or workplace as a highly narrated space. While Saara Mahbouba delves into Reality TV and cultural industries as "avant-garde" sites that forge sophisticated narratives for the

transformation of identity and labor, Maria Teresa Russo suggests that our social media culture of the “show-and-tell”, the “always-on” and of “connectivity” turns life into a permanent stage where the contemporary subject must respond performatively so to meet the demands of our hyper-narrated societies. Paola Jalili analyzes precisely one of those spaces where the neoliberal subject spends most of her/his time—the office—and how “office aesthetics” through its careful staged narratives enhances precarious labor.

In the fourth and final part we address the fascinating relationships between the visual arts and narrativity. While Maribel Castro focuses on the photographic works of Taryn Simon and Thomas Demand and how they both question and contest the limits “between reportage, conceptualism and portraiture”, Manuel González de Ávila investigates the pop and kitschy paintings of Audrey Flack as sophisticated and active “devices of the feminine condition and its production.” Finally, Cuban artist Yalili Mora presents a special visual essay curated by Paco Barragán titled *New World Order* in which a series of world leaders have been portrayed from a rather unusual and fascinating perspective: headless!

STORYTELLING HYPERREALITY

Andrea Mecacci

Abstract
In his 1985 book *America* Andy Warhol wrote: "I always thought I'd like my own tombstone to be blank. No epitaph, and no name. Well actually, I'd like it to say 'figment'". Starting from this caustic phrase of Warhol's expressed in the heart of the postmodern decade par excellence, the Eighties, this paper wants to trace the roots of contemporary hypernarrativity by analyzing the shift from a culture of function and meaning, the modern, to a culture of fiction and signifier, the postmodern. The metanarratives of the modern (Lyotard) ramify into the media labyrinth of contemporaneity creating a dimension in which we witness the "strike of events" (Baudrillard) and the staging of representational fiction, the spontaneity of the power of illusion and the plurality of meanings. The hypernarrativity that marks the spaces of the current debate appears to be the result of that process of substitution of reality with its aesthetic construction, already defined as "hyperreality" (Eco): it makes events of history, rather than happen, acquire meaning in their mimetic or media dimension, or narrative.

Keywords
Postmodernism, Hyperreality, Eco, Baudrillard, Fiction, Fake, Aesthetics

1. Introduction

The relationship between storytelling and postmodernism seems rather contradictory, although a general interpretation tends to overlap these two spheres. There is no doubt that postmodern culture is an immense narrative (and interpretive) network of reality, yet one of its most enduring and influential definitions starts precisely from the injunction of a possibility to have a shared and comprehensive metanarrative of reality. We are obviously referring to the well-known idea of Lyotard, for whom postmodernism marks the end of the metanarratives of modernity, of that complex of ideologies that saw progress as the engine of historical processes: what was narrated was nothing other than the idea that history was progressing towards a better world.

The idea of the end of metanarratives opened, on the contrary, a new scenario: the atomization of a progressive narrativity and the configuration of an individual, fragmented, if not chaotic storytelling. In this perspective, the end of modern ideologies configured two new dimensions: modernity changed into postmodernity and reality into hyperreality. Hyperreality thus became a possible new unifying storytelling of this unprecedented condition of contemporaneity[1]. A status that we can see summarized in a caustic phrase that Andy Warhol expressed in the heart of the postmodern decade par excellence, the Eighties. In his 1985 book *America* Warhol wrote: "I always thought I'd like my own tombstone to be blank. No epitaph, and no name. Well actually, I'd like it to say 'figment'."[2]

We are witnessing the shift from a culture of function and meaning, the modern, to a culture of fiction and signifier, the postmodern on which many authors have insisted. If in Lyotard the metanarratives of the modern ramify into the media labyrinth of contemporaneity, in Baudrillard this process creates a phase in which we experience the “strike of events” and the staging of representational fiction, the spontaneity of the power of illusion and the plurality of meanings. In Baudrillard, but also in some more circumstantial observations by Eco, the hypernarrativity that marks the spaces of the current debate appears to be the result of that process of substitution of reality with its aesthetic construction, already defined as “hyperreality”: it makes events of history, rather than happen, acquire meaning in their mimetic or media dimension, or narrative.

It is our opinion that this change had its first expression as operative narration and then developed into a process of dematerialization coinciding with media and digital storytelling. In the first case, we have a narrative readable in the morphologies of postmodernism. A stage that we can observe most easily in those aesthetic options that have defined postmodernism in its essential lines. These are formal values applied in an operative way above all in architecture and design and which are recognized overall in the aesthetic ideology of *pastiche*, which is in itself essentially a narrative of the past applied to everyday practices. In the second case, we have the idea of a historical reality interpreted as a suspended event, in which the metaphor evoked by Baudrillard of the real as a match behind closed doors will come in handy. This second moment simply transposes the operative morphologies of postmodernism into a dimension of technological narrative. If in the first classical phase of postmodernism, the *pastiche* still revealed a distinction between a model and its copy, at this stage the simulacrum appears to cancel this difference. It is therefore a question of historically contextualizing these passages as premises of today’s storytelling, which for its part is not the specific theme of our essay. Thus, our perspective will be historical, examining some theoretical moments in the debate of the 1970s and 1980s. We will develop our discourse therefore through these two passages mentioned above.

2. Narrative morphologies: an operative storytelling

By operative storytelling we mean the fundamental change within the culture of twentieth-century design that shows the transition from function to fiction. A passage that the German historian of architecture Heinrich Klotz at the conclusion of his *The History of Postmodern Architecture*[3] has extensively emphasized in some oppositions that structure the substantial difference between modern and postmodern. The function, which embodied the idea of truth and progress in the modern interpretation of *techne*, had been replaced by the fiction, by the narration of the imaginary: from the space of industrial progress, and of its utopia, we passed to the time of the

narrative exercise, and of its plural declination. So, in a paradoxical way, but completely understandable, fiction became the new function, as Warhol's sentence let it transpire.

The encounter between fiction and the media system, the latent structure of mass culture, reconfigured the very experience of architecture as a fictional dimension. As early as 1968 the Austrian architect Hans Hollein proposed a first analysis of architectural fiction, where the image (the simulated simulacrum) is more central than the reality that may be experienced (the building): "A building can become entirely information – its message might be experienced through informational media (press, TV, etc.). In fact, it is almost no importance whether, for example, the Acropolis or the Pyramids exist in physical reality, as most people are aware of them through other media anyway and not through an experience of their own. Indeed, their importance – the role they play – is based on this effect of information. Thus, a building might be *simulated* only."[4] Recovering Benjamin's reflections discussed in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Hollein focuses on the aesthetic experience of the role of the image in the media universe, no longer a substitute for the original, but the unique usable dimension: the exhibition value is the new real.

The fictional experience of places parallels – we could say that it represents almost its double – the culture of *pastiche* that innervates postmodern aesthetics. Both Fredric Jameson and David Harvey have dwelt at length on this configuration of a geography of uncontrolled quotation, of chaotic references that build an immense imaginary museum with which we narrate reality. A paradigm shift that leads from meaning to signifier (but also from message to medium, from thing to sign, and more generally from ethics to aesthetics) and that David Harvey summarized in this way: "We all of us carry around with us a *musée imaginaire* in our minds, drawn from experience (often touristic) of other places, and knowledge culled from films, television, exhibitions, travel brochures, popular magazines. [...] Fiction, fragmentation, collage, and eclecticism, all suffused with a sense of ephemerality and chaos, are, perhaps, the themes that dominate in today's practices of architecture and urban design. And there is, evidently, much in common here with practices and thinking in many other realms such as art, literature, social theory, psychology, and philosophy".[5]

If we admit that contemporaneity has experienced three great processes of aestheticization – pop (from the mid-1950s to the early 1970s), postmodernism (from the 1970s to the late 1980s), and diffuse aesthetics (1990s to present)[6] – we can see the same practices at work, a complex strategy of falsification and hybridisation: kitsch, aesthetics of fake, cult of quotations and appearance, and fiction. These are the characteristics of storytelling, which we define operational, that build the aesthetic system of postmodernism. A grammar that, summarized in the category of kitsch, Eco, for example, since the Seventies has tended to match the concept of

hyperreality. And it should perhaps be remembered that for Eco hyperreality is a process of mimetic improvement of reality, a concept that can be synthesized in the formula "even better than the real thing": the copy that exceeds the original in its appeal, giving the aesthetic experience almost a cosmetic meaning. An example, almost embryonic, of this process is offered by the Parthenon in Nashville, the replica of the Athenian temple built in Tennessee in 1897. And one might add that the same is true of Tianducheng, the residential complex in the Chinese city of Hangzhou, which perfectly replicates a district of Paris (including the Eiffel Tower). We will use the example of the American Parthenon – obviously only one of the many that can be employed – to introduce the concept of hyperreal storytelling.

John McHale, resorting to the Parthenon as an archetypal image and not referring directly to the one in Nashville, posed the problem of the past as an iconic function and expendable symbolic value system. It is in the way this exhibition's value is narrated that postmodernity sharpens its mimetic strategies. The processes of falsification are poured out in a cultural hermeneutics which is translated into a "replication of 'permanence past'."[7] A precise space opens up in which mass reproduction becomes both the content and the form of the now postmodern narrative: "The book, the film of the book, the book of the film, the musical of the film, the book, the TV or comic strip of the musical – or however the cycle may run – is, at each stage, a trasmutation which alters subtly the original communication".[8] On the contrary, Eco, returning to the notion of hyperreality that he had already addressed in the mid-seventies and to which we will return shortly, in *The Limit of Interpretation* cites the Parthenon of Nashville as a prototype of a hyperreality that tends to replace reality by activating a strategy of improvement of reality itself: an immense corrective cosmetics of the past, as we have already tried pointed out just above. Not the past as it appears to us now, but as it should have appeared in its present. An almost orthopedic idea of history is narrated. What emerges is the conviction that the authenticity of the past can only be experienced and shown by the artistic fake of the present. As Eco states in fact: "The Parthenon of Athens has lost its colors, a great deal of its original architectural features, and part of its stones; but the remaining ones are allegedly the same that the original builders set up. The Parthenon of Nashville, Tennessee, was built according to the Greek model as it looked at the time of its splendor; it is formally complete and probably colored as the original was intended to be. From the point of view of a purely formal and aesthetic criterion, the Greek Parthenon should be considered an alteration or a forgery of the Nashville one".[9]

In Eco the hyperreality is outlined almost as a morphology of the present, a signifier that obviously affects its own meanings. In the account of his journey into the American make-believe in 1975, Eco notes a decisive dialectic: the relationship between the real thing and the absolute fake. No longer platonically opposed in an ontological conflict, these poles now define a continuous

display of the desire in a culture increasingly linked to the image. The desire for authenticity can only be expressed in the logic of absolute fake, as demonstrated by the case of the Parthenon or in the other exemplary case, that of the Venus de Milo with her arms: "the 'completely real' becomes identified with the 'completely fake'."[10] This involves a shift in the role played by the mimetic. Now Plato's polemic targets, activated by mimesis (illusion, double, iconic seduction), become a cultural frame: the fake parts from the mimetic process, that process that still considers itself subordinately linked to an original model, becomes the sign of itself, creates a new dimension of reality, hyperreality. Even the aesthetic pleasure aroused by the hyperreal has its own inner logic. The fake is not so much the achievement of a technical perfection, but the criterion of aesthetic pleasure: the real will always be inferior and therefore less pleasant and desirable. In this framework, Eco's hyperreality seems to align itself with the idea of the past as an imaginary museum in which the obsession with mimetic normativity imposes itself as the main direction of meaning.

3. History as a Behind Closed Doors Match

Eco's conception of hyperreality, however, is still tied to a material dimension, we could say a narrative of historical reality almost naively touristy. But it can also be considered as the arrival of a new phase of aesthetic taste in which kitsch – which is the basic grammar that Eco indicates as the foundation of hyperreality, we repeat once again – arrives at a stage of self-awareness. To better understand this passage marked by the overcoming of taste and by the consolidation of the centrality of communicative values, we are helped by a sentence, almost a manifesto of the postmodern hyperreal kitsch, expressed by Jeff Koons: "My work has no aesthetic values, other than the aesthetics of communication. I believe that taste is really unimportant."[11]

Marginalization of taste, or its cancellation, and affirmation of communication: it is on these axes that we can recognize in Baudrillard's numerous theorizings hyperreality as a a process of derealisation by interpreting contemporaneity as an evident agony of the real and rational that is the modern, and as an input into an era of simulation: to the time of production follows the time of simulation, as to the logic of meaning (or sense) follows the logic of fascination (or seduction). Baudrillard, as known, especially since the second half of the Eighties and early Nineties will indicate this process as the interweaving of two interrelated processes: the vanishing point of art and the strike of events. It is thus outlined in a Platonic scheme (the simulation) the strongest narrative that modernity has conceived within it: the Hegelian narrative of the end, end of art and end of history.

In *The Illusion of the End* Baudrillard, by recording the exit from history and the entry into simulation time, thematizes a point not irrelevant to our discourse. The end of history (the strike of events, i.e., the substitution of information and event in the logic of cause-effect) is actually

nothing more than a repeated exercise of "feeding" the end: "the end is always experienced after it has actually happened, in its symbolic elaboration. […] History in real time is CNN, instant news, which is the exact opposite of history".[12] Warhol's art (more than that of Koons) is, we might add, one of these symbolic operations: a contemporary entrance into the universe of simulation and globalization. What is represented and conceived is not so much the final catastrophe (the sublime. if we want to use a category of traditional aesthetics), the disappearance of the world *tout court*, but the disappearance of these symbolic operations. It is precisely the modality of this representation that is in crisis. The center is not the disappearance of the world, but of its image, namely art. One of the crucial centers of modernity, as Hegel had already predicted: the end of history and the end of art, a fatal coincidence that bears the name of modernity.[13]

Baudrillard in *The Perfect Crime* outlines this catastrophic immanence as the imperceptible overlapping of two processes: making reality disappear and masking this reality at the same time. Therefore, a given historical reality disappears, the time of the human being, and an artificial, robotic, virtual, simulated reality emerges, that dark destiny for which "the image can no longer imagine the real, because is the real."[14] Extrapolating the negative meaning of aestheticization – the idea and the inheritance that Baudrillard has picked up, in his own way and in his own words, from Benjamin (the mechanical reproduction of the aesthetic) and McLuhan (the identity of medium and message) – means grasping in technique a new generation of meaning that offers itself as an aestheticized dimension. As reality is replaced by the simulation, so the production responds to the seduction as a principle that presides over the order of appearances, artifices, simulacra. Warhol is in this reading the ineluctable figure that connects these processes: on the one hand the dematerialization of art (vanishing point, "disappearance"), on the other hand the materialization of the aesthetic in operative form. This represents a further step forward with respect to the system of simulacra that oriented postmodernism. One enters into a "transaesthetic" in which art proliferating everywhere discovers itself engaged in its own disappearance. A storytelling that basically revolves around the concepts of disappearance and excess: disappearance of art, disappearance of history and disappearance of reality on the one hand, and excess of images of art, history and reality on the other hand.

In view of this approach – effectively a philosophy of history in which, as Baudrillard has insisted rather obsessively for years, the civilization of the mirror (the mimesis) is replaced by the civilization of the screen (the simulacrum) – it is possible to understand the metaphor that guides this hyperreal storytelling in which the event is totally absorbed by its communicative excess, cancelling any link with the real event.

The metaphor that we can infer from Baudrillard is that of the match behind closed doors. He introduced it at the end of the 1980s and then took it up again in a more systematic

way in *The Transparency of Evil*. The event was the European Cup match between Real Madrid and Napoli in September 1987. The game was played in a Santiago Bernabeu stadium without spectators: a disciplinary sanction imposed on Spanish fans for the acts of vandalism committed in the Uefa Cup final won the previous season. The match marked for Baudrillard further than the Brussels Heysel stadium tragedy, the final between Juventus and Liverpool in 1985, in which the violence of the hooligans that caused thirty-nine victims was made into a television spectacle. If in Brussels the tragedy was at the same time a media narration and a real tragedy, in the case of the Madrid match the link with the real data is cancelled. In Brussels, the hooligans transformed their role as spectators into that of protagonists, usurping that of the footballers: the spectator (the live viewer or the tv one) is the one who observes the event, but also the one who is the protagonist. He is the object and the subject of the narration. This reading, deeply indebted to Benjamin's notion of the aestheticization of politics, is completely depersonalized in the Madrid event, in which the subjects (the football players, the spectators) are totally incorporated into an event that transcends and dematerializes them: thus, the prototype of the hyperreal event is born. This is the core of the hyperreal narrative that from mere chronicle becomes a historiographic model, an interpretive paradigm of the world. It is no coincidence that the two great historical events that followed the collapse of the Berlin Wall and marked the entry into a new phase of history, the first Gulf War and the Twin Towers attack, show for Baudrillard the pervasive violence of globalization that between indifference and terrorism asserts itself as the true and only possible narrative. The closed-door match in Madrid and, obviously, in a more polemical and problematic way, that great video game that was the bombing of Baghdad in January 1991: "perfectly exemplify the terroristic hyperrealism of our world, a world where a 'real' event occurs in a vacuum, stripped of its context and visible only from afar, televisually."[15]

The two meanings of hyperreality to which we have referred, first a mimetic and operative hyperreality and then a simulated and post-historical hyperreality, probably lay the foundations of today communication: a kind of bulimia of postmodern signs that takes to the extreme the instantaneousness of increasingly globalized and interchangeable and, at the same time, increasingly individual and self-referential contents. The first phase of postmodern hyperreality had its own more recognizable dimension: the replicas of the past were concrete signs, sometimes vulgar, sometimes ironic, kitsch in their aesthetic essence. This phase, however, in order to assert itself or even simply to find its own identity, had to resort to continuously narrating a present that was a large collection of the past. History was either replicated or assembled. In this process of narrative construction, as we have seen or at least as we have tried to show quickly, hyperreality and kitsch met.

On the contrary, the storytelling activated by technological hyperreality was based on the idea not of replicating the past, but of replacing the data of (historical) reality with those of communicative excess. Postmodern storytelling had thus produced, in the space of about twenty years, at least two versions of the narration of the present: the fake Parthenon (a kitsch hypermimetic building), on the one hand, and a behind closed doors match (a purely media event), on the other. Two symbolic and exemplary paradigms of two different storytelling, but united by the same common denominator: reality interpreted as an immense fictional setting.

It would be tempting to affirm that this massive tangled assembly is the basis, or at least some of its first assumptions, of the narration that we are going through today. And if we give the term narration its classical collocation, namely literature, we could claim together with the authors of *Learning from Las Vegas*, right at the dawn of postmodernism, that "the same reason that makes signs (visual, artistic, linguistic and literary) works of Pop Art (the need for high-speed communication with maximum meaning) makes them Pop literature as well."[16]

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[1] We use the term "contemporaneity" to essentially indicate the historical phase that begins with the affirmation of the dominance of communication over production and that, sociologically labeled as mass culture, begins more or less in the middle of the twentieth century. It is therefore a questionable lexical usage, purely functional for this paper.
[2] Andy Warhol, *America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 129.
[3] Heinrich Klotz, *The History of Postmodern Architecture*, trans. R. Donnell (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press) 1988.
[4] Hans Hollein, *Everything is Architecture*, in *Architecture Culture 1943-1968*, ed. by J. Ockman (New York: Rizzoli, 1993) 462.
[5] David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry in the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 87-98.
[6] Andrea Mecacci, *Dopo Warhol. Il pop, il postmoderno, l'estetica diffusa* (Roma: Donzelli) 2017.
[7] John McHale, "The Plastic Parthenon", in *Kitsch. An Anthology of Bad Taste*, ed. by G. Dorfles (London: Studio Vista, 1973) 104.
[8] MacHale, "The Plastic Parthenon", 108.
[9] Umberto Eco, *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990) 184-185.
[10] Eco, *Travels in Hyperreality*, trans. W. Weaver (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 7
[11] Jeff Koons, *The Jeff Koons Handbook* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1992), 31.
[12] Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. C. Turner (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 90.
[13] Gianni Vattimo has indicated in the meaning of the end (of modernity) one of the central points of postmodernism: *The End of Modernity. Nihilism and Hermeneutics in Postmodern Culture*, trans. J.R. Snyder (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press) 1988. Eva Geulen, on the other hand, has insisted on the narrative role of the idea of the end of art in Hegel as one of the axes of the construction of modern philosophical debate: *The End of Art. Readings in a Rumor after Hegel*, trans. J. MacFarland (Stanford: Stanford University Press) 2006
[14] Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime*, trans. C. Turner (London-New York: Verso, 1996), 5.
[15] Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, trans. J. Benedict (London-New York: Verso, 1993), 79.
[16] Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas. The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1977), 80.

I DON'T CARE ABOUT THE TRUTH, TELL ME A GOOD STORY: NARRATIVITY AS DISCOURSE, CREDIBILITY AS CONDITION

Paco Barragán

Abstract
The advent of the 21st century has brought with it a more complex and contradictory society. The progressive integration of consumer society, mass media, technological innovations in the field of communications, internet and social media has created an extremely visual and hyper-narrative society that can be framed as the *storytelling* society in the American-driven West. This hyper-narrativity has degenerated into what has been termed "infodemic" or informative pandemic, merged with older concepts like fake news, conspiracy theory and post-truth. I suggest, as filter of or counterpower to this hyper-narrativity, the concept of "credibility." Departing from Niklas Luhmann's "trust-confidence" theory, the "credibility" theory reflects our "liquid" 21st-century society—in which modernist concepts like "truth," "fake," "false" and "veracity" have loosened their meanings—by proposing a "credibility factor" that is closely related to the experience of the receiver and defined by its relationship to the sender through the mass and social media sphere.

Keywords
Narrativity, Credibility, Post-Truth, Fake News, Niklas Luhmann, Conspiracy Theories, Trust-Confidence, Infodemic

1. Introduction

We live in a fascinating era. Albeit all the contradictions, complexities, confrontations, convulsions and conflagrations that raze our here-and-now, it's difficult not to wonder at such magnificent spectacle. How would one ever imagine that a person sidled out of a reality show like Donald Trump would ever become president of the United States? Or that right wing factions, instigated by the same Trump, would assault the Senate of the United States? Regardless, nobody like Trump to embody today's *Zeitgeist*! He is just another example, right, but highly iconic of this out-of-control and exacerbated narrativity that characterizes today's society, whose origins take us back to another notable actor: Ronald Reagan. From Ronald to Donald, from Reagan to Trump, two characters that have a lot in common. The temporal frame of 1980-2021 allows us to codify this new narrativity in the West called *storytelling*.

Men and women are narrative animals par excellence, a *femina* or *homo narrans*. Let's recall that for anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss narrative constitutes the basic and constant human expression, independently of its ethnic origin, primary language and acculturation.[1] For the semiotician Roland Barthes narrative is present in each media or discipline, from the myth and epic to the legend, fable, painting, film and comics. More precisely, Barthes argues a people without narrative would be unimaginable as "narrative is international, transhistorical, transcultural."[2]

The question that we could ask ourselves now is: What happens when a citizen feels annoyed or helpless because the quotidian narrative s/he must face debunks his future expectations or collides with her/his beliefs?

The answer to such a question is easy: we simply change the narrative.

And this is precisely my hypothesis when articulating the advent of this new narrativity in the '80s with the ascent of Ronald Reagan to power, which has been framed by Christian Salmon as *storytelling*.[3] (From now on I will use *storytelling* in cursive whenever I'm referring to today's western hyper-narrativity.) Since then, narrativity could only grow stronger, permeating all fields of society: from the bureaucracy and the government to the economy, advertising, religion, psychology, ideology, politics, mass and social media.

2. The Narrative Turn: From Metahistory to Storytelling

In order to understand how we arrived here it is of great use to us to take as departing point the intriguing concept "metahistory" developed by North American historian Hayden White in 1973 in his book *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*.[4] In it he poses the transgressive hypothesis that history differs not that much from fiction as both are highly narrative poetical exercises. In other words: the narrative form determines the historical content. And narrating, as we all know very well, means selecting, ordering and interpreting, decisions pervaded by a profound ideological character.

Hayden White does not so much appeal to the fact that the historian works with fake or imaginary events, but to the fact that historical thinking recurs equally to narrative strategies to confer sense to the narration and its narrative worlds. Also, Michel de Certeau and Karl R. Popper, like White, insisted in pointing out this fine and unstable line that mediates history and fiction.[5]

The concept "metahistory" prepares in a natural way the road to today's *storytelling*.

This new sense of history in the West, that brought about a narrative or "narrativist" turn of the present in the form of the so-called *storytelling*, has its roots in the arrival of Ronald Reagan and his *spin doctors* to the White House in the year 1983.[6] It's *the-actor-turned-president* who inaugurates in the '80s the *storytelling* or hyper-narrativity era: A new way of relating to the citizen through attractive and powerful narratives that pervade all spheres of society by substituting, adorning, deforming or even camouflaging inconvenient or directly vile realities.[7]

The American Dream was broken. Let's recall that there was a severe crisis of confidence in the future in American society in mid and late 1970s that, according to Russell D. Buhite, threatened to "destroy the social and the political fabric of America."[8] The excesses of the military in Vietnam and the failure of putting a halt to communist expansion in the world, the Watergate affair, the oil crisis in 1973 and the subsequent oil embargoes and, especially, the fiasco

of the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979 projected all together a tremendously vulnerable image of the American empire.[9]

Now, against Carter's pessimistic and defeatist narrative, Reagan or *the Great Communicator* offered, according to Robert M. Collins, a "profoundly optimistic vision of American renewal" in which he promised to "revitalize the economy, restore U.S. power and prestige in world affairs, and reverse what he saw as the dangerous drift in the direction of a European welfare state."[10] And how does Reagan succeed in imposing his narrative when the obstinate reality was adverse?

As John Anthony Maltese keenly pointed out in his best-seller *Spin Control. The White House Office of Communications and the Management of Presidential News*, under Reagan's mandate the Office of Communications and Information "contributed to the formation of a counter-reality. The idea was to divert people's attention away from substantive issues by creating a world of myths and symbols that made people feel good about themselves and their country."[11] As such, the White House during Reagan's era does not allow the media to dictate the information flow but goes on the attack with the *line of the day* or *story of the day*: messages or stories carefully crafted, very often supported by moving images, that imposed a script and determined the perspective of how the news had to be framed or transmitted.

Picture 1: President Ronald Reagan addresses the Nation from the oval office on National Security (SDI Speech) 23.3.1983

And this is what has been happening during almost four decades from the moment Ronald Reagan arrived at the White House to the election of the equally telegenic Donald Trump. A time span during which this extraordinary narrative machine has spun no less extraordinary narratives, like “Star Wars,” “The Empire of Evil” or “War on Terror.” In other words: the power of the narrative enhanced the narrative of power!

Christian Salmon puts forward the following pertinent question: “How do we explain this *storytelling* influence on the political discourses in the United States? Why is the narration of edifying stories considered there a new paradigm in political sciences at the very expense of the notions of images and rhetoric to the point that it dominates not only electoral campaigns but also the exercise of the executive power or the management of crisis situations?”[12]

Since Reagan and his spin doctors, politics haven’t ceased to be a media spectacle in which the president plays the role of main actor and in which *storytelling* defines the limits between reality and fiction. Ronald Reagan’s counter-realities convinced first the American people and later the whole world that it didn’t matter whether something was true or false, what really mattered was the narrative and the prettier and more credible, the better.

Our western *storytelling* society is, as we will see, made of different levels of counter-narratives that hover between that which is possible and that which is fake.

3. Classical and Modern Precedents: Honor, *Ethos*, Charisma and Trust-Confidence

Before we embark in the formulation of a communications theory, it’s very useful to investigate the classical or pre-modern precedents of the “credibility” concept in order to locate its theoretical articulation from a *longue durée* perspective. And while the Aristotelian notion of *ethos* comes immediately to our minds, we’re convinced that a close look at Homer's epic poem *Iliad* will be of great use to us, not only because it anticipates by some four hundred years Aristotle’s very elaboration of “character” as a determining factor of humankind, but also because it enables us to frame another complementary element like “honor.” Todd S. Frobish argues that Aristotle had to forcibly take inspiration from *Iliad* for the development of his own concept.[13] This is logical because, as George Kennedy reminds us, the “Homeric poems, after being written down in the seventh century B.C., became the textbooks out of which Greek students learned to read and were venerated as the bibles of the culture, the attitude toward speech in the *Iliad* strongly influenced the conception of the orator in Greco-Roman civilization.”[14] Basically, *Iliad* is the story of Achilles and his quarrel with King Agamemnon. Because of the slave Briseis he is compelled to give up, Achilles feels his honor has been publicly affronted and the poem narrates his inaction or lack of action to put an end to the war. What is decisive in *Iliad*, according to Frobish, is the fact that the concept of “character” is inevitably linked to the idea of action.[15] “For Homer’s men,

their identities were forged through action, not speech, and were usually displayed on the battlefield [...] a man simply was as he acted—his identity or character was strengthened through heroic deed or ruined by some act of cowardice."[16] In other words: a man's character was forged through his behavior on the battlefield. After all, epic poems like *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and myths and legends are populated by gods, demigods and heroes.[17]

Aristotle elaborates on this dilemma in depth through the concept of *ethos*, both in his *Rhetoric* as well as in *Nicomachean Ethics*. *Ethos* (character) is together with *pathos* (emotion) and *logos* (discourse) one of the three parts of rhetoric's persuasion that conform the image the orator projects through his discourse by means of qualities or moral virtues that establish a certain level of confidence among the audience. In other words: *ethos* understood as the speaker's credibility or ability to be believable. For Aristotle "character" or mood is acquired through habit, through elections of moral order that channel men towards a life of virtue. Those virtues are, according to Aristotle, manifested in "justice, courage, self-control, magnificence, magnanimity, liberality, gentleness, practical and speculative wisdom."[18] For Aristotle calls "habits those moral states which form a man's character in life; for not all habits do this. If than anyone uses the language appropriate to each habit, he will represent character."[19]

In *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle reminds us once more that morality "is the result of habit or custom" and that "the virtues, then, come neither by nature nor against nature, but nature gives the capacity for acquiring them, and is developed by training."[20] In short: what Aristotle suggests is that the orator with character not only possesses *ethos* but he also projects it in a way that the audience perceives it clearly. And that character is formed basically through the habit of a virtuous life.

At this point, two questions come up with respect to the Aristotelian *ethos*: To what extent does the public determine the orator's *ethos*? And has our *storytelling* era displaced *ethos* towards *pathos* and *logos*?

If for honor we resort to Homer and for *ethos* to Aristotle, the theorization of "charisma" falls exclusively on the shoulders of German sociologist Max Weber, although Homer's poem is already impregnated with indirect allusions to this *kharisma* in the form of "favor, grace or divine gift."[21]

Max Weber develops the concept of "charisma" in depth in his book *Economy and Society*, originally published in German in the year 1922, where he addresses the different types of legitimate domination that rule society. Weber explains that the "concept of 'charisma' (grace) has been borrowed from primitive Christian terminology" whose use has been attributed to the German ecclesiastical jurist and theologist Rudolf Sohm, who coined the term in his work *Kirchenrecht* (Ecclesiastical Law), published posthumously in 1923.[22]

For Weber there are three types of legitimate domination. The first type has a *rational-bureaucratic* nature: that which proceeds from the established order and legal authority. The second type is *traditional-patriarchal*: its power rests on sanctity and authority derived from ancestral traditions. And, in third place, we deal with the power of a *charismatic-individualistic* character: that which emanates from the extraordinary sanctity, heroism or exemplariness of one sole person or his call or charismatic authority.[23] Weber defines charisma as a "certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is considered extraordinary and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities."[24] Finally, Weber also insists in pointing out that in moments of crisis charisma is a big "revolutionary" force capable of overthrowing entire bureaucracies or hereditary regimes because of its power for renovation of the established order.[25]

The advent of liberal democracies and political parties in a way regains this very idea of heroic or shamanic charisma by investing the leader with the formation's charismatic authority.[26] Notwithstanding, this would be more of a nature of "personal charisma" or "secular charisma" and not something extraordinary or supernatural, which would fit neatly with the progressive widespread of mass media along the 20th century.[27] According to Sam Whimster, "today any leader is liable to be portrayed 'charismatic'" with the support of mass media and social media.[28] The contemporary politician, he continues, only needs to be "photogenic" and have a "likeable personality."[29] In this same sense, Vincent Lloyd and Dana Lloyd nuance that the epithet charismatic has suffered a very warholian trivialization as it even applies to "celebrities, lawyers, politicians, and new age gurus."[30]

The second concept that is particularly of interest to us is "trust-confidence" elaborated by German sociologist Niklas Luhmann in 1968. Luhmann's perspective is the seamless continuation to Weber's "charisma". Although the complexity and contradiction of the information society is today much more exacerbated, artificial and dominant than in the '60s, the *luhmannian* notion is extremely suitable when developing our own "credibility" concept as "media confidence." Etymologically speaking, confidence stems from Latin *fides*: it relies on faith (the imaginary), looks towards the future and implies a certain kind of familiarity. Within the trust-confidence theory, Niklas Luhmann establishes a difference between *trust* understood as confidence in people (simple, individual and small scale) and *confidence* applied to systems (complex, impersonal and abstract) like the economy, politics or government.

Luhmann defines his point of departure in a very basic way: "We put our trust in the self-evident matter-of-fact 'nature' of the world and of human nature every day."[31] And some years later he would summarize it even more explicitly: "Trust remains vital in interpersonal relations, but participation in functional systems like the economy or politics is no longer a matter of

personal relations. It requires confidence, but not trust."[32] And what happens to this "systemic confidence" when an exceptional situation like COVID-19 befalls? In the same essay Luhmann addresses the expectations with respect to contingent events arguing that we have to "neglect the possibility of disappointment. You neglect this because it is a very rare possibility [as is the COVID-19 situation], but also because you do not know what else to do. The alternative is to live in a state of permanent uncertainty and to withdraw expectations without having anything with which to replace them."[33] Still today these words acquire a lot of meaning given the instability and fragility of our social realities.

The high degree of complexity in today's world has exceeded by far the limits of personal trust and systemic confidence. We should not forget that Luhmann already insisted on the new risks that mass media with its language and symbols produced through narratives that, while having a big impact on people, not necessarily were told from a proper perspective.[34]

We will see how the "credibility theory" seeks to reduce the complexity of social communication in mass media and social media.

4. Plausible and Toxic Narratives in Today's Society: From Counterfactuals to Conspiracy Theories and Infodemics

"Strictly speaking," argue Denis J. Hilton, David R. Mandel and Patrizia Catellani, "counterfactuals refer to thoughts or statements that include at least some premises believed to be contrary to fact."[35] For their part, Barbara A. Spellman, Alexandra P. Kincannon and Stephen J. Stose nuance that among human beings' multiple cognitive capacities "counterfactual reasoning allows us to imagine something in the world being other than it actually was or is (i.e., counter-to-fact); we can then imagine, or mentally simulate, the world continuing to unfold in a direction other than the direction it has actually taken."[36] That said, in all spheres of society, from the scientific and the legal to the economic, the political or the literary, reality goes hand in hand to counter-reality: the discovery of causal relationships very often goes preceded by counter-factual reasoning.

A fascinating counterfactual hypothesis is related to Hitler and would try to answer the question: What would have happened if Hitler had passed the entry exam to the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna in 1908? We know that he tried a second time to enter the academy by presenting four watercolors which, to his great frustration, were rejected because they presented serious perspective errors.[37]

Another equally fascinating example closer in time is what was colloquially called *Star Wars*. President Reagan launched, during his presidential inauguration speech held on 23 March 1983, the *Strategic Defense Initiative* (SDI) or "Star Wars" in allusion to the famous George Lucas movie. It was the scientist Edward Teller, father of the nuclear bomb, who came

up with the SDI project that would supposedly turn nuclear missiles totally obsolete.[38] Robert McFarlane, National Security advisor between 1983 and 1985, said it bluntly: "SDI was the major hoax operation in history."[39] It constitutes without doubt a fantastic counterfactual narrative that acquired the potential to become reality and that had very practical effects on reality itself: given the possibility of a new and economically expensive arms race Russia abandoned and accepted negotiations for the dismantling of nuclear warheads.

In February 1989 Francis Fukuyama gave a lecture at the University of Chicago advancing his positive idea about "the end of history" and the consecration of liberal democracy in the world. In the year 1992, Francis Fukuyama finally published his iconic book *The End of History and the Last Man*. In the meantime, we know that the essay would turn into one of the most read and his book one of the most criticized in the long history of political philosophy.[40] Besides arguing that history would come to an end, Fukuyama also predicted that mankind would die of boredom. According to Fukuyama, liberal democracy would be "the end point of mankind's ideological evolution" and "the end of history as such."[41]

The message was powerful: Capitalism had defeated communism and liberal democracy would impose herself on a global scale. To make matters better, the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989, hardly eight months after Fukuyama's initial speech, ultimately served to endorse his daring thesis.

