



PALGRAVE STUDIES IN INTERMEDIALITY



Truth Claims Across Media

Edited by
Beate Schirmacher
Nafiseh Mousavi

OPEN ACCESS

palgrave
macmillan

Palgrave Studies in Intermediality

Series Editor
Jørgen Bruhn
Bunkeflostrand, Sweden

Intermedial studies has emerged as a new, global trend of the humanities. Emerging from Interart studies, Intermedial studies has been under intense theoretical development for the last 25 years, exemplified by extensive publications, research groups, conferences and interdisciplinary collaborations among scholars from areas such as literature, film, music, visual art, theatre, comics and game studies around the world. During this period, there has been a tendency to focus increasingly on contemporary artistic practices, restricting intermedial phenomena to digital technology and recent developments in communication. With this new book series, we suggest a more inclusive concept of intermediality. We propose an outlet for top research that does not restrict itself to contemporary art and entertainment, but rather embraces communication from all times and media types and focuses on the crucial importance of multimodality and media interaction for making meaning. Hence, the book series covers media studies, cultural studies and media and communication studies, as well as fields conventionally working with aesthetic media. We aim for a book series that satisfies the need to understand complex media interrelations and covers uncharted territories of communication; a channel for publication that remedies a major problem caused by specialisation in modern academia: the lack of communication among research areas that are in effect close to each other but divided by institutionalised borders of research and education.

Beate Schirrmacher • Nafiseh Mousavi
Editors

Truth Claims Across Media

palgrave
macmillan

Editors

Beate Schirmacher
Department of Film and Literature
Linnaeus University
Växjö, Sweden

Nafiseh Mousavi
Department of Arts and Cultural
Sciences
Lund University
Lund, Sweden



ISSN 2731-9512

ISSN 2731-9520 (electronic)

Palgrave Studies in Intermediality

ISBN 978-3-031-42063-4

ISBN 978-3-031-42064-1 (eBook)

<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42064-1>

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2024. This book is an open access publication.

Open Access This book is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this book are included in the book's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the book's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use. The publisher, the authors, and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Paper in this product is recyclable.

PREFACE

The articles in this volume were in early versions presented at the conference *“Trust Me!” Truthfulness and Truth Claims Across Media*, 9–12 March 2021, arranged by the Linnaeus University Center for Intermedial and Multimodal Studies (IMS). The aim of the conference was to explore a media-oriented approach to understanding truth claims and truthfulness. The call for papers pointed out how in times of “post-truth,” “fake news,” and “alternative facts,” new forms of mediating facts, thoughts, and emotions challenge our understanding of how we know something to be true.

By the time of the conference, researchers at IMS had already for some years been investigating the issues of truth claims and truthfulness in media, looking at the ways processes of media integration and transformation affect the communicative strategies for conveying reliable information and creating credibility, for instance, in the mediation of scientific facts in literature, films, and games, the construction of authentic representation in comics or animated films, and the role of media in the courtroom. The approach of Lars Elleström to truthfulness in communication (2018) provided a valuable theoretical ground to discern connections and similarities across different media types.

Intermedial and multimodal frameworks provide useful theoretical concepts and methodological approaches to explore how the mix of modes and media constructs truth claims and forms the perception of truthfulness. However, a media-oriented approach to truthfulness in

communication needs to be brought together with political, historical, transnational, and industrial infrastructures involved in the production of trustworthy meaning.

The conference, therefore, hosted scholars from a wide range of disciplines and fields of research including media and communications studies, linguistics, literary studies, theatre studies, film studies, history of ideas, computer sciences, anthropology, political sciences, and memory studies. In the presentations and discussions, the participants approached the role of media in knowledge communication and perceptions of truthfulness from different perspectives, especially addressing current social challenges such as fake and disinformation, or communication in times of climate or health crisis. The wide range of approaches highlighted how in different ways and contexts, the perception of truthfulness not only is about the factual and empirical but is rather based on an interplay between facts, patterns of coherence, and different modes of engagement.

This volume intends to take the exploration of truth claims and truthfulness across media a step further. Taken together, the contributions to this volume indicate how knowledge communication through the authority of experts, testimony, and authenticity needs to be thought together to understand the challenges of communication in the digital society. The volume mirrors the diversity of approaches and the interdisciplinary and intercultural conversations that the conference set in motion. It can equally be useful for a wide range of readers including scholars of various fields that work with fundamental questions regarding truthfulness and media, as well as media practitioners, proponents of civic engagement, and the general interested audience. The dynamics between truthfulness and media affect all of us.

We would like to acknowledge the financial support from the Faculty of Art and Humanities, Linnaeus University, the Linnaeus University Library, and the Linnaeus University Centre for Intermedial and Multimodal Studies (IMS) that made it possible to make the publication open access.

Växjö, Sweden
Lund, Sweden
November 2022

Beate Schirmmacher
Nafiseh Mousavi

CONTENTS

1	Introduction: The Dynamics of Truthfulness and Media	1
	Beate Schirrmacher and Nafiseh Mousavi	
Part I	Factual Evidence and Coherence in Knowledge Communication	25
2	A Story Too Good to Be True: The Manipulation of Truth Claims in Faked News	27
	Beate Schirrmacher	
3	The Montage of the National Past: Polish Right-Wing Illustrated Press and the Abuse of History	49
	Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska	
4	Trustworthiness in the Swedish Strategies for Covid-19 in Recorded Press Conferences from the Public Health Agency of Sweden	71
	Gunilla Byrman and Asbjørg Westum	

Part II	Personal Quests for Empirical Truth: Testimony and Media Hybridity	99
5	Unveiling Truth and Truthfulness in the Graphic Memoir <i>Heimat</i> Camila Augusta P. de Figueiredo	101
6	Cameras, Pencils, Traumas: Drawn Images in and as Documentary Practice Nafiseh Mousavi	127
Part III	Fact and Fake across Media Types	151
7	Fictionality as a Rhetorical Tool in Political Mockumentary Films: The Interplay of Fictionality and Factuality in <i>C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America</i> Tamás Csöngé	153
8	Clemens J. Setz on Bursting the Reader’s Reality Bubble Nataša Muratova and Anna Obererlacher	179
9	“An Occasionally True Story”: Biofiction, Authenticity and Fictionality in <i>The Great</i> (2020) Anna Gutowska	199
10	Impure Realism, Pure Eventness, and Horror Cinema in the Post-truth Era: A Case Study of <i>One Cut of the Dead</i> Yeqi Zhu	219
Part IV	Interaction, Trust, and Truthfulness on Social Media	243
11	Developing Misinformation Immunity in a Post-Truth World: Human Computer Interaction for Data Literacy Elena Musi, Kay L. O’Halloran, Elinor Carmi, and Simeon Yates	245

12	When the Post-Truth Devil Hides in the Details: A Digital Ethnography of Virtual Anti-Vaccination Groups in Lithuania	273
	Augustė Dementavičienė, Fausta Mikutaitė, and Aivaras Žukauskas	
13	Towards a Grammar of Manipulated Photographs: The Social Semiotics of Digital Photo Manipulation	309
	Morten Boeriis	
	Index	335

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Morten Boeriis holds a PhD in Multimodality and Moving Images and is Associate Professor of Visual Communication and member of Centre for Multimodal Communication at the University of Southern Denmark. Boeriis specialises in visual communication, multimodality, and business communication. He is Co-PI on the project the “Digital Resemiotisation of Buying and Selling Interaction” (RESEMINA) funded by the Velux Foundation and PI at the Nordic Council of Ministers financed project “The Remediation of Education” (REED) and the upcoming “Photo Manipulation—Visual Truth and Manipulation in the Digital Society” at University of Southern Denmark. Boeriis is also a skilled photographer.

Gunilla Byrman is Professor of Swedish at Linnaeus University, Sweden, specialising in text and gender analysis, along with multimodality. She has published, among others, “In Evidence: Linguistic Transformations of Events in Police Interview Reports” (2018, NJL), “Women and Men in Judgements: A Research Report on Linguistic Gender Constructions in Judgements on Criminal Cases, Custody Cases and LVU Cases” (2018, for the Swedish Court of Justice), “The Devil Is in the Details: On the Use of Quotation Marks by the Police and the Social Services” (2019, Sakprosa). She has led a research project on digital support for maternal health care (2016–2020) (<https://sadima.lnu.se/>).

Elinor Carmi is Lecturer in Media and Communication at the Sociology Department at City University, London, UK. She is a digital rights advocate, feminist researcher, and journalist and has been working on data politics, data literacies, feminist approaches to media and data, sound

studies, and internet governance. Carmi's work contributes to emerging debates in academia, policy, health organisations, and digital activism and has been included in reports by the UN and NGOs like Good Things Foundation, Demos, and Coding Rights. She is working on several projects, including "Developing a Minimum Digital Living Standard," "Digital Literacies for a Healthy Democracy," "Trustworthy Autonomous Recommender Systems on Music Streaming Platforms."

Tamás Csöngé is Senior Lecturer at the University of Pécs (Hungary), Department of Film and Visual Studies. He is a member of The International Society for the Study of Narrative. Working in the frame of rhetorical and classical narratology, he wrote his doctoral dissertation on the topic of perspectivation and character narration in film and published on the topics of narrative complexity, film narratology, and unreliable narration in the journals *Acta Universitatis Sapientiae Film and Media Studies* and *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*. His other research interests include film theory, ludology, and contemporary popular culture.

Augustė Dementavičienė is Junior Lecturer at Vilnius University Institute of International Relations and Political Science. Her interests are philosophy of technology, body politics, post-truth, posthumanism, and philosophy of science. She has been teaching methods of qualitative research and body politics for more than ten years at VU TSPMI. She is finishing her doctoral thesis: "Cyborg, Demigod, In-Betweenness and Posthumanism: How Donna Haraway Understands Politics and Why It Is Important for Political Philosophy?" She is also the author of the paper "How the New Technologies Shape the Understanding of the Political Act: The Case of Digital Vigilantism" (2019).

Camila Augusta P. de Figueiredo holds a doctoral degree in Comparative Literature/Literature, Other Arts, and Media from Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), Brazil, with a mobility period at the Technische Universität Braunschweig, Germany. She has a background in English Literature, and she was granted a CAPES/FIPSE scholarship during her studies. Her research focuses on intermedial studies, with an emphasis on transmedia and adaptations, especially those involving literature, cinema, and graphic novels. She works at UFMG University Press as Editorial Manager and Vice-Director.

Anna Gutowska works as an Assistant Professor at the Department of Humanities at the Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce (Poland) and as

a film development executive at the WFDiF Feature and Documentary Film Studio in Warsaw. In the years 2017–2019 she held a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Individual Fellowship at the Linnaeus University Centre for Intermedial and Multimodal Studies in Växjö, Sweden. Her research interests include novel-to-film adaptation, Neo-Victorian film and television, and nineteenth-century biofiction.

Fausta Mikutaitė is a photography and media art master's student at the Vilnius Academy of Arts. She holds a bachelor's degree in Political Science from Vilnius University Institute of International Relations and Political Science. Her fields of research and interest include media, culture, and communication studies; queer theory; and artificial intelligence in societies and art. She is particularly interested in whether machine learning can trigger emotional responses in humans. She is exploring AI's potential in creating affect within narratives in addition to the impacts and implications of automated storytelling.

Nafiseh Mousavi is Senior Lecturer in Intermedial Studies at Lund University, Sweden. She has a background in literature, anthropology, translation, and intermediality. In her research, she studies the intermedial processes in migratory and intercultural contexts with a focus on memory, materiality, and politics of inclusion and across a wide range of media and media practices such as comics, literary fiction, autobiographies, adaptations, and documentary films. She has written on migrant media, authorship, multimodality of migrant communication, and intermediality of social media and comics. She also writes fiction and non-fiction and has contributed as a writer with documentary film projects.

Nataša Muratova is a doctoral researcher at the Department of German Language and Literature, Stockholm University, and a member of the European PhDnet for Literary and Cultural Studies, Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen. She has a background in German Philology and literary studies. In her doctoral research, "Nonsense as Resistance? Breaches of Rules and Expectations in 21st century German Literature," she focuses on the critical side of nonsense as a technique in contemporary German literature.

Elena Musi is Senior Lecturer (Associate Professor) in Communication and Media at the University of Liverpool where she is programme lead of the MSc in Data Science and Communication. Her research interests rest at the interface between artificial intelligence and communication,

including theoretical and applied argumentation, (mis)information and the development of human–computer interaction technologies to advance critical thinking skills. She has been PI on the UKRI ESRC project “Being Alone Together: Developing Fake News Immunity” (<https://fakenews-immunity.liverpool.ac.uk/>), and she is PI of the EMIF-funded project “Leveraging Argument Technology for Impartial Fact-Checking” (<https://gulbenkian.pt/emifund/projects/leveraging-argument-technology-for-impartial-fact-checking-latif/>).

Anna Obererlacher is a doctoral researcher at the Department of German Studies, University of Innsbruck. She has a background in German literature and has researched the role of Epitexts in the early twentieth century. Her PhD thesis on “Fictitious Epitexts in Contemporary German Literature” is part of the bilateral research project “Forms and Functions of Authorial Epitexts in the Literary Field of the Present,” funded by the Austrian FWF (Austrian Science Fund) and the DFG (German Research Foundation).

Kay L. O’Halloran is Chair Professor and Head of Department of Communication and Media in the School of the Arts at the University of Liverpool. Her research specialism is multimodal analysis, involving the study of the interaction of language with other resources in texts, interactions, and events. In particular, a key focus of her work is the development of digital tools and techniques for multimodal analysis. She is developing mixed methods approaches that combine multimodal analysis, data mining, and visualisation for large-scale analysis of media within and across platforms.

Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska is a research fellow at the German Historical Institute Warsaw and an associate professor at Institute of Contemporary Culture at the University of Lodz (Poland). She published, among others, *Bilder der Normalisierung. Gesundheit, Ernährung und Haushalt in der visuellen Kultur Deutschlands, 1945–1948* (jointly with Anna Labentz, 2017). Her other publications include contributions to *The Public Historian*, *Memory Studies*, and *German Studies Review*. She is a member of the Executive Committee of the Memory Studies Association and Ambassador Scientist of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation in Poland.

Beate Schirmmacher is Associate Professor of Comparative Literature at Linnaeus University, a member of the Linnaeus University Center of

Intermedial and Multimodal Studies, and head of the International Society for Intermedial Studies. With Jørgen Bruhn, she is co-editor of *Intermedial Studies—An Introduction to Meaning Across Media* (2021). She has previously published on literary transformation of music and performative aspects of intermediality. Her research interests include the truth claims of media, intermedial approaches to news and journalism, and specifically the narrative strategies of journalism.

Asbjørg Westum is Associate Professor of Swedish at Linnaeus University. Her main research interests lie in the relation between language and culture, especially focusing on semantic aspects of vocabulary and word formation. Within the field of medical humanities, she has examined issues of folk classification of illness in Scandinavian languages. In a multidisciplinary research project at Umeå University about historical flu pandemics, led by Fredrik Elgh, Professor of Virology, and funded by the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency, she investigated folk narratives from Northern Sweden about the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918–1920.

Simeon Yates is Professor of Digital Culture at University of Liverpool. He has undertaken research on the social, political, and cultural impacts of digital media since 1990. Since 2004, he has mainly focused on projects that address issues of digital inclusion and exclusion. He has extensively published on gender differences in computer-mediated communication (CMC), gender and computer gaming, email and letter writing, and science in the mass media. He has also explored issues of gender and technology use, workplace ICT use, politics online, ICT use in relation to policing and security, and the role of digital technologies in arts and culture. Yates has written textbooks on social research methods—in particular, linguistic and discourse analytic methods.

Yeqi Zhu holds a PhD in Comparative Literature (2019) from Nanjing University and was also a visiting student at the Film Studies Department, University of Southampton, from 2015 to 2016. She is a lecturer at the School of Humanities and Communication, Ningbo University, in Ningbo, China. Her research interests include Kubrick studies, adaptation studies, transnational cinema, cult cinema, and the representation of communities in contemporary film culture.

Aivaras Žukauskas is an early career researcher at the Institute of International Relations and Political Science of Vilnius University. His primary research focus lies on the relationship between new media and

politics. He is also interested in historical memory formation techniques and capabilities in the context of media virtualisation. In his research, he combines philosophy of politics, sociology of politics, imaginative research, and the study of new media. He is investigating the relationship between video games and politics of memory and has published the article “Video Games and the Politics of Historical Memory: War Memory in American and Russian Video Games” (2018).

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 3.1	Cover of the history supplement to <i>Uważam Rze</i> 11 (2015)	50
Fig. 3.2	Cover of <i>Wprost</i> 2 (2016)	52
Fig. 3.3	Covers of <i>W Sieci Historii</i> 9 (2014), <i>W Sieci</i> 37 (2015) and the propaganda photograph depicting Wehrmacht soldiers at the Polish-German boarder in September 1939, National Digital Archive, sign. 2–16, Creative Commons	59
Fig. 4.1	A screenshot of protective measures presented on 17 June 2021, with the permission of the PHA	90
Fig. 4.2	A screenshot from the PHA's press conference on 27 April 2020, with the permission of the PHA	91
Fig. 5.1	A family photograph (Krug, 2019 [67])	111
Fig. 5.2	A photograph of a historical event (Krug, 2019 [26])	112
Fig. 5.3	A photographic reproduction of military documents (Krug, 2019 [108])	114
Fig. 6.1	Hand-drawn child portrait	137
Fig. 6.2	Sketch, refuge in the basement, panel on the right	138
Fig. 6.3	Sketch, refuge in the basement, panel on the left	139
Fig. 6.4	Final illustration, refuge in the basement	140
Fig. 6.5	Hand-drawn representation of ISIS capturing Yazidi women	144
Fig. 6.6	Hand-drawn reproduction of an archival image: Yazidi family dead while in flight in the Sinjar Mountains	145
Fig. 6.7	Representation of a refugee journey from refugee camp in Turkey to Germany	146
Fig. 7.1	The schematic narrative structure of <i>C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America</i> (2004)	164

Fig. 10.1	At the end of the film's first part, the film-within-a-film's fictional director shouts at the two leads, 'This scene will be the climax of my movie!'	228
Fig. 10.2	A crew member holds up a cue card off camera that read "We are not ready. Keep going!"	232
Fig. 10.3	Director Higurashi takes on the role of the "realism-obsessed" director and screams at lead actress Chinatsu, "Give me real emotions! The true face of fear!"	233
Fig. 10.4	Mao wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with Nicholson's Jack "Here's Johnny" Torrance	236
Fig. 11.1	Distribution of fallacy types in the dataset	254
Fig. 11.2	Example of guided fact-checking through fallacies identification	257
Fig. 11.3	Frequency of adjectives describing reasons for liking a philosopher avatar	263
Fig. 11.4	Most frequent qualities defining a good teacher	264
Fig. 11.5	Feelings triggered by the chatbot interface	265
Fig. 11.6	Aspects that could be improved in the chatbot interface	265
Fig. 11.7	Perceived ability of recognize fallacies across different context	266
Fig. 12.1	Themes and topics that emerged from "Skiepu żala" and "Po-skiepo.lt" groups	287

LIST OF TABLES

Table 4.1	Analysed press conferences on Covid-19: date, duration, accumulated number of deaths, total cases, and cases in ICU or hospital care	75
Table 12.1	Key characteristics of the Facebook groups analysed (numbers change every day, so are not entirely accurate)	284
Table 13.1	Fourfold subdivision of photo alterations at pixel-level	314



Introduction: The Dynamics of Truthfulness and Media

Beate Schirrmacher and Nafiseh Mousavi

1.1 FACTS, FAKES, AND TRUTHS: A MEDIA-ORIENTED APPROACH

Whether you look at the entertainment industry, social media, artistic realms, or the political and civil spheres, truth claims, authenticity discourses, and knowledge communication are high on the agenda everywhere. Social media influencers strive for creating an authentic persona, and TV series promise to show the audience the truth about a crime that actually happened. The crucial role of testimonies and witnessing for social justice has been made more than clear with social movements like #MeToo and political protests all over the world. Emergencies like the Covid-19 pandemic and the ecological crisis are global reminders that we do not have time to waste on misinformation; we need to get things right.

B. Schirrmacher (✉)

Department of Film and Literature, Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden
e-mail: beate.schirrmacher@lnu.se

N. Mousavi

Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences, Lund University, Lund, Sweden
e-mail: nafiseh.mousavi@kultur.lu.se

© The Author(s) 2024

B. Schirrmacher, N. Mousavi (eds.), *Truth Claims Across Media*,
Palgrave Studies in Intermediality,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42064-1_1

Adding to the complexity, there appears to be a communication paradox. The loss of influence of former gatekeepers and experts in the digital public sphere has led to a more multivoiced but also a more fragmented and polarized public debate. Digital social networks provide new and valuable ways to share opinions and information, but they also offer infrastructure for spreading false information. Digital technology allows for flexible integrations of words, images, and sounds, which can challenge perceived notions of authentic human presence in the form of deep fakes or chatbots. The internet has democratized access to information and publication but has also led to communication practices that threaten democratic processes.

The current disagreement on facts, fakes, and truths as well as the tensions between authority and authenticity, empirical and personal experience are complex problems with disruptive social consequences that are not easily addressed. The emergence of terms such as “post-truth” and “fake news” is a symptom of such complexity. “Post-truth,” according to the Oxford Dictionaries (2016), refers to situations “in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” This does not mean that a society could be “past” truth, but, rather, it signifies how certain actors increasingly treat truth as irrelevant (McIntyre, 2018). “Fake news,” another current term of relevance to our topic, is used as a shorthand to describe the various forms of false information spread for strategic reasons (Tandoc, 2019), but, it is also a term that is used rhetorically to attack opponents and to discredit facts that contradict specific ideologies and beliefs. Even if you want to describe the current “information disorder” more objectively, with the many different kinds of mis- and disinformation that “pollute” the information sphere (Wardle & Derekshan, 2017), this still leaves us with an underlying problem: What can be defined as mis- or disinformation is consumed as “information” and relevant “news” by certain audiences.

While truth still matters, there is disagreement on which sources qualify as truthful and how this can be established. As a result, a general agreement about facts, truth, and trust appears to be lost and needs to be renegotiated, as different forms of truth claims collide. Authorities and experts are challenged by alternative voices (Holt, 2020). There are different ways to establish facts and reach conclusions. You can rely on empirical facts, but you can also use evidence from personal testimonies and rely on what you perceive as authentic behavior. The hierarchy between these methods and which method trumps the other is currently under debate.

Disagreements over truth claims are not limited to today's world, but perhaps they have never been as visible and so dominant. The diversity of the mediascape is a significant factor behind this, and following Michael Lynch (2016), we find that the new digital possibilities to communicate also greatly affect how we gain and construct knowledge. The contradictory social and communicational challenges, new potentials, and disruptive effects can be connected to how digital technology has transformed the way we communicate, work, and socialize. In other words, the emergence of new media foregrounds the role of media in the construction of knowledge.

Emphasizing the importance of media for knowledge communication, this volume suggests that we need a media-oriented approach to understand truth claims and truthfulness in communication. Most of our knowledge about the world is mediated by sources we regard as reliable such as friends or experts. We also gain knowledge from media products such as textbooks, news media, encyclopedias, documentaries, scientific articles, and testimonials, as well as novels, movies, poems, and games. The kind of knowledge we expect and gain is different depending on whether we read a novel or a scientific report, whether we watch a movie or the news, share information among friends, or act as an expert. All communication is dependent on material objects or perceivable phenomena. The choice of objects and their affordances define what we can communicate and how. Yet the way the material and medial specificities form the information they convey goes very often unnoticed. The point is that as long as media are functioning and familiar, we treat them as transparent and focus mostly on the "content" they mediate. We tend to notice the media involved when they are broken or self-reflectively draw attention to themselves, or when we have to learn how to use them, in the case of new and unfamiliar media. So while digital technology enables us to combine and switch between different modes and media types in hitherto unprecedented scale, the underlying transformation processes that take place when different texts, images and sounds integrate or when individual media products such as texts, videos, memes are shared across platforms are easily overlooked.

The question of media authenticity and related social conflicts have previously followed in the wake of media revolutions (Enli, 2015). For instance, printing technology increased the speed of spreading information, which transformed fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European societies but also destabilized them (Pettegree, 2015; see also Langen &

Stjernfelt, 2022). New ways to access information meant the loss of authority for former gate keepers, particularly the Catholic Church; anonymous hate speech, spread in pamphlets; and polarization and conflict about religious truth. The connection between the technology of printing and a century of religious wars in Europe might be discouraging. However, considering how practices, standards, and conventions led to the fact that having something “in black and white” (that is in writing or print) came to express a degree of reliability and trustworthiness, we can probably assume that it would be possible to stabilize the current communication complex in a similar fashion.

Following Lynch, one way to contribute to this process of stabilization is to map and understand the collision and variety of the epistemic rules that are in place in different media contexts (2016, 60). In recent years, significant work has been done for a better understanding of some of the disruptive phenomena we mentioned: mapping post-truth politics (McIntyre, 2018), exploring the various reasons behind the amplified spreading of false and misleading information (Zimdars & McLeod, 2020; Farkas & Schou, 2020; Tandoc, 2019; Bakir & McStay, 2018; Althuis et al., 2018), and the characteristics of conspiracy theories and the role of human bias in knowledge communication (Butter & Knight, 2020). Scholars insist on defending and reconstructing the concept of truth (Zuidervaart et al., 2013; Benson & Stangroom, 2007) and the relationship between trust and knowledge communication (Krämer, 2017; Salvi & Turnbull, 2017). In this volume, we contribute to this process by exploring how reliable, trusted, truthful information is shaped by the media involved.

Truth Claims Across Media approaches truthful communication across different media types as well as cultural and medial contexts. We approach media in a broad sense and explore the impact of material and medial aspects in all forms of human communication, thus looking beyond what is called “the media” in everyday speech. Whether we think of journalism, cinema, literature, or social media, in each media context, facts and experiences are treated and mediated differently in complex systems that integrate material, sensorial, semiotic, and cultural aspects. Different conventions and social contexts form what Lars Elleström (2021) calls qualified media types such as news, cinema, social media forums, or visual arts. More basic media types, such as texts and images, integrate differently in, for example, a comic strip, a graphic memoir, a news article, or a meme. However, all these different media types with different

conventions converge on our digital devices turning into affordances that we can choose and pick from (Helles, 2013). As a consequence, even different forms of truth claims collide. The texts and images of a graphic memoir and a news feature not only look and are produced differently; but we also approach and evaluate them with different forms of truth expectations.

Therefore, we need to be more specific about whether media products convey knowledge about observable facts, personal experiences, or beliefs, and more specifically, how truth claims are manipulated by fakes and are negotiated in art. *Truth Claims Across Media* explores the epistemological question of how different kinds of truth claims collide, merge, or are confused. To this end, the volume brings together various media types and contexts, including journalism and literature, the arena of press conferences, documentaries and mockumentaries, images in political magazines and on Instagram, horror movies, screen biofiction, and (computer) games to increase data literacy.

1.2 TRUTH CLAIMS ACROSS MEDIA: THE INTERMEDIAL APPROACH

This volume explores the implicit truth claims of different media types, understood as the implicit reasons why and in which ways we conceive them as truthful to the physical and social world. We approach these different media contexts and their different truth claims from an intermedial perspective. Historically, intermedial theory developed from the study of artistic media such as literature, film, music, and visual arts and looks at how they integrate, transfer, and transform media characteristics, including what is perceived as media form or media content (Elleström, 2021; Rippl, 2015; Clüver, 2007; Rajewsky, 2005; Wolf, 1999). With our approach, we highlight that intermediality is more broadly useful. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Lars Elleström (2021), we highlight intermediality as a tool to explore all kinds of relationships between dissimilar media types, between different qualified media types such as news and literature, and between (or within) specific media products, such as news features and short stories. Elleström's approach to intermediality departs from the characteristics that all kinds of media products have in common, which he calls the media modalities. Intermedial analysis then can highlight, for instance, how transmedial

characteristics such as rhythm or narrativity play out in specific ways in different media and how all types of media adaptation join transfer and transformation (Elleström, 2014).

The intermedial perspective of finding similarities without ignoring crucial differences provides a valuable vantage point for understanding communication in a digitized society. Media and communication scholars therefore increasingly draw on intermediality as a concept to understand the hybridity, convergence and malleability of digital media and to explore the relationship between mass and interpersonal communication, the digital and the analogue (Rice, 2017; Helles, 2013; Jensen, 2016). In this introduction, we use an intermedial perspective to address the different forms of truthfulness that arise from material, perceptual, and semiotic media choices. We tease out the similarities and differences between how truth claims are made and how different forms of truthfulness are perceived in different media contexts. We argue that if one wants to better understand the attraction of conspiracy theories, why what is fake news for some is alternative information to others, or why post-truth politics can afford to ignore truthfulness with factual events, we need to look closer into how factual truth claims interact with other forms of claims that promise to be coherent with and thus truthful to conviction, beliefs, and experiences.

The challenge is that the truth claims that are at stake in a media context usually are not discussed explicitly. While the intermedial study of truthfulness and truth claims across media is still emerging (Bruhn et al., 2021; Elleström, 2018; see also Tseng, 2022), the implicit truth claims made by media products become first visible when metadiscourse draws attention to them or when scandals reveal that claims of truthfulness are not always sincerely made. Fake identities on social media, so-called native advertisements that imitate journalism, or the visual accuracy of the fictional events of deep fakes can lead to situations where audiences confuse constructed mediation with actual presence, in what Gunn Enli calls authenticity scandals (2015). These confusions also arise out of the fact that audiences address one kind of media product with the truth claims of another. Authenticity scandals tend to happen when new technology challenges existing conventions and evaluations of truth claims in a specific context. With the arrival of deep fake, for instance, the indexical truth claim of the moving images cannot be trusted by default to the same extent anymore. With the widespread use of artificial intelligence, such as

ChatGPT, conversation is no more automatically an indexical sign for human presence.

The broad transmedial scope of this volume can therefore be seen as a first intermedial step that brings similarities and dissimilarities between truth claims across media contexts to the forefront. The individual articles explore the questions of trust, different truth claims, and truthfulness in a specific media context. The articles, spanning across disciplines, present different methodologies in addressing the questions of truth claims and truthful representation in the media types of journalism, literature, cinema, and photography as well as in social media and digital educational games. Some offer concrete approaches and describe projects that deal with topical social challenges like disinformation strategies, knowledge communication in the pandemic and media literacy. Others focus on how artistic media types, in the form of metafictional literary texts, graphic novels, documentaries, mockumentaries, and biofiction, highlight and negotiate the complexity of different forms of truthful representation. Not all articles explicitly deal with digital media, but all of them draw attention to collisions between conflicting truth claims that can be encountered in the digital sphere as well. All the essays demonstrate that truthfulness in communication needs to be specified and explored more carefully in research. Statements of truth are situated in a context; they are grounded in implicit truth claims that should be made specific, and the experience of truthfulness can relate to different aspects of the social world. Taken together, the articles build a constellation of the transmedial characteristics that informative, artistic, and interactive media share, even if these transmedial characteristics are used and combined differently.

In the following section, we start to map the common underlying similarities of different kinds of truth claims. We present “truth claim” and “truthfulness” as concepts that enable us to spell out the prerequisites of the perception of truthfulness in communication in different contexts.

1.3 TRUTHS, TRUTH CLAIMS, TRUTHFULNESS, AND TRUST

The philosopher William James describes truth as an agreement with reality (James, 2008 [1907], 136). While this minimal definition might be accepted by many, philosophers do not agree on how this agreement is

reached, whether in correspondence to facts, in coherence with a set of beliefs or propositions, or within a certain limit of inquiry (Burgess & Burgess, 2011, 14). However, although truth can be defined as a form of agreement and the result of a process, it is often referred to as if it were an object in the social world that can be found or revealed. Thus, speaking of truth is always a shorthand that refers to knowledge that can be defined as “correct beliefs” or “true opinions” because they are justified or grounded (Klauk, 2020, 187–188; Lynch, 2016, 12–14). This process of grounding opinions, of gaining knowledge by forming agreements is based on different social acts, sets of rules, power relations, and trust relationships.

The lack of consensus about the ontological status of truth also might indicate that different aspects are relevant in the empirical knowledge production. When we speak of empirical, legal, poetic, or subjective truth, the cultivation of true beliefs is based on different operations and rules, and they refer to knowledge about different aspects of the social world. The steps to justify alleged truths often remain implicit (Klauk, 2020, 188). They are, in other words, socially constructed, but we want to stress that they should also be seen as media-dependent. Following what philosopher Ian Hacking points out, that “every new kind of truth-telling requires a new technology” (Hacking, 2005, 171), we claim that new technologies and media types might also affect practices of truth-telling.

The interplay of different aspects and the changes in agreements all motivate a closer look into the truth claims of media and how they contribute to the perception of truthfulness in different ways. When film and media scholar Tom Gunning discusses the truth claims of photography, he understands truth claims as the reasons implicitly brought forth by a media product, looking at how and in what ways we can trust it (Gunning, 2004). These claims appeal to the audience’s knowledge of the media’s production process, the acts usually involved in creating the media product, and what kind of knowledge these media products usually convey. Gunning discusses the truth claim of photography as based on the indexicality of the production process but also informed by the detailed iconicity of the photographic image. These implicit reasons, Gunning stresses, do not say anything about the actual truthfulness of a specific media product; instead they are “a claim made for it based on our understanding of its inherent properties” (Gunning, 2004, 42). On the contrary, fakes pretend to draw on the truth claims of production in a rhetorical way without in reality being grounded in the actual production process. Still, truth claims provide an explanation for why we heuristically tend to draw a specific

form of knowledge from certain media types. The truth claim of journalism, for instance, presents the professional work of journalists as a form of knowledge-production based on accounts of recent events (Ekström & Westlund, 2019; Carlson, 2017). The journalistic authority and its truth claim is based on specific practices such as the observation of eyewitnesses and research as well as a specific form of presentation, which includes the indexicality of photographs and the quotation sources (Haapanen, 2017; Kroon Lundell, 2010).

While the concept of truth claims provides the reasons why we should trust a particular media product, the concept of truthfulness can be used to better describe what kind of knowledge about the actual world we can draw from a specific media product. Truthfulness is often understood as a personal quality and a form of honesty. Philosopher Bernard Williams's understanding of truthfulness as a "commitment" to or "respect" of truth highlights truthfulness as a personal quality that is based on *accuracy* in the search for truth and *sincerity* when communicating the truth to others (Williams, 2002, 11). Yet when John Hyman explores truthfulness in painting, he stresses that even media can be truthful, in respect to what they represent and how they represent it (Hyman, 2021, 498).

When intermedial scholar Lars Elleström approaches truthfulness in communication from a semiotic perspective, he describes truthfulness in communication as an indexical relationship that connects communication with the actual world in the form of "extracommunicational truthfulness" but also has an inward direction that "establishes intracommunicational coherence" (2018, 423). This semiotic approach makes it possible to describe "what kind of external truthfulness can be expected from certain media products" (ibid., 444). Indexical signs form what semiotician Peirce calls "real connections" that are based on contiguity (ibid., 434). Therefore, indexical signs, traces, and symptoms are used as proofs, as they can convince us of the presence or existence of something else that we cannot immediately perceive with our senses (like a former presence or an inner state). This proof, however, needs to be constructed. While smoke is an indexical sign of fire, smoke rising above the treetops will not tell what kind of fire it is or who started it. A fingerprint proves that a specific person has been at a specific place but does not explain why or when. Therefore, photographs used as indexical signs, such as in legal contexts, "can only be the supporting evidence for a statement" (Gunning, 2004, 42). Photographs of red marks on skin can be presented as proof of physical abuse or a rash. At the same time, there are photographs that

circulate in social media as proof for a specific event although they have been taken at other occasions. Understanding truthfulness as an interplay of various indexical relations helps us understand why the spreading of mis- and disinformative narratives cannot be countered by fact-checks alone but calls for an approach that considers how facts and narratives integrate.

Elleström's indexical approach to truthfulness enables an intermedial analysis of the construction of truthfulness. It allows us to identify similarities between the truth claims of different media types and to differentiate expected from actually perceived forms of truthfulness. Truthfulness in communication needs to connect to the actual world and also provide or guarantee coherence. When reading, listening, or watching news, we not only look at the facts but also respond to how well they connect. All forms of knowledge communication depend on narratives and need to connect to previous knowledge. Facts are never isolated and even fictive stories need to be anchored in our previous knowledge in order for them to make sense to us. Thus, external and internal indexical relationships communicate different forms of knowledge in different kinds of media products, though they integrate differently in, say, a scientific report and a fantasy novel.

To understand the current information disorder, it is not enough to focus either on facts, narratives or human biases. If we start to explore more in detail how the extracommunicational truthfulness of facts relates to the intracommunicational coherences of narratives and how their relationships either confirm or challenge expectations and beliefs, we can analyze truthfulness in communication in a more fine-grained manner than using binaries like true and false, fake and authentic, and fiction and fact. We can start to describe what type of truthfulness we expect and actually perceive as well as which kinds of truth claims are made and may be colliding. An intermedial perspective allows us to spell out how facts, narrative, and audience engagement play out differently in different media types and to explore both underlying similarities without forgetting crucial differences between media products. We can consider the interplay of different forms of truth claims that go along with the empirical objectivity of facts, the coherences provided by narratives, and the psychological biases of personal engagement that are appropriate in some contexts but problematic in others.

In considering this interplay of truth claims, we need to address how the digital transformation has changed the practices of knowledge

production and how these changes relate to an increased demand for authenticity.

1.4 KNOWLEDGE COMMUNICATION, AUTHENTICITY, AND WITNESSING IN A CHANGING MEDIASCAPE

Knowledge communication is built on trust and the willingness to rely on others. Most of our world knowledge is not only mediated but formed in what Sybille Krämer (2017) calls “epistemic dependence,” which means that “[w]e rely on being informed through others in order to be able to know anything at all.” Krämer stresses therefore that “thinking and knowing are terms for fundamentally cooperative actions” (ibid., 247).

Similar to what the technologies of writing and printing have done before, digital technology allows more people to profit from the knowledge of others without meeting them in person, therefore changing the way to create knowledge. When media prevent us from relying on our senses to evaluate information from others in face-to-face communication, we have to find strategies to identify reliable information that we can trust quickly and heuristically.

Digital technology already affects our understanding of how and to what extent we trust texts and images. Digital texts and images look similar to their printed equivalent, but—due to their digital materiality—they can be more easily combined, changed, and manipulated (Manovich, 2002). Due to its production process, printed text provides a different form of truth claim. Printed text published in book form and distributed by publishing houses vouches for a series of gatekeeping and editing procedures that cannot be expected by default from texts that only exist in digital form. A lot of digital text that now appears in Times New Roman font on the screen would have been written by hand or machine typed and be visibly recognizable as drafts before the arrival of word-processing software. A similar change in trust and practices goes for the digital image. Digital photographs are still indexically connected to a camera that has captured an image at a specific time and place (Gunning, 2004, 40). However, the relationship between the indexical and iconic relationships has changed.

With the development of the internet, digital technology makes vast amounts of information more accessible, and it offers information in a

networked, interactive way. One important change in the history of the internet and new media is the move from what is generally called Web 1.0—the web that for most general and non-expert users was a read-only web and was retroactively labelled as “the web of documents” (Shivalingaiah & Naik, 2008, 499) or “a web of cognition” (Fuchs et al., 2010, 42)—to the read-write, communicative Web 2.0, which was then followed by the emergence of social media platforms. While in Web 1.0, more similar to analog mass media, the majority of users were consumers of the information, in Web 2.0 they are given the opportunity to not only react to the existing knowledge and interact with other users but, moreover, generate and share content to a much greater extent than before. Being at both ends of knowledge production thanks to the interactive and participatory affordances of what now is called social media, individuals found unprecedented possibilities for claiming truthfulness while also facing complex challenges in trusting media products and other users. The complexity has deepened with later developments in AI and machine learning and the general dependency on applications. The information one receives is regulated by the user’s history in the communication algorithms of search engines. Since these search engines provide search results based on previous queries, the results of internet searches are different for everyone. In this way, while different platforms have become more user-friendly, and media users are given individually tailored access to different applications, the task of distinguishing truthful from fake has become more complex.

Thus, a lot of information we find on the internet cannot be trusted by default. What Lynch calls “google knowing,” knowledge based on the use of search engines, gives instantaneous answers but is still dependent on others (Lynch, 2016, 25). The kinds of data and information we can get via internet search results are not selected or edited by gatekeeping experts. Instead, they have to be actively evaluated by the user. Therefore, by deduction, the same data can lead to different conclusions depending on different worldviews. As a consequence, the epistemic rules, practices and logical strategies differ from the rules for printed knowledge. The digital materiality of texts and images and the digital networked knowledge production also leads to new practices for how to trust and verify information, including methods such as the post-published editing and discussion of Wikipedia entries or digital image verification using reverse image search.

The changes in technology also have repercussions for the power relations of what Foucault calls the regimes of truth, that is, the discourses,

practices, institutions, and actors that are involved in the production of statements considered true in a specific historical and social context. The liberal truth regime of democratic societies builds on a scientific model of truth production by expert authority and accepts objective facts beyond political contest (Foucault, 1980, 131–132). This regime is destabilized when gatekeepers like experts and their hierarchical forms of truth-telling are drawn into question. Apart from truth regimes, Foucault describes the market as a competing site of truth that produces a market price truthful to the current value of things (Foucault, 2008, 31). In the fragmented digital public sphere, media scholars discern a regime that is more characterized by “truth markets,” what Harsin would call “a regime of post-truth” (Harsin, 2015). A lot of what is shared and amplified in digital networks engages and calls for emotional response. In this kind of communicative situation, the aim is to control the attention economy. Thus, “the domination of truth regimes now demands popular attention to/participation in its discursive games” (Harsin, 2015, 331).

When established practices and institutional actors are called into question, other criteria will lead people’s decisions about which ideas and actors to trust. The demand for authenticity, Sybille Krämer points out, tends to arise in knowledge crises. In situations of insecurity and ignorance, claims of authenticity create qualities that cannot be produced in other ways (Krämer, 2012, 25). In these situations, authenticity promises to put us in the presence of something that lies out of reach, in the past or beyond our perception. A material authenticity expresses a truthful connection with the past via historical objects, rituals, and traditions. As a personal quality, authenticity refers to human behavior that truthfully or sincerely expresses the inner states. However, although authenticity is called for in times of uncertainty, the concept at the same time tends to destabilize the acceptance of social conventions, as a claim of authenticity also justifies the breaking of social rules (Taylor, 1992). Krämer indicates how the material and the personal, the social and the individual often work together if authenticity is at stake (Krämer, 2012, 19).

The relationship between media and authenticity is contradictory. Many media types promise an experience of immediacy, a form of mediation that gives (seemingly unmediated) access to a sense of presence (Bolter & Grusin, 1999). This sense of mediated presence needs to be constructed in specific ways, thus the introduction of every new medium

has redefined authenticity (Enli, 2015, 109). And while new media offer new forms of contact, they are at the same time accused of inauthenticity and loss of presence. This pattern can be traced throughout history, from Plato's critique of writing technology to the need for a rhetoric of sincerity in the wake of the printing revolution and the Protestant Reformation (Trilling, 1972) to Walter Benjamin's (2018 [1936]) reflections about the aura of the original artwork in relation to its audio/visual reproduction. Currently, digital technology has created new needs for authentication that ensure real human presence in computer-based communication.

The claim of authenticity is thus a rhetorical, paradoxical claim for immediacy that is put forward with a "rhetoric of sincerity" (van Alphen et al., 2009) or with different forms of authenticity markers (Enli, 2015; Gilmore, 2007, 49–50). This claim of authenticity is used as a commercial selling point (Craig & Cunningham 2017; Gilmore & Pine 2007) but increasingly also as a political stance (Parry-Giles, 2014). Donald Trump's success illustrates how personal authenticity, namely, a claim to coherence between outer actions and inner convictions, can, in certain contexts, compensate for the lack of empirical coherence with facts. Digital media and technology highlight other paradoxes. YouTubers and influencers construct media personas that heavily rely on the promise of personal authenticity (Jensen et al., 2021), yet CGI or deep fakes put us in the presence of personalities, creatures, and events that may never have existed.

Knowledge communication, authenticity, and mediation all connect to the act of witnessing. At first glance, the embodied testimony of eyewitnesses who vouch with bodily presence for their testimony appears to be the opposite of mediated communication. However, media theorists John Durham Peters (2001) and Sybille Krämer (2015) argue the reverse. They present the knowledge gained through the testimony of a witness as a model for how we gain knowledge through media. This highlights that all knowledge beyond our own experience and perception relies on trusting the testimony of either persons or media products (Krämer, 2015, 149). The role of media as (un)reliable witnesses in knowledge communication then draws attention to evaluation practices. Concerning information retrieved on the internet, two different epistemological stances are possible (Krämer, 2017). You can consider this information as first-hand knowledge actively gained from visual perception and deduction in your research, or you can choose to focus on the epistemic dependence of relying on authority and testimony of experts and media products.

This evaluation of media products as reliable or unreliable witnesses reveals further complexities. Current credibility research indicates how processes of evaluation are transforming. Credibility research differentiates between the credibility of the source, medium, and message (Flanagin & Metzger, 2010). When media products are shared online, different sources (such as friends, experts, and institutions), media types (such as social media and journalism), and communicative acts nest into each other. When assessing credibility, audiences merge objective and subjective parameters and respond to specific cues, and credibility research notes the decline of authority cues and an increase in identity cues (Hilligoss & Rieh, 2008). The affective and emotional response creates a specific form of truth claim, as shown by Chew and Mitchell's study on interactivity in life-writing (2015).

As we explain above, the interrelations of knowledge communication, witnessing, and authenticity in the current complex mediascape speak to various aspects of making and perceiving truth claims across different media. The articles in this volume, grouped under four topics that are introduced in the following section, address different truth claims, different claims of authenticity, and the entanglement of different levels of testimony and evaluation while shedding light on the complexities and interdependence of these claims and practices.

1.5 DISPOSITION OF THIS VOLUME

1.5.1 *Part I Factual Evidence and Coherence in Knowledge Communication*

The volume begins with three articles focusing on journalistic practices and knowledge communication by authorities that discuss not only the reliance on factual evidence but also narrative structures and strategies of coherence that shape communicative events. Taken together, they provide examples of manipulative, truthful, informative, and complex usages of multimodal resources by gatekeepers in communicating knowledge or extending political agendas.

In "A Story Too Good to Be True" Beate Schirrmacher looks at manipulations of factual narratives in journalistic practices. Her article provides a comparative analysis of two journalistic features with a rhetorical and narratological method that works as a kind of reverse engineering and is developed from intermedial and semiotic conceptualizations of truth

claims. By offering a fine-grained analysis of the ways facts, narrative tools, and pre-existing experiences interact in journalistic narratives, this article opens up for developing rhetorical tools for supporting informative and detecting misinformative narrative strategies.

Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska's "The Montage of the National Past" analyzes covers of contemporary Polish right-wing magazines, looking at how the historical references are juxtaposed and appropriated. The article foregrounds the importance of magazine covers as "crucial elements of the iconosphere" and demonstrates how juxtaposing different visual elements from different historical contexts can lead to an abuse of history. This, Saryusz-Wolska argues, is manifest, for example, in the way polarizing associations on Polish right-wing magazine covers are constructed between the contemporary political agents and events and the notorious ones in the past.

Byrman and Westum, in "Trustworthiness in the Swedish strategies for Covid-19," analyze recordings of press conferences of the Swedish Public Health Agency at a few crucial moments during the pandemic. Their article maps out the discursive and communicative strategies of the Swedish authorities in transferring knowledge to the public while looking at the collisions of truth claims and expectations. Highlighting the way multimodal resources and communicative patterns are used in these communicative events, they demonstrate how knowledge communication by official gatekeepers is far from straightforward.

1.5.2 *Part II Personal Quests for Empirical Truth: Testimony and Media Hybridity*

Both articles in the second section focus on hybrid media products that showcase personal quests for empirical truth when confronted with historical disasters. Both discuss various types of indexicality and look at how hybrid materiality is used to mediate the complexities of the tension between searching for factual evidence and forming coherent narratives.

In "Unveiling Truth and Truthfulness in the Graphic Memoir *Heimat*," Camila Figueiredo analyzes Nora Krug's celebrated graphic memoir with a focus on the way different intermedial relationships form the claims to extracommunicational truthfulness and how coherence is created by authenticity and testimony. Figueiredo maps out Krug's journey in-between media in her quest through archives and memories to find out about her family members' involvement with the Nazi regime during the

Second World War, demonstrating the unsolvable tensions and insurmountable gaps in witnessing the past.

In her article, Nafiseh Mousavi approaches another hybrid media product and an example of media witnessing in a more recent historical disaster, namely, the ISIS genocide of Yazidis in 2014. In focus is the documentary film *Night and Fog in Kurdistan* in which drawn images are integrated with recorded images. Focusing on the mobilized drawn images, Mousavi analyzes the various functions these drawn images uphold in the documentary practice and the multiple media relationships that frame them. Through this analysis, the article looks at the way hand-drawn images are used to fill the representational gaps and how they affect the truth claims of the documentary film.

1.5.3 Part III Fact and Fake Across Media Types

The articles in the third section look at specific genres across different media that are conventionalized through an interaction between concepts of fact and fake: mockumentary, screen biofiction, author interviews, and Zombie movies. The cases these articles work with are distinguished in the way they play with and challenge the conventions of the genre and, further, the binary understandings of authentic/true/factual vs. fake/false/fictional.

In “Fictionality as a Rhetorical Tool in Political Mockumentary Films; The Interplay of Fictionality and Factuality in *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America*,” Tamás Csöngé demonstrates how an alternative version of the past can work as a relevant criticism of the present. Csöngé defines fictionality and factuality in the frame of rhetorical narratology and positions the political satirical discourse of mockumentaries in general and *C.S.A* in particular in such framework. The article argues that interweaving fact and fiction in cases like *C.S.A* effectively reveals the constructedness and historicity of norms while drawing on past and referring to the present.

In “Clemens J. Setz on Bursting the Reader’s Reality Bubble,” Nataša Muratova and Anna Obererlacher map the contours of author interviews in a new way, not as a direct window into the author’s mind but as an element of larger practices of authorial staging that interweave fact and fiction and are framed by discourses of authority as well as claims to authenticity in the so-called “presence culture.” The case they analyze, *Bot-Gespräch ohne Autor* (2018), with its presentation of a fictional author

interview in the form of a Turing test, allows them to shed light on the intricacies of the relationship between the author, claims of authenticity and the reader's truth expectations with the help of the intermedial concept of media representation on one hand and the narratological concept of faketon on the other.

Anna Gutowska's article discusses another dimension of presentism in a genre that gets part of its legitimacy from its reliance on the extracommunicational truthfulness of historical characters and their lives, namely, biofiction. Studying *The Great* (2020), a biofiction series about the early years of the reign of Empress Catherine the Great of Russia, "An Occasionally True Story': Biofiction, Authenticity and Fictionality in *The Great* (2020)" demonstrates how the deliberate inaccuracy of *The Great* works as a claim to a more authentic understanding of history. Gutowska does that by situating *The Great* in the broader frames of the relevant genres of biofiction such as queen pics and discussing examples of the deliberate inaccuracy of the series. The author highlights the affective results of such strategies in shocking the audience and presenting them with the derangements of history.

In "Impure Realism, Pure Eventness, and Horror Cinema in the Post-truth Era," Yeqi Zhu argues for a revised understanding of horror cinema in general and *Zombie*-movies in particular, not as escapist but, rather, as a genre that addresses contemporary tensions, such as the current tensions of a post-truth era. Her article offers a case study of the 2017 Japanese zombie comedy *One Cut of the Dead*, a zombie movie about making a zombie movie, and discusses in detail how realism is approached in this movie with a focus on communication.

1.5.4 *Part IV Interaction, Trust, and Truthfulness on Social Media*

Moving from aesthetic media genres to social media, the articles in the fourth section focus on the complexities of truth claims and trustworthiness in social media interactions.

The section begins with an article that addresses the problem of misinformation in an empirical and participatory way. In their article "Developing Misinformation Immunity in a Post-Truth World: Human Computer Interaction for Data Literacy," Elena Musi, Kay L. O' Halloran, Elinor Carmi, and Simeon Yates not only discuss the challenges of online communication but take a step further. The authors present a practical

example of how to deal with digital misinformation by developing and examining the Fake News Immunity chatbot. The chatbot educates users in recognizing misinformation by providing them with tools for identifying fallacies. The article and the empirical experiment of the chatbot demonstrate how interactive aspects of online communication can be used for training users in digital literacy.

In a less interventional and more observatory study, Augustė Dementavičienė, Fausta Mikutaitė, and Aivaras Žukauskas analyze interactions in two Lithuanian anti-vaccination Facebook groups in search of patterns of affects and narratives that shape the discourses of truthfulness. “When the Post-Truth Devil Hides in the Details: A Digital Ethnography of Virtual Anti-Vaccination Groups in Lithuania” identifies four main categories in shaping the discourse in these group: crisis of trust, competition with science, populism, and anti-public discourse. The authors argue for context-specific understandings of post-truth. As the article shows, the dominant Western conceptualizations of concepts like post-truth prove to be inadequate in contexts such as post-Soviet societies where the relationship between authority and authenticity has a complicated history.

Finally, in “Towards a grammar of Manipulated Photographs: The Social Semiotics of Digital Photo Manipulation,” Morten Boeriis adopts a multimodal social semiotic approach in looking at digital photo manipulation in relation to validity and trustworthiness. As a step towards establishing a “grammar” of digital manipulation, the article provides a detailed categorization of digital photo manipulation tools and practices that can lead to the manipulation of interpersonal, ideational, and structural meaning potentials. In light of that, Boeriis argues for the interpersonal validity system as a frame for assessing photographic claims of trustworthiness, a framework that positions photo manipulations not in the narrow binaries of fake and authentic but in dynamic communicative relationships.

1.6 CONCLUSION: THE DYNAMICS OF TRUTHFULNESS AND MEDIA

Zooming out and looking at the different sections together, we can see how recurring questions and problems emerge in very different media contexts. In a way, in many of the discussions, the core problems are to see how facts are made coherent in various informative, testifying and artistic forms of communication, and how different ways of making sense of the

facts and empirical data lead to different forms of engagement in communication. The creative play with fact and fiction in literature or film is not only a self-reflexive metadiscourse but negotiates the very paradoxes that trouble a polarized public discourse. Empirical facts and data, personal experience and interactive engagement are closely intertwined in online communication, and they need to be brought together when designing tools for digital literacy.

However, seeing the similarities in truth claims across media is different from saying that all truth claims are valid everywhere. Instead, the intermedial perspective allows for a more fine-grained description of how fundamental similarities in the interplay of facts, coherence, and engagement play out differently in media specific contexts. For instance, authentic expression may be a valid truth claim to communicate subjective perspectives, but it needs to be connected with empirically based statements about the social world in witnessing and testimony. With a dedicated quest for facts, a desire for coherence and a healthy self-awareness about the fallacies, we are more prepared for responding to challenges of communication in a digitized society. We hope that this volume provides a point of departure for future research that further explores the interplay between facts, coherence, and engagements in and across different media.

REFERENCES

- Althuis, J., Haiden, L., & Reynolds, A. (Eds.). (2018). *Fake news: A roadmap*. Riga.
- Bakir, V., & McStay, A. (2018). Fake news and the economy of emotions: Problems, causes, solutions. *Digital Journalism*, 6, 154–175.
- Benjamin, W. (2018 (1936)). *The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction: An influential essay of cultural criticism - the history and theory of art*. Adansonia Press.
- Benson, O., & Stangroom, J. (2007). *Why truth matters*. Continuum.
- Bolter, J. D., & Grusin, R. (1999). *Remediation: Understanding new media* (Vol. 4, p. 208). MIT Press.
- Bruhn, J., Salmose, N., Schirrmacher, B., & Tornborg, E. (2021). Truthfulness and truth claims as Transmedial phenomena. In J. Bruhn & B. Schirrmacher (Eds.), *Intermedial studies: An introduction to meaning across media* (pp. 225–254). Routledge.
- Burgess, A., & Burgess, J. P. (2011). *Truth*. Princeton University Press.
- Butter, M., & Knight, P. (Eds.). (2020). *Routledge handbook of conspiracy theories*. Routledge.

- Carlson, M. (2017). *Journalistic authority. Legitimizing news in the digital era*. Columbia University Press.
- Chew, E., & Mitchell, A. (2015). The impact of interactivity on truth claims in life stories. *Diegesis*, 4, 1–29. <https://www.diegesis.uni-wuppertal.de/index.php/diegesis/article/view/206>
- Clüver, C. (2007). Intermediality and interart studies. In J. Arvidson, M. Askander, J. Bruhn, & H. Führer (Eds.), *Changing borders: Contemporary positions in intermediality* (pp. 19–38). Intermedia Studies Press.
- Cunningham, S., & Craig, D. (2017). Being “Really Real” on Youtube: Authenticity, Community and Brand Culture in Social Media Entertainment. *Media international Australia*, 164(1), 71–81. <https://doi.org.proxy.lnu.se/10.1177/1329878X17709098>
- Cunningham, S., & Craig, D. R. (2019). *Social media entertainment: The new intersection of Hollywood and Silicon Valley*. New York University Press.
- Durham Peters, J. (2001). Witnessing. *Media, Culture and Society*, 23, 699–723.
- Ekström, M., & Westlund, O. (2019). Epistemology and journalism. *Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Communication*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.806>
- Elleström, L. (2014). *Media transformation*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Elleström, L. (2018). Coherence and truthfulness in communication: Intracommunicational and Extracommunicational Indexicality. *Semiotica*, 225, 423–446.
- Elleström, L. (2021). The modalities of media II: An expanded model for understanding intermedial relations. In L. Elleström (Ed.), *Beyond media borders. Intermedial relations among multimodal media* (pp. 3–91). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Enli, G. (2015). *Mediated authenticity. How the media constructs reality*. Peter Lang.
- Farkas, J., & Schou, J. (2020). *Post-truth, fake news and democracy: Mapping the politics of falsehood*. Routledge.
- Flanagin, A., & Metzger, M. J. (2010). *Kids and credibility. An empirical examination of youth, digital media use, and information credibility*. MIT Press.
- Foucault, M. (1980). In C. Gordon (Ed.), *Power/knowledge. Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977*. Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (2008). *The birth of biopolitics. Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Fuchs, C., Hofkirchner, W., Schafranek, M., Raffl, C., Sandoval, M., & Bichler, R. (2010). Theoretical foundations of the web: Cognition, communication, and co-operation. Towards an understanding of web 1.0, 2.0, 3.0. *Future Internet*, 2, 41–59.
- Gilmore, J. H., & Pine, B. J. (2007). *Authenticity. What consumers really want*. Harvard Business School Press.
- Gunning, T. (2004). What’s the point of an index? Or, faking photographs. *Nordicom Review*, 25, 39–49.

- Haapanen, L. (2017). Monologisation as a quoting practice. *Journalism Practice*, 11, 820–839.
- Hacking, I. (2005). Truthfulness. *Common Knowledge*, 11, 160–172.
- Harsin, J. (2015). Regimes of Post-truth, Postpolitics, and attention economies. *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 8, 327–333.
- Helles, R. (2013). Mobile communication and Intermediality. *Mobile Media & Communication*, 1, 14–19.
- Hillgoss, B., & Rieh, S. Y. (2008). Developing a unifying framework of credibility assessment: Construct, heuristics, and interaction in context. *Information Processing and Management*, 44, 1467–1484.
- Holt, K. (2020). *Right-wing alternative media*. Routledge.
- Hyman, J. (2021). Truth and truthfulness in painting. *Philosophy*, 96, 497–525.
- James, W. (2008 (1907)). *Pragmatism. A new name for some old ways of thinking*. Floating Press.
- Jensen, K. B. (2016). Intermediality. In K. B. Jensen, E. W. Rothenbuhler, J. D. Pooley & R. T. Craig (Eds.), *The International Encyclopedia of Communication Theory and Philosophy*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118766804.wbiect170>
- Jensen, S. K., Mousavi, N., & Tornborg, E. (2021). Intermediality and social media. In J. Bruhn & B. Schirrmacher (Eds.), *Intermedial studies: An introduction to meaning across media*. Routledge.
- Klauk, T. (2020). The philosophical perspective on truth. In M. Fludernik & M.-L. Ryan (Eds.), *Narrative factuality: A handbook* (pp. 187–208). De Gruyter. <https://doi-org.proxy.lnu.se/10.1515/9783110486278-012>
- Krämer, S. (2012). Zum Paradoxon von Zeugenschaft im Spannungsfeld von Personalität und Depersonalisierung. Ein Kommentar über Authentizität in fünf Thesen. In M. Rössner & H. Uhl (Eds.), *Renaissance der Authentizität? Über die neue Sehnsucht nach dem Ursprünglichen* (pp. 15–26). transcript.
- Krämer, S. (2015). *Medium, messenger, transmission. An approach to media philosophy*. Transl. A. Enns. Amsterdam University Press.
- Krämer, S. (2017). Epistemic Dependence and Trust: On Witnessing in the First, Second and Third-Person Perspectives. In S. Krämer & S. Weigel (Eds.), *Testimony/Bearing Witness: Epistemology, Ethics, History and Culture* (pp. 247–259). Rowman & Littlefield International.
- Kroon Lundell, Å., & Ekström, M. (2010). “Interview bites” in television news production and presentation. *Journalism Practice*, 4, 476–491.
- Langen, U., & Stjernfelt, F. (2022). *The World's first full press freedom. The radical experiment of Denmark-Norway 1770–1773*. De Gruyter.
- Lynch, M. P. (2016). *The internet of us. Knowing more and understanding less in the age of big data*. Liveright Publishing Corporation.
- Manovich, L. (2002). *The language of new media* (Vol. 27). MIT Press.
- McIntyre, L. C. (2018). *Post-truth*. MIT Press.

- Oxford Languages. (2016). *Word of the year 2016*. “post truth.” Accessed November 22, 2022, from <https://languages.oup.com/word-of-the-year/2016/>.
- Parry-Giles, S. J. (2014). *Hillary Clinton in the news. Gender and authenticity in American politics*. University of Illinois Press.
- Pettegree, A. (2015). *Brand Luther: 1517, printing, and the making of the reformation*. Penguin Press.
- Rajewsky, I. O. (2005). Intermediality, intertextuality, and remediation: A literary perspective on intermediality. *Intermedialités / Intermediality*, 6, 43–64.
- Rice, R. E. (2017). Intermediality and the diffusion of innovations. *Human Communication Research*, 43, 531–544.
- Rippl, G. (2015). *Handbook of intermediality. Literature – Image – Sound – music*. De Gruyter.
- Salvi, R., & Turnbull, J. (2017). *The discursive construal of Trust in the Dynamics of knowledge diffusion*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Shivalingaiah, D., & Naik, U. (2008). *Comparative study of web 1.0, web 2.0 and web 3.0*. Accessed November 28, 2022, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264845599_Comparative_Study_of_Web_10_Web_20_and_Web_30.
- Tandoc, E. C. (2019). The facts of fake news: A research review. *Sociology Compass*, 13, 1–9.
- Taylor, C. (1992). *The ethics of authenticity*. Harvard University Press.
- Trilling, L. (1972). *Sincerity and authenticity*. Harvard University Press.
- Tseng, C.-I. (2022). Truthfulness and Affect via Digital Mediation in Audiovisual Storytelling. In L. Elleström (Ed.), *Beyond Media Borders. Intermedial Relations Among Multimodal Media*. Vol. 1, (pp. 175–196). Palgrave.
- van Alphen, E., Bal, M., & Smith, C. E. (Eds.). (2009). *The rhetoric of sincerity*. Stanford University Press.
- Wardle, C., & Derakhshan, H. (2017). Information Disorder. *Toward an interdisciplinary framework for research and policymaking*. Council of Europe.
- Williams, B. (2002). *Truth & Truthfulness. An essay in genealogy*. Princeton University Press.
- Wolf, W. (1999). *The Musicalization of fiction. A study in the theory and history of Intermediality*. Rodopi.
- Zimdars, M., & McLeod, K. (2020). *Fake news: Understanding media and misinformation in the digital age*. MIT Press.
- Zuidervaart, L., Carr, A., Klaassen, M., & Shuker, R. (2013). *Truth matters. Knowledge, politics, ethics, religion*. McGill-Queen’s University Press.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.



PART I

Factual Evidence and Coherence in
Knowledge Communication



A Story Too Good to Be True: The Manipulation of Truth Claims in Faked News

Beate Schirrmacher

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In December 2018, Claas Relotius, a reporter at the German news magazine *Der Spiegel*, admitted that several of his prize-winning feature stories were partly or largely manipulated. Instead of factual narratives that referred to actual recent events, his texts were “beautifully narrated fiction... embellished with fudged quotes and other made-up facts” (Fichtner, 2018). Although the fraud appeared to be evident to many in hindsight, why did no one notice at the time that the features told stories that were a bit too good to be true? Former *Spiegel* journalist Stefan Niggemeyer points out how the ideal of the journalist as a storyteller cultivated at *Der Spiegel* motivates journalists to write the best possible story, which is not necessarily the most accurate one. Another aspect to consider is that Relotius wrote feature articles, a news genre that offers a more

B. Schirrmacher (✉)

Department of Film and Literature, Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden
e-mail: beate.schirrmacher@lnu.se

© The Author(s) 2024

B. Schirrmacher, N. Mousavi (eds.), *Truth Claims Across Media*,
Palgrave Studies in Intermediality,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42064-1_2

subjective perspective on events than news reports or breaking news. Therefore, every feature includes observations or experiences that fact-checking cannot wholly verify (Niggemeier, 2018).

How do we perceive a news story to be true? Publications of news outlets are read as factual narratives, based on trust and a tacit factual contract (Klein & Martínez, 2009, 3): The claim that their narratives about recent events are based on observation and research and provide verified public knowledge (Ekström & Westlund, 2019, 1). Journalistic falsifications like Relotius's texts pose the question, *how can one tell that this contract is upheld and its truth claims are honestly made?* This question cannot be answered by trying to differentiate facts from fiction and information from invention. Instead, one must look deeper to explore how facts and narrative strategies work together in journalism to convey information. Therefore the question should be, *how does a story stay truthful to the recent events it claims to report on?*

This article explores the characteristics of truthful narration in journalism and how they can be manipulated. The article starts with presenting news as factual narratives and discusses authority and truth claims in journalism. Drawing on Lars Elleström's approach to how truthfulness in communication is based on indexicality (2018), the analysis looks for the indexical traces of professional journalistic methods in two features published in *Der Spiegel*: Claes Relotius's "The story of Ahmed and Alin" (2016), which created a huge reader response but also revealed massive manipulations (CR-Dokumentation, 2018) and a feature by Alexander Osang (2018). Both features are written by renowned writers, published in the same beat, "Gesellschaft" ("society") and under the same topic "Schicksale" ("fates"). Both tell stories about children in a Middle East context. As the analysis explores how observed and verifiable details interact with elements of internal and external coherence in these two features, it becomes possible to describe more in detail how factual narrative is truthfully or insufficiently anchored in actual events.

2.2 NEWS, FACTS, AND FICTION

News, understood as accounts about recent events has always been an essential part of human social life. In modern society, news is distributed by news outlets, produced by professional journalists that are "committed to reporting information that is new about the world" (Conboy, 2013, 2). Yet digitization has fundamentally transformed how news is produced,

spread and consumed. Journalists are no longer the only ones who publicly tell accounts about recent events; they are increasingly challenged by alternative voices (Holt, 2020). As a reaction to this transformation, journalists and journalism research express more explicitly the basic principles of journalistic practice and the sources of journalistic authority (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014; Carlson, 2017). Journalists strive to be more transparent about why they can claim to provide “truthful and verified information” (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014, 33). However, stressing journalism as a knowledge-producing institution also draws attention to the tensions between the ideal and a less perfect practice (Carlson, 2017, 36) and to how journalists have to balance the obligation to truth and the need to sell an exciting story. The study of how journalists and news providers establish and claim to provide relevant knowledge has long been a core interest in journalism studies. Yet, this study is often impeded by binary thinking, where news either collects or constructs the facts; it either informs about or constructs reality (Broersma, 2010; Ekström & Westlund, 2019; Godler et al., 2020).

One way to overcome this binary thinking is to explore news as factual narratives, where the construction is informed by its reference to actual events (Klein & Martínez, 2009; Fludernik & Ryan, 2020). Journalistic narration is based on a “factual pact” between journalists and their audience, the assurance that news should make “statements about the real world” (Fludernik, 2020, 62). Linguists explore news as a distinctive narrative genre (Fowler, 2001) with a specific discourse (van Dijk, 1988). News forms complex multimodal narratives that integrate texts and images (see, for instance, Bednarek & Caple, 2012) as well as visual and sound-based modes (Bietz, 2013), and it increasingly employs transmedia storytelling strategies that span across different platforms (Rampazzo Gambarato & Tárca, 2017). The new and flexible choices to integrate words, images, and sounds in online communication that can be shared across different platforms all have narratological consequences (Renner, 2018, 147–48).

Journalists use narrative strategies as tools to convey information and provide understanding, yet the narrative strategies are not always prominent, and the balance between information and narration is different depending on the news outlets and genres. In news reports, the narrative mediation is often barely noticed, as journalists focus on conveying the facts. Still, even news reports and breaking news represent events in a meaningful order (Renner, 2020). These subtle narrative patterns become noticeable when comparing the reports of different news outlets on the

same event (Renner, 2012). In news features, narrative strategies and storytelling are more explicit, as the aim of feature journalism is not only to inform but to let the audience experience events of the recent past (Renner, 2020, 470). Cecilia Aare points out that narrative strategies and voice are not meant to convey the reporter's personal experience. Instead, narrative strategies are used to assert professional engagement and create empathy for the experiences of others (2021, 18–19). While the reporter's presence at the site of events and meetings with people are essential parts of the research, the reporter's role as an eyewitness is not always prominent in the text of the feature. The narrative stance as an eye-witness of events is only one of several narrative stances that Aare identifies. The reporter's presence at the site can even be downplayed or entirely removed in the text. Furthermore, reporters sometimes reconstruct events they have not been present to and give voice to the experience of others (*ibid.*, 203–241).

To create empathy and engagement, journalistic storytelling also draws on narrative strategies more familiar from fiction. Especially the style of so-called New, Literary, or Narrative Journalism advocates for imaginative use of language and the use of the subjective perspective (Vanoost, 2013, 77; see also Wolfe 1973). Still, in the factual context of journalism, such strategies have to be used differently. For example, although reconstructed scenes are frequently used in contemporary feature writing, they have to be marked in some way (Aare, 2021, 214), as the border between actual events and narrative construction easily blurs (Dernbach, 2015, 312).

However, according to the journalistic pact, all news features are read as factual narratives until proven otherwise. Looking at the narrative structure alone is therefore insufficient to answer whether the narrative remains truthful to actual events. Yet journalistic narratives are anchored in journalistic research, Aare points out, and the eye-witness perspective should impact the text's narrativity to some extent (Aare, 2021, 15). While narratology has yet to develop the tools to explore how truth claims are asserted (Strässle, 2019, 39), Thomas Strässle has identified certain characteristics of how they are manipulated. "Fakotional" narratives present fictive events in a factual context: Instead of conveying information, they strive to create resonance; instead of drawing on evidence, they draw on plausibility; and instead of informing, the text displays information gaps (2019).

Some important hints about the claims of factuality come from legal narratology. In the courtroom, factual and fakotional narratives on the same event are told, and the task of the judges and juries is to decide which

of them appears to be most truthful to the actual events. Thus, when legal narratology has explored characteristics of factual storytelling in court, research highlights how a credible and convincing narrative in court has to relate to the facts of the evidence but also needs to create coherence with a plausible plot. In addition, the narratives have to appeal to audience expectations, tie into existing macro-narratives (Kjus, 2010, 194) and concur with common-sense rules about “how things usually are” (Wagenaar et al., 1993). Thus, legal narratology indicates how truthful factual narration is not just about sticking to the facts. Instead, truthful factual narration should be traced in the relationship between fact, narrative, and pre-existing experience.

2.3 THE TRUTH CLAIMS OF MEDIA AND THE PERCEPTION OF TRUTHFULNESS

The next step to explore how facts, narrative, and pre-existing experiences interact in a truthful way in journalistic factual narratives, is to look at the truth claims of news. Tom Gunning describes how all media products draw on truth claims, as they provide reasons why and how we should trust certain kinds of media products such as news reports or photographs. These truth claims are not inherent properties of a media product but a claim that is “based on our understanding of its inherent properties” (Gunning, 2004, 42), on the production but also the perception of the media product. For instance, the truth claims of a photograph as indexical proof of what and who has been present at a certain time and place are grounded in the production process of photographs but also informed by the detailed iconicity of the photographic image (*ibid.*, 45).

In journalism, the truth claim of production involves the claim to be based on research and observation, the “necessary conditions for any news story to be accepted as a legitimate account of an event” as Matt Carlson (2017, 6) puts it. This truth claim of production is supported by practices of verification as well as the use of eyewitness accounts and reliable sources. Perceptual truth claims are made by using a specific visual and narrative form (*ibid.*, 50–93) and the use of a neutral voice in news (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2014, 103).

However, we need parameters to decide whether truth claims are sincerely made. Fakes in particular, only draw on the truth claims of production in a rhetorical way without being grounded in the production process.

(Gunning, 2004, 42). To define such parameters, I draw on Lars Elleström's approach to truthfulness in communication (2018). According to Elleström, truthfulness is established via indexical signs. Indexical signs point toward the presence of something else based on "contiguity, or real connections" (ibid., 424). For example, a footprint is a trace of previous presence, and a rash is a symptom of illness. In addition, even primarily conventional signs such as words or iconic signs such as images indexically point towards acts that have been carried out to produce them.

The following analysis of two feature stories from *Der Spiegel* therefore distinguishes elements that can be read as traces of the professional work of journalists, elements that confirm the truth claims of the production in journalism. The analysis distinguishes between the presentation of an event (defined as a change of situation) and how this event is specified using

- *Observed and experienced details* (as indices for someone's presence on site)
- **Verifiable details** (as indices for research and expertise)

These elements are part of what Elleström calls *external truthfulness* in communication (ibid., 437); they form a "real connection" between the news feature as a media product, the events that have taken place and the reporter's research that has been carried out. However, Elleström explains that indexical signs can also point toward the existence of other indices and thus form "real connections" between signs in the form of chains and webs of intracomunicational coherence (ibid., 436). Pronouns such as "he," "she," and "it" indexically point to names and nouns mentioned before, just as fragments point towards the (previous) existence of a whole. Therefore the analysis also searches for the way how the journalist as narrator structures and evaluates the events and connects new events to the previous knowledge of the expected audience.

