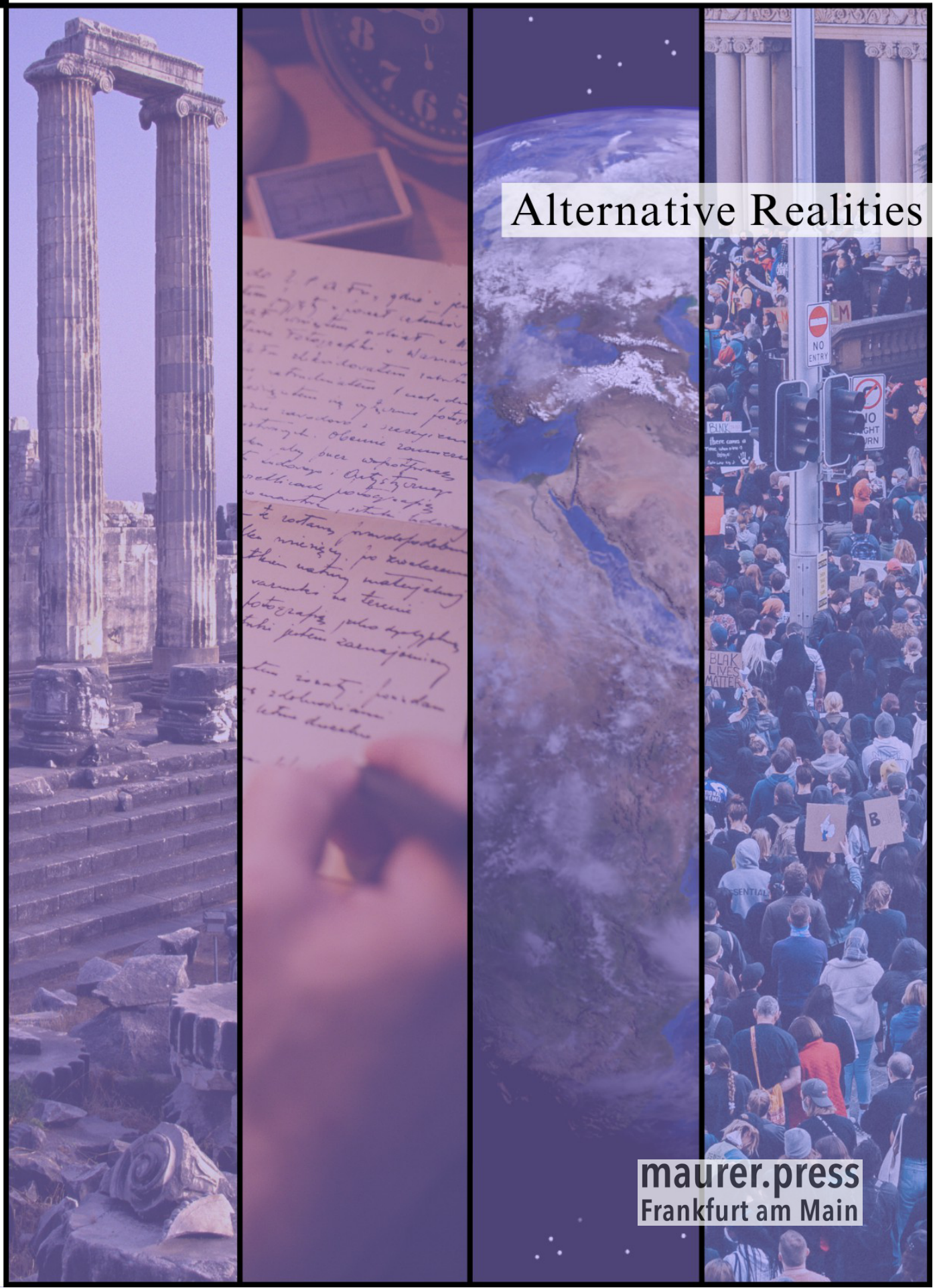
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Editors' Note

In the age of fractured truths and boundless creations, the concept of reality is giving way to numberless possibilities which lie at the crossroads of 'alternative' and the 'real'. The volume posits the lens of 'alternative realities' as a critical paradigm for interrogating the complexities of our contemporary life, transcending its association with speculative fiction and psychological abnormalities. The term 'alternative' denotes parallel modes of being, while 'reality' is approached as both a concrete existence anchored in here and now and a mutable construct shaped by perception and interpretation.

The central aim of this scholarship is to dismantle the reductive categorization and instead illuminate the agency of alternative realities within the mundane, the theoretical and the aesthetic. Comprising insightful studies from different research fields (sociolinguistic anthropology, media studies, cybernetics, folklore, music, ethnography, history, literature, cinema), the volume seeks to weave a conversation across disciplines, examining how other possible worlds incessantly brush against our own.

After highlighting the complexity, variety and importance of multilingual narratives in the wider context of migration policy-making, **Charlotte Bhar** (École Pratique des Hautes Études) explores how Tibetan migrants in Paris navigate integration through language. By analyzing multilingual practices, particularly code-switching, she argues that language learning is an emotional process of embodying new social values. In such a framework, language – particularly the spontaneous production of informal conversation – can never be detached from its context, and it allows for glimpses into events occurring in the speaker's life, particularly those which carry emotional charge.

John Bessai, an independent researcher from Canada, demonstrates how code-based interfaces encourage participants to co-produce knowledge that challenges settler governance, data capitalism, and extractive ecological logics. His analysis blends media studies, public-sphere theory, and the aporetic framework to trace connections among wildlife surveillance, urban futurism, testimonial memory, and personalized data dashboards. Through the strategic deployment of algorithmic processes, spatial audio, and responsive video, the viewers play a hybrid role – simultaneously witnesses, analysts, and participants. Interactive projects, such as *Bear 71, Biidaaban: First Light, The Space We Hold*, and *Do Not Track*, demonstrate that algorithmic storytelling provides a platform for social critique and civic imagination. They engage algorithmic culture from within and turn surveillance tools into engines of empathy, land-based futurity, accountable witnessing, and data literacy.

Drawing on the anthropologists Michael Taussig, Ernesto de Martino and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, the researcher **Max Kaari** explores the relationship between music, events, and transformative experiences in urban environments. His study makes use of the concept of the cybernetic sublime, explored as a moment of collective uncertainty where hierarchies are disrupted, and ambivalence, uncertainty, and ecstatic subjectivity give rise to a transformative, collective experience.

Maxim Braun (Friedrich Schiller University Jena) conducts a study which negotiates the boundaries between imagination and social reality in the German fairy tales authored by Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813) and Christiane Benedikte Naubert, demonstrating that their marvelous elements serve as vehicles for philosophical and social reflection. He also pinpoints three modes of social imagining – reformist, transformative, and diagnostic –, revealing how the Enlightenment fairy tales developed a sophisticated repertoire of critical strategies that anticipate later debates about literature's capacity to envision social change.

Aljaž Mesner (University of Ljubljana) explores Japanese Buddhist cosmologies and sacred spaces, tracing how pre-Buddhist perceptions of landscapes were transformed through the employment of mandalas as symbolic bridges between the earthly realm and the Other World. The paper highlights the ways in which such cosmologies remain deeply embedded in contemporary Japanese society – visible in urban planning, ritual practices, and even popular culture – where the "Other World" continues to be felt as proximate to everyday life.

Israel Holas Allimant and **Julio Uribe Ugalde**, both from the University of Melbourne, bring into focus the career of Mon Laferte, a famous Chilian singer covering a wide range of genres. Her musical style is characterized by the interplay between the retro-nostalgic and the futuristic sounds of Latin America's musical past and present, while her artistic voice creates an intimate, feminine space that counters dominant patriarchal attitudes and narratives by foregrounding personal and social traumas through emotionally charged music and visuals. Her introspective feminist vision demonstrates music's capacity to bridge personal and political realms, enabling emotional and social transformation as well as healing.

Eve Wong (University of Cape Town, South Africa) uses the imaginal possibilities of Deleuzian "fabulation" and John L. Jackson Jr.'s notion of "sincerity" to reconceptualize identity and to explain the circulation and the anchoring of emotions within collective memory. Her study centers on Khoisan people of South Africa and the Khoisan revivalism movement, which creates "alternative realities" that do not reconstruct a literal past, but affirm Khoisan existence amid ontological non-recognition. Fabulation is conceptualized as a recursive process, a speculative technique where identities become through iterative actions, affective relationalities, and cultural improvisation.

In her research, **Maria Mihaela Grajdian** (Hiroshima University) examines how Takarazuka Revue negotiates and reshapes the cultural identity in late-modern Japan by reconfiguring the relationship between producers and consumers of popular culture. She choses as case studies three high-profile productions derived from Hollywood cult movies: *Ocean's Eleven* (staged in 2011-2012, 2013, and 2019), *Once Upon a Time in America* (performed in 2020), and *Casino Royale* (staged in 2023). During the 2010s, these performances projected conservative messages of masculinity, national pride, and hierarchical order, while post-2020 stagings reveal a subtle, but significant re-orientation towards envisioning a pluricentric world, characterized by cooperation, compassion, and courage. The author points out that Takarazuka Revue's strategies are simultaneously preserving, contesting, and re-imagining the cultural scripts which define national identity and collective belonging.

Alexandru-Ilie Munteanu (Brukenthal National Museum) explores the political imagery as reflected in six fictional writings from the 17th and 18th centuries, found in the library of Samuel von Brukenthal (1721-1803), the governor of the Principality of Transylvania. The narratives are grouped in three sets, each highlighting a different historical perspective. The first literary duet, *Isle des Hermaphrodites* and *Voyages de Cyrus,* illustrates the concept of anti-utopia and the need for social and political change, the second pair, *L´Espion Turc* and *Voyage de Nicolas Klimius,* brings forward the establishment of an internal and international equitable jurisprudence and the birth of a new, non-Eurocentric, perspective on the world, whereas the last literary group, *Lettres d'une peruvienne* and *L'An 2440,* emphasizes women's emancipation, and the idea of a perfect society.

Thales Reis Alecrim (Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Lisbon) investigates the articulations between metal music and fantasy fiction as a form of cultural cross-fertilization. His study focuses on the album *Saberlight Chronicles* (2022) by Fellowship, which exemplifies how metal bands craft concept albums by narrating original fantasy stories. Metal music and fantasy are shown not merely as escapism, but as active tools for reimagining cultural processes, illustrating the influence of alternative realities in music expression. The study attempts to fill a gap in the literature by analyzing how metal's fantastical narratives address both contemporary anxieties and historical continuities, offering a lens to speculate on alternative realities.

Alicia Corts (Jacksonville State University) provides a robust framework for the concept of skinning in virtual realities. Skinning could be a technical process of binding images to 3D models so that they move believably within a coded environment, but also an act of world-making, an aesthetic and ideological choice that encodes the assumptions and the biases of its creator into the visual experience of the users. Coding constraints remain largely invisible, giving users the sense that they have control and freedom in the virtual space while masking the boundaries developers put in place. The paper argues that skinning invites critical analysis of who learners/participants in the virtual realities of *The World of Hugo Simberg* (developed by the Finnish National Gallery) and *C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience* (developed by the Italian Ministry of Culture and Vection Technologies) are allowed to be and what ways of knowing they are offered. It also positions skinning as a vital design principle for crafting immersive educational futures where learners not only consume content, but perform new ways of understanding.

Monica-Alina Toma, **Antonia Cristiana Enache**, and **Alina Maria Seica** (Bucharest University of Economic Studies) co-authored the study which tackles the complex interplay between spatiality, emotional suppression and authoritarian ideology in Wimmer's 2002 science fiction film Equilibrium, a key example of early 21st-century dystopian cinema. Through an interdisciplinary framework based on spatial theory and dystopian critique, the current research illuminates how these contrasting environments not only structure the narrative, but also articulate a broader sociopolitical commentary on the cost of engineered harmony.

In her paper, **Veronica De Pieri** (University of Bologna) draws on Murakami Haruki's literary production and juxtaposes "this world" (*kono sekai*) and the other world (*ano sekai*), thus contrasting between truth and fiction, facts and dreamlike visions. This impairment in reality testing can be interpreted as a multifaceted psychotic disorder, in which the protagonists' delusions, hallucinations and mnestic dysfunctions find manifestation in the "double world". *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* (2024) explores the sense of loss, regret,

and social withdrawal provoked by urban barriers in the claustrophobic context that compels the search for a dreamscape in which to take refuge.

In a mixed methodological approach (ethnographic description, media discourse analysis, hermeneutic interpretation), **Maria Mihaela Grajdian** (Hiroshima University) examines two live action SF blockbusters, *Oblivion* (2013) and *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014). Both movies engage with themes of individual self-awareness, historical consciousness, and the protagonist's role in his own transformation as a necessary precondition to saving the world. In addition, the films also expose our vulnerability as species, and warn us of the humanity's painful fragility. The study aims at revealing the ways in which science fiction action movies can serve as blueprints for resilient, liberated individuals – capable of courage, dedication, and compassion as they strive to lead meaningful lives.

We have purposefully gathered diverse voices – academics, artists, independent researchers, and professors – to interrogate the theme of alternative realities from every angle. This volume would not exist without their bold creativity and intellectual courage. We would like to thank all the contributors from so many different countries (France, Canada, Germany, Australia, South Africa, Japan, Romania, Portugal, USA, Italy), a diverse community of thinkers and creators whose scholarship and practice have explored the unconventional intersections of alternative realities. We hope that this collection serves as a valuable resource for ongoing discourse in this evolving field.

Editors-in-Chief (Special Issue)

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Mihaela Grajdian

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Raluca Nicolae

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Table of Contents

1. "BE LIKE WATER" ADJUSTMENT PRACTICES OF TIBETAN IMMIGRANTS TO PARIS 1
Charlotte Bhar, Paris, France

2. ALGORITHMIC REALITIES AND THE CANADIAN APORETIC CONDITION DIGITAL COUNTERPUBLICS AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL JUSTICE 15
John Bessai, Peterborough, Canada

3. THE CYBERNETIC SUBLIME GENTRIFICATION, ECSTASY, AND THE CELEBRATION OF MISUNDERSTANDING 26
Max Kaario, Paris, France

4. ALTERNATIVE REALITIES IN ENLIGHTENMENT FAIRY TALES WIELAND'S AND NAUBERT'S LITERARY EXPERIMENTS 37
Maxim Braun, Jena, Germany

5. "YOU CAN FEEL THE OTHER WORLD IS VERY CLOSE" BUDDHIST COSMOLOGIES AND SACRED SPACES IN JAPAN 51
Aljaž Mesner, Ljubljana, Slovenia

6. MON LAFERTE: RETRO-FEMINIST FUTURE POP FROM POST-DICTATORSHIP CHILE 66
Israel Holas Allimant, Julio Uribe Ugalde, Melbourne, Australia

7. FABULATION, ERASURE, AND THE RECURSIVE BECOMING OF IDENTITY ALTERNATIVE REALITIES IN POSTCOLONIAL (NON)EXISTENCE 79
Eve Wong, Cape Town, South Africa

8. COUNTER-HEGEMONY TAKARAZUKA REVUE'S ALTERNATIVE HOLLYWOOD BLOCKBUSTERS 91
Maria Mihaela Grajdian, Hiroshima, Japan

9. REASONABLE CREATURES? POLITICS OF IMAGINATION IN NOVELS FROM THE LIBRARY OF SAMUEL VON BRUKENTHAL (1721-1803) 110
Alexandru-Ilie Munteanu, Sibiu, Romania

10. *SABERLIGHT CHRONICLES* ARTICULATIONS OF METAL MUSIC AND FANTASY IN FELLOWSHIP'S CONCEPT ALBUM (2022) 127
Thales Reis Alecrim, Lisbon, Portugal

11. SKINNED WORLDS: VIRTUAL REALITY AND THE POSTBIOLOGICAL 140
Alicia Corts, Jacksonville, U.S.A.

12. SYNTHETIC UTOPIAS AND SUBVERSIVE SPACES ALTERNATE REALITIES IN KURT WIMMER'S *EQUILIBRIUM* (2002) 154
Monica-Alina Toma, Antonia Christiana Enache, Alina Maria Seica, Bucharest, Romania

13. ONEIRISM, ALTERNATIVE REALITIES, AND COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN MURAKAMI HARUKI'S *THE CITY AND ITS UNCERTAIN WALLS* (2024) 164

Veronica De Pieri, Bologna, Italy

14. REMEMBERING ALTERNATIVE FUTURES TOM CRUISE AND THE SUBTLE REVOLUTION OF SCIENCE FICTION ACTION CINEMA BY MID-2010S 175
Maria Mihaela Grajdian, Hiroshima, Japan

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Postface
The Plurality of Worlds and the Responsibility of Imagination

When closing a volume such as this, the temptation is strong to search for closure, to offer neat conclusions that tie together the diverse strands of research, reflection, and artistic exploration gathered under the rubric of "alternative realities". Yet, if this special issue of *Alma Mater – Journal of Interdisciplinary Cultural Studies* has demonstrated anything, it is that the very notion of "closure" is illusory. Alternative realities do not lend themselves to containment. They are porous, generative, unruly, and constantly in the process of becoming. To summarize them would be to betray their nature. Instead, what can be done here is to reflect on the trajectory this collection has traced and to outline some of the responsibilities it leaves with us, its readers.

The editors' preface rightly stressed the need to think of "alternative realities" not as escapist flights of fancy, nor as pathological distortions of truth, but as critical paradigms for understanding the layered, complex, and unstable conditions of contemporary life. Across the contributions, we have witnessed how alternative realities manifest – in language and memory, in music and narrative, in digital skinning and cinematic world-building, in identity politics and feminist interventions, in folkloric imagination and cybernetic sublime. Each contribution did not simply analyze "alternatives" from a safe critical distance; rather, they enacted them, making us see how worlds are always more than one.

In this postface, we would like to weave a conversation among three dimensions which emerged repeatedly across the studies: (1) the politics of imagination, (2) the ethics of memory, and (3) the aesthetics of world-making. These dimensions do not stand apart but are entangled, shaping the field of "alternative realities" as both an object of study and a lived practice.

1. The Politics of Imagination

Imagination has often been trivialized in modern rationalist discourse: it was considered childish, unscientific, or merely decorative. Yet the studies collected here argue that imagination is central to social and political life. It is not a frivolous add-on to reality but a constitutive force. To imagine is to anticipate, to reframe, to refuse the inevitability of the present.

We saw this powerfully in **John Bessai**'s discussion of algorithmic storytelling projects. Here, imagination is not simply the content of narratives but the very mode of engaging with data. By appropriating tools of surveillance and transforming them into engines of empathy, such works show the ways in which imagination can destabilize regimes of governance and capitalism. The politics of imagination is thus insurgent: it carves spaces where alternative relations to technology and ecology become thinkable.

Similarly, the work of **Eve Wong** on Khoisan fabulation reveals imagination as an ontological necessity. In a context in which official histories deny or erase existence,

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fabulation becomes survival. It is a recursive performance of identity, a speculative insistence that "we are here". To imagine, in this sense, is a political act of world-affirmation in the face of non-recognition.

At the same time, imagination is not free-floating. As **Maxim Braun**'s study of Enlightenment fairy tales demonstrates, imaginative narratives always bear the traces of their social milieus. Whether reformist, transformative, or diagnostic, imagination is a political tool: it can uphold, critique, or reconfigure social orders. This insight cautions us against romanticizing alternative realities. Not all alternatives are emancipatory; some may reinforce hierarchies or exclusions. Thus, the politics of imagination is inseparable from the question of responsibility.

The research co-authored by **Monica-Alina Toma, Antonia Cristiana Enache, and Alina Maria Seica** likewise highlights the political stakes of aesthetic environments. Their analysis of *Equilibrium* (2002) shows how spatial design and authoritarian ideology converge to regulate emotion, illustrating the cost of engineered harmony in dystopian cinema. By mapping how physical and symbolic spaces constrain affect, their study argues that alternative realities are not abstract speculations but concrete re-imaginings of how bodies move, feel, and resist within architecture and power structures.

2. The Ethics of Memory

Alternative realities often emerge not only in projection towards the future but also in re-encountering the past. Memory, whether personal or collective, is never neutral – it is a contested site on which identities are negotiated, traumas revisited, and possibilities re-opened.

Charlotte Bhar's ethnographic work on Tibetan migrants in Paris illustrates this well. Code-switching is not merely a linguistic strategy; it is an embodied negotiation of past and present, homeland and host society. The emotional charge of language use reveals how memory flows through speech, shaping integration and identity. The alternative realities generated here are fragile but vital: they allow migrants to inhabit multiple belonging without collapsing into assimilation or alienation.

Equally compelling is the study by **Israel Holas Allimant** and **Julio Uribe Ugalde** on Mon Laferte. Her music activates memory not as nostalgia but as a critical force. By blending retro and futuristic elements, she opens a sonic space in which personal trauma intersects with collective histories of gender oppression and political violence. In doing so, she demonstrates memory's position as an instrument of both feminist critique and social healing.

Memory equally plays a central role in cinematic and literary studies throughout the volume. From Murakami's dreamscapes to dystopian movie architectures, as **Veronica De Pieri** points out, from historical utopias in Brukenthal's library to the cybernetic sublime of musical events as **Alexandru-Ilie Munteanu** sensibly discloses, the negotiation of past and present recurs. The lesson is clear: memory is not a passive archive but a dynamic site of re-imagination. The ethics of memory lies in how we narrate, what we choose to recall, and which silences we dare to break. Eventually, **Aljaž Mesner**'s contribution reminds us that alternative realities are not always speculative projections of the future; they can also be inherited cosmologies that persist as living frameworks of meaning, for instance in the

ways Buddhist mandalas mediate between earthly and transcendent realms thus structuring as spatial and temporal thresholds human experiences of the sacred.

3. The Aesthetics of World-Making

Finally, the contributions repeatedly remind us that alternative realities are not only political or ethical phenomena but also aesthetic ones. They require forms, genres, and media through which they become sensible. Aesthetics here is not about decoration but about the very conditions of possibility for alternative experience.

The aesthetic and experiential dimensions of collective uncertainty also come to the fore in **Max Kaari**'s exploration of the *cybernetic sublime*. By tracing how music and transformative events in urban environments destabilize hierarchies, Kaari demonstrates that alternative realities are not only narrated but also *felt*. Ambivalence, uncertainty, and ecstatic subjectivity generate moments of rupture in which new social configurations become imaginable. His work underscores that alternative realities often emerge through embodied experience, revealing aesthetics as a catalyst for collective transformation.

Maria Mihaela Grajdian's dual analyses of Takarazuka Revue and Hollywood science fiction blockbusters foreground this beautifully. In both cases, we see how performance and cinema are not mere reflections of existing social realities but laboratories for new configurations of selfhood, nationhood, and humanity. By staging Hollywood cult movies within a Japanese context, Takarazuka Revue negotiates between tradition and globality, masculinity and femininity, conservatism and cooperation. Likewise, science fiction releases like *Oblivion* and *Edge of Tomorrow* dramatize the fragility of the human species while offering blueprints for resilience. These media projects do not simply represent reality; they *produce* alternative realities, shaping the ways in which audiences imagine themselves and their worlds.

A similar dynamic is evident in **Alicia Corts**' exploration of "skinning": what appears at first to be a technical detail of virtual reality design is revealed to be a profound aesthetic and ideological decision. By determining how bodies move and appear in digital environments, skinning encodes assumptions about identity, agency, and knowledge. The aesthetics of world-making here is inseparable from pedagogy: it teaches users how to inhabit digital realities, which roles they can perform, and which remain foreclosed.

The link between music and fantasy in **Thales Reis Alecrim**'s study further reinforces this point. The fantastical narratives of metal are not mere escapism; they construct immersive worlds that address anxieties and aspirations. Aesthetics here is world-making: it crafts experiences through which listeners rehearse alternative modes of being.

Towards a Shared Horizon

Taken together, the papers in this volume do not converge into a single theory of alternative realities. Nor should they. Their strength lies precisely in their plurality. By juxtaposing Tibetan migrants and Chilean pop icons, Enlightenment fairy tales and metal albums, South African fabulations and Japanese musicals, interactive documentaries and dystopian movies, the volume insists that alternative realities are everywhere. They inhabit our speech, our songs, our screens, our stories. They constitute the everyday textures of life as much as its exceptional ruptures.

Yet amid this plurality, a shared horizon emerges: the recognition that alternative realities matter because they shape our common lives and quotidian togetherness. They challenge

the hegemony of a single, totalizing "reality" and instead affirm multiplicity, contingency, and imagination. They remind us that what seems inevitable today may appear otherwise tomorrow. They ask us to cultivate sensitivity to the unseen, the suppressed, the not-yet.

Such a horizon demands both critical vigilance and creative openness. We must remain attentive to how alternative realities can be co-opted – by nationalist ideologies, capitalist spectacles, or authoritarian fantasies. But we must also nurture their emancipatory potential, their capacity to engender empathy, courage, and solidarity.

Responsibilities for the Future

Closing this volume does not mean ending the conversation. On the contrary, it calls for its expansion. Scholars, artists, and citizens alike carry responsibilities towards alternative realities. These include:

1. **Documenting** – Recording and analyzing practices of alternative world-making, especially those marginalized by dominant discourses.
2. **Critiquing** – Exposing the exclusions and biases that underlie certain "alternatives", and refusing to romanticize them.
3. **Creating** – Actively participating in the crafting of alternative realities through art, pedagogy, activism, and everyday practices.
4. **Connecting** – Building transdisciplinary and transnational dialogues, as this volume has done, to learn from diverse forms of imagination and memory.

Ultimately, the challenge is to live responsibly amid multiplicity: to inhabit alternative realities not as private escapes but as collective experiments in freedom.

Coda: Living in the In-Between

Perhaps the most profound lesson of this collection is that we have always already been living between worlds. Reality is never singular. Migration, memory, music, cinema, literature, and digital technologies all attest to the porousness of our lived environments. The task is not to choose between "the real" and "the alternative", but to navigate their constant interplay.

In this sense, the "alternative" is not elsewhere – it is here, in the cracks of the everyday, in the shifts of language, in the resonances of a song, in the flicker of a screen, in the collective thrill of a performance. To recognize this is to embrace the multiplicity of existence and to assume the responsibility it entails.

The journey this collection invites us on is therefore unfinished. Its papers do not close doors but open them, offering tools, concepts, and stories for future explorations. May the readers of this volume take up the invitation – not to finalize the meaning of "alternative realities", but to continue dwelling in their plurality, cultivating their promise, and living their questions.

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Raluca Nicolae

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Maria Mihaela Grajdian

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Remembering Alternative Futures
Tom Cruise and the Subtle Revolution of Science Fiction Action Cinema by Mid-2010s

Maria Mihaela Grajdian[1]

Abstract

Science fiction has long served as a dynamic platform for examining humanity's future, technological innovation, and profound existential questions. By mid-2010s, the genre of science fiction action cinema had matured into a complex and sophisticated form, merging intellectually ambitious story-telling with visually breathtaking, technologically advanced cinematography, often anchored by compelling performances from prominent actors. During this period, audiences were captivated not only by the sheer entertainment value of such movies, but also by their capacity to provoke deeper contemplation on philosophical and existential themes, particularly concerning humanity's evolving relationship with technology. In a mixed methodological approach (ethnographic description, media discourse analysis, hermeneutic interpretation), this paper examines two recent live action blockbusters within the science fiction category, both featuring Tom Cruise in the lead role – *Oblivion* (2013) and *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) – which re-define the genre by adopting a philosophy of pragmatic exploration and hands-on experimentation through intricate visual-auditory constructions. In doing so, they challenge the foundational principles which have traditionally underpinned the global cinematic production and distribution model: despite their distinct aesthetic approaches, thematic compositions, and ideological underpinnings, both movies engage critically with themes of individual self-awareness, historical consciousness, and the protagonist's role in his own transformation as a necessary precondition to saving the world. Through the lens of male central characters, these narratives explore the multifaceted process of personal growth against the backdrop of fractured historical events and a progressively eroded sense of identity, purpose, and orientation within the contexts which shaped them. By delving into *Oblivion*'s and *Edge of Tomorrow*'s cinematic mechanisms, the study aims at revealing the ways in which science fiction action movies can serve as blueprints for resilient, liberated individuals – capable of courage, dedication, and compassion as they strive to lead purposeful lives.

Keywords: pragmatic humanism, identity, memory, war and peace, aliens, endangered humanity

1. Introduction: Alternative Futures and the Power of Cinema in Late Modernity

Science fiction has always been a fertile ground for exploring complex ideas about humanity's future, technological advancement, and existential dilemmas. By mid-2010s,

[1] Associate Professor, Hiroshima University, Japan, grajdian@hiroshima-u.ac.jp, ORCID-ID: 0000-0003-1732-7117.

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science fiction action cinema had already evolved into a sophisticated genre which blended high-concept story-telling with visually stunning, technically advanced cinematography, often anchored by powerful performances from leading actors. This era witnessed the release of live-action movies which not only entertained, but also engaged audiences with deeper philosophical and existential questions, particularly regarding the future of humanity in the face of rapidly advancing technology. The current paper focuses on two recent live-action blockbusters belonging to the science fiction genre and starring in the lead role Tom Cruise – *Oblivion* (2013) and *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) –, and the ways in which they re-define action cinema by taking over a philosophy of pragmatic exploration and practical experimentation by means of visual-auditive constructions, targeted at portraying the convoluted human condition and re-formulating the basic elements which had been regarded as crucial within the global business model of producing and releasing movies (Csicsery-Ronay, 2008). Although sensibly different in aesthetic approach, thematic conglomerate, and the ideology they represent, both movies address issues of individual engagement with self and history and one's position as a father and as a citizen, through the lens of the (male) main characters and their multi-layered growth on the background of troubled social structures and an increasingly diluted sense of identity, of purpose, and of orientation within the milieu which created them, in the first place. The intrinsic technical details of *Oblivion* and *Edge of Tomorrow* and the far-reaching reverberations they carry throughout the development towards the denouement are at the core of this analysis, seeking to unveil the concrete mechanisms encompassed in works of arts – in this case, live-action movies – potentially leading to role-models of liberated, resilient individuals, capable of courage, commitment, and compassion in their pursuit of meaningful lives.

Previous research on Hollywood blockbusters has focused mainly on theoretical explanations of box-office success and positive critical appraisal (see Brake, 2018; Brower, 2024; Csicsery-Ronay, 2008; Freedman, 2000; Stanley, 2002). The hands-on analysis of live-action movies is mostly avoided: the reasons range from practical – sitting with products of mass-media, regardless of the genre, and doing one's best to observe them in critical light somewhat defeats the purpose of the very existence of such products – to tactical – theories and methods need to be re-written or even (re-)invented for releases which more often than not reflect the Zeitgeist of the era and hardly offer any durable standpoints which could, in turn, serve as reference systems. Therefore, the current investigation aims at bringing into the spotlight on the intertwining between narrative lines and their processing in visual and musical architectures resulting into quasi-revolutionary cinema products: both *Oblivion* and *Edge of Tomorrow* shattered the principles of what had been considered up to their releases as mainstream cinematic works both by questioning the juxtaposition of the two major dimensions of expression – visual and aural – and by opening up fresh avenues for that very juxtaposition. The goal of this study, thus, is to highlight the inner mechanisms of two of the most iconic live-action movies in recent years, outlining basic strategies for producers, consumers, and critics.

Methodologically, I draw on more than 20 years of empiric-phenomenological fieldwork on mass media such as cinema and animation: the phenomenological experience is socio-culturally contextualized, emulated in cinematic artifacts as a discursive concatenations and performative displays of authentic selves in their resistance against conformity, uniformity, and the alleged superiority which comes from their association, hence striving to attain the highest level of existential transcendence. This addresses the fact that consumerist scenarios visible in the global late modernity manifest, eventually, as plain symptoms of a forever postponed confrontation with the individual reality, and not a reliable solution in terms of personal fulfillment and/or social cohesion. I observe the multiple layers of

cinema as representative of comprehensive mass-media, caught in the stress-ratio between arts and mainstream media, embedded in bureaucratic structures of administration and self-organization such as release politics, the economic supervision of brand-related consumption, the socio-cultural management of producers and consumers, as well as the products themselves and their meta-narrative implications. The sources consist of extensive fieldwork with long-term participatory observation and empirical data-collection resulting from archive research of press-releases and informal discussions with producers, viewers, critics as well as additional consumers of products of popular culture, both locally and internationally anchored. This complex endeavor allowed unexpected insights into the mechanisms of production, consumption, perception, processing, and dissemination of media phenomena in Europe, USA and Japan. Taking into account the extreme volatility of the global media industry, almost painful in its vivacious superficiality with a calculated momentary impact on audiences, the longevity of specific cinema works, live-action or animated, throughout decades is a powerful reminder that determination, hard-work, and persistence in pursuing an ideal one firmly believes in are worthy assets in the hierarchy of human values, although not always forthrightly advertised as such.

In a first step, this paper details the narrative structures of *Oblivion* and the complex ways in which ideas and characters are brought to life while critically observing the superficiality of the live-action science fiction genre. Subsequently, *Edge of Tomorrow* undergoes a similar procedure, whereas the science fiction genre serves as the dramaturgic pretext for the sensitive interrogation of interhuman relationships, their tensions as well as their rewards. The conclusion sums up the major ideas and reflects on potential future research to deepen the current findings. Inherent limitations notwithstanding, this study aims at elucidating a potential recipe for cinema blockbusters which transcend financial preoccupations and instead focus on educational experiences, permeating media releases of the global entertainment industry, which serve as familiar, memorable, relatable vehicles to convey hard yet necessary truths. As to be shown in the lines below, the answer to a potent, long-term solution to current developments is not an escalation of violence and destruction as means of numbing ourselves out of the perception of human suffering and the slow, but inevitable alienation both from our own selves and from others, but a re-consideration of what makes humans, human: a deep-dive into the extraordinary quest for human excellence.

2. *Oblivion* (2013): Memory, Identity, and Civilizational Collapse

One of the key movies which epitomized the evolution of the science fiction genre in the necessity and ability to explore complex ideas about humanity's future, technological advancement, and existential dilemmas is *Oblivion* (2013), directed by Joseph Kosinski and starring Tom Cruise in the lead-role. On the surface, *Oblivion* appears as a standard science fiction action movie, adhering to its overwhelming conventions, but beneath its sleek exterior lies a rich conglomerate of themes, character development, and genre-defining elements, revealed within its cinematic exploration of complex tropes such as identity, memory, and human resilience. Indeed, at closer scrutiny, *Oblivion* reveals itself as a pivotal moment in science fiction action cinema, due to its plot, character dynamics, visual and auditory design, thematic depth, challenging the broader context of the genre and of mass media, altogether.

Oblivion is set in a dystopian future in which Earth has been devastated by an alien invasion, leaving the planet nearly uninhabitable. The movie follows Jack Harper (Tom Cruise), a

technician stationed on Earth, tasked with maintaining drones which protect the planet's remaining resources, who, along with his communications officer and partner Victoria (Andrea Riseborough), lives in a high-tech tower above the clouds, isolated from the remnants of humanity who are supposedly en route to a colony on Titan, before they both are supposed to join the rest of humanity. Jack's seemingly routine existence is disrupted by vivid dreams of a past life he cannot remember and the appearance of a mysterious woman, Julia (Olga Kurylenko), who crashes on Earth, leading him to question the nature of his mission and his own identity. As the story unfolds, Jack uncovers the truth about his existence, the reality of the alien threat, and the fate of humanity – leading him to face a crisis which forces him to question everything he knows about himself and the world. *Oblivion*'s narrative weaves together elements of mystery, action, and philosophical inquiry, embedded with classical science fiction themes – identity, memory, and the struggle for freedom –, culminating in a story simultaneously thought-provoking and visually captivating, keeping the audiences engaged with its twists and revelations.

At the heart of *Oblivion* is Jack Harper, portrayed by Tom Cruise with a blend of stoicism, vulnerability, and restrained intensity, capturing the character's internal conflicts and gradual awakening to the truth. The quintessential archetype of the reluctant hero – a man who starts as a cog in a vast machine, but gradually awakens to his own agency and individuality –, Jack is a man caught between duty and doubt, a soldier who begins to question the very foundation of his reality: throughout the movie, Jack's journey is marked by his growing realization that his memories, which he once thought defined him, are fabrications imposed by an external power. This internal struggle drives *Oblivion*'s exploration of identity and self-determination, themes central to the science fiction genre, pushing the plot forward as Jack unravels the mystery of his existence.

Victoria, played by Andrea Riseborough, serves as both Jack's partner and a foil to his developing doubts, to which her loyalty to the mission sharply contrasts, as she represents the comfort of conformity and the dangers of blind obedience, preferring the assurances provided by their superiors rather than the confrontation with the reality gradually unveiled by her trusted partner. Her relationship with Jack is complex, blending professional partnership with romantic undertones, but it is ultimately defined by her adherence to the *status quo*, as Victoria's unwavering commitment to their assigned roles creates tension between her and Jack, hence emphasizing *Oblivion*'s representation of resistance versus compliance. This dynamic illustrates, ultimately, the seductive nature of security and the fear of the unknown, despite clear evidence backed by real-life experiences.

Julia, portrayed by Olga Kurylenko, is the key to unlocking Jack's true identity and the catalyst to his transformation: a mysterious woman from Jack's dreams, her character is imbued with a sense of mystery and emotional depth, denoting both Jack's past and his potential future as well as his lost memories which keep on haunting him. Julia's character is integral to the plot, serving as both a symbol of Jack's past life and the embodiment of his future choices, and her arrival challenges the stability of Jack's world, prompting him to confront the lies he has been enacting. Her presence pushes Jack to confront the reality of his existence and finally leads him to take a stand against the forces controlling his life: through Julia, *Oblivion* explores the power of memory and the importance of human connection in defining who we truly are.

Visually, *Oblivion* is a masterpiece of modern science fiction cinema, making use of established aesthetics to reinforce its themes and the corresponding mood: the movie's visual design is characterized by stark, minimalist design, juxtaposing the high-tech environment of Jack and Victoria's living quarters with the desolate, post-apocalyptic

landscapes of Earth (see Hayward, 2012). The derelict beauty of the ruined Earth itself, captured through sweeping landscapes and meticulous production design, creates a haunting backdrop for the story, reflecting *Oblivion*'s themes of isolation, artificiality, and the loneliness of the remnants of a lost world, with the stark visual contrast between the exquisitely technological facilities in which Jack and Victoria live and the barren wastelands of Earth emphasizing the disconnect between the characters' perceived reality and the truth: the design of the drones themselves, the Tet (the space station overseeing the mission), and the technology used by the characters contribute in combination to *Oblivion*'s futuristic yet sterile atmosphere, underscoring the sense of control and surveillance disguised as safety and control which dominate such a dystopian world. Its employment of color is particularly noteworthy, with the cold whites and grays of the high-tech accessories juxtaposed against the warmer earthy tones of the natural world, effectively symbolizing the tension between the artificial and the organic, the controlled and the free – even more compellingly complemented by the movie's cinematography, which captures the vastness of the barren Earth and the gradual alienation in Jack's existence. This visual dichotomy mirrors Jack's internal conflict between his programmed duty and his emerging sense of humanity, with the sleek, minimalist design of the drones and other technology additionally reinforcing *Oblivion*'s exploration of oversight and surveillance, central themes to its narrative.

The musical score, composed by M83 in collaboration with Joseph Trapanese, plays a crucial role in enhancing the movie's atmosphere, its emotional depth, and story-telling structure, as it blends electronic and orchestral elements, creating a soundscape both futuristic and profoundly human (see Buhler, 2019; Cooke, 2010). Moreover, the music complements the visual design, with the soaring melodies and pulsing rhythms bringing into the foreground *Oblivion*'s key moments, its tension and emotional beats, from the sweeping shots of Earth's ruined landscapes to the intimate, emotionally charged exchanges between characters: thus, the score's use of recurring motifs reflects the movie's themes of memory and identity, with certain musical cues associated with Jack's flashbacks and personal revelations – overall, the interplay between visuals and music in *Oblivion* enables an immersive experience which draws the audience into its world and reinforces its thematic concerns.

Entertaining yet thought-provoking, *Oblivion* addresses several major tropes which resonate with contemporary audiences: indeed, at its core, *Oblivion* focuses on memory, identity, and the search for meaning in a world which has lost its way, explored through the lens of science fiction and its futuristic setting, as questions about the nature of reality and the role of technology in shaping our lives which bring eventually the theme of memory into the central spotlight, and with Jack's journey gradually unfolding as one of (re-)discovering his past and reclaiming his identity from the forces seeking to control him. Haraway's (1991) essay is helpful in understanding the human-machine hybrids present in *Oblivion*, particularly in the context of Jack Harper as a clone and his relationship with the technological systems governing his world. The cyborg metaphor is a useful tool for analyzing *Oblivion*'s exploration of posthuman identity, located within the architecture of its depiction of control and resistance, with the Tet serving as a metonymic presence for oppressive systems bent on subjugation and dehumanization. Jack's rebellion against the Tet represents a broader struggle for autonomy and self-determination – themes deeply resonating with contemporary concerns about surveillance, corporate power, and the erosion of individual freedoms: Jack's trajectory is driven by his quest to uncover the truth about himself and his past, triggered by the suggestion that our memories are integral to our sense of self, and that the loss or manipulation of memory can have – and does in fact

have – profound implications for our identity. Such an approach is particularly relevant in an age in which technology increasingly influences the ways in which we remember and interpret our experiences.

In this train of thought, the tension between freedom and control is another fundamental issue, appearing as a continuation of Wood's (2003) critique of Hollywood cinema's ideological underpinnings through the analysis of post-Vietnam Hollywood, leading to *Oblivion*'s contextualization within the broader landscape of American action cinema and providing a framework for understanding its themes of disillusionment, trauma, and the questioning of authority: *Oblivion* displays a world in which advanced technology is employed to degrade and to dominate, with Jack's rebellion against the Tet representing a broader struggle for autonomy and self-determination – which reverberates through contemporary concerns about surveillance, corporate power, and the erosion of individual freedoms in the face of technological advancements. Supported by Žižek's (2012) examination of ideology in popular culture, *Oblivion*'s cinematic description of control, resistance, and the construction of reality corresponds to the critically essential ways in which movies propagate or challenge dominant ideologies, therefore highlighting the importance of *Oblivion*'s critique of tight hierarchical inspection and authoritarianism – despite the science fiction setting.

Environmental degradation is the third key theme in *Oblivion*, with its illustration of a ruined Earth serving as a cautionary tale about the consequences of humanity's exploitation of the planet: the barren, lifeless world brings forth anxieties about climate change and environmental destruction, making it a relevant and timely commentary on the state of the world and the importance of sustainable practices. Lastly, *Oblivion*'s exploration of love and connection, with Jack's relationship with Julia serving as a reminder of the power of human bonds in the face of adversity, suggests that affection and memory are intertwined, with our interhuman relationships forming the foundation of our own identities, and adding emotional depth while grounding the movie's hypothetical elements in a relatable human experience.

Firmly rooted in the science fiction genre, drawing on a rich tradition of speculative story-telling which explores the possibilities of future technology and its impact on humanity, *Oblivion*'s narrative is built around classic science fiction concerns such as the nature of identity and reality, the consequences of technological advancement, as well as the question of what it means to be free and human in an increasingly controlled society – these themes are embedded within a plot combining elements of dystopian fiction, post-apocalyptic setting, and existential drama.

One of *Oblivion*'s most significant contributions to the genre is its exploration of memory and identity. Bukatman (1993) discusses in the analysis of the "virtual subject", the intersection between identity and technology in science fiction, thus providing a theoretical framework for understanding Jack Harper's character arc as he navigates a constructed identity within a technologically mediated environment: *Oblivion* presents a world in which technology has the power to manipulate and erase memories, raising disturbing questions about the nature of self and the extent to which our identities are shaped by our past experiences. Furthermore, one might incur Baudrillard's (1994) work and its relevance to *Oblivion*'s profound investigation of identity, reality, and the manipulation of memory through or as simulation: a distant reinforcement of Baudrillard's concept of simulacra and the blurring of the boundaries between reality and simulation, particularly in the ways in which Jack Harper's reality is shaped by the fabricated memories imposed upon him by the Tet. This theme is central to the movie's narrative, as Jack's journey is ultimately one

of self-discovery and the reclamation of his true identity, while aligning with the science fiction genre's tradition of examining hypothetical scenarios to probe the human condition. Furthermore, *Oblivion*'s engagement with the questioning the role of technology in society as well as the relationship between humanity and technology reminisces of Csicsery-Ronay's (2008) comprehensive analysis identifying science fiction's key aesthetic, ideological, and thematic elements such as "future shock" and "novum", particularly applicable to the movie's portrayal of a dystopian future and its technological innovations. The drones and other advanced technologies in *Oblivion* are depicted as both tools of control and symbols of a lost civilization, as *Oblivion* delves into the idea that technology, while capable of great feats, can also be a means of oppression and dehumanization, a theme even more keenly reflected in the depiction of the Tet, the artificial intelligence which oversees the operation on Earth and which represents the dangers of placing too much power in the hands of technology: the movie's critique of technological control and its impact on human freedom is a common thread in science fiction, echoing concerns about the increasing role of technology in our lives.

Oblivion's major challenge is the representation of gender roles within a complex picture, particularly within the context of a genre often dominated by male-centric narratives. Butler's (1990; 2024) theories on gender performativity might offer carefully crafted insights into the gender dynamics in *Oblivion*, with the roles of Victoria and Julia being analyzed through Butler's lens, specifically in the strategies through which their identities and actions are shaped by societal expectations and their relationships with the male protagonist: clearly, the movie's both female characters occupy distinct yet complementary roles in relation to Jack. Victoria embodies the archetype of the dutiful, strong, competent, and disciplined partner, whose identity is closely tied to her role within the mission and her relationship with Jack, as a presence whose strength lies in her adherence to the rules imposed by external authorities. Her role, nonetheless, is ultimately constrained by her loyalty to the system and her inability to question that very system, mirroring a traditional portrayal of female characters as supportive, but secondary to the male protagonist's journey. Victoria's adherence to the rules and her fear of stepping outside the boundaries set by their superiors highlights the tension between security and freedom, a theme consistently resonating throughout the movie. Julia, on the other hand, is depicted as a figure of mysterious resonance and emotional depth, whose influence is pivotal in Jack's evolution, bringing forth the classical trope of the muse or the woman who inspires the male hero to transcend his limitations and to discover his true self. While this characterization may seem reductive, Julia's role is essential in the narrative progression, and her strength lies in her emotional resilience and connection to Jack's past, as she represents the human connection which Jack has lost and the memories which define his true identity: through Julia, *Oblivion* touches on themes of love, memory, and the enduring power of human relationships, even in the face of overwhelming technological control.

Thus, while *Oblivion* made strides in giving its female characters agency and importance, it still falls into some of the traditional patterns of gender representation in action cinema: while Victoria and Julia are strong, capable characters who embody crucial parameters in the story, their narratives are primarily and largely defined by their relationships to Jack, the male protagonist, being intertwined with his development rather than existing independently, reiterating a common trope in action cinema which often positions female characters in relation to the male hero's journey – nevertheless, both characters are integral to the narrative, and their interactions with Jack help to drive the *Oblivion*'s exploration of

memory, identity, and self-discovery as foundation to the human experience, adding layers of complexity to the overall conglomerate.

Oblivion was released at a time when science fiction action cinema was experiencing a resurgence while undergoing a significant transformation, driven by advancements in visual effects technology and a growing appetite for high-concept story-telling: the movie's ability to tap into the cultural Zeitgeist of the early 2010s, a period marked by increasing concerns about technology, environmental degradation, and the future of humanity, as revealed in Sobchack's (1997) analysis of the evolution of science fiction cinema as a historical phenomenon at the intersection of special effects, the depiction of dystopian futures, and deep-going philosophical questions, appears as one dimension of its success at the box-office ad with critics. At the same time, Truffaut's book (1985, a compilation of interviews between François Truffaut and Alfred Hitchcock) provides insights into the craft of suspense and visual story-telling as evident in *Oblivion*'s narrative structure and direction, with the influence of Hitchcockian suspense subliminally conveyed in its pacing and its gradual revelation of the central mystery, adding to its overall impact. Noteworthy, *Oblivion*'s marketing campaign played a crucial role in its lasting impact, leveraging Tom Cruise's star power and the movie's stunning visuals to attract a broad audience, with the promotional materials emphasizing its epic scope and high production values, therefore positioning it as a must-see event in the landscape of blockbuster cinema – a dissemination strategy reinforcing the power of mass media in shaping audience expectations and driving the success of major cinema releases, as the use of trailers, posters, and other promotional content creates a sense of anticipation and excitement while highlighting the product's visual and thematic strengths.

Ultimately, *Oblivion* fits within the continuing trend in science fiction cinema towards blending action-oriented story-telling with deeper philosophical and existential themes, a trend be observed in movies from the same period, such as *Inception* (2010) and *Interstellar* (2014), which similarly combine thrilling action sequences with complex narratives, challenging the audiences to think critically about the implications of the stories, the nature of reality, and the human condition (see Kurzweil, 2005). In this larger context, *Oblivion*'s success demonstrates the power of mainstream cinema to engage with sophisticated ideas about the human experience while still appealing to wide audiences, as it exemplifies the evolution of science fiction action cinema by the mid-2010s combining high-concept story-telling with stunning visuals and a powerful performance from its lead-actor, in this case Tom Cruise, compounded by the credible exploration of themes such as memory, identity, control, and environmental degradation, which places it distinctly within the science fiction tradition, with action and spectacle ensuring its appeal to broad audiences. *Oblivion* is a testament to the power of science fiction to engage with complex ideas while providing thrilling entertainment, as its relevance extends beyond its speculative genre's canon and narratives, embedding vast cultural concerns about technology, the environment, and the future of humanity, within a mass-media framework which continues to resonate with global audiences throughout the years.

3. *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014): Invasive Aliens, War, and Limitless Chances

As mentioned previously, by mid-2010s, the landscape of science fiction action cinema was undergoing a significant transformation. Among the movie which contributed to this shift, *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014), starring Tom Cruise and Emily Blunt, stands out as a compelling example of the ways in which the genre could evolve by blending high-concept

science fiction with relentless action and cerebral story-telling within gradual complex – and innovative – narrative structures, complex character dynamics, and cutting-edge visual effects. Directed by Doug Liman with a story-line based on the Japanese science fiction light-novel *All You Need Is Kill* by Sakurazaka Hiroshi with illustrations by Abe Yoshitoshi published Japanese by Shūeisha under their Super Dash Bunko imprint in December 2004 and released in English by Viz Media in 2009, *Edge of Tomorrow* interrogates themes of repetition, transformation, and survival in a futuristic war against an alien species. The movie's influence extends beyond its immediate success, marking a pivotal moment in the genre's development and reflecting broader trends in mainstream media: by examining *Edge of Tomorrow*'s constitutive elements in detail, one can better understand its place within the history of the genre and its impact on contemporary cinema.

Edge of Tomorrow presents a narrative both ingenious and engaging by employing time loops in the context of war: on a near-future Earth, an alien race known as the Mimics has invaded, pushing humanity to the brink of extinction. The story follows Major William Cage (Tom Cruise), a public relations officer with no combat experience who is unwillingly thrust into battle. After promptly being killed in the first moments of combat, Cage quickly discovers that he is caught in a time loop, re-living the same day over and over every time he dies, as each death on the battle-field resets the day, giving Cage the opportunity to learn, adapt, and improve his combat skills: such a narrative structure, reminiscent of the 1993 comedy *Groundhog Day*, is adapted with a fresh twist, as the stakes are higher, the consequences more severe, and the repetition more grueling. While the narrative device of the time loop serves as the movie's most compelling element, blending science fiction with the tension and intensity of an action thriller, the story is not plainly a plot device but a metaphor for personal growth and resilience as well as for the cyclical nature of war, as the narrative structure forces audiences to engage with the concept of repetition, which allows Cage to develop from a cowardly, self-serving individual and inexperienced officer into a battle-hardened soldier, thus bringing into the spotlight themes of personal development, anti-fragility, and the futility of armed conflict (see Barber, 1996; Bauman, 2003; Krugman, 1994; Mestrovic, 1997). Through each loop, Cage becomes more skilled, courageous, and selfless, with the repetitive nature of the narrative mirroring the learning process, in which failure is not the end, but a step towards mastery: such a narrative construction serves, in addition, to heightening the tension, as audiences are increasingly aware of the consequences of failure, even if the protagonist is temporarily immune to it (see Greene, 2013; Taleb, 2012). Time turns, therefore, into the focal point of the movie, as viewers are confronted with the existential implications of repetition and the possibility of altering one's fate, while the time loop convention allows, ultimately, for a unique pacing, in which the narrative can skip over redundant sequences while focusing on incremental changes leading to the protagonist's eventual success.

Tom Cruise's portrayal of William Cage is a study in transformation and agency in crafting one's own identity – and a resolute departure from his typical action hero roles, as Cage starts off as an anti-hero: self-serving, cowardly, and entirely unprepared for combat. Indeed, at the beginning of the movie, Cage is a far cry from the typical action hero as he is manipulative, selfish, incompetent, and (mis-)using his position to avoid the front-lines, but the time loop forces him to face his limitations, fears, and failures repeatedly, until he develops into the hero he never wanted to be, and thus to evolve into a leader capable of saving humanity (see Campbell, 1949; Connell, 2005; DiAngelo, 2018; Katz, 2006). Cage's character arc is defined by his transformation into a seasoned warrior, capable of leading humanity's final stand against the Mimics and towards the final victory: his metamorphose is gradual and hard-earned, making it more impactful than the instantaneous changes often

seen in regular action movies, as Cage's character development is not just a personal journey, but also a commentary on the nature of heroism in science fiction cinema. Unlike conventional protagonists, often depicted as inherently brave and morally upright, Cage's heroism is forged through suffering, repetition, and the gradual accumulation of knowledge and experience, with the time loop serving as a crucible which burns away his flaws, leaving behind a more refined, albeit scarred, individual.

Cage's journey is paralleled by that of Sergeant Rita Vrataski (Emily Blunt), known as the "Angel of Verdun": a fearsome warrior who has killed hundreds of Mimics, Vrataski is the embodiment of the experienced soldier, already having experienced a time loop similar to Cage's, which has turned her into a symbol of hope for humanity, but in contrast to Cage, who begins his journey in ignorance, Vrataski's character is marked by her knowledge of the time loop and the burden it carries. Her relationship with Cage evolves from one of mentor and student to equals in the fight against the Mimics, as Vrataski's character challenges traditional gender roles in action cinema – not a damsel in distress or a mere sidekick, but a powerful, independent figure who drives much of the plot, with her physical prowess and strategic mind emerging as crucial to the mission's success (and the narrative's credibility), and her emotional resilience providing a counterpoint to Cage's initially fragile psyche (see Kristeva, 1974; Hooks, 2000; Lavigne, 2012). Thus, the dynamic between Cage and Vrataski subverts the typical male-dominated narrative, offering a more balanced depiction of gender in the context of war and survival. In this train of thought, *Edge of Tomorrow* challenges traditional gender roles in science fiction action cinema through Vrataski's character, delivering an unexpectedly progressive vision, particularly for a genre which has historically been dominated by male heroes. While her character is instrumental in Cage's transformation, portraying both a mentor and a partner in the fight against the aliens, she is presented not just as Cage's equal, but in many ways, his superior, the battle-hardened warrior who trains Cage, guiding him through his journey. This role reversal is significant in a genre in which female characters are often relegated to secondary roles, as "accessories" to the male character's development, transformation, and cathartic climax.

Nonetheless, Vrataski's construction is complex. She is not defined by her relationship to the male protagonist, but by her own experiences and agency, and her depiction rejects the conformist illustration of women in action films, in which physical strength is often coupled with a loss of femininity, therefore revealing a female character who is both strong and emotionally nuanced, capable of showing vulnerability without compromising her authority. In doing so, *Edge of Tomorrow*'s treatment of gender dynamics reflects broader societal shifts towards equality rather than artificial equity: by orchestrating a female presence who is both a mentor and a warrior, *Edge of Tomorrow* contributes to the ongoing conversation about the representation of women in media and offers a model of gender vitality in which power is not defined by gender itself, but by competence and character. Vrataski's role in *Edge of Tomorrow* subverts the typical description of female instances in action cinema releases, with her strength, intelligence, and determination turning her into a central figure in the narrative, as the movie script avoids, gracefully, moving her and Cage's relationship towards a conventional romance, focusing instead on their mutual respect and shared goal of defeating the Mimics: such a re-calibration mirrors a rather inconspicuous shift in gender ideology within the science fiction genre, gradually allowing for more nuanced and empowered representations of female characters.

The major themes of *Edge of Tomorrow* – war, time, and (personal) transformation – resonate deeply with contemporary audiences, each contributing to the movie's depth, relevance and impact. To start with war, the movie's depiction of war as a repetitive, seemingly

endless cycle reflects real-world conflicts which often appear intractable and unresolvable, and with the time loop emerging as a metaphor for the ways in which individuals and societies can become trapped in destructive patterns, unable to break free without significant effort and sacrifice – and often the ending of a cycle of violence only constitutes the beginning of new tensions to result in a further armed conflict down the road (see Arendt, 1970; Barber, 1996; Mestrovic, 1997). Without being explicitly anti-war, *Edge of Tomorrow* questions the validity of wars without coherent solutions in the background, able to provide sustainable resolutions in the aftermath.

The concept of time as a malleable force is another key theme, resulting in a time loop which allows the characters to manipulate temporalities, thus enabling them to change the outcome of events. Coupled with these temporal loops, the representation of war in *Edge of Tomorrow* raises questions about fate, destiny, and the extent to which individuals can control their own lives, exposing the underlying idea that, while time may be indeed cyclical, it is not immutable, and through determination and courage, it is possible to alter the course of history.

Thirdly, transformation, both personal and collective, surfaces as *Edge of Tomorrow*'s overarching theme: Cage's journey from cowardice to heroism is a classic narrative arc of personal metamorphosis, but the time loop adds layers of complexity, making his development more profound, particularly relevant in the late-modern context, in which individuals are often faced with the imperative to adapt and grow in the face of adversity, with *Edge of Tomorrow* suggesting that change is possible, but it requires persistence, resilience, and the willingness to confront one's own weaknesses and failures, as change is not a singular event but a continuous process of sustained self-aware effort. Related to this, teamwork and collaboration appear as crucial to the movie's resolution: Cage and Vrataski's partnership is essential to their success, highlighting the importance of trust, communication, and mutual respect in overcoming challenges – even more striking in the context of the movie's depiction of war, in which victory is achieved not by individual heroism, but by collective effort (see Castells, 1997; Giddens, 2020). Survival, therefore, in the face of overwhelming odds, is more than just a physical battle – it is a psychological one, as the characters grapple with the fear of death and the toll of endless repetition until they find strategies to endure and ultimately triumph. From this perspective, *Edge of Tomorrow* explores the meaning of being human in the context of war, which often equates survival with sacrificing one's humanity in the name of saving those whom one loves – or choosing to preserve one's own humanity. Both Cage and Vrataski are willing to sacrifice their lives repeatedly to achieve their goal, a staple of the science fiction genre, uncovering uncomfortable questions about the value of individual lives in relation to the greater good. In *Edge of Tomorrow*'s particular context, sacrifice is portrayed not as a tragic loss but as a necessary and noble act in the pursuit of a better future for as many people as possible.

Edge of Tomorrow's visual and aural elements subtly enhance its storytelling through a discrete yet subliminally impactful interplay of visuals and musical score: its visual style, characterized by gritty realism and futuristic design, grounds the science fiction elements in a believable world and effectively conveys the bleakness of a macrocosm under siege with the emotionally charged contrast between alien technology and the devastation of a war-torn Earth. The battle scenes are chaotic and intense, realistically depicting the confusion and brutality of warfare, sensibly augmented by the design of the Mimics, with their fluid, almost organic movements and menacing appearance, adding to the movie's sense of otherworldly menace. The exoskeleton suits worn by the soldiers are a key visual element, symbolizing the merging of human and machine in the fight for survival: while

these suits harness the soldiers' abilities, turning them into superhuman warriors, they also serve as reminders of the dehumanizing effects of war, as they are heavy, cumbersome, and require the soldiers to surrender some of their humanity in exchange for power.

The movie's musical score, composed by Christophe Beck, complements the *Edge of Tomorrow*'s visuals by setting the tone, increasing the tension, and highlighting the emotional impact of key scenes. Both atmospheric and propulsive, mirroring the urgency of the plot, the music oscillates between somber, reflective tones during moments of introspection, and pulsating, insistent rhythms during battle sequences, employing a combination of orchestral and electronic elements conducive to the creation of a soundscape futuristic yet grounded in the visceral experience of war, conveying and almost immersive experience in the movie's ecosystem, re-formulating the time loop concept as more subliminal and thus more emotionally-mentally engaging (see Buhler, 2019; Cooke, 2010). The relationship between the visuals and the score is virtually symbiotic, as each enhances the other, delivering a cohesive aesthetic which supports the movie's themes, amplifying, on the one hand, the sense of repetition and of inevitability which comes with the time loop, and with the visuals bringing, on the other hand, the futuristic setting to life in a way which feels immediate and tangible.

A quintessential science fiction movie utilizing the genre's conventions to explore complex themes of time, identity, and survival, *Edge of Tomorrow* embodies the very lens through which contemporary issues can be examined by blending traditional elements with action-oriented story-telling, revealing the time loop not merely as a gimmick, but as a fundamental aspect of its narrative structure, and allowing for complex character development and thematic exploration, with specific focus on the human condition while raising questions about free will, the nature of heroism, and the possibility of redemption (see Fuller/Goffey, 2012; Žižek, 1998; Eagleton, 2003). In the broader context of science fiction cinema, *Edge of Tomorrow* can be seen as part of a trend towards more sophisticated and intellectually engaging productions, as it draws on classic themes such as the nature of time, the consequences of war, and the human capacity for change, while simultaneously delivering the thrills and spectacle expected of a big-budget action movie: this combination of cerebral and visceral elements is emblematic of the mid-2010s shift in science fiction cinema, as movie-makers began to push the boundaries of what the genre could achieve.

Edge of Tomorrow's success is a testament to the power of mainstream media in shaping popular perceptions of the future: science fiction has always been a genre which looks forward, imagining what the world could be like and what challenges humanity might face. By presenting a future in which humanity is on the brink of extinction, *Edge of Tomorrow* taps into contemporary anxieties about war, environmental destruction, and the fragility of human existence, while discretely reflecting the compulsive nature of modern media consumption. In the longer run, the time loop emerges as a sophisticated metaphor for the repetitive cycles of news, entertainment, and social media which dominate contemporary life: just as Cage is forced to re-live the same day over and over again, audiences are bombarded with the same stories, images, and narratives, creating a sense of inevitability and ultimate desensitization. *Edge of Tomorrow* challenges this potential – and actual – reality by offering a narrative of resistance and change, suggesting that even in a world of endless repetition, it is possible to break the cycle and forge new pathways.

Edge of Tomorrow represents a significant moment in the evolution of science fiction action cinema by mid-2010s as it combines a compelling narrative with complex characters and progressive gender dynamics, innovative visuals and subtle musical intertwining as well as a thought-provoking exploration of major themes such as time, identity, and survival.

Through its innovative use of the time loop, complex character development, subversion of gender roles, and the interplay of visuals and music, the movie offers a fresh take on familiar genre conventions, while highlighting the challenges and opportunities presented by the power of mass media in shaping a movie's reception and cultural impact.

Indeed, despite positive reviews from critics, the movie initially struggled at the box office, with the underperformance being partially attributed to marketing challenges, including the confusion surrounding the movie's title, which was later rebranded as *Live Die Repeat* for home video release. This situation brings into the spotlight the importance of effective marketing in the movie industry, particularly for high-concept science fiction releases which may not have immediate mainstream appeal, with *Edge of Tomorrow*'s case illustrating the ways in which the power of mainstream media can influence a movie's commercial success, regardless of its quality or critical acclaim. Nonetheless, the movie's eventual success on home video and streaming platforms demonstrates the potential for science fiction cinema to find audiences outside of traditional theatrical releases, particularly in an era in which digital media consumption is on the rise. Ultimately, the major themes of war, time, and personal transformation explored in *Edge of Tomorrow* remain relevant today, mirroring the ongoing struggles and hopes of contemporary societies: as such, the movie not only entertains but also invites deeper reflection on the nature of heroism, the costs of conflict, and the potential for change in a world which often seems caught in its own time loop.

4. Conclusion: Science Fiction Blockbusters and the Power of Individual Charisma

In a first attempt of its kind, the current study has critically analyzed two science fiction blockbusters released by mid-2010s – *Oblivion* (2013) and *Edge of Tomorrow* (2014) – which, in their very specific ways, shattered the traditional understanding of the role and ability of cinema works to bring into public foreground the anxieties and obsessions of producers and consumers alike. In both movies, the larger-than-life stature of Tom Cruise dominates the cinematic discourse while allowing, in the particularly subtle manner which had turned the actor into a global icon, for such a crucial concept like identity and its role in formulating our perception and processing of reality, to materialize as the core of both *Oblivion* and *Edge of Tomorrow*. Repetitiveness, be it in the infinite number of clones or in the apparently endless todays, emerges as one strategy through which we might try to grasp who we are, as individuals and as members of collectives, thus eventually, gradually understanding our position in the world. Lost memory, on the one hand, and exquisite enhancement of life experience due to limitlessly available "one very day", on the other hand, are intricately connected with war either as a past, completed event, or as an ongoing destruction with no victory in sight.