In any case, Francis Fukuyama's "the end of history" became a very powerful and above all legitimizing narrative that equipped neo-liberalism with a though-provoking philosophical facet in line with the best *storytelling*. Michael S. Roth remarked conveniently that "the fantasy of the end of history allows one to imagine that the real and the ideal will coincide in the world."[42]

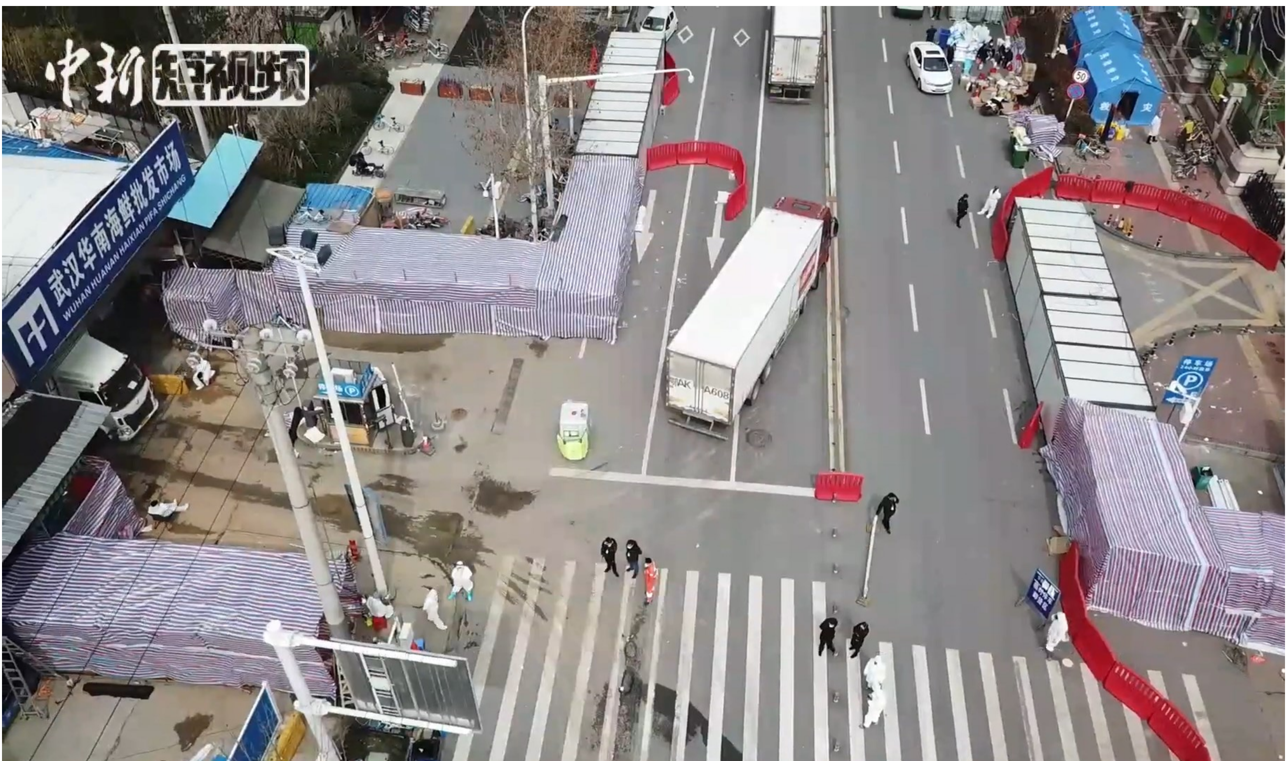
President John F. Kennedy's death was announced on 22 November 1963 at exactly 1:38 p.m. Lee Harvey Oswald was accused of the assassination. On 9 August 117 Publius Aelius Hadrianus—better known as Hadrian—received in Syria a letter announcing the sumptuous news that he had been adopted by emperor Trajan. Only two days later Trajan died in Selinus, a port-town on the west coast of ancient Cilicia. Soon rumors spread of a possible poisoning.[43]

These two temporal poles allow us to articulate this fascinating narrative phenomenon: *conspiracy* versus *conspiracy theory*.

We have, on the one hand, the historical Mediterranean roots with special emphasis on the Roman Empire where, according to Victoria Emma Pagán, conspiracies were part of the political and social life of the elites, senators, historians, playwrights and poets. In other words, conspiracy configures part of the rhetoric culture of ancient Rome. Pagán adds: "Conspiracy theory is a kind of story telling that makes claims to credibility and truth."[44]

The other big contemporary block would have its origins in North American post-war society and the Cold War psychosis. According to Timothy Melley, quoted by Pagán, we're dealing with a phenomenon driven by "a sense of political disaffection and individual autonomy in decline."[45] In particular, the terrible and unprecedented assassination of John F. Kennedy generates a maelstrom of *conspiracy theories*. According to Brian Keely a conspiracy theory constitutes a "proposed explanation of some historical event (or events) in terms of the significant causal agency of a relatively small group of people—the conspirers—acting in secret." [46] It basically proposes the reasons a certain event happened.

The big attention to conspiracy theories during the post-war goes back, on the one hand, to Karl R. Popper's use of the concept "the conspiracy theory of society"[47] and on the other, to Richard Hofstadter's *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*. Published on November 1964 in *Harper's Magazine*, this iconic essay would contribute to its widespread use. In it, Hofstadter explored the paranoid style that according to him characterized American Cold War politics and denounced "the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant."[48]



Picture 2: Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market.

There is a widespread societal disapproval of the allusion to conspiracy theories as anyone who dares to mention the term, from layman to lawyer, will be met with derision, ridiculed or frowned upon. And yet, conspiracy theories are frequently—if we are to believe Michael Butter and Maurus Reinkowski— "articulations of and distorted responses to existing problems, needs,

and anxieties. Thus, they must not be dismissed out of hand and ridiculed but have to be taken seriously."[49] Like with COVID-19, people try to look for an explanation to what is happening and, even more so, to find someone to blame for the difficult situation there are in. And for some citizens certain conspiracy theories are music to their ears as they provide the perfect scapegoat to blame for their bad luck. In today's society, and in particular after the arrival of internet and social media, it looks as if we live in the golden era of conspiracy theories.

There is unanimity among theorists and scholars that the year 2016 is the year of the advent of post-truth and fake news: Trump and Brexit were responsible for the alarming increase in manipulation and hoaxes, both in mass media and social media, achieving levels heretofore unknown.[50] In addition, this date would acquire historical meaning as the Oxford Dictionary would declare "post-truth" the word of the year.

For their part, so-called fake news became a relevant element of this epistemically post-truth regime. In this case, the Cambridge Dictionary provides one of the better definitions when it affirms that fake news are "false stories that appear to be news, spread on the internet or using other media, usually created to influence political views or as a joke."[51] According to Dan Evon, one of the most successful fake news happened precisely in 2016 when the news website *WTOE 5 News* announced that His Holiness Pope Francis had endorsed Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump.[52] It was of course a joke that went viral, yet many news outlets around the world were giving credibility to this unprecedented endorsement.

The actual state of hoaxes and conspiracy theories that COVID-19 brought about are to a certain extent heir to these postmodern disquisitions and have resulted in the so-called "infodemic" or "informative pandemic." According to Roy Schulman and David Siman-Tov, referencing a report of the World Heath Organization (WHO), "the pandemic was accompanied by an 'infodemic' that could threaten public health."[53] The term "infodemic" was coined in 2004 by Francesco Frangialli, the director of the World Tourism Organization (WTO) on the occasion of the SARS and Zika outbreak: "Many tourism officials in Asia are now saying their SARS crisis last year [2004] was not an epidemic at all but an infodemic."[54] This unprecedented and colossal mix of dis-information and over-information that COVID-19 unleashed on a global scale forced the very WHO to hold a scientic conference to fight false cures and conspiracy theories about the origin of the virus or the rumor about the control that the elites want to impose on the population through massive vaccination. The *1st WHO Infodemiology Conference* was held between 30 June and 16 July 2020.[55] The challenge was clearly stated by the WHO Head of COVID-19 for Europe David Nabarro, "We need to understand the form in which people tackle problems departing from their own perceptions, while we try to reach them in a way they can truly understand."[56]

The question we should ask ourselves now is: Do we have to throw up our hands in horror due to these widespread post-truths and fake news? The "lie expert" Spanish philosopher Miguel Catalán explains in his *Seudología* (Pseudology) that (self-)deception and lying are part of the very essence of humankind since its pristine beginning: the dissonance between our absurd expectations and reality forces us to a constant exercise of psychic compensation. And this chain of small and big lies that we say to ourselves on a daily basis is what ultimately grants us psychological and moral balance against an ever-diminishing reality and an ever-increasing ambition.[57]

9/11 was the illustrative case par excellence of this kind of infodemia fuelled by conspiracy theories, fake news, post-truths and counterfactuals that only an event of this magnitude would be able to arouse. *9/11* then and COVID-19 now certify once again this "'new narrative order' that presides the formatting of desires and the propagation of emotions," as Christian Salmon has rightly summarized. [58]

5. Credibility: A Communications Theory for the 21st Century

We will now propose the concept "credibility" as condition or filter for today's hyper-narrativity. We laid out a historical perspective of the different elements—honor, *ethos*, charisma and trust-cofindence—that have marked the process of individuation of the subject in the West. By doing so we have enabled ourselves to articulate our own concept of "credibility" as base or pillar for our actual hyper-narrative society. In order to contextualize the pre-modern concept of honor we resorted to Homer's *Illiad*, which in turn anticipated Aristotle's own concept of *ethos*; for the concepts of charisma and trust-confidence, we resorted to Max Weber and Niklas Luhmann, respectively.

This set of historical concepts enabled us to elaborate our own concept of "credibility" as "media confidence" amidst this chaos of narrative discourses. We suggest that "credibility" constitutes a contract of mutual consent between the sender and the receiver that can be broken at any time in a world based on subjective social constructions: people tend to believe what they want to believe at any moment according to their values and predispositions. And when they understand that the sender or the message is no longer credible, they search for a new narrative in which to believe in. As such, this communications theory proposes the liquid or intangible concept of "credibility" as a condition for society's *storytelling* regime, where solid concepts like truth, lie, veracity or falsehood are being permanently challenged.

The sort of narrative imperialism that the citizen is subjected to constructs stories that end up being interiorized by the spectator, even in those cases where what one understands by reality (or conforms the sense of it) has been totally alienated. The fictionalization of the real stood naked before the eyes of the international community when the United Nations officials desperately

looked for arsenals of weapons of mass-destruction in Iraq (later the dispute would end in the 2003 Gulf War). It is therefore hardly surprising as the officials were pursuing a story, a plot.

The concepts of honor, *ethos*, charisma and trust-confidence, which have imbued our hypothesis with a historical perspective, are 'solid' concepts that pertain to traditional 'solid' (pre)modernist structures, institutions and social forms. But today, paraphrasing late Zygmunt Bauman's terminology, belongs to "liquid times", *id est*, the transition of those same structures, institutions and social forms from "the 'solid' to the 'liquid' phase of modernity" in which they become 'liquid' because "they can no longer keep their shape for long" and "cannot serve as frames of reference for human actions and long-term life strategies because of their short life expectation."[59]

Even if the concept hasn't been used until today in an explicit theoretically defined context, we all sense in a natural way which is the material environment for the liquid term "credibility": consumer society, mass media and social media. With the perfectioning of marketing and mail order in the United States since the Second World War, the term "credibility" gained recognition in the field, according to Philip Kotler.[60] With the advent of Internet, web sales took over sales via traditional mail order and with the massive multiplying effect came fraud. Because of this insecurity, the University of Stanford developed in the year 2002 the *Web Credibility Research* project under the supervision of Brian Jeffrey Fogg: ten performance points that allow evaluation of the veracity of information offered, for example, by a vendor, a brand or a company online and that should be correct, trustworthy, updated and verifiable.[61]

The special fields of interest for our investigation are the mass and social media, as the notion of "credibility" is the appropriate tool for control and quality. It doesn't matter if it's former President Trump proclaiming the invasion of North Korea or Bill Gates announcing the last vaccine against COVID-19, all of them depend on inspiring, attractive, and above all, credible representations. In other words: that the citizen on the receiver end confers credibility to what he hears from the sender.

The "credibility factor" is determined by the personal experience of the receiver. Credibility is defined as a performative action exercised by the sender through the mass and social media with a discourse that's appropriate to the reality it describes, *id est*, coherent and endowed with a credibility with which the receiver can fully identify.

Credibility becomes a privileged media imagetext or image-event: a confidence-credibility transposed to the mass media and social media sphere that connects receiver and sender through the message-discourse. Credibility requires a continuous validation from the part of the receiver to the extent that there exists a declarative contract that is accepted by the receiver and assumed by the sender. Needless to say, the contract is fragile and likely to be broken at any moment. Put differently: people tend to believe what they want to believe in each individual

moment according to their values and inclinations. And when they cease to believe they move on and look for a new narrative.

It's maybe appropriate to recall here the words of Spanish theorist and photomedia-based artist Joan Fontcuberta when he affirms, "Photography [and the image in general I would add] is losing its endorsement of empirical roots and its *credibility* becomes dependent of the confidence the photographers themselves earn."[62] In our modernist society something had really happened or was considered true if there was a photo or a moving image to validate it. The problem now is not only that images but also words have lost their privileged relationship to ethics and facts as both are equally vulnerable. Words have been subject to manipulation since the dawn of man, but images too, which we thought were infallible and taken for absolute proof, have become prey of Photoshop and other graphics editors and everyone of us is a potential faker staging and distributing its own subjective narratives.

Picture 3: Obama and Biden await updates on bin Laden.

We could close this part of our argument with a perfect example of what we could call "incredulous credibility": the assassination of Osama Bin Laden. The death of Osama Bin Laden was announced on television on Sunday 1 May 2012 at 11:30 pm (ET). President Barack Obama addressed the nation from the East Wing of the White House. Until this day we (and the press)

hadn't been able to see the corpus delicti, only a photograph shot by Pete Souza from a cramped spot in a corner: We see Obama, Biden and his team in the Situation Room looking out of the frame while they monitor in real time the killing of Osama Bin Laden; also some fake images of Bin Laden's corpse published by various newspapers among which was the British *Daily Mail*;[63] an animated recreation of the assault operation and killing in Abbottabad by Taiwan's Next Media Animation;[64] and of course the block-buster movie *Zero Dark Thirty* by Oscar-winning Kathryn Bigelow, whose narrative will substitute any history book. That's more or less all there is. Lacking the corpus delicti, unlike what happened with Che Guevara, Gadaffi or Sadam Hussein, what credibility merit the words of President Obama? Was the United States establishing a new non-visual regime?

As we well know from *Iliad*, the Greeks were given to *believing-without-seeing*. Modernity showed us that we should only believe that which we saw with our own eyes (certified by a photograph or a moving image). And Barack Obama asked us to go back to the pre-modern habit of *believing-without-seeing*. Is it maybe possible that in our *storytelling* era we're no longer that which we see but only that in which we believe? Maybe truth has given way to credibility?

6. Conclusion

Throughout this essay we have raised the hypothesis about how hyper-narrativity or *storytelling* has imposed itself in western contemporary society, generating an unstoppable excess of discursive narratives. In the first part we took the time-arch that encompasses the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and Donald Trump so as to illustrate the advent and posterior consolidation of *storytelling*. And in order to exemplify our *storytelling* era we relied on the "narrative turn" of both the past and the present: "metahistory," *storytelling*, counterfactual history, "the end of history," conspiracy theory, post-truth and fake news. By doing so we traced most relevant theories that nurtured neo-liberal society when lubricating its narrative machine with view to the manufacturing of both plausible and toxic narratives in our "infodemic" age. And against this background, we proposed the concept of "credibility" as condition for narrativity. "Credibility," as this intangible quality, represents the condition-scale or filter when it comes to verifying the coherence of its narratives. Towards the contextualization of the pre-modern concept of honor we resorted to Homer's *Illiad*, which in turn anticipated Aristotle's concept of *ethos*; for the concepts of charisma and trust-confidence, already in full modernity, we resorted to Max Weber and Niklas Luhmann, respectively. These solid concepts enabled us to elaborate our own concept of "credibility" as "media confidence" amidst this excess of narrative discourses. We suggested that "credibility" constituted a contract of mutual consent between the sender and the receiver that could be broken at any time in a world based on subjective social constructions. The

examples taken from the fields of culture, politics and media allowed us to frame the narrative power of society through its symbols, texts and images when manufacturing credible stories, even if they're not necessarily true. The final aim of this essay has consisted in the coupling of these new and excessive narrative discourses to a communication theory that functions as an intangible shock absorber or buffer in the articulation of the complex and contradictory relationships that entertain the media sphere, culture and politics.

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FAKE NEWS AS META-MIMESIS: IMITATIVE GENRES AND STORYTELLING IN THE PHILIPPINES, BRAZIL, RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

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Abstract
We propose to consider "fake news" as a genre with its own conventions and narrative devices dependent on those of mainstream journalism. Departing from genre theory, "culture jamming" practice and Barnhurst and Nerone's (2002) concept of journalist modernism rooted in Louis Althusser's idea of form as the principal expression of ideology, we intend to highlight empirically how mainstream media storytelling is hacked, imitated and hijacked by "fake news" in the four countries that are known to have populist leaders and significant circulation of viral disinformation. Focused on empirical cases from Brazil under Bolsonaro, the Philippines under Duterte, Russia under Putin and Ukraine under Zelensky, this article draws significant comparisons between different cultures and traditions of journalist storytelling in the global peripheries concluding that while "fake news" can be subverting mainstream or integrating with it, even the most distant cases share the common basis of meta-mimesis, imitation of other texts. By way of distancing from the overpublicised cases of Donald Trump or Brexit, we also contribute to de-Westernizing media studies.

Keywords
fake news, genre, culture jamming, Brazil, Philippines, Russia, Ukraine

1. Introduction

The 2020 US presidential election saw the incumbent Donald Trump defeated. Even though it seems that his *kairos* – the opportune moment one can seize and turn into success – may have passed, this is far from certain. Yet no matter what future is awaiting Trump and his movement, there are much fewer grounds to expect the downfall of other strongmen around the world who modelled themselves after him and whom he sometimes modelled himself after. "Fake news", alternative facts, conspiracy theories – a range of phenomena that seem inherently linked and captured under the apt if vague concept of post-truth – have been and remain significant tools for these leaders, their regimes and followers.

While the much-publicized cases of viral disinformation in the West have already received disproportionate attention, research on "fake news" in other national contexts is scarce (especially in English while the body of research on fake news may be large at least in some national language such as Portugese). Studying these contexts is of great import not only because

they evade academic focus. Unlike Trump, other leaders who learned how to ride the populist wave are confidently remaining in power, and it is in this secure obscurity that new strains of "fake news" are tested on greater numbers of people than in the US, the UK or any EU country, before being exported to the West. This is why de-Westernizing media studies and refocusing on the peripheries should be a priority today more than ever.

In this study, we concentrate on a definitive aspect that makes "fake news" work: how mainstream media storytelling is hacked, imitated and hijacked (whether successfully or not). In order to be perceived as "news" by part of the audience, viral disinformation is forced to demonstrate certain features characteristic of good-faith journalism or other information products. Thus, the very possibility of "fake news" arises within "real news". In order to trace how it works in different cultures and traditions of journalism, we focus on the four countries that are known to have populist leaders and significant circulation of viral disinformation: Brazil under Jair Bolsonaro (2018-present), the Philippines under Rodrigo Duterte (2016-present), Russia under Vladimir Putin (2000-present), and Ukraine under Volodymyr Zelensky (2019-present).

Moreover, it is interesting to observe how imitation of mainstream narrative forms is functioning in the contexts of media systems that have been quite distant from both the Anglo-Saxon and the continental European models, despite sustained efforts at replicating one or the other (or both). Likewise, it is captivating to identify the parallels and discrepancies between the countries that each has its own distinct narrative tradition, journalist professional culture, different IT infrastructures and mainstream media outlets' modes of ownership.

2. The form of "fake news" and media jamming: Theoretical premises

"Fake news" has been studied extensively from a number of perspectives. Some of the earlier studies focused on the Russian disinformation against Ukraine and the fact-checking countereffort,[1] other applied quantitative framework to large datasets of fake news from the US,[2] others still studied patterns of diffusion,[3] or approached the problem qualitatively and conceptually.[4] However, Jankowski's call three years ago for more empirical studies defining concepts, developing typology, studying "narrative styles" etc.[5] – can hardly be seen as fully answered. Researchers focused on deception and elements of facticity as defining in fake news[6] yet almost never explored it within genre theory and analysis, the gap this contribution addresses.

We propose considering "fake news" as a genre. Genre is a conventional form of speech used in a typical situation. As "most genres imply a combination of purpose and form,"[7] different genres – an official oath, a keynote, a research paper or a love letter – differ widely in thematic and narrative structure, style, lexical corpus, and other conventions viewed as effective in gratifying the need that necessitated their use.[8]

In spite of the notion's long history since the times of Plato and Aristotle,[9] the conceptualization of genres remained weak until the recent decades. Carolyn Miller (1984) in her seminal essay advanced an "ethnomethodological" approach, whereby the identification of certain textual templates as "genres" by users is accepted rather than questioned because "the 'de facto' genres, the types we have names for in everyday language, tell us something theoretically important about discourse."[10] Therefore, the recognition of "fake news" as a different type of text evident from the term's widespread currency "in everyday language" is already a sufficient reason to consider it as a such "de facto" genre.

In theoretical terms, however, genre needs to pander to a certain socially accepted purpose in order to be classified as such. An essentially personal motive is socially legitimated through expression in a conventional, typified form (I am writing a research paper to make my findings known and strengthen my position as a scholar; I write a love letter to express my feelings and forge a relationship). The conventional form required by genre not only aims at achieving the communicative purpose, it is what informs the audience about this very purpose. "Form shapes the response of the reader or listener to substance by providing instruction, so to speak, about how to perceive and interpret [...] form becomes a kind of meta-information [...]."[11]

The rhetorical situations where journalism and "fake news" arise are different, even opposite in terms of pragmatics. From the locutor's perspective, journalism satisfies the need to provide factual information where it is lacking while "fake news" responds to the perceived situational demand to deceive the audience. This latter motive can hardly be legitimated by the audience as a social purpose, and effective deception requires presenting false statements under the guise of a factual genre. Therefore, the "how" of this rhetorical action on the level of syntactics (its form) is achieved by posing as if it were a text in a journalism genre, thus behaving exactly as if the rhetorical situation was to allay the information exigence. In order to persuade its audience that it is news, "fake news" must imitate the form of actual news. Imitation and mimicry are at the heart of "fake news" just as Aristotelian *mimesis* is at the heart of fiction; but while a fictional text seeks to imitate life, "fake news" texts imitate other texts, those of actual news. It is a *meta-mimesis*.

"Fake news" as a genre is thus fundamentally meta-mimetic, non-autonomous and dependent on conventions of genuine news, which is evident also in the common nomenclature used for purposefully erroneous messages, where "information"/ "news" always constitutes the root: "dis*information*", "fake *news*", "mis*information*" etc. Untangling this semantic further, we note that the opposite of "fake" is not necessarily "true" (its opposite would be "false"), it is the original, like the fake/original binary in art and aesthetics.

"Fake news" arises straight out of the genres of *bona fide* journalism, taking their form while subverting their purpose. If we follow Wittgenstein (1953) and consider all utterances as

language-games that acquire meaning insofar as they follow rules of the situation, "fake news" can be seen as pretending to play one game while in reality it plays another. In a different situation with a different purpose, the same non-factual text would pass harmlessly as a satire or joke.

"Fake news" thus represents a breach of what Lucrecia Escudero called "fiduciary contract".[12] It is based on the theory of a "reading contract" by Eliseo Verón (1985) who proposed that the reader must accept and activate a certain semiotic program offered to them by the text[13]. Fiduciary contract "implies *a priori* acceptation of the media narrative as true" while the actual verification may be delivered *a posteriori* "based on the legitimacy that media have as institutions"[14]. Without such contract, "the discourse of the news shares many properties with fictional discourses".[15] Once this contract is violated, we are tempted to add, what remains of news is "fake news".

Readers are used to certain forms out of habit, enabling them to tell the difference between a piece of news and a love letter, but it is in fact the repetition of this form that blinds towards the element of "truth" in it. Habit becomes the tool of manipulation preventing readers from unmasking it. It requires an act of dehabituation to be able to distinguish what makes the "fake news" fake.

The morphology of journalist genres is inherently linked to the professional culture and ideology behind journalism. The theory of media form and journalist modernism by Barnhurst and Nerone (2002) considers form and narrative to be the principal vessels of ideology as "the imagined relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."[16] Barnhurst and Nerone suggested that news is defined by its form rather than its content; a set of narrative devices and genre conventions, along with "persisting visible structure", such as visual organization, layout etc. The professional ideology of journalist objectivity, impartiality, separation of fact and opinion is also revealed in its media forms.

This professional ideology is not a given but a result of a historical disposition, an era of "journalist modernism" that arose in the early 1900s and simultaneously included rational and simplified design, an objectivist stance and ideas about journalism's role in society ("the fourth estate"). It also conformed to the standardized narrative built around headline, lead and body, the inverted pyramid ordering of content from most important to least important,[17] and a clear thematic structure divided into main event, consequences, circumstances, previous event, history, verbal reaction, evaluation, and expectation.[18] This contrasted with a greater narrative and design variety of the Victorian era, and its more partisan press.

The imitative and subversive relationship of "fake news" to the embattled professional ideology of journalist modernism can be compared to "culture jamming" that according to Leah Lievrouw, "captures and subverts the images and ideas of mainstream media culture"[19]. We propose to develop this concept and suggest that "fake news" manifests a culture jamming of

professional media culture, or a *media jamming*. It “takes the form of popular culture, but with the purpose of subverting and critiquing that culture”,[20] which is exactly what fake news does to the mainstream media: “monkeywrenching the media machine”.[21] Since its conception, culture jamming was seen as progressive by default, “the rupture and derangement of ideological spectacles and taken-for-granted assumptions.”[22] We extend this to a general disruption of any mainstream culture by the means of that very culture, regardless of the ideological positions involved.

One of the remarkable lessons of culture jammers, and a similarity with the current “fake news” practice, is “how effectively they have deployed humor, irony, fun, play, and absurdity as means of (even a weapon for) exposing social, political, and economic problems, attracting adherents, and moving them to action.”[23] Researchers have noted the role of creativity, conceptual depth and absurdity in the success of “fake news” as “deep stories”.[24] And while “progressive” culture jamming was easily co-opted by the capitalist mainstream as a cool counterculture in “reverse jamming”[25], this is unlikely with mainstream media jamming by “fake news”.

Departing from these premises, we are now going to look at cases from Brazil, the Philippines, Russia and Ukraine, trying to pinpoint how exactly mainstream media storytelling and culture are hacked and jammed by viral disinformation across different platforms as post-truth narratives often unfold simultaneously on various mediums following Henry Jenkins’ model of transmedia storytelling.[26] Recognising the differences in cultures and meaningful material, each case has a different orientation, focusing on YouTube shows in the Philippines, manipulated visuals in Brazil, imitative televisual simulacra in Russia, and hybrid ecology of “fake news” in Ukraine. We believe this does not affect comparability as our focus is not on genres of individual texts in country-specific “fake news” corpora, but on the diversity of storytelling forms of the fake.

3. The Philippines: constructing newslikeness

We concentrate on the appropriation of the news genre by pro-Duterte content creators on YouTube to obtain legitimacy in promoting his administration, and to attack the media and critics of the government. The analysis of YouTube channels and videos as “fake news” needs to be situated within the turbulent relationship between President Rodrigo Duterte’s populist government and the media, as well as the surge in YouTube engagement in the country. Duterte’s regime is marked by attempts to intimidate news organizations and activists critical of the administration’s violent “war on drugs”, his misogynistic remarks, and more recently, the shortcomings of the pandemic management. This has led to legal cases filed against news organizations such as *Rappler*, and the non-renewal of the franchise of the media giant, *ABS-CBN*.[27] This relationship between Duterte’s government and the media, and the cultural norms privileging the “broadcast yourself” culture on YouTube, facilitated an environment conducive to

challenging traditional news gatekeepers and open to "alternative news sources". Amid the tremendous growth of YouTube in the Philippines,[28] these "news" channels broaden their reach and are monetized with thousands of engagements through their creative appropriation of the news genre, while remaining obscure from regular fact-checking and scrutiny.

In this analysis, we highlight three ways of appropriating the news genre by YouTube content creators: 1) categorization, or the explicit use of the "news" label through the work of both content creators and the platform; 2) the use of the key elements of a regular television or radio broadcast; and, 3) the use of live news hybrid formats such as the "*teleradyo*" (the televised version of a live radio infotainment-style program). The case concludes by highlighting how the referencing, sharing, and circulation of such videos by multiple YouTube channels and social media influencers constitute "alternative influence networks"[29] that reinforce their legitimacy as news.

Among the pro-Duterte YouTube channels appropriating the label of news directly are DDS (Diehard Duterte Supporters) News Info (537K subscribers), DDS News channel, SMNI (Sonshine Media News Channel) (319K subscribers), DDS News Patrol (a pun on a popular news show, *TV Patrol*), DDS News Worldwide (53.8K subscribers), *Banat Balita* (*balita* is a Filipino term for news) (212K subscribers), and Philippines Trending News (253K subscribers). Anyone can create a news channel on YouTube, and the categorization of content as news is based on the content's categorization by the creators and the platform's algorithmic identification of content labeled as 'news' in the platform recommendation system. Therefore, their visibility and legitimacy as news are amplified thanks to the platform's loose governance mechanisms.

These channels appropriate elements of the news genre with varying intensity. The one that achieves the closest look and feel to a news broadcast are videos from SMNI, although other channels also mimic traditional news broadcasts. SMNI uses many elements from news genre conventions: from the tagline "Truth that matters" along with a "station ID" common for broadcast networks, to having newscasters in full business suits and adopting the marching tone of voice typical of Filipino newscasters, to the cityscape backdrop reminiscent of news studios, to the running footer, "Breaking News". SMNI is aired in selected regional and cable channels although it maintains its own digital version on YouTube, which compels them to aim for an authentic broadcast news appearance.

At the initial glance, it would be hard for a regular viewer to not construe this channel as "news". Upon close analysis however, one realizes how this channel engages propaganda and manipulation, common elements of "fake news".[30] The topics covered by this channel are selective and include those pertaining to the critics of the government or the administration's good deeds. Headlines and video titles also evidently favor the administration. In an example of the SMNI video with a click-bait title *"VP Leni at oposisyon sa kangkungan pupulitin"* ("Vice

President Leni [Robredo] and the opposition will emerge in the spinach dump"),[31] the broadcaster, in his formal outfit, admonishes the Vice President and the opposition using derogatory language and the second person pronoun to directly address the object of the attack – "ikaw" (you in singular form) or "kayo" (pertaining to the members of the opposition using *you* in plural form) – rather than the third person pronoun traditionally used in regular news broadcasts. The six-minute video does not include any other news or information other than the broadcaster's rant towards the opposition. By borrowing the style symbolic of traditional news formats, these videos draw from the legitimacy and credibility associated with news to attack the government's critics or commend the administration's "achievements". However, the use of news conventions for propaganda promotes a political agenda while hiding behind the veil of news objectivity, and therefore achieves the goal of persuading, rather than informing.[32]

We now turn to how pro-Duterte YouTubers use news media conventions to make a direct attack on the media, which can be construed as *culture jamming.*[33] During the heated debates concerning the franchise renewal of the media network ABS-CBN, the highly followed YouTube channel of pro-Duterte commentator *Banat By* and its more explicit news version, *Banat Balita,* aired a live YouTube broadcast to justify the non-renewal of the franchise,[34] situating this within the media's overall critical stance towards the government. One would notice how the layout of the video strikingly resembles the DZMM *Teleradyo* format (ABS-CBN's hybrid format of TV and radio news program aired on radio and cable channels) – with the hosts and guest in talking heads shots on a graphic backdrop using professional microphones and headphones, accompanied with a banner of the show title at the bottom of the screen.[35] The show, in its entirety critical of ABS-CBN network and justifying the denial of its franchise, also included an 'exclusive' interview of a resource person – a style typical of regular newscasts – to render authority to the content, albeit handpicked to privilege their preferred political narrative. The commentators consistently echo a one-side political view coupled with ad hominem attacks. The YouTube live feature affords the elicitation of audience engagement in real time, right when the story is at its peak. As "broadcasters," the YouTubers give "shoutouts" to acknowledge their viewers and read their comments and questions aloud – a feature more common in Philippine radio broadcasts and less so in TV broadcasts due to limited airtime. On YouTube, they are able to blend TV, radio, and social media, producing content that is not restricted by the limitations of bandwidth or airtime while maximizing audience-engagement strategies to make this content more dynamic and affective.

It is also through the reinforcement of these channels by each other that they build "alternative influence networks,"[36] expanding their reach and solidifying their legitimacy as news. The potency lying within these channels' ecosystem is critical for their political influence. For

example, *Banat By*'s live YouTube broadcasts, albeit not carrying the "news label" in its channel title, is actively re-shared in bite sized 5 to 10 minute videos across other DDS "news" channels, and by social media influencers within and outside YouTube. In these re-shares, the headlines, now with "Breaking News" banners, become more pointed in their framing and are more easily shareable among the community of supporters[37]. "News channels" and social media influencers also add click-bait and emotionally charged spins on headlines, sometimes with more direct expressions of hate against opposition figures.[38]

4. Brazil: self-mimesis of "Bolsominions"

The appropriation of the news genre by Bolsonaro supporters in Brazil since his election in 2018 follows similar contours to the Philippines but finds its main distribution in WhatsApp groups rather than YouTube. Unlike Trump, who relied mostly on Twitter and Facebook, Bolsonaro in 2018 turned to WhatsApp as 44% of approximately 120M WhatsApp users considered it their prime source of political news.[39] The application allows joining groups including hundreds of members, with easy sharing and replication of content. It has a user-friendly interface even in basic smartphones, offers encrypted chats, and does not require a high level of media literacy. It is also a cheaper alternative to subscription-based messaging services (SMS). The interface facilitates the dissemination of several content types including chain messages, news, memes, and links. In a country dominated by highly concentrated and generally distrusted mainstream media in a handful of conglomerates such as *Grupo Globo* and *Grupo Folha*, the application became an effective grassroots organizing tool to circumvent traditional news structures. WhatsApp extreme-right groups are administered by Bolsonaro's loyal volunteer army, known as "Bolsominions", who use rhetorical techniques based on "fake news" stories aided by a well-organized apparatus of production, distribution and replication of digital content.

The turbulent relationship between the Bolsonaro government and the established media is the object of a so-called "cultural warfare" inherited from the 1964—1985 military régime. Bolsonaro, a retired officer belonging to a radical faction dissatisfied with democratization, was elected in 2018 with a conservative agenda in line with the global alt-right movement. It includes contempt for established media, scientific knowledge, and is anchored in nationalism and fundamentalist Christianity. The official government's media narratives promote disinformation in the public sphere, polarize public debates, and, more importantly, aim to create internal enemies in order to discredit and destabilize democratic institutions from within. While the media landscape in Brazil consists mostly of private news conglomerates which previously influenced election outcomes, the press is considered anti-patriotic and corrupt by extreme right and the government.

Bolsonaro himself attacks journalists, repeatedly accuses the "written press" of promoting fake news, and threatens to withdraw licenses and government advertising from oppositional media.

The government has instead relied on official social media channels and its supporters' websites as the well-oiled "fake news machinery" including blogs, YouTube channels, and Facebook pages, among others. It is important to note that the government openly acknowledges itself as a producer of propaganda content, defining the aesthetics, styles and targets, and is the main influencer of WhatsApp groups. Their aim is to boost the President's public image in an informal way using viral memes, micro-videos and images on several platforms. This content is then recirculated by automated bots operated by the government from the presidential palace. The President's own communications office, an advisory board known informally as the "Cabinet of Hate" ("*Gabinete do Ódio*"), consists of communications, social media and advertising professionals paid by taxpayer's money. It is also a family affair spearheaded by the president's own sons, who are elected officials. The "Cabinet of Hate" and affiliated influencers use sophisticated image and video editing software to generate convincing and emotionally engaging digital content.