- Rhetoric and narrative patterns that provide internal coherence
- EXTERNAL COHERENCE with audience's PRE-EXISTING EXPERIENCES

None of these four elements alone is sufficient to evaluate the truthfulness of a media product. *Observed details* can be faked, **verifiable details** might not add relevant context, narrative coherence can provide plausibility to fictive events and COHERENCE WITH PRE-EXISTING EXPERIENCE appeals

to confirmation bias. The analysis therefore explores how these four categories support and vouch for each other. With this analytical framework, it becomes possible to describe more specifically how and when a story is truthfully or only insufficiently anchored in the event it claims to inform about.

2.4 ALEXANDER OSANG: “K.’s FIRST DAY AT SCHOOL”¹

The feature “K.’s first day at school” (Osang, 2018) deals with how people in Gaza are affected by Donald Trump’s Middle East politics. The feature tells the story of 7-year-old K.S. and his family. K.’s first day at school is used as a frame to connect different substories that are either retold (the story of the S. family, the story of UNRWA leader Matthias Schmale), researched (USA’s UN Ambassador Nikki Hayley’s story), or observed on-site (Gazans protest against unemployment). The journalist’s on-site presence is not very prominent, using Aare’s terminology, it appears reduced but not completely retouched out of the text, as there are instances of perceptions and thoughts of the reporter on site, and a specific scene at the S. family’s home describes the observations of and interaction with a visitor that is not explicitly mentioned (ibid., 50–51). These different substories contextualize each other, and in each narrative strand, a person’s life story connects with a story based on the journalist’s observations and research. Together the stories form a network of different perspectives on life in Gaza.

2.4.1 *Observed and Verifiable Details: Events Grounded in External Truthfulness*

The analysis of indexical relationships reveals a specific pattern. Throughout the feature article, nearly every new change of situation is immediately supported by at least one, often two, different indexical relationships.

Often, events are anchored in both observed and verifiable details. This pattern can be seen in the lead:

School has started in Gaza, *but this time there is a lack of US aid. This is part of Donald Trump’s new Middle East politics.* (ibid., 50).

¹Here and in the following, the names of private individuals have been anonymized.

When K. participates in a political demonstration, the event is anchored with the same pattern:

[K.] waved the flag. *He laughs when he tells this.* $\leq >$ **Further away, at the fence, many people died.** (ibid.)

Observed and verifiable details do not have to align. K.'s laughter and the death of protesters form a contrast ($< >$). K. is presented as the source of information about the demonstration, and his laughter testifies to his experience of the event, which contrasts with the verifiable details about the Friday demonstrations. The rhetorical contrast contributes to narrative coherence in spite of the contradictory relation between verifiable facts and the eye-witness experience. The frequent connection of observed and verifiable details anchors the described events in the professional journalistic work that relies on observing and expertise (Carlson, 2017, 42). Together, the combination of observed and verifiable details place the event in a relevant context that remains truthful to specific events.

Observed details that are mentioned often appear to be incongruous with the audience's pre-existing experience; K.'s laugh when he talks about the protest and a sit-in protest in front of the UNRWA "on plastic chairs" are unexpected details, as they do not correspond with generic ideas about protests organized as marches. Neither would the audience expect a 7-year-old Gazan to ask the German chancellor for help as K. does in a letter to Angela Merkel (Osang, 2018, 54). The letter is both quoted and verified by a photograph (ibid., 51) and so are the verbal descriptions of interviewees like A.S. (ibid., 52) and Matthias Schmale (ibid., 53). Thus, the same objects and phenomena appear in different versions, as observed details in the text and as verifiable details in the form of photographs.

2.4.2 *Coherence: Narrative Coherence Anchored in External Truthfulness*

Elements of internal coherence, such as narrative commentary, rhetorical or narrative patterns, appear in the feature closely connected to observed or verifiable details, as in the following passage, where the observed detail of K.'s age backs up and offers an argument for why the narrative tool of focalization (a narrator's access to another person's thoughts and feelings) remains truthful to K.'s apprehension of the situation.

K. did not one-hundred percent understand what it all had to do with him.
He is seven years old.

Contrasts are used to effectively demonstrate the relationship between observed and verifiable details, or between observed details and pre-existing knowledge (see below). In the following passage verifiable details also vouch that a rhetorical contrast remains truthful to the events:

In the summer, there were summer camps < > and bomb attacks that the Israeli air force used to avenge the burning paper dragons, which the Palestinians allowed to sail on their fields. (ibid., 50)

“Bomb attacks” in this sentence form a rhetorical contrast, the antithesis of “summer camps.” This contrast is backed up by verified details from previous news reports from Gaza. Figures of speech appear in the form of comparisons that are backed up by specific or verifiable details elsewhere in the text. For example, when the UNRWA is described as “something like Gaza’s tree of life,” this comparison is backed up by a specific observation of a mural of a life-giving tree on the UNRWA building (ibid., 50). The comparison is part of the motif of hope against all odds. However, this aspect of narrative discourse is backed up by a specific quote by Matthias Schmale, where the leader of the UNRWA explains that his belief in hope stems from his experience of the fall of apartheid in South Africa and of the Berlin Wall (ibid., 52). Thus, this specific quote provides an argument for why hope against all odds might not seem naive but here is grounded in lived experience.

2.4.3 *External Coherence in Contrast to Specific Events*

Even the appeal to the pre-existing experience of the German-speaking audience appears in contrast to observed details. The description of Matthias Schmale is based on a stereotype, the typical social science teacher. However this stereotype is used to challenge other pre-existing ideas of the audience, including generic ideas about leaders of international organizations:

You are surprised when you meet Matthias Schmale for the first time. He looks like a SOCIAL SCIENCE TEACHER. *Jeans; belly; unruly hairdo of little white hair; bright, soft laughter; a silver ring on the wrist.*

As the stereotype of a social science teacher is supported by observed details and made verifiable by a photograph, all four indexical relationship

are used to present the portrait of Matthias Schmale in the feature as truthful and coherent. However, the appeal to German pre-existing experiences often appears in contrast to observed details, for instance after a quote from protesting Gazans who feel let down by the UNRWA:

“Matthias steals the smiles from the faces of the children of Gaza.” The sentence echoes in the mind like a line from a CHILDREN’S SONG BY ROLF ZUCKOWSKI. (ibid., 52)

The contrast between an optimistic vision of childhood typical for children’s songs and the *observed details* of everyday life in Gaza with no future prospects is a narrative tool to create understanding and empathy. There are more examples of songs that create contrasts. For instance, the sentence, “It was a long, tough summer,” (ibid., 50) evokes the 1983 Bananarama hit “Cruel Summer” and forms an ironic contrast between the song about teenage despair and the numbers of deaths and injuries published by the Health Ministry in Gaza that the following sentence refers to. The contrasts, comparisons, and appeals to pre-existing experience add evaluation, explanation, and discursive framing. However, these internal and external coherence elements are always supported by observed and verifiable details. Together, they vouch that the journalistic storytelling remains grounded in the work of the reporter on site and that the story remains truthful to the events.

2.5 CLAAS RELOTIUS’S “THE STORY OF AHMED AND ALIN”

The feature “Königskinder” (Relotius, 2016) tells “The story of Ahmed and Alin. Two Syrian orphans trapped in Turkey” as the title of the international English version of the article sums up. *Der Spiegel’s* retroactive fact check of Relotius’s articles revealed that the feature was mostly invented: Relotius and his photographer Emin Özmen did, in fact, meet a boy named Ahmed in Turkey. According to Özmen, the boy Ahmed in the feature appears to be “composed from the stories of other children” (CR-Dokumentation, 132). The feature is built out of scenes where the presence of a journalist has been completely removed, and interviewees are quoted as talking to someone whose presence on site at a specific moment or place is never clearly discernible. While the reporter in this feature appears not to be on site, the journalist is more present in the text

as a narrative voice that retells the stories the children have told him “at different times, different places” (ibid., 128). The stories include reconstructed scenes and intradiegetic stories within stories in the form of fantasies, dreams, and hearsay. The story of Nasser, Alin’s employer, is the only story that does not include an additional intradiegetic level. The feature tells stories about people, but they are not explicitly connected to stories about the world and politics. Turkey’s president Erdoğan and German Chancellor Angela Merkel are mentioned, but no narrative thread explains how their political decisions affect the situation of Syrian child refugees. The stories do not form a network of public and individual stories; instead, they nest into each other.

2.5.1 *Lack of Verifiable Details*

The internal coherence of narrative discourse is very prominent in the feature.

This pattern can be observed in the lead:

Ahmed and Alin were *ten and eleven years old* when their parents die in Aleppo. They flee to Turkey and work here, separated from each other, *as a scrap collector and seamstress*. (N2) Sometimes, in dreams, ANGELA MERKEL appears to them. (ibid., 127)

Observed details appear interspersed in the presentation of the event. Verifiable details that refer to previous news reports are absent. Instead, a second intradiegetic level (N2) connects the children’s stories with a key figure in EU migration politics in an unexpected manner, as the audience would not likely expect child workers to dream of Angela Merkel. Even in the following paragraphs of the feature, observed details are not supported by verifiable details. Instead, the described scene is followed by the intradiegetic story of Alin’s song.

2.5.2 *Internal Coherence Between Observed Details*

Throughout the feature, observed details are interspersed in the narration and support coherence between narrated events, as in the first sentences:

One early morning this summer, Alin, a girl with *tired* eyes, 13 years old, walks *alone* through the *dark* streets of the city of Mersin and sings a song. (ibid.)

In his narratological analysis of this feature, Samuli Björninen draws attention to how emotion and sensory perception create an experiential narrative instead of vouching for the journalist's presence as an eye-witness (2019, 363). Here, the word choice "tired" to describe her outer appearance already shifts the focus to Alin's inner experience. This focus on experience instead of observation can also be seen in how internal coherence between the details creates a scene. The details do not so much provide specific information about a specific morning at a specific place. Instead, every detail is internally coherent with "one early morning" and externally coherent with "how things usually are" in early mornings: People are tired, streets are dark, and others are still asleep. This coherence with pre-existing experiences covers certain inconsistencies. Why, one might ask, do the dogs on the street remain "still asleep" although Alin passes them singing and with "clattering sandals" (CR-Dokumentation, 127)? Even when specific details are mentioned, such as the 15 steps down to the sweatshop (ibid.), they are not easy to verify, as no verifiable names of places are given. Specific details, like the plastic chairs and wooden tables in the sweat shop (ibid.) are coherent with the generic ideas of sweatshops as cheap and makeshift. Taken together, the observed details in the feature are more plausible than specific, which corresponds with Strässle's observations about the fakentional. In fact, the details display the characteristics of what Roland Barthes has called the *effet de réel*, details that evoke a realistic impression of a fictional world. The details of a fictional world are more iconic than indexical, "created to imitate familiar reality," as Christer Johansson puts it (2021, 26). And as the *effet de réel*, the details in Relotius's feature add familiar, not unexpected, details to the described scenes. The reader does not get a specific description of Ahmed and Alin's outward appearance. Instead, the children are described by their preferences and values: Alin liked homework and learned how to cook from her mother, Ahmed liked football and biking "more than praying" (CR-Dokumentation, 128). These descriptions are in fact internal characterizations that are externally coherent to expected gender roles and describe the children before they left home; they do not sum up details observed by the journalist himself and cannot be anchored in verified details like photographs. One photograph shows a pair of dirty hands (ibid., 127), which does not connect to Ahmed's description in the text stating that Ahmed has "jug ears." The photograph of a girl was provided by Relotius and not the photographer (ibid., 133), so no other person can vouch for the claim that it represents Alin, the girl with "tired eyes" (ibid.,

127), nor does the text of the feature claim this. The specific details shown in the photograph, are not used to verify specific details in the text. Instead, text and images appear to fill each other's gaps.

2.5.3 *Events Verified by Intradiegetic Stories*

The feature tells stories of people that tell stories. Instead of anchoring the events in observed and verifiable details, the narrated events are anchored in intradiegetic stories: Alin's story includes fantasies, dreams, hearsay, and overheard stories. A contextual event, the explosion of a car-bomb in Gaziantep, is mentioned as an overheard rumor and is therefore not a verifiable detail, even though the place and casualties are specified, with "2 casualties, 22 injured." In the description of an alleged car-bomb, the elements that are structurally presented as additional specifications are internally coherent and point indexically towards previous information.

In Gaziantep, ← were Ahmed lives, a bomb is said to have went off. A car, ← loaded with explosives, was driven to the front of a police station.... The driver of the car, it was said, was a young Syrian, ← underage, ← still a child. (ibid., 130)

No verifiable details are added to confirm Alin's story. Even events that can be verified, such as Angela Merkel's visit to Gaziantep (ibid., 129), is neither described as observed on site nor verified by its date on April 23, 2016. The story of Ahmed includes intradiegetic levels via photos and videos on his smartphone. He shows the video of an execution scene that is not verifiable nor specific but provides generic details of numerous ISIS execution videos (ibid., 128). The actions of ISIS and Western politicians provide relevant context to the children's experiences. However, context is not added by the reporter but it is only present in "found" fragments of context, integrated into the stories and films that the children show and tell.

The most elaborative intradiegetic story is explicitly fictive. Alin's folk song tells the story of two children who lose everything but are rescued in the end. The song provides internal coherence as a *mise-en-abyme* that mirrors the siblings' situation (Björninen, 2019, 365). The paraphrase of the lyrics is detailed but repeats generic phrasing ("Once upon a time," "a realm far away") and generic narrative patterns of fairy tales ("now they are king and queen"). The song is more internally coherent and it

connects the title “Königskinder” (“Royal children”) with the text of the feature rather than a specific observed detail (CR-Dokumentation, 127).

2.5.4 *Colliding Truth Claims: Authenticity and Authority*

As the analysis demonstrated above, the observed details are more generic than specific and verifiable details are absent. As a consequence, the text cannot establish journalistic authority. The truth claims made are thus not grounded in observation and expertise. Instead, the text draws on the alleged authenticity of the naïve child’s perspective, a claim that is supported by “metanarrative overcompensation” (Björninen, 2019, 367) when the narrator ensures that the children tell their stories:

In simple words, sometimes loud and sometimes silent, sometimes trembling and sometimes dumb, as lively and truthful as only children can tell. (CR-Dokumentation, 128)

The narrator tells the stories of the children more in his words than in theirs. When the narrator explicitly claims that the children are truthful rather than showing specific details that would prove this claim, the text is grounded solely in the institutional authority of a narrator. In Osang’s feature (2018, 54), running and shouting are examples of K.’s spontaneous, age-appropriate behavior. In Relotius’s feature, vagueness and incoherence are presented as characteristics of an authentic child’s perspective. The children’s perspective is also presented as the reason for why political and verifiable context only appear in fragments. The following passage contextualizes by enumerating what children are *not* aware of:

Ahmed and Alin do not know anything about refugee quotas. They don’t know anything about Turkey, of a president called Erdoğan or of a refugee agreement with the EU. All they know is they are not allowed to go back to Syria because it is too dangerous there and that they are not allowed to move to another country because the other countries do not want them. (CR-Dokumentation, 130)

In this passage, the authorial claims of the narrator who knows about the inner life of characters are not supported by specific quotes from the children. The internal coherence of parallelisms covers inconsistencies: Ahmed and Alin work for their living and have smartphones without knowing the name of the country they work in? And even if they did not

know, the journalist's job would be to put this into the context of verifiable events and details that connect the experience of people with a story about the world. The children's alleged ignorance is not consistent if taken as specific details about real people. However, ignorance and mistakes are familiar authenticity markers that construct the experience of authenticity in general (Enli, 2015) and the inconsistency between a focalized child's perspective and the reader's contextual knowledge is frequently used in literary texts to present the experience of war and conflict (Borčak, 2016).

Thus, what is presented as specific details of the stories of specific people points to a coherent narrative discourse. When Alin imagines Europe as "a little island, surrounded by the sea, 'somewhere in the North,'" (CR-Dokumentation, 130) and dreams of Angela Merkel as "a young woman in a white robe, skin soft as soap and long golden hair," (ibid.) these quotes are difficult to prove as false because they are presented as imagined. Although improbable as quotes, they are externally coherent with utopian and fairy tale discourses. They also create internal coherence as metaphors. Europe appears as unreachable as the mythological Ultima Thule, and Angela Merkel is presented as a benevolent fairy, based on her status as the white hope during the so-called migration crisis in 2015. But the metaphors are not presented explicitly as part of the narrator's commentary. The narrator's commentary is not used to explain the unfamiliar but used to correct inconsistencies and confirms only what the audience already knows, for example, that Angela Merkel wears pant suits (and not a fairy tale dress).

2.5.5 *Coherence Replaces Specific and Verifiable Time and Place*

Coherence replaces specificity in several other ways as well. The lack of specific dates makes it easy to miss the chronological inconsistencies, *Der Spiegel's* fact check noted (ibid., 131). A phrase like "a summer's day, two years ago" involves some temporal detail, but it is geared towards the audience's here and now. While there are few specific dates, the text draws on the coherence of cyclical time patterns. For instance, Alin is said to sew by day, and Ahmed collects scrap metal by night (ibid., 129). We know that night follows day, but is the night the best time for collecting scrap metal? At one moment in the description of Alin's working day, the narrator switches to the future tense (ibid., 127 f.). What looks like telling the story from a specific moment is a tool of iterative narration, which tells once what happens many times (and thus can be predicted). Unclear time

frames lead to the merging of scenes, like when Ahmed returns to the hut in the early morning and the cooking fire blends into the following bonfire scene at night (*ibid.*, 129)—which should be working time for Ahmed.

2.5.6 *External Coherence, Recognition Effects*

Explaining new events with reference to pre-existing experiences is a key strategy in journalism that enables both understanding and empathy (Aare, 2021, 19). However, in Relotius’s feature, the situation for child workers in Turkey is not only compared to life in Germany but presented as familiar, similar, and recognizable for the German audience. The Muslim girl Alin, who fasts during Ramadan (CR-Dokumentation, 130), is said to “fold her hands” to pray (*ibid.*, 128), a Western and Christian gesture. The children are said to have escaped from Aleppo in the luggage compartment of a car (*ibid.*), a description that reverberates with GDR flight narratives. Smartphones are key devices for migrants in the twenty-first century, and in the feature, they provide internal coherence between different sites and stories. Still, their key importance collides with other details; Ahmed is said to live in a makeshift shed without electricity, and Alin has barely any money for food after paying the rent.

Another pattern of internal and external coherence is established in the German title. The title “Königskinder” (“Royal children”) evokes a well-known German folk ballad, a version of the myth of Hero and Leander about “two royal children” that “held each other dear” and “they could not meet each other” because “the water was far too deep.”² The ballad is never explicitly mentioned, but the lyrics resonate throughout the feature, like when the siblings “cannot see and meet each other.” The evoked ballad creates internal coherence in the form of a family likeness between the siblings’ situation, Alin’s folk song and stories of refugees that try to cross the water and—like Leander—drown in the attempt. The folk song does not provide a new understanding but confirms pre-existing knowledge of actual events, of refugees that drown in the Mediterranean Sea.

²“Es waren zwei Königskinder / die hatten einander so lieb / Sie konnten beisammen nicht kommen / das Wasser war viel zu tief.” https://www.lieder-archiv.de/es_waren_zwei_koenigskinder-notenblatt_300454.html

2.6 CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis between two news features is only a first step and needs to be supported by more extensive studies. Still, it can be stated that extracommunicational truthfulness and intracommunicational coherence integrate differently in ways that cannot be explained solely by stylistic differences.

In Osang's feature, different indexical relationships back each other up but remain clearly distinguishable. Together, observed and verifiable details anchor events as truthfully grounded in journalistic work based on observation and expert knowledge. Observed or verifiable details anchor narrative coherence and pre-existing experience, and together these details vouch that the story is told in a way that remains truthful to actual events. There is a clearly discernible narrative voice and evaluative discourse, but they are anchored in observable or verifiable detail. Together these elements build an argument for the claim of factuality.

In Relotius's feature, the absence of verifiable detail is striking. Details are not specific enough to be connected to an exact place and moment in time, and they are never verifiable. Instead, details are hedged; they claim to refer to the past or to hearsay, to images and films that are described but not shown. Details are presented as part of a subjective experience that can be vague, wrong, and outdated but difficult to prove as false. The details indexically point back to previous information or externally confirm pre-existing knowledge. Although this text claims to be a news feature, the stories of people do not explain the more abstract stories about the world. Instead, the narrated events are coherent because of how the audience expects things to be. The narrative voice does not draw on the observer's testimony and the researcher's work. Instead, the narrative voice demands that the reader simply trust the narrator's authority.

Both features use similar narrative tools and even employ the same sort of details. They both evoke songs and draw on the children's perspective. Angela Merkel appears as a key figure in the migration discourse after 2015, but details and coherence integrate differently. The detail of a plastic chair can add surprising information about a specific moment in time, or it can create coherence with previous generic knowledge. The appeal to pre-existing experiences, such as an evoked song, can help understand the new and unfamiliar and create empathy for an unfamiliar situation. However, the appeal to previous knowledge can lead the audience to accept what otherwise would be hard to believe. For instance, an evoked

song can frame the new event as a repetition of already told familiar stories. Both features work with the same building blocks, but the indexical relationships integrate differently. The rhetorical and narrative strategies in Osang's feature appear deeply integrated with verification, but in Relotius's text, they are almost totally disconnected. Both build rhetorical arguments for the claim of factuality, but the differences lie in their strategies.

Looking at the differences between the two features, it appears, on the one hand, surprising that Relotius's manipulations went undetected for such a long time. Relotius's narrative may be compelling, but it is not anchored in verification, as it should be in every piece of journalism. A closer inspection provides more understanding about why Relotius's manipulations did not cause more suspicion and reaction. On the surface, the features comply with the perceptual truth claims of journalism, but the relationship between details and coherence is inverted. Details that should point toward a specific event are instead indices that point toward other details. Incoherent fragments of context appear where the journalist's work should provide coherence. A recollection of familiar elements replaces an understanding of the unfamiliar and the specific situation. Details that work like metaphors trigger recognition effects, hiding the fact that the narrative is not truthfully grounded in actual, specific events that tell something new about the complex reality.

Thus, the analysis of indexical relationships provides parameters for a more specific description of whether a factual narrative is truthfully grounded in actual events. The factual and the faketonial features differ in the way they anchor the narrative in verified facts. In this analysis, the difference between a factional and a faketonial text is striking. Analyzing the integration of facts, narrative and audience appeal can help to more objectively describe the informative narratives strategies of news reports or breaking news and help to identify risk factors for when and how the balance between truthful and engaging narration is disturbed.

REFERENCES

- Aare, C. (2021). *Reportaget som berättelse: En narratologisk undersökning av reportagegenren*. Stockholms Universitet.
- Bednarek, M., & Caple, H. (2012). *News discourse*. Continuum.
- Bietz, C. (2013). *Die Geschichten der Nachrichten: Eine narratologische Analyse telemedialer Wirklichkeitskonstruktion*. WTB.

- Björninen, S. (2019). The rhetoric of factuality in narrative: Appeals to authority in Claas Relotius's feature journalism. *Narrative Inquiry*, 29, 352–370.
- Borčak, F. (2016). *A Children's literature? Subversive Infantilisation in contemporary Bosnian-Herzegovinian fiction*. Linnaeus University Press.
- Broersma, M. J. (2010). The unbearable limitations of journalism: On press critique and Journalism's claim to truth. *The International Communication Gazette*, 72, 21–33.
- Carlson, M. (2017). *Journalistic authority: Legitimizing news in the digital era*. Columbia University Press.
- Conboy, M. (2013). *Journalism studies. The basics*. Routledge.
- CR-Dokumentation (2018). *Der Fall Relotius. Die Originaltexte und die Ergebnisse ihrer Überprüfung*. Accessed 1 September 2023 from <https://www.spiegel.de/media/a3a46a28-7ac2-480e-b3a8-97366f1f4c1e/CRDokumentation.pdf>.
- Dernbach, B. (2015). (Un)reliable narration in journalism: The fine line between fact and fiction. In V. Nünning (Ed.), *Unreliable narration and trustworthiness: Intermedial and interdisciplinary perspectives* (pp. 305–328). De Gruyter.
- Ekström, M., & Westlund, O. (2019). Epistemology and Journalism. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Communication*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.013.806>
- Elleström, L. (2018). Coherence and truthfulness in communication: Intracommunicational and Extracommunicational Indexicality. *Semiotica*, 225, 423–446.
- Enli, G. (2015). *Mediated authenticity: How the media constructs reality*. Lang.
- Fichtner, U. (2018). Der Spiegel Reveals Internal Fraud. [spiegel.de](https://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/claas-relotius-reporter-forgery-scandal-a-1244755.html) 20 December. Accessed 29 November 2022, from <https://www.spiegel.de/international/zeitgeist/claas-relotius-reporter-forgery-scandal-a-1244755.html>.
- Fludernik, M. (2020). Factual narration in narratology. In M. Fludernik & M.-L. Ryan (Eds.), *Narrative factuality. A handbook* (pp. 51–74). De Gruyter.
- Fludernik, M., & Ryan, M.-L. (Eds.). (2020). *Narrative factuality. A handbook*. De Gruyter.
- Fowler, R. (2001). The language of newspapers: Communicative and aesthetic aspects. In J.-F. Leonhardt et al. (Eds.), *Medienwissenschaft. Ein Handbuch zur Entwicklung der Medien und Kommunikationsformen* (Vol. 2, pp. 1693–1701). De Gruyter.
- Godler, Y., Reich, Z., & Miller, B. (2020). Social epistemology as a new paradigm for journalism. *New Media & Society*, 22, 213–229. <https://doi-org.proxy.lnu.se/10.1177/1461444819856922>
- Gunning, T. (2004). What's the point of an index? Or, faking photographs. *Nordicom Review*, 25, 39–49.
- Holt, K. (2020). *Right-wing alternative media*. Routledge.

- Johansson, C. (2021). YouTube Podcasting, the New Orality, and Diversity of Thought: Intermediality, Media History, and Communication Theory as Methodological Approaches. In S. Petersson (ed.), *Digital Human Sciences. New Objects – New Approaches* (pp. 253–284).
- Kjus, A. (2010). *Stories at trial*. Deborah Charles Publications.
- Klein, C., & Martínez, M. (Eds.). (2009). *Wirklichkeitserzählungen: Felder, Formen und Funktionen nicht-literarischen Erzählens*. Metzler.
- Kovach, B., & Rosenstiel, T. (2014). *The elements of journalism: What Newspeople should know and the public should expect* (3rd ed.). Three Rivers Press.
- Niggemeier, S. (2018). Der Fall Relotius: Der “Spiegel” und die gefährliche Kultur des Geschichten-Erzählens. *Übermedien*. 18 December 2018. Accessed 29 November 2022, from <https://uebermedien.de/33962/der-spiegel-und-die-gefaehrliche-kultur-des-geschichten-erzaehlens/>.
- Osang, A. (2018). K.s erster Schultag. *Der Spiegel* 37, 8 Sep 2018: 50–54.
- Rampazzo Gambarato, R., & Tárca, L. P. T. (2017). Transmedia strategies in journalism. *Journalism Studies*, 18, 1381–1399.
- Relotius, C. (2016). Königskinder. *Der Spiegel*, 28, 7 July. Quoted from *CR-Dokumentation*, 127–34. Accessed 29 November 2022, from <https://www.spiegel.de/media/a3a46a28-7ac2-480e-b3a8-97366ff4c1e/CR-Dokumentation.pdf>.
- Renner, K. N. (2012). Gefährliche Bilder: Die enthymemische Legitimation der Militärintervention in Haiti in den Fernsehnachrichten vom 1. März 2004. In J. Knappe & A. Ulrich (Eds.), *Fernsehbilder im Ausnahmezustand. Zur Rhetorik des Televisuellen in Krieg und Krise* (pp. 201–228). Weidler.
- Renner, K. N. (2018). Journalistisches Erzählen mit interaktiven multimedialen Online-Reportagen. In L. Blasch, D. Pfurtscheller, & T. Schröder (Eds.), *Schneller bunter leichter? Kommunikationstile im medialen Wandel* (pp. 147–175). Innsbruck University Press.
- Renner, K. N. (2020). Facts and factual narration in journalism. In M. Fludernik & M.-L. Ryan (Eds.), *Narrative factuality: A handbook* (pp. 465–478). De Gruyter. <https://doi-org.proxy.lnu.se/10.1515/9783110486278-032>
- Strässle, T. (2019). *Fake und Fiktion: Über die Erfindung von Wahrheit*. Hanser.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1988). *News as discourse* (p. 1988). Erlbaum.
- Vanoost, Marie. 2013. Defining narrative journalism through the concept of plot. *Diegesis 2*: 77–97. URN:urn:nbn:de:hbz:468-20131120-175150-0.
- Wagenaar, W. A., Koppen, P. J., & Crombag, H. F. M. (1993). *Anchored narratives: The psychology of criminal evidence*. Hemel Hempstead.
- Wolfe, T. (1973). Part One: The New Journalism, in T. Wolfe & E. W. Johnson, *The New Journalism with an Antology*, pp. 15–68. Harper & Row.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.





The Montage of the National Past: Polish Right-Wing Illustrated Press and the Abuse of History

Magdalena Saryusz-Wolska 

3.1 INTRODUCTION

In November 2015, just after the national-conservative PiS-party¹ won the parliamentary elections in Poland, the history supplement² to the right-wing magazine *Uważam Rze (I Mean that)* published a cover

¹ PiS is the abbreviation of Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (Law and Justice).

² History supplements is a literal translation of the Polish term *dodatki historyczne*. Almost all Polish political magazines and large newspapers publish special issues devoted to historical themes, monthly or bi-monthly. On the European media market, they are comparable to the German *Spiegel Geschichte* (bi-monthly), published by *Der Spiegel*. In the first and so far only study devoted to such magazines, Susanne Popp, Jutta Schuman, and Mirian Hanning (2014) call them “extension lines.” My decision to use the term “history supplements” is an analogy to the well-established notion of literary supplements, for instance *The Times Literary Supplement: TLS*.

M. Saryusz-Wolska (✉)

German Historical Institute Warsaw, Warsaw, Poland

Institute of Contemporary Culture, University of Lodz, Lodz, Poland

e-mail: saryusz-wolska@dhi.waw.pl

© The Author(s) 2024

B. Schirrmacher, N. Mousavi (eds.), *Truth Claims Across Media*,
Palgrave Studies in Intermediality,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42064-1_3

depicting the European flag with yellow swastikas instead of the golden stars. The title reads: “How Hitler’s Germany invented the European Union” (Fig. 3.1). The affective power of this image is based on its simplicity: The swastikas replace the stars. The initial symbol is visible only as shadows in form of the stars, behind the swastikas. In this way, the image suggests a causal relation between Nazi Germany and the EU. Even though accusing the EU of having Nazi origins is an extraordinarily provocative and factually false message, the cover hardly got noticed by other



Fig. 3.1 Cover of the history supplement to *Uważam Rze* 11 (2015)

Polish media. Soon it became clear that the rhetoric of mixing EU-symbols with Nazi iconography would stay: At the peak of the refugee crisis in late 2015 and early 2016, the newly elected government rejected the European Commission's proposal to introduce quotas that should regulate the number of refugees per member state, as the PiS considered it an intervention in Poland's sovereignty. In that context, the magazine *Wprost* (Straight Talk)³ published a cover depicting leading European politicians as Nazis, with a large headline in white and red (Polish national colors) saying: "They want to supervise Poland again" (Fig. 3.2). While *Uważam Rze* adopted a rhetoric that referred to iconic symbols, *Wprost's* argumentation was *ad personam*. The cover combines an image of men in Nazi uniform with the edited faces of Angela Merkel, Martin Schulz (then President of the European Parliament), Jean-Claude Juncker (President of the European Commission), Guy Verhofstadt (Member of the European Parliament and leader of the liberal group), and Günther Oettinger (one of the European Commissioners). As the general Polish audience hardly recognizes non-Polish politicians, the cover also includes small captions with their names. The Nazi imagery is taken from a famous photo displaying Hitler, Mussolini, and three generals bending over a map in Hitler's headquarters *Wolfschanze* (Wolf's Lair) in August 1941. While on the original Nazi photo there was a military map in the background, on the *Wprost*-cover we see the European flag. It strengthens the message about the alleged threat coming from the EU. The picture from 1941 was part of a series of propaganda photos taken during Mussolini's visits in Hitler's Germany (Goeschel, 2017). Today, some of them are available through commercial photo agencies; for relatively small fees, their digital copies can be legally downloaded and reused.

This time, Polish and international media commented on the cover extensively (Henley, 2016), although it was not the first comparison of Angela Merkel to Hitler published in Europe. Similar images appeared during the economic crisis in Greece, for instance, due to Germany's leading role in establishing European recovery plans for the country (Bach, 2013; Laurelle, 2019). However, the images circulating in Greece usually *juxtaposed* Merkel with Hitler; *Wprost*, in contrast, *replaced* Hitler's face with Merkel's. To be precise, she was not compared *to* Hitler but presented *as* Hitler—a rhetorical technique called *reductio ad Hitlerum*, i.e., "an attempt to invalidate someone else's position on the

³The English translation of the title follows Stańczyk (2013).



Fig. 3.2 Cover of *Wprost 2* (2016)

basis that the same view was held by Adolf Hitler” (Laurelle, 2019, 308). Usually, this kind of rhetoric is characteristic of extremist media: After the German magazine *Compact* depicted Merkel with a Hitler moustache in January 2017, for example, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution in Germany classified it as right-wing extremist, arguing that *Compact* questioned the “democratic order” (Deutscher Bundestag, 2020); Facebook removed the magazine’s profile for the same reason

(Berry, 2020). In Poland, in turn, it was the mainstream *Wprost* magazine presenting Merkel and other European politicians as dictators and Nazis, without any consequences.

3.2 THE AGENCY OF MAGAZINE COVERS

In this chapter, I discuss how Polish right-wing media abuse history—a concept introduced by Antoon de Baets (2009, 14) for intentionally deceptive usages of history—by means of assembling imagery on magazine covers. I claim that magazine covers are crucial elements of the visual public, which may be referred to as “iconosphere”—a useful notion by the Polish art historian Mieczysław Porębski (1972).⁴ In addition to existing research on the “visual rhetoric” of right-wing actors (i.a. Richardson & Wodak, 2009, 50–53; Doerr, 2021) and numerous statements such as they “have become very skillful at using visual material” (Hokka & Nelimarkka, 2022, 771), I argue that right-wing images are more than just elements of discourse; they are agents of discourse. Ever since the pictorial turn in the early 1990s,⁵ we know that the iconosphere has its own agency in shaping social realities. When creating historical narratives, images such as the two magazine covers presented above do (see Figs. 3.1 and 3.2.) more than just *represent* the past in an abusive way, they rather *abuse* history themselves. Not only do they *represent* deception, but they *are* deceptive.

Experts on the right-wing iconosphere observe a tendency towards transnationally circulating motifs (Doerr, 2017; Wodak, 2019; Hokka & Nelimarkka, 2022). Specifically images depicting migrants are framed in a way that supports “rapid and effective diffusion and continuous translation of denigrating images of minorities in multicultural transnational public spaces” (Doerr, 2017, 331). This observation corresponds with current trends in public history, visual history, or memory studies in the ongoing transnational turn (Wüstenberg & Sierp, 2020; Cauvin, 2018). Yet, the Polish right-wing media seem to pursue a reverse strategy: Instead of introducing national issues into transnational contexts, they shape national contexts for transnational issues. At the same time, they

⁴Unfortunately, there is no English translation of Porębski’s work. For a German translation see Porębski, 2006. Wojciech Bałus (2016) introduces the concept in English.

⁵See the classical essay by W.J.T. Mitchell (1996). For more recent conceptualizations see Paul (2013), Bredekamp (2018).

appropriate techniques previously “owned” by left-wing actors—a mechanism that Doerr (2021) also observed for German right-wing media. Below, I demonstrate the historical framing of current issues and the appropriation of previously left-wing visual techniques by right-wing actors through a close visual analysis and reading of right-wing magazine covers.

Cover pages, which at first glance may seem of minor importance for academic research, are especially informative for studying nationalistic communities in current East Central Europe. Unlike illustrations next to articles, cover pages are tools of self-advertising; since the early stages of the illustrated press at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, they “function not just as individual icons but rather as a symbolic system” (Heller & Fili, 1996, 8). In recent years, they have become an increasingly autonomous visual medium. While they used to advertise the main articles, called “cover stories” for a reason, they now often refer to content considered to be attractive, regardless of actual importance or length. The role of magazine covers is primarily to attract consumer attention, rather than provide information. Thus, many consumers study the covers in kiosks and shop windows without reading the content altogether.

Each cover remains on display for at least a week. D.W. Pine, designer of many famous *Time* covers, stated that “the cover... crystallises what’s important in a simple, graphic, impactful 8-by-10 space—and it’s that curation that is powerful in a day where most, if not all, of our visuals are presented in an instant and gone tomorrow” (Patterson, 2019). Magazine covers serve as labels for the respective (visual) discourses. It is not necessarily a contradiction that multiple Polish right-wing magazines were established in the 2010s, at a time when social media gained importance in political debates. In fact, print and digital media often complement each other and mutually reinforce their messages by addressing different target groups (Bijmans, 2017). Magazine covers, for instance, are usually available online as advertising for future issues. They are shared on social media—in Poland mostly Facebook and Twitter and rarely Instagram, despite its visual character. Eventually, some controversial images such as the abovementioned cover of *Wprost* become news themselves, not least in the context of shaping historical discourses. Editors and journalists often “take on the role of public historians,” as Carolyn Kitch (2005, 5) rightly claims. As today other media can provide information much faster than classic print, magazines seek topics that are less dependent on being up to date, for example history (Popp, 2015, 5).

In Poland, two right-wing magazines—*W Sieci* (In the Web), later published as *Sieci* (Web),⁶ and *Do Rzeczy* (To the Point)—appeared at the turn of 2012 to 2013 and quickly became political game changers. The third right-wing magazine of the time was the abovementioned *Uważam Rze*, printing the cover of the golden swastikas instead of golden stars (see Fig. 3.1). It was published as a weekly starting in 2011 and changed into a monthly in 2013 when the other two right-wing titles entered the market. From the very beginning, all three magazines contained history supplements. Ever since the fall of communism, hardly any Polish media outlet supported a political party as openly as *W Sieci* and *Do Rzeczy* did for PiS; however, at the same time the right-wing magazines introduced themselves as voices of “the people,” “disobedient” to the alleged “left-liberal mainstream.”

Provocative covers have been the trademarks of *W Sieci* and *Do Rzeczy* ever since their earliest issues, and national history has been among their preferred topics. Their authors identified alleged analogies between the past and the present and between historical and current heroes and traitors. Consequently, already in the first year of appearance, *W Sieci* was sued by Tomasz Lis, a well-known Polish liberal journalist, for showing him as Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels with blood on his hands.

From 2013 to 2015, 24% of *W Sieci* and 15% of *Do Rzeczy* covers depicted motifs of national history (Saryusz-Wolska, 2020, 68). Their openly nationalistic (visual) discourse contributed significantly to the election victory of PiS, as I argued elsewhere (ibid.). Today, they still play an important role on the Polish media market with a circulation of about 130,000 copies in total, plus online users.⁷ The last publicly available data from *W Sieci* is from November 2020 when 1.5 million users viewed their website 28 million times.⁸ *Do Rzeczy* is even among the leaders of the online media in Poland; in January 2022 (last available data), they had 4 million users.⁹ However, both magazines print about twice as many

⁶For the reasons of readability, I use only the initial title *W Sieci* throughout this article.

⁷Data from the annual press sales report by wirtualnemedi.pl, published on February 27, 2021; <https://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/artykul/polityka-wyprzedzila-goscia-niedzielnego-tygodnik-powszechny-przed-do-rzeczy>

⁸Data from the sales report by wirtualnemedi.pl, published on July 28, 2021; <https://www.wirtualnemedi.pl/artykul/wprost-pl-z-5-6-mln-uzytownikow-w-dol-newsweek-pl-i-niedziela-pl-serwisy-tygodnikow-opinii>

⁹Data from the sales report by press.pl, published on April 22, 2022; https://www.press.pl/tresc/70448,mediapanel_w-marcu-wprost-pl-mial-juz-prawie-9-mln-uzytownikow

copies as they sell, due to indirect public funding obtained through ads by state-owned companies. According to a recent report, *W Sieci* received 4.6 million Euros of public funding and *Do Rzeczy* 3.1 million Euros in 2020 alone—sums incomparable to any other title of the Polish press (Dąbrowska-Cydzik, 2021). This also allows them to maintain their cover pages on display and in the public iconosphere for entire weeks instead of 2 or 3 days per week, as long as it takes until the circulation is sold.

3.3 MONTAGE ON MAGAZINE COVERS

How can magazine covers “abuse” history and contribute to falsifying historical facts? As the two examples above illustrate, by assembling and editing images. The technique may be referred to as collage, assemblage, or (photo)montage, with different artistic and intellectual traditions behind each term. Since nothing indicates a sophisticated usage of traditions by the editors of the magazines at hand, I remain with the broadest term, “montage.” Another reason for using this term is the fact that different motifs interact with each other not only within single covers, but also between them; new meanings then form by assembling various images that appear in a temporal order, usually weekly or monthly. In such cases, the crucial relation is *between* and not *within* particular images.

Obviously, putting together incompatible motifs has a very long history, as the ancient examples of a sphinx (animal, usually lion, with a human head) and the Medusa (human with hair replaced by snakes) prove. Yet, the invention of modern media, mainly photography and film, opened up much more opportunities. From the 1850s onwards, the montage became an avant-garde technique used by activist artists (Kreibel & Zervignón, 2019); later, it became indispensable for filmmakers who created consistent sequences with individual shots. Ever since the rise of classical Hollywood cinema in the 1910s, film editors have employed the so-called continuity principle, according to which the viewer should not recognize cuts and individual shots but have the impression of a continuous narrative.¹⁰ Visible editing, in turn, has been a typical trait of avant-garde cinema. In the 1920s, Soviet filmmakers—among them Lev Kuleshov, Dziga Vertov, or Sergei Eisenstein—developed a theory (Eisenstein called it a “method”) of assembling contradictory images in

¹⁰For basic information see Bordwell and Thompson (2003, 310–332); for a more elaborate discussion see Berliner and Cohen (2011).

order to create new meanings. Different from Hollywood cinema, which presented consistent stories, Soviet films juxtaposed contradictory images and “sought to transcend ordinary storytelling in favor of a thesis-oriented narration of battling ideological concepts” (Lövgren, 2021, 173). The technique of montage has further developed throughout the twentieth century and eventually became the rule rather than exception in the iconosphere of the digital age (Kreibel & Zervignón, 2019, 119).

Despite its origin, the montage is currently among the most popular cultural techniques and, due to its omnipresence, lost its unique and critical character. Montage today shapes visual discourses at all ideological fronts; the replacement of the golden stars with golden swastikas (see Fig. 3.1) serves as an example of how this originally leftist and avant-garde technique has been adopted and manipulated by contemporary right-wing media. Interesting in this context is the fact that in Nazi Germany montage, or more specifically collage, was considered an element of “degenerate” (*entartet*) art (Zuschlag, 1997, 229). Suggesting a connection between the EU and Nazi Germany obviously is a false assumption of the EU being a totalitarian and criminal organization that threatens Europe’s safety. In fact, the European Community was established to “preserve and strengthen peace and liberty,” as the preamble of the Treaty Establishing the European Community reads.¹¹ Editing the faces of leading European politicians into a Nazi propaganda photo follows the same abusive strategy (see Fig. 3.2).

Yet, the usage of montage in the illustrated press seems under-researched, even though magazine covers used collage techniques long before the emergence of digital media and graphic software. In Poland, the illustrated press was a scarce commodity until the 1980s, when the political transformation into post-communism began. Only towards the end of the communist regime, a couple of new and almost uncensored magazines appeared, among them the abovementioned weekly *Wprost*, starting locally in 1983 and published nationwide in 1988. Since the earliest issues, their covers presented easy recognizable collages. Around the year 1989, for example, they combined the communist visual style (portraits of Stalin or Marx) with symbols of western and neoliberal values that were about to dominate the Polish public soon after (images of

¹¹ Consolidated Version of the Treaty Establishing the European Community, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:11997E/TXT&rid=1>. Accessed 9 April 2022.

US-banknotes or logos of well-known western brands). Back then, black and white collage was the main technique used by *Wprost*, which changed slightly in the early 1990s when color print was introduced. However, in the late 1980s, cover design was not just an instrument of corporate identity but also an effect of scarcity; having access to low-quality and two-color printers only, graphic designers were very limited in their work.¹² And yet, they presented critical images that addressed the changing realities. By juxtaposing elements of the old and the new, they emphasized social and political conflicts and pointed at the raise of neoliberal values in Poland. Just as the early covers of *Wprost* belonged to the iconosphere of the transformation around 1989, the current right-wing magazines have been part of the (visual) discourse during the nationalistic shift in the 2010s. To illustrate their techniques of abusing history for political purposes, I am now referring to selected examples from *W Sieci* and *Do Rzeczy*. Most important in this context is the montage of archival and contemporary images, both *within* one cover and *between* multiple covers.

3.4 MONTAGE WITHIN COVERS

In early September each year, around the anniversary of the outbreak of World War II, *W Sieci* and *Do Rzeczy* display respective motifs on their covers (Fig. 3.3).¹³ In September 2014, the cover of the history supplement to *W Sieci* depicted three Wehrmacht soldiers behind a red and white gate, one of them holding the Polish national emblem, with the caption: “Barbarians: unknown motifs of the German invasion of Poland.” Exactly one year later, during the parliamentary election campaign in Poland, *W Sieci*—this time the regular weekly magazine—appeared with a strikingly similar cover but the Wehrmacht soldiers now replaced by three seemingly Muslim men with stereotypical appearance. One of the men holds a weapon. The caption warns: “September 2015: they’re coming. The Germans are pushing through a suicidal plan—Tusk and Kopacz yield to

¹²The economic and material circumstances of producing press content in late 1980s and early 1990s have not been researched yet. However, publication about Polish television, video, and early computer games prove that the scarcities had an enormous impact on the then media and cultural industries, see Sitarski et al. (2020).

¹³The white arrows are added by the author in order to indicate the identical elements of the images.



Fig. 3.3 Covers of *W Sieci Historii* 9 (2014), *W Sieci* 37 (2015) and the propaganda photograph depicting Wehrmacht soldiers at the Polish-German boarder in September 1939, National Digital Archive, sign. 2–16, Creative Commons

it.”¹⁴ The image with the alleged refugees is obviously an edited version of the previous cover as the emblem, the gate, the hands, and the plants in the background are the same. Reusing the picture surely is a cost- and time-saving measure; more importantly, however, replacing the Wehrmacht soldiers with stereotypical Muslim characters reinforces the intended message of refugees posing a threat to Poland’s sovereignty. As with the image of golden swastikas or the manipulated propaganda photo of Hitler and Mussolini mentioned above (Figs. 3.1 and 3.2), the covers again are supposed to provoke with Nazi iconography. In Poland, using Nazi rhetoric is even more provoking than in many other countries, due to Germany’s brutal occupation of Poland during World War II and the painful memories still present today. Taken literally, any comparison to Nazism implies accusations of war crimes such as Genocide, torture, or expropriations. Paradoxically, Polish right-wing media accuse refugees, many escaping authoritarian regimes and torture themselves, of being “invaders.”

Both *W Sieci* covers are at the same time visual quotes from a well-known German propaganda photo that depicts Wehrmacht soldiers removing the barrier at the Polish-German border in September 1939. Looking at the composition of the picture, the reference is clear: The bar, the emblem, the men holding them and the ivy in the background. The name of the photographer who took the original picture in 1939 remains unknown, but the caption on the backside informs us that the picture was

¹⁴Tusk and Kopacz are surnames of then leading politicians of the governing PO (*Platforma Obywatelska*, i.e. Civic Platform) party.

taken on September 1. Since police officers from the Free City of Danzig are among the men depicted, the whole scene must have been staged, since the German troops had not yet arrived at this place.¹⁵ Soon after the war, the picture became an icon of the German invasion of Poland and was reprinted in countless Polish textbooks. Among the reasons for its popularity is the immanent contrast between its elements: We see fifteen uniformed and armed men struggling with a simple and probably rather flimsy turnpike. In contrast to the actual events during the German invasion of Poland in September 1939, the soldiers make no use of their guns, and we see no victims. In 2003, the artist Zbigniew Libera reenacted the photograph, reducing it *ad absurdum*: He replaced the soldiers with colorfully dressed cyclists pushing the turnpike. Today, the 1939-photograph is part of the collection of the National Digital Archive; the license is free and the image may be used almost without limitations. Consequently, it often reoccurs in the Polish iconosphere, both in the original and in manipulated versions.

Apparently, the editors of *W Sieci* relied on the fact that the historical picture is widely recognized. The cover from 2014 was a quite simple photographic reenactment of the original image from 1939: Both depicted Wehrmacht soldiers at a border gate. The cover from 2015, with refugees instead of soldiers, included an additional semantic layer: By reusing a Nazi propaganda photo, the image suggested that the refugee crisis in 2015 was somehow comparable to the beginning of World War II in 1939. Just as the abovementioned covers of *Uważam Rze* (see Fig. 3.1, swastikas replacing stars) and *Wprost* (see Fig. 3.2., Merkel replacing Hitler), *W Sieci*'s technique of montage is replacement: Symbolic figures of the Nazi occupation of Poland (Wehrmacht soldiers) are replaced by symbolic figures of the refugee crisis in 2015 (Muslims). While the threat in 1939 turned out to be real (the Nazi occupation of Poland resulted in approximately 6 million Polish victims during World War II), the alleged threat in 2015 was mainly Islamophobic propaganda. Interestingly enough, the replacement of Wehrmacht soldiers with refugees happened in Poland, the ethnically most homogeneous country in the EU, with a vanishingly small Muslim minority (Balcer, 2019, 209). Furthermore, the editors seem not to have considered another paradox: The reenactment of Nazi propaganda to warn about an alleged threat from Germany.

¹⁵ Gerhard Paul (2013, 135–154) provides a comprehensive history of this photo.

Considering the main goal of spreading panic among the population, the captions are no less important than the images. In 2014, the word *Barbarzyńcy* (Barbarians) clearly referred to the Wehrmacht soldiers and the Nazi occupation of Poland. The word *Nadchodzą!* (in yellow with exclamation mark) used in 2015 means “they’re coming!” Above (in white letters against black background) we read *Wrzesień 2015*, meaning “September 2015.” This time, the allusion is multilayered: The suggestion obviously is that the refugees are on their way to Europe, but it is also a reference to the anniversary of the Nazi invasion of Poland in September 1939. Put next to each other, the largest words on the magazine covers result in the sentence *Barbarzyńcy nadchodzą!* (Barbarians are coming!). In connection with the seemingly traditional appearance of the refugees, the sentence sends the message of uncivilized hordes threatening Poland’s safety.

The two magazine covers abuse history in multiple ways: They use a Nazi propaganda photo as if it was an *authentic* historical source (otherwise, we could read the covers as a self-ironic statement on doing propaganda, which—given the overall context—is not the case); at the same time, they put a stereotypical image of refugees into the place of the occupiers—a strategy aimed at causing fear and helping PiS win the elections shortly after. While from a logical point of view the montage of a well-known propaganda photo with motifs of current events seems unproductive, the strategy becomes politically comprehensive when considering the emotions it provoked.

3.5 MONTAGE BETWEEN COVERS

The two magazine covers restaging the 1939-propaganda photo, both discussed above, show how illustrated magazines can create meanings *between* different covers, constructing sequential, ideologically consistent discourses. Obviously, magazines build on a recognizable corporate design, including logo, font, or visual style and illustration. For instance, the history supplement of *Do Rzeczy* usually displays comic style illustrations, the supplement of *W Sieci* scenes resembling high-resolution video games. Despite the differences in visual style, the content is often similar. First and foremost, both usually contain images of uniformed men easily recognizable as Poles and Germans or Soviets. The Poles represent the “heroes” and the “good,” the Germans and Soviets the “invaders” and the “bad.” Just as in comics or video games (as well as other popular

media), the repeated appearance allows to treat the uniformed men as protagonists and antagonists of national myths about Poles heroically fighting against the two powerful neighbors. According to this visual narrative, people who are not part of this fight, mainly women, are also excluded from the national community.

Broadly speaking, the sequential appearance of related motifs shows similarities to a montage. “Serials generally appear as popular-cultural montages,” says Ilka Brasch (2018, 15). New meanings created by serial media like the illustrated press rely on association and repetition, thus also on memory (Sielkie, 2015, 90–92). Yet the question is if the readers remember older issues which they read/saw week(s) earlier. Do they recognize the repetitions? In the digital era, this question seems to play a minor role, as previous issues and especially their covers are easily available online. E-kiosks display current covers next to archived ones, and social media users comment on both extensively. A Polish Facebook page devoted to the critical discussion of magazine covers, for instance, currently has about 9000 followers;¹⁶ bloggers even create rankings of the covers.¹⁷ Apparently, the Internet has extended the life cycle of media products, with consequences for the coexistence of older and newer titles and covers. The historical person most present on the covers of Polish right-wing media is Adolf Hitler—so far he appeared twelve times on the cover images of *W Sieci* and *Do Rzeczy* directly and several other times indirectly, for instance by means of allusions or symbols such as the characteristic moustache. Some pictures of the Führer are taken from archival material (black and white or colored), others are computer-generated or reenacted. The images support various rhetorical goals: Hitler is juxtaposed with the political opponents of PiS, he illustrates anti-German resentments, and his image helps raising objections against the alleged re-writing of Polish history. In any case, the reasons for depicting Hitler on the magazine covers are current political issues and conflicts. In order to reinforce the message, his face (or figure) is often presented together with other motifs or persons, such as other Nazis or dictators (PiS insinuates that the former Polish Prime Minister, Donald Tusk, was authoritarian, which is why he is often montaged with Hitler, Stalin, and Putin). Hitler also appears in front of Warsaw on fire and/or in ruins. Two covers

¹⁶ <https://m.facebook.com/polskaszkolaokladki/>. Accessed 14 April 2022.

¹⁷ <https://poptown.eu/nasz-subiektywny-ranking-prawicowych-okladek-uderzajacych-w-lewicowa-zaraze/>. Accessed 16 April 2022.

of *W Sieci*, published in 2014 and 2017, are supposed to remind of compensations Germany allegedly owes Poland for war damages. On the 2014 cover,¹⁸ we see Hitler edited next to the Warsaw Castle on fire; the caption says that Poland may sue Germany for compensations up to 845 billion dollars. In 2017,¹⁹ more motifs appeared on the cover: Apart from the Warsaw Castle, we see two bombers in the skies above the city, a colored photo from the Warsaw Ghetto, and German soldiers putting something on fire. The caption also changed: Now, the number says six trillion dollars “for the horror of war.” Anti-German resentments like these were among the main themes of the PiS electoral campaign, as the right accused their main opponent, Donald Tusk’s PO party, of supporting Germany. It was not without a reason that the *W Sieci* cover demanding six trillion dollars in war reparations was published 1 week before the parliamentary elections in Poland.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the depiction of Hitler is not unusual in contemporary European media; even on the cover pages of the German center-left magazine *Der Spiegel*, Hitler has appeared more often than any other person throughout the magazine’s publishing history. The exhibition *Hitler and the Germans* at the German Historical Museum in 2010 presented an impressive collage of 46 issues of *Der Spiegel* from 1964 to 2010, all with Hitler on the front cover. The art historian Stefanie Endlich commented on their complex role and critical character:

Those cover pictures have definitely contributed to reproducing the Hitler myth in the post war era and transferring it into the present and future. Only since the mid-1990s, the depiction of Hitler has become more ironical, due to parodistic movies, comedies, comics, and later to the World Wide Web, its networks and its YouTube distribution. In the 1980s and 1990s, you could get the impression that Germany was seized by a kind of Hitler mania, meant with critical subtitle. (Endlich, 2017)

Beyond the critical and parodistic depiction of Hitler, there is also a commercial context. “Yes, Hitler sells!” Endlich writes. The 46 (today

¹⁸The cover can be accessed through the news portal devoted to the Polish media “Wirtualne Media”: <https://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/jedynki/sieci-wczesniej-takze-w-sieci/2014-09-29> (accessed February 22, 2023).

¹⁹See also the depiction at “Wirtualne Media”: <https://www.wirtualnemedial.pl/jedynki/sieci-wczesniej-takze-w-sieci/2017-08-07/> (accessed February 22, 2023).

probably more) *Spiegel*-covers depicting Hitler combine the two aspects. They advertise critical contributions on Nazi history through provocative images. Presented together on one collage in the German Historical Museum, they illustrate the serial character of magazine covers; while each cover addresses a current event, together they refer to each other and create a series.

Unlike *Spiegel*-covers, none of the Hitler images on the Polish right-wing magazines contributes to a critical reflection on the past or an ironic reflection on the present. Rather, the repeated reprinting of Hitler detached from actual Nazi crimes raises the question about the fascination with Nazism, especially since *W Sieci* and *Do Rzeczy* support a party with a nationalistic and social program. In 2002, *Wprost* used the *reductio ad Hitlerum* rhetoric (Laurelle, 2019, 308) for the first time and depicted the leader of the Polish farmers' party *Samoobrona* (Self-defense) with a Hitler moustache; the image was widely commented. As mentioned above, *W Sieci* and *Do Rzeczy* have showcased Hitler on their front covers at least twelve times since 2013, yet in most of the cases they did not provoke any public reactions. Apparently, the repeated appearance of Hitler and Nazi images in the Polish iconosphere reduced their scandalous potential. Instead, the magazine covers abuse history by reducing one of the most painful epochs in Europe's past to a mere collection of insults against current political opponents. The juxtaposition of Hitler with ruined Warsaw further suggests that the political opponents act against Poland's security. In contrast to the common use of archival imagery providing an impression of authenticity (Krämer & Lobinger, 2018; Banks, 2013),²⁰ the images of the ruined Warsaw are obvious references to national memory. Using motifs from Polish history, and especially from World War II, moves the distinction between perpetrators and victims into contemporary politics.

3.6 CONCLUSION

Montage is a powerful tool to abuse history. The magazine covers discussed in this chapter falsify historical facts, contextualize them improperly, or reduce them to slogans in current political conflicts. Seen from a visual perspective with a strong emphasis on the agency of images, the covers shape nationalistic discourses rather than just illustrating them,

²⁰For classic accounts see Arnheim (1997), Gombrich (1980).

either by assembling easily recognizable historical motifs or by constructing visual discourses through series of images. The covers of *W Sieci* and *Do Rzeczy* contribute to Manichean views on history, in which nations can be either victims or perpetrators, noble or brutal, heroic or coward, good or bad. These distinctive bipolar categories correspond with De Baets' idea of a "deceptive usage" of history. Furthermore, assembling generally true images can result in false messages; the meeting between Hitler and Mussolini did take place, just as Angela Merkel or Jean-Claude Juncker indeed were powerful European politicians. It is only a certain combination of true motifs that leads to the historically false conclusion of the EU being a totalitarian organization, while in fact founded to *prevent* totalitarianism in Europe.

Unlike many far-right movements in contemporary Europe acting within transnational networks and sharing transnationally recognizable contents (Hermansson et al., 2020), the right-wing magazines in Poland usually refer to national themes. Perceiving them requires basic knowledge about Polish history—as, for example, the cover with the soldiers on the Polish border in 1939 shows (see Fig. 3.3). At the same time, transnationally readable icons are framed nationally: Hitler, for instance, is presented next to the Warsaw Castle on fire—one of the main symbols of war-damaged Poland. Notably, the material for this chapter comes from traditional media, while research on the transnational discourse of the European far-right mainly focuses on digital media. Being de facto party magazines, *W Sieci* and *Do Rzeczy* direct their content at the electorate of PiS, hence readers from older generations, rural areas and small towns, and with lower education.²¹ It seems as if the national framing and the references to history are particularly relevant for those groups.

Although initially invented by left-wing artists who assembled contrasting images to ironically comment, criticize, and point out paradoxes and inequalities, montage is now as well characteristic of the right-wing iconosphere. However, the covers of *W Sieci* and *Do Rzeczy* are by no means elements of the extreme discourse in Poland. Quite the contrary: They are visible in bookstores, in kiosks, at gas stations, or in post offices; hence they represent Polish mainstream. The examples mentioned above are from the 7 years between 2013 and 2019, when Poland and other

²¹ The preference for PiS among those groups were again visible during the Polish presidential elections in 2020: The PiS electorate mainly consisted of less-educated older (50+ and especially 60+) and male voters from rural areas and small towns (Szymczak, 2020).

East-Central European countries (most notably Hungary, but also the Czech Republic, Austria or Croatia) experienced a significant nationalistic shift. The study of how right-wing media abuse history therefore contributes to our understanding of the current political developments in the region.

REFERENCES

- Arnheim, R. (1997). The two authenticities of the photographic media. *Leonardo*, 30, 53–55.
- Bach, A. (2013, April 18). Merkel as Hitler? *Deutsche Welle*. Accessed November 29, 2022, from <https://p.dw.com/p/18IL2>.
- Balcer, A. (2019). Islamophobia without Muslims as a social and political phenomenon: The case of Poland. In P. Bevelandre & R. Wodak (Eds.), *Europe at the crossroads. Confronting populist, nationalists, and global challenges* (pp. 207–228). Nordic Academic Press.
- Bałus, W. (2016). Mieczysław Porębski: Man and architecture in the Iconosphere. In Á. Moravánszk & J. Hopfengärtner (Eds.), *Re-humanizing architecture: New forms of community, 1950–1970* (Vol. 1, pp. 85–98). Birkhäuser. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783035608113-006>
- Banks, M. (2013). True to life: Authenticity and the photographic image. In T. Fillitz & A. Jamie Saris (Eds.), *Debating authenticity. Concepts of modernity in anthropological perspective* (pp. 160–171). Berghahn.
- Berliner, T., & Cohen, D. J. (2011). The illusion of continuity: Active perception and the classical editing system. *Journal of Film and Video*, 63, 44–63.
- Berry, A. (2020, August 29). *Facebook removes German far-right magazine compact*. Deutsche Welle. Accessed November 29, 2022, from <https://p.dw.com/p/3hj4E>.
- Bijsmans, P. (2017). EU media coverage in times of crisis: Euroscepticism becoming mainstream? In M. Caiani & S. Guerra (Eds.), *Euroscepticism, democracy and the media: Communicating Europe, contesting Europe* (pp. 93–94). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bordwell, D., & Thompson, K. (2003). *Film art: An introduction*. McGraw & Hill.
- Brasch, I. (2018). *Film serials and the American cinema, 1910–1940*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Bredenkamp, H. (2018). *Image acts: A systematic approach to visual agency*. (E. Clagg, Trans.). De Gruyter.
- Cauvin, T. (2018). The rise of public history: An international perspective. *Historia Critica*, 68, 3–26.
- Dąbrowska-Cydzik, J. (2021, February 18). Państwowe spółki wydają miliardy na reklamy. *Wirtualne Media*. Accessed November 29, 2022, from <https://www>.

- wirtualnemedi.pl/artykul/panstwowe-spolki-wydatki-reklamowe-do-kogoida-tvp-media-braci-karnowskich-gazeta-polska-media-tomasz-sakiewicz.
- De Baets, A. (2009). *Responsible history*. Foreword by Jürgen Kocka. Berghahn Books.
- Deutscher Bundestag. (2020). Stellung des Compact-Magazins im rechtsextremistischen Spektrum, Drucksache 19/23915, November 3. Accessed November 29, 2022, from <https://dserver.bundestag.de/btd/19/239/1923915.pdf>.
- Doerr, N. (2017). How right-wing versus cosmopolitan political actors mobilize and translate images of immigrants in transnational contexts. *Visual Communication*, 16, 315–336.
- Doerr, N. (2021). The visual politics of the alternative for Germany (AfD): Anti-Islam, ethno-nationalism, and gendered images. *Social Sciences*, 10(1), 20. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10010020>
- Endlich, S. (2017). Re-use of Nazi symbols in Germany after 1945. Observing Memories 1. Accessed November 29, 2022, from <https://europeanmemories.net/magazine/re-use-of-nazi-symbols-in-germany-after-1945/>.
- Goeschel, C. (2017). Staging friendship: Mussolini and Hitler in Germany in 1937. *The Historical Journal*, 60, 149–172.
- Gombrich, E. H. (1980). Standards of truth: The arrested image and the moving eye. *Critical Inquiry*, 7, 237–273.
- Heller, S., & Fili, L. (1996). *Cover story: The art of American covers: 1900–1950*. Chronicle Books.
- Henley, J. (2016, January 12). Polish press invokes Nazi imaginary as war of words with EU heats up. *The Guardian*. Accessed November 29, 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jan/12/polish-press-nazi-imagery-war-of-words-eu-angela-merkel>.
- Hermansson, P., Lawrence, D., Mulhall, J., & Murdoch, S. (2020). The international alt-Righth. In *Fascism for the 21st century?* Routledge.
- Hokka, J., & Nelimarkka, M. (2022). Affective economy of national right-wing images: Investigating transnational online networks through visual big data. *New Media & Society*, 22, 770–792.
- Kitch, C. (2005). *Pages from the past: History & memory in American magazines*. North Carolina Press.
- Krämer, B., & Lobinger, K. (2018). So und nicht anders ist es gewesen! In K. Lobinger (Ed.), *Handbuch Visuelle Kommunikationsforschung* (pp. 1–21). Springer VS.
- Kreibel, S. T., & Zervignón, A. M. (2019). Is photomontage over? A special issue of history of photography. *History of Photography*, 43, 119–121.
- Laurelle, M. (2019). Reductio ad Hitlerum as a new frame for political and geopolitical conflicts. In S. Samilenko, E. Shiraev, M. Icks, & J. Keohane (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of character assassination and reputation management* (pp. 307–319). Routledge.

- Lövgren, H. (2021, October). On the cinematic allegorizing of history. In I. Christie & J. Vassilieva (Eds.), *The Eisenstein Universe* (pp. 173–189). Bloomsbury.
- Mitchell, W. J. T. (1996, October). *What do pictures really want?* (Vol. 77, pp. 71–82). The MIT Press.
- Patterson, J. (2019, January 14). Behind *time* magazine covers: A Q&A with D.W. Pine. *FIPP*. Accessed November 29, 2022, from <https://www.fipp.com/news/behind-time-magazine-covers/>.
- Paul, G. (2013). *BilderMACHT. Studien zur Visual History des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts*. Wallstein.
- Popp, S. (2015). Popular history magazines between transmission of knowledge and entertainment – Some theoretical remarks. In S. Popp, J. Schumann, & M. Hannig (Eds.), *Commercialised history: Popular history magazines in Europe* (pp. 41–70). Peter Lang.
- Popp, S., Schumann, J., & Hannig, M. (2014). “Histotainment” by popular history magazines. The “edutaining” design of history and its challenges for media critical history education. *International Journal of Research on History Didactics History Education and History Culture*, 36, 29–44.
- Porębski, M. (1972). *Ikonosfera*. Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy.
- Porębski, M. (2006). *Der Begriff der Ikonosphäre*. (W. Sztaba, J. Birken, Trans.). Sztaba & Damar.
- Richardson, J. E., & Wodak, R. (2009). The impact of visual racism: Visual arguments in political leaflets of Austrian and British far-right parties. *Controversia*, 6, 45–77.
- Saryusz-Wolska, M. (2020). Abusing public visual history: The current right-wing Press in Poland. *The Public Historian*, 42, 61–85.
- Sielkie, S. (2015). Network and seriality: Conceptualizing (their) connection. *Americastudien/American Studies*, 60, 81–95.
- Sitariski, P., Garda, M. B., & Jajko, K. (2020). New media behind the iron curtain. In *Cultural History of Cideo Microcomputers and Satellite Television in Communist Poland*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego.
- Stańczyk, E. (2013). Caught between Germany and Russia: Memory and National Identity in Poland’s right-wing media Post-2004. *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 91, 289–316.
- Szymczak, J. (2020, July 12). Trzaskowski wygrywa wśród młodych. Jak głosowali Polacy według zamieszkania, wieku, wykształcenia. *Oko.Press*. Accessed November 29, 2022, from <https://oko.press/trzaskowski-wygrywa-wsrod-mlodych-jak-glosowali-polacy-wg-zamieszkania-wieku-edukacji/>.

- Wodak, R. (2019). Analysing the micropolitics of the far right in the ‘post-shame era’. In P. Bevelandre & R. Wodak (Eds.), *Europe at the crossroads. Confronting populist, nationalists, and global challenges* (pp. 63–92). Nordic Academic Press.
- Wüstenberg, J., & Sierp, A. (Eds.). (2020). *Agency in Transnational Memory Politics*. Berghahn.
- Zuschlag, C. (1997). “Chambers of horrors of art” and “degenerate art”. On censorship of the visual arts in Nazi Germany. In E. C. Childs (Ed.), *Suspended license. Censorship and the visual arts* (pp. 210–234). Samuel and Althea Stroum.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copy-right holder.





Trustworthiness in the Swedish Strategies for Covid-19 in Recorded Press Conferences from the Public Health Agency of Sweden

Gunilla Byrman and Asbjørg Westum

4.1 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

When Covid-19 reached Sweden at the beginning of 2020, it fell to the Public Health Agency of Sweden (PHA)¹ to inform citizens how they should act during the pandemic to suppress the spread. The PHA's strategy has been to provide such information via press conferences, assisted by representatives from The Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (CCA)² and The National Board of Health and Welfare (NHW),³ who were also involved in handling the consequences of the pandemic. All press conferences were broadcast and available on YouTube. The material for this article derives

¹ In Swedish, *Folkhälsomyndigheten*.

² In Swedish, *Myndigheten för samhällsskydd och beredskap*.

³ In Swedish, *Socialstyrelsen*.

G. Byrman • A. Westum (✉)
Department of Swedish, Linnaeus University, Växjö, Sweden
e-mail: gunilla.byrman@lnu.se; asbjorg.westum@lnu.se

© The Author(s) 2024
B. Schirrmacher, N. Mousavi (eds.), *Truth Claims Across Media*,
Palgrave Studies in Intermediality,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42064-1_4

from the online press conferences only (PHA Folkhälsomyndigheten 2021a). During parts of the pandemic, when the spread of infection was low, some journalists were on site, while others participated online. When the spread of infection was high, no journalists were allowed on site.

Already at an early stage, it became clear that the Swedish pandemic strategy differed from other countries (Rocklöv et al., 2020). Moreover, Sweden had high death rates, especially in elderly care home. Facts show that there were far more deaths in Covid-19 in Sweden than in the other Scandinavian countries in total (Bauhn, 2020, 1–2). For both of these reasons, we took an interest in analysing the PHA's communication, assuming they would face challenges in trying to convey their messages and establish trust from the public, who at the press conferences were represented by the journalists.

Studies show that Swedes' trust in authorities is unusually high in an international comparison. Polling from early 2021 shows that 50–57% of the Swedish public have quite high or very high trust in the PHA.⁴ During the pandemic, though, trust in authorities has been high in other places too. According to a recent survey covering seven European countries, 86.3% of the respondents reported being familiar with the WHO recommendations about Covid-19, while 59.8% trusted their information, and 15.5% reported distrust in the information from the WHO (Varghese et al., 2021, 5–7).

The PHA is an authority receiving its mandate from the government. It cannot issue restrictions to prevent the spread of Covid-19. In most other European countries, government has the power to intervene directly in the ongoing work of the authorities. In Sweden, the government must never control how the authority uses the laws, referred to as a ban on ministerial rule. In other words, the PHA is expected to provide citizens with general advice and recommendations, but it is up to the government to decide on how their information should be interpreted, and only the government can issue restrictions in any form.

Through the pandemic the PHA has encouraged personal responsibility, summed up in the motto “Together we can slow down the infection”

⁴ Downloaded from the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency's website: <https://novus.se/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/novusfortroende20210120.pdf>. Accessed 25 Nov 2022. Downloaded from the Kantar Sifo website: <https://www.msb.se/siteassets/dokument/aktuellt/pagaende-handelser-och-insats/coronaviruset%2D%2D-covid-19/resultat-fran-kantar-sifos-undersokningar/februari-2021/resultat-av-coronaundersokning-februari-2021.pdf>. Accessed 25 Nov 2022.

(PHA, website 15 September 2021). The recommendations have changed somewhat during the pandemic, but the overall message is to keep your distance and stay at home when ill, watch out for symptoms of Covid-19, and wash your hands frequently. In this, the PHA's strategy resembles those in many other comparable countries, such as Germany, Italy, and Spain, since the governments in these countries also highlighted individual responsibility and individual sacrifice as the solution to the ongoing health crisis (Sjölander-Lindqvist et al., 2020, 9–12; Wodak, 2021). But the PHA has not always been compliant with WHO recommendations, for example about the usefulness of face masks, which may have made it more difficult for them to gain public trust.

4.2 TRUST AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

There is a lot of research on trust, trustworthiness, and credibility in various fields of research. In this study, we mainly rely on the sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1979, 1988), but also on the philosopher Per Buhn (2020), and the economics researcher Lovisa Näslund (2018).

Trust relates to *trustworthiness*, and sometimes these concepts are used as synonyms, but according to the sociologist Niklas Luhmann (1979, 1988), it makes sense to distinguish between *trustworthiness* (Ger. *Vertrauen*, Sw. *förtroende*) and *trust* (Ger. *Zuversicht*, Sw., No. *tillit*, Da. *tillid*). Trustworthiness is a choice, implying that you have to ignore your vulnerability to assess someone as trustworthy. Trust, on the other hand is not a choice; it is a generalized attitude towards the outside world, that is, individuals' general tendency to trust their surroundings. The alternative is to be insecure and afraid.

Trust and trustworthiness will therefore also work in different ways. Trust is not based on an estimate of a person's character. Trustworthiness is interpersonal, while trust lies as a basic perception of the world in the individual (see Buhn, 2020, 1–2). However, there are, of course, links between trust and trustworthiness. A person with high trust will probably also be more inclined to gain trustworthiness in others, and vice versa (Näslund, 2018, 7).

