Re-Recording the Record
Pseudotranslation and Pseudotranscription in Media and Reality

Abstract

The role of translation in world literature is oft-studied and a popular source of debate among literary scholars. Among these academic opinions, Brigitte Rath’s discussions of pseudotranslation are notably well-constructed and applicable to much of the material in ENGL 3060. World literature, being worldly, is as much about a foreign culture as it is the denizens of that culture; while translation brings the reality of a foreign tongue into an accessible format, Rath posits that pseudotranslation allows an author to re-imagine an originally foreign idea in a "peculiar language," using false translation to evoke authenticity even while the form of the narrative is subverted. In this project, I seek to discuss and broaden the idea of pseudotranslation in applications to media beyond literature. I also offer a novel corollary to pseudotranslation: By borrowing conceptually from the central dogma of biology (where RNA is translated to protein in an information-to-'outformation' transfer [the simple and functionally useless RNA sequence is converted into a full protein], DNA is transcribed to RNA in what is essentially a change in coding language, or an information-to-information transfer), I will develop a hypothesis of pseudotranscription, wherein an idea, voluntarily or otherwise, is re-imagined in a new iteration beyond its true basis. Unlike pseudotranslation’s firm roots in fiction (since typical examples of pseudotranslation occur with foreign settings and subsequent needs for false translation between the language of the setting and the language of the narrative), pseudotranscription is far more grounded in reality. Essentially (and as my title suggests), this work examines the concepts of pseudotranslation and pseudotranscription and applies them to examples from literature, television, film, and reality including Animal’s People, Oil on Water, House of Leaves, the audio version of George Saunders’ newest book Lincoln in the Bardo, Chuck Palahniuk’s bibliography (and film adaptations), Mr. Robot, The Usual Suspects, religion, Brian William’s controversies as anchor of NBC Nightly News, commercials, and more. This analysis demonstrates the paradoxically convincing effect of detractive logical failings inherent to a pseudotranslated or pseudotranscribed media and the ameliorative response derived from these flaws on the media itself. Of course, some flaws are so obvious that their effects are no longer beneficial (e.g. Brian Williams), but this caveat is addressed in detail.
Script

Introduction

What does an author, (like Chuck Palahniuk, Mark Z. Danielewski, or Indra Sinha), or some other form of creative writer (like Charlie Kaufman, Christopher McQuarrie, or Sam Esmail) do when they’re faced with this dilemma: They have an idea, and they want to express it, but the original voice – the voice of the principal narrator – doesn’t quite work for whatever reason. Maybe the ideas they’re trying to convey don’t fit into the characterization the audience is familiar with in the main character, or maybe they don’t want to be too heavy-handed in their presentation of a concept by having a character just come out and explain whatever idea they’re attempting to express. In instances of worldly literature, the author wants to create a sense of authenticity that might not be captured without the use of multiple languages or versions of the same language. This can require a great deal of creativity in producing a coherent final text, and a common technique that these creative minds employ is pseudotranslation.

I’m Bruce Kirkpatrick, and today I’ll be discussing pseudotranslation and pseudotranscription in media and reality. Let’s start by developing the framework that we’ll use to analyze pseudotranslation and its effect.

Pseudotranslation

First, we need a robust definition of pseudotranslation. I gave three examples of why pseudotranslation might be needed, in instances of conflicting prior characterization in the primary narrator, an author desiring an added subtlety or nuance in the text, or a quest for textual authenticity in world literature. While these examples might explain some demands for pseudotranslation, there are many narrative subversions and literary tricks that an author could incorporate to meet these needs without a fictitious translation. Reframing a classic narrative like the hero’s journey or allowing an unreliable narrator to mislead the reader or viewer are familiar ways to manipulate an audience, but it’s my goal in this video to elucidate my framework of analyzing a creative piece through the lens of pseudotranslation, which I believe can offer enhanced profundity to the text of interest and improved critical understanding to the reader. Very generically, pseudotranslation analysis dates back to the mid-70s, when critical analysts first began to explore “fictitious translations.” These investigations gave rise to a definition given in 1995 by Gideon Toury, stating that “it is texts which have been presented as translations with no corresponding source text in other languages ever having existed... that go under the name of pseudotranslations.”

This concept was expounded on by Brigitte Rath, a German scholar who has a substantial body of work analyzing pseudotranslated texts, in her definition of pseudotranslation: “Adapting the concept, I suggest that pseudotranslation is a mode of reading one utterance as the translation of a preceding original utterance in a different language which is only accessible through
an act of imagination based on the seemingly derivative utterance.” These ideas were further applied by Tobias Döring, another German scholar, and Thomas Beebee of Penn State, who suggested that pseudotranslation could be broadened to a more general authorial practice of mimesis of translation. Mimesis is like verisimilitude, another popular critical concept among pseudotranslation analysts, in that both terms relate to an imitation or appearance of reality. From these resources, I developed my multipart definition of pseudotranslation that I’ll use to analyze a number of primary works.