One of the most efficient channels for disinformation are WhatsApp chat groups which can include hundreds of users by invitation of a group host. They rely on a combination of a pyramid scheme and network strategies, whereby producers create malicious content and broadcast it to regional and local activists, who then disseminate the messages to public and private groups. From there, the messages are spread further, forwarded by believing individuals to their own contacts.[40] As families are often numerous and spread across the country, WhatsApp has become an extension of the family and often acts as an individual's prime source of information. Spontaneous sharing is initiated by influencers, but its replicators have become known as the "*Tias do WhatsApp*", or "WhatsApp aunties" – a metaphor for gullible older relatives spreading "fake news" within family groups. Others refer to these groups ironically as "WhatsApp universities" since many rely exclusively on their content as political education. The dynamic of pushing "fake news" within the intimacy of family is a driving force both to unite Bolsonaro supporters and polarize society by splitting opinions within the nucleus of family, which in Brazil includes extended family members. In fact, the WhatsApp family group is where disinformation tactics have been the most effective in defining a voter base.

The platform has radicalized Bolsonaro's supporters since his 2018 election, providing echo chambers, conspiracy theories incubators and a source of governmental information. Pro-Bolsonaro WhatsApp groups operate under the radar of regulations (and allegedly WhatsApp itself, creating a sort of "dark web") as access to the groups' content is limited. They claim the use of social media is a democratic right and condemn any attempts at regulation. Bolsonaro uses this web as a proof that his campaign was organic, driven by legions of ordinary content

producers, and free of corruption. However, a parliamentary commission set up in 2019 to investigate the use of public funds for pushing "fake news" during elections resulted in a removal of 35 accounts, 14 pages, 1 group on Facebook (883K followers), and another 38 Instagram profiles (917K followers) directly connected to the "Cabinet of Hate".[41]

While numerous studies analyze textual content from these groups, less attention is given to the morphology and production of visual content such as images and memes, even though many studies' data include images.[42] Our focus is on photographic content presented in either adulterated forms through photomontage or decontextualized photographs with captions. It is based on a study by Fabrício Benevenuto and his team together with Agência Lupa, a Brazilian fact-checking organization using a WhatsApp monitor application of The Federal University of Minas Gerais'[43] research project "Elections Without Fake".[44] This study analyzed the truthfulness of 50 images most shared in 357 WhatsApp politically oriented "public" groups between 16 August and 7 October 2018, just before the first round of the presidential election.

This dataset comprised 846,905 messages posted by 18,088 users, including 562,866 text messages, 107,256 images, 90,962 external links, 71,931 videos, 13,890 voice messages. Images were the second most shared type of content. Of the 50 most shared images, most contained photographs, and 56% were classified as false or misleading while only 8% were fully truthful. All images were presented either standalone or accompanied by captions or semiotically related text within memes. Eight images were marked as "*false*" when checked against original sources. These are usually photomontages using archival images of celebrities with collaged heads of Bolsonaro's political enemies, taken out of their original context.[45] Sixteen images were classified "*true, but*" as authentic photos, usually of political opponents or cultural figures, yet presented alongside text pointing to conspiracy theories and unverifiable information, or else taken out of context. Four images were classified as "*unsustained*" whereby it was impossible to fact-check them; two images were considered "*true*", usually with Bolsonaro himself. The remaining were either satirical images or mere illustrations of biased articles, thus out of scope of disinformation.

However, fact-checking agencies such as Agência Lupa are also targeted by pro-Bolsonaro media and the "Cabinet of Hate" as ideologically motivated in definition of what constitutes a fact. They allege that fact-checkers themselves define this on an ideological basis or driven by mainstream media interests, using sources the far-right consider questionable by definition (such as academic institutions).[46] This puts the entire notion of veracity, autonomy and objectivity in a spiraling loop where alt-right media content tries to convince that legitimate fact-checkers are part of a "fake news" enterprise. Some sites frame this as critical thinking and freedom of expression, which in essence relativizes the criticality of ideological opponents by *mimicking* critical thought and rhetoric that *looks like* criticality. But in fact, their recommendation

is that Bolsonaro supporters "fact-check" news and information against the "truest" source, which is the president's own media production, making anything else "fake" by definition. This means that even though a supporter knows that the viral image is false by its appearance, if it comes from the "true" source, it no longer is a genre of "fake news", but has become news itself. This loss of parameter and connection to reality, the loss of indexicality, and the believability embedded in the style of synthetic realism[47] reveals that the act of persuasion is in the act of *self-mimesis*. It is the repetition of the genre of "fake news" which for its creators, disseminators and receivers makes it "true".

5. Russia: imitating history

Russia is often characterized as a hybrid regime that co-opts and imitates certain democratic procedures while avoiding rotation of individuals and groups that govern.[48] The television concentration in state-controlled media holdings and regime-friendly oligarchic groups was one of the first steps taken since Putin's ascension to power in 2000. Since 2005, Russian media system has been subject to increasing political consolidation. But a truly dramatic change in Russian media ecology was delayed to 2014-2016, the hot stage of the Russo-Ukrainian war.[49]

Nowadays Russian television market consists of 22 federal channels divided between three holdings: state-owned Gazprom Media, National Media Group (led by Alina Kabayeva, Putin's friend and alleged mistress) and formally state-owned VGTRK (All-Russian State Television and Radio Company). The main role in broadcasting belongs to Gazprom Media that owns federal channels with the largest audience share. The Russian sociologist Anna Kachkayeva calls Russian TV "the pipeline television", which is less of a metaphor than one would think: Gazprom Media's television cables are literally laid along Russian gas pipelines,[50] an ostensible demonstration of the ultimate neoliberal fusion of media and industrial infrastructures.

Such intimate connection of Russian media with both state and business requires to modify Hallin and Mancini's model and label Russian media system as polarized corporativist which is "a derivation and modification of the Polarized Pluralist Model."[51] Due to the lack of political tools, Russian television is one of the key elements that consolidate the country. According to a recent study, 85% of Russians receive information from three basic federal channels – Pervyi (*First*), Rossiya 1 (*Russia 1*) and NTV. During the latest decade Russian TV has been producing an atmosphere of hatred, and, since the annexation of Crimea and first hostilities in Donbass, Russian television has incorporated a plethora of disinformation formats rooted in imitation.[52] Social media are tightly controlled by the communication oversight authority *Roskomnadzor*, with jail terms given to many ordinary Russians for as little as a meme or a comment on Facebook or Vkontakte.[53] Russia's Kremlin-linked media businesses pioneered and perfected the technique of

trolling used to harass opponents, astroturf public opinion and employ bot-driven computational propaganda. Moreover, troll farms have become formally institutionalized and turned into lucrative businesses as well as propaganda vehicles, for example the infamous Internet Research Agency merging with *Fabrika media* and the *Patriot* media holdings (whose owner, Putin's personal friend, has also interest in the private military company active in Syria and Ukraine).[54] Mainstream and alternative media in Russia work in synch, whereby "[t]he mainstream has enveloped the extreme" and "chaos is embraced as a way to seize, define, and arrest the conflict's meaning", as observed by Andrew Hoskins and Ben O'Loughlin.[55] Therefore, it makes sense to focus on the narratives circulated top-down and remediated by mainstream as well as social media, choosing three distinct genres: a TV newscast, a documentary, and a military parade.

Covering the situation in Ukraine, Russian media uses the frame of WWII which is extremely ideologized in contemporary Russian public discourse. It can be asserted that "the Russian-supported campaign in Donbass is predicated as a 'Little Patriotic War'—a repetition or reenactment of "The Great Patriotic War".[56] Early on, Russian media reported about "threats from Ukrainians Fascists (Ukrofascists) to Russians" as well as "the struggle of militiamen (*opolchentsy*) against Kyiv's junta", dividing public discourse into good "us", whose "grandfathers fought [against the fascists]" and bad "others" – "Banderites", "fascists", "punishers" (*karateli*).[57]

Not only Russian television oversimplifies the reality, produces and replicates emotions – following Baudrillard[58] it seeks to produce the hyperreal, the image that precedes the reality. Russian mainstream channels actively embrace reconstructions, performances and "fake news". "The production of emotions" as genre has a specific nature that allows ignoring the hybridity of senses. As a result, news on Russian television contains mutually exclusive messages when the West is both enemy and partner of Russia, Ukrainian state does not exist but still represses ethnic Russians. The necessary "level of emotions" is attained due to increased airtime for news and political talk-shows as well as broadcasting such content in prime time.[59] Launched by TV, fake messages are remediated by social and digital media through transmedia storytelling.

Russian media desperately needed a picture to boost "high level of emotions" during the initial, hot stage of the Russo-Ukrainian war. In 2014, after the notorious fake story of a little boy crucified by Ukrainian soldiers, Russian state-controlled media disseminated another example of "fake news". This time Russian TV reported that Ukrainian government promised each of its volunteer fighters a plot of Donbas land and two slaves from local population.[60] The evening news story was positioned as a celebration of the 70th anniversary of expelling Wehrmacht from Ukraine, which helped draw direct parallels between Nazis and modern Ukrainian soldiers, even in their appearances and their faces. The parallels are purely emotional and lack any evidence or substantiation; the infamous allegation comes not from the journalist but is delivered

in a soundbite by a local official who reports he heard this from the soldiers themselves. In form, it follows the typical genre template of a television news story.

The broadcast was mocked in social media, did not procure the expected response,[61] and was ironically appropriated by Ukrainians as a catchphrase "a plot of land and two slaves". But the next performance found its audience. On 24 August 2014 (the Independence Day of Ukraine), in Donetsk, the so-called DNR militiamen (*opolchentsy*) organized a parade of Ukrainian POWs. While the genre of military parade is a political/military/aesthetic form remote from news journalism, it certainly belongs to the genre of media events.[62] What makes it unique is the extreme imitative nature of this media event which replicated in detail "the Parade of the Defeated" on 17 July 1944, when 57 thousand German POWs had been forced to march along the central streets of Moscow. The Donetsk parade of the captured Ukrainians recreated the 1944 parade in minutest aspect: POWs were clothed in rags, and water carts followed them washing the streets exactly as it had been done in Moscow 70 years earlier. The video with marching Ukrainian POWs in Donetsk was also disseminated by news media.[63] This reinforced the message "Ukrainians=Nazis" by imitating the form associated with victory over the Nazis. The media event became a mimesis of another media event.

A different episode that marked the establishment of "fake news" as a genre in Russian media became the Russian propagandist pseudo-documentary "Proekt Ukraina" ("The Project Ukraine"), released in 2015.[64] Shot by Andrey Medvedev, a former propagandist of VGTRK and now a deputy of Moscow city *duma*,[65] this pseudo-documentary represents Ukraine as an artificial state created by the Austrian General Staff during WWI to weaken the Russian Empire. The 1991 independence as well as 2014 Euromaidan was also shown as a covert US operation against Russia. Medvedev included interviews with historians (some with a dubious background) to boost credibility and formal appearance of the genre. This imitative documentary united in one linear narrative all "fake news" about the artificiality of Ukrainian history, language and national genesis that previously were shared via Russian TV, web and social media. The film was called xenophobic by the Russian oppositional politician Vladimir Kara-Murza. Its release was also combined with a talk-show of Vladimir Solovyov, a well-known Russian propagandist.[66]

6. Ukraine: a parallel mediasphere

Politically speaking, Ukraine is a democracy that changed six different presidents in 30 years. At the same time, its political system depends on oligarchic pluralism, in which the leverage on the political process is exerted by several groups whose interests clash and align intermittently. The political debate is typically populist, and traces of post-truth politics can be traced much further back than in mature Western democracies.

The media system in Ukraine has also formed as a product of this oligarch pluralism. Mainstream media outlets (such as TV channels) are oligarch-controlled and adhere to political parallelism by serving their owner's political interests,[67] reminding of Southern Europe's polarized pluralism. A number of smaller outlets (websites, YouTube channels and such), driven by ideals or profit, often sacrifice journalist impartiality and intervene in politics to expose corruption in their investigations.[68] Like the mainstream media, they display polarization and clientelist pluralism. Owner pressure and journalist corruption, or "envelope journalism" (covert promotion or defamation for illegal remuneration) are often identified as the key challenges to journalism.[69]

Viral disinformation in Ukraine blends very neatly into this polarized and partisan media system as clientelism, corruption and partiality are conducive of hyperpartisan communication.[70] "Fake news" becomes more than a staple of social media and obscure websites; it is integrated into and intertwined with the mainstream. This was clearly the case during the 2019 election campaign, when a transmedia narrative was created and delivered synchronously across a broad spectrum of media blending fiction and non-fiction genres, including mainstream news outlets, fictional TV series, "fake news" websites, and social media memes and videos[71]. Viber chats and especially Telegram channels are also major tools of disseminating viral disinformation, even though not as vital as WhatsApp in Brazil.

As an effect of hybrid media system, many "fake news" stories originated in mainstream media, especially on TV, for example, on 1+1, the leading TV channel by audience share (12.01 per cent in 2019),[72] that openly supported the challenger, comedian Volodymyr Zelensky. One of the notorious cases was a story alleging that the incumbent Petro Poroshenko murdered his own brother (in fact, he died in a traffic accident in 1997)[73] broadcast in a 1+1 show *Ukrayinski sensatsiyi* ("Ukrainians Scoops"). Promoted as a series of high-profile journalist investigations, the show was founded by journalist Oleksandr Dubinskyi, associated with oligarch Ihor Kolomoyskyi;[74] in 2019, Dubinskyi was elected MP on Zelensky's party list to be embroiled in a number of scandals and eventually sanctioned by the US.[75]

The show itself aired one week before the voting and has been massively viewed on YouTube (1,85M views). Branded as a "superexclusive" revelation, it features extremely dramatic music and a fictionalized narrative. Footage of Poroshenko is intercut with footage of suitcases with money, hands counting cash, and in one case, an image of heaped cash was inserted into a video of Poroshenko at a church service to give appearance he knelt and crossed himself before the money. The show constantly uses video and sound effects such as camera clicks and black-and-white footage with overlaid crosshairs in imitation of a hidden camera. The only witness, an exiled businessman under criminal investigation and self-admitted "Poroshenko's sworn enemy", speaks Russian but is completely dubbed in Ukrainian (movie-style, with no

remaining original speech), which makes impossible to understand what he is really saying. Another witness who testifies about the murder of Poroshenko's brother is also a fugitive pro-Russian politician from Moldova. Without any evidence, the incumbent president is accused of engaging in drug and prostitution business. These accusations are commented by an expert subsequently identified as a "fake" pollster.[76] The comments predict that Poroshenko would flee or go to jail if defeated (neither transpired as zero evidence of Poroshenko's corruption could be found by prosecution to date). Poroshenko is frequently mentioned together with fugitive Yanukovych officials, unpopular and convicted criminals. Chat messages – alleged proofs – are in fact designer-drawn, with animation and sound effects, and dubbed by actors' voiceover. In the top right corner, an advert of Zelensky's late night comedy show is constantly displayed, linking the negative and the positive parts of one transmedia narrative.

This fake "investigation" refers extensively to another one by a YouTube muckraking content creator *Bihus.info* (366K followers) that combine largely genuine investigations with occasionally dropped manipulative or falsified "revelations". Typical elements of journalist storytelling – a professional studio, stand-ups, soundbites, animated opening and closing sequences, uniformly designed titles – are integrated in their videos with elements of fictional storytelling such as dramatization or recreation of events, black-and-white footage to indicate the past, dramatic or suspenseful music, and personal attacks. All these features have also become adopted by mainstream television, as is evident from the analysis of the 1+1 show above. Rich infographic and well-designed visualizations mean to fill the gap in the missing information and reconstruct corruption links. However, they are not evidence as the authors are free to manipulate and introduce any elements, connecting any characters as they please. Much of the story is also told through recreation of the hacked messenger chats redrawn by designers and dubbed by actors' voiceover.

Other YouTube bloggers, like Anatoliy Shariy (2,43M followers), a petty criminal[77] turned blogger turned politician, mostly produce fake investigations or highly opinionated content. The pro-Russian Shariy earned popularity with investigations of an alleged paedophile brothel (debunked in court), drug and illegal game businesses; notably, he staged a fake attack on himself to boost popularity.[78] Unlike the Filipino bloggers, Shariy is distanced from the journalist genre. On the contrary, he appears to derive his authority not from imitating mainstream journalism but from being as different from it as possible. The graphic and editing are extremely simple. He is mostly facing the spectators frontally while a part of the screen is used to show screenshots or videos that he comments on casually. His free style is evident in his channel's slogan: "My videos about whatever I want".

"Fake news" is produced and amplified in "alternative influence networks" such as the media holding associated with Viktor Medvedchuk, a notorious Ukrainian oligarch and friend to

Vladimir Putin (Putin is the godfather of Medvedchuk's daughter).[79] In spite of the connection, he managed to accrue a group of TV channels in Ukraine (112, ZIK and NewsOne) as well as website Vesti.ua, semi-free newspaper *Vesti*, radio Vesti FM and website Strana.ua. They are used systematically to spread conspiracy theories like one suggesting that Ukraine is controlled by the West via a clique of *Sorosiata* (roughly "Soros cubs"). Strana.ua in particular furnished many "fake news" stories. For example, in April 2020 they ran a series of six articles alleging that Pentagon owns secret bacteriological laboratories in Ukraine, a proposed place of origin of covid-19.[80] The articles are organized in a credible format of source-based journalist investigation. The existence of labs is referred to a pro-Russian MP, and the official US denial is misreported as concession. The final verdict is also outsourced to an "expert" (a pro-Russian journalist).

These outlets are complemented by a series of lower-profile websites, such as Znaj.ua launched in 2015 by a PR firm Pragmatico. It procured over 4M Facebook followers thanks to 1.6M USD spent on promotion; it was the most followed Ukrainian website during the 2019 campaign.[81] It was also advertised offline, with guerrilla stickers in the subway quoting the late rock star Kuzma, "Politicians are from another planet. They make up laws to keep us within a shed like a herd", to connect with primarily Ukrainian-speaking public disillusioned with the establishment. Since 2016, Znaj.ua has always been among the 10 most visited websites in Ukraine. In September 2019, Facebook removed its pages because they were run from fake accounts and used other forbidden practices. Only 16% of its news is estimated by fact-checkers as trustworthy.[82]

The website completely imitates the layout and design of a genuine news outlet: it has breaking news feed on a left-aligned column, a number of regional sections, and special themes. Publications are grouped in thematic sections, each featuring a photograph and an informative headline organized around subject/predicate structure. The text is narrated in a relatively neutral style, putting the most important information first. Like in Strana.ua, manipulation typically occurs in the oft-misleading headline and in quotations. On Znaj.ua, many news items are often based on social media posts without any fact-checking (this is also done by mainstream media on a smaller scale). Thus, affordances of a hybrid media system are mobilized for hyperpartisan and false content: social media posts have become normalized as newsworthy.

7. *Fictiocracy International*: Discussion and conclusions

"Fictiocracy" is how Davide Banis diagnosed the current condition, speaking of a "political regime that, implicitly or explicitly, considers the distinction between fact and fiction irrelevant".[83] Inaugurated in the blurring of news and storytelling by Ronald Raegan's administration, this mode mobilizes the power of a story to abuse and violate the "fiduciary contract". Taking over

the journalist form and discarding its indexality, it blends it with storytelling forms developed in fiction and satire, leaving a hollowed and imitative shell.

This can be accompanied by attacks on the mainstream media (as in the Philippines and Brazil) or integration of the mainstream and alternative media (as in Ukraine and Russia). Whereas in the former case "fake news" can be construed as culture jamming that embeds a radical intentionality of using elements of the mainstream culture "turn its features against itself".[84] "Fake news" creators use the news genre to subvert it while articulating clearly in their content their resentment of the media, especially its gatekeeping functions. In the latter case, the partial merger of "the mainstream" and "the extreme" testifies to the original weakness and heteronomy of the mainstream, and a full-fledged hybrid media system. An integrated force of mainstream and fringe media outlets and social media create alternative influence networks that recycle and replicate the same posts, soundbites, concepts, associations, (fake) experts and pundits on all platforms. Together, they create an intertext united by a consistent transmedia narrative and making use of "deep stories", archetypal to the point of reminding folklore.

"Fake news" capitalizes on social media logic with its inherent virality and shareability.[85] In the Brazilian context, it also capitalizes on the mediatization of the family. As the family became mediated by WhatsApp, the blurring of private/public allowed manipulative political communication to invade the family and the intimate sphere. In the Philippines and Eastern Europe, YouTube is more important as it combines the social media logic and the legitimating appearance of mainstream television (which has also moved to YouTube to a large extent). We are witnessing how content creators on YouTube strategically appropriate the news and public affairs genre to mask propaganda under the veneer of news objectivity. The platform made it possible for political information to be seen and shared outside the confines of traditional expertise and regulation, but it is also being appropriated by forces to advance partisan political commentaries as news while discrediting the narratives of the opposition or critical media. These YouTube channels' use of professional news media conventions complicates how they should be distinguished, examined, and made accountable, especially when they work to undermine traditional media organizations. Their circulation within alternative influence networks makes them more potent. Despite calls for media and news literacy, this hybrid media environment makes it increasingly complex for users to make sense of what counts as "news". These imply the importance of more thoroughly examining the continuing evolution of "fake news" production and circulation styles on social media and better understanding how the audiences construe and engage with such content.

Visual narratives are also a productive ground for falsification. Photomontage as a tool for political propaganda is not novel but part of the medium's essence; photographs have

historically been manipulated to reinforce dominant ideologies, control history writing, or create misleading forensic evidence. Notorious cases include the erasure of Leon Trotsky from photographs where he appeared next to Lenin or the collaged portrait of Lee Harvey Oswald used as forensic evidence in the JFK murder trials. The list is extensive. This practice continues with digital transmutations, now including not only a superficial Photoshopping but also the increasingly mainstream algorithm-based manipulations of "deepfakes".[86]

Photomontage is also part of the art historical lineage of culture jamming, likewise employing modes of (photo)graphic collage in its aesthetic expression. The conceptual difference with culture jamming is that manipulated images are part of neither protest aesthetics nor anticapitalist critique even though tactics of disruption, *subvertising* and the "jamming" of signs and signifiers may have been appropriated from more anarchist types of guerrilla communication. When separated from its initial ideological purpose, culture jamming has become an aesthetic style signifying all collage with media artefacts, but its expression reveals its sources. Culture jamming is a style of exposure and denunciation of the materials it uses and remixes, whereas the manipulated images circulated by extreme-right supporters follow a style of opacity, hiding and concealing the sources it uses for deception, with the believability of photographic realism as visual prey. The photocollages shared massively in the Brazilian WhatsApp groups create a *trompe l'oeil* effect on the viewer, *mimesis* rather than representation, meant to not be noticed at first glance when the manipulation is well done.

Even though they can be fact-checked and their illusion is blatant to the trained eye, there is an issue of the believability of an image when perceived quickly on a scrolling feed amongst hundreds of others. Lev Manovich (2001) writes that the illusion generated by new media is the result of a synthetic realism whereby a computer-generated image is indistinguishable from a real photograph, which when combined with the temporal dynamic-constant of hypermedia reinforces this realism through repetition and oscillation between illusion and suspense reliant on the power of a dynamic, interactive mimesis. One way in which WhatsApp seeks to circumvent the believability of false images is by allowing users to click on an image in the feed and search for similar images directly on Google, using Google's database and algorithms to fact-check it. While this is a step towards demystifying a suspicious image, this mechanism also falls prey to whatever the algorithms are able to match against an existing database which may itself contain arrays of other false images and visual debris. In this case, Google acts as a fact-checker requiring more media and algorithmic literacy to ascertain some kind of "original"; otherwise, it may keep users and viewers in an endless loop of falseness where indexicality may never be found.

In semiotic theory, the image's indexicality according to Charles Peirce's triadic model is the physical relationship between the photographed object and the resulting image which

confers a degree of accuracy and truthfulness – a trace of what was once "there". In a deceptive photomontage, we need to be trained to look for the trace of deception beyond the immediacy of what is being represented. What makes images classified as "*true, but*" is precisely this threshold of believability where images are rendered legitimate enough so that they can be pushed beyond the fringe and enter mainstream discourse.[87] It is the artifice used in the "poor images" defined by Hito Steyerl (2009) as "an illicit fifth-generation bastard of an original image" passed on as a "decoy" testifying to the "violent dislocation, transferals and displacements of images (...) dragged around the globe as commodities or their effigies, as gifts or as a bounty (...) that spread pleasure or death threats, conspiracy theories or bootlegs, resistance or stultification".[88]

What unites these diverse "fake news" cultures is the imitation and meta-mimesis at the heart of its rhetorical purpose, and it seems the best way to make sense of practices so distant geographically and often mediatically yet so unmistakably similar. News, images and even media events in the empire of fake are all built upon imitation of other news, images and media events. Even when there is no imitation, like in the videoblogs by Anatoliy Shariy, the mainstream genre is expressed through its absence, as that which is despised and discarded. Mobilizing our predilection towards "the culture of the copy",[89] the protean fake changes masks and shapes, sometimes playfully and shamelessly displaying its fakeness in an almost-revelation, like a kind of artform, in which the meta-mimesis of "fake news" is married with the power of vested interest – and this is how the fictiocracy is born.

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"NO THEORY HOLDS TOGETHER:" SUSPICION, ITS PLOTTERS, AND THE PATTERNS OF IMAGINATIVE REASON IN (RE-)CONCEPTUALIZING DIGITAL CONSPIRACIST DISCOURSE[1]

Siim Sorokin

Abstract
Arguably, our (post)modern age engenders suspicion and (explanatory) uncertainty, prompting epistemic instability, eroding veracity conditions and causing rational skepticism and distrust. This throws into sharp relief the leading pathologizing or stigmatizing scholarly evaluation of the practice of conspiracy theorizing. Especially insofar as the proliferation and stratification of competing (and power-differentiated) stories and knowledge representations are concerned. In challenging the validity of such conventional wisdom, this multidisciplinary essay broadly follows the critical "particularist" philosophical perspective. I will highlight the doubly collaborative activity underscoring digital conspiracism: The Latin etymology of "to conspire" ("to breathe together") and the storytelling dimension of "to plot" ("plotting a story"). Two notions will be introduced: *contra-plotting* and *plotters of suspicion*. Both elaborate on the ubiquitous role of narrative, for plotting necessitates an indefinitely expanding "middle" communally self-reproduced through "continual interpretation" – precluding the final acceptability of any resolution (*sections 1-2*). The *third section* offers an illustrative qualitative analysis of 'natural' discursive data. The sample of forum posts on the MS Estonia's catastrophic shipwreck is taken from the bilingual (Estonian-English) conspiracy forum *Para-Web* and broader (motif- and theme-oriented) plotting tendencies are identified. The essay concludes with some summarizing thoughts and suggestions for further research (*section 4*).

Keywords
Contra-plotting, Plotters of Suspicion, (explanatory) Uncertainty, Behindo-logy, Narrative pattern, MS Estonia

"[Dietrologia:] *the science of what is behind something. A suspicious event. The science of what is behind an event*"[2]

"[Our] *mind is allergic to uncertainty, randomness, and coincidence. It is addicted to meaning. If the storytelling mind cannot find meaningful patterns in the world, it will try to impose them*"[3]

1. Some background context: the trust deficit and its ramifications

I will start this essay by dwelling to some limited extent on what some authors have termed the "crisis of trust" in the contemporary (Western) society. Following this, I will outline the subsequent structure of my essay. Now, arguably, our (post)modern era—where critical institutional omissions; wholesale withholding of information or key details due to presumable security concerns;[4] or the

misleading of or lying to the public, even—frequently invokes (explanatory) uncertainty. As such, ours is an age well primed for epistemic instability and erosion of veracity conditions, prompting popular suspicion and maintenance of a state of constant distrust, disbelief, and rational "vigilant skepticism."[5] Indeed, some research findings would undoubtedly help facilitate an argument that, more often than not, such suspicions may prove credible in and because of the historical retrospect. Some commentators have suggested that the First World War might be one point of origin for the betrayal of public trust. As history scholar Michael Redley explains, the belligerent powers' wartime governments brought into the fold "the 'free' press, publishing and film industries." By producing explicitly pro-war "propaganda masquerading as factual information," media became the mouthpiece for war, ensuring that "government's case gained a proper airing."[6] Moreover, Redley relates how these co-optation strategies also extended to the cultural sphere, instrumentalizing (even willing) people with some social standing—such as literary authors. These "[t]rustworthy people [who] len[t] their authority *to messages that the public might otherwise be inclined to disbelieve* became the basic stock-in-trade of wartime propaganda on both sides of the Atlantic."[7]

Similarly, we may consult a more recent case in the field of transport business. As sociologist Jane Parish indicates, here, too, the expert opinion effectively enacted a decoy's role. Namely, British Airways had for decades downplayed how long-haul passengers may be at risk for blood clots, going as far as using "counter-evidence [to mislead]" the public.[8] More recently still, the 2008 Center for Public Integrity investigation revealed that, following 9/11, George Bush Jr. and some other top officials had made "935 false statements [that] were part of an orchestrated campaign that effectively galvanized public opinion ... under decidedly false pretenses."[9] What, then, can be surmised from the above iteration of precedents, all with considerable significance to the public sphere? If anything, then the not so inordinate implication that "facts"—even though supposedly 'objective'—are nevertheless in many cases stubbornly social (or socio-cultural) constructions; with the natural facts, as established by hard sciences, of course being the most obvious exceptions.[10] Accordingly, assuming that facts so envisioned are above and beyond the immediate purview of, and thus neutral (as if ideal entities), to the *existing* relations of power and control, never to be manipulated by these (ruling) vested interests (or: by our "knowledge generating institutions"[11])—and always only by some interested, non-ruling parties—might be a somewhat naïve stance, at best.[12]

Consequently, it seems a likely upshot, as proved by some empirical analyses undertaken in the field of trust studies, that trust has been increasingly dwindling for decades, notably though not exclusively in the liberal Western societies.[13] Now, interestingly enough, where popular distrust in and suspicion toward societal and governmental institutions has risen, so has the reverse.

That is the normalization of suspicion as a "technique of governance" based on perceptions of "risk" (Giddens, Beck). Especially concerning the minorities and "foreigners." As the post-9/11 and the "war on terror" narrative has amply shown (if not proved), such all-impregnating suspicion can too readily reveal barely dulled contours of an atmosphere belonging to that "old" Cold War era; or at the very least reinforce its looming ramifications. For instance, as Guittet and Brion observe, the United States' Transport Security Administration (TSA) has for over a decade trained their officers in catching "suspicious behavior," meaning "measur[ing] reactions and looking for signs of stress or deception" while advancing casual conversations.[14] Crucially, in perhaps most cases, these sort of strategies imply a(n imaginary) quest after an imaginary. The "environment of risk"[15] underlines hyper-cautious threat perception and encourages the absence of and abstinence from 'objective facts,' making the ubiquity of narrative to become paramount.

Accordingly, as much as our current condition might be characterized by suspicion, it is also indicative of the power, persuasion, and extent of storytelling.[16] As Cristina Bacchilega puts it: "[W]e live by stories and in stories ... stories matter."[17] Hence, it should be relatively unsurprising that we see posited either, say, "stylized" facts, drawn in part from the expedient strata of sanctioned truths; or, facts that are "invented" altogether.[18] While not going as far as to argue as if—to keep with Guittet's and Brion's example—both the police and the intelligence cultures at all times invent evidence. The fact of the matter is that due to the anticipatory "anxious alertness" described above, some risk society institutions discipline their subordinates in "narrative profiling," to adapt Christian Salmon's phrase. Not in "what is there," but in "[reading the] people and situations constantly [as] if they are not what they appear to be"—probing further, "beneath the surface."[19] In short, the ultimate result of some of the tendencies delineated previously seems obvious enough: we are increasingly bearing witness to promulgation of a "particular conduct, *a new way to formulate truth*, trust and normalcy."[20]

Being indebted to the prevailing sense of suspicion, such emerging conduct for parsing reality immerses to different degrees both the citizenry and state officialdom. Similarly essential is the aspect of constant information overload, or "surround," brought about by the hyper-diffusion characteristic of the social media era. By inhabiting this "information surround," as cultural sociologist Gary Alan Fine observes, we concurrently experience "too much information and too little."[21] Indeed, this latter predicament spells out and leads us to this essay's primary topic—that of conspiracy theorizing (CT) in the face of (explanatory) uncertainty.

Jane Parish has positioned the practice of CT also in the context of the aforementioned "surround," envisioning it as "a way to assembl[e] possibilities and information." Parish draws on other authors, who already at the end of the previous century contended that truth of our age

refers to "[the] emergence of reality out of possibilities" – in contradistinction to truths derived from "external facts."[22] Now, in casting "the reality" and "the truth" in these terms—especially timely concerning the ongoing battle with "post-truth"—and still following Parish's work that builds on Baudrillard and others, her positing of what "reality" entails is noteworthy. Namely, the latter "[may] be understood as a surface where things scatter."[23] Parish proposes reality to consist of, or perhaps rather, being enrobed by, fragments of knowledge and information, leading to increased improbability in understanding. Luc Boltanski, for his part, talks of the (official) "surface reality"—itself a decoy concealing a "disturbed reality," made evident by the "thematics of mystery, conspiracy, and inquiry," in turn invoked by the 19th and 20th century's (detective) fiction.[24] In other words, Boltanski points out how *fiction*, namely popular literature, at least in part opened the floodgates for the suspicion and doubt to seep into the everyday. This affected peoples' construals of history and society, hence necessitating the exploration of "beneath the surface," as Guittet and Brion put it. As if to 'fix' any disturbances and re-assemble the real "real" reality once and for all. Accordingly, suggesting that the activity of conspiracy theorizing resembles an engagement with some form of "whodunit" is certainly not far off.[25]

Such proclivity to seek assurances, while peculiar in abstract, is thrown into exceptionally sharp relief if not legitimized, however, through the consideration of how the 'real' meaning and the manifestation of 'reality' is increasingly becoming undermined by the technological advances of our modern society. The emergence of so-called deep fake technology, inducing something of a "truth decay," is an example par excellence. For instance, recently, a deep-faked TikTok account of "Tom Cruise" went viral with 11 million views.[26]

In taking stock in the previous introductory discussion, I propose two tentative, interconnected summary notions: *malleable reality* and *fluidity of truth*. As I envision it, the former concept indicates how narratives and narrativizations increasingly come to operate as explanatory and exploratory heuristics for reality processing. Relatedly, the fluidity of truth marks the relativization of veracity conditions accompanying the latter. It underscores a deficiency of 'objective' truths and the consequent protrusion of subverted or subversive, communal truths.

This essay has three parts. Following the present introductory section (1.), I will ponder the theoretical issues from a multidisciplinary angle in the second section. In 2.1, I will briefly provide some relevant historical and etymological insight into the very concept of "conspiracy"; as well as sketch in broad terms the most inclusive definition of "conspiracy theory." In 2.2, I will survey key literature critical of the leading (and historically persistent) effort to stigmatize and pathologize conspiracy theories and theorizing. Finally, in 2.3, partially drawing on the previous overview, I will outline a more focused conceptual discussion. To that end, I will suggest

some alternative theoretical vocabulary: i.e., conspiracy theorizing as a communal *contra-plotting* of continuous, open-ended narratives (characterized by an expanding Aristotelian 'middle'); with "theorists" re-envisioned as *plotters of suspicion*. In proposing terminological updates, I aim to forge productive dialogues between conspiracy theory research, narrative and media theories. To the best of my knowledge the latter have not had any significant interest in such a popular practice. There has not been any cross-pollination between all the three fields, either. My contribution endeavors to fill these lacunae.

The *third section* is devoted to the qualitative analysis of 'natural' discursive data (instead of performing, say, interviews). Through an *illustrative* analysis I will concentrate on a sample of forum posts taken from the bilingual (Estonian-English) conspiracy forum *Para-Web*. I identify broader (motif- and theme-oriented) plotting tendencies and, at times, zoom in on further minute detail. While I will elaborate on this when introducing the section in question, suffice it to say for now that the posters are engaged in making sense of the still unresolved cruise ferry MS Estonia's catastrophic shipwreck in 1994. Although the posts span sixteen years, around 200 posts were extracted for present purposes: a sample of around 100 from 2004-2009 and a similar amount from year 2020. To afford a closer, 'micro-level' narrative discourse analysis, the sample was further limited by focusing on one of the key motifs and examined in order to sketch some loose temporal developmental trajectories of communal narrative contra-plottings. To this end, the presented analysis is experimental, exemplifying how the activity of the plotters of suspicion produces imaginative reasoning 'patternings' of virtual knowledge with 'expanding middles' (the "becoming" of knowledge). I will conclude by reiterating the novel theoretical conceptualizations, analytical findings and propose ways for further research.