Trustworthiness thus helps us to deal with uncertainty. If there is no vulnerability, no trustworthiness is needed either (ibid., 2). We tend to gain trustworthiness from those who believe they can trust us, and vice versa: Those who are viewed with distrust will respond with distrust (ibid., 4).

There have been constant changes in the state of the pandemic and the state of knowledge about Covid-19. No matter the situation, the PHA is expected to provide useful information, advice, and recommendations. All in all, we see our analyses of the dialogue between the PHA and the journalists, who are the public's representatives, as a kind of measurement of public trust in the PHA.

4.3 AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In this study, we investigate the multimodal world of the PHA's online press conferences, how it establishes public trust in its information, advice, and recommendations, and how its trustworthiness is negotiated in communication with journalists. The study has a special focus on two topics: death numbers and face masks. We ask the following questions:

1. What are the structural patterns of the Covid-19 press conferences compared to political press conferences?
2. What kind of information does the PHA want to communicate?
3. What kind of information are the journalists looking for?
4. How are multimodal meaning-making resources used in the video clips?

4.4 MATERIAL, METHODS, AND THEORY

This study is based on eight of the PHA's press conferences on Covid-19, all of which were broadcast live and are available on YouTube. The sample is intended to show variation over time, to make it possible to follow the PHA's communication from the beginning of the outbreak and as far ahead as possible within the period of this study. Table 4.1 shows the press conferences included in the material and basic data on the pandemic situation in Sweden presented by the PHA at each press conference. The duration of each press conference can also be read from the table; the shortest lasted for 33 minutes, the longest for 61 minutes.

We have chosen to study recorded press conferences from different seasons, as the Covid-19 virus spreads more easily in cold weather, leading to higher death rates in autumn and winter than in spring and summer (PHA, 2021b, 18–21). In addition, questions about public behaviour and protective measures of various kinds can be assumed to change in character and

Table 4.1 Analysed press conferences on Covid-19: date, duration, accumulated number of deaths, total cases, and cases in ICU or hospital care

<i>Dates</i>	<i>Press conf. duration</i>	<i>Deaths</i>	<i>Cases</i>	<i>ICU and hospital</i>
16 March 2020	33 minutes	6	1146	No information
27 April 2020	38 minutes	2289	19,431	533/2288
7 May 2020	39 minutes	3056	25,358	476/2128
16 June 2020	38 minutes	4952	53,694	239/1264
1 September 2020	47 minutes	5849	84,571	17/158
17 December 2020	42 minutes	7908	367,025	267/2504
14 January 2021	60 minutes	10,207	523,448	355/2621
17 June 2021	61 minutes	14,634	1,094,634	89/378

significance depending on whether the country is facing summer holidays, return to work and schools, or family holidays such as Christmas and Easter.

Table 4.1 shows that there was a sharp increase in both cases and death numbers between 16 March and 27 April 2020. The increase was relatively high throughout the period for both infections and death numbers, but it shows a clear dampening some time into the new year of 2021. This is certainly due to the vaccinations starting in December 2020 in elderly homes and accelerating during the winter and spring of 2021.⁵

The numbers of patients admitted to ICU or other hospital wards vary over time (Table 4.1). On 16 March 2020, no admissions were reported, but the number increased drastically in the spring of 2020.⁶ The risk of congestion in hospitals and health care facilities has been imminent from time to time but dropped radically during the later parts of the pandemic thanks to extensive vaccination.⁷

As a method, we use Wodak's (2021) categories for speech, text, and image in a critical discourse perspective, with multimodal and communicative aspects included. Her article is also about crisis communication concerning Covid-19. Her claim is that "[m]ost governments employed

⁵ Downloaded from the Swedish Public Health Agency's website: <https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/nyheter-och-press/nyhetsarkiv/2020/december/vaccinationerna-i-sverige-har-inletts/>. Accessed 25 Nov 2022.

⁶ The first reported hospital admissions date from 18 March, when 23 people were admitted to ICU, while 43 were admitted to other wards.

⁷ Downloaded from PHA's website: <https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/nyheter-och-press/nyhetsarkiv/2021/juni/okad-forekomst-av-deltavarianten-foranleder-smittskyddsatgarder/>. Accessed 25 Nov 2022.

specific modes of crisis-communication vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic, depending on the respective socio-political context and historical tradition” (ibid., 1). The basis of Wodak’s model is discourse, frame, and legitimation. She outlines the method in the following eight steps in her model:

1. Activation and consultation of preceding theoretical knowledge.
2. Systematic collection of data and context information.
3. Selection and preparation of data for the specific analyses.
4. Specification of the research question/s and formulation of assumptions.
5. Qualitative pilot analysis, including a context analysis, macro-analysis, and micro-analysis.
6. Detailed case studies.
7. Formulation of critique.
8. Practical application of analytical results. (Wodak, 2021, 6)

The present study is an in-depth analysis informed by the research questions. As an analytical tool, we use Wodak’s methodological steps presented above but exclude numbers five and eight, as we have not conducted a pilot analysis (5), and we cannot suggest practical applications from our results (8). We believe that the six other steps provide a good methodology for the in-depth analysis focusing on genre traits, multi-modal meaning-making, and information given by the PHA versus information asked for by the journalists. This approach allows us to discuss how the PHA works to establish trustworthiness, what kind of meaning-making resources are used, and how the topics are framed in the communication between the PHA and the journalists.

As theoretical concepts, we use *discourse*, *genres*, *situatedness*, and *discourse strands*. Wodak views discourse as “a set of context-dependent semi-otic practices” which are “socially constituted and socially constitutive, related to a macro-topic, characterised by a pluri-perspective” and linked to argumentation (2021, 6). In the present study, the discourse is crisis communication via the PHA, communicated through various media, but we concentrate this study on recorded press conferences. Wodak points out that “the key analytical categories of thematic analyses are discourse topics, which, conceptually, summarize the text, and specify its most important information” (2021, 6; see also van Dijk, 1991, 113). Thus, discourse topics provide relevant frames and interpretation frameworks.

The term *discourse strand* is understood as topical threads within discourses, and they are distinguished by topical continuity and boundedness (Rheindorf, 2019, 210–211; Wodak, 2021, 4–6). Specific discourse strands can be identified through subsets of data within a corpus, representing the discourse they are part of. In many instances, an initiating event or events can trigger debates that feed into such strands, in Wodak’s study, for example, the official announcement about lockdown came in March 2020, and most European countries decided to quickly deal with the crisis (2021, 4).

Texts (audio, spoken, visual, or written) are realized in specific *genres* and viewed in terms of their *situatedness* (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001, 40 ff.). The concept of genre is widely discussed, which makes it difficult to summarize the genre-theoretical approaches from different disciplines. We follow Swales’s angle, advocating that genre is associated with prototype performances, and that genre is characterized by repetition, as well as variation and change (see Swales, 1990, 44f). Consequently, a delimitation of the genre concept could include the following points: A genre connects texts to recurring social processes where interaction through text is central. It also includes prototype notions of design; it is normally named, and linguistically and socially codified (see Ledin, 1996, 26–30).

In this study, *genre* applies to recorded press conferences on YouTube. According to Ekström and Eriksson, a press conference “represents an institutionalised arena for political actions and journalistic interrogations” (2018, 352). Press conferences possess a ceremonial character, and “serve as symbolic representation of public political accountability, but they are also in a context in which political discourses are articulated, (re)enacted and negotiated” (Ekström & Eriksson, 2018, 352). Typically, the authority over the conversation belongs to the authorities or politicians who establish the norms for participation, but through their questions, journalists can partly control the press conferences (Eriksson et al., 2013, 121–122; Ekström & Eriksson, 2018, 342–343).

We assume that meaning-making is situated. Consequently, the development of the pandemic affects how meaning-making in the press conferences is processed through different semiotic resources, i.e. artefacts, actions, and materials (see Van Leeuwen, 2005, 285). Further, we assume that all meaning-making is multimodal (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). Typical modalities of importance for this study are speech, texts, and image.

It should be stressed that we limit the multimodal integration in the analysis to frames of verbal, visual, and auditory modes in the live

broadcasts now available on YouTube. In addition, the communicative and multimodal situation for broadcasts and the press conferences on site differ in that the live events are compressed into a one-screen window of audio-visual communication in the YouTube films.

4.5 ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Below we first report genre-specific features in the Covid-19 press conferences, second the dialogue in the themes: Death numbers and face masks with the integration of multimodal tools in the recorded press conferences, and how the tools are framed and situated through different multimodal resources in the YouTube recordings. The PHA uses those tools to establish trust and negotiate the credibility of the information.

4.5.1 *Genre-Specific Features in Covid-19 Press Conferences*

At the press conferences generally, the PHA practises its most important safety measure in a very visible way: When the first press conferences were broadcast, the journalists were sitting remarkably close together in the room. Later on in the pandemic, they were sitting further apart, and when the infection was spreading dramatically, everyone participated by link, including the PHA and other officials at the press conference. It is possible that this action had a broader purpose, to create trustworthiness.

All press conferences on Covid-19 have the following structure: First a brief monologue by the PHA followed by a longer question session with journalists. A press secretary from the PHA moderates the press conferences. As at other press conferences, a hierarchy has developed that allows the news media considered most influential to ask their questions first, such as TT News Agency, Swedish Radio, *Ekot* (The Echo, a news programme on public service radio), and Swedish Television (SVT), and the big national and international newspapers. Then the media can speak in descending order of importance.

The PHA press conferences differ from political press conferences in several respects. The main differences from political press conferences at the macro level are that press conferences on Covid-19 recur on a daily basis and later on twice a week throughout the whole pandemic. At press conferences in general, it is usually only accredited journalists who are invited, but at the conferences about Covid-19 there are quite often

medical experts asking questions, such as Lena Einhorn, a doctor and virologist, and Benjamin Kalischer Wellander who is a doctor. These two, and several other doctors, are critical of the PHA's Covid-19 strategy.

There are many activities going on during the Covid-19 press conferences. Different actors from three different public authorities (PHA, NHW, CCA) with different tasks are present and sometimes invited to answer questions or present information. The PHA also uses a wide range of different visual resources. The multimodal elements mostly concern the beginning of the press conferences. In the information part of the press conference, the PHA speaks with the support of PowerPoint presentations. In addition, sign interpreters are embedded in the video, translating the conference into sign language. Moreover, oral information is continuously transferred into a subtitle strip at the bottom of the video.

4.5.2 *The Topic of Death Numbers*

On 16 March 2020, the first Swedish deaths from Covid-19 had occurred. Six people had died, but the PHA added that “there are more [deaths] on the way”, because of a certain lag in the reporting. The PHA wants to give the impression of being in control in order to maintain their trustworthiness. Its discursive strategy in this situation seems to be to instil calm and at the same time prepare the public for a potentially more serious situation, which is parallel to Wodak's results (see Wodak, 2021, 8, 14–15). When the Swedish public service television (SVT) asks about how to assess public health in relation to the death toll, the answer is somewhat reassuring: The deaths are basically limited to Stockholm, and in addition there is an excess mortality of “about 1,500 from the flu alone” every year. Still, they conclude by emphasizing the importance of “working to deal with a much worse situation”.

SVT then follows up with a question about how many deaths it will take for the Covid-19 virus to be “classified as something out of the ordinary” and receives the following answer:

We do not know how relevant it is to calculate it.... We do our best to reduce the risk of death as much as possible. And it is very much about trying to protect the elderly from infection. And now we have time to do it. In Italy, they did not see this until it was a bit late to do so, because they already

had the infection in health care and nursing homes. We will work very hard together to try not to end up in that situation. (16 March 2020)⁸

This quotation reveals a certain reluctance to talk about death numbers and calculations. Instead, the PHA turns to its overall strategy, i.e. to slow down the spread and protect the elderly, points which are always clearly emphasized in words and images in the introduction to each press conference. The PHA seems to invalidate the journalist's question by pointing out that it may not be relevant to count. This creates a tension in the dialogue between them, with regard to the specific question as well as to the general strategy. In fact, it is one of the PHA's main tasks to collect data and make calculations about death numbers. Accordingly, this could be an instance where their trustworthiness is undermined.

The question about death statistics triggers debate and creates a clearly defined discourse strand, recurring on several occasions and "distinguished by topical continuity" (Wodak, 2021, 6). Creating tension in the communication between the PHA and the journalists, this discourse strand is a possible threat to the PHA's trustworthiness, because it can undermine the general trust and the public trust in the PHA in the long run.

In the spring of 2020, the death rate rose dramatically in Sweden. At the press conference on 27 April, the PHA's representatives initially states that despite the high numbers now reported, there is also a certain lag in the statistics, so the number is probably even higher. On this occasion they are supplemented by the NHW, who present their cause of death statistics, indicating a clear Covid-19 effect. Thus, their statistics differ from those of the PHA. The statistical discrepancy raises questions from journalists. TT News Agency asks why the NHW reports 10% more deaths than the PHA. The answer is that the two authorities use different measurement methods:

But the big difference is that we also have cases that have not been laboratory-tested but where the doctor in charge has documented that it is a Covid-19

⁸Vi vet inte hur relevant det är att räkna om det... Vi gör vårt bästa för att minska risken för dödsfall så mycket som möjligt. Och det handlar väldigt mycket om att försöka skydda dom äldre från smitta. Och nu har vi tid att göra det. I Italien så såg man inte det här förrän det var lite sent att göra det, för man hade redan då inne smittan i sjukvården och äldreboenden. Vi ska jobba väldigt hårt tillsammans för att försöka att inte hamna i den situationen.

patient, even though the person has not been laboratory-tested. (NHW, 27 April 2020)⁹

Unlike the PHA, the NHW thus include deceased persons who have not been laboratory-tested. The journalist at TT then turns to the PHA to find out if their statistics will always show too low numbers. The PHA admits that there will be a certain discrepancy but argues that consistency in the measurements is a crucial factor for the credibility of the statistics. However, TT calls for further clarity regarding the relationship between the two authorities' statistics and turns directly to the PHA: "So, you do not consider NHW's figures, so to speak, in this situation then?" The answer is brief: "We take it to heart, but we have not added them [the numbers], no". This vague answer pointing in two directions, could potentially damage the PHA's trustworthiness.

TV4 then asks why they did not test all the deceased for Covid-19, when Sweden has now received international criticism for the high spread and high death rates:

Yes, it is good that people look at us, see how we do and compare and so on, but we believe in this strategy, and we work from it.... And so far,... it [the death rate] is no longer increasing in the same way as it did before, so that now I think we'll stick to this and help keep the curve where it is. (16 March 2020)¹⁰

Here, the PHA spokesperson says that they believe in adhering to their overall strategy, which, above all, stresses everybody's personal responsibility, a fundamental element of the pandemic strategy also highlighted by Wodak (2021, 15). The PHA follows its discursive strategy to instil calm by pointing to the relative stagnation in mortality, but at the same time they introduce a discursive strand that will create tension in the dialogue with the journalists, namely comparisons between Sweden and other countries (see *ibid.*, 14–15). As a result, the South Coast, a Swedish news

⁹Men den stora skillnaden är att vi även har med fall som inte har laboratorietestat utan där ansvarig läkare har dokumenterat att det är en Covid-19 patient fastän man inte har laboratorietestat personen.

¹⁰Ja, nämen det är ju bra att folk tittar på oss, ser hur vi gör och jämför och så, men vi tror på den här strategin och vi jobbar utifrån den..... Och än så länge, ... det ökar inte längre på samma sätt som det gjorde innan, så att nu tycker jag vi håller i det här och hjälps åt och hålla kurvan där den är.

site based in Marbella, wonders how it can be that Andalusia with 8.5 million inhabitants has only half as many dead as Sweden, even though the pandemic outbreak occurred almost simultaneously in Sweden and Andalusia. In this case, the PHA does not really answer the question:

I cannot comment on that, but it is clear that an extremely strict lockdown also has other effects, you balance different things.... The disadvantage of a hard lockdown is that there is not so much spread and then you are left with the problem, so to speak, when you ease the restrictions. (27 April 2020)¹¹

The PHA here reinforces trustworthiness in the Swedish pandemic strategy by focusing on possible future drawbacks with hard lockdowns and suggests that the present high numbers are due to the mild restrictions applied in Sweden (see *ibid.*, 14–15). During the summer of 2020, death numbers fell significantly. In the introduction to the press conference on 1 September, the PHA emphasized that there was now zero excess mortality. Consequently, mortality stayed at a normal level for the season.¹²

In the late autumn of 2020, however, the numbers started increasing again, and on 17 December, the PHA warned that they would “most probably continue to increase”. Relating to their overall strategy, they stressed the importance of stopping the spread.¹³ The newspaper *Expressen* followed up with a very direct question: “Do you think we have failed?” to which they received a somewhat evasive answer:

Considering how many have died in Sweden, it is deeply regrettable, and we will in the end have to try to understand what we can do better to prevent it from ever happening again. Whether one should call it a failure or not, I

¹¹ Jag kan inte kommentera det, men det är klart att en väldigt strikt lock down har ju också andra effekter, man balanserar ju olika saker.... Nackdelen med en lock down helt är att det inte blir så mycket smittspridning och då har man ju problemet kvar så att säga sen när man lättar på den.

¹² Och antalet avlidna är nere på väldigt låga nivåer med bara enstaka fall per dag och många dagar utan avlidna. På det hela taget och som ni väl sett i annan rapportering är dödstal nere på en nivå som är normalt för årstiden och det är ingen överdödighet alls längre under en ganska lång tid.

¹³ Och tyvärr är det så att antalet avlidna kommer med hög sannolikhet tyvärr att fortsätta öka den närmsta veckan, kanske till och med veckorna om vi inte får stopp på smittspridningen väldigt snabbt.

think we should leave it to those in the future who will investigate these issues and decide about that. (17 December 2020)¹⁴

At this point, the PHA's trustworthiness faces a threat through the words *failed* and *failure* connected to the Swedish pandemic strategy. Clearly, the PHA does not want this issue to become a discursive strand. Its communicative strategy is to neutralize the issue by postponing it to the future; it is not yet time to evaluate the pandemic strategy, nor is it an issue for present-day researchers.¹⁵ While the PHA here avoids touching on the Swedish pandemic strategy and possible factors behind the high death numbers, they admit the need to learn from experience for future pandemics, which might constitute a certain concession to the journalists.

By 14 January 2021, more than 10,000 have died from Covid-19. Even now, the PHA admits, the statistics are incomplete to some degree. They also expect that the increase will continue, as there is still an extensive spread in the country. This statement provokes questions from the journalists, about the Swedish pandemic strategy in relation to mortality and about statistical methods. Both issues have been on the table during previous press conferences.

The questions from the journalists concern whether concrete measures are right or wrong and ask about causes and effects, while the PHA rather talks about overall strategy. The newspaper *Expressen* wants to know whether the high number is in any way related to the Swedish pandemic strategy. Again, the PHA seems slightly reluctant to answer the actual question, as the spokesperson argues that deaths from Covid-19 must be regarded from a holistic health perspective. This could be an attempt at a discursive shift concerning death numbers in order to reinforce trustworthiness for the information from the PHA, which can lead to improved trust in the PHA in the long run (see Wodak, 2021, 6):

¹⁴Med tanke på hur många som har avlidit i Sverige, det är djupt beklagansvärt och vi kommer ju att till slut att behöva jobba med att försöka förstå vad vi kan bli bättre på för att förhindra att det nånsin händer igen. Om man sen ska kalla det ett misslyckande eller inte, det tycker jag vi ska överlåta till dom i framtiden som kommer att utreda dom här frågorna och ta ställning till det.

¹⁵The final report from the independent Corona Commission appeared on 25 February 2022. It concluded that the Swedish government, instead of assuming leadership, had let PHA take the lead.

But the corona strategy itself and our handling of it must be seen from more perspectives than just the deaths. You must look at the whole health in society and the consequences of the measures in relation to it. (14 January 2021)¹⁶

The strategy to establish a discursive shift does not seem to be successful, since a journalist from *Vetenskapsradion* (Science Radio) immediately asks whether deaths are now measured according to different principles than before, and whether it is now possible to make comparisons between countries. The PHA denies that anything has changed but admits that there is still a difference between the NHW and the PHA figures. On the other hand, *Vetenskapsradion* does not receive an answer to its question about international comparisons.

The statistical method is later revisited in a question from the online newspaper *Bulletin*, which, due to the lag in statistics and the fact that these only include deceased persons who have been tested, raises the question of a possible dark figure. The PHA answers:

We will not change our statistics in any way. But, on the other hand, when assessing the whole in terms of the effect on death rates in the country, one needs to look at different statistical sources.... To look at the excess mortality that is updated on our website, to look at the NHW's statistics on deaths within 30 days. (14 January 2021)¹⁷

The answer here is ambiguous, as it is initially stated that the statistics should not be changed, at the same time as it is obviously considered necessary to “look at different statistical sources” to get an overall picture of the situation. The latter part of the statement could be regarded as a concession to the journalists, and thus as a step towards releasing the communicative tension that the discourse strand about death numbers has created between the PHA and journalists.

The newspaper *Bulletin*, however, returns to the significance of the hidden statistics for the overall picture and receives the answer that the PHA

¹⁶Men själva coronastrategin och vår hantering måste belysas ur fler perspektiv än bara dödsfallen. Man måste titta på hela hälsan i samhället och konsekvenserna av åtgärderna i relation till det.

¹⁷Vi kommer inte att ändra vår statistisk på något sätt. Men däremot när man bedömer helheten vad gäller effekten på dödstaten i landet så behöver man titta på olika statistiska källor.... Att titta på överdödligheten som finns uppdaterad på vår webbplats, att titta på Socialstyrelsens statistisk om dödsfall inom 30 dagar.

has an overall view of this because they can use excess mortality as a reference point:

It is the excess mortality that we think gives a good measure, because we had a very low flu season this year. So, it is Covid-19 that is responsible for the large mortality in these groups that make up the large groups where we have deaths. (14 January 2021)¹⁸

Previously, the PHA has dismissed international comparisons. Now, they say that it might be relevant to compare mortality from Covid-19 between countries, if excess mortality figures are calculated.

Clearly, during the period of investigation, the PHA has made a discursive shift in the matter of statistics and death numbers, but they have never explicitly commented on it. This turn of opinion could be interpreted as an attempt by the authority to partly neutralize the discourse strand of death statistics, which has often posed a threat to its trustworthiness.

4.5.3 *The Topic of Face Masks*

The Swedish strategy to protect people from the virus differ from other liberal democracies. Personal responsibility is invoked, and people are not ordered by the authorities but are asked to keep their distance. The Swedish overall strategy has a clear impact on the PHA's attitude to face masks.

At the first two press conferences included in this study, i.e. 16 March and 27 April, face masks are a non-existent discourse strand in the press conferences. On 27 April journalists ask if more protective measures are needed, as there is information from several parts of the country that the PHA's advice is not being followed; there is congestion in public transport, restaurants, bars, and outdoor cafés. The journalists still ask questions indicating trust in the PHA, and when asked directly by the newspaper *Göteborgs-Posten* if there is "any other call to how to behave" than to keep distance from others, the PHA simply answers "no", without further explanation.

In spite of this, face masks receive increasing attention in the spring and summer of 2020, when the WHO recommends the use of face masks:

¹⁸Det är ju överdödligheten som vi tycker ger ett bra mått, eftersom vi haft en väldigt låg influensasäsong i år. Så det är ju covid-19 som står för den stora dödligheten i dom här grupperna som utgör de stora grupperna där vi har dödsfall.

If Covid-19 is spreading in your community, stay safe by taking some simple precautions, such as physical distancing, wearing a face mask, keeping rooms well ventilated, avoiding crowds, cleaning your hands, and coughing into a bent elbow or tissue. Check local advice where you live and work. Do it all! (World Health Organization website 2021)

As the quotation shows, the WHO's advice largely coincides with the PHA's, but not in the case of face masks. This is probably why the issue receives increasing attention from journalists. They will later make face masks into a discourse strand triggering communicative tension between the PHA and the journalists, thereby challenging PHA's trustworthiness, who must now find ways to legitimize their position (see Wodak, 2021, 7–8).

On 7 May and 16 June, critical questions are being asked about the PHA's views on the use of face masks. Journalists believe that the PHA is vague in its communication on this point, others wonder if it is not time to add the use of face masks to the list of protective measures. However, the PHA is consistent in its discursive strategy, claiming that other hygiene measures are much more important than face masks. According to the PHA, face masks can even prove counterproductive in the fight against the pandemic, as they can induce a false sense of security, and thereby cause the wearer to fail to follow other more effective hygiene advice.

Throughout the period covered in this study, the PHA is consistent in its discursive strategy, insisting that face masks are not crucial in fighting the spread of infection. At best, the PHA says, face masks can be a complement, but only in certain limited situations (16 June 2020). According to the PHA, the public would have difficulty managing the face masks properly. It is difficult to determine how this position, that face masks are best left to the experts, affects the PHA's trustworthiness and the communication with the journalists. What we can say, though, is that journalists throughout the period of our study will revisit this discourse strand, creating tension in their dialogue with the PHA (see Wodak, 2021, 5–6).

It is very unusual for the PHA to raise the issue of face masks, so in this respect the press conference on 1 September 2020 is an exception. The main message is the same as before, meaning that limited use of face masks may be considered:

The issue of face masks has now, as it were, landed in the position that there may be a role for face masks at the local level when everything else is in

place.... Then there may be a signal value in introducing face masks in certain situations. (1 September 2020)¹⁹

At first sight, the quotation above indicates a discursive shift, since the PHA admits that there may be a function for face masks. Yet the language is vague, marked by modifiers and reservations (*as it were; may be a role; when everything else is in place; may be a signal; in certain situations*). The PHA also makes clear that the effect of face masks is symbolic rather than real. Thus, it seems that there is no actual shift in strategy, just an apparent one, maybe a concession to the citizens, and to WHO's strategy for face masks. The PHA then concludes the sequence by saying that "we remain in the centre, what we do is to..." They leave the sentence unfinished, pointing to the picture where the advice is listed, which does not include the use of face masks. This underlines that the agency's approach to safety measures follows a consistent line.

During question time, the newspaper *Aftonbladet's* journalist wonders if the PHA regrets having previously excluded face masks from the advice on how to fight the infection. Once again, the PHA follows its discursive strategy that face masks would not have fulfilled any function earlier in the pandemic, and that they can only be assumed to be effective in specific activities for a limited time, to build trust:

So, I strongly believe that one should do it as a targeted effort for a brief period and have a particularly good value signalling that there is a problem right now. And it can provide a certain protective effect in public transport and other things but having it for extended periods of time in different places does not seem to have worked well anywhere. (1 September 2021)²⁰

The journalist's choice of the verb *regret* when asking if the PHA regrets excluding face masks from the list of advice, challenges the PHA's trustworthiness, implying that the authority has been wrong in the past and there is, in fact, something to be sorry about. In the answer, the PHA avoids the topic of regret. Instead, the PHA follows its discursive strategy,

¹⁹ Munskyddsfrågan har ju nu liksom landat i att det kan finnas en roll för munskydd på den lokala nivån.... Då kan det finnas ett signalvärde i att införa munskydd i vissa situationer.

²⁰ Så jag tror väldigt mycket på att man ska det som en riktad insats under en kort period och har ett väldigt bra värde som signal om det är ett problem just nu. Och kan ge en viss skyddseffekt i kollektivtrafik och annat men att ha det under långa tider på olika ställen har verkar inte ha fungerat bra nånstans.

but with the admission that face masks could have a positive effect in public transport. On the other hand, the PHA legitimizes its strategy by saying that there are clear indications from other countries that widespread use of face masks does not serve its purpose (see Wodak, 2021, 7–8).

On 17 December, the question comes up again when a journalist from TT wonders if it may be time for the PHA to revise the advice on face masks. The answer is no, but indirectly, in that they immediately refer to the weak research situation in the field:

No, unfortunately there are very few studies. There was an interesting study from Germany similar to the one done in the city of Jena some years ago. But it has the same basic problems as many others. Otherwise, we have the Danish study, which is quite clear, so we do not have much data, unfortunately.... There is, sort of, no firm position on that issue. (17 December)²¹

In the quotation above, the PHA claims that the existing international studies have some fundamental problems. They do not, however, indicate what the problems are, but believe that the issue is not yet scientifically settled. Here, the journalists do not choose to challenge the PHA's trustworthiness, which might be due to the PHA legitimizing themselves as scientists, knowing how to decide if a problem is scientifically settled (see Wodak, 2021, 7–8).

During Christmas, the spread increased in Sweden. At the press conference on 14 January 2021, a journalist from SVT asks how the PHA views this. They respond by repeating some of the ordinary advice, but at the same time call for the use of face masks in public transport during rush hours:

We think it is important to adhere to the recommendations for the infection before you get symptoms. Therefore, it is important to work from home, keep your distance and use face masks when there is congestion in public transport. And that employers consider a situation where people are close to each other indoors for a long time in small premises, and consider face

²¹ Nej, det kommer tyvärr väldigt få studier. Det kom en lite intressant studie från Tyskland som var. liknande den som var. gjord på staden Jena får nåt år sen. Men den har ungefär samma grundläggande problem som mycket annat. Annars har vi den danska studien som är ganska tydlig, så det kommer inte mycket data tyvärr... Det finns liksom inget fast ställningstagande i den frågan.

masks, and there are recommendations about that on our website. (14 January)²²

The quotation above signals a discourse shift. A new approach to face masks emerges, something that has also had an impact on their website. However, it is a silent discourse shift, because the changed approach is not justified verbally, or commented on, by the PHA.

Despite the slight discourse shift with regard to face masks, they are never an item on the list of protective measures. On 17 June 2021, when the Swedish government has decided that the restrictions will end 3 months later, the journalists ask many questions about protective measures before the opening of the country. Again, the PHA does not mention the use of face masks, which apparently prompts journalists to challenge the authority's trustworthiness. Accordingly, a TT journalist wonders what to do if it gets crowded at workplaces and in public transport, if distance to others is impossible. The answer is that people must still try to keep their distance and follow the list of recommendations. Thus, the conclusion to be drawn from the discourse strand of face masks is that the PHA on certain occasions makes slight changes in its discursive strategy, but that these changes have no impact in practical life.

4.5.4 *Situatedness and Multimodality*

Situatedness is crucial for understanding the meaning-making through semiotic resources that takes place in the PHA's press conferences (see Van Leeuwen, 2005, 285). The communication in the press conference venue is affected by multiple factors: the development of the pandemic worldwide and in Sweden, discourses about the pandemic in other places or media, and the social and epistemological relation between the PHA and the journalists. Furthermore, the information provided in the press conferences should be accessible to everyone, no matter whether you follow them on place, broadcast on radio, television, or YouTube.

²²Vi tycker det är viktigt att man förhåller sig till rekommendationerna för smittan innan man får symptom. Därför är det viktigt att jobba hemifrån, hålla avstånd och använda munskydd när det är trängsel i kollektivtrafiken. Och att arbetsgivare tittar på situation där man har tätt vistelse under lång tid i mindre lokaler och beaktar munskydd och där finns det rekommendationer på vår webbplats kring den frågan.

The physical room of the press conferences is of special interest in relation to the use of multimodality. There is a clear pattern through all press conferences in the PHA's use of visual resources. All sessions start by the PHA showing and explaining a set of charts, diagrams, and statistics about the recent development of the pandemic in Sweden and internationally, advice for containing the spread of the virus, etc. The question session, on the other hand, is mainly oral without the additional visual resources, but the PHA often refers to the charts and statistics when answering journalists' questions. Thus, statistics, diagrams, and charts are used to emphasize the verbal information and thereby to build trust in the message as a whole. The importance attached to multimodality is finally illustrated at the end of all press conferences, when the PHA shows the poster with the advice that people should follow to protect themselves and others from the virus (Fig. 4.1). The sign says:

Slow down the infection by keeping your distance.
 Keep a distance from others both indoors and outdoors.
 Spend time in a small circle, avoid new close contacts.
 Stay at home even if you just feel a little sick.
 Work from home if possible. (PHA, 17 June 2021)

Bromsa smittan med att hålla avstånd

-  Håll avstånd till andra både inomhus och utomhus.
-  Umgås i en mindre krets, undvik nya nära kontakter.
-  Stanna hemma även om du bara känner dig lite sjuk.
-  Arbeta hemifrån om det finns möjlighet.

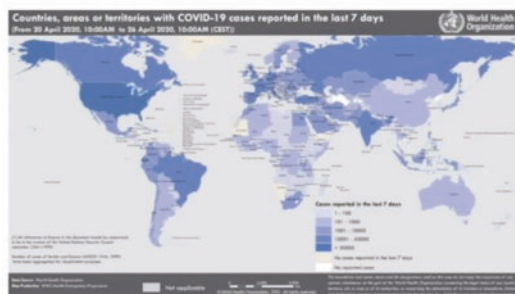
möjligt, undvika framförallt nya nära kontakter, stanna hemma om man är sju

17 juni 2021  Folkhälsomyndigheten



Fig. 4.1 A screenshot of protective measures presented on 17 June 2021, with the permission of the PHA

Fall globalt



världen, varav 200 000 avlidna

ungefär. 1,3 miljoner fal

27 april 2020



Folkhälsomyndigheten

- Cirka 2,9 miljoner fall och 206 000 döda i världen
- Cirka 1,1 miljon fall och 118 000 döda i Europa



Fig. 4.2 A screenshot from the PHA's press conference on 27 April 2020, with the permission of the PHA

Multimodality can be a double-edged sword, though. When overused, it can be confusing, since everything happens simultaneously. Hence, it is hard to know, as a listener or viewer, where to focus your attention. Figure 4.2 illustrates this situation with a lot of graphics, text, subtiting, and visual interpretation for those with impaired hearing.

Of course, viewers might learn over time how to focus and to read the multimodal signs at the press conferences. Still, everything that happens on the screen entails a large cognitive load that can make it difficult to absorb the message from the PHA in the video clips.

A press conference in the material that deviates in several ways from the usual pattern for the PHA's press conferences was the one on 17 June 2021. The introduction was unusually long, 13.5 minutes, as opposed to the usual 4–5 minutes. In addition, the PHA comes back when all other officials have spoken, which also deviates from the pattern. This press conference was just before the Midsummer weekend, which is an important Swedish family holiday. Themes for the day are that there is a continued reduction in the spread of Covid-19, but the PHA nevertheless emphasizes that citizens need to be aware of new outbreaks and that infection tracing is important. The general guidelines have been extended but adjustments are planned. People are encouraged to follow the advice: to

stay at home at the slightest symptom, avoid festivities with many guests, and socialize outdoors.

On the same day, the PHA's press conference routines or genre rules are put to the test from a somewhat unexpected angle. This time, it is not a critical question, but a journalist from a foreign news channel, in clear support of the PHA using visual resources to highlight the benefits of the Swedish pandemic strategy. Behind her, written texts such as "Award winner, A mother's quest for more common sense in the Pandemic, and Covid, Tango and the Lagom Way" idealize the PHA. All in all, it is difficult to understand and analyse what the journalist wants to say with all the illustrations behind her, but her positive attitude to the Swedish strategy and especially Anders Tegnell is clear. She portrays Tegnell, the Swedish head epidemiologist at the PHA, as a rock star. The text with the message *Tango and the Lagom Way* is not completely clear, but tango is a dance that requires two, i.e. "it takes two to tango". Possibly, it is the mutual trust between the PHA and the people in Sweden that is invoked, and that strategies in other countries are based on control and not on trustworthiness. The control strategy has in some countries led to protests in the streets.

Of special interest from a communicative point of view is perhaps the use of the word *lagom*, meaning "just right, not too much, not too little", and commonly seen as the essence of Swedish mentality. But the journalist's multimodal action during the press conference is absolutely not *lagom*, but a cornucopia of various images and statements to celebrate the beauty and adequacy of the Swedish Covid strategy. The word *lagom* therefore has a strong symbolic function, in this case not least since it relates to the expression *common sense* (*folkvett*; see Wodak, 2021, 16), which has a prominent place in the journalist's collage. In addition, her background screen shows a picture of Anders Tegnell, the PHA's representative at nearly all press conferences. She also requested permission to record the interview during question time. Doing this, the journalist broke the genre conventions of objectivity and distance that otherwise characterize the press conferences about Covid-19.

The PHA, in this case Anders Tegnell, makes no comment about the unorthodox background screen, but briefly refuses the journalist's request. The moderator then refers her to question time and hence shows that rules apply to everyone without exception. Seemingly, the PHA's trustworthiness as an authority remains unharmed thanks to these measures, since the situation is left uncommented by journalists present at the press conference, and elsewhere.

4.6 DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS OF THE ANALYSIS

Relating to the categories *discourse*, *texts*, *genres*, *situatedness*, and *discourse strands* (Wodak, 2021, 5–6), we discuss how the PHA handles the tension in the dialogue with the journalists, when trying to create and maintain trustworthiness. The discourse in this study concerns crisis communication in recorded press conferences where, in short, the Swedish pandemic strategy is presented and negotiated. Ultimately, the actual crisis is about people being afraid that they themselves, their relatives, or friends will catch Covid-19, become seriously ill and even die. We note that tension often arises in the dialogue between the PHA and the journalists. Of course, tension is an integral part of the press conference genre, but this is still a symptom that trustworthiness is at stake.

On the one hand, there are the representatives from the PHA providing facts and instructions about the pandemic, thus trying to calm and reduce anxiety in people living in Sweden. On the other hand, there are the journalists who, in their professional role, are representatives of the Swedish public, seek guidance and answers to very specific and often critical questions about protective measures that just about anyone would have asked, thereby challenging the soothing messages from the PHA.

The major difference between the PHA's press conferences and press conferences in general, is that those on Covid-19 are regularly scheduled. In fact, they were broadcast every weekday in the beginning of the pandemic. Another salient difference is that the PHA uses a range of multi-modal features, such as images and graphs, speech, text, and sign language to underline their trustworthiness, among other goals. Their oral presentations are at all times supported by a PowerPoint presentation. Oral comments explain the visual data most of the time but not always. Sometimes they collide, or the speaker may let data speak for itself by pointing to the PowerPoint saying nothing, where it could be appropriate to give an oral explanation, since it is not always clear what part of the image the PHA is referring to.

It could be said that the PHA's recorded press conferences are like the film *Groundhog Day*, about a man who has to relive the same day over and over again, only with some minor difference.²³ The situatedness contributes to this impression, since the events always have the same structure

²³The film was released in 1993, starring Bill Murray and Andie MacDowell, and directed by Harold Ramis.

and identical multimodal elements. In this respect, the press conferences are very predictable, and the attending public thus knows what to expect from them. Sometimes, though, technical problems cause difficulties in hearing what speakers say. The abundance of sound, text, image, sign language, and various people acting in the video may also cause cognitive overload and make it difficult to absorb the information, despite the fact that all these semiotic resources are justified by accessibility.

During question sessions, it becomes apparent that the journalists often want to address topics not introduced by the PHA at the beginning of the press conference, such as statistical methods for calculating the number of deaths or the usefulness of face masks. There is thus a discrepancy between information requested and information given, resulting in communicative battles between the PHA and the journalists. Sometimes it can be difficult for the general public to follow these battles, since they often concern issues requiring some degree of medical or statistical expertise.

The PHA has a communication problem, because they have to teach people new behavioural patterns to stop the pandemic and to convince people that their strategy is right. On the one hand, they are expected to provide general advice and recommendations during the pandemic. On the other hand, they are not allowed to issue any form of restrictions to prevent the spread of Covid-19. Only the government can do that. This ambivalent position, being in between the government and the public, could be difficult for the PHA to manage. In this study, there are indications of these difficulties in the discourse strand about face masks, where we noticed a discursive shift, from a negative view towards a more positive view. This discursive shift did not result in any change in the PHA's recommended protective measures, though. We cannot ignore the possibility that the reluctance to add face masks to their otherwise relatively short and invariable list of recommendations, can be connected to their ambivalent position, and the fact that recommendations from the PHA are not even close to coercive measures.

At the start of the pandemic, there is a lack of research data on Covid-19, and the situation is constantly changing, but as the analysis shows, the longer the pandemic progresses, the more research results are presented. Clear information about death numbers and protective measures is required for the public at all times, but the information and advice given often appear like oscillation between vagueness and certainty, which can

create uncertainty about how citizens should relate to the pandemic in different situations. For example, in the discourse strand about death numbers, the PHA expresses certainty in its own strategy, claiming that the situation is always under control. At the same time, they apply a vague communicative strategy when asked direct questions about deaths or statistics from the journalists, as they often avoid the actual question, often pointing to their general pandemic strategy, or sometimes even invalidating the question. In these cases, the PHA uses repetition as a rhetorical tool, saying it is important to keep the curve down, reduce the spread, protect the elderly, etc. Finally, they seem more willing to talk about deaths when numbers are low than when they are high, and this adds to the impression of vagueness in their communication. This vagueness in communication appears to open for questions about precisely the matters the PHA does not want to talk about, namely statistical methods, deviations, and international comparisons.

We observed the same communicative pattern in the discourse strand about face masks, i.e. reluctance to address the issue and vagueness in expression. For example, the PHA spokesmen never bring up face masks in their introductions to the press conferences. Referring to the weak scientific basis for a widespread use of face masks, it seems as if they try to neutralize the issue, even though they never address the shortcomings of the studies mentioned. Further, questions about whether it is time to recommend face masks in public spaces are regularly met with references to the PHA's standard list of protective measures; repetition is a frequent rhetorical tool in these situations.

The PHA wants to spread its message, and the journalists want to take the information from the press conferences and turn it into spoken and written news. The present study revolves around issues of trust and trustworthiness. The central question is whether the PHA's communication about the spread of the infection is trustworthy in the eyes of the journalists as representatives of the public. The answer seems to be that it depends on varying factors. Their vague rhetorical strategies, together with the reluctance to address topics where journalists seek answers, may pose threats to their trustworthiness. Their consistency in keeping to their pandemic strategy, only rarely making minimal changes in their list of protective measures, may on the contrary have signalled stability and thereby reinforced their trustworthiness.

REFERENCES

- Bauhn, P. (2020, May 27). Förtjänar Folkhälsomyndigheten folkets förtroende? In *Kvartal*. Accessed November 29, 2022, from <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:lnu:diva-95247>.
- Eikström, M., & Eriksson, G. (2018). Press conferences. In R. Wodak & B. Forchtner (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of language and politics*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315183718>
- Eriksson, G., Larsson, L., & Moberg, U. (2013). *Politikernas arena: En studie om presskonferenser på regeringsnivå*. Studentlitteratur.
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2020). *Multimodal discourse: The modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*. MTM.
- Ledin, P. (1996). *Genrebegreppet: En forskningsöversikt*. Institutionen för nordiska språk. <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:oru:diva-32804>
- Luhmann, N. (1979). *Trust and power*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Luhmann, N. (1988). Familiarity, confidence, trust: Problems and alternatives. In D. Gambetta (Ed.), *Trust: Making and breaking cooperative relations* (pp. 94–107). Basil Blackwell.
- Näslund, L. (2018). Förtroende och tillit – vad är det? In *Organisation & Sambälle - Svensk företagsekonomisk tidskrift*. Accessed November 25, 2022, from <https://org-sam.se/fortroende-och-tillit-vad-ar-det-av-lovisa-naslund-2/>.
- PHA Folkhälsomyndigheten. (2021a). Accessed November 25, 2022, from <www.youtube.com/channel/UCQFL1Ag69yNLvR-ULHQKbTg>.
- PHA Folkhälsomyndigheten. (2021b). Scenarier för fortsatt spridning – delrapport 6. Delrapport inom regeringsuppdraget att löpande uppdatera scenarier för hur smittspridningen av det virus som orsakar sjukdomen covid-19 kan komma att utvecklas framöver. Accessed 25 November, 2022, from <https://www.folkhalsomyndigheten.se/contentassets/9ff003627b8a4a1a881f34844f0fcc0a/scenarier-fortsatta-spridning-delrapport-6.pdf>.
- Reisigl, M., & Wodak, R. (2001). *Discourse and discrimination: The Rhetorics of racism and antisemitism*. Routledge.
- Rheindorf, M. (2019). *Revisiting the toolbox of discourse studies*. Palgrave.
- Rocklöv, J., Lundbäck, B., Larsson, E., Elgh, F., Sjödin, H., & Olsen, B. (2020). Sverige bör byta strategi för att bromsa spridning av coronaviruset. *Läkartidningen*, 117, FZ7R.
- Sjölander-Lindqvist, A., Larsson, S., Fava, N., Gillberg, N., Marciàno, C., & Cinque, S. (2020). Communicating about COVID-19 in four European countries: Similarities and differences in National Discourses in Germany, Italy, Spain, and Sweden. *Frontiers in Communication*, 5, 593325. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2020.593325>

- Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge University Press.
- van Dijk, T. A. (1991). *Racism and the press*. Routledge.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2005). *Introducing social semiotics*. Psychology Press.
- Varghese, N. E., Sabat, I., Neumann-Böhme, S., Schreyögg, J., Stargardt, T., & Torbica, A. (2021). Risk communication during COVID-19: A descriptive study on familiarity with, adherence to and trust in the WHO preventive measures. *PLoS One*, 16, e0250872. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0250872>
- Wodak, R. (2021). *Crisis communication and crisis management during COVID-19*. University of Lancaster, Vienna University, Bristol University Press.
- World Health Organization. (2021). Accessed 25 November, 2022, from <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/advice-for-public/when-and-how-to-use-masks>.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.



PART II

Personal Quests for Empirical Truth:
Testimony and Media Hybridity



Unveiling Truth and Truthfulness in the Graphic Memoir *Heimat*

Camila Augusta P. de Figueiredo

5.1 INTRODUCTION

During the last decades, graphic narratives have conquered a stable and legitimate position in popular culture, not to mention a high-valued status among other types of literary and visual media. The popularity of graphic narratives was consolidated upon several cases of successful autobiographical and biographical comics published especially since the 1970s, which found their way of expressing personal and collective experiences through a fruitful combination of images and text.

Also known as *graphic memoirs*, these (auto)biographical comics or graphic novels are of particular interest when truth claims and truthfulness are concerned. As a convention of the genre, it is always expected that autobiographical works relate to some kind of truthfulness to actual events. Graphic memoirs mediate truthfulness by using a particular combination of verbal and visual modes, more dependent on media representation than fictional comics and graphic novels. As subjective life reports,

C. A. P. de Figueiredo (✉)

Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG), Belo Horizonte, Brazil
e-mail: capf@ufmg.br

© The Author(s) 2024

B. Schirrmacher, N. Mousavi (eds.), *Truth Claims Across Media*,
Palgrave Studies in Intermediality,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42064-1_5

their focus is on individual truthfulness, although they are also supposed to be truthful to collective historical events, in order to increase a sense of veracity.

Heimat: A German Family Album is a graphic memoir by author and illustrator Nora Krug, named Best Book of 2018 by *The Guardian* and *The New York Times*' critics and winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Autobiography. In *Heimat*, Nora Krug, an émigré from Germany living for more than a decade in the United States, explores the idea of German collective guilt over the Holocaust. The memoir, however, focuses on guilt from an individual, more subjective perspective, as the author turns to her own family's past.

In an attempt to identify the reason for the guilt and shame she has always felt when identifying herself as a German citizen, Krug goes back to her childhood. The author then revisits her education: How she was taught in school about the Holocaust, the first visit to a concentration camp, a school assignment in which she had to analyze a speech of Hitler, etc. However, because these topics were taught in a way that felt too impersonal, they did not help her understand her feeling of unease about her national identity. Paradoxically, after living in America for many years, she felt more German than ever, despite her efforts to hide her identity. To better understand her discomfort, she then decides to look back, to "follow the bread crumbs" (Krug, 2018, [46])¹ in hope they will lead to the home—*Heimat*—she has lost.

As the author visits and collects information in historical sites, flea markets, libraries, documentation centers, and talks to family members and historians, one follows her quest to reconstruct the past in order to truly know whether any of her relatives from the South German towns of Karlsruhe or Kilsheim took part in the Nazi Party or professed any political views during the regime.

As it happens with other graphic memoirs—in which drawings are combined with other represented media such as photographs, as well as reproductions of objects and historical documents of various sources—, in *Heimat* most of the times the represented media bear a direct correspondence to extradiegetic reality and to historical facts and events. This enhances authenticity and confirms the veracity of certain facts and stories the author has heard, seen, or read at some moment in her life. However,

¹Here and in the following quotations from *Heimat* the approximate page number will appear between brackets, since the edition consulted does not contain page numbers.

there are also some key moments in which these representations leave room for interpretation or simply contradict the information previously known as true.

In this text, I intend to examine how the medial configurations of graphic memoirs can communicate truthfulness. In order to do this, I will briefly comment on some examples of graphic memoirs and then concentrate on the specific case of *Heimat*. What are the effects of the heteromedial aspects of the graphic novel (Bruhn, 2010)—the blending of text- and image-based medial configurations—in the way we perceive truthfulness? How do we perceive them to be truthful or how do they claim to be reliable (truth claims) or create a truthful perception of the world?

In the following section, I will discuss the notion of truthfulness in mediated communication, relying on Lars Elleström's framework for that purpose; next, I will examine the established tradition in graphic narratives of using media representation, transmediation, and associated media products in order to claim truthfulness, so that readers accept them as valid demonstrations of a factual narrative. Then I will present the case of *Heimat*, demonstrating how this is not always the case with Krug's work. Finally, I will propose an explanation of the possible cause for this deviation from the traditional use of media representation in graphic memoirs to convey truthfulness.

5.2 TRUTHFULNESS IN MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

Truthfulness can be understood as the consistent representation of the world as we know it. In mediated communication, two different domains act in the mind of the perceiver of media products, as Lars Elleström explains:

the intracommunicational, created in the act of communication, and the extracommunicational, existing prior to and outside the act of communication. The two basic functions of indices in communication can hence be identified as intracommunicational indexicality (internal coherence) and extracommunicational indexicality (external truthfulness). (2018, 424)

While intracommunicational indexicality puts together the different modes of a media product in an integrated, coherent manner, the extracommunicational domain is formed in one's mind and includes experiences of both objective and subjective matters. Truthfulness, thus, is built

upon two pillars: How coherently indices are communicated and how they consistently relate to our world of information, experiences, and perceptions. Together, they manage to transform information into knowledge and put it into a convincing context.

Nonfiction works such as autobiographical ones, for example, are expected to present certain coherent indices and establish a consistent relation to our world of information; they must present external truthfulness. In opposition, in fiction, not the same amount of external truthfulness is expected. Works of fiction therefore may also present indices that can diverge from our past experiences, knowledge, and perceptions.

Because individuals have different worldviews, the idea of truthfulness is intricately based on each one's perception and experiences of the world. What comes as truthful for one may not be so much for another person. It is, therefore, important to distinguish truthfulness from truth. According to Lars Elleström, the notion of truthfulness

is thus to be understood as a conceived communicative trait, not to be confused with truth, understood as a feature of the actual, never fully accessible world. However, truth may possibly be approached through accumulated truthful communication and the observation of effects of further action on the basis of conceived truthfulness. (2018, 437)

As essential parts of the communicative process, different media have different ways of expressing truthfulness when referring to facts and stories being told or shown. As a communicative trait, Elleström explains that one can understand the idea of different kinds of truthfulness that are expected to be present in certain kinds of media types, but not in others.

As graphic memoirs usually tell (auto)biographical narratives, one expects them to be strongly truthful to some of the protagonist's real-life events and sometimes to events related to collective history. In order to establish truthfulness, it is more likely these works include photographs of factual events, of the protagonist, of their relatives, or of objects that are meaningful to them. They are also supposed to make real connections to persons, places and events, ideas and emotions.

5.3 TRUTHFULNESS IN COMICS AND IN GRAPHIC MEMOIRS

During the 1960s, the American underground movement developed as a reaction to the enforcement of content control in comics that took place in the previous decades. It was a period of fertile production of comics aiming for a more mature audience. They mainly focused on themes forbidden by the Comics Code Authority, including drug use, sexuality, and violence. Among others, well-known artists from this period are Robert Crumb, Aline Kominsky-Crumb, Art Spiegelman, and Trina Robbins.

The next decade saw the prominence of autobiographical comics, among them Harvey Pekar's *American Splendor* (1976–2008)—written by Pekar but illustrated by a variety of artists—which narrated events of his daily life as a file clerk. As Domingos and Cardoso explain, as they turned to biographical and autobiographical stories,

comics began to concern themselves with portraying daily life drawn from the experiences of the author or the observed character, in the form of personal stories, family stories, or common dramas often intertwined with great facts of history. In this context, involvement with the characters' psychological, sentimental, and motivational issues emerges—illustrated by memory flashbacks—whose subjective nature reveals interpretations and opinions made in a very personal and particular way. (2021, 85–6).

Comics and graphic novels are media types that are characterized by a specific set of modes: They are solid, visual, two-dimensional, with static illustrations (whether digitally or hand-drawn), positioned in sequence in order to communicate a narrative. These images are generally displayed within frames, and sounds such as speech and noises are usually represented by letters located inside of balloons of different shapes.

Despite having similar medial modes, I observe that graphic memoirs can differ slightly from other genres of comics and graphic novels in one aspect. In graphic memoirs technical media that appeal to visual modes are represented in a more diverse manner: Besides digital illustrations and/or handmade drawings, photographs, paintings, photographic documents, and objects are represented more frequently. In other genres of comics and graphic novels, the artist's drawings usually have prominence over other types of media; representations of other media will probably have a more accessory role in the narrative. More specifically, as qualified media

types,² graphic memoirs tend to differ from fictional comics in terms of media representations, transmediations, and associated media products.

Media representation is a type of media transformation in which one medium represents another, such as a news article describing the performance of a play or a photograph depicting a dance performance. The other type of media transformation, according to Lars Elleström, is transmediation, the “repeated representation of media traits, such as a children’s book that tells the same story as a computer game” (2014, 12). In *Heimat*, for instance, family narratives are transmediated when Krug’s relatives, acquaintances, and professionals such as librarians and collectors are interviewed, and parts of their accounts are transcribed by the author.

Associated media products designate data or material such as other publications, data, documents, photographs that help establish real connections to the extracommunicational domain. They are not necessarily present in the media product analyzed, but they offer some habitual signs that, in relation to this media product, create coherence to it and thus convey a stronger sense of truthfulness. Scientific articles, for instance, composed by certain specific symbols and signs, often rely on expected indices in associated media products (such as other scientific publications, which in general are believed to be truthful to external facts) to create truthfulness (Elleström, 2020, 42).

In graphic memoirs media representations, transmediations, and associated media products are common features, meant to emphasize indexical modes, so that they are truthful to or hold a higher correspondence with actual events and their accounts in history, whether individual or collective. Graphic memoirs thus create indexicality through the intermedial relations established by associated media products, transmediations, and media representations, so that readers accept them as valid representations of a factual event.

As this media type forcefully relates to historical or past narratives or experiences, the representation of documents, photographs, and other visual materials related to the nonfictional characters is thus a key element in graphic memoirs. In order to ensure credibility to the story being told, they present a factual narrative elaborated by means of a combination of

²According to Lars Elleström, “[q]ualified media types are simply categories of media products grounded not only on basic media modality modes but further qualified.” (2020, 55).

iconic signs (drawings) and indexical signs (photographs and photographic quality objects, documents, newspaper, and magazine pages).

Perhaps the most common type of media representation in comics and in graphic novels is the photograph. As Thierry Groensteen (2014) reminds us, photography and modern comics were born at around the same time in the nineteenth century. The photographic technique of motion capture developed by Eadweard Muybridge inspired cartoonists to elaborate a sequence of drawings based on the repetition of scenes from a fixed point of view, with slight variations of movement.

After the Second World War, photography was used as the basis for some Italian romantic stories with movie celebrities, as the ones artist Walter Molino illustrated for the *Grand Hotel* magazine, starting in 1946. In France, the genre *roman-photo* became popular in the 1960s; in opposition to the Italian version, the French magazines reproduced the photographs, not drawings based on them.

Based on Groensteen's historical account on the relation between comics and photography, one notices that in these early initiatives photographs aimed less at documentation and more at an approximation with the materiality and the sequentiality of the cinematic image.

A different approach to photography is observed in some works by Jacques Tardi and Hergé. As Groensteen points out, these artists are known to represent photographs from postcards and newspaper pages in drawings. Expanding this idea, in *Fun Home*, Alison Bechdel uses photographs throughout the book: Hand-drawn illustrations simulate the indexicality of photographs. Photographs that appear within the comics frame are depicted in a more realistic way, as in a double-page spread in which the author holds a photograph taken by their father of the family's yardwork assistant/babysitter Roy, during a vacation (2007, 100–01).

Yet, when drawings represent photographs, the referent might not be completely truthful to actual events. Groensteen points out that artists can create or simulate details that are not present in the photographic image, so the drawing image leaves room for doubt whether it is a truthful representation of an actual photograph or not.

A third type of use of photography in comics is the reproduction of the photographic image as itself, that is, the photograph is displayed in its particular materiality. Specifically when family photographs are reproduced, frames are usually explicitly shown. This happens, for example, in *Maus* (2003 [1991] 294), by Art Spiegelman, when Anja receives a letter from her husband Vladek with a photograph of him. In opposition to

Spiegelman's drawing style, the photograph is less figurative, which highlights the different modality of the photographic image in relation to the drawn ones. The fact that the photograph appears dislocated from the comics frame also contributes to emphasize its different modality.

Besides family, landscape, and historical events, photographic images can also reproduce other elements such as documents, letters, reports, and objects of several kinds. In *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo and Me*, for instance, Ellen Forney reproduces photographs of her own sketchbook: First, one sees it closed, with its cover and a black wire-O binding; then, opened, revealing some of her sketches (2012, 70, 93).

The reproduction of photographic objects reinforces the sense of veracity of the events and subjects portrayed in the narrative. Reproduced in their own materiality, documents and objects confer a greater sense of external truthfulness if compared to drawn images based on photographs.

Photographs have an indexical capacity to represent reality, so when they are present in graphic narratives, photographs are usually associated with the notions of "factual," "reality," and "proof," especially in those genres that retell historical events or personal memories, the graphic memoirs. For Peirce, photographs are "produced under such circumstances that they [are] physically forced to correspond point by point to nature." As indices, they are "in certain respects exactly like the objects they represent" (qtd. in Elleström, 2018, 426).

Yet, one may observe certain nuances in the use of photography as evidence for factual events in graphic memoirs, as Pedri suggests:

In both nonfictional and creative life writing, photography rarely operates as indisputable documentary evidence that corroborates, validates, or even establishes claims of empirical truth. Instead, the photograph's evidential value is oftentimes undercut by a number of narrative choices that force readers to question what exactly underlies the photographic documentary. (2008, 162)

In the next sections I will address the different ways photographs communicate truthfulness in *Heimat*, focusing on some distinct forms of media transformation.

5.4 MEDIA REPRESENTATION, TRANSMEDIATION, AND ASSOCIATED MEDIA IN *HEIMAT*

As a graphic memoir, *Heimat* displays a combination between different media types. Drawings and photographs are combined with hand-written text in a scrapbook style. The fact that the text is handwritten, not typed, emphasizes the idea of a first-person testimonial, truthful to the author's personal experience. Krug chooses handwritten text to write what she has heard from relatives and from people she interviewed.

Concerning drawings, a traditional characteristic of comics and graphic memoirs, Nora Krug uses them mostly when no documental evidence that could be photographically represented is available, so she had to use her imagination. Therefore, while Krug recounts her findings and retells the history of her family, she also writes and draws details of what might have happened when facts were not completely available. Besides the fact that every drawn image holds a unique "signature," with the artist's style imprinted through particular traces and colors, drawn images, as Wolk points out, are "necessarily mediated; they present 'the way the artist's mind interprets sight'" (qtd in Pedri, 2008, 7).

Using both hand-written text and drawn images, for example, Krug mediates the scenarios for the deaths of her relatives Karl-Joseph in 1888 (who she was told fell down the stairs), Franz-Karl in 1944 (who fell in the War), Alois in 1947 (who fell off a tractor), and August in 1968 (who fell while climbing up some stairs). She also reimagines the scenes her uncle Franz-Karl experienced during the War, according to passages described in a letter he wrote to her aunt Annemarie in 1944. And, in one more example, she illustrates a possible scenario in which her grandfather Willi could see, from his office across the street, the burning of a synagogue during the November pogroms in 1938.

For Reingold, in this process of filling in the gaps with drawings where documents were lacking, Krug also offers her own point of view of past experiences and events. Her exploration of the past, although carefully conducted, is "always presented in ways which reflect the ways she wants to see the past, which more often than not revolve around a desire to see her grandfather as being a victim of history, as opposed to being a perpetrator of it" (2019, 558).

Besides the hand-drawn text and drawings, the book makes intensive use of associated and represented media, another strategy aiming for external truthfulness to the facts of the story being narrated.

As the subtitle for the UK edition³ announces, *Heimat* is a family album, that is, it contains family photographs of Nora Krug and her relatives. Family photographs are reproduced with an emphasis on their materiality rather than hand-drawn illustrations simulating the detailed iconicity of photographs. This means the photographs are reproduced in their particular materiality.

Besides the media representation of photographs, other strategies help characterize the book as a family album. First, photographs are represented on a page that imitates a notebook lined or graph paper, a kraft paper, a paper with wrinkles and frayed edges, etc. Sometimes a representation of a scotch tape is also visible, “holding” the photographs on the page. In the opening page to each chapter, there is an image representing a vintage gummed label with red borders, similar to those used in children’s old notebooks but also typical of photograph albums tags. Next to each photograph, there are captions on strips of paper with Krug’s handwriting.

Together with the media representation of photographs, these strategies reinforce the idea of a photo album, a procedure that Irina O. Rajewsky (2005) calls *intermedial reference* and that produces an “*as if*-effect,” an illusion-forming quality of a medium simulating the characteristics of another medium, in this case a book simulating a family album.

In addition to Nora Krug’s family photographs, there are also several representations of historical photographs, moments of factual relevance to the narrative. Figures 5.1 and 5.2 show one example of a personal photograph and one of a historical event.

In the book, the page with Krug’s mother dressed as a poisonous mushroom in 1953 is followed by a hand-written note saying that, until today, “she remembers the moment the picture was taken because of how disappointed she was that she couldn’t be a princess, instead” (Krug, 2018, [60]). This page comes after the translation of an excerpt from her uncle’s notebook, a school assignment written by him in 1939 that describes the Jews as poisonous mushrooms. It also follows a page of Krug’s own

³Whereas the title of the British edition (Penguin UK, 2018) is a direct translation of the German title, *Heimat: Ein Deutsches Familienalbum*, the title for the American edition (Scribner, 2018) is: *Belonging: A German Reckons with History and Home*.

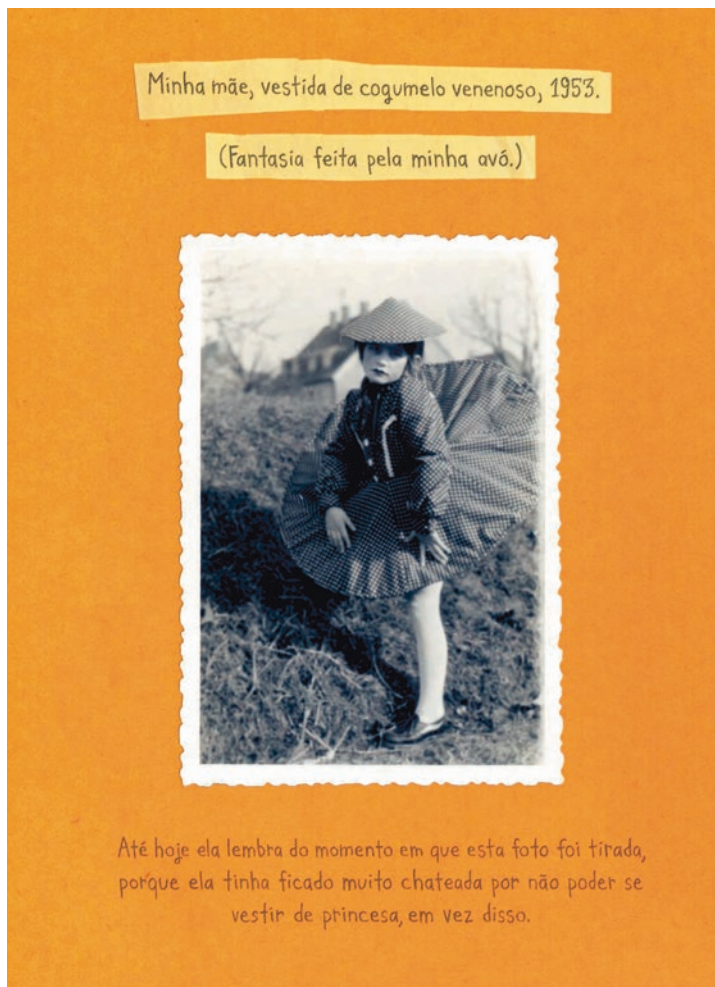


Fig. 5.1 A family photograph (Krug, 2019 [67])

notebook, describing *das Pilze-Sammeln* [mushroom collecting] as a typically German family activity and adding that the “red-and-white-polka-dotted mushroom” (Krug, 2018, [59]) is a symbol of good luck, appearing in New Year’s greeting cards and in marzipan sweets made in its shape. One can therefore understand the photograph of her mother being dressed



Fig. 5.2 A photograph of a historical event (Krug, 2019 [26])

as the talismanic (and poisonous) toadstool first as a thematic contiguity to the previous pages. Then, the photograph adds veracity to the author's claim that mushrooms, and in particular the red-and-white toadstool, are a common element in German culture, and that it reminds her of her family. Finally, one can establish a link between the negative feelings her uncle

and her mother had about poisonous mushrooms when they were children, albeit for different reasons.

The second example is the third page in a sequence with historical photographs from the period after the end of the War. Nora Krug tries to recall the first time she ever saw pictures of the Holocaust. She presents two pages with pictures portraying civilians who lived in towns surrounding the concentration camps being forced to look at the dead bodies. Their expressions vary from disgusted to horrified, from upset to shocked. In the third page of the sequence one sees a photograph of the Allies forcing local farmers to drive bodies through the streets on the way to the burial site, for everyone to see. Next, Krug adds a page with two pictures she took on a class trip to concentration camp Birkenau, in 1994. The author translates the facial expressions of her classmates in the photographs: “Here was the evidence of our collective guilt” (Krug, 2018, [22]). Here, the author establishes a coherent thematic thread using both historical and private photographs, that display unknown people’s and her acquaintances’ reactions to the atrocities of the Holocaust. The way the photographs are organized and presented establish a collective factual context for the narrative and then move to an individual one, both appropriately proven by means of represented photographs. In other words, Krug draws on external truthfulness of publicly historical photographs to create internal coherence with her individual experience.

Besides family and historical photographs, the photographic image of objects, documents, letters, reports, postcards, newspaper announcements, old maps, etc. is also a common type of media representation in *Heimat*. Figure 5.3 shows a page with a photographic reproduction of Krug’s grandfather’s military documents the author manages to retrieve during a visit to her old house in Karlsruhe. The page is the last from a series with photographic reproductions of contents found in an old shoebox: One photograph of a group of soldiers digging a road, of her grandfather Willi wearing a Wehrmacht uniform, and some pictures of Knokke, a seaside city in West Flanders where he was supposedly stationed during the Second World War. In this page, we see a photographic image of Willi’s *Soldbuch*, a booklet that served as an identity card and pay book for military services and that contained all the ranks he occupied and places he served. The information available proved that what her aunt Karin had told her, that her grandfather had been a prisoner of War in Belgium, was not true, because he was declared unfit for service 2 years before Knokke was liberated by the Canadian army. The documents represented are a



Fig. 5.3 A photographic reproduction of military documents (Krug, 2019 [108])

proof of Krug's findings; more than if Krug had drawn it or written about it, the photograph offers the reader an increased sense of truthfulness about Willi Rock's participation in military services.

Besides the main narrative that follows the process of Krug's investigation, alternating between the history of her mother's and her father's

family, the memoir also contains two thematic sections that recur throughout the book at the end of the chapters. The first is “From the scrapbook of a memory archivist” (appearing in Chaps. 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, and 10), in which the author collates several small objects dated back from the War and found, most of the times, in flea markets and antiques fairs. These are toys, trading cards, brooches, drawings, letters, and postcards, among other items, which help contextualize the narrative, so that the author and the reader feel closer to the time in which some events narrated take place.

In the second section, called “From the notebook of a homesick émigré” (located in the introduction, in Chaps. 1, 3, 4, 6, 12, and in the epilogue), the author draws objects that she feels are typically German or that she misses while living in America: *Hansaplast* (a kind of band-aid); *der Wald* (the forest); *das Pilze-Sammeln* (collecting mushroom); *Leitz Aktenordner* (a type of binder); *die Wärmflasche* (hot water bag); *das Brot* (German bread); *die Gallseife* (bile soap); *Uhu* (a brand of super glue).

For Elleström, objects such as those in the two sections (represented photographically and drawn) “may have an external material facet in that they reach out to the material through recollection of former sensory perception of materiality” (2018, 4–5). The objects found in these sections not only reactivate former sensory perceptions of materiality but also trigger emotional responses related to the author’s childhood.

Aside from media representations, associated media products also play an important role in *Heimat*. These media products are materials that, in general, are used during the process of research of historical events: digital and physical archives, old objects from specific historical periods, accounts from witnesses and professionals (librarians, collectors, etc.). From a broad perspective, they compose a source of indices with real connections to the extracommunicational domain that create coherence with the narrative of the graphic memoir. A document file found in a city archive is considered truthful to a certain historical event. An object that looks old is usually believed to have been produced and used during a certain period of time. As Elleström explains (2020, 42), associated media products are important because media products cannot be said to be truthful in isolation; they depend on connections to other associated media products to be perceived as coherent and, in some cases, truthful. Consequently, when media representations of historical documents appear in *Heimat*, for instance, one tends to assume, based on associated media products, that they are truthful to factual events.

Finally, it is also important to mention the way different media are combined in the work and how it affects its visual aesthetics. Concerning the process of creation of *Heimat*, all the different medial elements chosen by the author to compose a certain page are manually but also digitally manipulated in a process she herself designates as *collage*.

This technical procedure, with French roots in the *papiers collés*, appropriates an element conceived for a certain particular use and thus promotes an illusion effect by creating a rupture in its materiality. In collage, each “cited” element breaks the continuity or the linearity of the discourse and leads necessarily to a double reading: that of the fragment perceived in relation to its text of origin; or of the same fragment incorporated into a new whole, a different totality (Perloff, 1993).

According to Nora Krug, the technique was chosen intentionally. First, because combining hand-drawn elements with photographic representations would enhance authenticity to the reader to external truthfulness. In that case, the heavy use of photographs throughout the book when referring to a particular moment in history conveys a stronger sense of proximity to facts: “it is more powerful to experience this moment firsthand in the photograph” (Kamaras, 2018).

In addition, collage was chosen because, in her opinion, the technique combines with the fragmentary and visual nature of memory, considering that “history is an accumulation of visual experiences... moments in time that we then make sense of it in retrospect” (Wagner, 2019).

5.5 COMMUNICATING TRUTHFULNESS IN *HEIMAT*

In graphic memoirs, as said, photographed representations are indices that prove that a certain object and situation did happen or exist, conferring a greater sense of truthfulness to the narrative. In *Heimat*, all the elements represented are important to the process of reconstruction of certain historical events connected to the past of Nora Krug’s family. The unveiling of her past becomes a necessary path towards a better comprehension of her own German identity.

Being away from Germany for almost two decades was important for Nora Krug to want to look back and find out more about her own identity. Distance was essential for her to formulate the questions *Heimat* attempts to answer, including those about the sense of collective and individual guilt that has always disturbed her. Guilt about the Holocaust, for her, is a feeling that has been widely explored in a collective sense, in a

national scope, but not individually. The idea to investigate one's own family is definitely not a comfortable one, so the fact that she remained at a certain distance from some of her relatives and from Germany contributed to making it less difficult.

The feeling that she had to be ashamed of her national identity was noticed with more intensity during her teenage years and it remained with her. After 12 years living in America, she confesses that she still hides her accent and “not even marrying a Jewish man has lessened [her] German shame” (Krug, 2018, [34–35]). And, in 2014, during the FIFA World Cup, she feels uncomfortable when she reads the newspaper headlines that followed Germany's victory over Brazil by 7x1: “Brazil left humiliated by Germany's dominance,” “the Germans were merciless,” “a soccer massacre of the highest order” (ibid., [42]).

Despite learning about it in school and visiting concentration camps, she felt the Holocaust was an event far from her own history, always related to other people. So, even though the feeling of guilt was present, it was also abstract. And, in her own family, talking about the War had always been a taboo, which did not help her comprehend the reason for her emotions.

The need to understand more about the reasons for this guilt she feels is what motivates Nora Krug to investigate the past of her country and of her family. The initiative to write and illustrate *Heimat* comes, then, from a struggle to comprehend the meaning of this German word, a place “with which a person... associates an immediate sense of familiarity” (ibid., [27]). *Heimat* also takes an important step in its attempt to connect past events to the present, trying to make sense of “the effect history has over generations and of the role that the memory of war, collective and personal, plays in the shaping of cultural identity” (Kamaras, 2018).

Aleida Assmann observes that this is a tendency in contemporary German literature, which has dealt with national, large-scale history through individual and family memory. This reorientation from large-scale history to individual memory is typical of the shift from second to third generational narratives. While the second generation was marked by narratives of conflict and breaks with their parents, “this third generation is now much more concerned with seeking its place in a continuous family history, however troubled and ruptured that continuity might be” (2006, 192–93). This is certainly the case with Nora Krug's attempt to reconstruct her family history, which does not aim at criticizing or accusing her relatives. As she sometimes questions and confronts their accounts with

newly found information, Krug's desire is primarily to understand where her guilty legacy as a German comes from in order to feel more comfortable with her identity.

As Matt Reingold observes, in the beginning of the book Krug's definition of *Heimat* is connected to a physical space, as she believes that her feeling of dislocation is due to a rupture with her land as a place. However, over the course of the work she comes to realize that the idea of *Heimat* is not physical, but refers to "the emotional and psychological connection to the people and the objects who inhabit that land in the past and present" (2019, 556). And, finally, as she becomes aware of this, she starts searching for *Heimat* in time, by looking back at her family's history in relation to the War.