The first element of pseudotranslation is an original concept, which can be provided by an altern or subaltern voice. The altern voice is applicable when the narrator’s voice is available to the reader (although it might be made unclear by a fictitious translation), and the subaltern voice is relevant when an original narrator’s voice is completely missing from a text. Either way, the altern or subaltern voice is somewhat hidden from the reader. The next element of pseudotranslation is the conversion of the original concept to its visible “translated” form, which the audience perceives and can digest in the natural form of the medium. The final element of pseudotranslation, by my definition, is the ultimate effect of the translation, which gives way to the following analytical questions:

Why can’t the altern or subaltern voices express themselves in a typical way without translation?
What is the objective of the altern or subaltern voice in conveying their ideas to the audience?
How effectively is the altern/subaltern message conveyed? Are their objectives achieved?

Don’t worry if this is confusing, because I’ll explain these concepts through an example in a moment.

Part One: Pseudotranslation in literature

In this section, I’ll apply the concept of pseudotranslation first to Indra Sinha’s Animal’s People in an explicit manner to set a clear analytical framework by which I will further examine Helon Habila’s Oil on Water, Mark Z. Danielewski’s House of Leaves, Chuck Palahniuk’s Lullaby and Haunted, and George Saunder’s recent audiobook release of Lincoln in the Bardo. I first became familiar with the concept of pseudotranslation when I read Brigitte Rath’s analysis of Animal’s People titled “His Words Only? Indra Sinha’s Pseudotranslation Animal’s People as Hallucinations of a Subaltern Voice,” wherein she explores the ideas I mentioned earlier of altern and subaltern voices, as well as the more general concept of pseudotranslation.

Animal’s People is a novel that follows Animal, a young man living in Khaupfur (a fictionalized version of Bhopal), who survived a pesticide plant disaster as a baby and can only move on all fours as a result of his chemical exposure. The book begins with an editor’s note, claiming that the story of Animal’s People was recorded in Hindi on a series of tapes by Animal that have been translated “entirely in the boy’s words.” Apart from translating to English, the note alleges, nothing has been changed. In my opinion, the author, Indra Sinha, chose to begin his novel as an asserted pseudotranslation for the third reason I posited earlier: to generate a sense
of authenticity in world literature. But how does Animal’s People follow the structure I claimed in my definition of pseudotranslation?

First, the original altern voice of the novel is clear from the editor’s note: Animal, having dictated his story in Hindi, has been transformed to an altern voice in the novel’s English presentation. No original Hindi transcript exists, so his voice has been obfuscated by the supposedly hands-off translation performed by an anonymous journalist. We see flaws in the next element of pseudotranslation – the translated voice – in the context of “his words only” throughout the novel, including partially-translated and mistranslated sections, spelling deconstructions in the translated text, and one instance of vertically-aligned text, but these idiosyncrasies don’t detract from the novel. Rather, the third element of pseudotranslation is addressed when these apparent diversions from the narrative structure achieve their goal of creating a more realistic Khaufpuri setting without jarring the reader from Animal’s claimed monologue.

Animal’s People also contains a subaltern voice. In the article by Brigitte Rath I mentioned earlier, she explains that Indra Sinha did in fact interview Sunil Kumar, a poison victim in Bhopal whose life mirrors Animal’s in more than one way. The exclusion of Kumar’s voice from the text renders him the subaltern voice of Animal’s People, whose story is told and message is conveyed through multiple levels of translation. This exclusion, in the postcolonial canon, marks the continued repression of real-life characters like Kumar and their relegation to the subaltern.

Let’s answer the questions we ask of pseudotranslation in the context of Animal’s People: First, we can’t “hear” Kumar because he’s been rendered subaltern by society and Sinha. Admittedly, the novel is dedicated to him, but no other textual reference to his story is made. Animal can’t be directly “heard” in the text because he’s been translated to English. However, the idiosyncratic inclusions of his untranslated voice, although in conflict with the pseudotranslated form, add to the overall realism of the story. Next, the repressed voices of the novel convey themes and concepts of life in Khaufpur (and accordingly, Bhopal) and the long-term effects of corporate oppression and hazardous environmental conditions. The stories of survivors of the Union Carbide plant disaster in Bhopal are, in part, included in Animal’s People, and the readers’ understanding of the region is in some small way enhanced. Finally, Kumar’s (and Animal’s) messages are effectively conveyed because Sinha presents the novel in a relatively accessible and enjoyable way: He does not ask too much of the reader in suspending their disbelief as they enter the pseudotranslated world of Khaufpur.