2. Theoretical Discussion

2.1 History and etymology of "conspiracy" and the definition of "conspiracy theory"

The earliest known mentions of the word "conspiracy" can be attributed to literary and historical records. Where Geoffrey Chaucer used it in "The Monk's Tale" (*The Canterbury Tales*) in 1386; Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* reports of a summer night in 415 B. C. when supposedly "unknown individuals" defaced the statues of Hermes in Athens, then in the midst of the war. According to Thucydides, such act indicated not only bad luck but grounds to suspect "a revolutionary conspiracy to overthrow democracy."[27] In 1770, the *New Hampshire-Gazette* implored its readership, the colonists of the "City and Colony of New York," to be cautious of "tyrannical" British "minions" laying "snares [to] enslave a free people." In 1835 the inventor Samuel Moore spoke of what he perceived as a vast "Catholic plot" against the United States

people.[28] As Ed White observes, although the Enlightenment brought about the rising complexity in social and political life, its 'ideology' emphasized the logic of cause and effect, underwritten by the individualist modes for, or representations of, acting, i.e. motives, intentions, responsibilities, etc. Each of these was, in turn, open to be further "arranged as patterns."[29] An increasing state of anxiety evoked inquiries about "what was who and who was doing what."[30] As such, appeals to conspiracies emerged as the "constitutive thought" of the 18th century. Especially during the American Revolutionary War, with "conspiratorial explanations of complex events becom[ing] normal, *necessary*, and rational."[31] (Around the same time frame in Europe, one can just as quickly point to the dissemination of the anti-Semitic forgery of the *Protocols*.) Indeed, in reflecting on the above examples it might be worth arguing—as some commenters, like Stef Aupers, have—that conspiracy thinking, invoked by the "generalized distrust" and "epistemological insecurity," highlights the broader influence of the "cultural logic of modernity." As such being far more importantly contingent on its still ongoing "processes of modernization," i.e., via media apparatus, social platforms, etc.[32] Hence, in discussing conspiracist cultures as driven by "epistemic instability," amongst other factors, some recent authors, like Jaron Harambam, recount how in 2018, the HRW Forum in Düsseldorf, Germany, hosted an international group art exhibition called "Im Zweifel für den Zweifel" (In doubt for doubt). This event proposed to explore" 'the power of conspiracy theories in times when increasing digitalization raises uncertainty about what we see on the internet'."[33]

How to exactly define these widely acknowledged and tacitly understood notions such as "conspiracy" and "conspiracy theory," however? We could start by consulting the Latin etymology. In Latin, the verb "to conspire" originates from the respective roots *con* ('with') and *spirare* ('to breathe'). Hence, as epistemological philosopher David Coady usefully remarks, the act of conspiring implies whispering. That is, conspiratorial plotting can be conceived of as an "act of 'breathing together'... a coordinated effort of plotting for some particular purpose" by some "set of agents with a plan" acting (or having acted) in secret (at least for a time).[34] "Theory" meanwhile—some authors, in fact, use narrative here instead—is something more 'loose' and ambiguous; in contradistinction to, say, the unified nature of scientific theories. Therefore, a (conspiracy) 'theory' is an assembly of hypothetical knowledge[35] that focuses on the "hows?" and "whys?" of some potential, assumed conspirators plotting. And it is advanced and elaborated on through tentative 'prospecting.' This prospecting, in turn, may "progress through and consist of truths and falsehoods simultaneously." For the markers of its ontological status, i.e., its truth-value, truth-status, and the degree of its fictitiousness (or facticity) are—just as more or less *everything* about it—as of yet volatile and uncertain, subject to constant revisions.[36]

Now, in uniting these two component parts, "conspiracy theory," then, becomes (i) an account "about an implicitly powerful group [of conspirators behind] historical, ongoing, or future events"[37]; (ii) whereby the "official story"[38] is usually challenged and, to a considerable extent, opposed. Put differently, history scholar Cornel Zwierlein's broad definition most appropriately coalesces (i) and (ii) for the purposes of this essay; whilst underscoring both the tricky ambiguity instrumental to any such' theory,' and its dimension of narrativized (and counterfactualized) past. Observes Zwierlein: in "mix[ing] fact and fiction … [a] *conspiracy theory is typically a narrative of a possible past*[39] *constructed with a material of a large amount of facts that have really happened and that are commonly accepted as 'real'*[40] *and other fictions*, or at least not proven and not commonly accepted elements which are supposed to have happened."[41]

Now, as I have highlighted elsewhere, the act of plotting appears to hold two concomitant meanings. (1) "To plot" as in conspiring (something done by the supposed conspirators); and (2) as in *plotting a story* (about how and why do these supposed conspirators plot, challenging the received "official" explanation if one exists). This latter distinction—the explicitly narrative dimension of the act of plotting—is pertinent not only in light of the ramifications of Zwierlein's suggestion but especially for how the conceptual understanding of the activity of conspiracy theorizing could be further enriched. Consequently, in 2.3 I will zoom in on the latter concern, whilst establishing some preliminary points of tangency between conspiracy theory research, narrative (media) theories, and more.

2.2 Overview of critique on the received meanings of "conspiracy theory/theorizing"

In order to appropriately suggest augmentations and revisions, however, it is necessary to first assess some of the key literature on conspiracy theory research. In doing so, I will foreground authors who have been critical of the pathologizing and stigmatizing trends in scholarly approaches on the topic; and whose work might have more useful implications for my current study, as opposed to the dominant view.

Now, as conventional academic perspective would have it, conspiracy theories (CT) and theorizing (CTing) are something deeply "irrational." This scholarly effort for wholesale irrationalization, as it were—either through pathologization or illegitimization[42]—originates from Richard Hofstadter's account of "paranoid style" (Hofstadter 1964), on the one hand; and, from Karl Popper's discussion on the "conspiracy theory of society" (Popper 1972), on the other. Some recent authors have detected the early seeds of said trends decades earlier, however, in the 1930s, in the studies on "psychopathology."[43] In the contemporary research on CTs/CTing across a variety of scientific fields such intellectual heritage is still largely maintained.[44] Accordingly, epistemological

philosophers Buenting and Taylor coined the distinction of "generalism" and "particularism" in order to pinpoint where such blanket dismissal approaches usually go awry. As they maintain, "believ[ing] *any* theory depends on considerations of evidence. Judging any theory to be insufficient independently of considerations regarding the evidence is [itself] irrational."[45] More recently, M. R. X. Dentith has argued that the generalist dismissal fails because historical documentation proves the occurrence of at least *some* conspiracies. Therefore, popular theories about *potential* conspiracies cannot be easily dismissed as "irrational CTing" for they might indeed turn out to be warranted in the long run (thus carrying legitimate baseline suspicions). Accordingly, the "[b]elief in [CTs] is not prima facie irrational."[46] Instead, the "rationality of belief" of (or skeptical, vigilant distrust underwriting) every CT should be treated on its individual "merits" (or, indeed, lack thereof). For "it is not clear that conspiracies and CTs are [always] unlikely compared to their rivals [the "official theories"]."[47] Moreover, generalist assumptions carry a number of other negative side-effects, such as a naïve and overly trusting relationship with authority; an unsophisticated understanding of "what role officialness plays in theories which have been endorsed"; and, most importantly perhaps, what Dentith terms the "social cost": "[T]he idea that CTs *as such* are intellectually suspect helps conspirators, quite literally, to get away with murder (of which killing people in an unjust war is an instance)."[48] Arguably, the particularist stance avoids such pitfalls, however, for "when inferring any explanation, we have to look at the evidence before we accept or dismiss it. CTs are no different."[49]

Nevertheless, even if to allow that strictly based on its most rudimentary operative function (positing and proving a hypothesis) the activity of CTing might resemble scientific theorizing, the accepted similarities, if even that—as some other authors have remarked—ordinarily stop there.[50] These indiscriminately dismissive approaches, observes Jack Bratich, evaluate (all) CTs not merely as false, but "not even wrong."[51] That is, CTs and their "stigmatized knowledge[52] [claims]" are accommodated by the "epistemic authority" held by our validating institutions (e.g., governments and their agencies, mass media, etc.) only insofar as transposing them into a no man's land or a limbo space.[53] Hence, the very existence of CTs expands beyond the wrongness and falsehood itself. For being effectively non-falsifiable—unlike scientific theories ought to be—CTs thus loom somewhere below the thresholds of "acceptability" and "respectability."[54] Indeed, it may be this invalidating lack of epistemic categorization that commonly leads to the invocation of pathologizing terms like 'paranoia' and 'paranoid thinking.' Consequently, as spelled out by Bratich, CTs are "*para* (beyond or beside) the *nous* (mind). They are paranoid."[55] Notwithstanding that "the problemization of knowledge may be one of the most defining contemporary cultural and political issues."[56] In a similar vein, authors like Rankin Jr. and Hustling

and Orr relate the tendency of a blanket dismissal to (socio-political) power relations and hegemonic strategies of "silencing" and "exclusion." [57] Meanwhile, some other researchers, like Katharina Thalmann, take a culture-oriented perspective, suggesting how conspiracy theories should not be wholly dismissed on the grounds of the accompanying theorizing activity functioning as a form of cultural "meaning-making," identifying and articulating actual "anxieties."[58] Stef Aupers concurs, maintaining that CTing—far from being wholesale "irrational" or "delusional"—builds on real historical events, thus "embod[ing] [a] form of reflexivity, criticism and skepticism about every truth claim."[59] Taking into account especially the latter two socio-cultural considerations; but also more broadly building on the previous critical discussion, I will subsequently flesh out some theoretical vocabulary and conceptual context expounding on a narrativist research profile for the study of communal activity of CTing.

2.3 Some notes on the ubiquity of narrative, plotters, plottings and plots

It would be instructive to begin this sub-section with quotations from a recent speech by Margus Kurm, the ex-Chair for the (Estonian) Investigative Committee in the matter of MS Estonia's sinking (and also an ex-Attorney General). Speaking before the Estonian Parliament, Kurm observed how "[t]he official version is in a large part a theory of conciliated computations and calculations that have quite little to do with what the survivors remember." Kurm concludes by noting that the current official end report of the shipwreck is a "beautifully written story" and "seems plausible upon reading"; and yet, he opines, it has a "weak evidentiary basis."[60] For such an evaluative statement to come from someone of Kurm's stature, some extraordinary events were necessary. I will get to that in the next section. For now, though, I would argue Kurm's words to be instrumental in reflecting what could be termed the ubiquity of narrative. Here I mean a kind of condition brought about by the proliferation of stories. Each told from a power-differentiated vantage point whilst vying for authority—be it "the official" (state/government-sanctioned narrative) or "the popular" (grassroots' narratives challenging and re-working or re-drafting the seemingly factual account).

Focusing specifically on the actual activity of CTing, cultural and political history scholar Kathryn Olmsted has written about a "culture of suspicion" that affiliated grassroots networks of "citizen sleuths" in the United States. That is, amateur researchers who opposed the "culture of government secrecy" with regard to the Warren Commission and the so-called lone gunman theory of the Kennedy assassination (to this day the official story). By doing so, these sleuths—condescendingly dubbed the "housewives' underground" by their contemporaries for they were primarily women—became skeptical of "state's monopoly on expertise" and 'sanctioned' experts. Accordingly, they took upon themselves to implement careful, rigorous analysis of publicly

accessible Warren Commission transcripts.[61] In her book-length study, Olmsted thus lessens this blistering tension between lay investigators and the officialdom by suggesting that not only are both storytellers, but, in some ways, the officials are not too much unlike those they persecute: "[State] officials also become storytellers ... [these] [o]fficial conspiracy theorists tell one story about an event; alternative conspiracy theorists [i.e., the skeptical members of the public] doubt the stories told [and] to make sense of the world, [tell] their own."[62]

Now, presumably due to the overall negative, superficial attention CTs and the activity of CTing has been and keeps on receiving, however, either topic has attracted—to best of my knowledge—any consistent or systemic approaches from narrative scholars. If anything, "narrative" (or "narratology," even) has in more recent studies been subsumed by other approaches or scientific fields (e.g., the systems theoretical;[63] or political and organizational theoretical angles[64]). In particular, the more advanced studies into the storytelling and sense-making mechanics inherent in CTing have so far been only the bailiwick of the quantitative and information studies.[65] Consequently, in taking into account the potential deficiencies the above brief overview might have highlighted, my current theoretical and analytical contribution both builds upon my previous preliminary research; as well as sketches some new, potentially useful theoretical pathways for further investigations.

Accordingly, I find it necessary to start broaching these matters through the concept of "forensics." Accordingly, Katharina Thalmann's illuminating observation in her recent study—drawing on McKenzie-McHarg's unpublished research—sheds some further light on the genesis of the term "conspiracy theory." Apparently, it came to use in a *neutral* fashion in the late 19th and early 20th century forensic sciences and legal proceedings. Specifically, it was implemented to "describe a hypothesis to account for a possible crime."[66] Incidentally, in narrative theoretical media studies the correlation with forensics has already seen some purchase, namely in relation to popular television series and complex digital fan engagement. Accordingly, speaking of ABC's *Lost*, Jason Mittell explains: "[V]iewers [parse] the show ... [for it] demands a hyper-attentive mode of spectatorship ... a detective mentality, seeking out clues, *charting patterns and assembling evidence into narrative hypotheses and theories*."[67] In other words, *Lost* exemplified what Mittell coined as "drillable media," meaning that "viewers are mining to discover something that is already there, *buried beneath the surface*."[68]

The rest of this sub-section is devoted to my theoretical proposal. I will build on (i) Thalmann's historical observation; (ii) Mittell's theoretical insight; (iii) and the idea of the "science of suspicion" (dietrologia or "behindo-logy"[69]). I will also follow, in broad strokes, the assumption of CTing being a "creative activity" for making sense of the world (Hayes 2017). Consequently, I would

re-conceptualize CTing as the activity of narrative *contra-plotting*—something that the *plotters of suspicion* are engaged in. Whilst this conceptual maneuvering would enable to avoid any, more or less justified, negative connotations of the original notion; what is its theoretical import? Firstly, the verb "to plot" holds two concomitant meanings. Whilst conspiracy theory research to date has understandably focused on one specific connotation of "to plot," i.e., a set of agents conspiring, "breathing together," in secret; crucial for understanding the complete implications of the activity of CTing is to foreground the second common meaning of the verb—namely, *to plot a story*. Indeed, the most integral act of CTing as such. Consequently, the immediate result of such conceptual expansion would be that the storytelling dimension of "to plot" indicates "*another* set of people who … plot (though not in secret) *about* that first group of people who are supposedly plotting." Put differently, plotters "plot (about) the plotters—and that is fundamentally a narrative act."[70] Secondly, the theoretical discussion I have so far advanced allows to augment this latter preliminary conceptualization with that of *plotters of suspicion*. What does this specification bring to the table? As I envision it, "of suspicion" implies two perspectives. On the one hand, the (contra-)plotters are rigorously engaged in the 'science' of "behindo-logy," i.e., attempting to pursue 'truth' of some event perceived as "suspicious" (e.g., the MS Estonia's shipwreck). On the other hand, however, the accompanying condition of "continual interpretation"[71] forecloses "the end" in any measure, type or form. Instead, this kind of interpretation self-reproduces or self-perpetuates ambiguity as its operative mode. Narrative patterns[72] with ever-expanding Aristotelian 'middles' ("the space of suspense"[73] of deferred endings) are construed and fitted together—searching for yet immediately discarding, as if by design, any final, crystallized 'truth.' As such, insofar as the plotters of suspicion endeavor to obliterate any suspicion and reach peer-agreed, concrete, and straightforward event explanation; their very activity paradoxically breeds—and is scaffolded on the never-ending existence of—suspicion.

Before moving on to the analysis, it would worthwhile to further flesh out both concepts, however. Paul Wake's (2008) fascinating treatment of "plot" and "plotting"—drawing on Peter Brooks' seminal work (1992)—might be of interest here. Wake proposes a double-layered conception for both notions. The "first plane" is the classical plot (*mythos*), the "organizing line"[74] of narrative. This pegs narrative as a "mechanism of control"—"allied to power"—for its "organizing principle" (the plot) constrains, includes, excludes, restricts, summarizes and finalizes. Now, these previous ideas, when juxtaposed with my proposed notion of contra-plotting, help to further outline how this activity would work against—in aiming to "subvert" the "ordering" of—the accepted account of some event (the authoritatively plotted explanatory narrative). Moreover, Wake's "second plane," that of plotting, is clearly correlative with my proposals. "[Laying] outside of the borders of … truth/fact," Wake conceives plotting as a "dynamic form," an unrealized (or unfinalized), open and

emergent *plot potentiality* to be predictively plotted by challenging the authoritative version. The implication here would be that this plotting—"read as a verb [and] necessarily imaginative"—would ultimately reveal the 'latent,' 'real' plot (the one underneath the "surface reality" of the official story). In order to make his distinction conceptually more transparent, Wake utilizes the dictionary meaning of "plot" (map, plan, scheme); as well as parts of dialogue from Shakespeare's *Henry IV* that play on divergent meanings of the word "plot." In the latter case, a plot becomes simultaneously a "model," a blueprint for a potential building (i.e., some final event explanation in the case of conspiracy plotting); and a plot of land where the building would be built (i.e., the official story).[75] To complement this, I would argue that Shakespeare notably implies the inherent ambiguity of any such plotting. For the "figure of the house" (the blueprint) might prove too complicated to build. Hence necessitating "draw[ing] anew the model," thereby "survey[ing] both the plot and the situation" (and maybe also the (plot of) the model, to boot?).[76] Clearly, all the above sounds quite abstract, however. The purpose of the last section (esp. in 3.2) is to counteract any overt (theoretical) abstraction by outlining how—in the case of plotting the MS Estonia shipwreck—the probing of potentialities for a hole in the ship's hull (assumed since the outset of the discussion thread as the most potent cause for extremely quick sinking) and the "bomb version" hypothesis shifts to focus on the "how?" and the "what?" inflicting the hole (following the real world confirmation, in 2020, that the latter indeed exists).

3. When a(n) (official) "beautifully written story" will not do: plotting the "working version[s]"[77] on the elusive 'truth' of MS Estonia's sinking

"I only have one question: do you want THE TRUTH in the question of Estonia's sinking, or do you want that there would eternally persist a contraction of opinions and facts on this topic?"[78]

"On the question of the sinking there's indeed an actual truth to be found, if to collect more evidence both from the seafloor and near the visor. Insofar as the quantity of certain evidence goes right now it's just very feeble that no theory holds together incl. the official[.]"[79]

3.1 Some introductory context

The 1994 sinking of the MS Estonia has been noted as one of the worst maritime disasters of 20th century and the deadliest peacetime shipwreck in European waters (Wikipedia). This disastrous event—both on the national and Scandinavian context (there were fatalities also amongst the Finns and the Swedes)—that left nearly 900 dead has recently been back in the public eye due to the supposedly revelatory Swedish docu-series *Estonia – funnet som endrer alt*. This 5-part series aired on Sweden's Discovery Channel in September last year and touched

upon some of the most well-known theories about the MS Estonia's sinking. It depicted the diving onto the Baltic seafloor near the wreck. Specifically, documentary's key revelatory turn made it evident how there indeed is a huge hole (or crevasse) in the ship's hull—as had been long speculated vis-a-vis the official narrative.[80] These findings, whilst derided as 'conspiracist,' nevertheless pushed both the Estonian as well as some Scandinavian governments to re-open the investigation (or at least strongly consider doing so). Since then, though, the documentary makers had been accused, in Sweden, of violating the grave site sanctity, facing either heavy fines or jail time. Just recently, the first-tier court acquitted the men, however.[81]

Now, the posts quoted above are from the bilingual (Estonian-English) so-called conspiracy forum *Para-Web*. This forum accommodates a wide variety of related interests (many types of which are admittedly indeed, politically reactionary, but also inconsequential to the present discussion). The focus of current analysis is the long-running thread on MS Estonia ("The Catastrophe of Estonia – accident? Conspiracy?"). This thread, in Estonian, contains to date (23.02.21) 1,605 posts with over 240,000 views. Notably, its activity spans sixteen years and counting, being originally published in 2004. These statistics, but especially the longevity involved, make it one of the most popular threads in this forum environment. This wealth of data is certainly worthy of scholarly attention. For present purposes, a number of posts from the outset of the thread (2004-2009); and some more contemporary material (2020) were collected. The underlying intention was to pinpoint narratively significant developments in time by contrasting different eras, as it were, especially in light of the recent real world revelations described previously. To that end, following a long-term observation, in total 210 posts were gathered and inserted into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet in two columns (user/date – post). Thereafter a preliminary surface reading and subsequent coding of the sample was performed and subsequent coding was performed. The coding process was inspired by a mixture of "motif" and "narrative" coding practices.[82] It revealed a number of potent narrative markers, or core motifs, that appear with some frequency across the sample and hence enable to trace the loose 'patternings' exemplifying the "becomings" of the communal reasoning in the ongoing development of virtual knowledge.

The analysis is presented as follows. On the one hand, I will pursue a context-sensitive 'macro-level' narrative analysis observing how—within the 'patternings' of imaginative reasoning in the span of 16 years and over two distinguished periods—some open-ended narratives (or assemblies of virtual knowledge) may emerge and be more or less identifiable. On the other, however, the latter analytical mode coincides with a discourse-oriented 'micro-level' format, at times augmenting the more general perspective with more specific details. In order to guarantee a manageable sample size for such qualitative examination, the initial samples from two time periods were further limited

by zooming in on one central motif-- namely that of a (potentially) sprawling "hole" [*auk*] in ship's hull or in its bottom.[83] This "hole" comes to hold especially high relevance due to the apparent findings of the documentary crew that the plotters enthusiastically acknowledge. (There will also be some other, adjacent but significant motifs involved, e.g., ship's visor, possible bomb, submarine, etc.). It should be noted that the mode of analysis presented here is both experimental and *illustrative*. For a completely thorough treatment would require (at least) an essay of its own.

3.2 Analysis

Now, ever since the first handful of posts from 2004, the interlocking common sentiments appear to hold that, on the one hand, the "real," "actual truth" about MS Estonia will not be known; and, on the other, that the state governments involved must have been (and are) "lying," for why else would they "fear new investigation[s]" or "keep silent."[84] Accordingly, the real story, as it were, will remain unearthed because of "all the evidence having been eliminated"[85]; and presumably also because of the enforcement of the grave site sanctity law. A number of posters from the early period foreground the "bomb version," which at least partially might be credited to German freelance journalist Jutta Rabbe's diving expedition leading to claims of holes in the ship's hull.[86] Some posters, though, remain at the same time skeptical of Rabbe in particular for, in fact, she neither "glimpsed nor photographed [any] hole"—i.e., it may well just be idle talk, and nothing substantiated by evidence.[87] Nevertheless, in 2006 there even circulate photographs of the hole (whether modelled, speculative ones, or actual, remains unclear due to broken web links), leading to further elaborations on the bomb theory, e.g., maintaining that "the edges of the hole are torn from the inside to outside," like "in case of an explosion."[88] Indeed, plottings about the potentiality of "something to do with a bomb"[89] persist into 2009, leading to an extensive debate totaling in some 25 consecutive posts out of the overall sample collected. In these posts authors either reference each other by name or use direct quotes of another's arguments (as afforded by forum's framework). Moreover, in this discussion thread (taken in a broad sense) the previously stand-alone plottings about the possibility of a "bomb"—and hence, the "hole"—coalesce more explicitly with those focusing on the "hows?" and "whys?" of the breaking away of the ship's (bow) visor. For instance, some find it "not logical" that the ship's visor breaks away just by itself, without any particular pressure (thus causing the sinking), hence making it a "strange theory." Some others, conversely, do not view the visor as if insufficient causal force at all.[90] Ultimately, there remains a somewhat fragile consensus in reasoning that other factors, such as MS Estonia having been "patched up," may have played a complementary, if not a deciding, role.[91] Nevertheless, this thread from 2009—as briefly outlined above—concludes by foreshadowing, 11 years earlier, Mauno's post in the epitaph for this section: "What I want to say

is that with the present information no one theory can be either definitively proven or rebutted. Including the official."[92] Yet, even so the similar sort of attentive drilling, evermore beneath the surface, persists. Not only throughout 2009 and later, but being still ongoing little more than a decade after the posts considered above.

Comparatively, there are notable differences in the 2020 discussion, though. For one, there is Mauno's admission of uncertainty figuring as a hallmark of the whole paradoxical enterprise: the uncertainties and suspicions involved in 'unlocking the truth' persist, new findings notwithstanding. That is, having their suspicions and lingering doubts proved to have been at least to some significant degree justified *necessarily doesn't close the plotting process* but rather enables shifts to novel pathways whilst not entirely 'disconnecting' these previous, now resolved, inquiries. What I specifically mean here is that in taking into account latest real world developments (in 2020) it now appears that the hole (or crevasse) indeed is sprawling in the ship's hull. Hence, the central inquiry into the possibilities that once reinforced the potentiality of such hole (a potentiality now fulfilled) gets diverted to instead target (yet new) potentialities of the "how?" (was the hole inflicted) and (by) "what?" (a strong wave, visor's impact, submarine collision[93], etc.). The apparent confirmation of the hole is taken as salutary and long time coming, no doubt; but this very acknowledgement comes with further inquiries attached, yet to be 'solved.' Hence, insofar as the noted affirmation is concerned, there again emerge extensive back-and-forth discussion threads, also within the 2020 sample.

The first one (11 posts) is initiated by a post featuring a schematic image of what might be a construction blueprint of MS Estonia. The image appears to foreground one of the flanks of the cruise ferry, with the below the deck area especially zoomed in on, as marking of red circle indicates.[94] In the accompanying commentary it is reasoned (though the winking eye emoji in the end leaves the post somewhat ambiguous) that due to hole's position—above the ship's carcass—maybe the "welded seam," due to being "delicate," was "torn asunder." Hence there might not even have been any "big bang," for a "very little nudge" from the visor would have sufficed.[95] It is worthwhile herewith to point out how the "bomb version" from the 2004-2009 period begins to be updated with a variety of novel constellations of virtual knowledge applied to it insofar as the initial suggestion on the "welded seam" beckons further refinement from subsequent plotters. As such, in developing further the hypothesis (or its incorrectness) about the "welded seam," the potential significance of the visor and the possible explosion, the replies draw further insight from sources as diverse as the aforementioned Swedish documentary; elementary knowledge of (or lack thereof on) ship-building; a work-related visit to a Swedish pipe factory; or the well-known fact of a strong storm on the night of the shipwreck.[96]

The second thread (13 posts) was initiated a day later, involving a very lengthy, full quotation from a post from another forum (a more 'serious,' naval forum kipper.ee; "Kipper" meaning "skipper" in Estonian). The quoted post was from Imre Kaas, a journalist and ex-television reporter turned author who has written a book about the MS Estonia catastrophe and is thus held in something of a high regard in these circles (at least by this particular poster).[97] There are two issues with perhaps most ramifications between the two periods that both the original poster as well the subsequent ones pick up on from Kaas' account (who had alleged to have met with an initials-only ex-military 'whistleblower'). These are (a) the supposed existence of a "radioactive metal plate" (either extracted in secret due to otherwise "poisoning the whole of the Baltic Sea"; or buried beneath the seafloor); and (b) the history of whistleblowers, in the face of Kaas' account; and, in particular, the early (discredited and "eagerly" debunked by the Swedish authorities) claims by the Swedish military diver Håkan Bergmark of there having been a hole, indeed (later somewhat confirmed by the Rabbe-Bemis expedition). Here (a) leads to various kinds of criticism and suspicion on the truth-value of claiming the existence of any such object[98]; as well as to re-emergence of adjacent plottings, such a potential collision with the submarine (which is, accordingly, plotted as buried, instead); or, the truck which carried the plate—the latter obviously dislodged from the wreckage post-haste by the Swedes); or, finally, a "Baltic Sea" UFO as "causing" the hole.[99] Meanwhile, the complete impact of (b) becomes evident already on the outset of yet another thread, where the reaction to Margus Kurm's speech becomes front and center in how to further tie down the continuity between the two eras.[100]

4. Conclusions

The present paper was a multidisciplinary theoretical exploration pursuing a narrative theoretical outlook on the popular digital practice of conspiracy theorizing. I began by charting the general background by considering the issues of (dis)trust and suspicion in the contemporary (Western) society (sec. 1). Next, I entered into a theoretical discussion (sec. 2) by giving a brief historical and etymological overview on the term "conspiracy" and pointing out a more inclusive definition for the notion of "conspiracy theory" (2.1); surveying some relevant literature critical of the predominant tendency to stigmatize and pathologize conspiracy theories and theorizing (2.2); and finally, elaborated on my proposed narrativist research profile, especially by proposing the notions of *contra-plotting* and *plotters of suspicion* aimed to better (and in less value-laden terms) foreground the centrality of narrative and sense-making in the much-maligned popular activity of "conspiracy theorizing." The last section (3.) was devoted for an illustrative analysis of a sample of forum posts discussing the sinking of the cruise ferry MS Estonia.

Qualitative analysis, utilizing narrative and discourse analytical perspectives (3.2), was preceded by a short overview of recent real world events with regard to MS Estonia (3.1). Future research would necessitate both further fine-tuning of the conceptual apparatus as well as identifying potential topical points of comparison with other (international) corpora (e.g., Covid denialism, anti-vaxxers, 9/11 'truth' movement, etc.).

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[2] DeLillo, *Underworld* quoted in Wesley Beal, "Conspiracy, Theory, Genre: Collecting, the Paralysis of Interpretation, and Lyrical Truth in John Sayles's Silver City," *Genre* XLI, Summer (2008): 154.

[3] Jonathan Gotschall. *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012), chp. 5, Kindle.

[4] See, e.g. Brendan Nyhan et al., "Classified or Coverup? The Effect of Redactions on Conspiracy Theory Beliefs," *Journal of Experimental Political Science* 3, no. 2 (2016): 109-123.

[5] Montague (1968: 70) quoted in Michael Redley, "Origins of the Problem of Trust," In *Communication in the Age of Suspicion. Trust and Media*, edited by Vian Bakir and David M. Barlow, 27. Cham (CH): Palgrave Macmillian, 2007. Peter Knight, "ILOVEYOU: Viruses, paranoia, and the environment of risk," *The Sociological Review* 48, no. 2_suppl (2001): 24-5.

[6] Redley, "Origins," 27-28.

[7] Redley, "Origins," 30.

[8] Jane Parish, "The age of anxiety," *The Sociological Review* 48, no. 2_suppl (2001): 3-4.

[9] Kurtis Hagen, "Conspiracy Theories and Stylized Facts," *The Journal for Peace and Justice Studies* 21, no. 2 (2011): 19n6. See also, M. R. X. Dentith, "When Inferring to a Conspiracy Might Be the Best Explanation," In *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, edited by M. R. X. Dentith, 8, 12, 21-22n9n10n11. London et al.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018.

[10] Granted, the Covid and climate warming denialist and anti-vaxxing conspiracy theories take on even those.

[11] Joseph E. Uscinski, "The Study of Conspiracy Theories," *Argumenta – The Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 2, no. 3 (2017): 237.

[12] David Coady, "Conspiracy Theories and Official Stories," In *Conspiracy Theories. The Philosophical Debate*, edited by David Coady, 125-126. Hampshire, Burlington: Ashgate, 2006. Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Real Enemies: Conspiracy Theories and American Democracy, World War I to 9/11* (Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 2009), 6. *Contra*, e.g., Stuart Sim, *Post-Truth, Scepticism & Power* (Cham (CH): Palgrave Macmillian, 2019), 13ff.; Michael E. Sawyer, "Post-Truth, Social Media, and the 'Real' as Phantasm," In *Relativism and Post-Truth in Contemporary Society: Possibilities and Challenges*, edited by Mikael Stenmark, Steve Fuller, Ulf Zackariasson, 63. Cham (CH): Palgrave Macmillian, 2018.

[13] Vian Bakir and David M. Barlow, "The Age of Suspicion," In *Communication in the Age of Suspicion. Trust and Media*, edited by Vian Bakir and David M. Barlow, 3-5. Cham (CH): Palgrave Macmillian, 2007.

[14] Emmanuel-Pierre Guittet and Fabienne Brion, "The New Age of Suspicion," In *Politics of Anxiety*, edited by Emmy Eklundh, Andreja Zevnik and Emmanuele-Pierre Guittet, 79-81. London, New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017.

[15] Knight, „ILOVEYOU," 26.

[16] Comp. Banis, Davide. "Fictiocracy: media and politics in the age of storytelling." Feburary 22, 2018 at Institute of Network Cultures. Accessed June 28, 2019.http://networkcultures.org/longform/2018/02/22/fictiocracy-media-and-politics-in-the-age-of-storytelling/; Salmon, Christian. Storytelling: Bewitching the Modern Mind. Translated by David Macey. London, New York: Verso, 2017. Kindle.

[17] Cristina Bacchilega, "Narrative Cultures, Situated Story Webs, and the Politics of Relation," *Narrative Culture* 1, no. 2 (2015): 28-29.

[18] Comp. Hagen 2011; Schmidt, Siegfried J. "On the Construction of Fiction and the Invention of Facts." *Poetics* 18 (1989):319-335.

[19] Guittet and Brion, "New," 80-81.

[20] Guittet and Brion, "New," 80-81; emphasis added.

[21] Gary Alan Fine, "Rumor, Trust and Civil Society: Collective Memory and Cultures of Judgement," *Diogenes* 213 (2007): 5.

[22] Cooper (1997: 690-691) quoted in Parish, "Age," 8.

[23] Parish, "Age," 9.

[24] Luc Boltanski, *Mysteries and Conspiracies: Detective Stories, Spy Novels and the Making of Modern Societies*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA.: Polity, 2014), xv, 1ff.

[25] Ole Bjerg and Thomas Presskorn-Thygesen, "Conspiracy Theory: Truth Claim or Language Game," *Theory, Culture & Society* 34, no. 1 (2017): 2.

[26] See also, https://thispersondoesnotexist.com , https://generated.photos/faces or CNN Business. "No, Tom Cruise isn't on TikTok. It's a deepfake." March 3, 2021 at CNN. Accessed April 5, 2021.
https://edition.cnn.com/videos/business/2021/03/02/tom-cruise-tiktok-deepfake-orig.cnn-business;

[27] Quoted in Ted Remington, *Conspiracy Theories as Socially Constructed Mythic Narratives* (PhD Diss., University of Iowa, 2002), 1. For a very comprehensive overview of the general and regional history of the term, see in the *Routledge Handbook of Conspiracy Theory*, edited by Michael Butter and Peter Knight (London, New York: Routledge, 2020), section 5.