By intermingling identity, memory, and war, the two movies lay bare our vulnerability in the face of truly species-threatening incidents, and cautiously warn of the humanity's painful fragility. An important role in this construction of potential realities and alternative futures plays the musical score: stylistically diverse without protruding into the narrative logic of quest and redemption, in both movies the music reminds of the powerful healing power of unconscious drives and propensities, subtly yet progressively crafting parallel discourses of longing and paradoxically belonging. In classical non-diegetic tradition of musical scores, *Oblivion*'s and *Edge of Tomorrow*'s music faithfully intensifies and outlines

emotional paradigms and mental imageries, thus crucially contributing to the movies' overall subliminal credibility, memorability, and enduring relevance.

Last but not least, Tom Cruise's presence delivers pivotal impulses to the science fiction genre by mid-2010s: not only a tool for entertainment and to a certain degree mindless consumerism, but the deeply motivated opportunity to think about ourselves and about the future – and in doing so, to re-imagine ourselves as co-creators of that very future, not helpless victims of history's trajectory. There is hope and there is vision – empowerment results from self-awareness and from the willingness to deeply heal, so that tomorrow does not simply repeat today's suffering, but transcends it and turns it into valuable life lessons.

The major limitation of the current study is its almost exclusive focus on the narrative dimensions of the two movies and the ways the story-lines emerges from the visual architecture and its aural entanglements. Future research might observe the critical reception and audiences' reactions, in an attempt to expand the findings of this investigation so that the inner pathways of planning, projecting, pursuing, promoting and lastly releasing masterworks become more visible – and therefore more easily to be developed by aspiring creators. The juxtaposition of an all-encompassing human symbol such as Tom Cruise with pressing issues of late modernity such as identity, war, and memory as (individual as well as collective) history might result, after all, into the reconsideration of our hierarchies of values and, potentially, into a return to what makes us truly human.

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Oneirism, Alternative Realities, And Covid-19 Pandemic in Murakami Haruki's *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* (2024)

Veronica De Pieri[1]

Abstract

Murakami Haruki's literary production can be associated with oneirism from different perspectives. The liminal boundary that in authorial works divides 'his world' (*kocchi no sekai*) from the 'other world' (*acchi no sekai*) constitutes the focus of a narrative between truth and fiction, facts and dreamlike visions. This impairment in reality testing can thus be interpreted as a multifaceted psychotic disorder, in which the delusions, hallucinations and mnestic dysfunctions to which the protagonists are subjected find manifestation in the "double world" that characterizes the authorial production, undoubtedly influenced by magic realism. It is the identity crisis of the contemporary era, in which the mind is tormented by the freneticism of daily life, social pressures and the present insecurity. Murakami's most recent novel, *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* (2024), indulges in the author's most common literary tropes by adding to the psychological distress of the protagonists the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic that saw the genesis of the work. The novel explores the sense of loss, regret, and social withdrawal provoked by urban barriers in the claustrophobic context that compels the search for a dreamscape in which to take refuge. Through an interdisciplinary approach that brings into dialogue literary criticism and an interest in psychopathological sequelae related to the fluidity of the present and the social anxiety that permeates the contemporaneity, this paper aims to explore how Murakami's alternative realities are manifestations of hallucinatory psychosis reflective of social turmoil and political chaos, a split, if not an actual dissociative disorder of the individual unable to integrate into the society of which he or she is a part.

Keywords: Murakami Haruki, magical realism, alternative realities, oneirism, mental health

Introduction: Murakami Haruki – Writer, Idol, Myth

Murakami Haruki 村上春樹 (born 1949) is one of the most controversial contemporary authors: much loved by his loyal fandom, but at the same time criticized by the literary circles for his production aimed more at the global than the local Japanese dimension (Chozick, 2008, 62). His elusive personality is unconventional in Japan, where writers are considered stars and at the same time opinion leaders, often engaged in the national and international socio-political debate. Thus, Murakami's distance from the public sphere contributed to the creation of his myth: an idol celebrated by the masses but difficult to approach. His many passions and hobbies – music, especially jazz, travelling, running –

[1] Senior Researcher and Adjunct Professor, Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna, Italy, veronica.depieri@unibo.it, ORCID-ID: 0000-0003-0041-2710.

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contributed to the construction of a lifestyle later imitated on social media (Torrefranca, 2020).

His literary production bears a trademark that distinguishes his novels from other contemporaries: the protagonists are a male (*boku* 僕) and a female narrative voice surrounded by mystery; continuous flashbacks fragment the time frame; and the setting is always suspended between the real and dream-like worlds, which often overturn the perception of the narrative in what is considered Murakami's 'double world'. Then again, a series of collateral but distinctive elements characterizes Murakami's writing style: a cat, a fantasy figure somewhere between a man and a sheep, explicit if not violent sexuality, and unresolved psychological trauma. The recipe for a Murakami-like bestseller is all here, resolved between the use of magical realism and the description of contemporary anxiety.

Ōe Kenzaburō, Japan's second Nobel laureate in literature, lamented in Murakami's generation and his production a lack of social engagement, at least in the early part of his career. Critics agree in defining a very early production of the author as 'detachment' and a second of 'commitment', as will be explored later (Kim, 2023, 416). The constant references to popular culture, especially North American pop culture, that characterize Japanese literary production in the 1980s, were not just a result of post-World War II occupation, but rather a consumerist drive dictated by the first hints of globalization. The constant intertextual references to overseas musical, cinematic, and literary creations are accurate homages to a production that accompanied this generation of writers born after World War II in childhood and adolescence. According to Yurdakul (2024, 1004), "Murakami's international success is emblematic of this broader cultural shift, as his works resonate with both Japanese and Western audiences, bridging cultural divides and demonstrating the enduring impact of Japan's historical engagement with Western ideas".

It is unwise, therefore, to regard these authors' literary production as merely aimed at entertainment. Murakami Ryū 村上龍 (born 1952), a multifaceted novelist, radio broadcaster, and filmmaker, recounts in his novels the revolutionary movements for sexual emancipation of his generation; Yoshimoto Banana 吉本ばなな (born 1964; real name Yoshimoto Mahoko 吉本真秀子), who owes much of her success to *shōjo bunka* 少女文化 (girl culture), deals with the redefinition of identity of her protagonists as they enter adult life and cope with the trauma of bereavement, abandonment, and social isolation by cultivating nostalgia for the past.

Murakami Haruki, for his part, committed as an essayist by investigating one of the most sensitive collective traumas of 20th-century Japan: the terrorist attack at the Tōkyō subway by the Aum Shinrikyō sect in 1995, covered in the two-volume *Underground* and *Underground II* (1997-1998). In the same year, the author also commemorated the Kōbe earthquake in his collection of short stories, *After the Quake* (1995). According to Rosenbaum (2014, 102), the fil rouge of these two works is the 'underground' which enables the exploration of the Japanese mindscape. In a sense, "[t]his dual exploration of the 'underground' in both literal and symbolic terms underscores Murakami's innovative perspective on the intersection of personal and collective trauma" (Yurdakul, 2024, 1006).

Less than a decade later, *Colorless Tsukuru Tazaki and His Years of Pilgrimage* (2014) was released, which Suter (2016, 306) read as the author's critical response to the Tōhoku triple catastrophe and the mainstream discourse of endurance and social bonds, by proposing an "individual story of loss and grief". At the same time, Lee (2019) considers the abrupt abandonment by Tsukuru's friends as a response to the tremendous toll of the 2011 earthquake and tsunamis. Last but not least, in the author's last novel, *The City and Its*

Uncertain Walls (2024) readers glimpse the legacies of the Covid-19 pandemic that has ravaged the globe in the two years of global health emergency.

Hence, it is inappropriate to limit the definition of Murakami's production as 'art pour l'art'; equally complex to frame him as a socio-political committed author, in the sense attributed by Jean-Paul Sartre (1998) or Ōe to the writer's activity. Certainly, Murakami's meta-literary reflections on writing return a more accurate picture of his opinion on the subject, but, as he stated (2022, cover), "[w]ords have power. Yet that power must be rooted in truth and justice. Words must never stand apart from those principles". *Jun bungaku* 純文学 (pure literature) and *taishū bungaku* 大衆文学 (popular literature) are outdated labels that reveal little about an author's production.

This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach that brings into dialogue literary criticism and an interest in psychopathological sequelae related to the fluidity of the present and the social anxiety that permeates contemporaneity. The final aim is to explore how Murakami's alternative realities are manifestations of hallucinatory psychosis reflective of social turmoil and political chaos, a split, if not an actual dissociative disorder of the individual unable to integrate into the society of which he or she is a part.

Oneirism, Psychotic Disorder and Reality Testing in Murakami's Double World

In the psychological field, the term 'oneirism' refers to a dream-like state (from the Greek word 'oneiros,' meaning 'dream'; APA Dictionary of Psychology). This dream-like mental state is experienced while awake; the concept of 'dream delirium' also addresses visual and auditory hallucinations, temporal and spatial disorientation, trance or other altered state of consciousness, delusional thoughts provoked by irrational ideas and emotional discomfort.

According to a psychoanalytic perspective, oneirism occurs as the repression of a painful stimulus; it is the distancing from reality that is unconsciously manifested through states of somnolence. Murakami's short story *The Little Green Monster* (1993), played on the metaphor of a bleeding ground of a large tree as the ejaculation of non-consensual intercourse suffered by the protagonist, is undoubtedly one of the most striking examples among Murakami's production that employs oneirism to expose repressed psychological trauma.

Critics link the protagonists' refuge in alternative realities, in another dream-like, fantastic world, as a more or less conscious escape from reality, a 'detachment' due to "protagonists' lack of engagement with the external world, a lack of social critique, an unproductive urban ennui, solipsism, an escape into surrealist fantasy" (Kim, 2023, 417), which seems to mirror author's lifestyle. The presence of the oneiric dimension finds explanation in Murakami's production since "dreams or other semiconscious states are one way to come in contact with [particular] images, but more often they surface unpredictably in our waking lives to apprehend by the conscious mind and then to return just as unpredictably to their place of origin" (Rubin, 1999, 180).

Some of these symptoms of oneirism overlap, in whole or in part, with psychotic disorders in which the subject loses contact with reality due to misinterpretation of one's thoughts. In fact, according to *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition (DSM-5), visual and auditory hallucinations perceived as real; delusions, i.e., false beliefs; disorganized behaviors and thoughts for which normality becomes the exception and vice versa; expressive disorders, such as alexithymia or selective mutism, refer to the psychosis cluster.

The protagonists of Murakami's works often find themselves in liminal circumstances, on

the border between truth and fiction, facts and dream-like visions. Reading's alienating effect comes from the inability to recognize the demarcation line that separates Murakami's so-called 'double worlds,' *kocchi no sekai* こっちの世界 (this world) and *acchi no sekai* あっちの世界 (the other world). In some novels, that line is more evident, as in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985); in others, it is much more insubstantial, as in *Norwegian Wood* (1987), considered the author's most realistic novel, even though the clinic where the female protagonist is ospedalized is described as a non-place suspended in time. In other works, immersive storytelling blurs the otherwise fairly precise boundaries of these 'double worlds', so much so that it flips the perspective between what is real and what is fictional; Roy (2021) defines it as "psychic, physical and spiritual fluidity-cummobility".

Such is the case of *The Strange Library* (2014) or the *1Q89* (2011) trilogy pervaded by a dystopian atmosphere that even the title recalls George Orwell's masterpiece. For instance, the Jungian psychologist Kawai (2002, 234) locates in the name of the protagonist of *Kafka on the Shore* (2005) a mirror of his inner conflict, trapped between what is possible (*Ka-* 可) and what is not (*-fuka* 不可), reinforcing the idea that Murakami's 'double world' consists of two parallel universes, communicating but not interchangeable. Likewise, in *The City and Its Uncertain Walls*, elements that blur common auditory and visual perceptions appear, contributing to the bewilderment of reason.

Oneirism can also be described, in psychological terms, as an impairment in reality testing (Arlow, 1969): the protagonists, and by extension, the reader, compromise their inner world, consisting of their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions, with objective reality. This state of derealization is perceived as highly unfamiliar, thus causing detachment towards the outside world.

As anticipated, this deviation from reason is usually due, in the author's novels, to a psychological trauma that the protagonist has undergone without having the opportunity to reprocess his or her traumatic memories. In *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* (1997) it is the trauma of war, rape, adultery, and murder; in *South of the Border, West of the Sun* (2000) the psychological disorder is given by illness, represented by Shimamoto's polio and the Inuit syndrome called Piblokto or Siberian hysteria that affects the protagonist; again, in The Trilogy of the Rat it is suicide, both in *Pinball, 1973* (1980) and in *A Wild Sheep Chase* (1989), and abortion in *Hear the Wind Sing* (1987). Potik (2023, 2) summarized them up in "isolation, meaninglessness, freedom and death". In debating the reception of *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle*, Strecher (2002, 69) concluded:

> But after all, the inner mind is not a well-organized machine, but a place of dark, disturbing forces, containing the roots of identity, but also the potential for madness. How can one really discuss such chaos in concrete, logical terms, much less expect a well-reasoned conclusion?

Hence, Murakami's resorting to magical realism and alternative realities serves as a literary stratagem to approach the unconscious, the inner psyche, and its unpleasant turmoil. In this sense, also the massive presence of music in Murakami's novels acts as a vessel for introspection and reprocessing of traumatic memories (Islam, 2024, 19).

Murakami, in conversation with Kawai Hayao (2022), stated he started writing fiction as a self-therapy for having lost his ex-girlfriend by suicide. Dil (2022) suggests that Murakami's novels are a battle between a Jungian-inspired protagonist and a Nietzschean-inspired antagonist. Eventually, some critics have attempted a Jungian reading of the author's works through the archetypes of Persona, Shadow, Anima, and the Self (Perez & Perez, 2024; Nygren, 2010). The author himself introduced a psychotherapist as a protagonist in the short story *A Shinagawa Monkey* (2006), published in *The New Yorker*.

The repression of such traumatic memories, which often emerge through these states of dream-like delirium, occurs through a tacit rule of omertà or taboo, which imposes strict secrecy on the protagonists. Contrary to critics' assertions, who see Murakami as an author closer to Western sensibilities than Japanese, this typical temperament of his characters is instead extremely Japanese: it is the *enryo* 遠慮, as to say, the hesitation in expressing oneself so as not to risk making the interlocutor uncomfortable, provoking embarrassment. This is a crucial element in cultural psychology because it intervenes as a modifier of relationships between both strangers and acquaintances.

The common traits of Murakami's protagonists seem to confirm the author's interest in translating onto paper a psychotic distress of which some symptoms are evident: hallucinations, delusions and expressive impairment that require the protagonists to restrain the expression of their feelings. At times, the symptoms are so pronounced as to suggest a schizoid personality: introverted, withdrawn and solitary characters - "lethargic", according to Potik (2023, 1); those protagonists who are socially cold and distant but very reflective and with a rather pronounced intimate dimension. They are intimidated by intimacy (but rather curious), uncommunicative, and prefer theoretical speculation to practical action. This can perhaps be recognized as the archetype of Murakami's male protagonists, a schizoid personality belonging to the personality disorder cluster. In the short novel *TV People* (2006), Ferreira (2018, 22-24) even identifies schizophrenic traits. Potik (2023, 3) discussed them in terms of "isolated schizoids"; instead, I would speak of the protagonist in terms of a schizotypal personality with paranoid ideas. Nevertheless, the author's interest in psychological distress and mental disorder is quite clear.

As a literary technique, this mutual intrusion into reality and fiction aroused by emotional distress is expressed through magical realism, which undermines the distinction between the ordinary and the extraordinary through the incorporation of fantastic or supernatural elements into a real setting. The result, in the author's production, is to prefer an imaginative view of life, in which the distinction between reality and fiction is not only undermined but ultimately loses importance. In *Super-Frog Saves Tokyo* (2002), the reader is not shocked that an ordinary salaryman meets a giant talking frog one day: what matters is the outcome of that association and the rescue of the city from the monstrous Worm that is swirling under the metropolis, threatening to give rise to the fearsome Big One earthquake.

Murakami's production provides no solutions. According to Suter (2008, 120), "the writer/analyst Murakami Haruki is able to give meaning to the stories that people tell him because he is able to give them a narrative form". This metaphor of the author as psychotherapist highlights the complexity of the authorial production. It is not exclusively meant for entertainment, since it investigates the unease of modernity given by the frenzy of the present, the fluidity of both individual and collective identities and the social anxiety derived from an unstable and insecure contemporaneity. Both the socio-political sphere and the virtual world in which humankind is taking refuge are epitomized by Murakami's 'double world' and his conception of virtual (ir)reality. Loughman (2017, 88) stated:

> Murakami's characters are universal stock figures of contemporary literature, almost a cliché of the existential condition. Lonely, fragmented, unable to communicate, they live a mechanical, purposeless existence […] [and v]aguely sense they have a deep need for meaning and self-fulfilment. Mostly they are simply bewildered by their sense of disconnection and loss.

Cityscape, Isolation, and Covid-19 Pandemic in *The City and Its Uncertain Walls* (2024)

Machi to sono futashikana kabe 『街と、その不確かな壁』 was published by Kōdansha in April 2023, and therefore, when Japan was still in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic emergency (level 2 of the Infectious Disease Control Law until May 2023). The pandemic officially caused in Japan more than 74.000 deaths, with 33 confirmed million cases (Worldometer). The result was a voluntary public cooperation in refraining from going out or "non-compulsory self-restraint requirements" (Karako et al., 2022, 1) – *jishuku* 自粛, which was successful thanks to Japanese cultural cohesion and collectivism (Qiao, 2024, 3). Indeed, Japanese allocentric society imposes forceful conformism, which in turn has contributed to enhancing civic spirit and collective responsibility for the Covid-19 transmission during the pandemic crisis. According to Yamamoto et al. (2020), although mask-wearing, hand-washing, and a strong awareness of public hygiene by the Japanese have worked as protective factors, almost 50% of people in major cities in Japan reported mild or greater psychological distress during their one-month mild lockdown experience.

The novel, first published as a short-story in *Bungakukai* 『文學界』 magazine in September 1980, had been judged by the author to be "a flop" that he "should not have written" (Murakami, 1991). Notwithstanding, the author confessed in the novel's afterword that he felt the urgency to invest new time and energy in the ancient plot, revisit it, and republish it in a new form, not least because, he added,

> [o]ne other thing to add is that 2020 was the Year of the Coronavirus. I started writing this novel in March 2020, just as the coronavirus began its rampage across Japan, and finished it nearly three years later. In the interim I rarely set foot outside my home, and avoided any lengthy trips, and in the weird and tension-inducing situations (with fairly long pause or cooling-off period in between) I worked steadily, day after day, on this novel (like the Dream Reader reading old dreams in the library). Those circumstances might be significant. Or maybe not. But I think they must mean something. I feel it in my bones. (Murakami, 2024, 445)

The novel is divided into three parts. The first involves a male and female character who, as teenagers, experience first love, moving between their cities of residence until the girl disappears without a trace. The only clue is the fact that she is convinced she is not real but a shadow: her authentic self, she claims, lives in the 'city of a high wall', described as "a very technically clever, artificial space" (Murakami, 2024, 122).

The description of their loving rendezvous is intertwined with the dream-like tales of the male protagonist, now an adult, who finds the girl again in that 'city of high a wall', even though he is not aware how he found it. This city is described as an oneiric space that can be reached only by coincidence, animated by strange figures – the unicorns that keep dying at its gates, the Gatekeeper who minds the only way in, the silent and condescending inhabitants. The atmosphere there is gloomy and the weather really cold.

To enter the city, individuals must renounce their shadows: that is why the girl is sure that her 'real' person is not the one the boy fell in love with in our world, but the eternal adolescent who lives in the city without her shadow. The girl, who has remained a teenager, does not seem to remember her great love and instead merely treats him as a Dream Reader. The protagonist's job is to spend his days in the library, reading people's old dreams – a skill he acquired through both innate nature and the sacrifice of his own shadow to enter the city, driven by a desperate attempt to meet the girl again.

Hence, the first impasse: if it is not reconnected to the human body, the shadow is bound to perish after a while. The protagonist then has to make a decision: stay in the 'city of a high wall' with the 'real' girl while losing his own shadow, or make the desperate attempt to escape back to 'our world', inhabited by the girl's missing shadow and the 'real' him.

Murakami devotes pages to the inner conflict of the protagonist, unable to make up his mind about what to do. His indecision is a symptom of the crisis of modern humankind, trapped between reality and virtuality: "Walking you home every night after work. How much of that was real, and how much was fiction? I couldn't say. […] Which world should I belong to? I couldn't decide" (Murakami, 2024, 103-104). And again: "In my head, there was a battle going on between reality and unreality. At this moment I was standing right in the interstice between this world and the other world. There was a fierce split between the conscious and the unconscious, and I had to choose where I should belong" (Murakami 2024, 121).

The protagonist opts for the second choice and he manages to escape, although without understanding clearly how. Once in Tōkyō, he decides to abandon his lifestyle and take refuge in an old library that reminds him of that of the 'city of a high wall' – a decision made not without regret:

> In the real world on this side I was on the verge of what's called middle age. Just a man with nothing special about him, not a 'specialist' anymore with the skills I possessed in that town. My eyes weren't wounded, and I wasn't qualified to read old dreams. I was nothing more than a cog in one of the systems that made up a gigantic society. A tiny, replaceable cog. I couldn't help feeling some regret for that. (Murakami, 2024, 133-134)

The second part of the novel begins with the man moving to an unnamed but icy town in Hokkaidō. Here, he becomes the director of a small, rather busy municipal library. The fantastical element emerges when he discovers that his employer died months earlier and that the pleasant conversations in front of the fireplace that he entertains with him are ... Dreams? Hallucination? Reality? It is hard to say, since this second part of the novel features realistic descriptions and the protagonist is not the only one who sees Mr. Koyasu: Mrs. Soeda, the library secretary, also enjoys occasional discussions with him and talks openly about the former library director to the protagonist. The liminal boundary between dream and reality, seems to have invaded 'our world' as well, considering how much the figure of the ghost – if it can be labeled such – of Mr. Koyasu is present in the second part of the novel.

Up to this point, the reader is completely bewildered: he has been repeatedly catapulted from a real urban setting to a dream-like one, suspended in space and time (the clock in the 'city of a high wall' has no hands). The protagonist himself cannot explain the nature of the city and comments: "And we went on to create and share a special, secret world of our own – a strange town surrounded by a high wall" (Murakami, 2024, 16).

The reader, therefore, cannot tell whether the town actually exists in a parallel world, whether it is a daydream created by the imagination of the two teenagers and then cultivated by the adult protagonist to escape his life of loneliness and broken hearts. Alternatively, the city can be the result of a collective hysteria shared by a few members of the story, such as the protagonist and his girlfriend, Mr. Koyasu and the young boy who always comes to the library, nicknamed Yellow Submarine because of the sweatshirt he constantly wears. He suffers from savant syndrome, and wants to reach that city at all costs.

The protagonist's confusion is thus at its peak: "About all I did know was that right now I seemed to be hovering on the boundary between the world over there and the world over here. […] That's where I was situated, in that twilit world. A line that was neither one nor the other. And I was trying to judge which side I was really on, and on which side the real person, the real me, could be found" (Murakami, 2024, 287-288). Indeed, the protagonist himself reasons about the liminality of the city and especially of a life contended between two worlds, the real and the dream-like one, whose boundaries are uncertain by nature:

> As my shadow said, the town might be full of made-up stories, the origins of the town itself rife with contradictions. Since this was nothing but an imaginary town you and I had dreamed up over the course of a summer. Nevertheless, the town might actually be able to snatch away a person's life, since it was already out of our hands and had grown on its own. Once it was set in motion, I couldn't control that power or alter it. Nobody could. (Murakami, 2024, 87)

The frenzy of the contemporary era, which forces individuals to focus on productivity and achieving goals rather than on the 'here and now', leads to a lifestyle which 'surfs' or 'floats' on the surface, encouraging individuals to take refuge and thoroughly enjoy an imaginary life instead. The virtual reality to which video games and social media have accustomed us reflects this unease of modern humankind. We are more concerned with 'what to do next' (we think it, imagine it, and daydream about it) than we are with appreciating what we are already experiencing. Once again, Murakami's 'double world' epitomizes an investigative mirror of contemporary psycho-social distress, and it is not limited to portraying a fantastic, magical story.

The third part of the novel takes place in the 'city of a high wall'. After the sudden disappearance of Yellow Submarine, again, without knowing how, the protagonist finds himself in that distant city in time and space. There, he finds not only the girl, still a teenager, but also the boy, with whom he will later merge his consciousness, to become one. And this is because,

> I think the wall surrounding the town is the consciousness that creates you as a person. Which is why the wall can freely change shape apart from any personal intentions. A person's consciousness is the same as a glacier, with only a fraction of its showing above the water. Most of it is hidden, unseen, sunk in a dark place. (Murakami, 2024, 375)

The pandemic is present several times in the novel, as a possible description of the causality that led the 'city of a high wall' to be strictly guarded by a Gatekeeper. This boundary wall delimits its urban space. In his written exchange with Yellow Submarine the two try to understand why such a city has become hermetically sealed off from the outside world. The answer is a pandemic: "But an epidemic had to have ended at a certain point," I said to the boy. "No pandemic lasts forever. Yet the wall went on as before maintaining a strict isolation. No one could come in, no one could go out. Why is that? […] 'A never-ending pandemic,' I read aloud" (Murakami, 2024, 306).

The influence of the Covid-19 pandemic is present in the novel's conception, as confirmed by the author in the afterword. Moreover, these words also leave room for metaphorical reflection on lockdown. The sense of isolation, alienation and segregation to which the pandemic emergency has forced us has actually revealed many fragilities already inherent in our communities. Weak and marginalized individuals – the elderly, the diseased, minorities, and *hikikomori* – have been most affected by the pandemic. However, our lifestyle has revealed that such social isolation is a common feature even in non-critical times. The fact that the walls of the 'city of a high wall' change according to a person's consciousness reveals how the individual himself builds barriers between himself and others: a social distance caused by inequality and virtual-life dependency that Murakami's 'double world' and the Covid-19 pandemic have exposed.

Conclusion: Murakami's Alternative Realities

> What is real, and what is not? In this world is there really something like a wall separating reality from the unreal? I think there might be. No, not might – there is one. No, it's an entirely uncertain wall. Depending on circumstances and the person, its shape transforms. Like some living being. (Murakami, 2024, 399)

The generation of writers who debuted in the 1980s-1990s, of which Murakami Haruki is a member, is regarded by critics for their leisurely produced works, which reveal the great legacy of the post-World War II period in Japan, defined by the double atomic bombing, the dismantling of a colonial empire, and the American occupation. However, an unresolved intergenerational trauma, that of bitter defeat, does not seem to emerge in the author's works; nor does the bewilderment due to the clash with the consumerist era that was advancing unstoppably with its music, cinema, ever-changing fashions, of which Murakami's works are overloaded. Perhaps this is why literary critics have no difficulty in associating his literary production with the label of world literature, which still eludes a clear epistemological definition but undoubtedly intersects sociopolitical issues of global concern: "geography, identity, nationalism, and postcolonialism have become more prominent subjects for world literature scholars from the West and former colonizing cultures (Atkins, 2012, 228). Thus, Scrolavezza (2023, 163) argued Murakami Haruki is "the most comprehensive example of *brand author*" referring to the Murakami franchise which since the 1980s has invaded global editorial market with a series of recurring themes and subjects (see Grant Snider's *Bingo Board* on Murakami's novels, 2014) able to enhance the fidelity of its fandom while promoting an high-recognisable - and thus bestselling - (literary) product.

Murakami's production thus transcends Japanese national boundaries to become not supra-national but a-national: his protagonists give voice to the social anxiety, isolation and loss of references that contemporary society imposes with its frenetic pace and constant uncertainty, speaking to a global audience. Even the anonymity of Murakami's protagonists enables the global readership to identify with them and engage in the same life concerns:

> This is exactly where Murakami flourishes and rises above his contemporary post-modern writers who knows how to actively engage his readers in his world of hyper-surrealism and mysticism. Memories, dreams and visions actively entwin the readers and characters together, where the abnormal interpretation of equally abnormal motifs and symbols and an ambiguous inclusion remains adamantly stuck to the readers' conscience compelling them to reflect beyond the purview of the novel. (Roy, 2021)

The recourse to an alternate reality, that is, to a parallel universe that intersects the narrative on several levels, more or less dream-like, fantastic or hallucinatory, is not a symptom of a detachment from contemporaneity sought by Murakami himself. Rather, according to Kim (2023, 424),

> [t]he oft-noted surreal, fantastical, and 'thin' air of unreality underpinning Murakami's fiction, generally, is not indicative of is escaping into his own fantasy worlds on order to avoid history, society, and culture – as critics have said – but is rather a tacit suggestion that perhaps his protagonists – impressed upon by a 'heavy' evidentiary history of bloodshed and its aftermaths that suffuses the 'real world' – necessarily exile themselves from it, and, in doing so, breathe the 'thin' air of unreality they have chosen, or are forced, to inhabit.

The City and Its Uncertain Walls represents the author's latest bestseller in which the use of oneirism is, in typical Freudian interpretation, the tool the protagonists have to interrogate their fears, investigate their sense of loss and reprocess their traumatic memories. The uncertainty of those ever-changing walls, the ambivalence of being on the border between two worlds, is nothing but a metaphor for a life on the verge of a real but in many ways unsatisfying ordinariness and an alternative reality that fulfils our desire but is fictitious. In this, the pandemic has exacerbated a pre-existing state of precariousness and underscored the insecurities and fragilities of our social bonds.

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Synthetic Utopias and Subversive Spaces Alternate Realities in Kurt Wimmer's *Equilibrium* (2002)

Monica-Alina Toma[1]

Antonia Cristiana Enache[2]

Alina Maria Seica[3]

Abstract

This paper explores the complex interplay between spatiality, emotional suppression and authoritarian ideology in Wimmer's 2002 science fiction film *Equilibrium*. As a key example of early 21st-century dystopian cinema, this work reflects deep-seated cultural anxieties about the ethical consequences of unchecked biotechnological progress and totalitarian control. The story unfolds in Libria, a strictly regulated city where citizens are compelled to take Prozium, a drug designed to eradicate all emotional experience in order to prevent social unrest. Opposition to this regime is ruthlessly crushed by the Grammaton Clerics, an elite enforcement unit. Through the story of John Preston, a high-ranking Cleric who begins to feel again and ultimately rebels against the state, the study explores how chemical suppression serves as both a literal and symbolic mechanism of dehumanization. The paper equally argues that *Equilibrium* constructs two primary spatial imaginaries: the synthetic inner city of Libria, characterized by architectural homogeneity and affective sterility, and the subversive colorful urban area of the Nethers, that preserves fragments of human affect, memory and cultural expression. Through an interdisciplinary framework drawing from spatial theory and dystopian critique, the current research illuminates how these contrasting environments not only structure the narrative but also articulate a broader sociopolitical commentary on the cost of engineered harmony.

Keywords: dystopian film, emotional suppression, surveillance society, social conformity, resistance

1. Introduction

Within the expansive corpus of dystopian cinema, ranging from canonical works such as *Metropolis* (1927) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four (1984)* to more recent contributions like *Snowpiercer (2013) and The Giver (2014),* a central thematic preoccupation consistently emerges: the systematic erosion of individual agency under the weight of authoritarian governance or under (bio)technologically mediated forms of social domination. These films construct speculative futures or alternative realities wherein oppressive political

[1] PhD Assistant Professor, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Faculty of International Business and Economics, Bucharest-Romania, monica.toma@rei.ase.ro, ORCID-ID: 0009-0002-8263-7103.
[2] PhD Associate Professor, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Faculty of International Business and Economics, Bucharest-Romania, antonia.enache@rei.ase.ro, ORCID-ID: 0000-0002-9606-5735.
[3] PhD Assistant Professor, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Faculty of International Business and Economics, Bucharest-Romania, alina.mardari@rei.ase.ro, ORCID-ID: 0009-0006-5232-0876.

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systems employ various mechanisms such as omnipresent surveillance, neurochemical manipulation or ideological indoctrination in order to enforce compliance and to curtail both affective expression and critical thought.

Kurt Wimmer's *Equilibrium* (2002) emerges from this tradition as a cinematic meditation on the existential consequences of emotional erasure under a totalitarian, suffocating regime. In particular, the film's impressive thematic depth reflects a convergence of contemporary anxieties: the dehumanizing potential of (bio)technological control, the moral vacuity of bureaucratic frameworks and the erasure of individuality in the name of public order.

Equilibrium situates its narrative within the postapocalyptic city-state of Libria, where the pursuit of peace and stability is realized through radical affective suppression. Inhabitants are required to administer Prozium, a state-mandated neurochemical that nullifies emotional capacity, thereby eliminating the variables of love, anger, guilt and grief that historically incited human conflict. The city's apparent order is thus predicated on a denial of subjectivity itself, being reinforced by the Grammaton Clerics, elite operatives tasked with identifying emotional deviance and with neutralizing the so-called "sense offenders".

Libria functions as both a literal and a symbolic space wherein the state's ideological ambitions are inscribed onto the urban landscape. The geometrical rigidity of its architecture, the chromatic monotony of its interiors and the mechanistic comportment of its populace collectively dramatize a vision of synthetic utopia – an artificial harmony sustained by repression.

Yet, as the narrative unfolds, the viewers also discover spatial counterpoints to this dystopian monolith: zones of resistance, often clandestine and emotionally charged, where memory, art and affect still exist. These subversive environments serve not only as narrative catalysts for the protagonist John Preston's transformation from an instrument of the regime into its undoer, but they also function as symbolic reassertions of the human spirit. The interplay between these two spatial paradigms – the synthetic and the subversive – structures the film's exploration of autonomy, resistance and of the ontological significance of sentiments.

By interrogating *Equilibrium* through the perspectives of dystopian ideologies and spatial politics, the research seeks to reveal how this work's representation of alternate realities – manufactured and insurgent – offers a compelling case study in humanity's enduring negotiation between control and freedom, chaos and order, and between the mechanized self and the feeling subject. More importantly, the study will show that this cinematic creation affirms the irrepressible individual need for emotional expression.

2. Defining the Aesthetics and Themes of Dystopian Cinema

As cautionary tales, dystopian film often warn us against potential futures shaped by totalitarianism, by unchecked technological expansion or by the erosion of fundamental human values. These cinematic creations do not merely present alternate realities for entertainment; they challenge the viewer to consider the implications of certain political and technological frameworks when taken to their furthest logical end.

One of the defining features of a dystopia is the creation of a controlled environment in which individuality and freedom are systematically dismantled. The narrative arc usually centers on the protagonist's journey from compliance to resistance, from emotional numbness to awakening. As Rosenfeld (2021) observes, traditional dystopian narratives are

often constructed around an isolated, alienated consciousness, this singular perspective becoming a tool through which the oppressive order is both experienced and, eventually, resisted:

> In the classical dystopia the reduced, singular perspective is pushed to an extreme. The world is viewed through a singular lens – there is only one thinking, feeling character, and only one set of forces and outcomes for everyone. […] The world viewed from the singular perspective easily slides into paranoia – it is only a matter of time before the philosopher who stands on a hill gazing down at a world organized around his perspective finds himself in a ditch with the world staring back. (Rosenfeld, 2021)

In turn, Rodriguez (2010) outlines the core characteristics shared by many dystopian works, noting that they often take place in an imagined, challenging future that allows for an objective critical distance. Within this setting, authority is concentrated in the hands of a "semi-sacred" (Rodriguez, 2010, 166) leader figure whose cult of personality replaces traditional forms of religious worship. This sacralization of political authority acts as a tool for power consolidation and for the repression of dissenting voices. Such regimes typically rewrite or erase history, portraying the past as a chaotic era of war and instability. The present, despite its dictatorial nature, is thus constructed as a utopian alternative to historical catastrophe:

> First, the authority imposes various types of control on citizens' lives by using various ideologies such as corporate control through products, advertising, mottos and/or the media; […] relentless regulations, and incompetent government officials; distorting or eliminating past history; complete censorship and surveillance; scientific and technological control. Second, people in the dystopian society lose basic human traits such as freedom, individuality, love, family and identity. Third, the authority misleads people by claiming quest for perfection through achieving conformity and sameness among all people. (El-Sobky, 2016, 151)

El-Sobky (2016) expands on this depiction of dystopian domination by identifying three primary strategies through which totalitarian authorities maintain power. First, the imposition of various forms of control – corporate, ideological, technological – ensures that every aspect of the citizens' lives is regulated. These regimes often manipulate populations through relentless advertising and commodification, reducing citizens to mere consumers. Ideological supervision is reinforced through censorship and propaganda, while technological governance manifests in the form of invasive monitoring systems. Second, individuals within these societies are stripped of their essential human aspects such as freedom, love or identity, the power's imposition of absolute conformity eroding the possibility of a self-determined existence. Finally, the state enforces a deceptive narrative that promotes a false quest for perfection through homogeneity and sameness, masking the dehumanization inherent in such a system.

According to Moosavi (2021), the totalitarian power maintains control not only through external surveillance but by fostering a deep, internalized sense of mistrust among individuals. This breakdown of trust – even between close relations – serves as a powerful tool of psychological manipulation, ensuring that citizens engage in self-censorship and mutual surveillance out of fear. This internalization of surveillance reflects a key strategy of authoritarian systems, the erosion of personal bonds and the isolation of individuals thereby neutralizing the potential for collective resistance:

> The fact that no one is able to trust another person, even those closest to one, means that the totalitarian regime is trying to give its citizens the sense that none of their actions, or what they express as opinions, are, or can be, hidden from them, or remain unknown to the ruling power. This acute sense of being surveilled is, in turn, internalized to the point where one expects to be unable to trust their loved ones and acts accordingly. (Moosavi, 2021, 151-152)

In dystopian films, all these abstract concepts are made viscerally real through meticulously constructed environments that shape and constrain behavior. These controlled atmospheres, marked by repetitive structures and by the absence of color, all serve to communicate the lifelessness of a society governed by repression. Dystopian narratives frequently take place in futuristic cities, which are usually depicted as grim and oppressive settings where the imposing architecture reveals the absolute control of the authoritarian power. Instead of representing human achievement, these urban environments become emblems of surveillance, domination and emotional nullification. While cities are generally seen as the peak of civilization and technological progress, in these cinematic creations they morph into suffocating, prison-like spaces that deprive inhabitants of their individuality and freedom. As Daniel Ferreras Savoye observes, these urban landscapes do not serve the people but instead maintain the interests of the repressive system that sacrifices human values in the name of progress:

> The dystopian city brings together some of the most haunting notions put forth by contemporary science fiction, such as exploitation, alienation, dehumanization. […] The victory of reason and technology have come to mean the defeat of humanity and the corruption of its urban space, which has turned into the crucible of progress gone wrong. (Savoye, 2011, 147-148)

Thus, the city itself acts as a dystopian entity: not as a place of opportunity or connection but as a cold and hostile environment where the ideal of utopia crumbles into a bleak, mechanized existence. Its very design enforces conformity and heightens feelings of isolation and despair among its inhabitants.

On the other hand, science fiction films often portray alternative, visually striking spaces filled with color and joy, such as libraries or hidden rooms containing forbidden books or artworks, that serve to juxtapose the synthetic order of the impersonal authority with the messy, vibrant reality of human emotion and creativity. These marvelous spaces often become sites of subversion and resistance, symbolizing the enduring human need for freedom, expression and affective connection. They not only reinforce the critique of the regime but also posit hope: that even in the most oppressive conditions, the human spirit can resist and recover.

3. Sociopolitical and Ideological Structures in *Equilibrium* (2002)

Kurt Wimmer's *Equilibrium* (2002) constructs a dystopian society rooted in the aftermath of a cataclysmic global war, envisioning a world where emotional expression is rendered not merely undesirable but criminal. Through the narrative of John Preston, a high-ranking enforcement agent who transitions from loyal operative to insurgent, the film investigates the psychological and ideological consequences of suppressing the affective dimension of the human experience. *Equilibrium* critiques authoritarian control mechanisms and demonstrates how the repression of sentiments not only dehumanizes individuals but also erodes cultural memory, social vitality and personal agency. Preston's journey symbolizes the potential for emotion to act as a form of resistance, positioning feeling as both a political act and a form of subjectivity reassertion.

Equilibrium portrays a meticulously ordered totalitarian state – Libria – which functions on the premise that human emotion is the root of violence, conflict and collective collapse. Within the regime's ideological apparatus, feeling is pathologized and constructed as the singular cause of war and societal breakdown. This is clearly articulated in the opening voice-over of the film, which asserts:

> In the first years of the 21st century, a third world war broke out. Those of us who survived knew mankind could never survive a fourth. That our own volatile natures could simply no longer be risked. So, we have created a new arm of the law, the Grammaton Cleric, whose sole task it is to seek out and eradicate the true source of Man's inhumanity to Man: his ability to feel. (Wimmer, 00:39-01:39)

The ruling power constructs a historical narrative in which all global conflicts are attributed to unregulated sentiments. This altered version of history is circulated through visual propaganda – montages of nuclear bombings and of war-torn landscapes, images of totalitarian leaders such as Stalin and Saddam Hussein –, which is designed to justify total emotional nullification, to elicit compliance and to suppress questioning. Simultaneously, the power imposes a form of collective amnesia, the erasure or manipulation of cultural artifacts – books, art and music – being meant to sever the citizen's connection with the real past and to eliminate the emotional narratives that tie people to one another. By destroying these artifacts, the regime not only obliterates memory but reconfigures identity, replacing it with ideological conformity.

The state's authority is embodied in the figure of "the Father", an omnipresent leader whose visage dominates the public space through pervasive screens and whose discourse serves as the official voice of the totalitarian power governing Libria:

> Libria, I congratulate you. At last peace reigns in the heart of man, at last war is but a word whose meaning fades from our understanding, at last we are whole. Librians, there is a disease in the hearts of man, its symptom is hate, its symptom is anger, its symptom is war. The disease is human emotion. But Libria, I congratulate you for there is a cure for this disease. At the cost of the dizzying highs of human emotion we have suppressed its abysmal lows and you as a society can embrace this cure; it is Prozium. Now we are at peace with ourselves and humankind is one, war is gone, hate, a memory, we are our own conscience and it is this conscience that guides us to rate EC10 emotional content, all those things that might tempt us to feel again, and destroy them. Librians, you have won against all odds, and your natures, you have survived. (Wimmer 2002, 8:38-10:44)

In accordance with Father's legitimizing discourse, the suppression of people's sentient engagement is not only acceptable but morally imperative for collective survival. Such an engineered emotional stasis is ideologically described as the precondition for peace and existential security. Within this sociopolitical framework, affective discipline is not a matter of personal control but a legally mandated condition achieved through the compulsory use of a psychotropic substance, Prozium, that secures emotional uniformity and social docility. Refusal to medicate is designated a criminal offense, transforming emotive defiance into political insurrection. This compulsory administration of Prozium transforms human biology into a site of political intervention, the mechanisms of power functioning not solely through overt repression, but also through the calculated governance of biological existence (see Foucault, 1990).

The Tetragrammaton Council, named after the sacred four-letter name of God in the Hebrew tradition, adds legitimacy to the regime's claims of moral and ideological superiority (Tóth, 2009: 143). As Toth observes, the name "John" of the main character also has religious connotations.

> John means "the Lord is gracious" or "Yahweh is gracious;" secondly, the one among the twelve apostles whom Jesus Christ liked the most was John, the supposed author of the fourth Gospel and Revelation; and thirdly, John the Baptist was the forerunner of Jesus Christ who baptized him. These Biblical references imply that John Preston as the highest-ranking Grammaton Cleric in Libria has a symbolical significance in the evolution of the plot. (Toth, 2009, 141)

This symbolic alignment between religious sanctity and state authority sacralizes surveillance and unchallengeable control. Thus, the city of Libria becomes a space where sacredness and imprisonment coincide. Talking about this aspect, Tóth draws parallels between the city and various institutional forms that impose a deeply internalized regime of affective discipline through spatial and emotional regulation:

> [Libria] is privileged and sacred, and at the same time, a container of forbidden places. It is like a boarding school with military regulations and strict 'education'; it is like a rest home or a psychiatric hospital because people are drugged and treated; it is like a prison because people are closed, locked within this sphere where they are under close and constant surveillance and they have to keep strict regulations. Libria is like a library and/or a museum where the enclosed knowledge of all time and places can be found (though it is accessible solely to the privileged). […] Thus, it seems that Libria is eternal – an allusion to the Cittá Eterna. (Toth, 2009, p. 143)

Indeed, the geopolitical configuration of Libria reinforces the binary between compliance and dissidence. The city is physically and symbolically divided into two dominant zones: the inner city, representing ideological purity, and the Nethers, a marginal wasteland inhabited by the insurgents.

The inner city is a sterile environment dominated by towering skyscrapers with symmetrical design and austere surfaces. This cold architecture is an urban manifestation of emotional repression, being void of color, aesthetic variation or cultural memory. Rather than celebrating human ingenuity or diversity, it functions as a constant reminder of the state's control.

In this rigid area, surveillance is ubiquitous, being facilitated by massive digital screens that broadcast state propaganda and reaffirm the ideology of affective nullification. The central architectural monument, the skyscraper named "Equilibrium", houses the infrastructure for Prozium production and distribution. Its dominance over the cityscape symbolizes the omnipresence of the authority and the physical inescapability of the regime's reach.

The remaining public buildings, residential units and communal spaces are constructed with spartan minimalism, adhering strictly to functional requirements and systematically excluding any form of aesthetic expression. This enforced homogeneity shows how dystopian regimes utilize architecture as a tool for erasing personal identity and for promoting ideological conformity. The visual monotony of the urban landscape reflects the mental and emotional vacuity of the citizens, whose capacity for individual thought and feeling has been chemically extinguished. This affective sterilization is evident not only in the people's mechanized movements and in their detached interactions, but also in the city's artificial materiality of steel, glass and concrete, from which all organic life, such as plants and animals, has been systematically removed. In this context, the absence of nature functions as a visual and symbolic corollary to the absence of humanity.

While the state maintains a vast network of cameras, microphones and informants, the most effective form of control is psychological. Citizens are conditioned to police other people's thoughts and behaviors, and to report those who deviate from the norm – even if they are family members. Thus, the inner urban space emerges as a complex visual and ideological representation of psychological conditioning, systemic conformity and totalitarian domination, becoming a symbolic tool through which the regime exercises its power and enforces obedience.

Conversely, the Nethers serve as the spatial antithesis to Libria's orderly core, functioning as heterotopias in the Foucauldian sense – places of alternative consciousness that subvert the dominant territorial narratives. Located on the urban periphery and deemed lawless by

the regime, these zones are repositories of banned materials – books, artworks, music and other cultural artifacts –, being imbued with memory, emotion and sensory richness, qualities that the central city seeks to eliminate. Degraded, disordered and largely abandoned, these places resist the totalitarian aesthetic imposed on the inner city, functioning as a reminder of a world unbound by pharmacological control.

The regime's strict demarcation between "clean" and "contaminated" spaces reflects its ideological need to externalize threats. By designating entire zones as being beyond redemption, the state creates spatial justifications for its violence. Yet, the resilience of these subversive places and of the people who inhabit them points to an underlying optimism in the film's depiction of the city. While Libria represents a closed, totalized system of control, the Nethers symbolize the possibility of change and renewal. The fact that these zones persist, despite the power's efforts to destroy them, suggests that human emotion and cultural memory may not be so easily extinguished. They survive in hidden pockets, waiting to be rediscovered.

The spatial polarization between the inner city and the Nethers functions as a metaphor for the broader ideological division between repression and freedom, mechanization and humanity, uniformity and individuality. It is within this liminal space that Preston begins his emotional reawakening, experiencing for the first time the unfiltered world of affect and beauty.

4. John Preston's Emotional and Political Awakening

At the core of *Equilibrium*'s narrative is John Preston's gradual transformation, which serves as the primary conduit for the film's thematic development. As a senior Grammaton Cleric, Preston initially embodies the regime's ideal, being ideologically unwavering and lethally efficient. His earlier complicity is made explicit when he reports and ultimately consents to the execution of his wife for emotional dissent – a personal tragedy that he is, at the time, chemically incapable of mourning.

The catalyst for Preston's metamorphosis occurs accidentally: he breaks his Prozium vial and misses a dose. This lapse initiates a cascade of sensations previously unavailable to him – grief, awe, curiosity and eventually love. These feelings are reinforced through his contact with Mary O'Brien, a detained Sense Offender whose humanity becomes the mirror through which the agent confronts his own affective deprivation. Although their relationship is not deeply romanticized, her presence acts as an emotional touchstone, reawakening the protagonist's sense of empathy and moral responsibility.

The resurgence of Preston's memory and capacity for affection leads to a deeply personal confrontation with grief, loss and guilt, which brings about the hero's rejection of the state's moral codes. As his sensitive faculties gradually return, so does his ability to perceive the falsity and the brutality of the regime.

On the other hand, this regained sense of humanity allows the protagonist to engage with the spatial world on an affective level for the first time. Architectural forms that once signified only authority and control now acquire subtle textures, shades and emotional resonances that had previously been inaccessible to him. The rigid geometries and gray hues of Libria's buildings, formerly emblematic of repression, begin to reveal moments of unintended beauty, fragility and even melancholy. Thus, the city, once a tool of ideological containment, becomes a site of potential meaning and subjective transformation that responds to the interior life of its brave inhabitant.

Preston's subsequent journey through the contrasting geographies of Libria – from the antiseptic government chambers to the chaotic, emotionally charged Nethers – mirrors his internal evolution from conformity to resistance. These places serve not just as locations of rebellion, but as sensory archives that reconnect the protagonist with universal, suppressed human experiences. Through his contact with forbidden objects – a record player, a book of poetry, a painting – Preston reclaims a sense of self that had been denied to him by the authority.

In the climax of *Equilibrium*, the agent becomes the instrument of the regime's destruction, utilizing the combat skills he once employed for the state to turn against the system. These climactic sequences further highlight the symbolic function of the urban space. As Preston stages his final rebellion, he moves through an increasingly symbolic landscape from the bureaucratic sterility of the administrative offices to the ritualized arena of the Father's inner sanctum. Each location is laden with ideological significance, and Preston's traversal of these spaces becomes a form of performative resistance. By infiltrating the very heart of the regime's spatial order, he enacts an emblematic inversion of power.

Preston's confrontation with the authority is as symbolic as it is literal. He annihilates the mechanisms of propaganda, assassinates the central leadership and exposes the illusion of Father's presence. The destruction of the central command is not merely a tactical victory; it represents a spatial and ideological collapse of the totalitarian system. Thus, the hero dismantles not only the physical infrastructure of oppression but also its theoretical foundations. The protagonist's act of resistance is not simply a political rebellion but an assertion of affective agency – a demand to feel and to remember. It represents a restoration of aesthetic and emotional possibility, allowing the books, paintings and music – once forbidden – to re-enter the social sphere.

Equilibrium's concluding imagery contrasts sharply with its opening bleakness, suggesting that emotional liberation holds the potential to reanimate even the most desolate landscapes. In its final moments, the film gestures toward the reclamation of the urban space as a site of human flourishing. Although the city remains largely intact, the suppression it once represented is undone. This denouement affirms the idea that dystopian systems, no matter how comprehensive, contain the seeds of their own undoing. The very need to repress affection so thoroughly reveals its enduring power, while the return of feeling signals the possibility of a new social order built not on fear and control, but on empathy and complexity.

Through its architectural design, spatial hierarchies and symbolic contrasts, Libria exemplifies how urban areas in dystopian cinema are not passive backdrops but active agents in the perpetuation of a totalitarian rule. Yet, the film presents the dystopian city not merely as an agent of oppression but as a dynamic arena where the struggle between repression and liberation unfolds in cultural and psychological terms. By situating the protagonist's emotional and political awakening within this contested context, the cinematic creation offers a nuanced critique of authoritarian spatial logic and affirms the enduring possibility of transformation, both personal and collective, even in the most controlled places. Thus, *Equilibrium* stands as a touching reminder that cities, like the societies they house, are always capable of being reimagined.

5. Conclusion

Kurt Wimmer's *Equilibrium* articulates a profound critique of authoritarianism, emotional suppression and ideological indoctrination. Through its portrayal of a chemically subdued society and of one man's journey to emotional and moral clarity, the film foregrounds the significance of sentiments, insisting on the resilience of the human spirit.

The cinema work presents a multifaceted vision of a dystopian world in which the urban space operates not merely as a backdrop but as a central mechanism through which state control is articulated, maintained and ultimately contested. The city of Libria exemplifies a highly rationalized environment, meticulously constructed to eradicate emotional variance and to enforce collective uniformity. Through its sterile architecture, spatial segmentation and psychological conditioning, Libria becomes an embodiment of the regime's totalitarian aspirations. Its urban design is not simply about functional governance, but about the instrumentalization of space in the service of ideological objectives. Buildings stripped of aesthetic individuality, symmetrical streetscapes and controlled interiors reflect a society that privileges order over organic human expression. Citizens, conditioned through both pharmacological and environmental means, unwillingly become enforcers of this dystopian logic, performing surveillance on themselves and others in a closed circuit of control.

Nevertheless, *Equilibrium* does not rest solely within the depiction of repression; it constructs a counter-geometry of resistance through its portrayal of the Nethers. These peripheral spaces, laden with memory and sensory richness, function as heterotopias that resist the power's dominant logic. In fact, the regime's spatial policies – such as weaponizing architecture or isolating threat zones – simultaneously expose its vulnerabilities, the persistence of cultural artifacts and of subversive places revealing the limits of total control.

By mapping the ideological structures of Libria onto the physical contours of the city, *Equilibrium* emphasizes the extent to which space can be mobilized to condition behavior, to suppress dissent and to shape collective identity. Yet, in doing so, it also affirms the enduring potential of territorial transgression and of emotional revival. The city, even in its most dystopian manifestation, retains within its structure the latent capacity for human resurgence and transformation.

In staging the protagonist's journey across the contrasting zones of Libria, the film articulates a spatialized narrative of political and emotional awakening. John Preston's journey – his moving from the sanitized core of the inner city to its affectively charged margins – reveals the urban environment as a psychological map of his shifting subjectivity.

Through the symbolic reclamation of affective richness, aesthetic beauty and historical memory, *Equilibrium* positions emotion as both a personal truth and a revolutionary force. Preston's rebellion reveals that, even in the most repressive conditions, the capacity to feel remains an irreducible aspect of human subjectivity that cannot be entirely erased. The ending of the film offers not a utopian resolution but a moment of radical possibility. It affirms that the reawakening of emotion, however dangerous or painful, is also the first step toward rebuilding a fractured world.

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Skinned Worlds: Virtual Reality and the Postbiological

Alicia Corts[1]

Abstract

This paper explores the concept of "skinning" in educational virtual reality (VR) environments, reframing it as a dramaturgical and pedagogical act rather than a mere visual overlay. Through comparative analysis of *The World of Hugo Simberg* and *Ciao: Piazza Navona Experience*, the study investigates how design decisions shape user identity, agency, and the performance of learning. Drawing on performance theory, it examines how avatars – or their absence – guide learners through curated paths, subtly influencing perception and interaction. While both applications strip away overt self-representation, they open space for subversion, reflection, and imaginative engagement. The paper argues that skinning encodes the boundaries of presence and the architecture of knowledge, inviting critical analysis of who learners are allowed to be and what ways of knowing they are offered. Ultimately, it positions skinning as a vital design principle for crafting immersive educational futures where learners not only consume content but perform new ways of understanding

Keywords: skinning, educational applications, virtual reality, identity in virtual spaces

1. The Potential of Virtual Spaces

Choosing an avatar in a video game or virtual reality application is a commonplace activity. A user casually scrolls through the options available, perhaps choosing to perform in an alien body or an animal rather than a human. You do not have to be confined to just one body; many applications allow a user to switch to a different form with a simple click of a mouse. But what are the implications of this action? What does it mean to take on a skin in the potential worlds of the virtual?

When we enter virtual environments, the skin we know as a biological constant suddenly shifts into a programmable surface. Where we can feel the sun on our skin in the biological world, for example, a user can only feel a virtual sun on a virtual skin if the developer programmed a sun into the world, manipulated the variables of that interaction between pixel points, and translated that data through a haptic device to the biological skin of the user. Even without haptic devices, the sense of presence in virtual reality is a state which users widely report, and users experience a seamless connection between the virtual and the biological skin after spending time in the virtual space (Berki, 2019; North & North, 2016).

The skin acts as a way of projecting our inner self into the virtual space, and the world, in turn, presses against that skin to mold behavior and our sense of self. One way to view this programmable surface is as an interface between user and world that functions as both a

[1] Chair and Associate Professor, Department of Theatre and Film, Jacksonville State University, acorts@jsu.edu, ORCID-ID: 0009-0006-5917-586X.

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projection site and a container for identity. We recognize that function because we use skin in the biological world in the same way: our skin is a way we project our sense of self while also receiving information from the world around us about how we are perceived, something Didier Anzieu calls the "skin ego" (Anzieu, 2018). Our skin is a container for who we are, so when we move into virtual performance spaces – video games, virtual reality applications, or even social media – we take on a new, virtual skin, and, while these containers may seem limitless, they are developed and shaped by systems that often obscure the creators. The concept of skin, so often taken for granted in biological contexts, assumes new significance when applied to the constructed bodies and landscapes of virtual reality (VR). These digital skins do not simply cover a form; they define the conditions of agency, perception, and relational presence within immersive environments.

Skinning, in the context of VR, functions on multiple levels. It is a technical process of binding images to 3D models so that they move believably within a coded environment. But it is also an act of world-making, an aesthetic and ideological choice that encodes the assumptions and the biases of its creator into the visual and haptic experience of the user. Users often feel that they are choosing their virtual identities freely when they enter into these worlds, but the range of possible performances is limited by the interface design and narrative architecture behind the world. These constraints remain largely invisible, giving users the sense that they have control and freedom in the virtual space while masking the boundaries developers put in place. Coding makes decisions for the user, but the alternatives to that coding lie just below the surface. If your avatar's hair is red, for example, all potential colors, including ones not visible to the human eye, are possible underneath the prescribed coding.

This disjuncture between perceived freedom and pre-coded limitation recalls the tension between what we know in the biological world contrasted with the postbiological. In virtual worlds, where bodies are conjured through pixels and data points rather than cells and tissue, the avatar becomes a site of negotiation between self and system, presence and programming. Skin functions as a symbolic surface imbued with power, allowing the wearer to appropriate, transform, or conceal identity, so to do digital skins confer symbolic significance upon users, enabling access to alternative identity performances while occluding others. Digital skinning occurs in a fully constructed potential world, one that can only be navigated through the boundaries it sets.

This paper argues that skinning in VR is not merely a superficial aesthetic layer; it is a performative structure that governs embodiment within the potential worlds of the virtual. The focus of this exploration are two virtual reality applications that suggest how a user can enter into a virtual space through a different skin: *The World of Hugo Simberg* and *C!ao*: *Piazza Navona Experience*. These two worlds have similar aims: to bring the user into an alternative reality as an educational experience. The difference in the way the user is skinned in each world alters how they interact with new knowledge, and examining these experiences can show us insight into how VR developers can consider the body as a vital performance element.

By placing *The World of Hugo Simberg* and *C!ao*: *Piazza Navona Experience* in conversation with the theories of skin, postbiological embodiment, and digital subjectivity, this study explores how virtual skin mediates the user's engagement with both world and self. It investigates how skinning establishes a framework of potentiality, a limited field of action where realities are reimagined. Far from being a neutral technical process, skinning functions as a gatekeeper to agency, revealing not only what is possible within a digital world but, more importantly, what has been excluded.

2. Skin, Cyborgs, and the Posthuman

Early virtual scholars framed the virtual as a landscape of limitless play (Bruckman, 1996; Turkle, 1995), but its horizons are bound by the same cultural theories that govern embodiment and identity in the physical world. To ground the argument that follows, this section synthesizes cultural studies of skin, cyborg and posthuman theory, psychoanalytic accounts of the skin ego, game-studies work on the game-ego, and cognitive–linguistic models of metaphor and then re-reads them through the lens of "skinning" as both technical procedure and ideological act.

Claudia Benthien's seminal work positions skin as the visible, performative border where self meets the world, echoing Anzieu's conception of the skin ego (Benthien, 2002; Anzieu, 2018). Because it is simultaneously surface and signal, skin can never be "purely biological;" it is always already encoded with social meaning. In Benthien's terms, skin is the medium through which identity is broadcast and read. When that medium migrates into VR, its semiotic function does not disappear; instead it is re-implemented as graphics layers, texture maps, and shader code. Digital skin thus inherits the same burden of representation as its fleshly counterpart, but with an additional layer of opacity: the user rarely sees the labour or value-judgements embedded in the code that renders it. We adopt the Anzieu's skin ego in these spaces, but developers mask their presence in the regulations deciding how that ego will develop.

When we enter the virtual, we take on the characteristics of the cyborg, a bricolage, a hybrid assemblage of organic tissue and technological surface, which extend Benthien's insight into the posthuman domain (Gaggi, 2003). In VR the avatar is precisely such a bricolage: a body whose biological skin has been replaced by a programmable membrane that may or may not resemble the user's biological body. A user could, for example, choose to craft an avatar body within the limits of the virtual space that reflects how they feel internally, but goes beyond the biological: my own avatar can reach the upper shelves of a cabinet, for example, something that my biological body cannot do in the virtual space. When we are given these options in building the cyborg body of an avatar, the result is a post-biological interface that promises fluidity, such as being as tall as you wish, while simultaneously delimiting agency to what the designers have foreseen, such as only allowing a range of heights for an avatar. Users often celebrate the plasticity of this condition, but the freedom is highly conditional: every menu slider and texture pack mark the outer edge of someone else's imagination.

As mentioned earlier, Didier Anzieu's psychoanalytic notion of the skin ego explains how a coherent sense of self is generated by interactions at the skin/world threshold; the ego contains, protects, and filters psychic material through that envelope (Anzieu, 2018). In virtual environments a complementary mechanism is required, because biological skin is no longer the operative boundary. Ulf Wilhelmsson's game-ego fills that role: it is the functional link that fuses the player's intention with the affordances of a digital body (Wilhelmsson, 2008). As a user interacts with the avatar body and learns to control it, the feedback which loops from those interactions graft the avatar onto the existing biological skin-ego, creating a new psychic envelope specific to the virtual space. This new virtual skin goes indeed beyond the biological and affords the user new ways of expressing their inner sense of self. Skinning provides the scaffold for this graft by attaching visual and kinaesthetic cues to avatar skeletons. The game ego builds our understanding of who we are inside the virtual space and allows us to influence the virtual world in return.

We understand these potential worlds, therefore, as we negotiate our virtual skins. Skin here is a helpful metaphor for us to navigate between the virtual and the biological. Lakoff & Johnson (2008)_ argue that the self is conceptualised through pervasive "container"

metaphors: being "in" or "out" of one's body, letting others "in," and so on. Digital skinning literalizes those metaphors. When a user selects an avatar, they are not merely picking hair color or body shape; they are choosing the container that will delimit projection and perception in that world. They are choosing a body that can project beyond what their biological skin can do, but it is a negotiation between what the user wants and what a developer will allow. None of those containers is neutral: every choice list and random-spawn default encode what the developer regards as legible or desirable. If a starter avatar is a white, young, handsome, straight male, for example, we would see a reification of a patriarchal hierarchy. To move away from that power structure, a user makes choices for their avatar body that go beyond the developer's idea of the starter avatar. The process of skinning therefore stages an implicit negotiation between user intention and designer constraint, a negotiation that continues well after the first login as updates, patches, and mods rewrite what the container can do.

Together these frameworks show that skinning is far more than a minor technical step in the asset production; it is the hinge on which questions of identity, ethics, and power turn. In what follows, the study leverages these lenses to analyze *The World of Hugo Simberg* and *Ciao: Piazza Navona Experience* as practical instantiations of skinning's promises and traps: worlds that invite users to believe in boundless presence, while quietly scripting the limits of what that presence can be.

3. Skinning as Design

While the user's perspective often dominates discussions of virtual reality, the skinning process begins long before a player enters the world. Every digital surface, movement, and constraint is authored, intentionally crafted by the developers who act as world-makers, dramaturgs, and costume designers all at once. In this sense, the developers are not simply technicians; they are choreographers of experience, shaping how our digital bodies will interact with the world. To understand skinning fully, we must shift our gaze toward the systems and creators behind the rendered world. Not every developer decision results in a negative impact to the user. Indeed, without the developer's decisions, the virtual world would not be visible to us at all. What is interesting is to consider what the developers chose to keep and what potentials they have ignored. In traditional theatre, designers carefully choose fabrics, colors, and cuts to signify status, character, or tone. In virtual environments, these choices are executed in pixels and code, but the dramaturgical implications remain.

In educational virtual spaces, a developer is determining a path for a user to follow with an explicit goal of providing access to knowledge in a way that would be impossible in the biological world. We cannot, for example, whisk a class of students off to Italy and Finland within a sixty-minute class period, but we can achieve such a task with a VR headset. Virtual reality offers pedagogical potential not simply by transferring content into immersive formats but by transforming the conditions under which learners experience that content. The process of skinning plays a critical role in determining how learners enter, inhabit, and make out the meaning within virtual spaces.