"Perhaps the only way to find the Heimat that I've lost is to look back, to move beyond the abstract shame and ask those questions that are really difficult to ask," (Krug, 2018, [46]) she ponders in the beginning of the narrative. These difficult questions refer to the participation of her closer family members and relatives in the Nazi regime, especially her uncle Franz-Karl, who died in the War, and her grandfather Willi. The 15 chapters alternate narrating parts of Krug's process of research about the two of them.

An important characteristic of *Heimat* is that it does not present Krug's findings from the start but, instead, narrates her process of research. In this sense, because of this idea of an in-progress investigation, at times readers might feel they are following a detective story, impersonating one of those traditional sidekick figures of private investigators. Instead of only establishing truthfulness by media representation of photographs and documents, *Heimat* highlights the author's attempts to create truthfulness particularly by comparing media representations with transmediations of relatives' and acquaintances' accounts.

As explained, in graphic memoirs photographs, testimonials, and documents will hold, in general, a high sense of truthfulness to factual data. However, in *Heimat*, photographic and documental evidence sometimes conflict with previous information the author had, so that her certainties (and her relatives') are questioned from time to time. Thus it is a common narrative structure throughout the book to confront what she had been told by her relatives about her family members' participation in the War with found material from that time. In other words, one comes across some instances of diverging knowledge—what Krug's relatives say versus

what the photographs and photographed documents show. She is constantly wondering to what extent she can trust their testimonials about other family members, especially in a context in which the lives of the people who were against the Nazi regime were at a great risk. Moreover, at some moments, even the represented media will not be sufficient to clarify the motives behind her relative's actions.

This idea coincides with what Ann Cvetkovich (2008) calls “archive of feelings” in graphic memoirs, the interpretation of the photograph from the point of view of the narrator as an adult. Placing text next to the photographs, Krug adds a layer of meaning to them, revisiting the evidenced fact through her perspective and asking what it means and how it fits her account. As I have observed and the examples that follow may illuminate, this happens rather systematically whenever her uncle and grandfather are concerned.

From conversations with relatives, she had always been told her uncle was a well-behaved boy. Her aunt Annemarie, the only person still alive who knew him, confirms that her uncle was “diligent. Cheerful. Humane” (Krug, 2018, [251]). She decides to look for more information about him:

My uncle was a complete stranger to me. I didn't know anyone who had known him. War and death were the only things I associated with him. Because he had been one of Hitler's soldiers, I learned early on that I wasn't supposed to feel sadness over his premature death. His photos and exercise books were the only physical evidence of his existence.... (ibid. [55])

The author finds the first evidence that her uncle may not have been a good guy after all, or that the idea some people have of good behavior does not coincide with her own. As briefly mentioned before, in an old notebook that belonged to her uncle, the author identifies a passage in a school essay in which he compares Jews to a poisonous mushroom: “Just like the poisonous mushroom can kill a whole family, the Jew can kill a whole people” (ibid., [57]). That is a document that contradicts what she knew about him, and she ponders that he was 12 years old when he wrote that essay, “too young to understand the power of Nazi propaganda. But old enough to understand that Jews are not like poisonous mushrooms,” (ibid., [64]) which led her to another question to herself: “Was he proud to fight in the War?” (ibid., [67]).

However, it is perhaps in relation to her grandfather Willi that Nora Krug finds the largest number of conflicting pieces of information. In

order to find out more about his past, the author interviews people who knew him, goes through family members' documents, and visits city and national archives. She begins with her mother, who says: "I don't think my father was a Nazi. He didn't like Hitler because he screamed all the time. Nobody knew what was happening to the Jews" (ibid., [71]). Or, at some other moment: "I'm convinced that Willi was no perpetrator... He was softhearted... I felt no need to check whether what they said was true." To which the author replies: "I need stronger proof than my mother did" (ibid., [133]).

From conversations with her aunt Karin, Nora Krug has learned that Willi was a chauffeur for a Jewish linen salesman. At some point, the employer told him he had to "go away" and gave Willi a large sum of money for their good relationship. With that money, he bought a car and started his own driving school. Once again, the author questions the veracity of the narrative: "Was the story my grandfather told her about the Jewish linen salesman really true? Or was it just a postwar family fantasy?" (ibid., [79]). She has reasons to doubt these stories. Among other information about Willi told by her aunt Karin, the one about him having been stationed and imprisoned in Knokke was probably not true, as previously explained.

Looking for more evidence about her grandfather's participation in the Second World War, Nora Krug goes to the city archives in Karlsruhe and finds Willi's US military file. Some of the questions she posed throughout the narrative finally have a chance to be answered, the most important of them: "Was Willi a Nazi?" Of all Germans, 15% joined the Nazi Party (NSDAP), and Willi *was* one of them, from 1933 to 1940, according to the document file "E. Membership in organizations," filled in by Willi himself on January 10, 1946, and represented photographically. "The revelation envelops me like a burning rash," (ibid., [179]) the author confesses, and it proves her mother and aunt had been wrong about his affiliation.

A letter written by her grandfather to the mayor of Karlsruhe on January 22, 1946, explains that the acquisition of the driving school was made dependent on his entrance to the Nazi Party. In Willi's own words: "During my membership I had no office, rank or other post, nor did I wear the uniform. The money to found the driving school was obtained from my wife who had a milk shop for several years" (ibid., [184]). That letter contains conflicting information, first about the fact that Willi did

not wear the uniform, then about the origin of the money with which Willi bought the driving school.

In relation to the uniform, the author had previously found photographs of her grandfather wearing it. So, if Willi was not really engaged in the Nazi Party, why did he wear the uniform to take pictures? She asks herself: “Because he wanted to commemorate a moment in history? Because he wanted to be remembered as a patriot, if he didn’t return from Belgium? Because Anna thought that a uniform would look more impressive in the family album? Or was it just to be part of a romantic tradition?” (ibid., [195]), questions that are left unanswered.

About the origin of the money for the driving school, according to her mother and aunt the money had come from his Jewish linen employer, so the author questions: “Did the money for the driving school really come from Anna’s milk shop? Or is Willi just afraid of facing repercussions if he mentions that the money had instead been given to him by a Jew?” (ibid., [187]). Once again, there is a photograph of a real document being reproduced in the album, performing an indexical function. However, different from most autobiographical graphic memoirs, once again, the material that is being represented as evidence is questioned as it diverges from previous information collected by the author.

The situation is repeated in the next document. In September in that same year, Willi writes a letter to a public prosecutor stating that he was not engaged with the party and offering five testimonials. He also said that his wife was dispossessed of her milk business in 1939 because she refused to join the Nazi Party. Yet, once again, Nora Krug confronts this information, as she finds Anna’s name next to the milk business from 1940 to 1944 in the old phone book found in the city archives.

Since his dismissal from the German Armed Forces, Willi hadn’t been able to work as a driving teacher because his permit had been frozen, so he needed the means to support his wife and two children—her mother and aunt Karin. After his papers were analyzed, the officials found out Willi had lied in the questionnaire; he was not a member of the Nazi Party from 1933 to 1940, but actually from 1933 to 1945. A verdict is issued designating him as an “offender.” In 1947, after a new contestation letter, a final verdict downgrades him to the category “follower” and the lawsuit is suspended.

In general, media representations in graphic narratives are employed to corroborate the written text, so most of the time one perceives photographs, documents and objects not only to be authentic and reliable, but

also that they attest for what is being told as truthful facts and events. However, as observed in these examples from *Heimat*, especially when it comes to Krug's grandfather, there is a discrepancy between the oral accounts collected and what the imagetic evidence found may represent to the story. In other words, the external truthfulness conveyed by media representation of objects, documents, and family photographs are inconsistent with the internal coherence of oral accounts of historical events transmediated.

Compared to other graphic memoirs, the interaction between aspects of transmediation (what people said, rewritten by the author) and media representation (what documents, objects, and photographs display) whenever Willi Rock is concerned makes *Heimat* a distinguished case among them. In these events, the media represented are still perceived to be authentic and reliable; yet, instead of confirming the written testimonials, they question or dismiss the author's (and our) previous perception of a truthful communication. Faced with multiple and conflicting media claiming truthfulness, Krug comes to realize that the truth about her relatives' motivations will remain unachievable despite her efforts. Nevertheless, the author explains that, eventually, her goal was not to discover the truth about their motives, but to "test the limits of [her] own empathy towards the decisions they made" (Kamaras, 2018).

5.6 CONCLUSION

The idea that, in life writing, photographs may play a more complex role than factual evidence finds echo in Pedri's statement that photographs "serve a documentary function not because they tell readers how things stand in the real world but rather because they lead out into a number of possibilities" (2008, 170).

This is the case with *Heimat*. As I have observed, in several moments, but especially when it comes to Krug's uncle's and grandfather's participation in the Second World War, instead of photographs and documents serving as evidence for what really happened, they end up opening multiple possibilities for interpretation. In these particular instances, after reading/visualizing images and text, one may ask: "What is the meaning of this document to the story?"

Thus, considering the way the external truthfulness of media representation interacts with the internal coherence of transmediated narratives, I believe the truth concepts found in *Heimat* are somewhat distinguished

from those that we expect in most graphic memoirs. The reason for that is because, contrary to some memoirs, in *Heimat* Krug does not narrate what she has found out about her family; the emphasis is on the process of investigation itself. Rather than a simple account of memories, *Heimat* develops more as a detective-like investigation, with the reader following Krug's process of research: from her own childhood memories to asking meaningful questions to her relatives and, finally, to elaborating her own hypothesis about some past events.

However, just like a postmodern mystery, in *Heimat* a satisfactory resolution is unattainable. New findings only lead to more questions. As a postmodern detective, Krug fails on her mission to uncover the truth, and her expectations to find answers to some of her relatives' participation in the Second World War are left unfulfilled. By the end of the book, she realizes that her "knowledge will have limits, that [she]'ll never know exactly what Willi thought, what he saw or heard, what he decided to do or not to do, what he could have done and failed to do, and why" (Krug, 2018, [234]). Even if she managed to know more about her past by accessing historical documents and by interviewing witnesses, she will never be able to put together all the pieces of her family history, and to restore the reasons behind certain facts or choices.

Nevertheless, more important perhaps than finding answers to all the questions about some of her deceased relatives was eventually the possibility of reconnecting with those who are still alive. This was only made possible because of the process of investigation she conducted to create the graphic memoir. Although she did not find definite answers for the broad questions she initially posed, the greater awareness of her country's and of her family's past, together with a stronger connection to her relatives in the present, helped build an improved sense of cultural belonging she has longed for. She then gets to the conclusion that *Heimat* is not located in space, but in time; yet not in the present time, but in the (unattainable) past: "Heimat can only be found again in memory... it is something that only begins to exist once you've lost it" (Krug, 2018, [261])⁴.

⁴I would like to thank the editors as well as the text's anonymous reviewers for the helpful reading suggestions.

REFERENCES

- Assmann, A. (2006). On the (n)compatibility of guilt and suffering in German memory. *German Life and Letters*, 59, 187–200.
- Bechdel, A. (2007). *Fun Home*. First Mariner Books.
- Bruhn, J. (2010). Heteromediality. In L. Elleström (Ed.), *Media Borders, multimodality and Intermediality* (pp. 225–235). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Cvetkovich, A. (2008). Drawing the archive in Alison Bechdel's *fun home*. *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 36, 111–128.
- Domingos, M., & Ana, and José Arlei Cardoso. (2021). Media representation and Transmediation: Indexicality in journalism comics and biography comics. In L. Elleström (Ed.), *Beyond media Borders* (Vol. 2, pp. 79–115). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Elleström, L. (2014). *Media transformation: The transfer of media characteristics among media*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Elleström, L. (2018). Coherence and truthfulness in communication: Intracommunicational and extracommunicational indexicality. *Semiotica*, 225, 423–446.
- Elleström, L. (2020). Representing the Anthropocene: Transmediation of narratives and truthfulness from science to feature film. *Ekphrasis*, 2, 36–48. The Anthropocene and Intermedial Ecocriticism.
- Forney, E. (2012). *Marbles: Mania, depression, Michelangelo and me*. Avery.
- Groensteen, T. (2014). Photographie. Dictionnaire esthétique et thématique de la bande dessinée. Neuvièmeart 2.0. Accessed November 27, 2022, from <http://neuvièmeart.citebd.org/spip.php?article703>.
- Kamaras, S. (2018, November 21). Belonging – Featuring Nora Krug. Interview with Nora Krug. *Museum of Jewish Heritage*. Accessed 27 November 27, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jorfr2B_bXI.
- Krug, N. (2018). *Heimat: A German family album*. Penguin.
- Krug, N. (2019). *Heimat: Ponderações de uma alemã sobre sua terra e história*. (Trans. André Czarnobai). Quadrinhos na Cia.
- Pedri, N. (2008). Documenting the fictions of reality. *Poetics Today*, 29, 155–173.
- Perloff, M. (1993). *O momento futurista: avant-garde, avant-guerre e a linguagem da ruptura*. Edusp.
- Rajewsky, I. O. (2005). Intermediality, intertextuality, and remediation: A literary perspective on Intermediality. *Intermedialités*, 6, 43–64.
- Reingold, M. (2019). Heimat across space and time in Nora Krug's *belonging*. *Monatshefte*, 111, 551–569.
- Spiegelman, A. (2003). *Maus: The story of a survivor*. Penguin Books.
- Wagner, Marc-Christoph. (2019, May 29). Nora Krug interview - who I am as a German. Interview with Nora Krug. *Louisiana Channel*. Accessed November 27, 2022, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajO39wGKKDs>.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.





Cameras, Pencils, Traumas: Drawn Images in and as Documentary Practice

Nafiseh Mousavi

6.1 *NIGHT AND FOG IN KURDISTAN: THE GENOCIDE OF YAZIDIS AND THE PREDICAMENTS OF REPRESENTATION*

The genre of documentary film is constantly changing not only thanks to the evolving digital technologies of recording, transforming, and creating images, but also through integration with older media types. This article looks at a documentary film with the latter type of hybridity in which recorded images are integrated with hand-drawn images. *Night and Fog in Kurdistan* (2023), the film at the focus of this article, is a documentary film that fills the gaps of its photographic representation with non-animated drawn images. How these drawn images are positioned in the broader photographic frame of the film, what functions they play, and how they affect the truth claims of the documentary film are questions that this article aims to explore. The article adopts a textual methodology while also partially looking at the production process, relying on conversations

N. Mousavi (✉)

Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences, Lund University, Lund, Sweden
e-mail: nafiseh.mousavi@kultur.lu.se

© The Author(s) 2024

B. Schirrmacher, N. Mousavi (eds.), *Truth Claims Across Media*,
Palgrave Studies in Intermediality,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42064-1_6

with the director and the creative producer of the film, and analysing preliminary sketches of the drawings.

Night and Fog in Kurdistan (2023)¹ is a documentary film by Shilan Saadi, an Iranian Kurd filmmaker, that documents the lives of seven Yazidi teenage girls over the span of six years, from their settlement in refugee camps in the aftermath of the ISIS genocide of Yazidis until their resettlement in other, mostly Western countries. Yazidis are an ethnoreligious minority mainly settled in Iraq, and to a lesser extent in Syria and Turkey, with a large diasporic population, especially in Germany. In August 2014, Sinjar in northern Iraq, the second most important area populated by Yazidis, was attacked by ISIS troupes. The ISIS attackers, despite their low number, could advance easily, as the Iraqi forces and Peshmerga (Kurdish military forces of the Kurdistan region in Iraq) withdrew from defending the Yazidi community.

According to statistics published by Yazda, a Yazidi community-led institution that advocates for survivors of the genocide, with this attack, 1268 Yazidis were killed, 360,000 were displaced, and 6417 were kidnapped. Among the latter, 3548 women were sold into sexual slavery and forced labour. As of today, there are still 2760 Yazidi women and children missing, and 200,000 remain in internally displaced persons camps.²

While the genocide received wide coverage in Western mass media, many Yazidi scholars argue that the Western media representation of the genocide was limited and biased. Buffon and Allison, for instance, argue that “Yezidis³ narratives and subjectivities since 2014 are silenced across media representations in the West in favour of a ‘hyper-visibility’ of women’s ‘injured bodies’, which mobilises a specific narrative of victimhood” (2016, 177).

In the same vein of advocating for a more multifaceted representation of Yazidis that can account for the specific identity of the community, Ali, Pirbari, and Rzgoyan, in their study on the reformation and development of Yazidi identity in the aftermath of the genocide, analyse the way Yazidi identity has historically been trapped between the religious and ethnic

¹The film was at its latest stages of post-production when this chapter is being written. I collaborated with the film crew in 2021 for writing the narration of the film. But, as the focus of this chapter is mainly on the drawn images, with which I wasn’t involved, I leave my role out. It has however affected the chapter by facilitating my access to the crew and the production material.

²<https://yazda.org> Accessed 21 Nov 2022.

³Yezidi and Yazidi are different pronunciations of the same term.

tensions of the region. Yazidis are a non-Muslim minority surrounded by Islamic states who reside in Kurdistan and speak Kurmanji (northern Kurdish), yet as Ali, Pirbari, and Rzgoyan argue, “It has now become a form of hidden confrontation between Yazidis identifying themselves as an ethno-religious group and those believing themselves to be Yazidi Kurds” (2022, 2). The former stance strives for a specific ethnoreligious identity for Yazidis and is also connected to the idea that “[i]n Iraq and KRI,⁴ the Kurdish political parties ignore Yazidi attempts to represent a separate identity” (2022, 15).⁵

Night and Fog in Kurdistan follows the critique of the Western media representation of the genocide, turning its lens to the refugee-survivors of the genocide whose narratives are underrepresented. In terms of identity, the filmmaking process becomes a point of interaction and conversation for the two sides of the ethnic equation, with an Iranian Kurd filmmaker on one side of it and Yazidi teenagers on the other. The filmmaking process was initiated in 2015 with a workshop for the refugee teenagers in the Fidanlık camp in Diyarbakır, Turkey, which was at the time governed by Kurdish authorities and hosted many Yazidi families who had fled the ISIS genocide. The first idea was to familiarise the teenage participants of the workshop with cameras and documentary filmmaking and to encourage them to film instances of their everyday life in the camp. The recorded fragments were planned to be edited by Saadi into a single participatory documentary, which was tentatively entitled *I promise*. The workshop had to stop halfway through, as with the change of the political situation in the area and securitization of the camp, Saadi and her group were asked to leave before the planned time. However, Saadi edited the recorded images into a single short film and went back to the camp a year after to show it to the participants. This return led to multiple other journeys, following the characters and their life stories across different refugee camps and later in European countries.

The initial short participatory documentary has been recycled in the current version of the film that embraces both the footage filmed by the director and her team and what has been filmed by the characters with handy cams and cell phone cameras. The new title, *Night and Fog in Kurdistan*, is an homage to Alain Resnais’s *Night and Fog* (1956), a

⁴ Kurdistan Region in Iraq.

⁵ I would like to thank my friend Dr. Houman Oliaei for his time and comments and especially for bringing the complexities of the Yazidi situation to my attention.

documentary classic that captured one of the most breath-taking images of a genocide with its depiction of the abandoned grounds of Auschwitz and Majdanek, its shifts between past and present, and its poetic style of narration in recounting the lives of camp prisoners. The reference to Resnais's film in *Night and Fog in Kurdistan* works as a two-fold claim of attachment for the film as well as the genocide. For the audience who is familiar with Resnais's film, the title would on one hand suggest that Saadi's film is probably following the same style. On the other hand, with this reference, the film makes a performative enunciation in positioning the genocide of Yazidis in the broader context of human history.

Such acts of producing additional layers of meaning and connecting separate narratives of suffering and violence are not limited to the paratext of the film. In the film-text and to establish a connection between her own experience and what the characters are going through, the director adopts a reflective mode and frames the representation of now and the recent past with the narrative of her own war-stricken childhood. Saadi, born in 1980, spent her childhood during the Iran-Iraq war in Mahabad, a Kurdish city in Iran close to the Iran-Iraq border and scene to various waves of state violence. Apart from a few recent shots of Mahabad, this personal narrative thread is mainly represented through hand-drawn images that represent distant memories and are embedded within the film.

According to the director and the creative producer of the film, the usage of drawn images, which goes far beyond representing the director's childhood traumas, began rather incidentally, as the first idea had been to fill the gaps of the recorded images with animated scenes. A few sketches were used in the first rough cut of the film to sew different frames together, but the effect of the still, drawn images inspired the group to begin testing the idea of not animating the drawn images. The usage of drawn images did not stay limited to the personal memories of the director; in the final version of the film, drawn images appear in multiple instances, portraying scenes from the genocide, refugee journeys, and other events and experiences.

The hand-drawn images, with their subjective quality and vagueness in representation, affect the form, style, and narrative of the film while also unsettling the established truth claims of documentary film as a genre. In the following sections, I first discuss the theoretical implications of this representational shift between the photographic and hand-drawn images and then argue for the specific case of these drawn images as mobilised images, shaped at the heart of various media relations of combination and

transformation. Analysing examples from the film, I address the implications and functions of the mobilised drawn images and finally examine the way the truth claims of the documentary film are affected, destabilised, or changed by the representational shifts.

6.2 REPRESENTATIONAL GAPS AND THE REPRESENTATIONAL SHIFT BETWEEN PHOTOGRAPHIC AND HAND-DRAWN IMAGES

In *Night and Fog in Kurdistan*, the usage of drawn images is mainly motivated by the gaps in representation, namely what has not been captured, such as the ISIS attack, the long journey refugees had to take to arrive in Europe, and the childhood memories of the director. In an absence of visual traces that can claim to have indexical relationships with the happened events, drawn images are created as new signs that recreate the uncaptured memory. The representational shift not only refers to changes in mode of representation due to necessity but has further interpretive implications. Nancy Pedri, in her study on the usages of photographs in graphic memoirs, from which I have also borrowed the notion of representational shift, argues that the movement between the photographic and the drawn image introduces changes “in the degree of visual abstraction” and challenges the way “the factual can accommodate the interpretative initiatives signalled by stylistic or genre variations in the visual track” (2012, 249). What Pedri argues for in a different context can also be relevant in the context of *Night and Fog in Kurdistan*, where the visual abstraction of the drawing and the perceived preciseness of the photographic are at play.

Lacking the indexical relationship that photographic images have to the events they represent, drawn images have had a contested history for gaining legitimacy in documentary practices. Nowadays, the photographic still or moving images are generally accepted to function as evidence due to their “indexical iconicity” (Sadowski, 2011, 356) as they support a claim of “I have been there, and the scene exactly looked like this”. “Photographic realism”, as a dominant paradigm in visual representation of reality, is working, more than anything due to the function of recorded images as a “certificate of presence” (Mickwitz, 2016, 29).

Comparing photography with painting—a very popular comparison in the history of photography—Sadowski brings in the question of subjective

interference to differentiate between the types of relationships each media type establishes with the world:

It is because of this fundamental difference between intentional and personal (that is, iconic) depiction, and natural and impersonal (that is, indexical) record of reality that we say that a painting is ‘made’, whereas a photograph is ‘taken’.... Unlike paintings therefore, photographs are causally dependent on the objects they represent, whereas paintings are causally dependent only on the beliefs and skills of the painter. This also means that paintings, iconic as they are in relation to the objects depicted on them, are also indexical in relation to their authors.... (2011, 361)

Thus, the hand-drawn image can only claim to be an indexical trace of the drawing hand and is only partially precise in terms of its iconicity and cannot usually escape foregrounding the constructedness of the image in the eye of the viewer. However, documentation via drawing has a long history, especially in the pre-photographic mediascape. A prominent example of the latter is the old but still-thriving tradition of court drawing, which began as a mode of documentation in the pre-photographic mediascape and is still active and even required in judicial contexts where cameras are not allowed. Court drawing, however, is not only a less exact substitute for a camera but provides another type of representative and interpretative frame for interaction with the law. As Anita Lam argues in her study of courtroom sketching, in contrast to the camera, the human courtroom artist approaches the law in a “primarily tactile way” that, unlike optical constructions, does not “give the illusion that the law is an immaterial specter” (2016, 143).

The haptic aspect is backed in the literature on the capacities of non-fiction comics in representing historical, personal and political narratives of violence and trauma. Hillary Chute, in *Disaster Drawn* (2016), explains the dominant cultural understanding of drawing as “an autographic mode of expression” that holds an authenticity claim similar to “signatures”: haptic, and with a “visible connection to its making” and “a perception of embodied subjectivity, especially by contrast to photographic technologies” (2016, 32–33). The integration of “haptic” and “visual”, in Chute’s view, establishes the potential in drawing for *witnessing* and creates a different type of *presence* than the photographic.

The proliferation of animated documentaries in the recent decades and the consequent theoretical discussions have contributed new perspectives

to the photography-drawing equation, or as Murray and Ehrlich formulate it, the “relations between antinomic aesthetics of and aspirations towards artifice and authenticity” (2018, 3). Returning to widely accepted definitions of documentary films that are broad enough to include various semiotic practices has been popular in theorisations on animated documentary. These theories have sought to establish the legitimacy of the documentary potential of non-photographic images. As early as in 1997, in “If truth be told, can ‘toons tell it? Documentary and animation” Sybil DelGaudio used Bill Nichols’ emphasis on “representing reality” in defining documentary and situated animated documentary in the “reflexive mode”. In Nichols’ categorisation of documentary modes of filming in expository, participatory, performative, poetic, and reflexive mode, which is still widely used, reflexive mode is the one that foregrounds the relation between the filmmaker and the audience (Nichols, 1991). More importantly, the reflexive mode unsettles the potential claims of the documentary film to objectivity by laying bare the process of constructing the filmic image. DelGaudio argues that certain types of animated documentary equally function as a form of metacommentary and can be situated in the reflexive mode (1997, 192).

John Grierson’s definition of documentary as “creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson & Hardy, 1966) has also been popular in untangling the documentary practice from the necessity of photographic indexicality. Annabelle Honess Roe, in *Animated Documentary* (2013), draws on Grierson as well as Nichols’ idea that documentaries “address *the* world rather than *a* world imagined by the filmmaker” and argues for defining documentaries based on the world that they represent rather than their mode of representation. Emphasising the creativity and freedom that animation offers, Roe argues that animation releases the documentary “from the strictures of a causal connection between filmic and profilmic” and opens up for bringing the “temporally, spatially and psychologically distant” into closer proximity (2013, 2).

“The world” in Nichols’ terms or “actuality” in Grierson’s words are too broad and vague to be used as precise analytical concepts, but they both imply a sense of unimagined event-ness with no hint of excluding what cannot be seen by human eye or captured by cameras. Such broadening of the concept of documentary and disentanglement of its truth claims from the photographic indexicality leads to embracing subjectivity not as unreal or less real but as part of the experienced reality:

[T]he truth claims of non-fiction forms are no longer located in the ‘reality effects’ of the photographic trace. Rather, they reside in a developing understanding that the realities that surround us and the events that structure our present are not always visualizable, that their meanings are unclear, and that documentary evidence is not always possible, revealing or clarifying. Meanings and occurrences at times can only be pointed to through speculation or active imagination. But such speculative imaginings are, nonetheless, part of the dynamic of an event, and an integral part of what it is to document any issue or event in all its complexity. (Skoller, 2011, 207)

Furthermore, reliance on the indexicality of the photographic is also shattered, if it ever could be an absolutely unshattered point of reference. The photographic image can be manipulated to present false claims, especially in the current era of abundance for photo-manipulation tools. Even in the least manipulated cases, no photographic still or moving image can be unaffected by the choices of the person behind the camera. Going even further, Roe, drawing on Gunning (2007), argues that the semiotic notion of indexicality taken from Pierce’s complicated semiotic framework is used in a simplified and insufficient way to vouch for the exceptional value of the photographic image in documenting reality (2013, 29–31).

Departing from the ontology of the animated documentary in favour of a functional view, Roe suggests “mimetic or non-mimetic substitution” and “evocation” as main functions that animated images can adopt in a documentary context (ibid., 23). Mimetic and non-mimetic substitution are re-enactments of actual events with or without an aspiration to photo-realism, and evocation refers to the representation of certain concepts, emotions, feelings and states of mind that are difficult to represent through live-action imagery (ibid., 25).

It is interesting to see how these functions are still defined in relation to the representational limitations of the photographic apparatus. While these functions are valid and useful, it is also important to look at the emergent and not only the substitutional capacities of drawn images. Destabilising the indexicality of photography as a *trace* and embracing the alternative indexicality of drawn images can lead to new frames of perception for animated documentaries. For example, Landesman and Bendor (2011) show how the different stylistic and material aspects of images and their hybridity in *Waltz with Bashir* encourage an embodied engagement with the film. Accordingly, the juxtaposition of drawn and photographic images in one single context, as happens in *Night and Fog in Kurdistan*,

and the back-and-forth movement between the two modes does not need to be only understood as a shift from indexicality, objectivity, and presence to iconicity, subjectivity, and past. A more careful observation that considers how these binaries are unsettled in the historical perception of both modes justifies understanding the relationship more as a type of contamination of one another or exchange between the two media types, at the same time that the boundaries between the two are made visible.

6.3 MOBILISED DRAWN IMAGES IN ACTION FOR REMEMBERING, TESTIFYING, WITNESSING, AND MAPPING

In the previous section, I outlined the theoretical discussion regarding the tensions and interactions between photographic and drawn images, mainly with reference to theorisations on animated documentary and to a lesser extent documentary comics. However, this is not to suggest that a one-to-one relationship exists between the drawn images analysed in this article and those in the context of animated documentary—distinguished by the frame-by-frame filming and the creation of an illusion of movement—or in comics—silent, still, and positioned in a sequence. Rather, I formulate the drawn images in *Night and Fog in Kurdistan* as “mobilised drawn images”.

The “mobilised” attribute refers to the point that in this context, drawn images are not animated but are presented with additional layers of movement and amplification through the movement of camera, the integration with narration and music, and the combination with the photographic moving images that come before and after them. These dynamics can be explained in terms of intermedial relations of media combination and media integration. In intermedial studies, media combination is defined as different basic media (image, sound, text, etc.) are mixed and enmeshed together in one single media product (as for example in film or comics) (Bruhn & Schirmacher, 2022, 103), and the distinction between combination and integration is considered to be a matter of degree (Elleström, 2021, 75). In the following, however, I use media integration and combination to distinguish between the different temporalities of synthesis. With integration, I refer to the way the drawn images are synchronically integrated with camera angle and movement, voice-over, and soundtrack; with combination I refer to the diachronic relationship between drawn

images and what comes before and after it, or in other words the sequential juxtaposition of photographic moving images and mobilised drawn images.

In terms of motion and temporality, these mobilised images stand in between moving and still images. In the scenes that include the drawings, the camera zooms in and out, moves between different parts of one single image in a sequence, and adds more affect through effects like shaking. The mobilised drawn images put the motion of the recorded image to a partial pause and in temporal terms act like a technique of delay. This can represent the tendency that is formulated as increased refashioning of the moving image in contemporary cinematic practices “in the direction of demonstrating its abilities to remain motionless, or to move in ways that are barely visible” (Røssaak, 2011, 16).

Furthermore, all these drawn images can, in one way or another, be understood as “transmediations”, namely “repeated representation of media characteristics by a different form of medium” (Elleström, 2021, 81). By looking at these images as transmediations, I highlight the point that they do not only *substitute* actual or potential photographic images but transform them into something new. As is addressed in the following sections, these different media relations that mobilise the drawn images make it possible for various acts of representation and patterns of signification like remembering, visualising, mapping, witnessing, and testifying to emerge.

6.4 REMEMBERING THE WAR-STRICKEN CHILDHOOD

One of the first images (Fig. 6.1) that the viewer is presented with very early in the film (00.01.19) is a drawn portrait of a smiling child, simple and minimalistic, with non-realistic body proportions. The frame is accompanied by the voice-over saying (in Kurdish), “This is my childhood. With this hairstyle, dress, and face”. With this initial uttering about a drawn image in the film, which sounds contradictory enough, the director’s narrating voice makes an authorial claim that sets the tone for the perception and evaluation of the drawn images in particular and the truthfulness of the whole film in general: The drawn portrait cannot be anybody’s specific *childhood* but perhaps only a cartoonish, minimalist, and imprecise picture of an imagery of a childhood. Moreover, it is too generic and stands in contrast with the narrator’s emphasis on the hairstyle, dress, and face.

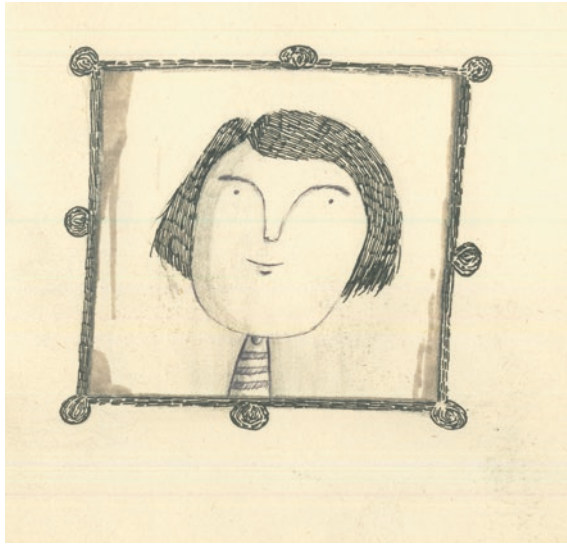


Fig. 6.1 Hand-drawn child portrait

The frame is followed by other drawn images and an additional explanation, with which a representational gap is addressed, and the subjective memory is highlighted: “There aren’t many pictures of that time. In those days, we didn’t all have cameras like now. But I’ve painted my whole childhood in my mind”. Referring to the drawn image and making an authorial claim about its truthfulness, the narrator/director’s voice establishes an alternative type of indexicality: An index which is not a trace but points to its context (deictic index). At the same time, the integration of narrator/director’s voice and confirmation of the drawn image as a substitution for her childhood photograph works as an invitation for the viewer to perceive the drawings as truthful, however non-realistic, representations of what they are claiming to represent.

Most of the drawn images in the film that represent the director’s childhood memories have imaginary and non-realistic qualities to them. A look at the process of drawing and transmediation of sketches into the final drawings demonstrates that the non-realistic aspects are gradually added in the multiple stages of the process of transformation. This process, from personal memories to the final drawings, has been a collective and multi-level process with at least three main agents: the director herself, the

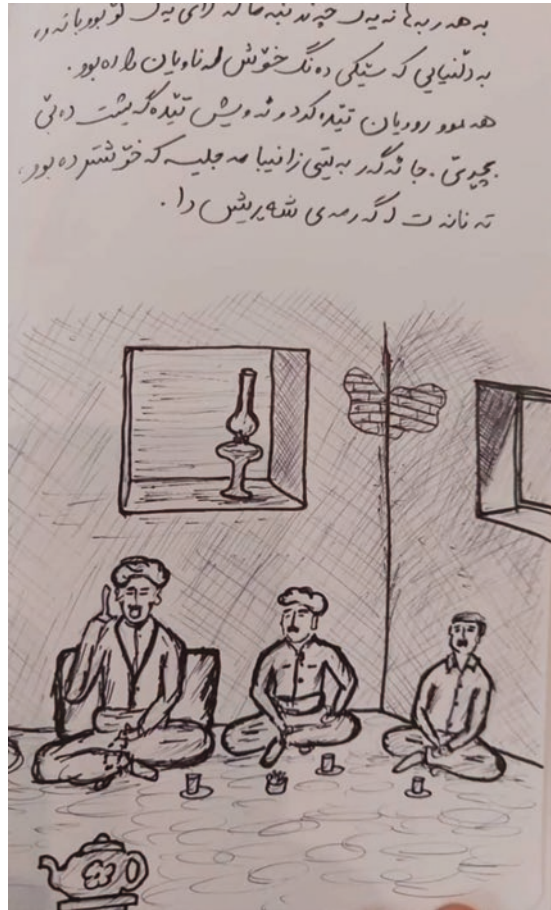
creative producer, Keyvan Fahimi, and the illustrator of the film, Pejman Alipour.

In practice, different stages of transmediation were formed by memory retellings, sketches made by the creative producer in conversation with the director, and then a stylistically free transmediation of the sketches by the illustrator. Figures 6.2 and 6.3 present the sketches that have turned into the final image in Fig. 6.4. The scene portrays an iterative childhood memory of the narrator referring to the times she and her family took refuge in the basements from the Iraqi bombs in the mid-1980s.



Fig. 6.2 Sketch, refuge in the basement, panel on the right

Fig. 6.3 Sketch, refuge in the basement, panel on the left



A quick comparison between the source (Figs. 6.2 and 6.3) and the target (Fig. 6.4) shows how a sober, minimalist but realistic enough image has turned into one that expresses both fear and excitement and reaches its highest non-realistic point, with the image of the woman on fire hovering in the air with a baby in her arms.



Fig. 6.4 Final illustration, refuge in the basement

In the sketch (Figs. 6.2 and 6.3), the Sorani⁶ text that is combined with the images reads as such:

During the war, the basement was a place of protection. It was time for playing hide and seek. It was time for the adults to take a nap. The basement was a place for contemplation.

⁶The Iranian Kurds speak Sorani and the Yazidis speak Kurmanji, which are recognized as two dialects or Kurdish languages and are not completely mutually understandable. The narration of the film is read in Sorani. The narration was first written by me in Persian, as I am not Kurd, and was then translated to Sorani by Keyvan Fahimi.

With the slightest pretext, the families gathered. There was always someone who could sing and tell epic stories. Without saying anything, everybody looked at him and he began singing. While a terrible war was going on outside, the storyteller kept on singing.

The figure of the singing man in the sketch, which can remain unnoticed at first sight, is indexically pointed out in the text. The information that the text provides in the sketch is transmediated to the visual cues of the illustrator's version: The children's positions and postures, the more distinguishable gesture of the storyteller, and more than anything, the curious image of the screaming woman on fire with her baby that anchors the whole image.

This quasi-mythical female figure seems to have evaporated from the story that is being told and creates a parallel to the woman in the room who is also protecting her children by covering them with her unusually long arms. At the same time, the female figure can work as a reference to the war going on outside, killing children. In the film (29:14), the image appears together with a voice-over⁷ that presents a recap of Saadi's childhood in the war, and the scene ends with the singing voice of a man in Kurdish. Interestingly, right before this scene, the viewer is presented with material traces of the war, still visible and touchable on the walls of Mahabad. The viewer sees the director in her hometown walking alongside walls that have several dented points and deep holes in them: Shrapnel traces from a war that ended almost three decades ago. It is after this that the viewer sees the ambiguous drawn image, which oscillates between fear and excitement, as a child may have experienced the scene. The combination of the recorded image of the present with visible traces of the past and the drawn image in a sequence combines the trace of the war, as material as a fossil, with the subjective and affective memory that has become more loaded with affect and fantasy while being passed to other minds and hands. This synthesis resonates with what Pedri points to about how inclusion of photography in graphic memoirs "can very well draw attention to the divide between real life experiences and the telling of those real-life experiences" (2012, 252), but it is also symptomatic of an attempt to a multi-faceted representation that aims for including both the telling (remembering) and living of a war through different temporalities.

⁷The voice-over is performed by Saadi herself, unless stated.

6.5 TESTIFYING ON THE GENOCIDE

First-hand testimonies of the genocide by survivors are implemented in the film in multiple occasions. First, fragments of such testimonies are presented through the lens of one of the participants, Faezeh, who for her part in the participatory documentary has interviewed people, especially women in the camp. Faezeh's footage ends with the image of an old woman crying and saying, "They give four-year old girls as gifts to each other. God damn them" (00:20:19–00:20:27). A minute later, a longer scene offers a more extensive testimony, this time with more direct and visible interventions from the director and also with mobilised drawn images. The scene begins with the narrator telling the story of how a woman and her children, who are family members to two of the workshop participants, are captured by ISIS. Then the voices of multiple adult survivors, men and women are heard who narrate what they experienced the night of the genocide and then later during their flight and refuge in the Sinjar Mountains (21:35–25:17).

They entered our village with heavy weapons. We asked the peshmerga to give us weapons, but they refused. We didn't have any weapons to defend ourselves. DAESH members who entered Sinjar were less than a hundred, ... the village all became DAESH...

When we got to the mountain, people were all on foot and without shoes. Some had even left their children behind....

Some ate tree leaves. We didn't have water. We stayed on the mountain for nine days. We didn't have enough food. We just fed the little kids. A few times the helicopter tried to bring us water, but people were so thirsty they rushed, and the helicopter couldn't land. So they had to throw out the cans and they burst....

All these retellings overlay mobilised drawn images that illustrate the genocide, captivities, and the flight in a minimalist style. Yet, unlike the drawn images that represented a strong subjective value, these images are closer to realistic substitutions for photographic documentations, as they are coherent with the oral testimony and illustrate many of the details described in the voice-over testimony.

The voice-over of witness accounts plays the main role in this scene, providing an indexical frame—we were there, and we are the first-hand, survivor witnesses—that supports the partial iconicity of images. The testifying voices do not show a face and remain anonymous, but the combination of these testimonies with the interviews that precede them can

imply that the same or similar people are speaking. An additional cue for authentication of the testifying voices here is that the brief interviews in the previous scene are done by one of the participants, herself a survivor, and not the director, who has an outsider position to this narrative.

There are two types of hand-drawn images in this scene. Many of them are direct transmediations of the oral testimonies, (Fig. 6.5) but there are also those that transmediate the rare photographic evidence that exists of the genocide of Yazidis and their flight in Sinjar Mountains (Fig. 6.6). These two types of transmediations—from the oral testimonies and from the archival images—differ slightly in style of drawing in their degree of visual accuracy and subjective expression, a difference that may be even noted by the viewers who have not seen the archival images. An example of a transmediated archival images (Fig. 6.6) is a reproduction of a frame copy righted by Çira TV, a Yazidi channel based in Germany, which was released to the production crew. The source represents the dead body of a mother and her two sons on a dusty ground, with two empty water bottles in the corner of the frame. It is only the body of one of the sons who is lying face-down on the ground, that is clearly distinguishable. The mother's body is covered by a big black cloth, likely her chador, and it is only her hands that can be recognized. A child and an adult are passing by, the camera only capturing the lower body of the adult and the child up to the chin. The adult is apparently a woman covered in a long grey chador, and the child is wearing a bright pink, layered dress which looks festive and is in clear contrast with everything else in the image.

The source includes details that are not transferred to the drawn version (Fig. 6.6). The transmediated image presents a silhouette of the archival image, leaving out those passing by and centring on those who haven't survived. It provides a softened and more ambiguous image of the painful and traumatic image that the original footage portrays. According to the directing group, reproducing archival images in drawing was primarily a stylistic choice: The more drawn images were integrated with the photographic, the less comfortable it became to break the rhythm with inserting archival images. In these transmediations, there is no striving for mimicking the indexical iconicity of a photograph, but, rather, through the transmediation to a drawn image, the photographic evidence is deemphasised and the oral testimonies are foregrounded. Media integration in this scene embeds the fragility of the drawn image as evidence within the truth claims of the oral testimony.



Fig. 6.5 Hand-drawn representation of ISIS capturing Yazidi women

6.6 MAPPING THE REFUGEE JOURNEY

From 38:50 to 40:57, Fig. 6.7 is mobilised in the film to narrate the story of the journey one of the girls, Leila, and her family take to join the rest of their family in Germany. The viewers never see the image in its entirety, but the information they receive is controlled by the camera movement that moves step-by-step, according to the arrows, while the voice-over gives a recap of the journey.



Fig. 6.6 Hand-drawn reproduction of an archival image: Yazidi family dead while in flight in the Sinjar Mountains

The image works like a map as it visualises various spatial elements and relationships. It summarises a quite unfathomable journey, which includes multiple arrests, deportations, and attempting again, walking for miles, passing the sea, hiding in back of a truck with numerous others, as well as many other incidents. The image provides another oral-to-drawn transmediation, as it visualises the information about Leila's journey received in the form of oral retellings. But it is also a transmediation of the journey itself. It gives an outline of the agents and the spatial elements of the journey: characters (refugees, police, the smuggler, the rest of the family already in Europe), vehicles (trucks, buses, police car), borders (fences, flags), routes (water, desert, roads), and hiding places (woods). At the same time, it shares similarities with playing surfaces of many board games where the goal is to succeed in a journey and reach a destination.

The mobilised drawn image not only visualises the journey for the viewer but turns it into a narrative. In the film, the integration of various media, together with the “visual aid” quality of the image-map,



Fig. 6.7 Representation of a refugee journey from a refugee camp in Turkey to Germany

narrativises the journey into a narrative of success. The camera movement, voice-over, and music enhance the plot and the sequencing of the events. The music plays a crucial role in this scene, as it moves from a low-key tone with ambient humming vocals, to an epic tone, ending in a calm and slowed-down rhythm at the point of arrival. The “evocation” function (Roe, 2013), which addresses the potential of non-photographic images for representing what is out of reach for photography, is brought in more clearly here: The image-map reduces the scale and simplifies the steps of the journey, and it uses the deictic type of index—arrows—to represent the path taken. The map, however, is not geographically correct or realistic. It presents an unfinished circle and represents the flight according to a game logic of repeated attempts and loss and win, while also offering an incomplete summary of Leila’s journey which can at the same time testify to other similar journeys.

6.7 CONCLUSION: EMERGENT POTENTIALS AND CRITICAL DOUBTS

Remembering, testifying, visualising, witnessing, imagining, fantasising, mapping, softening, and narrativising: The drawn images act in multiple ways in *Night and Fog in Kurdistan* as they are mobilised with intermedial integrations and combinations. At the same time, the film never stops foregrounding its own constructedness, always remaining a transmediation and often a transmediation of transmediations. While the drawn images replace the existing photographic images or fill the empty place of the uncaptured photographs, they also interact with them or their absence, and the interaction opens up for new potentials and emergent meanings and affects. As Alistair Oldham also suggest, “an interdisciplinary approach to documentary, in this case between drawing and film, can help create a dialectical space where old forms are broken and new spaces can begin to emerge” (2014, 714).

When I asked the director and the creative producer of the film about whether they think that the usage of drawn images might reduce the trustworthiness of the film as a documentary, they responded by distinguishing between documentary film as art, and documentary film as reporting. What they are after, they said, is an artistic documentary film that does not provide a seemingly raw report of what has happened but is a personal take on events. In other words, it is not about defying the truth claims of documentary film but stressing how a documentary can rely on different forms of truth claims and combining them together.

The distinction between art and reporting, or art and documentation, that came up in the above practitioners’ formulation is of course echoed frequently in the theoretical discussions surrounding documentary film and photography. For example, intermedial scholar Lars Elleström argued in his article about photography for a distinction between photography as documentation and photography as art, not only as two different genres of photography but as two essentially distinct qualified media that are contextualised with different conventions and expectations (2013, 164). *Night and Fog in Kurdistan*, I argue, offers a context for an interaction between the two, with its hybridity, representational shifts, and conjunction of truth claims.

The drawn image here lacks the type of autographic indexicality that is so significant in graphic memoirs and would connect the drawn image to the body of the person who *remembers*. The mobilised drawn images in

Night and Fog in Kurdistan are produced and mobilised in collective and multi-staged processes of transformation and integration and are not connected to a single body. Furthermore, they do not so much induce a haptic quality and a sense of embodiment, as their flatness and minimalist style are highlighted when they are seen in combination with recorded images. The drawn images in this context contribute to various acts of representation by producing added value in their synthesis with other basic media and other categories of signification. They do not stay with one function and one style but change and adapt to the acts of remembering, testifying, and witnessing. They change the temporal interface of the film by slowing down the recorded image and foregrounding its absence.

Though referring to one of the most atrocious mass killings and community eliminations of the very recent past, *Night and Fog in Kurdistan* does not include any traumatising images, neither photographic nor drawn. The drawn images have been especially prevalent in representation of the traumatic-traumatising images, as was explained in relation to the testimonies of the genocide and the survivors' flight. An important function of the mobilised drawn images is thus that they help avoid traumatising the audience by portraying the traumatic event. The film in general and the drawing sections in particular make the audience hold their breath, but they do not suck out all the air and leave them out of breath.

However, there is always a risk when the harsh reality of sufferings meets aesthetic practices. As Skoller argues:

While this kind of argument that animated documentary, in its departure from indexical documentation toward subjective perception and phantasmagorical imaginings, can enhance our experience of war, deepening the richness and density of the depiction of complex events by showing what cannot be seen by the naked eye, it can also thin out our comprehension, erasing the realities of an event and their inconvenient truths. (2011, 211)

This critique stays relevant for a film like *Night and Fog in Kurdistan*, and the answer to it should perhaps be searched for in the actual reception of the film. The answer, I suspect, would be different among different types of audiences who can be considered as the targeted audiences for this film, most importantly the Yazidi audience who may or may not see it as a media witness to the genocide, displacement, and oppression of Yazidis and their identity.

REFERENCES

- Bruhn, J., & Schirmmacher, B. (2022). *Intermedial studies: An introduction to meaning across media*. Routledge.
- Buffon, V., & Allison, C. (2016). The gendering of victimhood: Western media and the Sinjar genocide. *Kurdish Studies*, 4, 176–196.
- DelGaudio, S. (1997). If truth be told, can'toons tell it? Documentary and animation. *Film History*, 9, 189–199.
- Elleström, L. (2013). Photography and intermediality: Analytical perspectives on notions referred to by the term “photography.”. *Semiotica*, 197, 153–169. <https://doi.org/10.1515/sem-2013-0086>
- Elleström, L. (2021). The modalities of media II: An expanded model for understanding intermedial relations. In *Beyond media Borders* (Vol. 1, pp. 3–91). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-49679-1_1
- Grierson, J., & Hardy, F. (1966). *Grierson on documentary*. University of California Press.
- Gunning, T. (2007). Moving away from the index: Cinema and the impression of reality. *Differences*, 18, 29–52. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2006-022>
- Lam, A. (2016). Artistic flash: Sketching the courtroom trial. In S. Marusek (Ed.), *Synesthetic legalities, sensory dimensions of law and jurisprudence* (pp. 142–158). Routledge.
- Landesman, O., & Bendor, R. (2011). Animated recollection and spectatorial experience in waltz with Bashir. *Animation*, 6, 353–370. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746847711417775>
- Mickwitz, N. (2016). *Documentary comics: Graphic truth-telling in a skeptical age*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Murray, J., & Ehrlich, N. (2018). *Drawn from life: Issues and themes in animated documentary Cinema*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Nichols, B. (1991). *Representing reality: Issues and concepts in documentary*. Indiana University Press.
- Oldham, A. (2014). Drawing on Topolski: An exploration of the relationship between reportage drawing and documentary filmmaking. Paper presented at AVANCA | CINEMA. Accessed November 28, 2022, from <https://uwe-repository.worktribe.com/output/814410/drawing-on-topolski-an-exploration-of-the-relationship-between-reportage-drawing-and-documentary-filmmaking>.
- Pedri, N. (2012). Cartooning ex-posing photography in graphic memoir. *Literature & Aesthetics*, 22, 248–266.
- Resnais, A. (1956). *Nuit et brouillard [night and fog]*. Anatole Dauman. Agros films. 32 min.
- Roe, A. H. (2013). *Animated documentary*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- Røssaak, E. (2011). *Between stillness and motion: Film, photography, algorithms*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Saadi, S. (2023). *Night and fog in Kurdistan*. Pro. Shilan Saadi. 79 min.
- Sadowski, P. (2011). The iconic indexicality of photography. In P. Michelucci, O. Fischer, & C. Ljungberg (Eds.), *Semblance and signification*. John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- Skoller, J. (2011). Introduction to the special issue making it (un) real: Contemporary theories and practices in documentary animation. *Animation*, 6, 207–214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746847711422496>

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.



PART III

Fact and Fake across Media Types



Fictionality as a Rhetorical Tool in Political Mockumentary Films: The Interplay of Fictionality and Factuality in *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America*

Tamás Csöngé

7.1 FICTIONALITY IN DOCUMENTARIES

Richard Walsh draws our attention to the fact that the difference between fiction and nonfiction is not a distinction between realness and fakeness, truth and untruth, reality and fantasy, honesty and falseness, since both fictional and nonfictional narratives are artificial rhetorical constructs made of complex conceptual structures (Walsh, 2007, 14). To better comprehend a fake documentary's relation to "fact" and "fiction," I adopt an understanding of fictionality elaborated by scholars in the field of rhetorical narratology. Henrik Skov Nielsen, James Phelan, and Richard Walsh approach fictionality as "the intentional use of invented stories and scenarios" (2015, 62), which should be distinguished from the "set of

T. Csöngé (✉)

Department of Film and Visual Studies, University of Pécs, Pécs, Hungary
e-mail: csonge.tamas@pte.hu

© The Author(s) 2024

B. Schirrmacher, N. Mousavi (eds.), *Truth Claims Across Media*,
Palgrave Studies in Intermediality,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42064-1_7

153

conventional genres (novel, short story, graphic novel, fiction film, television serial fiction, and so on)” (ibid., 62; Zetterberg Gjerlevsen & Nielsen, 2020, 19–20) and understood as a quality or discursive mode that is “employed in politics, business, medicine, sports and throughout the disciplines of the academy” (Nielsen et al., 2015, 62), just as the mode of factuality exists inside the realm of generic fiction. Following their distinction, I will use the expression “fictionality” when referring to a local quality of semiosis and use “fiction” as a genre-defining frame for a media product.

As Stefan Iversen and Nielsen described it: “Fictionality is present whenever a piece of communication signals its own imagined nature” (2016, 251). In this sense, a fictional discourse is not equal to lying, since the recipient is aware of its general communicational intent. It is also different from dreams, which are inventions, but unintended ones (Phelan, 2017, 235). Far from indicating an ontological relation between the discourse and reality, fictionality—as Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh put it—is a culturally variable “communicative context” (2015, 66), or a rhetorical frame, which the creators employ to communicate non-actual states of affairs (Phelan, 2017, 235) to the audience. “If we assume—rightly or wrongly—that a discourse is fictive, we read it as inviting us to assume (among other things) that it is not making referential claims, and that its relevance is indirect rather than direct” (Nielsen et al., 2015, 68). Here, the expression “referential claim” should be understood in a restrictive way, as the suggested veracity of its *assertions* in a literal way and regarding the actual world. Naturally, every act of meaningful communication has referents as its constituent signs have denotations or signified objects. But Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh mean that an assertion (what the analytical tradition calls a *proposition*) will be interpreted as false regarding the communicating parties’ presumed common knowledge about reality, therefore the employment of the rhetorical tool of fictionality modifies the recipient’s understanding of the nature of the discourse’s referents. What is more interesting to us lies in the last part of their statement about a fictional discourse’s “indirect relevance,” which is a central concept in this branch of rhetorical understanding of fictionality (see Walsh, 2007 and 2019).

Few would argue with the suggestion that fictionality can have other purposes than providing engagement with a fantasy or offering pure entertainment and relief from troublesome realities. As Phelan has put it, fictional discourses “depart from the actual not to escape it but to illuminate it with light unavailable in direct reporting” (2017, 236). I propose that

both types of discursive modalities (factual and fictional) can be serious tools for reasoning, as they are suitable to make *specific* types of truth claims. Non-fictional discourses typically rely on the communication of their propositional veracity (or directly informative relevance, Walsh, 2019, 411) to report facts and events. Therefore they aim to display literal and particular truths, a function comparable to the role of “historiography” in Aristotle’s poetics; while the general characteristics of a fictional discourse make it suitable to convey more universal insights through “the inferential retrieval of less immediate implicatures” (Walsh, 2019, 411), which is similar to the role of “poetry” in Aristotle’s poetics (see Heath, 1991). Famous historian Hayden White reflects on the same conceptual duality when he writes that “historical discourse wages everything on the true, while fictional discourse is interested in the real—which it approaches by way of an effort to fill out the domain of the possible or imaginable” (2005, 147). The most common and straightforward form of the concept of “indirect relevance” is the “point” or “(moral) lesson” of a story, which is usually based on the compelling argument made by its narrative logic, that is the linking of “events according to causal relations of probability or necessity” (Carli, 2010, 304). It is even more appropriate to say that the fictional mode’s *relevance* to the recipient’s physical, social, psychological, or moral reality lies in the comprehension and interpretation of the represented narrative, rather than in the reporting of particular real facts and events. Consequently, these truth claims are inseparable from subjective commitments to certain worldviews, ethical standards, and value judgments.

One benefit of the rhetorical conception is its recognition that despite the guidance of their generic or paratextual frames, media products are not unequivocal or monolithic in respect of their use of fictionality, therefore local instances of fictionality and factuality should be explored separately from these generic frames. Sometimes an author makes it purposefully ambiguous, whether a given discourse is making direct truth claims with its assertions or not (Phelan, 2017, 237). Consider Art Spiegelman’s *Maus: A Survivor’s Tale* (1991), a controversial graphic novel about the experiences of the author’s father as a Holocaust survivor, where different animal species are used to allegorically represent different nationalities. From the perspective of fictionality, the work was classified as a memoir, biography, historical tale, fiction, autobiography, or even “postmodern ethnography” (Hathaway, 2011) by critics and scholars exactly because of the tension that exists between its serious subject matter and its unusual format.

Fiction as a generic frame permits that fictionality can be utilized in several communicational acts of a work, but not in others. For example, *Forrest Gump* (Zemeckis, 1994) not only depicts the life of the titular fictional character but also offers an interesting view of the history of the United States from the 1950s to the 1980s. The film depicts historical persons and events, side by side with obviously non-actual ones while the narrative presents how Gump influences well-known cultural phenomena and events like Elvis Presley's performance style, John Lennon's lyrics of his song *Imagine*, and the Watergate scandal. The climax of this strategy of juxtaposing actual and imagined elements occurs in scenes in which the protagonist (played by the actor Tom Hanks) is digitally inserted into archival coverage of real American presidents. Hereby, well-known major historical events are altered or creatively reconsidered, however, the humor of the scenes stems from the implied—ideal—audience's recognition of the difference between the historical and the posteriorly added elements.

There are also numerous cases where a generally factual discourse contains fictional elements. The presence or absence of fictionality signaled by the global frame (most often the genre) can be locally overwritten or reframed as a rhetorical strategy. A prominent example can be found in *The Social Dilemma* (Orlowski, 2020), an otherwise stylistically unremarkable documentary about the harmful effects of social media. The film juxtaposes interviews and reports with former employees of top tech companies with a parabolic narrative featuring fictional characters played by actors. The entire storyline of this embedded fable about a teenage boy who developed extreme political views due to his social media addiction is presented as a demonstrative example of the film's argument. A complex discourse can also play with the audience's understanding of the nature of its referents during the temporal process of reception, purposefully reframing previously clearly defined elements. A classic example is a sequence about Pablo Picasso's and Oja Kodar's relationship from Orson Welles's *F for Fake* (1974). While the film presents the account of the life of the art forger Elmyr de Hory, Welles also demonstrates how forgeries work by creating one. He includes a seemingly authentic storyline about Picasso's romantic affair with the actress, but at the end of the film, he debunks the sequence as an invention of his.

A documentary can encourage the viewer to recognize multiple types of truth claims. Besides (1) the truth of its *general argument* (previously discussed as indirect relevance) and (2) its individual *assertions* by which it refers to actual states of affairs, (3) it often contains *documents* with a

seemingly closer connection to reality than the rest of its elements. However, it is important to note that even this third type of truth claim (that I will call *indexical*) is not the automatic consequence of the fact that these documents are the recording of authentic, unmanipulated reality, containing images and/or sounds that function as imprints of the physical reality or historical events. As Carl Plantinga (2009) pointed out, a documentary is not equivalent to a document in the sense of a semiotic object made up of indexical signs that have a direct correlation in space and time with the signified object, but they are much more: A documentary is a rhetorical construct in a specific medium, a cultural object, an established genre with a history and conventions of its own (often with a narrative, an ideological perspective, a specific way of reasoning, and definite rhetorical purposes to persuade its audience). Documentaries are made in such a way that the audience recognizes these patterns when evaluating the fictionality of each media product. Although every live-action film is an imprint of the reality that happened before the recording devices, the communicated content (most often the represented narrative) can still be an invention, regardless of the type of signs the film communicates with. Without the proper context, a film will not automatically become a documentary, just because it utilizes indexical signs (a fiction film does the same) or presents original, unstaged raw footage (the recorded material of an industrial camera is still not a documentary). Although a documentary can include documents where these types of signs can authenticate and support a claim as evidence (they are not *part of the reality* the film refers to, but they are material, non-linguistic tools for making another type of truth-claim), its intended meaning is always determined by its context and the same document can be used for very different purposes: It can easily make false or contradictory assertions regarding the actual states of affairs with the help of these imprints of the physical reality.¹ Not only is indexicality not required for attaching a direct truth claim to a discourse, but it is also not required for a film to be categorized as a documentary: consider the case of the more than a hundred-year-old genre of animated documentary which usually makes truth claims without the use of any documents.

¹In a self-reflexive scene of Chris Marker's documentary *Letter from Siberia* (*Lettre de Sibérie*, 1958) the same sequence of images are shown multiple times, each time with a different voice-over narration and background music that gives the images completely different meanings. The city of Yakutsk, the capital of a republic in the former Soviet-Union is described once as "the worker's paradise," another time as "hell on earth."

7.2 FICTIONALITY IN MOCKUMENTARIES

Mockumentaries have the special quality of conveying conflicting messages inasmuch they present the formal features of a documentary but indicate their narrative's status as invention. This forms a unique tone in a significant portion of the sub-genre, making the films' attitude ironic, sarcastic, or satirical towards their own style. While activating the corresponding factual sub-genre's discourse (be it reality television, a historical account, or a nature documentary) by evoking its formal devices and tropes, mockumentaries inevitably criticize this frame. This is the special type of (more abstract, more general) truth claim every mockumentary makes through this contrast.

As Alexandra Juhasz and Jesse Lerner argue, mockumentaries reflect to multiple layers of reality: They are at the same time parodies (mocking the genre of documentary and media in general) and satires (mocking an idea, an ideology, or a political system). "Every fake documentary is multi-voiced, speaking about its subject, its target text, the moral, social, and historical, and the multiple relations among all of these" (2006, 7). But besides mockery, the most important rhetorical achievement of the best satirical pseudo-documentaries is the debunking of discourses that present themselves as objective as inevitably perspectival, deceptive, and deeply ideological. The genre's characteristic strategy is to create a semblance of authenticity by the imitation of a recognizable documentary style which they question, suspend, or demolish at some point in their narrative. Juhasz and Lerner remark that mockumentaries' "formative and visible lies mirror the necessary but usually hidden fabrications of 'real' documentaries, and force all these untruths to the surface, producing knowledge about the dishonesty of all documentaries, real and fake" (ibid., 2).

Mockumentaries are not uniform in terms of how obvious they make the invented nature of their narratives. For example, Peter Jackson's *Forgotten Silver* (1995) never gives explicit signals that its main character is the product of the screenwriter's imagination in its entirety. The film premiered as a documentary about a neglected New Zealand filmmaker Colin McKenzie who pioneered many filmmaking techniques in the early days of cinema such as color cinematography, talking pictures, and the close-up shot. David Bordwell claims that "[t]he silliness of the enterprise is pretty apparent" (2007), but at the time of its television broadcast many were fooled by it since it was heavily suggested that the forgotten director has existed and the presented archive silent film footage is authentic.

Therefore—notes Bordwell—this “brilliant parody of the filmmaker documentary” for a brief time “became, inadvertently, a forgery” (ibid.).

Other mockumentaries play with the viewer’s understanding of their fictional status until a certain point in the film, where they unequivocally reveal the imaginary nature of their contents. A famous example for this strategy can be found in *The Real Mao* (Siklósi, 1994), a film about the life of Mao Zedong, and how his twin brother secretly took over the leadership of the People’s Republic of China after the real Mao died during the military retreat known as the Long March. The film—narrated by someone who looks like an acknowledged university professor—starts as a typical historical documentary but takes ever weirder turns until it becomes suspiciously absurd. At the very end, a message appears on screen about “all the statements” in the film being “products of fantasy” and the film being a psychological experiment about the audience’s susceptibility to “political manipulation.” However, some films make it clear right from the beginning that fictionality plays a heavy role in their mode of communication. Willmott’s *C.S.A.* falls into this category with its opening quote from G.B. Shaw that states “If you’re going to tell people the truth, you better make them laugh; otherwise they’ll kill you,” before presenting a counterfactual, alternative universe.

Mockumentaries can reveal the nature of their referents directly by an explicit assertion (via their narration or paratexts), or the audience has to deduce it from their represented content (which is in many cases a more subtle, purposefully weaker indication of fictionality) by the recognition of improbable, unrealistic, fantastic, illogical, or excessive elements as markers of invention. (On the other hand: Locally, the factual nature of an element can not only be signaled formally but indicated by the communication of widely known and universally accepted facts). A characteristic strategy of comical mockumentaries is to juxtapose these revealing elements with a familiar documentary style. For example, Taika Waititi’s 2014 mockumentary *What We Do in the Shadows* employs technical and dramaturgical elements that heavily resemble the filmmaking techniques of direct cinema and cinema vérité, with its shaky handheld camera, a seemingly spontaneous dramaturgy of the scenes, and lack of a voice-of-god narration while capturing a blatantly fantastic subject, the everyday life of four vampire friends living in contemporary Wellington, New Zealand.

7.3 IDEOLOGY AND POLITICS IN MOCKUMENTARIES

For our purposes here, we should reckon with two different senses of ideology in all media products, but especially in argumentative works such as political mockumentaries. I will structure this distinction along the lines of David Bordwell's model of cinematic sensemaking. In the first sense, the ideological message is an essential and evident part of the authorial rhetoric and usually exists at the level what Bordwell calls "explicit meaning" (1989, 8), the abstract, but "directly spoken" point of the discourse. For example, in the non-fictional mode, the propagandistic content news outlets convey by their presentation of carefully selected information, specific perspectives, and commitment to certain values form the backbone of this rhetoric. A (still apparent) variation is propaganda relayed through invented scenarios that have a great, if not greater intended impact on its viewers than the presentation of real events: Propagandistic fiction films and stories with well-known narrative arcs and character archetypes are the most widespread form of ideological persuasion in this mode. In some cases the *intended* meaning is "implicit" or "indirectly spoken," and the recipient has to deduce it from the literal meaning. The most tangible example is an ironic discourse, where the intended meaning is the opposite of what is directly asserted. It is evident that even an "implicit meaning" is intentional because the recipient constructs it following the discourse's rhetorical agenda.

A second, post-Marxist, Žižekian sense² of ideology is connected to the "unconscious" layer of the discourse, from which "*repressed* or *symptomatic* meanings that the work divulges 'involuntarily'" (Bordwell, 1989, 9) can be unraveled. From this point of view, media content can display societal values and norms without the explicit purpose to persuade or manipulate its audience. What is more interesting is that "such meanings are assumed to be at odds with referential, explicit, or implicit ones" (ibid.), therefore there could be discrepancies between the "apparent" and "latent" ideological positions of a work.

Juhász and Lerner (2006) argue that the mockumentary form is particularly suitable for making statements on political issues and at the same time criticize the means with which documentaries most often treat such

²For a detailed elaboration of the concept, see Žižek's basic book on ideological theory *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989).

subjects, putting on the armor of cold objectivity, often blindly to their own ideological stances.

In my approach, two criteria have to be met to consider any film political in a wider sense, one permissive and one restrictive: The film can deal with any social subject but must have a firm stance concerning its attitude—it must reveal its own ideological perspective and commit to this position. For example, this condition is met if the film openly has an agenda to convince its audience about a neglected social risk, the unfairness of certain institutional structures, or wants to mobilize its viewers for a burning social cause (Zimmer & Leggett, 1974). In this regard a lot of mockumentary films have political commitments: For example, a classic like Jan Svěrák's *Oil Gobblers* (*Ropáci*, 1988) relays a hard environmental message by describing a fictive animal that thrives on carbon dioxide-rich exhaust gas and gets sick from fresh air. In *No Men Beyond This Point* (Sawers, 2015), another mockumentary that is set in an alternative present, the human male population on the planet is almost extinct and struggling for its rights in a women-dominated society. The situation is a satirical reversal of the patriarchal structures still determinative in the first decades of the twenty-first century.

In Peter Watkins' *The War Game* (1965)—an early example of the explicitly political sub-genre—there is an imagined scenario of a Soviet nuclear attack on the British town of Kent and its devastating effects on the unprepared population. The film criticizes the lack of proper governmental measures for a possible war situation like the one depicted in its pseudo-documentary style narrative. In *Punishment Park* (1971), a subsequent film of Watkins, the director focuses on the internal social tensions of the United States, created by the government's foreign policy and ongoing war with Vietnam. In the film, multiple groups of countercultural pacifist young people are arrested, prosecuted, and offered the option to participate in a game of survival to avoid prison. The participants have to reach the American flag in four days through the hot California desert without food or water. Of course, the film argues that it is impossible to win this rigged game. It highlights and satirizes the anti-democratic and violent nature of the early 1970s US political system.

There are excellent depictions of professional politicians and political life in Garry Trudeau's and Robert Altman's miniseries *Tanner '88* (1988) and in Tim Robbins' *Bob Roberts* (1992). Both films follow campaigning politicians and show the process by which a political persona is constructed while revealing the artificiality and fakeness of these roles. *Death of a*

President (Range, 2006) presents an alternative timeline and the successful assassination of George W. Bush. At the time of the film's release, the depicted events were still a matter of the future (2007), therefore the audience knew they were invented. Its director stated in an interview that "[t]he intent of the film is really to use the assassination of President Bush as a dramatic device—using the future as an allegory to comment on the past" (Moyer, 2014). The narrative reflects on the witch-hunt of Muslim people in the United States, which was at its height in the years after 9/11, making them scapegoats for the crime, while in the film's story it is strongly suggested that the real perpetrator was a desperate American ex-soldier and Gulf War veteran, who blamed Bush for the death of his son in Iraq.

The crossing of political satire—a predominantly fictional genre that addresses social issues since antiquity—and the documentary form proved to be fertile terrain to experiment with the blending of *general*, *assertional*, and *indexical* truth claims. As Willmott himself said, "[s]atire can bring out truths that journalism and other forms of examination cannot" (Kliman, 2015). The genre's most important ideological commitment lies in the fact that its factual and invented elements are closely tied together to address relevant social issues, and the audience can infer the "general truths" (the interpretative position of the work) through the identification of these interrelations.

7.4 GENRE IMITATION AND SATIRIC EXCESS IN *C.S.A.*

C.S.A.'s rhetorical purposes are highly political as the film deals with the subjects of social inequalities, abuse of power, and racism through a presentation of an alternative history of the United States. First, I discuss how the documentary style—which masks an ultimately invented narrative—contributes to the argument of the film regarding the actual political and social situation of Black people in the States at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Then, I show how Willmott's film shifts the focus from the subject of criticizing the politically influenced American media's dishonesty and deceptive nature to the ideological importance of mass media's non-fictional and fictional narratives as an identity and community forming force.

C.S.A. introduces the viewer to the history of an imaginary America, an alternative version of the United States, where the confederate South won the civil war and slavery of African-Americans was never abolished. In this timeline, where President Lincoln was forced to flee from the presidential

chair, he was captured while hiding in blackface, exiled to Canada, and died in his old age as a broken man and failed leader. The government of the United States was overthrown by the Confederate forces and The Confederate States of America was born. In World War II, the country was the ally of the Nazis, and the Cold War was fought not against the Soviet Union, but progressive Canada. In those times a giant concrete wall was pulled up on the border between the Confederate States and its northern neighbor. It was called the Cotton Curtain, a reference both to the Iron Curtain and the Berlin wall.

Although the satirical narrative utilizes the style of several nonfictional genres, the film does not intend to deceive its audience. Because the main events depicted contradict well-known historical facts, their referential status is clear. The first striking feature when we take a closer look at the film's narrative structure from the perspective of narrative framing is the multiple layers of embedded discourses. It is important to note that the highest *fictional level* is not the imitation of a documentary film, but it is a TV broadcast of a Confederate television channel, which features a British documentary film with an identical title as Willmott's film.

Willmott's film creatively displays and contrasts the different political perspectives and stances by juxtaposing segments of the "progressive" documentary with other materials of the pro-slavery TV channel, which is controlled by the Confederate States. The first five minutes are a good example of the film's structural complexity, as we dive five levels deep in embedded discourses, and the content of each one should be interpreted in light of its position and purpose in the whole narrative (Fig. 7.1). The first discursive level is (1) *C.S.A.*, Willmott's film itself, which features an imaginary (2) San Francisco-based TV channel (Channel 6) broadcast that almost entirely fills the film's runtime. Its transmission is framed by two short scenes that include the sole bits of direct authorial communication that are not just representations of audiovisual media products and not embedded in a larger, often ironic frame: 1a) The G.B. Shaw quote at the beginning clarifies the overall rhetorical purpose of the film ("tell people the truth") and refer to the method/discursive mode by which it tries to achieve this goal ("make them laugh"). The quote also establishes the general tone of the work, which is mostly comical, but also dark and bitter ("make them laugh; otherwise they'll kill you"). On the Confederate channel, (3) a "scandalous" British documentary about American history is shown, presenting the viewers an extraneous, foreign political perspective. This British film takes up most of the runtime of *C.S.A.*, but the

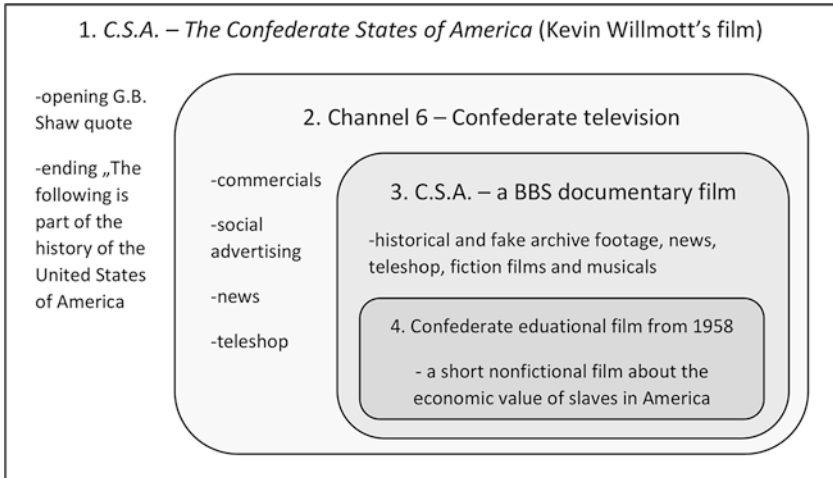


Fig. 7.1 The schematic narrative structure of *C.S.A.: The Confederate States of America* (2004)

Confederate channel also features other types of programming that characterize its own ideological stance: Commercials, public service ads, newscasts, and teleshop programs regularly interrupt the documentary, imitating the way commercial television channels usually operate. The historical documentary also contains rich material of other media: A (4) Confederate educational film from 1958 is shown, in which a typical schoolteacher of the era enlightens a student about the economy of their country. This educational film contains another nonfictional film about the economic value of slaves in America. It seems that Willmott’s film is not only preoccupied with the creation of alternative history but emphasizes the mediated nature of this reality by introducing representations with competing perspectives.