Now that we have a firmer understanding of my pseudotranslation framework, I’ll move on to other texts that I think apply this concept in interesting ways.

Helon Habila’s Oil on Water is exemplary of the subaltern voice. The novel follows a Nigerian journalist, Rufus, through the jungle as he investigates the disappearance of a white woman. While the story may not follow the traditional format of a pseudotranslation, in that it was conceived, written, and presented in English, Habila employs a transfer of an original concept to a new medium that runs deeper than language. In so doing, he creates a far more complete picture
of environmental degradation, militancy, kidnapping, and oil theft in Nigeria. These subjects are specifically addressed in Professor Sule Egya’s article "Idiom of Text: The Unwritten Novel in Recent Nigerian Fiction." In the essay, Egya explains the historical context of modern Nigerian literature with regard to military oppression and suppression of creativity. The result of this oppression, Egya argues, is that new Nigerian fiction contains an “unwritten novel,” telling the horror stories of militancy and environmental terrorism that were kept quiet for many years.

Habila was a journalist before his first fiction publications, and his previously repressed voice acts as the subaltern in his own writing as it expresses concepts Habila himself could not before his liberation in fiction. Ultimately, *Oil on Water* is a highly effective pseudotranslation of Habila’s once-forbidden personal stories of journalistic integrity and capitalistic evil into Rufus’ fictitious journey through memory and Nigerian jungle.

Where *Oil On Water* was interesting for its implications in world literature and the subaltern voice being the author’s own, *House of Leaves* fascinates me for its subversion of the haunted house story through the bizarre textual variations throughout the novel and multiple levels of narration. As Laura Barrett of Armstrong Atlantic State University states in "Repetition with a difference: Representation and the uncanny in *House of Leaves*,” “The haunted structure in Danielewski’s novel represents any medium that creates the world as it attempts to replicate it.” At its heart, *House of Leaves* tells the story of the Navidson family, who move into a seemingly normal home in Virginia only to discover that when measured by any conventional means it is slightly larger on the inside than it is the outside. This discrepancy with reality grows and grows until a newfound closet space transforms into a “5-and-a-half minute hallway,” which further expands into a cavernous space. A group of explorers enter this space, which has developed into a labyrinthine maze, and become disoriented, ultimately driving several characters to insanity and murder.

As I mentioned, The Navidson Record is the heart of *House of Leaves*, but there are several narrative shells beyond the story of the house in Virginia. First, The Navidson Record itself is presented in the text as an academic study of a documentary film of the same name. This study, written by Zampanò, is discovered by Johnny Truant, who finds the manuscript while looking through the recently deceased Zampanò’s belongings. Johnny provides his own commentary throughout the text, and his increasingly obsessive attempts to find out more information about Zampanò only further call into question the validity of the source material in the world of House of Leaves. Footnotes from Johnny, Zampanò, and unidentified editors litter the pages of the novel, and these voices compete for the audience’s attention in an architectural masterpiece.

The text is made more complex by its unique structure, which features highly unusual typesetting and invokes John Shannon Hendrix from *Architecture and Psychoanalysis*: “Architecture is always a reflection of the psychological make-up of the human subject.” The psychological architectures of the competing narrators, the ever-shifting architecture of the Navidson home, and the challenging architecture of the novel itself all speak to themes of obsession, growth and decay,
and the uncanny. In a sense, Danielewski pseudotranslates his intended messages concerning the terror of the human psyche on multiple levels in *House of Leaves*, through the characters, the plot, and the form of the novel. To cement this work as a pseudotranslation in my mind, the audience learns at one point in the story that Zampanò was blind and required the assistance of transcribers, who may not have been recording his words at all making, rendering his voice altern. Danielewski’s subversion of standard formal structures is highly effective, and makes the stories of the novel all the more compelling and terrifying. Very broadly, one could consider the novel world literature as it extends outside any known physical realm and this departure is authentically reflected in the text.

Another master of subversion, albeit in a very different way, is Chuck Palahniuk. His classic novels *Invisible Monsters* and *Fight Club* inform critical analysts today on unreliable narration tropes, and I find two of his novel that fit the pseudotranslation framework to be exemplary for the purposes of this video. The novels of interest here are *Lullaby* and the short story collection *Haunted*, which respectively deal with an ancient death song and a series of irreverent vignettes of characters’ former lives. Beginning with *Lullaby*, I’ll provide brief plot overviews so I can later explain the importance of pseudotranslation to these texts:

*Lullaby:* A newspaper reporter investigating sudden infant death syndrome discovers an ancient African death song and, after memorizing it, inadvertently becomes a serial killer. Joining forces with a real-estate agent who is also familiar with the deadly lullaby, the reporter goes on a wild adventure to protect the book containing the song.