[28] Katharina Thalmann, *The Stigmatization of Conspiracy Theory Since the 1950s: "A Plot to Make Us Look Foolish"* (London, New York: Routledge, 2019), 1.
[29] Ed White, "The Value of Conspiracy Theory," *American Literary History* 14, no. 1 (2002): 4.
[30] Wood (1982: 410), quoted in White, "Value," 4.
[31] Wood (1982: 420-421), quoted in White, "Value," 4; emphasis in original. Thalmann, *Stigmatization*, 18n2.
[32] Stef Aupers, "'Trust no one': Modernization, paranoia and conspiracy theory," *European Journal of Communication*, 27, no. 1 (2012): 23, 26. See also, Emma A. Jane and Chris Fleming, *Modern Conspiracy: The Importance of Being Paranoid* (New York et al.: Bloomsbury, 2014).
[33] Jaron Harambam, *Contemporary Conspiracy Culture: Truth and Knowledge in an Era of Epistemic Instability* (London, New York: Routledge, 2020), 4-5.
[34] David Coady, "An Introduction to the Philosophical Debate about Conspiracy Theories," In *Conspiracy Theories. The Philosophical Debate*, edited by David Coady, 1-2. Hampshire, Burlington: Ashgate, 2006. Coady, "Official Stories," 117; Dentith, "Inferring," 8, 22n12n13.
[35] A type of 'pre-' or 'foreknowledge,' an assembly of virtual structures of understanding, in-development, "in becoming." See, Camilla Hald, *Web Without a Weaver. On the Becoming of Knowledge: A Study of Criminal Investigation in the Danish Police* (Dissertation.com: Boca Raton, 2011), 5-6, 11ff.
[36] Siim Sorokin, "Narrative conspiracy theorizing, fluidity of truth, and social media storytelling in the post-truth age," *Interstudia* 25 (2019): 72. Peter Deutschmann, "Conspiracy Theories, Discourse Analysis and Narratology," In *"Truth" and Fiction: Conspiracy Theories in Eastern European Culture and Literature*, edited by Peter Deutschmann, 22. Bielefeld: transcript Verglag, 2020.
[37] Uscinski, "Study," 235.
[38] "[A]n explanation that has official status at the time and place in question" (Coady, "An Introduction," 2).
[39] Some conspiracy theorizing could just as well be about a possible *future*, however. Currently topical COVID-19, for instance, has birthed types of anti-vaxxer theorizing which, quite explicitly, focus on dystopian futures. Hence, whilst my present data is indeed about a past event, I see no reason to be temporally exclusive in a general sense.
[40] "[T]he raw materials of history" (Olmsted, *Real Enemies*, 7).
[41] Cornel Zwierlein, "Security Politics and Conspiracy Theories in the Emerging European State System (15th/16th c.)," *Historical Social Research*, 38, no. 1 (2013): 70; emphasis added. See also, "Conspiracy theories [...] are modes of thinking, templates imposed upon the world to give appearance of order to events" (Michael Barkun, „Conspiracy Theories as Stigmatized Knowledge," *Diogenes* (2016): 1).
[42] I should underscore here that my intent is certainly *not* to suggest as if any and all CTs are warranted. There are plenty of "epistemically vicious" (to use Charles Pigden's phrase) CTs that *should* be actively discouraged (anti-Semitic, anti-Muslim, anti-LGBTQ*, climate change denialist and some over-exaggerated anti-vaxxer CTs come to mind here). See also, M. R. X. Dentith, „Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously and Investigating Them," In In *Taking Conspiracy Theories Seriously*, edited by M. R. X. Dentith, 222-223. London et al.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018. However, the kind of CTs that are, in broad strokes, counter-hegemonical, i.e., invested in pragmatically-practically proving—with a great deal of effort and attention to detail—some governmental misconduct in handling, or worse, being involved in some grave (inter)national event, especially on the backdrop of historical precedents for deceit (in the case of U.S., at least)—might not be the best epistemic bedfellows to CTs about, say, covert lizard people or vaccines-as-microchips.
[43] Jack Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics: Political Rationality and Popular Culture* (Albany: State University of NY Press, 2008), 26-31. Nebojša Blanuša, "Depathologized Conspiracy Theories and Cynical Reason: Discursive Positions and Phantasmic Structures," *Coatian Political Science Review*, 48, no. 1 (2011): 96.
[44] E.g., Darwin, Hannah, Nick Neave, Joni Holmes. "Belief in conspiracy theories. The role of paranormal belief, paranoid ideation and schizotypy." *Personality and Individual Differences* 50, no. 8 (2011): 1289-1293; Sunstein, Cass R., and Adrian Vermeule. "Conspiracy Theories: Causes and Cures." *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 17, no. 2 (2009): 202-227; Quassim, Cassam. "Bad Thinkers." *Aeon*, 2015. https://aeon.co/essays/the-intellectual-character-of-conspiracy-theorists De Mucci, Raffaele. „The methodological individualism antidotes to poisons of the conspiracy theory of history and society." *Sociologia (Italy)* 49, no. 2 (2015): 15-21.; for criticism, see, e.g., Coady, David. "Are Conspiracy Theorists Irrational." *Episteme* 4 (2007): 193–204; Hagen 2011; Basham, Lee, and M. R. X. Dentith. "Social Science's Conspiracy-Theory Panic: Now They Want to Cure Everyone." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 5, no. 10 (2016): 12–19.
[45] Joel Buenting and Jason Taylor, "Conspiracy Theories and Fortuitous Data," *Philosophy of Social Sciences*, 40, no. 4 (2010): 570; emphasis in original.
[46] Dentith, "Inferring," 3, 7.
[47] Dentith, "Inferring," 13.
[48] Pigden (*in press*), quoted in Dentith, "Inferring," 14.
[49] Dentith, "Inferring," 19.
[50] However, some commentators do see strong correlations between these two forms of discourse, see, e.g., Luis Roniger and Leonardo Senkman, "The Logic of Conspiracy Theory," *ProtoSociology*, 36 (2019).
[51] Bratich. *Conspiracy Panics*, 3.
[52] Peter Deutschmann terms this the "heterodox" (sub-cultural) knowledge (*versus* the "orthodox") (Deutschmann, „Narratology," 27).
[53]53 For "stigmatized knowledge," see, Barkun, "Stigmatized Knowledge," 2-4 and Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America* (Berkley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2013), 33-38. "Epistemic authority" comes from Jaron Harambam and Stef Aupers, "Contesting epistemic authority: Conspiracy theories on the boundaries of science," *Public Understanding of Science*, 24, no. 4 (2014).
[54] Sorokin, "Narrative conspiracy theorizing," 73.

[55] Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics*, 3; emphases in original.
[56] Harambam, *Epistemic Instability*, 6.
[57] Some scholars have also argued that the term "conspiracy theory," the way we know it today, was developed by the CIA (see, Lance DeHaven-Smith, *Conspiracy Theory in America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014).
[58] Thalmann, *Stigmatization*, 10.
[59] Aupers, "Modernization," 24. See also, Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* (Revised and Updated Edition) (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 93-155.
[60]The IV Session of the XIV Parliament, 26.11.2020, see: https://archive.is/9mv3m (archieved 22 Feb 2021).
[61] Kathryn S. Olmsted, "The Truth Is Out There: Citizen Sleuths from the Kennedy Assassination to the 9/11 Truth Movement," *Diplomatic History*, 35, no. 4 (2011): 672-673, 681, 683.
[62] Olmsted, *Real Enemies*, 6.
[63] Deutschmann, 2020.
[64] Yiannis Gabriel, "Narrative Ecologies in Post-truth Times: Nostalgia and Conspiracy Theories in Narrative Jungles?" In *What Political Science Can Learn from the Humanities: Blurring Genres*, edited by R. A. W. Rhodes and Susan Hodgett, 33-55. Cham: Palgrave Macmillian, 2021.
[65] See, Introne, Joshua, et al. "The Collaborative Construction and Evolution of Pseudoknowledge in Online Conversations." #SMSociety'17, July 28-30, 2017, Toronto, ON., Canada. http://dx.doi.org/10.1145/3097286.3097297 Introne, Joshua, et al. "How People Weave Online Information Into Pseudoknowledge." *Social Media + Society* (July-September 2018): 1-15; Timothy R. Tangherlini, et al. "An automated pipeline for the discovery of conspiracy and conspiracy theory narrative frameworks: Bridgegate, Pizzagate and storytelling on the web." *PloSOne*, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0233879
[66] Thalmann, *Stigmatization*, 10.
[67] Jason Mittell, "Lost in a Great Story: Evaluation in Narrative Television (and Television Studies)," In *Reading Lost*, edited by Roberta Pearson, 128-129. London, New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009; emphasis added.
[68] Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York, London: New York University Press, 2015), chap. 8, Kindle; emphasis added.
[69] Spark (1998), quoted in Bratich, *Conspiracy Panics*, 15; Beal, "Collecting," 154.
[70] Sorokin, "Narrative conspiracy theorizing," 76; emphases in original.
[71] Fenster, *Secrecy*, 94.
[72] I take the term "pattern" here in a generalized sense. Causal linkages, agency attribution, seeing consistencies "in noise" (of the information overload, say) all apply.
[73] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA., London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 18.
[74] Brooks, *Reading*, 25.
[75] Paul Wake, "Plotting as Subversion: Narrative and the Gunpowder Plot," *The Journal of Narrative Theory*, 38, no. 3 (2008): 295-296, 299, 301-303.
[76] Wake, "Plotting," 295.
[77] The term (*tööversioon* in Estonian) is borrowed from Geargirl, „Estonia katastroof – õnnetus? Vandenõu?", Para-Web forum, November 18, 2020, http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569&page=42.
[78] Geargirl, Para-Web, 19.11.20; all translations mine.
[79] Mauno, Para-Web, 19.11.20.
[80] See: https://www.imdb.com/title/tt13175494/ (Accessed 8.03.2021). For the moment of the discovery, see: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1Z4ID7git4 (Accessed: 8.03.2021).
[81] See: https://news.err.ee/1608101959/swedish-court-acquits-ms-estonia-documentary-makers (Accessed: 8.03.2021).
[82] See: Johnny Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Los Angeles et al.: SAGE, 2009),105-112.
[83] Margus Kurm: "All alternative theories revolve, in some sense, around the hole in the bottom of the ship."
[84] E.g., posters rha, "Estonia katastroof – õnnetus? Vandenõu?", Para-Web Forum, October 9, 2004, http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569; Kaabulott, April 2, 2006, http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569&page=2; HidoTozi, June 4, 2009, http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569&page=5.
[85] Rha, "Estonia katastroof".
[86] See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jutta_Rabe; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baltic_Storm .
[87] Rha, „Estonia katastroof".
[88] Madman07, "Estonia katastroof – õnnetus? Vandenõu?", Para-Web Forum, August 29, 2006, http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569&page=2.
[89] HidoTozi, "Estonia katastroof".
[90] HidoTozi, "Estonia katastroof". E.g., "not impossible at all," referencing the building material failing Titanic (laizk, June, 2009, http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569&page=5); The broken off visor "ALONE" not a cause, "only consequence" (excubitoris, June 4, 2009); Or that, in addition, the "ramp" also has to "give in," "be loose" (MorganLaFey, June 25, 2009). There are also a number of still further developments, e.g., when posters draw on (various deficiencies of) computer simulations on sinking scenarios.
[91] Due to having "been repeatedly banged on reefs" (Alfar, June 6, 2009); "miscellaneous damages besides the visor" (Sturm, June 27, 2009). Interestingly, a variation on this "prior injuries" hypothesis also emerges in 2020: "Was on a trip to Saaremaa, the ship nudged the pier quite fiercely, but no welding came unstuck from nowhere. And from here the thought: perhaps Estonia split its side already in the port? It did stand with its right side facing the pier. [G]ot a tearing and went on the trip?" (TTT, "Estonia katastroof – õnnetus? Vandenõu?", Para-Web forum, November 17, 2020, http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569&page=42). For more on "welding" and "welded seam," see below.

[92] Alfar, „Estonia katastroof".
[93] Granted, the submarine hypothesis existed long before the existence of the hole was confirmed.
[94] For the image (already inaccessible through the forum), see: https://ibb.co/RyJshHJ (uploaded 15.03.2021). At least for me it proved impossible to find its origin. It could also be sketched by this user themselves.
[95] Vasamasa, November 16, 2020.
[96] "[T]he force of impact was calculated [there] based on the indented dint not [based on the hole itself]" (Mauno, November 16, 2020); "wouldn't it be easier to weld the hull together from rectangular metal plates? This hole, however, is askew, isn't it?" (Geargirl, November 16, 2020); "the welded seam was stronger than any other part of the pipe [...] it never was torn asunder" (Aadu66, November 17, 2020); "the wave banged [on it], the weight of the visor+the mass of the water pushing it=damage to ship's hull" (Vasamasa, November 17, 2020).
[97] Geargirl, November 18, 2020.
[98] Xcad, November 18, 2020; Mauno, November 18, 2020.
[99] For a supposed UFO on the seafloor of the Baltic Sea, see this mainstream news story from 2012: https://forte.delfi.ee/artikkel/64549240/esimesed-eksklusiivkaadrid-laanemere-pohjas-avastatud-ufost. Xcad, November 18, 2020; Mauno, November 18, 2020; Geargirl, November 18, 2020; all from: http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569&page=42.
TTT, November 19, 2020; xcad, November 19, 2020; Mauno, November 19, 2020; zzz34, November 19, 2020; all from: http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569&page=43.
[100] Mauno, November 26, 2020, http://para-web.org/showthread.php?tid=569&page=45.

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"I, MYSELF AM THE MEDIA." THE *AESTHETICS OF THE SELF* AND ITS NARRATIVE MODES IN THE *ECHO-SPHERE*

Maria Teresa Russo

Abstract
The hyper-narrativity typical of our society might be conceived as a manifestation of the "Expressivist Turn,"[1] previously considered a feature of modernity, now one of postmodernity "Aesthetics of the Self."[2] This phenomenon is related with a double shift: one occurring at institutional level, moving from information to communication; at individual level, from communication to expression. This paper focuses on the transformation of the concept of experience, as an effect of the social media. No longer merely reflected and narrated, experience is currently and intimately connective and immersive performance, a setting built for everyone and for every kind of event (a holiday, even a pandemic or a funeral). In this context, subject's autonomy is limited to the ability to manage the game of mirrors among individual expressions, where the immediacy of emotions reigns and the stories are transformed into serial fragmentary, visual, spectacularised fiction, lacking a structured plot. In my view such a world can no longer be seen as an *Infosphere*,[3] but as an *Echo-sphere*: a social forum, where narratives cross and collide, and concern for the objective reference to the truth of the story disappears and mutual trust declines.

Keywords
Communication Ethics, Foucault Michel, Habermas Jürgen, Intimacy, Hyper-narrativity, Social Media

1. Introduction

The prefix "hyper" often recurs in the verbal characterization of the properties of today's culture. For example, "Hyper-connection", "hyper-activity" and "hyper-functioning" are some of the distinctive elements of a hyper-modern[4] society, in which individuals live their lives suspended between the public and intimate domains, often referred to online and offline, respectively. As early as 1962,[5] Habermas had already identified the early symptoms of these transformations. First, the decline of the boundary between the public and private spheres, meaning that private life was being made public, while the public dimension was assuming forms of intimacy. Second, the permeability of the boundaries between information, entertainment, publication, which according to Habermas led to the replacement of the notion of truth as adequacy with reality, with usability.

The myth of transparency and the proliferation of intimate narratives on the social networks has transformed our daily life into a "communicative environment", even into a global "message" which is reflected in multiple spheres, no matter they are real or virtual. In this paper, I examine the consequences of these changes at institutional level, and then analyse the characteristics of the overexposure of intimacy in the social media at individual level. Finally, I try to identify the philosophical roots of the phenomenon.

2. Institutional communication: from *infodemic* to *showdemic*

Most sociological investigators consider reflexivity,[6] together with hyper-narrativity, not only at the individual but also at institutional level, a striking feature of our age favoured by the development of new technology.

Therefore, not only the rules and the narrative modes of communication have changed, but it's very content too. Such change had a total impact on the sphere of political discourse. As Habermas pointed out, if a discussion in parliament is broadcast on TV or radio, the speakers' direct interlocutors are not only the other deputies but the citizens too, and communication assumes a plebiscitary characteristic. This way, it abdicates its specific role because it loses its critical in favour of its demonstrative function. The political debate is thus turned into a public show and consensus concerning the veracity of the content becomes more and more superfluous than the mode of discussion. On the other hand, the public sphere provides the audience with the mere appearance of participation, as it mainly searches for universal consent, the processes of the exercise and balance of power remaining impenetrable to the large majority of citizens. Even admitting that justice is somehow related to a sort of spectacularisation, e.g., the live transmission of trials, the risk is to model justice on criteria that pertain more to showbusiness and entertainment.

Habermas would have never imagined the forms that the processes he diagnosed almost sixty years ago are currently assuming. In particular, his thorough analysis of the notion of "public

sphere" and "public opinion", could not have included the profound transformations produced by current social media. For Habermas, the public sphere originated when private citizens began to come together to openly and rationally debate the political and social issues of the day. It was a communicative space where the exchange of information and opinions constituted a cooperative attempt to reach an understanding on matters of common concern, forming public opinion, as a critical instance of the political power.[7] Traditional media (radio, tv, newspapers) undoubtedly helped to expand the dissemination of information, but subsequently produced structural changes, progressively eroding the independence and critical function of the public sphere with respect to political power, fostering passivity and conformity on the part of citizens.

More recently, Habermas due to the development of new media, has highlighted the need for precise premises capable of providing truly mediated political communication. He wonders, however, if the two conditions he hopes for - a) “a self - regulating media system independent of its social environments”; b) “anonymous audiences who provide feedback between an informed elitist discourse and a responsive civil society”[8] - are possible in this new communicative context. Many studies actually reveal that the inclusion of increasing numbers of citizens within flows of mass communication not only appear to fail to increase involvement in politics but, on the contrary, seem to give rise to a phenomenon moving in the opposite direction[9]. Those who avail themselves of the electronic media more extensively and consider it an important source of information denote a lower level of confidence in politics and are more likely to assume attitudes of helplessness, apathy and indifference. According to Habermas the cause is not to be found in the condition of civil society but in the content and format of a certain type of political communication which is progressively degenerating. A civil society is inclusive when empowers citizens to participate in a public discourse that, in turn, must not degenerate into a colonizing mode of communication: “the colonization of the public sphere by market imperatives leads to a peculiar paralysis of civil society.”[10]

Habermas's diagnosis hits the mark: relying on the media and the social networks, the institutions identify more and more with their protagonists, producing what is known as *leaderism*, that is subjects who communicate more and more, though they inform less and less. "News" replaces "data", which, furthermore, are frequently emphasised and manipulated to gain consensus or induce certain patterns of behaviour. More than of *infodemic* we should speak about *showdemic,* a phenomenon governed by the same laws as those of entertainment and marketing. As Postman observed in 1985, in this new way of communication the form excludes the content, meaning that a particular medium can only sustain a particular level of ideas[11]. Postman was referring above all to television but his reflection also applies perfectly to the new media which alter “the meaning of 'being informed' by creating a species of information that

might properly be called disinformation — misplaced, irrelevant, fragmented or superficial information that creates the illusion of knowing something but which in fact leads one away from knowing."[12] Today, the scenario is made even more complex by the multiplication of technological systems and devices which induce us to evaluate the message no longer according to criteria of truth, or to say it with Habermas, "the public use of reason", but on the basis of quantitative parameters, like speed of transmission and range of diffusion. The more widespread a datum is, the more it is allegedly true.

An outcome of this pervasiveness of media is trivialisation of the public discourse: real facts have been replaced by news and now from news we pass on to so-called "bullshits."[13] which marks the decline of "fake news" and is far more harmful. "Fake news" continues, in fact, to refer to a solid concept of truth which it contradicts. Bullshit, on the other hand, expresses total disregard for truth, so that it is impossible to debunk it, that is, to prove its groundlessness. Trying to arguing against it might look like excessive pedantry, disproportionate to the quantity of bullshit circulating and the brevity of its circulation life on the web. Facts, theories, judgments, opinions, fantasies, jokes, lies all circulate indiscriminately on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter etc. Dean notes that in the digital world all messages are communicatively equal all the others and no opinion or judgment is worth more than any other because "messages are contributions to circulating content, not actions that elicit responses. It's like a shift from the primacy of a message's use value to the primacy of its exchange value, that is, to its capacity to circulate, to be forwarded, counted. Unlike a message, which needs to be understood, a contribution is just to be added."[14] What matters is not what is said but that something is said and fresh comments simply increase the circulatory flow of opinions. To ensure democracy the absence of censorship would not suffice, the critical function of truthful screening of information would also be mandatory.

One might object that the possibility of faster and more extensive communication acts as a barrier to the authoritarian exercise of power and as an incentive to the process of democratisation, making the phenomena of popular uprisings possible as in the case of the "*Gilets jaunes*" demonstrations in France or the "*Révolution des Jasmins*" in Tunisia. This is true, but the opposite is true as well. As Rosanvallon observed, the mobilisation of protest, favoured by the Internet and social media, is an expression of non-institutionalised popular sovereignty, a phenomenon structurally necessary for democracy because it complements the mechanisms of electoral representation. It is a question of "*contre-démocratie*" which assigns the function of judge and guardian of democracy to the people as an expression of mistrust in the establishment. However, this dynamic is not devoid of risks. If the properties of control and resistance of civil society are radicalised, the public debate ends up turning into an accusatory process often fuelled by theories of conspiracy, thus playing into the hands of populism and anti-politics.[15]

3. From Infosphere to Echo-sphere and Ego-sphere: *"I, myself am the media."*

At individual level, the phenomenon of hyper-narrativity of social media, while appearing to be the answer to the need for relationships, satisfies it only apparently because it often exacerbates, even contradicts it. I analyse its characteristics and then try to identify and trace the roots of this continuous flow of narratives to the source.

The culture of the "show-and-tell", of the "always-on"[16] of "connectivity"[17] has now become an integral feature of daily life. Many scholars have indicated the smartphone as the cardinal element in the production the "tethered-self" or "networked self,"[18] characterised by a link of an emotive kind with the device, considered practically an intimate object. The "Internet framework" is declined according to the *three E* model: *embedded*, inseparably integrated with ourselves; *embodied*, no longer external but at one with our bodies; *everyday*, extended to cover all areas of daily practice.[19] Everyday life has been turned into a perpetual set, with ourselves as directors, actors and, to some extent, public, due to the reflective effect our performances produce. The habit of *self-disclosure* involves, among other things, profound transformation. On the one hand, the concept of intimacy is distorted, on the other, the boundary between the playful and the serious vanishes, with the emotionalization of experience and the slip-sliding of everyday life into *divertissement*.

Habermas had already highlighted the decline of the distinction between the public and the private, whenever the public assumed the language and contents typical of the intimate sphere. Foessel went even further and made a distinction between the private and intimate spheres, defining the latter as a relational notion, not an inaccessible area, but a world we intend to share only with those who know how to safeguard its secrecy and whom we authorise to participate in the definition of our identity. The private sphere, on the other hand, is a property that I can deal with as the object of a contract and that can be exchanged, ceded.[20] In short "*le privé nous appartient quand l'intime nous concerne."* The hyper-narrativity of the social media reduces the intimate to the condition of the private, because it involves a display of the self that cancels all protection, risking expropriation of the intimate which can also become an object of control.[21]

The other change concerns the transformation of experience according to the instantisation/aestheticisation binomial. The spread of psychological culture and of the psychoanalytical method has contributed undoubtedly to enhancing emotional life, but it has also helped create a communicative model where emotions, both positive and negative, are externalised and made public through a "narrative of recognition", containing the request to have one's needs and desires recognised and legitimised by others and the promise to do the same for them. This narrative of acknowledgement combines one's need for self-realisation with claims to emotional suffering and, unlike a novel or a short story, has a beginning but can continue indefinitely. This narrative of recognition combines the aspiration to self-realisation with the claim to emotional

suffering though, like the novel or short story it has a beginning, unlike them, however, it may continue indefinitely.[22]

These are processes which create bipolarity between the offline and the online dimensions, an interpenetration between these two universes, so that what is experienced in one cannot but readjust the axiology upon which the evaluation of the other universe rests. Joshua Meyrowitz, as early as 1985, analysed the changes regarding experience and behavioural patterns produced by digital interaction, especially in relation to "who knows what about whom" and "who knows what compared to whom". In his opinion, these changes could be summed up in a reversal of roles consisting in a conventional kind of staging featuring more adultlike children and more childlike adults; more career-oriented women and more family-oriented men; leaders who try to act more like the "man next door" and real neighbours claiming a greater say in local, national, and international affairs.[23]

One example of this is the construction of personal “profiles” on the social media. Most users to describe themselves use expressions, adjectives, images aimed at presenting a desirable personality type. Moreover, they often resort to standardised, uniform expressions, albeit with the illusion of being original and authentic. Even if one does not use deception or falsification to provide one’s identity, the selection and organisation of the narratives and photos are, nonetheless, the result of choices aimed at exposing something and hiding something else. This is a practice which, on the other hand, is taken for granted and conventionally shared: "you and I know it's not entirely true, but it doesn't matter".

From living “with” the media, we begin to live “in” the media, to then move on to a third phase where the media are us. This may be intended in two ways. Not only does the tool govern those who use it (the medium modifies the user), but also those who use it are assimilated with it (the user becomes the medium). Digital disintermediation, that is, the elimination of intermediary links between the user and goods, information or services, has not only changed people’s habits regarding purchase and consumption, but it has also placed the user-ego at the centre of the system, making it producer, as well as user of the contents of communication. This way, sharing prevails over the right to privacy and the disclosure of the digital self becomes common practice. “Broadcast yourself!” exclaims the YouTube pay-off. The individual is reflected in the media (he/she is its content) created by the individual him/herself (she/he is also the producer): “I, myself am the media”.

The outcome of all this social interaction does not seem to be the intensification of strong ties, but, rather, the extension of weak ones, although some scholars claim the opposite. There are, for example, those who argue that the new technological media are rewriting the rules of relationships, not by causing a decline in trust, but by creating a new paradigm based on "distributed trust",

more horizontal than vertical. This trend seems to induce younger people, in particular, to share and interact confidently with strangers, as proven by the online use of credit cards, the renting of accommodation through the Airbnb platform, the various forms of sharing[24] that people choose. However, one may wonder if it is really a question of trust or whether it is not the result of rational choices made following careful reconnaissance, mediated by consumer and market needs.

Other scholars speak of the positive possibility of building up solidarity between equals, but this too has a flip side to its coin, that is the creation of "gated communities" or, worse still, “filter bubbles”[25] or “echo-chambers”, which isolate and exclude those outside of the group and can give rise to manifestations of intolerance. There are also those who claim that, by observing a norm of non-intrusiveness, avoiding asking and revealing excessively personal data, it may be possible to preserve some degree of individual privacy while participating in an intimate or personal space shared with others. So, it would be possible, it seems, to be able to build a "public privacy", that is, a third dimension somewhere between purely individual privacy and indiscriminate publicization. This third space would be characterised, from a point of view of public debate, by an attitude of “subactivism”, as a form of “mundane citizenship”, a type of empowerment rooted in individual and small group interests. However, for Bakardjieva, this would not be politically irrelevant and could turn response to events of decisive importance for society into public activism.[26]

Others still believe that some of the social media like Facebook have created opportunities for self-expression that did not exist before and which constitute a mirror where people can better observe and analyse their own behaviour while developing a sort of “media self-awareness.”[27] However, it is important to note that in northern Asia, in countries like Japan, Thailand and China, change seems to have moved away from a culture that emphasised community bonds, also with regard to self-esteem and the social function of honour. This new trend, with the spread of the social media, has helped create, especially among young people, a greater degree of sensitivity towards individual rights, shifting the emphasis from oriental collectivity to more Western-like privacy.[28] Obviously, this phenomenon has its dark side too. While in China this process of strengthening the self has produced movements demanding greater individual freedom, in countries like Japan and Korea it has helped create generations of *hikkikomori*, mainly young people imprisoned and socially isolated in their online bubbles.

One thing is certain. As Luciano Floridi argues, as we have entered the *onlife era* and we constantly experience the fusion between the digital and the analogue, it no longer makes sense to ask ourselves whether we are online or offline. We simply need to ask ourselves whether we are sufficiently trained and skilled to remain abreast of all that new technology provides us with[29]. This means that rather than in an *Infosphere*, we dwell within an *Echo-sphere*, continuously closer to finding ourselves in an *Ego-sphere*.

4. Philosophical contextualization of today's hyper-narrative self

To what may we attribute this rampant tendency to expose ourselves and hyper-narrate on the web? How did we come to the conception of this "I-confessional" which considers the sharing of one's private life almost as a moral duty? It is a complex and constantly changing phenomenon, although some of the elements that contribute to contextualizing it philosophically and historically can be indicated.

Without claiming complete thoroughness, the "Expressivist Turn" theorised by Taylor converges at the root of this phenomenon characteristic of modernity and outlined in Foucault's postmodern "aesthetic of the self", with Nietzschean theory of the "fabulation of the world". According to Taylor, it is starting from Romanticism - Herder is an example - that we find, in polemic against the Enlightenment idea of disengaged, instrumental reason, the notion of the self-definition of the I through artistic creation, and a new idea of art no longer as *mímesis* - imitation of reality- but as creation. From this stance we all need to discover how to be ourselves, but we can only do so by inventing an original way to express ourselves through language and action as a mark of our authenticity. Self-discovery and artistic creation go hand in hand, therefore, making everyone the creator of him/herself.[30] "Expressivism" is the basis upon which to found a new conception of the single individual endowed with a very personal way of living and the almost moral obligation to live up to their particular originality. His/her lives will be modelled according to their artistic expression in terms of both content and methods. "What is new in the post-expressivist era - Taylor observes- is that the domain is within, that is, it is open only to a mode of exploration which involves the first-person perspective, meaning what it requires to define the voice or impulse as 'inner'."[31] This gives rise to a centrality of sentiment and imagination and the ability to articulate one's "inner depths" as narrative.

Successive transformations of this kind of expressivism would lead, in the nineteenth century, to the identification of human fulfilment with aesthetic values. For Schiller, as we can see from his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*, the aesthetic dimension becomes the expression of the integrity and authenticity of the self, while its development makes us spontaneously moral. Nietzsche goes even further. In *The Birth of Tragedy,* he believes the whole of reality to be art, "only as an aesthetic phenomenon is existence and the world eternally justified."[32] But his thinking already contains the new connotation that the "inward turn" assumes in the 1900s. It is no longer a question of orientation towards a unitary self, meaning something that needs to be given voice through the narrative, where reason, instinct and creativity are perfectly integrated, but the discovery of a split identity devoid of cohesion, whose fragmented experience can only be expressed in an incoherent and episodic flow. As a result of this, the correspondence of the narrated with reality does not matter, nor does concern with the truth.[33] Furthermore, even the psychoanalytic narrative model consists in bringing the chaotic magma of our urgings to the surface, because the spontaneity and immediacy of the experiences matter, not the will to construct a coherent kind of exposition.[34]

The "aesthetics of existence" or "aesthetics of the self" find a new declension in Foucault, this time without drawing on the romantic, but on the classical Greek tradition. Claiming that the ego is not a substance, but a plurality of forms, the French philosopher considers it ethically imperative to create oneself as a work of art. The type of relationship that we all have with ourselves needs to be considered a creative activity whereby true "care of the self" consisted in making ours a beautiful existence[35]. The problem lay in the fact that this revival of the classical tradition cannot take place in keeping with the aesthetic conception itself. For the Greeks the beautiful, the good and the true coincided, while at Foucault's time beauty is an essentially emotional and sensorial experience perceived by the subject which needed to construct itself. The techniques of self-care - or self-governance - that Foucault proposes are, therefore, a way of subjectivizing oneself, as a reaction against the objectification produced by science, medical practice and power, procedures for deciphering one's own identity and fixing it.[36] Obviously, in the absence of an objective truth to adhere to, everyone is free to find their own way and style, the freedom to invent new and different modes of existence, their own way of expressing a fragmented experience and narrating it. Although the philosopher does not identify self-care with romantic "self-worship", with the "self-seeking" bend of modern humanists, or with the self-realisation of postmodern individualism, nevertheless, his proposal fluctuates in a contradictory way between an invitation to asceticism and encouragement to enjoy pleasure, between self-governance and the urge to indulge in limitless recklessness. One thing is certain: for Foucault the self has no ontological consistency and needs to constitute itself as a subject, but since there are no pathways to follow, people need to plot them for themselves. Quite an arduous undertaking.

It might seem rather forced to seek to bring contemporary hyper-narrativity back into the context outlined above. Yet, the social networks and digital technologies have done nothing but unwittingly assume its elements and amplify them: the quest for an original way of expressing oneself, pushed to the point of exhibitionism, the exasperated reflexivity, the loss of the boundary between true and false, the construction of the self through a narration that often takes on the characteristics of psychoanalytic confidence, the need for recognition that almost means "putting oneself into the world in order to exist."

All this is expressed not through articulated language, but more often than not through commercials and images, transmitted to groups which seem best able to acknowledge us, and favour our self-realisation, to those with interests and lifestyles similar to ours, although, in actual fact, we actually make what we narrate available to everyone. This excess of communicative exchanges, from blog posts to Instagram and Tweet messages, also responds to the need to cadence our daily experience, without, however, taking those pauses of reflection necessary to order and structure it, without engaging in confrontation with a horizon of objectively real meaning, so that our narrated lives remain

fragmentary and, ultimately, indecipherable. Identity risks turning into a part to be played, making one the actor of oneself, divided between the real and the imaginary, which, nevertheless, urges us to affirm, “I exist, I am here, I am an image, look, look!”[37]

5. Conclusions

From the above, two neuralgic points of the hypernarrative nature of our society have emerged: the problematic feature of the public sphere, with the decline of the notion of truth, and the illusion that the exhibition of intimacy through social media constitutes a way to freely express oneself and build bonds. A redefinition of the categories of truth and identity would therefore be necessary to properly manage a process that is now underway and therefore unstoppable. It is evident that it is not possible to silence the chatter of the social media, nor impose bans or limits on compulsive exchanges of messages, also because the digital media possess undeniable positive aspects, like the possibility of communicating with people at a distance, something particularly appreciated during the Covid- 19 pandemic.

At the institutional level, the shift from information to communication and the colonization of the public sphere by the market has not produced the homologation hypothesized by Adorno, in referring to the mass media of the 1950s[38]. Instead, it has given rise to a chaotic agglomeration of contrasting opinions, the effect of the disappearance of mediation. At the political level, a horizontality prevails, where participation is understood as the simple right to access that legitimates any point of view: public opinion is thus transformed into a public of opinion makers.

For this reason, it is necessary to develop a new kind of awareness. We need to understand that technology shapes us as humans and we need to be aware that it is also possible for us humans to critically shape technology. A computer and an I-phone are not simple tools that enhance our skills, they are ontologising devices because they create communicative environments that are always updated and have a performative power that modifies users’ behaviour inducing them to change constantly.

This is why it is so difficult to propose a filter or an antidote: the diagnosis is rather easy, but the therapy is extremely complex. Formulating a new paradigm for “homo digitalis” is perhaps too ambitious, like the proposal to “build the raft while swimming”[39] or develop responses to problems as they crop up from time to time. To avoid becoming an audience of opinion makers or the actors of a permanent show, it is important not only to know the rules of the game and know how to govern the processes, it is also necessary to cultivate the twofold ability of knowing how to wait and pay attention. The considerable acceleration in the transmission and dissemination of news, typical of the digital platforms, makes us increasingly impatient and intolerant of delay in our effort to absorb as many data as possible without having time to evaluate them properly from a

truthful and ethical point of view. We are growing accustomed to cognitive simplicity, so that every piece of information we receive needs to be simple and quick to process; if not, it is too complex and difficult to understand. This perceptual degradation makes us unable to distinguish the real from the virtual, risking an overlap between different planes of reality. It is fundamental that we learn how to deal efficiently with times of reception and reaction.

Alongside this, it is also necessary to cultivate attention. We can distance the false from the true only if we are able to reason by making distinctions, that is, by perceiving differences; this operation, as opposed to distraction, requires, as is the case with everything we focus on, time.[40] At the individual level, we have to consider that identity can be adequately expressed only in a real context, where the dialogical relationship with others is not structured according to the mediatic logic of a storytelling. First, an authentic encounter needs real corporeality: gaze, tone of voice, gestures. Second, self-narration is not the instantaneous communication of emotions and actions, but it needs reflection and re-elaboration that allows the experience to be structured.

Moreover, the encounter is always risky, because it is also exposure to the other. In social communities, on the other hand, transparency and authenticity are only apparent: we show what we consider positive and useful, in a certain sense "choosing" which identity to exhibit. For this reason, social communities are not real communities. A real community is cohesive and supportive, requires mutual listening, trust and dialogue, based on the responsible use of language. Social communities remain simply groups of individuals who recognize one another through common interests or concerns characterized by weak bonds. Moreover, in the *social web,* identity is often based on opposition to people outside the group: we define ourselves starting with what divides us rather than with what unites us, giving rise to suspicion and to prejudice (ethnic, sexual, religious, political). In this way, what ought to be an opportunity to promote encounter with others, a window on the world becomes a showcase for exhibiting personal narcissism, often with the effect of isolating us from those closest to us.

The challenge, addressed especially to the younger generations, is to promote real relational places, where identity is discovered and matures thanks to trusting relationships with the other, and to confrontation of values and meanings. Only a strongly rooted kind of identity will be able to protect itself from overexposure during communicative exchanges on the social media and protect others by means of a pact of confidentiality based on mutual relations of profound trust.

To be authentically oneself, one need ultimately to remain human.

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RESTRUCTURING REALITY – NARRATIVES OF WORK AND IDENTITY

Saara Mahbouda

Abstract
Reality TV and the cultural industry exist at the forefront of the performative, attention economy. Examining the prevailing narratives of these two fields in comparison with their structural realities, highlights the power of narrative in shaping contemporary conditions of labor. Further, situating these fields within the context of two significant historical transformations of labor— primitive accumulation and the transition to biocapitalism— establishes how longstanding cultural narratives around difference and the needs of the market come together to shape the lives of individuals and the collective. This text situates the stories that have been told about labor— what counts as work, who should perform certain kinds of work, and which work is valuable— into the historical context of racialized and feminized labor. It examines how perceived divisions and definitions of work affect the organization and remuneration of labor, allowing for the widespread exploitation of precarized and feminized labor.

Keywords
Biolabor, Feminized Labor, Exteritorialized Labor, Labor Division, Hypernarrativity, Performativity, Reality TV.

1. Introduction

The number one lesson to learn from watching Reality TV is, deny, deny, deny baby. And if that doesn't work, deflect, deflect, deflect. In the world of RTV, every minutia of expression, conflict, or triumph is caught on camera, played back and analyzed over and over again. With such an abundance of accessible, recorded data, one might think 'returning to the facts' would be modus operandi for solving conflicts, proving points, or catching people in the act. In the world of hyper documentation, however, the exact opposite is true. In RTV, the truth no longer really exists. Rather, the overwhelming quantity of footage leads to such an overload of information that the final word is had by whatever storyline stands out the strongest. Whoever argues most vehemently, cries the most convincingly, or most stubbornly repeats a lie on camera, comes out as the truth teller of that episode, season, or lifetime.