The main focus of the film is the British documentary, where two talking heads are prominent beside the “impartial,” bodiless-narratorial voice that comments the images. A black Canadian historian and a Confederacy sympathizer southern writer share their views on the history of the States. Despite being critical towards the institution of slavery and the political structure of the C.S.A., the British film seeks some kind of balanced view by including a professional who explains and defends the system.

With these stylistic choices—the television aesthetics, the talking heads, and camera movement scanning seemingly historical documents—Willmott openly imitates Ken Burns’ widely known monumental ten-part documentary series (*The Civil War*) made for TV in 1990 on the topic of the American Civil War. However, *C.S.A.* is not the *parody* of this specific series, its target is more general, it only utilizes Burns’ work as a vessel, an iconic piece of classical documentary with the same subject.

Far from denying the importance of the ideological nature of media representations, *C.S.A.*’s assertion is more than just the tired mantra of mass media’s manipulative nature. (According to the Confederate TV channel, the British documentary caused a public scandal in the imaginary C.S.A., because it falsely suggested the mixed-race background of a leading Confederate senator, which led to his eventual suicide.) Willmott’s film is critical, but not specifically hostile towards the referenced media objects, it treats them as cultural products that reflect the norms and conventions of a culture and society that produced them. They are not imprints of an objective reality but documents of how certain ideologies (through different narratives of reality) work, not hiding the fact that the director is also biased towards certain values. The ever-present ironic distance, humor, and satirical tone only reinforce this claim. *C.S.A.* tries to grasp not the agendas, but the preconditions and effects of different types of media representations, and how cultural schemes and collective ideas are reflected in them; how media frames historical facts and creates impactful narratives that people absorb and works as a source of their cultural, racial, and national identities.

The British film stages the abolition of slavery as a central issue of the Civil War and this is not disputed by either side of the debate. However, *C.S.A.* shies away from the bold step to posit a key Confederate figure—general Lee—as the face of the pro-slavery camp (just as any other real American president). It must be emphasized that this is an ideological consideration of Willmott, not the fictional creators of the embedded British film because, in the fictive universe of *C.S.A.*, this is a fact that has not been questioned by anyone. According to *C.S.A.*’s timeline, Lee was a latent abolitionist and was set aside after the war. Rather than a humorous deconstruction of the political positions of the warring parties, the event can be easily interpreted as the result of the creators’ fear of offending a Confederate icon. On the other hand, the mythical character of Lincoln—maintained, reinforced, and updated by Burns’ *The Civil War*—is destroyed here to some extent (Kilgore, 2016, 118), as *C.S.A.*’s

narrative depicts him as a coward and weak-spirited man who values his own life more than the future of his country.

Willmott does not try to be impartial or present his stance as ideologically neutral, he embraces an ideological commitment that is no doubt similar to the political stance of the British documentary. What justifies the simplification of the driving forces of American politics, and the exceeding emphasis on a single social issue is precisely this political commitment of the work, paired with the film's clear intention to persuade its audience through sarcastic humor and exaggerated representations of American history.

On the surface level, the satire is aimed at the backwardness, brutality, and inhumanity inherent in "southern values," which notion is simplified and exaggerated to absurdity, making a potential public outrage against the film understandable. Through its narrative, the film depicts that under Confederate authority, horrible conditions would have continued to exist for African-Americans, but the whole point of a functional satire is to criticize existing systems, current states of affairs, and this is what Willmott's film really wishes to do: to attack actual political institutions and social practices (Gallager, 2007, 53). Although it seems that the main target of the film's criticism is the Confederacy, southern politics, and the symbolic region of the South (with everything it stands for in the cultural imagination), the actual case is more complex, as the film ultimately claims that real-world conditions are only slightly better than in the represented alternative reality. For this reason, the accusation is not only directed to the imaginary C.S.A. and "the South", but also to the actual historic and contemporary United States. This claim is reinforced through the whole narrative, especially in the scenes that feature the Confederate TV channel's other programs. There is a parody of *Cops* (1989–), one of the longest-running television shows in the United States, which was canceled twice during its history: first following the request of a civil rights organization in 2013 and later in response to the George Floyd protests in 2020. Through the spoof show's style, tone, and iconography—which is basically a direct imitation of *Cops*' opening sequence—the film suggests that Black people are more likely targeted by the police and subjected to aggressive and humiliating treatment.

The latent argument that seeks to point out the distinct position of this racial minority in American society becomes an explicit claim by the end of the film when the factuality of many previously presented elements is revealed. As a final twist, the film confronts us with the reality of many

satirical moments which were presented as hyperbolic jokes of lesser-known historical facts: Many racist products that actually existed (The Gold Dust Twins washing powder, Sambo Axel Grease oil, Darkie Toothpaste, Niggerhair Tobacco, Coon Chicken Inn restaurant chains) are advertised on Confederate TV as funny and surreal inventions. For the uninitiated, the most absurd and staggering fact is the existence of a medical diagnosis called drapetomania or “freedom disease,” an alleged mental illness identified in slaves by the physician Samuel A. Cartwright. The film confronts the (ideally American) viewer with their earlier ignorance of how little they knew about the country’s racist past and present. As Lisa Doris Alexander put it: “featuring products that existed in history prime forces the viewer to ponder just how ‘fictional’ the film really is” (2019, 111).

As its most powerful rhetorical weapon the film plays the discursive codes of fictionality and factuality against each other, but in an uncommon way: not presenting invented content as real (as in *Forgotten Silver*, or for the most of *The Real Mao*), but portions of reality as invention. Usually, when the factual status of an element is relevant, there is an active authentication process to suggest the nature of the signified object: Viewers have to be convinced that certain elements are a truthful representation of facts, and every element of the work (the genre frame, the style, the type of narrative) functions to justify this claim. *C.S.A.* initially encourages the viewer to see the advertised products completely as inventions of the film’s creators despite their historical existence. This reversed authentication is effective not only because of the comical excess and absurdity of the ads, but other, contextual elements also add to the plausibility of this interpretation: The contents of the narrative (the alternate history), the genre (mockumentary), the general tone (ironic, satirical), the logic of satire (it attacks social institutions and power structures with representations that had to be understood metaphorically).

In a first step, the film convinces its viewer about the satirical and excessive nature of its narrative segments (suggesting there has never been such a serious medical diagnosis as “freedom disease”), which nonetheless refers to a more general truth (suggesting it must be only a metaphor for the moral rationalization of slavery). *C.S.A.* basically asks its audience to trust that its narrative is an invention, but indirectly relevant to the actual world if they correctly decode its genre as social satire. Then, in a second step, it reveals the occasional factual (literal, nonfigurative) truth in what was presented as a figurative excess to elevate its argumentation onto an

even higher level. At this point, the film steps out from the ironic frame of imaginary documentaries and a text appears onscreen: “The following is part of the history of the United States of America.” This contrast between figurative (discursive) and direct truth claims or plausible fakes (according to genre rules, it is a well-formed, but invented narrative) and implausible reality (mainly due to its first discursive framing) highlights the seriousness and absurdity of the facts this rhetorical maneuver was based on.

There are other obviously invented scenes where the audience is pretty much aware of the factual elements contained in the representation. For example, the advertisement of “the shackle” (a restraining device that allows satellite tracking of its location) or “the slave shopping network” (an interactive television program for human trafficking) are practically modernized versions of once-existing practices. In both cases, the film uses fictionality to argue that the imaginary C.S.A. is not so different than the actual history (and present-day conditions) of the United States.

7.5 RECEPTION AND THE CRITICISM OF THE MEDIA

In 2017, HBO announced the development of a TV series based on the same narrative premise as *C.S.A.* with *Game of Thrones* creators David Benioff and D.B.Weiss, but the project was eventually canceled due to the social media outrage: Many criticized the idea to depict a slavery-based contemporary America³ which could be easily used as a white-supremacist fantasy, a kind of “voyeuristic wish-fulfillment”⁴ or problematized the (white) identity of its creators.⁵

An interesting tendency can be observed here: The fear of an audience who reads the (film)text against explicit and obvious authorial intentions, against its dominant, suggested interpretation, going against the totalizing (progressive) message of the represented stories and occupying an “oppositional position” (Hall, 1980, 61), which is, in a political sense,

³ An article by Tim Molloy (2017) argues the series is unnecessary because it has been done before, referring to Willmott’s *C.S.A.*

⁴ The title of a New York times article is telling: “I Don’t Want to Watch Slavery Fan Fiction” (Gay, 2017)

⁵ Similar accusations were made regarding the subordinated position and explicitly displayed violence against women in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (2017–). A journalist of the online magazine *The Mary Sue* asks if “is it possible to tell this story without showing violence enacted by women on a societal level?” and remarks that the show’s second “season has moved away from necessary storytelling devices to near torture porn.” (Gardner, 2018)

also a reactionary position, since it opposes the accepted discourse of the liberal elite, favors exclusionary cultural trends and maintains repressive social structures.

According to its director, the film was heavily criticized with various political attitudes (Kliman, 2015): Some claimed, it makes racism and slavery entertaining, therefore it is nothing else but a cheap and exploitative spectacle.⁶ An appalling case points out how it also violated liberal sensibilities: Larry Peterson, the actor who played the confederate senator Fauntroy was fired from his job at Time Warner after they screened a scene from the film at an event held in his honor (Kliman, 2015). It also resonated to a large extent among people who sympathized with the former Confederation and who claimed the film simply calls them and their ancestors fascists (Kliman, 2015). As Linda Hutcheon pointed out, the richly layered ironic mode that *C.S.A.* utilizes is particularly suitable to provoke contradictory reactions, since two mutually exclusive, but perfectly functional readings exist in parallel. In other words, the discourse contains its counter-discourse, just as it happens in Wittgenstein's famous philosophical example of the duck/rabbit drawing (Hutcheon, 1995, 57). According to Hutcheon, the question of ultimately which reading will prevail is heavily dependent on the community that interprets the "text" (ibid., 85).

There is no doubt Willmott's audience has to face a difficult situation: As several critics noted,⁷ the film shows many scenes related to genuine human horror and slavery as ridiculous and funny, where viewers should enjoy and laugh at these depictions while probably aware of the inappropriateness of their own reaction. (Especially when confronted with their ignorance of historical facts at the end). The question emerges: Is it ethical to create a funny film (or fictional universe) *about* the Civil War or chattel slavery?⁸ The demonization of Confederalist values and traditions is a rightly raised issue, as the film creates culprits not only from political leaders or the intellectual elite but from anyone who is a beneficiary of the system, depicting them as evil, impenitent people.

⁶There is a known case about the screening of the film in a high school history class, where "Dalton students said that some felt the film was insensitive to the struggle of blacks and made light of slavery" (Hernández, 2014) and the school had to apologize for the event.

⁷Aggregated critical reviews for the film can be found on rottentomates, IMDb and metacritic.

⁸"the idea that any of this nonsense is funny dishonors those Americans who died in the Civil War" (rsterneq, IMDb user reviewer)

To a degree, satire made it possible for Willmott to defend the film from such accusations. Because of its framing as fiction, the film has greater freedom to utilize its representations argumentatively: The evaluative statements and depictions of the Confederacy (“the South”) are not historians’ accounts or factual descriptions of different periods or political ideologies, but hyperbolic and excessive caricatures. These rhetorical figures became ethically permissible with fictionality and genre-framing since the status of their referents is communicated to the audience, making the contents of the film a thought experiment within an ironic discourse. Not to mention that most of the statements made in the film are all attached to represented narratorial instances (fictional narrators) in embedded discourses.

Another ideological issue with the narrative lies in the way the film makes certain aspects of (the social) reality visible or invisible, important or insignificant: Instead of exploring systemic mechanisms, in its explication, the film often focuses on the questions of personal identity and amplifies the role of individual beliefs and character deficits. Strangely, it presents a plausible economical explanation behind the institution of slavery, and then it explicitly denies its significance. The film begins with an emphasis on the economic importance of slavery, but this aspect only comes up in the embedded discourse of the 1958 Confederate educational film. Near the end of *C.S.A.*, the American author in the British documentary admits that the Confederacy’s insistence on slavery was not a consequence of an economic necessity, and in fact, it was always disadvantageous for the Confederate economy. Instead, it is a core element of their identity: “Yet, slavery, like nothing else, is what defines us, shapes us as a people, as a nation. Owning a slave is a constant reminder of who you are. It strengthens our role and responsibility to be a leader in our homes, in our families, and in our communities, and to provide the leadership as only a white man could hold in the most powerful nation in the world.” It seems the film text is conscious about the leftist reading of the issue, but the expert’s reinforcing words render the economic aspect somewhat obsolete as it is ultimately rejected as an insufficient explanation, which is unsatisfactory for the film’s rhetorical purposes. The idea of the Confederacy crystallizes rather as a system of values and identity constructions instead of a social institution based on particular economic mechanisms.

As Hutcheon suggests, irony and satire create a layer of semiosis that escapes strict authorial control and is susceptible to double readability. If the film makes us laugh, as its motto states, who do we laugh at? How can

we decide whether the rotten, demonic figure of the Confederalist (and everybody who sympathizes with him) is a critique of “southern” values, or this image itself is a satirical joke, the stereotyping of the “southern intellectual” as imagined by the “North” who is the real target here? If excessive and explicitly cartoonish black figures are interpreted as racist stereotypes from the cultural imagination of the Confederate psyche, why can’t we understand the juxtaposed southern attitudes and characters as similarly exaggerated and the representation of another collective’s fantasy? A prime example could be the Fauntroy family, which plays a crucial role in national politics as members of a political dynasty that is extremely insistent with the views of their ancestors. To emphasize the satirical aspect of this political attitude, the same actor (Peterson) was asked to play the head of the family in every generation. This hyperbolic trope can change the target of the joke from the southerners’ attitude towards slavery to liberal concepts of the Confederate worldview and perspective. The figure of the southerner may not be so explicitly and childishly funny, but it is nonetheless depicted as an exorbitant and clichéd character. No matter how unintended it is, the discursive tension created by the irony in the text makes it possible to read excessive elements like the creed about the significance of slavery (as an identity and community forming practice) and Fauntroy’s character in the film—not primarily as caricatures of southern values—but the mocking of this liberal ideological imagination of the Confederate character.

In this kind of embedded ironic discourse, it is much harder to pin down the ever oscillating meaning: As a whole, Willmott’s film suggests that “the abolitionists” (an obvious representation of the early 2000s “liberals” or “progressives”) present events in a more nuanced way, creating a more complex view of history, but even this aspect becomes more complicated through the ambiguity of certain details. The confederate author at narrative level 3 is purposefully unsympathetic, but after all, it is the state’s television at level 2 that airs the British documentary. It is announced as “controversial” and one that “created a national scandal,” shown only because of “public demand” in an apparently collapsing political system. Did Willmott want to suggest the Confederacy’s softening media policies or an inevitable step for the system? Or was this move a discursive necessity for Willmott to include a conflicting voice in the film?

Many viewers criticized the authenticity of the film’s alternate history by claiming it is not consistent, or upright illogical and laughable (see

Gallager, 2007)⁹ when they asked: How can such a different outcome of a major historical event in the nineteenth century result in a very familiar twentieth century? (The World Wars still occur, Kennedy still runs for president against Nixon, gets elected then assassinated, etc.) Is it a mistake to ask for the authenticity that certain critics of the film wanted to see? They expected a credible story in which the “what if” logic of the events would be elaborated by taking into account as many factors as possible. Note that this wish for *realism* in this case is not the expectation of truthful or factual accounts, but what might be called the expectation of internal coherence¹⁰ or simulational consistency of the narrative that unfolds from an altered, imaginary historical situation. Because *C.S.A.* wanted to reflect on the nation’s actual conditions, it sacrificed narrative consistency to mock and satirize. We can understand its commitment by viewing the film at least as much an argumentative work (where satirical references to real-world events and puns matter the most), as it is a narrative work with a cause and effect logic (where the consistency of the story matters the most). In this respect, the essence of the film’s rhetoric is to operate the satirical/comical code, which overwrites the internal coherence of the alternative world: It becomes interesting to the spectator precisely because it depicts well-known situations and events through a parodistic perspective. (For example the president of the nation invites Hitler to the capital and suggests that instead of killing the Jews, he should use them as a free labor force). Major historical events of the twentieth century are

⁹ See also the IMDb user reviews of the film with titles like: “The Brutal Satire Works Much Better Than The Alternative History”, “Too Much ‘Mock’ In This ‘Mock-umentary””, with observations such as: “obviously this completely fails as a believable alternate history but that’s fine as it is intended as satire.” (GusF); “The script’s imagination falls flat and finally trails off as it imagines how a CSA would fare in world affairs” (noralee); “even a satire has to have some level of believability to it to work” (sddavis63) <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0389828/reviews>. Accessed 31 Jan 2022.

¹⁰ Lars Elleström points out that “internal coherence” can be understood as another type of indexicality where a system is built by signs referencing each other inside a given communicational discourse. He calls the phenomenon *intracommunicational indexicality* and gives us the following examples: “represented persons and actions appear to be generally interrelated; events and moods seem to somehow follow from another rather than occur randomly; details are apprehended as parts of discernible mental or material wholes; psychological states, ideas, and concepts are developed intelligibly; physical properties are associated to material items in a consistent way; physical and psychological actions lead to reactions that are linked to the actions; emotions are possible to understand in the context of other emotions and activities; concepts make sense considering the setting; entities and developments are felt to be proportional given the overall frame.” (Elleström, 2018, this chapter)

transformed according to *C.S.A.* logic, but the base for every important segment is a real situation. This world is not built up logically from the results of the Civil War, but it is kept close to the actual one. (A concrete barrier very similar to the Berlin Wall got built but on the border of the States and Canada, or the anti-communist propaganda of the fifties is alluded by an anti-abolitionist campaign in the film). It follows that the aspects of alternate history (diegetic causality) and satire (humorous allusions) are in constant semiotic tension as they utilize different logics. World-building (that needs internal narrative coherence) and biting critique of society (with witty allusions and improbable exaggerations), a syntactic-narrative logic and a semantic-argumentative logic strain at each other. This tension exists because the film in its diegesis tries to *depict* an alternative universe while *satirizing* and *criticizing* the actual one. The difficulty is to fulfill these different purposes in a single discourse that should be suitable for decoding on multiple levels: The primary level of comprehension of a logically coherent narrative and the secondary level of interpretation of its references that have relevance to actual states of affairs.

I am not attempting a symptomatic reading of *C.S.A.* but proposing that it (implicitly, but verifiably) examines the role of ideology in the Žižekian sense by its complex discursive frames. The presentation of a highly mediatized and narrativized reality draws the interpreter's attention to the fact that in virtually every culture, the authentication frame for accepted and desired behavior for its members (which form the value-system of a society) is for the most part not based on lessons learned in a direct, experiential reality, but on narratives that are referencing other foundational narratives (myths). Basically, these are stories that point to each other.

The Ken Burns-style features play a fundamental role in the mediation of the story, but I propose—even though complex narrative embedments have an important function in the film—the primary purpose of *C.S.A.* is not a critique of media propaganda, but the critique of ideologies inherent in societies that symptomatically manifested in pop-cultural narratives. Perception of society through representations is much more than the examination of overt manipulations of “state propaganda”; it is about the unconscious ideologies representational discourses reveal. It is not about how propaganda distorts the facts and tames the brutal and inhumane practice of slavery: After all, for most of its runtime, we do not see propaganda (at least not Confederate propaganda), but a “foreign” and possibly “dangerous” documentary that seeks “objectivity” and “balance” on a

Confederate TV channel that just wants to entertain and inform its audience and make money by selling advertising time to corporations.

According to Alexander, “Willmott is not making fun of documentaries as a genre in the way that Brooks does with the Western with *Blazing Saddles* (Brooks, 1974). *C.S.A.* is simply utilizing the form and not making any statements about the genre itself. For that reason, the film has a very complicated and uncomfortable relationship with both parodies and mockumentaries” (Alexander, 2019, 106). I would argue that although the parodic element is not dominant here, and the film does not explicitly criticize the genre itself, it shows the function and significance of media representations, that is, it reflects on the wider context, only in this case, in the form of more subtle, analytical insights. A much sharper satirical character is present in connection with its main theme (slavery and racism), but the effect of satire is often based on the implicit ideological nature of the mediatized information. This is why the best satiric moments in *C.S.A.* are not in the main narration of the British documentary (when the film directly discusses Confederate values, opinions on slavery, history and politics, theory and moral principles), but when it indirectly reflects on these, by showing them “in action.” When the film presents the everyday life of American society, the mundane, the present time, and the implementation of their values in commercials, news, teleshopping, and TV shows designed for entertainment. These television programs with practical aims serve an ultimately capitalistic society. This is the ideology Willmott’s film itself presents at an unconscious level and the inconsistent abandonment of this thought is why we can criticize the film’s premise.¹¹ Willmott himself stated,

I wanted to bring out the reasons why the war was fought, you know, because that’s the big debate that still goes on in some circles. And you know, there are these people that don’t want to admit that it was fought over slavery. So, it’s important to show how valuable slaves were. I love that luxury car example that we used in the film And so, if you don’t understand that part of slavery, I don’t think you really understand how slavery

¹¹The first really impactful economic interpretation of American slavery is called the Williams-thesis, which sparked numerous debates since its publication in 1944. In short, it “held that capitalism as an economic modality quickly replaced slavery once European elites accumulated the vast surplus capital from slavery that they needed in order to bankroll their industrial revolution.” (Mount, 2015)

functioned in America. With the products, I wanted to show how we still make money off the legacy of slavery. (Carter, 2015)

The propagandistic nature of *C.S.A.* and the significance of these two levels of ideology could be a subject of debate, but the film—reflexively—puts a great emphasis on the ideological role of fictions, as it depicts their role both as tools for filtering as well as indicating certain mindsets about history, society, nation, and race. Besides the expected “non-fictional” style media content such as clips stylized as or real archive footage and documents that illustrate a historical event or the general atmosphere of an era, the most striking feature of the British film is the inclusion of embedded fiction (all parodies of certain fictional genres) that only exist in this alternative universe as full works: a fake D.W. Griffith film (*The Hunt for Dishonest Abe*, 1915), a fake RKO film about Jefferson Davies, a Broadway musical titled *A Northern Wind*, *The Dark Jungle*, a 1940 war film about the southern war, *I Married an Abolitionist*, a parody of 1950s anti-communist propaganda films, and *That’s My Boy*, a “black” sitcom. These “fictions” share the quality of edgy satire with *C.S.A.’s* general tone and create a mise en abyme-like structure. The multiple frames play a crucial role here, as the tonal character for most of these works (with the frame of the Confederate channel) is heroic, tragic, or pathetic, even to a non-Confederate viewer; but as “fake fictions” (with the frame and interpretation created by Willmott’s film), they are comical, ironic, and satirical to us, real viewers.

For the sensitive interpreter, the embedded fictions in *C.S.A.* show how dominant ideologies in society can be manifested in cultural products, how they become an invisible and natural constituent in representations and practices that are not reports of single, unique events but narratives with culturally accepted and legitimized elements that have become part of the norm. They also reflect on the tendency of how fiction can shape and change a society’s perception of an event or phenomenon, just as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* made a deep impression on the American public and attitude towards slavery in the mid-nineteenth century.

If *C.S.A.* is an interesting critique of any media, it is by no means the nationalistic documentary or propagandistic newscast. It doesn’t repeat the tired mantras of “media lies” and “the news is distorted and fake.” Willmott’s film is not only about the cruelty and absurdity of slavery, but also about how easily a society can accept this practice. His film is about norms and how these norms are ultimately artificial, historical, but

naturalized and difficult to dispute for an individual in a certain political system and cultural environment. *C.S.A.* is fiction that highlights the role of both nonfictional and fictional narratives as important instruments for understanding culture, ideology, and politics and claims that these representations are at the same time cameras that register and record a particular reality and projectors that affect this reality by maintaining existing power structures through the reinforcement of their implicit ideological positions.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, L. D. (2019). *Expanding the black film canon: Race and genre across six decades*. University of Kansas Press.
- Bordwell, D. (1989). *Making meaning: Inference and rhetoric in the interpretation of cinema*. Harvard University Press.
- Bordwell, D. (2007). Film forgery. David Bordwell's website on cinema: Observations on Film Art. Accessed November 25, 2022, from <http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/2007/03/25/film-forgery/>.
- Carli, S. (2010). Poetry is more philosophical than history: Aristotle on mimesis and form. *The Review of Metaphysics*, 64, 303–336.
- Carter, D. (2015). Playing with history: A black camera interview with Kevin Willmott. *Black Camera*, 6(New Series), 42–51.
- Elleström, L. (2018). Coherence and truthfulness in communication: Intracommunicational and Extracommunicational Indexicality. *Semiotica*, 225, 423–446.
- Gallager, C. (2007). When did the confederate states of America free the slaves? *Representations*, 98, 53–61.
- Gardner, K. (2018, July 12). It's prestige TV season, and the hottest trend might still be violence against women. *The Mary Sue*. Accessed November 25, 2022, from <https://www.themarysue.com/emmys-violence-against-women/>.
- Gay, R. (2017, July 25). I Don't want to watch slavery fan fiction. *New York Times*. Accessed November 25, 2022, from https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/25/opinion/hbo-confederate-slavery-civil-war.html?_r=0.
- Hall, S. (1980). Encoding/decoding. In S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe, & P. Willis (Eds.), *Culture, media, language: Working papers in cultural studies, 1972–79* (pp. 128–138). Routledge.
- Hathaway, R. V. (2011). Reading art Spiegelman's *Maus* as postmodern ethnography. *Journal of Folklore Research*, 48, 249–267.
- Heath, M. (1991). The universality of poetry in Aristotle's poetics. *Classical Quarterly*, 41, 389–402.

- Hernández, J. C. (2014, January 30). Dalton School apologizes for screening slavery satire. *The New York Times*. Accessed November 25, 2022, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/31/nyregion/dalton-school-apologizes-for-screening-slavery-satire.html>.
- Hutcheon, L. (1995). *Iron's edge: The theory and politics of irony*. Routledge.
- Iversen, S., & Nielsen, H. S. (2016). The politics of fictionality in documentary form: *The act of killing* and *the ambassador*. *European Journal of English Studies*, 20, 249–262.
- Juhasz, A., & Lerner, J. (2006). Introduction: Phony definitions and troubling taxonomies of the fake documentary. In A. Juhasz & J. Lerner (Eds.), *F is for phony: Fake documentary and Truth's undoing* (pp. 1–35). University of Minnesota Press.
- Kilgore, D. W. D. (2016). On practicing an independent African American cinema: An interview with Kevin Willmott. *Black Camera*, 8, 95–123.
- Kliman, T. (2015, July 20). Why banning the confederate flag Won't stop confederate America an interview with Kevin Willmott, the director of the mockumentary "CSA." *Washingtonian*. Accessed November 25, 2022, from <https://www.washingtonian.com/2015/07/20/why-banning-the-confederate-flag-wont-stop-confederate-america/>.
- Molloy, T. (2017, August 21). *Another problem for HBO's 'confederate': It's been done*. *The Wrap*. Accessed November 25, 2022, from <https://www.thewrap.com/another-problem-hbos-confederate-done/>.
- Mount, G. E. (2015, November 21). *Capitalism and slavery: Reflections on the Williams thesis*. Black perspectives. Accessed November 25, 2022, from <https://www.aaihs.org/capitalism-and-slavery-reflections-on-the-williams-thesis/>.
- Moyer, J. (2014, December 17). Before Sony and The Interview: This award-winning movie imagined George W. Bush's assassination. *The Washington Post*. Accessed November 25, 2022, from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/12/17/forget-sonys-the-interview-this-award-winning-movie-imagined-the-assassination-of-george-w-bush/>.
- Nielsen, H. S., Phelan, J., & Walsh, R. (2015). Ten theses about Fictionality. *Narrative*, 23, 61–73.
- Phelan, J. (2017). Fictionality. *A/B: Auto/Biography Studies*, 32, 235–238.
- Plantinga, C. (2009). Documentary. In P. Livingstone & C. Plantinga (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to philosophy and film* (pp. 494–504). Routledge.
- Walsh, R. (2007). *The rhetoric of Fictionality: Narrative theory and the idea of fiction*. The Ohio State University Press.
- Walsh, R. (2019). Fictionality as rhetoric: A distinctive research paradigm. *Style*, 53, 397–425.

- White, H. (2005). Introduction: Historical fiction, fictional history, and historical reality. *Rethinking History. The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 9, 147–157.
- Zetterberg Gjerlevsen, S., & Nielsen, H. S. (2020). Distinguishing fictionality. In C. A. Maagaard, D. Schäbler, & M. W. Lundholt (Eds.), *Exploring fictionality: Conceptions, test cases, discussions* (pp. 19–39). University Press of Southern Denmark.
- Zimmer, C., & Leggett, L. (1974). All films are political. *SubStance*, 3, 123–136.
- Žižek, S. (1989). *The sublime object of ideology*. Verso.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.





Clemens J. Setz on Bursting the Reader's Reality Bubble

Nataša Muratova and Anna Obererlacher

8.1 INTRODUCTION

Digital technology has made it easier than ever to combine, recombine, and spread information from and in different media, leading to phenomena like the destabilization of reliable communication. This destabilization is also observable in current literary texts and authorial staging practices. The Austrian author Clemens J. Setz, one of the most prominent figures in the contemporary German-speaking literary scene (*Literaturbetrieb*), is a paradigmatic example of disrupting reliable communication. Setz destabilizes communication by moving beyond the dichotomies of fact/fiction and authentic/fake and thus disrupts the perception of the author and his texts. Setz links fact and fiction in his literary texts so that they become

N. Muratova

Department of German Language and Literature, Stockholm University,
Stockholm, Sweden

e-mail: natasa.vukelic@tyska.su.se

A. Obererlacher (✉)

Department of German Studies, University of Innsbruck, Innsbruck, Austria

e-mail: anna.obererlacher@uibk.ac.at

© The Author(s) 2024

B. Schirrmacher, N. Mousavi (eds.), *Truth Claims Across Media*,
Palgrave Studies in Intermediality,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42064-1_8

intertwined. He then puts the indistinguishability of fact and fiction in the literary texts to use in his authorial staging practices. Our analysis shows how Setz playfully addresses hypothetical implications the blurring of fact and fiction in literary works may have on an author's credibility and their role as an authoritative figure. We do this by looking at Setz's experimental literary text *Bot – Gespräch ohne Autor* from 2018 (“Bot – Conversations Without the Author”¹), which can be grouped with his authorial staging practices.

In *Bot*, Setz makes use of destabilizing communication and, further, destabilizes communication in the form of an author interview, prefaced with a supposedly factual foreword by the author. In this foreword, the author-character Setz plays with the idea of having an android or a bot, constructed in his image, answer questions in an author interview with the editor Angelika Klammer instead of having to do it himself. The text thus implicitly raises the issue of creating an author surrogate (*Kunstfigur*) to act on an author's behalf. Creating an author surrogate brings facts from the author's known biography and fictional elements so close together that fact and fiction can become indistinguishable. This correlates with Setz's authorial staging practices. Following the notion that private persons use their author personas when assuming the function of authors in public, author surrogates can be described as replacements for author personas that eventually become the subject of literary communication in public. In *Bot*, this subject toggles between the author-character Setz and the android/bot, as the interview is said to be conducted as a Turing Test, a thought experiment introduced by Alan Turing in 1950 to find out how good a machine is at imitating humans (Shah & Warwick, 2017, 556). This disrupts the perception of the author persona Setz and his text *Bot*. To pin down precisely how the perception of the author persona Setz is played with, we look at a question and an answer in *Bot*. The interviewer asks a question about his life as a literary character, and the answer details an encounter between the author-character Setz and a woman who has read his fictional novel *Indigo* (2012) as a text that represents actual events. *Indigo* is a novel by Setz that was short-listed for the German Book Prize (*Deutscher Buchpreis*) in 2012. According to Thomas Strässle, *Indigo* is fakeliterary since it makes use of various techniques to design a “deceptively real narrative robot” (2019, 66) that resembles the real Setz and

¹There is no official translation of the book. However, a description of the book in English can be found on the website of the German publishing house *Subrkamp*.

creates a “texture of research, reportage and novel from an esoteric theory” (ibid.). *Bot*, too, can be viewed as faketonial, since it partially pretends to represent actual events and thus may be perceived as truthful (ibid.), which might lead to the construction of “reality bubbles” (Setz, 2018, 43). The faketoniality is emphasized by the imitation of the media product of an author interview and the *as if*-character (Rajewsky, 2005) that the interview is conducted as a Turing Test.

Thus, the approach to both fictions—*Bot* and *Indigo*—as faketonial is crucial, as it helps to see the metafictional thematization of the perception of (1) the author persona Setz, (2) Setz’s literary texts, and (3) the narrators or literary characters with the name Setz in Setz’s literary texts. The question and answer we analyse take this idea even further. As part of the author interview in *Bot* that evokes the illusion of a Turing Test, the answer facilitates a metafictional reflection on the perception of truth claims traditionally expected in author interviews. It challenges the conventions of the imitated media product (author interview) as well as the conventions of literary authorship staged in and created through author interviews, and it playfully reveals the possibilities, limits, and dangers embedded in the perceived truthfulness within the framework of fiction and authorship.²

8.2 CLEMENS J. SETZ AND THE AUTHOR INTERVIEW

Since the publication of his first novel *Söhne und Planeten* (“Sons and Planets”, 2007) Setz has become increasingly famous and is now considered to be one of the most important figures in the contemporary German-speaking literary scene. His success as an author can in part be attributed to his versatile staging practices, which are intertwined with his literary work. His novel *Indigo* plays an especially important role in the author’s writing career and the staging of his authorship. It was Setz’s first novel, published after his transition to the prestigious German publishing house *Subrkamp*, that led to increased attention and recognition in the literary scene. *Indigo* was short-listed for the German Book Prize in 2012, which is a good indicator of the popularity of a literary text and usually increases sales and distribution. The attention given to Setz by the literary scene allows him to stage himself as a literary character in his works, such as

²We would like to thank the editors Beate Schirmacher and Nafiseh Mousavi for their support during the writing process of this article and for bringing important aspects to our attention.

Indigo, where he playfully incorporates his known biography into the novel. It makes use of Setz's fame in the literary scene and the deceptive familiarity that arises from it.

Setz deliberately exploits the conventions of the literary scene to experiment with the concept of authorship. His authorial staging practices can be read as a response to the mechanisms in the literary scene, where authors become increasingly interesting for mass media (Ruchatz, 2014, 54) and are often interviewed on the occasion of a new publication (Genette, 2001, 342; Heubner, 2002, 149). In general, an interview can be defined as "a meeting in which someone asks another person, especially a famous person, questions about themselves, their work, or their ideas, in order to publish or broadcast the information" (Macmillan). Interviews are often regarded as journalistic texts in the form of dialogues, with an unequal distribution of the roles between the interviewer and the interviewee (Bentele, 2000, 179). In the literary scene, interviews can be attractive to authors since they draw the attention of the public to their literary works with the intention of guiding the perception and canonization of the literary works (*Werkpolitik*) (Martus, 2008). Furthermore, in a modern society that promotes individualism (Ruchatz, 2014, 54) and singularization (Reckwitz, 2019), accompanied by the celebrity culture of the present age (Ruchatz, 2014, 53), author interviews may also function as platforms for the staging of authorship (Hoffmann & Pabst, 2016, 1) and creation of author personas.

Particularly in the culture of presence (*Präsenzkultur*) (Birnstiel, 2014), which is an integral part of contemporary literature, authors become "vivid, present, approachable, and observable" (Schaffrick & Willand, 2014, 99) through activities such as performances, public readings, appearances in mass media, or interviews (Birnstiel, 2014, 73). Interviews in general are perceived as authentic and evidence-based (te Heesen, 2013, 327), and author interviews specifically suggest intimacy and personal authenticity (Hoffmann & Kaiser, 2014, 19). According to Ruchatz, a public appearance can be seen as a form of role-play, performed in the author interview, which allegedly bridges the gap between the writer of the text and the private person (2014, 54 and 57). As a part of authorial staging practices, author interviews can be regarded as simulations that produce a notion of authenticity (Fischer-Lichte, 2000, 23). According to Jan-Frederik Bandel, literary interviews do not create the illusion of someone speaking directly and truthfully (2006, 81). Instead, a simulation of presence leads to a form of "authentic presence" (*ibid.*, 80).

Setz is a welcome guest in author interviews, who has been invited to podium discussions, literature shows, and festivals, and he has been asked to share his opinion on poetics and his role as an author in the literary scene. On such occasions, Setz has repeatedly (and increasingly over the past years) expressed an interest in the relationship between author personas and their author surrogates. In the opening speech for the literary festival *Tage der deutschsprachigen Literatur* 2019, he compared the literary scene with professional wrestling, a mixture of combat sport and performance art (Setz, 2019). In the speech, he emphasized the showmanship nature of the literary scene, in which the agents (*Akteure*) resemble stage characters created by professional wrestlers for their show fights (ibid.). In the opening speech for the literary festival *Out of Joint*, whose title is a reference to Philip K. Dick's dystopian novel *Time Out of Joint* (1959), Setz (2021) played with the idea of becoming fictitious during his lifetime and created a link to his literary works. Then, in an online interview in 2021 he talked about the phenomenon of author-surrogates replacing the author in public (Postmodern Talking, 2021). *Bot*, too, refers to this phenomenon by (self)ironically playing through the idea of an artificial intelligence replacing the author persona Setz and, as a result, raises questions about Setz's status as an author as well as his authority and credibility in the literary scene that generally emphasizes the importance of authors.

8.3 THE AUTHOR INTERVIEW AS A TURING TEST IN *BOT*

Bot is divided into two main parts: A supposedly factual foreword that is written in the first-person perspective of the author-character Setz and an author interview the foreword describes as a Turing Test, a thought experiment introduced by Turing in 1950. In Turing's experimental setup of a Turing Test, a so-called judge poses questions to two entities (A and B) without knowing which of the respondents is a person and which is a machine. Generally speaking, the aim of the test is to check how good the machine is at imitating humans—the more humanlike the answers sound, the more difficult it is for the judge to uncover the machine (Shah & Warwick, 2017, 556–57). According to the foreword in *Bot*, the editor and interviewer Angelika Klammer interviews a so-called Setz-Bot whose core is reportedly based on the author's journals (Setz, 2018, 11). At the same time, Setz suggests in the foreword that even he, the author, nevertheless must be hidden in the answers (ibid.). This ambivalence makes plausible the fiction that the interview is a Turing Test, in which Klammer

is said to be the judge and Setz and the Setz-Bot, the interlocutors, even though the Setz-Bot is depicted as a “rudimentary AI” (ibid.), and only an analogue imitation of the computer-based imitation of the human mind—it essentially is Klammer,³ who is said to semi-randomly look for the answers in the journals (ibid., 10).

Philosophically, the Turing Test implies an examination of whether machines can be viewed as intelligent entities that can learn and think (Shah & Warwick, 2017, 554). This also reflects the question of what makes people human and how humans ultimately differ from machines. When Turing presented the imitation game, he still saw it as a pure thought experiment, but he believed that by the turn of the millennium, technology should be sufficiently advanced so that such experiments could be conducted (Turing, 1950, 436 and 442).⁴ Today, when Turing Tests are carried out, it is not uncommon for machines to be identified as humans (Shah & Warwick, 2017, 557). The author-character Setz refers to this in the foreword by mentioning the robot Phil, who was built by David Hanson to resemble the science-fiction author Philip K. Dick and has access to Dick’s journals (Setz, 2018, 7–8 and 11; Smith, 2012). When Hanson once invited Dick’s daughter to talk to the robot Phil and the robot relayed a cogent scene from their life together as a family, she was surprised by how much Phil’s way of communicating resembled her father’s (Setz, 2018, 8; Smith, 2012).

Although conversations with Phil are not a Turing Test per se, they are convincing conversations with an android. From Phil’s story, Setz concludes that a robot’s ability to imitate style can be just as important as its intelligence when attempting to pass the Turing Test (2018, 8). The fact that Klammer is said to look for the answers to her interview questions in Setz’s journals (ibid., 9–11) can be interpreted as an intermedial reference (Rajewsky, 2005) to the robot Phil. The reference creates the illusion of a robotic entity that resembles the author-character Setz, which facilitates the intermedial reference to the Turing Test. In the vein of a structural imitation, “[t]he literary author writes *as if* he had the instruments of [an artificial intelligence] at his disposal, which in reality he does not” (Heller

³The editor Angelika Klammer really exists and is known for conducting interviews with renowned authors such as Hertha Müller.

⁴Turing thought that in the year 2000 the probability that an average judge is able to correctly identify the respondent after a 5-minute interrogation should be at most 70% (Turing, 1950, 436 and 442).

in Rajewsky, 2005, 55, emphasis in original). With the help of an intermedial reference to the author interview as a media product in the foreword and the structural imitation of it in the second part of the book, the author interview is presented as if it were the result of a conversation with an AI developed from Setz's journals. This *as if*-character brings to light a meta-fictional reflection on the conventions in the genre of the author interview, including the staging of authorship in it, since it shows that the experiences, opinions, and beliefs presented in the interview might as well be those of the Setz-Bot.⁵

The structural imitation of the author interview, together with the answers that are said to be taken from Setz's journals and hence mislead to a factual reading, can be viewed as a nod to the readers' general assumptions that they are confronted with authentic and truthful experiences, opinions, and beliefs of authors whenever they read author interviews. However, authenticity in author interviews is created through presence (Schaffrick, 2014, 71), and interviews as presence formats are used by authors to perform authorship and claim authority.⁶ Setz's author surrogate allows him to reflect on his own significance as an author for the means of literary communication and the perception of his literary texts. His authority as an author that can be claimed through traditional author interviews and his author persona that is constituted through his oeuvre⁷ are called into question. This happens because the qualities of intimacy and authenticity are compromised since the simulation of presence

⁵“Th[e] medial difference gives rise, or at least *can* give rise, to the so-called “as if” character of intermedial references, as well as to a specific, illusion-forming quality inherent in them (with the exception of ‘mere thematizations’ of the other medium).” (Rajewsky, 2005, 54, emphasis in original)

⁶The Latin word *auctoritas* has different meanings such as credibility, responsibility, authorship, and influence (Schaffrick, 2014, 13–14). Thus, authors claim authority over products they create. Furthermore, an *auctor* vouches for someone or something (Schaffrick, 2014, 13–14). The public persona is therefore crucial in the perception of literary texts. If the authority is compromised in some way—either by contradictory behaviors or appearances of the author, or by the text seeming unreliable—it may have an effect on how authorship and literary texts are perceived.

⁷In another article Schaffrick discusses the concept of *Werkberrschaft*, which describes the authority of the author over their work and vice versa, the power of the text over the author. He states that in the same way as the work is the product of an author; the author only consolidates their status as an author subject through their work and publication. This suggests a symmetrical relationship between author and work (*Autor-Werk-Herrschaft*) (Schaffrick, 2018, 2).

(Bandel, 2006, 80) is rendered impossible, as either the Setz-Bot or the author and narrator Setz in *Bot* could be the respondent to every single one of Klammer's questions. The author Setz, who usually is provided with a high degree of authority and control over the perception of his work and author persona, is called into question. This topic is also thematized in the question and answer in *Bot*, which centres on the author-character Setz meeting a woman who has read the novel *Indigo* as a text that represents true events (2018, 42).

8.4 BOT IN THE REALM OF THE FAKETIONAL

Using the author's name in works of fiction is considered as a strong reference to reality (*Realitätsreferenz*) (Krumrey, 2014, 31), and the illusion of identifying the author Setz with the narrator and literary character is created through the sharing of the same name (ibid., 122). Thus, one possible approach to *Bot* would be to analyse it as autofiction. The concept of autofiction focuses on the friction derived from an overlap of the contradicting pacts when reading/writing a factual autobiography versus a fictional novel (Pontzen, 2016, 298; Pottbeckers, 2017, 59; Zipfel, 2009). Generally speaking, references to an author's name can add plausibility to works of fiction as well as draw attention to the artificiality of literary constructs (Krumrey et al., 2014, 13). Nonetheless, autofiction is primarily located in the realm of fiction, often paratextually⁸ marked as novels, with an attempt to draw attention to the constituting mechanisms of authorship in the literary scene and the conditions of fictionalizing autobiographies and memories (Kutzenberger, 2021, 89; Ott & Weiser, 2013, 9).

Some of Setz's literary texts, such as *Indigo*, have been discussed from the perspective of autofiction (Pontzen, 2016; Pottbeckers, 2017). Jörg Pottbeckers, for instance, analyses *Indigo* as unreal autofiction "that positions itself consciously far from reality" (2017, 178, our translation). Taking a different approach, Alexandra Pontzen classifies *Indigo* with reference to Vincent Colonna as "fantastic autofiction" and with reference to Frank Zipfel as a "special form of fictional narration, characterized by the author and character having the same name, often combined with fantastic

⁸ Gérard Genette defines paratexts as (mostly textual) elements that transform a (literary) text into a book and make it accessible to the public. He distinguishes between peritexts that are materially connected to the book (e.g. title, chapter headings or forewords) and epitexts that lie outside the book but refer to it (e.g. interviews, letters or diary entries) (Genette, 2001).

elements, so that it cannot be read as a factual report but as a poetic text” (2016, 293, our translation). Zipfel distinguishes between three forms of autofiction: (1) a specific method of autobiographical writing, (2) a specific method of fictional narration, and (3) a combination of the autobiographical pact and the fictional pact (2009, 298–311). Pontzen’s classification of *Indigo* as 2) a specific method of fictional narration is conclusive since *Indigo* has been published as a novel by an author who is known for his fictional works.

However, the idea that Setz is an author of fictional works is ironically challenged in his fictional work *Bot*: The answer to Klammer’s question refers to a fictional encounter of the author-character Setz, who claims that *Indigo* is 2) a specific method of fictional narration with a reader who is convinced that *Indigo* is 1) a specific method of autobiographical writing. With this in mind and together with Pontzen’s classification of *Indigo* as 2) a specific method of fictional narration, it seems crucial for our analysis to view *Indigo* as 3) a combination of the autobiographical pact and the fictional pact. With the latter, 3) a combination of the autobiographical pact and the fictional pact, Zipfel draws on the idea of the overlap between the autobiographical and the fictional pact and emphasizes the “oscillating uncertainty between autobiographical and fictional reading” (Wagner-Egelhaaf, 2013, 12). One could say that this uncertainty causes tension between the two pacts, which in turn can lead to misjudgements about the status of texts by readers, as reflected in the answer to Klammer’s question in *Bot*. In this respect, analogies can be drawn between Zipfel’s remarks on autofiction and Strässle’s concept of the faketonial. In these premises, autofiction is useful to describe *how* an author surrogate can emerge from the overlap of factual and fictional elements in the realms of fiction. On the level of fiction, both *Bot* and *Indigo* can be considered autofictional in respect to the stories’ blurred lines between factual and fictional elements. However, looking at the scene that unfolds in *Bot* with regard to *Indigo* the concept of autofiction does not suffice since it does not take into account the uncanny effect that an author surrogate within the framework of autofiction can have on its readers.

As opposed to the overlap of the contradicting pacts of the factual autobiography and fictional novel, Strässle approaches elements in works of fiction that could be regarded as autofictional with the help of fake and fiction. Strässle refers to literary works that play with the strategies of factual narration with the aim of providing tools for debunking fakes. He points to seven different aspects that are important when approaching the

relationship between fake and fiction: intention, knowledge/ignorance, plausibility, publicity, suggestion, identification, and merging (2019, 39–49). Setz’s novel *Indigo* is one of several examples that Strässle uses to explain his concept of the faketional, even though the novel does not really aim to deceive since it was published in a literary context. Nevertheless, even with novels such as *Indigo*, misinterpretations about whether the text represents true events can occur. The scene in the answer to Klammer’s question expounds this issue on a metafictional level. It implies that the creation of an author surrogate and, thus, the blurring of fact and fiction may have large-scale consequences on the author’s credibility and authority.

Similar to the fiction in *Bot*, the fictional narrative in *Indigo* also alludes to the blending of boundaries between fictionality and factuality, for instance, with the help of paratextual clues. In *Bot*, peritexts set the frame for fiction: the information on the cover (the name of the author, the title, or the summary on the back), the book’s description, and in the foreword that is written in the first-person perspective of Setz. Paratextual elements can evoke contradictory readings. The most prominent element that may cause contradictory readings of *Bot* are the author’s name and the title of the book: Clemens J. Setz and *Bot – Gespräch ohne Autor*. “Bot” is the title of the book and it is also one of the fictional authors. The typography of the author’s name and the title suggest two readings: Clemens J. Setz, *Bot – Gespräch ohne Autor* or Clemens J. Setz-Bot, *Gespräch ohne Autor*, since the font size is the same, although the colour sets Setz and Bot apart. In this way, Setz and Bot are always divided and connected at the same time.

The (para)textual elements reciprocally interact with each other: The content of the interview in the second part of the book connects with context information that lies outside of *Bot*, such as the biographical data of Setz, his statements in interviews or speeches, the mentioning of the editor Angelika Klammer, the robot Phil that represents Philip K. Dick, or even authors like Dick, who in his speech *The Android and the Human* (1972) explored philosophical consequences of the fact that “machines are becoming more human” (1972, 184). This leads to fictional details flowing into Setz’s publicly known biography and facts finding their way into the fictional narrative, like in his novel *Indigo*. In addition, in *Indigo*, pseudo-documentary material is used to provide evidence of the

much-criticized esoteric concept of indigo children,⁹ which is portrayed in the novel with the help of exaggeration. Strässle refers to the metaphor of a narrative robot to look at the fundamental nature of the author/narrator/character Setz in *Indigo* (2019, 61 and 66) and draws on the hypothesis of the Uncanny Valley, a topic that is discussed in *Indigo*, to explain the poetics of the faketonial in Setz's novel (Strässle, 2019, 62–66).

The hypothesis of the Uncanny Valley describes an uncanny feeling that people experience when observing anthropomorphic figures with a degree of similarity to humans between 95% and 99% (Mori, 2012). The roboticist Masahiro Mori first outlined it in the 1970s (Mori, 2012; MacDorman, 2012). Mori's theory does not explicitly refer to but shows parallels to Ernst Jentsch's or Sigmund Freud's descriptions of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*). According to Jentsch, the feeling stems from doubt about the animation or ensoulment (*Beseelung*) of a living being and about whether an inanimate object might not be animate after all; it is a feeling "of horror" that lasts as long as the doubt persists and later transforms into "worry about physical integrity" (Jentsch, 1906, 197–98, our translation). For Mori, too, the feeling is related to self-preservation and "a form of instinct that protects us from proximal... sources of danger" (2012, 100). Mori mainly deals with the reactions of people when they see robots that look and behave like humans (*ibid.*). Jentsch applies his hypothesis to automatons in literary texts, particularly to the doll Olympia in E. T. A. Hoffmann's short story *The Sandman* (1816), and states that a writer can provoke an uncanny effect by leaving readers in the dark about whether a certain literary character is a person or an automaton (Jentsch, 1906, 203). For the effect to last, the uncertainty must not come directly into the focus of the readers' attention, so that they are not prompted to investigate and clarify the matter immediately (*ibid.*).

While Jentsch believed that the reason for an uncanny feeling lay in the challenge of human striving for intellectual mastery of the surrounding world (1906, 205), Freud saw the source of the uncanny in the old familiar (*Altvertrautes*) (1919, 299 and 318). Instead of stressing the familiar that seems a little unfamiliar, Strässle approaches the theory of the Uncanny

⁹A much-criticized, pseudoscientific concept that was first explained in the 1980s in the esoteric publication *Understanding Your Life Through Color* by Nancy Anne Tappe (Singler, 2015, 19). The indigo children in the pseudoscientific concept are said to have special characteristics such as creativity, stubbornness, giftedness, or a strong aversion to authority (Singler, 2015, 17–19; Leland, 2006).

Valley from the unfamiliar that looks almost entirely like the familiar (2019, 65). As opposed to theories on autofiction, Strässle's perspective takes into account the uncanny effect an author surrogate within the framework of autofiction can have on its readers and helps to show how the blurring of fact and fiction helps create fictional characters that resemble author-characters but also make these author-characters' presence fade. For this reason, we apply Strässle's ideas to analyse the scene in *Bot* in the following section to explore how Setz playfully addresses hypothetical implications the indistinguishability of factuality and fictionality in literary works may have on an author's credibility and their role as an authoritative figure.

8.5 AUTHOR-CHARACTER SETZ IN THE UNCANNY VALLEY

In the context of the Uncanny Valley, Strässle refers to a scene from Setz's novel *Indigo* in which the math teacher Clemens Johann Setz witnesses several mysterious events during his internship at a boarding school for indigo children but fails to understand the hidden truth(s) behind them. The math teacher's mental health is significantly affected by being exposed to indigo children. To lay out the concept of the Uncanny Valley, Strässle speaks of two simulation techniques: One leads from humans to machines (deviation) and the other from machines to humans (construction) (Strässle, 2019, 62–65; Setz, 2012, 157–58). For an uncanny effect, the constructed simulation must match at least 95% and at most 99% with the content of the simulated reality (Strässle, 2019, 65; Mori, 2012). Strässle points out the uncanny effect of the narrative stance in *Indigo* (2019, 61 and 66). The same uncanny effect arises in *Bot* between the author/narrator/character Setz.

In his analysis of *Indigo*, Strässle draws on the concept of the Unidentified Narrative Object, coined by Roberto Bui, who used it to describe texts of the New Italian Epic, in which fact and fiction are inextricably linked so that the texts cannot be assigned to any conventional genre. In Bui's concept, the effect of the Uncanny Valley helps to describe impressions such texts might have on readers (*ibid.*, 65). Based on the concept of the Unidentified Narrative Object, Strässle draws a parallel between *Indigo* and Roberto Saviano's *Gomorrha* (2006), and although *Gomorrha* is a reportage book of investigative journalism, a factual

narrative, it creates a similar notion of uncanniness. By incorporating police reports or court documents and deliberately mixing them with personal experiences, Saviano blends the narrative conventions of fiction and non-fiction, which forms an unidentifiable narrative self that could be Saviano, a narrator, or even somebody else. Strässle notes that the question of the self also arises in *Indigo*, but that here the texture of research, reportage, and novel leads to the uncertainty about a narrative character, which he metaphorically refers to as a deceptively real narrative robot (2019, 66). The robot metaphor is even implicitly present in the scene in *Bot* where the play around fact and fiction is pushed to its limit.

The scene we refer to is the answer to the following question from Klammer: “In *Indigo* you appear as Clemens Setz, in *Die Stunde zwischen Frau und Gitarre* as a rabbit. What is life like as a literary character?”¹⁰ (Setz, 2018, 42) The answer to the question reflects the status of *Indigo* by describing an encounter between the author-character Setz and a woman who has read *Indigo* as a text that represents true events. The woman claims that her daughter is an indigo child who makes others sick, just like the children in the author-character Setz’s actual novel, which exaggerates the widely criticized pseudoscientific concept of Indigo children by claiming that the mere presence of the children can cause people to have reactions like dizziness and nausea (ibid., 43). The author-character Setz in the scene assumes that the woman is referring to the esoteric phenomenon, but after a short conversation he realizes that she must have read his novel as a factual text, despite all the exaggerations in the fictional narrative:

At first, I think she is referring to the well-known esoteric concept of the indigo children, but then I ask her (conceitedly curious, like a typical author, if she has actually read the novel) what she means by “just like in my novel”. Well, the other preschoolers get sick when her daughter is with them. At first, she thought it might be the shampoo they use at home—even the teacher, who had first noticed the girl’s sickness-inducing impact, suspected it might be the shampoo—but the effect was the same even after they changed it. And now she has found out that there is—what a coincidence—someone in Graz who has written a book about such children; she wanted to know what my relationship with the mothers portrayed in the novel was like today. After I had understood that she was serious about all this and that

¹⁰This and the following passages from *Bot* were translated by Nataša Muratova.

it was not a belated April Fool's joke, I explained to her, somewhat horrified, that my novel was fiction, pure fantasy. (2018, 43)

The author-character Setz fails to convince the woman to read his novel as pure fiction, and she continues to believe that *Indigo* represents actual events, despite the artistic freedom an author is entitled to when writing a literary narrative (ibid., 43). Moreover, she seems happy that somebody has finally written a book about the challenges she is facing with her daughter and hopes that through the book she will find like-minded parents with similar problems (ibid., 43–44). This time the author-character Setz tries to convince the woman to send her child to the grandmother and later to a boarding school—he lies that he went to such a school himself—because he wants the girl to get away from her family (ibid., 43–44). But he once again fails to convince her that *Indigo* is fiction and recalls a quote from Elias Canetti: “A good writer encounters his characters only *after* he has created them” (ibid., 44, emphasis in original).

Based on this, it can be concluded that the scene alludes to a moment of (self)admiration for the actual author Setz's work: The author-character Setz in the scene realizes that *Indigo* is so convincing that one of his readers (the woman) considers the events described in the novel to be true. One could say that the narrative robot in *Indigo* (Strässle, 2019, 61, 66) does not have an uncanny effect on this particular reader, perhaps because the reader believes to have met the real author Setz who has written *Indigo*. However, it appears to have an uncanny effect on the author-character Setz in the scene, who seems a bit unsettled¹¹ and comments, “[Encountering one's characters *after* having created them] sounds like something pleasant, the way Canetti puts it” (Setz, 2018, 44). Just as in Jentsch's and Mori's theory, the author-character Setz's experience could be interpreted as a sense of eeriness: The source of his “horror” could be doubt about his own ensoulment because he seems to have lost his intellectual ability to master the surrounding world (Jentsch, 1906, 205). What is more, he seems to have lost control over himself and entered the reader's “reality bubble” (Setz, 2018, 43), the woman's “chamber of madness” (ibid., 44), as this reader suddenly has the power to decide what is real and what is not. She seems to have decided that the author-character Setz is more real than its creator.

¹¹The scene starts with Setz's mentioning that he feels uneasy about the encounter with the woman (reader of *Indigo*).

The scene could be interpreted as the author-character Setz trapped in the middle of the Uncanny Valley. Not only does the author-character Setz meet the woman who has read *Indigo* as a factual text, but he also meets another fictional version of himself, namely the strangely familiar narrative robot from *Indigo*. He recognizes this robot as a version of himself because the constructed simulation matches with the simulated reality to a degree of 95% to 99% (Strässle, 2019, 65; Mori, 2012). However, since the scene is told in the *Bot* interview, it can be interpreted as a self-parodic reflection on the actual Setz's work, literary talent, and existence as an author. Leading back to Klammer's questions, it can be said that according to the reflection in *Bot* that draws on Canetti's statement about an author meeting his characters in real life, the author-character Setz's life as a literary character feels as if it were real. From this, it can be concluded that slowly but surely, the author-character Setz in the scene can no longer differentiate between his human self and the narrative robot he created in *Indigo*. This in turn can be read as a reflection on Setz's authorial staging practices, which go beyond the dichotomies of fact/fiction and authentic/fake and include the creation of author surrogates, disrupting the perception of him as an author and his texts.

8.6 *BOT*: A REFLECTION ON THE PERCEPTION OF TRUTH CLAIMS

Judging by the scene in *Bot*, Setz's persuasive faketional fiction-writing can have an impact on his as well as on his readers' lives. On a metafictional level, this can be read as a playful reflection on an author's responsibility and touches on a topic that has always been important for writers but is especially relevant today when the blurring of fact and fiction in literature is eminently popular: Can authors write whatever they please—for instance, fictions that could be perceived as truthful—no matter the consequences? Thus, as part of the author interview in *Bot*, the scene can be interpreted as a mocking (self)criticism of Setz's heedless writing of faketional fiction that highlights not only the importance of authors but also the role of the readers, who are just as involved in the sense-making and sense-giving of stories. At the same time, the scene, as part of the author interview in *Bot*, scrutinizes authorial staging practices since, particularly in the context of the genre of the author interview, the perception of an interview depends on whether or not truth claims are accepted or doubted. The illusion in

Bot that the author interview is a Turing Test points to the possibility of a meticulous imitation of Setz's intellect and style by an AI. In this way, Setz furthermore passes on the power to create links to his literary works and suggest certain readings (Ruchatz, 2013, 528) to the Setz-Bot, thus allegedly renouncing his authority, which is similar to what happens in the scene with the reader of *Indigo*. In this light, *Bot* also poses the question of whether or not authors are indeed capable and trustworthy just because they are portrayed as such in public. Strictly speaking, the book serves as a (self)parody¹² directed at the actual Setz's work and existence as an author, his authority and thus the responsibility that comes with his authorship. It reflects on the fact that fiction can be found not only in literary texts but also in author interviews by playfully emphasizing the authorial staging practices and possibilities, limits, and dangers of allegedly truthful communication. Most importantly, it raises the question of who is authorized to pass judgment on the truthfulness of communication. The book does so not by showing how truthful communication is realized but by stressing the complex relationship of authors, texts, and readers; not least by pointing out a possible shift within such relationships and its consequences.

REFERENCES

- Bandel, J.-F. (2006). Das fünfte und das sechste Ohr. *Kultur & Gespenster*, 2, 72–81.
- Bentele, G. (2000). Interview. In H. Fricke (Ed.), *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturwissenschaft. Neubearbeitung des Reallexikons der deutschen Literaturgeschichte. H–O* (pp. 179–180). De Gruyter.
- Birnstiel, K. (2014). Interview, Präsenz, Paratext. Versuch einer vorläufigen Feldbestimmung. In T. Hoffmann & G. Kaiser (Eds.), *Echt inszeniert. Interviews in Literatur und Literaturbetrieb* (pp. 63–80). Wilhelm Fink.

¹²Following a definition by Uwe Wirth, we use the term parody as an imitation of a prototype, which creates distancing between the parody and the parodied through comical refunctioning of the prototype (Wirth, 2017, 26). On a metafictional level, it is a parody of the actual author Setz and his literary work by the Setz-Bot. On the level of the work of fiction and in the case of a self-parody, the prototype is the actual author Setz and his literary work, imitated by the author-character Setz in *Bot*. Last but not least, in the case of a parody on the level of the work of fiction, it is the actual author Philip K. Dick and his literary work, including Phil, the android, who is supposed to represent Dick, who is imitated by the author-character Setz in *Bot*.

- Dick, P. K. (1972). The android and the human. In L. Sutin (Ed.), *The shifting realities of Philip K. Dick. Selected literary and philosophical writings* (pp. 183–210). Vintage Books.
- Fischer-Lichte, E. (2000). Theatralität und Inszenierung. In E. Fischer-Lichte & I. Pflug (Eds.), *Inszenierung von Authentizität* (pp. 11–27). Francke.
- Freud, S. (1919). Das Unheimliche. *Imago. Zeitschrift für Anwendung der Psychoanalyse auf die Geisteswissenschaften*, V, 297–324.
- Genette, G. (2001). *Paratexte. Das Buch vom Beiwerk des Buches*. Suhrkamp.
- Heubner, H. (2002). *Das Eckermann-Syndrom. Zur Entstehungs- und Entwicklungsgeschichte des Autoreninterviews*. Logos.
- Hoffmann, T., & Kaiser, G. (2014). Echt inszeniert. Schriftstellerinterviews als Forschungsgegenstand. In T. Hoffmann & G. Kaiser (Eds.), *Echt inszeniert. Interviews in Literatur und Literaturbetrieb* (pp. 9–25). Wilhelm Fink.
- Hoffmann, T., & Pabst, S. (2016). Einleitung: Literarische Interviews. *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 91, 1–6.
- Jentsch, E. (1906). Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen. *Psychiatrisch-neurologische Wochenschrift* 22, 195–198 and 23: 203–205.
- Krumrey, B. (2014). Der Autor in seinem Text. In *Autofiktion in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur als (post-)postmodernes Phänomen*. V&R unipress.
- Krumrey, B., Vogler, I., & Derlin, K. (2014). Realitätseffekte in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur. Einleitung. In B. Krumrey, I. Vogler, & K. Derlin (Eds.), *Realitätseffekte in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur. Schreibweisen nach der Postmoderne?* (pp. 9–19). Universitätsverlag Winter.
- Kutzenberger, S. (2021). Enden der Liebe, Enden des Texts: Der Alltag der Liebe bei Navid Kermani und Karl Ove Knausgård. In G. Zocco (Ed.), *The rhetoric of topics and forms 4* (pp. 87–102). De Gruyter.
- Leland, J. (2006, January 12). Are they here to save the world? *The New York Times*.
- MacDorman, K. F. (2012). Masahiro Mori und das unheimliche Tal: Eine Retrospektive. In K. Daniel, L. Nelke, & M. Planitzer (Eds.), *Uncanny interfaces* (pp. 220–234). Textem.
- Macmillan Dictionary. (n.d.). *Interview*. Accessed October 27, 2021, from https://www.macmillandictionary.com/dictionary/british/interview_1.
- Martus, S. (2008). *Werkpolitik: Zur Literaturgeschichte kritischer Kommunikation vom 17. bis ins 20. Jahrhundert mit Studien zu Klopstock, Tieck, Goethe und George*. De Gruyter.
- Mori, M. (2012). The Uncanny Valley. Trans. K.F. MacDorman and N. Kageki. *IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine*, 19, 98–100.
- Ott, C., & Weiser, J. (2013). Autofiktion und Medienrealität. Einleitung. In C. Ott & J. Weiser (Eds.), *Autofiktion und Medienrealität. Kulturelle Formungen des postmodernen Subjekts* (pp. 7–18). Winter.
- Pontzen, A. (2016). Autofiktion als intermediale Kommunikation: Französische und deutschsprachige Ich-Narrationen der Gegenwart im Vergleich

- (M. Houellebecq, T. Glavinic, G. Grass, F. Hoppe, M. Köhlmeier, D. Leupold und C. J. Setz). In *Vom Ich erzählen. Identitätsnarrative in der Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Heribert Tommek and Christian Steltz (pp. 275–302). Peter Lang.
- Postmodern Talking. (2021). Kampf mit der Kunstfigur. Clemens Setz über Wrestling, Stühle und den Rest. Accessed November 29, 2022, form <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSaRvw24uAg>.
- Pottbeckers, J. (2017). *Der Autor als Held*. Königshausen & Neumann.
- Rajewsky, I. O. (2005). Intermediality, intertextuality, and remediation: A literary perspective on Intermediality. *Intermédialités: Histoire et théorie des arts, des lettres et des techniques/Intermediality: History and Theory of the Arts, Literature and Technologies*, 6, 43–64.
- Reckwitz, A. (2019). *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten. Zum Strukturwandel der Moderne*. Suhrkamp.
- Ruchatz, J. (2013). Interview. In N. Binczek, T. Dembeck, & J. Schäfer (Eds.), *Handbuch Medien der Literatur* (pp. 528–535). De Gruyter.
- Ruchatz, J. (2014). Interview-Authentizität für die literarische Celebrity. Das Autoreninterview in der Gattungsgeschichte des Interviews. In T. Hoffmann & G. Kaiser (Eds.), *Echt inszeniert. Interviews in Literatur und Literaturbetrieb* (pp. 45–61). Wilhelm Fink.
- Schaffrick, M. (2014). *In der Gesellschaft des Autors. Religiöse und politische Inszenierungen von Autorschaft*. Universitätsverlag Winter.
- Schaffrick, M. (2018). Ambiguität der Autor-Werk-Herrschaft (Bosse, Luhmann, Jean Paul). In Svetlana Efimova (Ed.), *Autor und Werk. Wechselwirkungen und Perspektiven*. <http://www.textpraxis.net/en/matthias-schaffrick-autor-werk-herrschaft>.
- Schaffrick, M., & Willand, M. (2014). Autorschaft im 21. Jahrhundert. In M. Schaffrick & M. Willand (Eds.), *Theorien und Praktiken der Autorschaft* (pp. 3–148). De Gruyter.
- Setz, C. J. (2012). *Indigo*. Suhrkamp.
- Setz, C. J. (2018). *Bot. Gespräch ohne Autor*. Suhrkamp.
- Setz, C. J. (2019). *Kayfabe und Literatur. Klagenfurter Rede zur Literatur 2019*. Verlag Johannes Heyn.
- Setz, C. J. (2021). Wie man zu Lebzeiten fiktiv wird. *Dossieronline.at*, 5, 9–18. <https://doi.org/10.25364/16.05:2021.1.2>
- Shah, H., & Warwick, K. (2017). Machine humour: Examples from Turing test experiments. *AI & Society*, 32, 553–561.
- Singler, B. (2015). Big bad pharma: The indigo child concept and biomedical conspiracy theories. *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, 19, 17–29.
- Smith, P. D. (2012, March 27). Losing the head of Philip K Dick – Review. *The Guardian*. Accessed November 29, 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/mar/27/losing-head-philip-k-dick-david-duffy-review>.

- Strässle, T. (2019). *Fake und Fiktion: Über die Erfindung von Wahrheit*. Carl Hanser.
- te Heesen, A. (2013). Naturgeschichte des Interviews. *Mercur. Deutsche Zeitschrift für Europäisches Denken*, 67, 317–328.
- Turing, A. M. (1950). Computing machinery and intelligence. *Mind. A Quarterly Review of Psychology and Philosophy*, 236, 433–460.
- Wagner-Egelhaaf, M. (2013). Einleitung: Was ist Auto(r)fiktion? In *Auto(r)fiktion*. In M. Wagner-Egelhaaf (Ed.), *Literarische Verfahren der Selbstkonstruktion* (pp. 7–12). Aisthesis.
- Wirth, U. (2017). Parodie. In U. Wirth (Ed.), *Komik. Ein Interdisziplinäres Handbuch* (pp. 26–30). J.B. Metzler.
- Zipfel, F. (2009). Autofiktion. Zwischen den Grenzen von Faktualität, Fiktionalität und Literarität? In S. Winko, F. Jannidis, & G. Lauer (Eds.), *Grenzen der Literatur. Zu Begriff und Phänomen des Literarischen* (pp. 285–314). De Gruyter.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.





“An Occasionally True Story”: Biofiction, Authenticity and Fictionality in *The Great* (2020)

Anna Gutowska

When the American streaming service Hulu released the television series *The Great*, a darkly comedic take on the early life of Empress Catherine the Great of Russia, the marketing materials described the series as “anti-historical” (Onion, 2020, n.p.) and one snarky reviewer commented that the series’ creator Tony McNamara

had jotted down some names, relationships and a few historical bullet points, torn up the paper, and started writing. And so must the viewer abandon himself to what’s on the plate without a care to learning anything useful or even true about Russia or any of the real people represented here. (Lloyd, 2020, n.p.)

A. Gutowska (✉)

Department of Humanities at the Jan Kochanowski University of Kielce,
Kielce, Poland

e-mail: anna.gutowska@ujk.edu.pl

© The Author(s) 2024

B. Schirrmacher, N. Mousavi (eds.), *Truth Claims Across Media*,
Palgrave Studies in Intermediality,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42064-1_9

The accusation falls flat, because teaching its audience about Russia was never an aspiration that the series seemed to have. *The Great* proudly signals its anti-historical and anachronistic agenda from the get-go, and its title card tellingly reads “The Great: an occasionally true story”. In the finale of the second season the creators follow the path to total and self-referential historical inaccuracy even further by tweaking the subtitle to “The Great: an almost entirely untrue story”.

In this article I am going to explore how *The Great* handles its historical subject matter and analyse the series’ creators’ claims of anti-historicity, looking at *The Great* against the backdrop of genres to which it belongs, notably the biographical film, and in particular the “queen pic”—a type of a biographical film portraying the life of a female royal, and also in the context of the literary concept of biofiction. I will address the issue of expectations of truthfulness tied to each genre and analyse the effect that these expectations have on *The Great*. Before I start my analysis of the series itself, I will offer an overview of two overlapping generic categories into which *The Great* falls, that of a “biopic” (a biographical film/tv series) and that of screen biofiction.

9.1 BETWEEN ANTI-HISTORICITY AND BIOGRAPHY

In today’s crowded TV landscape, *The Great*, a biographical series about the youth of Russia’s Empress Catherine the Great, might excusably be confused with a plethora of other television projects about young queens, such as *Reign* (2013–2017, focused on young Mary, Queen of Scots), *The White Queen* (2013, whose subject is King Edward IV’s consort Elizabeth Woodville), *The Spanish Princess* (2019, Catherine of Aragon), and *Victoria* (2016–2019). What sets it apart, however, is its black comedy tone and knowing anachronisms.

In fact, anti-historicity becomes *The Great*’s unique selling point, and in an oblique way, the series calls on reviewers and audiences to re-examine their expectations related to the amount of creative license which is “allowed” in costume drama, and especially in biographical projects. In the recent *Narrative Factualty: A Handbook* (ed. Monika Fludernik and Marie-Laure Ryan, 2020), Ryan tackles the issues of fictionality and audience expectations in the following manner:

Fiction is a use of signs meant by the producer to invite the user to imagine, without believing them, states of affairs obtaining in a world that differ in

some respect from the actual world. These uses of signs are typically framed by external devices so that users know they are dealing with fiction, not with failed factual representation (i.e. errors and lies), but within the frame, the irreality of these represented states of affairs is not overtly marked, though it may be suggested by so-called “signposts of fictionality”. (Cohn, 1990) (Ryan, 2020, 78)

The notion of “signposts of fictionality”, which Ryan borrows from the narratologist Dorrit Cohn, was introduced in the latter’s *The Distinction of Fiction* (1990) and expounded more fully in her eponymous “Signposts of Fictionality: A Narratological Perspective” (2000). In the latter text, Cohn posits that in historical fiction, the usual bi-level narratological model of story/discourse should be expanded to include the historical reference (2000, 779).