*Haunted:* *Haunted* is a frame story about 17 creatives who attend an alleged three-month writing symposium. Each of the seventeen are referred to almost entirely by self-given nicknames based on the stories each of them presents. These names are epithetical, like “Saint Gut-Free” for the character who underwent an involuntary bowel resectioning, or the Earl of Slander for the character who frames a former child star for unsavory behavior so he can write a Pulitzer-winning article. Alternating chapters in the book tell the stories of how characters’ nicknames came to be, and many of these chapters invoke biblical imagery and tone.

Although these seem like the strangest examples of pseudotranslation yet, I assure you that they fit our model. *Lullaby* is another example of the author-as-subaltern: When Chuck Palahniuk wrote the novel, he was contemplating whether or not to endorse the death penalty for his father’s murderer. The overarching message of choosing to murder people who “deserve it” in the novel is representative of Palahniuk’s ultimate decision to endorse the death penalty and it’s effectively conveyed through the translation of Palahniuk’s own subaltern voice into the thoughts of the main character. The presence of a foreign lullaby as a central plot element provides an additional worldly flair to the novel, and the exclusion of a transcript of this song is a translation in its own right. Succinctly, Lullaby translates a much larger story about the death of Palahniuk’s father and the subsequent decisions Palahniuk had to make to a fanciful and engaging tale of lethal songs and vengeful real-estate agents.
Subaltern voices abound in *Haunted*, as many of the disturbing short stories find bases in reality. The most popular and shocking of the vignettes in the collection, “Guts,” was based on a brief interview between Palahniuk and an extremely thin man at a sexual addiction support meeting, where the thin man explained the circumstances leading up to his massive bowel resectioning. The other characters of Haunted find similar footing in the lives of Palahniuk’s interview subjects and acquaintances. Their exaggerated stories give new life to the stories of the subaltern voices on which they are based, and the absurd, bizarre, and sometimes horrific contents of each segment result in a fascinating exercise in variable translation. After all, the characters themselves are the authors of each story, so the picture the audience receives is supposedly the one the character wants us to have.

This brings us to our final written primary source, *Lincoln in the Bardo*, a recent George Saunders novel. In an interview with *Time*, Saunders explains that the novel was, in part, an attempt to express the “different Americas in the time of Lincoln” by using “high diction, low diction, obscene rants, beautifully articulate 19th-century letters, and everything else you could ask for.” His manipulation of language was further elevated in the audiobook version of the novel, which features 166 actors in a seven-hour reading. Every character is provided their own voice, and Saunber’s representation of “alternified” historical figures is given an additional element of pseudotranslation as many of these voices are provided by SNL alumni, Academy Award Winners, and other aurally recognizable figures. The added context of a recognizable voice gives further characterization, even unintentionally, and is emblematic of a pseudotranslation application extending beyond the written medium.

**Part Two: Pseudotranslation in television**

Moving from the written word and the spoken word to the small screen, I’ll discuss Bill Lawrence’s *Scrubs* and Sam Esmail’s *Mr. Robot*.

In *Scrubs*, the single-camera setup and hospital setting reminiscent of *Grey’s Anatomy* or *House* imply heightened seriousness compared to comparable four-camera sitcoms, but the episode naming system beginning each title with “My” suggests that every episode is a new entry in the main character’s diary. The diary format wouldn’t effectively come across in the standard sitcom camera setup where there are constantly variable points of view, although the subject matter of *Scrubs* is far more suitable to this format. This pseudotranslation of the original concept of the protagonist’s video diary in a sitcom into the single-camera format allows for more effective and personal storytelling.

*Scrubs* plays on the one-camera setup in clever ways that allow the audience to see the protagonist’s perspective in ways impossible in the four-camera setup. *Scrubs* also incorporates these dreamlike sequences to create shockingly poignant scenes. As with pseudotranslation, the original idea of the protagonist’s imagination has to enter the peculiar language of the one-camera format to be made accessible to the audience. In fact, the idea cannot exist in the
original conception, since the protagonist is fictional. Without the ability to visualize the main character’s imagined perspective, we wouldn’t be able to get fabulously touching and nostalgic scenes like the season eight finale.