For those who don't watch RTV, one can imagine it as a plot point in a bad legal show: an old school mobster is accused of tax evasion and his defense team is compelled by the judge to hand over all relevant accounting information. Suddenly, the prosecution finds themselves with a truckload of paperwork on their driveway. Somewhere in there, the truth might be buried, but who has the time to find it before trial? In TV-land, people are always better off spending their time constructing a convincing story than digging through the past for something as flimsy

as facts. At the end of the day, cold hard proof isn't any more powerful than the hint of a suggestion, if it takes the right tone.

To look at a more specific example of this rule in play, one can turn to Season 7 of Bravo's RTV series "*Below Deck*". The show follows the crew of a luxury charter yacht, living together confined on a boat for months at a time, working long hours serving the rude and demanding nouveau riche. Typically, one comes to learn, the interior staff (stewardesses) are young, hegemonically attractive blond white women, and the exterior deck crew are muscular boating bros. A culture of ubiquitous boat romances and excessive alcohol consumption leaks into the workplace hierarchy, creating a dramatic and frequently problematic environment. Season 7 reached RTV notoriety through the toxic masculinity that ran rampant onboard, leading to a widespread fan call out on social media. Throughout the season, male members of the deck crew used incredibly derogatory language towards the women onboard, undermined their work, physically intimidated, and sexually harassed them. The breaking point came towards the end of the season on a night out, when the black-out drunk bosun, Ashton Pienaar, forcefully grabbed the chief stewardess, Kate Chastain's, face and kissed her against her will (for the second time that season), and then later that night screamed and physically intimidated her in a taxi and punched the window.

All of this was addressed in that season's reunion show, a staple structure of the RTV genre wherein the cast of a show reunites after filming is over to discuss conflicts and review footage from that season. Reunion show hosts preside over these discussions, cast as a mix of authority figure, neutral party, and representative of the audience. On the Bravo network, this figure is typically Andy Cohen, an executive producer and celebrity in his own right.

The actual footage of the gendered violence and more subtle misogyny of the season was played over and over again and the guilty cast members doled out rote apologies lifted from PR handbooks. But as the show progressed, the acknowledgement of clear wrong doing started to get muddied. Minor petty instances of 'bad behavior' by the women onboard, such as the chief stewardess angrily and drunkenly dumping the deck crews' laundry on the ground after being called a derogatory name by one of the men, were amplified by Cohen as equal offenses to the sexism and sexual assault. Another glaring problem was the near omission of the experience of the only Black stewardess, Simone Mashile, in the show's history. The problematic racist and objectifying standards for stewardesses in the industry is openly acknowledged and at points on the show Mashile mentions the difficulty in getting hired by a yacht at all, let alone advancing or being treated with respect. In the reunion, Mashile's experience is given a quick talk over, without race once being explicitly mentioned, and then largely dismissed as her just not being good at her job. While the overall experience of the women facing sexism is woefully warped in the

final narrative, Mashile's experience with intersecting gendered and racialized workplace discrimination is almost entirely erased.

By the end of the episode, it seems that the overall narrative Cohen and the producers are trying to build is that nothing *that* bad really happened to anyone, and since there was fault on both sides, can't everyone just get along? The backlash to the reunion episode by fans was intense but by no means universal, and while Cohen issued a weak apology, there was never a strong and unequivocal condemnation of the misogyny of the season or the show's handling of it, even though the events in question had been documented and hyper visibilized.

These RTV reunion shows can be representative of how contemporary hyper narrative societies function. The facts might not vanish, they are probably more readily available and visible than ever before, but the reality is, that in a world with an overwhelming quantity of facts, they just don't matter.

A recent New York Times article offers another example, describing the insidious effects of greenwashing on holding big oil accountable for climate change. Writer Bill McKibben points to the culpability of P.R. campaigns and advertising firms "that help provide the rationalizations and the justifications that slow the pace of change."[1] McKibben goes into detail on campaigns by the B.B.D.O. and Universal McCann agencies for Exxon, highlighting the oil company's investment in the green future of algae biofuel. According to these campaigns, algae was a major investment and the focus for the company's future. But before these ads even came out, it had already been proved by numerous companies, and later admitted by Exxon themselves, that algae fuel never had the potential to be a serious fossil fuel alternative or make economic sense. Meanwhile, Exxon continued to lobby and invest in opposing any clean energy initiatives that might slow the production of fossil fuels. Despite the reality, the campaign succeeded in softening the brand's public image, allowing their production processes to continue with less public scrutiny. Society seems to have a problem with prioritizing a good story over reality. But is this problem unique to today?

This is far from the first-time narrative has overtaken reality to the great harm of a great many, despite the facts pointing to an altogether different reality. Perhaps the greatest narrative con projected onto society, which continues to function today, is the great myth of capitalist definitions of labor. The stories that have been told about labor - what counts as work, who should perform what kind work, and which work is valuable- have had untold influence in shaping social and economic structures in deeply violent and detrimental ways. Focusing on a few key points in the history of labor in comparison with contemporary industries that rely heavily on the power of narrative, RTV and the cultural industry, can elucidate how certain narratives about work have shaped the history of labor and social structures and continue to do so today.

2. Labor and the Weaponization of Narratives of Difference

One of the major historical transitions in labor was the process of primitive accumulation. Tracing primitive accumulation through to the development of capitalism as the hegemonic system running much of the world, demonstrates how this system was built on and enabled by, constructed cultural narratives of difference.

Capitalism was built up by controlling the global labor force through assigning constructed narratives to identity groups that justified the exploitation of their labor and pitted them against one another. The complexity of existence in the world was flattened in the hegemonic narrative into easily exploitable identity camps and binaries that contained the entire world population in just a few categories and kept their bodies and labor locked in positions of permanent availability. The work of Silvia Federici and Maria Mies provides a framework for understanding the origins of narratives of "difference" and contributes to a deeper understanding of how difference is used by the market today.

The poor in feudalist Europe, connected to the land and a communal lifestyle, presented a constant source of struggle against the hegemonic class and were a force which had to be broken for a greater accumulation of wealth. By the end of the 15th c. the state was hard at work consolidating its power across social and political life. The bourgeoisie of the cities joined forces with the nobility and crushed the popular revolts and social movements. Serfs were externalized from the land (their source of survival), and from each other, leaving them entirely dependent on the wage. In the 16th and 17th centuries, merchant capitalists were able to take advantage of this cheap and desperate labor force to break the power of artisan guilds in cities. Meanwhile, wealthy landowners could use their new holdings to commercialize agriculture and send more food to market and for export. This accumulation of land, wealth, and tradable goods provided funding and drive for colonization, as part of a search for new markets and resources.[2]

The colonial campaigns consisted of a plunder for resources, land, and labour, presented as a "civilizing mission of the Christian nations."[3] The enslavement and extermination of indigenous peoples was justified through a campaign of othering meant to dehumanize racialized indigenous peoples as godless and immoral beings.

> Defining the aboriginal American populations as cannibals, devil-worshippers, and sodomites supported the fiction that the Conquest was not an unabashed quest for gold and silver but was a converting mission [...] It also removed, in the eyes of the world and possibly of the colonizers themselves, any sanction against the atrocities which they would commit against the "Indians," thus functioning as a license to kill.[4]

Thus, the earliest days of capitalism were built on creating a narrative of the racialized Other in order to justify the theft of resources. Colonists tightened control of the labor pool by way of land expropriation strategies learned at home, with local people forcibly transported to various mines and worksites. Colonial violence was of course not quietly accepted, and colonized peoples revolted in many ways, including the use of narrative as an incitement for resistance:

> In Peru, as well, the first large-scale attack on diabolism occurred in the 1560s, coinciding with the rise of the Taki Onqoy movement, a native millenarian movement that preached against collaboration with the Europeans and for a pan-Andean alliance of the local gods *(huacas)* putting an end to colonization. [...] The threat posed by the Taquionqos was a serious one since, by calling for a pan-Andean unification of the *huacas,* the movement marked the beginning of a new sense of identity capable of overcoming the divisions connected with the traditional organization of the *ayullus* (family unit).[5]

Colonized peoples in the Americas reclaimed the narrative of racial unity that had been imposed upon them, and re-configured it into a defensive strategy. The colonial forces countered with an even stronger attack on local religions and culture, and with the creation of gendered social hierarchy to break this new unity. "It was women who most strongly defended the old mode of existence and opposed the new power structure, plausibly because they were the ones who were most negatively affected by it. Women had held a powerful position in pre-Columbian societies."[6] Thus, multiple intersecting levels of narrative and counter narrative around race and gender were formed in a cultural struggle underlying the literal struggle of colonial violence and indigenous resistance.

Meanwhile, in Europe, the poor's resistance had been largely broken with the wealth accumulated through plundering the colonies, and the wage was reduced to a minimum. This resulted in extremely poor conditions and widespread death in Europe, which combined with the genocide in the colonies, led to a demographic and labor crisis. This crisis spurred the development of Mercantilism and the assumption that the wealth of nations is proportional to the quantity of laborers available to them, bringing about new narratives of humans as "raw materials, workers and breeders for the state."[7] In the mid-16th c., enabled by these new narratives, the state increased surveillance of women's bodies (via attempts to control reproduction and ban contraceptives) and began the horrors of the large-scale African slave trade.

These structural changes were once again justified through dehumanizing racial narratives, with enslaved African peoples assigned tropes of "bestiality" and as existing outside of moral bounds, in order to assign them to a permanent labor role of exploitation, outside of the waged economy. Systems of control were based on violently transplanting a population to a work site, breaking communal structures and ties to the land, and horrific physical violence and large-scale death.

To replenish the pool of the laborers perishing from exploitative work conditions in Europe, new social narratives also had to be constructed at home. "The female body was turned into an instrument for the reproduction of labor and the expansion of the work-force," "from now on their wombs became public territory, controlled by men and the state."[8] To achieve this, women's collective power, knowledge, and social status had to be broken and every aspect of life and personhood redefined. This was achieved through a campaign of cultural denigration, legal infantilization, and the violence of the witch hunts, targeting any forms of sexuality outside the confines of heterosexual marriage, attempts to limit or control reproduction, and any women living independently outside of the direct control of a man. In the new monetary regime, only production for market was defined as valuable, whereas reproduction and care labor, to which women had been limited, were considered valueless and workless, invisibilized and naturalized.

This process of subjugation was enabled by new cultural cannons delineating the difference between women and men, "the main female villain was the disobedient wife, who, together with the 'scold', the 'witch', and the 'whore' was the favorite target of dramatists, popular writers, and moralists."[9] Women were made out to be an "unreasonable other" during the early days of suppression until resistance was broken. It then became convenient to repaint white European women, collectively, as the chaste, submissive housewife, raising her in status, at the expense of the externalized racialized woman as her counterpart. "While African women were treated as 'savages' the women of the white colonizers in their fatherlands 'rose' to the status of 'ladies', these two processes [...] are not simply historical parallels, but are intrinsically and causally linked within this patriarchal–capitalist mode of production."[10] As white European men of the upper classes "appropriated land, natural resources and people in Africa, Asia and Central and South America in order to be able to extract raw materials, products and labour power, they began to build up in their fatherlands the patriarchal nuclear family."[11]

Identity became the definition of every aspect of life and narratives around gendered and racialized identities were re-constructed, based on the need for a constantly replenished and more easily exploitable workforce. By creating distinctions within the subjugated, European men over European women, Europeans over colonized men and women, colonized men over colonized women etc., "it becomes possible to externalize or exterritorialize those whom the new patriarchs wanted to exploit."[12] Hierarchies of difference were firmly locked into place, ensuring the constant availability of cheap or free labor, enabling the vast accumulation of wealth. The interconnectivity of these systems demonstrates, from the earliest days, how signifiant the use of narrative can be in constructing and perpetuating power structures that have resulted in centuries of violence and loss.

3. Performativity and Narratives of Change

Jump back to today, and there is currently a wide spread reckoning with this history, there are popular protests and uprisings against the after and ongoing effects of these structures. Parallel to the many political struggles, labor movements, feminist, anti-racist, and independence movements that play out via direct actions and protests, are the politics and protests of representation. Struggles over claiming and defining narratives for different groups and protesting the images and representations of otherness that are allowed to dominate the cultural discourse have been ongoing and on a surface level, seem to finally have been heard.

When taken at face value, the interests of the art world and wider world of popular culture, seem in many ways to be diametrically opposed to the colonial ideology of hierarchized difference. One can hardly turn around without running into an art university, curatorial program, exhibition text, or editorial mission statement that does not claim to prioritize decoloniality and intersectional feminism. The consensus seems to be that difference really does matter, and even more than that, it should be centered, highlighted, praised, elevated, and highly visibilized.

Scrolling through the social media pages of major museums in the U.S. such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, MoMA, Guggenheim, The Museum of Fine Arts Houston, Denver Art Museum, LACMA… there is a definitive change in media presence. The work of BIPOC artists is highlighted on every Instagram, websites show a plethora of new exhibitions about otherness, and every museum has released some kind of statement committing to access, diversity, inclusion and equity.

But the reality underneath this spectacle of acceptance doesn't seem to match. The Instagram account *Change the Museum*, a page "pressuring US museums to move beyond lip service proclamation by amplifying tales of unchecked racism"[13] and *For The Culture*, "a coalition of current/former Black and Brown employees and allies united together to call out systemic racism in cultural institutions"[14] offer the public copious evidence of the performativity of these gestures. Posts by employees from the above named museums describe numerous instances in which their advancement in the field has been blocked in favor of white hires, race based discrepancies in pay, blatantly racist comments that have been reported to museum structures and ignored, the prevalence of BIPOC employees restricted to the lowest paying positions as museum guards and maintenance crews with this staff also being the first to be fired (particularly relevant in the time of pandemic with museums laying off huge numbers of front line workers rather than making pay cuts at the highest tiers or deacquisitioning), countless descriptions of racism and cultural ignorance in exhibition texts and displays of problematics art works even after official complaints were made by staff members. The racism also extends to the experience of museum visitors, as stories are chronicled of outreach focused only on white wealthy audiences while ignoring or actively discouraging

BIPOC residents from local communities to visit, and youth education and outreach programs treating BIPOC youth as security threats. The list goes on and on.

When comparing the public narrative put on by these culture institutions with the day-to-day realities of their neocolonial cultural models, it becomes pretty clear that there is a marketing strategy of co-opting resistance movements into a salable product. The market has after all found a use for protest and calls for change, recuperating them into a trend that extends far beyond cultural institutions. Social influencers make their names off of superficial demonstrations of wokeness and major corporations have joined in, virtue-signalling wholeheartedly, while doing little to nothing to change their own problematic structures.

But the thing is, this process has happened many times before. In her article *The God of Big Trends*, Noy Thrupkaew writes about the publishing world in the 90s when “Color had become a marketing boon. Interviewers probed into a writer’s upbringing, seeking out ethnic factoids for a voracious public,” and again in the early 2000s when “bookstores would create pretty displays of books by authors of a ‘hot’ ethnicity.”[15]

The problem with important issues becoming trend, is that while there can be noticeable short-term change in the center, trends tend to slip away quickly, without leaving anything meaningful behind, only to come back again in ten or twenty years to complete the same cycle of tokenized surface level initiatives. Thrupkaew addresses this point too:

> Literary trends can be good for women writers of color. At least more voices are finding their way onto the store shelves; one can’t protest the fact that Americans are expanding their reading horizons, or that female authors of color are receiving much deserved attention [...] Still, it’s hard to balance those sweet and sour sensations each time the next ethnic girl wonder stakes it big with her book. Happiness over her success is often marred by the onslaught of exoticized marketing. After a while, ethnicity seems as much as a commodity as anything else.[16]

Even when narratives center marginalized or Othered people, they don’t necessarily do anything to rectify geographic, racialized, gendered, classed, or any other identity based social and labor divisions. At times, they can serve to further entrench these systems, as they are made into tokenized “success stories,” and used to argue that the system couldn’t possibly be rooted in identity-based exploitation when these individuals have made it to the top. This system is built on capitalizing on a few tokenized performances of difference, meaning the vast majority, or the “group” can never win. While the messaging might be the exact opposite of what it once was, it doesn’t really mean anything has changed.

But this too seems confusing. How can there be a widespread fetishization of otherness, while the colonial system of externalizing and denigrating marginalized groups is still intact? How can the underlying structure support the exact opposite of the values promoted by popular language? Looking at another major turning point in the history of labor can explain some of the disconnect between proclaimed narrative and structural reality.

4. Restructuring Labor and Identity

The 60s and 70s, were a time of major transformation with the advent of biocapitalism and neoliberalism. This period marks a departure from the rigid identity and geopolitically defined labor roles established by primitive accumulation, into something more insidious.

The 1960s was an era of a rise in working class power and demands, and this time, the labor revolt was very nearly global. In capitalist countries at the center, workers revolted against the conditions and remuneration of factory work. Student movements demanded more flexibility and freedom, and greater valuation of the types of labor that capitalism had marked as "non-work," or existed outside of the waged production economy. Feminist and racial equality movements demanded equal treatment under the law and access to employment. In the ex-territorialized regions, "Decades of revolutionary struggle from the Chinese Revolution to Vietnam and from the Cuban Revolution to the numerous liberations struggles throughout Latin America, Africa, and the Arab world had pushed forward a proletarian wage demand that various socialist and/or nationalist reformist regimes had to satisfy and that directly destabilized the international economic system."[17]

The simultaneity and accumulation of workers' struggles in the dominant capitalist countries and anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist struggles in exploited countries led to global economic destabilization, as they "undermined the capitalist strategy that had long relied on the hierarchies of the international divisions of labor to block any global unity among workers."[18] The imperialism of the past hundred years meant that nearly the entire globe was subject in some way to capitalism and made it impossible to shift the greater burden of exploitation and exteritorialize the struggle as had been done up until this point.

The social struggles "forced a change in the quality and nature of labor itself."[19] By applying pressure to the capitalist and forcing change, "the proletariat actually invents the social and productive forms that capital will be forced to adopt in the future."[20] No longer able to explicitly enforce control through colonial, imperialist violence and abject defamations of difference, capitalism was forced to adjust labor structures, or at least the narratives around why the structures are the way they are. Within the labor pool, people could no longer overtly be assigned to unpaid reproductive work or enslaved for manual labor based on gender and race.

The other major impetus for change was the development of new technologies that caused a transition in production from Fordist assembly lines, to a post-Fordist system wherein the traditional factory is replaced by a far-flung global network of "subcontracting productive chains, marked by cooperation and/or hierarchy."[21]

In this new system, the value of a product is no longer necessarily inherent in that object but more than ever can be found in intangible relational networks around it, like brand names, market fluctuations etc. As a result, capitalism pivoted to valuing relational and knowledge-based labor over production-based labor, building up more visibility, higher remuneration, and social value in this area.

The new predominant form of labor developing from these technological, political, and social changes can been termed biolabor, defined by Cristina Morini and Andrea Fumagalli as the "use of the relational, emotional and cognitive faculties of human beings" and often resulting in immaterial products, goods, or services.[22] Workers are no longer expected to function as machines, but to self-engage with work, they should incorporate every aspect of their social beings, their feelings, desires, fantasies are the grounding sites of their value. With biolabor, all of life has been put to work. Labor has shifted to evaluate every aspect of a person's identity, experience, and being, as part of their value as a laborer. Emotional labor and the ability to relate to and appeal to others becomes central. Biolabor refers to a labor market in which it is no longer simply the amount of time a laborer spends working or their training for one specific skill that is valuable, "but rather subjectivity itself, in its experiential, relational, creative dimensions" that is exchanged.[23]

With biolabor, there is little to no delineation between the time spent working or time spent "living." Similarly, work is not limited by a location, such as an office or factory floor, but can occur anywhere. There is no longer any separation between production and reproduction, circulation, consumption, and self-expression or social communication. The commodification of subjectivity results in a global imbalance wherein, "the value produced by labor structurally exceeds its monetary retribution."[24]

But to understand how this change in valuing one type of work over another morphed into subsuming all of life into value production and how narratives around identity play into that, it is helpful to look more specifically at one of the widespread social movements that brought about these changes. Mariarosa Dalla Costa's writings on the wave of feminist struggles in the 1970s and the capitalist response, visibilize how the interplay of narrative and readjustment of labor roles can be used to avoid making substantial change, while still appearing to do so.

The 1970s saw a new organization of production and society, with women working outside of the home in larger numbers than before. The new labor market's interest in more flexible and mobile labor power worked with the increasing unwillingness of women to accept the

burden of unwaged reproductive and care work. As women left the home to work in the waged market, the figure of the housewife, forged through bloody witch hunts, receded, but the labor she had been made responsible for did not magically vanish, it simply shifted in visibility, and distribution. The outcome of these struggles was largely the "compromise" of precarious employment for all, with capital expanding its pool of labor to include low-wage work for all, rather than a true emancipation from the wage and capital for everyone. This crucial pivot away from uniformly equating identity to labor role opened up a new level of individualization, that elevated the living standards of some, at the expense of the continued exploitation of the many.

This redistribution of reproductive and care labor followed several avenues but resulted primarily in an externalized market of care. The externalization of the home encompasses a broad range of sectors and professions from food service, sex, custodial, mental health, and social workers, to the educational sector, nursing, retail, and textile industries. All of these fields perform professionalized and waged versions of work that was once performed in the home as unpaid care labor. When this work entered the market, it became a part of constructing the attention economy, wherein "attention, exchanged for money in function of a temporal pattern of measure, is separated from incarnated communication, that which produces lasting relations, trust, and cooperation, and turns to a functionalized and uninvested exchange of codes (words and gestures)."[25] Care, listening, and communicating have been turned into commodities exchanged on the market.

Though this new market of work seemed to attach a wage to reproductive work and delink it from belonging to specific identity groups, in reality much of this precarious work is still gendered, classed, and racialized. This work is largely invisibilized, performed in many fields with no contracts, job security or benefits, much of it being shift work with low hourly pay.

This externalization of the home extends the exploitative working conditions of the housewife to entire economic sectors, leading to the housewifization of wider society. "The public space as a whole is progressively feminizing itself, since it incorporates more and more visibly some of the most traditional and stereotypical elements of the feminine (maternity, care, seduction)."[26] It also reinstates the other main classification of difference put to use during primitive accumulation: racialization, which never disappeared but was simply adjusted and reaffirmed as a neocolonial global structure of exploitation.

The paid domestic help and precarious service work found in the market reflect "a new division of reproductive labor worldwide, whereby women coming from the so-called developing countries or countries 'in transition' ... increasingly come to do the reproductive work in advanced countries."[27] In order for the women of the Global North to take their place in the waged economy, the Othered women of the Global South, or the local poor have to take their place in exploitation.

> The reproduction of the areas considered ‘more peripheral’ has been devastated ... the plan is to produce cheap labor power to be employed in the reproductive sector of the more developed regions. In this way, the state avoids having to confront the emerging reproductive problems and, crucially, can avoid taking on the financial burdens that should be its responsibility.[28]

The continued racialization and exteritorialization of labor structures and the new housewifization of entire swathes of society also extends to production based labor. With the rise of biocapitalism, the material side of production was undervalued, and remunerated less, shifted to the Global South and invisibilized as much as possible. In a similar vein to the 15th c., when women were confined to reproductive work just as it ceased to be valued and only production was remunerated, the Global South has recently been made the main grounds of material production, just as it ceases to be valued. Yet, despite new narratives of its unimportance, material production has not disappeared and continues to be a necessary part of economic cycles.

In fact, the high profits that allow for the higher remuneration and social value of relational-cognitive work in the Global North, rely on the low labor costs of invisibilized production in the Global South. Furthermore, these high wages also appear to be greater than they really are, because the low cost and availability of the local externalized care market to perform necessary reproductive work, allows for longer work hours by relational-cognitive workers.

Biocapitalism continues to exploit all workers, and continues to exploit women, racialized peoples, and other marginalized identities at higher rates. It simply disguises this exploitation by creating narratives around certain types of work as more valuable than others and reducing essential work to the worst possible conditions so that other sectors can appear more valuable. This myth is perpetuated by convincing workers that their labor roles are no longer due to race, gender, geopolitics etc. but simply the type of work they do.

Shifting the narrative of identity as equivalent to labor role, to a system of individualization has allowed the labor structure to exist in largely the same format as before, simply having made room for a segment of women in the global north, and a select few from various identity groups, to take their places at the top of the pyramid, while the structures at the bottom remain largely the same. These narratives of progress can be just as dangerous to actual progress as not moving at all, as they can serve to disguise struggles, making it seem that collective struggles are personal ones, as the system appears to have evolved past them.

5. Reality TV and the Erasure of Labor

To narrow this wider assessment of the effect of narrative on actual labor structures to a specific example, one can return, at last, to Reality TV. Alison Hearn has written extensively on how RTV

shows function as products, but also as sites of production, exhibiting all of the interconnected global narratives and structures around labor within biocapitalism. Her work on the production practices of these shows demonstrates how perceived divisions and definitions of work affect the organization and remuneration of labor, and allow for the accumulation of huge profits through the exploitation of widespread precarized and feminized labor.

The narrative that the work of being an RTV star - the work of turning oneself into a branded persona – is "workless" and "natural," is the primary deception that allows for the exploitation of all of the other labor within its supporting networks. But the reality for an RTV star is a perpetual existence of living under scrutiny and doing the work of meeting societal expectations for the type of identity they present as. The work of being an RTV star centers on transforming the body, life, and persona into the most commercially salable version of their lives to target market demographics. Unsurprisingly, the subtexts that are most consumable fall into many problematic gendered, racialized, and class-based tropes with persistent underlying consumerist messaging. Writer Roxane Gay describes it succinctly:

> If reality television has any connections to reality, it is that women are often called upon to perform their gender, whether through how they present themselves and their sexuality, how they behave, and how they conform (or don't) to society's expectations for women. The repetition of gender acts in reality television becomes grossly stylized through artificially tanned skin, elaborate hair extensions, dramatic makeup, surgically enhanced bodies, and chemically injected faces. The acts become grossly stylized though bad behavior, often carefully orchestrated by producers.[29]

The production of extreme emotional affect, i.e., drama, is really the most universally acknowledged point of reality television and at the core of being a successful RTV star. The shows are built around pushing people to emotional extremes and filming the fallout, often by contriving forced confrontations fueled by alcohol, and based on the vested interest of everyone on and off camera in creating as messy a situation as possible.

RTV stars are well aware that their continued presence on these shows, their pay rates, and future career options depend on delivering usable, ratings grabbing performances, no matter the emotional toll. The work of being an RTV star is rooted in the labor currently deemed most valuable by biocapitalism: doing the relational - emotional labor of cornering the attention economy by constantly transforming the self to become more valuable.

The contracts and business strategies of the networks behind these shows reflect the importance of this brand building labor. Under RTV contracts, "a celebrity's public persona is considered to be a form of property" and its ownership is a vital driver of profit for networks.[30] They

work to “cultivate mini-celebrities in ‘house’ and lock down a percentage of participants’ future money-making potential via endorsements and brand extensions.” [31]

In the RTV labor model, the individual laborer shares ownership of themselves with a corporation, like owning stocks in a company. The star becomes an employee of their own brand, managing the business of their own life. The brands these RTV stars create do not belong to them, yet are completely entangled with their bodies, lives, and subjectivities and as such, is a type of work that the RTV star can never quit. With huge profits at stake, the lives and beings of these stars have to be directed down very specific paths. According to a former production supervisor:

> ALL of the wives are in on this. We discuss popular storylines from the season before, storylines that need tying up, and also ways of threading in new storylines that look organic to the story. Do you really think we spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on just following these women around with no plan? No, the season and the storyline have a basic outline from the first day.[32]

Thus, the reality of a branded self is not a life of worklessness that draws in wealth simply for existing in the public eye. The entire existence and personhood become subsumed into task fulfillment on behalf of the brand, resulting in alienation from a sense of self, as life and subjectivity become work on behalf of the company.

Yet, one of the primary on screen tropes of RTV is the invisibilization of work and the categorization of certain types of work as illegitimate. The marketing of these shows is as reality, meaning that inherent to the show is the minimization of any appearance of artificiality, or constructed lives. Thus, the central purpose of the show is built around the erasure of the work of building it. By coding this work of self-branding as leisure, the shows erase this labor and making biolabor appear to be natural and workless, and therefore undeserving of remuneration for RTV stars or anyone else performing similar work. The erasure of this labor trickles down into the rest of the production practices of the genre as well.

RTV does not simply refer to a genre of television determined by content, it “names a set of cost-cutting measures in broadcast television production.”[33] This refers largely to practices built around bypassing unions such as The Writers Guild of America, The Screen Actors Guild (SAG-AFTRA) and others, “in order to avoid having to provide industry-standard wages, benefits, and appropriate working conditions.”[34] By shifting from traditional scripted dramas to ‘unscripted’ RTV, the industry can claim it doesn’t require writers or actors whom are protected by unions.

This shift in language and public perception allowed outside workers to be brought in, breaking the power of those in the center, and allowing for a new level of low wages to become the accepted industry standard. The narratives promoted to the public about RTV revolved around the

democratization of the field, with "regular people" finally allowed to appear on stage, conveniently masking the cost benefits of onscreen talent no longer having to be paid by professional standards.

The basis of RTV is cheap production with high profits for the network, parent company, and corporate sponsors, "with an average cost per episode of US$300,000, as opposed to budgets in the millions of dollars per episode for scripted dramas."[35] The shows also capitalize off of bypassing writers and "rely[ing] on editors to build the story in the editing bay [...] simply renam[ing] writers segment or field producers."[36] By renaming labor, the industry is able to invisibilize the labor of production and undermine the bargaining power of the entire field.

Below the line workers such as production assistants, drivers, interns etc. are unrepresented by unions and face extremely exploitative working conditions, "often asked to work 18 hour days, seven days a week, and to go without lunch and dinner breaks, healthcare, benefits, pensions or over- time pay."[37] RTV has "product[ed] a whole new bottom tier of industry worker who is willing to suffer under precarious and exploitative conditions in order to get their foot in the door."[38] Furthermore, the material products that make up RTV stars' brand extensions (clothing lines etc.) that are a big source of revenue for the networks, are also typically made by invisibilized and underpaid labor that has been externalized to the Global South.

By invisibilizing the labor of the entire system of production, the industry is able to maintain the narrative that only the relational-cognitive brand building labor of the RTV star creates any value, yet this too has already been redefined as non-labor. Through the creation of narratives of non-work, and categorizing some types of work as more or less valuable than others, networks are able to justify their own high profits, and perpetuate the myth that low wages are simply the fault of individuals not working, or performing the wrong type of work. The interconnectivity of this labor system illustrates how narratives of non-work, immaterial work, or production free 'products' are always linked back to very real systems of production and that the repercussions of invisibilizing work at one point down the line, ripple out across the entirety of the labor network.

6. Visibilizing Work and Identity to Re-Claim Narratives

Though the current state of labor paints a bleak picture, to end on a more positive note, it is important to remember that narratives do not belong exclusively in the hands of power. Struggles over reclaiming and redefining narratives of identity, work, social value, and structures have been ongoing as long as these structures have existed and continue to grow. Resistance mobilizations such as the feminist strike, part of the fourth wave feminist movement rooted in Latin America, are fighting to visibilize the many forms of work and being that have been violently erased and undervalued by capitalist structures, and redefine work's connection to identity.

Veronica Gago defines feminist strike as revolving around the widespread acknowledgment that all labor is interdependent, important, and valuable, whether it is even considered to be work by the market, let alone valuable work. The fundamental tenet of the feminist strike is that it "maps new forms of the exploitation of bodies and territories from a perspective that is simultaneously that of visibilization and insubordination."[39] The strike exists "in a state of applied investigation," continuously naming and making visible work and workers that have before been invisibilized, naturalized, or externalized.[40]

This interconnectivity and recognition of labor in all its forms means that there can be no exteritorialization, no capitalist weaponization of the center against the margins and vice versa. By visibilizing and doing away with hierarchies of work and identities behind work, there is no opportunity to appease one group at the expense of another, further entrenching capitalism in more hidden corners. While the feminist strike recognizes the significance of each individual's struggles, it also recognizes that they aren't the same. There is significantly and crucially no attempt to flatten the plane of resistance and experience, to cut out identity and individual experiences and struggles for the sake of a unified whole. Differing from previous more mainstream and academic feminist movements that silenced differing experiences of race, class, sexuality, for the sake of unity.

The power of narrative is undeniable when it comes to shaping and maintaining the structures that control the conditions of everyday lives. But the thing about narratives, is that people can pick which ones to believe in, and even the most powerful ones are subject to change.

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OFFICE AESTHETICS: NARRATIVES AROUND CONTEMPORARY LABOR THROUGH REPRESENTATIONS OF OFFICE SPACES

Paola Jalili

Abstract
In today's office, work is equally carried out and narrated through aesthetics. The visual and textual representations of contemporary workspaces popularized by design and architecture firms, social media, and pop culture have a major influence in how we conceive work, how we value it, and how we perform it. This article presents the study of *office aesthetics*—a concept that designates the visual homogeneity of the architecture, interior design, and supplies found in offices throughout the world—and its relation to the narratives around work within the current neoliberal system, which perpetuate excessive, meaningless, and precarious labor, which is often gendered and racialized.

Keywords
Offices, Labor, Work, Labor Studies, Architecture, Design, Workspace, Precarious Labor, Gendering Processes

1. Introduction

Office Aesthetics is a research project that analyzes relevant literature on concepts such as work, labor, gender, post-work imaginaries, precarious and immaterial labor, as well as a visual study of contemporary office spaces. This second part is informed by architecture and design books, as well as online resources, which offer visual representations of offices,[1] that communicate a very particular narrative about labor and the workplace, which turned out to be completely opposite from the theoretical insights consulted for this paper. This narrative is constructed through the visual representation of offices as well as through the texts that accompany these images, both which create a rhetoric where work is everywhere, and where work is the only option.

This article uses both sources as a way of understanding the narratives around contemporary labor in a somewhat conflicting display of perspectives. By putting them side by side, they will hopefully present a wider perspective on what is labor today. What follows is a series of examples of how contemporary offices are built, designed, used, and promoted. Following this, there is an analysis of the relationship these spaces have with the way in which we narrate work, and suggest other possibilities of what that work could be—and look like—instead.

Figures 1, 2, 3, 4 (clockwise, left to right)

2. Open plan: *«People connected to people and not to desks or rooms»*

At present, open plan offices are one of the most popular office designs. However, the conception of this floor plan dates back to the 1950s, when it was rapidly disliked by those working there.[2] These open workplaces are often marketed—by both architects and the companies that decide to adopt them—as productivity boosting and facilitators of human interaction and creative collaborations, but many studies have proven quite the contrary, as open offices tend to be too loud and distracting for employees, as well as harmful for their physical and mental health.[3]

The internet-based companies that conformed what was known as the dot-bubble injunction[4] at the end of the last century brought with them an idea of the workplace as a mobile and dynamic space, which is perhaps one of its most notable and lasting legacies. To this day, new corporate discourses still claim to challenge "traditional" structures by using open floors, which they promote as democratic workplaces where all employees can interact and collaborate with each other freely. Let's take, for example, the following descriptions of advertising agency Leo Burnett Office in Singapore, and tech company Neology in Mexico City, respectively, which have adopted an open floor workspace:

> In this large open space the creative talent is united around a series of open-plan desks that allow for individuals to either collaborate or concentrate on their own.[5]
>
> With a focus on open-plan space, the office comprises only two enclosed environments—for private meetings, interviews or making important phone calls—and two management offices; although these are flexible enough to be adapted into make-shift meeting rooms when the senior directors are out.[6]

After seeing and reading about open offices, what I tried to analyze was if this change was truly a structural one or just a spatial redistribution of the same ways of performing waged labor. The second quote, for example, implies that the private management offices are not *flexible* enough, and that the same hierarchies that differentiate the "senior directors" from the rest of the employees remain quite visibly functional. This is relevant because the term *flexible* was a word that kept reappearing in many of the accounts of open plan offices consulted for this text. But as much as it was praised, I believe that it actually reflects, quite ironically, how work, even the kind which has been historically enjoyed by the most privileged amongst society, has become more and more precarious.