The two VR applications in this paper purposefully build a skin for the user, both in the way the user perceives themselves within the world (their skin) and in the way the world acts upon the user. Both applications are designed to introduce the user to new information through a student's interaction with a potential world. Neither application is a perfect copy of the biological equivalent of the performance world: each application uses the potential of the virtual to transform what exists into what is possible. *The World of Hugo Simberg* simulates a museum experience while *Ciao: Piazza Navona Experience* guides users on a

virtual walking tour of a Roman piazza. What we need to look for in these experiences is not just the developer's choices but the intention for the learner's path. What opportunities do these potential worlds afford the user and what potentials do they hide?

Theatre scholars look at biological productions with a dramaturgical lens, unpacking the semiotic load of the set, costume, lighting, and other design choices. For virtual applications, the same kind of analysis unpacks the design framework that determines the user's role, capacity for action, and the relationship to the knowledge which present within the application. The developers encode the boundaries of presence for specific pedagogical reasons, shaping how learners perceive themselves within a world and how that world responds in return. Without such an analysis, however, we cannot determine if those coding choices result in the appropriate educational outcome. When applied to VR education, skinning reveals its architectural logic: not just who the learner appears to be, but what kind of learning they are permitted to perform. Skinning, therefore, is the means to determine effectiveness of the virtual experience.

We must start, therefore, with an understanding of the basic design structure of each of these applications. *C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience* draws from a dramaturgical impulse to skin the user as a cultural tourist, navigating a richly reconstructed Roman square through wayfinding cues and embedded media. The user does not have a full body, only hands that allow the user to interact with the various locations within the piazza. A warm voice tells the stories of each landmark, with visual lighting cues guiding the user from point to point. The user can decide whether to do the tour on day or night mode, unlocking different story cues in each environment. The world closely resembles the biological version of the piazza, with some elements mimicking that space, such as the babbling of the fountains. There is also an absence of biological-world cues, such as other people, the smells within the piazza, and the feeling of the weather on any given day.

The World of Hugo Simberg, by contrast, builds a very different kind of skin that functions through aesthetic affect and narrative distance. The user is not embodied in the conventional sense; no avatar appears, no shadow suggests corporeality. Instead, users drift through atmospheric recreations of Simberg's paintings and imagined spaces, guided by sound cues and environmental transitions. This absence of visual self gives users a ghostly quality, positioning them as silent witnesses to a poetic, memory-laden world. The skin they wear is ambient, simply the palette of the artist, the soft gloom of his landscapes, the symbolic weight of reapers and angels. The experience is contemplative rather than kinetic. By eliminating a performative body, the developers direct focus toward immersion in tone for the world.

These two design strategies reflect fundamentally different educational philosophies encoded through skinning. *The World of Hugo Simberg* values symbolic engagement and reflective pacing; *C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience* prizes clarity, realism, and guided learning outcomes. Both build paths for the user, but their architecture reveals different assumptions about how knowledge is accessed and what role the learner plays. In *The World of Hugo Simberg*, the user's learning is secondary to the experience of being in the world of the painter's imagination. In C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience, the learner is a curious navigator expected to absorb modular, scaffolded information efficiently.

In both cases, the skin is not passive. It is directive. It tells the user how to move, what to notice, and how to relate to the world around them. The *The World of Hugo Simberg* developers chose movement that is fluid and slow, inviting users to linger, observe, and absorb. For the Piazza Navone Experience, movement is deliberate and goal-oriented, with visual prompts and interface mechanics that suggest progress and completion. These choreographies are not neutral; they encode pedagogical and cultural values. One

prioritizes introspection; the other, information access. One scripts the user as an art-lover lost in imagination; the other as an informed tourist with a map in hand. This distinction becomes especially apparent when we consider what is not possible within these worlds. With *The World of Hugo Simberg*'s paintings, users cannot question the logic of the narrative or step outside the affective tone. While strolling through Ciao: Piazza Navona Experience, users cannot engage with the local population, enter shops, or deviate from the curated route. These limits are not failures, but dramaturgical decisions. Understanding their impact is essential to evaluate the success of the experience. The skins may be seamless, but they are always selective.

Skinning as design is, thus, a diagnostic tool. It lets us see not just how a virtual world looks, but also how it thinks. It reveals what kinds of learners are being imagined and what kinds of learning are being privileged. In *The World of Hugo Simberg*, the learner is skinned as a poetic wanderer, guided by visual and emotional metaphor. While walking through the Piazza Navone, the learner is skinned as a cultural spectator, empowered through interactivity but bounded by informational structure. Both are valid educational roles, but both are constructed through invisible choices in code, tone, and interface. Understanding skinning from this vantage point returns us to the theatrical roots of virtual experience. Just as a costume designer shapes character through silhouette, fabric, and color, the VR developer shapes the learner through space, interaction, and constraint. And just as theatre is always a collaboration between performance and perception, so too is VR education a collaboration between design and interpretation.

What we learn, in the end, depends on what we are allowed to be. And what we are allowed to be depends on the skin we are given or denied.

4. Pedagogical Analysis through Performance

Virtual reality offers pedagogical potential not simply by transferring content into immersive formats, but by transforming the conditions under which learners experience, interpret, and embody that content. The process of skinning plays a critical role in determining how learners engage with and construct knowledge within the virtual spaces, and without a thorough analysis of not only what the developers include, but also what they exclude we cannot fully see whether an educational VR application has the capacity to be successful.

The World of Hugo Simberg, developed by the Finnish National Gallery, invites users into the fantastical landscapes of the Finnish Symbolist painter's imagination. One of the pedagogical purposes behind this app is to introduce users to this artist's work, and it uses the potential of the virtual in a specific way. Simberg worked with paper-based gouache, a technique that can easily degrade in light, making traditional exhibitions of his work difficult. No such limitation exists in the virtual. His work can be arranged in any way imaginable without the need to worry about the destruction of the paintings themselves.

In this VR space, learners traverse an interpretive environment that merges biography, symbolic imagery, and art historical narrative. The user enters a world with four potential paths, represented by four of Simberg's paintings. At this point in the experience, the user is in what resembles a museum: a darkened room with the paintings hanging under specific light. Once the user decides which painting to follow, they are suddenly immersed in the worlds of Simberg's making: a field of haystacks, a lake nestled in hills, a garden, and a forest. Paintings hang from various elements, and the user can decide to click on any of the images to see a larger version with an interpretive piece of dialogue explaining the painting.

The application has a very specific pedagogical purpose: take delicate works not commonly seen in public and place them in a space where they can be experienced in more depth and immersion. As the page for the application states, the Finnish National Gallery wanted to explore innovative ways of sharing Simberg's work safely and widely:

> The virtual environment allows the details of small-scale original works to be viewed at a much larger size and presented in an environment that does not follow the laws of the physical world. In other words, it is possible to provide an experiential space for the exhibition that draws on Simberg's imaginative world. *The World of Hugo Simberg* is an enchanting journey that sweeps you away (Finnish National Gallery, 2023).

There are several objectives in this paragraph: firstly, to allow a user to view the paintings in ways that go beyond the biological space, a necessity for these sensitive works; secondly, to give the user an experience of Simberg's imagination; and, finally, to take the user on an enchanting journey. These are excellent pedagogical objectives, especially when introducing students to new work. Skinning shows us how developers made choices to engage the user with these objectives, and in that analysis, we can also see where other potentials could also be useful paths to success.

In this application, the user's perspective is loosely embodied. They are not granted a visible avatar or interactive gestures, but instead become a floating presence within Simberg's paintings and memories. The skinning here is environmental rather than personal. A user does not possess a body, but simply feels the impact of the various elements. The world itself is skinned in Simberg's aesthetic: dark gardens, skeletal figures, muted palettes, and symbolic animals surround the user, generating a mood that is both immersive and reflective. Simberg's work is enchanting in itself, but the lack of a body means that the user is only a spectator rather than an active participant in the experience. We can choose which paintings to view, but we cannot sit beneath a tree or touch the water of the lake. The developers made the choice to keep the user distanced from the work, similar to the experience in a museum. Could a choice to give the user a body like the skeletal figures in Simberg's work offer a different experience? Potentially, leading to the question of whether these choices were the correct ones.

By contrast, *C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience*, developed by the Italian Ministry of Culture and Vection Technologies, uses VR to situate users in a historically reconstructed Roman piazza, layered with augmented information about architectural features, cultural history, and civic life. Users are cast as tourists in this experience, but more specifically as data consumers. With a simple set of hands, the user starts the experience in an alleyway next to the piazza, where they are guided through the basic controls and introduced to the way that they will navigate through the experience. The body is only a set of hands, which are skinned as large, masculine, and white. The hands are the guiding force of the experience, leading the user through the square. As various areas light up, the user is expected to travel to that area of the square, and when they do, an audio recording describes what the user is looking at in the square and the history behind it. The user is free to move about the world as these recordings occur, in contrast to the stillness of the Simberg application.

Although a full-body is again absent, the environment is richly populated with interactive objects. The skinning in *C!ao* is driven by a logic of clarity and comprehensibility: bright visuals, realistic scale, and smooth transitions encourage a sense of frictionless navigation through a historic square. It is like a guided tour: while the tour guide is talking, there is no sense that the user needs to look in a specific place but can visually and kinesthetically explore the space at one's leisure. The developers call this app "travel entertainment," with a goal of bringing the sensation of exploration and cultural immersion to users who may not be able to physically visit the location. In this way, the skinning in this application

emphasizes comfort over complexity, framing virtual tourism not as challenge or simulation but as a relaxed, intuitive encounter with history.

These two approaches exemplify the spectrum of skinned pedagogy in VR. In *The World of Hugo Simberg*, the learner is enveloped in affect and metaphor, moving through an environment that demands interpretive labor and emotional engagement. The absence of a body heightens the sense of ghostly witnessing. Users are not meant to be Simberg, but to feel the atmosphere of his world. *C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience*'s developers position the user as a more active learner, engaging with clickable nodes, choosing when to access certain information, and receiving feedback through clear visual and auditory cues. Knowledge here is scaffolded rather than evoked.

Yet both applications share a crucial feature: the absence of a fully embodied avatar. Users are not given the tools to customize appearance, gesture, or interpersonal presence. Instead, the skin is worn through perspective. The user's identity is constructed by where they are placed in space, what they are allowed to do, and how the environment responds to them. In *The World of Hugo Simberg*, the environment is largely non-reactive, emphasizing contemplation and haunting detachment, while in *C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience*, the user's movement and gaze trigger interactions, fostering a sense of agency, even if that agency is confined to predefined educational routes. This contrast speaks directly to the idea that skinning is not only about avatar design, but also about the dramaturgy of knowledge itself. The Finnish National Gallery developers chose to teach through mood and immersion; the *C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience*'s developers chose education through structure and interactivity. One is poetic, the other didactic. Yet both rely on carefully designed skins to structure the learner's experience: what they see, what they can touch, how they feel, and what they remember.

In both cases, the lack of a personalized avatar can be seen as a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it removes distracting self-consciousness, allowing the users to engage more fully with the content. As one user of *The World of Hugo Simberg* notes in the review, the lack of distractions makes the art more alive because of the focus of the experience (Finnish National Gallery, 2023). On the other hand, it limits opportunities for expressive or participatory learning. The user becomes a node in a system, a camera with agency, rather than a character within a narrative. *The World of Hugo Simberg*'s design choice reinforces the dreamlike distance of the artwork; *C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience*'s world helps maintain the clarity of an educational tour. But in both, it restricts relational identity formation. There is no person to gesture to, no dialogue to inhabit, no social presence beyond the self.

However, even within these constraints, users may still experience moments of affective learning. With Simberg's work, these moments may emerge through symbolic recognition: a user familiar with death iconography may find unexpected poignancy in a garden of skeletons. While navigating the Italian piazza, they may be sparked by the contrast between present-day Rome and the reconstructed, idealized past. These moments do not come from interactivity per se, but from spatial narrative: how the world is skinned to provoke affect and understanding simultaneously.

The design philosophy behind each application also reveals different assumptions about what constitutes learning. *The World of Hugo Simberg* offers ambiguity and interpretive space, inviting the user to draw personal or emotional conclusions. *C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience* assumes a goal-oriented learner and organizes content accordingly, guiding the user along a curated path toward specific knowledge outcomes. In this sense, *The World of Hugo Simberg* is more aligned with experiential, constructivist learning models, while *C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience* mirrors more traditional instructional design, even as both use immersive

technology. Yet what unites both experiences is the insistence that the skin, however abstract, is not merely a wrapper, but a pedagogy. It determines how learning is framed, what kinds of knowledge are possible, and how the users understand their own presence in relation to content. Whether one floats through the haunted brushstrokes of a symbolist painter or walks the clean stones of a Baroque Plaza, one is always wearing the space. That skin defines how one learns to see.

As virtual education continues to evolve, the role of skinning and the choices developers make about who the user is allowed to be and how the world reveals itself will become ever more central. If VR is to fulfill its promise of transformative learning, it must attend not only to content, but also to embodiment: not just what is taught, but also how learners feel themselves taught to be.

5. Identity and Performance in Skinned Realities

In skinned virtual environments, identity is not merely chosen or expressed. It is performed within a set of constraints that define the limits of recognition, participation, and transformation. These constraints are not simply aesthetic; they are structural and deeply performative. The skin, both as avatar and interface, becomes the site where identity is negotiated, shaped, and often contested.

Performance theorists have long emphasized the body as the locus of meaning in theatrical experience. In live performance, the body's gestures, voice, and presence signal emotion and intent. But in virtual performance, the body is no longer biological: it is simulated, skinned, and often abstracted. This abstraction creates both opportunity and tension. On the one hand, it enables a kind of fluidity. Users can step outside of normative bodily expectations, experiment with form, and enter spaces untethered from physical identity. On the other hand, the limits imposed by the digital skin – such as the gestures allowed, the level of interactivity, or any encoded expressivity – circumscribe what forms of identity can be meaningfully performed.

In the two educational applications we have been considering, identity is largely stripped of distinguishing markers. There is no body in *The World of Hugo Simberg*, and there is only a pair of floating hands in *C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience*. There are no names, no user tags, and no ability to customize appearance. Yet within this imposed anonymity, a rich field of identity performance still emerges.

The absence of an avatar in *The World of Hugo Simberg* is not neutral. It reframes the user's role from participant to observer, even as it immerses them in the visual and affective texture of the artist's world. Without a body, users cannot gesture, emote, or even occupy space in a way that might be interpreted by others. Instead, they exist as a mobile point-of-view, a ghost among memories. This condition of non-being becomes a kind of performance in itself. It demands a mode of presence rooted not in action, but in reception – how long one lingers before a symbolic image, how slowly one moves through the dim corridors of Simberg's imagination. Identity here is enacted through rhythm, gaze, and stillness. It is a performance of sensitivity rather than assertiveness.

By contrast, *C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience* offers users partial embodiment through disembodied hands – a gesture toward physical presence without the complexity of full-bodied animation. These hands serve as cursors and triggers, signaling that the user is a tactile being capable of interacting with the world. However, without a head, face, or voice, the performance of identity is functional, not expressive. The user is defined by what they can activate, not how they are seen. This reduction simplifies navigation but also flattens

individuality. The user's performance becomes one of progress through pointing and clicking rather than one of emotional or intellectual expression.

Yet even these minimal systems construct frameworks for identity. In *The World of Hugo Simberg*, the user becomes a poetic voyeur, immersed in the psyche of an artist who, notably, also operated on the edge of physical visibility in his own lifetime. Simberg's own body was marked by illness, silence, and retreat. The user's formless presence mirrors this quiet erasure, creating a resonance between avatar and subject. The learner is not invited to become Simberg, but to experience the world as though thinking alongside him: without intrusion, without weight.

C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience positions the learner as a kind of digital flâneur, walking a prescribed path through architectural history. Flâneur implies a male body, which we see in the size and shape of the hands. We are skinned as the intended audience for the square itself historically. The disembodied hands suggest interaction, but the limitations of movement and the absence of dialogue reinforce the user's role as an informed spectator temporarily inhabiting this skin. This is not a space for invention or self-reflection; it is a guided tour, and the learner's identity is shaped by their willingness to follow. Still, the performance is not without agency. Users choose where to linger, which artifacts to examine more closely, and how quickly they move. These choices produce a rhythm of attention that can differentiate one user's performance from another, even in the absence of personalization.

Both applications therefore raise key questions about identity in educational VR. Who is the user meant to be? What actions can they take, and what performances are recognized or ignored by the system? The answers, as with any performance, are encoded in the environment's design. *The World of Hugo Simberg* invites a slow, reverent tempo, *C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience* a paced, goal-directed progression. Both constrain speech and gesture, rendering identity legible only through pacing, proximity, and curiosity.

This is where the concept of skinned performance becomes particularly useful. In theatrical terms, a skin is both costume and constraint. It dresses the performer but also defines their mobility and silhouette. In VR, the skin is both visual and procedural. It is the interface through which performance occurs, and the boundary that limits what kinds of performance are possible. The user is always performing, even when silent. The choice not to touch, not to move, not to follow is itself a performance of resistance or disengagement. Educational designers often focus on cognitive outcomes: did the student learn the historical facts, identify the correct symbolism, retain the material presented? But in skinned realities, learning also occurs through performative engagement: how the student experiences themselves in relation to the knowledge. Do they feel like a tourist, a witness, a collaborator? These identities are shaped not by the content alone, but by how the system scripts their role, which is wholly dependent on the developers' choices in the potential world.

Moreover, the minimalist avatar strategies in both *The World of Hugo Simberg* and *C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience* also point to broader ethical questions about visibility, agency, and the pedagogy of presence. What does it mean to strip users of visible identity? In some cases, it may protect against bias, creating an egalitarian space where learners are not judged by race, gender, or appearance. In others, it may erase opportunities for meaningful self-expression, limiting users to anonymous consumption. These tensions echo debates in theatre and performance studies around invisible labor, audience agency, and the politics of representation.

Virtual identity, then, is never neutral. It is always coded – by gesture, by limitation, by what the world allows the user to do and to be. In *The World of Hugo Simberg*, identity is

shaped through spectral immersion; in *C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience*, it is shaped through guided action. Both demand a kind of choreography: not just of movement, but of self. And this choreography is not fixed. Users bring their own subjectivities to these roles. A student exploring *The World of Hugo Simberg* may feel an unexpected affinity with the melancholy symbols and find resonance in their silence. A learner in *C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience* may resist the guided path, choosing to remain in one plaza and contemplate a fountain's sculpture rather than "progress" toward the next data point. These acts of divergence are performative, and they remind us that even within constrained environments, users create identity through friction, rhythm, and resistance.

Ultimately, skinned realities do not erase the self but, rather, stage it. They script possibilities, and mark boundaries. They offer affordances through which identity can be temporarily worn and reimagined. Educational VR is not just a tool for delivering content. It is a stage upon which students try on new ways of being learners. And that stage, like any theatrical environment, demands critical attention to the roles we are asked to play.

6. Potentials Beneath the Code: Subversion and Imagination

At first glance, educational VR applications such as *The World of Hugo Simberg* and *C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience* may seem rigidly structured, bound by the clarity of their objectives and the apparent linearity of their user pathways. But beneath their polished surfaces lie deep reservoirs of potential, sites where the virtual skin does not simply direct behavior, but opens opportunities for imaginative subversion. These are neither chaotic, sandbox-style worlds, nor do they offer branching narrative choices. Yet, even within their scripted architectures, users may engage creatively, far beyond the bounds of what the developers imagined. The true pedagogical value of these environments emerges not only in what they present, but also in how users choose to inhabit them. For developers, considering these alternative performances can more carefully illuminate the potentials of these worlds.

Virtual experiences, like theatrical ones, do not require overt rebellion to be subversive. In fact, the very act of lingering, skipping, or reframing a learning experience within VR may constitute a kind of quiet challenge to the designed path. In *The World of Hugo Simberg*, where interaction is minimal and embodiment is absent, users are invited into a symbolic world rich with metaphor and melancholy. While the environment provides no obvious agency – no levers to pull or quests to complete –, the open-ended pacing and spatial ambiguity grant the user permission to resist narrative closure. A user can sit with a painting, for example, for as long as they wish, although the audio cues for each painting indicate a moment when the user has completed the experience. There is no explicit "lesson" to be mastered; instead, the experience leaves room for personal interpretation, including how long a user wishes to be involved in the experience. Subversion here takes the form of imaginative inhabitation: a student may begin by simply listening to the audio explanation of the symbolism in Simberg's work, but end up immersed in a meditation on grief. This divergence from curricular intent is not a failure. It is the mark of a deeply affective and flexible pedagogical skin in a virtual space. Even without a body, the users in this experience feel the pressure of the virtual space on their sense of self, giving them the space to reflect on Simberg's work without the societal pressures which their biological skin would experience in a physical-world museum. One might be looked at askance if crying loudly while meditating on death in a still museum, for example.

C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience, while more directive in its structure, similarly invites subtle acts of reinterpretation. Its precise reconstructions and informative nodes suggest a clear learning goal: to introduce users to the architecture, history, and cultural importance of

Piazza Navona. But the user need not follow this path obediently. They might choose to ignore the audio prompts and instead focus on textures of the stone, the spatial relationships between fountains, or the imagined sounds of contemporary street life bleeding in from the edges of the scene. There are even small cafes where a user could sit and simply look at the square for a period of time. Even in a setting built for efficient delivery of historical content, the user can wander and daydream, filling in silences the program does not account for. The tension between the curated experience and the user's wandering attention becomes a powerful space for learning, one not easily measured, but richly generative.

These moments of imaginative subversion, though subtle, speak to the affordances of VR as a learning medium. Unlike a video or a textbook, VR places the user in spatial and temporal control. Even in tightly skinned worlds, the user determines their rhythm in the experience. The very constraints of *The World of Hugo Simberg* and *Ciao: Piazza Navona Experience*, such as their minimal avatar presence and limited interactivity, paradoxically amplify this internal agency. There are fewer buttons to press, but more space to feel, interpret, and resist. It is here that performance theory becomes particularly resonant. If we consider each user a performer and each session a performance, then we must also consider the possibility of improvisation or quiet rebellion. In both applications, the user can refuse to follow the script. A visitor to the *The World of Hugo Simberg* world may dwell on unexpected details or even turn their backs completely on the paintings to experience only the opening scene in a quiet, dark museum. A visitor to the Piazza Navone in *Ciao: Piazza Navona Experience* may focus on the emotional implications of public space or imagine the lives of invisible people behind closed windows instead of absorbing only the historical narrative on offer.

Such acts of imagination are not distractions from learning; they are its expansion. They move the user beyond the presented content into reflective territory where connections are forged and more complicated ideas are awakened. These acts may never be assessed on a test, but they mark the difference between passive reception and critical engagement. They also reveal the flexibility hidden in even the most structured skinned environments. The skin may shape the path, but the performer always retains the interpretive power. Moreover, these imaginative acts invite a reconsideration of what educational success looks like in VR. Should we measure learning in terms of completed checkpoints, time spent in-app, or information retained? Or should we also account for the user's emotional journey, their spontaneous questions, and the invisible mental theatre that unfolds beneath the code? This question is particularly urgent for humanities-based educational VR, where meaning is often shaped less by recall than by resonance.

Both *The World of Hugo Simberg* and *Ciao: Piazza Navona Experience* implicitly encourage this kind of resonance by denying users the tools of overt performance. There are no conversations with other users, and without a body, facial and bodily expression remain minimal. And yet, this lack can become a gift. In the absence of expressive tools, users must turn inward. They become observers and authors of their own interpretations, layering meaning onto their silent, floating perspectives. The skin, in this context, does not prevent identity. It stages it as a contemplative act. These potentials are fragile. Without intentional design practices that leave room for interpretive wandering, even the most beautiful VR applications can become rigid delivery mechanisms. The key for developers lies in recognizing that they cannot predict all outcomes. Educational VR does not need to control every response; it can allow space for surprise. When developers understand that the skin is not just a container, but a performance partner, they may begin to craft experiences that welcome rather than suppress improvisation.

7. Conclusion: The Reality beneath the Surface

Virtual environments may promise escape, immersion, or freedom, but as this study has argued, what they most reliably offer is structure. The skin, whether worn as an avatar or encountered as a world, is the central organizing metaphor of virtual performance. It is what the users see, what they inhabit, and ultimately, what they become. But unlike theatrical costuming, where identity may be chosen or discarded at will, digital skinning embeds identity within the rules of the system. It is not merely surface, but structure.

The educational applications considered here exemplify this relationship between skin and system. They show that freedom in virtual space is not the absence of constraint, but the ability to perform meaningfully within it. The experience strips users of verbal language, personalized features, and clear narrative goals, yet out of this emptiness, rich performances emerge. Users wave, kneel, follow, abandon. They form attachments to live performers. They repeat the rituals. They build ephemeral communities. None of these behaviors are demanded by the code, and yet they arise from it: proof that within the skin lies not just control, but invitation.

In this sense, the skin is not a barrier to meaning but a dramaturgical device. It frames the user's range of movement and action, shaping not just what can be done, but how it feels to do it. It is a politics of presence. As such, it demands critical attention, not only for how it encodes systems of power, but also for how it can be reimagined through performance. Skinning equally offers a valuable lens to understand how users craft identity in postbiological contexts. Here, identity is not selected from a menu or expressed through customization. It is enacted through the experience of moving through a skinned world where even the smallest decisions result in an interaction with the world. It is seen in things like how long one lingers in the experience or whether to engage with the interactive elements. By applying a dramaturgical lens to the design of educational VR, we move beyond questions of technological novelty and enter the realm of critical performance. In this frame, learning becomes an act of performed identity; presence is something sculpted by code and interface; and the virtual world, like the theatre, becomes a stage for becoming. The learner is not merely a consumer of content but a character cast within a tightly written script – albeit one that always leaves space for improvisation.

This paper does not suggest that all constraints are limitations. Quite the opposite: it is within the boundaries of skinning that meaning emerges. What matters is not the presence or absence of user agency, but how that agency is framed, supported, and interpreted. In *The World of Hugo Simberg*, agency is contemplative and affective. In *C!ao: Piazza Navona Experience*, it is spatial and procedural. Each world constructs a specific mode of learning, and each leaves open particular avenues for imaginative resistance and subversion. What is at stake, then, is the ethics of skinning: the question of what kinds of learners we are designing for, and what roles we are asking them to perform. Educational VR carries the power to replicate the worst habits of traditional instruction, but it also holds the promise of staging radically different futures. These futures are not utopian, nor are they free of constraint. Rather, they are thick with possibility, inviting users not just to absorb knowledge but also to move through it. The practice of skinning reminds us that even digital education has a dramaturgical core. Behind every interface is a set of choices about bodies, presence, and potential. To understand those choices and to imagine new ones is the critical task of both educators and world-builders. As we look to the future of immersive learning, the question is not just how we will use VR, but how we will perform within it, and who we will be allowed to become.

If the world is a stage, as Shakespeare reminds us, then VR education is a new kind of theatre, one where the scenery is code, the audience is immersed, and the costume is the

skin we are given. To engage with that skin is to ask: What kind of performance is this? Who wrote the script? And most importantly, how might we revise it?

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Saberlight Chronicles Articulations of Metal Music and Fantasy in Fellowship's Concept Album (2022)

Thales Reis Alecrim[1]

Abstract

This paper investigates the articulations between metal music and fantasy fiction as a form of cultural cross-fertilization, focusing on the creation of narratives grounded in magical themes. Within this trend, there are two distinct creative processes: bands that draw on existing literature and those that create original stories. This study focuses on the latter, particularly on the album *Saberlight Chronicles* (2022) by Fellowship, which exemplifies how metal bands craft concept albums narrating original fantasy stories. Despite the existing scholarship addressing laterally the contacts between metal and fantasy, there is no relevant discussion exploring their relationship. This paper aims to fill a gap in the literature by analyzing how metal's fantastical narratives address both contemporary anxieties and historical continuities, offering a lens to speculate on alternative realities. Hence, the paper argues that modern metal's engagement with fantasy mediates long-standing cultural tensions of the enchantment of modernity that gain nuances when sedimented in the music record form. Therefore, metal and fantasy are shown not merely as escapism but as active tools for reimagining cultural processes, illustrating the influence of alternative realities in music expression. By examining the lyrics and musical structures that evoke fantasy, this paper aims to show how these strategies operate within a dialectic between freedom and control, reification and utopia. Consequently, metal music (particularly the subgenre known as power metal), in this context, becomes a site where cultural meaning is negotiated.

Keywords: metal music, fantasy, articulation, popular music, power metal

Introduction

Saberlight Chronicles (2022) is a concept album created by the Scottish power metal band Fellowship. By building on a long tradition of articulations between metal music and fantasy fiction, each track of this album represents a chapter of a longer narrative. What is intriguing is that, unlike other concept albums which adapt literary material, *Saberlight Chronicles* follows the other way around and produced an original narrative that was later crystallized in a novel, available for free download on the band's website (Colly, 2022).

Inside the plot of both the music and the text, the band Fellowship is depicted as a caravan of traveling bards. They also embody such characters in their musical performances. In this sense, *Saberlight Chronicles* takes the articulation between metal and fantasy to its apex, transforming even the musical performance into a fictional act. I think that such artistic proposition raises interesting questions regarding the role of imagining alternative worlds in metal music productions. More specifically, I am intrigued by what historical and cultural

[1] Doctoral Researcher, Universidade Católica Portuguesa, Research Centre for Communication and Culture, Lisbon, Portugal. talecrim@ucp.pt, ORCID-ID: 0000-0003-4823-9646.

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conditions allow the emergence of *Saberlight Chronicles* and which ideas shape the construction of the meaning of this album.

To address such problems, in this paper, I approach *Saberlight Chronicles* to investigate the relationship between metal and fantasy. I aim to demonstrate how this specific cross-fertilization between music and fiction encompasses more than just the adaptation of material that informs the lyrics. As I suggest, it is an articulation, a cultural and historical process, that allowed the association between music and literary genre. More than a formalist or intertextual interpretation of how music can incorporate elements of fiction, I analyze *Saberlight Chronicles* as a symbolic practice that emerges to address cultural anxieties. By all means, while this study offers specific interpretations, it does not seek to foreclose other possible readings – instead, it hopes to open new avenues for critical discussion regarding the cultural role of imagining alternative worlds through music.

Furthermore, I suggest comprehending the relationship between metal and fantasy as an articulation. As Stuart Hall argues, "a theory of articulation is both a way of understanding how ideological elements come, under certain conditions, to cohere together within a discourse, and a way of asking how they do or do not become articulated, at specific conjunctures, to certain political subjects" (Hall, 1986, 56). In popular music, Richard Middleton argues that articulating principles "operate by combining existing elements into new patterns or by attaching new connotations to them" (Middleton, 1990, 18). Therefore, in line with this theory that aims to understand how different cultural formations come into a relationship and what historical forces allow them to combine, I argue that the cross-fertilization between metal and fantasy is neither deterministic nor natural but a historically contingent cultural negotiation.

To demonstrate such claims, this study is divided into three sections. The first one historicizes the relationship between metal and fantasy by proposing a dialectical reading of both genres. However, my scope of investigation only encompasses the British and American contexts, since they are more immediately crucial to the present exploration. Following that, the next section analyzes *Saberlight Chronicles*, considering how the musical material and the structure of the novel follow a specific form of storytelling particular to metal music. Finally, the third segment coincides with the conclusion and proposes a theoretical reading of this album, arguing how the alternative world that emerges from its storytelling techniques expresses different layers of reification and utopia that mirror the cultural anxieties of late capitalism.

On Metal and Fantasy

Before proceeding, it is crucial to establish what I understand by fantasy. Unfortunately, I do not have enough space to elaborate on the pre-history of this literary genre, which encompasses myth, folk tales, religious stories, Gothic fiction, and Romanticism – see Mendlesohn and James (2008) and Attebery (2022) for a more extended discussion on the subject. For this reason, I ground my investigation in what is widely regarded as the foundation of modern fantasy – a literary movement that emerged in parallel in Britain and the United States in the early 1900s, with key contributions from J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis on one side of the Atlantic and Robert E. Howard on the other.

While fantasy has diversified into numerous subgenres since its emergence, this study focuses specifically on works that construct and narrate stories within fully realized alternative worlds. Important examples of this trend are Tolkien's Middle-Earth, Lewis's Narnia, and Howard's Hyborian Age – and later, it is also represented by Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea and Terry Prachet's Discworld. What characterizes all these examples of

alternative fictional worlds is the seeming absence of modernity; consequently, most of them embrace a medieval-like social structure, which substitutes modern bureaucracy and technology for magic and preternatural creatures.

To define his approach to worldbuilding, Tolkien (1964, 11-72) introduced the notion of the "secondary world" – an imagined realm constructed through sub-creation, drawing from myth and folklore (themselves part of primary Creation) while requiring internal historical and conceptual consistency. Building on that, Brian Attebery (2022, 42-45) argues that fantasy is a form of crafting fiction that proposes a gaze into the past, painting it in magical frames, while opposing realism and rationalism, but without abandoning modern narrative techniques. These perspectives paved the way for authors such as Anne Besson (2007), Michael Saler (2012) and William Blanc (2019) who argue that fantasy, especially stories about alternative worlds, present an attempt at re-enchanting a disenchanted world.

While recognizing these contributions, I would like to avoid binarisms – such as magic versus reason, or enchantment versus disenchantment. Instead, I propose a dialectic and materialistic reading of fantasy. To do so, I mobilize Fredric Jameson's critique (2002; 2005) to theorize fantasy as a negative space – its narrative exuberance marking the boundaries of historical possibility, its world-building exposing through compensation what material conditions render impossible. I will come back to this in the last section, where I propose the dialectic reading of *Saberlight Chronicles*.

Now, turning to metal music, it must be stated that although it is acknowledged and indicated by a few scholars in the field of metal music studies (Lusty, 2013, 101-138; Mora-Rioja, 2023, 183-184; McParland, 2016, 46; Spracklen, 2020, 75-88; Walser, 2014 [1993], 143), there is no systematic examination of the relationship between this genre and fantasy. Such a lack of interest is intriguing because, as Ruth Barratt-Peacock and Ross Hagen argue, "metal music is brimming with elsewheres, ranging from mid-twentieth century American motorcycle culture, to supernatural gothic horror, to futuristic science fiction, and many points besides" (2019, 4). Therefore, it seems that metal music has a strong connection with broader cultural trends that have been challenging the paradigms of realism and normative culture.

Nonetheless, even within the realms of popular music, metal is not a pioneer in claiming magical tropes. As early as the 1960s, English prog rock and hard rock bands began forging strong ties with speculative literature – a connection thoroughly examined in the texts of the volume edited by Chris Anderton and Lori Burns (2024). Indeed, there are some prolific, influential, and long-standing examples of this relationship.

One of the most important intertextual relationships between metal and fantasy is "The Wizard", a track in Black Sabbath's eponymous first album from 1970. This song is a direct reference to Gandalf, the wizard, one of the main characters of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. For instance, Led Zeppelin, another band that is placed as one of the founders of metal, has a long dialogue with J. R. R. Tolkien in songs such as "Ramble On", "Misty Mountain Hop", and "The Battle of Evermore".

The converse is equally valid, as exemplified by fantasy writers like Michael Moorcock, who actively engaged with rock music aesthetics and culture. Since the 1960s, he has composed lyrics in this genre for many bands of prog rock and metal, such as Hawkwind, Blue Öyster Cult, and Smoulder. Above all, Moorcock has his own rock project, a partnership with The Deep Fix.

However, it is noteworthy that the 1960s and 1970s watched an intense engagement with Tolkien's texts – and speculative fiction in general, such as the works of Ursula K. Le Guin

and Samuel Delany – in association with the counterculture and hippie movements, which saw in fantasy a critique of industrialization and technocracy (Macan, 1997, 80). In this sense, both Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin were in contact with these repertoires of ideas. However, in doing so, they also anticipated the articulations between metal and fantasy by sedimenting a range of lyrical tropes that were explored by the bands who looked to them in search of inspiration.

Yet, in the broader scope of 1970s popular culture, there are further intersections between metal and fantasy. During this decade, the world-famous role-playing game (RPG) *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) premiered and forged strong connections with the emerging metal communities. The game was based on a fantasy setting and asked players to interpret their characters in the manner of a Tolkienesque quest. The importance of RPGs in the articulation between metal and fantasy cannot be dismissed, since bands like Twilight Force and Fellowship actively borrow from this source in their performances, in which they incorporate fictional characters.

During the 1980s, the tie between metal and fantasy strengthened due to the Satanic Panic, which connected both RPGs and the music genre in the social imaginary of Ronald Reagan's USA. In fact, such articulations are so culturally crystallized in media culture that, during the 2010s and 2020s, the connections between metal, RPG and fantasy were exhaustively explored in the plot of nostalgia television series about the 1980s, such as *Stranger Things* (since 2016 until present) and *Hysteria* (2024).

Yet, it was not until the late 1980s that metal bands began to systematically incorporate fantasy themes. The emergence of the New Wave of British Heavy Metal (NWOBHM) and the global popularization of the genre (mainly in Europe and North America), championed by bands such as Manowar (USA), Helloween (Germany), Mercyful Fate (Denmark), and Dio (UK), established fantasy as a reliable source of inspiration for lyrics and imagery.

Nonetheless, the incorporation of fantasy into metal has not only impacted lyrics and performance but also the musical material. As Heather Lusty argues, "[h]eavy metal's primary distinguishing characteristic is that it embraces a literary structure more than most popular music" (2013, 103), because of that, metal can produce melodic narratives. In analyzing the adaptation of English poetry to metal, Arturo Mora-Rioja argues that

> [u]nlike the average pop song, metal music welcomes extended introductions and endings, odd metres and metre switches, fast and slow passages, instrumental sections and architectural song designs sometimes reminiscent of classical music. (Mora-Rioja, 2022, 11)

I would like to borrow from Mora-Rioja's insights and also argue that metal songs can accommodate literary and fictional material because of the openness of their musical form, which is not strictly bound to the verse-chorus structure of most pop songs. Yet, it can also be the other way around: just because metal musicians wanted to adapt literary material, they tensioned and expanded the musical form. In any case, "metal's wide dramatic range" (Mora-Rioja, 2022, 11) – these traits include guitar distortion, intense rhythms, extreme volume contrasts, high-range singing (or guttural vocals in radical styles), and lengthy solo passages – allows the songs to embrace the expressivity and emotional value of fiction. Musically, this process is equally made possible by what Robert Walser (2014 [1993], 54) defines as a dialectic between freedom and control as the defining characteristics of metal music. I will return to this point in the last section because it is also connected with how the musical material addresses the demands of the historical conjuncture.

This embrace of fiction is multifaceted and concomitant with a myriad of references from popular culture. In this way, Hollywood films of the 1980s, such as *Conan the Barbarian* (1982) and *Highlander* (1986), offered role models and behavior patterns, while the epic

soundtracks were incorporated into metal's musicality. However, it was only later in the decade, in 1988, that Iron Maiden launched the main object of interest of this thesis, that is, the concept album that draws directly from fantasy literary texts.

A concept album is one in which the tracks, rather than standing alone, contribute to a larger narrative meaning – for a history of this recording practice, see Wolfson (2024). In this sense, the first metal attempt to adapt fantasy literary material, in which each song stands for a chapter, was Iron Maiden's *Seventh Son of a Seventh Son* (1988). However, instead of a literal adaptation, the band stylized the novel *Seventh Son* (1987) by Orson Scott Card. The album addresses similar themes of magic and folklore, but through a different narrative strategy that, unlike the source material, emphasizes the psychological state of the characters.

This approach to storytelling in metal concept albums was consolidated in a different subgenre, power metal, which is specifically concerned with fantasy themes and, thus, is the inheritor of Iron Maiden's NWOBHM musical style and storytelling techniques. In fact, metal music is brimming with different ramifications (see Hillier [2020] and Smialek [2015] for further discussion), but since I have limited space, I will just focus on power metal – although some black metal bands like Summoning and Dwarrowdelf also produce fantasy concept albums based on Tolkien's work.

Emerging from NWOBHM and speed metal influences of the 1980s, power metal prioritizes melodic speed over dissonance, favoring fantasy themes and neoclassical flourishes. Its hallmark – anthemic choruses set against fantastical lyrics – cultivates an aspirational, emotionally charged aesthetic distinct from extreme metal subgenres. Consequently, power metal also engaged in a constant dialogue with prog rock, borrowing from bands like Rainbow and Yes, to create a sense of otherworldly epicness related to heroic themes (Saguar García, 2021, 37-40).

In this way, the German band Blind Guardian, in *Nightfall in Middle-Earth* (1998), which adapted Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*, built on the path paved by *Seventh Son of a Seventh Son*, but incremented it with opera performance, voice acting, and symphonic modulation (Calvo, 2011). Moreover, Blind Guardian, in narrating stories through their songs, assumed the imagery of bards, a movement that started to blur the line between fiction and musical performance (Ringsmut, 2024, 113).

Helloween, another influential German band, established power metal tropes not through literary adaptations but by crafting original fantasy worlds in their *Keeper of the Seven Keys* albums (1987-1988). As the 1990s unfolded, this musical current began absorbing tabletop RPG influences. Pioneering groups such as Italy's Rhapsody of Fire and later Sweden's Twilight Force embraced persistent fantasy stage personas while constructing elaborate album-length sagas that progressed like role-playing campaigns.

Therefore, by building on both trends, that is, the intertextual dialogue with literary material and the creation of original fantasy fiction, Fellowship establishes an interesting laboratory to explore the articulation between metal and fantasy. Consequently, in the following section, I proceed with an analysis of the musical and lyrical material, concomitant with the novel, of *Saberlight Chronicles*.

The Articulations of *Saberlight Chronicles*

The following analysis of *Saberlight Chronicles* is sustained by a dialectical procedure, one that borrows elements from Theodor Adorno's (2001 [1938]; 1982) reading of the relationship between the musical material and social history. However, this repertoire of

ideas was designed to examine the canon of 19th-century Western music, later encompassing also the avant-garde of modernism in the 20th century. For this reason, it is important to counterbalance Adorno's mistrust of popular music with a theoretical and methodological framework that blends critical theory, history and cultural studies.

In this way, through a formal analysis of the musical (and lyrical) material, I argue that it is possible to address broader elements of the cultural environment in which this artifact emerged, such as the tensions between ideology and hegemony. This position is a means to investigate ideas that were culturally relevant in the shaping of the possible meanings of this album. Consequently, the analysis of the music itself is not enough, especially when dealing with concept albums, since the meaning is equally constructed against the whole cultural constructs that shape and are shaped by the musical activity. For this reason, Juan Pablo González (2023) proposes an intermedial music analysis, one that brings different references that also illuminate aspects of the process of musicking (Small, 1998), such as interviews, paratexts, and imagery.

With those parameters established, I can proceed with the analysis of *Saberlight Chronicles*, both the album and the novel. First of all, Matthew Corry, the vocalist of Fellowship, stated in an interview with the website *Angry Metal Guy* that "There will be a novella for every album that we do. I am committed to saying that" (Elitist, 2024). However, this literary material is not an imposition or something outside the formal structure of the music: "[t]he origin of the novella is as a writing tool, to keep album one lyrically fresh, and it just sprawled into a novella. I love that idea, so now we're doing it every time" (Elitist, 2004). Therefore, the novel emerged as a consequence of the narrative structure of the album.

In reality, this is very clear in the formal aspects of the literary material, since it is mostly a skeleton or a framework for a plot, lacking more sophisticated techniques common to fantasy literature like detailed descriptions of the social setting, represented thought, and manipulation of time and perspective (Attebery, 2022, 45). Therefore, the album is neither an adaptation of the novel, nor a stylization, nor a form of transmedia or intermedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006). Whereas the album presents a self-contained narrative, the novel acts as both structural reinforcement and hermeneutic guide – a paratext that binds the work together while decoding musical storytelling techniques that might otherwise remain opaque.

Moreover, a particularly compelling dimension of this album's fictional construct lies in its metafictional layering – the band members themselves embody the Fellowship characters across both musical and literary manifestations of the narrative. Every album or novel is "the tale of the Fellowship itself, which is a set of immortal storytellers, cursed to tell every story from history, that they experience whenever they are asked" (Elitist, 2004). This is a metafictional device that connects different albums within what Anne Besson (2004) defines as a cycle romanesque. Hence, each new album narrates a different story, but all of them are unified within the same universe by the Fellowship itself, not only as musicians but also as fictional characters. As Corry explains, "[e]verything exists in the same universe, where the characters of Fellowship are represented in the prologue and epilogue of every book as storytellers" (Elitist, 2004).

Indeed, both the novel and the album start and end with the events that have led the Fellowship to narrate the story that the listener/reader follows. Accordingly, the first track of *Saberlight Chronicles,* "Until the Fires Die", is the introduction of the Fellowship, the fictional band, who invite the listeners to enjoy the story – "Come with me/ I'll take you on a hero's journey/ Through the hills and spires of history's spell". It opens with a playful introduction on the xylophone, set on a major scale, followed by the distorted and bright-timbre guitar that already establishes the recurring main riff of the song, the same one used

in the chorus. In fact, the role of "Until the Fires Die" is to establish the mood of the album.

Moreover, the song employs the compound AABA, the hegemonic musical form in metal music. As Stephen Hudson (2023) argues, it is also a musical storytelling strategy that combines musical material and lyrics to produce a coherent narrative. This riff-centered AABA arrangement juxtaposes the structural cohesion of the A section (introduction, verse, chorus) against the destabilizing bridge (B section), often realized through a guitar solo. Hudson (2021, 12) grounds his assertion of AABA's prevalence in metal by referring to John Covach's (2005, 68) work, which traces the form's origins to early American 20th-century popular music.

In this way, the musical and lyrical material of the A sections presents the Fellowship while addressing and demanding the participation of the listener in the unfolding of this story. This is confirmed by the catchy chorus – "Hold your hearts up and lift them high/ Live your life with a battle cry/ Sing with us 'til the fires die/ Fellowship foretold!" – which was designed to work as a moment of sing-along. However, the B section of the song, that is, the guitar solo, builds on the long-phrased melody, reminiscent of the 1980s neoclassical metal, to create a mythical aura, grounding the perspective of the listeners as witnesses of an epic tale. After establishing the fantastic setting of the album, the song returns to the chorus and closes with the final resolution of the melody.

Since the album has already introduced the storytelling role of the Fellowship, it now presents the narrative of the *Saberlight Chronicles*. The second track, "Atlas", in which the title refers to the main character of that tale, positions the listener inside the main story. Nonetheless, the lyrics present little of the plot; instead, the verses focus on demonstrating the inner conflicts of Atlas. Accordingly, the musical form develops an interesting variation of the compound AABA, switching some passages to introduce the state of confusion, resembling something like an AABABAB structure. If the B sections reflect a moment of destabilization of the narrative, they are sustained in this song to reiterate the constant state of conflict.

"Atlas" revolves around two characters who must act in the face of the upcoming invasion of the Empire. Firstly, it presents Sahn, an ancient Oldkin woman (as the name says, she is part of a giant-like elder race), who has the duty of overseeing Lar Valley, the sanctuary that protects the holy weapon, Saberlight. Her perspective is mostly introduced in the first stanza, accompanied by a melancholic melody in minor key conducted only by the bass, drums, and some piano phrases – "I am something ancient/ I am something yet to be/ This body is my chronicle and history/ Sail beyond this heart of mine/ Find life beyond its reach". This is an engaging instrumentalization that connects low sounds with the Oldkin, who is associated with the earth and knowledge.

Secondly, Atlas appears, while he watches the approach of the Empire and the Death Wizards who will raid over Lar in search of the legendary sword. The song's introduction of the character is marked by a modulation to a brighter, more vigorous guitar riff that establishes both the character's thematic motif and the chorus's musical foundation. This energized passage then lyrically articulates the protagonist's central conflicts: "Save the knowledge and the knight/ Pray that we'll be sanctified/ Hope's enough to bear the sky/ So make of me an Atlas, I/ Hold upon this bitter lie/ That sacrifice is justified/ Oh, better yet to do than die/ So bear the sky these calloused hands of mine".

Despite the heroic tone and chorus, the song is mostly about Atlas's despair, doubts, and frustration. He wants to use Saberlight to fight against the enemies, while Sahn refuses this plan; instead, she wants him to run rather than fight – the elder knows this is a battle they cannot win and would rather preserve one life than witness another needless sacrifice. To

introduce such motifs, the song enters into a very short guitar solo that ends abruptly with the question "How can I go on?". Following that, a longer guitar solo emerges, suggesting Atlas's despair facing the upcoming destruction of Lar. Much like film scores use leitmotifs to represent characters off-screen, these solos acquire narrative meaning through the novel's contextualization. This symbiotic relationship transforms the text into a hermeneutic paratext for decoding the album's musical material.

The next track, "Glory Days", is quite successful in its embrace of musical and lyrical storytelling. By adopting the compound AABA structure, it narrates how Sahn liberates the people of Lar from their oath of protecting the sword. However, instead of running, they stay and fight against the Empire. To convey this feeling of epic and melancholic self-sacrifice, this song gladly applies many conventional structures of power metal songs: orchestral introduction, galloping rhythm, chorus accompanied by a choir-like chant, and, above all, the use of the Mixolydian mode, emphasizing the V–IV–I turnaround. Although the end of "Glory Days" builds a sense of epicness – a common trait of the genre that emerges from, for example, large instrumentation, wide dynamic range, long forms or movements, sustained arpeggios, and progressions of power chords (Saguar García, 2021, 37-40) –, the outcome is tragic: the people of Lar and Sahn are killed by the Death Wizards.

Atlas tried to avoid that by taking the test of the Saberlight; this episode is addressed by the fourth track, "Oak and Ash". In the novel, this moment is almost unimpactful due to the hasty writing. In the album, however, this song plays a central role, tackling the main question of narrative: how can one be worthy amidst despair? The whole character arc of Atlas revolves around this doubt, and the chorus states it clearly: "Please help my heart release/ All of this anxiety/ Someone tell me, am I worthy?". To convey this theme, "Oak and Ash" opens with a fast and long guitar riff in a minor key that sets a tone of urgency, raising the tension of the music that finds resolution only in the chorus.

Following the plot, Atlas fails the test and, after witnessing the death of all the inhabitants of Lar, he runs to the mountains. This leads to the fifth track, "Hearts Upon The Hill", which follows the train of thought that Atlas has while he flees into the wilderness. The intro of this song – a chord progression of Dm–Bb–C–F played in 4/4 tempo – suggests the presence of the D Aeolian (natural minor), one of the most used modal structures in metal music. The qualities of this mode evoke melancholic and heroic auras – evidently, these connotations are not intrinsic to the musical material but are always relational, being historically and culturally constructed (Walser, 2014 [1993], 47). In this song, it is also conveyed by the vocal performance and the content of the lyrics.

Here, a melancholic mood makes sense within the narrative of the album, which is musically sustained by the lack of a leading tone. Hence, the song avoids strong resolution tension, making the mood more tragic or introspective than dramatic. In this sense, the listener is invited into the psyche of Atlas, who sees his own survival as bittersweet. Therefore, just as the mythological Atlas was condemned to hold the celestial spheres, this character must bear the burden of living with the memory of the self-sacrifice of his people. Yet, the whole epic tone of the song and the chorus also suggests a glimpse of hope – "So comes the day we forge another storm/ And triumph in the end of things". The slow and atmospheric guitar solo also evokes such contradictory feelings between melancholy and hope.

Nonetheless, "Hearts Upon The Hill" finds its resolution (musically, lyrically and narratively) in the sixth track, "Scars And Shrapnel Wounds". This is the last song I analyze in depth because, from now on, the album starts to repeat its musical structures in a mirrored fashion. More than that, this track is a moment of inflection in the narrative, leaving the tragic events behind and embracing a more wholesome feeling. Such a change

in the mood is clear even in the harmony of the song, which modulates from G major (that creates chromatic tension) to G Mixolydian, having the G major as a pedal chord that marks the transitions from moments of tension towards comfortable resolutions.

The plot tells how Atlas finally leaves the mountains and falls into a battle between the rebels and the Death Wizards. Instead of running and crying for those whom he has lost, Atlas decides to accompany the resistance: "Cause there's always things that scream at me from the darkness/ And there's always, yet more wars left to fight." In the same spirit of these verses, the chorus reiterates the idea of acknowledging the pain while moving on with life: "All the scars and shrapnel wounds/ Well they ache with every movement/ And the battles fought for love are getting harder every day". This resolution is also the theme of the seventh track, "The Hours Of Wintertime", when Atlas realizes that he must act regardless of fear or uncertainty.

The eighth track, "Glint", undermines what was expected to be a tale of vengeance. It describes when Atlas is accepted by the Saberlight, leading him to realize that "I've always been worthy/ I know that you know me". He also discovers its true power: it is a sword of healing, not destruction. At this moment, the answer to the question of one's worth amidst despair depends on how one reacts to life. It is merely an individual choice of self-making. This point comes back at the ninth and tenth tracks, "The Saint Beyond The River" and "Silhouette", which narrate how Atlas builds alliances not with power, but through example and conviction, while his healing becomes as legendary as any weapon.

In a very fast piece of music, marked by the constant use of the drums' double-bass, "Still Enough", the eleventh track, narrates the self-realization of Atlas, resulting in self-trust and respect: "I stand within the morning lights/ With my hope and heart on either side/ I'll take a lion's share of pride/ And trust that I've got strength inside". In the novel, this passage is not narrated from his perspective, but it is rendered in an epistolary format. The album, however, by singing from Atlas's perspective, maintains the role of the bards as storytellers of a tale that finds its closure in the last track, "Avalon".

Both the chapter and the song are quite significant because they present, to use Jameson's concept (2005, 4), a Utopian investment. Avalon is a name that Atlas saw in the Saberlight's shrine. However, throughout his journey, he realized that it is not a place, but an idea: a future worth striving toward. The island of Avalon is where Arthur recovers after being wounded; it is constantly evoked throughout British history to refer to a healing utopia (Blanc, 2020, 8). *Saberlight Chronicles* embraces this idea from the Arthurian cycle to suggest how music heals and might offer "us the symbols of [a] potential society which lies still beyond our grasp" (Small, 1980, 118). For this reason, "Avalon" is a long song (9:08 minutes), spawning long melodies and instrumental sections. While it sometimes points towards community ("I'll make my empathy my pride"), this Utopian investment is embedded in heroic individualism and neoliberal subjectivity ("I will forge my own candescent life/ I'll be my father and my guide"). Herein lies the dialectic between freedom and control, reification and utopia, that revolves around the articulation between metal and fantasy.

Conclusion: Reification and Utopia, Freedom and Control

If Jameson is right, fantasy is "a celebration of human creative power and freedom which becomes idealistic only by virtue of the omission of precisely those material and historical constraints" (2002, 278). This means that, as a fictional mode, it expresses a Utopian longing for a world in which it is possible to imagine what is beyond the constraints of capitalist modernity. Nonetheless, fantasy operates as ideological reification, mystifying

capitalism's own magical thinking (as seen in commodity fetishism), while simultaneously articulating Utopian impulses that imagine alternative worlds. Thus, it exists in perpetual contradiction: reproducing yet yearning to transcend the logic of capital – in other words, fantasy is entangled within reification and utopia.

This view demands a broader Marxist cultural analysis – one that retains its critical task of exposing how artifacts reinforce power and ideology but also recognizes their utopian potential as expressions of collective unity. These functions form a dialectical totality, and they should not be regarded as competing forces (Jameson, 2002 [1981], 282). Moreover, *Saberlight Chronicles* is not only a fantasy narrative but also a metal music album. In this regard, there is a concomitant dialectic that is happening in the musical material that equally articulates within the historical conjuncture, one between freedom and control.

Metal's innovation in the 1980s – from NWOBHM to its transatlantic evolution – lies precisely in what Robert Walser identifies as its core dialectic: the tension between freedom and control. This manifests musically through the guitar's improvisational flights (with their liberating solos and fills) locked in dynamic struggle with the rhythm section's imposing structure (the bass's physicality and drums' metronomic violence). Crucially, this is not a mere opposition. As Walser (2014 [1993], 54) notes, the solo's transcendent virtuosity allows listeners to identify with power without feeling subjugated by it – a musical allegory that reassures survival amid capitalist modernity. The genre thus encodes in the musical material both the threat of control and the euphoria of overcoming it.

The alternative world of *Saberlight Chronicles* indeed expresses a form of utopia in which an individual can overcome their personal tragedies and achieve freedom. Musically, this is suggested by the liberating presence of guitar solos in the B sections of the songs, disrupting the rhythmic and modal control. Additionally, it suggests that any person can build their own destiny as the result of a self-making process: building oneself as an enterprise.

What is curious is that the promise of unrestricted freedom for the individual is the unfulfilled promise of neoliberal capitalism, the very hegemonic order across Western societies since the 1980s – for a historical overview of this economic form, see Perry Anderson (2025). So, is Fellowship simply reproducing the dominant values and stating that we are already living in a utopia? I do not think it is such a linear process. Furthermore, the band required an alternative world to make this possible, in which the immateriality of music supports the moments of transcendence. The album basically states that it is impossible to become a fully realized individual within the control of capitalist modernity.

On the one hand, this album presents a reification process. It invites the subjects to imagine themselves as going through a neoliberal self-making endeavor toward a commodity subjectivity. Reification is the transformation of humanity into marketable items. As Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval (2016, 398) argue, neoliberalism intensifies this process by emphasizing individual responsibility, market-based solutions, and the pursuit of self-interest. This is ideologically linked to the idea of freedom, which in neoliberal societies is strictly connected to consumerism and work. Hence, neoliberalism forces individuals to treat their own subjectivity as a commodity: entrepreneurs of the self are constantly striving to increase their value and adapt to the market society.

In the album, Atlas's journey is a constant struggle for self-making individuality and unrestricted freedom. When he ceases to carry the burden of grief, which linked him to his community, and assumes a heroic and triumphant individualism, he becomes a legendary example to be followed. At the musical level, the album faithfully sticks to the power metal conventions to provide a growing sense of epicness supported by comfortable resolutions for the melodic tensions. It suggests, therefore, that the genre's musical structures – with

their predictable harmonic payoffs and climactic buildups – sonically naturalize this ideological transition from collective mourning to solitary heroism. The very conventions that create cathartic release for listeners simultaneously reinforce the neoliberal fantasy of self-made transcendence, masking the social costs of Atlas's abandonment of communal ties.

On the other hand, the Utopian impulse in the narrative paradoxically champions an individual freedom that transcends its source of oppression – the Empire, which allegorizes the State's castrating role under capitalism. Atlas only achieves true agency when he wields Saberlight not as a weapon of destruction but as a tool of healing, enabling him to reconcile his subjectivity with collective liberation. His victory over the Empire establishes Avalon, a utopian community that harmonizes individualism with empathy, suggesting that magic (as a metaphor for the human potentialities) enables political reorganization beyond exploitative systems. Musically, this vision is reinforced through power metal's signature elements: liberating guitar solos against rigid rhythmic structures, while extended melodic passages evoke contemplative release. Although conventional to the genre, these features narratively mirror the overthrow of oppressive control, musically enacting the album's central dialectic – individual freedom emerging from, yet ultimately transforming, collective struggle.

As I stated in the introduction, it is not my aim to foreclose the interpretations of this phenomenon. Instead, I want this text to be read as a challenge that might open new avenues and readings of the prolific articulations between metal music and fantasy. Therefore, I questioned the simplistic claims of escapism and superficiality that are bestowed over these genres to propose a dialectical reading, which oscillates between reification and utopia, freedom and control. Nonetheless, different facets deserve more attention than I could provide here – the blurring line between musical performance and fiction; the intersections of metal music and fantasy with other popular culture artifacts; a more sustained musical analysis of how the sense of heroic epicness is evoked, etc. However, I hope to have demonstrated how *Saberlight Chronicles* is representative of a paradox: power metal is a musical genre bound by reification and control that, nonetheless, in its finest moments, offers the silhouettes of alternative worlds, allowing us to imagine what lies beyond the grasp of the logic of capital.

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Reasonable Creatures? Politics of Imagination in Novels from the Library of Samuel von Brukenthal (1721-1803)

Alexandru-Ilie Munteanu[1]

Abstract

This paper is the result of the analysis of six fictional writings from the 17th and 18th centuries from the library of Samuel von Brukenthal (1721-1803), the governor of the Principality of Transylvania between 1777 and 1787. The research was conducted in order to search and extract aspects concerning the political imaginary of the time. These writings are fantasy and science-fiction novels and they comprise *Description de l'Isle des Hermaphrodites* by Thomas Artus, Andrew Michael Ramsay's *Voyages de Cyrus*, *L'Espion Turc à Francfort*, Ludvig Holberg's *Voyage de Nicolas Klimius dans le Monde Souterraine*, *Lettres d'une peruvienne* by Françoise de Graffigny and *L'An 2440* by Louis-Sébastien Mercier. The first literary duet, *Isle des Hermaphrodites* and *Voyages de Cyrus,* illustrates, among other things, the concept of anti-utopia, the need for social and political change that was increasingly appearing in the writings of the time, the ideas of kingship and enlightened despotism. The second literary pair, *L'Espion Turc* and *Voyage de Nicolas Klimius,* brings forward another political *desideratum* of fantasy writers of the time, namely the establishment of an internal and international equitable jurisprudence, but also the birth of a new, non-Eurocentric, perspective on the world. The third duet, *Lettres d'une peruvienne* and *L'An 2440,* emphasized what in the Modern Age would be radical political ideas, such as women's emancipation, but also exemplifies the idea of a perfect society, envisioned by the Enlightenment-Age author Louis-Sébastien Mercier far in the future, in 2440. The analysis of these novels reveals both some similarities between the writings, but also specificities and emphases on different political, social and cultural issues that the authors saw as problematic in real life.

Keywords: political imaginary, fantasy, science-fiction, utopia, Enlightenment

Introduction

The 17th and especially the 18th centuries witness a diversification of fiction literature, as part of the great class of Belles Lettres (De Bure, 1765). Science-fiction literature of the Modern Age, although a distinct literary sub-genre, was in some respects more similar to what the contemporary 21st century reader and critic would call fantasy. It also had much in common with travel literature. Whether we are talking about the Island of the Hermaphrodites in the eponymous novel by Thomas Artus, the Underworld imagined by

1 PhD, Library curator, Brukenthal National Museum, Sibiu, Romania. amunteanu.mnb@gmail.com, ORCID-ID : 0009-0004-9818-2216.

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Ludvig Holberg or the Turkish spy on a pilgrimage through Europe, fantasy literature from those times, like travelogues, often has at its heart one or multiple journeys, fictional and/or imaginary.

Just like travel literature, the fantasy and science-fiction, utopian and anti-utopian writings of the time encompassed a deeply educational, formative side. Even in the preface to an edition of the popular novel *The Turkish Spy*, the editor asked himself rhetorically: "What does it matter whether it is fiction or fact? As long as common sense prevails in the literary work in question, what more is necessary to make it praise-worthy." (*L'Espion I,* 1715, [1]-[2]).

The phrase "reasonable creatures" (read also *rational*)2 appears in 18th-century literature, in *Niels Klim Travels in the Underworld*. It was used by a fantastic population, the Potuans of Keba, to describe the species of an unusual visitor:

> "By virtue of the orders we have received from your Serenity, we send back to you the Animal called Man, who came here some time ago from the other world; we have trained him with great care in our College. Having examined with all possible attention the range of his genius, and spied his morals, we have found him docile enough, and of a very promising conception, but of such doubtful judgment, that, considering the rashness of his mind, we scarcely dare to number him among reasonable Creatures [...]" (Holberg, 1753, 50).

Who were these Potuans? They were the talking trees who formed a civilized society named Potu, on the planet Nazar in the Underworld, invented by the maverick Danish nobleman Ludvig von Holberg (1684-1754) in his novel *Nicolas Klimius' Journey to the Underworld*. They were a people characterized by: "such gravity and restraint, that you would take them all for senators rather than citizens." (Holberg, 1753, 37). Already, we can see how, in the eyes of authors such as Holberg, reasonableness and rationality were not so specific to human species. In the words of one of his contemporaries, Bernard de Fontenelle: "How dreadfully slow do men arrive at something reasonable, however simple that something may be!" (Hazard, 2007, 58). The same word, reasonable/rational, but with a slightly different meaning than Holberg used it, appears in the preface to the *Lettres d'une peruvienne* (*The Letters of a Peruvian woman*) by the French writer Françoise de Graffigny (1695-1758) when she describes the Incas making the leap from barbarism to "reasonable people", thanks to the laws and the knowledge of agriculture they received from two envoys of the Sun God (Graffigny I, 1759, 14-15).

Reason, reasonableness, civility, prudence were individual qualities regarded with great admiration in Modern Europe. They often appeared in the literature of the time as the pillars of a European social, political and cultural architecture that was emerging in the 17th and 18th centuries. Holberg, like Graffigny and others, seem to have stood somewhere between admiration for humanity's potential and the flaws, the abuses that held people back, hardly putting them among the reasonable creatures.