*Mr. Robot* also pseudotranslates the form to express the views of the main character, but in extremely different ways and for very different reasons. Take a look at how the main character in *Mr. Robot* interacts with the audience. As you just saw, *Mr. Robot* is demanding of the audience: the main character challenges the viewers, asking us questions and confounding our understanding of the narrative. Sam Esmail, the creator, uses the pseudotranslated form of the show to develop a rich and complex tale of intrigue, and achieves unparalleled narrative ingenuity in allowing the main character’s alter voice speak directly to the audience in brief soliloquies.

**Part Three: Pseudotranslation in film**

I’ll discuss *Fight Club*, *The Usual Suspects*, *Memento*, and *Synecdoche, New York*. In the interest of time, each of these discussions will be kept to a single statement regarding how each movie relates to pseudotranslation and a brief piece of relevant footage from the film.

In *Fight Club*, Chuck Palahniuk once again adopts the author-as-subaltern voice. Similarly to *Mr. Robot*, the main character speaks to the audience and has a hidden subset of his psyche that wants to express ideas that violate prior characterizations of the primary narrator. As a result, the main character creates an alter, or Other, who can express their ideas in a “peculiar language,” setting up climactic reveals when characters realize the presence of the alter – or in the cases of this video – alter-ego and allowing for narratively compelling rehashes of cliché ideas of personal acceptance and identity. Before this dramatic reveal sequence, the audience has been given information to characterize the narrator as a consumerist nobody and is led to believe that he’s been “along for the ride” as Brad Pitt’s character, Tyler, has burnt the narrator’s hand, kidnapped and assaulted strangers, and started a domestic terrorism group. These ideas conflict with our established understanding of the narrator, and Palahniuk’s clever manipulation of the narrative as he pseudotranslates the Narrator’s repressed inner self through Tyler’s realized alter voice generated a cult classic novel and film adaptation.

Christopher McQuarrie’s *The Usual Suspects* is a spectacularly tricky unreliable narrator story – most of the movie is a fiction spun by Kevin Spacey’s character, who is secretly an underworld legend well-known for murdering his enemies: Keyser Söze. To evade police custody, Spacey’s character fakes cerebral palsy and adopts the persona of Verbal Kint. The audience spends most of the film watching the manipulated version of the truth presented in Verbal’s police interview, which contains nonexistent characters and elements inspired by random items in the detective’s office where Verbal is sitting as he tells his story. In the end, we realize with the detective that Verbal was not all that he seemed and watch as Keyser Söze emerges from his disguise and disappears back into the underworld.

We can hear all the voices competing for narrative dominance. After watching the entire
movie, we learn that almost nothing was presented as it happened in the universe of the film and are left reeling at the revelation of Kevin Spacey’s identity. Keyser Söze remains one of the greatest movie villains of all time because the presentation of the film involves Kint pseudotranslating the story of his actions as Keyser Söze into a police-acceptable variation, manipulating the detective into letting him go and supplementing his status as an underworld urban legend. The film concludes with Spacey taunting the detective and the audience one last time as he gives a face to his previously altern self – a fitting farewell to a strange pseudotranslater of his own story and the medium of the film.

Christopher Nolan’s *Memento* follows the story of Leonard, who suffers from anterograde amnesia, meaning he cannot make new memories. As the principal narrator, he tells us that wife was murdered in the home invasion that left him without a functional memory, and he uses tattoos to remember key facts about his wife’s murderer. Even without memory, Leonard still seeks revenge against the killer and the film shows his haphazard investigation into “John G,” who he believes to be the man he seeks. The film is constructed in an interesting way, with alternating timelines shot in different color palettes, and the narrative syuzhet, or plot order, is wildly different than the fabula, or chronological story. We discover at the end of the film that, as a result of the injury to his memory, Leonard is no longer interested in justice. Rather, he seeks anyone who somewhat matches the mental image of his wife’s killer that he clings to, and he willingly deceives himself by way of his disability into murdering innocent people for short-lived solace. Leonard, in a way, pseudotranslates his inner altern voice by tattooing himself with “facts” that were once-known falsehoods. His original voice can’t be self-understood in the world of the movie because he literally cannot remember it. Watch as Leonard admits this to himself, and then tragically forgets in the final moments of *Memento*.