Melissa Gregg, for example, demonstrates that such flexibility in fact allows organizations to hire fixed-term contract employees who perform vital tasks without any of the benefits of regular, salaried job.[7] And, indeed, many of the offices reviewed were actually prepared for this "flexible" positions: there were plenty of "hot desks" ready for anonymous workers that would come to work only for a short period of time, or even whole offices "where no one had a fixed position [...] where all phones were mobile—people connected to people and not to desks or rooms."[8]

The concept of "flexibility," when seen through these office design "innovations," is most definitely related to precarity, as Gregg explains: "[i]n recent labor politics, 'precarity' has been used to describe the feeling of threat inherent to jobs with flexible conditions that bring an inevitable degree of financial and existential insecurity. For precarity theorists, labor conditions are a battle over a worker's relationship to time. Precarious work involves living with constant uncertainty."[9] While architects may claim that the work culture of the past century was inflexible and isolating,[10] and that today's culture is instead flexible and social, what these "flexible workspaces" manifest is quite the contrary. Flexibility here only means that organizations can now impose this financial and existential insecurity more easily, and at the same time they get to advertise proudly their *alternative open working spaces*.

The absurdity of this is much better described in the following testimony from David Graeber's *Bullshit Jobs,* in which Irene, a bank employee, succinctly describes what the term flexibility truly means in her workplace: "On top of the metrics, there were the cruel, patronizing

'flexibility' and 'mindfulness' seminars. No, you can't work fewer hours. No, you can't get paid more. No, you can't choose which bullshit projects to decline. But you can sit through this seminar, where the bank tells you how much it values flexibility."[11]

As this testimony points out, the supposedly "transformative" elements of the office are, in reality, only a discourse that organizations devise, propagate, but never actually put into practice when it comes to working conditions: from better economic compensations to creative development, nothing concrete is really improved by this rhetoric.

Instead, people in offices now find themselves working precarious jobs, just as many others in today's labor market. Srnicek and Williams, authors of *Inventing the Future,* relate this development of work as follows:

> Relative to the stable and well-paying careers of earlier generations, today's jobs typically involve more casual working hours, low and stagnant wages, decreasing job protections and widespread insecurity. This trend towards precarity has a number of causes, but one of the primary functions of surplus population is that it enables capitalists to place extra pressure on the lucky few who have found a job.[12]

As seen in this quote, "flexible" conditions only benefit employers, as they do not only gain more economically (by lowering wages, not offering benefits, and not committing to pay a fixed number of working hours) but also create a deeper sense of vulnerability for those looking for work and those working, a social phenomenon that the authors have somberly labeled as "the misery of not being exploited."[13]

Finally, there are also other, more evident and practical disadvantages to working in this type of open spaces. The most common complaint Melissa Gregg heard from the participants of her study (professionals from the areas of information, communication, and education) was that they couldn't *work at work*, meaning that their workplaces were routinely full of distractions[14] that made it impossible to fulfil their obligations there and, instead, had to be completed outside their working hours.[15] Although these distractions were not exclusively caused by the design of the workplace alone (constant emailing and meetings were other top distractions), being unable to concentrate in one single task can be traced to working in such spaces. Employees, then, have to work at home to complete their tasks. And when this extra work is done at home, it has very different implications for male and female workers, as we will see next.

Figures 5, 6, 7, 8 (clockwise, left to right)

3. Lobbies and reception areas: *«She is our pride and joy»*[16]

For many of those who are familiar with labor studies, it is clear that workplaces are organized by normative conceptions of gender, race, age, class, and sexual orientations. And in the images that represent and narrate the contemporary office, this becomes clear right away. “Cool” office design aims to attract young people, while older employees constantly feel uncertain about their place in such spaces, where age is perceived as a problem. The images of a successful businessman are often—if not always—those of a heterosexual, strong, cis, white man that can control his emotions.[17] Front and back doors are designed to regulate who is seen and who is not seen entering the office building; maintenance, cleaning, and other low-paid workers are even required to wear uniforms to distinguish them from the “white collar” employees.

It is important to acknowledge that all these factors intersect and shape the working conditions of many, in particular those in historically marginalized groups due to their race, ethnicity or class, and are just as important in any discussion and analysis of labor. This article, however, only focuses on how gender organizes the contemporary office, but it is good to remember that all these other elements are present in the workplace too, often found alongside gendering processes.

When analyzing offices, one does not have to go very far to find certain unmistakably gendered spaces. For this researcher, it did not take long to recognize that the lobbies and reception desks—the first area one sees when entering an office—were perhaps the most evident examples of how gender can organize and visually define the contemporary workplace. As I was searching for images of offices in design books, soon enough I realized that when I came across a photograph of a lobby in an office, a woman was behind the reception desk almost every time I saw such image, the alternative being a photo without any person in the frame. A search in *Office Snapshots*—an online source on global office design—threw mostly the same results: overall, women were sitting at reception, some desks were shared by a man[18] and a woman, and very few other photos featured a man alone.

The texts that were consulted for this research on office design kept repeating buzzwords like "alternative work habits,"[19] or insisting that their employees conform "a knowledge community that is in control of how it wants to work,"[20] but the reality shown by these images seemed to me very far away: while the *evolution of the workplace* might have taken place already in the blueprints designed by architects, the depiction of people, and in particular women, using these spaces proved the contrary.

Another aspect that is perhaps more important and influential here is the perception that many people *still have* of women in the workplace. The following extract from a text called "I'm the Manager, not the Receptionist," published in 2016 by Emily Dunn, relates precisely this:

> The number of interviews I have conducted where the candidate will speak over the top of me, direct the answers to the questions I have asked to the CEO and fail to shake my hand upon leaving is astounding. Yes, I have a notepad in front of me and take notes; no, this does not mean I am a secretary. Just last week I interviewed five males in a row. Of these five, only one made extended eye contact with me when answering the interview questions that I had asked. Three of the five only shook the CEO's hand.[21]

There is, it seems, a persistent perception of women in the office as those who are there to receive visitors, take notes, or follow the instructions of male workers. It is not a coincidence, then, that women appeared and reappeared in so many photographs of reception desks: these images, then, not only represent this disparity found within offices, but perhaps this depiction can also help perpetuate it.

Yet, the sources consulted proved that the gender stereotypes that organize the workplace are not only represented visually in the space—for example by the fact that mostly female employees are portrayed sitting at reception desks—but these stereotypes are also created by the people who work and interact in these spaces. Office workers constantly construct a *perception*

of women in the workplace by the ways in which they believe how women are supposed to perform work and which kind of careers they should follow. For example, Ulla Eriksson-Zetterquist's case study of a trainee program for young Business Administration graduates found out that the managers

> reproduced the picture of a normal man and a normal woman. A normal man is the person who can build a career with support from his family—the source of balance and harmony. A normal woman is the person who bears children, but with that follows a responsibility that makes a top career impossible. For her, the family is no source of balance and harmony but rather something that takes all her attention, at least from the company's point of view.[22]

Although the author explains that the managers in charge of this program were in fact aware of workplace gender inequalities, the quote above demonstrates that they could also not escape from the powerful influence that normative gendered perceptions generate regarding the career progression of women and men. So, although women do not face anymore a systemic imposition of certain roles within an organization, the perceptions that employees themselves have of them, particularly those in higher positions such as the managers, still play an important role in defining the kind of careers women end up pursuing.

Finally, this perception is not restricted only to co-workers. Yvonne Benschop and Hans Doorewaard's study on gendering in the Dutch banking system also revealed the aggravating perception of clients when assisted by female bank employees: "Female consultants, for instance, are regularly confronted with clients who think them secretaries [,] and women at the telephone help-desk of Loans report clients to ask explicitly for 'one of the men', even if they have to wait longer."[23] Benschop and Doorewaard's case study further demonstrates how influential gendered stereotypes are in society at large.

As mentioned earlier, other disturbing findings when it came to women in the office were related to their apparent innate nature as caregivers. Consider, for example, the following quotes that quickly relate female workers to emotional labor:

> The reliance on women workers also undoubtedly influenced the development of comfortable office environments, as employees bring with them the experience of creating such environments at home and the expectation of maintaining such comfort at work.[24]

> Women have been steadily more integrated into the workforce, and given much more meaningful roles. So have minorities and, lately, the elderly. This has humanized the workplace and made it more truly emotionally resonant and a more complete mirror of the rest of the life.[25]

These two quotes are a selection from many other similar statements that consistently equated women in the office with emotional labor, however oblivious of it the authors of those texts might have been. As it has already been established by many, the work that women have performed at home throughout history has not only been unremunerated but also invisibilized as the motor of capitalist production and surplus.[26] This labor, of care, of emotions, and mainly immaterial, that women have to perform often—both at home and at the workplace—is seen here as innate, as if women exclusively had the capacity to create nicer or more meaningful working environments, no matter that this task is most of the time unremunerated and not even acknowledged.

As administrative tasks entail many forms of emotional labor—as well as many others of material, physical work—, women are then immediately linked to them, no matter what their *actual* position is within the organization. Amanda Sinclair's study on bodies and leadership, for example, supports this view by analyzing the different ways in which leadership is embodied and expected from men and women. Her research discovered that "[w]omen in management roles—despite their seniority—are expected to answer phones, take minutes and embody nurturance through their tone of voice and demeanor."[27] Gender thus defines and differentiates the same job roles, expecting of women more labor than their male counterparts.

The link between female labor and emotional labor is further analyzed by Melissa Gregg, who actually found out that not only the liberating promises of new technologies reveal themselves false in the contemporary workplace, but that they in fact create even more work, particularly for women. This happens precisely due to the second shift women have had to fulfill historically at home after their "day job" is over: taking care of the children or elderly family members, as well as having to deal with all the domestic work usually by themselves.[28] As opposed to the quote cited before where we read that women are used to creating comfortable environments at home and expect the same from the office, what Gregg explains is that, instead, "women's extended history of working from home prepares them well for the mobile, multi-tasking, high-paced environment of the contemporary workplace."[29]

Gregg's study cases also showed that, aside from women being expected to perform (even with gratitude) affective labor on top of the other material aspects of their jobs (administrative or physical), mobile devices and new technologies only made women move "between various phases of a never-ending working day" at the office *and at* home, which no matter if they happened to be double income households, the woman would inevitably carry out more responsibilities and a heavier workload.[30]

The current global pandemic caused by covid-19, which has forced millions of people to work from home, has only made this dynamic clearer.[31] Aliya Rao, a sociologist specialized in gender and unemployment, focuses on the spaces mothers and fathers use to work from home

during the pandemic, and how this can also indicate gender inequalities: “When both partners work at home in dual-earner couples, I’m wondering how the space of the home will be shared. For instance, if men’s jobs are prioritized, does this mean that they will get dedicated spaces to focusing on paid work, potentially away from the noise of children, and women won’t?”[32] Once again, the extra work done from home tends to be unequally distributed between women and men, visually represented here through the use of these emergency home-work-spaces.

4. Home office: *«A home away from home»*

The office is nowadays not only a workspace, but a domestic space too. In the architecture sources researched for this paper, there were plenty of examples where companies deliberately searched for a home-like design and decor. Advertising agency TBW\CHIAT\DAY, for example, asked the architects in charge of redesigning their San Francisco headquarters “to refrain from using anything they would not wish to have in their homes.”[33] The Mexico City offices of design studio Archetonic, built on a structure that used to be a house in Lomas de Chapultepec residential neighborhood, also tries to merge an office space with a living space: “While some areas have been turned into traditional office environments, some still appear as though the space has been laid out for living in.”[34] Finally, a more extreme example of this tendency is that of Airbnb Sao Pablo’s offices, where they chose to replicate some of the houses rented on their platform “following the interiors to the letter. By setting a variety of rooms the designers created a mixture of environments that make up, quite literally, a home away from home. [...] Thus, the Airbnb office comprises sofas, not chairs; rotating work counters, not desks; and a yoga room.”[35]

There were many more examples of offices adopting home and domestic features during this research, but it was perhaps the concept of “resimercial design” that resonated the most. The term *resimercial* results from the combination of the words residential and commercial, and refers to “[a] layout and furnishing style that brings the homey feel of residential furniture into the workplace. Resimercial design celebrates commercial quality, residential-inspired features over the sterile and standardized feel of corporate furnishings.”[36] This approach to office architecture tries to distance itself from “old corporate” design, while encouraging the idea that personal and professional spheres should not be separated anymore:

> There was a time when keeping one’s personal life separate from the professional was good advice. But today, that no longer holds true. Younger employees don’t just want to work and go home—they look to form meaningful relationships with the colleagues they work with. Co-workers become more like extended families, often sharing meals, laughs or a post-work drink. Resimercial spaces cater to this change in professional behaviour much better than traditional offices.[37]

Plenty of examples were found that, like the quote above, described an image of work merging with one's private life as an ideal, a goal to aim for. The way texts like this were written really struck the author of this text, as the language they used reinforced and even normalized the fact that our private life should now be brought to and enjoyed within the workplace. This style seemed utterly cynical, even opportunistic, not to mention the fact that people's actual experiences in offices might be very far away from this rhetoric where, apparently, millennials "place 'my job' equally or even ahead of 'my family' as their dream," and "have their best friends at work—including best friends who are customers."[38]

The book *Dead Man Working* is a great example of what seems a more realistic portrait of life in an office, and even the extreme opposite of that uplifting language used in the quoted design sources. In this book, the authors relate with deep sorrow and hopelessness what they have defined as *a feeling of non-living* in various contemporary workplaces, from offices to warehouses.

Cederström and Fleming in fact emphasize the problematics of bringing home to the office by talking about a "formalized informality," which means that organizations demand from their employees *just to be themselves*[39] in order to profit from this imitation of life: "Extending workplace regulation by imitating life serves an important economic role when capitalism becomes super-reliant on human qualities like social intelligence, reciprocity, communication and shared initiative."[40] Then, when the workplace is presented as a space where you should not feel like you are working but perhaps just living, where you can decorate your working space with family photos or even play your favorite music, the reality of merging workspaces with home spaces can take away the freedom to live outside of work for many. And, at the same time, Cederström and Fleming's concept of *formalized informality* allows corporations to exploit people's social skills in a labor market that has become so reliant on content production, networking, creativity, and other forms of immaterial labor.

Finally, another important consequence of this phenomenon is that it can also diffuse the differences between the private and the public sphere in a more structural level. This is a reference to Kathi Weeks, who urges us to analyze the power relations found in the employment relationship, which according to her should not be conceived as an individual matter but as a systemic one. Weeks warns us that within this system, "[t]he workplace, like the household, is typically figured as a private space, the product of a series of individual contracts rather than a social structure, the province of human need and sphere of individual choice rather than a site for the exercise of political power."[41] In this same line, when office design adapts the workplace to make it feel as if it were a home space, it can also be supporting a system wherein the problematics of work are never addressed as an issue at large that affects all those who work in an office.

5. Conclusions

Workplaces, office design, and the architecture of these spaces clearly narrate the ways in which we work today, perhaps more so than the actual work we perform there. Thus, it is crucial to understand and question the narratives that are created in those spaces, since these discourses have larger implications in our lives as individuals and members of the society. My point of view is that, in this larger scale, one of the most important consequences of contemporary office design and its visual and textual narratives is that they support, promote, and perpetuate a work-centered society, an idea thoroughly explored by Frayne in his book *The Refusal of Work*.

The fact that many of the images that were presented in this text are also those feeding public imaginaries of office life is one of the reasons why I believe studying office aesthetics is important in any critical study of contemporary labor. While these offices are only a small percentage of the millions of offices around the globe, they are still positioned as an ideal—perhaps never reached by many—, something to keep working for until one gains a cubicle inside a cloud or a desk shaped like a wave. That is, this ideal is also supporting and maintaining the centrality that works holds in our society.

As I have tried to establish throughout this article, the office as a workplace is not the democratic, equal space that the narratives studied sought to present and promote. Perhaps the term that could best summarize this attempt is one of the buzzwords that kept reappearing in the sources consulted: "work-life balance." This concept—which is of course not particular to the realm of office design—creates an aura of individual control in which workers are portrayed as free agents that can determine the limits between work time and life time. And when it comes to work performed in offices, the term positions organizations as those who bestow this harmony to their employees, particularly through the kind of workspaces they provide.

The problem, it seems to me, is that the balance that turns out to be promoted is that in which employees have to balance work and life in the same space: the office. When the term work-life balance is used in this context, it might seem to indicate that new office design and labor practices are evolving to give people more time and space to pursuit personal interests outside their jobs, but in reality, that time and that space are actually just incorporated inside the workplace during work time, which then inevitably prolongates and even gets diffused with private time.

The concept of work-life balance erases the fact that life is also comprised of other types of labor that do not necessarily have to be waged but which allow our lives to be not exclusively within consumerism and commodity relations. In other words, while capitalism has shaped our worldview by establishing that we can only be inhabitants of this society as productive citizens who earn a wage in order to have a living, there are in fact many other aspects of life that require

a labor that is neither waged nor reproductive, but simply enjoyable and pleasurable, but which many do not have time to fulfill—perhaps because some of them are trapped in an office.

Picking mushrooms, practicing new printmaking techniques, or learning how to ride a bike without holding the handlebars—to mention some of the things I personally enjoy more than the jobs I have had in order to earn a living wage—are just some examples of activities which involve labor but are not waged nor do they have to balance out work in order to be satisfactory or relevant. I believe it is important to recognize these activities as a source of pure fulfillment and enjoyment and, most importantly, let them be outside capitalist and commodity relations in order to shape, perhaps, a new narrative around contemporary work and labor.

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[1] For examples of these images, you can visit the Office Aesthetics online archive, an ongoing project I curate: https://www.instagram.com/office.aesthetics/

[2] The landscape office plan was designed in the 1950s in Germany (called *Bürolandschaft*), where it soon became evident that such an open space for working "was chaotic and inhospitable to concentration," (Saval, *Cubed*); "made it more difficult for individuals to escape the scrutiny of their managers" (Budd, "The Office", 29); and simply became an excuse to overcrowd offices, not to mention how it produced anxiety (Knevitt, *Responsive Office*, 22).

[3] For a summary of recent published studies on open floor design and employee dissatisfaction, see: Anna Winston, "Open-plan office designs unpopular with workers and can damage productivity," *Dezeen*, November 21, 2014, https://www.dezeen.com/2014/11/21/open-plan-office-designs-unpopular-with-workers-damage-productivity/

[4] "The dotcom bubble, also known as the internet bubble, was a rapid rise in U.S. technology stock equity valuations fueled by investments in internet-based companies during the bull market in the late 1990s". Adam Hayes. "Dotcom Bubble." *Investopedia*, June 25, 2019.

[5] Judy Shepard, *The Office Idea Book* (New York: RSD Publishing, 2012), 186.

[6] Ana Martins, ed. *The Other Office 3,* (Amsterdam: Frame Publishers, 2018), 480.

[7] Melissa Gregg, *Work's Intimacy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 56.

[8] Philip Ross. "Typology: Offices." *The Architecture Review*, July 24, 2012.

[9] Gregg, *Work's Intimacy*, 154.

[10] The Nodal Office, according to the authors of *The 21st Century Office*, is "a response to the inflexible, isolating culture of 20th-Century headquarters buildings as hierarchical containers for work, populated by largely sedentary workforces unable to share ideas with clients or colleagues on account of the status-driven, departmental, static division of space." Jeremy Myerson and Philip Ross, *The 21st Century Office* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2006), 9.

[11] David Graeber, *Bullshit Jobs*, (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2018).

[12] Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future* (London: Verso, 2015).

[13] Ibid.

[14] It's no surprise, then, that "office pods" are some of the newest elements of the contemporary workplace: soundproof pods—around the same size as a phone booth—located in many open plan offices that employees can use to make phone calls or do any task that requires some degree of privacy (anyone can see them inside through their windows, though). An odd and intriguing sight for anyone who spots them for the first time in an office.

[15] Gregg, *Work's Intimacy*, 1.

[16] One of the participants of Benschop and Doorewaard's study describing the only female member of their team at a Dutch consultancy office said: "'We have this one woman in our department. She has a high position and she is our pride and joy.'" (Benschop and Doorewaard, "Covered by Equality", 792).

[17] For a study on the normative image of male workers as heteronormative, family men, see Joan Acker's "Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations."

[18] Many times, the man pictured there would be a security guard, i.e., not a receptionist.

[19] Martins, *The Other Office 3*, 346.

[20] Jeremy Myerson and Philip Ross, *Space to Work* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2006), 58.

[21] Emily Dunn, "I'm the Manager, not the Receptionist," *Medium*. May 1, 2016, https://medium.com/swlh/im-the-manager-not-the-receptionist-ce7ce2fbc99f

[22] Ulla Eriksson-Zetterquist, "Construction of gender in corporations," in *Casting the Other,* eds. *Barbara* Czarniawska and Heather Höpfl (London: Routledge, 2002), 101.

[23] Benschop and Doorewaard, "Covered by Equality", 800.

[24] Knevitt, *Responsive Office*, 54.

[25] Larry Keeley, "Work Waves," in *Workspheres*, 22.

[26] "Dalla Costa and James insisted that, despite what Marx both did and did not write, domestic labor is essential to the production of surplus value, and the site of its extraction is what they called the social factory." (Weeks, *Problem with Work*, 120.)

[27] Sinclair, "Leading with the body", 119.
[28] Pat Maniardi's *The Politics of Housework* wittily narrates how self-proclaimed left-wing men still won't do any housework while at the same time promote themselves as feminists and revolutionaries. The text, although published in 1970, still feels relatable, and it supports this view of women still having to deal with all the domestic labor, even in double income households and with partners who claim to believe in gender equality.
[29] Gregg, *Work's Intimacy*, 54.
[30] Ibid, 54.
[31] For a review on the global situation of working women around the world, see: Sandrine Lungumbu and Amelia Butterly, "Coronavirus and gender: More chores for women set back gains in equality," *BBC News*, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-55016842
[32] Anne Helen Petersen, "Who gets the office, who gets the kitchen table," *Culture Study,* 2020, https://annehelen.substack.com/p/who-gets-the-office-who-gets-the
[33] Matthew Stewart, ed., *The Other Office,* (Basel: Frame Publishers, 2004), 48.
[34] Martins, *The Other Office 3*, 199.
[35] Ibid, 94.
[36] Wayfair, "An Introductory Guide to Resimercial Design," https://www.wayfair.com/sca/professional/ideas-and-advice/interior-design/an-introductory-guide-to-resimercial-design-T4900
[37] "Home sweet work: The rise of resimercial office design." *Space Matrix*.
[38] Jim Clifton, "The World's Broken Workplace," *LinkedIn*, 2017, https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/worlds-broken-workplace-jim-clifton
[39] Carl Cederström and Peter Fleming, *Dead Man Working* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2012).
[40] Ibid.
[41] Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 4.

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BEHIND CLOSED DOORS: FROM FACTS TO NARRATIVES IN THE PHOTOGRAPHIC WORKS OF TARYN SIMON AND THOMAS DEMAND

Maribel Castro Díaz

Abstract
Photography, after reaching a sophisticated conceptual development in the last decades, is probably one of the most powerful art forms nowadays, and omnipresent in a hyper-narrative society; in this context, new discursive concerns are emerging. This study discusses artistic works made by Taryn Simon and Thomas Demand to examine how art photography questions the "documentary" quality of the medium in new ways. Blurring the boundaries between reportage, conceptualism and portraiture, Simon´s projects often deal with issues of power: *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamilar* (2007) makes visible matters that are usually concealed from the public audience, showing inaccessible or unknown places that are inherent to America´s foundation, mythology and daily functioning. Demand´s recreations of apparently mundane scenes explore the frictions between opacity and intelligibility, fiction and veracity. Both Simon and Demand take as subjects the media-based narratives and perceptions of reality, remarking the potential of photography as a vehicle of consciousness.

Keywords
Photography, Thomas Demand, Taryn Simon, Unfamiliar Sites, Media-based Narratives

1. Introduction

Photography is present in almost every aspect of our daily life and visual culture. Photographs were given a considerable amount of authority, since they supposedly tell us how the world is and what is important in it. David Campany explains how conceptual art photography involved a certain modernist "auto-critique": "...Photography is inherently representational, inherently descriptive... Within conceptualism photography reflected on itself not by looking inward to define a special or essential character but by looking outward to reflect on how mass culture understood photography, how it puts its descriptive character to use in everyday life."[1]

However, in the last decades, the photograph as an authoritative document has been largely examined, while postmodern practices have increasingly exploited its use as fiction and artifice. The supposedly indexical relationship between photography and its referent can be a form of fiction or narrative. Joan Fontcuberta affirms that "contrary to what history has instilled in us, photography belongs to the realm of fiction much more than that of evidence. *Fictio* is the

participle of *fingere*, which means "to invent". Photography is also pure invention. All photography. Without exception."[2]

An inherent trait of current photographic practices is that there is often an inclination to understand reality as something visual which in turn obscures the visibility of ongoing processes. Working with photographic images allows artists to credibly reveal (and therefore criticize) the artifice of constructions and media-based narratives, directing the attention beyond the subject itself. Photography is an elastic, hybrid medium, that can thus function as a construct, as a simulation, a substitution and, ultimately, as a proposition.

In the background of a contemporary society dominated by hyper-narrativity or storytelling[3], and the consequent excess of discursive narratives, art critic and curator Paco Barragán[4] proposes the concept of "credibility" as filter for those narratives. "Credibility, as this intangible quality, represents the condition-scale or filter when it comes to verifying the coherence of its narratives. The interrelationship between visual arts, politics and media allows us to frame the narrative power of society through its symbols, texts and images when manufacturing credible stories, even if they're not necessarily true."

The narrative is a form of manipulation which tends to fix a meaning according to a determined interest, frequently that of institutions of power. And this kind of manipulation demands a non-active spectator. Current practices assume that documentary will not be objective, since it will somehow involve a fiction, an opinion. Here the question arises as to what extent is there veracity or transparency in what is narrated to us as such? Facts are often more problematic than what we can see, than how they are presented. Also, Barragán notes, at present we are experiencing "complex relationships between a culture that is basically affirmative" and a visual arts that, while responding to the need of compromise with the society it takes part in, has generated critical and credible discourses that have been able to influence not only culture but also the sphere of that which is political."[5] We agree with the necessity of a more emancipated, participative culture that promotes critical thinking, where photography can play a fundamental role as a critical and analytical medium.

This study aims to reflect, from the analysis of the works by artists Thomas Demand and Taryn Simon, on how photography explores complex or disturbing facts of our recent and present history, examining prevailing narratives in which image-based images play a key role. Using photography in a way that opens up new questions about the documentary and narrative capacity of the medium, Demand and Simon address themes that depart from but complement those from recent art history such as conceptual art, postmodernism, relation between image and text, the "constructed" image, and the political image. Their sophisticated artworks push beyond

conventional thinking and make critique of the unconscious of the archive, of its partiality, its inconsistencies and exclusions.

The analysis of works presented in this research intends to be a vehicle for shedding light on the complicated relationship between facts and narratives, addressing issues of freedom and security, individuals and the state, and exploring rich concepts and themes that include secrecy and disclosure, violence, power, surveillance, territory, and the visible versus the hidden.

2. Thomas Demand: The stories behind reconstructed empty spaces

Thomas Demand makes large-scale color photographs of life-size paper models that recreate actual places, based on images he obtains from different sources, including the media and internet. Basically, As Roxana Marcoci[6] explains, Demand starts with an image, frequently from a photograph obtained from the media, newspapers or the internet, which the artist later translates into a three-dimensional life-size paper model. Once the model is ready, it is photographed with a large-format camera with telescopic lens to obtain the highest resolution and appearance of reality. After this, the model is destroyed, leaving us only with Demand's staged image. Then, the photograph is printed at a large scale and laminated with Plexiglas, displayed without a frame, which enhances the feeling of a new reality completely apart from the objects depicted in it.

Thomas Demand´s painstaking work really developed out of sculpture. His signature procedure always begins with an archive photograph; his work is based on pre-existing images from the media, often of sites of political or cultural interest. These spaces related to exceptionally charged scenes of political or cultural importance are appropriated from mass media. As Ralph Rugoff notes, the images "re-present existing information, rather than depict it."[7] Demand's appropriation of media imagery evokes a sense of familiarity. The viewer cannot identify the specific memory, but the images suggest locations we think we know. On many occasions, these apparently banal sites are linked to specific events of a disturbing nature, including some associated with crime and extreme violence.

In his images, Demand leaves small signs of the imperfection in the reconstruction, with subtle details such as tears or gaps in the paper as a way of signaling to the viewer that this is not a fully convincing reconstruction of a site. Sometimes we can see joins, the fit of a paper surface. His almost *trompe l'oeil* approach never attempts an absolute verisimilitude. As François Quintin explains,

> When you look at an image by Demand, everything seems uniform, regular, but traces of their making can still be seen in certain areas. Each detail gives warning: what you see is not what is shown. This fragile construction of cut and folded paper reveals its imperfections. "I don´t cut paper on purpose so that you can see how it was cut [Demand has

> said]. But it is true that at every stage I can choose whether or not to leave these visible flaws. Over time I developed a more acute sense of this kind of subtlety. That, maybe, is the perfection my efforts are directed at. [8]

The idea that photographs are indexical is crucial to Barthes´s arguments in *Camera Lucida*. This notion is true in Demand´s photographs; the images are indexical to their paper models. However, the models are mediatized simulacra. According to Baudrillard, contemporary society is dependent on models, symbols, and signs; we have replaced all reality with a simulation of reality.[9] Baudrillard suggests that contemporary society no longer has the capacity to distinguish between what is real and what is artificial. The simulacrum omits the distinction between reality and its artificial representation.

Demand´s scenes (typically devoid of people) may have a banal, dull appearance, but they recreate places that hold a key role in frequently controversial narratives. These photographs often repeat the scheme of what we could call *the scene of a crime*, since they frequently depict places of special historical or political significance, or sites where crucial events took place, even if we never witnessed them.

Every image serves as a replica of something rather transposed or translated without human touch.[10] These psychologically charged spaces induce feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and isolation. They lead the viewer to question what act or event they might be intruding upon or a witnessing. In his book *The Architectural Uncanny,* Vidler discusses Freud's concept of the "unhomely". Freud's concept refers to an instance where an environment or feeling is familiar yet foreign at the same time.[11]

When standing before one of Demand´s photographs, the viewer goes through a two-stage response to them: A first stage in which the image seems unexceptional, cold and abstract, and a second moment in which the viewer perceives there is something missing or wrong and starts to detect that the scene is not but a reconstruction of a place. At first glance, images appear ahistorical, tricking the viewer into thinking that their appearance is merely aesthetic.[12] According to François Quintin, as soon as the viewer discovers Demand's photographs are re-creations of actual places, they encounter a "psychological strangeness."[13] This strangeness in Demand´s images is also reinforced by a lack of information there should be in the elements of the images: ballots with no writing or marks in them, boxes and bottles with no labels. No signs of use or wear -no coffee stains, no dirt, and of course, no human presence at all. In "Thomas Demand: Phototrophy", Rugoff notes this noticeable absence of signs of use. Demand omits graphics, such as the text on a piece of paper, logos on household items, or numbers on the buttons of a phone.[14]

Demand provokes the viewer to become a voyeur.[15] The minimalist aesthetic in the images makes it difficult for the viewer to experience any kind of empathetic projection. The viewer, thus, is emotionally and imaginatively apart. Something was there, and something that was linked to this place, to these objects, to this title, to the story hidden behind the surface of things, but nothing in the image seems to vibrate. The artist explains:

> I´m sitting in the very same media world as you are, and I realise that there are places that we all know but have never set foot in. And I feel that it´s a lot better to stay in these places and reinterpret what´s there than to invent new things. It´s a kind of privatisation of the public world of images instead of just going along with creating more and more new images that compete with each other [...][16]

Regarding Demand´s work, Charlotte Cotton affirms:

> It makes for hyperconscious stance, as we look for narrative form despite the in-built warning signs that this is staged, therefore unreal, place. The closeness with which we as viewers are place to the scenes and the large scale of the works makes us less and audience looking into an empty stage and more investigators of how little of a physical subject, and how much of the photographic approach, we need in order to start the process of imagining meaning and narrative.[17]

Thomas Demand has typically addressed contemporary events of recent history of Germany. In *Room* (1994), Demand replicates a photograph of Hitler´s bunker at Rastenburg, East Prussia, after the failed bomb attempt on his life in 1944. A mundane sight turns out to be the coded representation of a political incident. Another photograph with Nazi associations is *Archive* (1995). The picture refers to Leni Riefenstahl´s film archive; Riefenstahl was the maker of *Triumph of the Will*, the famous propaganda film about the Nazi´s Party rally in Nuremberg in 1934. Getting back to another historical time, *Office* (1996) recreates the East Berlin headquarters of the Stasi secret police: A room with crumpled papers all over, based on images of Stasi offices following the collapse of East Germany in 1989.

With a forensic style, *Bathroom (Beau Rivage)* (1997) recreates a photograph of a bathtub in a hotel where Uwe Barschel, a well-known German politician was found dead in mysterious circumstances in an apparent election scandal in 1987. Scenes like these invite the viewer to try to discover through the details of the image the key to solve what happened. The narrow point of view, square bath tiles, and angled composition of Demand's photograph replicate those of the original photograph seen on the cover of *Stern* magazine.[18]

In *Tavern* (2006), a series of 5 photographs depicts five corners in a bar in the German village of Burbach, where in 2001 a boy was kidnapped and eventually killed. The story, extensively covered in the media, appalled the German public. Apparently, everything in the image is clean, walls lit with sun. There are no signs of any crime here, but since we are aware that something horrible happened, the smallest details suddenly acquire an enormous metaphorical weight.

Parallel to his attention to events happened in his own country, Demand has also turned his artistic gaze to relevant events and secret stories happened in America. In his photograph of 1996 titled *Corner*, Demand recreates the dormitory room where Bill Gates created his first computer operating system. Made in the same year, *Room* depicts the hotel room in which L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology, wrote *Dianetics*. Two apparently banal stances in which two still unknown people would work in creations that would become game-changers worldwide.

A more sinister image, *Corridor* (1996), depicts a hallway that leads to the apartment that belonged to American serial killer, Jeffrey Dahmer (1960–1994). The hallway appears pristine, without any clue that would allow identification. The viewer may imagine something lurking within the image as the ceiling lights highlight one door, that of Dahmer’s apartment.

For *Poll* (2001), Demand reproduced images of the Palm Beach County Emergency Operation Center, where the recount for the 2000 United States presidential election took place: A manual recount of around 425000 ballots would (legitimately) determine whether Al Gore of George W. Bush would be president of the United States. Images like *Poll* have, by virtue of its omnipresence in the media, crystalized in public imagination. The laborious process of manually recounting thousands of votes is echoed by Demand's meticulous reconstruction of the scene in paper. In relation to this work, Demand explains:

> If images like the ones I use in “Poll” can be traced to ones transmitted by the media—that is, to a context with its own set of meanings—then the work will naturally have entirely different connotations, which, in turn, have to be conceived of differently. But what one might be justified in calling a dehistoricized effect is perhaps related to the influence that digital image production and distribution on the Net have had on our conception of reality.[19]

Besides his photographs, some film works by Thomas Demand also fit the same narrative pattern. *Tunnel* (1999) explores the passage through a model of the tunnel resembling the one in Paris where Princess Diana died in 1997. In the words of Michela Parkin:

> *Tunnel* is intended to evoke the idea or the memory of such a journey, rather than to simulate the experience of any actual event. It is closer in feeling to the images that form in the mind while dreaming, or when thinking about what it might be like to travel

> through an underpass, for instance. The audience is taken on a succession of endlessly repeated drive-throughs of a strangely familiar yet unidentified place, an archetypal, entirely non-specific tunnel. It could be any tunnel. One does not need to have been there to feel that one knows it well. Some might be reminded of a fateful night in Paris, but Demand is careful not to limit readings of the work by linking it to any one interpretation or event. The absence of any characters, obvious narrative, or action, invites the viewer to engage in a process of speculation and personal identification with the work.[20]

Demand is fascinated by the nature of perception and the way in which media-generated images structure our experience of the world, to the point where they become more real than reality itself. The deliberately vague titles of his photographs (*Office*, *Room*, *Tunnel*...) and the absence of human figures or obvious narrative let the audience enter the image as if they entered an empty stage or filmset, projecting their own stories. The viewer is encouraged to decipher the significance of the space and the human acts or story that might have taken place there, looking for a narrative.

In his essay "Interpreting the Void: Architecture and Spatial Anxiety", Vidler suggests that "...all space has a history, or even many histories," if it is correlated with economic, political, and social forces.[21] Demand's sculptures and photographs attempt to recapture the plainness or innocuousness of historically violent spaces; the artist achieves a basic, incorrupt first impression of a content-charged space.

As much as Demand copies and reproduces the world, he also describes it. And description is rarely neutral, even when everything is described in an extremely plain and uninflected way. These images have an unequivocally emotional flatness, somehow equivalent to the prose of a police report. And perhaps there resides the disturbing.

3. Taryn Simon: America´s hidden sites and forbidden objects

Conceptual artist Taryn Simon has already become one of the leading visual anthropologists of American culture. In terms of her creative intentions and conceptual approach, Simon is at the vanguard of a relatively new kind of photography that evades simple categorization and often blurs the boundaries between reportage, conceptualism and portraiture. Simon moves between documentary photography and fine art practice, bringing the real world and politics into galleries and museums.