The construction of historical narrative from the traces of past events (the referential level) [which is variously called] “configurational act” (Mink, 1978), “emplotment” (White, 1978), *mise en intrigue* (Ricoeur). All of these terms essentially signify an activity that transforms pre-existing material, endows it with meaning, makes it into “the intelligible whole that governs the succession of events in any story” (Ricoeur, 1980, 171). These same theorists also stress the decisive role played by selection in any historical text, what it includes and what it excludes, with its all-important temporal corollary: Where it begins and where it ends. (Cohn, 2000, 781)

When it comes to signposting *The Great’s* fictionality, the above-mentioned title card (“An occasionally true story”) serves both as content warning, which spells out that the audiences should not look to the series for historical accuracy, and as a tongue-in-cheek subversion of the viewers’ expectations. Settling to watch an opulent costume series about the life of a historical royal, the audience members would expect a more reverent approach to facts, so that a card reading “based on a true story” or “inspired by a true story” would be the standard. According to the series’ creator Tony McNamara, this prior warning was also a consciously selected strategy of deflecting possible backlash.

“When we made *The Great*, there was someone who questioned some of the big mistakes that I was making with history.... And I was like, ‘They *have* to be big.’ People have to know we’re making mistakes on purpose, rather than ‘we’ve made a few changes,’ [and] then it’s poor history professors tearing

their hair out. At least with ours, the history professors can go: ‘They don’t know what they’re doing!’” (Marsh, 2021, n.p.)

Indeed, in terms of energy and atmosphere, *The Great* shares more artistic DNA with such HBO shows as *Veep* (2012–2019), a biting satire of contemporary American politics, or with *The House of the Dragon* (2022–), a medieval fantasy series fixated on the theme of royal succession, than it does with sedate royal biographical series in the vein of ITV’s *Victoria* (2016–2019). *The Great* follows just the broadest outline of Catherine’s biography, crossing certain well-known facts off the list. It is true that Catherine was originally a minor Prussian princess, who came to Russia as a prospective bride, that her marriage to the future Peter III had a rocky start, and that she eventually deposed her him in a military coup (S1E10). She was something of a *femme savante*, well versed in fashionable French philosophy, and cultivated progressive ideas about female education (S1E1). She was a proponent of modern medical ideas, including small pox inoculation (S1E7). She also waged a successful war against Turkey (S2E9–10). However, many crucial facts are changed to serve the needs of the plot: Catherine did not instigate the coup against her husband until 1762 (seventeen years after their wedding), and when she married Peter, he was not a ruling monarch but the heir to the throne. Even more crucially, the show’s Emperor Peter is a conflation of Catherine’s real husband Peter III and his father Peter II. In the series, much is made of the fact that Peter suffers an inferiority complex comparing himself to his father Peter the Great, whereas the historical Peter III was Peter the Great’s grandson and not his son.¹ Other historical inaccuracies, great and small, are too numerous to mention.

On the other hand, there is no denying that, as a series that portrays the life of a historical figure, *The Great* falls within the broad category of biographical television. A long established film and television genre, the biopic (to use the ubiquitous abbreviation) is a convenient umbrella term that refers to a vast array of possibilities: Primarily it refers to film and television projects portraying the lives of famous people, living or dead, but it can also shed light on subjects who had hitherto been unknown to the general public (e.g. *Erin Brockovich* (2000) or *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013)). Apart from portraying a broad spectrum of protagonists, biopics

¹The short overview of Catherine and Peter’s biography and reign is based on John T. Alexander’s *Catherine The Great: Life and Legend* (Oxford University Press, 1988).

also differ with reference to their scope. They can either focus on a pivotal period of the subject’s live (e.g. the Winston Churchill biopic *Darkest Hour* (2017)) or adopt the more traditional cradle-to-grave approach (e.g. *Ray* (2004) the Ray Charles biopic starring Jamie Foxx.)

By its very nature the biopic, which tells the life story of its subject, is a form of adaptation. When it comes to its treatment of the source material, there is also a wide range of possible approaches, which vary with respect to the selection of sources (a biopic can be based on a single (auto)biography of its subject or on multiple texts) and with respect to the end product (faithfulness to the source vs. artistic freedom). While the two perspectives (biopic as an account of a real person’s life vs. biopic as an adaptation of a biographical or autobiographical text) differ subtly in their implied claims about their degree of facticity, both will be governed by basic principles of screenwriting. The above-quoted passage from Cohn highlights the role of “emplotment”, i.e. the creative act of transforming pre-existing material into a viable plot. While Cohn refers to historical fiction, so to text-to-text adaptation, her remarks can also be applied to text-to-screen adaptation and to the process of creation of a biographical film or television series. The most important creative decisions that would need to be taken relate to the scope of the project (in Cohn’s words, “where to begin and where to finish”), to introducing causality and showing the protagonist’s agency, and to the selection of events from the subject’s life.

The multiplicity of applications of the term “biopic” led George F. Custen, in his foundational study of the genre, to offer a minimalist definition, and posit that a biopic is simply “a film that presents the life of a historical person, past or present” (1992, 5). For the last three decades, scholars of the genre have proposed numerous taxonomies of the biopic, trying to account for its many sub-genres and varieties. In a recent edited volume entitled *Genre and Performance: Film and Television* (Cornea, 2017), Dennis Bingham outlines a useful typology of possible biopic modes, seeing them in relation to film genres:

- The classical, celebratory form (melodrama)
- Warts-and-all (melodrama/realism)
- Critical investigation and atomization of the subject (or the *Citizen Kane* [1941] mode)

- Parody (in terms of choice of biographical subject, what screenwriters Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski call the anti-biopic – a movie about somebody who doesn’t deserve one (Alexander & Karaszewski, 1999, vii])...
- Minority appropriation (as in queer or feminist, African American or Third World, whereby James Whale or Janet Frame, or Malcolm X or Patrice Lumumba owns the conventional mythologizing form that once would have been used to marginalize or stigmatise them);
- Since 2000, the neo-classical biopic, which integrates elements of all or most of the above. (Bingham, 2017, 76–77)

Bingham’s typology brings attention to the fact that biopics should be analysed in the broader cultural context of established filmic and literary modes such as realism, melodrama or parody. For my discussion of *The Great* the most salient point in Bingham’s typology is the possibility of mixing the biopic with the comedic mode, and also of using the form as an ironic celebration of “somebody who doesn’t deserve it”. The latter possibility would be a good perspective to approach *The Great’s* portrayal of Catherine’s husband, Emperor Peter.

More generally, the cinematic mode within whose confines each biopic operates dictates the approach to the subject and the choice of material. This can be seen in the example of various biopics that focus on the same subject but choose a different mode. For example, one can contrast the 1938 *Marie Antoinette*, a lavish Golden Era production starring Norma Shearer and directed by W.S. Van Dyke, which is a full-on melodrama, with the lighter touch of Sofia Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* (2006) which, though it was also ostensibly billed as “historical drama”, makes frequent use of satire and teen comedy tropes. The French queen’s love affair with Count Fersen, documented in historical sources, is played as a doomed romance in Van Dyke’s film, where the audiences’ are asked to empathise with the protagonist who faces a heart-breaking dilemma and chooses duty over love, whereas in Coppola’s film the same relationship is presented as an inconsequential fling. A similar contrast can be drawn between various biographical projects portraying Catherine the Great, such as the Marlene Dietrich vehicle *The Scarlet Empress* (1934) and the HBO 2015 series *Catherine the Great* (directed by Nigel Williams, starring Helen Mirren), which both veer towards melodrama, and the comedic and self-consciously anti-historical *The Great*.

9.2 FROM BIOPIC TO SCREEN BIOFICTION

Another theoretical concept that has bearing on the discussion of *The Great's* treatment of its biographical subject is that of biofiction. The term is applied in literary criticism to the large body of quasi-biographical texts which explore the lives of historical subjects. It has typically been used to denote works of fiction written in the twentieth or twenty-first century that present fictionalised versions of lives of historical subjects. One of the prominent theoreticians of the field of biographical fiction, Michael Lackey, goes as far as defining biofiction as “literature that names its protagonist after an actual historical figure” (Lackey, 2017, 3), suggesting that the only thing biofictions have in common with facts are the names of their protagonists. Lackey’s sparse definition of biofiction brings to mind Custen’s above-quoted and similarly minimalist definition of the biopic. The broadness and inclusiveness of Lackey’s definition can account for even the most “unfaithful” texts, which consciously (and often with relish) falsify historical facts, with Seth Grahame-Smith’s novel *Abraham Lincoln the Vampire Hunter* (2010) being one of the most blatant cases. Setting such examples aside, most biofictions are actually eager to demonstrate their historical credentials, containing and referencing well-researched information on historical lives, albeit in an awareness that all biography is a “fake authentic” (Heilmann, 2018, 16).

Similarly to the biopic, the term biofiction also covers a wide spectrum of texts, which belong to the domain of fiction, and whose protagonist is a fictionalised version of a real life person. At its tamest and most factual, literary biofiction can denote fictionalised biographies of historical personages, such as Irving Stone’s canonical books on Vincent van Gogh (*Lust for Life* (1934)) and Michelangelo (*The Agony and the Ecstasy* (1961)). On the opposite side of the spectrum are biofictional projects that are predicated on conjecture or include elements of mashup with other literary genres, such as detective fiction or horror. When it comes to the first type, Richard Flanagan’s *Wanting* (2008) is a case in point. The novel is purportedly a fictionalised biography of Mathinna, an Aboriginal child adopted by the colonial administrator John Franklin during his service as the governor of Tasmania. While Mathinna’s adoption is a historical fact, the central plot point of the novel centres around an unfounded (and unverifiable) assumption that Franklin was a sexual predator who abused his adopted daughter. *Wanting* and other similar projects capitalise on the readers’ desire to know the historical subjects’ darkest and most hidden secrets.

Apart from the question of degrees of authenticity and fictionality in specific projects, another often studied aspect of biofiction is the selection of subjects. The Neo-Victorian scholar Marie-Luise Kohlke offers a useful typology, dividing biofiction into three types:

- (a) Celebrity biofiction, which depicts “inner lives, secret desires, traumas and illicit pursuits of high-profile public figures, most often writers, poets and artists (Kohlke, 2013, 7).
- (b) Biofiction of marginalized subjects, which “recuperates untold stories of individuals relegated to bit parts, adjuncts or appendixes in the life-stories of subjects that mattered, while deemed of comparatively little or no matter in and of themselves” (Kohlke, 2013, 10).
- (c) Appropriated biofiction: “attributes elements of real lives to someone else entirely or uses these lives as springboards to launch into blatantly counterfactual fabrications” (Kohlke, 2013, 11), where the “blatantly counterfactual” category may include such cultural texts as Seth Graham Smith’s *Abraham Lincoln the Vampire Hunter* (the 2010 novel and its 2012 film adaptation) or Dan Simmon’s novel *Drood* (2009) in which Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins are haunted by a supernatural being.

Whereas the term “biofiction” is usually deployed in the analysis of literary works, I would like to argue that its application can be broadened beyond literature to encompass also other types of cultural texts such as films, television series and theatrical plays which share the same approach to historical characters. An overview of critically acclaimed costume films and television series produced in the last thirty years reveals that many of them possess the constitutive feature of biofiction, which is a revisionistic, fictionalising, or even blatantly counter-factual approach to their subjects. One of the early and influential examples of screen biofiction is the director Shekhar Kapur’s *Elizabeth*, a feature film portraying the early reign of Elizabeth I, written by Michael Hirst and starring Cate Blanchett in title role, released in 1998. The contemporary reviews of *Elizabeth* noted its many historical inaccuracies such as characters’ ages, as well as telescoping notable events that took place during Elizabeth’s long reign into a few years covered by the film’s timespan. “It didn’t happen like that in history, but it should have”, said Roger Ebert in his review of the film, referring to one if its many anti-historical plot developments (1998, n.p.). Ebert’s notion of “history as it should have happened” is a neat shorthand to

describe the film’s rewriting of historical facts in order to show more direct causal chains of events and to give the protagonists more psychological consistency and agency. It is often achieved by making the leads perform crucial actions which in real life were performed by others. A good case in point is a plot development in *Elizabeth*, which occasioned Ebert’s comment, and which consists of the queen’s advisor Sir Francis Walsingham personally poisoning one of her enemies, Mary of Guise (whereas historical records state that she had died of natural causes). The same tactics are employed in other notable screen biofictions such as HBO’s series *Rome* (2005–2007), Showtime’s *The Tudors* (2007–2010, also scripted by *Elizabeth*’s writer Michael Hirst), or Sofia Coppola’s above-mentioned *Marie Antoinette* (2006). All of these screen products privilege main characters’ emotional consistency and exciting plot developments over historical accuracy.

The question of accuracy—or deliberate inaccuracy—in biofiction is wrapped in a broader range of ethical issues related to rights to privacy and to misrepresentation of past lives for monetary gain. In her preface to *Neo-Victorian Biofiction* Kohlke acknowledges these concerns and links them to the myth-making potential of biofiction. Even though she writes specifically about the nineteenth century-inspired biofiction, her remarks are equally applicable to all historical periods.

Biofiction raises questions about... historical distortion that intersect with contemporary concerns about the “bare-all” culture of confession and “fake news”, as well as the insidious manipulation of public opinion by social media and other means. How actual nineteenth-century subjects and their lives are represented—and sometimes deliberately misrepresented—impacts on collective memory and on mainstream versions of the period’s history accepted as “true” by laypersons and the general public. Biofiction may thus be regarded as one of the aesthetic forms par excellence for meditating, remediating, and shaping popular perceptions of the past (Kohlke & Gutleben, 2020, 3).

Intriguingly, Kohlke makes the connection between biofiction’s defining characteristic, i.e. deliberate falsification of the historical record, with contemporary fake news culture, and with gossip-obsessed social media and celebrity culture. On the other hand, the audiences’ desire for gossipy costume drama that centres on the love lives of famous historical personages certainly pre-dates the rise of social media and fake news, as evidenced by such early blockbusters as *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933, dir. Alexander Korda).

To come back to the term “biopic”, which I used above as a starting point for the exploration of the generic affiliation of *The Great*, the difference between screen biofiction and biographical film seems to be that of degree.² The biopic, as discussed above, encompasses a wide variety of possible approaches. The biopics that use a relatively cavalier approach to the established facts, or (as is often the case) are centred around a crucial lacuna in the subject’s life, employ essentially the same strategy for presenting the lives of the main characters as literary biofictions. Specifically, notwithstanding the medium shift from literature to film, they fulfil Kohlke’s requirements for “celebrity biofiction” which

speculates about the inner lives, secret desires, traumas, and illicit pursuits of high-profile public figures, most often writers, poets and artists, that may have been left out of surviving records including subjects’ own self representations. (2013, 7)

For this reason, I am going to use the term “screen biofiction” to refer to biographical films which employ biofictional strategies, and crucially, which deliberately depart from historical truth in their presentation of historical subjects, often centring the plot around secrets or conjectures. Apart from the examples mentioned above, such as Kapur’s *Elizabeth* or Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette*, this type is exemplified by projects that focus on their subjects fictional or conjectural love affairs such as John Madden’s *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) or Julian Jarrold’s *Becoming Jane* (2007).

9.3 THE GREAT AS A QUEEN PIC

While *The Great*’s balancing act between biofiction, costume drama, romance, and black comedy seems unique, there is a specific subgenre of the biopic from which it seems to draw inspiration for much of its main plot. That subgenre is the “queen pic”, or the biographical film portraying the life of a queen. In general, royal biopics have been a popular type of costume drama since the very beginning of cinema as evidenced by such

²A more in-depth discussion of the relationship between biopic and biofiction can be found in Barbara Braid and Anna Gutowska “‘Tell all the truth but tell it slant’: queer heritage and strategic humour in recent screen biofictions of Emily Dickinson” in: *Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies*, Special Issue 2021/2022 Beyond Biofiction: Writers and Writing in Neo-Victorian Media, edited by Armelle Parey and Charlotte Wadoux (<http://www.neovictorianstudies.com/>)

influential classical films as *Les Amours de la reine Élisabeth* (1912, a French short film directed by Louis Mercanton and Henri Desfontaines, starring Sarah Bernhardt), *Queen Cristina* (1933, dir. Walter Wanger, starring Greta Garbo), and the already referenced *Marie Antoinette* (1938, dir. W.S. Van Dyke, starring Norma Shearer). According to Custen, the queen pics tend to follow the same narrative template:

Often the female royal figure must choose between her heart and her “professional” commitment to the state. The mere owning up to sexual desire is often taken, by men, as a sign of weakness, so a female ruler can only show her mettle by forgoing things typically “female.” (1992, 105)

It is startling how aptly Custen’s summary, written thirty years ago, seems to describe not only the classical biopics but also a spate of more recent projects released many years after the publication of his monograph, such as the above-mentioned *Elizabeth* (1998) and its sequel *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2007), the Danish biopic of Queen Caroline Matilda *A Royal Affair* (2012, dir. Nikolaj Arkel, starring Alicia Vikander), and the first two seasons of Netflix’s award-winning series *The Crown* (2016-), presenting the early reign of Elizabeth II with focus on the pressures that she had to overcome as a young woman in the role of a monarch.

The same trajectory, in which the female ruler has to choose duty or public affairs over love also seems to inspire the first season of *The Great*. The series opens with the arrival of young Catherine (Elle Fanning), the emperor’s “mail order bride,” at the Russian court. The first season charts her path to staging a successful coup against her husband and achieving a position of power, and the second episode of season two finally sees her crowned Empress of Russia, after finally having manoeuvred her husband into abdicating (S2E1). If there is one thing that the series’ viewers will already know about Catherine, it is that she eventually became a powerful ruler, but in the two seasons that have hitherto been released, we see Catherine before she has earned her cognomen “the Great.”

In spite of its avowed originality, the series spends much time following above-mentioned Custen’s blueprint for queen pics, and building the contrast between Catherine’s happy and wholesome love affair with Leo Voronsky (Sebastian de Sousa), and her political machinations aimed at deposing her husband. The season’s finale follows the time-honoured blueprint of royal melodrama. In a Machiavellian move, Catherine’s husband imprisons her lover and blackmails her, saying that if she will move

against him, Voronsky will be executed. The last scene of the season shows the agonised Catherine, who kisses her lover goodbye and gives orders to start the coup. The final outcome of this plotline follows the broad outlines of the historical facts (it is true Catherine deposed her husband and ruled in his stead), even though the character of Leo is fictional, as is the blackmail instituted by Catherine's husband.

Another common feature of the queen pics, apart from the "love vs. duty" plotline is that they follow the trajectory of the coming-of-age story. Shekhar Kapur's *Elizabeth* (1998) and Jean-Marc Vallée's *The Young Victoria* (2009) are both good cases in point. Both films present the youth of their respective subjects, with their ascension to the throne and coronation happening around the middle of the movie (in script terms, they constitute "the point of no return" for the main character). The remainder of the film is subsequently spent on showing the female protagonists finding their life partners (or, in the case of *Elizabeth*, deciding, after a series of setbacks, that she will forgo romantic life altogether and will instead become "married to England.") The most distinct common feature of these royal coming of age stories is that they present the early years of their subjects as a series of tests, where the character is confronted with increasingly difficult challenges and has again and again to rise to the occasion and prove her worth, courage and determination. The "learning on the job" trajectory is supplemented with the character's relationships with various mentor figures, some of whom may eventually be revealed to be untrustworthy (e.g. Melbourne in *The Young Victoria*) or unhelpful (e.g. William Cecil in *Elizabeth*).

In a darkly comic way, *The Great* appropriates and then subverts this trope. In accordance with the blueprint, Catherine arrives in Russia, idealistic and ill-prepared for the challenges ahead of her, with naïve expectations regarding both her position as a consort and her relationship with her future husband (S1E1). However, the skillset that she needs to acquire does not involve the usual requirements presented in earlier queen pics (courage, independence, learning not to rely on advisors). In contrast, striving to survive in the cut-throat atmosphere of the Russian court, in which she is not counted as a valuable player, she has to learn ruthlessness and scheming, eventually besting her violent husband at his own game (S1E10).

The Great had a long development history, which suggests that the heady mixture of genres and tones must have been a hard sell in the generally risk-averse media landscape. The Hulu series began its life as a stage

play which premiered at the Sidney Theatre Company in 2008. It was written by the Australian playwright Tony McNamara, who later adapted it as a spec script for a feature film. The script eventually found its way to the desk of the director Yorgos Lanthimos, who at that time was starting the development of *The Favourite* (2018), another darkly comedic queen pic. Lanthimos liked the irreverent tone of *The Great* and hired McNamara to rewrite *The Favourite* and “freshen it up,” as the original script had been written in the late 1990s (see Marsh, 2021, n.p.). McNamara then received a co-writing credit for *The Favourite*, and the critical and popular success of the film meant that he was able to secure financing for his next project. The streaming platform Hulu gave season order for *The Great* in late 2019 (see White, 2019, n.p.), and the series premiered in May 2020 on the platform, and was subsequently made available internationally on HBO. On the first season, Elle Fanning is credited as one of the executive producers, whereas on the second season the list of executive producers includes both Fanning and her co-star Nicholas Hoult.

Interestingly, *The Great* was one of two television series released in the space of the last four years that depicted the life of Catherine the Great. The other, released in 2018 by HBO and simply called *Catherine the Great*, starred Helen Mirren in the title role and focused on the later years of the monarch’s life, and especially on her tumultuous relationship with her favourite Grigory Potemkin (Jason Clarke). A dutiful if somewhat lacklustre production in the tradition of heritage film, it failed to make any kind of cultural impact and is now largely forgotten. However, the mere fact that in the space of two years two big-budget English language biographical projects portraying the life of a Russian ruler were released is a testament both to the appeal of Catherine the Great’s biography, which is in line with the tastes of the contemporary audiences, and to the continuing popularity of the queen pic. Incidentally, the current context of Russia’s war against Ukraine may impact the future of any productions centring on Russian history, including the viability of the third season of *The Great*. At the time of writing this article, the third season has been announced by Hulu (Hibberd, 2022, n.p.), but is still in early stages of development.

As I have signalled before, many contemporary costume dramas share the biofictional agenda, focusing either on uncovering secrets of their historical subjects, or on presenting the periods in their lives which were hitherto considered to be blank spots, and which can be filled with conjecture. A large group of such projects, including *The Great*, focuses on the

early, pre-fame lives of their subjects, a fact which is best exemplified by the title of the Coco Chanel biopic, *Coco Before Chanel* (2009). A sizeable sub-set of these projects show a conjectural or fictional youthful love affair of the historical subject, presenting it as a stimulus for future achievements. While this is especially the case with writer biopics (e.g. the already mentioned *Shakespeare in Love* (1995) or *Becoming Jane* (2007)), this trope can also be found in queen pics. For example, Kapur's *Elizabeth* (1998) purports that Elizabeth I's thwarted love for the earl of Leicester (Joseph Fiennes) was the reason for her decision not to marry. *The Great* also seems to follow this template in season one, in its portrayal of Catherine's romance with Leo. However, Catherine's decision to sacrifice her lover's life in order to achieve her political goals (S1E10) subverts the trope in a way which is shocking for the viewer familiar with the blueprint and creates a memorable and poignant cliff-hanger at the end of season one.

Even more subversively, Catherine's love interest in season two is her own husband, Emperor Peter, with whom she eventually develops a warped and yet strangely fulfilling relationship, eventually forgiving his part in the execution of Leo. Peter, played by Nicholas Hoult in a vibrant and universally praised performance, is a fascinating and mercurial character, at times shockingly violent and unexpectedly kind, dim-witted and perceptive. Such a version of Peter has little to do with historical facts (see Marsh, 2021, n.p.), especially because the fictional character of Peter is a conflated version of Catherine's actual husband, Peter III and his uncle Peter II, who preceded him on the throne. The last two episodes of season two, in which Catherine and Peter talk about their bond and their mutual attraction, reach new levels of psychological insight while at the same time they retain the show's signature darkly comedic tone, and end on another cliff-hanger leaving the audiences wondering whether Catherine will order the assassination of her husband in the light of his most recent, shocking transgression (S2E10).

The Great as a series is character-centred, which is not to say that it follows the historical facts of Catherine and Peter's lives. As I have argued above, it contains certain crucial events such as the protagonists' marriage, the birth of their child, or Catherine's coup against Peter, but it also arranges them freely, without paying too much attention to chronology. McNamara clearly privileges characters' emotional consistency and building compelling causal relationships between events over historical accuracy. As Thomas Leitch argues in his seminal *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents* (2009), post-literary adaptations (i.e. biopics and other

projects that are “based on true stories”) must necessarily yield themselves into the mould of Hollywood genres (Leitch, 2009, 286). Hence, *The Great* in spite of its originality and freshness of tone is also indebted to existing generic tropes, such as the queen pic trajectory of “the growth of a leader” and the “passion vs. duty” inner conflict, the love triangle, or the televisual convention of a cliff-hanger.

In an informative section about truth claims in non-literary adaptations Leitch (2009, 287–289) furthermore discusses typical truth claims which became the focal points of marketing campaigns of well known, big budget films based on true stories, such as “truth is stranger than fiction” (perfectly exemplified by the title of *It Could Happen to You* (1994), a romantic comedy allegedly based on a newspaper headline). This category also includes such recent biographical projects as Netflix’s *Inventing Anna* (2022) or HBO’s *Landscapers* (2022)). Another category singled out by Leitch is “now it can be told” (e.g. *The Insider* (1999)), *Imitation Game* (2014) or to the recent drama portraying the journalistic investigation that led to the downfall of Harvey Weinstein (*She Said* (2022)).

I would like to posit that *The Great*, while scrupulously drawing attention to its own anti-historicity (“an occasionally true story”) also plays with audiences’ assumptions regarding the levels of cruelty and intrigue in eighteenth-century Russia. Often it capitalises on the viewers’ disorientation for darkly comedic effect, relying on the audience to wonder if a given display of violence, or a startlingly barbaric tradition could indeed be factual.

The blatant and joyful disregard for historical facts in a paradoxical way protects the series from accusations of inaccuracy. If McNamara and his writing team made less blatant mistakes, the series would no doubt find itself under more historical scrutiny. Almost exactly one decade ago, when Shekhar Kapur’s *Elizabeth: The Golden Age* (2011) was released, liberties such as conflating characters or telescoping events were noted by reviewers and the filmmakers were accused of going too far (e.g. von Tunzelmann, 2011, n.p.). Similarly, Coppola’s *Marie Antoinette* (2006), which flaunted bold anachronisms in costumes and set design, dialogue and music was highly divisive, and its initial reception was largely hostile (Cheshire, 2015, 114). Going against the critical consensus of the times, Roger Ebert became one of the film’s notable early champions. His review of the film draws attention not just to the presence of anachronisms, but also to their role and function, and Ebert’s point could be equally applicable to *The Great*:

Coppola has been criticized in some circles for her use of a contemporary pop overlay—hit songs, incongruous dialogue, jarring intrusions of the Now upon the Then. But no one ever lives as Then; it is always Now. Many characters in historical films seem somehow aware that they are living in the past. Marie seems to think she is a teenager living in the present, which of course she is—and the contemporary pop references invite the audience to share her present with ours. (Ebert, 2006, n.p.)

The Great definitely takes a leaf off *Marie Antoinette*'s book, but goes even further. It is not only that the protagonists of the series “live in the Now,” but also the fresh, contemporary feel of *The Great* is amplified by the fact that it follows a presentist agenda, focusing on the problems of the past that are still relevant today. McNamara states that the contemporary parallels are what attracted him to the material:

“I like the stakes of the era, the life and death stakes of the court world.... I also like that they're dealing with stuff we're still freakin' dealing with We're still dealing with privilege, and how to give people equality, and all that kind of stuff. I'm interested in the parallels—and I'm also interested in the freedom I get.” (Marsh, 2021, n.p.)

By focusing on such social issues as class inequality or the plight of women, *The Great* proves the truth of Christian Gutleben's observation that costume drama tends to dwell on “fashionable wrongs”, tailoring the past to what today's audiences want to watch (2001, 11).

Accordingly, the first season of the series focuses on Catherine's fight for power, where the setbacks she encounters are a representation of generalised misogyny and oppression of women in eighteenth-century Russia. Apart from sexism, another recurring motif is the casual cruelty of the aristocracy against the palace servants and other working-class characters (esp. S1E7). This theme finds its fullest expression in season two in the minor subplot of an elderly servant nicknamed “Shakey”, who is casually killed by Lady Svenska (S2E5–6). The show's portrayal of grotesque violence against working class characters fulfils Kohlke's requirements for presentist historical projects, which involve “contemporary witness-bearing to historical trauma and injustice, providing symbolic commemoration and restitution to history's victims and an important source of audience's edutainment” (2018, 2).

Apart from presenting the continuing relevance of such issues as gender inequality or class inequality, *The Great* also at times makes the past look exotic. Such historical titbits as a ban on wearing beards at court under

pain of death (S1E2), or a custom that dictated that a royal woman was supposed to give birth in public, observed by court officials (S2E7) are played for laughs, and the level of casual cruelty perpetrated by Peter (e.g. executing all the palace cooks on suspicion of poisoning him (S1E6) or serving heads of slain enemy soldiers on plates for his guests during a victory banquet (S1E5)) is so grotesque that it can only be seen as black humour.

In rejecting the ponderous nostalgia of most of the earlier queen pics, which presented a harmonious and stately vision of the past (and of which HBO's *Catherine the Great* (2018) is a good benchmark), *The Great* is telling its audience: This is what the past was really like; the manicured, stately vision seen that you have seen in earlier costume films and television is not true. This tacit claim that the most outrageous version of history will in fact be the authentic one is very close to the founding assumption of biofiction which maintains that the most respectable historical personages must perforce hide scandalous secrets. Scholars of nineteenth-century literary biofiction draw attention to the fact that the authors' desire to elucidate the secrets of its historical subjects is in fact "a form of scopophilia—the desire to know forbidden secrets [of]... the dead" (Kaplan, 2007, 47). From the audience's perspective, it can be equated with voyeurism, as the audience is obsessed with recovering the historical subject's "'true' and 'authentic' self behind the mask of his/her renowned public persona" (Novak & Mayer, 2014, 25).

Today's media landscape is saturated with many different depictions of the past that appeal to the tastes of different segments of the audience. In the words of Andrew Higson, "the past becomes, in Fredric Jameson's phrase, 'a vast collection of images', designed to delight the modern-day tourist-historian" (1993, 114). In my opinion, the notion of 'tourist-historians' is an apt description of *The Great's* intended audience. The show's viewers are not invested in historical accuracy but are willing to be amused by the preposterous nature of the events and customs presented on their screens. In a paradoxical way, *The Great* also serves as "edutainment", because the shocking scenes that it often portrays have the potential of sending the audience down the rabbit hole of Google research. Did it really happen? Did Catherine the Great really stab the Turkish sultan to death with his own dagger (S2E10)? To borrow from Robert Ebert's review of Kapur's *Elizabeth*, "it didn't happen like that in history, but it should have" (1998, n.p.). All the same, *The Great* provides more than just edutainment. By proudly flaunting its anti-historical creed, it makes

audiences and critics reflect on the amount of fictionality which is involved in producing ostensibly more truthful biographical projects. At the same time, while the series proudly asserts its anti-historical credentials and subverts audiences' generic expectations linked to the biopic and the queen pic by introducing black humour, comedic depictions of violence, and knowing anachronisms, it also tacitly observes some of these genres' tropes and conventions, such as the coming of age trajectory or the love vs. duty dichotomy. This reliance on time-honoured plot devices suggests that, bold and innovative as it may be, *The Great* still has to operate within the recognisable confines of filmic and televisual genres.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, S., & Karaszewski, L. (1999). *Man on the moon: The shooting script*. Newmarket.
- Bingham, D. (2017). Living stories: Performance in the contemporary biopic. In C. Cornea (Ed.), *Genre and performance: Film and television* (pp. 76–95). Manchester University Press.
- Cheshire, E. (2015). *Bio-pics: A life in pictures*. Columbia University Press.
- Cohn, D. (1990). Signposts of Fictionality: A Narratological perspective. *Poetics Today*, 11, 775–804.
- Cohn, D. (2000). *The distinction of fiction*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Cornea, C. (2017). *Genre and performance: Film and television*. Manchester University Press.
- Custen, G. F. (1992). *Bio/pics: How Hollywood constructed public history*. Rutgers University Press.
- Ebert, R. (1998). *Elizabeth*. Accessed November 29, 2022, from <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/elizabeth>.
- Ebert, R. (2006). *Pretty in Pink*. Accessed November 20, 2022, from <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/marie-antoinette-2006>.
- Gutleben, C. (2001). *Nostalgic postmodernism: The Victorian tradition and the contemporary British novel*. Rodopi.
- Heilmann, A. (2018). *Neo-Victorian Biographilia and James Miranda Barry: A study in transgender and Transgenre*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hibberd, J. (2022, January 11). 'The great' renewed for season 3 at Hulu. The Hollywood reporter. Accessed November 29, 2022, from <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/the-great-season-3-hulu-1235072929/>.
- Higson, A. D. (1993). Re-presenting the national past: nostalgia and pastiche in the heritage film. In L. Friedman (Ed.), *Fires were started: British Cinema and Thatcherism* (pp. 109–129). University of Minnesota Press.

- Kaplan, C. (2007). *Victoriana: Histories, fictions, criticism*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Kohlke, M.-L. (2013). Neo-Victorian biofiction and the special/spectral case of Barbara Chase-Riboud's *Hottentot Venus*. *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, 18, 4–21.
- Kohlke, M.-L. (2018). The lures of neo-Victorianism presentism (with a feminist case study of penny dreadful). *Literature Compass*, 15, 1–14.
- Kohlke, M.-L., & Gutleben, C. (2020). Taking biofictional liberties: Tactical games and gambits with nineteenth-century lives. In M.-L. Kohlke & C. Gutleben (Eds.), *Neo-Victorian biofiction: Reimagining nineteenth-century historical subjects* (pp. 1–53). Brill. <https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12463>
- Lackey, M. (2017). Introduction to focus: Biofiction—Its origins, natures, and evolutions. *American Book Review*, 39, 3–4.
- Leitch, T. (2009). *Film adaptation and its discontents*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Lloyd, R. (2020, May 14). Hulu's 'The Great' tears up the history books. It's not Shakespeare, but it works. *Los Angeles Times*. Accessed November 29, 2022, from <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/tv/story/2020-05-14/the-great-hulu-elle-fanning-nicholas-hoult-catherine-peter-russia>.
- Marsh, W. (2021, November 14). Tony McNamara on *The Great*: “Historians have to know we’re making mistakes on purpose.” *The Guardian*. Accessed November 29, 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/nov/14/tony-mcnamara-on-the-great-historians-have-to-know-were-making-mistakes-on-purpose>.
- Mink, L. O. (1978). Narrative form as a cognitive instrument. In R. H. Canari & H. Kozicki (Eds.), *The Writing of History* (pp. 129–149). University of Wisconsin Press.
- Novak, J., & Mayer, S. (2014). Disparate images: Literary heroism and the “work vs. life” Topos in contemporary biofictions about Victorian authors. *Neo-Victorian Studies*, 7, 25–51.
- Onion, R. (2020, May 15). Hulu's “the great” is wrong on the facts but smart about history. *Slate*. Accessed January 1, 2022, from <https://slate.com/culture/2020/05/the-great-hulu-series-review-historical-accuracy-nope.html>.
- Ricoeur, P. (1980). Narrative time. *Critical Inquiry*, 7, 169–190.
- Ryan, M.-L. (2020). Fact, fiction and media. In M. Fludernik & M.-L. Ryan (Eds.), *Narrative factuality: A handbook* (pp. 75–94). De Gruyter.
- Tunzelmann, Alex von. (2011, 29 September). Wild liberties take the shine off *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*, *The Guardian*. Accessed November 29, 2022, from <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2011/sep/29/reel-history-elizabeth-golden-age>.

White, H. (1978). *Tropics of discourse: Essays in cultural criticism*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

White, P. (2019, February 11). *Hulu hands out series orders to femme fatale Drama 'reprisal' & Russian period romp 'the great'*. *Deadline*. Accessed November 29, 2022, from <https://deadline.com/2019/02/hulu-reprisal-the-great-tca-1202554199/>.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.





Impure Realism, Pure Eventness, and Horror Cinema in the Post-truth Era: A Case Study of *One Cut of the Dead*

Yeqi Zhu

10.1 INTRODUCTION

This article is a brief study of certain devices by means of which Shinichiro Ueda's *One Cut of the Dead* (2017) offers a commentary on the post-truth era. Here, the term “post-truth,” which first came into widespread usage as adjective describing American and British politics in 2016, is the name given to an increasingly powerful mode of discourse that legitimizes anxieties and conspiracies regarding how mysterious, unclassified, and/or so-called less-than-human groups cause social unrest. The Oxford Dictionary describes it as “[r]elating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief” (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016). Although we can rightly assert that the conception of post-truth is still under theoretical development, applying the definition enabled us to reflect on not only how the

Y. Zhu (✉)

School of Humanities and Communication, Ningbo University, Ningbo, China
e-mail: zhuyeqi@nbu.edu.cn

© The Author(s) 2024

B. Schirmacher, N. Mousavi (eds.), *Truth Claims Across Media*,
Palgrave Studies in Intermediality,

https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42064-1_10

zombie trope has been taken advantage of in order to create nostalgia for a pre-apocalyptic, pre-pandemic life, but also how zombie events call upon us to work toward possible ways of getting beyond established mechanisms.

Within this context, many critical questions have arisen about prevailing perceptions of visual mass media's realistic effect, as well as about the realistic-looking representations of the nonhuman/Other in paranormal or supernatural genres. *One Cut of the Dead*, Ueda's debut feature, which at first glance appears to be a conventional treatment of the mockumentary horror, opens with a 37-minute, edit-free, handheld shot of monster mayhem. This design, characterized by long takes and handheld cameras, suggests that the camera is offering an unmediated, anti-anthropocentric "window on the world" (Bazin, 2005, 111). This is, of course, favored in the theoretical position mapped out by one of the principal defenders of a cinematic realism, Andre Bazin. However, interestingly, for the Catholic Bazin, the realist style has the capacity to increase our sense of the mystery of earthly things by transcending human sense experience. Accordingly, in a fiction film that adopts a quasi-documentary, realist form, where human characters are shown as part of "the natural image of the world," (2005, 15) the notion of how truth is projected onto an image, in turn, slips back into the field of tension between supernatural and natural. Thus, by locating Ueda's film at the intersection of contemporary reality media and the horror genre, this study explores how the film can be interpreted as a vision offering an imaginative commentary upon issues of identity, community, and capitalism, with particular emphasis on the intensified interplay between the trope of the zombie and post-truth practices.

Anticipating the fact-fiction interplay of a zombie-film-within-a-zombie-film, the viewer finds in Ueda's micro-budgeted horror-comedy much more than expected. As the film moves backwards to show the pre-production of the pseudo-documentary, by presenting the viewer with the reality layer that addresses no actual horror aspect, *One Cut of The Dead* seeks not confirm the zombie as an exceptional, existing threat, but to perform a continuous, participatory process of filmmaking which makes zombies real. Consequently, Ueda asks us to consider alternative ways of comprehending the unrepresentable truth (or Real). And from this point of view, *One Cut of The Dead*, as well as other films within the subgenre, can therefore provide us with a valuable opportunity to examine the complexities of post-truth politics.

10.2 THEORETICAL PREMISES: BEYOND GENRE

Given that the topic of genre is a vital part of my discussion, it is necessary to reconsider the theoretical significance for understanding the zombie horror formula which, through a Lacanian lens, resists symbolization absolutely and represents an intrusion of the nonsymbolized Real. Taking the case of *One Cut of the Dead*, the film pays homage to the genre in an unconventional way. As a critically self-aware “post-genre horror” or “post-horror” film (Rose, 2017; Rubenstein, 2019, 268), it goes further to reactivate the genre as it demonstrates the process of becoming nonsymbolized in the post-truth era.

In light of the approaches to the matter of “symbolic efficiency” articulated by contemporary thinkers like Slavoj Žižek and Jodi Dean, the question of “the presence of the Real” is cast in the context of “communicative capitalism”: A mode of enjoyment that is based in the “realization of fantasies on the textual screen” inaugurated by capitalism (Dean, 2010, 7). Combining her theory of communicative capitalism with Žižek’s account of the decline of symbolic efficiency in contemporary media culture, Dean argues that the post-Enlightenment breakdown of the generalized trust in the symbolic institution, characterized by the move from a public to several publics, leads to an inability to find the “true purpose” behind the countless claims and counterclaims, thereby distracting us from “significant political intervention” (ibid., 2).

Against this backdrop, *One Cut of the Dead* foregrounds the tension between the explosive proliferation of media images and the unsymbolizability of the “return of the repressed” in the genre. Therefore, a cultural craving for real-life encounters with the nonsymbolized becomes manifest. As is becoming increasingly evident with current hits in today’s media world, such as 2022’s zombie series *All Of Us Are Dead*, the zombie fever “touches something deep in contemporary subjectivity” (Assef, 2013, 6). This brings us to Agamben’s idea of inclusive exclusion that allows the state to include an exception (1998, 104–111), which can be associated with the “anthropomorphic realism.”

Introducing the concept of “anthropomorphic realism” in film studies, theorist Rey Chow referred to it as a discourse of visibility that “the iconoclasm of film, as its early theorists observed, undid” (2001, 1393). Chow coined the phrase to cast doubt upon the validity of identity politics in the cinematic visual field, thereby loosely supporting the broad assertion that identity politics demands that filmmakers give priority to seeking inclusion within the existing symbolic, rather than to bringing the symbolic as a whole into question.

I would argue that the dominance of identity and emotional motives in shaping subjectivity, as a consequence of the post-truth condition, is what enables the zombie figure to be included within the framework of anthropomorphic realism through its very exclusion. Eric King Watts makes the point that the proliferation of zombie narratives embraces the double helix of “symbolic misery” and “conspiratorial fantasy.” Drawing upon the idea that “post-truth is fed by uncertainty and fills that gap with excess—with conspiracies,” “zombies are real in the sense that zombie relations and identifications get actualized by the discourses and material practices of post-truth” (2018, 466). At the same time, we also need to refer to the larger context as “the mainstreaming of paranormal beliefs as revenue streams” (Hill, 2010, 170). The conservative turn within popular culture (for example, the emergence of consumerist approaches to spirituality, and the trend toward celebrating virginity in popular young adult fictions such as the *Twilight* franchise [2005–2008] and *The Hunger Games* trilogy [2008–2010]) happens to coincide with a rise of the collusion between paranormal interests and post-truth rhetoric. According to Timothy Gibson, post-truth modes of discourse these days have a particular resonance with conservative politics,

post-truth strategies proliferate reflexive questioning, disrupt the authority of experts, and resist efforts at fact-checking and falsification. As such, these strategies excel at muddying the political waters, sowing confusion, and immobilizing political will. They thus serve as powerful arrows in the quiver of anyone attempting to block collective action aimed at significant social change. (2018, 3181)

Rather than being represented as imagined enemies in the context of identity politics that simultaneously creates imagined communities, Ueda’s non-existent monsters are restored to the realm of the not-yet-symbolized Real. As Peter Knight notes, identity politics, by placing priority on group loyalty over objective facts, on the one hand, ensures “a tight-knit entrenchment of community identity,” on the other, generates “a somewhat vague sense of the conspiring enemy—often no more than a conviction that ‘They’ are to blame,” which “hinders the formation of a coherent in-group” (2013, 44–45). In particular, I consider *One Cut of the Dead* a post-genre response to the crisis of identity in a post-truth era. It provides an example of artistic practice that remains faithful to the zombie event and opens to the yet-unknown, which goes further not only than

traditional horror, but also than well-known genre parody films such as *Shaun of the Dead* (Edgar Wright, 2004), *Tropic Thunder* (Ben Stiller, 2008), and *Gonjiam: Haunted Asylum* (Jung Bum-shik, 2018). This, in turn, pays a special tribute to the zombie horror tradition.

Offering an alternative to Deleuzian classification of images (namely as varieties of movement-image and time-image), Mehdi Belhaj Kacem's conception of the event-image suggests that new subjectivities can be attained within the cinematic experience (2017, 13). Instead of identifying the nonsymbolized singularities as frightening "alternative facts," in the wake of the pre-linguistic, pre-human intensities of cinematographic encounters as chance events, the new subjects rediscover themselves as whatever-singularities. In doing so, they can possibly touch upon the reality under the veil of post-truth discourses.

In this article, as part of a more general project to outline the undoing-of-event crisis for the study of horror cinema today, I draw attention to what we might call the genre's potential connection to Agamben's "coming community," in which "[whatever] singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong, without any representable condition of belonging" (2003, 86). It also can be understood as a structuration process that "mediates between structure and event," (Eagleton, 2012, 199) a process that is continuously opened up by the event-truth. For my enquiry, I will look at *One Cut of the Dead* as a significant instance of attempting to reaffirm and revitalize the genre as an emancipatory force. The next section, therefore, offers an elaboration of the interplay between zombie narratives and the theme of the contemporary uncanny, how impure monsters get involved with our reality-obsessed media culture, and how Ueda's work foregrounds the ideological functioning of today's enjoyment of post-truth.

10.3 ZOMBIES, THE IMPURE, AND THE RETURN OF REPRESSED "POST-TRUTH"

For psychoanalytic scholars Stephanie Swales and Carol Owens, experiences of ambivalence, as encounters with desire's traumatic Real in the Freudian/Lacanian sense, are increasingly excised or foreclosed under present-day neoliberal capitalism. The zombie, to use Lacan's neologism, hints at an increasingly deep relation to the ambivalence, grotesquery, and "hainamoration," (lovehating or hate-loving) reminding us of the truths we'd rather not know about ourselves. As Swales and Owens put it, "it is

the foreclosure of ambivalence in the symbolic that leads to the returning of this ambivalence - materialised in the figure of the zombie - in the real” (2019, 32). The reference to the zombie as an embodiment of ambivalent truth is revealing here and perhaps explains people’s long-lasting fascination with the interaction between supernatural beings, horror, and issues of truth-telling within literary canons, such as Homer’s *Odyssey* (ca.700 BCE), Murasaki Shikibu’s *Tale of Genji* (1021), and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1603). Furthermore, it is in the context that what we now call the horror emerged as a literary genre, especially in the form of the Gothic novel, we may more specifically understand how the presumed existence of the invisible, liminal, unclassifiable functions as a “return of the Truth’s repressed,” a deviation from Western Enlightenment era’s (ca 1650–1800) view of truth that, as interpreted by sociologist Thomas DeGloma, was linked to what human beings could perceive with “their reason-driven interactions with the world” (2014, 49).

In response to the post-Enlightenment legacy, or its “radicalized” continuation, that emphasizes “there is no ‘Other of the Other’ pulling the strings,” (Dean, 2010, 10) the role of the repressed has changed: “the liminal, invisible, and unclassifiable” becomes incorporated into the “post-truth narratives built on emotion and deception” (Brown, 2019, 206). Putting together Dean’s argument with Menara Guizardi’s, it is possible to argue that the post-Enlightenment arrival of “wholesale, endless reflexivity” is linked to “the radicalization of neoliberal mechanisms,” (Guizardi, 2021, 10) expressed particularly in the discourse around post-truth. This process, in Žižek’s words, leads to a “post-political” situation which not only represses the political, but rather more effectively excludes it, whereby realism’s imbrication with capitalism produces a double illusion that “consists in overlooking the illusion which is structuring our real, effective relationship to reality” (2012, 316).

Noël Carroll, in his now classic *The Philosophy of Horror*, sees the monstrous, alien, and impure as one of the crucial elements of horror in general:

Many cases of impurity are generated by what... I called interstitiality and categorical contradictoriness.... On the simplest physical level, this often entails the construction of creatures that transgress categorical distinctions such as inside/outside, living/dead, insect/human, flesh/machine, and so on. (2003, 43)

This definition of the horrifying monster has been associated by Carroll with Mary Douglas's theory of impurity. As entities whose existence is denied by classification within the categories of modern rational thought, for Douglas, the "impure creatures" can be defined with reference to "matter out of place" that is "the by-product of a systematic ordering" (Douglas, 2003, 36). Similarly, as Carroll asserts, "Many monsters of the horror genre are interstitial and/or contradictory in terms of being living and dead: ghosts, zombies, vampires, mummies, the Frankenstein monster, Melmoth the Wanderer, and so on" (2003, 32). Therefore, the experiences of going to horror movies or reading horror stories, which relate to the perceived disorder "occurring at the margins of a system," are set in opposition to the post-Enlightenment truth-finding attempt.

Before turning to the specificities of *One Cut of the Dead*, it is worth noting that the zombie is uniquely suited to explore, in the context of contemporary popular culture, certain problems of identity, otherness, and truth that beset individuals ill at ease with singular situations emerging from the culture. As scholars Eric Hamako and Kyle William Bishop note, the zombie generally differs from other impure monsters in several ways that are relevant to the origins of the revenants.

Unlike creatures such as the vampire, the werewolf, and the ghost, however, the zombie has no superhuman powers, but it infects their victims, creating more zombies. As Hamako argues, "there is another, less acknowledged characteristic: zombies are creatures that have lost their sense of self, their humanity" (2011, 108). On the basis of such observations, we can trace the uniqueness back to the birth and subsequent development of the zombie narrative. The so-called "walking dead," as summarized by Bishop, "is the only supernatural foe to have almost entirely skipped an initial literary manifestation," "passing directly from folklore to the screen" (Bishop, 2010, 12–13). Hence, through the figure of zombie our horrors of the risk society, of global pandemics, of downward mobility, of "becoming monsters" loom up. In general, the zombie genre makes it possible to explore the post-truth world in which ideas of subjectivity/community are built with rationally inconsistent pieces. The uncanny in the figure is in itself a quest to categorize the chaotic, but because it is "between species: always-already in a state of indifferentiation, or undergoing metamorphoses into a bizarre assortment of human/not-human configurations," (Pielak & Cohen, 2017, 52) such quests for truth are futile.

During the past 20 years, as observed by Swales, Owens, and Bethan Michael in their analysis of the zombie figure's ambivalence through its various iterations, a so-called "air of reality" is obviously brought into twenty-first century zombie cinema: "the contemporary zombie is the result of interfering with the human world rather than the supernatural or spirit world" (Owens & Swales, 2019, Chap. 2). Through "being connected with the favourite projects and passions of the times," (Michael, 2016, 33) the living dead are now more frequently placed in realist scenarios. Meanwhile, with its abundance of nonfiction television programming (reality shows), Internet culture (vlogs on YouTube and TikTok), and their embrace of hand-held video technology, the current media landscape has mainstreamed forms of paranormal interests, such as ghost hunting, Bigfoot research, and exploring haunted places. As Roger Hallas has suggested, by linking these contexts—the cultural trend toward the "subjective, autobiographical, and confessional modes of expression," (2009, 113) and the growth of "alternative media" based upon herd mentality rather than objective facts—we can better think about how the zombie, as a metaphor for "the return of the repressed truth," is becoming a conduit for reflection on the post-truth era.

The challenge facing both the intra- and extra-diegetic members of *One Cut of the Dead's* crew and cast, as the title itself highlights, is to tell the zombie-apocalypse story not just in the style of a mockumentary but in a single cut. This all begins with Higurashi, a frustrated director of news reenactments and karaoke videos. He is recruited by a new horror TV channel, "Zombie Channel," to shoot a 30-minute short completely live. And it must be filmed using a handheld camera in one take, with no edits at all. In this sense, Ueda's film-within-a-film puts special focus on the realist obsession that characterizes contemporary tendency towards what Rob Nixon calls the "cultural industrialization of the real," and its "remixing and recombination of all kinds of cultural data permitted by the digital environment," (Twidle, 2019, 5–6) as well as with the neoliberal production and circulation of images—be those images about persons of different races, nations, or sexual orientations. And via the massive generation of consumable images, an identity-politics-driven form of anthropomorphic realism emerges.

For Chow,

if we, however, remember that what are on the screen are not people but images, the conventional, identity-politics-driven understanding of cine-

matic identifications will have to be abandoned. Accepting these images as artifice would, I contend, liberate us from the constraints of literal, bodily identification... we have yet to come to terms with the radical implications of cinema's interruption of the human as such—indeed, with its conjuring of human beings as phantom objects. (2001, 1393)

Taking into account the underlying conflict between “phantom images” and “anthropomorphic realism,” it is possible to argue that Higurashi's task of showing real nonhuman entities not only deals with issues of visible identities, but also becomes increasingly intertwined with individuals' anxieties about not being “properly human” stemming from the neoliberal fantasies.

From the moment Higurashi opens the film, the protagonist's unsuccessful artistic career calls to mind Jack Torrance in *The Shining* who, as a wannabe writer and recovering alcoholic, struggles to survive within power systems of capitalism and patriarchy. Just like *The Shining*, the first 37-minute one-take part of *One Cut of the Dead* is suffused with references to the relationship between the director's tyrannical ego and the sufferings of those around him, containing obvious traces of the zombification process that comes to symbolize workplace repression and violence (Fig. 10.1). Film buffs may even consider the early scene in which Higurashi scolds the actress for being insufficiently frightened as a reference to the filming of *The Shining*, during which Stanley Kubrick was famously hard on Shelley Duvall to get a better performance (IMDB, 2022).

In his delineation of neoliberalism's illusory fantasy that obfuscates the true hierarchical distinctions (human and nonhuman, culture and nature), by employing Agamben's concept of the “anthropological machine,” Luis I. Prádanos explains the unconscious source of an anxiety about being impure mixtures of categories that cannot normally be combined: living and dead, human and animal, human subject and inanimate object. In this era of systemic violence made invisible by “the growth-oriented ideology,” “humans are reduced to ‘self-investing capital’... then individuals who are unable to make a profit on their human capital, or communities not feeding the economic machine, can lose their status as properly human and pass into the category of the less than human” (2018, 25).

Rather than exceptionalizing the zombification based on anthropomorphic realism and placing it in opposition to the existing reality, in *One Cut of the Dead*, owing to the ensuing twist that shifts the film from its first section, the characters are liberated from the ideologically naturalized



Fig. 10.1 At the end of the film's first part, the film-within-a-film's fictional director shouts at the two leads, 'This scene will be the climax of my movie!'

identities. By revealing the artificiality of the first act's apocalyptic scenes shot in the found-footage documentary style, Ueda's experimentation interrupts the production of post-truth, through which the film responds to the precarious socioeconomic situation anticipated by Kubrick's *The Shining*. To borrow Deleuze's idea of becoming, a return of the becoming-zombie experience, rather than an invasion of monstrous others, is evoked in Ueda's film that turns out to be a self-deconstruction of the genre (sans zombie), whereby the performance of the actor-characters playing zombie objects undermines the invisible system that renders people as "self-investing human capital."

As such, it is my contention in this article that the "generic truth" establishes a basis for theorizing realist approaches under a post-truth regime, which nevertheless retain a radical potential in the form of images. In my subsequent discussion, I examine the relevance of the show-must-go-on spirit imbued within the film to a fidelity to the pure zombie-event and then investigate the impact of the event-image that compels us to think the unthinkable within the view of late capitalism.

10.4 CONCEIVING A PURE EVENT-IMAGE

If we consider Higurashi to be Jack Torrance's uncanny doppelgänger, representing Jack's obsession with work and his "frustration to become uncontrollable," (Webster, 2011, 105) it becomes interesting to examine how far this resemblance extends. Thanks to the second and third parts giving a retrospective narrative of the filmmaking apocalypse as an intervention upon the real zombie apocalypse, Higurashi, rather than resembling Jack who is desperate to maintain his "properly human" status and being resentful toward the unsettling otherness (on grounds of gender, age, colour, physical appearance, experience, and so forth) of people around him, is compelled by the dual-apocalypse event to "invents a new way of being" (Badiou, 2012, 41–42).

In this light, the predicament of individuals' tendency to separate themselves from "bare life" through their truth claims in Ueda's film carries echoes of *The Shining*. Indeed, *One Cut of the Dead* dramatizes what Alain Badiou names an "event" and its resulting "truth process."

Adopting Badiou's notion of the Event of Truth, philosopher Kacem coined the term "event-image," using it to refer to a perception of the cinema functioning throughout the "truth process" (2017, 14). According to Badiou, truth is a process that does not define the world as real, it creates it as real by retroactively transforming the past to give meaning to the present. In Badiouan terms, the process begins with an unpredictable break within the established order that "escapes conventional representation" (Hallward, 2004, 3). Thus, a truth process cannot be rooted in an identity, "by which 'we' of the human species are engaged in a trans-species procedure, a procedure which opens us to the possibility of being Immortals. A truth is thus undoubtedly an experience of the inhuman" (Badiou, 2019, 28). Within this framework, Kacem discusses the event-image for which an anti-Cartesian perception of the subject is an important precondition, because this may lead to vibrating flows of images constituting a subject-as-fold. This folding of external images within the internal life (Kacem, 2017, 16), unlike Deleuze for whom the time-image as an "inhuman event" marks a reduction of subjectivity to "any-point-of-view-whatever," in turn can become the precondition for the emergence of the "faithful subject." As a "post-evental body," it "decides again and again about the truth of an event" (Besana, 2014, 42). This reversal of the Baudrillardian-Deleuzian understanding of the subject frees us from post-modernism's disrespect for the hackneyed genre cinema. As such, for

Kacem, the new subject is submitted neither to existing clichés nor to a higher authority of a fictitious body (God, Race, Culture, Nation...) imposed upon other images (2017, 10–13).

If, as the history of zombie cinema shows us again and again, zombie films continue to provide one of the best examples of how immediacy functions in film, then *One Cut of the Dead* displays a particular affinity with the conception of the event-image, in which a fidelity to the eventual immediacy points to the post-apocalyptic possibility of change. As Johan Höglund writes in his tracing the history of pandemic horror cinema, “the point of pandemic horror cinema in general, and of the zombie film in particular,” from George Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) to the 2016 *Train to Busan*,

is that it makes a different understanding of the pandemic possible. With the aid of the horror genre, the pandemic is sped up and magnified so that its destructive capabilities become starkly visible...This acceleration of pandemic violence enables the zombie film to invest the (imagined) disease it represents with specific political content and, in relation to this, to tie it to various types of Otherness. (2017, 2–3)

What we might call *One Cut of the Dead*’s “eventness” consists in unmasking the “undoing of the Event” beneath the staged reality, thus making it all the more effective. Being left behind in abandoned places (such as the deserted WWII Japanese facility in the film) while proliferating through what Higurashi’s wife Nao calls “rumors, urban legends,” the zombie stands outside neoliberalism’s comforting embrace, but its existence is increasingly palpable and actionable. As one reviewer of the film observes, “Whatever that ‘something’ is, it results in actual zombies appearing on the set to attack the cast and crew” (Foley, 2019). Tsuyoshi Sone’s cinematography also places us right in the middle of the life-imitating-art action. The identification of potential bogeymen hidden in the shadows, and the production of the fictive illusion that is associated with it, constitutes an environment in which “performance and exception are intimately linked” (Hughes, 2007, 4–5). As Jenny Hughes puts it, a state of exception is generated through “practices of performance and theatre,” (ibid., 149) which authorize the “institutionalized imagination” to “create threats,” “identify frailties,” and invent evidence of display of the sovereignty to support its truth claims, such as those deriving from the destruction of its violent and hungry rival (Hughes, 2011, 2). In the context of exceptionalism that based upon performance, zombie viruses

become familiar as visual objects inscribed into the expansion of powers of conventions and ideologies, blurring boundaries between what is “ordinary and extraordinary.” Here too, it is possible to witness an aesthetic shift within popular zombie cinema, one that seemingly embraces “unmediated” materials (for example, the faux-archival footage presented in the [REC] franchise [2007–2014]) over postmodern parody of generic topos (*Shaun of the Dead* and 2009s *Doghouse* being two such examples—they wrap zombie-horror conventions recognizable from American and Italian horror cinema around references to particular social circumstances), but in all the mixes between the zombie renaissance and the blending of fact with fiction, the zombie-event remains confined to the private sphere and the danger is that an event can be undone when we regress into the normalized “state of emergency or exception.” This way the radical potential of the post-apocalyptic public sphere is subverted by pre-selected pseudo-eventual interpellation. In sum, what makes Ueda’s film different from earlier zombie hits—like the ones mentioned above—is its fidelity to something that has not been selected and realized but that remains a potentiality, which prompts the surviving characters, as well as the audience, to determine how they will re-establish a world where they can live with yet-to-emerge forms of otherness, simultaneously challenging the post-ideological illusion of “free choice within existing parameters” (Žižek, 2004, 122) that de-eventalizes the uncanny.

What distinguishes the event-image from the ongoing popularization and commercialization of paranormal narratives is its liberation of elusive/repressed/evental truths from the normalized state of exception. The DIY imagination in *One Cut of the Dead* offers a co-existence of these two understandings of truth in both forms —of drama’s elusive mystique and documentary’s demystifying effects—that is a re-imagining of the elusiveness not as neither escapist fantasy nor doomsday prophecy, but as a new beginning of Badiou’s truth process that opens up possibilities hitherto unthinkable within comprehensible limits. The hitherto exceptional situation is a post-apocalyptic, post-pandemic world, in which, as the prompts written on an off-camera cue card that read, survivors do not retreat into private fantasies but “keep going!” in the case that “we are not ready” (Fig. 10.2). On both the intra- as well as the extradiegetic levels, the film crew’s attempts to present a “docudrama” mixture of documentary and dramatic narrative can be understood, in relation to the Zeitgeist of the digital era, as a portrayal that amplifies issues of the day such as voyeurism, surveillance, identity shaped through mass media, and the possibilities and



Fig. 10.2 A crew member holds up a cue card off camera that read “We are not ready. Keep going!”

limits for audience access and agency offered by new media forms. This context is provided so as to better appreciate how the growth of reality TV helps turn the popularity of the zombie trope into a symptom of the age.

As Mara Einstein, Katherine Madden, and Diane Winston demonstrated in their introduction to the collection of papers titled *Religion and Reality TV: Faith in Late Capitalism*, “The supernatural genre, with programs that focus on paranormal activity ranging from psychics to ghost hunting, continues to expand in popularity,” (Einstein et al., 2018, Introduction) as a form of entertainment across multiple platforms using reality-based content. This trend, when considered in conjunction with the ubiquity of emphasis upon private emotional attachments and its influence on the public realm, would seem to add weight to the suggestion that a post-truth shift is taking place, in which an extensive fragmentation of sources of information creates “echo chambers,” thereby serving to lead people to think that their opinions, no matter how outlandish and implausible, are more widely agreed with. Researchers have pointed out that viewers are more likely to share content when it generates strong emotional feelings. When Higurashi screams at his cast, in the film-within-a-film, “Give me real emotions! The true face of fear!” he is not only acting like a stereotypical mad cult filmmaker but also, seemingly

unconsciously, stressing the post-truth dimension underlying the extensions of the (sub-)genre's concern with emotional states involving class resentments, nationalist exultation, and racist xenophobia, etc. (Fig. 10.3). As embodied in the film's twist transforming a found-footage film into a live-streaming reality show, occult or conspiracy-laden content is ripe for exploitation in this type of media landscape because it tends to stir up emotions, like anger, fear, hate, and shame.

For fans who take a cult interest in zombie films, the (sub-)genre is supposed to have been marginal, subversive, and excessive. In her *The Subversive Zombie*, Elizabeth Aiossa explains her interest in studying “the ability of the zombie narrative to call its fans to action in the real world,” and argues that the film's narratives “inspire fans to band together in politically productive ways, and this is a remarkable and exciting development not seen from other film genres and popular culture more broadly.” However, as reality programming about zombies (just like the film's fictional “Zombie Channel”) becomes ubiquitous, it becomes increasingly impossible to connect the monster, as a “legible cultural signifier,” with “the social impact and activism seen in today's society” (Aiossa, 2018, 175) —thus reducing people's feelings of uncertainty and fear to empty



Fig. 10.3 Director Higurashi takes on the role of the “realism-obsessed” director and screams at lead actress Chinatsu, “Give me real emotions! The true face of fear!”

gestures, and situating us within a privatized world of spectacle that is removed from larger social engagement and public concerns. Moreover, as emerging research suggests, the recent COVID-19 pandemic provides a convenient pretext for national governments' articulation of neoliberalism and nationalism. Individual citizens are mobilized to take care of themselves in order to reinforce an imagined homogenous national community. At the same time, the use of the media for government campaigns, as highlighted by Shani Orgad and Radha Sarma Hegde (2022), may reduce the probability that individuals reach beyond the ideological echo chambers and challenge the existing segregations and exclusions in response to the global crisis. With fictional/nonfictional media formats encouraging consumers' emotional investment in the real people portrayed as human/nonhuman characters onscreen, for Žižek, the all-too-common public displays of affection means, paradoxically, "emancipatory events" emerging within public space are being undone. He goes on to point out that,

it is often said that today, with our total exposure to the media, culture of public confessions and instruments of digital control, private space is disappearing. One should counter this commonplace with the opposite claim: it is the public space proper which is disappearing... Such privatization is an exemplary case of how, in our societies, the emancipatory Event of modernity is gradually undone. (2014, 124)

For the film's second half, as it reveals why and how the film-within-the-film is created, along with the shift from shaky-cam "DV realism" to "artificial," clean TV-lighting, Ueda reconstitutes a sans-zombie situation where the characters engage in an event of becoming-zombie. Rather than enforce a camera-based, ego- and anthropocentric "emotional realism" (where emotion serves as inference) and its claim to unmediated reality (Harsin, 2018), the team of underdogs, Higurashi and his cast and crew, motivate a radical reconsideration of the differentiation between self and other, "superior" and "inferior." Cutting across fixed differences in identities, the universality of the apocalyptic / filmmaking event promises an equality that is only possible within the DIY imagination, which implies a utopian vision of the endless becoming-filmmaker, becoming-actor, becoming-human, becoming-nonhuman, and becoming-imperceptible. In Simon Bacon's reading of zombies over the last 20 years, he remarks, "As such, the more likely bonds between the living and the not-living are, as seen in the film *Shaun of the Dead*, more likely to be of a 'superior'

human, keeping the ‘lesser’ zombie as a ‘pet’ of some sort” (2016, 182). From a different angle, *One Cut of the Dead* offers a new form of “public encounter,” during which the whatever singularities are irreducible to any identity based on hierarchies of difference such as amateur/professional, monster/normal, friend/enemy. Thus, it is by casting a light on the processes of what Higurashi calls “everyone’s cooperation” and unanticipated mayhem, as viewed through the lenses of Badiou’s subject-of-truth and Agamben’s “coming community,” that the film opens up possibilities for the experiencing of new types of subjectivity and community. While figuring out how to maximize the use of the resources available to carry out his motto of “fast, cheap, but average,” Higurashi, as well as other members of the cast and crew, turns out to be a subject who respond to the “ludicrous confluence of events” (Meyer, 2018) in what Badiou calls a “faithful” way. Instead of being “human capital” as an ideological formation, they start to invent a new way of being by breaking with existing opinions, attitudes, knowledge, and identities, so as to survive the apocalypse (of filmmaking, with zombies). The second act, which focuses on the guerrilla tactics required by the low-budget project, shows the audience how Higurashi achieves what was previously thought “impossible.” In the “real” behind-the-scenes narrative, rather than using autocratic working methods like the stereotypical, realism-obsessed director-character does in the film-within-a-film, Ueda’s protagonists emerge as subjects of the coming community—“without destiny and without essence” (Agamben, 2003, 43)—through collaboration with other members of the largely inexperienced or unprepared team.

Further, the film shows how the director’s family members work as actors or as part of the production team, which embodies a cost-saving approach to filmmaking that low-budget filmmakers often apply. Nao, Higurashi’s wife, a former actress who gave up the career years ago, plays an active part in the process not only because of her double role as a makeup artist and a performer, but also by adapting her passion for self-defense videos into a creative endeavor. Agamben envisions the work of art’s long-repressed capacity as “its emancipation from fixed contexts and contents” (Jarvis, 2000). In Agambenian terms, “artistic subjectivities without content” are not privileged subjects whose intention is representation of existing content, but subjects who “co-belong without a representable condition of belonging,” (2003, 87) which allows them to differentiate their communication from the increasing polarization created by post-truth communication. This is particularly apparent in the film’s

treatment of Mao, Higurashi's genre-crazed, aspiring-director daughter, who keeps getting in trouble doing various jobs on film shoots. Notably, the allusion to *The Shining* is further reinforced here in a scene, which shows Mao wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with Nicholson's Jack "Here's Johnny" Torrance (Fig. 10.4). And, being somewhat apart from her father, Mao is about to move out of the family home. But ultimately, it is the filmmaking apocalypse that turns her perfectionism into the potentiality of bringing something into being. When the camera rig for the planned crane shot ending gets broken, Mao improvises a human pyramid as a hitherto unthinkable means to realize the finale. Meanwhile, as a result of helping her father to remain faithful to events of the filmmaking apocalypse, Mao ends up improving communication with her father in the truth-process.

If, to use Kacem's term, horror cinema is more interested in constituting a form of event-image, which focuses upon the immediacy of unpredictable situations, then *One Cut of the Dead* can be understood as an ode to the show must go on spirit of the B movie genre and hands-on filmmaking. To borrow the repeated line from the film, "Keep going," the two parallel narrative thrusts—the story of the cast and crew somehow changing into zombies, and the artists' attempts to deal with unplanned



Fig. 10.4 Mao wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with Nicholson's Jack "Here's Johnny" Torrance

circumstances—might be considered a discovery of the truth-process increasingly concealed in the “hackneyed genre.” As critic Jason Shawhan comments, “Eschewing the right-wing fantasies of the majority of modern zombie narratives allowing for consolidation of absolute power and wielding Life and Death over those who disappoint you, this is a film about cooperation and foibles” (2019). Looking away from the impurity of monsters serving an apocalyptic function, and instead emphasizing the purity of the zombie event that reorganizes a coming community, enables us a refreshing understanding of what horror cinema can do in the post-truth era.

10.5 CONCLUSION

One Cut of the Dead can be understood on one level through the notion of horror cinema as “a return of the repressed.” Ueda uses the technique of film within film to advocate a return to a pre-signifying, pre-zombified regime of signs as a homage to the genre. This homage, however, is paid not only to the filmmaking process, but equally to the truth process in which events compel whatever singularities to cooperatively make it possible, as opposed to post-truth discourses appropriating the zombie event by undoing its eventness. In this sense the film suggests a different approach to realism—an approach based less on identification and more on communication. By breaking the realist illusion of the film’s first section, the second half counters the collusion of “emotional realism” and “apocalyptic conspiracy” visions in late-capitalist culture attuned to mass media. This shift towards an event-image, within the context, owes much to the utopian potential created by the characters/cast/crew who become subjects while entering a partnership with the zombieness/otherness. In the post-truth media-political sphere, when compared to the conventions governing the de-eventalization of zombie narratives, horror tropes in *One Cut of the Dead* seem to be particularly accessible and participatory. And in this way, the genre performs certain post-apocalyptic functions in bringing audiences into a coming community. Funding This article was supported by the Youth Foundation of Humanities and Social Sciences of the Ministry of Education in China [grant number 21YJCZH253]. Thank you very much to the participants and audience at the conference “Trust Me!” *Truthfulness and Truth Claims across Media conference* at Linnaeus University, for their questions and feedback.

REFERENCES

- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign power and bare life*. (Daniel Heller-Roazen, Trans.). Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, G. (2003). *The coming community*. Trans. Michael Hardt. University of Minnesota Press.
- Aiossa, E. (2018). *The subversive zombie: Social protest and gender in undead cinema and television*. McFarland.
- Assef, J. (2013). The zombie epidemic: A hypermodern version of the apocalypse. *LC Express*, 2, 1–16.
- Bacon, S. (2016). Dying to love you: The evolution of the romantic zombie. In B. Brodman & J. E. Doan (Eds.), *The supernatural revamped: From timeworn legends to twenty-first-century chic* (pp. 177–190). Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.
- Badiou, A. (2012). *Ethics: An essay on the understanding of evil*. (Peter Hallward, Trans.). Verso Press.
- Badiou, A. (2019). *Logics of worlds: Being and event II*. (Alberto Toscano, Trans.). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bazin, A. (2005). *What is cinema?*. (Hugh Gray, Trans.) (Vol. 1). University of California Press.
- Besana, B. (2014). The subject. In A. J. Bartlett & J. Clemens (Eds.), *Alain Badiou: Key concepts*. Routledge.
- Bishop, K. W. (2010). *American zombie gothic: The rise and fall (and rise) of the walking dead in popular culture*. McFarland.
- Brown, R. J. (2019). *Political encounters: A hermeneutic inquiry into the situation of political obligation*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Carroll, N. (2003). *The philosophy of horror: Or, paradoxes of the heart*. Routledge.
- Chow, R. (2001). A phantom discipline. *PMLA*, 111, 1386–1395.
- Dean, J. (2010). *Blog theory: Feedback and capture in the circuits of drive*. Polity Press.
- DeGloma, T. (2014). *Seeing the light: The social logic of personal discovery*. University of Chicago Press.
- Douglas, M. (2003). *Purity and danger: An analysis of concepts of pollution and taboo*. Routledge.
- Eagleton, T. (2012). *The event of literature*. Yale University Press.
- Einstein, M., Madden, K., & Winston, D. (2018). Introduction. In M. Einstein, K. Madden, & D. Winston (Eds.), *Religion and reality TV: Faith in late capitalism*. Routledge.
- Foley, B. (2019). Why one cut of the dead should be your new favorite Halloween movie. Cinapse. Accessed November 27, 2022, from <https://cinapse.co/why-one-cut-of-the-dead-should-be-your-new-favorite-halloween-movie-a82e3c0816bc>.