Like Leonard says, “maybe [he] lies to [himself] to be happy,” involuntarily relegating his internal monologue to the altern, but our final movie does exactly the opposite. In fact, many of Charlie Kaufman’s movies feature characters being unhappy with the harsh truths of their lives. *Synecdoche, New York* follows the life of Caden Cotard, a stage director who is awarded a MacArthur Fellowship and begins a massive theater production about the biggest concept of all – existence. Cotard, played by Phillip Seymour Hoffman, is meticulous and obsessive, and he reflects many ideas that Kaufman philosophically ponders in his films. Concepts of mortality, legacy, and human connection are of huge importance in Kaufman’s body of work, and a closer examination of his writing reveals the same author-as-subaltern concept I discussed with regard to Chuck Palahniuk’s book *Lullaby*. Take a look at this clip from *Synecdoche*. Although the actress’s responses to Caden’s (and Kaufman’s) thoughts could be considered egregiously congratulatory, Caden’s look of weary disgust speaks to how he feels about pandering compliments. Kaufman’s original concepts and fears are pseudotranslated through the film medium, his characters, and Hoffman’s performance. These elements coalesce to form a heartbreakingly beautiful and true piece of modern art. Kaufman’s complex ideas don’t require overt exposition because
his masterful storytelling and direction inform the audience more effectively than a monologue ever could. At the end of *Synecdoche, New York*, we see that the enormous theaterscape of Caden’s magnum opus has fallen apart. Despite his constant existential concerns, he outlives essentially the entire cast of his production and, reflecting Kaufman’s innermost concerns, only realizes how to create his “honest piece of theater” moments before succumbing to old age. As a side-note, *Synecdoche, New York* is by far my favorite movie and is a must-watch for anyone interested in critical analysis.

Earlier, I mentioned the author-as-subaltern voice in Chuck Palahniuk and Charlie Kaufman, so I want to take a brief moment to theorize why these writers employ this tactic and what purpose it achieves. In my opinion, both writers are trying to accomplish ‘option number 2’ from early in this video. They’re attempting to convey ideas that can’t be effectively expressed through overt means, and require increased subtlety. I know that many scholars would laugh at the idea of Chuck Palahniuk being subtle, but the difference in presentation between him and Kaufman stems from the material they’re attempting to convey. Palahniuk tries to tell personal stories about himself and people he’s met while Kaufman tries to tell stories about bigger philosophical ideas. Neither can be achieved in the way they desire through a monologue or an exposition, so they subalternify their own voices and pseudotranslate their messages through their creative pieces. In Palahniuk’s case, the message often incorporates transgressive elements that might shock the reader while Kaufman is more liable to finesse his ideas into the fabric of his films, but both writers ultimately achieve their goals and receive significant academic/domestic attention.

**Part Four: Pseudotranslation in religion**

An interesting similarity I noticed between these primary sources was their inclusion of religious and quasi-religious elements. I’ll go through a very brief overview:

Animal’s guardian in *Animal’s People* is Ma Franci, who is an insane nun that represents a spiritual guardian of Khaufpur. She loses her ability to speak any language other than French in the chemical leak that hobbles Animal as a baby, which serves as a figure for the town of Khaufpur having lost their collective voice in the disaster. At the end of the novel, the old plant is set on fire and releases another cloud of toxic gases. Last she’s seen, Ma Franci is yelling in perfect Khaufpuri and directing people away from the chemicals in an absolution and resurrection that gives the story’s end a sense of determined and renewed hope.

*Oil on Water* features a despicable general who gives his prisoners oil baptisms, satanically anointing unwilling participants with fuming petrol. Moreover, a parable-type section reminiscent of the biblical King Nebuchadnezzar is included where a village chieftain describes how his tribe lost their land to an aggressive oil company and is now cursed to wander. The ever-growing hellspace in the walls of Navidson home in *House of Leaves* serve as a hall of worship to the uncanny. Parts of the novel suggest the presence of an otherworldly monster that could be thought of as the God of the obsession and madness that consume several main characters. *Lullaby* includes magical lyrics
outside of the death song, and a pair of environmental terrorists use these non-lethal spells to stage seemingly divine spectacles. The narrator ends the novel by stating “Look for magic. Look for saints. Imagine if Jesus chased you around, trying to catch you and save your soul. Not just a patent passive God, but a hardworking aggressive bloodhound.” *Haunted* features characters like Reverend Godless and Sister Vigilante who provide interesting character studies of the anti-religious and devout, respectively. They collaborate with the other characters to illustrate themes of martyrdom, grief, and rebirth, which are of course hallmarks of religion. Outside of their comedic effect in *Scrubs*, the protagonist’s daydreams are sometimes variations on prophetic visions and are meant to imbue the viewer with a deeper understanding or heightened awareness of his underlying subconscious. *Mr. Robot’s* main character is quasi-messianic in his quest to “save the world” and his ability to communicate directly with the viewer indicates some bizarre omniscience on his part. Incidentally, although the works are very different, *Mr. Robot* and *Fight Club*’s protagonists are extremely similar in their creation of a realized altern voice to express their messiah-like behavior and thoughts. *The Usual Suspects* continues this concept (although the disguised altern voice of the main character in this film is far more devil than savior) by allowing Verbal to protect himself through the alternification of his true identity. *Memento*’s main character must put special faith in his translated altern inner monologue in the form of his tattoos as he cannot remember why he received them. We ultimately see this to be tragically misguided, but his faith is unshaken. Finally, *Synecdoche, New York* includes notions of divine community; [that] everyone is special, and no story can be complex enough because every “extra” in someone else’s life is the main character in their own story.