Parallel to the so-called *revolution of the saints* that Michael Walzer wrote about (Walzer, 2013, 5, 11-13), a scientific revolution took place in the Modern Age. In contrast to the one described by Walzer, the latter one was less associated with a change in morals. This happened in spite of the fact that the geographical and scientific discoveries played a major

2 In the French *Encyclopédie*, *reasonable/rational* (*raisonnable*, adj.) is defined as follows: "It is said of persons and things. A rational man, in whom his conduct is in accordance with reason; a rational action, whose motive is in accordance with reason. This word has a slightly different meaning, when applied to a woman; a rational woman is one who is not at all carried away by the strong spirit of gallantry. Rational is sometimes synonymous with just; and hence reason in conduct, or philosophy, or justice, is the same. [...] Reasonable is sometimes understood as modest." (*Encyclopédie* XIII, 1765, 776).

role in the emergence and sharpening of the crisis of conscience among the European thinkers (Hazard, 2007, 317-331). Wiser leaders, better laws, (self-)criticism and (self-)irony referring to the way in which European societies were organized, and even the emancipation of women were some of the main elements that a part of the Republic of Letters began to convey more and more often in the literary creations during the 17th and 18th centuries.

Both "revolutions" or paradigm shifts developed rather gradually (Kuhn, 2012, xi, xviii-xxii, xxvii), than in a revolutionary way. This shift took place in the period which began roughly with the publication of three works programmatic for Western European political culture, education and civility: Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Institutio principis christiani* (1516) and *De civilitate morum puerilum* (1530), and Thomas More's *Utopia* (1516). It ended with the political revolutions in England (1688), North America (1776) and France (1789), events that can be seen as attempts to apply some political ideas of many of the values and worldviews accumulated over the centuries.

The first revolution, the revolution of the saints, was promoted by the new religious trends such as Protestantism, from its incipient branches to Puritanism, Pietism, etc., and had to be started from childhood, in the intimacy of every Christian family. Besides the parents, the parishes (Jacob, 2007, 236, 240), or the tutors, depending on financial possibilities, often taught their children to observe the catechism and the Bible in holiness, to be moderate, prudent and civil in their interactions with others. In the more radical environments, spouses encouraged each other to consider renouncing the "outside"/secular world, dedicating themselves body and soul to Jesus and God, and living a life in full accord with Christian morality (*The Christian Education of Children,* 1678). Christian religion and morality were thus at the heart of the revolution of the saints that some Protestant cults attempted to accomplish in Western Europe.

On the other hand, the so-called Scientific Revolution and, additionally, the philosophical revolution, manifested in particular through deism, natural religion and the more ancient natural law, which entered the scene of European thought at that time to some extent as outsiders, especially in terms of morality. Over time, however, through natural religion, sciences such as natural history and astronomy started to acquire moralizing, "corrective" and character-forming values. How else can we explain the fact that in his chapter on the theology of the Potuans, Klim compares their theology and religion with natural religion? One explanation could be that the author of *Klimius's Journey*, Ludwig Holberg, was himself a follower of the natural religion and tried to promote or, at least, to bring this concept to the attention of the readers.

In the context of what Hazard called *universal critique* (Hazard, 2007, 10-19), the Enlightenment, even if it did not remove religious thought from society (nor did it set out to do so except perhaps in its most radical forms) nevertheless put an end to the hegemony of religion over philosophy. Through this gradual de-theologization of thought (Funkenstein, 1998, 11, 304), the Enlightenment, especially through Voltaire and Rousseau, sought to promote and train "the earthly saints" by means of secular and just jurisprudence. The aim was to form *the citizen*, a reasonable, rational individual, tributary to the laws of nature, the only ones which – since Thomas Morus – could be reliable, objective, untainted by the almost intrinsic sin of human intervention and invention (Morus, 1958, 141; McManus, 2005, 41-42; Hazard, 2007, 283-285).

In this paper I offer a brief analysis of six fictional, fantasy and science-fiction writings from the 17th and 18th centuries that Samuel von Brukenthal (1721-1803), the former

governor of the Principality of Transylvania, had in his library. My scientific attempt is to extract some aspects of the political imaginary of the time in the novels: *Description de l'Isle des Hermaphrodites* (*Description of the Island of the Hermaphrodites*) by Thomas Artus, which is mirrored with Andrew Michael Ramsay's *Voyages of Cyrus*; *L´Espion Turc à Francfort* (*The Turkish Spy in Frankfurt*) analyzed together with Ludvig Holberg's *Voyage de Nicolas Klimius dans le Monde Souterraine* (*Voyage of Nicolas Klimius in the Underworld*), and Françoise de Graffigny's *Lettres d'une peruvienne* (*Letters of a Peruvian woman*) contrasted with Louis-Sébastien Mercier's *L´an 2440* (*The Year 2440*).

Without denying the religious valences of many (pre-)Enlightenment thinkers and the eschatological character of fiction, these writings on the borderline between fantasy, science fiction and reality had a very realistic and immediate goal: earthly happiness through major political, social and cultural changes. The Utopians, Cyrus, the societies of the Underworld, the Peruvian maiden abducted and brought to 18th century´s France, and the city of Paris in the year 2440, found followers and sympathizers among Europeans, as suggested by the presence of these works and many others in the bookstores and libraries of the time, from Denmark to Transylvania (*Catalogue general de livres françois de Rodolphe Græffer,* 1768, 82; *Bibliotheca selecta* […]*,* 1774, 93; *Catalogus librorum* […]*,* 1774, 41; *Catalogus Bibliothecae Wittwerianae* III, 1794, 246).

All the Pleasures One Can Imagine. A Major Issue?

The image of the princely, royal or imperial courts of Early Modern Europe, or of societies as a whole being hedonistic and lazy, is not something that comes easily to mind as being specific to that period. However, criticisms of the aristocracy's leaning towards a life of pleasure, laziness and irresponsibility towards social problems did appear from time to time in literature and they only multiplied in the context of universal criticism.

Even long before the 18th century, Thomas More wrote of the idleness of the nobility, that they would gladly rather feed the lazy than the sick, of widespread waste, of dishonest games, of filthy inns and so on (Morus, 1958, 53-54, 57). As far as the 18th century was concerned, the cases of literary and other types of discontent seemed to be widespread, and political elites, royalty, etc. were among the culprits (Mercier II, 1782, 50-52; Mercier V, 1783, 297-298). Louis Sébastien Mercier, for example, published his famous *Tableau de Paris* (*Panorama of Paris*) in Neuchâtel (1781) and then in Amsterdam, because it had been banned in France. A glance at some of the passages in this work shows why: his criticism of the French aristocracy in particular, and of certain habits promoted by it and followed by other socio-professional categories, such as luxury, pomp, superficiality, etc., reappears regularly in his writings (Mercier I, 1782, iii, 49-50, 111; Mercier IV, 1782, 87-88).

If More and Mercier criticized in a general way the excesses to which many Europeans and the French, especially from the upper social strata, indulged, Thomas Artus, a late 16th-century writer (like Mercier) – at first anonymously – projected his irony and criticism onto a specific case, the court of King Henry III (1551-1589), the last king of the House of Valois. Although other individuals at the time paid with their lives for illegally publishing books against royal authority (Rushworth II, 1680, 222-223, 232-233), Thomas Artus, the author of *Description de l'Isle des Hermaphrodites,* was not punished for the ironies and blasphemies he had included in his fictional writing; this despite the fact that king Henry IV, the successor of the man to whom the novel was addressed, knew of the existence of this writing (Artus, 1724, f. 5r-v). The fact that the *Description de l'Isle des Hermaphrodites* did not appear in the time of Henry III, and because Henry IV was also of a different family,

Bourbon, and at one time of a different confession from Henry III, probably saved the author's life. In any case, in 1605, when this satire on King Henry III of France the likes of which had never been seen before was published, Europe was constantly beset by major political dissensions, massacres and religious wars. No wonder writers sometimes escaped from the turbulent world into fiction and fantasy, ridiculing some crowned heads while dreaming of monarchies and institutions capable of wise government (Jalobeanu ed., 2011, 65 et seq.).

Although a radical example of an "ingenious satire", as P. Bayle described it (Artus, 1724, f. 5r), and, at the same time, of the excesses of some royal courts, the *Description de l'Isle des Hermaphrodites* is a landmark in European literature, which illustrates how far political attacks, satire, criticism and, last but not least, anti-utopia as a literary genre could go back then. If Thomas More's *Utopia*, as the subtitle of the book suggests, offered early 16th-century Europeans a description of what the best state organization might look like (*de optimo reipublicae statu*), an anti-utopia was the expression of a society in complete antithesis to the one mentioned above, with acknowledgment and support from the population. From this point of view, Artus's book would have been a complete shock to the reader with its totally opposite worldview on a variety of values and behaviors that were socially accepted at the time: sexual orientation, honesty, prudence, moderation, laws, etc. In other words, morality, which was supposed to be a cornerstone of politics, was turned upside down.

In the novel, the ocean voyage to the Island of Hermaphrodites begins around the time of the peace between France and Spain (probably 1598). After a powerful storm brings them to a bizarre island floating on water, the main character and a friend arrive at a palace where they are greeted by a king dressed in a white shirt, powdering his face in the morning. From the outset of the novel, the tapestries depicting Hadrian and Antonius offer images of homosexuality, a form of sexuality which disregarded Christian morality (Artus, 1724, 21). The motif of homosexuality and hedonism, exemplified here by the love affair between the Roman emperor Hadrian and Antonius, reappears periodically in the novel. These were in fact the main criticisms and rumors circulating in the real world about Henry III and his mignons (*favorites*, lovers), as well as his bisexual love affairs.

Besides these, another aspect that would have bewildered a 17th-18th century reader, both in theme and the minuteness in which it was described, would be the legislation on the Island of the Hermaphrodites. If in the *Utopia* of More or in *The Travels of Cyrus*, a wise and moral ruler was the supreme pride of a society, and the laws were the *sine qua non* vehicles of good coexistence, in the world of the Hermaphrodites, jurisprudence nurtured the opposite: immoral, obscene, sometimes even criminal behavior, legislated by the Senate (Artus, 1724, 31-32).

The radicalism of Artus' writing did not hold back even when referring to divinity and religion. In what is oxymoronically called in the book *The Articles of Belief of the Hermaphrodites*, the reader was once again confronted with a mentality opposed to what he knew of the real world. More specifically, they reveal precisely what was perhaps the least acceptable at the time, apart from sexuality not in conformity with the Christian religion: atheism, unbelief (Artus, 1724, 39-40); even later, around the year 1700, in Britain, which was in many respects viewed with admiration for its modernity, there were several publications which condemned atheism (Ellenzweig, 2008, 3, 21-22, 126, 130-131).

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First published in 1727, *Les Voyages de Cyrus* by Andrew Michael Ramsay (1686-1743) enjoyed publishing success in France and throughout Europe.3 The author of the novel was a Scottish intellectual, born to an Anglican mother and a Calvinist father, who later converted to Deism and then, under the influence of François Fénelon, Bishop of Cambrai, to Catholicism. Ramsay studied theology at the universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh and was a member of several societies and orders, including the Order of St. Lazarus and the London Freemasonry from 1730. If we only consider these biographical aspects, Andrew M. Ramsay can be seen as a personification of the multiple schools of thought that were contending for the minds of Europeans at that time.

As an idealist, Ramsay was preoccupied with the idea of education and especially with the idea of establishing a wise government that would bring and preserve happiness on earth. If on Hermaphrodite Island we had in many ways the reign of lawlessness and immorality, and in Morus' *Utopia* a powerful senate and a populace deeply involved in government, in *The Travels of Cyrus*, Ramsay proposed to the readers another variant of enlightened, moral government: the wise despot, knowledgeable about the people he ruled. To illustrate this ideal, inspired by the ancient Xenophon, the Scottish writer chose Cyrus, the emperor of ancient Persia.

Samuel von Brukenthal had in his library three editions of this writing: Edinburgh 1727, Amsterdam 1728 and London 1730 (*BBK* III, f. 66r). From the preface of the London edition, printed in French, one can already find out the novel's aim, which was to educate (Ramsay, 1730, vii). The novel is divided into eight books, recounting the imaginary and initiatory journeys undertaken by – at the time – the young Persian prince Cyrus, son of King Cambyses and Queen Mandana. He begins by traveling to Persia and Lydia, where he met Zoroaster and Cressus and learned, among other things, about the dangers of luxury. Then, at his father's request, he departed for Egypt, "the mother of science", then for Greece and Crete to study the laws of Solon and Minos. Thence to Babylon, to "bring back to your own country all the knowledge necessary to polish the minds of your subjects and to enable you to fulfil your high destiny", as his father told him (Ramsay, 1730, 82).

Arriving in Egypt (Book III), Cyrus and his friend Araspe are met by Amenophis, a member of an ancient Egyptian family who had assisted the Pharaoh in his wars against the Sidonians and Cypriots. Travelling throughout the country, Cyrus discovers the antiquity of Egyptian civilization, its numerous, large and well-populated cities, its magnificent temples and palaces (Ramsay, 1730, 106). In Memphis and Theba, he learns about the history and laws of the Egyptian people and attends a religious ceremony in a temple dedicated to the goddess Isis, "a privilege that had never before been granted to any foreigner except after the most severe trials" (Ramsay, 1730, 112-118, 131). From Egypt, Cyrus travelled on to Greece, where he discovered the military genius of the Spartans and their revulsion against the excesses, such as greed, ambition and love. He saw how the Greeks were educated at an early age in the gymnasiums, and witnessed the Corinthian mourners at the death of the son of Periander, the King of Corinth, whose cremation brought tears to his eyes (Ramsay, 1730, 140-166). The visit to Greece culminated with the meeting between the young Persian and the famous lawgiver of Athens, Solon (d. 560 BCE). It is a defining episode in the formation of Cyrus and, probably, one of the main messages Ramsay was trying to convey to his readers through this literary creation: enlightened despotism, with the involvement of a senate, but without

3 https://blog.nls.uk/curators-favourites-the-travels-of-cyrus/ (Accessed: 6. September 2024)

too much populace interference in the affairs of the country, is the right political system to follow (Ramsay, 1730, 181).

Religion, spirituality, wisdom and the nature of divinity are other recurring themes in this novel. Here, Ramsay concludes in the third person, as a narrator detached from the main character, but not from his own opinion, that the foremost of the world's wisdoms, above the civilizational conquests of Egypt, above the laws and philosophy of the Greeks, better than any wisdom and philosophy about divinity, is the Jewish wisdom and, by extension, the Christian wisdom. This is the reason why the author calls the prophet Daniel a consummate Christian:

> "The Prince of Persia, shaken by the force of Daniel's speech, swayed within himself; he felt that all the lights of Zoroaster, of Hermes, of Orpheus, of Pythagoras were only imperfect traces. [...] He had found in Persia, in Egypt, in Greece and among other peoples, only obscure, uncertain and vague opinions; he found among the Jews Books, Prophets, Wonder whose authority could not be questioned." (Ramsay, 1730, 342)

Whereas in the Island of the Hermaphrodites, atheism was the letter of the law, preferred to any religious cults, *The Travels of Cyrus* can also be seen as a defense of the belief in divinity, of Christianity and, implicitly, as a refutation of *the various atheisms*, as some religions and philosophies, such as pantheism and deism, were called. As early as the preface, the reader could encounter signs of this refutation. In addition to learning about the specificities of the peoples among whom he had lived during his travels, Cyrus, after the encounter with the prophet Daniel, was finally able to calm his conscience, confused by the mixed truths and errors he had learnt from Zoroaster, Pythagoras and others (Ramsay, 1730, xi).

Apart from the fact that Daniel pointed out to Cyrus that the latter is mentioned by name in the Book of Isaiah, which proved the soundness of their prophets, Cyrus found in the "Religion of the Jews", as Ramsay calls it, the resolution to his own inner restlessness caused by his inability to grasp the nature of divinity. In the passage, the connection between this resolution and civil life is also noteworthy:

> "I do not understand how men can balance these two systems: one is dark to the mind, disturbing to the heart, destructive to society, the other is full of consoling ideas, produces noble feelings, strengthens us in all the duties of civil life. One of the two systems must be true: the Eternal Being is a blind nature, or an enlightened Intelligence: there is no middle; you have proved the first opinion false and absurd; it follows evidently that the other is true and sound. (...) The Prince found the solution of this difficulty only among the Jews;" (Ramsay, 1730, 245-246).

The Grand Mufti of Rome. A New Perspective

Paul Hazard wrote that the 17th century ended in disrespect and the 18th century began in irony (Hazard, 2007, 10). An example that supports the French historian's claim is one of the popular novels of the early Enlightenment, *The Turkish Spy* (*L'Espion* I, 1715, [4]. By reading it, the 18th-century European familiarized oneself with irony and self-irony, with criticism and self-criticism, but above all, with a new, non-Eurocentric, perspective on the world.

Samuel von Brukenthal had in his library two editions of this literary work, different in content, however (*BBK* I, f. 216r). The first is *L'Espion dans les Cours des Princes Chretiens* (Cologne, 1715), which centers on a spy sent to gather information from European courts, especially the French one at the end of the 17th century (*L'Espion* I, 1715, [2]). The other

edition, *L'Espion Turc a Francfort pendant la Diète & le Couronnement de l'Empereur, en 1741,* was printed in London in 1742. As the title suggests, the book describes the travels and observations of a Turkish spy in Europe, this time on the eve of the election of Charles VII, the Prince Elector of Bavaria, as the Holy Roman Emperor. The latter is also the edition we will focus on.

A work full of curiosities of all kinds, with adventures and anecdotes told in the plausible, commonplace context of everyday life, *The Turkish Spy* was bound to attract the attention of a large audience. Ironic imagery and criticism of Europeans are to be found throughout the book. The Spy calls the Pope and the Christian clergy *mufti*, and the major European kings *sultans*: the Sultan of France, the Sultan of Prussia and so on (*L'Espion,* 1742, 5, 19, 22-23, 32-34, 38, 43, 159). He describes the "Christian sects" in Europe, where he includes all the major religious denominations. In this light, *The Turkish Spy* was a good exercise in imagination for the 18th century European reader as it broke out with one's own cultural realities and comforts. At the same time, it provided incentive for self-criticism.

Given the success of this writing, it seems that Western Europeans had not only learned self-criticism and self-irony by then but even embraced them. If, for example, all the inhabitants of Nazar, the fantastic planet in Klimius' travels, spoke the same dialect and there were kingdoms where, despite the variety of religious cults, lived together so well that it surprised Klim (Holberg, 1753, 208), in the real Europe of the 18th century, things were somewhat different. In the midst of negotiations to elect a new emperor of the Holy Roman Empire – which Klim portrayed as neither holy, nor an empire (Holberg, 1753, 310-311) –, the Turkish spy roamed around the settlements of Central and Western Europe, stopping in various places and leaving to posterity his observations as a non-European and non-Christian traveler on the morals and manners of his hosts. Throughout his journey, we see the Turkish spy giving descriptions of the national characters of the main nations participating in, or interested in, the election of the new emperor in Frankfurt. Whereas the Spaniards are presented as proud and passionate individuals, Germans are portrayed as good people, but cold, unpretentious, simple, sincere. On the other hand, he is most laudatory when talking about the French because they were lovers of delicacy, manners, etc. (*L'Espion,* 1742, 47, 55, 84-85).

The Spy devotes a significant part of his epistles to questions concerning the religion of Europeans, Christian sects, as he calls Catholicism, Lutheranism, Calvinism, etc. Their prophets, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin and the new religious movements, such as Quakerism and Pietism, also caught his interest. He even sketches a laudatory portrait of the Quakers, with a slight reservation caused by nothing other than what he called the laws of nature (*L'Espion,* 1742, 33, 165).

In terms of sketching the individuals – crowned heads and ambassadors – but also national and confessional portraits, the Turkish spy provides the reader with a picture of the interests of different European states in the larger context of the power struggles of the mid-18th century. He writes in his epistles about the Pragmatic Sanction by which the Habsburg Emperor Charles VI legislated the succession and how, despite the Sanction, the great powers of Europe pulled strings, each in its own interests, to elect a favorable emperor. Moreover, the novel's conclusion is satirizing the pomp, pageantry and the power games of the aristocracy participating in the election of the emperor. After devoting a significant part to describe the robes and the processions of the electors, particularly that of the Elector of Mainz surpassing all others, the Turkish spy concludes his entire account by writing that: "in less than eight minutes they had almost unanimously elected the Elector of Bavaria as Emperor of the Romans" (*L'Espion,* 1742, 198).

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Niels Klim's Journey to the Underworld (1741) by Ludvig Holberg is equally among the books that heralded some major changes in European attitudes and the world outlooks, focusing on the changes that took place in Western Europe, in one form or another, more than a century after Holberg, and like few other civilizations on the globe underwent. However unlikely it may seem at first sight that future changes in mentality with very real political, social and cultural implications could be found in a fictional, science fiction work written in the north of the European continent in the first half of the 18th century, this writing has such things: the desacralization of royalty, the equality of men and women, the taming and humanization of the judicial and punitive system, the rise of meritocracy and so on (Wooldridge, 2022, 117-119, 128-130, 137, 140, 148, 168 etc.). Last but not least, like the Turkish spy, Holberg writes in Klimius' adventures about self-criticism, both personal and collective.

The author of the work, Ludvig Holberg, was born in the winter of 1684 in Bergen, Norway, to a soldier father and a mother from an old Norwegian-Danish clergy family. Orphaned at an early age, Holberg left his hometown in 1702 and went to Copenhagen where he studied theology. Between 1709 and 1716, he made several stipendiary study trips to England, the Netherlands, France and Italy. A self-made nonconformist professor or "the great loner" as he is also known, Holberg completed several literary projects in the 1720s and 1730s, among them, the *History of Denmark* in three volumes, published in 1732-1735 (Haakonssen, Olden-Jørgensen, 2017, 3-9). In 1741, in addition to his theatrical plays and scientific works generally in the field of history, Ludvig Holberg published a satirical science fiction travel novel in Latin, which was quickly translated into German, Danish and other European languages, *Niels Klim's Travels in the Underworld*. Although it contains no descriptions of futuristic science or technology, Holberg's depiction of the Hollow Earth makes this particular novel as one of the few more science fiction-orientated ones. Samuel von Brukenthal had an edition of this literary work in his library, in French, published in Copenhagen and Leipzig in 1753 (*BBK* II, f. 43r).

The novel begins with a group of students, including Niels (Nicolas) Klim, traveling from Copenhagen to Bergen. Once there, he and his friends decide to inspect the area's main curiosity: a cave on Flöien mountain. Entering the cave, Klim finds himself descending into a fantastic underground world on a griffon vulture. Klim's first stop on the planet Nazar – at the center of the Earth – is the city of Keba, in the kingdom of the Potuans, where he is soon confronted with his own impulsiveness. He himself had to admit at one point that once he had learned the language of the inhabitants, he no longer judged them as harshly as he had done before (Holberg, 1753, 33). Incidentally, the Potuans, the talking trees mentioned at the beginning of this article and described by Klim as senators, after cohabiting with the visitor from heaven, concluded that they could hardly classify the latter as a reasonable, rational creature because of the haste and impulsiveness of his judgment. Moreover, Klim observes the same typical restraint in the Potuans – quite the opposite of the *charivari* in Europe – even in the presence of strangers (Holberg, 1753, 37).

The spirit of universal critique which animated many European thinkers of the time made them question everything, including royalty and the mentality that placed crowned heads on the divine level. Klim illustrates this very well. At one point, he arrives in the Potuan capital, Potu, at the princely court, where he witnesses an event that marks him, like many others in the novel: his kneeling before the Potuan king, which the latter rejects (Holberg, 1753, 62-63). The divine nature of kingship, present in the minds of Europeans for centuries, was being challenged by Holberg. Only the Supreme Being – which was

gradually replacing the classical Christian God – was deserving of such gestures. The fact that Holberg characterizes the Potuans as being "to the other peoples of Nazar as the Europeans are to the nations of our world, that is, they surpass all in prudence and wisdom" (Holberg, 1753, 80), becomes a quite evident suggestion to the European reader on how to relate to royalty, divinity and meritocracy, to the general social-political construct of Europe of the time (Holberg, 1753, 87).

As for the religion of the Potuans, I already pointed out that, from the very words of their king, they believed in a Supreme Being. Klim noted that their religion had a dogma, but it was relatively simple – they had no faculty of theology (Holberg, 1753, 124) – with few articles of faith and akin to that idea of divinity which was making a career in that age, natural religion (Nisbet, 1969, 130-140). To paraphrase from the novel, the religion of the Potuans "will seem to some to be a pure natural religion" (Holberg, 1753, 97-98). Moreover, Holberg's language recalls the subtitle of William Derham's popular work of scientific theology *Astro-theology, or a Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God, from a Survey of the Heavens* (1714). Reflecting on their religion, Klim went on to note that it had a mystical side, that the Potuans recognized the concept of revelation, and that their dogmas were to be found in a book sent from heaven centuries ago (Holberg, 1753, 93-94).

If in *The Turkish Spy*, the international law was bypassed by interested parties, in many societies in the Underworld, a sense of responsibility for a respected, efficient and fair system of customs and judiciary for an enlightened governance had to slowly take root in each individual. Through this empowerment of the population and by cultivating respect for the law, the judicial process was moving away from a fatality often dictated by divine will or great political figures. The laws of the Potuans were made in such a way as to lead to equity among citizens, and meritocracy dictated public policy (Holberg, 1753, 106). On the other hand, not surprisingly judging by Holberg's depiction of human versus underworld inhabitant, an exception to this type of jurisprudence was to be found among the Quamite population, the only one that was human. Spending time among them, Klim personally had to persuade the Quamite emperor not to kill the Tanakite prisoners caught in the war, because he detested the practice (Holberg, 1753, 301, 303).

I Am Seven Hundred Years Old. Other Ideas for Future Societies?

Once the source of individual and collective anxieties (Avramescu, 2009, 9), in the eyes of some Enlightenment intellectuals, nature and the savage man became either a deity worthy of adoration (the Supreme Being) or the subject of fascination, admiration and, last but not least, reflection on their own past mistakes. In her novel *Lettres d'une peruvienne*, Françoise de Graffigny (1695-1758) brought "the good savage" to the European public.

First published anonymously in 1747, Graffigny's *Letters of a Peruvian Woman* enjoyed great success with readers, as evidenced by the reviews of the time and by the many editions that appeared in the years that followed. In Raynal's words, *Lettres d'une Péruvienne* is: "an ingenious novel, full of grace, delicacy and taste" (Kulesa, 1997, 11). The work also reached the eastern periphery of Catholic and Protestant Europe, in the library of Samuel von Brukenthal, who had a bilingual edition of the work, in French and Italian, published in Paris in 1759 (*BBK* I, f. 270r).

A novel full of grace, delicacy and taste, but beginning with a harsh episode, for which some European societies were taking upon themselves a *nostra culpa* in the 18th century (Raynal III, 1780, 1). The episode refers to the invasion and the destruction of an Inca

temple by the Spaniards and the kidnapping of the virgins worshipping the Sun God. One of those virgins, Zilia, is the main protagonist of this epistolary novel. From her journey to France to the end, the novel tells the story of what was considered in those days a "good savage". It portrays her personality and exposes her views on French society. Last but not least, it shows her inner struggles, which she overcomes, from the one brought on by exile and the loss of her lover, Aza, to her linguistic and emotional adaptation to the new reality in which she has found herself in France.

The dichotomy of "the good savage" and "the cruel European" is amplified throughout the novel by various observations that Zilia makes on different French realities. Zilia at one point becomes the object of admiration of a young nobleman, whom the author portrays as a morally weakened European. What did the young man appreciate in the Inca maiden abducted from faraway South America? Among other things, her simplicity, her naivety, her spiritual purity (Graffigny I, 1759, 382) aka a spiritual cleanliness that was educated early in her life. The 18th century had no shortage of educational books, which conveyed the main message that education must begin as early as possible for the healthy development of the young. From works on civility, whether Christian or more secular, to Locke and others, the education of the young was becoming a growing concern for the adults in early modern Europe (Ariès, 1962, 33-44). In this novel, Graffigny sketches an Inca society that took great care of the morality of its children, even if they did not possess the educational books that the Europeans had. So moral were the Peruvians depicted that "before the Spaniards came, it was common knowledge that a Peruvian never lied" (Graffigny I, 1759, 40). The same fairness can be seen in another passage in the book, which refers to the respect the Incas had for their kings (Graffigny I, 1759, 36): "The Amautas, the philosophers of this nation, taught the young men the discoveries made in the sciences. The nation was still in its infancy in this respect, but it was in the bloom of happiness." (Graffigny I, 40). With such a virtuous, apparently pacifist people, in touch with the divine and with nature – a classic image of the "good savage" –, the arrival of the Spaniards, as Guillaume Thomas Raynal wrote, could not have been more contrasting. Lastly, the language often used by Graffigny urged the European reader to empathize with the individual drama of the Peruvian maiden, but also with the collective drama of the entire Inca people (Graffigny I, 1759, 52).

Having disembarked from the "floating house", as she called the ship on which she arrived in Europe, Zilia was put up in the house of Deterville, the French nobleman who rescued her. In his house, she gets acquainted with the totally different specifics of a well-heeled European house. From seeing her own reflection in a mirror (she had never experienced anything like this before) to meeting the other maids, who were also non-European, Zilia began to see the reality of a cosmopolitan France, a reality that was generally proving to be much larger than she had realized before (Graffigny I, 1759, 192).

The culture shock is amplified by her visit to Paris. Apart from not knowing what to think of the genius and character of the locals, because the French, like Klim, "crossed extremes with great speed" (Graffigny I, 1759, 292), Zilia was speechless to realize the dimensions of the French capital. If for Mercier, Paris was of staggering immensity and cosmopolitanism (Mercier I, 1782, 8-9; Mercier II, 1782, 52), for the young Peruvian, the city was beyond her capacity to understand and comprehend: "It contains more people than two or three of our regions could muster." (Graffigny I, 1759, 236, 238). Even before arriving at Déterville's Parisian home, which was "almost as magnificent as that of the Sun", the Peruvian virgin could not help but be amazed at the sight of the city's buildings (Graffigny I, 1759, 238, 240).

Graffigny contrasts Peruvian naivety and purity not only with the material, external world. As Zilia gets to know the French better and better, she comes to say to herself, "Not without real regret, [...] I pass from admiration for the genius of the French to contempt for the way they use it. [...] I cannot deny the evidence of its faults." (Graffigny II, 1759, 84). Once again, the French ended up in the eyes of an external "judge" as being devoted to luxury and uselessness (Graffigny II, 1759, 86).

In addition to the advice on education that appears in the work, the Peruvian virgin's judgments on how women were viewed and positioned in 18th-century France are quite numerous, a feature already noted in the literature (Kulesa, 1997, 37). Zilia's remarks, some not without irony, on the double standard with which women were treated differently from men,4 abounds in the second volume of the *Lettres d'une Péruvienne*. Her position is best summarized by the following statement: "I don't know the consequences of the education a father gives his son, I have not found out. But I do know that as soon as the girls begin to be capable of receiving instruction, they are locked up in a religious house to teach them how to live in the world." (Graffigny II, 1759, 156, 158, 164, 168).

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The establishment of happiness on earth could wait no longer when Louis-Sébastien Mercier published *L'An 2440* (1770/1771) and the *Tableau de Paris* (1781). At least that is the impression one can get from reading these two writings. By criticizing the society in which they lived, many Enlightenment writers became vehicles for spreading the need for change, and apostles of progress.

Before the French Revolution radiated its most tragic and puritan discourse through Maximilien Robespierre (Furet, 2012, 91), many of its ideals were already making themselves heard, including in fantasy and science fiction literature. Few novels from Samuel von Brukenthal's library better illustrate the French Enlightenment idealism and radicalism than *L'An 2440*. The former governor of Transylvania had in his library the London edition of this literary work, published in French in 1772 (*BBK* I, f. 15v).

From the very beginning of the novel, we see that "reasonableness" was a value, a benchmark human virtue, a *sine qua non* trait for social harmony and a perfect society: "The Sage knows that evil abounds on earth; but, at the same time, he always has in his mind that perfection so beautiful and touching, which can and must be the very work of a reasonable man." (Mercier, 1772, 1).

"I am seven hundred years old" (*J'ai sept cent ans*) were the words spoken by the main character from the novel *L'An 2440*, when he realized that the year MMIVCXL, engraved in marble with gilded letters in a central square, was neither in his imagination, nor an error made by the authorities (Mercier, 1772, 13-14). While Artus ironized the excesses of a French royal court in the 16th century, in many of Mercier's writings, ranging from *The Year 2440* to *The Portrait of Paris*, we find the same dissatisfaction and fierce criticism of the opulence of the French aristocracy, and their abuses: "as strange as they are numerous: you cannot conceive them, nor count them, and your mind is lost in them [...]." (Mercier, 1772, 3-4). As extreme as it may seem, the statement "I am seven hundred years old" is a metaphor that probably summarizes and interweaves Mercier's sense of expectation with his radicalism, visible as early as the dedicatory letter of the novel (Mercier, 1772, [2]).

4 In the *Encyclopédie*, under the term *raisonnable*, a distinction is made between what a *reasonable man* meant and what a *reasonable woman* meant. See note 3 of this article.

Mercier had obvious grievances with the political system in France, the elites of the state and, more specific to his occupation, the publishing policy in the kingdom. Some of these grievances were made known in the *Tableau de Paris* (Mercier VII, 1783, 17-25). Moreover, as if to shun even more the French, he consistently casts the English model in an extremely favorable light (Mercier V, 1783, 297-301; Mercier VII, 1783, 26, 44-45, 272-276). Whereas the Peruvians were prized for their purity of soul, as the Enlightenment idealists like Graffigny saw it, the British began to be the subject of increasing admiration as we moved into the 18th century. In addition to their cultural and scientific achievements, they were valued to the point of envy by some because of their political system. After all, they managed a glorious revolution (albeit after bloody civil wars) which put the merchant and bourgeoisie at the helm of the country alongside the monarchy; almost like those from More's *Utopia*, the Potuans of the Underworld or the inhabitants of 2440, as the French traveler would learn from a contemporary of the time: "This revolution," you say, "took place in the most peaceful and happy manner. [...] – It was the work of philosophy: it acts in tranquility, it acts like nature, with a force all the more sure because it is insensible." (Mercier, 1772, 114).

To his astonishment, many of the problems of 18th-century´s Paris were but sad memories in that same city of 2440: orderly, civilized, simple, without the opulence and violence that had characterized it in the past. The sense of security and of belonging that Klim felt as no Potuan looked at him negatively, even though he was a foreigner, reappears in Mercier's *The Year 2440*. Right from the opening parts of the novel, the main character, although dressed in 18th-century clothes, experiences the same lightness of spirit that was typical for the 25th-century society (Mercier, 1772, 22). People moved freely, easily and in an organized manner, and the king present in the daily lives of the citizens of 2440 was reminiscent of the ideal of the enlightened sovereign in Cyrus' travels (Mercier, 1772, 27-28). In the New Paris (chapter 8), urbanity was for and to the benefit of the inhabitants. The city was inviting, efficiently reorganized and functional, not messy and untidy as in the past. The sick were cared for, not, as in the past, "housed between a corpse and a dying man", the laws were obeyed, and the city's panorama was a delight to behold (Mercier, 1772, 40-41).

As a man of the press and letters, Mercier also wanted to imprint in his novel the image of a society tolerant of the press, especially because France had aroused many complaints in the Republic of Letters for the increased censorship towards the end of the Ancien Régime. He even writes in the novel that freedom of the press is the true measure of civil liberty (Mercier, 1772, 54). He was delighted to learn that the French *Encyclopédie* and that authors such as Corneille, Moliere, La Fontaine, Montesquieu, Rousseau, Buffon, Voltaire, Mirabeau had become common knowledge in that future society. All the more noteworthy is the fact that this realization of the main character is described in a chapter entitled *Les Nouveaux Testamens* (sic!) (*The New Testaments*) (Mercier, 1772, 60).

Following the secular Enlightenment model of prioritizing jurisprudence, Mercier's hero discovered that one can live without theology, but not without jurisprudence (Mercier, 1772, 81). The author gives readers some examples of how the people of 2440 related to and followed the laws. First, they were no longer "Gothic and bizarre," as he writes, and written "in favor of the rich," but were just, inspired by the "sovereign lawgiver", nature (Mercier, 1772, 81, 85, 105). Here Mercier also makes an *apologia* of freedom, criticizing a detail of the prison system: the shackling of convicts. He spoke out against this practice because, he argued, justice had the right to condemn to the loss of life, but it did not have the right to brand the guilty with the mark of slavery (Mercier, 1772, 94). As with the

Potuans, making citizens accountable for their actions in the name of the law was seen as a great political, social and behavioral progress (Mercier, 1772, 92, 95-96).

The sacralization of the secular and the political religion of the Enlightenment are therefore specific to this novel (Mercier, 1772, 117-118; Voegelin, 2010, 62). In Mercier's view, the people of 2440 were followers of natural religion, of the Supreme Being. Society, at that time, had no saints (the author even uses this term) other than people who, by their own civic example, earned collective respect; they were those "earthly saints", the laymen, mentioned earlier in the study. On the other hand, Mercier also offers a description of a religious service in that distant future. After reading a poem placed at the entrance to the temple, which basically summarizes his goal of becoming one with nature, Mercier's character narrates:

> "As his voice pronounced the sacred hymns, the choir of assistants alternately raised theirs. Their soft and subdued singing portrayed the reverential feeling of their hearts; they seemed filled with the majesty of God. No statues, no allegorical figures, no pictures. [...] If you lifted your eyes to the top of the temple, you could see the heavens uncovered; for the dome was not enclosed by a stone vault, but by transparent skylights. Sometimes a clear sky announced the goodness of the Creator. [...] When the breath of spring brought down the pure air of life, like a balmy river, then was impressed this salutary and consoling truth, that those treasures of divine clemency are inexhaustible." (Mercier, 1772, 121-123)

Conclusion

Just as in the treatment of a disease, the first step, decisive for its success, is the identification of the main symptoms, followed by the diagnosis, so that the appropriate treatment can be applied. Similarly, fantasy and science fiction literature in the Modern Age Europe came to the readers with the identification and signaling of gradually more social, political and cultural issues. It then proposed alternative realities therein, with solutions through examples from the fantasy worlds visited by different fictional characters. It presented customs and habits, often different or opposed to those of real European societies, it highlighted the laws, the institutions and the beliefs that kept social harmony.

Samuel von Brukenthal had several books of this kind in his library. An anti-utopia novel, in which atheism and even homosexuality were the law. The more or less subtle association of hermaphrodites with hedonism, and atheism, with lack of morality, induced readers to make an easy link between aberrant sexuality and the ultimate deviation from faith, atheism, unbelief. At the same time, this association fed a political imaginary and the mentality that could partly explain the exclusion and marginalization of the two groups, which remained useful at the time only as potential political weapons and accusations. In all the analyzed novels one can find the belief in the afterlife, except for *Description de l'Isle des Hermaphrodites*.

At that time, enlightened despotism was a desirable political solution, capable to maintain social cohesion and to provide prosperity to modern European societies. Christianity, in a less pompous version, was equally seen as the basis for the wisdom of an enlightened despot. The passage in which Cyrus acknowledges his inability to decide on the definition of divinity, blind nature or enlightened intelligence, is illustrative of one of the main ideological and philosophical debates that grew in the 17th-18th centuries, a symptom of the crisis of conscience in European culture. In Ramsay's novel, Cyrus, this ancient hero, became the personification of the man and the wise leader of the 18th century who found

a way out of this crisis of the mind by appealing to Jewish wisdom and, by extension, to what some authors of the time called primitive Christianity.

On the other hand, the frequent appearances of natural religion in a positive light, of nature in general, understood as a new supreme, creative authority, show us – apart from the end of Christianity's monopoly on religious thought in Europe – precisely the considerable influence that religion still had on the continent. In other words, natural religion was itself an expression of the symbiotic relationship that still existed between philosophy and theology, between the natural sciences and religiosity. In the second half of the 18th century, the de-theologization of thought, especially atheism, was present only in the minds of some Enlightenment thinkers and still in the realm of fantasy when presented to the general public; they were hallmarks of an alternative reality. Not even More's utopians accepted disbelief or the belief that the soul dies along with the body. Nevertheless, by reading *Utopia*, *N. Klims' Travels in the Underworld* or *The Year 2440,* the European reader's mind may have opened even more to the possibility of a simple religion or a plurality of opinions, including religious ones.

Also in the 18th century, a few novels, such as *The Turkish Spy* and *Letters of a Peruvian Woman*, may have added counterpoints to the Eurocentrism in which Europeans lived. Klim, the Turkish spy and the Peruvian maiden showed the inhabitants of the Old Continent what they were really like, what their flaws were: they were sometimes superficial and pompous, cruel and ignorant of their own cultural biases. Fair, reasonable jurisprudence, inspired by the boundless, and therefore trans-national and trans-confessional wisdom of nature, but also by Judeo-Christian morality in varying degrees, were able to remedy these things and set people on a new virtuous, equitable and meritocratic path.

Surprisingly or not, what is certain is that some of the so-called fantasies and desires presented in the above-mentioned works came true in the centuries that followed. The self-criticism fostered by their writings has most probably contributed to the spread of these ideas and to the preparation of the new mentalities that built the new political, social and cultural architectures in the democracies of the world. A relative humanization of the judicial system was already felt in the late 18th century, with the slow abolition of torture and of witchcraft trials. Equality before the law and a generally fairer and more transparent jurisprudence than Holberg, Graffigny or Mercier had witnessed were also achieved. The rise of meritocracy, the exit of women from the private sphere and their political emancipation, the de-criminalization of atheism and homosexuality, likewise transformed from alternative realities of 18th century literature into the palpable reality of the 20th century, in the same democratic and open societies that produced these literary works.

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Counter-Hegemony
Takarazuka Revue's Alternative Hollywood Blockbusters

Maria Mihaela Grajdian[1]

Abstract

This paper examines the ways in which the Takarazuka Revue negotiates and reshapes cultural identity in late-modern Japan by reconfiguring the relationship between producers and consumers of popular culture. Drawing on more than two decades of fieldwork – combining phenomenological observation, audience and performer interviews, and archival research –, I analyze the mechanisms through which Takarazuka Revue productions stage and market broader narratives of nationhood, gender, and power. The guiding question addresses Takarazuka Revue's adaptations of well-known Western stories and their function as cultural mirrors: not simply reproducing imported material, but re-inscribing it with Japanese neo-nationalist and increasingly post-nationalist sensibilities. As case studies, the analysis focuses on three high-profile productions derived from Hollywood cult movies: *Ocean's Eleven* (performed by the star, flower, and cosmos troupes in 2011-2012, 2013, and 2019, respectively), *Once Upon a Time in America* (snow troupe, 2020), and *Casino Royale* (cosmos troupe, 2023). These performances, while situated within the commercial logics of musical theatre, also reflect shifting socio-political currents. During the 2010s, they projected conservative messages of masculinity, national pride, and hierarchical order, often couched in aesthetics of glamour and romance. In contrast, post-2020 stagings reveal a subtle but significant re-orientation: a move towards envisioning a pluricentric world characterized by cooperation, compassion, and courage – an imaginative response shaped in part by the global pandemic and its cultural aftermath. By situating these productions within Japan's wider mediascape, this study shows Takarazuka Revue's strategies of simultaneously preserving, contesting, and re-imagining the cultural scripts through which national identity and collective belonging are performed.

Keywords: musical theater, (re-)negotiation of modernity, soft power, masculinity, co-creation of the future

1. Introduction: Leaning into the Subtility of Inconspicuousness

Despite largely promoted efforts to unify the world since the end of WWII, the global community is increasingly divided nowadays both on the East-West and on the North-South axis. One central point of reference is military supremacy which brings with it economic-political and sociocultural supremacy nobody dares to seriously challenge at the moment – or when the current world order is questioned in some form, it happens rather symbolically or with dire consequences in case of severe situations (Dalio, 2021; Miegel, 2007; Castells, 2015). Nonetheless, one way of managing ideological resistance without attracting the retaliatory wrath of the ruling power is by means of counter-hegemony,

[1] Associate Professor, Hiroshima University, Japan. grajdian@hiroshima-u.ac.jp, ORCID-ID: 0000-0003-1732-7117.

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occurring mostly culturally: the movement of turning cultural assets belonging to the apparently almighty structures into local phenomena and, subsequently, instilling them with elements of the importing actor.

Throughout the decades, the Japanese all-female highly popular musical theater Takarazuka Revue has proven masterfully the subtle, but powerful tactics which make counter-hegemony a credible yet difficult to pinpoint strategy in asserting oneself on the global stage. Taking as case-studies three performances directly derived from Hollywood cult releases of recent history – *Ocean's Eleven* (2011-2012, star troupe; 2013, flower troupe; 2019, cosmos troupe), *Once Upon a Time in America* (2020, snow troupe) and *Casino Royale* (2023, cosmos troupe) – with their narrative and meta-narrative concatenations, the forthcoming analysis observes in a phenomenological and comparative approach Takarazuka Revue's marketing of neoliberal messages of masculinity and nation on the background of subliminal associations of power, enlightenment and love throughout the 2010s and the discreetly orchestrated shift towards a pluricentric world of cooperation, compassion and courage during the early 2020s – in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Traditionally associated with strictly conservative gender politics and socio-economic hierarchies, military-like instruction methods and performance standards which transcend the wildest expectations while pushing the entertainment industry beyond the limitations of technological progress, fans' requirements and technokrats' visions, Takarazuka Revue 宝塚歌劇[2] has been accompanying Japan since its foundation in 1914 (Stickland, 2008; Watanabe, 1999; Yamanashi, 2012). Simultaneously a faithful mirror of Japanese society and a lucid barometer-like institution for the future, Takarazuka Revue's hallmark is its all-female cast impersonating both male (男役 *otokoyaku*) and female (娘役 *musumeyaku*) roles divided in five performing troupes which bring on the stages of the two major theaters in West-Japan (Takarazuka Grand Theater in the city of Takarazuka) and in East-Japan (Tokyo Takarazuka Theater in the posh district of Ginza in Japan's capital) during ten weekly performances throughout the entire year a huge diversity of topics covering all genres and historical-geographical areas (Tsuganesawa, 1991; Watanabe, 2002).[3]

These elements are embedded in theatrical live performances with Western popular music, laborious choreographies and impressing singing acts, luxurious stage designs, sparkling – and quickly changing – costumes compounded by discrete displays of individual excellence. Moreover, since 1974's blockbuster *The Rose of Versailles* 『ベルサイユのばら』, Takarazuka Revue has been essentially circumscribing the so-called *shōjo* culture (少女文化 *shōjo bunka*): the framework delineating femininity, feminine identity and feminine corporeality by means of instrumentalizing female teenagers within Japan's rapacious systems juxtaposing consumerism, sexuality and public discourses on love, marriage, reproduction (Kawasaki, 2005; Allison, 2013). In recent years, especially since the beginning of the new era in Japanese historiography in 2019 (the Reiwa period) and even more accelerated since the big reset posited by the global pandemic of 2020-2022, a tremendous paradigms shift has been occurring with a renewed focus on expanding the

[2] Takarazuka Revue is the mass-media phenomenon whereas Takarazuka Revue Company is the fiscal entity. Takarazuka Revue administrators did not possess a specific level of fiscal awareness before 1945 so that they changed the names of the institution several times in accordance with the political tendencies of the time.

[3] Since 1919, the exclusive, very competitive two-years Takarazuka Music School (宝塚音楽学校 *Takarazuka Ongaku Gakkō*) delivers yearly 40 (female) graduates who join the team of ca. 350 actresses performing on Takarazuka Revue's stage. Similarly to Takarazuka Revue (Company), Takarazuka Music School changed its official denomination several times since its inception. The current name dates back to 1946.

traditional business model centered around "deep fandom" (Jenkins, 1992, 36; see Nehring, 1997), referring to a rigidly delineated fan community composed mainly of stay-at-home housewives and female financially powerful seniors, aged 35 and above, towards a more diverse consumers' basis to include male theater-goers of all ages, reflected in correspondingly diversified performances to encompass a greater variety of preferences, interests and ideals.

Based on more than two decades of on-site fieldwork comprised of extensive phenomenological experiences and detailed empiric inquiries with both producers and consumers of Japanese popular culture and, distinctively, of Takarazuka Revue's releases as well as comprehensive archival literature research, this paper aims at hermeneutically elucidating the three performances' mechanisms of confronting audiences with uncomfortable narrative reconstructions while suggesting credible visions of a future based on universal values of (healthy) self-love, compassion and mutual respect: the very fact that these values are taken for granted by late-modern social participants leads to them being jeopardized in populist discourses on "the greater good", "pastoral premodernity", "technological evil". Therefore, raising awareness of their historical perishability functions as a sustainable counter-force to current global efforts employed in the dissolution of modernity and its accomplishments towards their replacement with new forms of autocracy, totalitarianism and oppression. After the detailed analysis of the three performances, the Conclusion briefly delves into the main strategies associated with counter-hegemony as an existential attitude – both national and individual – to assert one's own right to self-determination, dignity and responsible freedom.

2. Ultra-Conservative Innuendoes: Takarazuka Revue's *Ocean's Eleven* (2011/2012, 2013, 2019)

When Takarazuka Revue Company took over *Ocean's Eleven*'s plot to turn it into a live-action performance in 2011, it seemed to follow the premise of post-2008 global financial crisis: an increasing uneasiness with the American Dream of unlimited potential and possibilities as long as one was audacious enough and ready to deal with the corresponding risks and potential consequences. Nonetheless, *Ocean's Eleven* 『オーシャンズ 11』 carried substantial narrative and ideological elements to allow for the inclusion of Takarazuka Revue's typical characteristics into the staging protocol, thus resulting into an eventual re-interpretation of the American Dream towards its Japanisation in the manner it had previously happened with Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel *Gone with the Wind* (『風と共に去りぬ』, repeatedly staged by Takarazuka Revue Company since 1977) or *The Great Gatsby* (『華麗なるギャツビー』, respectively 『グレート・ギャツビー』; Takarazuka Revue Company was the first institution globally to turn F. Scott Fitzgerald's novel from 1925 into a musical performance in 1991, 2008 and 2022; (see Yamanashi, 2012).

The troupes designated to take over *Ocean's Eleven*'s performance were star troupe in 2011-2012, followed by flower troupe in 2013 and cosmos troupe in 2019: among Takarazuka Revue's five currently performing troupes – flower troupe 花組 *hana-gumi*, moon troupe 月組 *tsuki-gumi* (both founded in 1921), snow troupe 雪組 *yuki-gumi* (founded in 1924), star troupe 星組 *hoshi-gumi* (1933-1939 and since 1948), cosmos troupe 宙組 *sora-gumi* (since 1998) – each of them being associated with specific characteristics which then color the message of the performances themselves, star troupe, grounded in 1933, in the same

year as the original Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre was inaugurated, but banned from performing between 1939 and 1948, is said to deliver strong, charismatic *otokoyaku* performers (such as Kozuki Wataru 湖月 わたる 2003-2006 and Yuzuki Reon 柚希 礼音 2009-2015) in performances with memorable messages (Hashimoto, 1999, 49-53; Kawasaki, 1999, 111-113). Thus, star troupe's *Ocean's Eleven*, staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from 11. November 2011 until 13. December 2011 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 2. January 2012 until 5. February 2012 with Yuzuki Reon as Danny Ocean, Yumesaki Nene 夢咲 ねね as Tess Ocean, Suzumi Shio 涼 紫央 as Rusty Ryan and Kurenai Yuzuru 紅 ゆずる as Terry Benedict in the lead-roles appeared emblematic for the neo-conservative tendencies in Japanese mass-media of early 2010s: while it draws on US-American practices of entertainment and nonchalant attitude towards rules, the focus in Takarazuka Revue's version laid on Danny's and Tess' marriage (who, unlike in the original movie, are still married, with Danny declining to sign Tess' divorce papers, countless times) and Danny's efforts to win her back.

The characters' interactions are more important than the goal of their pursuit – robbing Terry Benedict's casino – and its alleged immorality, which serves, in fact, to underscoring their humanity, their flaws, their expectations (see Giddens, 1991; Castells, 1995). Moreover, the broken marriage of Danny and Tess is placed at the center of the plot-line, with the remaining cast implicitly looking as if they were mainly tools in Danny's attempts at regaining his still-wife from Terry's rapacious hands. Consequently, Terry himself is portrayed as a demonizing force disrupting the marital bliss, emblematically displayed in one key-scene added in Takarazuka Revue-style to the original movie script: a dream-like set-up in heaven with Tess as Eve, being notoriously, shamelessly tempted into sinful interaction by a devil-turned-snake Terry and miraculously rescued by an angelic Adam-like Danny. At the same time, Danny's nefarious personality, his shady endeavors, his emotional abuse, past and present, towards Tess, which had been keenly depicted in the original movie and had shaped the narrative development into Danny's recovery to learning from his mistakes and becoming a better human, respectively a more suitable life-partner for a respectable lady like Tess, are fully obscured in Takarazuka Revue's iteration of *Ocean's Eleven*. They were replaced by a fuzzy idea of romantic love as able to inspire abnegation and a groundless willingness for sacrifice in wives towards the preservation of their marriage, regardless how useless, abusive, downtrodden their husbands might be.

The all-encompassing emphasis on marriage and unequal gender relationships continued in flower troupe's *Ocean's Eleven*, staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from 8. February 2013 until 11. March 2013, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 29. March 2013 until 5. May 2013, with Ranju Tomu 蘭寿 とむ as Danny Ocean, Ranno Hana 蘭乃 はな as Tess Ocean, Hokushō Kairi 北翔 海莉 as Rusty Ryan and Nozomi Fūtō 望海 風斗 as Terry Benedict in the lead-roles. Grounded in 1921, flower troupe is largely perceived as the most treasured of the five ensembles, with larger budgets and more lavish stage and costume designs as well as more powerful and impactful performances (Hashimoto, 1999; Robertson, 1998, 152-156); accordingly, flower troupe's *Ocean's Eleven* amplified its orchestration of the romantic bond between Danny and Tess, both by involving the two of them in more shared stage time, with focus on their mutual attraction and irresistible chemistry and by caricaturally demonizing Terry and his attempts at materialist over-compensation due to his lack of human qualities. While carefully avoiding to downplay the importance of material safety and financial stability within the marital constellation, flower troupe's version of *Ocean's Eleven* equally cautiously bypasses the realist explanation of Danny's pursuits, the absence of an honest source of income, work-skills, civil

engagement, sense of morality and deontological mindset, instead fully focusing on his unwaveringly passionate love for Tess, while nullifying any allusion – which persisted in the initial movie – that Danny might chase Tess mainly out of spite and competitive drive against Terry and his, obviously superior, success in life in the three areas which matter in the capitalist logic of things: money, power and status, women (see Connell, 2005; Kimmel, 2012).

More than in the previous version of 2011-2012, in which Yumesaki Nene delivered a powerful Tess which leads with her head and can have her own voice among the cacophony of male egos dominating the stage – as Julia Roberts' presence had convincingly done in the original Hollywood release –, Ranno Hana's Tess loses her vitality and strength and becomes almost an "accessory" employed to highlight Danny's overwhelming "alpha masculinity", in opposition to Terry's whiny, fragile sense of self. This directorial approach additionally bolsters the polarization of masculine role-models in a world – both on- and off-stage – increasingly at odds with a healthy grasp on the real challenges emerging from the extremely toxic radicalization of existential attitudes, expectations as well as coping strategies (see Hook, 2004; Sugimoto, 2013).

In a historical comparison, what had started with a questioning of US-American values and their media-conveyed portrayal in Steven Soderbergh's *Ocean's Eleven* movie from 2001 by means of star troupe's counter-representation of a rather diluted "alpha masculinity" rooted in Western ideas, but turned into hyper-masculinity by topstar-*otokoyaku* Yuzuki Reon's personal charisma, acting skills, stage presence, metamorphosed in flower troupe's *Ocean's Eleven* into an almost incomprehensible amalgamation of concepts and messages, poorly hidden underneath the classically glamourous dramaturgic architecture, stage design, choreographic vision and performers' own undisputable skills, training, commitment to individual as well as collective excellence.

Eventually, cosmos troupe's *Ocean's Eleven*, staged at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 19. April 2019 until 27. May 2019, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from 14. June 2019 until 21. July 2019, with Makaze Suzuho 真風 涼帆 as Danny Ocean, Hoshikaze Madoka 星風 まどか as Tess Ocean, Serika Toa 芹香 斗亜 as Rusty Ryan and Sakuragi Minato 桜木 みなと as Terry Benedict, materialized as the ultimate continuation and indelible solidification of its previous performances based on US-American sources: the most preeminent was cosmos troupe's 2013 *Gone with the Wind* (staged at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 27. September 2013 until 4. November 2013 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from 22. November 2013 until 23. December 2013) which had in turn validated flower troupe's *Ocean's Eleven* earlier that same year. Accordingly, the members of the cosmos troupe delivered in 2019's *Ocean's Eleven* the most conservative version of the play, indicating a return towards 'classical' values and traditions with the restoration of masculine dignity and hegemony and the simultaneous reiteration of male supremacy within the all-encompassing aura of the nuclear family as the foundation and existential model of any functional, sustainable, solid nation-state (Sakai, 2022; Yoshino, 1992).

At this point it is crucial to point out that cosmos troupe, founded in 1998, is commonly associated with a non-conformist allure, breaking prevailing standards in Takarazuka Revue's tradition; the employment of the cosmos troupe in any performances is supposed to strike in audiences' perception a chord of experimental, explorative exuberance; in comparison to other troupes, the cosmos troupe is regarded as less bound to any sort of image Takarazuka Revue – as a socio-economic or cultural phenomenon – might have established, and many of its performances appear as "pilot-projects" with the

administration virtually "testing" the boundaries of audiences – that is, whether audiences are ready, willing, able to accept new themes being addressed on-stage, new approaches to old themes as well as new performance styles (Hashimoto, 1999, 65-70; Kawasaki, 1999, 123-128). More often than not, such "pilot-projects" fail due to audiences equivocal rejection, only to be re-hashed eight to ten years later on in a slightly modified manner and by a different troupe, when they are (usually) enthusiastically embraced.[4]

Thus, the combination between cosmos troupe's public image of future-leaning performativity and 2019's *Ocean's Eleven*'s overly conservative, indeed somehow retrograde demeanor and message, indicated an unexpected return to the idealized world of the 1970s

[4] Historically speaking, as two examples of cosmos troupe's progressive role in bringing on-stage Takarazuka Revue Company's administrative efforts in exploring new areas of representation and experimenting with innovative technologies, creative designs, unexpected topics, 2008's performances *A Morning Breeze: The Challenge of Shirasu Jirō, the Samurai Gentleman* (『黎明（れいめい）の風：侍ジェントルマン白洲次郎の挑戦』, staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from 8. February 2008 until 17. March 2008, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 4. April 2008 until 18. May 2008) and *Paradise Prince* (『パラダイス・プリンス』, staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from 26. September 2008 until 3. November 2008, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 21. November 2008 until 27. December 2008) stand out. In *A Morning Breeze*, the employment of classical, archetypal characters as symbolized by Shirasu Jirō, one of the most important businessmen in postwar Japan, enacted arguably somewhat over-the-top by cult-*otokoyaku* Todoroki Yū 轟悠, was meant as the acute re-actualization of the *wakon yōsai* (和魂洋才, "Japanese spirit/identity, Western knowledge/technology"; Howland, 2001, 173; Havens, 1970) slogan which he embodies in his synthetic figure. Though educated at famous schools in England, Shirasu Jirō bared his soul for Japan's welfare and defies General Douglas MacArthur, the Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers (SCAP) during the occupation of Japan from 1945 to 1951, almost caricaturally embodied by topstar-*otokoyaku* Yamato Yūga 大和 悠河 with the words: "Japan has lost the war, but that does not mean Japan has been enslaved." Shirasu Jirō dashed like a "morning breeze" through the turbulent 20th century, firmly determined to devote himself entirely to Japan's postwar reconstruction and to the restoration of its sovereignty and its people's dignity. Even more so, few months later, topstar-*otokoyaku* Yamato Yūga brought forth in *Paradise Prince* Stuart Green Menfield, a promising and talented painter from an upper-class American family with a long tradition of successful artists, but who wants to become an *anime* creator like the real-world globally renowned Miyazaki Hayao 宮崎 駿 explicitly mentioned as a role-model in the show. Stuart leaves his well-groomed home to make his own luck in the world of animation; after several petit-bourgeoise adventures, he is shown in the homely finale watching with his wife and their two kids his own successful television animation series, as he symbolically celebrates the fulfilment of his own life motto expressed in the title song: "Do not give up your dreams; even if today everything goes wrong, there is also tomorrow." Both performances were meant to remind audiences of Japan's past greatness and of its current achievements and to performatively defy its dependence on USA, but were extremely poorly received by audiences, a situation only exacerbated by 15. September 2008's Lehman shock. Nonetheless, when performances with similar messages were staged in the second half of the 2010s – e.g., *Le Chateau de la Reine/The Queen's Castle* (『王妃の館』, cosmos troupe, 2017) which combined the popular *parimono* framework (since 1927's *Mon Paris* 『モン・パリ：和が巴里よ』, *parimono* パリモノ referring to the category of performances with narrative lines located in Paris, France's capital, totaling ca. one third of all shows) with the attempt to overcome the narrative avoidance of Japan's modernity by humorously describing the adventures and misdemeanors of a group of Japanese tourists in present-day Paris, or *Company: Lessons, Passion and Companionship* (『カンパニー：努力、情熱、そして仲間たち』, moon troupe, 2018) about the daily life of a widowed Japanese employee ("salary-man"), displayed in an idealized show of late-modern Japan by providing reassuring testimonials to what has been assiduously constructed throughout the decades since 1945 as a "homogeneous harmonious society" with solely exemplary citizens joyously fulfilling their duties and no outcasts (Sugimoto, 2013, 165; see Leheny, 2018) –, they were joyfully, wholeheartedly, unquestioningly celebrated by audiences. Essentially, such performances overtly demonstrated Japan's and its population's sense of empowerment and global domination independently of USA's validation or even counter their growing internal and external struggles. Subsequently, performances addressing present-day Japan, which had been a huge taboo since 1945 due to Takarazuka Revue's outrageous role in promoting Japan's militarist, expansionist, fascist policies in prewar and wartime eras, became widely accepted by Takarazuka Revue's audiences, fans and fan communities and are a regular part of its ongoing repertoire.

seen from a disenchanted historical distance of almost 50 years and delivering a Takarazuka Revue-baked vision of "how things should be" or at least "become". One might argue that such a vision emerged as an unexpected turn in light of historical developments, with debates on gender equality/equity and the quest for alternative forms of work-family balance which would enable parents and children to spend more time together, and therefore, to overrun discourses on inter-generational trauma, lack of emotional connection in the metropolises of the world, endemic loneliness, mental exhaustion, despair dominating the headlines (see Giddens, 2020; Conti, 2021; Castells, 2009).

Performed at a key-moment in Japan's recent history – the abdication of the Heisei emperor Akihito and the beginning of a new era, Reiwa period, under the ruling of his eldest son Naruhito took place on 1. May 2019, an event which had not happened since 1817 –,[5] 2019's *Ocean's Eleven* symbolically marked the end of an era and the beginning of a new one, with more simplicity, a revival of old structures (or their enhanced preservation) and a sense of community which excludes those who do not adhere unconditionally to this new historical order – and void of any genuine reflection on the past. The undermining of the American Dream with its audacious disrespect towards communal values in the name of individual fulfilment and its replacement with ultra-conservative ideologies which go so far as to disguise romantic and marital abuse as love with the goal of reinforcing marriage as the ultimate vehicle of socioeconomic stability while actively rejecting any contemplation of authentic change is what turns Takarazuka Revue's *Ocean's Eleven* from its first iteration in 2011/2012 through 2013 until 2019 into a paradigmatic example of the dangerous strategies employed by right-wing intellectuals not only to re-write history and present it to larger consumer groups as "facts", but, more importantly, to reconfigure the future with elements extracted from the intentional distortion of history, thus leading to its (self-)destructive repetition.

3. The Dissolution of the American Dream: Takarazuka Revue's *Once Upon a Time in America* (2020)

Takarazuka Revue's version of *Once Upon a Time in America*, officially based on novel *The Hoods* (1952) by Harry Grey (1901-1980, real name Herschel Goldberg), but, in fact, heavily influenced by the eponymous movie from 1984 *C'era una volta in America* (directed by Sergio Leone on music by Ennio Morricone), infers several variables: Japanese language, cross-gender representation due to the all-female cast, live performance, the (predominantly) female (predominantly) Japanese audiences.

Snow troupe's *Once Upon a Time in America*, carrying the same title in Japanese which ran at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 1. January until 3. February 2020, and was scheduled to run at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from 21. February until 22. March 2020)[6] and its golden combination's *otokoyaku* Fūtō Nozomi as David 'Noodles' Aaronson and *musumeyaku*

[5] The last abdication in Japan's history took place in 1817, when Morohito 師仁 (23. September 1771-11. December 1840), posthumously honored as Emperor Kōkaku 光格天皇, 119th emperor of Japan according to the traditional order of succession and who had reigned since 1779, abdicated in favor of his son Ayahito 恵仁 (16. March 1800-21. February 1846, posthumously honored as Emperor Ninkō 仁孝天皇. After his abdication, Emperor Kōkaku ruled as Daijō Tennō 太上天皇 ("Abdicated Emperor", also known as a *Jōkō* 上皇) until his death in 1840 (Mason & Caiger, 1979, 275; McClain, 2002, 57).