- Gibson, T. A. (2018). The post-truth double helix: Reflexivity and mistrust in local politics. *International Journal of Communication*, 12, 3167–3185.
- Guizardi, M. (2021). Chapter 1: The migration crisis and the ecstasies of hatred. In M. Guizardi (Ed.), *The migration crisis in the American southern cone: Hate speech and its social consequences* (pp. 3–20). Springer.
- Hallward, P. (2004). Introduction: Consequences of abstraction. In P. Hallward (Ed.), *Think again: Alain Badiou and the future of philosophy* (pp. 1–20). Continuum.
- Hamako, E. (2011). Zombie Orientals ate my brain! Orientalism in contemporary zombie stories. In C. M. Moreman & C. J. Rushton (Eds.), *Race, oppression and the zombie: Essays on cross-cultural appropriations of the Caribbean tradition* (pp. 107–123). McFarland.
- Harsin, J. (2018). Post-truth right-wing populism: emo-truth from the French anti-gender theory movement to trump. Accessed November 29, 2018, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/322787080_Post-truth_Right-Wing_Populism_Emo-truth_from_the_French_Anti-gender_Theory_Movement_to_Trump.
- Hill, A. (2010). *Paranormal media: Audiences, spirits and magic in popular culture*. Routledge.
- Höglund, J. (2017). Eat the rich: Pandemic horror cinema. *Transtext(e)s Transcultures: Journal of Global Cultural Studies*, 12, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.4000/transtexts.706>
- Hughes, J. (2007). Theatre, performance, and the ‘war on terror’: Ethical and political questions arising from British theatrical responses to war and terrorism. *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 17, 149–164.
- Hughes, J. (2011). *Performance in time of terror: Critical mimesis and the age of uncertainty*. Manchester University Press.
- Jarvis, S. (2000, April 7). Sound reasoning. *Times Literary Supplement*.
- Kacem, M. B. (2017). *Dieu: La Mémoire, la Techo—science et le mal*. Les Liens Qui Libèrent.
- Knight, P. (2013). *Conspiracy culture: From the Kennedy assassination to the X-files*. Routledge.
- Meyer, J. (2018). 3 things to know about the blockbuster Japanese movie ‘one cut of the dead’. GaijinPotBlog. Accessed November 24, 2022, from <https://blog.gaijinpot.com/3-things-to-know-about-the-blockbuster-japanese-movie-one-cut-of-the-dead/>.
- Michael, B. (2016). The return of the dead: Fears and anxieties surrounding the return of the dead in late postmodern culture. In I. Dixon, S. E. M. Doran, & B. Michael (Eds.), *Th’re’s more to fear than fear itself: Fears and anxieties in the 21st century* (pp. 31–44). Brill.
- One Cut of the Dead (2017): Trivia. 2022. IMDB. Accessed November 29, 2022, from https://m.imdb.com/title/tt7914416/trivia/?ref=tt_ql_trv.

- Orgad, S., & Hegde, R. S. (2022). Crisis-ready responsible selves: National productions of the pandemic. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 25, 287–308.
- Owens, C., & Swales, S. (2019). *Psychoanalysing ambivalence with Freud and Lacan*. Routledge.
- Oxford Dictionaries, Word of the Year. (2016). *Oxford dictionaries*. Accessed November 29, 2022, from <http://en.oxforddictionaries.com/word-of-the-year/word-of-the-year-2016>.
- Pielak, C., & Cohen, A. H. (2017). Living with zombies. In *Society in Apocalypse in film, literature and other media*. McFarland.
- Prádanos, L. I. (2018). *Postgrowth imaginaries: New ecologies and counterhegemonic culture in Post-2008 Spain*. Liverpool University Press.
- Rose, Steve. (2017, 6 July). How post-horror movies are taking over cinema. The Guardian.
- Rubenstein, D. (2019). “An actual nightmare, but ... pretty good TV”: Horror-comedy in the trump era. In J. A. Webber (Ed.), *The joke is on us: Political comedy in (late) neoliberal times* (pp. 267–291). Lexington Books.
- Shawhan, J. (2019). *One cut of the dead* makes played-out elements fresh. Nashville Scene, September 12.
- Twidle, H. (2019). *Experiments with truth: Narrative non-fiction and the coming of democracy in South Africa*. James Currey.
- Watts, E. K. (2018). “Zombies are real”: Fantasies, conspiracies, and the post-truth wars. *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 51, 441–470.
- Webster, P. (2011). *Love and death in Kubrick: A critical study of the films from Lolita through eyes wide shut*. McFarland.
- Žižek, S. (2004). *On belief*. Routledge.
- Žižek, S. (2012). *Mapping ideology*. Verso.
- Žižek, S. (2014). The undoing of an event. In S. Žižek, F. Vighi, & H. Feldner (Eds.), *States of crisis and post-capitalist scenarios* (pp. 107–126). Ashgate.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.



PART IV

Interaction, Trust, and Truthfulness
on Social Media



Developing Misinformation Immunity in a Post-Truth World: Human Computer Interaction for Data Literacy

*Elena Musi, Kay L. O'Halloran, Elinor Carmi,
and Simeon Yates*

11.1 INTRODUCTION

One of the major challenges of the current information ecosystem is the rapid spread of fake news through digital media. The phenomenon of fake news is complex and includes at least three types of media distortions. First, disinformation, non-factual information which is spread with the intention of disseminating harmful false information. Second, misinformation, information which is misleading but not created with the intention

E. Musi (✉) • K. L. O'Halloran • S. Yates
Department of Communication and Media, University of Liverpool,
Liverpool, UK
e-mail: elena.musi@liverpool.ac.uk; kay.ohalloran@liverpool.ac.uk;
scssy@liverpool.ac.uk

E. Carmi
Department of Sociology, City University, London, UK
e-mail: Elinor.Carmi@city.ac.uk

© The Author(s) 2024
B. Schirrmacher, N. Mousavi (eds.), *Truth Claims Across Media*,
Palgrave Studies in Intermediality,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42064-1_11

of producing harm. Third, malinformation, information that is based in reality, but is used to inflict harm on a person, organisation or country (Carmi et al., 2020).

Even though misinformation is often disseminated unintentionally, it has a wide societal impact. For example, in a sample of 225 cases of fake news collected between January and March 2020, 59% of fake news does not contain fabricated or imposter content, but rather reconfigured misinformation (Brennen et al., 2020). Such information proliferates through social media, the main source of news for infodemically vulnerable citizens. Since it is unintentional, misinformation is not always blocked through internal fact-checking before a news article is published. More generally, the identification of misinformation is also far from being successfully addressed by human third parties fact-checkers, let alone automated techniques aimed at verifying the accuracy of information.

This is largely due to the lack of an agreed upon *truth barometer*, which in turn hinders the creation of datasets to train automatic systems. Continuous updates about Covid-19 from the scientific community, as well as governments and health institutions, often results in media outlets unintentionally disseminating misleading content. What makes these types of news *fake* is not the mere truthfulness of the information conveyed, but the fallacious way the arguments are presented (Musi & Reed, 2022). The news making process is, in fact, a rhetorical and argumentative exercise since it is aimed at gaining the acceptance of a certain interpretation of a news event. Misleading or misrepresentative arguments, if perceived as coherent and trustworthy, might thus crucially affect the processes through which information turns into shared public knowledge. In such an environment, to counter the fake news phenomenon, it is necessary to go beyond the identification of non-factual information towards a reason-checking exercise “evaluating whether the completer argumentative reasoning [underpinning news] is acceptable, relevant and sufficient” (Visser et al., 2020, 38).

As part of our UKRI funded project *Being Alone Together: Developing Fake News Immunity*,¹ we proposed to counter misinformation by providing the means for (a) citizens to act as their own fact-checkers and (b) communication gatekeepers (e.g. journalists and news editors) to avoid creating and spreading misleading news. We did so by combining Fallacy Theory (Carmi et al., 2021) with Human Computer Interaction (HCI).

¹<https://fakenewsimmunity.liverpool.ac.uk/>

Drawing from the multi-level annotation of a dataset of 1500 Covid-19 related news web-crawled from 5 English fact-checkers (*Snopes*, *The Ferret*, *PolitiFact*, HealthFeedback.org, and *Fullfact*), we propose a systematic procedure to identify fallacious arguments across different digital media sources and type of claims (e.g. predictions, interpretations). Relying on the analysis of significant correlations (positive p values) among types of fallacies, sources, and claims, we show trends in the way misinformation is constructed and communicated (Musi et al., 2022).

Leveraging the outcomes of our data analysis, we built two chatbots, the *Fake News Immunity Chatbot*² and the *Vaccinating News Chatbot*,³ respectively targeting citizens and communication gatekeepers. Through these chatbots, users learn how to fact-check through fallacies and create fallacy-free news content through interactions with the *fathers of critical thinking* (i.e. Aristotle, Gorgias, and Socrates) and members of the research team. While adhering to default design principles of gamification environments (e.g. progressive game levels), the two chatbots give voice through their dialogical templates to philosophical modes of inquiry (e.g. Socratic maieutic) with the goal of increasing users' learning process in a conversational environment. In this paper, we present four aspects of our work. First, we introduce the notion of data literacy as new form of media literacy. Second, we introduce the heuristics we developed in order to teach how to fact-check misinformation through fallacies (Sect. 11.2.2). Third, we describe the design of a human-computer interaction environment (the *Fake News Immunity Chatbot*) as a pedagogical tool to assist citizens in learning how to reason-check misinformation (Sects. 11.2.3, 11.3.1, 11.3.2). Fourth, we report on the beta testing of the chatbot through survey-based focus groups aimed at eliciting advantages and pitfalls of the devised human-computer interaction tool. The results shed light on multi-modal factors which affect users' trust in AI agents, suggesting that HCI can be effectively used to augment rather than replace human skills through a tailored design thinking.⁴

²<http://fni.arg.tech/>

³http://fni.arg.tech/?chatbot_type=vaccine

⁴Although the whole paper has been the result of a continuous process of interaction among the authors, Elena Musi is the main responsible of Sects. 11.1, 11.2.2 and 11.3; Elinor Carmi of Sect. 11.2.1 and 11.2.2. Simeon Yates and Kay O'Halloran have contributed to the questionnaire design/analysis and elaboration of recommendations.

11.2 MEDIA LITERACY IN THE POST-TRUTH WORLD

11.2.1 *From Media Literacy to Data Literacy*

People's engagement with and understanding of media devices and digital systems have been intertwined with their levels of trust towards institutions and other people. These two main relations have influenced people's media literacies and their data literacies, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. We developed our data literacies framework, which we call Data Citizenship (Carmi et al., 2020), across three main dimensions: (1) *Data doing*—Citizens' everyday engagements with data (for example, using data in an ethical way); (2) *Data thinking*—Citizens' critical understanding of data (for example, verifying information and sources online); and (3) *Data participating*—Citizens' proactive engagement with data and their networks of literacy (for example, helping others with their data literacy through games/chatbots). Trust is a common thread that relates to all these three dimensions and consequently how people navigate the data-fied ecosystem.

When it comes to trust in institutions, this relates to people's critical thinking about how reliable they perceive a specific institution to be (e.g. a news outlet or health institute) and therefore whether they should read or believe their messages. Fletcher et al. (2020), for example, show how during the Covid-19 pandemic people's attitudes in the United Kingdom towards the trustworthiness of news outlets have decreased from 57% to 46%, and their trust levels in the government have declined from 67% to 48%. In addition, as Cushion et al. (2021) have shown, UK citizens have broadly managed to identify "fake news", but they felt confused by the statistics and the neglect of important facts, such as how the pandemic was being handled by the UK government. According to Cushion et al. (2021), this was mainly due to editorial decisions where sufficient details were not conveyed to citizens, with the result that people felt misinformed. Cushion et al. points out both how people's trust in the main sources of information has deteriorated during the pandemic but also, importantly, that the arguments presented to them by mainstream media were confusing and were causing a proliferation of misinformation.

Such a situation cannot be simply solved by relying on fact-checking organisations as arbiters of trustworthy information. Not only is there a great abundance of non-fact checked information but the epistemology of

fact-checking is far from standardised and affected by selection effects and other types of biases (Uscinski & Butler, 2013).

Drawing from our research (Yates et al., 2021), it seems that the answer lies in a collective effort: We found that people mainly rely on their personal *networks of literacy* to verify information and learn new data literacy skills. We see this as a modern digital version of the 2-step-flow model of influence, originally conceived by Katz (1957) taking place in citizens networks of literacy. In relation to the *Fake News Immunity Chatbot*, this means that people can develop their *data thinking* skills using the game. This teaches them how to critically use fallacy theory as they search for and identify reliable/trusted sources and how to locate reliable articles on social media. It also encourages them to practice *data participating* by either playing with others in their networks of literacy or through propagating these key ideas through these networks. This can help different people in their networks with lower data literacies.

11.2.2 *Fallacies as Misperceptions of Truthfulness*

The pandemic has created an epistemological situation in which what counts as true is continuously updated. A vaccine trial could, for instance, by default, offer reliable but constrained truths about potential side-effects, while reporters rely on second-hand evidence due to lockdown restrictions. In such a scenario, the distinction between mediation, the “material prerequisites for representation in media”, and representation, “the semiotic operation, that is, the creation of meaning in the mind” (Elleström, 2017, 663) is almost removed since the representation necessarily happens in a mediated environment. That is, our sense-making processes have to rely on truth claims which depend on the reasons provided by a media product supporting their trustworthiness (Elleström, 2014, 2017, 2021).

In the era of citizens’ journalism, the news making process is inherently transmedial, and it assumes the shape of a polylogue (Musi & Aakhus, 2018) where multiple users (often anonymous) negotiate different opinions across different venues (from social media to fora). In the absence of a gatekeeping process, the discourse through which a news claim is shaped becomes the main guarantor for its truth. Thus, its persuasiveness through rhetorical strategies impacts on our perception of truthfulness. In light of this, fallacies, i.e. arguments that seem valid but are not (Hamblin, 1970),

are likely to support claims which, even if not false, might be misleading and trigger misperceptions of truthfulness.

We call these misinformation news “semi-fake” since “created/shared by the authors with the intention of circulating fabricated information and hard to be flagged by the public through common ground knowledge” (Musi & Reed, 2022, 17). *Fallacies, thus, constitute useful means to identify fake news.* This is especially true when misinformation—information which is misleading but not necessarily non-factual or created with the intention of causing harm—rather than disinformation—i.e. information which is blatantly false—is at stake.

Two caveats have, however, to be considered. Firstly, verifiable news can also be supported by fallacious arguments, and secondly, there is so far no agreed upon taxonomy for fallacies. As to the former, our goal is to make people aware of fallacious arguments as means for scrutiny rather than truth verdicts. Our guidelines for the analysis of fallacies are, in fact, based on critical questions which cast doubt on various aspects of the news. As to the latter, we have adopted an empirical approach in selecting a decalogue of fallacies relevant for the current misinformation ecosystem. We analysed a preliminary set of 40 fact-checking commentaries and their source articles randomly picked from the fact-checker [Healthfeedback.org](https://www.healthfeedback.org). We developed guidelines for 10 fallacy types found in the data, which include a definition, identification questions, and an intuitive example, as presented below.

- **EVADING THE BURDEN OF PROOF**

Definition: A position is advanced without any arguments supporting it as if it was self-evident.

Critical Questions:

1. Does the position express an unassailable fact?
2. Are there any arguments in support of the statement apart from personal guarantee?

Example: A politician tweeting that a vaccine for Covid-19 was found without providing proof.

- **STRAWMAN**

Definition: An intentional misrepresentation of the other side’s opinion is attempted.

Critical Questions:

1. Has an opponent's position been misrepresented?
2. Is that misrepresentation the basis for an attack or dismissal of the opponent's claim or argument?

Example: A politician arguing that he does not have to follow the advice of the World Health Organization (WHO) since it did not give positive results in the past, even though that piece of advice was good at that time and in that context.

- **FALSE AUTHORITY**

Definition: An appeal to authority is made where the source lacks credibility in the discussed matter or (s)he is attributed a statement which has been tweaked.

Critical Questions:

1. Is the proposed person or source a genuine/impartial authority?
2. Did the authority make the attributed claim?
3. Are the authority and claim made relevant to the subject matter?

Example: When a politician says he knows that the climate crisis does not exist because he did research on it.

- **RED HERRING**

Definition: The argument may be formally valid, but its conclusion is irrelevant to the issue at stake.

Critical Questions:

1. Has the issue been shifted in the course of an argument to another issue or different aspect of the same issue and not shifted back?
2. Is the shift irrelevant to addressing the initial issue?

Example: When a politician is asked to assess the seriousness of the Covid-19 pandemic and replies that corruption is a worse problem.

- **CHERRY-PICKING**

Definition: The act of choosing among competing evidence that which supports a given position, ignoring or dismissing findings which do not support it.

Critical Questions:

1. Is the evidence reported the only available?
2. Is there any other data available which would bring to a different conclusion?

Example: When a politician announces that schools should be open because one research project indicates that children are less affected by a virus, whilst different research suggests otherwise.

- **FALSE ANALOGY**

Definition: Since two entities or situations are similar in one or more aspect they must be similar in other aspects as well.

Critical Questions:

1. Are the two situations alike for real?
2. Are the similarities relevant to derive the conclusion?
3. Are there any dissimilarities relevant for the conclusion?

Example: When someone compares Covid-19 with regular flu.

- **HASTY GENERALIZATION**

Definition: A generalization is drawn from a numerically insufficient sample or a sample that is not representative of the population or a sample which is not applicable to the situation if all the variables/circumstances are considered.

Critical Questions:

1. Is the considered sample quantitatively large enough?
2. Is the considered sample representative of a population or it has been selected in a biased way?
3. Is the considered sample relevant due to the circumstances of a present situation or does it constitute an exception?

Example: Arguing that all people from a specific race are more likely to refuse to wear face-masks because of one incident.

- **POST HOC**

Definition: It is assumed that because B happens after A, it happens because of A. In other words a causal relation is attributed where, instead, a simple correlation is at stake.

Critical Questions:

1. Is there a correlation supporting the causal claim? That is, are there a number of cases on which the claim is grounded?
2. Can the move from the correlation to the alleged causal link be explained by coincidence?

Example: Claiming that 5G is causing Covid-19.

- **FALSE CAUSE**

Definition: X is identified as the cause of Y when another factor Z causes both X and Y or X is considered the cause of Y when actually it is the opposite.

Critical Questions:

1. Is the causal claim itself credible? That is, are the cause and effect correctly identified and has an underlying common cause of both clearly been ruled out?

Example: When someone claims that ibuprofen makes Covid-19 worse.

- **AMBIGUITY/VAGUENESS**

Definition: A word/a concept or a sentence structure which are ambiguous are shifted in meaning in the process of arguing or are left vague being potentially subject to skewed interpretations.

Critical Questions:

1. Have key terms, concepts, or phrases retained their initial meanings throughout the argument?
2. Does a word, concept, or phrase have no clear meaning in the context in which it arises?
3. Does that vagueness prevent us from being able to judge whether an argument has occurred or what it might be?

Example: A council stating that there is a fair number of available swabs without specifying what “fair” means.

Using these ten fallacy classifications, we undertook an annotation exercise involving two minimally trained students and an expert annotator to solve cases of disagreement to analyse a dataset of news web scraped by five English factcheckers (*Snopes*, *The Ferret*, *FullFact*, *Politifact*, and Healthfeedback.org) from January 2020 to end of June 2020 and from January 2021 to end of March 2021. The resulting dataset consisted of 1500 claims.

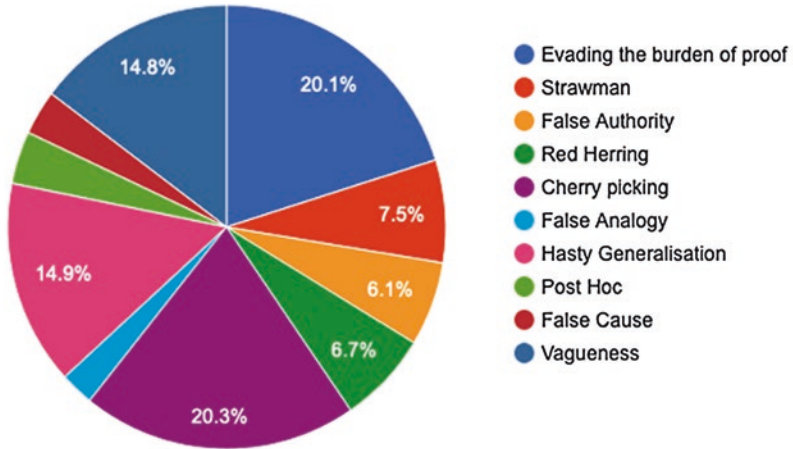
Type of Fallacy

Fig. 11.1 Distribution of fallacy types in the dataset

The results show that the 10 fallacies are associated with all cases of misinformation according to the distributions displayed in Fig. 11.1. We developed series of recommendations on how to identify such fallacies, which are publicly available in a simplified format.⁵

The annotation experiment has shown that non-experts are able to successfully identify the majority fallacies when aided with a set of heuristic guidelines. However, the task is highly complex and cognitively taxing, as shown by the cases of disagreement in the annotation exercise. For this reason, an active learning environment grounded in educational technology promises to foster engagement while retaining a focus on the task at hand, as discussed below.

11.2.3 *Human Computer Interaction as an Educational Tool for Data Literacy*

According to the report *Testing and Refining Criteria to Assess Media Literacy Levels in Europe* (Shapiro & Celot, 2011) commissioned by the

⁵ <https://fakenewsimunity.liverpool.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Fake-News-Immunity-Liverpool-Uni-project.pdf>

European Union, one of the factors which hinders critically reflective skills is screen time since it affects the way we access information (in a fragmented rather than holistic vein). Such a negative correlation is particularly problematic in times such as the pandemic where educational settings are constrained to virtual environments. The situation is further complicated by the proliferation of fake news which is frequently hard to pinpoint, especially as it proliferates through social media. In such a scenario digital fluency is hard to achieve. Teaching people how to identify reliable sources of information is, in fact, not enough in the current (mis)information ecosystem since official news venues can convey misleading information regardless of their intentions.

Relying on fact-checkers' comments as material to develop their critical media literacy (Kellner & Share, 2007) also has its limitations. Besides struggling to keep up with the abundance of information spread online, fact checkers make use of ratings that do not inform the readers about the basis for the misinformation (e.g. *Mostly False/Half True*). Rather, these online factor checkers simply apply a veracity value with little pedagogical relevance. For example, the following news was analysed by the factchecker *Snopes*: "In January 2021, the World Health Organization warned that pregnant women should avoid the COVID-19 vaccine". The rating assigned by the fact-checker is *Mixture*, which points to the presence of both elements of truth and of falsity without, however, instructing on how to identify misleading aspects. For example, is it true that pregnant women should avoid the vaccine or is it not accurate to state that the WHO expressed a view upon the issue?

Crisis situation such as the pandemic bring to the fore two challenges identified by Kline (2016) in relation to the critical media literacy framework. Firstly, while the pedagogical focus is on teaching how the content of media messages responds to political and economic agendas, the problem of media at the level of form is underestimated. Secondly, when it comes to misinformation, media affordances play a crucial role. Word limits imposed by a social media platform can, for instance, cause cherry-picking behaviours of information. Rendering a headline more clickable might bring to misrepresentations of various kinds, while the "sharing without caring" widespread attitude might make misleading content viral.

In relation to fallacies, two main interconnected educational challenges imposed by the virtual medium need to be considered to guarantee an effective learning environment: (1) learning how to recognize fallacies, as any other critical thinking skill, implies a thinking slow process (Kahneman,

2011) which clashes with the *scrolling* behaviours of today's news readers; and (2) the digital medium tends to reduce the attention span if not involving interaction. To cope with these issues, we developed the *Fake News Immunity Chatbot* which is an online publicly accessible game. This game aligns with the pedagogical hallmark of boosting active learning methodologies. That is, through the game, users learn how to fact-check news using fallacies by talking to a set of characters which embody ancient philosophers. Gamification has, in fact, been proven to foster students' commitment and motivation, which may lead to improvement of critical skills (Huang & Soman, 2013). For example, the *GoViralGame*⁶ was recently launched by Cambridge researchers to introduce players to four tactics (e.g. using charged language) used to spread fake news online. The concept behind the game is that exposing people to a mild dose of the ways used to disseminate false information will help to generate *inoculation*. Inoculation Theory (Compton, 2013; McGuire & Papageorgis, 1961) is based on the assumption that "just as vaccines generate antibodies to resist future viruses, inoculation messages equip people with counter arguments that potentially convey resistance to future misinformation, even if the misinformation is congruent with pre-existing attitudes" (Cook et al., 2017, 4).

In our case, the *Fake News Immunity Chatbot* leverage fallacies as a *vaccine* to *inoculate* against fake news. As opposed to *GoViralGame*, it is focused on misinformation rather than disinformation and on identifying triggers, which can make a news misleading even when the author did not mean to spread false content. To assess the efficacy of gamification to teach critical thinking, we tested the *Fake News Immunity Chatbot* with two cohorts of postgraduate students (36 participants overall). After having played with the chatbot, students are asked to complete a questionnaire to evaluate the chatbot at different levels. The choice of having students self-reflect upon various aspects of the chatbot instead of merely tracking their interaction times and behaviours is driven by two main reasons: (a) It increases the perception of their role and responsibility as beta testers in a research-led teaching environment, and (b) it serves the learning outcome of making students mull over the role that human computer interaction might have in facilitating rather than replacing human decision making and reasoning (Vinuesa et al., 2020). The gamification exercise is discussed below.

⁶<https://www.goviralgame.com/en>

11.3 THE *FAKE NEWS IMMUNITY CHATBOT*

11.3.1 *Chatbot Design*

The *Fake News Immunity Chatbot* has been created with the overall goal of reverse-engineering the manipulation of information. It is designed to use Fallacy Theory to teach citizens how to act as fact-checkers by training them in critical thinking. As users, citizens are in essence signing up to be students of a fact-checking initiative. After having been fronted with a summary of the chatbot rationale, users are introduced to the other participants, the three avatars of the Ancient philosophers Aristotle, Gorgias, and Socrates and the avatars of the members of the research team, among whom they are asked to select an interlocutor. The conversation begins *in media res*, with the selected avatar asking the user to assess the reliability of a news item, then cross-checking it with the fact-checker's answer. After this first prompt, if the user decides to be willing to learn how to fact-check through fallacies, they are asked to read a news item and answer questions by the philosophers, while challenged in their decision-making process. For example, Fig. 11.2 shows an example of how the user is guided through the fact-checking process by identifying fallacies.

As the chatbot is educational, its dynamics beyond the conversational outline have been designed to match those gamification principles that have turned out to be most pedagogically effective (Stott & Neustaedt, 2013):



Fig. 11.2 Example of guided fact-checking through fallacies identification

- *Freedom to Fail*: Users can fail any of the identification questions without having to start all over again, provided that they read the explanation provided by the philosophers and amend their choices. Accordingly, each step of the decision-making process works as a formative assessment during which they assess their digital literacy while interacting with *experts* in the field.
- *Rapid Feedback*: As underlined by Kapp (2012), feedback is a critical element in learning that is especially effective when targeted. We have thus, ensured that users receive continuous and fast paced feedback since their answers are immediately commented by the philosophers in the format of an argumentative discussion. Furthermore, the students can ask for help to Aristotle, Socrates, or Gorgias before making a choice at any stage of the game.
- *Progression*: Users are invited to follow a progression path across three incremental levels (i.e. credulous, skeptic, and agnostic) to keep track of their learning process in an organized manner. For every eight correct answers they receive a point as a reward for becoming an expert in recognising fallacious news.
- *Storytelling*: Since the misinformation ecosystem during the pandemic can be overwhelming, we decided to build a narrative centred around ancient Greece as *the cradle* of Critical Thinking. The main participants are among the fathers of informal Logic—Aristotle, Socrates, and Gorgias—represented through avatars and dialogical patterns which mirror their historical portraits and philosophies. In addition, users can choose their own avatar among those representing the members of the research team. The points earned throughout the game are represented through gadflies in honour of Socrates, described by Plato as a gadfly who stings people with his questions to keep them on track in the pursuit of virtue. Such a setting is also meant to induce users realizing the evergreen role played by ancient philosophy and critical thinking to solve contemporary issues.

11.3.2 *Design of the Gamification Experience*

Drawing from Huang and Soman (2013), we designed the gamification experience accounting for: (1) target audience and context, (2) learning objectives, (3) structure of the experience, and (4) gamification elements. As to the audience, the students that participated in the study were enrolled in the postgraduate modules “Artificial Intelligence and

Communication” (MSc in Data Science and Artificial Intelligence) and “Discourse, Rhetoric and Society” (MSc in Strategic Communication) at the University of Liverpool in the United Kingdom. Both student cohorts were introduced during the modules to key concepts related to the (mis) information ecosystem, such as the distinction between misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (Carmi et al., 2020), the blurred notion of fake news (Tandoc et al., 2018) and the fact-checking process. Both modules took the form of workshops and followed a blended learning approach during which students were presented with notions followed by active learning activities and discussions in small groups. The modules were hosted on Zoom due to the pandemic, which resulted in various challenges, including Zoom fatigue. Students were also provided with an overview of the scope, the goals, and the methodologies adopted within the research project. However, they were not presented with a thorough explanation of fallacy theory and its relevance for misinformation before playing with the *Fake News Immunity Chatbot*. They were, instead, instructed about the role played by their feedback as beta testers in improving the chatbot in view of its launch to foster their sense of self-ownership and motivation.

The learning objectives of the sessions hosting the gamification experience were to: (1) learn how to fact-check news through fallacies and (2) reflect upon the role played by human computer interaction in learning skills. From the analysts’ point of view, we wanted to understand (1) whether the heuristic implemented in the chatbot is effective in teaching how to recognize fallacies, and (2) what are best strategies to guarantee human-computer trust in the context of the misinformation ecosystem. The latter aspect is crucial in building effective pedagogical digital interventions for data literacy, but it has so far been under-investigated. The majority of studies have tackled the need for human-computer trust scales which cut across domains (Gulati et al., 2019).

However, the information ecosystem is peculiar since social bots are generally discussed as fake news spreaders. They are, therefore, potentially associated with dis-information by the larger public, rather than as gate-keepers of truth. Furthermore, while persuasive technology is usually associated with human-likeness, this tendency might not apply to a context where radical uncertainty makes peers somewhat unreliable as experts.

The gamification experience was structured in the same way for both cohorts. That is, students had 15 minutes to freely play with the chatbot,

after which they were asked to fill in a questionnaire on *Qualtrics*⁷ to evaluate the chatbot for an estimated time of 10 minutes. Even though students were then encouraged to discuss their experience with their peers, the training activity was mainly self-led to avoid face-threatening situations (e.g. a student might be faster in correctly completing a stage). The students could select which game level (i.e. credulous, skeptic, and agnostic) to start with to allow them to build their own strategies in training as factcheckers (Simões et al., 2013).

11.3.3 Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire has been designed to assess four different facets of the chatbot in line with evaluation criteria set up by Jain et al. (2018). The aspects considered, the associated questions and their underlying rationale are the following:

- **Conversational Intelligence**

- Q1: How was the rhythm of the conversation flow? Too slow/slow/just right/fast/too fast.
- Q2: How did you find the tone? Too formal/formal/ just right/informal.
- Q3: The conversation had contributions from several participants. Sometimes the AI participants talked amongst themselves. Did you find this: interesting/confusing/informative/boring.
- Q4: Did you feel that you managed to actively participate in the conversation? Active/just right/not active/sometimes.
- Q5: Pick one or more of these sentences if you agree:
 - These philosophers talk the same way to everyone...They did not even remember my name.
 - Finally a chatbot with no “bro language”.
 - Everyone there is so serious... Cheer up guys!
 - Having questions to ask yourself while reading really helped me out!
 - Sometimes I did not feel ready to choose yes or no.... The world is not black and white!

⁷<https://www.qualtrics.com/>

Rationale: The questions are aimed at understanding what conversational features prompt students' engagement in a virtual setting. Even though the ultimate goal of chatbot developers is that of achieving human-like conversation, the natural language patterns with the strongest educational value in a gamification environment have been understudied. For instance, the presence of options that allow to delay choices (e.g. "maybe later", "I do not know") seem to increase users' engagement in commercial chatbots (Valério et al., 2020), but might have a different outcome in an educational setting.

- **Chatbot Personality**

- Q6: Who is your favourite participant? Aristotle/Gorgias/Socrates.
 Q7: Why do you like them? Pick three adjectives that apply: humorous, knowledgeable, nosy, smart, expert, reliable, friendly, helpful, open minded, provocative, organized, unpredictable.
 Q8: Did you ask help more frequently from your favourite character? Yes/no/sometimes.
 Q9: What do you think are the three most important qualities in a teacher? (Open question).

Rationale: The questions are aimed at eliciting what personality traits are perceived by the students as positive in a virtual pedagogical interaction, thus facilitating learning. In designing the questions, we used findings from persuasive technologies studies. For example, as explained by Fogg (2002): a) We are more likely to be persuaded by computing technology that we perceive similar to us (principle of similarity), b) we tend to be persuaded by computing technology that offers us praise of some sort (principle of praise), and c) we tend to feel the need to reciprocate when computing technology has provided some benefits to us (principle of reciprocity).

- **Chatbot Interface**

- Q10: How does the interface make you feel? Relaxed/bored/overwhelmed/amused/Other.
 Q11: What would you change? Font/colours/example/avatars/Other.
 Q12: If you would change an avatar, which one and why? (Open Question).
 Q13: Which participant looks more trustworthy? And why? (Open Question).

Rationale: The questions are aimed at getting information as to the role played by multimodal input in creating a favourable learning setting. In particular, Q13 it is formulated on the basis of the hypothesis that computing technology that shows the role of authority is generally perceived as more trustworthy and, thus, persuasive.

- **Functionality**

Q14: What fallacy did you discover?

Q15: Are you able to describe it? Please write in 1–2 sentences.

Q16: Do you think you might be able to recognize this fallacy in news you might read in the future? Yes, maybe, no, if no, why not?

Rationale: The questions are meant to check whether the learning outcome of being able to identify fallacies across news has been achieved. Specifically, Q16 explores whether the participants think they have been, at least partially, inoculated.

11.3.4 Beta Testing Results

The results of the questionnaire show that some facets of the chatbot design have been deemed as more controversial than others. To start with, the rhythm of the conversation has variously been perceived as “slow” (40.54%), “just right” (29.73%) or “fast” (27.03%), and “too slow” by a minority (2.70%). No one perceived the rhythm to be “too fast”. The turn-taking has been designed to mimic human behaviour, adding a 250 milliseconds delay per word in coming up with a new conversational move. As to the tone, that has been meant to be colloquial but lexically rigorous, it has been assessed by the majority as “just right” (64.86%). More varied has been the assessment of the presence of a multi-agent conversation, considered “interesting” (38.30%), “informative” (27.66%), but also “confusing” (29.79%) and rarely “boring” (4.26%). Overall, the participation in the conversation has been felt by the majority of the participants as sometimes “active” (37.84%) or “just right” (32.43%), but less frequently as “not active” (18.92%) or “active” (10.81%). As to Q5, 20% of respondents remarked that the philosophers did not remember their name, 16% recognized the usefulness of having a set of questions to help them in the fact-checking process, and 50% declared that the binary choice was sometimes difficult to make.

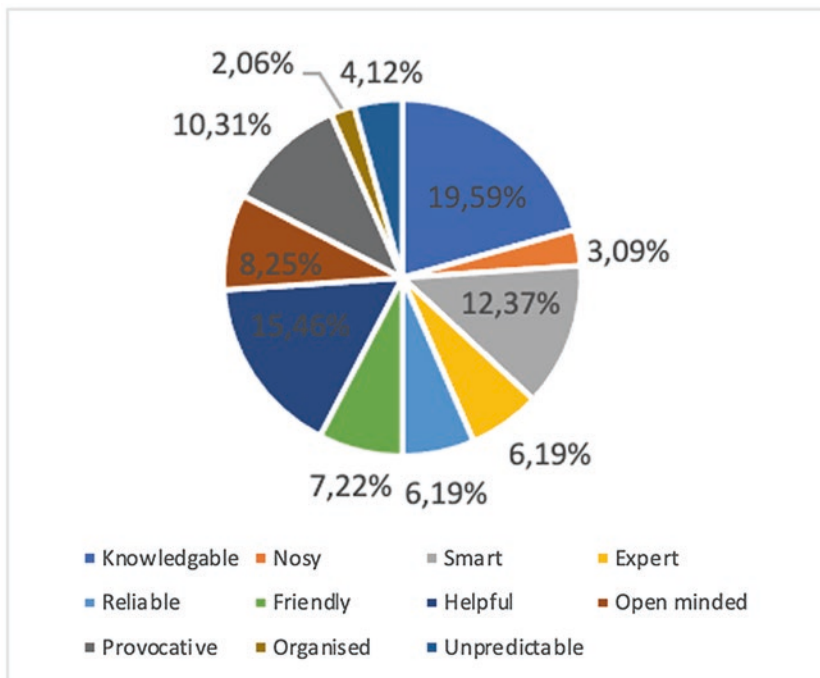


Fig. 11.3 Frequency of adjectives describing reasons for liking a philosopher avatar

Turning to the chatbot personality, there is no clear preference for one philosopher over another. The adjectives providing reasons for the positive sentiment are variously distributed as displayed in Fig. 11.3, with the most common adjective being “knowledgeable” (19.59%).

The majority of the respondents answered “no” to Q8 (64.86%), suggesting that liking a character does not increase the likelihood of reaching out to them to seek help, most likely to avoid face-threatening feelings. From the open question Q9, it emerges that five qualities (frequency > 5) are commonly perceived as characterizing a good teacher beyond the fallacy scenario: namely, knowledgeable, friendly, helpful, clarity, and passion, as displayed in Fig. 11.4. Therefore it seems that folk values associated to quality in an ideal pedagogical setting underpin positive attitudes towards different participants in the praxis of a digital game.

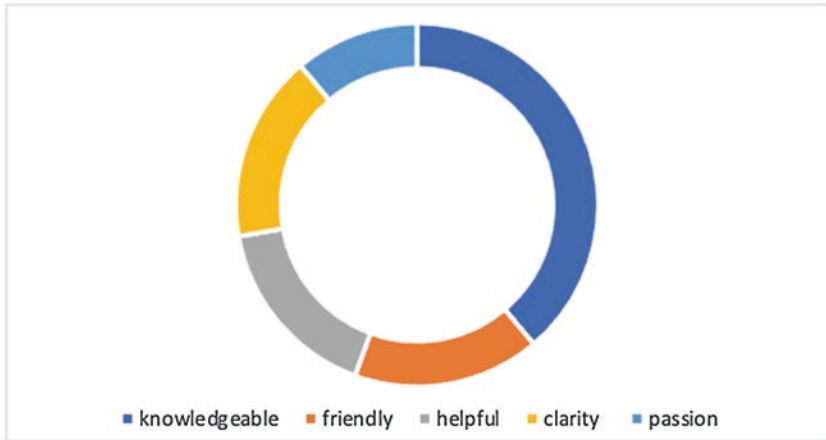


Fig. 11.4 Most frequent qualities defining a good teacher

Moving to questions related to the interface, there is variation in terms of associated feelings (Fig. 11.5), with no single feeling emerging as significant. In fact, the most common response was “other”, closely followed by “relaxed”, “overwhelmed”, “bored”, and “amused.”

Browsing through the explanations provided for “other”, a feeling of confusion regarding actions to take is the one most frequently voiced. Similarly, the advocated changes in the interface cut across different facets, including stylistic features such as font, colours, examples, language, avatars, and others (Fig. 11.6).

Focusing specifically on the avatars, the large majority of respondents would have not changed any of them (Fig. 11.6). As to trustworthiness (Q11), only 21 students provided an answer. One third of the responses pointed to a lack of preference, while among the chosen avatars, the ones most frequently selected are Aristotle, the Principal Investigator of the project, and Socrates. Unfortunately, few participants provided a justification for their choice. When reasons were given, these related to *familiarity* for the Principal Investigator and *helpfulness* for Socrates (e.g. “Socrates, even if he didn’t provide straight answers, he pointed me in the direction that I had to look in”).

In terms of functionality, students encountered a wide range of fallacies, with cherry-picking (25.30%), hasty generalization (13.25%), and

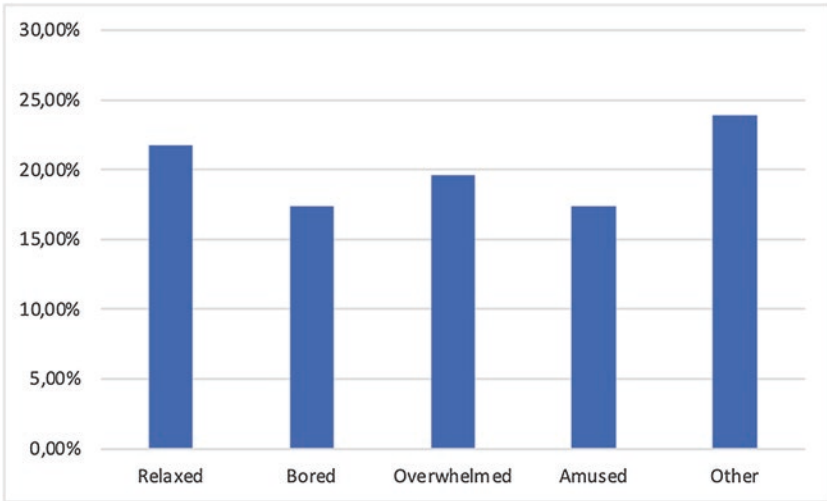


Fig. 11.5 Feelings triggered by the chatbot interface

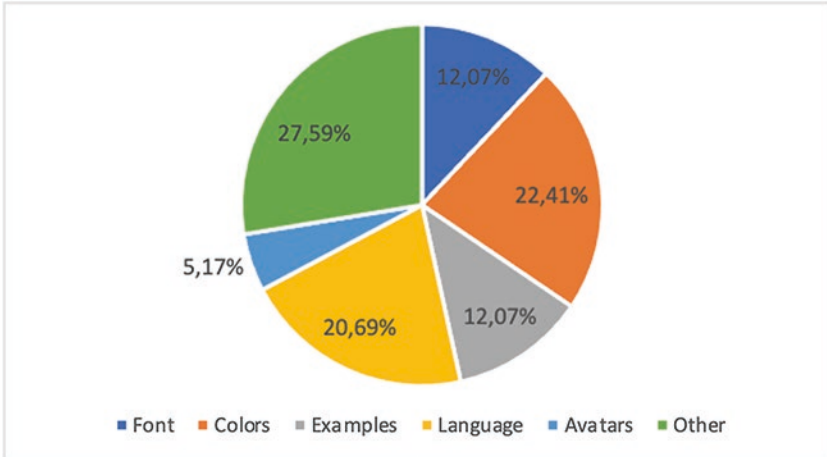


Fig. 11.6 Aspects that could be improved in the chatbot interface

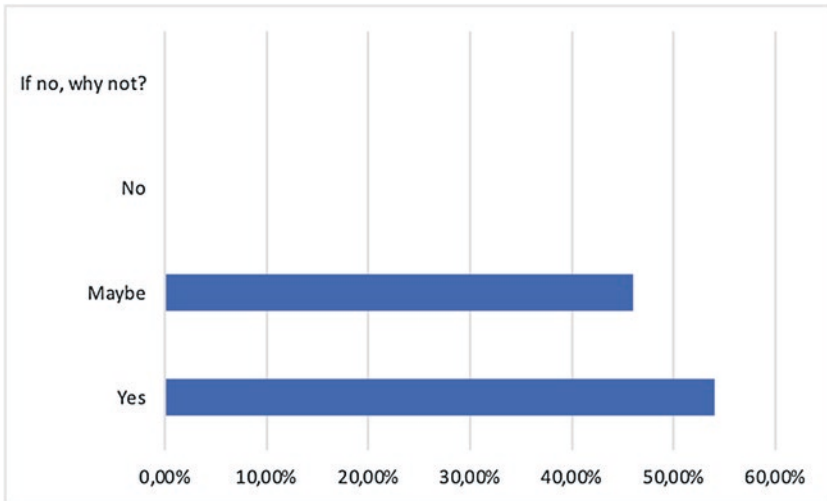


Fig. 11.7 Perceived ability of recognize fallacies across different context

red herring (10.84%) on top of the frequency scale. Apart from one student, they all declared they were able to describe the fallacy they encountered. Manually checking the answers, they turned out to be all correct. Furthermore, differences in phrasing used by different students to describe the same fallacy show that they did come up with personal elaborations without stemming from dictionary-like definitions (e.g. cherry-picking: “Selectively picking supports to provide a predecided argument”; “The information might be chosen for a specific purpose, but may not tell the whole picture or may misguide you”). Interestingly, the students tend to think they might be able to recognize the fallacy they learnt in different contexts, such as different news (Fig. 11.7). Even though the responses were overall positive, there is uncertainty as to whether they will be able to fully transfer the learnt knowledge.

11.4 CONCLUSION

The results of the beta testing sessions provide insights as to the role played by human-computer interaction to teach critical media literacy. As remarked by social constructivists (see Vygotsky & Cole, 1978), language

and dialogue constitute our most powerful semiotic mediators that assist us in the process of developing reasoning patterns and selective skills to make sense of our realities. However, differences between a classroom discussion among humans and an online dialogue game from the students' perspective have so far been under-investigated (Ravenscroft & McAlister, 2005).

The results of the questionnaire provide insights as to the role played by human-computer interaction to teach critical media literacy. First, they show that certain aspects such as the rhythm of the conversational flow and the feelings triggered by digital interfaces or liked avatars are highly subjective and hard to standardise, even though these factors impact on the learning experience. While acknowledging and accounting for differences among individual learners is a core value in education, it is a challenging goal to achieve in a gamification environment where a wide array of settings is predefined. On the other hand, the analysis of the answers revealed some clear trends which are relevant in face-to-face teaching. For example, the attributes more frequently associated to the preferred avatars broadly match those ascribed to a good teacher beyond the digital setting: knowledgeable/smart/expert knowledgeable, friendly, helpful, smart, reliable/organized, and clarity. Not surprisingly, the avatar considered the most trustworthy is Aristotle, introduced as the inventor of Fallacy Theory (thus the most knowledgeable), followed by the avatar of the PI who (having been their lecturer) is most probably perceived as friendly and reliable, and finally Socrates, deemed as helpful.

The main take-away is that competence, among the three main components of trust of competence, benevolence, and integrity (Schoorman et al., 2007) plays a crucial role in the reason-checking context. This is probably due to the scarcity of authoritative sources of information that characterize the misinformation ecosystem. Furthermore, authority and expertise do not necessarily pattern with a perception of "peer hood" in a pedagogical context where asymmetric knowledge is a value. For example while we are likely to trust a friend with tastes similar to ours in choosing what restaurant to reserve, we'd rather trust an expert in matters outside common ground knowledge. The quest for human-like avatars prosecuted in human-computer interaction design does not appear to be a priority for educational contexts. On the other side, the digital infrastructure offers the opportunity to make philosophical ideas and theories accessible, applicable, and usable for contemporary tasks, opening up new venues for active learning.

To improve the chatbot, we plan to better shape avatars' personality to decrease the potential confusion caused by multi-agent interaction and to more clearly define the epistemological contribution provided by each character. Besides the human computer interaction component, the answers to the questionnaire suggest that the *Fake News Immunity Chatbot* constitutes a useful tool to teach critical thinking through fallacies, given that twenty minutes of play enabled students to learn several fallacies. From their descriptions, it emerges that they learnt how to use these fallacies as lenses to interpret the digital media context (e.g. "The no proof one is the easiest one for me to spot - when a politician makes a tweet but has no evidence for the claim"). Furthermore, the identification of fallacy seems to have triggered further critical thoughts about the complexity of the misinformation ecosystem (e.g. "Also, in my opinion it is not always enough to throw in reference there, because even choosing the source (e.g. scientist) over another may still be biased"). Such an awareness shows that "inoculation through fallacy theory" in a gamification environment serves the primary goal of making users more sceptical towards information quality and coherence. The ability of asking the right questions constitutes the kernel of critical thinking and provides an asset to deal with scenarios of radical uncertainty in a post-truth world. Funding This work was supported by the UK Research and Innovation Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/V003909/1].

REFERENCES

- Brennen, J. S., Simon, F., Howard, P. N., & Nielsen, R. K. (2020). Types, sources, and claims of COVID-19 misinformation. Accessed November 24, 2022, from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/types-sources-and-claims-covid-19-misinformation>.
- Carmi, E., Yates, S. J., Lockley, E., & Pawluczuk, A. (2020). Data citizenship: Rethinking data literacy in the age of disinformation, misinformation, and Malinformation. *Internet Policy Review*, 9, 1–22.
- Carmi, E., Musi, E., & Aloumpi, M. (2021). The rule of truth: How fallacies can help stem the Covid-19 Infodemic. Impact of Social Sciences Blog. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2021/01/08/the-rule-of-truth-how-fallacies-can-help-stem-the-covid-19-infodemic/>.
- Compton, J. (2013). Inoculation theory. In J. P. Dillard & L. Shen (Eds.), *The Sage Handbook of Persuasion: Developments in Theory and Practice* (pp. 220–237). Sage.

- Cook, J., Lewandowsky, S., & Ecker, U. K. H. (2017). Neutralizing misinformation through inoculation: Exposing misleading argumentation techniques reduces their influence. *PLoS One*, *12*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0175799>
- Cushion, S., Morani, M., Kyriakidou, M., & Soo, N. (2021). (Mis)understanding the coronavirus and how it was handled in the UK: An analysis of public knowledge and the information environment. *Journalism Studies*, *23*, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2021.1950564>
- Elleström, L. (2014). *Media transformation: The transfer of media characteristics among media*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Elleström, L. (2017). Transfer of media characteristics among dissimilar media. *Palabra Clave*, *20*, 663–685. <https://doi.org/10.5294/pacla.2017.20.3.4>
- Elleström, L. (2021). Media transformation: The transfer of media characteristics between media. In M. Deckert, M. Kocot, & A. Majdzińska-Koczorowicz (Eds.), *Moving between modes: Papers in Intersemiotic translation* (pp. 27–42). Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego.
- Fletcher, R., Kalogeropoulos, A., & Nielsen, R. K. (2020). Trust in UK government and news media COVID-19 information down, concerns over misinformation from government and politicians up. *Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism*. Accessed November 24, 2022, from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/trust-uk-government-and-news-media-covid-19-information-down-concerns-over-misinformation>.
- Fogg, B. J. (2002). *Persuasive technology: Using computers to change what we think and do*. Morgan Kaufmann.
- Gulati, S., Sousa, S., & Lamas, D. (2019). Design, development and evaluation of a human-computer trust scale. *Behaviour & Information Technology*, *38*, 1004–1015.
- Hamblin, C. L. (1970). Fallacies. *Tijdschrift Voor Filosofie*, *33*, 183–188.
- Huang, W. H. Y., & Soman, D. (2013). Gamification of education. *Report Series: Behavioural Economics in Action*, *29*(4), 37.
- Jain, M., Kumar, P., Kota, R., & Patel, S. N. (2018). Evaluating and informing the Design of Chatbots. In *Proceedings of the 2018 Designing Interactive Systems Conference*, pp. 895–906. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3196709.3196735>.
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Macmillan.
- Kapp, K. M. (2012). Games, gamification, and the quest for learner engagement. *T+D*, *66*, 64–68.
- Katz, E. (1957). The two-step flow of communication: An up-to-date report on an hypothesis. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, *21*(1), 61–78.
- Kellner, D., & Share, J. (2007). Critical media literacy: Crucial policy choices for a twenty-first-century democracy. *Policy Futures in Education*, *5*, 59–69.
- Kline, K. (2016). Jean Baudrillard and the limits of critical media literacy. *Educational Theory*, *66*, 641–656.

- McGuire, W. J., & Papageorgis, D. (1961). The relative efficacy of various types of prior belief-defense in producing immunity against persuasion. *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, *62*, 327.
- Musi, E., & Aakhus, M. (2018). Discovering argumentative patterns in energy Polylogues: A macroscope for argument mining. *Argumentation*, *32*, 397–430.
- Musi, E., & Reed, C. (2022). From fallacies to semi-fake news: Improving the identification of misinformation triggers across digital media. *Discourse & Society*, *33*, 1–22.
- Musi, E., Yates, S., Carmi, E., O'Halloran, K., & Aloumpi, M. (2022). Developing fake news immunity: Fallacies as misinformation triggers during the pandemic. *Online Journal of Communication and Media Technologies*, *12*, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.30935/ojcm/12083>
- Ravenscroft, A., & McAlister, S. (2005). Dialogue games and e-learning: The Interloc approach. In Looi, C.-K., Jonassen, D., & Ikeda, M. (Eds.), *Towards Sustainable and Scalable Educational Innovations Informed by the Learning Sciences – Sharing Good Practices of Research, Experimentation and Innovation, Proceedings of the 13th International Conference on Computers in Education, ICCE, Volume 133 of Frontiers in Artificial Intelligence and Applications* (pp. 355–362). IOS Press.
- Schoorman, F. D., Mayer, R. C., & Davis, J. H. (2007). An integrative model of organizational trust: Past, present, and future. *Academy of Management Review*, *32*, 344–354.
- Shapiro, H., & Celot, P. (2011). Testing and refining criteria to assess media literacy levels in Europe. Final Report. https://eavi.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/study_testing_and_refining_ml_levels_in_europe.pdf.
- Simões, J., Redondo, R. D., & Vilas, A. F. (2013). A social gamification framework for a K-6 learning platform. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *29*, 345–353.
- Stott, A., & Neustaedter, C. (2013). Analysis of gamification in education, technical report 2013–0422-01, Connections Lab, Simon Fraser University, Surrey, BC, Canada, April. <http://clab.iat.sfu.ca/pubs/Stott-Gamification.pdf>.
- Tandoc, E. C., Jr., Lim, Z. W., & Ling, R. (2018). Defining “fake news:” a typology of scholarly definitions. *Digital Journalism*, *6*, 137–153.
- Uscinski, J. E., & Butler, R. W. (2013). The epistemology of fact checking. *Critical Review*, *25*, 162–180.
- Valério, F. A. M., Guimarães, T. G., Prates, R. O., & Candello, H. (2020). Comparing users. Perception of different chatbot interaction paradigms: A case study. In *Proceedings of the 19th Brazilian Symposium on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3424953.3426501>
- Vinuesa, R., Azizpour, H., Leite, I., Balaam, M., Dignum, V., Domisch, S., Felländer, A., Langhans, S. D., Tegmark, M., & Nerini, F. F. (2020). The role of artificial intelligence in achieving the sustainable development goals. *Nature Communications*, *11*, 1–10.

- Visser, J., Lawrence, J., & Reed, C. (2020). Reason-checking fake news. *Communications of the ACM*, 63, 38–40.
- Vygotsky, L. S., & Cole, M. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press.
- Yates, S. J., Carmi, E., Lockley, E., Wessels, B., & Pawluczuk, A. (2021). *Me and my big data final report: Understanding citizens' data literacies*. University of Liverpool. Accessed November 24, 2022, from <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/humanities-and-social-sciences/research/research-themes/centre-for-digital-humanities/projects/big-data/publications/>.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copy-right holder.





When the Post-Truth Devil Hides in the Details: A Digital Ethnography of Virtual Anti-Vaccination Groups in Lithuania

*Augustė Dementavičienė, Fausta Mikutaitė,
and Aivaras Žukauskas*

12.1 INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, internet and social media were among the driving forces of social upheavals and opposition movements (Tufekci, 2017). Technological innovations do not simply change how we act but also how we understand surrounding reality. Information technology, particularly social media, has revolutionised almost all forms of information exchange: from interpersonal to mass communications. This rapid revolution in how we interact with each other has probably affected even how we communicate with ourselves. It also affects the structure of what we consider to be

A. Dementavičienė (✉) • F. Mikutaitė • A. Žukauskas
Institute of International Relations and Political Science, Vilnius University,
Vilnius, Lithuania
e-mail: auguste.dementaviciene@tspmi.vu.lt

© The Author(s) 2024
B. Schirrmacher, N. Mousavi (eds.), *Truth Claims Across Media*,
Palgrave Studies in Intermediality,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42064-1_12

public debate. Technological progress brings opportunities for new independent public spaces empowering various voices, “positive” and “harmful”, to coexist in contemporary general discussion. There is no consensus as to whether this is a problem to be solved or a feature of a healthy open democratic society. The comment sections and other spaces for user-generated content are the central attributes of the current new media shift (Secko, 2009). This new-found interactivity creates a constant dialogue between users, simplifying ways of reaching out to others and even starting up new communities and movements which (sometimes) play a political role.

Social media and its affordances provide new possibilities for forming public opinion and even creating opposition movements. The anti-vaccination movement is one of the latest examples to have gained prominence in recent years. Moreover, the anti-vaccination question is often rephrased from pandemic to infodemic (Germani & Biller-Andorno, 2021), the accent is moved from the more or less medical realm to one of communication and even to the question of reality perception.

At the beginning of our research, fear of the MMR vaccine was the main topic of discussion, and, as the pandemic hit, the discourse visibly shifted to Covid-19 being a hoax. Fearfulness towards future vaccines was accompanied by hatred of the government’s actions to manage the pandemic. Fears, misinformation, and “alternative facts” continued to spread through the public sphere during the second quarantine. In social and news media, anti-vaccination proponents tended to present themselves as a social minority, which the government and the remaining part of the population constantly ignored and whose freedom of speech was restricted.

Similar global trends transferred to Lithuania as well. There were a couple of anti-face masks/no-to-quarantine-restrictions protests in the capital city of Vilnius, underlining the growing activity of these movements even beyond the realm of social media where they actually started. In 2021, the movement continued to gain momentum and broadened its spectrum of interests: Anti-LGBT+ and anti-Istanbul Convention content shared the same anti-vaccination circles. Later that year, the same organisers rallied 10 thousand people to protest against LGBTQ rights. Since then, two other massive anti-government, anti-Covid-19, anti-LGBTQ demonstrations have been organised, one of which (2021-09-10) ended in a riot outside the Lithuanian Parliament. In terms of the public sphere, it appears that these groups highly influence the process of forming opinions and interests, but they are challenging to research because the typical

models used to explain similar processes in Western countries often “banalise” and obscure the more nuanced logic and motivation behind such actions even in the Western contexts themselves. The research presented in this article aims to address this issue by emphasising the contextual peculiarities of different societies.

Vaccine hesitancy is growing with the help of the internet, social media, and an immense amount of various unreliable types of content that can be found there (Hussain et al., 2018, 2–3). The 2019 measles epidemic signalled a slow but steady decline in vaccination coverage. The WHO warns that this trend is one of the most significant dangers to global health (WHO, 2019). Not long ago, when looking for information about vaccination, there were more pages dealing with their harm than with their benefits (Bean, 2011). Nevertheless, more than half of internet users (in the United States and Canada) firmly believe that “all” or “almost all” information published on health websites is truthful (Kata, 2010, 1709).

The question of connections between the growth of the anti-vaccination notions and usage of social media raises concerns among scientists from the field of psychology to social movement research (Puri et al., 2020; Betsch, 2011; Blume, 2006; Burki, 2020). The latest research on vaccine hesitancy has been further developed during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic (Miskulin et al., 2021). The approach and scope of research is changing rapidly along with the pandemic itself (Megget, 2020; Pullan & Dey, 2021). Opinions vary from seeing the anti-vaccination movement as an alternative to being suspicious (Curiel & Ramírez, 2021) to those seeing it as dominant in the future political agenda (Johnson et al., 2020). In the field where the researchers are interested in how health related beliefs occur, studies vary from more quantitative (Čavojová et al., 2020) to more qualitative approaches (Okuhara et al., 2018; DiRusso & Stansberry, 2022).

Overall, anti-vaccination notions are seen as dangerous, inevitable, worth fighting against (Hughes et al., 2021), worth to be handled by specific experts (Nguyen & Catalan, 2020), worth banning, and anti-governmental. The followers of such beliefs are seen as spreaders of misinformation, spectral lies or performative interpretations (Gaon, 2020). Different strategies how to handle the spread of these notions are suggested as well (Germani & Biller-Andorno, 2021; To et al., 2021). Researchers also analyse the content of various social media (Küçükali et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2020) not only to explore the attitudes or measure the trends but also to understand how the media promise to create a truthful perception of the social world in the digital sphere frames human

experience of the real. For example, how on Twitter, Russian trolls and bots propagated anti-vaccination content and promoted political discord (Broniatowski et al., 2018).

The more empathetic attitudes are not very frequent in academia. It can be stated that “these people” require deeper understanding, when their motifs are not reduced to irrational reactions reflecting ignorance or misinformation (Peretti-Watel et al., 2014). Also, there is still a lack of nuanced research about post-Soviet countries, where the vaccination rate is relatively low despite the countries having plenty of vaccines. The context of post-totalitarian society should be kept in mind too.

The main aim of this article is to understand how anti-vaccination communities on social media platforms can shape and rationalise their perception of truth and what contextual features frame the formulation of truth statements in connection to the vaccine issue. This is expected to provide more insight into the development of different truth regimes on social media in Lithuania and, potentially, in other post-Soviet countries. This study seeks to contribute to the already existing body of work within this research field, while at the same time critically reconsidering the often overtly Westernised application of this analytical lens to online communities.

In this article, we explore two anti-vaccination Facebook groups: “Skiepu žala” (“Harm Of Vaccine”) and “Po-skiepo.lt” (“Post-vaccine. It”). In order to get closer to the participants’ worldview we approach data inspired by a methodology of digital ethnography. Afterwards we analyse the data with text-based methods. The analysis was conducted in two steps: First, we used qualitative content analysis to find the main themes and to merge them with wider analytic categories, thus allowing the ongoing process to be investigated in a wider theoretical context. Even though no predetermined categories are used in this article, they arise in the data analysis process; the theoretical base of post-truth and anti-public discourse hints at what to focus on. The data in this step was managed with MAXQDA 2020 software. Subsequently, we carried out discourse analysis because the overall course of the research, following discourses and pandemic itself, made us reevaluate the topic from multiple angles and question our methods of acquiring knowledge. Along the way, the shortcomings of existing approaches to post-truth studies are considered.

12.1.1 *Theoretical Considerations: Alternative Epistemologies in Post-truth Publics*

Questions of truth, and criteria for truth statements are arguable connected to the exponentially developing field of post-truth politics, touching on various aspects of the phenomenon in contemporary mediated environments (Hannan, 2018; Harsin, 2020; Barrera et al., 2019). A broad understanding of post-truth points towards emotions and personal beliefs becoming the main guideline for assessing truth claims in the real world. A fact-based or science-based correction may even have adverse, if not opposite, unintended effects on individuals' beliefs (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). This insight became especially pertinent during the Covid-19 pandemic, which not only brought about an exponential increase in the anti-vaccination movements by 7.8 million in 2020 alone (Burki, 2020), but also contributed to the overall resurgence of conspiracy-based movements, such as QAnon and beyond (Bodner et al., 2020).

Post-truth does not equal to lying; it can be traced back to the broader issue of the criteria for truth, and on the mechanisms with which individuals and their groups subvert the truth, ranging from unconscious utterances to wilful ignorance, or to deliberate lying. As McIntyre puts it, "in its purest form, post-truth is when one thinks that the crowd's reaction does change the facts about a lie" (McIntyre, 2018, 7–9). Post-truth problematics are also related to the Foucauldian understanding of knowledge as power. Post-truth claims were often "weaponised" by politicians to shape their constituencies' perceptions, as happened before with 2016 elections in the US presidential election campaign, or the Brexit campaign in the United Kingdom. On a more theoretical level, post-truth also includes a "going meta", that is, of not playing by the rules of uttering truthful statements but changing the rules themselves (Fuller, 2018, 3). As important as it is to understand *what* post-truth is, this article is driven by the understanding of *why* and *how* it comes about.

The notion of post-truth has proven in recent years to be a productive, if somewhat imprecise, term to describe a field of research connected to truth claims and the perception of truth in a mediated environment. However, the emphasis on emotion when describing a post-truth discourse also needs to be critically reconsidered. One explanation for the lack of precision may be the fact that many contemporary studies often connect post-truth politics to conspiratorial thinking (Balta et al., 2021; Harambam et al., 2022; Cook et al., 2020). Although there is such a

connection, conspiratorial thinking (Moore, 2018) does not equal the issue of post-truth as such, since they can conflate questions of conspiracy theories as narratives with a more general distrust towards information from what may be called the “establishment”.

This distinction becomes even more relevant when applying the post-truth concept to contexts outside the United States and Western European democracies as for example when approaching contexts with a totalitarian past. A case in point is Eastern Europe, including Lithuania, where entire societies were under the totalitarian regime of the Soviets for five decades. Media environment was no exception—it was rife with propaganda, that is “alternative facts”. In this context, journalism was perceived as a tool of Soviet propaganda, “aimed at educating citizens to be loyal to the communist establishment and the Communist Party” (Volek & Urbániková, 2018). That, in addition to the overall culture of suspicion cultivated since the Stalinist era, contributed to substantial mistrust towards anything presented to the public (Vaiseta, 2015).

This general scepticism towards anything public and institutionalised has stayed with post-Soviet societies even after the fall of the Soviet Union, as “past political repression creates long-lasting mistrust” (Nikolova et al., 2022). Following Bufacchi, one can even argue that post-truth as a condition based on general mistrust towards anything resembling an establishment, had already existed before the rise of Trumpism, or the Brexit movement. It shares its roots with what we may call “truth” in the practice of consensus, since a lot of statements regarding sociopolitical reality may be subscribed to a consensual theory of truth (Bufacchi, 2020). That is, a lot of the truth statements related to our social reality cannot be compared to, for example, scientific truths. Social reality truth statements often involve an element of (for a lack of a better term) “values”, related to moral, ethical, or cultural attitudes often based in subjective understanding of different phenomena. This prompts one not to dismiss the discourse in online anti-vaccination groups as mere conspiratorial statements, but rather consider them as truth statements, drawn from long-lasting practices of mistrust and questioning as a strategy of political opposition.

Dismissing such statements as mere conspiracy theories also betrays a certain bias, since the term “conspiracy theory” is already loaded with certain ethical and moral implications. When we explore the discussion within the post-truth paradigm, we advocate instead to consider these critical aspects as crucial in order to have a more nuanced look into the social dynamics of contexts differing from what have been categorised as

Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich and Democratic (WEIRD) countries and societies.

The process of passing from analogue to digital has had a tremendous impact on sociopolitical dynamics and leads to a form of virtualisation of public spaces. Various theoreticians point toward the affordances and practices found on social media platforms (filtering, moderation, length limitation, etc.) (Kreiss et al., 2017) as laying the foundations for filter bubbles, availability bias, and selective exposure, leading to increased ideological polarisation (Spohr, 2017). Adopting a broader perspective, some theoreticians suggest that post-truth societies, characterised by a changing culture of social debate and increasingly blending fact and emotion (Malcolm, 2021), are potentially leading to what may be termed as a new media-based “tragedy of the commons” (Friedman, 2019).

Another aspect of social media discourse, which informs this research ethically and theoretically, is the problem of distinguishing between public-private spheres. To this day there is a prevailing acceptance of Habermasian terms, where the public sphere is understood as a space, consisting of individuals and institutions, in which what may be called public opinion is formed. The private sphere is reserved for individual or other forms of autonomy separate from the state or public opinion (Habermas, 1989 [1962]). However, problems with Habermas’ own concept notwithstanding,¹ recently many researchers have been problematising this classic distinction of the sociopolitical space, noting that the blurring of traditional private-public sphere boundaries can be traced back to the rise of photography (Ravn et al., 2019) and later to television bringing politics “into the living room”. The rise of the internet and new media only accelerated and expanded this erosion (Gurevitch et al., 2009), giving rise to what may be distinguished as intimate publics, public sphericles (Gitlin, 1998), or even networked counterpublics (Renninger, 2014).

This blurring of traditional boundaries is especially relevant when it comes to online communities, and in particular those falling out of what is considered to be the upholding of mainstream/popular narratives and truth regimes. Unpopular content frequently remains unrecognised in the public sphere due to relatively fixed political standards. Alternative public

¹Hohendahl and Russian (1974) argue that Habermas himself described as public something that, for example, ancient Greeks considered to be private, that is the sphere of non-governmental opinion making, showcasing the already existing problematic blurs within the boundaries of public-private even within Habermasian thought.

spaces (internet forums, websites, Facebook groups) are used to disseminate misinformation and propaganda, sparking hatred and mobilising (Davis, 2019) forces. In such spaces, white supremacy discourses, climate change denial, and hatred against LGBTQ+, women, and racial minorities proliferate. Cammaerts and Davis call such internet spaces “the online anti-public sphere” where conventional norms of the public sphere lose their meaning (Davis, 2019). The concept of the public sphere (Dahlgren & Sparks, 1993), allows researchers to bring together the context, actors, and various factors forming a coherent theoretical scheme and utilise it as an analytical tool (Aurylaitė, 2019).

What are these developments of social media creating in terms of the common *Lebenswelt*? Digitised misinformation, often conditioned by the increasing use of social media and other virtual platforms, has been at the nexus of the proliferation of post-truth practices on a global level, creating conditions for the growth of what can be called alternative epistemologies, through which understanding of the world is being created (Fischer, 2019). According to Lewandowsky et al., it is a mistake to label all the issues around the post-truth phenomenon as almost exclusively questions of “misinformation” or, even more erroneously, “disinformation”, as if the prevalence of emotional perception over factual/scientific perception is a “blemish on a mirror” (Lewandowsky et al., 2017). Instead, these questions should be viewed as “mirrors” into alternate realities. In other words, post-truth is related to differences in the perception of reality that have been amplified exponentially by social media affordances in recent years, even in societies considered to be relatively small and homogenous in terms of the common understanding of “non-political” questions like medicine. Lithuania is one such case demonstrating that the logic of “alternative realities” or epistemologies ought to be studied in more detail.

12.1.2 *Methodological Challenges and Decisions*

In this article, we try to get closer to the participants’ worldview by gathering data in a digital ethnographic manner. We were exploring two anti-vaccination Facebook groups at the time of shifting (quite accidentally), when the discussion of MMR vaccines turned into conversations about the future and the then-current *corona vaccine*, including the more significant change in the level of politicisation of the vaccine which took place in society.

During our research, we acted in the mode of, as Walstrom calls it, participant-experiencer (Garcia et al., 2009), trying to understand the group dynamics by analysing texts and not meeting people in person. Because of this decision to not participate fully, we adapted both the content and discourse analysis methods to the exact period of the research (for 22 days of the 2-year observation). The decision to adopt the ethnographic perspective was a more accurate expression of our attitude: The will to understand these groups better.

Throughout our research we discussed ethical problems at great length. We considered the Facebook groups as public spaces even when they may have been titled private. Obviously, such groups are not fully *public* per se, since they involve a certain level of *gatekeeping*, or control of those entering and participating in such spaces. However, such spaces are also not entirely private, as they for the most part allow anyone to join, as long as they fulfil certain criteria, which in the cases we chose involved a short questionnaire and terms of agreement. Thus, we were able to enter them as public spaces with our identities, but did not interact in any way.

We considered doing ethnographic research in their social habitat, as it would have been done by joining some other activities, so we did not seek the consent of all the group members or moderators. To act ethically, we did not collect any personal data or images; we analysed only the content of posts and comments, not going into the detail of who these persons are to protect their private space. We translated all posts and comments from Lithuanian into English, so it is almost impossible to trace the original posts and related data on the internet. We left only two blocks of information: the group and the date, to compare and understand the dynamics. The date is essential for understanding the discourse change from MMR vaccines to Covid-19 as well as the discursive shift in the discussions of these particular groups to distrusting not only the medical elite but also the whole political, scientific, and media levels, or in other words, the state itself. We can freely state that, after this shift, alternative epistemology became evident in the action of merging medical, political, and geopolitical stories into one narrative, which afterwards bled out beyond mere presence on social media.

We therefore chose a qualitative research strategy, which would hopefully help us understand the meaning of the phenomenon, formulate claims, and raise theoretical questions. When all the data had been gathered, it was evident that the amount was far beyond our possibility of

using thick description to provide grounds for our findings. In addition, we felt that the topic was very sensitive for society and we needed approaches that deal better with the reliability and validity of the research. We needed to find tools to refine our data so that it would be possible to understand what was actually happening in the groups, so we decided to blend digital ethnography with the text-based methods.

We employed a two-step text analysis: First, we performed a content analysis to determine what main topics are discussed in the groups, what relations exist between those topics and what categories could be outlined. Content analysis is often used in understanding social reality. However, little attention is paid to the context because meanings are understood to be stable, representing objective and independent reality, which, unlike in discourse analysis, does not provide a strong enough basis for the critique of the social problem being analysed.

At the second integral step we returned to the posts, comments, and notes for each category and implemented discourse analysis to deepen our understanding of how different meanings and truth claims are constructed and stated. This methodological approach allows us to examine social reality, comprising spheres of knowledge, social interactions, and institutions—discourse constructs and controls these areas. In other words, it is a principle of governing reality, which should be deconstructed (by analysing communicative acts) to reveal how it is constructed (Hardy et al., 2004, 19). In some cases, during analysis, the term “discourse” is used to describe speaking practices, such as a public discussion.

In addition, the Facebook groups are very temporal (i.e. both groups are now almost inactive); people gather for a period of time until their emotions and passions lead them to some other groupings,² e.g. the Facebook group “Trotilo Fabrikas” was recreated, and even new political party “Second Lithuania” was created inspired by the discourse of these groups. In this, we followed Clifford Geertz’ idea that ethnographers collect a “picture” of the past to tell the story to the future, and the original data is very important for understanding the story (Geertz, 2000).

²For more about thinking of this action as swarming see Dementaviciene, 2019; new groups (“Trotilo Fabrikas”), and even new political parties (“Second Lithuania”);

12.2 MECHANICS OF THE RESEARCH: DATA GATHERING

The starting point for the study was 2019-10-14 when we managed to join a Facebook group “Harm of Vaccines” (“Skiepų žala”) and on 2019-11-21 a group “Post-vaccine.lt” (“Po-skiepo.lt”) and began documenting the content as well as getting acquainted with the members’ communications. We carried out a purely ethnographic study at that time but understood that, to provide better evidence for our findings and blend them with text-based methods of data analysis, we needed stricter and more structured data gathering. Taking these aspects into consideration, it was decided to hand collect the data sample over 22 days: From 2020-04-03 until 2020-04-26; the last sampling date was chosen because the first anti-quarantine protest took place on 2020-04-21 in front of the Lithuanian Parliament, where group members were either participants or organisers. The dynamics in the groups were observed for a couple more days after the protest had taken place until code saturation was achieved, after which no new discussion topics were identified.³

The groups are deemed to be semi-public, so members must become acquainted with the internal rules, acceptance conditions and answer posed questions. The description of “Skiepų žala” starts with the statement “VACCINES AGAINST [diseases—sic!] DO NOT EXIST”, followed by statements regarding what the group does and does not support, which implies that the candidates must share the same perception of truthfulness. The internal rules are quite strict: Discussions about pills and supplements are forbidden (only alternative medicine is allowed), and contravening members will be excluded. It is also mentioned that members will be excluded and blocked for speaking about the benefits of vaccines (if no “facts and arguments” are provided), as well as for encouraging “ALLOPATHIC MISTREATMENT⁴”—in other words, for motivation to use a medicine or visit a doctor. Overall, the group’s rules and content allow us to conclude that the administration of “Skiepų žala” appears to apply strict control mechanisms, employing the existing restrictive affordances of the social media platform.