These shared elements of the works I selected to analyze through the lens of pseudotranslation struck me: Why was religion or quasi-religion such a common theme?

I realized that religion itself follows the framework of our pseudotranslation analysis, in that an original idea cannot be expressed in its conceived form (at least for the sake of argument, in that no humans are actively hearing the voice of a true God). This results in the translated voice the audience perceives. However, I felt that my basic foundation of pseudotranslation was limiting my application: By my own definition, pseudotranslation requires a fictionalized translated voice to make visible a hidden concept that can stem from a submerged level of fiction or real life. Applying this idea to religion, which billions of people adhere to worldwide, felt dismissive and close-minded, which led me to conceive a reality-based iteration of pseudotranslation that I call pseudotranscription.

**Pseudotranscription**

First, I need to provide a little background information about biological translation and transcription, because I drew on my knowledge of these processes to develop my definitions of pseudotranslation and pseudotranscription. In translation, RNA, which is like a sequence of unit entries that make up a code, is converted by intracellular biological machinery called ribosomes
into protein, which, for the purposes of this video, we’ll call the “realized” version of the RNA. If pseudotranslation is the transfer of a “code,” something original and “unrealizable” to a “realized” version, then what does that make pseudotranscription?

Well, biological transcription is the transfer of DNA to RNA, or more generically, a coding sequence to another (similar) coding sequence. From this perspective, I establish pseudotranscription to be the transfer of an original “unrealizable” concept to a new iteration of that concept that can be realized through an existing framework. While the primary elements of pseudotranslation and pseudotranscription are the same (those elements being an original concept that can’t be conveyed effectively by normal means and a “peculiar language” that can be used to translate and present the concept), the nature of the peculiar language in the two concepts sets them apart. In pseudotranslation this language could be a fictional transcript from a tape recording, a subverted formal camera system for a sitcom, or a mythical African death lullaby, but it generically needs to be a direct part of the written or visual medium or the form of that medium. In pseudotranscription, the peculiar language is the language of the original concept, just as DNA and RNA have similar compositions. We started our discussion of pseudotranslation with the explicit example of Animal’s People, and we’ll begin this discussion of pseudotranscription with a similarly fleshed-out application. Since I originally conceived pseudotranscription in the context of religion, I’ll start by going back and elaborating on that concept.

Part Five: Pseudotranscription in religion

I mentioned that, assuming no human has actively heard the true voice of a God, religions are by nature pseudotranscription. First, the original element, the unrealizable concept, is the voice of God. If the voice of God is heard in the mind of the original religious writer, they adopt a “peculiar language” as a prophet or a scholar and pseudotranscribe the voice of God to those who will listen. I argue that this is not direct transcription, even if Gods are real and do speak to people, because the representation of God’s voice in reality continue to be produced by human beings.

As such, an original concept is transcribed through a peculiar language in an act that imparts meaning to otherwise unbelievable “truths.” As in the fictional works we discussed, the suspension of disbelief required to literally interpret religious texts is substantial, but the efficacy of these pseudotranscriptions is inarguable. Religions have global followings numbering in the billions and their positive and negative effects resonate worldwide.

Part Six: Pseudotranscription in commercials

Compared to religion, a less effective, more annoying, and equally prevalent pseudotranscription can be seen in modern advertising.

This pseudotranscription is pervasive: it occurs in the transfer of an idea conceived or developed by a marketing team – maybe that using Old Spice will make miniature chicken versions
of you hatch out of your body wash containers if you fry them, or that giant talking M&M’s will convince you to eat smaller versions of themselves along with other brand-name products at the movie theater, or that a strange lizard wants you to be well-insured, or that it’s somehow a good idea to spend your time watching a montage of advertisements – into the peculiar language of an advertisement. Their ultimate goal in pseudotranscribing a fictitious idea into the medium of a commercial is to get your attention as a consumer and to encourage you to spend money on their product or service, just as the subaltern and altern voices in many of the primary works I discussed are pseudotranslated to convey meaning to reader.