[6] Originally scheduled to run from 21. February 2020 until 22. March 2020 at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater, *Once Upon a Time in America* was interrupted on 28. February due to the global pandemic, restarted on 9. March until 11. March, and then reopened on 22. March for its final two shows.

Maaya Kiho 真彩 希帆 as Deborah and secondary *otokoyaku* Ayakaze Sakina 彩風 咲奈 as Maximilian 'Max' Bercovicz, delivers a performance which rigorously transcends the original cinema version, with less display of armed violence and brutalized sexuality (Ebert, 1984; Frayling, 2012) – still, far more than common on its deeply sanitized and aesthetically curated stage – and more focus on the inner development of the characters as well as their complex interactions underlying the diversity of possible life choices and their outcomes.

In hindsight, snow troupe's *Once Upon a Time in America* appeared as part of the ongoing paradigm shift in Takarazuka Revue's performance and marketing strategies from the commonly encompassed *shōjo* imagery, characterized by beautification efforts to flamboyantly idealize romance and sexuality, towards narrative lines bringing into foreground anti-social – or para-social – elements: antagonists such as gangsters, assassins and terrorists circulating among the population of late-modern Japan without, crucially, turning them into heroes on their initiation journeys seeking enlightenment towards maturity through overcoming hardships and achieving greatness. This pivotal turn had been initiated by *Ocean's Eleven*'s stagings (2011-2012, 2013, 2019) and their stunning success with audiences: US-American dubious characters are presented with their questionable intentions and actions, nevertheless always integrated within the archetypal ideology of the hero's journey, while connecting them with the parallel development of USA's representation on Takarazuka Revue's stage to be discussed in greater detail further below (see Hashimoto 1999; Uchino 2009).

Snow troupe's *Once Upon a Time in America* in early 2020 simultaneously draws a long line to 1968's world-premiere of the Japanese version of *West Side Story* (『ウエストサイド物語』 based on the eponymous musical by Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim from 1957) by moon troupe and snow troupe (and reiterated in 1998 and 1999 at the main theaters by moon troupe and star troupe and in 2018 by cosmos troupe at smaller theatrical institutions), which won the nationally recognized Culture Prize and brought on stage the brutal realities of gang-rivalries, armed violence and quotidian murders on the background of a star-crossed love-story à la *Romeo and Juliet* but racially motivated, with its universally known denouement. Thus, Takarazuka Revue's premiere of *Once Upon a Time in America* appears as both a climax of this approach to USA's representation by Takarazuka Revue and equally a paradigm shift: it takes Noodles' iconic character (admirably embodied in the US-American original by Robert de Niro in one of his most insightful if not celebrated roles) and strives for the clarification of the question of whether the production and promotion of masculine identity can be achieved by the instrumentalization of money, sexuality and power as key-elements of freedom or, conversely, of whether the on-stage display of fundamental values such as determination, hard-work and persistence can lead to their reinforcement in real life (see Hooks 2004; Kimmel 2012). Then again, the phenomenon of masculine vulnerability as the ability to connect with one's emotions and therefore to those around oneself in an authentic manner is both observed and performatively encouraged, keenly reconstructing Noodles' inner structure, in the pursuit of developing and pro-actively employing these values as a means to transcend the impeding "death of vulnerability" in human individuals of late modernity (see Bauman, 2000; Eagleton, 2003). Essential in understanding *Once Upon a Time in America*'s pivotal role in Takarazuka Revue's – and implicitly Japan's – efforts in reconfiguring the world order and its global dynamics are three dimensions: the historical moment in which it was world-premiered in Japan, the parallel history of USA's representation on Takarazuka Revue's

stage since 1967 and the employment of the snow troupe in the staging of the Japanese version of *Once Upon a Time in America*.

Firstly, the historical moment at which *Once Upon a Time in America* was world-premiered on Takarazuka Revue's stage and in Japan as a Japanese musical is drawn into discussion: early 2020. *Once Upon a Time in America* was the first performance of the year and, ironically, the last performance to be fully performed at Takarazuka Grand Theater before the pandemic-caused massive disruptions and months-long closing until the regularization of the schedule by mid-2022. The administrators' choice of this temporal placement turns Takarazuka Revue's *Once Upon a Time in America* above all else into a political statement on the necessity for radical change both within Japan and on the global level – with Japan as its locomotive, to be sure (see Stickland 2008; Tsuganesawa 1991). As already detailed, prior to *Once Upon a Time in America*, 2019's *Ocean's Eleven* manifested as the continuation and reinforcement of 2013's *Gone with the Wind*, in which the members of the cosmos troupe delivered the most conservative version of the play since its world-premiere in 1977, clearly echoing the neo-conservative discourses crisscrossing Japan's political discourses and widely parroted by mainstream media during the 2010s.

Secondly, the parallel history of USA's representation on Takarazuka Revue's post-WWII stage starts with 1967's world-premiere of Japan's first musical based on a Broadway performance: *Oklahoma!* 『オクラホマ！』, drawn upon the eponymous musical by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II from 1943, which was followed in 1969 by the world-premiere of the Japanese version of *Carousel* 『回転木馬』, based on the eponymous musical by Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II from 1945: the down-to-earth personality of Curly McLain, the main male character from *Oklahoma!*, delivered a new model of masculine existence, who provided material support and moral orientation to his fellows. Furthermore, world-premiered in 1977 and staged repeatedly throughout the subsequent decades due to its unexpected box-office success, the Takarazuka Revue's version of *Gone with the Wind* displays Japanese visions on love, family, historical heritage, gender roles and race hierarchies, thus transcending its US-American origins (Hashimoto, 1999, 63; Tsuganesawa, 1991, 148). While officially inspired by Margaret Mitchell's novel from 1936, it *de facto* relies heavily on its film adaptation from 1938 with Clark Gable and Vivien Leigh in the lead-roles and openly plays with technologies of representation employed by producers of popular culture to construct patterns of gender and race: *otokoyaku*'s ambivalence embodies both the struggles of masculinity as an ongoing project of defining the self in its own core identity and the fantasies of feminine power as a field of desire, resistance and negotiation in the modern world – Japan included (Yamanasahi, 2012, 162; see Žižek, 1998).

After the 2008's debacle with cosmos troupe's *The Wind of Change* and *Paradise Prince* (see Footnote 3), snow troupe's performance *Shall We Dance?* (with the same title in Japanese, which ran at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 8. November 2013 until 12. December 2013, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from 2. January 2014 until 9. February 2014) took over the role of the cosmos troupe in representing US-American contents to Japanese audiences in the highly ideologized light of a reverse hierarchy of nations: itself a re-import of the eponymous US-American movie from 2004, directed by Peter Chelsom, with Richard Gere, Jennifer Lopez and Susan Sarandon in the lead-roles, which had been based in its turn on the Japanese movie with the same title from 1996, directed by Suo Masayuki 周防正行, the Takarazuka Revue version keeps the US-American setting as well as the US-American background and main characters' names, the married couple Hailey and Jocelyn Hartz and the dance instructor Ella, portrayed by "golden combination" consisting of

topstar-*otokoyaku* Sō Kazuho 壮 一帆 and topstar-*musumeyaku* Manaka Ayu 愛加 あゆ and future topstar-*otokoyaku* Sagiri Seina 早霧 せいな. It is a plain performance, focused on family life and potential betrayal and on the restorative power of strong values and a deeply seated sense of duty, while at the same time meant to educate and familiarize Japanese audiences – and consumers of cultural goods – with their role in the upcoming world-order.

Thirdly, the symbolical employment of snow troupe comes into focus: among the five active troupes, each of them being associated with specific characteristics which then color the message of the performances themselves, snow troupe stands out due to its conservative atmosphere in bringing forth "traditional Japan", with its classic imagery of the stress-ratio between *giri* (義理 social obligations) and *ninjō* (人情 individual emotions) as the highest form of human transcendence encapsulated within plots commonly set in premodern Japan (Mason & Caiger, 1979; McClain, 2002; Sansom, 1931). Part of Takarazuka Revue administration's postwar policy to never again represent Japan or Asia in modern times resulted from its nefarious – and unconditional – support of Japan's expansionist militarist colonialist politics in the first decades of the 20th century; naturally, *jidaimono* 時代物 or historical performances with narrative lines located in Japan's premodernity which ended in 1868, were chosen since 1945 and they make up ca. 30% of the yearly program.

While other troupes equally stage Japan-themed performances and snow troupe takes over various narrative lines as well, snow troupe's major features is the referential "Japaneseness" in the *wakon yōsai* (和魂洋才, commonly translated as "Japanese spirit/roots, Western technology/knowledge") framework which underlies Takarazuka Revue's hybridity in tune with Japan's modernity and delivers the crucial "Japanising" element(s) to all its performances – Japan-related or not (see Mason and Caiger, 1979; McClain, 2002). In this train of thoughts, the snow troupe inauguration in 1924, simultaneously with the opening of the first Takarazuka Grand Theatre, is virtually connected to its image as the upholder of traditional dance and opera for the entire company and has the reputation of being the vanguard of classical Japanese drama, so that the fact that it premiered in Japan in 1996 the Vienna-original musical *Elisabeth* from 1992 as *Elisabeth: The Rondo of Love and Death* 『エリザベート：愛と死の輪舞』 has symbolical underpinnings, with 'appropriation' and 'Japanisation' as one of the main preoccupations.

Curiously enough, Takarazuka Revue's Noodles – more specifically, snow troupe's topstar-*otokoyaku*'s Fūtō Nozomi's Noodles – resolutely distances himself from its US-American original and turns into a human archetype: in this version, more normative concerns such as the integration of the individual within the community and the permanent references to one's origins while consistently alluding the religious affiliation, the friendships he develops throughout his formative years which do not over-shadow the importance of family, the counter-intuitive representation of money and career as a means of making a living and not as an ultimate existential goal, turn to the foreground and gradually lead to the formulation of a re-solidified identity paradigm which emerges as a self-reflexive project harmoniously unifying courage and perseverance, lucidity and compassion, honesty and respect (see Bauman, 2000; Eagleton, 2003). This seems to be the core of the *homo tener*, the tender human, calling for a (more) affectionate relationship with the self and the other. Much more than in the novel or in the live-action movie, Noodles becomes an ontological paradigm: to that extent, one must recall that throughout Takarazuka Revue's post-WWII

history and its orchestration of identity, the androgynously charismatic and ambiguous figure of *otokoyaku* mainly transported its ideals.

In contrast to the apparently submissive and conformist *musumeyaku*, *otokoyaku*'s position has been suggesting a strongly dialectical movement between traditional role-models and innovative consumption patterns. Kobayashi Ichizō's famous statement that audiences should desire the *otokoyaku*, but identify themselves with *musumeyaku* (Kobayashi, 1955, 37; Iwahori, 1972, 33; Tsuganesawa, 1991, 183) turned into the foundation of an explosive liquefaction of identity structures during the exuberant 1970s and 1980s, which subsequently made place for new identificatory models during the 1990s until late 2010s: in Takarazuka Revue's version of staging humanity, every *otokoyaku* was supposed to abandon the sphere of her own identity and to infiltrate the public space (see Watanabe, 2002). She would metamorphose into a symbol for something which she cannot possibly be, while obeying the limits, rules and circum- stances imposed upon her from the outside. Similarly to Don Quixote in another spatial and temporal culture – who meets in the second part of the novel people who have already read the first part of the novel, so that he has no other choice but to be faithful to the book he has himself become while protecting it from misapprehensions, counterfeits and apocryphal continuations, to paraphrase Michel Foucault (1966, 73) –, an *otokoyaku* keeps on following her own discourse and transforms herself into an object of the process which she had herself originally created as a subject.

The perplexing androgynity of the *otokoyaku* is compounded by her 'racelessness', mirroring the instability and ambiguity of Japanese modernity as a reputed monolith and simultaneously challenging Takarazuka Revue's self-advertised position as a self-conscious icon of modern Japan: a unique synthesis of Japanese spirit and Western knowledge/technology blatantly splurging on her all-too fluid identity representations. This progression is brought to a halt by the staging of *Once Upon a Time in America*, with its fallible, humble Noodles and its more self-reflexive secondary characters: Max, who eventually takes unequivocal suicide as the final solution to his ruthless life, and Deborah, who returns to the indissolubly stable values of family and motherhood, against the background of the socio-creative tendency to facilitate closeness between male and female citizens, in an attempt to teach them the sense of mutual compassion, acceptance and curiosity.

4. Progress through Entertainment: Takarazuka Revue's *Casino Royale* (2023)

It is on the foundation of questioning technological development and the focus on individual excellence located at the center of 2006's live-action movie *Casino Royale*, directed by Martin Campbell and starring Daniel Craig in his first appearance as James Bond, that Takarazuka Revue's administrators conceptualized their version of *Casino Royale* in 2023 and brought it forth as a pivotal performance in the revamping of its post-pandemic business model. Staged by cosmos troupe, a choice which determines in Takarazuka Revue Company's advertising and marketing strategy the message of each performance, *Casino Royale: My Name Is Bond.*『カジノ・ロワイヤル：我が名はボンド。』, was officially based on Ian Fleming's novel in its Japanese edition translated by Shiraishi Rō 白石朗 , published by Tōkyō Sōgensha 東京創元社 in 2019, as much as on previous adaptations in Western media. Staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from 11. March 2023 until 17. April 2023 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 6. May 2023 until 11. June 2023 and starring Makaze Suzuho 真風 涼帆 as James Bond, Jun Hana 潤 花 as

Delphine, Serika Toa 芹香 斗亜 as Le Chiffre, Takarazuka Revue's *Casino Royale* took the primary character and narrative line – that of a confrontation between the iconic British spy and master-terrorist Le Chiffre during a high-stakes gambling show-off at Casino Royale – and modified it in accordance with Takarazuka Revue's own conventions, mostly encapsulated in its intrinsic set of conventions named "the Violet Code" (すみれコード, *sumire-kōdo*; Kobayashi, 1955) which prohibits any non-stylized display of ugliness such as violent death, open sexuality, bloody encounters as well as allusions to mundane events such as medical procedures (to which biological birth and death count) on Takarazuka Revue's stage, unless the dramaturgic logic explicitly requires it.

The story of Takarazuka Revue's *Casino Royale* is set in 1968 with the world in the grip of the Cold War, tacitly carried since the End of WWII between the West, with its capitalist societies and nations led by the United States of America, and the East, a communist conglomerate led and controlled by the Soviet Union. The two blocs have been confronting each other, struggling for supremacy, without directly engaging in warfare while intelligence agents from each country ("spies"), keep fighting covertly on the front lines. In Paris, anti-establishment protests known as a general strike "May 1968" break out, mainly among students and workers calling for social change; their rage being directed against capitalism, consumerism, American imperialism and traditional institutions, but after they are suppressed, the radicals merge into an underground organization calling itself "The Red Army League." At MI6, the pinnacle of the elite British Secret Intelligence Service, outstanding secret agent James Bond, code name 007, who had already been through fierce battles, receives an order to neutralize a Soviet agent known as Le Chiffre, who has been regarded as the commander of KGB operations in France – and who is suspected of fueling the ongoing unrests in Paris and countrywide. As a front-business, Le Chiffre seems to run a nightclub in Paris, but he has been embezzling its proceeds, in fact funds sent by the Soviet organization to The Red Army League, and is consequently in such a tight spot that he secretly has been searching for a buyer for the nightclub while also planning to recover a quick fortune at a casino. Bond's mission is to use his gambling abilities to beat him and cut off his source of funds, and then to take him alive and force him to divulge any information he possesses. Bond, disguised as a Jamaican millionaire, heads firstly to Paris to scout the nightclub, where he encounters and saves Delphine, a female student participating in a demonstration and being chased by the police. He becomes captivated by Delphine, a graduate student at the Sorbonne and the girlfriend of Michel, a radical student who escaped to The Red Army League and who pursues passionately the ideal to change the current world plagued by inequalities into a better one. Later on, James Bond arrives at Casino Royale in a hotel at the Royale-les-Eaux on the Atlantic coast of France, to play against Le Chiffre. There, he runs once again into Delphine, who turns out to be the heiress of a vast fortune as the successor of the late Grand Duchess Natalia, according to her last-will: coincidentally, the mourning Romanov family have gathered at the same hotel and are fighting over who will become the next patriarch, the head of the family. The glamorous casino's biggest annual event "Night of Baccarat" has just started. Bond, still undercover as a Jamaican millionaire, joins the baccarat table Le Chiffre is at. But once Le Chiffre finds out his true identity, the game turns into an intense confrontation between the two of them. When Le Chiffre loses to Bond at the gambling table, he decides to target Delphine's inheritance, just as she is about to begin a relationship with Bond who cannot stop thinking about her. With CIA agents, French intelligence officers, and Soviet spies joining the scene as well, Bond faces a series

of crises in his pathway, but eventually does what he does best: risks his life for the success of the mission while countering various conspiracies and dangers.

The third performance of the calendar year 2023 and last performance of the Japanese fiscal year 2022-2023, Takarazuka Revue's *Casino Royale* was also the final performance (さよなら公演 *sayonara-kōen*) for topstar-*otokoyaku* Makaze Suzuho and topstar-*musumeyaku* Jun Hana among several other performers, and the first Takarazuka Revue production to receive an international livestream for the Tokyo final performance (千秋楽 *senshūraku*, literally "joy of thousand autumns") on 11. June 2023 via the Beyond LIVE platform, with subtitles in eight different language options (English, Korean, simplified and traditional Chinese, Indonesian, Spanish, Vietnamese, Thai). In addition to the unexpectedly controversial narrative focus – the Cold War –, approximately one year after Russia's invasion of Ukraine on 24. February 2022 and the ongoing war, and an unique allusion to current realities in Takarazuka Revue's post-WWII history (perhaps apart from the notable – and symbolical – exception of 2003's star troupe's performance *A Song for Kingdoms* 『王家に捧ぐ歌』 and its alignment with peacekeeping campaigns at the time in Japan, but translocated in ancient Egypt with its warring dreams of grandeur), *Casino Royale* marks the end of an era and launches at the same time the beginning of a new chapter. This happens both narratively and meta-narratively, as to be detailed further below.

To start with, the two previous performances of the calendar year 2023 staunchly validated the continuation of tradition in Takarazuka Revue's performance strategy and business vision: both flower troupe's *Mayerling* 『うたかたの恋』 (staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from 1. January 2023 until 9. January 2023 and from 19. January 2023 until 30. January 2023 due to coronavirus-caused interruptions and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 18. February 2023 until 19. March 2023) and moon troupe's *Ohten no Mon: The Tale of Young Sugawara no Michizane* 『応天の門：若き日の菅原道真の事』 (staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from 4. February 2023 until 6. March 2023 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 25. March 2023 until 30. April 2023) delve into stories of passion and grandeur, reviving two of Takarazuka Revue's most beloved themes: on the one hand, the tragical love-story between partners in the highest echelons of the Western society, as revealed in Yuzuka Rei's 柚香 光 portrayal of Rudolf, the Crown Prince of Austria and the son of the cult-empress Elisabeth "Sissi" of Austria and of Emperor Franz Joseph, and Hoshikaze Madoka's 星風 まどか representation of Marie Vetsera, a baron's daughter at the imperial court and Rudolf's lover despite all odds, in the first performance; on the other hand, in the second performance, the breathtaking orchestration of (early) Heian period (794-1185), indisputably the "golden age" of Japanese classical history and the climax of cultural refinement, with Tsukishiro Kanato 月城 かなと as Sugawara no Michizane and Umino Mitsuki 海乃 美月 as Shōki delivering credible on-stage recreations of the eponymous, equally popular historical *manga* (Japanese comics) series, literally translated as "The Southern Gate", written and illustrated by Yak Haibara, which had begun serialization in Shinchōsha's 新潮社 *seinen* manga magazine targeted at young male readers *Monthly Comic Bunch* in October 2013, reaching 19 volumes as of time of this writing (December 2024).

Apart from the narrative contents, the symbolical connotation of both troupes delivers these performance substantial significance: flower troupe, grounded in 1921, is largely perceived as the most treasured of the five ensembles, with larger budgets and more lavish stage and costume designs as well as more powerful and impactful performances; similarly set-up in 1921, moon troupe was the one to push forward the performance strategy when

it staged the world-premieres of *Mon Paris* (『モン・パリ：我が巴里よ！』, 1927), *The Rose of Versailles* (『ベルサイユのばら』, 1974) and *Gone with the Wind* (『風と共に去りぬ』, 1977), with meticulous attention to group performances and in particular to powerful expression in chorus singing as well as numerous adaptations from Western dramas. Thus, flower troupe and moon troupe are not only the most longevive ensembles in Takarazuka Revue Company's organigram, but they also carry particular weight in integrating Takarazuka Revue within the universal circuit of cultural institutions and in mediating Western contents, ideologies, aesthetics to Japanese consumers.

When cosmos troupe subsequently staged *Casino Royale*, it came as a natural conclusion and, simultaneously, as an optimist spring-board due to its progressive reputation, despite *Casino Royale*'s superficially aristocratic appearance. Furthermore, combined with star troupe's re-staging a few weeks later of *1789: The Lovers of Bastille* (『1789：バスティーユの恋人たち』, at Takarazuka Grand Theater on 2. June 2023 and until 18. June 2023 until 2. July 2023 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 22. July 2023 until 15. August 2023 and from 19. August 2023 until 27. August 2023, due to coronavirus-caused interruptions), the Japanese version of the French musical *1789: Les Amants de la Bastille*, with music by Dove Attia, Laurent Delort, Louis Delort, Rod Janois, Jean-Pierre Pilot, Benoit Poher, William Rousseau and Olivier Schultheis as well as lyrics by Attia and Vincent Baguian and a book by Attia and François Chouquet, which had its world-premiere 10. October 2012 at Palais des Sports de Paris, *Casino Royale* continues, symbolically and realistically, Takarazuka Revue Company's relentless pursuit of the appropriation of modernity since at least 1927 by means of the *parimono* genre[7] and its intense focus on Paris due to its crucial role during the French Revolution in triggering, defining and structuring modernity – Western modernity, initially, and the global modernity, eventually.

Compared with the previous moon troupe's version from 2015, star troupe's *1789: The Lovers of Bastille* brings into the foreground the importance of vibrant, decisive male personalities, able to change the course of history and to and to re-direct it into the right tracks: Rei Makoto's 礼 真琴 Ronan Mazurier (a young man whose father was shot dead by the authorities) and Maisora Hitomi's 舞空 瞳 Olympe du Puget (the governess of the Crown Prince and who becomes Ronan's girlfriend) are far more than individual characters on their own journeys through life in times of turmoil; they are symbols of the French Revolution and they are actively employed in the redefinition ("Japanisation") of modernity through performative appropriation (see Barnes, 2001; Bennett and *Woollacott*, 1987; Black, 2005). *Casino Royale* touches only briefly France's capital, but it is there, in the middle of the riots, that he encounters Delphine – incidentally, a descendent of the former Russian imperial family, itself a "hot topic" in two recent Takarazuka Revue performances, both assigned to cosmos troupe, and its representation of 1917's Bolshevik Revolution.

On the one hand, in 2017, 100 years after the Bolshevik Revolution put an end to the century-old Russian Empire and changed the history of the world, the performance *The Land of Gods: The Twilight of the Romanovs* (『神々の土地：ロマノフたちの黄昏』, at

[7] The *parimono* genre refers in Takarazuka Revue's nomenclature to performances centered on Paris as the inception space of ideological modernity due to the French Revolution of 1789, and celebrated as such since 1927's *Mon Paris*, Japan's first performance patterned upon Western, specifically French, models while proclaiming, at the same time, Japan's supremacy and world leadership, with repeated reiterations ever since in ca. one third of the performances; with the remaining two thirds being equally divided between Asian/Japanese and Western plots (Watanabe, 1999, 65-67).

Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 18. August 2017 until 25. September 2017, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from 13. October 2017 until 19. November 2017) with Asaka Manato 朝夏 まなと and Reimi Urara 伶美 うらら in the lead-roles, displayed in nostalgic tones of remembrance and pain the tableau of a wintery Russian aristocracy, entangled in its own twisted sense of importance and unable to sense the upcoming upheavals. Cosmos troupe delivered touching reverberations of times long past, but lacking the atemporal tension from earlier performances based on Leo Tolstoy's monumental novel *War and Peace* from 1869 (star troupe 1988-1989, a subtle pretext to explore Napoleon Bonaparte's life and work) or his complex novel *Anna Karenina* from 1878 (snow troupe 2001, star troupe 2008, moon troupe 2019), which, like *Gone with the Wind*, allowed Takarazuka Revue's administrators to orchestrate once again modern visions on masculinity based on the main female character's flaws and lack of existential direction and by focusing on Count Alexei Kirillovich Vronsky (Alyosha) who turns into the main character. In contrast, *The Land of Gods: The Twilight of the Romanovs* investigates a symbolical return to the sacredness of rural life which could transcend history's violence and past suffering in the light of a new beginning (see Anderson, 1988, 95; Stickland, 2008, 142). Like Marie Antoinette, the Austrian queen of France who was guillotined due to her inability to see the reality metamorphosing in front of her own eyes and who is one of the most celebrated and mourned characters in the popular culture of Japanese media, the Romanovs are seen as ill-fated figures swallowed by the waves of history, inevitably intertwined with the dramatic shifts triggered by mechanisms of popularity, and completely cut-off from their intrinsic significance – or lack of hereof.

On the other hand, three years later, in late 2020, *Anastasia* 『アナスタシア』 breaks away with the tradition of hesitant performance strategy and public display of educational conformity by eviscerating the *parimono* パリ物 subgenre with naturalist insertions *à* la Émile Zola and reframing it in dimensions reminiscent of Fyodor Dostoevsky. In Takarazuka Revue's *Anastasia*, a huge parable on the protective power of amnesia and the benefits resulting from not always remembering the past – at least, not too accurately – is being told, with the main male character Dimitri (without family name, admirably portrayed by Makaze Suzuho), a man of questionable morality, turning to the right pathway in contact with genuine aristocracy which transcends poverty and betrayal, as represented by Anya/Anastasia and her gracious enactment by Hoshikaze Madoka. Staged at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 7. November 2020 until 14. December 2020, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from 8. January 2021 until 21. February 2021, cosmos troupe's version of *Anastasia* was based on *Anastasia The Musical* with music by Stephen Flaherty and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens on a book by Terrence McNally, which premiered on Broadway at Broadhurst Theater in April 2017 after its initial world-premiere in 2016 in Hartford, which in turn originated in Don Bluth's and Gary Goldman's animated musical movie *Anastasia* from 1997. The female main character's absence of a clearly outlined past hinders her emergence as a full-fledged citizen; simultaneously, it allows for an infinity of potential futures to take shape, initially blurry, on the horizon of historical manifestations, counterpointing Anya's silhouette and her shy waltz among the many shadows haunting the derelict imperial palace and its symbolical ramifications in interwar France. Takarazuka Revue's *Anastasia* reiterates prewar *Mon Paris*' imperialist ethos and its overtly paternalist message from 1927, embedded within a thick emotional fabric of *otokoyaku*'s cool reticence and *musumeyaku*'s cute submission, which reverse the cliché of the disempowered human being into a hero of longing and, paradoxically, belonging (see Iwahori, 1972, 12; Takaoka, 1943, 54). As in *The Land of Gods: The Twilight of the Romanovs*, generosity and spiritual enlightenment underscore, according to the axiological ideal promoted by Takarazuka

Revue, the re-evaluation of humanity from a competitive undertaking towards a playful togetherness. The desire to situate Japan in its symbolical representation by Takarazuka Revue Company as a credible successor to the world's last two great empires, the Russian Empire before it became the Soviet Union and the United States of America, transpires from deep within and inoculates itself into audiences' subconscious.

In this train of thoughts, Takarazuka Revue's *Casino Royale* not only brings on-stage one of the most iconic symbols of masculinity – James Bond – which transcends US-American induced hegemony and sways France's territory on a mission both treacherous and divisive, which requires him to overcome his own natural instincts and to obey to his sense of patriotism, commitment to his duty and professional integrity. Conversely, his encounter with Delphine is a symbolical display of the two world they belong to and their incongruent values: within the dramaturgic logic of Takarazuka Revue's approach to history, Delphine's participation in the protests accentuates the distance from the cruel realities of Imperial Russia with its blatant inequalities and simultaneously reflects the post-WWII pro-Communism ideologies held by French intellectuals. While each of them can – and eventually does indeed – move beyond individual and national limitations, there is no simple, unified, unequivocal solution to the world's problems: despite light-hearted interventions like the comical – and not distinctively politically correct – character Zweistein, Einstein's rival to the Nobel prize and his nefarious counterpart in the scientific community, the overall atmosphere of the performance is unexpectedly bleak.

Performed at a key-moment in Takarazuka Revue's recent history, *Casino Royale* opens the way for subsequent performances to address less typical issues, such as technology and its both positive and negative side (in snow troupe's *A Dream in Lilac: The Pride of the Droysen Family*『ライラックの夢路：ドロイゼン家の誇り』, at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 22. April 2023 until 28. May 2023, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from 17. June 2023 until 16. July 2023; and in moon troupe's *Flügel: The Wings You Gave Me*『フリューゲル：君がくれた翼』, at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 18. August 2023 until 24. September 2023, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre on 14. October 2023 and from 18. October 2023 until 19. November 2023) and the continued deconstruction of Japanese premodernity (in *Singing Lovebirds*『鴛鴦歌合戦』, based on the 1939 eponymous musical comedy movie directed by Makino Masahiro マキノ 雅弘 [1908-1993] starring Kataoka Chiezō 片岡 千恵蔵 [real name Ueki Masayoshi 植木 正義, 1903-1983] and Shimura Takashi 志村 喬 [1905-1982]) and staged at Takarazuka Grand Theater from 7. July 2023 until 13. August 2023 and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater from 2. September 2023 until 2. October 2023 and from 6. October 2023 until 8. October 2023), while exploring new directions for the future in two truly revolutionary performances: cosmos troupe's *Pagad: Cagliostro, The Mysterious Magician of the Century*『PAGAD（パガド）：世紀の奇術師カリオストロ』 (based on the 1949 film *Black Magic* directed by Gregory Ratoff which in turn extracted its narrative line from the novel *Joseph Balsamo* by Alexandre Dumas-Père published in 1853, and planned at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 29. September 2023 until 15. November 2023, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from 25. November 2023 until 24. December 2023) and snow troupe's *Boiled Doyle on the Toil Trail*『ボイルド・ドイル・オンザ・トイル・トレイル』 (based on the life of Arthur Conan Doyle, and planned at Takarazuka Grand Theatre from 10. November 2023 until 13. December 2023, and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theatre from 3. January 2024 until 11. February 2024). Tragically, the death by suicide of one of the cosmos troupe's members in late September 2023 and the subsequently emerged allegations/accusations of harassment,

over-work, improper labor practices and rehearsal conditions led to the cancellation of all cosmos troupe's scheduled performances both at Takarazuka Grand Theater and at Tokyo Takarazuka Theater for 2023 and 2024 and to the partial cancellation of snow troupe's scheduled performances at Takarazuka Grand Theater for 2023. The regular performance schedule was reprised with the beginning of the New Year 2024, while investigative and administrative efforts carried on in the background with the goal of normalization and improvement of work conditions for performers.

5. Conclusion: Embracing Theatrokratic Mastery

In Takarazuka Revue's staging of some of Hollywood's most spectacular movies in recent decades, their questionable morality is re-calculated within the formulation, amplification and propagation of certain ideas and ideologies which might function as peaceful counter-hegemonic strategies to USA's claims of historical and geographical supremacy. These strategies are not meant to directly challenge the post-WWII world order; they function, at least in theory, as measures to envision the future and eventually to lead to its benevolent (co-)creation in the name of sustainability and inclusion, mutual respect and a life in dignity for all humans.

Firstly, in Takarazuka Revue's multiple versions of *Ocean's Eleven* staged by three different troupes, the focus moves from the comradeship and the masculine sense of self-assertiveness in the initial live-action feature to the importance of marriage, family and mutual commitment between the two members of the marital union, despite challenges, hardships, betrayals, broken promises and even outright abuse of various sorts. This idealization of abuse as love and its inherent consequence – the sublimation of marriage and family as the ultimate goal regardless of its dysfunctionality – appears as a desperate attempt to salvage the concept of "nuclear family" as the core and fundamental cell of the modern society while blatantly ignoring both its characteristics of being a sociopolitical construction on the background of specific economic realities and necessities brought forth by modernity's rapid urbanization and industrialization, and not a "natural phenomenon" of the human species.

Secondly, Takarazuka Revue's version of *Once Upon a Time in America* unequivocally humanizes its main character Noodles and delivers justice unlike its US-American source of inspiration: the employment of the snow troupe itself with its reputation of staunch traditionalism draws attention to the necessity of punishing the villains and forgiving the lost persons who express sincere regret and genuinely put in the effort to integrate themselves into and to contribute to the community they belong to. In this interpretation, *Once Upon a Time in America* metamorphoses from the twisted representation of the American Dream with its inner contradictions, cruelties and sacrifices, into its cathartic counterpart and delivers the solution to a life of repentance possible after mistakes and wrong-doings: a very hopeful message of love and compassion in a world composed of societies moving gradually farther away from the principles which ensured their functionality, development and survival.

Thirdly, in Takarazuka Revue's version of *Casino Royale*, one of the most iconic representations of Western masculinity and professional prowess is transformed into a symbolical pillar of the current world order while questioning that very world order by softly delving into the mechanisms of history which had led to it – the two major revolutions alluded in the performance – and showcasing, at the same time, the vulnerable elements which would result, if left unchecked, into its decline and eventual collapse. Once

again, the spotlight glides from the individual citizen living in the midst of turmoil and upheaval towards the collective composed of people who do their best to survive and thrive during difficult times. Then again, *Casino Royale* addresses burning questions of the post-pandemic global world with its concurrent tendencies towards increasing interdependence and gradual deglobalization, on the one hand, and pluricentrism as the temporary solution for a more equitable distribution of resources – primarily, natural, human, financial resources – and the overcoming of the brutal inequalities between geographic areas, on the other hand. To be sure, there are no simple answers to such challenges; but facing them straightforward instead of waiting for some sort of miracle to happen seems as the better attitude, *Casino Royale*'s message emerges from one of Takarazuka Revue's most outspoken performances in its more-than-centennial history.

While highly idealist, such performances draw on the millennial tradition of live theater as a tectonic force, capable to shifting history towards the future through the creative manifestation of the discreet yet palpable fluctuations occurring underneath the surface of the present. The courage to embrace this creative manifestation and to deliver it to large audiences – in the way creators and institutions have been doing since time immemorial – is what makes or breaks the validity of the performing event. Takarazuka Revue (Company) has been pursuing this fine balance between ideological freedom and careful soothing of the establishment for more than 110 years – successfully, so far –, thus proving that theatrokratic mastery *is* an authoritative way of observing the present, learning from the past and ultimately shaping the future as a co-creative adventure.

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Fabulation, Erasure, and the Recursive Becoming of Identity Alternative Realities in Postcolonial (Non)Existence

Eve Wong[1]

Abstract

This paper experiments with the functional and imaginal possibilities of Deleuzian "fabulation" as a strategy and methodology for ontological resistance and speculative world-building. Like many Indigenous communities around the world, the Khoisan people of South Africa grapple with the contemporary precariousness caused in part by historical erasure.

The present study utilizes John L. Jackson Jr.'s notion of "sincerity" to re-conceptualize identity as relational rather than essential, incorporates Sara Ahmed's "stickiness" to explain the circulation and anchoring of emotions within collective memory, and demonstrates how "fabulation" serves as a pragmatic approach to navigating marginality. "Fabulation" is framed as a method of speculative ontology that reconfigures reality rather than escaping it. Critical analyses of performances, digital expressions, and quotidian rituals focus on ecologies where official histories, legal structures, and institutional classifications fail to represent lived experiences adequately. These practices, illustrating how small, repeated acts of defiance and creativity can lead to a restored existence, are linked to broader discussions in Indigenous studies, Black studies, and speculative theory.

Keywords: fabulation, speculative identity, Khoisan revivalism, sincerity, alternative realities, affective infrastructures, ontological resistance

Fabulation and the Right to Be Real

What remains after erasure? Survival becomes a means, a form, and an act of rebellious imagination for those whose names were left unsaid and whose futures were closed down due to state ideologies. This paper explores these survival strategies, asking how erased communities survive and, more significantly, how they turn absence into structures. The Khoisan revival in South Africa, I argue, is an illustration of Gilles Deleuze's idea of "fabulation", a narrative technique that blends memory, creation, possibility, and reality. Fabulation is not history or fantasy, and it should not be confused with fabrication. Rather, it represents an act of ontological defiance: a refusal to be obliterated. These narratives are forms of survival grammar rather than escapist tales or philosophical daydreams.[2] Fabulation uses performance, grief, imagination, and repetition to create "alternative realities" or tangible infrastructures of being.

In post-apartheid South Africa, "colored" individuals are hypervisible in carceral systems but invisible in reconciliation efforts. Their Indigeneity claims are often ridiculed as

[1] PhD, University of Cape Town, South Africa, eve.wong@alumni.uct.ac.za, ORCID-ID: 0009-0000-5307-7464.

[2] This resonates with Saidiya Hartman's "critical fabulation" as methodology for addressing "archival gaps" created by colonial violence, challenging knowledge canonized by hegemonic positions while creating space for marginalized voices.

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inauthentic and disconnected from recognized bloodlines. Meanwhile, urban youth who identify as Khoisan do so not to re-establish a fixed, colonial identity, but to create a relationship to land, ancestry, and becoming through ritual, stories, gestures, and memory. These practices are not unique to South Africa. For instance, fabulation is used as a global survival language in Afro-futurist visions in the diaspora and Indigenous storytelling in Taiwan to tell stories about identity and community that are suppressed by systems. Drawing on Deleuze's idea of "people-yet-to-come", I contend that fabulation is not compensation for erasure but a way to materialize the otherwise. Based on fieldwork with people who are reclaiming their Khoisan identity and lineage, I show how youth use ritual, dress, and memory to reshape reality, not recover the past. To support this argument, I examine three frameworks. John L. Jackson Jr.'s (2005) concept of sincerity asks "What relations do you perform?" rather than "Can you prove you are Khoisan?" Meanwhile, Sara Ahmed's (2004) concept of affective stickiness describes how emotions are linked to bodies, rituals, and places, acting as technologies of return through pride and grief. And finally, Deleuzian fabulation, which sees identity as recursive and open-ended, emphasizing continuity amid breakdown.

The study has four parts: reworking "authenticity" into "sincerity"; tracing affect as inheritance; viewing fabulation as temporal speculation; and challenging "the real". The focus is not on whether Khoisan youth are "truly" indigenous but whether our frameworks can recognize that. Fabulation is not identity work but world work, claiming the right to reshape reality.

From Authenticity to Sincerity: Performing Realness

In South Africa, where Khoekhoe and San communities were the targets of centuries of dispossession, renaming, and epistemicide, identity has been overdetermined from without and fragmented from within. The colonial composite term "Khoisan" is ingrained with the sticky nature of these histories. It was first used by a German researcher in 1928, and after South African anthropologist Isaac Schapera adopted it, it became the recognized term in academia. Fabulation thrives right in the shadow of this history. The pursuit of authenticity (whether via bloodlines, land deeds, or unbroken customs) turns into yet another kind of gatekeeping in Khoisan revivalism settings. A verifiable source, such as ancestral maps or genealogical charts, is necessary for authentication. And yet for many, such evidence has been effaced by colonialism, slavery, and apartheid.

Khoisan claims are frequently disregarded because they are thought to be little more than the remnants of a lineage lost to urbanization and hybridity, at least in the case of the "Cape Khoi" of Cape Town. In addition, Khoisan revival intersects with Afrikaans language, Muslim slave heritage, and working-class solidarities, all of which are and were shaped by colonialism. To further complicate matters, the apartheid-era term "colored" has also masked and supplanted Khoisan identity. Legally, the matter is also muddled. In the 2019 Traditional and Khoi-San Leadership Act only five groups are recognized, each requiring proof of community existence before 1913, a standard many urban Khoisan descendants cannot meet. These enquiries concerning place, language, and lineage all relate to protocols of legitimizing belonging. But many young people, according to research, use cultural practices to defy state criteria and reframe politics in other ways. One participant even dismissed pro-Khoisan demonstrations and protests as "poli-tricks", saying simply, "I am just Khoisan". This section suggests a shift away from the strict, extractive logic of authenticity and towards a practice of sincerity, a lived, relational, and performed truth-making that doesn't ask for permission to exist.

To sidestep the bind, this study draws on John L. Jackson Jr.'s (2005) concept of racial sincerity. Unlike authenticity, which fetishizes documentary proof, sincerity emphasizes relational truth.

> "Racial sincerity and authenticity are both ways of thinking through how we find these shortcuts for knowing ourselves and others – for locating the real in (and in the intentions of) everyone around us. The difference is that authenticity theorizes this as an unbalanced relationship between the powerful seer and the impotently seen, the latter being a mere object of the seer's gaze and discourse […] Authenticity attempts to domesticate sincerity, rein it in, and control its excesses. Sincerity highlights the ever-fleeting 'liveness' of everyday racial performances that cannot be completely captured by authenticating mediations of any kind". (Jackson, 2005, 18)

Sincerity is a contextual, embodied expression of identity that emerges through care, repetition, and vulnerability. Sincerity does not ask "are you real?" but "do you show up, again and again, as this self?" Sincerity permits contradiction. It permits grief. It permits growth. It reframes identity not as a fixed inheritance, but as a sustained claim, becoming a doing, not a being. Lavender, a young woman in her early thirties and one of my research participants, described her experience of fragmented memory and identity as "tenselessness". Initially, this was a slip of the tongue, an accident where she had intended to say "tenseness". But after a laugh about it, she and I unpacked her slip-up and arrived at the conclusion that it was probably the result of her brain reaching for more than one "truth" in that moment. In so doing, it merged an operation of time in "tense" with the affective texture of "tenseness". The result was that it captured a temporal cognitive dissonance: a past never fully past, a future still slipping. In this context, being sincere means unapologetically embracing that dissonance. Performances such as dance, dress, prayer, and spoken word all transcend aesthetics in this context and become ritualized claims about the future. A young man may still treasure his "colored" grandfather's "potjiekos" even after wearing a t-shirt he screen-printed with the protest slogan "Khoisan Forever, Colored Never". These are truths to carry sincerely, not contradictions to reconcile. Sincerity asserts its claim allowing multiplicity rather than enforcing purity.

But, does a performance run the risk of turning into a costume? When does sincerity slide into masquerade? In this context, Judith Butler (1990, 94-95) is helpful. She reminds us that performativity is reiteration under pressure, not parody. Identity develops through repeated behaviors influenced by history, surveillance, and consequences rather than through spontaneous choice. Through my research, I was able to trace how repeated acts like multilingual poetry, body adornments, and revived dances all form a counter-archive. They are performed into existence rather than for external attention. In this sense, sincerity is a gambit that existence is real and legitimate without need of recognition. People who are reclaiming their Khoisan identities, like those I have met in my research, do not look to the government, academia, or "official" status for their validity. They assert presence in other ways, where merely stating one's existence turns into revolutionary resistance. This is a metaphysical intervention rather than a rhetorical flourish. Saying "I am Khoisan" sincerely without offering up genealogical evidence for external authentication is to remake the coordinates of the real. Sincerity establishes sovereign terms of legibility and demands to be seen with or without formal permission. These embodied declarations resonate far beyond South Africa, echoing a larger strategy of temporal resistance marked by a refusal of linear history and of colonial inheritance logics. What Khoisan individuals perform are not identities of return, but identities of recursion. Their sincerity rebuilds reality in the doing. And a significant part of how successful that rebuilding is hinges upon its "stickiness". Through stickiness, which I discuss next, I explore the affective infrastructure of this work and how grief, joy, and longing become tools of fabulation.

Stickiness and Affective Worlds: The Emotional Architecture of Alternative Realities

Not all histories are stored in archives. Some are written upon human bodies. They surface as sensations instead of names or dates. A throat that tightens at a half-remembered phrase, tears drawn by hearing a language one never learnt, or even a strange calm in a ritual's repetition. In the next section, I suggest that alternative realities need not only be performed or imagined into form, but they can also be sensed and felt. Ahmed's (2004) "stickiness" helps to clarify this approach. She writes that emotions do not exist inside people; they move. Emotions stick, linger, rub off, and frequently, return. Emotion, when reckoned through their movement, is better understood as "affect". And affect is not just felt but also worlded through the sticky entanglements between body and land.

> "Stickiness itself might not be a quality that always 'adheres' to an object. Rather than using stickiness to describe an object's surface, we can think of stickiness as an effect of surfacing, as an effect of the histories of contact between bodies, objects, and signs. To relate stickiness with historicity is not to say that some things and objects are not 'sticky' in the present. Rather, it is to say that stickiness is an effect. That is, stickiness depends on histories of contact that have already impressed upon the surface of the object". (Ahmed, 2004, 90)

In the context of Khoisan revivalism, affect is not incidental, it is infrastructural; serving as the essential material and relational substrate from which speculative worlds emerge. When people say "I feel Khoisan" instead of "I know I am Khoisan", they are talking about an emotional logic that is both historical and world-building.[3]

One person said, "I just know it in my bones" that they are Khoisan. Another person said, "I cry when I hear Khoekhoegowab, and I don't even understand it". These are not sentimentalities but entries in an affective archive, a memory system that surpasses mere documentation and persists in sensation. For many urban individuals who are presently re-establishing their connection with their Khoisan heritage, the formal archive is either inaccessible or has been destroyed. But not fully lost. Through histories of contact, marking what has been touched, inherited, and carried forward, emotion is not secondary to identity, it is the mode through which disallowed pasts speak. This iteration of Khoisan identity does not cohere through lineage charts but through visceral knowing, reflecting the identity's "stickiness" despite historical efforts at erasure. In the absence of documentation, grief, pride, longing, and shame transform into sticky evidence.

One participant stood at a landmark on Table Mountain and she lamented that she could not call this landmark by its "real name" and said, "I do not have the [papers]. But this place makes me cry. Something is here. And it. is. mine". For her, the mountain becomes an archive, a kin, and a claim. It offers not proof, but presence. Not history, but relation. This is not a metaphor. It is a method. When documents fail, landscapes remember. When bloodlines break, bodies carry continuity. Affective archives do not attempt to replace official history, they grow alongside it, in tension, in refusal, in repair. Khoisan revivalism, which might seem like cultural resurgence on the surface, actually operates as a kind of emotional economy or an affective commons wherein grief, longing, and belonging are shared, redistributed, and reactivated.

Stickiness also shows how emotions can be unevenly weighted and dispersed. Scholars have contended that shame particularly adheres to "colored" identity.[4]

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[3] Dian Million's "felt theory" extends this analysis, demonstrating how Indigenous communities privilege "emotional knowledges" as legitimate forms of community knowledge that challenge colonial marginalization of experiential narratives (Million, 2013).

[4] See, for example, the works of anthropologist Elaine Salo and author Zoë Wicomb.

During apartheid, "colored" was a label used to simplify the challenges of classifying collectivities of people who defy or complicate their racial ideologies. One South African joked with me that it was like the "'there be dragons' bucket" of apartheid. Historian Mohamed Adhikari (2005) once wrote that the social perception was that being "colored" meant you weren't black enough, white enough, pure enough, or whole enough. This imagined link between "colored" and shame persists despite its falsity, showing a negative side to Deleuze's "powers of the false", which I discuss in further detail in the next section. It has been internalized, absorbed, passed down, and often thrums in the background. But revival practices are starting to rewire this emotional circuitry. In a conversation with a schoolteacher from a "colored" township, he discussed his community's Khoisan roots. He joked, "We are the most South African of all South Africans", before adding, "[t]he whole country's history is written in our blood". Almost immediately, he spoke about being forgotten and neglected by his country and fellow South Africans, sadly saying, "We try not to think about it". Proud, defiant, ironic. This is what stickiness looks like. It creates a world where shame and pride coexist, altering each other's stories like layers of a palimpsest. People newly connecting with their Khoisan identities now come together for ceremonies, poetry, and dance at the Castle of Good Hope. They do not sanitize the site's literal and symbolic violent history; instead, they give it a new meaning. Their activities and celebrations turn trauma into a dance of return, rewriting it as strength, survival, and a celebration. These rituals do not heal the wound or deny the scar; they map it.

In this work, a rematriation is at play, pulsing beneath the surface. Indigenous scholars use the word "rematriation" instead of "repatriation" to signal a return through maternal lineages. In the South African context, Bernedette Muthien has notably reframed land and heritage, positioning them not as patriarchal, possess-able, inheritances but as generative matriarchal relationships. Grandmothers, mothers, and "aunties" are not just keepers of memories; they its conduits. One person told me, "My mother doesn't speak the language, but she cooks it [using herbs and flavor palates she learnt from her mother and her mother learnt from her mother's mother]. That's where I learned I was Khoisan". Taste, smell, fabric, and rhythm are all ways to come back, technologies of return.

Ahmed contends that intensity alone does not render an affect "sticky". Repetition is key. Wearing the same ostrich beads each Heritage Day, smelling buchu steeped by a great-aunt, reciting the same poem every September... these are not just nostalgic rituals; they are counter-temporal acts that rebel against convention and create cyclical time within linear erasure. These "small heritages", as David Harvey (2008) would call them, accumulate and as they do, their affect intensifies. They might not require proof, but they demand presence. This "stickiness is what coheres them into a shared social lexicon. It brings together seemingly disparate acts like a young adult's tattoo of a flower she saw in her grandmother's garden, a first attempt to write a poem that starts with the lines, "I do not know where I come from, but I know I come from her", and many other "small heritages" across Khoisan communities into shared meaning, a shared world-building. Through these actions, when taken together, memory is not restored; it is remade.

One interviewee said, "I thought I was the only one who felt this way", but then they met others who also felt Khoisan but didn't care about politics or activism. Affect moves through private WhatsApp groups, open mic nights, flea markets, and shared playlists. Recognition flashes. The human urge to belong gathers people together. These are not formal social movements. They are organic, embodied collectivities of feelings, brought together not by ideology, but by affective intensity. They are not defined by doctrine, but by shared ache. They also tend to be volatile and not organized by any metric typically believed necessary for a "social movement". Emotions can misfire, and relationships can rupture. But in these affective webs, a new kind of social legitimacy rooted in relationality

begins to grow. I saw this all the time. The "auntie" who gives someone else in the group a wild dagga cigarette to smoke while talking about how a mountain once spoke to her. Teenagers who cried during a rematriation poem that they didn't fully understand. Someone saying, "I don't know what I am, but I know I'm not nothing". These lives are sticky. Lives that remember and are remembered through sensation and affect. Lives that won't be erased, even without an archive. When sincerity makes room for change and stickiness keeps us in touch with a recursive and affective (rather than linear) time, fabulation becomes the method by which both lives and archives are woven into becoming.

Fabulation as Speculative Becoming

What does it mean to become something that was lost? When the archives fall silent or deliberately erase you, how do you survive – and more than survive, thrive and remake the lost world? In this section, I propose that fabulation serves as a means to become something new by embodying something old, which I view as a way to counterbalance the absence in the archives and the epistemal demand for "proof" under colonial paradigms. Deleuze posits that fabulation enacts the "powers of the false" (1989, 129-131), not via deception, but through creative falsity as a catalyst for becoming, wherein

> "[t]he time-image puts truth into crisis, not in the sense of shifting cultural values, but in what we cannot know today will come to pass tomorrow and thus must acknowledge the existence of more than a single world – one in which the event does occur, one in which it does not". (Deleuze, 129)

For Khoisan-identifying individuals reclaiming a "lost" identity, fabulation is not an ironic shrug at factual truth. It is a way to make the truth real because the truth is something that dominant frameworks cannot or refuses to see. Fabulation becomes a way to forge existence without archival verification. A design protocol. A planetary ethics. And in these acts of revivalism, the stakes are existential.

If fabulation (1989, 220) is the mode through which today's "missing people" can speak, it is important to highlight that, in South Africa, this "missingness" is not metaphorical, it is material. The Khoisan are rendered missing by classification, by law, by land dispossession. But absence does not erase presence; it innovates invention. During my fieldwork, fabulation manifested in instances where documents were required but were unavailable, inaccessible, or "missing". When proof of identity was needed, fabulation gave a poem. When there were gaps in the family tree, fabulation insisted on oral history. "I am the theatre of pre-colonial imagination" is a line from the hip-opera *Afrikaaps* that sums it up best. This is not cosplay; the Khoisan people are "worlding". Worlding, as a method, is not pretending or posturing at a world that hasn't happened... yet. Worlding is a community playing for keeps towards a reality where game for a world where identity is not conjured through imitation but invoked into existence through iterative acts of becoming. It constructs alternative realities through recursive identity-making small heritage practices like performance, memory, and desire. Instead of trying to recover lost origins, fabulation creates the conditions that make it possible for the missing people to arrive (even if they never do). The mere possibility of arrival is the point.

Fabulation breaks the linear flow of time. It recombines the ideas of origin and invention, refusal and inheritance. Lavender's fabulatory "tenseless" gave her space to exist without proof and still imagine futures. This is a method, a way. This recursive structure reflects Vanessa Watts' Place-Thought theory, wherein land, thought, and existence are interconnected, entangled. Identity is constructed not in a linear fashion but through loops,

affective reverberations, and reassembled fragments (Watts, 2013, 20-34). She writes that Place-Thought is

> "a theoretical understanding of the world via a physical embodiment – Place-Thought. Place-Thought is the non-distinctive space where place and thought were never separated because they never could or can be separated. Place-Thought is based upon the premise that land is alive and thinking and that humans and non-humans derive agency through the extensions of these thoughts". (Watts, 2013, 21)

Watts' cyclical perspective on a Place-Thought cosmology is one where Spirit starts and ends the loop, not as a ghost, but a life-force relationality. It is circular, reciprocal, and co-constitutive: existence emerges from obligation and relation. From this viewpoint, marginalization is not a historical event. It is a phenomenon that perpetuates, refracts, and shape-shifts. Fabulation is the force that reshapes marginalization in real time.

Interlude: Between and Betwixt Spiral and Cycle

Between the recursion of fabulation and the continuity of Place-Thought exists a common metaphysical ethic: the creation of worlds through relation. These two diagrams, spiral and cycle, are not just illustrations; they are ontological arguments. Watts' closed-loop cosmology sees Spirit as the force that starts and ends everything through land, interdependence, and obligation. The cycle returns to an unchanged Spirit and repeats again. In contrast, my fabulation spiral is recursive, fabulation forms layers that spiral around each other. Each iteration goes through absence, imagination, and performance, accruing a surplus before returning ↻ to Absence, but the new "Absence" has been transformed. Every pass alters the substrate. Both perceive reality as fluid, constructed recursively through relationships. Both are an obligation, a transmission, and a speculative speech act. In both cases, agency is never individualistic; it emerges through embeddedness, whether in spirit-place or imagined futures. Both reject linear temporality.

When placed side by side, they show two complementary logics of becoming: one is circular and grounded on Indigenous cosmology, and the other is spiral and grows from speculative insurgency. Both models reject linear colonial temporality but present distinct mechanisms of Indigenous futurity. The spiral accumulates and the cycle grounds. Together, they demonstrate that identity is not recovered, but rather reassembled repeatedly through presence, relationship, and fabulation. The primary difference is that while the hinge in Watts' cycle is communication, in my fabulation spiral, performance is the hinge. With these frames in mind, we now return to fabulation to conclude this section with an exploration of fabulatory future-work and then conclude with a discussion on fabulation's political edge: how it challenges ontology and proposes new ways to be real.

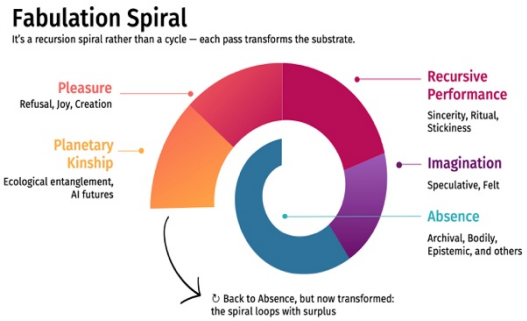


Figure 1. Fabulation Spiral
A recursive model where each pass through absence, imagination, and performance accumulates surplus rather than returning to origin unchanged.



Figure 2. Watts' Place-Thought Cycle
Watts' cyclical cosmology where Spirit initiates and returns through place-based relationality, emphasizing grounded continuity over linear progression.

Fabulation as Speculative Becoming, Remix

This work led to the idea of "Khoisanification", or doing things "in a Khoisan way". It describes a process of revival not through preservation but through remixing, memes, fashion, pleasure, and refusal. It is not a fixed identity. It is a creative, re-iterative re-indigenization. Someone at an event wore a handmade shirt that said, "I am Not Your Rainbow", which is a rainbow nationalism burn. When I asked him about it, he said he had also thought about "Khoisan WiFi: Connecting Past to Present", but his friends thought people would not "get it". Instagram filters ancestral visuals and symbols on selfies. TikTok videos experiment, mixing Khoekhoegowab with Afro-trap beats. Are these fun? Yes. But they are also insurgent. adrienne maree brown (2019) reminds us that pleasure is resistance. These micro-acts of humor, tenderness, and irreverence can be thought of as "tiny desk revolutions". Not loud. But radically reorienting.

Fabulation is not just social, it is global. Khoisan youth are experimenting with technology in unexpected ways, like storing oral histories on YouTube. Using AI tools not to prove lineage, but to play with it the way one might immerse themselves in augmented reality. One participant joked: "If AI cannot find my ancestors, maybe it is not smart enough yet". This is not techno-optimism. It is ontological insurgency: using systems that erase you to build existence elsewhere. This approach resonates with proposals for minoritarian AI: technologies that encode refusal, relation, and recursion, as opposed to normativity or extraction. Fabulation also changes how people and the environment interact. Land is not a metaphor. It is kin. As one revivalist told me that the mountain is sacred, "[Mountain] is my family", she said, using "Mountain" is if it was a personal name. In the face of the climate crisis, these worldings become lessons. They propose a different way of living, one that does not see life as discrete or individualistic, but as entangled entities, beings, systems, biocivilizations across time and species. Fabulation is not an escape. It is an insistence, a way of making reality otherwise. This aligns with what Grace Dillon calls "biskaabiiyang", or a returning to ourselves that rejects Western narratives of progress and asserts Indigenous temporal sovereignty across past, present, and speculative futures (Dillon, 2012). Indigenous futurisms frameworks repositions cultural revival as declarations of the right to exist across all temporal dimensions on Indigenous terms. Khoisan fabulation thus operates within this broader Indigenous movement toward temporal self-determination.

Political Imagination and Ontological Repair

Resistance must be ontological if erasure is ontological, as it targets both existence and the fundamental concepts that coheres existence intelligibly. Khoisan practices of fabulation do not constitute a form of nostalgia. Protests are not symbolic. Ontological insurgency is the process of reassembling a beingness and a becoming in circumstances where their existence has been negated or disregarded. I investigate fabulation as a form of political imagination in its most expansive interpretation, focusing on its capacity to transform the structure of reality rather than confining it to the narrow realm of electoral or institutional politics. In this context, fabulation repudiates the legibility mandates enforced by colonialism, the archive, and the nation-state. Instead, it makes a new way of existing by giving places new names, making new customs, and tracing family trees without official state genealogies. In this way, fabulation becomes both a cultural gesture and a metaphysical intervention. The point is not to claim visibility. The point is to create the conditions that might allow visibility to happen.

Decolonial and postcolonial scholars have long asserted that colonial violence extends beyond physical and material displacement. It pierces the very structures that define existence and life. Sylvia Wynter (2003) identifies this violence in the concept of "Man" as a category that falsely claims universality, depicting Black, Indigenous, and non-Western subjects as deficient or irrational. To be "real" in these kinds of governments means being assessed by colonialist standards. Under these circumstances, fabulation becomes a denial of those measurements. It creates worlds, not identities. These revivalist practices do not seek to integrate into the existing order, as posited by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's notion of "fugitive planning" (2013). They work under it, next to it, or against it. This is an active restructuring of the terms of existence, what I have been referring to as "ontological insurgency". This ontological insurgency practice aligns with speculative realism's assertion that multiple ontologies can coexist without being diminished to epistemological disparity (Bryant et al., 2011).

Indigenous and colonial frameworks do not offer competing ways of knowing the same world; instead, they propose fundamentally distinct worlds characterized by divergent arrangements of existence, agency, and possible relations. Fabulation transforms into a method of actualizing these alternative ontologies. Think about a young Khoisan woman who paints her face with symbols of her ancestry before performing a spoken word piece in Bellville. Or someone that plants healing herbs in a traffic circle and calls it "Khoi Circle". These are more than just works of guerilla Indigenous art. They literally reorganizing meaning and space. They reconfigure the "distribution of the sensible", which Jacques Rancière (2004) would say determines who can be heard, seen, and read. Fabulation breaks the silence of colonialism. No permission is needed. In any case, the silence is speaking. In fabulation, there is no difference between the poetic and the political.

As a method, it passes through aesthetic forms. Ritual dances and TikTok memes are revivalist expressions that transcend mere ornament. These infrastructures are speculative. They invite us into what José Esteban Muñoz (2009) calls a "utopian blueprint", or a place where new ways of being seem possible rather than political promises of liberation. These procedures are not always consistent. They mix and remix the political and the personal, the serious and the light-hearted, the sacred and the profane. Édouard Glissant's (1997) concept of the "right to opacity" is essential in this context. Explainability is not a requirement for emergent Khoisans. Their denial of openness is a defense of emergence and a rejection of colonial surveillance. To fabulate is to engage with the world rather than merely represent it. Karen Barad (2007) says this: meanings and beings don't exist before their interactions; instead, they are created through relating. A young person's claim of "I

am Khoisan" is fluid. It is a contingent, ongoing, and incomplete event. The performance and the ritual do not come before the identity. Identity is composed through them.

By moving in loops, breaks, and glitches, fabulation disrupts colonialism from trying to correct Indigenousness through authenticating (or not) the past in the present. Indigeneity claims the "tenseless", blending the past, present, and possible future in their practices and performances. Elizabeth Freeman (2010) calls this opposition to linear time, which divides life into acceptable times as "chrononormativity". But fabulation breaks chrononormativity.[5] At the Woordfees festival a few years back, I saw a young Khoisan university student in Nike trainers surrounded by a few of his friends in a park calling on precolonial gods with a mobile torch while surrounded by spoken word and incantation. They were probably intoxicated. The gods probably weren't called by their proper names. It lacked temporal coherence. It was incredibly sincere. It was flawless. Moten (2013) reminds us that "we owe each other the indeterminate". These "time glitches" are not errors. They are tactics. They make it seem like new futures are now possible. Fabulation does not promise utopia. It does what Donna Haraway (2016) calls "staying with the trouble". The Khoisan people who are coming out live in contradiction: they quote ancestral chants that have been auto-tuned, they are skeptical of bloodline claims, and are proud of having a Khoisan grandfather or grandmother. They don't resolve these tensions. They inhabit them. They lead speculative lives that are both luminous and wounded.

This work offers more than just a critique of culture. It is a suggestion. Fabulation is most effectively understood as a variant of speculative ontology, a domain that integrates queer temporality, Black studies, Indigenous cosmology, and speculative design. This field is not academic in the narrow sense. It is experienced. It is done. You can feel it. In this ontological framework, absence is respected as a method. Denise Ferreira da Silva (2007) posits that blackness constitutes the essence of being rather than its negation. Replacing or restoring what has been lost in the archive does not fix it. But the possibilities have now multiplied. It increases presence instead of eliminating erasure. Fabulation sees multiplicity, ambiguity, and contradiction as things that create new things, similar to how Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) understood multiplicity, ambiguity, and contradiction. These are not abstract dreams. They are felt realities, constructed through rituals, desires, and repetition. Fabulation creates the conditions for an alternative way of living. It is very personal, recursive, and insurgent. It doesn't try to make itself readable by existing, hegemonic systems. It asks: what if legibility itself is the problem? With that, I proceed to the next section, where these expansive ideas come together with everyday actions, commonplace gestures, memes, performances, and an embodied poetics that make the speculative feel real. I call these "tiny desk revolutions" because they are small, lasting changes in how we become rather than top-level, structural changes. They turn fabulation from a theory into a way of life.

Tiny Desk Revolutions and the Recursive Present

What if revolution does not erupt but accumulates? Not in banners or battalions, but in beads, memes, and names spoken softly. This work has shown how young South Africans who are part of Khoisan revivalism resist not by going back to the past, but by fabulating a future, one small act at a time. They are not waiting for the revolution. They iterate it. In this perspective, fabulation is distinct from fantasy. It is a recursive form of realism. It builds with the broken and the unreadable, with ghost archives, interrupted languages, and

[5] Mark Rifkin's "temporal sovereignty" theory demonstrates how Indigenous temporalities become expressions of political sovereignty, enabling modes of becoming that exceed "settler time" (Rifkin, 2017).

inheritances that are uncertain. To fabulate is to live in a glitch and stay there long enough to call it home. These are not big actions. They are quiet no's. A bracelet on a school desk. A voice note on WhatsApp with a word here or there in half-remembered, maybe Khoekhoe words, a grandmother once said. A social media post with the caption "I don't have the paper[s], but I have our poetry". These "tiny desk revolutions" are fairly unremarkable on their own, but recursive in power. These micro-acts, these small heritages, they accumulate, layer, and resonate. They create a world that the government does not recognize, but is real nonetheless. In this case, fabulation is not an attempt to prove identity. It is a way of becoming real despite non-recognition. It rejects the pressures to be authenticated, to have the right family tree or documentary evidence, or to be legible to bureaucratic requirements. Instead, it moves through sincerity, affect, recursion, and refusal. It does not ask, "Am I Khoisan enough?" Instead, it asks, "What relationships do I enact and invoke, again and again?" Lavender said, "We don't need anyone's permission to exist." That line could be a methodology.