Just like Thomas Demand´s, Taryn Simon´s images involve painstaking creative processes, leading to projects that end up being incredibly laborious. Taryn Simon's photographic work is characterized by its complexity and ambition and has always shown a powerful critical and political approach. Interestingly, most of Simon's work process is not exactly photographic; it

involves researching, searching for people, places and data, collecting information, obtaining permission to access her subjects, analyzing. She is meticulous, to the point of being obsessive, in her preparation and research. The act of taking photographs is only a very small part of the process.

Simon´s photographs do not have the aesthetic of reportage we are more used to, with the appearance of the "real": hand-held camera, grainy film, casual framing of the scene... Instead, her images are carefully lit, hyper-realist, presented in high definition that put an extreme focus in the places and things that are kept hidden from the society. Simon´s main concern is with the hidden or overlooked, as evinced by two of her books, *The Innocents* (2003) and the acclaimed *An American Index of the Hidden and the Unfamiliar* (2007).

An American Index of the Hidden and the Unfamiliar is series of 70 photographs made over five years, in the midst of a national identity crisis post 9/11, of some of America's hidden objects and sites: a nuclear storage facility, the interior of the CIA headquarters, an avian quarantine facility and a cryopreservation unit where bodies are frozen just after death, among others. One the one side, the book is a collection of curiosities—including an image of a Braille edition of Playboy, a hibernating bear, an inbred white tiger and a stacks of sexual assault kits awaiting DNA analysis. But it is also an elliptical portrait of America at a crucial and anxious moment in its history.

An American Index delves deep into a secret vision of America in images that are distant and threatening at the same time. "Over a five-year period following September 11, when the American media and government were seeking unknown sites beyond its borders, most notably weapons of mass destruction," Simon said of the project, "I chose to look inward at that which was integral to America's foundation, mythology, and daily functioning. I wanted to confront the boundaries of the citizen, self-imposed and real. And confront the divide between privileged and public access to knowledge."[22]

Getting access to certain subjects takes time, effort, and commitment. Also, patience, tenacity and strong diplomatic skills are needed to access some organizations not known for their openness, such as the Church of Scientology, the Ku Klux Klan and the Prisoner of War Interrogation Resistance Programme run by Team Delta, a private body run by former US military personnel. Ironically, one of the few organizations that denied her access was Disney, whose spokesperson sent her a fax that read: "Especially during these violent times, I personally believe that the magical spell cast on guests that visit our theme parks is particularly important to protect, and helps to provide them with an important fantasy they can escape to."[23]

According to the introductory essay on the book *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*, Simon "assumes the role of a shrewd informant while invoking the spirit of a collector of curiosities, culling from the diverse domains of science, government, medicine,

entertainment, nature, security, and religion. One commonality persists in her chosen subjects: each remain relatively unknown or out-of-view to a wider public audience. These are the hidden and unfamiliar."[24] The project works, indeed, as an inventory of elusive, hidden and otherwise controlled spaces within the United States. Examining sites from within the fields of government, defence, science, industry and religion, Simon blurs the divide between those with the privilege of access and those without, reflecting on both the workings and mythologies of America in the process.

As Aaron Schuman states, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* "is so far, the twenty-first century's finest response to a longstanding tradition within American photography, described by Robert Frank in his own 1954 Guggenheim application as, 'The making of a broad, voluminous picture record of things American, past and present... *American Index* presents a resolutely more obscure collection of curiosities, but just as accurately reflects the United States at a very particular point in its history... Whereas earlier photographers sought to define America through that which was common – 'elevating the casual, the everyday and the literal into specific, permanent symbols'– Simon chooses to symbolize the country's current incarnation precisely through that which is official, exceptional and freakishly extraordinary."[25]

Paradoxically, while the title states that the body of the project is an index, Simon´s images are not mere documents. According to Jung Joon Lee, Simon "challenges the indexical value of her photographs by suppressing events or narratives in them, letting them unfold when the photographs are joined by the text. These texts are products of year-long investigations and studies of her objects. Most of the seventeen images on view lack the events that we often look for in photographs, such as events or drama; some are very abstract, even uncanny. Yet the texts reveal intensely complex issues selected by the artist such as a physician-assisted suicide and nuclear waste storage."[26] Each image is accompanied by a brief text written by the artist, that precisely explains what is seen and why it is hidden or off-limits. After reading these combinations of text and image, the viewer is allowed to grasp what is at stake in these images, abstract and uncanny. Taryn Simon explores photography´s intertextuality through the use of literary documentation as an extension of the photographic image, enhancing its documentary value.

In the introduction to the book, Salman Rushdie wrote: "Ours is an age of secrets. Above, beneath and beside what Fernand Braudel called the 'structures of everyday life' are other structures that are anything but everyday, lives about which we may have heard something but of which we have almost certainly seen nothing, as well as other lives about which we have never heard, and yet others in whose existence it is hard to believe even when we are shown the pictorial evidence."[27]

Simon´s projects are complex and multilayered, but also direct and engaging. They are often focused on issues of power, mainly American power, at a historical moment when governance and power structures are destabilizing and changing. In her later work *Contraband* (2010) continues to explore faces of the post-9/11 America and cast light on the global networks that are hidden just out of sight.

Contraband consists of a book with 1075 photographs of items confiscated by US customs and the US postal service international mail facility at John F Kennedy international airport, New York, during a week in 2009. The seized items include various drugs (Xanax, anabolic steroids, Ritalin, ketamine, hashish), counterfeit jewelry, bags, DVDs and watches as well as several kinds of plants, seeds, grass, and foodstuffs. Among the more extravagant confiscated substances are deer antlers, deer blood, deer penis and deer tongue, as well as cow-dung toothpaste. Simon photographs these cleverly concealed packages, often carefully arranging them in symmetrical compositions that are strangely pleasing to the eye.

Contraband is an inventory of the illegal and the prohibited. But it's also a comment on the ingenuity, both of those attempting to bring banned goods into America and of those who try and prevent the illegal traffic of goods across international borders. *Contraband*, in both its style and content, shares similarities with another inventory-style book made in another airport: Christien Meindertsma's *Checked Baggage* (2004), a record of the 3264 prohibited items seized at Schiphol, Amsterdam, in a single week[28]. This project was made in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in New York, when increased airport security meant that many ordinary items carried by passengers – nail scissors, corkscrews, tweezers, lighters, hairspray, toy guns – were suddenly viewed as dangerous objects, as potential weapons that could be used in a mid-flight terrorist attack. Meindertsma categorized and photographed all of the 3264 prohibited objects on a white seamless background as if for a sales catalog.

Hans Ulrich Obrist, curator and art historian, draws clear connections between *Contraband* and Simon´s previous works[29], like *The Innocents* (2002), where "Simon investigates photography's function as a credible eyewitness and arbiter of justice" or *An American Index,* "which, like *Contraband*, is an almost anthropological view of America, as told through its material life, its secret history of things. She confronts the divide between public and expert access through an investigation of that which is little known but at the very foundation of America's mythology and daily functioning".

Combining the visual and the textual powerfully, Simon´s work is sophisticated in terms of contemporary art practice but also tightly connected to the real world and its narratives. Taryn Simon´s commitment with the present is undeniable. Salman Rushdie states:

> In a historical period in which many people are making such great efforts to conceal the truth from the mass of the people, an artist like Taryn Simon is an invaluable counter-force. Democracy needs visibility, accountability, light… Somehow, Simon has persuaded a good few denizens of hidden worlds not to scurry for shelter when the light is switched on, as cockroaches and vampires do, but to pose proudly for her invading lens […][30]

Both *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar* and *Contraband* say much about contemporary America. Although they force us to confront the darker side of democratic society, they also convey the fascination that attends the exploration of forbidden territories, objects and realities.

4. Conclusions

In this study, we have explored how the photographic work of Thomas Demand and Taryn Simon is much concerned with the authority and power of images, what is revealed and what is not shown. The direction of their interrogation into truth takes as its subject the media-based perceptions and representations of reality. Narrativity as an essential and key theme in recent years, both in art and photography, will be one the negotiating points for the image of today and of the future.

Both Thomas Demand and Taryn Simon develop complex relations with the photographic medium and its power as document, or index. They raise new questions through photographs that are paradoxically indexical and that challenge media-based narratives. Their works ensure that photography becomes a vehicle of consciousness as much as a form of testimony to seeing anew.

In some way, Thomas Demand´s photographs are about the meanings we ascribe to things, what we know and what we project. Demand's photographs of contemporary events work as images that appear to be at once realistic, yet also strangely anonymous, abstract, and vacant, producing an uncanny and anxious combination of the alien and familiar. As viewers, we are invited to virtually enter those empty stances where crucial or terrible things once happened, places we did not know that existed, and that we could only know through the media.

A desire to uncover unknowns, understand their purpose, and display their impressive - in many different ways- appearance motivates a great part of Taryn Simon's work. She makes use of the annotated-photograph's capacity to engage and inform the public and transforms that which is off-limits or under-the-radar into a visible and intelligible form, confronting the divide between the privileged access of the few and the limited access of the public.[31]

Visual storytelling always requires positioning, sometimes ethical positioning. There must be a responsibility in the way the media and photographs are used and arranged, a commitment in the ways of targeting ideologies, and also of working with poetic capacity. When constructing visual narratives, questions about what to tell, which stories are more authentic than others, and which narratives should be generated become relevant. Neither Thomas

Demand nor Taryn Simon´s projects are preeminently critical, or at least do not have any political agenda. Rather, they share a strong commitment to the facts and challenge the narratives in an attempt to open other ways of thinking and acting.

Perhaps today more than ever, we should ask ourselves if a picture is worth a thousand words. Paradoxically, photography is capable of revealing, with its apparent objectivity, a radically non-objective word. Within this context, it might be asked if the photographic narrative can bring us closer to the "real" world or if, on the contrary, the image is what keep us at a distance. In short, photographs like the ones analyzed in this study might function as a question about reality and its position with respect to us.

When we look behind the curtain, we may realize that what we have come to rely on, the institutions that are supposed to guarantee our security, the people in charge of important issues, the actual places in which decisions are made, are actually crumbling. Seeing the reality of things is not going to solve the inner problems, but at least it may create further awareness and help understanding the complexities of contemporary society. Thomas Demand and Taryn Simon invite an interrogation about the "truth" of representation. Thanks to their photographic projects, we are presented a way of accessing to these sites and facts that we were not supposed to know. All these things that happen behind closed doors. [32]

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[1] David Campany, *Art and Photography* (New York/London: Phaidon, 2003), 18.
[2] Joan Fontcuberta, *El beso de Judas. Fotografía y verdad* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili), 1997, 167.
[3] Paco Barragán defines the contemporary narrativity or storytelling as a hyper-narrativity that has literally infected all fields of society, from the state bureaucracy to the economy to mass media and politics. See Barragán, Paco, "Narrativity as Discourse, Credibility as Condition: Art, Politics and Media Today". PhD diss., Universidad de Salamanca, 2020. https://gredos.usal.es/handle/10366/145323
[4] Paco Barragán, "Narrativity as Discourse, Credibility as Condition: Art, Politics and Media Today". PhD diss., Universidad de Salamanca, 2020, p. 430. https://gredos.usal.es/handle/10366/145323
[5] Paco Barragán, 429.
[6] Roxana Marcoci, "Paper Moon", in *Thomas Demand*, exh. Cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2005), pp. 9-10.
[7] Alexander Kluge, "A Conversation Between Alexander Kluge and Thomas Demand," in *Thomas Demand at the Serpentine Gallery, 2006* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2006), 7.
[8] François Quintin, "There is No Innocent Room," in *Thomas Demand,* exh. cat. (Paris, London, and New York: Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain and Thames & Hudson, 2000), 52.
[9] Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 6.
[10] Stephen Horne, "Thomas Demand: Catastrophic Space," *Parachute* 96 (October/December 1999): pp. 21-24.
[11] See Freud, Sigmund, David McLintock, and Hugh Haughton. *The uncanny* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003). See also Anthony Vidler, "Unhomely Houses," in *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 23.
[12] Ulrich Baer, "End of a World: On Thomas Demand's Photography," in *Thomas Demand: L'Ésprit D'Escalier*. Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2007, 87.
[13] Quintin, "There is No Innocent Room," 53.
[14] Ruggoff, "Introduction," 6.
[15] Katya Tylevich, "Hide and Seek," *Mark* 25 (April/May 2010), 159.
[16] See Morris, Robert "Notes on Sculpture, Part 1" in *ídem, Continuous Project Altered Daily: The Writings of Robert Morris* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1993), 15.
[17] Charlotte Cotton, *The Photograph as Contemporary Art*. (London/New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), pp. 73-74.
[18] Alexander Kluge, "A Conversation Between Alexander Kluge and Thomas Demand," in *Thomas Demand at the Serpentine Gallery, 2006* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 2006), 19.
[19] Yilmaz Dziewior, "100 Words: Thomas Demand". *Artforum* vol. 39, nº 9. (May 2001).

[20] Michela Parkin, "Art Now. Thomas Demand. Online exhibition guide, Tate Britain, London 1999. https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/exhibition/art-now-thomas-demand (accessed March, 8th, 2021).
[21] Anthony Vidler, "Interpreting the Void: Architecture and Spatial Anxiety", *The Subjects of Art History: Historical Concepts in Contemporary Perspectives* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 292.
[22] Taryn Simon, "Photographs of Secret Sites". Filmed July 2009 in Oxford, UK. TED video, 17:09. https://www.ted.com/talks/taryn_simon_photographs_of_secret_sites?language=en
[23] Taryn Simon, "Photographs of Secret Sites". Filmed July 2009 in Oxford, UK. TED video, 17:09. https://www.ted.com/talks/taryn_simon_photographs_of_secret_sites?language=en
[24] Elisabeth Sussman & Tina Kukielski, Introduction from *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*. http://tarynsimon.com/essays-videos/docs/Introduction%20from%20An%20American%20Index%20of%20the%20Hidden%20and%20Unfamiliar_Elisabeth%20Sussman%20%26%20Tina%20Kukielski.pdf
[25] Aaron Schuman, "American Surfaces: Taryn Simon´s *An American Index of the Hidden and the Unfamiliar*", *Spot*, Houston Center of Photography (2007).
https://aaronschuman.com/tarynsimon.html
[26] Jung Joon Lee. "Photography's Intertextuality." Afterimage 35, no. 1 (2007), 28.
[27] Salman Rushdie, Foreword from *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*. Taryn Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*. Exh. cat., Whitney Museum of American Art. (Göttingen: Steidl, 2007), 8-9.
[28] Christien Meindertsma, *Checked Baggage: 3264 prohibited items* (Eindhoven, Netherlands: Soeps Uitgeverij, 2004).
[29] Hans Ulrich Obrist, "Ever Airport: Notes On Taryn Simon´s *Contraband*" (2010). http://tarynsimon.com/essays-videos/docs/Ever%20Airport_Hans%20Ulrich%20Obrist.pdf. Originally published in Taryn Simon, *Contraband*. Göttingen: Steidl/New York: Gagosian Gallery, 2010.
[30] Salman Rushdie, Foreword from *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*. Taryn Simon, *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*. Exh. cat., Whitney Museum of American Art. (Göttingen: Steidl, 2007), 9.
[31] Elisabeth Sussman & Tina Kukielski, Introduction from *An American Index of the Hidden and Unfamiliar*. http://tarynsimon.com/essays-videos/docs/Introduction%20from%20An%20American%20Index%20of%20the%20Hidden%20and%20Unfamiliar_Elisabeth%20Sussman%20%26%20Tina%20Kukielski.pdf

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ON NARRATIVE HYPERSIGN AND FEMININE IMAGINARY: AUDREY FLACK´S *PHOTOREALISM*

Manuel González de Ávila

Abstract
Many theorists of the image do prefer to see in it an ineffable epiphany, a presence or gift for the senses that heralds, above all, the advent of form, colour, texture and the other features of perceptual experience, even when the image refers the world.The paintings in Audrey Flack's *Photorealism* series seem to have been conceived by its author to simultaneously confirm and invalidate this hypothesis about the existence of a pure semiotics of the image. Saturated with sensible qualities, they nevertheless constitute a language of visual hypersigns capable of putting together a story, and of constructing an argumentation, about the feminine condition contemporary of its production. That while still wrapping story and argumentation in a *pop* aura, and in an apparent celebration of *kitsch*, behind which hides, to better reveal itself to the attentive viewer, a sophisticated inter-artistic and inter-discursive elaboration, that turns them into the thinking and acting devices of a feminism both tender and ironic.

Keywords
Audrey Flack, *Pop Art*, *Kitsch*, Irony, Feminism

Picture 1: Audrey Flack, *Pretty Woman* (1972-1973), oil and acrylic on canvas, 181x243cm. Image copyright fair use.

1. Introduction

Is it feasible to narrate the status of women (of a certain class of women) at the end of the last century, the height of the feminist movement, through the appropriation of the historical resources of art, subjected to a process of radical updating? Such appears to be the issue of paintings like these, most of which belong to the *Photorealism* series, made by Audrey Flack from roughly 1971 to 1981.

Picture 2: Audrey Flack, *Energy Apples* (1976), oil and acrylic on canvas, 121x122cm. Image copyright fair use.

Whoever contemplates them, after the first aesthetic surprise, cannot but feel admiration for its technical quality, its semantic complexity and its cultural density.

2. Some paintings with a lot of art

The viewer immediately perceives them through a triple inter-artistic filter, made up of the languages called to contribute to its genesis, the pictorial genres taken up and the aesthetic movements requested there —Audrey Flack[1] is a highly learned creator.

The very title of the collection, *Photorealism*, unambiguously declares the languages chosen for its conception: those of the consolidated tradition of realistic painting, and of the hyper-realist one,

Picture 3: Audrey Flack, *Queen* (1976), oil and acrylic on canvas, 203x203cm. Image copyright fair use.

in the process of institutionalization; and, at the same time, those of photography, whose codes of production and recognition of images take pleasure in mimicking these works, albeit superimposing a hyperbolic prosody on them.

Regarding the recovered genres, critics detected, from the beginning, the *still life* and the *vanitas*, rewritten for the occasion with a neo-baroque spirit that anticipated, from the point of view of practice, the forging of this concept by Omar Calabrese in 1987[2]. With one caveat: what is dead, in these "dead natures" – its designation in Spanish, “naturalezas muertas” – is not nature, but culture, since they are highly artificial pictures. As for the aesthetic movements absorbed in Flack’s paintings, they are, of course, those the artist was responsible for processing and transforming in her time: *pop*, its *camp* derivation, and also, in particular, what concerns to object art — and to the industrial design that constitutes its substrate. Movements, all of them, characterized by a determined *trans* vocation (trans-linguistic, trans-generic, trans-aesthetic).

3. An art with a lot of discourse

But this accumulation of appropriations and anticipations would be a mere exercise in style if it was not for the fact that Flack’s *still lifes* and *vanitas*, a display of dazzling visual insights, equally possess a rare narrative eloquence, which is not far from becoming *dianoia*, a discursive reason.

The works in the *Photorealism* series, in effect, narrate and argue with a constancy, and in a plurality of registers, that overwhelms the beholder. Confronted with the previous images, and with others like the following, one reads in them, from the outset, a clear confession about the seductions of the discourse of advertising, its internal referent:

Picture 4: Audrey Flack, *Rolls-Royce Lady* (1981), oil and acrylic on canvas, 50x60cm. Image copyright fair use.

However, this advertising discourse emerges, from the painting, in such an emphatic way that it requests a less obvious reception on second-degree: the one that we would grant to typical research, in communication theory, regarding advertising as the main architect of the social imaginaries of the

Picture 5: Audrey Flack, *Chanel* (1977), oil and acrylic on canvas, 142x208cm. Image copyright fair use.

of late capitalism. Imaginaries culturally marked by *kitsch*, and economically determined by the fetishism of merchandise: the integral aestheticization of life, in which the logical cause of the end of art has been seen[3], corresponds to the belief, studied by the social sciences since Marx, that material goods are the axiological center of human life; and that from them derive all the values we can aspire to (and, especially, apart from beauty, happiness and security, these post-modern versions of truth and good).

The jewels, bibelots and dressings, superabundant in Flack's paintings, compose a sort of catalogue of industrial beauty. And they are, at the same time, the instruments with which the existential experience of the mass subject is manufactured. A subject surrounded and harassed by its polished and gleaming mechanized perfection.

Anyway, they are not about the experience of any subject, but, as we have already mentioned, about that of a woman; or, better, of a certain model of a contemporary woman, summoned as the phantom that inhabits the inert matter of the fetish.

Because the series of neo-baroque *still lifes* and *vanitas* by Audrey Flack, in addition to displaying, with visual means, the objective (embedded in objects) narration of the mass consumer's destiny, as the theory of communication and the social sciences would do with verbal means; and, in addition to auguring, through the plastic excess they lend to such objects and its representation, the extinction of art and its replacement by a multiplication of *simulacra* of beauty, as aesthetic theory would do, also supports a consistently feminist discourse: the discourse who announces and denounces, at the same time, that —Simone de Beauvoir wrote this sentence a few years before the public presentation of the paintings— "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman."[4]

This is, undoubtedly, the hierarchically superior discourse —the critics soon detected it[5]— in the dense interdiscourse of a kind of images whose apparent realistic homoglossia transmits a rich and varied critical heterology.

4. An inter-discourse with a lot of sense

Realistic homoglossia, certainly, or the extraordinary effect of reality of these images concocted as a hypersign or total sign, since they fuse, without residues, three different semiotics that work together: the semiotics of the natural world (the objects represented in them already are significant as objects)[6], the double visual semiotics of representation (the conventions of lifelike painting and of photography), and the verbal semiotics (all encyclopedic knowledge, mostly linguistic, associated with those objects and visual codes, which seem eminently describable, translatable).

Picture 6: Audrey Flack, *Marriage* (1979), oil and acrylic on canvas, 120x160cm. Image copyright fair use.

That said, *Photorealism* also transcends semiotic virtuosity thanks to the inflection that its hypersigns impose to the sociology of gender transported by the series. The female subject described there carries on her shoulders —on her adorned and made-up body— the obligation to become a woman by accumulating the symbols of a stereotypical femininity, embodied, in mass culture, by the muse Marilyn.

Picture 7: Audrey Flack, *Elegy I* (1980), oil and acrylic on canvas, 243x243cm. Image copyright fair use.

These symbols (jewels, cosmetics, *bibelots*, ceramics, crystals, etc.) are called to operate*, en bloc*, as vectors of a rigorously imaginary drive for social identity, for the crystallization of a fabled and fabulous feminine self, completely different from the indeterminate psychic self of any of us. A self whose social realization is ambivalent: desirable and obligatory at the same time, normative and fascinating; and, finally, potentially lethal, since it is, by definition, impossible[7].

Thus, the *vanitas Elegy II*, also consecrated to Marilyn, spills from a brush, almost on the head of the girl who was once Norma Jean, a drop of blood-red, a simultaneous signifier of aesthetic representation and of existential mortification:

Picture 8: *Elegy II* (1980), oil and acrylic on canvas, 243x243cm. Image copyright fair use.

Then, more than in the perspective displayed on the social fabrication of female identity, not very new for its time, it is there, in its insistence on the failure of the subject in her effort to transform the (imaginary) desire for female identity into (real) fulfilled and satisfied experience, where the greatest interest of Flack's works lies. Because the immanent functioning of the symbolic does not allow it: the realization of the symbol is delayed in that of other symbols[8], such as that of a trope of the socialized woman in another trope, through these saturated and saturating paintings. Only death puts a chronological end, not a logical one, to the symbolic proliferation. The indefinite self of the biological subject, no matter how much it tries in this way, cannot fully constitute itself as a feminine self.

Here is, we think, the discursive intention of Flack's story in images about the social condition of women. For, in fact, a double negative mark discredits there the symbolic chains, those of the painted signs and those of the painting of the signs.

At the level of the painted signs, or of the visual statement, the signifiers of femininity are empty of denotation, and of truth: neither those fruits are fruits, but rather *simulacra* of fruit, neither such jewelry has the value of a jewel, nor a plastic hourglass like that can measure time. At the level of the painting of the signs, or of its visual enunciation, Flack's trans-artisticity dissolves into irony. Not only has it been executed, in many cases, by painting over an underlying photograph, but to top it all, as an aesthetic exercise, it is over-acted: ostentatiously displayed, but not assumed by its author[9]. Flack pretends to take over the feminine universe, but exclusively for better subverting it. Still, she does not condemn with the rigorism of a moralist or with the radicalism of a militant: her enunciative attitude, as an artist, consists, rather, in having a look into it at the same time tender and distant, complicit and critical, very distinctively *pop*.

In short, a master lesson, that updates, playfully, older masters' lessons, placing them in its new social environments, and in the material culture of the end of the past century:

Picture 9: Audrey Flack, *Leonardo's Lady* (1974), oil and acrylic on canvas, 188x203cm. Image copyright fair use.

We do not know if the mysterious Lady originally painted by Leonardo would appreciate the *kitsch* ecosystem to which she has been incorporated in Flack's works. But she was probably forced to pursue, with the same tenacity as the one portrayed by the American artist —almost always *in absentia*, or through object delegation—, an imaginary ideal of a woman. And perhaps the jewel that adorns her forehead, surely of better quality than its imitations in the modern cultural context, served her, according to certain historians[10], to hide some deadly injury (a venereal disease) linked to her relationships with men, in the same way that the 70s and 80s woman, according to Flack, was destined first for frustration, and then for death.

Such is the political and axiological limit imposed by the creator to the ambiguous complacency that her images seem to show towards that feminine universe.

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[1] Audrey Flack is a well-known American painter, sculptor and photographer. Pioneer of the genre of hyperrealism, her work is exhibited in major museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Allen Memorial Art Museum, the National Gallery of Australia, etc. She is an honorary professor at George Washington University and Bridgeport University, a visiting professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and has taught and lectured around the world. Her aesthetic and intellectual legacy lives on to influence many American and International artists today.
[2] Omar Calabrese, *L'età neobarocca* (Bari: Laterza: 1987).
[3] Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998); Jean Baudrillard, *Le complot de l'art* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 1997).
[4] Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949 [1976]), 191.
[5] V. Katherine Hauser, "Audrey Flack's Still Lifes: Between Femininity and Feminism", *Woman's Art Journal* 22, no. 2 (2001-2002): 26-30.
[6] So significant that there is not only a semiotics, but also an anthropology, a history and a sociology of objects. See, for example, for the first, Anne Béyaert, *Sémiotique des objets. La matière du temps* (Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2015); and, for the latter, Pierre Singaravélou et Sylvain Venayre, *Le magasin du monde. La mondialisation par les objets du XVIIIè siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Fayard, 2020).
[7] Jacques Lacan, Séminaire V (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998).
[8] Jacques Lacan, "D'une question préliminaire à tout traitement possible de la psychose", in *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), 531-583.
[9] Alain Rabatel, " Ironie et sur-énonciation", *Vox romanica* 71 (2012): 42-76; J.-C. Coquet, *Physis et Logos. Une phénoménologie du langage* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2007), 23-39; Jacques Fontanille, *Sémiotique du discours* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Limoges, 2003), 282.
[10] François Boucher, *Histoire du costume en Occident* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), 127.

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NEW WORLD ORDER

VISUAL ESSAY

Yalili Mora

Curated by Paco Barragán

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STUDYING MEDIA FROM THE MIDDLE OF THINGS

REVIEW

Maja Bak Herrie

**Jacob Lund and Ulrik Schmidt (eds.) (2020): *Medieæstetik - en introduktion.* Samfundslitteratur (7 September 2020), Softcover, 341 pages.
ISBN-13: 9788759332344**

Opening Jacob Lund and Ulrik Schmidt's *Medieæstetik*, one is immediately placed in the thick of things after a short introduction gives way to a catalogue of 15 entries each describing their own facet of contemporary media aesthetics. The book starts *in medias res*, so to speak, as the reader is presented with a dialogue between various positions, connections, and negotiations between Scandinavian researchers in the field of aesthetics and media: images are no more important than sound, space no more important than time; dating apps, search engines, and algorithms are taken just seriously as canonised superstars as Marcel Duchamp or Guillaume Apollinaire. Could a unison, steadily progressing text with clear-cut distinctions have been an easier inauguration to the compound and versatile concept of *media aesthetics* for the uninitiated reader? Perhaps. But the open-ended and non-hierarchical form of the book never distracts from its purpose as an introduction, due to the role *aesthetics* plays throughout the book, that is, as both a central, critical approach and a recurring point of orientation. Furthermore, the dialogical format emphasises and communicates that media aesthetics is both too heterogeneous and young to be completely contained: as a new field, it cannot be delimited to a particular academic discipline, but is rather a set of perspectives that relates to "forms of perception, relations, and senses of reality,"[433] (p.12) that technological and mediatic phenomena contribute to.

Studying media through sense perception

So how do media mean and make sense in a particularly *aesthetic* way, or, put differently, how do notions of *media* and *aesthetics* interrelate and strengthen one another when combined? While the introduction is short, it does present some key definitions that provide the reader with

important guidance, before she plunges into the recesses of contemporary studies of cultural expressions and technologically mediated experiences.

First and foremost, a crucial demarcation is made in the positioning of the central term *medium*. While media *studies* as a particular academic discipline typically deals with the "history, structures, and economy of mass media" and "draws on communication studies, sociology, and journalism," (p. 12), media *aesthetics* is concerned with the ways in which media mean, that is, in questions of sensation and perception related to processes of mediation. Or, to quote the editors, "media aesthetics is less interested in the ways in which something – e. g. the newest iPhone – appears as an isolated product of design and more interested in the various relations of effects, which media take part in and give rise to." (p. 12). 'Medium' literally means 'intermediate' or 'middle', to draw on the Latin denotations, and the studies of aesthetic mediation take this middle ground seriously. "Vision is caught or is made in the middle of things," as Maurice Merleau-Ponty put it,[434] and in order to understand this becoming of vision (or touching, hearing, tasting, or smelling), one has to start from the middle ground, that is, from the very process of mediation. "A media aesthetic perspective," the editors stress,

> place particular emphasis on the materiality of media and on dissolving a clear division between subject and object and between humans, environment and machine. It breaks with an understanding of media as representation and as conveyors of content that exists independently of the media making it available, in favour of a notion of media as world-constituting, that is, as active co-creators of our world views and behaviour. (p. 11)

This focus on *mediation* (rather than "medium" in the singular) is primarily expressed in the structuring of the book's entries in four parts: 'Positions' presents broader interdisciplinary approaches such as "media genealogy," (Knut Ove Eliassen) "media archaeology," (Anders Skare Malvik), "posthumanism," (Jacob Wamberg) and a particular "media-critical optics' offered by Ina Blom. This first part emphasizes that the media aesthetician approaches *mediation* as a complex perspective for understanding, potentially making use of a wide range of inspirations, including, e.g., media philosophy, medium theory, and critical theory. 'Framings' points to media modalities such as "space," (Ulrik Schmidt) "time," (Jacob Lund) "image," (A. S. Aurora Hoel) and "sound" (Rune Søchting). This second part emphasizes a broad, perceptual engagement with the objects of study in media aesthetics. Finally, 'Connections' and 'Exchanges' mark the many links between different matters of concern related to contemporary media and technology. These last two parts emphasize that media aesthetics is to be understood as a "fundamental discipline of cultural studies in the 21st century," reopening aesthetic thinking "as a *critical* science" (p. 13). These two parts of the book include topics as different as "infrastructure," (Eivind Røssaak) "data and archives," (Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, Daniela Agostinho and Kristin Veel)

"software and interface," (Christian Ulrik Andersen and Søren Bro Pold) "design," (Rosita Satell and Anders V. Munch) "experience," (Mette-Marie Zacher Sørensen) "body, gender, and identity," (Louise Yung Nielsen) and "subjectivity" (Torsten Andreasen).

Broad conceptions of aesthetics

By indicating this important shift in perspective from an understanding of "medium" as an object of study and "media" as collections of specific artefacts or technologies, to medium and media as ideas or concepts to understanding certain practices and experiences, the editors position the book in connection with other important media aesthetic publications, including *Thinking Media Aesthetics* (2013) and *Medieestetikk* (2009), edited and authored by Liv Hausken, *Teknologi, medier, estetikk* (2015/2016) (a special issue of *Agora*) edited by Knut Ove Eliassen, *Medienästhetik* (2013) (a special issue of *ZfM (Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft)* edited by Erich Hörl and Mark B. N. Hansen, and the updated and expanded second edition of *New Media, Old Media* (2016) edited by Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, Anna Watkins Fisher, and Thomas Keenan. While the encounter between *mediation* and *aesthetics* seems to be both very productive for and central to the rationale of the book, it is unfortunate that it is not further elaborated in the introduction. The editors occasionally point to more traditional understandings and disciplinary approaches to aesthetics, but do not elaborate on these connections in further detail.

An example of this is the implicit yet important role played by a broad conception of aesthetics throughout the book. Whether it is in investigations of *post-industrial machines* that exploit "thinking, attention, memory, language, emotions, and sense perception" (Ina Blom, p. 26), in media aesthetic conceptions of *big data* and the archival uncertainties connected to it (Nanna Bonde Thylstrup, Daniela Agostinho and Kristin Veel), or in studies of feminist activism and pro-ana networks (Louise Yung Nielsen), a broad, non-hierarchical approach to aesthetics is required. "All areas of cultural life and society that concern the context for sensing" (p. 12) should in principle be covered, the introduction states. But how does one grasp – and even navigate – such a broad field of study? An exhaustive survey of different notions and uses of "aesthetics" throughout the history of the concept would have been excessive, but the text would have benefitted from some select references to earlier, historical conceptions of aesthetics, that emphasize the discipline as broader than the more specialized subject matters of the "traditional arts as specialized aesthetic subdomains" (p. 12). The Aristotelian idea of "media" (or at least the etymologically related terms *to metaxy* and *perièchon* (p. 111)) has found its way into the introduction as well as the entry on "space". Why not also mention A. G. Baumgarten's idea of aesthetics[435] or point to pre-Hegelian ideas of a broad aesthetics not pertaining solely to the arts?[436] Although they belong to a different time (in the 1700s, philosophical aesthetics and art as an independent field was only incipient, leaving room for broader discussions of the relation between sensory perception and knowledge

relevant beyond the art forms alone),[437] such connections could have helped further clarifying and situating the meaning of the compound term *media aesthetics*.

(Digital) aesthetics today

In 15 thematic chapters, *Medieæstetik* depicts the present fields of "aesthetically oriented media research" and "media-oriented aesthetic research" (p. 15) by providing the reader with theoretical introductions to a range of fundamental problems related to modern media and their cultural influence in a philosophical, aesthetic, and historical optics. While this reviewer could have wished for even more theoretical connections between the complex notions of mediation and aesthetics, especially in light of the history of aesthetics, the book is a highly recommended introduction to the field of media aesthetics. It represents a good opportunity to discuss not just the meaning of *aesthetics* today – that is, its status as a nerve centre of recent and historical theories and analytics in its own right – but also how aesthetic insights can contribute to ongoing discussions of the cultural, social, and political meaning of mediation.

The book presents a multi-faceted, thorough, and critical introduction to media aesthetics as a specific field. This shows not least in the ambitious objective of the project: to introduce to "leading approaches, perspectives, and theoretical positions" in a media aesthetic perspective, (p. 15) to "central aspects of the ways in which different media frame sensory perception by focusing attention on space, time, image, and sound respectively," (p. 17) to "different aspects of collecting, organising, distributing, and presenting information in today's digital media culture," (p. 18) and to discuss "experience, subjectivity, embodiment, and identity" in the light of media aesthetics (p. 20). As a whole, it is an ambitious introduction, which not only contributes by outlining and introducing to the field, but also by going into depth with new and diverse problems related to contemporary digital media culture. In this way, the book has obvious relevance for researchers and students as well as professionals from different fields of study, e. g. media- and information studies, art history and visual culture, comparative literature, and more broadly, aesthetic communication, experience-, interaction-, and digital design.

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433 All translations from Norwegian and Danish are made by the author.
434 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Ted Toadvine, and Leonard Lawlor, eds., *The Merleau-Ponty Reader* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 354.
435 Alexander G. Baumgarten, *Ästhetik I–II*, trans. Dagmar Mirbach (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2007).
436 Oiva Kuisma, Sanna Lehtinen, and Harri Mäcklin, "Introduction: From Baumgarten to Contemporary Aesthetics," in *Paths from the Philosophy of Art to Contemporary Aesthetics*, eds. Oiva Kuisma, Sanna Lehtinen, and Harri Mäcklin (Helsinki: Finnish Society for Aesthetics, 2019), 11.
437 Jørn Erslev Andersen, *Sansning og erkendelse* (Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag, 2012), 237.

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