When this goal is achieved, the consumer is faced with a final question: Does the product live up to their expectations imbued in them by the commercial? We know that this same question can be asked of religion in the context of pseudotranscription and answered with several billion “yesses,” but when the answer is “no,” it’s because whatever message was pseudotranscribed was too much for the available suspension of disbelief. Dissatisfaction is rife in consumerism, so I want to take this final example to really examine when the effectiveness of pseudotranscription breaks down to identify why the disconnect between the original and translated concept occurs and determine the ultimate effects of the breakdown.

Part Seven: Pseudotranscription in Brian Williams

For anyone not familiar with Brian Williams, he was the anchor and managing editor of NBC Nightly News from 2004-2015. He was often recognized for his outstanding reporting, accumulating prestigious awards and accolades from other reputable news services like Time and The New York Times, and was especially lauded for his coverage of the 2004 Indian ocean tsunami and Hurricane Katrina. However, in 2003, Williams was reporting on the invasion of Iraq. In a segment for Dateline, he discussed in his coverage a close call between a helicopter and a rocket-propelled grenade. But his story changed. What once had been...eventually became...

So what happened? It’s easy to say that he lied, and plenty of people have said exactly that, but I’ll again play the role of devil’s advocate and assume that Brian Williams was trying to be honest. Keep in mind that this is highly speculative, but I believe that it fits the framework of pseudotranscription quite closely.

As a well-travelled and world-famous news anchor, Brian Williams began to broaden his career outside of reporting around the time when his exaggerations began. He hosted SNL, was featured on 30 Rock, and became familiar with non-factual entertaining. I believe that in this pursuit, Brian Williams’ sense of identity changed and resulted in him conflating two opposing personalities: Brian Williams the wannabe entertainer, and Brian Williams the reputable news anchor. His original and transcribed voices are clear, with his reputable status as newsmen pseudotranscribing the exaggerated stories of his altern self, and the reason the transcription was ultimately ineffective is because Williams’ asked too much from the audience’s suspension of disbelief.
We can see from this example where pseudotranscription, and by proxy, pseudotranslation, backfires. When the medium of transfer is inappropriate or unbelievable in the context of the subject matter, the audience rejects the translated idea and the original idea fails. Commercials and religion get special passes on suspension of disbelief because their subject matter is expected by the audience to be fanciful, whereas Brian Williams’ anticipated role of “authentic new source” was violated and required further examination when he made claims that seemed too grand to be true.

**Conclusions**

I know we’ve covered a tremendous breadth of information and material. The description below contains timestamps that you can click on to skip to any section of the video. If you sat through the whole thing, congratulations. I know it was dry at times, or maybe throughout. Before I sign off, I’ll go back through the biggest ideas I covered in this project and leave you with some final questions to consider moving forward. Whether it originates in a writer or a public figure or an advertisement, what is the use of pseudotranslation or pseudotranscription?

First, I determined that both processes occur through the transfer of an original unrealizable idea into an accessible peculiar language. I talked about the subaltern and altern voices and how they can influence a text. Next time you read or watch something, consider the pseudotranslation framework and try to find something new in the work. Explore the lives of the creators, try to find parallels, and examine how real life is reflected in art. My examples of the objectives of repressed voices were numerous: some seek recognition by society, while others express grief and loss. Some might try to mislead or deceive you, while others still might only seek inner cohesion, even if it comes at a cost. These objectives are achieved and fail depending on the audience’s receptiveness to the translated voice, the nature of the original concept, and the relationship between these two elements. Often, these ideas are small and require little faith to accept, but some pseudotranslations and pseudotranscriptions ask too much from their recipient and collapse to reveal the apparent nonexistence of the original idea.

Ask yourself some questions next time you think about applying these concepts: Does the pseudotransfer of information imbue some truth in the translated concept? Does it ask us to take a leap of faith? And finally, what purpose do these leaps of faith serve to us as an audience and the originator of the pseudotransfer? In a pseudotransfer of information, everyone is a skeptic and everyone is a believer. Keep your heart open and your mind sharp when interacting with media and real-life, because everyone has a story to tell you, even if it isn’t their own.
Primary Sources (in order of appearance)

**Literature**  

**Television**  
*Scrubs*, Bill Lawrence;  *Mr. Robot*, Sam Esmail.

**Film**  
*Fight Club*, Chuck Palahniuk (original novel), David Fincher (director);  *The Usual Suspects*, Christopher McQuarrie (screenplay), Bryan Singer (director);  *Memento*, Christopher Nolan;  *Synecdoche, New York*, Charlie Kaufman.

Secondary Sources


[32] Riess, Jana. ”Are Mormons in their 20s and 30s leaving the LDS Church?” Flunking Sainthood (2016). Web.


Tertiary Sources (in order of appearance)


[16] “And so it begins Old Spice commercial with Terry Crews.” Image.