Fabulation transforms into a survival cosmology, an approach to engaging with the world that is neither reactive nor nostalgic. It is speculative and situated. It says, "The archive is gone, but I remember through my nose." The state might not see me, but the mountain knows. There are gaps in my history, but my rituals are intact. In her Place-Thought cosmology, Vanessa Watts (2013) says that being comes from relation, not recognition. And relation is a recursive process. The speculative lives examined here transcend identity politics. They offer a roadmap for everyone who has been made ontologically precarious, such as refugees, Indigenous people, undocumented migrants, and people whose language, data, law, or time have been erased. Fabulation transforms into a politics of unproof, operating without waiting for legitimization. It becomes true through repetition, affect, and sincerity. That belief isn't naive. It is tactical. To fabulate is to reject the ontological violence of being declared unreal. It is an act of defiance. It means putting a picture of a Khoisan ancestor on a classroom wall. It is giving a child an Khoekhoe name. Even when no map agrees, it says, "I come from here." These are the politics of the in-between: not quite recognized, not entirely lost, and constantly becoming. This is not a conclusion, this is not the end.

It is an invitation.

An invitation to consider reality as recursive.

An invitation to listen to the speculative not as fiction, but as a method.

An invitation to make space for the unverifiable and the intensely felt.

To fabulate is to build otherwise.

To build otherwise is to world.

And to world is to resist disappearance.

And sometimes, that is enough.

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Mon Laferte: Retro-Feminist Future Pop from Post-Dictatorship Chile

Israel Holas Allimant[1]

Julio Uribe Ugalde[2]

Abstract

Born in 1983, at the tail end of Chile's dictatorship (1973-1990), and becoming prominent as an artist in Chile in 2003 and later well-known across Latin America and worldwide, Mon Laferte's career has been marked by its dynamic relationship with retro-futuristic aesthetics. Covering a range of genres, from futuristic Latin-Pop, the retro-Latin ballads of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, to Latin America's folkloric traditions including Mexican regional music, bolero and even *salsa*, Laferte's work combines the nostalgic sounds of the popular music of Latin America's recent past with a set of intensely personal narratives. Utilizing Mark Fisher's and Bifo Berardi's theorizations of hauntology and lost futures, Simon Reynolds' insights into the retro, and combining these with Ahmed's insights on feminism, this article proposes that Mon Laferte's work as a musician, lyricist, cover-artist, and producer of visual media, functions towards overcoming the dual traumas of Chile's dictatorship and Latin America's *machismo*, by producing an aesthetic territory that privileges feminine and traditionally feminized spaces, experiences, affects and discourses. In this way social traumas are enmeshed with personal ones, and a retro-futurist voice emerges, which side-steps masculine visions of the social and the political, proposing instead an introspective vision that is filtered through the feminine experience.

Keywords: Mon Laferte, Retro-futurism, Feminist Pop, Pain/Trauma, Chilean Pop Music

1. Introduction

Mon Laferte (Norma Monserrat Bustamante Laferte) is one of Chile's most successful contemporary popular musical artists. From 2015 onwards, she has enjoyed a high degree of success as a recording artist and performer across the Spanish-speaking world and globally. She has won two Latin Grammy awards (2019, 2021), and in 2024 she was the subject of the Netflix documentary, *Mon Laferte: te amo*. Yet, however successful in the last decade, Laferte's story has humble origins: born in the regional city of Viña del Mar in 1983, ten years into Chile's military dictatorship (1973-1990), Laferte began her career as a singer/composer in her early life, dropping out of school in order to perform in the streets, night clubs and local festivals of her hometown, earning $1500 Chilean pesos a day (approximately USD $1.50) until 2002.

[1] Lecturer in Spanish and Latin American Studies, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia, israel.holas@unimelb.edu.au, ORCID-ID: 0000-0002-6763-1646.
[2] Lecturer in Spanish and Latin American Studies, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia, julio.uribe@unimelb.edu.au, ORCID-ID: 0000-0003-1391-9940.

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In 2002, her luck changed when she was selected to participate in the popular national television talent show *Rojo: Fama Contrafama* (*Red: Fame Against Fame*). Under the name of Montserrat Bustamente, she took part in the show from 2002 until 2007, nurturing a public profile, and professionalizing her career as a performer. While still in the show, Bustamante released her 2003 debut album, *La chica de rojo* (*The Girl from Red*), receiving Gold and Platinum Album awards in Chile within its first month of release. This album marked the beginning of her career as a recording artist, while it also highlighted her ambiguous relationship to pre-existing genres of popular music, most notably the romantic ballad and bolero genres, an ambiguity which, as we shall see in the pages that follow, would prove central to the later retro-futurist pop she would release under the name of Mon Laferte, where she would develop her sound around genres traditionally associated with feminine audiences, yet which were traditionally controlled, in the sense of composition and production, by men, reverting completely the power dynamic in the genres by emphasizing intimately lived experiences, from the perspective of feminine lived experience.

Despite her successful first album, Laferte later declared that *La chica de rojo* did not faithfully represent her artistic identity, as the show producers did not allow her to include her original compositions. Many of the songs on the album spoke of themes of love and romance from the position of a naive female speaker, distant from her musical and personal interests, which lay, at the time, more strongly in alternative-rock music and singer-songwriter compositions ("La vida antes de Mon Laferte", 2017, paragraph 18) with lyrics based around themes of personal experience, and which later developed to include public statements on feminism and solidarity with topical social struggles in Chile. Nevertheless, given Laferte's background, the exposure from the album allowed her to earn a living as a performer, alongside her work on the television show until, in 2007, she moved permanently to Mexico, where she changed her artistic name to Mon Laferte and started performing covers in nightclubs again, before eventually performing her own repertoire.

In 2011, she released the independent album *Desechable* (*Disposable*) – her first album under the name Mon Laferte – and in 2013, *Tornasol* (*Iridiscence*), also independently produced. These albums represent a dramatic contrast to her prior work. The songs in these albums are much more varied, owing much to various pop-rock styles, and are characterized by their confronting lyrics that mark her departure from the naive image fabricated by her former producers. Visually, Laferte adopts a striking image, comprised of long dark hair, bold make up, and sleeveless short dresses that accentuate her retro-styled tattoos. Lyrically, these albums touch on themes of self-empowerment, on romantic experiences articulated from Laferte's own perspective (rather than from the stereotypes of the masculine songwriter of romantic ballads), and on the expression of the interiority of intimate lived experiences.

Since 2013's *Tornasol*, Mon Laferte, who became a Mexican citizen in 2022, has released six albums on major label, Universal Music. In 2024, she embarked on a tour of the Americas and Europe and signed to US-label Sony Music Latin. Although Laferte's career is still developing and underway, the albums released in the period spanning from 2013 until present are considered her mature work, where her own interests and influences are most developed and distilled in terms of their musical, lyrical and visual content. Laferte's work over this last decade has continued to explore the sonic and songwriting possibilities offered by different genres, mixing her own futuristic-sounding Latin-pop sensibilities, with the retro-sonic imprints of distinctly Latin American popular music genres from the mid-20th century onwards, including bolero, *salsa*, *cumbia*, as well as more distinctly folkloric traditions from Chile and from Mexico's regional music genres. During the same period of time, Laferte has also largely eschewed the alternative-rock and heavy rock influences

of her independently produced 2011 and 2013 albums, embracing instead the intimacy offered by her dialogue with popular music genres from the recent past. As an artist, Laferte has focused on her own compositions, largely articulated around themes of lived experiences, underscoring the effects of emotion and affect in response to personal experiences, including childhood, romantic encounters, social commentary and reflections on the past, as well as her own experience of celebrity.

This article proposes that Mon Laferte's work as a musician, lyricist, cover-artist, and producer of visual media, functions towards the overcoming of the dual traumas of Chile's dictatorship and Latin America's patriarchal *machismo*, by creating, via her retro-aesthetics, an expressive territory that hijacks past genres of music, intervening in their discourses and sonorities to privilege traditionally feminized spaces, experiences, affects and discourses. By intervening in older genres, Laferte articulates her femininity from a first-person perspective, creating a saturating effect which de-centers the patriarchal original bent of the genres that she re-works (Benisz, 2021, 3). In this way social traumas are enmeshed with personal ones, and a retro-futurist voice emerges, which side-steps masculine visions of the social and the political, proposing instead an introspective vision that is filtered through an embodied or lived feminine experience, first based in Chile, and then in Mexico.

2. Retro-Feminist Future-Pop: Memory between the Past and Future in a Post-Dictatorship Society

Numerous scholars have signaled the paradoxical role that popular music plays in the opening decades of the 21st century, with respect to its relationship to the past, the present and to the future. Throughout the 20th century, popular music in the Western world had been "the herald of the future" (Attali, 1985, 11), intimately linked to the production of the new, and deeply tied to social changes because of the plasticity and adaptability of its aesthetic textures and its status as economic vanguard of the culture industries. Because of its ties to the counterculture of the 1960s, for the rest of the 20th century music held a special status, whereby

> music culture was a probe that played a major role in preparing the population to *enjoy* a future that was no longer white, male or heterosexual, a future in which the relinquishing of identities that were in any case poor fictions would be a blessed relief. (Fisher, 2014, 28)

In contrast, at the turn of the new century, popular music and popular culture had, for many scholars, become characterized by its "retromania" and an "addiction to its own past" (Reynolds, 2011). Popular culture was questioned for its inability to face up to the present moment,

> as though we had become incapable of achieving aesthetic representations of our own current experience. […] an alarming and pathological symptom of a society that has become incapable of dealing with time and history. (Jameson, 1998, 9)

For Fisher, Reynolds, Jameson and other scholars working on the politics of memory, this was a sign of popular culture's connections to a generalized sense of nostalgia expressed in the face of the profound economic, social and political transformations of the early 21st century:

> Nostalgia for the past also intensified because the world was changing faster. Economic transformations, technological innovations and sociocultural shifts all meant that for the first time there were increasingly stark differences between the world that you grew up in and the world in which you grew old. (Reynolds, 2011, xxvi)

For scholar Franco "Bifo" Berardi, however, the turn towards the retro-nostalgic is also profoundly linked to the cultural horizons and material expectations produced by the political movements of the twentieth century, which

> were shaped in the conceptual frameworks of an ever progressing development, albeit through different methodologies: the Hegelo-Marxist mythology of *Aufhebung* and instauration of the new totality of Communism; the bourgeois mythology of a linear development of welfare and democracy; the technocratic mythology of the all-encompassing power of scientific knowledge, and so on. (Berardi, 2011, 19)

In the present, the defeat of alternative political projects by the drive to embrace neoliberal rationality in all spheres of life, a process in which Chile was at the global vanguard (Klein, 2007), has eviscerated all this horizon of utopian thinking:

> The idea of the future is central in the ideology and in the energy of the twentieth century, and in many ways it is mixed with the idea of utopia. […] In the last three decades of the century the utopian imagination was slowly overturned, and has been replaced by the dystopian imagination. (Berardi, 2011, 17)

Thus, instead of horizons of solidarity, and political projects built on class struggle, in the twenty-first century, life is thought of as competition: "Captured in the dynamics of war, everyday life is ready to be subjected to the unlimited rule of the commodity" (Berardi, 2011, 36). In response, popular culture has stopped looking toward the future, and instead, remains frozen in a retrospective gaze contemplating the past traumas that have created the present moment.

From a hauntological perspective, Holas Allimant (2024) argues that Chile's popular music remains haunted by the ghosts of its recent past, particularly with respect to the utopic horizon represented by the Chilean Popular Unity project of democratic socialism (1970-1973), which was violently interrupted by a 17 year-long military dictatorship (1973-1990), in which Chile underwent a radical counter-revolution, and a profound social and economic set of transformations (Klein, 2007). As a result of this trauma, Holas Allimant (2024, 9) identifies three retro-nostalgic tendencies in Chile's contemporary popular music: firstly, a "nostalgia" that has been reterritorialized by capital (represented for example, in the reunion tours of famous bands from the late 20th century); secondly, that of a pop-depressive phase (represented, for instance, in Chile's neo-psychedelic scene), where the nostalgic is expressed as a subtle form of resistance against capital's individualist discourses of entrepreneurship; and thirdly, a retro-combative tendency that through nostalgia reactivates symbols from Chile's past political history in the face of present social struggles (represented in the work of activist-musicians like Ana Tijoux). In what follows, we situate Mon Laferte's work in a fourth space that branches out from the "retro combative" (Holas Allimant, 2024, 9) and its rekindling of the past in order to change the present: in Laferte's nostalgic dialogue with genres of music from Chile's and Latin America's recent pasts, she creates new aesthetic and political possibilities, reinscribing older musical genres with new potential in an intimate and personal expression of feminism that speaks back to the past, in order to create a new horizon of possibility in the present.

Laferte's critical dialogue with the popular music of the recent past begins to become apparent in the 2015 album *Mon Laferte Vol. 1*, where she starts to fuse traditional musical styles with intimate, autobiographical storytelling. In this work, Laferte unveils her interest in older musical styles, such as bolero, romantic ballad, Mexican and Andean folk music. Laferte dialogues with these genres in a gesture that echoes the work of one of her main influences: Chilean singer and folklorist, Violeta Parra (1917-1967). As scholars have noted (Torres, 2004; Vilches, 2004; Kim, 2018; Valdebenito, 2019), in the 1950s and 1960s, Parra, who was a major figure in Chile's folk-music scene (as performer and singer/songwriter), was also engaged in the documentation of the musical traditions of Chile's countryside,

which were endangered due to mass migration from the country to the capital city, Santiago. Parra's work aimed to vindicate the "difference" of such unique peripheral sounds, which she reinterpreted, and made her own (Torres, 2004, paragraph 77). Parra, like Laferte, used these references as a starting point in her own artistic practice, adding a personal touch as she would incorporate influences into her own authorial perspective, innovating and creating novelty within an established and highly codified musical tradition. Laferte also identifies with Parra in their shared lack of formal musical training, as both artists developed their musical skills by observing family members at home: Parra learned from her parents, while Laferte was taught by her grandmother, Norma. In both cases, musical techniques are not as important as their artistic honesty and sensitivity. Hence, Laferte states: "Violeta was not formally trained in the arts, but she had a unique expression, and that is what I take from her. I am her daughter. If you really want to express yourself, you must listen to your heart"[3] ("Mon Laferte homenajea el legado de Violeta Parra," 2025, paragraph 9). Thus, in this statement, we can clearly see Laferte's two-fold engagement with tradition: her work is characterized by its dialogue with older musical styles, which in turn, is personalized in her retrieval of personal memories within the context of family tradition, and these experiences are expressed in lyrics that narrate intimate stories of her own lived experience.

Musically, Laferte's work is characterized by its amalgamation of the retro-nostalgic elements, expressed in the employment of old-fashioned rhythms, styles and aesthetics of genres like the romantic ballad, bolero, *cumbia, salsa*, and other regional and folkloric musical traditions, with the sounds of contemporary pop. Her songwriting is characterized by its articulation of emotionally loaded lyrics, often based on biographical experience, which strongly highlights the feminine voice and perspective, sharing them with her audience. This notion of sharing the intimate experience through song is central to her artistic production and to the political potential implicit in it, for as Patrick Hogan (2010, 185) explains, emotions are not directly transferred but are mediated and represented through narratives. These narratives reach an audience who interpret the emotions through their own sensory and cognitive frameworks. Thus, it is notable that Laferte decides to materialize her own traumatic experiences in her song lyrics, sharing them with her listeners through the language of music. In doing this, Laferte enmeshes her own personal, embodied and lived experience as feminine subject in a patriarchal society, with the public domain, in an act of solidarity and activism that brings catharsis to a society that is also dealing with its own process of healing: Chile, with respect to the trauma of the 1973-1990 Pinochet dictatorship, and more broadly Latin America, with respect to the way patriarchal values are embedded in popular culture.

Having established here the basic coordinates of Laferte's retro-nostalgic musical topography and noted the importance of her highly personal lyrical and emotive themes, and how these nevertheless extend beyond the realm of her own individual experience, in the following section we will contextualize Laferte's work as part of a new movement of Chilean feminist singers and songwriters that exercise activism by voicing their pains and traumas throughout their artistic compositions. The following section contextualizes the emergence of feminism in Chilean music since the 1973-1990 dictatorship until the present day, providing examples of activism in popular song.

[3] All translations are ours unless otherwise stated.

3. Feminism in Chilean Song Today

The representation of a feminine/feminist voice in Chilean popular music can be traced back to Violeta Parra. Chilean musicologist Lorena Valdebenito (2019) notes that, although songs explicitly addressing womanhood are rare in Parra's corpus, two standout pieces in her canon are "Versos por despedida a Gabriela Mistral" ("Farewell verses to Gabriela Mistral") (1957) and "Qué vamos a hacer (Ayúdame Valentina)" ("What are we going to do! [Help me Valentina]") (1963), dedicated respectively to the Chilean poet Gabriela Mistral and the Soviet cosmonaut Valentina Tereshkova. In each of these songs, Parra establishes a fictional dialogue with these women, an action that serves as homage to their contribution to world history. In one, Parra concentrates on Mistral's pedagogical and literary contributions, which resulted in her Nobel Prize in literature award in 1945, in the other, she highlights Tereshknova's intelligence and scientific achievements, positioning her as an exemplary woman from whom Parra can learn about complex scientific and political topics (Valdebenito, 2019, 5). If explicitly addressing the social and scientific contribution of women in her songs positions Violeta Parra as a pioneering feminist, as is argued by Valdebenito, Parra's songs can also be interpreted as feminist interventions in the folk tradition, as they foreground her own experiences and subjectivity, giving voice to the feminine exposure to reality in a time in which this was uncommon, at least in popular and folk music traditions. As a result, Parra would prove a central influence in the Chilean New Song movement[4] which came to prominence in the 1960s and in the lead up to the 1970 elections, and which was intimately linked to the political program of the *Vía chilena al socialismo* (*The Chilean Road to Socialism*). Despite Parra's artistic influence and eminent work as a folklorist and singer-songwriter, the New Song movement was mostly made up of male singers and bands, who eschewed the personal themes explored in Parra's music for more explicitly political themes. Musicologist Pablo Rojas argues that, given the powerful image associated with manhood during this period, expressed in the idea of the socialist "new man," discussions about gender roles were not considered a priority for New Song artists at the time (2022, 2), who were focused on class struggle. If gender relations would prove to be a blind-spot during the transition to the Democratic Socialist government (1970-1973), gender inequality would be radically entrenched in the 1973-1990 dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet (1915-2006).

Beyond the patriarchal logic that underlies authoritarian regimes in the Spanish-speaking world (Zamora Garrao, 2008), the Pinochet dictatorship ensured that traditional patriarchal gender roles were clearly defined in the 1981 constitution which contained an explicit prohibition against supporting ideologies that undermined the patriarchal, traditional family, by enshrining gendered norms in the national educational system and reinforcing these in state-controlled mass media (Kirkwood, 1986, 46). This focus on traditional gender roles had a counterproductive effect, triggering women to voice their demands and create alliances against patriarchy.

Following the return to democracy in 1990, Chilean feminism experienced a decline, largely due to the absence of a common adversary and a unified political agenda. Many feminist political groups sought to position the newly established democratic government as an ally, particularly after the creation of the National Women's Service (SERNAM). In contrast, the popular wing of the feminist movement sought to preserve an autonomous and critical stance, remaining dissident. As a result, Chilean feminism became divided between those

[4] "New Song began as a fusion of traditional musical forms with socially relevant lyrics [...]. Beginning in the mid-1960s, [this movement] grew and consolidated throughout the rest of the decade and flourished during the 1970–73 presidency of Salvador Allende. The music of the Nueva Canción was outlawed after the military coup d'état of 1973" (Morris, 1986, 118).

who pursued institutional alliances and those who defended independence and dissent (Feliú, 2009, 703). The institutional sector, closely aligned with the political establishment and enjoying greater visibility, came to represent a hegemonic form of feminism. Their proximity to governmental discourse led them to embrace a more conciliatory approach, emphasizing women's roles within the family rather than advocating for rights related to still politically contentious issues such as divorce or abortion. This moderation was influenced by the Catholic Church and the prevailing conservative values of the political right (Richard, 2001, 230). Within this context, the notion of "gender" was often condemned and portrayed as a threat to moral and social conventions. Instead, so-called "natural" female traits – such as emotionality, delicacy, intuition, and practicality – were associated with traditionally feminine domains like healthcare, education, and domestic life. This essentialist framing reinforced binary gender distinctions and contributed to the perception of femininity as inherently subordinate to masculinity (Richard, 2001, 235). Toward the end of the 20th century the gender discussion in Chile shifted to sexual and reproductive rights. Demands for the legalization of abortion, the incorporation of secular sex education in schools, access to safe contraceptive methods, the right to non-discrimination based on gender or sexuality, and the shaping of sexual policies that are not founded on compulsory heterosexuality, became the main topics of debate (Morán, 2013, 486). In this scenario, feminist movements lose their capacity to mobilize, being undermined by a generalized devaluation of collective action, within a context where political decisions were increasingly shaped through inter-elite dialogues (Morán, 2013, 501).

Providing an alternative vision of the role of women in Chilean society – disconnected from largely institutionalized debates about gender-relations in Chile –, in the early 2000s, feminist singers and bands like *Venus*, *Mamma Soul* and *Corrosivas* emerge with compositions that criticize patriarchy. Their songs spoke about a different type of woman: corrosive, independent, incisive, lascivious and sexual, fearless and determined to say who they were and what they wanted, thus inverting the roles of masculinity and femininity imposed by the establishment (Becker, 2011, 57). This contrasted sharply with the submissive image projected at the time by Anglo singers – such as Whitney Houston and Celine Dion –, and even that of popular local singers like Myriam Hernández, who performed songs centered on emotional suffering and heartbreak caused by male neglect and indifference (Becker, 2011, 56).

The arrival of the Internet in Chilean households marked a turning point for female musicians, who were empowered by the availability of the home studio and the internet as a means of production and distribution of music, side-stepping the censorship and processes of the major labels. Additionally, due to the growth in the number of music schools during the 2000s, there was a notable increase in the number of female instrumentalists and, consequently, in women's bands (Becker, 2011, 58). Among Chilean young women there was a proliferation of bands that revisit themes such as gender, lesbianism, segregation, and machismo, adopting a stance that is less about reclamation and more about provocation and playfulness, characteristic of post-feminism. Among young rock musicians, a new vision of femininity emerges – one centered on the empowerment of individual capacities, with live performances emphasizing a critical interrogation of gender (Becker, 2011, 58).

A key figure in the voicing of feminist values in popular music is that of Chilean hip-hop musician Ana Tijoux. Her 2014 song "Antipatriarca" ("Antipatriarch") – among multiple others in a musical career that began in the 1990s with the groundbreaking Chilean hip-hop group *Makiza* – functions as an artifact of feminist activism that advocates for women's autonomy, freedom and empowerment, while rejecting patriarchal violence. The

song urges its recipients to reject and transform the condition of subordination and discrimination that affects women (Barros, 2020, 60). "Antipatriarca" is notable because it highlights the links between popular music and social movements in Chile and Latin America in the contemporary moment: the song's 2015 film clip connects to the Zeitgeist of the #NiUnaMenos (#NotOneLess) movement, a feminist campaign that began in Argentina in response to rising femicide rates and gender-based violence, which quickly spread across the region, strongly resonating in Chile, a country with an alarming history of gender violence. In 2016, as women marched on the streets of Santiago, student leaders called on protesters to bring photocopies of the lyrics to the song "Antipatriarca", which became a manifesto for the thousands of women mobilized against sexual violence (Barros, 2020, 59).

For Chilean feminist and philosopher Olga Grau, this movement was characterized by the ways in which female bodies became a powerful symbol of political rebellion, used in novel, unexpected ways. Although critically questioned throughout feminist history as a univocal signifier, whether as a maternal body, a heteronormative sexual object, or as a corporeality confined to certain functions or domains, in the protests the body acquired a revolutionary role (Grau, 2019, paragraph 4): the actions of young women baring their breasts in public protests became a clear gesture of the female body's cultural resignification, signifying women's refusal to be seen as objects of masculine possession, and therefore, physically manipulated or violated (Grau, 2019, paragraph 4).

In October 2019, after a succession of events that accumulated "precariousness and structural inequality that neoliberal policies configured, materialised, and naturalised in Chilean society" (Garcés, 2019, 483), people spontaneously organized a "series of national-scale protests that placed Chile's postmillennial socio-political order [...] under structural crisis." A number

> of barricades became commonplace, and in the later months of 2019, seeing hooded individuals in streets next to flaming barricades had become routine, a basic element of protests that were being held multiple times a week by mobilized individuals. (Woods, 2022, 29)

This physically embodied intervention, which was widespread in the protests, gained international visibility in the cultural sphere, with the performance of "Un violador en tu camino" ("A Rapist in your Path") by the collective group LASTESIS. The overall discontent expressed in the street protests sought to demonstrate "that the State and its various representatives are equally rapists insofar as they enable gender-based civil violence by granting impunity to those exercising violence on women's bodies" (Woods, 2022, 104).

It is in this general context, laden with explicit links between popular music and feminist social mobilization, that we situate Laferte's career as a musical artist. In the pages that follow we relate how her retro-futurist aesthetic forms a novel link between the musical and the political that foregrounds a particularly reflexive feminist lived experience.

4. Laferte's Retro-Feminist Future Pop: between the Present and the Past

Despite her move to Mexico, Laferte used her public image to raise awareness on behalf of her fellow Chileans and their broadly socially progressive demands by condemning the police brutality and violence enforced against protesting civilians. This was demonstrated at the 2019 Latin Grammys award ceremony, where she appeared partially nude with a green bandana around her neck exposing her breasts to photographers with the text "En Chile torturan violan matan" ("In Chile, they torture, rape and kill"). Because of this

statement, publicized in mass-media across the globe, Laferte was charged by the Chilean public prosecutor's office, to which she publicly responded:

> When you are born poor and suffer from hunger you cannot keep silent when witnessing social injustices. I became a singer because of a matter of necessity as I needed to provide for my family. I said what I said because I thought it was the right thing. […] My preferred language to raise my voice is my songs. That is how I best speak. (Laferte in FESTIVALDEVINACHILE, 2020)

Although the charges were dropped, Laferte's statement demonstrates that, while her work as a singer-songwriter did not often explicitly deal with political positions, it nevertheless proposes a critical dialogue with social expectations about the role of women in Chilean society and politics. Inspired by the protests, in November 2019, she released the single "Plata Ta Tá" with Puerto Rican rapper Guaynna, with lyrics that allude to the Chilean social uprising. In this song she unveils her critique of the abuse of power and wealth accumulation in her homeland, signaling the power of the feminist movement in creating a popular voice in the lead up to the 2019 protests:

> Al final todo es porque quieren plata
> Los mismos huevones de siempre
> No están ni ahí con la gente
> Todo es plata, plata, plata
>
> Nos sacamos los sostenes
> Levantamos los pañuelos
> Verde como la marihuana
> Esa que vende la anciana...
>
> *In the end, it's all about the cash*
> *The same old bastards*
> *They couldn't care less for the people*
> *It's money, money, money*
>
> *We take off our bras*
> *Raise our scarves*
> *Green like weed*
> *Sold by grandma...*
>
> (Laferte & Guaynna, 2019)

However radicalized by the Chilean social uprising, this song also illustrates the strategies we have discussed over the last several pages as central to Laferte's art: the combination of the futuristic aesthetics of contemporary pop music with an intervention and dialogue with the regional, popular and historical folk music of the past; the articulation of demands from the perspective of the feminine lived experience, expressed in the first-person. This combination of the contemporary and futuristic is evidenced in the song's own musical composition as a contemporary reggaeton rhythm with a marked dembow beat, which is combined with varied instruments, such as the Andean *charango,* as well as woodwinds employed in a manner reminiscent of the *diabladas* (the marches and dance of the religious *La Tirana* festival in Chile's north, a notion which is reinforced by the carnival costumes used by the performers in the film clip). As if the artist were reflecting on her decision to embrace reggaeton, a musical statement that seems to depart from her more retro-nostalgic musical repertoire, Laferte's lyrics state "Le entré al reggaetón, y hasta el culo te muevo, pa' así mandarte el mensaje de nuevo" ("I got into reggaeton, and I'll even shake my butt, just to get the message through"). Where the song's musically incorporates the sounds of other genres, its lyrics refer to *cumbia* and reggaeton, and they allude to Shakira's 2005 hit "La Tortura" ("Torture"), before directly citing the now standard *ranchera* from 1971 "El Rey" ("The King"), composed by José Alfredo Jiménez, inverting its inherently masculine original message – articulated around the singer's position as "King" –, by placing its

famous refrain "con dinero y sin dinero, yo hago siempre lo que quiero" ("with or without money, I always do as I please") in the mouth of an empowered feminine singer:

> Como chicle, la plata uno la estira
> Es una tortura como dijo Shakira
> Yo con dinero, o sin dinero
> Al final hago siempre lo que quiero
>
> *Like chewing gum, one stretches the out money*
> *Like Shakira said, it's torture*
> *With money, or without*
> *In the end I always do what I want.*
>
> (Laferte & Guaynna, 2019)

Even in songs that appear to be composed in contemporary idioms, like the apparent reggaeton of "Plata ta tá", Laferte engages in an active dialogue with music from Latin America's recent past, engaging a retro-nostalgic dimension in her pop music, where the musical forms of the past are transformed in a dialogue with the present. In the pages above we have contextualized Laferte's relationship to pre-existing forms of feminism in Chile, outlining through the analysis of "Plata ta tá" her intervention in politics and in the generic conventions of past music (expressed in the retro-nostalgic element of her otherwise contemporary pop); in the next section we focus on demonstrating that some of her musical work is the result of a reflective, introspective process that focuses on the intimacy of her own lived experience, but which nevertheless contributes to social and feminist activism in the Chilean and Latin American context.

5. Pain, Trauma and Embodied Experience in Laferte's Songwriting

The use of the body as an instrument of feminist demands in Chile's late protests – as Grau asserts – was a clear gesture of displacement of sexualized meanings. In what follows we argue that, distinct from the eloquent and explicit forms of feminist activism performed by other Chilean contemporary singers, Laferte's songs unveil a reflexive feminist poetics that is rooted in the artist's own memories, pains and traumas. Through Laferte's musical artistry these are transformed into cathartic narratives that function as messages of inspiration, hope and healing addressed to her female listeners, as evidenced in the song "Pa' dónde se fue" ("Where did he go?") from *La trenza* (*The Braid*, 2017), which is analyzed further below.

For feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, one of the drives of emotional responses in feminism is pain. Ahmed posits that pain is not to be forgotten in the exercise of identifying feminist demands. Rather, feminists' task is to remember how "embodied subjects come to be wounded in the first place, which requires that [they] learn to read that pain," interpret it, and transform it into a political action (Ahmed, 2004, 173). Although the experience of pain may be subjective – as it affects individuals differently –, Ahmed posits that the value of identifying pain as a feminist drive is to understand that one's pain may also be the pain of others. In that sense, sharing stories of pain allows women "to make connections" and move subjects into a process of "education for critical consciousness of collective political resistance" (hooks quoted in Ahmed, 2004, 174). A logical response to pain is anger, which is often loaded with information and energy regarding a past event. However, Ahmed argues that anger should also be used to open to the future. Thus, identifying anger and transforming it into a vehicle to heal past wounds can be a feminist exercise:

> [Anger] moves us by moving us outwards: while it creates an object, it also is not simply directed against an object, but becomes a response to the world as such. […] Feminist anger involves a reading of the world, a reading of how, for example, gender hierarchy is implicated

> in other forms of power relations, including race, class and sexuality, or how gender norms regulate bodies and spaces. Anger against objects or events, directed against this or that, moves feminism into a bigger critique of 'what is', as a critique that loses an object, and opens itself up to possibilities that cannot be simply located or found in the present. (Ahmed, 2004, 176)

These notions on emotions, pain and anger – as characteristics of feminism – are reflected throughout Laferte's compositions. In the song "Pa' dónde se fue," which is notable for its foregrounding of Andean folk rhythms with the characteristic sound of *charangos*, Andean-style drumming, with brass and wind instruments (including *quena* or Andean panpipes), Laferte acts as the song's lyric speaker, narrating the pain and consequences of her father's abandonment as a child, a traumatic episode she has elsewhere described as follows:

> My parents divorced when I was a child. After losing custody of my sister and me, my father vanished – both physically and financially. […] We knocked on countless doors, searching, hoping, but we never found him. I hated every moment of it. When I turned 17, I decided to try again – this time on my own terms. I managed to get his phone number and called him. He hung up. I called again. He hung up. (Laferte in Reposi & Grandi, 2024)

Laferte uses the first two stanzas of the song to narrate episodes of her childhood. In the first one, she remembers waiting for her father while she was accompanied by "shadows," a metaphor that alludes to the vanishing memory of his presence in her life. She also states that she used to play with "the waves," an idea that connects to her lived experience of her beach hometown. She asks the waves "where did he go?" hoping to get a response from the sea, lacking one from her family:

> Yo me acompañaba con las sombras
> Esperando, esperándote
> A veces yo jugaba con las olas
> Les preguntaba, pa' dónde se fue?
> *I kept myself company with the shadows*
> *Waiting, waiting for you*
> *Sometimes I played with the waves*
> *I asked them, where did he go?*
>
> (Laferte, 2017)

The second verse addresses the process of growing up and becoming a teenager. In a poetic register, Laferte states that while her "eyelashes danced," "spiders" were crawling up her body. We interpret the spiders as the threats that taunted her adolescence – violence and sexual abuse – and which she had to confront alone, without a father figure. Then, the verse "con el dedito tapaba el sol" ("I tried to block the sun with my little finger") – borrowed from the popular Spanish saying "tapar el sol con un dedo" ("to block the sun with one finger"), which means to try to deny or to hide something that is too big to cover up – demonstrates her attempt to carry on a normal life, although covering up the trauma of her father's abandonment was all too painful to ignore:

> Mientras me bailaban las pestañas
> Se me iban subiendo las arañas
> Con el dedito tapaba el sol
> Mientras se me ahogaba el corazón.
>
> *While my eyelashes danced,*
> *The spiders were crawling up me.*
> *I tried to block the sun with my little finger,*
> *While my heart was drowning.*

The song's chorus concentrates particularly on the idea of emptiness. The lyric speaker compares herself with a broken-off spring, unable to bloom. She also states that even today she feels the burden of her father's abandonment. Therefore, she keeps searching for his humanity, his fatherhood "through people, through men, through so many men...":

Como primavera entrecortá'
Yo me quedé a la mitad
Hasta hoy me siento en soledad
Buscando en miles, buscando en gente
Buscando en hombres, en tantos hombres
Tu humanidad, tu paternidad.

Like a broken-off spring,
I was left halfway.
To this day I feel alone,
Searching through thousands, searching through people,
Searching through men, through so many men,
For your humanity, your fatherhood.

Toward the second half of the song, aware that life can be unfair ("it sometimes gives, it sometimes takes") Laferte takes a reconciliatory approach. Her father had the opportunity to "make daisies grow" and not make them "wither," yet, he made his choices, and she no longer blames him, wishing to "fit him into her life," in an eloquent and unconditional gesture of generosity and love. Hence, she asks him: "Have you ever stopped to think what you're going to do? When you're old, who will take care of you?" Although the question is not answered in the song, it is assumed that Laferte keeps her door open should he want to return, demonstrating that she has been able to forgive, and most importantly, to heal. As we have seen, in this song, the object of thought is her father. His abandonment has had an impact on both her identity and her becoming. However, at the same time, it has allowed her to recognize her lacks and weaknesses and to find ways to heal, suggesting that her musical artistry and reflection is an act of both personal catharsis and feminist activism.

6. Conclusion

As we have shown in the above pages, Mon Laferte's artistic trajectory is characterized, sonically, by the interplay between the retro-nostalgic and the futuristic sounds of Latin America's musical past and present. Lyrically, her music is shaped by her personal lived experience, but by privileging in her songs an empowered, reflexive feminine first-person subject, it also dialogues with collective political horizons, particularly in light of the 2019 Chilean social uprising. Laferte's work creates an intimate, feminine space that counters dominant patriarchal attitudes and narratives by foregrounding personal and social traumas through emotionally charged music and visuals, giving voice to an intimate feminist expression. Laferte's songs transform anger and trauma into acts of healing and solidarity, fostering a shared space of connection where feminine experiences and emotions are expressed, validated, and charged with the potential for social change. Through this lens, her retro-futurist voice not only articulates an introspective feminist vision but also demonstrates music's capacity to bridge personal and political realms, enabling emotional and social transformation and healing.

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"You Can Feel the Other World Is Very Close" Buddhist Cosmologies and Sacred Spaces in Japan

Aljaž Mesner[1]

Abstract

This paper examines some conceptualizations of Japanese cosmologies and sacred spaces within the Buddhist tradition. It first outlines how spaces and landscapes were perceived before the arrival of Buddhism and then explores their subsequent transformation in the medieval period through the use of mandalas, which were used to bridge the gap between the earthly realm and the Other World. This is connection is exemplified through the Womb World represented in mandalas, that can still be symbolically accessed through a sensory experience at multiple temples even today. Such entrances to the Other World are marked not only by symbolic spatial boundaries but also by temporal thresholds, during calendrical rites and liminal times.

These cosmologies continue to exert a lasting influence on contemporary society, as evident in the remnants of geomancy in urban planning and frequent inclusion of Other Worlds in Japanese literature and popular culture. On the basis of fieldwork findings and existing research, the author concludes that the Other World is still present in contemporary Japan, being experienced as proximate to, and intertwined with, everyday life.

Keywords: Japan, religion, cosmology, sacred space, alternative worlds

Introduction: Japan, a Land Both Sacred and Profane

The world often imagines Japan as the enchanted land of ancient temples and shrines tucked away in old forests – likening it to a dreamlike and mysterious Other World. These idealized depictions have only been further reinforced in recent years due to increasing tourism and social media posts. I believe that many visitors, myself included, experience a degree of disillusionment when finally visiting the country, as the reality of modern urban life is rather mundane, marked by economic and societal issues. This made me want to explore how the Japanese themselves perceive the environment they live in and how their religious cosmologies influenced these perceptions. During two months of fieldwork across Japan in the spring of 2025, I encountered the coexistence of multiple, seemingly contradictory worldviews – ideas about reality and the world which took shape during hundreds of years of history, yet still have a subtle, but enduring influence in many aspects of modern life.

Fact is, that the Japanese are nowadays showing less and less interest in actively participating in their religious traditions, as indicated by the decreasing numbers of parishioners at the Buddhist temples (see Nelson, 2012). Perhaps the reason for the unassuming stance of the Japanese regarding their religious culture is due to the fact that

[1] BA in Ethnology and Cultural Anthropology, University of Ljubljana, aljazm2000@gmail.com, ORCID-ID: 0009-0006-1707-7700.

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they are used to things like passing by a wayside Jizō shrine on their way to work or visiting famous temples on holidays. Even though individuals may not consider themselves religious per se, one gets the impression through observing the way people experience the world around them, that they are very much living in close proximity to the Other World, despite having embraced the Western, scientific and rational worldview more than one and a half century ago, and to an even greater degree in the decades following the second world war.

Ancient pilgrimage trails have never stopped being trodden, and both shrines and temples are still enjoying a steady influx of domestic visitors, although the question of whether they are tourists, pilgrims, or both is up for debate. It seems that the old and the new worldviews, apparently different, are not necessarily incompatible for the Japanese.

> Indeed, to many Japanese their country has a split ontological outlook: on the one hand, there is Japan as the concrete place of their everyday lives; on the other, an invisible realm populated by all kinds of presences: ghosts, spirits, ancestors, gods [...] (Rambelli, 2019, 1)

Essentially, the typical Japanese adheres to several ontological systems (Clammer, Clammer, Poirier, & Schwimmer, 2004, 14) that influenced each other greatly while remaining distinct from each other. The Japanese worldview is poly-cosmological in that different models of reality coexist within belief systems, while retaining their boundaries and distinctive logics (Palmer, 2022). Thus, we cannot easily draw clear lines of categorization between different traditions (Reader, 2005, 20).

One method of analysis, which I will also make use of in this study, is the geography of religion, which studies its relationship with the environment through both empirical and symbolic means. Through the agency of communities, religion generates concrete spatial structures and, at the same time, offers a cosmology which appears symbolically in the structure of the space (Matsui, 2013, 191).

Fieldwork material for this paper was gathered during my travels across Japan in spring of 2025, the majority of which comes from the Kansai area (centering around Kyoto, Kobe and Osaka). Collecting the material proved quite difficult, both because of the language barrier and because many people were not used to talking about matters pertaining to religion and their beliefs. That is why I wish to express my gratitude to all interviewees who openly shared their views with me.

In this study, I wish to present the ways the alternative realities in Japan have been conceptualized in the history of the archipelago within the Buddhist tradition, which, upon its arrival in the 6th century, built upon already existing indigenous conceptions of space. Since Japan's cosmologies have always been pluralistic and not mutually exclusive, one can trace a plethora of different conceptualizations of religious space in the land which was sacralized and imbued with a spiritual dimension exceeding the physical landscape – both in the case of specific sacred sites, larger geographic areas and finally, the nation as a whole.

One of the most important tools for this process were mandalas, which made their way from India through China. They were widely adopted and adapted by the ranks of monks of Esoteric Buddhism, although their influence eventually permeated every aspect of society. Their depictions, often referencing actual sites, provided new ways of conceptualizing space and time and proved fruitful in the spiritual practice of clergy and lay people alike. The edge of the mandala, of course, also implies the border of the sacred space, the entry into the Other World, which can be accessed, or barred through passageways such as gates and bridges, serving as both a symbolic and literal point of departure from the secular world.

A powerful metaphor, which lies at the heart of the mandala, is the womb. Even today, passages through the womb, resulting in symbolic rebirth, can still be experienced in specific temples, for example in Zenkō-ji, where one can wander through their subterranean passages in total darkness before making the ascent back towards daylight.

Traditional cosmologies and conceptualizations have had a lasting influence on Japanese culture, from popular culture and literature to the way houses and cities continue to be organized to harmonize space and avoid negative influences according to the laws of geomancy. The examples from this paper will attempt to show the Other World's historical and continuous entanglement with the quotidian reality in Japan.

Pre-Buddhist Cosmologies and the Structuring of Sacred Space in Japan

Reconstructing the worldviews of the Japanese before the arrival of Buddhism proves difficult, partly due to a lack of written records (Palmer, 1994, 480). However, we can be sure that they took shape in interaction with the physical landscape, through agricultural practices and in relationship with nature, since mediating human-nature relations has always been a key component within Japanese religions (Rots, 2024, 187).

The earliest locations considered as "expressions of the sacred realm in the earthly world" (Grotenhuis 1998:151) were places of unusual physical phenomena, such as exceptionally large trees, strangely-shaped rocks (Nute, 1999, 2) or other similar extraordinary geographic features which were revered as abodes of the spirits called *kami*, whose numinous realm was, although removed from the earthly world, often revealed through such forms. It was only later that permanent structures were established at these places of worship (Matsui, 2013, 18), acquiring their present form of *jinj*a – Shinto Shrines, which are today such a ubiquitous part of Japan's topography, that their presence is "taken for granted by Japanese people, including Japanese geographers" (Palmer, 1994, 485).

> Every Japanese neighborhood has its own local Shinto shrine, and many a Japanese street corner (or rooftop in bustling, urban areas) is home to a small, tutelary shrine to the local kami, or ancestral spirits. (Williams, 2000, 34)

Shrine buildings, however, only started to appear after the arrival of Buddhism in the 6th century. As a monk at Gakuen-ji temple in Izumo put it: "Back then it was just nature, and after Buddhism arrived came the buildings – Shinto copied the temple style" (interview with a Gakuen-ji monk, 7.5.2025). Both religions adopted each other's elements, however (Umehara, 1991, 184). Buddhism especially diverged from its original form when it syncretized with indigenous Japanese cosmologies of the Spirit World (MacFarlane, 2010, 198). With its introduction, the Japanese were given a far more complex cosmos to make sense of (Blacker, 2004, 61). The proposition that Buddhahood could be realized in this body, in this life, and in this world (Grapard, 1982, 202) meant that sacred space, previously limited to sites of *kami* worship, had become all-encompassing.

Generally speaking, the cyclical cosmology of medieval Japan encompassed two main dimensions of existence: the "Other World" of *kami* (and Buddhas), and this world, the world of the living (Williams, 2000, 42). These two dimensions were not mutually exclusive and were considered to be connected. Within the human world, the existence of sites and areas of special religious significance began to be recognized. According to Allan Grapard, a historian of Japanese religions, we can distinguish three coexisting categories of sacred space during the medieval period (Grapard, 1982, 196):

1. Sacred site: a clearly delimited residence of divinities worshipped in Shinto rituals

2. Sacred area: a larger geographic area, covered by a Buddhist pilgrim and depicted using mandalas
3. Sacred nation: Japan as a sacred land, supported by Buddhist cosmology

Buddhist cosmology was also instrumental in shaping Japanese cartographic traditions. In the medieval era maps "functioned as a window through which to project a worldview strongly influenced by religious doctrine, and also a visual guide to see how these ideas, in turn, influenced self-understanding and self-representation" (Kim, 2024, 205). The place of Japan within the Buddhist World was a central topic in both cartographic and Buddhist discourses as early as the 8th century, with Japan taking on both a marginal and central position, simultaneously a "peripheral country as small as a millet grain" and a "great kingdom within the Buddhist world" (Moerman, 2016, 88). One example of the latter was the connection which the Tendai intellectuals made between Mount Hiei and Lake Biwa, on one hand and Mount Sumeru and the Cosmic Ocean of Indian mythology, on the other hand. Claims like these promoted Japan from a remote island chain on the edge of the map to the center of the cosmic mandala – in fact, the concept of Japan as a sacred space played an important role at times when the nation faced the outside world (Grapard, 1982, 217), for example during the 14th century Mongol invasion (Šmitek, 2016, 267).

Ultimately, Buddhist maps were not only a cartographical matter, but also epistemological models. Hōtan[2], a Buddhist monk and cartographer from the 17th century, argued that human vision and Buddhist wisdom are two qualitatively different views of the world, stating that "the wisdom eye of the sage is far more powerful than the human eye and sees the boundless ten-thousand-fold world just like a fruit held in one's hand" (Moerman, 2016, 90).

Topography of the Mandala and Religious Cartography

In this context Buddhist mandalas became an important tool and concept for combining both earthly and otherworldly topographies. We can define mandalas as "representations of sanctified realms where identification between the human and the sacred occurs" (Grotenhuis, 1998, 1), although in Japan, from the 11th century onward, the term was also being used for other religious paintings such as depictions of paradise lands, abodes of Buddhist deities and Shinto shrine complexes. They were simultaneously aesthetic objects and visual representations of sacred space while also serving a ritual purpose in religious practices.

Mandalas were most widely used in Esoteric Buddhist circles, within the schools of Tendai and Shingon. Each school established its respective monastic and symbolic center on a sacred mountain – Mt. Hiei above Kyoto for Tendai and Mt. Koya in the southern part of the Kansai region for Shingon. According to the doctrine of the latter, visual representation is not merely allegorical; rather, the painting or the statue of a deity is the deity itself, thus the mandala is also the cosmos itself (Yamasaki, 1988, 70; Šmitek, 2016, 223). It is this identification of the mandala with our material world that enabled the landscape to be sacralized through the process called mandalization, "an ultimate exercise in magical manipulation" (Grapard, 1982, 207), aimed at making all Japan a sacred site.

Mandalas were projected over geographical areas, with parts of the mandala corresponding to geographic units, which then became sacred spaces of practice for the realization of Buddhahood. One of the first examples of geographic mandalization on a larger scale is

[2] Zuda Rokashi Hōtan (1654-1728) was a prominent Buddhist scholar-priest who 1709 drew the first Buddhist world map called "Map of the Myriad Countries of Jambudvīpa"

the 1180 text, *Shozan engi* ("Origins of Various Mountains"), which likened the Yoshino-Omine and Kumano mountain ranges to the Diamond World and Womb World Mandalas (Grotenhuis, 1998, 175). Similarly, the Tateyama mountain range, depicted in the Tateyama Mandala, was analogous to the Buddhist hell realms, which could be traversed during one's lifetime as a means of ritual purification, thereby avoiding such a journey after death (Šmitek 2016, 259). The physical and spiritual ascent of the pilgrim were seen as simultaneous, as mountains functioned not only as sacred spaces but also as pathways toward enlightenment.

Japanese cartography was not separate from Buddhist cosmographical iconography until the 17th century, with the first influences from European sciences. According to Japanese medieval depictions, the archipelago had the shape of a double mandala of the material and the spiritual world (Šmitek, 2016, 367). Pilgrims and travelers had to rely on such abstract depictions of space when making their journeys. Sometimes mandalas were painted on cheaper paper instead of the usual silk wall tapestries, to be carried on person, and were used both for navigation, didactic purposes, and as an object of worship. They were called *sankei*, pilgrim mandalas, and were often distributed by temples and shrines as a way of collecting donations (Šmitek, 2016, 226). Accomplishing a pilgrimage meant tracing and perceiving a mandala in the traversed space, as seen in one of the first published pilgrim maps of the famous Shikoku pilgrimage, which became widely popular in the 17th century. The map depicts the four prefectures of the circumambulated island as corresponding to the four quadrants of the mandala, while each group of temples represents one of the eight petals of a lotus flower (Šmitek, 2016, 281).

From the 16th century onwards, replicas of sacred spaces akin to miniature pilgrim trails started appearing, enabling believers to accomplish famous pilgrimages, which were often a physical and financial burden (Šmitek, 2016, 280). Some of them can still be visited today, such as the miniature Shikoku pilgrimage in one of the temple halls of Daishō-in on Miyajima. A path leads you around the temple hall, and each of the 88 temples is represented by a deity. Visitors pay homage to each one, as they would at every temple on the trail. This phenomenon shows us how sacred space and landscape can be copied, scaled down, and transported to a new place.

In 835 when Shingon Buddhism was made the official state religion, the emperor started partaking in mandala worship and his palace was seen as a model of the heavenly abode of Buddha Vairocana (Šmitek, 2016, 348). The headquarters of the Shingon school lies south of Osaka, on Mount Kōya, which is even today one of the most famous sacred places and pilgrimage destinations in Japan, perceived as a physical manifestation of a mandala.

> Mandala is the world itself where we live. But we cannot see the Buddha's field in the mandala. Kōya-san [Mount Kōya] is a mandala surrounded by the petals of a lotus flower. Because there are eight mountain tops around this area. So this is the kind of lotus flower, itself, this area. Actually, there is a map of this town represented by the lotus flower. (interview with a Shingon monk, 25.4.2025)

The center of the mandala on the mountain is in the 49 meter tall pagoda, Konpon Daito, which was finished shortly after the death of the founder of the Shingon school on Mount Koya, Kūkai, in 835 (Šmitek, 2016, 443). Its interior is modelled after a stupa and holds a spectacular three-dimensional mandala with Dainichi Nyōrai[3] seated in the middle.

[3] Japanese name of Vairocana, a celestial Buddha particularly important in Mahayana Buddhism.



Figure 1: Konpon Daito Pagoda
Source: the author

Traditionally, pilgrims would make the ascent to Kōya-san on the Chōishi-michi trail, stretching 24 kilometers and marked by 109-meter intervals using stone markers in the shape of a Gorintō, which resembles a five-element pagoda, representing the elements that make up the world – earth, water, fire, wind, and ether. Traditionally, female pilgrims were not allowed on the mountain and, as a result, a system of sub-temples around the summit developed, allowing them to circumambulate the sacred space at the edge of the mandala without actually entering it.

Entering the Womb World

Nowadays several temples across Japan are known for offering their visitors a unique sensory experience of entering the sacred space of the womb, called *Tainai Meguri* ("going around in the womb"). Conceptualized as a metaphorical rebirth in the womb of the motherly goddess of compassion, Kannon, these spaces are usually in the form of subterranean corridors in complete darkness, often directly below the main altar of the temple where visitors are guided by a rope or a chain of beads, treading through the liminal state between death and new life.

According to visitor guidelines at the Zuigu-dō Hall within the Kiyomizu temple complex in Kyoto, the subterranean hall is regarded "as the womb of Zuigu-Bosatsu[4]. That is why it is completely dark inside, and there is supposed to be no space for your attachment.

[4] A female Bodhisattva known to have the power to grant any human wish.

After you are out through the womb, you will purify yourself and feel the rebirth with the virtue of Zuigu-Bosatsu" (Kiyomizu-dera, 2025).

Another famous example of this is the Zenkō temple (Nagano city) where visitors circumambulate an absolutely hidden (i.e. never shown to the public) Buddha statue above the underground hallway (Suzuki, 2011, 7). It is interesting to point out that in Japanese, the same kanji compound word, *tainai* (胎内), is used for both referring to the interior of a woman's womb and the interior of a Buddhist statue.

Besides the Zuigu-dō Hall mentioned above, I have also experienced this rite in one of the temples on Kōya-san, in Daishōin on Miyajima Island, off the coast of Hiroshima, and in Nata-dera, Ishikawa Prefecture. Although each experience was unique, the element they all have in common is the darkness, which is often an important element of Buddhist sacred spaces. Similarly, the main hall of Enryaku-ji on Mt. Hiei is veiled in darkness, giving the impression of endless space stretching onward from the last pair of barely visible pillars illuminated by flames of lanterns whose purpose is "not to light up the space, but to intensify the darkness" (Suzuki, 2011, 7).

Darkness is one of the key characteristics of sacredness and sacred space in Japan and is also analogous to the esoteric Womb World Mandala, which, together with the Diamond World Mandala, forms the Mandala of the Two Worlds (Grotenhuis, 1998, 3), featured prominently in Japanese esoteric Buddhism and usually hung on opposite walls inside the temple halls such as the aforementioned Konpon Daito on Kōya-san.

Crossing the Threshold: Boundaries to Other Worlds

Having established where and how the Japanese conceptualized sacred space we can turn to something equally important – its boundaries and entrances – "portals" to the Other World. Spatial boundaries, such as the village boundary, shoreline, forest edge etc., were representative of liminal gaps between this world and the Womb dimension and considered the lines at which a fissure opened into the Other World (Williams, 1997, 42).

> Boundaries are where order meets disorder or anti-order. When "we" (people on the side of order) come into contact with such realms, we are overwhelmed by a sense of the unfamiliar, resulting sometimes in pleasure, sometimes in fear. (Komatsu, 2017, 185)

In her 2002 book The Emergence of Boundaries, Norio Akasaka points out that we live in an era "when all boundaries are on the verge of being erased, and in which, therefore, the old world (or cosmology) of space and time divided by visible boundaries seems on the brink of invalidation" (Akasaka, 2002, as cited in Komatsu, 2017, 184–185). While it may be true that boundaries are being redefined in contemporary societies, Japanese landscape is still abundant with symbolic entrances to divine areas which indicate the border between the sacred and secular worlds (Matsui, 2013, 31).

> We have like a feeling that if you pass through something, for instance torii5 or tunnel, the other world is coming. Have you ever watched Spirited Away? So we feel like the Other World is very close… In Shimane Prefecture there is a stone, and this is a boundary between the living and the other world. Yomotsu Hirasaka. You can feel that the other world is very close when you are there. Just like a boundary. (interview with a Shinto priest, 28. April 2025)

The boundary Yomotsu Hirasaka (Shimane Prefecture) is particularly infamous, since it has been one of the traditional entrances to the world of the dead, appearing twice in *Kojiki*

[5] A *torii* is a freestanding gate, typically consisting of two vertical pillars and two horizontal crossbars, that marks the symbolic entrance to a Shinto shrine. It delineates the boundary between the sacred space of the shrine and the profane world.

(Record of Ancient Matters, 712). I visited the site after nightfall, which added even more mystery to the ambiance of the entire area. Upon arrival, the visitor is greeted with multiple information boards that explain the mythological background and cultural significance of the site. Above them, there is a pathway beginning with a stone *torii* bound by *shimenawa* ropes and culminating with two unusually shaped boulders, on each side of the so-called entrance.

Many superstitions still surround the place, for example, one university professor confessed to me that her colleagues absolutely refuse to take photographs in that area. The fact that the supposed entrance has a physical location in this world alludes to the idea that in Japan the Other World is very near to the one we are living in. This was reiterated to me in conversation with a professional storyteller of *kaidan*, Japanese horror stories with supernatural elements:

> Ano yo and kono yo (That World and This World) are very close. In Japan, such boundaries and borderlines are very important. The shrines have torii which mark outside and inside world. The temples also have sanmon ("gates"). Shimenawa ropes also create the border, naka and soto ("inside" and "outside"). River [as in], Sanzu no Kawa, kocchi to acchi ("over here" and "over there"). On the other side of the river was another land. Yūrei and obake ("ghosts" and "monsters") and so on were plenty on the other side of the borderline. [There were also] tunnels, for example. (interview with a kaidan storyteller, 26.4.2025)

Torii, one of the most recognizable and iconic symbols of Japan, marks the entrance to a shrine. They divide the realm of humans outside, and the realm of the *kami,* placed within. Many people believe it is best to pass under the *torii* instead of going around it, as if not to improperly enter the sacred domain (Williams, 1997, 162). Additionally, they can signify a numinous object when placed in front of it, such as trees or boulders, or even mark a whole area or forest as sacred (Gilday, 1993, 279). A common accompanying element are *shimenawa*, twisted hemp ropes with zig-zag shaped papers, called *shide,* tied to them. They can be hung on *torii*, under the roof of the shrine or tied around the object itself. In essence, they signify not just the boundary to the sacred, but the sacred objects themselves.

When visiting Shinto shrines, the visitors are usually confronted with a boundary beyond which lay practitioners cannot pass. The inner shrine called *honden*, the place where the *kami* resides, is usually off limits to the public and often not much can be seen from the ultimate vantage point – the most sacred place is also the best hidden one. This invisibility, in a sense, protects and secures the place for *kami* (Kawano, 2005, 63), by keeping it away from any human influence and pollution.



Figure 2: House and *torii* with *shimenawa*
Source: the author

Sacred space for *kami* can also be bound and thus created temporarily, for example during the land purification ceremony:

> We just set up the four bamboo poles and tie the rope and the shide. This is an area of sacred place. So, if you pass through that area, you enter the realm where kami are invited. This is kind of like passing through another world. (interview with a Shinto priest, 28.4.2025)

The contemporary Shinto land purification ritual bears resemblance to the ancient rites which marked the possession of the new land and the establishment of its boundaries (Grapard, 1982, 197) with binding things, hinting at the continuity of practices for the sacralization of space. The features of the landscape are, however, not intrinsically boundaries – landscape features can only become boundaries, or the indicators of a boundary, in relation to the activities of the people for whom they are recognized or experienced as such (Ingold, 1993, 156).

> People often refer to bridges, rivers, mountain ridges, or crossroads as boundaries, as though this were an obvious fact. But considering the above definition reveals just how much clarification such statements require. To whom does the bridge represent a boundary? Why is it a boundary – or, depending on the circumstances, why not? (Komatsu, 2017, 182)

The bridge is one of the most important manmade elements of the landscape, connecting two sides of a river or chasm, making passage possible – essentially connecting two spaces on both a physical and metaphorical level. An example of this is the stage bridge from Noh theatre, *hashi-gakari*, which serves both functions since, according to the information gathered at Kanazawa Noh Museum, it "physically connects the backstage to the main stage, and metaphorically is a border between the real and supernatural world" (Kanazawa Noh Museum, 2025).



Figure 3: Hashi-gakari in Nagoya Nōgaku-dō (Noh Theatre)
Source: the author

Bridges are also featured prominently in the landscape of Kōya-san, for which we have previously established that it represents the Mandala World, with the whole area of the mountain being considered a sacred space. The traditional entrance to the mountain is a red bridge called Gokurakubashi. In crossing it "pilgrims left the world of defilements and entered the world that purifies" (Payne 2008). The bridge, in close proximity to the last train station, is nowadays somewhat overshadowed by the cable car, which provides passengers a direct connection to the summit.



Figure 4: The original Gokurakubashi
Source: the author

Interestingly, the open hallway, signaled even in English and linking the cable car and train stations is adorned by imagery of a red bridge, "connecting the secular world and the sacred" (Nankai Electric Railway 2025), serving as a simulated crossing: "There is a legend that the border between the sanctuary and the everyday world is Gokurakubashi. Here is the beginning of your journey to the sanctuary."



Figure 5: Gokurakubashi cable car station walkway
Source: the author

On the mountain itself multiple bridges are featured within the most famous cemetery in all of Japan – Oku-no-in, each of them representing a crossing of the boundary into an even more sacred zone of the cemetery: "there are actually three bridges to enter. Like stages, first stage, second stage […]" (interview with a Shingon monk, 25. April 2025). The last bridge marked the entrance to the most sacred area on Kōya-san, the mausoleum of Kōbō Daishi – Kūkai, where a signboard asks visitors that, after this point, to refrain from taking photos, eating or drinking or acting inappropriately.

Although spatial boundaries are the most widely represented in Japan, there are also some examples of aural and temporal boundaries. An example of the former are temple bells,

struck to mark the time or musical performances which signify the appearance of *oni* (demon) and other *yōkai* in rituals and performances (Komatsu, 2017, 191). It is also often believed that a spirit of a departed person may be called back to this world by the voice of spiritual mediums (Matsumura, 2007).

The temporal dimension can be understood through the binary opposition of sacred time, which is primordial and mythological, and "erupts" into profane time, through different calendrical rites such as village *matsuri* (festivals), recitation of founding myths, and pilgrimages to sacred sites (Nadeau, 1996, 113). Definitely, the most important temporal boundary in Japan is between life and death and is often represented both symbolically and spatially via funerary send-offs of the deceased and the concept of the riverbank, called "*Sai no Kawara*" between our world and the Other World. Furthermore, the spring equinox, called the "far shore" (*o-higan*) is a time when ancestors return to the world of the living (Williams, 1997, 61).

Among the Ainu, there exists a significant difference between time in both worlds – a day in the other world corresponds to a year in this one (Umehara, 1991, 168), while all across Japan the day-night cycle itself also carries an important temporal boundary:

> For example, the time between day and night. Sunset time. Day is the time of humans, of living things; the night is the time of dead things. The time in-between does not belong to either. The time when the worlds come close. (interview with a kaidan storyteller, 26.4.2025)

This fascination with the liminality of twilight was already recorded in the writings of Japan's earliest folklorist, Kunio Yanagita, for whom this twilight zone was poetically "at once a time where vision becomes indistinct as shadows lengthen, and a space where the objective and the imaginary blur and transform" (Jensen, Ishii, & Swift, 2016, 157). The Japanese word for twilight, *tasokare* (誰そ彼), includes the characters for "who", as it was seen as a time of uncertain identities (Figal, 1999, 5) – you could not ascertain the face of a person passing by on the path at that hour, so a greeting is roughly equivalent to the phrase "who is there?", employed to make sure that the other person is human, and not a dangerous phantasm.

Tasokare does not "simply indicate the dusk as an in-between period transitioning from day to night, but also a hybrid moment in which visible entities become invisible and hidden presences momentarily reveal themselves" (Castiglioni, 2019, 173). More recently, the concept was heavily featured in Makoto Shinkai's animated blockbuster "*Your Name"*, where the twilight time enabled the protagonists to be able to meet each other even though they were living in different Worlds.

Contemporary Influence of Traditional Cosmologies

Conceptions of the Other World in Japan have always been fluid and subject to change. The Meiji Restoration of 1868 was a major turning point for traditional beliefs, since it was during that time that Japan started introducing Western categories of "science", "philosophy" and "religion" and, as a result, certain elements of traditional cosmologies got sorted as proper "religion" and others as primitive "superstition". In 1873, the Gregorian calendar was adopted, replacing the lunar calendar and marking the beginning of a new chronology in Japan, bringing with it a new set of cosmological and temporal assumptions (Miura, 2024, 111). Although initially suppressed and dismissed, traditional beliefs were eventually reconciled and reintegrated into modern worldviews.

Despite many Japanese who are now identifying as non-religious, the influence of traditional religious cosmologies continues to be evident in many segments of Japanese

society, with tens of millions of people visiting shrines and temples for various rites of passage and festivities. From my experiences of visiting many Buddhist temples across the country, it is definitely the older generations for whom temple visits represent a form of personal religious and ritual practice. Meanwhile younger people, that would ascribe themselves a certain degree of religiosity, tend to frame it through concepts such "*supirichuaritī*" (i.e. spirituality). Non-sectarian and not even necessarily felt as religious, spirituality as understood in Japan can encompass anything from New Age practices to traditional forms of divination, *fū sui*[6], sometimes even reframing traditional forms of religiosity through a contemporary lens, such as in the case of "power spot" (see Rots 2014) visits.

> In one way or another, "the ancient cosmology and cosmography continue to exert considerable influence over various aspects of daily life in contemporary Japan, from customs associated with funeral rites and festivals, to quite profound effects on the landscape features and land use associated with many mountains and all Shinto shrines. (Palmer, 1994, 485)

Japanese geographers agree that traditional systematization of space still plays a role in spatial relations of landscape features in present-day Japan (Palmer, 1994, 480–484). From the land claiming ceremony to the rite of completing a building and the purification of the new dwelling, as ways of expressing gratitude to the *kami* (Williams 1997, 217; Šmitek 2016, 310), such practices are even today still the rule, not the exception.

Many spatial principles, for example differentiating lucky or unlucky days, directions, etc., were imported from China. The Japanese court readily adopted theories of the universe combining Buddhist cosmology, the yin-yang paradigm, divination, astrology and geomancy (see Buhrman, 2024) under the umbrella term of *fū sui* (Miura, 2024, 108). Formerly court magicians, the magical specialists of the art called *Onmyōji* (Jolivalt, 2012) are still consulted to make sure that "a business is aligned auspiciously to encourage success" (Muir, 2024).

One particularly unfavorable element is the so-called Demon Gate, *Kimon,* the northeastern direction that is believed to be an opening for demons and other evil spirits to enter. That is why on Mount Hiei, which lies northeast of Kyoto, a city historically designed according to principles of *fū sui*, a Buddhist temple complex of the Tendai school was built to protect the capital at the time from negative influences. More recently, in the 1990s and 2000s, the idea that Kyoto is animated by various invisible agencies saw a revival, and multiple construction projects that wanted to contribute to the energetic balance of the city were carried out (Van Goethem, 2019, 82). Besides Kyoto, Nara, and Kamakura, Tokyo is one of the cities in Japan with the richest cosmological undercurrents (see Jinnai 1995). Thus, it does not come as a surprise that the construction of the SkyTree tower has gotten a lot of attention for its design and placement. While some criticized it for having bad *fū sui*, others pointed out the fact that its shape, reminiscent of a five-element Buddhist pagoda, will thus protect Tokyo for years to come (Williams, 2017). Even today, people are careful when considering the placement of windows and doors so as not to offer the spirits an opening into their dwelling.

The influence of traditional cosmological systems is not limited only to the configuration of sacred spaces and landscapes however, as the Other World is a recurring theme in both popular culture and literature. In the anime world, the genre of *Isekai*, literally "another world", where the protagonist is transported or reborn in an alternate universe/reality, has become very popular in recent years (see Hack, 2023). This renewed interest could even be considered as revival of sorts, since we can find an abundance of similar tropes in literature of the medieval period. In the world of contemporary literature, Japanese authors

[6] The Chinese art of geomancy *feng shui* as it is pronounced in Japanese.

have wholeheartedly embraced the genre of magical realism. Most famously, the works of Haruki Murakami often prominently feature Other Worlds (Strecher, 1999), such as in *Hardboiled Wonderland and the End of the World* (1985) and *Kafka on the Shore* (2002). These examples further prove that the idea of the Other World has had an enduring presence throughout Japanese history and remains an important concept even today. As Murakami himself puts it:

> In Japan, I think that other world is very close to our real life, and, if we decide to go to the other side, it's not so difficult […] Right next to the world we live in, the one we're all familiar with, is a world we know nothing about, an unfamiliar world that exists concurrently with our own. The structure of that world, and its meaning, can't be explained in words. But the fact is that it's there, and sometimes we catch a glimpse of it, just by chance – like when a flash of lightning illuminates our surroundings for an instant. (Murakami, 2018, 2019)

Conclusion: Future Other Worlds in Japan

The examples presented in this paper mostly drew from the cosmological influences that Buddhism brought to Japan and are by no means intended to be an exhaustive representation of the rich tapestry of beliefs and conceptualizations of the Other World through Japanese history. For example, much could be said about the parallel developments of indigenous cosmological beliefs and their eventual separation from Buddhism, a process that culminated in the present-day Shinto tradition (see Kuroda, Dobbins, & Gay, 1981).

Nonetheless, Buddhist thought was a highly influential ideological engine that, through the centuries, redefined the spiritual landscape of Japan and gave rise to sacred spaces with varying degrees of scale and complexity. Mountain ranges and sacred peaks were made analogous to and explained through mandalas – representations of sacred space that served not only as powerful tools for its navigation, but also as means of attaining enlightenment. Practices such as womb-entry rites ritualized the crossing of spatial thresholds, enabling participants to symbolically traverse into parallel dimensions which in one way or another continue to exist in contemporary Japan. In the present day, Other Worlds are not only available through religious practices, but are also integrated within fields such as in architecture, urban planning, popular media and modern literature.

Further research on alternative realities in Japan could potentially examine how they are negotiated in emerging contexts – for example, the use of modern technology to transport individuals into digital, augmented, and virtual environments. As the number of people living in cities and by themselves is steadily increasing, it is not surprising that new methods for transposing oneself into constructed Other Worlds are being created. Only time will tell how these phenomena will continue to develop and what impact they will have on Japan's social and ontological landscape.

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Alternative Realities in Enlightenment Fairy Tales
Wieland's and Naubert's Literary Experiments

Maxim Braun[1]

Abstract

This article explores how late 18th-century German fairy tales negotiate the boundaries between imagination and social reality. Through close readings of selected narratives, it traces how the construction of "alternative realities" enables critical approaches that reflect the tensions of the Enlightenment period. Focusing on the works of Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813) and Christiane Benedikte Naubert (1752-1819), the analysis demonstrates that marvelous elements in these tales serve as vehicles for philosophical and social reflection. By creating fictional alternatives, these Enlightenment narratives invite readers to critically engage with contemporary discourses and reimagine existing social arrangements. The article thus shows how the genre participates in a productive dialectic between reason and imagination, offering "experimental" – in the sense of tentative or exploratory – models for social critique and transformation. Employing close reading methodology, this analysis identifies three distinct modes of what can be termed "social imagining": reformist approaches that seek to improve existing structures, transformative visions that envision radical alternatives, and diagnostic perspectives that reveal fundamental incompatibilities between different orders of knowledge.

Keywords: German fairy tales, Enlightenment literature, Christoph Martin Wieland, Christiane Benedikte Naubert, imagination and reason

1. The Dialectic of Enlightenment Fairy Tales[2]

The creation of "alternative realities" – understood here not simply as speculative or fantastical worlds but as parallel, mutable constructs that coexist and interact with the observable world – is, by no means, a modern invention. Literary history offers numerous examples of the fabrication of possible worlds that enter into productive tension with empirical reality. Fiction, as a central expression of human imagination, has always enabled the exploration of social alternatives and the testing of the boundaries of possibility. In this respect, the fairy tales of the German Enlightenment prove particularly revealing texts,

[1] M.A., Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Department of Cultural Anthropology / Cultural History, Germany, maxim.braun@uni-jena.de, ORCID-ID: 0009-0007-0119-2445.

[2] This article develops themes initially examined in my Master's Thesis "Wahrheiten, die sich nicht gerne ohne Schleier zeigen – Integration von Wunderbarem und Wirklichkeit in deutschsprachigen Märchensammlungen des 18. Jahrhunderts" submitted to Friedrich Schiller University Jena in April 2024, and extends into my current doctoral research on fairy tale imagination processes in 19th-century European publications. The work has benefitted from discussions within the Excellence Cluster "Imaginamics" at the same institution.

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precisely because they emerge in an era fundamentally skeptical towards the marvelous and irrational.

The fairy tales of Christoph Martin Wieland (1733-1813) and Christiane Benedikte Naubert (1752-1819) exemplarily demonstrate how, towards the end of the 18th century, a German-language type of fairy tale emerges only to place the marvelous and reality in a productive relationship with one another. The narrative spaces in Wieland's "Dschinnistan"[3] (1786-1789) and Naubert's "New Folk Tales of the Germans" ["Neue Volksmärchen der Deutschen"] (1789-1793) do not function as escape routes from social realities, but rather as spaces of reflection for contemporary conditions.

Wieland's poetological reflection in the preface to his collection reveals a decidedly Enlightenment-oriented approach that conceives the fairy tale's supposed detachment from reality[4] as an opportunity to practice social criticism:

> It was found that wit and humor, even philosophy and indeed philosophy of the esoteric kind, are very compatible with this popular form of poetry [the fairy tale], which is so far removed from all pretension; and that it is a very good way to introduce certain truths, which do not like to show themselves without a veil, into society: or to make those agreeable and popular which have something deterrent in serious garb (Wieland, 2007, 7-8).[5]

The present investigation shows how the fairy tales of Wieland and Naubert open up "experimental" [6] spaces through the construction of alternative realities, in which contemporary discourses are reflected upon and critically illuminated. The marvelous does not serve as world-flight but becomes a vehicle for philosophical and social reflection. Through these narratives, the Enlightenment authors engage in what can be termed as "social imagining"[7] – the literary construction and testing of possible social arrangements that invite readers to reimagine existing conditions. This process operates on multiple levels: authors imagine alternatives, characters experience them, and readers are prompted to evaluate both their own world and the fictional possibilities presented to them.

2. From Court to Cottage: Christoph Martin Wieland's Alternative Realities

As early as 1764, Christoph Martin Wieland established an early milestone for the literary significance of the fairy tale by integrating the tale of Prince Biribinker into his novel "The Adventures of Don Sylvio De Rosalva" ["Der Sieg der Natur über die Schwärmerei"]. The

[3] In this neologism Wieland combines "djinn" (genie) with the Persian suffix "-stan" (land), thus meaning "Land of the Genies".

[4] A notion, which was decisively shaped and popularized by the Brothers Grimm, who write in their preface to the second edition of the "Children's and Household Tales" ["Kinder- und Hausmärchen"] from 1819: "but the fairy tale stands apart from the world in an enclosed, undisturbed place, from which it does not look out into that world any further" (Grimm, 1952, 120), though recent decades of research have reflected more critically on this paradigm and engage with it in significantly more differentiated ways (see Hühn & Matuschek, 2014; Röhrich, 2001)

[5] Except for Wieland's "The Philosophers' Stone" in which case I am gratefully using an English translation by Jack Zipes, all translations of the original German text have been done by myself.

[6] The term "experimental" draws on the concept of literature as thought experiment, as theorized by scholars like Davenport (1983) and more recently explored by Bornmüller et al. (2019), wherein fictional narratives function as systematic explorations of hypothetical scenarios – a tradition traceable to Enlightenment concepts of "hypothetical possibilities" (Musäus, 1926, 3).

[7] The concept builds on Castoriadis' "The imaginary institution of society" (1987; original French publication from 1975) – the idea that societies create themselves through acts of imagination – applied here to analyze how fairy tales participate in this process of social self-creation.

Biribinker tale, which explicitly refers to the French tradition of the "Contes des Fées," is considered the first German-language fairy tale composition.

In the context of his work as editor of the cultural magazine "The German Mercury" ["Der Teutsche Merkur"] (1773-1789), Wieland repeatedly investigated the relationship between reason and imagination. In his essay "On the Human Inclination to Believe in Magic and Supernatural Phenomena" ["Über den Hang der Menschen an Magie und Geistererscheinungen zu glauben"] (1781), he articulated a position that was quite exceptional within the context of the Enlightenment: instead of denying or suppressing the "inclination toward the marvelous" (Wieland, 1796, 68), he recognized it as an anthropological constant and emphasized the necessity of its productive use for the Enlightenment project.

Crucially, Wieland theorizes how literature can harness this inclination productively through what he terms "Einbildungskraft" (Wieland, 1796, 68) – the imaginative faculty. He argues that in the medium of art, a tacit agreement emerges whereby authors deploy marvelous narrative elements to which readers willingly consent in order to participate in aesthetic experience, as Wieland explains: "poets, from whom the richest source of invention and interest would be taken away with the marvelous, nourish this inclination in such a seductive way that, even though we have enough understanding to see that they are deceiving us, we still willingly agree to be so pleasantly deceived" (Wieland, 1796, 69).

Against this background the "Dschinnistan" collection appears as a literary implementation of Wieland's theoretical reflections on the marvelous. In the preface to the collection, he reflects on the seemingly contradictory human inclinations: "it seems strange that two such contradictory inclinations, as the tendency towards the marvelous and the love of truth, should be equally natural, equally essential to man; and yet it is so" (Wieland, 2007, 6).

This realization leads him to the conception of the fairy tale as the literary form which can accommodate both human inclinations through the strategic deployment of the "Einbildungskraft," allowing reason and wonder to coexist as "a deceptive whole for the imagination" (Wieland, 2007, 6). Based on this theoretical framework, the "Dschinnistan" narratives function as sophisticated analytical instruments that use the marvelous strategically to examine contemporary social conditions.

2.1 Childish Dreams and Conservative Endings: "Timander and Melissa"

Wieland's "Timander and Melissa" ["Timander und Melissa"] establishes an opposition between competing modes of understanding already in the exposition. Thessaly, a country modeled after the historical Greek mainland, where "fairy magic and sorcery had been at home since ancient times," is contrasted with a hypothetical world that "from the very beginning would have devoted itself to the natural sciences" (Wieland, 2007, 196). The fairy tale framing stands in striking contrast to the initially realistic conception of the human characters. The plot of "Timander and Melissa" begins at a royal court, which is depicted as a space of political intrigue. King Siopas is characterized as a "good kind of king" through his "negative virtues," yet his rule is marked by passivity – he does nothing that "would have caused a stir in the world" (Wieland, 2007, 195). This demonstrative

inactivity of the king ultimately provokes a conspiracy among his subjects, who are displeased with his style of governance.

The first fairy tale-like element in a classical sense – a magical ring that allows King Siopas to "read the hearts of men" (Wieland, 2007, 196) – fulfills an enlightening function. Through the ring, he becomes aware of the corruption of his royal court for the first time: "either the ring was lying, or his entire court retinue was a pack of false, scheming, ungrateful, fawning, rapacious flatterers and traitors, whose sole purpose was to outwit one another, to deceive and to exploit him" (Wieland, 2007, 196-197).

The initial juxtaposition of fairy tale framing and political reality is paradigmatic of Wieland's literary procedure in his "Dschinnistan" tales. What manifests itself here at the beginning is a narrative strategy that employs the fairy tale as an instrument of critical distancing. The magical ring functions as a medium of knowledge – not by revealing marvelous secrets, but by exposing the prosaic truths of courtly power dynamics and human corruption.

King Siopas subsequently finds a successor to the throne so that he himself can turn his back on the depraved court. He flees to a rural landscape, which, at least in appearance, is inhabited by people of "innocent character." However, he only settles there after casting away the magic ring with a spell, for he does not wish "to see whether appearances would be deceiving here as well" (Wieland, 2007, 198). If the ring is a medium of knowledge, Siopas here consciously rejects it by adopting a resigned attitude: instead of striving for a true utopia, he retreats into a pseudo-idyll.

The newly appointed King Euthyfron meanwhile attempts to educate his subjects to become better people through simple virtues. However, the main narrative only unfolds with the introduction of his son, Timander. The young prince is driven by an inner "restlessness" that leads him out of his kingdom one day and into an "unpaved mountain range" (Wieland, 2007, 200). Here the youth, filled with yearning, hopes: "to find an object that would fill his entire imagination and grant him all the raptures he had anticipated, without having seen the person who might bestow them upon him" (Wieland, 2007, 200).

Timander's enthusiastic disposition prepares him for the marvelous encounter that now follows. He comes upon a "strange apparition," which he initially "was inclined to take for a product of his imagination." A flock of white doves, bearing a "marvelous giant throne," alights before the youth and presents him with the invitation to embark on an "adventure" and to take a seat upon it (Wieland, 2007, 200).

The narrator's choice of words repeatedly indicates that Timander doubts the credibility of the wondrous events, questioning whether they might be illusory. This creates a remarkable tension, since Thessaly is introduced as a place where "fairy magic and sorcery had been at home since ancient times." Rather than depicting a unified magical realm, Wieland's narrative constructs a divided fairy tale world: a rational human sphere represented by the royal household, and a marvelous fairy sphere that exists apart from ordinary reality. Timander's first impression upon his arrival in the fairy realm reveals a world of absolute harmony:

> This place awakened all the loveliest dreams of his childhood and youth at once within him. [...] An eternal summer shared dominion over these enchanted fields with zephyrs and floras; the trees never lost their foliage, nor the meadows their flowers [...]. Storms, rain, and tempests were forever banished from this happy island [...]. Everything breathed harmony and love in this earthly Elysium. There was no plant that discolored the flowers around it with its poison-

> breathing shade, no bird of prey [...], no predatory beasts, no snakes, no troublesome insects desecrated this abode of joy and voluptuous repose (Wieland, 2007, 201-202).

This fairy realm brimming with harmony is conceived not merely as a contrasting setting to the intrigue-ridden royal court, but as a far more radical narrative construction that quickly unmasks itself. This world with no seasons, changes in weather, insects or dangerous animals springs from a childlike notion of happiness that seeks to free itself from anything perceived as uncomfortable or restrictive. The idyll follows a purely self-referential logic – aimed solely at personal well-being, without regard for natural cycles and dependencies.

On his further journey through the fairy realm, Timander meets the fairy princess Pasithea. At first, he feels a passionate desire for her. However, after the two spend a night together and Timander, in the morning light, secretly removes the veil from the sleeping princess's face – which until then had concealed her features – he is astonished by her "little monkey face" (Wieland, 2007, 210) and launches into a torrent of insults. Deeply offended, Pasithea transforms him into a butterfly, though he retains the "consciousness of his former being and status" (Wieland, 2007, 212).

In his butterfly form, Timander later encounters the young girl Melissa, who once grew up as the princess daughter of former King Siopas at the court of Thessaly, but was then abducted by a good fairy, as the latter had prophesied that the child would be "poorly raised" in the human world (Wieland, 2007, 220). However, the fairy did not bring Melissa to the realm of fairies, but to a simple peasant woman. Under her care, Melissa grew up over the past years to become a "good, sensitive, and innocent girl, modest, gentle, compassionate, charitable, capable of every noble sentiment, and open to every human joy" (Wieland, 2007, 220). While the courtly world is inevitably corrupting, the combination of fairy tale intervention and rural simplicity enables the formation of an unspoiled character.

Timander, too, is ultimately made a better person through his adventure. Up to this point, he appears as a headstrong and superficial hero who, in his search for paradisiacal places and erotic fulfillment, shows little interest in the reality outside himself. Other people interest him only insofar as they relate to his own needs. As a butterfly, however, his perception fundamentally changes. When he finds Melissa sleeping and half-naked in a meadow, he feels: "instead of cursing his butterfly form, an indescribable pleasure at the thought of loving the lovely beauty purely for her own sake, without any selfish desires, and of delighting in the pure contemplation of her perfections, without, like a common lover, destroying them through his own selfish love" (Wieland, 2007, 213-214).

Finally, Timander is restored to his human form by means of a magical vial. He and Melissa return to Thessaly, where their wedding promises happiness and prosperity to the kingdom. King Siopas also reappears to discover that his daughter Melissa is still alive. He acknowledges the value of her upbringing away from the royal house: "she certainly would not have turned out that way at court" (Wieland, 2007, 220).

A truly progressive message – such as an opening up of rigid marriage principles – cannot be expected from "Timander and Melissa." Thus, Timander's father initially rejects his wish to marry Melissa on the grounds that she is merely a "country girl" (Wieland, 2007, 221). Only after it is revealed that she is, in fact, the long-lost daughter of former King Siopas, social equality is established and the marriage can be consummated. This turn of events exposes the fairy tale resolution as a conventional affirmation of aristocratic order,

leaving unresolved the question of whether the courtly corruption depicted earlier can truly be overcome through the mere education of the enlightened rulers.

This underlying conservative attitude becomes even more apparent in the grotesque resolution of the Pasithea conflict: a husband is found for the offended fairy princess who, having been raised "among such ugly monkeys" since childhood, is attracted to her "monkey face" (Wieland, 2007, 222). While this solution does indicate a certain skepticism towards superficial ideals of beauty, it remains in its exaggeration merely a comedic punchline without transformative power.

Although a socio-critical dimension unfolds in "Timander and Melissa" through the juxtaposition of realistic court and magical intervention, the tale ultimately remains tied to conventional structures. Timander's transformation into a butterfly does function as a process of moral correction, freeing him from his egotistical dreams and enabling genuine empathy. However, this individual purification ultimately results in a return to the existing order. The fairy tale-elements serve less to fundamentally question social hierarchies than to admonish their moral renewal. In the end, the social order – described as deficient in the beginning of the tale – is not overcome but merely reaffirmed, as Melissa is rehabilitated as an equal princess. The fairy tale thus corresponds to an Enlightenment reform project that imagines alternatives of education in order to improve existing structures, but not to transform them in a revolutionary manner.

2.2 Social Transformation and the Critique of Materialism: "The Philosophers' Stone"

While "Timander and Melissa" deploys the marvelous encounter as a pedagogical corrective, "The Philosophers' Stone" ["Der Stein der Weisen"] intensifies this dimension of social critique through a materialist analysis of aristocratic power structures. From the outset, King Mark is presented as the embodiment of monarchical decadence: „he was arrogant without ambition, sensuous without taste, and greedy without knowing how to be economical. [...] When his income was no longer sufficient for his expenses, he burdened his subjects with new taxes. And when they no longer had anything to give, he made money off them by selling them to his neighbors" (Wieland, 1993, 529).

This depiction reveals more than just individual failure: the progression from taxation to human trafficking illustrates how aristocratic excess inevitably degrades subjects to merchandise. The royal court thus becomes a parasitic institution that consumes its own foundations.

This structural dysfunction reproduces itself in the quality of Mark's advisors. Through miserable court management, he squanders his fortune and now seeks remedy among wandering "treasure seekers, necromancers, alchemists, and swindlers who called themselves disciples of the great Hermes" (Wieland, 1993, 530). The court mutates into a magnet for charlatans; Mark's credulity – he is described as "most gullible man in the world" (Wieland, 1993, 530) – prevents reasonable counsel from breaking this vicious cycle.

Mark's personal relationships reveal the same fundamental flaw as his economic policies: treating all resources as inexhaustibly available rather than requiring active cultivation. This aristocratic entitlement creates a systematic blindness to the labor required to maintain both financial stability and intimate bonds, evident in his indifference toward Queen

Mabillje and his nonchalance regarding her romantic entanglements with some young knights.

Into this sphere of systematic failure steps Misfragmutosiris, whose enigmatic name already signals his otherness. Mark falls under his spell because he "had a great deal of gold and a bunch of rare items with him, and he talked about huge sums of money as if they were trifles" (Wieland, 1993, 533). Misfragmutosiris claims to be over a thousand years old and to possess mysterious powers, under which "everything is possible" (Wieland, 1993, 542).

After this mysterious figure has strung King Mark along for a while and demanded an enormous quantity of precious stones from him – allegedly in order to produce the coveted philosophers' stone that would transmute base metals into gold and solve all his financial woes – Misfragmutosiris disappears without a trace. Mark is magically transformed into a donkey, flees the castle and wanders the wilderness, shying away from people who might exploit him as a beast of burden. Now he has lost not only his kingdom but also his human existence, and yet "he still yearned to possess the stone of wise, even though he was a donkey" (Wieland, 1993, 561). To rid him of this obsessive desire, a "beneficent spirit" (Wieland, 1993, 561) now appears in the fairy tale, attempting to influence him through a dream.

The most innovative literary device in Wieland's "Philosophers' Stone" lies in this central dream sequence. Mark – once again a human and still king within the dream – receives from the spirit a magical lily that enables him to transform any object into gold. Yet instead of bringing him happiness, a cascade of economic catastrophes unfolds:

> Still, the enormous amount of gold that King Mark poured into the world brought considerable inconveniences with it. The first was that the foreigners who had flocked to his court from all parts of the world to offer him their wares [...] raised their prices as soon as they were informed about his inexhaustible supply of gold. [...] The products of the craftsmen became so expensive that gold, of which there was a surplus, became cheap, and eventually it could no longer be used as a symbol of the value of things in trade (Wieland, 1993, 563-564).

The tale here demonstrates a remarkable understanding of monetary theory. The social collapse that follows this economic destabilization is developed just as systematically. The native population falls into poverty as production comes to a standstill:

> While his court life was conducted in a bountiful, sumptuous, and wasteful way, which flooded half the world with gold, most of his own subjects were starving because they were denied all opportunities to earn something. They stopped all farming and business, for who wanted to do anything when one could have all life's necessities and luxuries in all the harbors of the kingdom at all times, and in much greater quantity and quality? [...] Everyone just wanted to have a good time, and soon all their riches, which had cost them so little, were consumed in riotous living and debauchery (Wieland, 1993, 564-565).

The dream sequence becomes a precise allegory for the dangers of a purely consumption-oriented model of society and thus serves as a critique of 18th-century economic assumptions that equated national wealth with the accumulation of precious metals.[8] By playing out the logical consequences of this idea to its destructive end, the text exposes the illusion that material accumulation is sufficient to solve social problems. The fairy tale invites readers to use the experiences of an alternative literary reality to reflect on the aporias of contemporary economic theories and to reconsider forms of social organization.

The healing process in Wieland's tale, while initiated by magical intervention, unfolds primarily through a radical change of spatial and social sphere. Mark's transformation into

[8] For the centrality of bullionism in early modern economic thought, see Heckscher (1955).

a donkey and the ensuing dream indicate the beginning of a therapeutic process that frees him from the corrupted environment of the court and brings him into contact with the possibility of an alternative form of life. As a donkey, Mark roams through a natural landscape that resembles the "romantic appearance of [...] wilderness" (Wieland, 1993, 566). Here he encounters a young peasant woman whose appearance presents a striking contrast to the courtly world. The narrative stages this encounter as an erotic awakening, even though it is based on entirely different foundations than the superficial pleasures of the court – the maid embodies a "daughter of guileless nature" (Wieland, 1993, 567) and thus represents the tale's vision of uncorrupted human nature.

By eating a lily – the same flower with which he was able to turn everything to gold in his dream – Mark regains his human form, but not as King Mark; instead, he becomes a "husky peasant about thirty years of age, full of health and strength" (Wieland, 1993, 568). This transformation is accompanied by a profound psychological change: "the strangest thing about it was that he had totally believed himself to be Mark, King of Cornwall, just a few days before and had a clear memory of all the foolish things he had done during that period of his life, and yet he was thinking quite differently, felt his heart beating in an entirely different way" (Wieland, 1993, 568).

Mark, who from now on calls himself Sylvester, does not experience this change as a loss, but as an immense gain. His new identity enables him to attain a form of happiness that was impossible within the courtly sphere. The therapeutic transformation culminates in Sylvester's complete reversal of values: "he thought with horror about what his fate might have been if he had become King Mark once again. [...] if he had to choose, he would prefer to become a donkey again rather than be King Mark of Cornwall" (Wieland 1993, 568).

These reflections clarify that the alternative reality of the rural sphere functions not merely as a place of temporary respite, but as a lasting cure for the pathologies of power. The transformation into the peasant Sylvester represents his rebirth as a happier and more complete person. In this way, Wieland's fairy tale thus demonstrates that true transformation is not achieved through external privileges or material wealth, but through a fundamental change in one's living conditions and social relationships.

The healing power of the alternative reality is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the restoration of the relationship between the formerly estranged spouses. For what does Sylvester discover in conversation with the country girl he has fallen in love with? She is none other than his wife, Queen Mabillje, who had first been transformed into a goat by one of her seducers, before she, too, was changed into a young maid through the consumption of a flower and took the name Rosine.

Transformed into Sylvester and Rosine, Mark and Mabillje now encounter each other not only as new versions of themselves, but as individuals who have undergone the same process of transformation. This parallel experience of alienation from the courtly sphere creates a new foundation for a connection unmarked by courtly presence between the couple – one that was impossible in their original existence. The recognition of their shared past does not lead to nostalgic longing for their lost status, but rather to an affirmation of their new identities. Both confess their renewed love to one another: "'I'm the happiest creature in the world just as long as you remain Sylvester–' 'And I'm the happiest of men just as long as you never stop being Rosine'" (Wieland, 1993, 577).

The alternative reality of the rural sphere thus functions as an enabling space for what the tale presents as authentic relationships. Whereas King Mark and Queen Mabillje were

separated by indifference and emotional coldness, Sylvester and Rosine discover a love based on mutual respect and genuine affection. It was not the individuals themselves who were bad – after all, Sylvester and Rosine are essentially still the same people – but rather the courtly sphere that brought out the worst in them.

Wieland's "Philosophers' Stone" operates according to what might be called – in modern terms – a "poetics of possible worlds," where magical elements serve primarily as poetic vehicles to access realistic social alternatives within the Enlightenment framework of probability.[9] The rural alternative to courtly decadence presents itself not as a supernatural utopia, but as a realistic life option, characterized by simplicity, physical activity, and authentic interpersonal relationships. The marvelous thus serves as a poetic vehicle, enabling the transition between social spheres without undermining the plausibility of the depicted alternative.

The functioning of the alternative reality here differs fundamentally from that in "Timander and Melissa." Whereas the fairy realm in "Timander and Melissa" is conceived primarily as a temporary space of education from which the protagonists return to their original world, "The Philosophers' Stone" establishes the rural sphere as a permanent alternative. Mark and Mabillje remain as Sylvester and Rosine in their new existence.

Through the permanence of the alternative, the nature of social reflection is decisively altered. "Timander and Melissa" invites readers to consider improvements to existing structures, whereas "The Philosophers' Stone" raises the more radical question of whether alternative ways of life might be desirable on a lasting basis. The focus shifts from optimizing what already exists to seriously contemplating entirely different social arrangements. This marks a crucial distinction in how Enlightenment authors employ social imagining: while "Timander and Melissa" uses it reformistically to improve existing structures, "The Philosophers' Stone" mobilizes it transformatively to envision radical alternatives.

3. The Costs of Transcendence: Benedikte Naubert's "Ottilie"

With Christiane Benedikte Naubert's "New Folk Tales of the Germans," the construction of alternative realities in German-language fairy tales undergoes a decisive shift. While Wieland's "Dschinnistan" is committed to the principle of a harmonious reconciliation of reason and sentiment, Naubert's tales develop a markedly more pessimistic understanding of the marvelous. Her texts are less concerned with integrating supernatural experiences into rational concepts of life than with exploring the destructive consequences that can arise when incompatible systems of reality collide.

Naubert's "New Folk Tales," which could only be attributed to its anonymous author in 1817, do not function as utopian models of society, but rather as narrative experiments that explore the limits of social integration. The alternative realities become, in a sense, experimental setups in which tensions between individual aspirations and societal demands are not resolved but are instead fully displayed in all their complexity.

[9] While the term "possible worlds" is modern, the concept aligns with Enlightenment poetics as developed by Johann Jakob Bodmer and Johann Jakob Breitinger, who sought to legitimate the marvelous within verisimilar frameworks (cf. Nobis, 1976, 38 & 261; Schelle, 1981, 121).

The fairy tale "Ottilie"[10] exemplifies this approach by posing a radically new question: what happens when the experience of a marvelous parallel world does not enable an individual

to improve existing conditions, but instead renders them permanently unfit for life? Here Naubert employs a different form of social imagining than Wieland – a form that does not explore the possibility of social transformation but rather diagnoses a profound incompatibility between individual and social reality.

From the very beginning, the narrative establishes two essentially incompatible worlds. The dying Princess Ottilie, cast out by her husband Rörich[11], entrusts her newborn child to the Virgin Mary. The Mother of God baptizes the child with the names Marie and Ottilie "in memory of her unfortunate mother" (Naubert, 2001, I 171) and, after the mother's death, leads the girl into the kingdom of heaven. However, Virgin Mary decides not to raise the child "for the life of the blessed" (Naubert, 2001, I 172) in the celestial sphere, but rather to prepare her for earthly existence. To this end, she gives the heavenly beings an appearance deceptive to the child's eyes, adapting them to human customs: "angels and the blessed appeared to the little earth-dweller as beautiful golden-haired youths and maidens, the festivities of heaven bore much resemblance to those on earth [...] and even the small tasks [...] were the same as those that might await her in her future earthly life" (Naubert, 2001, I 172).

In the fairy tale, the heavenly realm is thus conceived as a paradoxical pedagogical construct: an alternative reality that must deny its own alterity in order to fulfill its educational mission. This translation of the transcendent into familiar categories reveals a fundamental contradiction: the attempt to build a bridge between incompatible spheres through mimetic adaptation produces neither what might constitute an experience of heaven nor genuine preparation for the human world. Instead, a hybrid "neither-nor space" emerges – neither fully celestial nor truly earthly – and leaves little Marie inadequately prepared for both forms of existence.

The narrative voice criticizes this pedagogical project with remarkable sharpness. The direct characterization as a "half-completed education" that can "never be of great benefit" (Naubert, 2001, I 172) exposes the aporia of the heavenly educational program. The central problem does not lie in deficient execution, but in the conceptual impossibility of the undertaking itself: the intended preparation for earthly existence fails precisely because of the otherworldly environment. Marie's taste is so "infinitely refined" by the "heavenly company" (Naubert, 2001, I 172) – a refinement that implies both aesthetic sensitization and moral elevation – that this sublime state does not produce transferable education but rather leads to existential alienation.

What appears on the level of the plot as a failed pedagogical experiment functions on the level of reception as a sophisticated narrative technique. Particularly revealing in this context is the topographical concretization of the transcendent sphere: the kingdom of heaven is not located in a beyond universe that is closed off from the realm of experience, but on the moon, an empirically tangible celestial body. For the Enlightenment-era fairy tale, the moon serves as a liminal space par excellence – visible yet unreachable,

[10] Deriving from the historical Saint Odilia of Alsace (c. 660-720), whose life spawned countless legends and folk tales across German-speaking lands. These stories typically involve themes of miraculous transformation and divine favor.

[11] Rörich's cruelty exemplifies the type of corrupt ruler also embodied by King Mark in the beginning of Wieland's "Philosophers' Stone," representing the Enlightenment critique of monarchical incompetence and moral failure.

scientifically explored yet mythologically charged, part of the empirical cosmos and at the same time a projection surface for fantasies. This localization enables the text to productively exploit the tension between rational worldview and imaginative world-making.

The realization that she is on Earth's satellite is imparted to little Marie by the words of a dubious spirit who, through his tale, sows in the child a longing for her lost homeland: "do you really believe you are in heaven? – Poor deceived one, you are living on a small planet, called the moon by the inhabitants of the earth, whose main purpose is to shine upon their nights. – Can you imagine that the servant of the earth could be more beautiful than the earth itself?" (Naubert, 2001, I 176).

In this interpretative ambivalence, the epistemological crisis of the Enlightenment crystallizes; the fairy tale stages the collision of incommensurable worldviews: the moon becomes a contested terrain of competing systems of imagination – the sacred topography of divine perfection collides with the mechanistic cosmology of the Enlightenment science. This tension culminates in Marie's transgression, as she defies the prohibition of her heavenly patroness and leaves the far side of the moon. What follows is one of the most striking passages of the fairy tale:

> [...] a lake, which the eye could not take in at glance, appeared before her, and above it there was no other covering than the dusky evening sky, on whose horizon the deceived one's [Marie] dearest luminary[12] rose beautifully and terribly. Fate had willed that she had chosen precisely the hour for her daring deed in which the moon's inhabitants were anticipating an eclipse of the earth. The sun stood behind the dark planet, which cast a dreadful shadow on the luminary that the foster daughter of the saint had never before seen as anything but silver-bright and pure. The part of the earth which was not in the shadow was red as blood, and the edge of the smooth lake seemed to swim in fire from its reflection (Naubert, 2001, I 178-179).

The eclipse of the earth becomes a cosmic threshold scene in which multiple layers of meaning overlap: the blood-red earth functions as a polyvalent sign – it simultaneously evokes violence and vitality, sacrifice and regeneration, the Passion of Christ and the Fall of Man. The fiery lake that lies between Marie and earth in turn activates an intertextual web of biblical apocalyptic imagery ("lake of fire" in the Book of Revelation[13]) and ancient conceptions of liminal waters (Styx, Lethe).

The threshold scene marks the turning point of the narrative. Marie's transgression brings about the unyielding lawfulness of heaven suddenly revealing the contradictions inherent in the entire educational project. Virgin Mary finds herself in the position of having to enforce a judgment that leaves no room for mercy: "the sentence of expulsion from these dwellings of peace is irrevocable" (Naubert, 2001, I 180). It is precisely these "dwellings of peace" that prove to be a place of merciless regularity. When Saint Mary promises "not to completely abandon" (Naubert, 2001, I 181) the child on earth, the continuation of the precarious liminal existence that has defined Marie's life is already foreshadowed.

The return to earth – designated as "land of tears" (Naubert, 2001, I 181) – is accompanied by the command that Marie must now assume her earthly name, Ottilie. Upon arriving in

[12] "Luminary" translates "Gestirn," which in 18th-century usage had a broader meaning than the modern "star." According to Adelung, "Gestirn" could refer both to individual stars and, as a collective term, to "all stars, or stars in general" (Adelung, 1793-1801, II 638). The term encompassed any celestial body, as Adelung's definition of "star" includes "all luminous celestial bodies, except the sun and moon" (Adelung, 1793-1801, IV 356).

[13] The "lake of fire" appears multiple times in Revelation as the final destination of the damned (Rev., 19:20; 20:10, 14-15; 21:8).

her birthland, she is discovered by her father Rörich, who immediately recognizes and accepts her as his own long-lost daughter. However, the initial reintegration quickly proves to be illusory. The sensitivity Ottilie cultivated in heaven manifests itself as an ensemble of "talents of the sort that could only be considered supernatural" – abilities that inevitably mark the child as a stranger, one from whom "everyone recoiled" (Naubert, 2001, I 186-188). This supernatural refinement functions not as a gift, but as a stigma that stands in the way of any genuine participation in the human community. The resulting longing for the "place from which she came" (Naubert, 2001, I 186) completes a tragic symmetry of homelessness. Just as Marie's longing for earth was awakened on the moon, so now does earthly reality in Ottilie give rise to a yearning for the lost heavenly sphere.

The father's prompt insistence on arranging a marriage for Ottilie, shortly after her arrival, exposes the unbridgeable gulf between heavenly formation and earthly social order in all its brutality. Ottilie's desperate search among her earthly suitors for a "heavenly smiling John" or "golden-haired Gabriel" (Naubert, 2001, I 189) reveals more than mere romantic infatuation – it documents the impossibility of reconciling her internalized ideals with the prosaic reality of courtly marriage politics.[14] The devastating assessment – "as for perfection of soul, things looked even more concerning" (Naubert, 2001, I 189) – marks not only the moral deficiencies of the suitors, but the fundamental incommensurability of two value systems. When "the thought of a union with an earthly youth" (Naubert, 2001, I 188) fills Ottilie with revulsion, it manifests a radical self-alienation: she is unable to imagine herself as part of the human species. The pragmatic advice of the governess, that princesses "must never follow their hearts, but only consider reasons of state," clashes directly with Ottilie's internalized conception of love as an "eternal union" (Naubert, 2001, I 189).

The return of the dubious spirit marks the final escalation of Ottilie's existential crisis. This figure, who had already orchestrated Marie's heavenly disillusionment, now appears as a dark doppelganger of her own homelessness. His self-identification as an "outcast" (Naubert, 2001, I 196), born from the Old Testament's sinful union of angels and humans, mirrors Ottilie's own hybrid existence. The spirit offers Ottilie a way out, if she commits to him: "immortality! [...] The entire cosmos, all of eternity is ours, and we grant it to whomever we wish. Oh mortal girl, to fly for aeons from planet to planet in the arms of an instructing angel, to gaze upon all the wonders of creation and their most secret primal forces, in my arms, Ottilie" (Naubert, 2001, I 198).

Ottilie's desperate attempts at categorization – "are you human, an angel of light, or a spirit of the night [...]?" (Naubert, 2001, I 198-199) – reveal her complete epistemological disorientation. Fleeing from her father and a bridegroom chosen for her, she is on the verge of surrendering herself to the "tempter" (Naubert, 2001, I 207), when suddenly the Virgin Mary hears the cries for help from her former foster child and performs a miracle: "the mountain opened up, took [Ottilie] into its bosom, and closed thunderously behind her" (Naubert, 2001, I 207). At first, this may suggest a final redemption, but the last sentences of the fairy tale deconstruct this hope. It is told that the mountain into which Ottilie disappeared was now named after her, since it "was sometimes visited by the silent shade of the blessed one, who, even in the heavenly realms, still clung longingly to her

[14] Naubert's fairy tales are particularly compelling in their exploration of female perspectives and the challenges women face within patriarchal social structures. Her collection repeatedly foregrounds women's experiences of constraint and agency, as exemplified in tales like "The Short Cloak" ["Der kurze Mantel"] which has been the subject of feminist literary analysis (cf. Diamond, 1999; Martin, 2006, 98-99; Thiel, 2001).

homeland, and on moonlit nights would gladly float down to its peaceful regions" (Naubert, 2001, I 209).

The resolution of the narrative – Marie/Ottilie as an eternal wanderer between heaven and earth – crystallizes the fairy tale's radical critique of the Enlightenment fantasies of mediation. While Wieland's characters either pass through their alternative experiences temporarily (as in "Timander and Melissa") or settle permanently in alternative realities (as in "The Philosophers' Stone"), Naubert condemns her protagonist to a state of existential liminal homelessness. Whereas Wieland still explores reformist or transformative possibilities, Naubert diagnoses the fundamental incommensurability between different orders of knowledge.

"Ottilie" thus dismantles the pedagogical optimism project of the Enlightenment. The heavenly education, conceived as a bridge between transcendence and immanence, instead produces a subject fit for neither world. This tragic paradox distinguishes Naubert's vision from Wieland's tales: while the fairy in "Timander and Melissa" successfully intervenes educationally, and the benevolent spirit in "The Philosophers' Stone" enables a salutary transformation, Virgin Mary's educational experiment fails due to the impossibility of synthesizing the irreconcilable. Naubert's fairy tale thus demonstrates a third mode of social imagining – neither reformist like Wieland's "Timander and Melissa", nor transformative like his "Philosophers' Stone," but diagnostic: it reveals how exposure to transcendent alternatives can render individuals incapable of social participation.

What emerges from Naubert's portrayal is a sharp critique of idealistic pedagogy. Exposure to idealized alternatives – be they heavenly spheres or utopian models of society – is here revealed not as liberating, but as potentially destructive. In this way, Naubert formulates a fundamental critique of the Enlightenment ideal of education itself: cultivation and sensitization that are detached from the world can lead to social incapacity.

4. The Instrumentalization of the Marvelous

The fairy tales examined here illustrate how the Enlightenment narratives deploy the marvelous – precisely that element which would seem to contradict their rationalist worldview – as an instrument of critical social analysis. Through their strategic use of alternative realities, these texts develop a sophisticated typology of social imagining: Wieland's reformist mode in "Timander and Melissa" seeks to improve existing structures through temporary education; his transformative mode in "The Philosophers' Stone" permanently reimagines social arrangements; while Naubert's diagnostic mode in "Ottilie" reveals the tragic impossibility of reconciling incompatible worlds.

These different narrative strategies reveal the philosophical sophistication of the Enlightenment fairy tale. The texts operate not escapistically, but analytically – they use the marvelous to conduct thought experiments that would be impossible within realistic forms of representation. Alternative realities function as contrasting backdrops that make the deficits of existing orders visible: the corruption of the nobility in "Timander and Melissa," the materialistic delusion in "The Philosophers' Stone," and the failure of Enlightenment attempts at synthesis in "Ottilie."

The alternative worlds are not autonomous poetic spaces but carefully constructed instruments of social imagining through which the tensions between ideal and reality, between the marvelous and the rational, can be productively negotiated. By identifying these three modes of social imagining – reformist, transformative, and diagnostic –, this

analysis reveals how the Enlightenment fairy tales developed a sophisticated repertoire of critical strategies that anticipate later debates about literature's capacity to envision social change.

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The Cybernetic Sublime Gentrification, Ecstasy, and the Celebration of Misunderstanding

Max Kaario[1]

Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between music, events, and transformative experiences in urban environments, arguing that certain musical and social settings facilitate individuation through aesthetic experiences that momentarily exit from normalized daily rhythms. Drawing on the anthropologists Michael Taussig, Ernesto de Martino and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, it examines how aberrant forms of collectivity, such as the trance-inducing tarantella, suspend the strictures of contemporary capitalist norms, allowing for the release of hidden, entropic information. The collectivity of music can become a catalyst for transcending the quotidian, an aesthetic experience that might be identified as the 'cybernetic sublime'.
The experimental music events the author has organized in the Northeast Paris over the past 12 years have been attempts to put these strategies into practice, aiming to foster a resistant atmosphere that disrupts conventional concert venue settings. Strategic disorientation, efforts to demonetize, and the celebration of misunderstanding are key to encouraging an anti-colonial form of the cybernetic sublime, a collective experience of uncertainty across social, spatio-temporal, and technological systems, offering a brief but intensely collective potential for individuation that resists the dominance of capitalist experience.

Keywords: cybernetic sublime, gentrification, misunderstanding, music events, anthropology

1. Introduction

Money driven music events are spectacular in a way that reflects Guy Debord's early warning about the rise of cybernetic society (Debord, 1967). Social and spatiotemporal control, risk assessment, and a homogeneous sum of expected outcomes. Money driven expectations frame an event with a limited means of verbal and gestural enunciation, bodies placed in endless lineups for entrance, toilets, drinks and exits. Stringent hierarchies for people performing, working, and forming an audience for spectacular music events ensure any outcome is known beforehand.

However, in many cities, other sorts of music events exist, often hidden within marginalized communities and eccentric milieus. These events undermine the spectacular by utilizing a realm of uncommodified aesthetics. Generating little money, they rely heavily on community volunteers and emphasize collective forms that are at times ecstatic, in a way not possible in an event setting strategizing a more commercialized outcome. Today, online forms of ecstasy are perhaps easier to identify than those which take place in public or private spaces among interacting bodies.[2] This essay focusses on collective situations

[1] Independent researcher, maxkaario@gmail.com, ORCID-ID: 0009-0003-4110-5650.
[2] A recent example which describes many online ecstatic forms is Susca (2024).

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that take place at music events in urban spaces like bars, squats, galleries, restaurants, small clubs, or épiceries. With alcohol sales often forming the money-making ends of a space's subsistence, the music event can minimize the importance of financial gain.[3]

One challenge of organizing music events in these urban contexts is understanding and attempting to reduce their participation in gentrification. My attempts to understand the aesthetic dimensions of gentrification have led me to identify a type of collective situation I have called the cybernetic sublime. By reducing the spectacular, money-driven expectations of the music events I organize in Paris, I have attempted to offer a place and time where the cybernetic sublime might emerge with a minimal gentrifying impact.[4]

What follows is a breakdown of some of the aesthetic and anthropological reflections that brought me first to identify the cybernetic sublime in its gentrifying impetus, and then to describe its antidotal form as a celebration of misunderstanding.

2. Longinus and the Early Modern Evolution of the Sublime

The sublime has been associated with ecstatic experience since the writings of Longinus in the first century AD:

> The Sublime leads the listeners not to persuasion, but to ecstasy: for what is wonderful always goes together with a sense of dismay, and prevails over what is only convincing or delightful, since persuasion, as a rule, is within everyone's grasp: whereas, the Sublime, giving to speech an invincible power and [an invincible] strength, rises above every listener. (Longinus, "On the Sublime")

For Longinus, the sublime is a literary affect that extends beyond persuasion into an ecstatic experience of being overwhelmed. In more contemporary terms, Longinus' sublime might be described as a leaving behind of everyday expectations, forcing the reader into the ecstatic. This "leaving behind" involves a risk-taking, an uncomfortable venture into the unknown. Drew Hemment's raises awareness of the risk taking aspect of ecstasy: "a turn to ekstasis is not intended to rescue our humanity - quite the reverse. For it is our humanity, and specifically the puritan self, that holds our desire in suspense, and which would be undone by a resurgence of ekstasis." (Hemment, 1997) The 'puritan self' belongs to the every-day: bourgeois desire, work, domestic responsibility. When this constrained self is left behind in ecstatic moments, a remapping takes place, a questioning of hierarchies, repositioning the underpinnings of social milieu.

In early modern Europe, when Longinus' Latin text was translated into modern European languages, new interpretations of the sublime emerged, notably in the writings of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant. The intricacies of these 18th century renewals of the sublime are beyond the scope of the present essay, but their descriptions, which contain an Enlightenment ethic, admit the role of experience that extends beyond 'sense': "For what is sublime, in the proper meaning of the term, cannot be contained in any sensible form." (Kant, 1987)

Another aspect of the 18th-century sublime were the new enticements of leisure and particularly travel, especially among rich young European men. What was known as the Grand Tour, a coming-of-age ritual where young European men of a certain class traveled through Western Europe, became emblematic of a new sensibility, that included an experience of 'awe and terror' in front of natural wonders such as the Alps. An important

[3] Art galleries can be an exception to this point, as they often receive government and sometimes private funding. While galleries can be exciting places to play and put on music, their clinical, white cube aspect, can encourage sophisticated, or professionalized behavior.

[4] Whether or not these attempts have been successful or ineffectual is beyond my ability to measure.

example that influenced Kant's version of the sublime was Saussure's *Exploration of the Alps* (1796). The significance of this characteristic of the 18th century sublime might not be obvious at first glance. But the particular feeling of pleasurable awe that is the 18th century sublime was directed by a class apparatus that sought momentary exit, an ecstatic moment beyond the limitations of the aristocratic or bourgeois self.

As shall be seen, this 18th-century ecstatic, related to leisure, contemplation of 'wild' nature, a colonial spirit of cultural exploration, is reminiscent of the contemporary desires of artists and information workers.

3. The Technological Sublime

With the advent of the Industrial Revolution, the sublime changed its form, becoming technological. This is the thesis of *The Machine in the Garden,* a work of literary history and theory which analyzes the recurrent insertion of machines into garden or wilderness settings in 19th-century American literature, and the ecstatic collectivity that it sometimes instigated (Marx 1964). Perhaps the most evocative example is *Moby Dick*, where the crew of the Pequod, an industrial whaling ship, roam the seas in search of a white whale.

The whaling ship is a complex industrial machine, the seas are a garden/wilderness, and the white whale is a sheer representation of the unknowable. During moments when the crew is working together, for example squeezing whale sperm in a large vat, there is an experience of ecstatic togetherness that is at least partially provided by the experience of the collective use of machinery in a wilderness setting (Melville 1851). The technological sublime combines an idea of an opportune 'wild' setting intercepted and sometimes augmented by technological collectivity.

The cybernetic sublime, as I formulate it, took its initial impetus from *The Machine in the Garden*, translating the industrial setting into a contemporary post-cybernetic context. Society has undergone a cybernetic paradigm shift that has only expanded since 1948, the year the term cybernetic was formally coined by Norbert Wiener (1948). This paradigm shift includes the digital technology revolution, the dematerialization of money, labor and culture, and a profound general integration of cybernetic concepts and apparatuses.[5] This essay focusses on the cybernetic sublime as it is experienced in music events taking place in neighborhoods undergoing gentrification. Following the logic of *The Machine in the Garden*, the cybernetic sublime is the collective ecstatic experiences that can take place through the insertion of a sound system in particular urban spaces.

The representation of the technological sublime in *Moby Dick* contains another particularity, not mentioned in *The Machine in the Garden*, which is highly relevant to the present essay: at the helm of the Pequod, is Ahab, a maniacal captain who has abandoned the money-making ends of a standard whaling voyage in search of Moby Dick, the white whale. Arguably, the ecstatic collectivity of *Moby Dick* is heightened by this non-lucrative difference. Ahab as orchestrator of a collective ecstatic through his maniacal obsession of the white whale.

In a music event setting, with its cables, speakers, acoustic and electronic instruments, there is a similarity to *Moby Dick*'s complex technological assemblage. When the event takes on a nearly demonetized social apparatus, as on Captain Ahab's Pequod, from my experience, the potential for ecstatic collectivity is heightened. Simultaneously, because the event is

[5] A growing literature upholds the idea of a cybernetic paradigm shift. For an example, see Lafontaine (2014).

demonetized, as much as the context allows, there is potentially a lessened gentrifying impact.[6]

4. The Cybernetic Sublime and Gentrification

The sublime is a moment experienced outside the semiotic readability of every day, beyond the social or proportional confines those algorithms enforced by the rapid transformations of societies facing imminent ecological catastrophe. The cybernetic sublime is collective, experienced between bodies. As Vincenzo Susca (2024) has evocatively suggested, current dance crazes, which encompass both online and in person worlds, are a type of dance of death.[7] The gentrifier is a prime organizer and participator in this apocalyptic entrancement.

In the Parisian context, where I live and organize music events, who are the gentrifiers? As Anne Clerval shows in *Paris sans le peuple* (2013), in the early stages of gentrification in a Parisian neighborhood, the population of information workers increases.[8] Certainly information workers are looking for lower real estate prices. This is a primary reason they move to the neighborhoods they do. But given their cultural values, many of these people also seek out diversity, neighborhoods they do not know or understand, a way of life that implies difference from what they have already experienced. It is here we find a similarity with the older forms of the sublime: I argue that information workers experience a form of pleasure, sometimes reaching the summits of fearful awe and ecstasy, by frequenting, moving through, occupying, passing their leisure time within pre-gentrified neighborhoods. Eventually, as gentrification progresses, information workers financially invest in the neighborhoods by opening up businesses, galleries, associations and renting or buying property.

Perhaps even more pertinent to the current study, is the early role of gentrification among artists. Before the information workers arrive, artists and musicians form an early vanguard in un-gentrified neighborhoods (Ley, 2003). For example, in Paris and its near suburbs, the opening up of artist squats in ungentrified suburbs was a prominent feature of young artists' attempts to establish radical living situations, until recent anti-squat laws made it more difficult to open up unused architectural spaces for utopian purposes. In the contemporary Parisian region, the opening of galleries, art associative spaces, and studio collectives, are part of an influx of artists newly frequenting and inhabiting a given neighborhood. Eventually spaces of commerce are opened which directly refer to the values of the artists. At some point in this evolutive medley the arrival of information workers enters into the mix.

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[6] Monetization remains present in the events because performers rightly expect to be paid for their work. The complexity of gathering money at a music event that is at the same time trying to reduce the importance of money, is an unresolved challenge I continue to face in the events I organize.

[7] Susca (2024) presents social media trends, on the one hand, and all sorts of dance parties, concerts, festivals, house parties, new age practices, therapy, on the other.

[8] A rather vast subject, what I refer to as information workers is to be associated with post-Fordist, post-industrial, or cognitive labor. Key characteristics of this type of labor include precarity, dematerialization and 'always-on' working conditions. The information worker, bodily invested with these characteristics, asserts themselves in the yet to be gentrified neighborhoods they frequent and inhabit, thus enforcing gentrification in the public and commercial spaces that make up the quarter. Anne Clerval's description is best summed up in the following citation: "La présence des professions culturelles est donc notable dans les quartiers populaires dans lesquels la gentrification est la moins avancée, là ou les cadres sont les moins nombreux par rapport aux classes populaires. Ainsi, la part de ces professions parmi les cadres est la plus forte le long du front de gentrification. Cela confirme la place d'avant-garde des professions culturelles dans la gentrification à Paris." (Clerval, 2013, 174)

5. Neo-Colonialism, the Frontier Mentality, and the Semiotic Unreadability of Wilderness

The word gentrification was first put into use by the British sociologist Ruth Glass in 1964, as part of her description of the urban changes London was undergoing (Glass, 1964). This historical placement is synonymous with the insertion of cybernetics into the discourse of art, the social sciences, and philosophy (Geoghegan, 2011). An early commentator on the paradigm shifting importance of cybernetics was French philosopher Henri Lefebvre. Most well-known for his radical urban theory, Lefebvre also wrote book length essays on cybernetics. While his critique of cybernetics is less well-known than his work on urbanism, I believe they coincide, and thereby provide an impetus to understand the inner workings of both gentrification and the cybernetic sublime.

The constraining force of cybernetics, according to Lefebvre, prevents renewal, imposing a homogeneous, mimetic repetition of habits, gestures and verbal forms of expression. This is largely due to the technical application of information theory in new media such as television, computers and the culture industry. According to Lefebvre (1973), the renewal of language and gesture is being disrupted by the appearance of cybernetics in the media landscape. The result is a standardization of social relations, in which the conditions necessary for the renewal of social forms are eliminated. This is where we might understand why, at the end of the 1960s, with the publication of *Le Droit à la ville*, cities and, later, urban spaces, take on paramount importance for Lefebvre. They are practical sites for the renewal of gestures, offering them a critical space to be invented and reinvented in 'moments', a means that escapes the algorithmic framing of cybernetic technologies.

Lefebvre's 'moments' offer the possibility of disrupting the expected algorithms of an increasingly stratified everyday life. Described in this way, 'moments' help us to understand the cybernetic sublime as the experience of vital forms of communication that renew gestures and verbal language through the practice of urban spaces. The vitality of communication that occurs in non-gentrified urban spaces is a central element of the 'new orality', and extends beyond the domesticated signs of pre-established behavioral codes.

In the second installation of *La Droit a la ville*, Lefebvre describes an internal neo-colonialism that establishes itself in the aftermath of the loss of multiple French colonies in the 1950s and 1960s. This internal neo-colonialism, Lefebvre associates with "overdevoloped, overindustrialized, overurbanised zones" within French cities (Lefebvre, 1973).[9] Lefebvre shows that in the post-colonial situation of the 1960s, there was a form of 'internal neo-colonialism' being installed in French cities. Gentrification is synonymous with this neo-colonialist drive, functioning with a frontier mentality where artists form an early thrust, moving into neighborhoods, opening spaces formerly occupied by industry and working class communities.

Describing the consumerist frenzy of the frontier myth embodied by artists and information workers, unknowingly inherited from the past of European colonialism, Neil Smith (1996, 12) writes:

> As new frontier, the gentrifying city since the 1980 has been oozing with optimism. Hostile landscapes are regenerated, cleansed, reinfused with middle-class sensibility; real estate values soar; yuppies consume; elite gentility is democratized in mass produced styles of distinction.

Writing in 1996, Smith suggests the frontier myth is present in much of the rhetoric surrounding the gentrification of contemporary cities, and that this pioneering vision of a

[9] "La France impérialiste a perdu ses colonies, mais un néocolonialisme interne s'est installé. La France actuelle comprend des zones surdéveloppées, sur-industrialisées, sur-urbanisées." (Lefebvre, 1973, 143).

'wilderness', while evidently racist, unashamedly establishes a direct correlation between the 'Wild West', the contemporary city, and its 'urban jungle', renewing a European myth charged with a form of discrimination that romantically attributes wild primitiveness to people living in these neighborhoods. This mythological frontier mentality is driven by a search for wild nature, and just as the introduction of the railroad into the American landscape created an ecstatic form of the technological sublime, the frontier mentality of gentrification takes the ecstatic form of the cybernetic sublime.

The cybernetic sublime is driven by the desiring machines of a frontier mentality that seeks to experience the ecstatic shock of alterity. Among the historical characters entailed in the search for alterity, the anthropologist is a key figure. Born during the late period of European colonialism, the anthropologist has very often participated in the justification for imperialism (Viveiros De Castro, 2009). However, since the mid 20th century numerous anthropologists have attempted to address the complicity their discipline has had in colonial processes.

This paper finishes with three examples from anthropology that provide insight into how the gentrifying mentality present in music events might be upturned, reduced, or slowed down, for example through demonetization. Michael Taussig, Ernesto de Martino and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro offer radical methodological and conceptual tools to disrupt the colonialist mentality of music event situations, pointing towards an ecstatic that is in ecological tune with the neighborhood in question.

6. Seeking the Unreadable: Wildness, Uncertainty, and the Gentrifier

Like the technological sublime, the cybernetic variant must be understood as implicated in colonialist forms of violence, discrimination and domestication. A seeking out of wildness, a periphery of everyday readability, is part of the artist's pioneering mentality. In the artist's search to deterritorialize space, there is a desire to unearth alterity. What better place for an artist to experience alterity than in an un-gentrified neighborhood, where ways of living are often 'other' to them, a place where the subaltern continues to speak. The alterity an artist can embody encourages an edgy sheen, an otherness to people living and working in more domesticated circumstances. The artist is supposed to be a miner of unreadability, a semiotic pioneer that refuses a fully domesticated life. Through the desire bound seeking out of undomesticated experience, the artist can be made to believe their presence in an un-gentrified neighborhood is justified. The justifications of the colonizer are key to understanding any colonial process (Said, 1978).

The artist's contemporary interest in experiencing alterity is analogous with a predominant European colonial narrative that identifies wilderness with any context that is not easily readable, reaches beyond a domesticated threshold of certainty, and perhaps most significantly, any misunderstanding that might occur in a newly experienced territory. The concept of wilderness participates in a long-held, fallacious lens that invents and maintains stereotypes that vary in degree of being maliciously or soothingly discriminatory of the peoples already occupying a given territory.

This is true of both historical and contemporary forms of colonialism, among which gentrification is to be included. The mythological rhetoric applied to the inhabitants of yet to be gentrified urban neighborhoods, to which colonizing artists are drawn, appeals to a stereotypical vision of the "magical" wild man, as described by Michael Taussig in his analysis of the idea of wildness as seen through the lens of the European pioneer:

> [Savagery] is incessantly recruited by the needs of order (and indeed, this is one of anthropology's most enduring tasks and contributions to social order). But the fact remains

> that in trying to tame wildness this way, so that it can serve order as a counterimage, wildness must perforce retain its difference. If wildness per se is not credited with its own force, reality, and autonomy, then it cannot function as a handmaiden to order. The full implications of this paradox are submerged in a violent act of domestication. (Taussig, 1987, 220)

Today the concept of wilderness is a 'handmaiden' of an order that depends on the preservation of everyday capitalist rhythms. In the urban areas of neo-liberalized nation-states, artists and information workers have been trying for decades to access the cybernetic sublime by attending punk shows, raves, dance parties, and concerts – cultural forms taking place in urban areas not yet engulfed by the most radically homogenized forms of capitalism. These events unwittingly reinforce the process of gentrification, while at the same time asserting a 'wildness' that enables a sensorial de-territorialization which participates in the artist's quest to upturn and renew meaning.

The careerist aspect of the majority of information workers and artists today leads them to experiment with 'cleansed' spaces of consumption, fitted for their branded attachments to design: concept stores, minimalist cafés, vintage boutiques, or organic food shops are a short list of examples.

The idea of wilderness provoked by the colonial imperatives is complicit with the artist's aim to renew sense. In other words, art is regenerated in its constant search to invent the new through a belief that the accessing of the 'wildman' – in Taussig's terms – can provide an ecstatic relinquishing of the domesticated and an entrance into a 'death space' for the readable.[10]

7. Aberrant Temporality, Social Lacuna and the Crisis of Presence

By identifying the complicity between art's search for unreadability and gentrification, a region of tacit desire begins to be made explicit. The cybernetic sublime is a meeting point between art, aesthetics and gentrification. This raises a question related to the search for a form of the cybernetic sublime that subverts rather than produces gentrification in a music event setting. One response is to further describe the Lefebvrian notion of the need for 'moments' that extend beyond the capitalist squeeze on everyday temporality. A correlate temporal concept, which turns the aesthetic of 'moments' on its head, can be found in the work of Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino. One of his most powerful ideas is the acceptance of a need for allowing a space for social lacuna in collective situations. How he arrived at this conclusion requires some unpacking.

In his first book, *Il mondo magico* ("The Magic World", 1971), De Martino produced an ethnographic compilation, bringing together examples of field situations in which European anthropologists witnessed phenomena that cannot be explained by modern scientific epistemology. Examples such as fire-walking and telepathy are described using historical ethnographic studies carried out by anthropologists in different parts of the world. Above and beyond any assertions about the veracity of these paranormal phenomena, what must be retained from De Martino's ethnographic examples is that the

[10] "Wildness also raises the specter of the death of the symbolic function itself. It is the spirit of the unknown and the disorderly, loose in the forest encircling the city and the sown land, disrupting the conventions upon which meaning and the shaping function of images rest. Wildness challenges the unity of the symbol, the transcendent totalization binding the image to that which it represents. Wildness pries open this unity and its place creates slippage and a grinding articulation between signifier and signified. Wildness makes of these connections spaces of darkness and light in which objects stare out in their mottled nakedness while signifiers float by. Wildness is the death space of signification." (Taussig, 1987, 220).

rituals in question are not to be understood from the scientifically biased perspectives of the European anthropologists:

> The paradox of culturally conditioned nature is now before us in all its scandalous force. But at the same time the 'new way' opens up for us: the culturally conditioned nature leads us back to the cultural situation from which it springs, to the historical world of magic. Whether, and to what extent, the magical powers are real is a question that cannot be decided independently of the sense of reality that serves here as a predicate for judgment. (De Martino, 1971, 61)

The literate European intellectual perception of magical rites practiced by non-Western cultures is falsified by the very logic on which its perceptions are based; as De Martino writes, one cannot decide what is actually happening in a magical rite, without including the culturally specific 'sense of reality' applied in the actual rites. Hence, this happening in the context of a music event during which social, spatiotemporal and technical organizational strategies are demonetized, could differentiate it from a standardized sense of capitalist reality, even if only momentarily, establishing a spatiotemporality that cannot be rationalized beyond the enunciative particularities of the collective milieu itself.

This helps account for the challenge of documenting music events, for which the actual aesthetic affects are somatic and collective, far from being limited to photographs, videos or sound recordings, which often only serve as a type of promotion for the artists. For De Martino, the bodies of the collective become the central source of mediation: the body as media, the body as memory, the body as documentation – a moment beyond easy readability.

Rituals which dissolve the standardized course of everyday life are often a response to an anthropological need De Martino later called "the crisis of presence". He saw rituals presenting entropic or 'aberrant' enunciation, such as the Tarantella trance in Southern Italy, as a collective admission of the existence of a social need; a lacuna that must be filled by a ritualized setting, offering a particular spatio-temporal 'moment' for enunciative aberration (De Martino, 1961). In David Gutherz's analysis, this need for "aberrant moments" must be collectively accepted and endorsed:

> Through the history of magic, de Martino sought access to societies that didn't push this "drama of presence" out of the public sphere, but rather treated it as a problem that concerned the whole community. Fascism, he suggested, was able to undermine liberal institutions by offering collective solutions to the pain that "humanists" blinded by individualism couldn't even see. To counter this pseudoregression, socialist humanists would have to find a more compelling response to "primitive" fears. And to do this, de Martino insisted, they would have to work through the history that ethnology erased. (Gutherz, 2017, 58)

Behavioral aberrations remain possible within moments when social lacuna are collectively encouraged to emerge. "The crisis of presence" is tacitly or explicitly present in every social situation, no matter how rational, puritan, professional or clinical. If a music event is monetized, in a stadium, large concert hall, commercial gallery or museum, for example, the crisis is made to be invisible, but remains present as tacit violence that stultifies the aesthetic potential. On the other hand, a music event that strategically accepts the important presence of the crisis of presence, may engage with a leave-taking of quotidian stringencies, while also celebrating social phenomena that are difficult to understand, exactly because they contain an aberrance that is necessary for radical diversity.

There is an equivocal difference between the perceptions of one person to the next. Learning to perceive misunderstanding as inevitable is a way of celebrating the complexity of radical difference in an urban neighborhood. In other words, the celebration of misunderstanding experienced at demonetized music events represents a means to reinvent from a "bottomless" source in the Deleuzian sense: reorienting movements,

behaviors and enunciations towards a reterritorialization that is immune to gentrifying desires:

> These movements are the expression, the visible form of this 'bottomlessness' that has replaced the foundation. For what interests Deleuze is not exploring the depths, but establishing new 'lands', new surfaces, that respond to a new logic of the irrational. (*Le Monde*, 2014)

Establishing new 'territories' of desire requires a dismantling of rational expectations, an admission of the limits of understanding, or in other words, to use Ernesto De Martino's expression, an admission of a crisis between subjective bodies that must not be homogenized by state-approved tactics of 'communication'. The demonetized music event is a locus where such re-territorialization might occur. However before newly individuated surfaces can emerge, misunderstanding must be accepted as an inevitability.

8. The Celebration of Misunderstanding

Misunderstanding is at the heart of the search for irrational territories. As Taussig articulates, wildness is a semiotic unreadability, a terrifying yet enthralling encounter with the seemingly unknowable. A desire to domesticate wildness swipes away the potential for a celebration of misunderstanding as a viable model for communication in a situation of urban diversity. A celebration of misunderstanding accepts the inevitable unreadability of some situations that present themselves in urban contexts where there are communities with which a newcomer to a neighborhood has had little contact.

A gentrifying desire would be to make a stereotyping defense that builds a justification for changing a neighborhood by installing new values which are economically reenforced as superior. At the opposite end of the spectrum, an acceptance of the inevitability of misunderstanding, creates an opportunity for individuation away from gentrifying thresholds of desire. A new desire for a harmonizing sustainability of radically different collective ecosystems might be territorialized: indeed, the co-existence of two radically different ecosystems is a natural phenomenon known as ecotone.

Misunderstanding thus provides both a perspective that might disrupt gentrification, while at the same time providing an ecstatic form of the cybernetic sublime that leaves behind the puritan or professionalized self.

At the heart of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's *Cannibal Metaphysics* is the acceptance of the inevitable misunderstanding experienced when people with different bodies meet. This framework for understanding encounter, reveals a challenge the music event organizer must face if they are to achieve a level of involvement that goes beyond mere professional expectation. Indeed, I would argue that it is a celebration of misunderstanding that is a means of overturning the insistent forces of gentrification, for it denies the homogenized vision of nature imposed by capitalism. To approach this level of involvement, event organizers must understand that

> [t]he crucial point here is not the empirical fact of misunderstandings, but the "transcendental fact" that they were not the same. The question, then, is not who is wrong, still less who is deceiving whom. Equivocation is not an error, a misunderstanding or a falsehood, but the very foundation of the relation that implies it, which is always a relation with exteriority. An error or misunderstanding can only be defined as such in a given "language game", whereas equivocation is what happens in the interval between different language games. Misunderstanding and error presuppose premises constituted in advance, and constituted as homogeneous, whereas equivocation not only 'presupposes' the heterogeneity of the premises

> in play - it posits them as heterogeneous, and it presupposes them as premises. (Viveiros De Castro, 2009, 58)[11]

The "equivocation" proposed by Viveiros De Castro is the recognition of insurmountable difference, of a heterogeneity of bodily perspectives on misunderstanding. The differences between the perspectives of people who attend a music event vary; there is no direct means of "communication". The method for dealing with the inevitable troubles caused by event organization allows translation and interpretation to take precedence over communication, rejecting the homogenizing directives of contemporary colonialism.

An aesthetic aim of the music events I organize is to confront information workers and artists with urban enunciations beyond what is acceptable in their normalized everyday lives. Confronting the digital worker with the equivocation always present but concealed by their prejudices. Consequently, this aim can be seen as a practice of strategically setting up situations in which participants are invited to reconsider their capacity to accept different levels of behavioral aberration and misunderstanding.

9. Conclusion: Ecstatic Experience and Literacy

Ecstatic experiences are difficult to articulate in written form. In many respects, they are not compatible with literacy, reading text being part of a state-led campaign to eradicate cultural manifestations that engage social phenomena capable of creating or allowing a gap between the multitude of different perspectives and natures making up a city or state. Each of our bodies contains multiple thresholds of resistance and capitulation to the homogenizing directives of overarching contemporary power systems. The aim of this essay has been to describe a particular form of ecstatic sublime that can occur in demonetized music events. Ecstatic experience is inscribed in the memory, in the body, in communities, between people. Attempting to describe ecstatic experience in an essay form remains a contradictory challenge.

The sublime is the acceptance and proliferation of an ontology that celebrates the unknown. Through radical collectivity there might be an entry into what is pejoratively known as wilderness, and more positively as the irrational, a loss of legible semiotic sense, a surpassing of homogenized experience as imposed by the nation-state, institutional education and the professional situations of contemporary workers. This intrusion into everyday life necessarily provokes some level of social friction or conflict, an urban confrontation with differences in values, moments of uncertainty and incomprehension.

The clinical professional life expected of the contemporary adult obligatorily foregoes the potential experience of rich heterogeneity through the enforced application of transparent communication systems, both at work and in what remains of private life. The cybernetic sublime, in this context, has to reach extensions of alterity hidden in everyday life, and among the technical assemblages available to the city-dweller, the sound system remains one of the most resistant, an apparatus of proto-subjective dimensions, integrating an

[11] "Le point crucial ici n'est pas le fait empirique des incompréhensions, mais le "fait transcendental" qu'elles n'étaient pas les mêmes. La question, donc, n'est pas celle de savoir qui a tort, et encore moins de savoir qui trompe qui. L'équivoque n'est pas une erreur, une méprise ou une fausseté, mais le fondement même de la relation qui l'implique, et qui est toujours une relationavec l'extériorité. Une erreur ou une méprise ne peuvent se définir comme telles que dans un "jeu de langage" donné, alors que l'équivoque est ce qui se passe dans l'intervalle entre différents jeux de langage. La méprise et l'erreur supposent des prémisses constituées d'avance, et constituées comme homogènes, alors que l'équivoque ne "suppose" pas seulement l'hétérogénéité des prémisses en jeu- elle les pose comme hétérogènes, et elle les présuppose comme des prémisses." (Viveiros De Castro, 2009, 58)

ecstatic proper to the incomprehensible and incoherent moments that we are sometimes given to experience.

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Algorithmic Realities and the Canadian Aporetic Condition Digital Counterpublics and Epistemological Justice

John Bessai[1]

Abstract

Interactive projects from the National Film Board of Canada demonstrate how algorithm-driven storytelling can illuminate the structural tensions that define the Canadian aporetic condition. Through a close study of *Bear 71*, *The Space We Hold*, *Biidaaban: First Light*, and *Do Not Track* this paper demonstrates how code-based interfaces encourage participants to co-produce knowledge that challenges settler governance, data capitalism, and extractive ecological logics. The analysis blends media studies, public-sphere theory, and the aporetic framework to trace connections among wildlife surveillance, urban futurism, testimonial memory, and personalized data dashboards. Each project cultivates digital counterpublics in which Indigenous sovereignty, ecological interdependence, survivor authority, and data-justice activism gain discursive traction. The findings suggest that immersive design can promote epistemological justice – fair access to knowledge production and recognition of diverse ways of knowing – by redistributing representational power, visualizing previously hidden infrastructures, and expanding civic imagination within a publicly funded platform. These insights suggest practical pathways for cultural institutions seeking to align interactive media with democratic resilience and equitable futures.

Keywords: interactive documentary, Canadian aporetic condition, digital counterpublics, epistemological justice, data privacy

1. Introduction

Interactive digital media now delivers immersive, data-driven storytelling that blends database structure with real-time user agency (Manovich, 2001). The National Film Board of Canada (NFBC) advances this practice through interactive documentary experiences such as *Bear 71* (2012), *The Space We Hold* (2017), *Biidaaban: First Light* (2018) and *Do Not Track* (2015). These works invite participants to serve as witnesses and co-authors through code-based interfaces that share narrative authority. Each experience foregrounds marginalized perspectives and knowledge systems and expands public dialogue on state power and cultural sovereignty (Druick, 2007), ecological responsibility (Parikka, 2015), and data capitalism (Zuboff, 2019). T They unfold inside the structural tensions that define the Canadian aporetic condition – a condition marked by unresolved contradictions in national identity, policy frameworks, and cultural sovereignty, particularly the ongoing interplay between settler governance and Indigenous sovereignty (Bessai, 2024). They unfold inside the structural tensions that define the Canadian aporetic condition,

[1] Independent Scholar, Canada, john@bessai.com, ORCID-ID : 0009-0003-2755-6623.

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particularly the ongoing interplay between settler governance and Indigenous sovereignty (Bessai, 2024).

This study joins media studies, public-sphere theory, and the aporetic framework to show how NFBC interactive projects cultivate digital counterpublics and advance epistemological justice. The analysis traces interface design, narrative choice, and user engagement to reveal pathways toward democratic resilience and equitable futures.

2. The Canadian Aporetic Condition

The aporetic condition gathers structural conflicts that persist in Canadian policy and identity. Indigenous treaty rights intersect with colonial governance, bilingual frameworks coexist alongside multicultural realities, and economic pragmatism intertwines with social-justice commitments (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The NFBC draws on public funding while preserving artistic autonomy and works inside these tensions, amplifying counter-narratives that challenge official culture (Druick, 2007).

- *Bear 71* situates wildlife surveillance alongside ecological stewardship, highlighting the friction between technological control and wild autonomy (Allison & Mendes, 2012).
- *The Space We Hold* introduces a participatory mode of testimony shaped by survivor voices and interface ethics – topics explored further in Case Study III (Hsiung et al., 2017).
- *Biidaaban: First Light* envisions an urban future informed by Indigenous language and land ethics, and reconfigures colonial spatial orders (Jackson, 2018).
- *Do Not Track* visualizes browser fingerprints and live advertising bids, bringing the political economy of data capitalism into view (Gaylor, 2015).

Together, these works advance epistemological justice, validate multiple ways of knowing, and build digital counterpublics that circulate dissenting voices (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002).

3. Organization of the Paper

The Methodology section outlines an interdisciplinary approach that joins media analysis, public-sphere theory, and the aporetic framework. The case studies examine *Bear 71*, *Do Not Track*, *The Space We Hold* , and *Biidaaban: First Light* in separate subsections, focusing on narrative design, interface affordances, and ideological critique. The discussion draws cross-cutting patterns – algorithmic critique, counterpublic formation, and experiential pedagogy – while the Conclusion reflects on the capacity of immersive storytelling to navigate national contradictions and envision equitable futures. Throughout, the prose maintains an analytical register that demonstrates how interactive media can widen dialogue, interrogate algorithmic power, and amplify diverse epistemologies.

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, multiple-case design rooted in critical theory and media studies (Yin, 2018). Four interactive NFBC projects anchor the analysis, each examined through the Canadian aporetic-condition framework (Bessai, 2024). This lens highlights

paradoxes inside each narrative experience and links them to wider societal contradictions. The procedure combines close textual and visual scrutiny of narrative, aesthetics, and interface features with contextual interpretation drawn from interviews, production notes, and scholarly commentary. Albert Murray's insight that style shapes cultural meaning informs the reading of interface choices, framing *stylization of experience* as the process that converts raw encounters into public narratives (Murray, 2016; Bessai, 2024). Public-sphere theory guides the inquiry into discursive space. Nancy Fraser (1990) outlines subaltern counterpublics, and Michael Warner (2002) defines counterpublics as arenas where marginalised voices circulate and contest hegemonic norms. Global-citizenship education theory sharpens the pedagogical lens: Andreotti (2006) emphasises empathy, cross-cultural understanding, and critical self-reflexivity, qualities that immersive media can cultivate.

The analytic toolkit blends critical discourse analysis, cultural studies, and political theory. Each interactive work functions as a text that stages social critique (Fairclough, 2015). Particular attention falls on algorithmic design choices and their ideological weight (Noble, 2018). Holding a key to hear a survivor's voice in *The Space We Hold* signals assumptions about agency, attention, and care, whereas the animated telemetry in *Bear 71* foregrounds surveillance and stewardship dynamics. Together, these methods reveal how NFBC experiences articulate, challenge, and re-shape Canadian public discourse.

Primary data consists of the interactive projects experienced first-hand, production dossiers, press kits, and Bessai's dissertation materials. Supplementary sources include creator interviews, trade-press articles, and critical reception in venues such as *Hyperallergic* and *Filmmaker Magazine*. The four projects under review present distinct alternative realities – ecological, futurist, mnemonic – while collectively addressing governance, cultural sovereignty, and environmental ethics. Aligning with the edited volume's emphasis on epistemological justice and algorithmic critique, the analysis regards the Canadian aporetic condition as a dynamic arena for debate. Each creative work serves as an intervention that sustains and steers this dialogue toward greater justice and inclusivity.

5.1. Case Study I – *Bear 71* (2012): Surveillance, Ecology, and the Human–Wildlife Divide

Leanne Allison and Jeremy Mendes's *Bear 71* (National Film Board of Canada, 2012) combines trail-camera footage, GPS telemetry, and a stylized monochrome map to recount the life of a female grizzly monitored in Banff National Park from 2001 to 2009 (Allison & Mendes, 2012). The interface renders each collared animal as a moving node; users click, zoom, and pan across an ever-shifting data landscape, thereby occupying the position of an all-seeing observer (Andersen, 2012). The narration, voiced by Mia Kirshner from the bear's perspective, inverts conventional wildlife-film hierarchies and immediately signals the project's critique of human-centred environmental discourse (Meier, 2017).

Bear 71 interrogates two intertwined narratives: technocratic wildlife management and human separation from nature. Park authorities frame collars, cameras, and rail-line grain mitigation as tools of scientific stewardship; however, the interactive documentary highlights the psychological and physical strain these devices place on the monitored animal. The bear's first-person commentary connects each layer of surveillance to a loss of autonomy and exposes an ecological trade-off that shapes governance practice. At the same time, the first-person narration and interactive map dissolve the spectator–specimen divide. Empathy arises when viewers trace the bear's movements, read her reflections on rail traffic, and watch grainy night-vision clips that mirror the aesthetics of human closed-

circuit monitoring (Castellano, 2018). This design strategy accords the non-human subject epistemic authority, satisfying a key demand of epistemological justice by relocating knowledge production from the researcher to the researched (Fricker, 2007).

The Canadian aporetic condition surfaces in the tension between conservation rhetoric and infrastructural encroachment. National mythologies often celebrate wilderness protection, yet roads, railways, and digital surveillance systems often bisect habitats and contribute to wildlife mortality. Bear 71 dies in a train collision despite years of data-driven oversight (Meier, 2017). The contradiction between stewardship ideals and extractive mobility networks typifies the unresolved policy paradoxes Bessai (2024) identifies. *Bear 71* converts that abstract contradiction into an experiential dilemma: the interface grants users informational power while simultaneously exposing their complicity in the structures that endanger the bear.

The project leverages stylization – monochrome cartography, glitch aesthetics, and a subdued soundscape to translate raw telemetry into an affective narrative, a process Bessai attributes to Albert Murray's "stylisation of experience" (Bessai, 2024). Audience surveys and press coverage reports have heightened concern for non-human agency and increased awareness of technological overreach in environmental governance (Meier, 2017). Such perspective-taking aligns with global-citizenship education goals by expanding moral imagination beyond the human (Andreotti, 2006).

Bear 71 reframes Banff National Park as an algorithmic reality in which surveillance both illuminates and endangers the wild. By granting narrative voice to a tagged animal and exposing the infrastructural web that constrains her, the project questions the efficacy and ethics of data-driven conservation. The interactive form thus functions as a digital counterpublic, circulating a dissenting ecological narrative, inviting critical reflection on technology's reach, and embodying the aporetic impulse to hold contradictory impulses – protection and control – within the same frame. In doing so, the documentary fulfils the NFBC's public-service mandate and demonstrates how immersive media can spur democratic debate on environmental governance in Canada's wired wilderness.

Case Study II – *The Space We Hold* (2017): Bearing Witness in the Digital Global Sphere

Tiffany Hsiung, Chris Kang, and Patricia Lee created *The Space We Hold* (National Film Board of Canada & Cult Leader, 2017) as an interactive web-documentary that confronts visitors with the testimonies of three survivors of Imperial Japan's military sexual-slavery system – Grandma Gil (South Korea), Grandma Cao (China), and Grandma Adela (Philippines). A minimalist interface greets users; progress depends on continuously pressing and holding the space bar. Releasing the key pauses the testimony, making attention a visible ethical act. Design elements – such as a monochrome palette, archival inserts, and a constellation of messages left by previous participants – transform private listening into a collective ritual of remembrance.

Official histories long obscured the organized nature of wartime sexual slavery, and survivors endured decades of denial (Hsiung, 2016). By foregrounding first-person testimony, the project asserts these accounts as indispensable historical records and positions global audiences as responsible witnesses. The hands-on-keyboard mechanic tests commitment; testimony proceeds only when the listener demonstrates active

presence, thereby reversing passive consumption norms and challenging media habits that fragment attention.

The experience also resists cultures of shame surrounding sexual violence. Survivors speak with authority, and the interface centres their agency. Users receive subtle prompts to reflect and, in some versions, add supportive messages that appear as luminous stars – an image of networked solidarity. This design shifts power from voyeuristic spectatorship to participatory witnessing, aligning with public-sphere expansions that bring private trauma into collective discourse (Fraser, 1990).

Canada brands itself a defender of global human rights while grappling with its histories of gendered and colonial violence. By hosting a platform for transnational justice stories, the NFBC acknowledges this tension: a state agency funds artwork that exposes unresolved systemic harm elsewhere, and by implication, at home. The project, therefore, exemplifies the aporetic impulse – holding contradictory positions, such as advocating for national pride and acknowledging domestic shortcomings without resolving them (Bessai, 2024).

Physical effort – the sustained press of one key – produces embodied empathy. Listeners feel a mild strain, mirroring the survivors' sustained courage. The mechanic also offers built-in pacing: releasing the key allows emotional regulation without abandoning engagement, an ethical safeguard uncommon in linear documentary. Awards such as the Peabody-Facebook Futures of Media prize acknowledged this innovative fusion of form and ethics.

Creators extended the documentary's reach through moderated Twitter dialogues that asked, "How do we hold space for survivors of sexual violence?" – prompting public reflection on digital witnessing. Such outreach situates the work within a digital counterpublic that values survivor-centred discourse and collective accountability.

The Space We Hold transforms spectators into active witnesses, linking tactile interaction with moral responsibility. The work integrates survivor testimony into the digital public sphere, contests historical erasure, and exemplifies how interactive design can uphold epistemological justice. Within the Canadian aporetic landscape, it illustrates the role of public institutions in amplifying marginalized voices while provoking introspection about national commitments to justice. These qualities affirm the volume's proposition that alternative digital realities can model more equitable potential worlds.

Case Study III – *Biidaaban: First Light* (2018): Indigenous Futurism and Decolonial Urban Imaginaries

Lisa Jackson's *Biidaaban: First Light* (2018) immerses viewers in a room-scale virtual-reality vision of future Tkaronto/Toronto reclaimed by water, vegetation and Indigenous presence (Jackson, 2018; Astle, 2018; MIT Open Documentary Lab, n.d.; NFB MediaspaceFilmmaker MagazineMIT/Docubase). Nathan Phillips Square appears familiar yet transformed: the square is flooded, vines cover south-facing walls, mature trees push through cracked concrete, people commute by canoe, and rooftop gardens thrive (National Film Board of Canada [NFB], 2018; NFB Mediaspace). The title term *biidaaban* – "the first light before dawn" in Anishinaabemowin – signals renewal and continuation (Astle, 2018; Filmmaker Magazine). Jackson designed the experience as open exploration rather than a didactic lesson: participants physically move through the space, guided by a soundscape of Indigenous voices and by gaze-based interactions with written Wendat, Kanien'kehá:ka

(Mohawk) and Anishinaabe (Ojibwe) text – not conventional signage (Astle, 2018; MIT Open Documentary Lab, n.d.; NFB, 2018; Filmmaker MagazineMIT/DocubaseNFB Mediaspace).

Canadian cities often frame Indigenous cultures as historical footnotes while casting Euro-Canadian architecture as the self-evident index of progress (Coleman, 2006). *Biidaaban* contests this by making Indigenous language and ecological principles architectonic in a future Toronto. The written Indigenous words function as assertions of linguistic sovereignty rather than as translations for outsiders. Their presence affirms that Wendat, Kanien'kehá:ka and Anishinaabemowin continue to shape the city's meaning, challenging a state bilingual regime that privileges English and French while historically marginalizing Indigenous languages (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015).

The work also reframes "urban nature." Where popular media might read vines and flooded transit infrastructure as collapse, Jackson offers gentle renewal: commuters paddle through wetlands, rooftop gardens flourish and urban life is "thriving" (NFB, 2018; NFB Mediaspace). Jackson explicitly rejects a post-apocalyptic framing, describing the piece as contemplative and "ambient" rather than catastrophic; the sound design foregrounds Indigenous languages, birds and crickets to create space for reflection (Astle, 2018; Filmmaker Magazine).

Biidaaban visualizes a core Canadian contradiction: reconciliation discourse versus colonial urban practice. City Hall's concrete – now seen alongside living trees – suggests that any reconciled future demands spatial and linguistic transformation, not ceremonial acknowledgements alone (Bessai, 2024). By placing Indigenous epistemologies at the centre of the city's fabric, the piece exposes the gap between multicultural rhetoric and material reality.

Room-scale VR here enables embodied engagement. Participants walk a mapped play-area, explore to-scale models of Osgoode subway station and the buildings around Nathan Phillips Square, and engage written Indigenous text via gaze (Astle, 2018; NFB, 2018; Filmmaker MagazineNFB Mediaspace). Reviews and audience accounts consistently report calm, wonder and reflective discomfort – feelings intensified by hearing Indigenous languages in the urban core and by the work's invitation to linger rather than "solve" a narrative (Astle, 2018; Rockbrand, 2019; Filmmaker Magazinethelinknewspaper.ca). These affective triggers plausibly foster humility, cross-cultural curiosity and ecological empathy – outcomes consistent with critical global citizenship education (Andreotti, 2006).

Finally, *Biidaaban: First Light* advances Indigenous futurism by depicting a decolonized Toronto grounded in ecological reciprocity and linguistic resurgence (MIT Open Documentary Lab, n.d.; MIT – Docubase). The immersive form also functions as a digital counterpublic – a circulating space of address that centres Indigenous knowledge and contests dominant urban imaginaries (Warner, 2002) – inviting Canadians to imagine governance rooted in treaty relationships rather than extractive logics.

5.4. Case Study IV – *Do Not Track* (2015): Data Capitalism and Participatory Privacy

Conceived and directed by Brett Gaylor, *Do Not Track* (2015) is a seven-episode personalized web documentary co-produced by Upian, ARTE, Bayerischer Rundfunk, and the National Film Board of Canada (NFB). The series invites viewers to opt in to data sharing so the platform can demonstrate – in real time – how tracking and profiling operate on the open web. By turning the web's analytics infrastructure into a live object of inquiry, *Do Not Track* situates participants inside the political economy of platform capitalism and

prompts reflection on their own roles within it (MIT Open Documentary Lab, n.d.; National Film Board of Canada [NFB], 2015; Upian, n.d.; Zuboff, 2019).

Viewed through an aporetic lens, the project also registers tensions within public-service media. An NFB-backed investigation into opaque platform practices unfolds through an international co-production that coordinates across Canadian, French, and German public broadcasters and digital partners, aligning creative goals with heterogeneous regulatory contexts and distribution arrangements (Media Impact Funders, 2016). Episode 3 centers social-platform activity and shows how seemingly harmless interactions generate inferences and reach; the episode combines personalized sequences, code visualizations, and expert interviews to clarify a democratic dilemma: liberal orders prize openness while data infrastructures remain largely proprietary and inscrutable (NFB, 2015).

Interface mechanics reinforce the argument. Choosing "Share My Data" yields live, personalized outputs inside the player – location cues, social signals, and browser context shape what the viewer sees – and the narrative deepens as participation increases (Media Impact Funders, 2016; MIT Open Documentary Lab, n.d.). The self-implication at work here echoes other interactive documentaries that visualize tracking to prompt ethical and political reflection (Allison & Mendes, 2012).

Reception indicates reach beyond a niche counterpublic. The series received a Peabody Award and the International Documentary Association's Best Short Form Series honor, was distributed in multiple languages with public-service partners, and engaged hundreds of thousands of users during its initial release cycle (IDA, 2015; Media Impact Funders, 2016; MIT Open Documentary Lab, n.d.; Peabody Awards, 2015). Educators incorporated the project into civic and digital-literacy courses, using its personalized demonstrations to open discussion about consent, algorithmic bias, and media concentration (Media Impact Funders, 2016).

The narrative architecture supports this pedagogical ambition. Episodes alternate concise explainers with interactive segments that require clicks or gestures; each interaction queues server-side scripts that personalize animations and textual overlays, producing outputs that evolve with continued engagement. This temporal elasticity resists tidy closure and aligns with an aporetic frame: surveillance capitalism appears as an ongoing relation that participants inhabit whenever they connect (MIT Open Documentary Lab, n.d.; NFB, 2015).

By embedding personalized data reveals into the episode flow, *Do Not Track* cultivates a practice of bearing witness to one's own digital traces, pairing self-reflexive exposure with collective critique (Fine, 2006; Fine & Torre, 2019). Viewers see their volunteered and passively collected data reassembled into inferences and profiles, then hear from activists, scholars, and technologists who contextualize those practices within the web economy and surveillance-capitalist incentives (NFB, 2015; MIT Open Documentary Lab, n.d.). The series' options-oriented finale and its between-episode explainers position the project as a pedagogical commons, where lived, personalized demonstrations and expert testimony circulate in tandem – linking intimate routines (searches, clicks, location patterns) to systemic political-economic logics (NFB, 2015; Media Impact Funders, 2016). While DNT itself does not advance specific regulatory blueprints, its critique sits alongside policy debates – such as information-fiduciary proposals – that seek to realign platform duties to users (Balkin, 2016, 2020). Read as a digital counterpublic, the project thrives on

dissonance rather than consensus: it stages tension between affective self-exposure and structural critique to widen the space of public argument (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002).

In relation to the earlier case studies, *Do Not Track* enlarges the analytic frame by shifting from ecological or testimonial arenas to the everyday economics of attention. *Bear 71* interrogates remote-sensing apparatuses aimed at non-human life; *Biidaaban* re-imagines urban futures through Indigenous language; *The Space We Hold* foregrounds survivor memory within a global-justice landscape. *Do Not Track* complements these interventions by illuminating how algorithmic infrastructures mediate even the act of consuming activism or environmental news. Together, the four works trace a continuum of mediated governance – from wildlife telemetry to data brokerage – highlighting the multiple fronts on which Canadian public media can cultivate counterpublic awareness.

Finally, the project amplifies calls for epistemological justice by decentering expert authority. While prominent scholars appear on screen, the documentary's argumentative spine rests on each viewer's embodied data encounter. Knowledge emerges through direct engagement with tracking scripts, rendering technical systems legible without demanding advanced coding skills. This approach mirrors Indigenous protocols of situated learning, as articulated in Biidaaban, and testimonial sovereignty, as expressed in *The Space We Hold*. In each scenario, the NFBC's digital storytelling resists universal claims and instead animates plural epistemologies.

Do Not Track, therefore, supplies the study with a vital fourth vantage point: it makes the financial and technical substrata of algorithmic realism visible while modelling participatory inquiry. The series confirms that public institutions can harness interactive media to democratize digital literacy, challenge extractive data economies, and extend the moral geography of Canadian storytelling well beyond territorial borders. Within the aporetic condition, such work opens conceptual bandwidth for re-imagining governance frameworks that respect sovereignty, privacy, and ecological integrity in equal measure.

6. Discussion

Interactive works from the NFBC reveal a common design logic that blends code-driven interfaces with civic commitments. *Bear 71*, *Biidaaban: First Light*, *The Space We Hold*, and *Do Not Track* each invite audiences to engage directly with datasets, maps, or dashboards. This engagement turns spectators into active interpreters who trace relationships among land, memory, and data. As participants navigate these environments, they encounter perspectives that usually remain outside mainstream media circulation. The projects, therefore, build digital counterpublics that expand collective deliberation and strengthen the conditions for epistemological justice (Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002).

A shared emphasis on situated experience anchors each narrative. *Bear 71* situates users inside a wildlife-tracking grid where every click alters a living map. *Biidaaban* immerses visitors in a future Toronto that draws on Anishinaabe language and land ethics. *The Space We Hold* orchestrates a dialogic interface in which viewer choices shape the pace of survivor testimony. *Do Not Track* exposes browser fingerprints and real-time ad bids, framing data traces as personal evidence. Through these mechanics, the viewer gains a sense of world-making agency. Interface actions carry significant ethical weight, as they link micro-level decisions to broader ecological, social, and economic structures.

Algorithmic critique emerges through clear visualizations rather than abstract exposition. Each work renders invisible infrastructures – such as tracking collars, colonial grid plans,

silences surrounding sexual violence, and ad exchanges – into legible forms. Visualization serves as a pedagogical tool, training perception and sharpening analytic skills without relying on technical jargon. By aligning form and argument, the projects model an applied media literacy that resists technocratic gatekeeping. The code, therefore, serves an educational purpose while maintaining narrative momentum.

Public-service mandate shapes another pattern. The NFBC funds creators to explore themes that intersect with policy debates on surveillance, Indigenous sovereignty, ecological stewardship, and platform regulation. This institutional backing signals collective ownership of cultural infrastructure. At the same time, artists retain autonomy in storytelling methods, enabling experiments that commercial platforms rarely accommodate. Viewers thus witness a publicly accountable system in action: state resources support critical reflection on state power and corporate influence.

The four case studies further demonstrate how immersive design encourages affective resonance. Soundscapes of forest and freeway in *Bear 71*, immersive VR vistas in *Biidaaban*, intimate video diaries in *The Space We Hold*, and personalized data dashboards in *Do Not Track* each cultivate emotional involvement. Empathy grows through sensory cues, narrative pacing, and interactive choice. Emotional engagement then nourishes cognitive insight, aligning with experiential-learning research that links affect with durable understanding. Together, these observations suggest a model of cultural democracy grounded in shared infrastructure, plural epistemologies, and participatory literacy. Interactive storytelling distributes narrative authority across users, creators, and datasets. Counterpublics that arise through this distribution do more than voice dissent; they generate actionable knowledge on environmental ethics, reconciliation, survivor justice, and data capital. The NFBC approach, therefore, aligns with policy frameworks that value openness, inclusion, and sustainability. While these works aim to democratize digital storytelling, future development must also attend to access disparities, ensuring that broadband infrastructure, hardware compatibility, and language localization do not limit participation. Future practice can draw on this model in several ways. Designers may pair transparent data pipelines with Indigenous knowledge protocols to honour sovereignty and consent. Educators can embed these projects in curricula that couple interactive exercises with reflective discussion. Policymakers might reference the NFBC model when crafting oversight mechanisms for platform governance. Each pathway advances epistemological justice by ensuring that diverse communities define the terms of technological engagement.

The paper's analysis thus affirms interactive media as a fertile site for public inquiry within the Canadian aporetic condition. Creative teams utilize algorithms, spatial audio, and responsive video to expose historical contradictions and contemporary power dynamics. Viewers step into roles that blend witness, analyst, and collaborator. Through these collective experiences, digital counterpublics chart routes toward ecological balance, social equity, and responsible data futures.

6. Conclusion

Interactive projects, such as *Bear 71*, *The Space We Hold*, *Biidaaban: First Light* and *Do Not Track,* demonstrate that algorithmic storytelling provides a platform for social critique and civic imagination. Each work bends digital systems – GPS telemetry, game-engine world-building, keyed video streams, and live data dashboards – toward exposing hidden injustices and elevating voices that commercial media often overlook. By foregrounding a

grizzly's sensory map of its habitat (Allison & Mendes, 2012), Anishinaabe ecological insight (Jackson, 2018), survivor testimony (Hsiung et al., 2017), Anishinaabe ecological insight (Jackson, 2018), and personal browser traces (Gaylor, 2015), these pieces advance epistemological justice through direct design choices. They engage algorithmic culture from within and turn surveillance tools into engines of empathy, land-based futurity, accountable witnessing, and data literacy.

The Canadian aporetic condition frames this analysis, revealing how enduring tensions can energize democratic creativity when a public institution supports critical art (Bessai, 2024). The NFBC finances projects that probe state narratives and stimulate national dialogue, illustrating a model of "creative dissent" similar to Gramsci's organic catalyst in cultural life (Gramsci, 1971/2020). State backing and rigorous reflection therefore operate together to thicken democratic resilience.

The case studies enrich global-citizenship learning, counterpublic development, and digital ethics. Immersive interfaces cultivate cross-species empathy, activate Indigenous futurisms, highlight survivor agency, and demystify data economies, answering Andreotti's (2006) call for transformative global education. Through map navigation, room-scale exploration, branching testimony, and real-time data visualizations, audiences step into co-author roles that extend counterpublic conversation (Warner, 2002). Design blueprints emphasize consent, cultural authority, and visible data flows, setting standards for responsible immersive media (Fricker, 2007; Noble, 2018).

Taken together, these NFBC productions outline potential worlds where technology aligns with ecological reciprocity, urban space honours treaty relationships, and collective listening affirms historical truth. The works encourage the public to engage with contradictions, examine complicity, and imagine equitable futures. Justice and sustainability arise through creative encounters that keep tension in sight, invite dialogue, and spark action across generations.

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"Be Like Water" Adjustment Practices of Tibetan Immigrants to Paris

Charlotte Bhar[1]

Abstract

This paper attempts to explore how integrationist immigration discourses play out in real life, by examining the different multilinguistic approaches used by Tibetan migrants as they adjust to life in Paris. I explore how social values become emotionally embodied over time as we learn language, meaning that those who speak multiple languages must negotiate multiple, simultaneously-felt realities on a day-to-day basis. An awareness of the mechanisms behind the acquisition of languages and their associated value systems can therefore help us to understand how acculturation happens within immigrant communities. I give a brief overview of the Tibetan and French sociocultural milieus, and highlight the complexity, variety and importance of multilingual narratives in the wider context of migration policy-making. Specifically, I examine instances of *code-switching* to reveal potentially "sticky" moments of emotional charge for a given term, indicating points of connection forged with the new country, or else maintained with the old.

Keywords: Tibet, France, multilingualism, emotion, code-switching

Introduction

In a world which is today interconnected as never before, in both the concrete and virtual realms, the "global community" has quickly discovered that, rather than coming to share a singular reality, we are splintering off into innumerable competing echo chambers. While many of us struggle to piece together a coherent grasp of reality within this chaos, governments, in turn, are scrambling to seize control of both national and international narratives. The apparent global lurch towards conservatism can thus be understood as an attempt to re-establish stability by reinforcing borders both metaphorical and literal, in a stark rejection of the new and fluid "contours of belonging" promised by globalization (Letizia 2014; Croucher 2018).

In the midst of this battle, immigration has emerged as one of the defining concerns of our age, often cast as a failure to integrate with central nationalist values. However, the "problem" of immigration can be better understood as being one of competing, linguistically-bound realities (Kuhl et al 2005). The multiple, structurally-diverse languages used by the vast majority of the world's immigrants create a swirling maelstrom of affective ties and core beliefs which cannot suddenly jackknife into new configurations upon arrival to a new land. In effect, immigrants must learn over time to inhabit multiple alternative realities, understand in which contexts they can evoke them, and accept that the complex

[1] Dr. Charlotte Bhar, *École Pratique des Hautes Études* (EPHE) – PSL, CRCAO, charbhar@outlook.com, ORCID-ID: 0009-0003-5740-4735.

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process of recreating a sense of belonging in their new country (or indeed, of maintaining one with their old) may never fully be realized.

This is certainly the case for the Tibetan diaspora in Paris, who are caught between a host nation which demands ideological integration *à la française*, and a "home" nation which is built around the fight to one day return to a free Tibet.[2] In the former case, French Revolutionary values of *Liberté, Égalité* and *Fraternité* ("Freedom, Equality and Fraternity") are regularly invoked by both sides of the political divide to attempt to carve out the boundaries of the "in-group" and the "out-group." Explicitly supremacist colonial-era ideologies of *assimilation* are somewhat softened by France's commitment to human rights – indeed, the French consider their country to be the "birthplace of human rights." However, in an increasingly heightened environment of racial tension (in particular following a decade of Islamist terror attacks across the nation), the question of what it means to be French, or how to successfully integrate, is now one of the most pressing issues facing the country today, one which will be a deciding factor in national elections for the foreseeable future.

It is into such an environment that Tibetan migrants are arriving. Since the invasion of Chinese forces and the escape of the Dalai Lama across the Himalayas to India in 1959, a steady stream of Tibetans have left their now-occupied homeland, finding refuge first in Indian settlements, the largest of which is in Dharamsala, which today functions as the *de facto* capital of the Tibetan community-in-exile, as the location of the headquarters of the Central Tibetan Administration (the CTA – formerly known as the Tibetan Government-in-Exile). Tibetan communities have also relocated to Nepal, Pakistan and Bhutan, as well as the United States, Switzerland and France, with Paris itself estimated to have at least 8,000-10,000 Tibetan refugees, although official figures are impossible to verify (Robin 2020; Simon 2023). Despite many Tibetans having never set foot on Tibetan soil, community identity is outwardly very coherent, based around a shared narrative of suffering, persecution and a fight for independence and religious freedom. The personal experiences of community members who make their lives in France are much more complex, however, with many torn between competing, often mutually exclusive narratives related to belonging, cultural heritage and emotional performance. These individual stories and, crucially, the ways in which they are being told, serve as important testimonies to the kinds of challenges, boundaries and adjustments made by the Tibetan community in Paris on a daily basis, as one participant named Yeshi puts it (M, 25 years-old; L1 Hindi, L2 Punjabi, L3 Tibetan, L4 English, L5 French; 2 years in France)[3]: "I have four different people in my head – it's like a wave coming on you, like brainstorming."

This study is, therefore, based on a conception of language as a foundational part of the sense-making feedback loop which exists between a person's inner and outer worlds, a loop which is both enriched and complicated as further languages are added to the equation. In such a framework, language – particularly the spontaneous production of informal conversation – can never be detached from its context, and allows for glimpses into otherwise ineffable events occurring in a speaker's life at that time, particularly those which carry emotional charge. The examples cited further below are taken from doctoral fieldwork interviews conducted among the Tibetan diasporic community in Paris between 2020-2023 with 18 individuals (6 females, 12 males, aged between 18-63 years old). I focus

[2] Clearly, the definition of what and where "Tibet" is has been the source of decades of conflict and controversy, the history of which is outside the scope of the current work.

[3] L1 = first language; L2 = second language etc. Biographical details for each participant are provided where possible, with the number of years in France accurate at the time of our first meeting. Participant names have been anonymized. In the interest of transparency, my immigrant profile is as follows: F, 40 years old; L1 English; L2 French; L3 Spanish; L4 Mandarin Chinese; L5 Swedish; 8 years in France.

on instances of *code-switching* recorded during these conversations, whereby a word or phrase from another language than that in which the conversation is being conducted suddenly makes an appearance, revealing a potentially significant emotional "sticking point" associated with the term (Ahmed 2004). While conclusions about the true motivations behind such language behaviors can only ever be speculative, such switches occur among all multilingual and/or immigrant groups, and are thus of enormous value in highlighting the often-conflicting conceptions of reality baked into the various tongues being used, and how speakers attempt to reconcile them.

Theoretical Framework

The notion that different languages mean that its speakers perceive, understand and interact with the world in different ways is not new, and has ebbed in and out of favor within academic circles for more than a century. Indeed, the debate between linguistic universalism and determinism remains unresolved, one reason for which may be that the prevalence of multilingualism within human society has long been underestimated by postcolonial European scholars and policy-makers alike (see Bhabha 1994, Said 2019 [1974] or much of Fanon's work, for instance 1990[1961]). The so-called "linguistic turn" which emerged during the last century was in many ways a coming-to-terms with the end of empires, and the possibility that those groups which had been summarily Othered for so long had, in fact, points of view and perspectives which were just as valid as any other, and that Western actions had already done much to destroy them.

The post-structuralist, existentialist philosophy of mid- to late-20th century France – of thinkers such as Bourdieu (2001[1982]); Foucault (2009[1966]); Deleuze & Guattari (2004[1980]) – spoke of how culture becomes embodied by (and ultimately imprisons) its citizens, binding and defining us all within the prevailing social system through habitual behaviors, including our linguistic practices (Scheer 2012). More recently, some evidence as to how this process might actually occur has drawn from the field of neurology, particularly neurolinguistics, where advancements in brain imaging have enabled us to understand more (although we are still at the early stages of such work) about the constant interplay between internal (i.e., bodily) and external (i.e., social) forces in the creation, refinement and maintenance of word-concepts within the brain (Feldman-Barrett 2017; Kuhl 2005; Patterson, Nestor & Rogers 2007). This process begins "at mother's knee" (Anderson 2016[1983]:154) as we begin to make synaptic associations between basic objects and sensations, by learning the unique sounds we use to describe them. Even pre-linguistic sounds are language-specific – each version of "Motherese" (parental baby talk) is different, and introduces the infant to the particular phonetic boundaries and challenging pronunciations of the child's L1. By the age of around seven months (in monolingual households, at least), children have generally fully locked into their native tongue (Kuhl 2010; Kuhl et al. 2005). As our language skills improve, we refine our mental lexica and learn to contextualize increasingly complex and abstract concepts and sentiments.

Emotion words (such as "happy" or "sad") or emotionally charged words (such as "mother" or "fuck") are of particular value in cross-cultural linguistic studies. Their immediate, visceral, full-body charge means that they are often deeply felt and thus indelibly engraved into our memories – we all remember the white-hot scorch of our first rejected kiss, for instance (which might be the prototypical reference point when we look up "humiliation" in our mental dictionaries). Critics of linguistic determinism (see for instance Pinker 2015[1992]) argue that there exist universal emotions shared by all humanity, although extensive work by scholars such as Lutz (1998), Pavlenko (2005; 2008), Wierzbicka (1986), Tcherkassof & Frijda (2014), Wikan (1989) and many others

has shown that, for some communities, even the idea of having an individual experience of emotion is not a given, and can be couched instead as a social event, for instance. Indeed, there are a great many examples of culture-specific emotion words which cannot easily be glossed into other languages. The creation and continued usage of a word in a given language means broadly that it is collectively considered to be of general utility to the speaking community. Importantly, however, given adequate motivation and an encouraging ethnolinguistic landscape (Markus & Kitayama 1991; Landry & Bourhis 1997), a person can learn to create another feedback loop between the proprioceptive and the social realms for a new language's word-concepts. For new terms to be fully understood, therefore, emotional investment through proper contextualization needs to take place (Pavlenko 2005; 2008).

Instances of *code-switching* (or *code-mixing*), where a word (or other syntactical, grammatical or morphological structure) from a different language appears in a conversation, may reveal areas where emotional charge has been weighted differently, so the brain-in-action makes an executive decision to produce what it deems the more appropriate term. A potential indicator of acculturation processes at work within immigrant communities, then, is the extent to which the new country's word-concepts have been absorbed by its speakers, which may be inferred by the ease with which they can produce them in spontaneous speech. Conversely, switches into languages learned earlier in life are suggestive of some resistance to integration, a point of connection maintained with a previously acculturated life.

In addition, code-switching behaviors remind us that the line between conscious and unconscious language choices is not as clear as we might imagine, and that, given that we have learned to use external cues to reinforce our word selection since infancy, we cannot help but be unconsciously influenced by our interlocutor during conversation, including a swift taking-in of the languages they speak, and adjusting switching practices accordingly (Poplack 1980). Given the precarious social position that refugees and asylum seekers often find themselves in upon arrival in a new country, it is also possible that some linguistic choices are made entirely consciously, intended to convey a clear message and (re)iterate a pre-defined social status (in the Tibetan context, see for instance McGranahan 2018; Schröer 2016; Yeh 2007). While all social interactions are performances to some extent, they are especially so in cross-cultural linguistic exchanges with unequal power dynamics, as in the context of immigration. This inequality is in part due to fluency issues, but is also due to how viscerally a language is connected to a felt reality. As one young Tibetan woman, Lhatso, described her experience when she first arrived at her new French high school:

> In discussions with my teachers [in French], I was breaking the image, losing the emotion, there was a lot of loss of meaning from Tibetan. I had to add words, use ornamental words. For example, for "sun" I said, "the one who gives light."

While poignant in its poetry, examples such as Lhatso's show the linguistic burden of immigration, as well as the loss of certainty and the taking-for-granted of the world around us (and our place within it) when using an unfamiliar tongue. Languages which jostle for place in multilingual minds in effect represent competing versions of reality, and learning to accommodate and find space for them all (as was the case for all of the Tibetan participants in this study, whose linguistic profiles contained four or even five distinct, concurrent languages) takes time and the allocation of State resources – not a priority when immigration is such a hotly polemicized subject.

Sociopolitical Context(s)

Clearly, no immigrant arrives in a neutral space, so an awareness of multilingual strategies used within a given community can offer an idea of how multiple sociopolitical contexts impact the everyday negotiation of these competing realities, and how this affects the construction of individual identities. The experiences of the Tibetan immigrant community in the West offer valuable insight into how such competing value systems are embodied, felt and expressed. All members of this group keenly understand that their status within Western host nations is largely predicated on maintaining the significant amount of goodwill built up by the Dalai Lama and the CTA since the beginning of exile. The relatively positive reputation which the Tibetans hold in France, especially when compared to general attitudes towards North-African Muslims, for instance, is due to their concerted efforts to create consistent narratives which appeal to European national ideologies, fantasies and ideals. Such efforts to maintain their status mean that personal narratives are more often than not subsumed to the dominant national discourses, leaving little room for diversity or dissent.

France

Despite the ongoing absorption of more extreme right-wing discourses into the political mainstream (see, for instance, Ivaldi 2023), France has long defined itself as a land of humanitarian values. It is true that the country can certainly boast some of the world's most comprehensive and humane protections for its citizens in terms of access to healthcare, education, employment and more, and these rights have traditionally also been extended to immigrants (although some argue that, besides being an easy target for budget-cutting during times of economic downturn, such compassion may eventually lead to harsher immigration policies, which risk racialized pigeon-holing and the reduction of individuals into oversimplified victims – see Ticktin 2006, 2011; Wang 2017).[4] French immigration policy is an extension of French national identity, which is based around a number of key ideological influences, chief of which is the French Enlightenment (French *Les Lumières*, literally "the lights") which drove the French Revolution and the modern conception of the French nation. The national motto *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité* can be seen on every public building throughout the country, including public schools, and indeed, Rousseau's Social Contract is implicit in everyday discourse, and his famous adage "One man's freedom ends where another's begins" (*La liberté des uns s'arrête là où commence celle des autres*) is regularly invoked in a uniquely individualist framing of community.

However, the question of who exactly gets to participate in the national project, and which freedoms can or cannot be accommodated, has long caused tension in the *République* (now in its 5th iteration). The tenet of *laïcité* (roughly translated as "secularism") is technically the fourth pillar of the above national motto, and prohibits the public display of any religious belonging (such as the famous "ban on burqas" which made the headlines in the 2000s) – by relegating all outward signs of religious difference to private spaces, the idea is that nobody's personal freedom is encroached upon, meaning that equality is maintained. Over time, however, what started out as a largely progressive gesture has been reappropriated by the political right, with critics of the policy deploring its degradation into nothing more than an ideological baton used against minority groups (see Tissot 2019; Raim 2019; Chemin 2016). Undoubtedly, the ideological grandness of the French national

[4] One recent example is the new *Asylum & Immigration Law*, introduced on 27th January 2024, including measures which place further restrictions on making asylum demands, travel and housing permissions for those awaiting asylum decisions, including unaccompanied minors, for instance. (France *Terre d'Asile* 2024)

project in the postcolonial era has created much confusion and frustration for French citizens and non-citizens alike.

Behavioral expectations such as these set out the boundaries of the "in-group" (i.e. those whose values align with our own) and the "out-group" (i.e. those whose values do not – see, for example, Alba 2005). Immigrants are under increasing pressure to understand, internalize and perform these expectations as best they can. The idea of performance-as-survival emerged from queer communities long forced to "pass" (as heteronormative or heterosexual, see Butler 1997), so that the performance of belonging is context-dependent, with language being one of the principal ways in which conformity can be expressed – modern France's overwhelmingly monolingual public landscape is the result of such a history of imposed conformity (Choquet 2017), as are its attitudes to national unity.

Tibet

Since Chinese Occupation formally began in the 1950s, the Tibetan peoples have continued to leave their homeland and set up communities-in-exile, with the Indian government granting land and refugee status to Tibetans in the Himalayan region. (It remains to be seen how increasingly extreme Hindu nationalism under President Narendra Modi will impact Tibetans' status and rights-to-remain.) There are also sizeable communities elsewhere in Southeast Asia (notably Nepal and Bhutan), where 2nd and 3rd generation Tibetans speak local languages often to higher standards than Tibetan dialects; as well as further afield, to Western Europe and Northern America. The current study focuses mainly on Tibetan linguistic identities, but it should be understood that there are many other important factors which influence community members, including religious, political, economic, administrative, sexual and technological pressures, coming both from inside and outside the community.

The vast majority of Tibetans, however, still remain within what is today known as the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR) within the Chinese Mainland (the People's Republic of China or PRC), a vast area which borders and at times crosses into the Yunnan, Sichuan, Gansu, Qinghai and Xinjiang Provinces. Tibetans in the PRC, much like their Uyghur counterparts, are subject to extreme levels of surveillance and restrictions on movement and expression both explicit (e.g., State educational policies equally covering teaching content and language) and implicit (e.g., surveillance on online activity). According to my sources in the region, while public frustration over draconian COVID-19 restrictions in China has led the government to put efforts into the creation of a national "Social Credit System" (Ch. shèhuì xìnyòng tǐxì 社会信用体系) on the backburner, there are nevertheless various similar social scoring systems still being used to varying degrees across the country, meaning that there are few safe spaces for Tibetan people to speak freely and express dissent, for fear of losing travel, investment or other "privileges" due to their low social score, imprisonment or worse. This control extends to the community-in-exile, whose lines of communication to family and friends in the PRC are strained or even cut off, for fear of reprisals by State Police. As Norbu, a Tibetan restaurant owner in Paris I spoke with puts it, "[The Chinese] can't put everyone in prison, but we have [the] prison in our pockets."

Despite the outward display of a unified, homogenous cultural Tibet, these sociopolitical fissures simmer beneath the surface of the community in Paris, where those who have arrived from Nepal or India feel that they have a more legitimate claim to "Tibetanness," often dismissing arrivals from China as too Sinicized or even as being potential spies; whereas TAR Tibetans focus on geographical claims to legitimacy, and see the former group as having lost their way by embracing the bad habits of the West (such as drinking or smoking) and

letting Tibetan cultural and linguistic heritage die out.[5] Furthermore, regional differences across the vast Tibetan Plateau itself (principally divided into the Kham, Amdo and Ü-Tsang regions) mean that provincial identities also play an important role in individual and collective identity construction, both "at home" and within the new country. Given that there are at least 25 distinct main dialects spread over the region, the dialect of Tibet's capital city Lhasa is generally used as a *lingua franca* to help bridge linguistic divides among Tibetans, and is therefore promoted by the CTA to cement both the performance and the feeling of unity (Tournadre & Dorje 2003).[6] The Lhasa dialect is often referred to simply as "Tibetan" – indeed, Dolma (F; 30 years old; L1 undisclosed local Tibetan village dialect, L2 Tibetan, L3 English, L4 Hindi; 3 years in France), mentioned the shock within the community when an ethnic Tibetan cannot speak this language, saying "If you are Tibetan you should speak," so that her (Lhasa Tibetan-speaking) boyfriend had warned her to tell me that "Tibetan" was her first language.

There are, accordingly, many pressures to conform to standardized national narratives from the Tibetan community-in-exile, due mostly to the decades-long efforts of the CTA to create an infrastructure of statehood, including the dissemination of the *rangzen lagteb* or "green book" (Tibetan: rang btsan lag de རང་བཙན་ལག་ཏེ), which is a stand-in for a formally recognized passport, as well as the publication of a National Charter).[7] Tibetan communities-in-exile (and their online extensions, in WeChat or WhatsApp group chats, for example) are hierarchical, as Tibetan society has long been based around important *geshes* or *lamas* – religious leaders who structure, guide and help the laypeople. As these monks have shifted their focus to teaching Western acolytes, exile Tibetans now look to more explicitly political actors, such as the CTA or other community leaders, who work to maintain cultural practices and investment, but also to make sure that these are "correctly" expressed, meaning that any non-Tibetan influences, especially those traditionally associated with Black culture, such as hip-hop or basketball, are much maligned by the older members of the community (Yeh & Lama 2006). Yeshi, an enterprising and erudite young Tibetan man from India (whose quote about having "four different people in his head" is cited in the introduction), spoke of being rejected by Tibetan charities in Paris, even youth organizations such as the Students for a Free Tibet (SFT), when seeking funding for his fledgling basketball association, with the response: "*Qu'est-ce que nous on va gagner avec ça?*" ("What do we stand to gain by that?"). Beyond the discernible squeamishness around Black culture – he also spoke of the unwritten rule (that he gleefully flaunted) that dating white people was fine, but that it was "not OK" to date black or mixed-race people – we see here an example of the ongoing calculations made within the Tibetan community to negotiate the challenges of integration amid competing versions of reality.

[5] Due to inconsistencies in Chinese State education policies over the years, some Tibetan students (the *min kaomin* 民老民) have received a bilingual Mandarin/Tibetan high school education; others (the *min kaohan* 民老汉) have received teaching exclusively in Chinese; and others (the *nei di xizang ban* 内地西藏办) were relocated from their home villages to the inner cities, all of which exacerbate linguistic disunity (Yang 2018; see also Zenz 2010).

[6] For a more complete exploration of Tibetan languages, see Tournadre (2014), and for their respective impacts on inter-generational communication, see Simon (2021, 2023) and Yeh (2007)).

[7] Despite these efforts, Tibet is not currently formally recognized as a country by the UN. It became a founding member of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization in 1991, the same year it published its Charter for All Tibetans-in-Exile. (Member Profile – Tibet, UNPO).

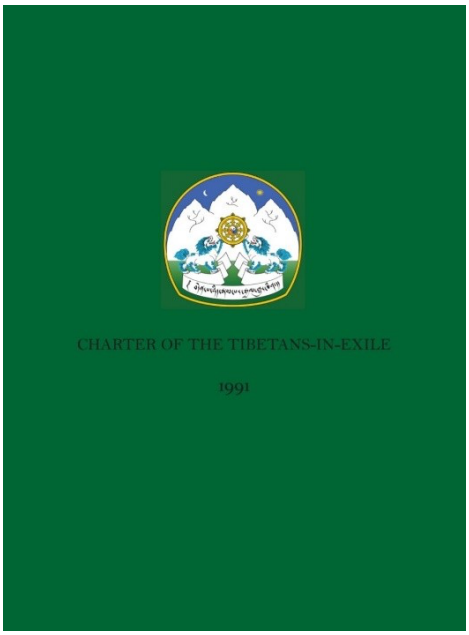


Figure 1: Cover page of the Charter of the Tibetans-in-Exile (1991)

Discussion: *Tibetans in France – code-switching as integration or resistance?*

We have seen briefly how there are a myriad of competing pulls on Tibetan immigrants who have moved to France. We will discuss first some examples of code-switching which show possible evidence of "positive" integration processes (in this case, of key French cultural ideals which were switched into predominantly English-language conversations).

The first example was by far the most common instance of French code-switching recorded by interview participants, and was the use of the word *manifestation* or "protest":

> They [the Tibetan refugees in Paris] do *manifestations* every Saturday, but they protest against the Chinese – if you really are a freedom fighter, 70% of Tibetans are working under the Chinese. They pay well (Dolma).

This key term reflects on the one hand the central position that France's revolutionary history holds within its national ideology, so that protest is regularly used to create a sense of belonging-through-participation. On the other hand, the Free Tibet movement is not only the most visible element of Tibet in the West, but also helps to concretize a core Tibetan political narrative based on themes of persecution, suffering, independence and pride. The usage here is a clear point of connection between the two cultures, which has been widely adopted by the community-in-exile.

The second instance of integrative code-switching is the word *obligatoire* or "obligatory/mandatory," used here in a discussion about education:

> Westerners have knowledge, education, so 'I can, I am'. Tibetans we don't have. For example French, I was very surprised kind of when I heard your child go to school at 3. Like me I never went until 16. Here it is *obligatoire*. Here basic education. We have five negative emotions – root emotions. 'Proud' is one of [those] emotions – knowledge, money, country, Donald Trump, America First, proud because of country. Knowledge [is] proud of 'I, I, I'. Sometimes it's strange. – Dorji (M; 38 years old; L1 Amdo Tibetan, L2 Nepalese, L3 English, L4 Hindi; 2 years in France).

The difficulties encountered with the French administrative system were a common theme in interviews, with references made to the fact that, for any dealings with the authorities,

especially in terms of processing asylum and immigration paperwork, competence in the French language and an awareness of the State's requirements are "obligatory." However, here the use of this switch by Dorji could also be a more positively charged cultural connection point for him, as he had spent most of his life in the discipline and rigidity of Tibetan monasteries, having left his family home at the age of 9.



Figure 2: Image of Tibetan protests in Paris before the State visit of Chinese President Xi Jinping in March 2019, *Le Figaro*, 24th March 2019

The monastery is also a place of refuge, however, meaning that the move to Europe often has a lasting impact on Tibetans' perception of which spaces are "safe" to express themselves. This was evoked by Gyatso (M, 48 years old, L1 Tibetan; L2 Urdu; L3 English; L4 French; 10 years in France) in a revealing example, where he uses two separate instances of code-switching: first the French *isolé* for "isolated," then the Tibetan *dzogchen*, which refers to the ultimate state of awareness beyond the mind, the highest state for Bön practitioners:

> I am not really talkative [about subjects which I consider to be] nonsense, meaningless. I don't like empty, meaningless [talk]. For me, usually, I don't talk too much [laughs]. With some friends they feel *isolé*. For me, very comfortable to talk, but I would like to speak in Tibetan about philosophy, to teach sutras and discuss tantra and *dzogchen*.

These examples of code-switching could arguably be understood as conscious choices made for my benefit – elsewhere Gyatso spoke of the decision he had taken when teaching Western acolytes not to translate key Tibetan conceptual terms. Alternatively, they could be unconscious instances of emotionally charged terms which have become encoded in the language of the host country (as in the French *isolé*) or else maintained in another (i.e., *dzogchen*). The above examples show how Tibetan speakers are effectively maneuvering between different versions of reality, alternate places and times and indeed, versions of themselves.

Having grown up in a multicultural, multi-religious environment in India, Yeshi seemed at ease in the "brainstorm" of competing linguistic realities in his mind. In the following quote we see the fluidity of code-switching at work in his speech patterns:

> Les tibétains sont considérés ***low class*** en Inde – ***the Britishers had their impact back in the day***.[8]

A clue to the pragmatism behind the Tibetan attitude towards language usage came from a Tibetan businessman named Ngawang (45-50 years old; L1 Lhasa Tibetan, L2 Mandarin Chinese, L3 English, L4 French; 18 years in France). Our conversation began rather abruptly with the following declaration:

> Language is linked to culture – you have to change, you have to be like water, to act like water. Even to introduce yourself you have to change – in Chinese they ask *chi fan le ma?* ("Have you eaten?") [to greet one another]. […] In any society, you have to be like water, transparent but fluid, dynamic but with force. Water is strength, you must be strong. I have to figure it out for myself.[9]

Ngawang was more politically engaged in the Tibetan community in Paris than the majority of the study participants, and was, at times, visibly angry about China. Nevertheless, he made sure to speak excellent Mandarin when dealing with Chinese people, justifying himself thus:

> Speaking Chinese doesn't mean that I agree with China. If somebody doesn't know how to speak their own language, it is a great shame, but if I manage to speak your language, that gives [me] a kind of pride. I show respect by speaking other people's languages – I am still proud, even if it isn't my mother tongue. It is absolutely strategic. I don't feel strange about it, because I know deep down that I'm Tibetan. That's what strength is (Ngawang).



Figure 3: Detail from a traditional Tibetan *thangka* depicting the Paani (Water) Buddha (Thangka Portal 2025)

[8] Author's translation: "The Tibetans are considered low class in India – the Britishers had their impact back in the day." We note also that despite his large linguistic repertoire, Yeshi's code-switching only included those languages which I could understand. The term "Britisher" is a colonial-era term used in India to refer to the British Occupying Forces, and its usage here was, I believe, intentional.

[9] Ngawang was aware of my language profile, and his code-switching was also tailored accordingly. His quotes are my translations from his original French.

Here language fluidity can be considered a ("negative") act of resistance – an affirmation of agency and autonomy in the face of external pressures. Himalayan peoples (including the Tibetans – see McGranahan 2018; Scott 2009; Shneiderman 2010; 2015) have a long, proud history of resistance, although this is generally based on refusal rather than engagement practices, both in a literal sense, by physically disappearing into high mountain ravines when pursued, or else, in more abstract ways, such as refusing to accept Indian citizenship status, not participating in local census surveys or, in this case, by refusing to let their guard down when using the various languages at their disposal (especially with strangers). However, as nomadic groups living in isolated, often treacherous terrains, these same groups also have a long history of using adaptation and integration strategies, especially when using language. Code-switching has long been known in Tibet as "half-goat half-sheep speech" (Tibetan: ra ma lug skad རམ་ལུག་&ད་), and while in the past such practices were seen as markers of a good education, they are now increasingly discouraged by the CTA so as to promote a cohesive monolinguistic community which is imagined as "pure," "clean" or "immaculate" (Anderson 2016[1983]; Roche 2014; Thurston 2018a, 2018b; Tournadre & Suzuki 2023).

Conclusion

> (Author) The uncertainty, I feel it too.
>
> (Gyatso) And that's called what? Impermanent. Change, you know? [laughs] Everything is changing, you know?

The particular circumstances of the Tibetan community in Paris demonstrate how every immigrant has their own unique relationships with various realities, which are knitted together from competing ideas about family and the State, the before and the after, the outside and the inside, and so on. While much of social anthropology focuses on the "in-group" in isolation, this approach cannot be so easily applied to immigrant communities, as so much of their daily reality consists of interactions with a foreign Other. By conducting interviews in non-native languages, my work mimics the confusion, fatigue and performance of immigrant realities, and in doing so, reveals something of the emotionally sticky fault-lines between two (or more) competing value systems at work in individual minds-in-action. Similar future studies focusing on linguistic fluidity conducted by multilingual Tibetan-language speakers would bring much-needed further clarification on the different types of communicative performance which the Tibetans are producing in various social contexts.

Any work into emotion and language production is by its very nature ephemeral, reflexive and subjective, so it is important to try to contextualize a given group's micro- and macrocosmic realities as fully as possible before attempting analysis, and to be mindful of the limitations of this kind of approach. Given the gossamer web which constitutes an individual's relationship with their national identities and senses of belonging, State policies based on overly broad notions of integration or even assimilation are, at best, unhelpful, at worst, potentially harmful. An awareness of multilingual issues, and the multitude of feeling-worlds which they can create, is thus vital for any study into immigration, as it allows us to stand on the bridge between internal and external migrant realities.

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