³ After some time, we understood that we collected our sample when these questions were at the peak: it can be clearly seen that this period is the peak of searching information about the future Covid-19 vaccine: Pullan, Samuel, and Mrinalini Dey. 2021. Vaccine hesitancy and anti-vaccination in the time of COVID-19: A Google Trends analysis. *Vaccine* 39.14: 1877–1881.

⁴ Capitalised in original comment.

However, the description of “Po-skiepo.lt” is not as intimidating; its purpose is stated as being to share real stories of people who suffered from vaccination. However, there are few such stories in the group. Even though the group “Po-skiepo.lt” is officially listed as private, there are no strict internal rules, and no questions were asked before joining the group. The group was created later than the other group, yet has been consistently growing, and the discussions there have been much more active than in the previous group. In general, the groups are similar: The most active members of “Skiepų žala” actively participated in “Po-skiepo.lt” discussions and there were cases where content in the two groups was identical (Table 12.1).

The selected data consists of posts shared by the group members or their comments. All the group members’ posts and comments (published within the outlined period) were included in the data to achieve the highest level of transparency and avoid bias. It is important to note that the data related to these two groups were gathered separately but are presented together since the results are similar.

Altogether, 129 posts and 1270 comments from both groups were gathered and analysed. Examples of comments illustrating corresponding topics were chosen based on their level of discursive practices, affective/emotive aspects, self-sufficiency, (meaning that no additional context is required to make sense of the fragment), and also, how well they reveal the underlying narratives. Moreover, the comments are those that appear repeatedly and could hardly be associated with one person.

In addition to the data formed by the comments and posts, we constructed a diary in which we entered information about the group

Table 12.1 Key characteristics of the Facebook groups analysed (numbers change every day, so are not entirely accurate)

	<i>Creation date</i>	<i>Number of members</i>	<i>Avg. no of posts/day</i>	<i>Avg. no of posts/last 30 days</i>	<i>Most reactions/10 posts</i>	<i>Most comments/10 posts</i>	<i>Privacy listing</i>
“Skiepų žala”	2014 01 19	10,178	11	243	42	78	Private
“Po-skiepo.lt”	2019 03 20	8708	5	472	52	225	Private

Table is made by authors

dynamics and the atmosphere of the discussions, which is harder to grasp only from the text itself. The diary was used in the interpretations and CDA to help to fulfil the idea of trying to understand group members more empathetically.

12.3 MECHANICS OF THE METHOD: DATA ANALYSIS

The content analysis method and its codification process (primarily due to their precision and structure) enabled us to manage the vast amount of data (129 posts and 1270 comments). The data gathered from the groups were collected and analysed with the help of the MAXQDA 2020 software. We followed the suggested idea of Hardy et al., “how to use content analysis within a discourse analytic approach” (2004, 21) in order to adapt their different ontological backgrounds, seven aspects had to be reflected upon:

When dealing with *categories* we had inductive logic of thematic analyses, when no predetermined categories are used, they mainly arise from the data research (Boyatzis, 1998). The frequently used *technique* was to always move back and forth from the categories, topics, and codes to the data. And we always kept in mind that previous research and different theoretical approaches guided how and where to look, and the research question already provided a simple frame to begin with. The most problematic aspect is how to deal with the *meaning* while using both methods. We had to avoid the usual understanding used in content analyses, that the meaning is fixed and merely reflects reality and to switch to a more discursive understanding of meaning in constant change in order to reconstruct reality. In our research the meaning is inseparable from its context and is generated in between the exchange of the content producer, reader, and the researcher. We used discourse analysis as a tool to examine the social reality that ties together agents, ideas, and *context*. Context helped to understand how people in these groups position themselves in relation to the official state discourse and are at the same time influenced by other discourses and the conditions of post-truth. In this way, we seek to reveal the motives underlying the discourse, the constructed meanings, and the social and political actions provoked.

According to Hardy et al., the qualitative research is *valid*, when the interpretations of the meanings are constitutive of the real world. In order to validate our interpretation, we try to show the context of post-Soviet societies, also, when possible, we try to add some additional verification

from other research. That helps to show that our interpretation is rational in the particular context. Qualitative research is *reliable* to the degree that the reader would understand the logics applied during the process of codification and interpretation. We tried to be transparent in showing links between different codes, topics, and categories: Doing this we were as near to the texts as it was possible. The advantage of having three authors is that it is possible to compare different interpretations during the process. The last but not least aspect is *reflexivity* when the authors are required to understand that they also play a role in meaning making (Hardy et al., 2004). As a result, our research strategy was aimed at reflecting and avoiding clichés and value-loaded interpretations.

12.4 RESEARCH RESULTS: DOMINANT NARRATIVES AND TOPICS IN THE GROUPS “SKIEPŲ ŽALA” AND “PO-SKIEPO.LT”

During the content analysis of 129 posts and 1270 comments from both groups, 54 thematic codes were identified that were used to form 10 topic groups making up 4 analytical categories, which formed the basis for structuring the subsequent parts of the article. With the help of the combined method, as well as the outlined theoretical basis, the following topic groups were formulated: (1) conspiracy discourse, (2) attempts to influence, (3) pseudoscience, (4) stigmatisation of experts, (5) social division, (6) antagonism, (7) libertarian discourse, (8) subversion, (9) specificities of the discussion, (10) community. As seen from the coding tree, some codes appear to overlap but are grouped under different topics because the contexts in which these codes appeared were different. While analysing people’s utterances, we noticed many ambiguities, attempts to “kill two birds with one stone”. Those instances are especially prominent in the subsequent sections, where the features of post-truth, populism, and the contemporary postmodern public sphere are considered.

The following sections are structured in the same way: First the results obtained from the content analyses are set out—the codes are merged into themes and then broadened into theoretical categories—the crisis of trust, competing against science, populism, and anti-public discourse. After stating the main themes and the relationships between them, we re-analyse the comments and posts from the particular category using critical discourse analysis tools, where the emphasis is on the metaphors, context, and how the meaning and truth claims are presented (Fig. 12.1).

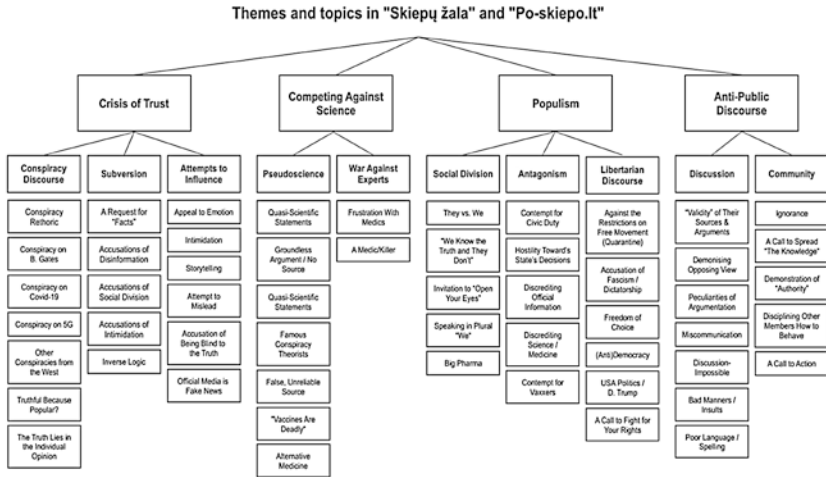


Fig. 12.1 Themes and topics that emerged from “Skiepy żala” and “Po-skiepo.lt” groups

12.4.1 Crisis of Trust

“Crisis of Trust” is one of the major themes that emerged during the analysis which represents how various disinformation tactics were being employed in the discussions to challenge truth and trustfulness among the group members. By “Crisis of Trust” we imply the growth of scepticism and overall negative assessment of already-existing criteria of truth, i.e. denial of peer-reviewed analysis of research data, distrust of announcements from specialised institutions, and reluctance to employ established standards of fact-checking, etc. This is by no means an exhaustive list of possible examples/occurrences of such a crisis but implies the reluctance to accept the criteria for truth established in “the mainstream” as it is often described by anti-vaccination and similar movements.

This theme is underpinned by the following sub-themes which indicate applied strategies: “Conspiracy Talk”, “Subversion”, and “Attempt to Influence”. This section will cover these themes and how they demonstrate the evident similarities between “Skiepy żala”, “Po-skiepo.lt”, and the anti-public discourse which, as described by Davis, lacks interest in adhering to the basic democratic principles of argumentation, evidence, and truthfulness (Davis, 2021).

The first sub-theme—“Conspiracy Discourse”—contains such codes as “Conspiracy Rhetoric”, “Conspiracy on B. Gates/5G/Covid-19”, and “Other Conspiracies from the West”; these codes mostly refer to the general group content like external links or stories that were shared as posts and comments. One of such examples is a group post of a YouTube video titled “The Coronavirus Conspiracy: How Covid-19 Will Seize Your Rights & Destroy Our Economy - David Icke - London Real”. The codes “Truthful Because Popular?” and “The Truth Lies in Individual Opinion” refer more to the characteristics of argumentation in conversations between participants. In the groups analysed, the conspiracy rhetoric was prominent and in order to work, it needed to be used in a twofold way: dispute a generally accepted fact by making an alternative truth claim.

The second sub-theme, “Subversion”, was a very apparent communication tactic where one would subvert the opponent’s argument or accuse another of his own “crime”. For instance, they would “Request *Facts*” but when presented with a scientific fact, group member would throw “Accusations of Disinformation/Social Division/Intimidation”, therefore this “Inverse Logic” would instantly end any possibility of conversation. The sub-theme number three, “Attempt to Influence” and associated codes are a cluster of communication styles and tactics. “Appeal to Emotion”, “Intimidation”, “Storytelling”, and “Attempt to Mislead” were more commonly used by content creators and group moderators via a range of highly emotive media. An article titled “Coronavirus Hoax, satanic ritual released in the Opening London 2012 Olympics “that was posted in one of the groups is a precise example of these affective practices combined together. Codes like “Accusation of Being Blind to the Truth” and “Official Media Is Fake News” also underpin the majority of activities in the groups but were especially dominant topics in the comment sections.

Affective expressions and opposing views in passion-driven discussions should not be considered as risks for democracy per se, on the contrary, they are integral to the healthy public discourse of a plural society (Mouffe, 2013). They, however, become problematic when personal opinions and “gut instincts” take a stand against scientific knowledge in debates on climate change, immigration, LGBTQ or women’s rights (Davis, 2021), and in our case—vaccines.

To show how the public disbelieves verified facts and general truths, we used the discourse analysis to look more deeply into the posts and the comments. Conspiracy theories are commonplace, yet in the current conditions, they are not just mere imaginary narratives but a tool used to

construct a perception of reality and trust in it. Perhaps the most prominent feature revealed in the research was a constant effort to diminish trust in legacy media, governmental institutions, and expert opinion, which allows us to imagine the volume and variety of this content in the groups analysed. Distrust creates favourable conditions for the creation and dissemination of conspiracy theories. Great attention is paid to general discussions about what truth is and how the truth is concealed from the general public. This signifies growing challenges that the responsible institutions have to face in order to withstand the powerful multimodality of social media interactions that potentially contaminate societal experience. Both prove the rationality sceptics otherwise (Temmerman et al., 2019, 1–2).

“Those who claim that the VIRUS exists must provide indisputable evidence.”

Ex. 42, “Skiepų žala,” 2020-04-20

“I’m asking about a proof of the existence of a virus (corona), not about the symptoms of the disease.”

“I don’t know where to get one”

“Well, that’s where you should have started, thank you:) why do people associate their experiences with proof of a virus?”

Ex. 42.1, “Skiepų žala,” 2020-04-21

In the first quote, it is presumed that the Covid-19 pandemic is a mass conspiracy, a scam, without presenting (or having) any valid reasons to question the reality of this global situation. The statement reveals the attitude that everybody must doubt everything they face in life. Subversion is used as a means of influence: The author asks for “indisputable evidence” of the existence of the virus, this could be regarded as one of the features of post-truth when science is challenged (McIntyre, 2018, 41–42). The inversion of logic attempts to make others doubt the obvious and in so doing lose trust in everybody who states otherwise. Maybe not by chance the above-mentioned quotes are from the admin and one of the most active members of “Skiepų žala”; the more people doubt something, the more “real” this doubt becomes. The statement’s validity depends on its effects—the more people believe it, the stronger the perception of reality becomes (Kalpokas, 2019, 13; Solomon Asch conformity experiments). One of the features of anti-vaccination discourse is that it is created by

people who generally adhere to the idea of post-truth, according to which there are multiple ways of framing truth claims in relation to the social reality. The production of Covid-19 vaccines and clinical trials inspired the most active group members to combine narratives into conspiracy theories on a larger scale.

Finally, this theme showcases the general mechanism of the politically asymmetric credulity discussed by Lewandowsky et al. (2017, 358), referring to increased susceptibility to misinformation being asymmetrically distributed across a political divide. Lewandowsky et al. use the term in the context of liberals and conservatives in the United States, concluding that individuals identifying themselves as “conservative” are more prone to see “profoundness” in vacuous statements. However, we contend that such a divide cannot be freely applied to the Lithuanian case, since none of the groups researched subscribe to any specific political ideology, which contrasts with the American case. In other words, Lithuanian anti-vaccination group members, do not defend any clearly ideological positions, let alone any of the major parties in the country. Overall distrust is based not on political views but rather social and political distrust of society and the government as such.

“What is a nanovaccine? Why is 5G internet needed for them? What kind of chips will be used for future vaccines? Why are nanovaccines Bill Gates’ specialty,... How will the world population be reduced to 1 billion people? How will AI regulate human health and cure their diseases?”

“... Nanoparticles will be controlled via 5G internet and powered by.... They will function like antennas transmitters, move through human or animal bodies, and perform needed actions.... [They] will be able not only to spy on enemies but also to harm their health affect their psycho-emotional state.... Vaccines, as they are, will become a eugenic tool; that is why to get vaccinated and let your children get vaccinated is irresponsible, irrational behaviour. In the future, you will suffer from vaccines more than you would suffer from infections.”

Ex. 41, “Po-skiepo.lt,” 2020-04-14

The author of the fragment starts by provoking rhetorical questions with the aim of triggering the reader’s emotions. Although the author uses natural elements, different contexts are invoked to make the scenario more believable. Verified facts are followed by unverified conclusions, as long as they fit into a particular frame of worldview. Nanotechnology has

indeed become an integral part of today's medicine and other industries, highlighting the need for scientists and society to discuss the ethical challenges posed by biotechnology (Kuzma & Besley, 2008). The author uses the future tense, creating the impression of inescapable fate, which, in its turn, is an attempt to make the reader resist the outlined future threats now. That is why the author warns that "let[ting] your children get vaccinated is an irresponsible, irrational behaviour" and threatens that "you will suffer from vaccines more than you would suffer from infections". Furthermore, this reflects the overall tendency to decrease trust in science (Lewandowsky et al., 2017, 358) which is discussed below. However, it is notable that this divide is politically driven in the post-soviet countries, not in the sense of the typical liberal-conservative divide, but by an overall high level of distrust in political institutions, opening the door for questioning across a wide specter of political leanings.

With such a patchwork of imaginary narratives, the author aims to attract the attention of other group members to satisfy their inner motifs and desires (Kalpokas, 2019, 18). At the same time, this "sci-fi scenario" is so effective that it makes others question what they already know and how valid this knowledge is. Since the function of such apocalyptic scenarios is to frighten and engage the reader simultaneously, a narrative targeting the recipient's emotions is a visionary strategic move.

Facebook multimodal design serves such instances perfectly—the author can provoke emotions by (1) the text; (2) the image; (3) the sound (4) adding an external, additional link, a source supporting the main message; and finally, (5) inviting others to continue the "discussion" in the comments section thus keeping it going and making it more visible, as Facebook's algorithms favour "popular" content. It seems that such arrangements could benefit multiple parties: Social media affordances tolerate and even encourage divisive, controversial online content because it helps attract user attention, whereas political actors can exploit such technical design aspects to promote sociopolitical controversies. For example, comparing any new sociopolitical development to the dawn of a new type of totalitarianism, comparable to that of the Soviets. Generation of controversy along these lines is beneficial, since on social media all kind of user engagement—whether one reacts with likes, love, surprise, or anger—is encouraged, bringing in more visibility despite the veracity of the statements provided. So, it seems that both the curators and the audience are thirsty for content that raises emotions and creates interaction. The question, whether it remains truthful to acknowledged facts appears less important.

12.4.2 *Competing Against Science*

In the analysed anti-vaccination groups, the crisis of trust can be seen as directly linked to the continuous stream of misleading, unconfirmed truth-claims that are presented as a legitimate scientific viewpoint. The theme “Competing Against Science” includes science misuse and expert discreditation in “Skiepų žala” and “Po-skiepo.lt”. The “Pseudo-Science” sub-theme consists of codes like “Quasi-Scientific Statements”, “Groundless Argument / No Source”, “Famous Conspiracy Theorists”, “False, Unreliable Source”, “Vaccines Are Deadly”, and “Alternative Medicine”, all of which refer to attempts made by group members to undermine scientific facts or expert knowledge by providing the “truth”, as in YouTube video that was shared in the group with title “M.D. Dr. Andrew Kaufman Explains How Viruses Do Not Spread Person To Person - Corona Theatre”. A question such as “How many dead children will make you question what’s going on?” (*note*: from vaccines or medical mistreatment) well presents the second sub-theme “War Against Experts”. We observed a great deal of “Frustration with Medics”: from distrust towards any institutionalised medical care to defamation of field specialists. The code “A Medic/Killer” refers to truth claims as such—“Medical errors kill 5 people every minute” and usually third-person accounts of medical “horror stories”. False scientific claims, pseudo-medical jargon, and information on traditional alternative medicine were used to create “counter-knowledge” against the official scientific discourse. Anti-public discourse does not simply oppose the dominant systems of knowledge and offer an alternative (Davis, 2019), but uses an extreme counter-hegemonic communication to go against the “basic values of democratic culture” and disturb (Cammaerts, 2007), with the intent not of informing, but of shocking.

“Pseudo-Science” could be regarded as both instrumental and a more complex strategy to counter scientific discourse. Ugnius Kiguolis, one of the anti-vaccination leaders in Lithuania, is a prolific producer of counter knowledge, he uses his personal Facebook page and external website of his association on “health information”/ex non-traditional “medical practice”—“Firmus Medicus” to propagate alternative medicine and homeopathy. By pushing a homeopathic (and usually conspiratorial) agenda, he openly opposes scientific medicine. Likewise, in the analysed groups’ pseudo research, that is, an assemblage of non-scientific statements, conspiracy-based claims about the world, is posing as science. The

information is often spread via YouTube in a video format (content in English or Russian was being swiftly translated into Lithuanian), or presented in a form of “scientific” articles. The *pseudoscientific* here can be recognised from the effort to imitate the scientific method, most often by employing a double-talk which is a mixture of factual information and incomprehensible, sometimes fake scientific jargon. Pseudo-scientific articles analysed were never peer-reviewed (found in academic databases) or used disproved scientific facts to make truth-claims. The creation and spread of such information is an inseparable part of the anti-vaccination discourse which focuses more on convincing than on informing. Everything is presented as learning material to enlighten those who are ready to “witness the truth”, as a “hidden” part of ongoing history, which has to be heard by anyone willing to have an “objective” opinion. This discourse of “revealing the truth” can be considered as a distinguishing characteristic of pseudo-science.

Because the scientific authority of medical professionals is questioned/not accepted, their arguments do not have a place in the reality bubble created by anti-vaxxers; actual scientific opinion is instantly rejected without any discussion. Indeed, according to Lewandowsky et al., well-established scientific research is framed as (leftist) anti-science. However, many producers of anti-vaccination discourse, and sometimes even its followers, draw on the truth claim of medical training to support their arguments, which provides additional wrinkles to the often-simplified theoretical view as it relates to the politicisation of science.

“Every tenth patient that visits a hospital experiences harm.... Negative consequences of inefficient care are one out of 10 most common causes of death or disability in the world.... The unsafe practice of prescribing medications... make millions of patients suffer.”

Ex. 26, “Po-skiepo.lt,” 2020-04-20

Claims of this nature perturb the followers, encouraging them to share hateful comments and their thoughts on that natural treatment. The motif of natural medicine and homeopathy is also prominent in the groups examined. For example, a potential member may not have lost trust in vaccines and doctors but wishes to be healthy “naturally”. Such individuals are easy prey for competing against the producers of scientific discourse. Especially because the health care system in the Soviet Union was highly corrupt and even used against the dissidents (and included denial of care,

medical malpractice, or the use of psychiatric hospitals as prisons, more: (Van Voren, 2011). Nowadays the corruption levels in the health care system of Lithuania are still very high (according to the latest data from the Special Investigation Service).

“WHOOPING COUGH. / Does anyone know how to get rid of that damned cough? My daughter is 14, been coughing for more than two months. Our GP says there is no treatment at this stage of the disease. We need to wait for up to 12 months, but I can’t torture my child anymore. Not vaccinated. The disease has been identified through testing.”

Ex. 24, “Skiepų žala,” 2020-04-11

The members recommend natural or completely alternative treatment methods in the comments section. Denying the efficiency of the propagated treatment or bringing it into question is forbidden; conventionally accepted treatments are not even discussed, even if the individuals are lacking necessary medical knowledge and qualifications.

This explicates a crucial point regarding the structure of reasoning within anti-vaccination movements. It is essential to note that the way our brain interprets information (McIntyre, 2018) has a significant impact on the emergence of post-truth. For instance, the Dunning-Kruger effect is a cognitive bias whereby an individual lacking knowledge overestimates their own capabilities. This bias is evident while observing group discussions about diseases and their treatment and, also, was proved by more quantitative methods (Huynh & Senger, 2021). The Lithuanian case shows that this tendency is prevalent in the post-Soviet societies, likely aggravated by the already existing experience from the past where often home remedies needed to be used instead of the services of corrupt and often stalling doctors. It can be seen that there is an inverse correlation between group members’ self-confidence and their trust in medical workers, which still prevails and is amplified by the situation of uncertainty in the present.

12.4.3 *Populism*

The “Social Fragmentation” sub-theme refers both to the group activities and the general atmosphere in these communities, indicating how the participants were actually feeling, how they saw their relationship with one another and others outside the group (or movement). The “Us vs. Them”

sentiment was almost always present with “them” being anyone from the state or healthcare, or anyone that didn’t agree with or didn’t support the group’s worldview. The following codes show the type of messages used routinely to perform or stress the social division: “We Know the Truth and They Don’t”, “Invitation to Open Your Eyes”, “Speaking in Plural *We*”, and “Big Pharma”. The second sub-theme in this section, “Antagonism” refers to the active display of hostility observed in the group, such as “Contempt of Civic Duty”, “Hostility Towards State Decisions”, “Discrediting Official Information”, “Discrediting Science/Medicine”, and “Contempt for Vaxxers”. The third sub-theme “Libertarian Rhetoric” mostly refers to the emotional, sometimes even hateful, speech targeted against society, democratic processes and / or the state itself. Sentiments such as “Against the Restrictions of Free Movement”, “Accusation of Fascism/Dictatorship”, “(Anti)Democracy”, “USA Politics/D. Trump”, and “A Call to Fight for Your Rights” were almost always present when discussing vaccines. According to Davis (2021), antagonistic and divisive communications, often in conjunction with undertones of rage towards the elite, experts, and the state, can be considered as one of the thematic continuities of the anti-public discourse.

It would not be wrong to say that the efficiency of the practices discussed above was heavily based on populist rhetoric promoting the idea of “returning power to people”. Furthermore, antagonism: “they” rich politicians, together with experts—the elite—are trying to exploit “us”, ordinary citizens, so we must not give in. Ultimately, proclamations result in action because people start believing in the constantly repeated narrative.

This kind of discourse attempts to undermine trust in governmental institutions, official media, and politicians in general. Anti-vaccination discourse could be genuinely regarded as the discourse that is anti- to anything that is officially decided, a characteristic which was especially prominent in the Covid-19 situation. A common accusation related to the quarantine, which, according to the group members, is “illegal” and infringes upon human rights is that those who are in favour of it are “a flock of sheep”. We can observe a constant attack directed toward media channels: The news is regarded as misinformation and propaganda whose aim is to shift the public focus of attention from vaccines and 5G towers.

One of the most peculiar features of such discourse is the fact that its proponents ideologically resist and trample on democratic values and processes such as citizenship or reciprocity (Davis, 2019), but at the same time speak in favour of, or passionately fight for, such democratic rights as

freedom of speech and freedom of movement (more on freedom in Gaon, 2020). The image of reality is constructed in such a way that it corresponds with this interest of anti-public discourse: Governmental policies are equated with “total control” or “fascism”.

Donald Trump’s announcement that he planned to stop funding the WHO excited the group members; one of the commentators even wrote that when he read this news, his eyes “were filled with tears of joy”. WHO is equated with Bill Gates, whom they particularly hate because of the “organised genocide”. Tears are caused by the futuristic vision of an imaginary world where corrupted elites and “phar-mafia” will no longer exploit ordinary people. This discourse encourages people to create possible versions of reality and the future for themselves. Finally, they give people the opportunity to find something new, something not yet experienced and therefore desirable.

12.4.4 *Anti-public Discourse*

The last theme, “Anti-public Discourse”, is perhaps the most general and abstract, as it was constructed from and addresses the overall characteristics of “Skiepų žala” and “Po-skiepo.lt” communities and their discussions. This code was used to mark those places where there were doubts during the discussion concerning logic, sources, or dissatisfaction with and refusal of the opposite opinion. When group members clashed over opinions, they often required their opponents to prove the “*Validity of Their Sources & Arguments*”; in reality, this is a type of communication behaviour adopted from group moderators, content creators, or most active group members, when they were avoiding answering a question while attempting to defend alternative truth claims or expressing suspicion towards any, mostly official, information. “Demonising Opposing View” is another communication feature that was seen in similar instances, and “Peculiarities of Argumentation” refers to any other (intentional or not) logical fallacy observed in member discussions. More often than not, these participant communication styles led to an unsuccessful ending, that is to “Miscommunication” and “Discussion Impossible”. All of this shows that this kind of discourse “selectively lacks rationality or resource to evidence” regarding the matters central to the discussion, meaning that “irrationality in play is not general but is ideologically programmatic” (Davis, 2021). White supremacy, anti-immigration, anti-LGBTQ+, alt-right, and other anti-public discourses all share and exploit this motif of unreason to

construct and spread counter-messages not only inside the anti-public discourses but also further up in the general public sphere (Cammaerts, 2007; Davis, 2021). “Bad Manners / Insults” and “Poor Language / Spelling” are just some additional characteristics regarding the group communications; quite regularly, participants would just pick on each other’s grammar or reasoning to start an argument and “fight” each other trying to prove whose alternative truth claims were more “correct” (Cammaerts, 2009).

To get a better understanding of how such anti-public communities operate and grasp how the moments of clash were addressed, we need to understand their use of language. Group members, objects, shared dreams, and fears are all connected by social ties; the members have similar opinions partly because of the swift and invisible elimination (carried out by the group moderators) of alternative views. Despite “ignorance”, a common character undertone for members of both groups, all of the following traits were active by default, for example: a “Call to Spread *The Knowledge*”, “Demonstration of *Authority*”, “Disciplining Other Members How to Behave”, and finally “A Call to Action” (to resist/fight), became more and more prominent when mask and quarantine regulations came into force in 2020.

However, it would be incorrect to say that there was no evidence of diverse opinions during the research. Diverse opinions occur: (1) When the accepted group opinion is challenged, when a doubter or an infiltrated vaxxer demands evidence for the accepted opinion; (2) when anti-vaxxers cannot agree among themselves to what extent a certain truth-claim proposed by the discourse is true. The collision of opinions did not result in any constructive conclusions or consensus in either case, with the result that the discussion terminated where it started—at the point of personal opinion.

The most dedicated members of the groups, although constantly insisting on providing factual basis to any of their claims, were not open for a more open discussion employing a wider range of facts related to the question(s) at hand. The human brain partly conditions this vital feature: Due to confirmation bias, people tend to be more willing to accept information that confirms their initial opinion (Spencer & Heneghan, 2018).

The administrators of both groups were the most active members, shared content across both groups, and never failed to demonstrate their superior status to other group members. The main administrator of “Skiepių žala” eliminated members from the group for “stupid questions”

or “spreading false information”. The role of the imaginary “gatekeeper of the discourse” is not coincidental, since in the past the group was often “attacked” by vaxxers. The administrator does not tend to communicate with members who did not acquaint themselves with certain “information”. The “Po-skiepo.lt” community is more minor, freer, and members actively express themselves. We did not observe any attempt to discipline group members until the very last days of the research when the administrator decided to terminate rights to post or share other posts freely.

“Some people started to share fake videos and articles in the groups, which shows their lack of maturity. From now on, the uploaded content will be approved by administrators.... I appreciate your understanding.”

Ex. 7, “Po-skiepo.lt,” 2020-04-21

To sum up, emphasis is placed on sharing symbolic meanings and the shared perception of truthfulness rather than on a constructive discussion. Both groups could be characterised by having “ideological circuit breakers”, which means that debate can continue only up to a specific limit and is then blocked by an ideological wall.

12.5 CONTEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS IN POST-TRUTH RESEARCH: THE DEVIL ALWAYS HIDES IN THE DETAILS?

The analysis presented in the article aims to counter two major problems related to the field of post-truth studies, oversimplifying social phenomena. First, the prevailing interpretation inadvertently puts alternative truth statements as merely variations of globally popularised conspiratorial narratives, which makes one question the efficacy and productivity of research aimed at post-truth communities (what is the point of the research if all of them are conspiratorial anyway?). Second, this reading also dismisses the contextual peculiarities which must be considered when analysing the occurrences of communities founded on “alternative epistemologies”, especially in societies whose past differs from that of Western democracies.

Our data analysis shows that any analysis related to truth statements, alternative epistemologies, and even post-truth itself, must consider the contextual aspects of communities and discourses under investigation. While the general codes for topics point towards the more or less recognisable narratives of populism, anti-scientism, and general opposition to institutionalised truth regimes, one common thread running through the

data is contextual references to the past and to historical experience. In our opinion, this proves that one needs to take a more nuanced look at communities based on alternative truth statements to truly understand the rationale and motivation behind their positions, which may often, at first glance, replicate, in a modified fashion, the traditional anti-vaccination narratives, coming from Western countries (the United States especially). However, contextual realities often provide the starting point for the proliferation of these narratives and strongly influence them.

One of the attributes of anti-vaccination group rhetoric is references (not always direct) to life under the total control of the Soviet regime:

“All the divisions in society and the fear of each other, where everyone is made a suspect, leads to one thing: civil war. We have already been at this point in history. Someone will retreat into the forests, someone will fight in blood for their own and their children's freedoms and rights, someone will hunt down those fighters, and someone will voluntarily surrender all their rights to the new fascist system. The time has come to choose which group you belong to. Make sure you have something to say to your children, when later, they will ask what you did when fascist psychopathy took over the world?”

Ex.10.1; 10.2., “Skiepu žala,” 2020-04-18

In this example, attentive readers can see that all different figures of the Soviet occupation in 1940 are tackled: from the partisan fighter to the conformist and traitor. It is very important to state that these historical issues are now under very heated discussion.

Comparing Western standards and norms of the European Union to those of the Soviet Union has become a popular strategy for opposition-minded internet activists, populist politicians, and even ex-dissidents who joined the anti-EU and anti-vaccination movements in Lithuania motivated by the desire not to let the reality of the Soviet Union repeat itself. The rhetoric in anti-vaccination communities online is no exception—references to going back to Soviet totalitarianism directly or indirectly make their way into these communities on a frequent basis.

As a result, contrary to the Westernised perception, it could be argued that relating this to political or party identities (as described by Lewandowsky) would oversimplify the picture of social reality, misleading the research. Anti-vaccination movements in Lithuania (and other Eastern European countries) often unite people with different and contradicting political views, precisely for the contextual reason of “fighting against the

rise of totalitarianism”. Under such thinking, even the theory of “Big Pharma”, while having conspiratorial leanings, can be seen by a post-Soviet individual as just another face of a late Soviet/early post-Soviet doctor who would not cure a patient without a bribe, or until he is told by a contact he knows and respects that this person needs good treatment. Whether such a siege mentality is politically motivated and manipulated is a different question, but the logic itself provides food for thought in terms of whether certain truth statements should be treated outright as “non-sensical conspiracies”, or as alternative truth claims with roots in a painful historical experience that still affects coping and rationalisation strategies considering contemporary political and social developments.

In a way, the point made above may also be illustrated by the prevailing ambiguities in arguments and rationalisation tactics found in researched communities. When researching these communities, finding utterances expressing “ideal types” of codes is complicated, since ambiguities in argumentation point toward a general lack of clarity when it comes to building coherent narratives deemed “conspiratorial”. No matter how contradictory, conspiracy theories usually imply at least a semblance of a narrative explaining the existing situation. In the case of Lithuanian anti-vaccination communities, such a narrative is not formed. Rather, it is framed as a reaction towards allegedly “regressive” and “authoritarian” tendencies of the state and media, which, like the Soviets in the past, disguise the destruction of democracy by loudly promoting that society has decision-making power in public matters. All this only strengthens the case for a more nuanced look into communities and discourses placed under the broad umbrella of post-truth.

12.6 CONCLUSION

This article was partially inspired by the need to find theoretical concepts allowing us to understand the analysed anti-public discourse phenomena. Our opinion changed throughout the research as the problem revealed itself from different angles. It was evident that it is crucial not to settle for an ideological assessment. This appears to still be one of the most challenging issues about researching anti-vaxxers and similar movements: We still do not know the best methods to analyse their discourse without over-relying on value-based simplifications. Usually in our attempt to do good research, we usually find ourselves (morally) assessing rather than analysing: We tend to forget the transformation of the public sphere and the

consequences and repercussions of this transformation for our society. The public sphere of post-truth reveals itself from angles that are yet to be analysed by future researchers. However, a strategy of melding different methodological approaches (digital ethnography, content analysis, and textually-oriented discourse analysis) seems to provide a satisfactory instrument for avoiding and reflecting upon this challenge.

The findings presented in this research show that discourses produced by the anti-vaccination movement in Lithuania showcase most of the traits related to the rise of post-truth politics in the contemporary world, as they express the decrease of social capital, a decline of trust in science, as well as a particular form of politically asymmetric credulity. However, it is worth noting that, whether or not because of its totalitarian past, Lithuania as a post-soviet case also enable one to touch upon more subtle variations of the factors mentioned above. This is most evident in the case of politically asymmetric doubt, where the divide in trusting or “reading into” ungrounded statements is not expressed along the lines of the liberal-conservative divide. Quite the contrary, most of the members of the movements are fierce critics of the ruling liberal and conservative governments as a whole. This characteristic reflects a much broader distrust of the political system, which has its origins in the Soviet regime where lack of transparency created the conspiratorial narratives of “those up above” who are manipulating everyone. More conscious citizens were thus obliged to read into everything they do, because signs of government corruption are always there, especially in the face of crises such as a pandemic.

The second point to note is the rejection of established scientific findings. This does not fall neatly along political lines either, but also points to the fact that the scientific establishment is not rejected in itself. Instead, in a proper (unconsciously) postmodern fashion of scientific paradigms, individuals are looking for ways to confirm their worldviews using the tools of the same scientific establishment they criticise. Research articles and licensed doctors (even from a different field) are still widely cited as evidence. Essentially, this points to the need to study the politicisation of science by using it pragmatically to provide “proof” for different positions. There is no straight denial of scientific practices, but rather an understanding or belief in “correct” and “unpoliticised” forms of science. This distinction has still not been analysed by theorists working with post-truth problematics, who, for the most part, still subscribe to the typical thesis of the rejection of all modern science as the main crux of the argument,

allegedly guiding the antivaccination groups or any other movements based on alternative epistemologies.

However, it is even more crucial to understand the mechanics and dynamics of such thinking, especially in a world driven by emotionally-charged politics. We may state that led by fear, anger, disappointment, or curiosity, people join such social media groups where they get a sense of “belonging” and find “answers”. This type of content becomes an alternative to official news sources and encourages distrust of the state, society, and humanity. Most of these actions are done by specific members, and they employ emotionally-charged narrative tools that may involve symbols from collective memory and emotional manipulation techniques to present their desired perspective. The group is a space for discussion and togetherness for the members, where they search for relevant information and share their thoughts and personal experiences. Meanwhile, the administrators rarely join in the discussions with other members in the comments sections unless they need to discipline or educate members not complying with the internal rules. The primary goal of the leaders of these two groups is to guarantee a constant flow of content.

Lastly, even though the overall level of the distrust in these groups is exceptionally high, the trust of social media platforms itself is almost not reflected upon. During the research we could not find any expressed doubts directed to social media affordance, privacy, or other issues discussed in the academic circles. This points us towards a paradox which demands closer study, i.e. that groups of individuals gathered around the idea of radical mistrust towards everything in the public sphere, do not reflect upon the problematic nature of their own sources and their interpretation. Exploring the dynamics and reasons behind this paradox provides an important direction for future research.

REFERENCES

- Aurylaitė, I. (2019). Viešosios erdvės funkcijos informacinėje visuomenėje. *Darbai ir dienos*, 72, 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.7220/2335-8769.72.1>
- Balta, E., Kaltwasser, C. R., & Yagci, A. H. (2021). Populist attitudes and conspiratorial thinking. *Party Politics*, 28, 625–637. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540688211003304>
- Barrera, O., Guriev, S., Henry, E., & Zhuravskaya, E. (2019). Facts, alternative facts, and fact checking in times of post-truth politics. *Journal of Public Economics*, 182, 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2019.104123>

- Bean, S. J. (2011). Emerging and continuing trends in vaccine opposition website content. *Vaccine*, 29(10), 1874–1880. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2011.01.003>
- Betsch, C. (2011, April 28). Innovations in communication: The internet and the psychology of vaccination decisions. *Eurosurveillance*, 16(17), 19849.
- Blume, S. (2006). Anti-vaccination movements and their interpretations. *Social Science & Medicine*, 62, 628–642. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2005.06.020>
- Bodner, J., et al. (2020). *Covid-19 conspiracy theories: QAnon, 5G, the New World order, and other viral ideas*. McFarland.
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Sage.
- Broniatowski, D. A., Jamison, A. M., Qi, S., AlKulaib, L., Chen, T., Benton, A., ... & Dredze, M. (2018). Weaponized health communication: Twitter bots and Russian trolls amplify the vaccine debate. *American Journal of Public Health*, 108(10), 1378–1384.
- Bufacchi, V. (2020). Truth, lies and tweets: A consensus theory of post-truth. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 47, 347–361. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453719896382>
- Burki, T. (2020). The online anti-vaccine movement in the age of COVID-19. *The Lancet*, 2(10), e504–e505. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S2589-7500\(20\)30227-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S2589-7500(20)30227-2)
- Cammaerts, B. (2007). Jamming the political: Beyond counter-hegemonic practices. *Continuum*, 21, 71–90. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304310601103992>
- Cammaerts, B. (2009). Radical pluralism and free speech in online public spaces: The case of north Belgian extreme right discourses. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 12(6), 555–575. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877909342479>
- Čavojová, V., Šrol, J., & Mikušková, E. B. (2020). How scientific reasoning correlates with health-related beliefs and behaviours during the COVID-19 pandemic? *Journal of Health Psychology*, 27, 534–547. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105320962266>
- Cook, J., van der Linden, S., Lewandowsky, S., & Ecker, U. (2020, 15 May). Coronavirus, *Plandemic* and the seven traits of conspiratorial thinking. *The Conversation*. Accessed September 7, 2022, from <https://theconversation.com/coronavirus-plandemic-and-the-seven-traits-of-conspiratorial-thinking-138483>.
- Curiel, R. P., & Ramírez, H. G. (2021). Vaccination strategies against COVID-19 and the diffusion of anti-vaccination views. *Scientific Reports*, 11, 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-85555-1>

- Dahlgren, P., & Sparks, C. (1993). *Communication and citizenship: Journalism and the public sphere*. Routledge.
- Davis, M. (2019). “Globalist war against humanity shifts into high gear”: Online anti-vaccination websites and “anti-public discourse.” *Public Understanding of Science*, 28, 357–371. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0963662518817187>
- Davis, M. (2021). The online anti-public sphere. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24(1), 143–159. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420902799>
- Dementavičienė, A. (2019). How the new technologies shapes the understanding of the political act: The case of Digital Vigilantism. *Politologija*, 95(3), 33–55. <https://doi.org/10.15388/Polit.2019.95.4>
- DiRusso, C., & Stansberry, K. (2022). Unvaxxed: A cultural study of the online anti-vaccination movement. *Qualitative Health Research*, 32, 317–329. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10497323211056050>
- Friedman, G. (2019). *The internet and the tragedy of the commons*. Geopolitical Futures. Accessed 2 December 2, 2021, from <https://geopoliticalfutures.com/the-internet-and-the-tragedy-of-the-commons>.
- Fuller, S. (2018). *Post-truth: Knowledge as a power game*. Anthem Press.
- Gaon, S. (2020). Lies in the time of COVID. *Derrida Today*, 13, 149–158. <https://doi.org/10.3366/drt.2020.0231>
- Garcia, A. C., Standlee, A. I., Bechkoff, J., & Yan, C. (2009). Ethnographic approaches to the internet and computer-mediated communication. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 38, 52–84. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241607310839>
- Geertz, C. (2000). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. Basic Books.
- Germani, F., & Biller-Andorno, N. (2021). The anti-vaccination infodemic on social media: A behavioural analysis. *PLoS One*, 16(3), e0247642. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0247642>
- Gitlin, T. (1998). Public sphere or public sphericules? In J. Curran & T. Liebes (Eds.), *Media, ritual and identity* (pp. 179–186). Routledge.
- Gurevitch, M., Coleman, S., & Blumler, J. G. (2009). Political communication—Old and new media relationships. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 625, 164–181. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716209339345>
- Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society*. (T. Burger with assistance of F. Lawrence, Trans.). Polity Press.
- Hannan, J. (2018). Trolling ourselves to death? Social media and post-truth politics. *European Journal of Communication*, 33, 214–226. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323118760323>
- Harambam, J., Grusauskaite, K., & de Wildt, L. (2022). Poly-truth, or the limits of pluralism: Popular debates on conspiracy theories in a post-truth era. *Journal*

- of *Cutaneous Medicine and Surgery*, 31, 390–396. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1203475421995132>
- Hardy, C., Harley, B., & Phillips, N. (2004). Discourse analysis and content analysis: Two solitudes. *Qualitative methods*, 2, 19–22. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.998649>
- Harsin, J. (2020). Toxic White masculinity, post-truth politics and the COVID-19 infodemic. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 23, 1060–1068. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549420944934>
- Hohendahl, P., & Russian, P. (1974). Jürgen Habermas: “The Public Sphere” (1964). *New German Critique*, (3), 45–48.
- Hughes, B., Miller-Idriss, C., Piltch-Loeb, R., Goldberg, B., White, K., Criezis, M., & Savoia, E. (2021). Development of a codebook of online anti-vaccination rhetoric to manage COVID-19 vaccine misinformation. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18, 7556. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18147556>
- Hussain, A., Ali, S., Ahmed, M., & Hussain, S. (2018). The anti-vaccination movement: A regression in modern medicine. *Cureus*, 10, e2919. <https://doi.org/10.7759/cureus.2919>
- Huynh, H. P., & Senger, A. R. (2021). A little shot of humility: Intellectual humility predicts vaccination attitudes and intention to vaccinate against COVID-19. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 51, 449–460. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12747>
- Johnson, N. F., et al. (2020). The online competition between pro-and anti-vaccination views. *Nature*, 582, 230–233. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2281-1>
- Kalpokas, I. (2019). *A political theory of post-truth*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.
- Kata, A. (2010). A postmodern Pandora’s box: Anti-vaccination misinformation on the internet. *Vaccine*, 28, 1709–1716. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2009.12.022>
- Kim, Y., Song, D., & Lee, Y. J. (2020). #Antivaccination on Instagram: A computational analysis of hashtag activism through photos and public responses. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(20), 7550. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17207550>
- Kreiss, D., Lawrence, R. G., & McGregor, S. C. (2017). In their own words: Political practitioner accounts of candidates, audiences, affordances, genres, and timing in strategic social media use. *Political Communication*, 35, 8–31. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.2017.1334727>
- Küçükali, H., Ataç, Ö., Palteki, A. S., Tokaç, A. Z., & Hayran, O. (2022). Vaccine hesitancy and anti-vaccination attitudes during the start of COVID-19 vaccination program: A content analysis on twitter data. *Vaccine*, 10, 161. <https://doi.org/10.3390/vaccines10020161>

- Kuzma, J., & Besley, J. C. (2008). Ethics of risk analysis and regulatory review: From bio- to nanotechnology. *NanoEthics*, 2, 149–162.
- Lewandowsky, S., Ecker, U. K. H., & Cook, J. (2017). Beyond misinformation: Understanding and coping with the “post-truth” era. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 6, 353–369.
- Malcolm, D. (2021). Post-truth society? An Eliasian sociological analysis of knowledge in the 21st century. *Sociology*, 55, 1063–1079. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038521994039>
- McIntyre, L. (2018). *Post-truth*. The MIT Press.
- Megget, K. (2020). Even Covid-19 can't kill the anti-vaccination movement. *BMJ*, 369, m2184. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m2184>
- Miskulin, M., Gavranic, K., Domacinovic, T., Pavlovic, N., Vukoja, I., & Miskulin, I. (2021). Antivaccination attitudes and intention to take COVID-19 vaccine in Croatian adult population. *European Journal of Public Health*, 31(3), ckab165.127. <https://doi.org/10.1093/eurpub/ckab165.127>
- Moore, A. (2018). Conspiracies, conspiracy theories, and democracy. *Political Studies Review*, 16, 2–12. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1478-9302.12102>
- Mouffe, C. (2013). *Agonistics: Thinking the world politically*. Verso Books.
- Nguyen, A., & Catalan, D. (2020). Digital mis/disinformation and public engagement with health and science controversies: Fresh perspectives from Covid-19. *Media and Communication*, 8, 323–328. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v8i2.3352>
- Nikolova, M., Popova, O., & Otrachshenko, V. (2022). Stalin and the origins of mistrust. *Journal of Public Economics*, 208, 104629. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2022.104629>
- Okuhara, T., Ishikawa, H., Kato, M., Okada, M., & Kiuchi, T. (2018). A qualitative analysis of the beliefs of Japanese anti-influenza vaccination website authors. *Heliyon*, 4(4), e00609. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2018.e00609>
- Peretti-Watel, P., et al. (2014). Attitudes toward vaccination and the H1N1 vaccine: Poor people's unfounded fears or legitimate concerns of the elite? *Social Science & Medicine*, 109, 10–18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2014.02.035>
- Pullan, S., & Dey, M. (2021). Vaccine hesitancy and anti-vaccination in the time of COVID-19: A Google trends analysis. *Vaccine*, 39, 1877–1881. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2021.03.019>
- Puri, N., Coomes, E. A., Haghbayan, H., & Gunaratne, K. (2020). Social media and vaccine hesitancy: New updates for the era of COVID-19 and globalised infectious diseases. *Human Vaccines & Immunotherapeutics*, 14, 2586–2593. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21645515.2020.1780846>
- Ravn, S., Barnwell, A., & Neves, B. B. (2019). What is “publicly available data”? Exploring blurred public–private boundaries and ethical practices through a

- case study on Instagram. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics*, 15, 40–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1556264619850736>
- Renninger, B. J. (2014). “Where I can be myself ... where I can speak my mind”: Networked counterpublics in a polymedia environment. *New Media & Society*, 17, 1513–1529.
- Secko, D. M. (2009). The unfinished science story: Reflections on journalist-audience interactions in the online environment. *Journal of Media Practice*, 10, 259–266. https://doi.org/10.1386/jmpr.10.2-3.259_3
- Spencer, E. A., & Heneghan, C. (2018). Confirmation bias. In *Catalogue of Bias*. Accessed May 18, 2020, from www.catalogueofbiases.org/biases/confirmationbias.
- Spohr, D. (2017). Fake news and ideological polarization: Filter bubbles and selective exposure on social media. *Business Information Review*, 34, 150–160. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266382117722446>
- Temmerman, M., et al. (2019). Post-truth and the political: Constructions and distortions in representing political facts. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 27, 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2018.10.002>
- To, Q. G., To, K. G., Huynh, V.-A. N., Nguyen, N. T. Q., Ngo, D. T. N., Alley, S. J., Tran, A. N. Q., et al. (2021). Applying machine learning to identify anti-vaccination tweets during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(8), 4069. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18084069>
- Tufekci, Z. (2017). *Twitter and tear gas: The power and fragility of networked protest*. Yale University Press.
- Vaiseta, T. (2015). *Nuobodulio visuomenė, Kasdienybė ir ideologija vėlyvojo sovietmečiu (1964–1984)*. Lietuvos katalikų mokslo akademija.
- van Voren, R. (2011). Psychiatry as a tool of repression against dissidents in the USSR. *Darbai ir dienos*, 55, 29–42.
- Volek, J., & Urbániková, M. (2018). Predictors of mistrust: Towards basic characteristics of Czech mistrusting news media audiences. *Obervatorio Journal*, 12, 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.15847/obsOBS12120181200>
- World Health Organisation. (2019). *Ten threats to global health in 2019*. Accessed December 17, 2020, from <https://www.who.int/emergencies/ten-threats-to-global-health-in-2019>.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.





Towards a Grammar of Manipulated Photographs: The Social Semiotics of Digital Photo Manipulation

Morten Boeriis

13.1 INTRODUCTION

Photography as a social practice has changed with digitalisation as technological development induces new photographic conventions which include the widespread use of image filters and other types of image manipulation (Johannessen & Boeriis, 2021; Boeriis, 2021). Inexpensive software for digital photo manipulation allows any layperson with basic digital competencies to alter the visual content of a photograph. For instance, it has become less complex to remove unwanted persons or to change the appearance of depicted elements (such as body shape or skin details). As smartphone photography becomes an augmented part of human sensory motor apparatus (Blaagaard, 2013; Frosh, 2015; Han et al., 2017), and as digital photographs are distributed in a fast and vast digital social

M. Boeriis (✉)

The Department of Design, Media and Educational Science, University of Southern Denmark, Odense, Denmark
e-mail: boeriis@sdu.dk

© The Author(s) 2024

B. Schirmmacher, N. Mousavi (eds.), *Truth Claims Across Media*,
Palgrave Studies in Intermediality,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-42064-1_13

environment, the communicative practice of photography takes on an almost dialogical form where filters and other photo manipulations are part of the visual vocabulary (Boeriis, 2021). The indexical understandings of photography as documenting evidence still resonate in media discourses around photo manipulation (as can be seen in governmental initiatives for the compulsory explicit labelling of photo manipulation in Norway and Denmark), but the widespread quotidian use of image manipulation has consequences for the conventions of photographic meaning-making in general (Johannessen & Boeriis, 2021) and for the understanding of photographic truth and trustworthiness in particular. This article makes a first move towards elucidating the grammatical implications of digital photo manipulation in order to get a better understanding of the meaning potential affected by the digital manipulations. Thus, the filtered visual dialogue of contemporary photography is examined through undertaking an investigation of different editing options in digital photo manipulation software from a visual grammatical perspective.

The theoretical point of departure is in multimodal social semiotics (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001), and Kress and van Leeuwen's *visual grammar* (2020) serves as the conceptual framework for the analyses and discussions of a number of options for photo manipulation in digital photo editing software. Kress and van Leeuwen's grammar takes a contemporary Western cultural perspective on visual grammar (2020), and consequently the insights presented in this article apply only to this context.

From a social semiotic point of view, a photograph can be perceived as a semiotic artefact (*text*) consisting of multiple meaning-making choices (*signs*) instantiated from an overall repertory of possible choices (*grammar*) (van Leeuwen, 2005; Kress, 2010) that utilise semiotic technologies (*media*) (see Zhao et al., 2014; Poulsen, 2018). In this article the visual meaning-potential of photo manipulation is examined by combined perspectives on both technological editing options in photo editing software and the grammatical repertory of visual communication.

This article defines photographic trustworthiness from a social semiotic point of view as a dynamic phenomenon which relies on a *semiotic truth agreement* established between a text producer and a text receiver in relation to cultural conventions for photographic truth. Semiotic truth agreements are created in the way photographs relate to sociocultural conventions of claiming trustworthiness in connection to photographic genre, context and communicative aim. In each photo-communicative

event, the text producer implicitly establishes a claim to adhere to certain kinds of truth by choices in the design of the photograph, and the degree of trustworthiness can be evaluated against this claim. If a text producer claims to adhere to a particular truth convention but uses photo manipulation techniques that violate this agreement, the text producer is untrustworthy. Therefore, semiotic truth agreements function as an account of how the content is to be received—which type of trueness the photographer vouches for. Different types of photographs have different kinds of conventions (in different contexts) for claiming trustworthiness. For instance, there are different genre traits between a documentary photo and a fictional photo or a work of art.

Manipulated photographs are not deceiving *per se* in social interaction, and therefore it is important to differentiate between different kinds of semiotic truth agreements and relate these to the various options for photo manipulation provided by digital editing software. This is achieved in the following by a close examination of the relation between technical resources for digital photo manipulation and grammatical resources for photographic meaning-making, explicating the ways in which different visual grammatical systems can be affected by digital post-production—and with what consequences for meaning-making in relation to trustworthiness. In other words, the area of concern in this article is digital post-production, and it explores how different visual meaning-making resources are involved in claiming visual trustworthiness in digital photographs in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of photo manipulation which can inform future critical citizens of a digital society.

13.2 THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In order to elucidate digital photo manipulation as a communicative phenomenon, and employing a social semiotic approach, this article takes a theoretical point of departure in the way visual meaning potential is affected by digital photo manipulation. Social semiotics is centred around a descriptive ambition of accounting for the resources available for meaning-making in semiotic modes (van Leeuwen, 2005). The article follows this ambition by focusing on both the practical technical resources for digital photo manipulation and the meaning potential which can be instantiated through these manipulations.

Social semiotics originates in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (see Halliday, 1978; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), which initially

described the resources of language. In the late 1980s, scholars in social semiotics began to take an interest in theorising and describing semiotic modes other than language, taking inspiration from Halliday's general view on communication and semiotics (Hodge & Kress, 1988; O'Toole, 1994; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). Multimodal Social Semiotics has since then developed into a diverse, influential paradigm which focuses on meaning-making in potentially any semiotic mode—and on the interplay of different semiotic modes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Baldry & Thibault, 2006; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020).

The social semiotic approach describes the practices of meaning-making in context, and the core idea is that members of a given community share knowledge about the available semiotic resources and their corresponding meaning potential (Hodge & Kress, 1988). These resources are conventionalised ways of instantiating semiotic resources which aim to aptly convey specific content (Kress, 2010). The available repertoire for meaning-making is described as *grammars* of semiotic modes within a community (e.g. language regions) (Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). However, crucial to the social semiotic approach is that grammar is not viewed as a set of rules but rather as a description of conventionalised practices for meaning-making in a particular cultural context (Feng & O'Halloran, 2013). Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar takes a distinct *common Western* point of departure for describing the resources for visual meaning-making (2020).

Individual members of a society develop knowledge of and competencies within the overall semiotic systems of different modes (ontogenesis) through being a semiotically active member of the society (Halliday, 1978). At another timescale, each individual semiotic action (logogenesis) contributes to either sustaining or gradually changing the semiotic systems of the modes (phylogenesis) (ibid.) as the grammars of modes evolve along with cultural changes in the communities (Kress, 2010). Summing up, the societal conventions for photographic communication are on the phylogenetic scale; the individual photographic competencies are on the ontogenetic scale; and the processes of creating photographic texts are on the logogenetic scale (Johannessen & Boeriis, 2021). The social semiotic understanding of semiotic resources and meaning potentials as dynamic phenomena enables analysis of the accelerated phylogenetic development caused by digitalisation and social media (ibid.), and therefore the social semiotic approach is particularly apt for investigating digital photo

manipulation as acts of meaning-making in relation to claiming trustworthiness.

Although the social semiotic approach speaks of meaning potential rather than fixed meanings (Kress, 2010), social semiotics has an ambition of being as descriptively precise and exhaustive as possible to provide comprehensive overviews of practices of semiotic modes. Detailed descriptions provide insights into particular semiotic modes and allows for detailed systematic analysis of texts using these semiotic modes. In this article, the intention is to present an inventory of a grammar of digital photo manipulation in order to get a deeper understanding of the meaning-making involved (*ibid.*).

When describing the resources available for instantiation in particular texts, Halliday has described three general domains of meaning, or three *metafunctions*, which are realised by different subsystems in the overall grammar (Halliday, 1978). These metafunctions have been carried over to theorising other semiotic modes than language from a social semiotic approach, and this includes photography (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). The three metafunctions of language and other modes are: the *ideational metafunction*, which involves the representation of the world in the text for the reader/viewer; the *interpersonal metafunction*, which is the enactment in the text of the relation between the producer and the consumer of the text; and the *textual metafunction*, which is meaning conveyed by the structuring of the text as a coherent whole for the reader/viewer (Halliday, 1978; Hodge & Kress, 1988).

In order to provide a systematic examination of the social semiotic meaning potential of digital photo manipulation, this article is structured along the logics of the semiotic metafunctions, which will be elaborated in separate sections below. However, first the article outlines how different software for digital photo manipulation can modify or transmute photographs.

13.3 SOFTWARE

The industry standard photo editing software is *Adobe Photoshop*, which has been dominant in the photo editing industry for the past 30 years to a degree where the verb construction *photoshopping* has become a commonly used term for image manipulation. Other professional photo editing software includes, for instance, *Adobe Lightroom*, *DxO*, *PhotoLab*, *GIMP*, *Capture One Pro*, *Corel Paint Shop Pro*, *Nik Collection by DxO*

and so on. In the first two decades since the introduction of *Photoshop*, digital manipulation of photographs was performed by a relatively small number of experts because it required specialised skills and the software was expensive (Boeriis, 2021, 3). However, in recent years the use of photo manipulation apps for smartphone devices has become a very common practice in everyday amateur photography (Blaagaard, 2013), whether via the in-built proprietary phone system software, common social media apps such as *Instagram*, or dedicated manipulation apps such as *Betterme*, *Facetune*, *Canva*, *Pixlr*, *PortraitPro* and so on. Many of these types of software are typically inexpensive, either free through social media apps or sold at a relatively low price in app stores. Recent editions of photo-editing apps are becoming increasingly advanced, and the gap between what can be done with professional software and phone apps has narrowed.

Digital photo manipulation works on bitmap grounds for calculating adjustments, which entails that the base level of adjustments are alternations in values of colour and brightness at pixel level. For the analysis of photo manipulation, this article proposes a fourfold basic subdivision of the photo manipulation alternations at pixel-level (see Table 13.1):

1. *Global modifications* are adjustments made at a global image scale level, where all pixels in the photo are affected. These include common filtering effects such as image colour tinting or overall exposure adjustments.
2. *Local modifications* are adjustments to pixels in selected areas of the image. The affected areas can be selected by many different inbuilt software criteria, ranging from simple marked areas to selected colours or to areas with high contrast.
3. *Global transmutations* are the repositioning of pixels over the entire image, and the adjustments can be compared to turning, squeezing or stretching a flexible canvas. At pixel level, the colour and bright-

Table 13.1 Fourfold subdivision of photo alterations at pixel-level

	<i>Global</i>	<i>Local</i>
Modification	1. Colour and brightness adjustments to all pixels	2. Colour and brightness adjustments to selected pixels
Transmutation	3. Displacement of all pixels	4. Displacement of selected pixels

ness values of one pixel are moved to another pixel position in the picture frame, and this happens across the entire picture frame, which can result in distortions of the proportions of elements in a photograph and altering the perceived perspective in the photograph. Rotation effects are global transmutations in which pixels are moved relatively to a selected rotation point in the picture, for instance, in order to balance horizon lines. *Photoshop's* perspective adjustments use squeezing or stretching to remedy different optical distortions such as perspectival warps (converging building lines) and aperture distortions (barrel roll or pincushion effects).

4. *Local transmutations* are radical adjustments in pixel values that can potentially change the content of the picture by overwriting the pixel values with completely different values and adding or deleting elements in the picture. A Photoshop effect that uses transmutation is the *Clone Stamp* tool, which can sample pixels in one area and paste them into another. This can be used to remedy skin blemishes by copy-pasting skin from a non-affected area onto the problem area. Another *Photoshop* tool that makes use of local transmutation is the *Liquify* tool, which can be used for pushing pixels in a certain direction to alter the shape of elements in the picture, for instance, pushing the waistline inwards to make a person seem slimmer or moving the position of the eyes to make a person's face more symmetrical.

Over the past decade, photo manipulation software has become increasingly based on content-aware functionalities—both in professional software and in smartphone photography software. Artificial intelligence and image content recognition have become central to photo manipulation software, not least the functionalities related to local modifications and local transmutations. Early implementations of *content aware fill* were introduced in *Photoshop* in 2010 (CS5), enabling computer-generated content in local transmutations. Since then, artificial intelligence has been improved to the point where the 2020 update of *Photoshop* implemented a machine-learning based *object recognition* functionality used for selection of objects in the workflow—and the artificial intelligence is continuously being optimised by gathering data about *Photoshop* users' editing practices. Artificial intelligence and object recognition also play an important role in many automated functionalities in photo apps, in which the software is able to recognise faces or body shapes and apply pre-set effects to them. This is used in humorous ways in *Snapchat*, where funny masks that can

follow facial expressions are superimposed onto the image of a person—for instance, giving the person the head and face of a kitten. Facial recognition can also be used to apply different *beautifying* filters, so that the image of a person is automatically enhanced in their selfies (see Boeriis, 2021, 8).

In the following, the theoretical framework provides a cornerstone to understanding the grammar of manipulated photographs. The next sections provide a systematic understanding of the social consequences of the manipulation of photographs by taking a point of departure in the meaning-making conventions of visual communication.

13.4 MANIPULATING INTERPERSONAL MEANING POTENTIAL

The interpersonal metafunction in social semiotics is the intra-text enactment of the relation between the communicating parts (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, 106). In other words, the interpersonal metafunction is concerned with how the text expresses “social relations... between the sign-maker and the sign-interpreter and the people, places and things represented” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020, 17). Two general systems express the interpersonal meaning in images, namely *point of view* (choices of perspective) and *validity*, (degrees of expressed realism) (Boeriis, 2009). The article turns to the validity first.

13.4.1 *Validity*

The grammatical system *validity* (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020) focuses on the conveyed and perceived reality of the content (Hodge & Tripp, 1986; Hodge & Kress, 1988), which entails an understanding of “as how true” the represented content is to be taken (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020, 149). Validity as a multimodal concept is derived from Halliday’s linguistic concept *modality*, which deals with “the region of uncertainty that lies between ‘yes’ and ‘no’” (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, 147), and thus concerns how the truth value or credibility of verbal statements can be modified by the use of auxiliary verbs, adjectives, adverbs and intonation patterns. The multimodal validity system describes the conventions for (figuratively and literally) colouring the multimodal content (O’Toole, 1994, 9), that express subjective tone towards the content. The validity

scale runs from *highest validity*, which is a seemingly objective representation of the content, to *lowest validity*, which is an overtly subjective representation of the content (Boeriis, 2021, 28). Validity is measured by a number of parameters called *validity markers*, and according to Kress and van Leeuwen these include *colour saturation, colour differentiation, colour modulation, contextualization, representation of detail, depth, illumination* and *brightness* (2020, 156–158). Kress and van Leeuwen’s validity system is predominantly focused on validity at a global level, for instance values across whole photographs, but overall validity can also be affected by local values in validity markers in the subsections of a photograph (see below).

The values of the individual validity markers combine into an overall validity profile, which is evaluated against certain standard validity profiles, called *coding orientations*, that are typically utilised for conveying different kinds of reality (ibid., 159–65). The more the validity profile of a picture deviates from a standard profile, the lower the validity. High validity conveys that the content is presented with the highest degree of objectivity and no subjective slant, whereas low validity conveys a more subjective tone because the content is presented in a marked non-neutral manner. Lowered validity means more meta-focus on the subjective stance towards the content—which subsequently can have different consequences for trustworthiness depending on the coding orientation of the photo. Kress and van Leeuwen (2020, 164) propose four different coding orientations with individual typical validity profiles relating to different communicative purposes.

The common-sense *naturalistic coding orientation* is based on what Kress and van Leeuwen have termed a “35 mm photorealistic representation” (ibid.) that is recognised by all members of a culture as being neutral naturalistic photography. Applying filters to a photograph lowers the naturalistic validity because the validity markers are altered away from the validity profile of a naturalistic coding orientation. The heavy filtering of colour, light and detail in post-production can lower validity and render the image non-real to the point where the validity is so low that it is no longer construed as depicting naturalistic reality. High naturalistic validity conveys an implicit assertion that the content is to be taken as a neutral representation, which implies ‘representational trustworthiness’, whereas lower validity conveys a more subjective tone which points towards other types of trustworthiness such as sensory, technological, abstract or emotive coding orientation which are discussed below.

The *sensory coding orientation* is based on the principles of sensation and pleasure, and is often used in contexts such as art and advertising (Ravelli & van Leeuwen, 2018). The goal of the sensory representation is not high fidelity to a photo-realistic depiction, but rather fidelity to a sensory reality, expressing the aesthetic value of the depicted motif to convey pleasure (or displeasure) (ibid.). The standard profile of sensory validity includes strongly saturated colours, (often) bright light and a lower amount of detail compared to the naturalistic coding orientation. High validity in the sensory coding orientation is related to claiming ‘aesthetic trustworthiness’.

The *technological coding orientation* is based on a more pragmatic criterion in which validity is related to the usefulness of the visual representations, as can be seen, for instance, in assembly manuals, maps or blueprints in more technical contexts (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). If a parameter does not provide information which optimises the use of the image, it does not have a scientific or technological purpose in the image, and consequently it will lower the technological validity. In this context, a naturalistic rendition of a piece of furniture or a building will not be of help in the process of assembling the parts into the final construction. Technological images often utilise low detail, low colour differentiation, no contextualisation and the isometric perspective (ibid., 164). High validity in the technological coding orientation is related to claiming ‘functional trustworthiness’.

The *abstract coding orientation* is based on a conceptual criterion in which the validity of representations becomes relatively higher the more an image reduces the individual motif to a general conceptual reference, as the focus is then more on the generic and essential qualities than on the concrete (ibid.). The abstract coding orientation is often used in science and high art and is associated with the domain of conceptual knowledge and abstract meaning. Therefore, the ability to produce and/or read texts grounded in this coding orientation is a mark of social distinction, of being an educated person or a serious artist (Ravelli & van Leeuwen, 2018). In the abstract coding orientation, the image is not about the concrete motif per se, but rather the motif functions as a reference to a more generic abstract idea or concept that is under scrutiny or discussion in the communicational context of the image. Thus, high abstract validity is related to claiming ‘conceptual trustworthiness’.

A fifth coding orientation could be called the *emotive coding orientation* (Boeris, 2021). This coding orientation was developed to encompass the

practices that have evolved in everyday smartphone social media photography in which the fidelity of the photograph is related to how well it conveys the emotions of the photographer at the time of taking the shot. Rather than a naturalisation, or a sensualisation, it is an emotivisation of the motif (*ibid.*). Moreover, the manipulated emotive smartphone photograph has higher validity if the filtering truly expresses the emotions of the photographer. Consequently, the high validity of the emotive coding orientation is conveyed through non-naturalistic choices in the validity markers. Pre-made filters, for instance, in *Instagram*, can be highly saturated or desaturated, they can have a low colour differentiation, rendering the shot highly tinted, or a contrastive dark and gloomy expression. Other *Instagram* users recognise the filter and have a keen understanding of the evolving conventions in the semiotic practice of photo manipulation in social media. When users post filtered photographs on social media, they are expressing feelings, regardless of whether these feelings are exaggerated or understated. Therefore, the emotive photograph can be a tool for communicating subtle emotional states, such as adding a melancholic feel to otherwise positive ideational content, which can convey nuances of the photographer's feelings about the content (*ibid.*, 35). In the emotive coding orientation, high validity is related to claiming 'emotional trustworthiness'.

Most photo editing software has options for global modifications of colour, light and detail, which can be used, for instance, to make a photo darker or brighter, to raise or lower contrast, to introduce or remove a colour tint or to make a photo sharper or softer. Professional software and many phone apps offer functionalities for similar local modification that can alter the values of validity markers in selected areas, which impacts the overall validity profile in ways not accounted for by Kress and van Leeuwen's validity systems. For instance, a very commonly used ready-made effect used for local modification is *vignetting*, which was originally a flaw caused by optical imperfections in the camera's lens design, resulting in darker areas in the corners of the image, which is now viewed as having an aesthetically pleasing effect. A type of aesthetic effects commonly found in photo editing software emulate optical phenomena caused by chromatic distortions of analogue vintage cameras, darkroom techniques and not least the decay of old film stock over years (see, for instance, *RetroCam*, *Snapseed* or *VNTG*). These filters often involve *split toning*, which alters the colour differentiation differently in bright and dark tones through intricate local modifications, such as tinting the shadows blue and

the highlights orange. This references the optical decay of vintage film while also having an aesthetically pleasing retro effect. Other examples of technical flaws that have made their way into photo manipulation as aesthetic options are: *grains*, *scratches*, *flares*, and *light leaks*, which are added as local modifications and transmutations in photo apps and advanced post-production software, such as *DxO's Analog Effects Pro*.

In sum, the validity profile—and manipulations hereof—sets the scene for how individual photographs are to be perceived in relation to a given cultural and situational context. The manipulations discussed in the following parts of the article all perform on grounds set by the chosen validity profiles and how these can convey degrees of representational, aesthetical, conceptual, functional, or emotional trustworthiness.

13.4.2 *Offering a Point of View*

When composing a photograph, the photographer chooses the perspective by which the motif is to be viewed, which means offering the viewer a particular point of view, or position, from which to observe the motif—from below or above, frontal or from the side, from close distance or from far away, with or without eye contact. The photographer can move the camera to a different position, for instance, closer, to the side or to a higher vantage point, or instruct a model to look into the camera, turn in a direction or to move closer to the camera. The choices of points of view are closely related to the physical placement of the camera in relation to the motif and, consequently, points of view cannot easily be manipulated in photo editing software.

Nevertheless, some options are available for making perspective adjustments in *Photoshop* or specialised software like *DxO Viewpoint*, which are designed to repair distorted or converging lines caused by perspective and optical flaws from the lens design (typically used on photographs of buildings or other man-made constructions). By utilising global transmutation in perspectival corrections, it is possible to make small adjustments to the perspective and consequently manipulate the viewpoints, albeit to a limited extent.

However, neither the vertical point of view nor the horizontal point of view is easily manipulated in post-production, as the optical characteristics of the camera lens create a distinct perspective in the image. Attempting to manipulate these points of view entails the use of advanced global

transmutation functionalities, such as *perspective adjustment* in *Photoshop*, but it is difficult to achieve convincing results with the currently available tools.

Distance can be manipulated in post-production by cropping the image, but it is more complicated to digitally make a shot appear from farther away because this requires complex *compositing* and often involves using secondary photographic material to fill out the blank space revealed by the new framing. Newer functionalities in *Photoshop* called *Content-Aware Fill*, which are based on artificial intelligence, can be utilised for these local and global transmutations, but it is still not an easy task to create naturalistic representations with artificial content.

It is also complicated to manipulate eye contact (Boeriis, 2009) in digital post-production, as changing the direction of the gaze involves complex compositing to move the pupil and iris to a different position in the eye-opening.

Global transmutation of the lateral point of view (*rotate*) (ibid.) often ranks highly in the adjustment hierarchy in software design. This tool is used to level the horizontal line in the shot, and such adjustment functionalities are often available in the in-built photo apps of smartphones. In some software, there are also aids to help to level the lateral point of view, such as for instance in *Lightroom's Crop and Straighten* tool, with which it is possible to mark a line on the image at the desired level, based on which the software rotates (and crops) the picture automatically.

13.5 MANIPULATING IDEATIONAL MEANING POTENTIAL

With inspiration in Halliday's (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) linguistic transitivity systems, Kress and van Leeuwen (2021) describe the conventions for ideational representation in a visual text as an array of *processes* (what can happen in an image) and their associated *participants* (elements involved in what happens in an image). In visual texts, the participants are, typically, depicted elements that are represented as whole entities (Boeriis, 2012, 141), such as persons, things or geometrical shapes. Furthermore, groups of elements can function as one participant (Boeriis & Holsanova, 2012, 266).

The following sections investigate how the meaning potential of visual processes and the elements involved as participants can be digitally manipulated in post-production.

13.5.1 *Representing Existence*

Halliday's *existential processes* (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) can extend Kress and van Leeuwen's visual transitivity system (Boeriis, 2009, 186) with a process type that describes the meaning potential of choosing what is depicted and what is omitted, which entails choices of representation of gender, race, stereotype and so on. In the analysis of existential processes in images, it is typically the case that simply by being there, existents are represented as having importance in the visual text. Omission and inclusion can be the result of simple everyday actions, such as choosing who is invited to the shoot and which way to point the camera.

Post-production manipulation has been performed throughout the history of photography, and perhaps the best-known examples of existential local transmutations are the infamous Soviet photo retouching images in which political opponents were simply paint-brushed out of group portrait photographs (see Boeriis, 2021). However, today these existential local transmutations can be done relatively easily in digital post-processing.

There are several specialised functionalities for manipulating the representation of existence in digital post-production of photographs that mostly operate at the local levels. *Cropping* is one of the simplest ways to alter existence by simply cutting off the part of the frame where an unwanted element is placed. Other common examples of existential local modification include hiding elements, for instance, in shadows (*darkening*), in blown-out, bright areas (*brightening*) or in unfocused areas (*blurring*). Such alterations also have consequences for the salience hierarchy (see below about foregrounding). Local modifications require software that enables controlled selections of parts of photographs, which is a speciality of, for instance, *Photoshop* and *Lightroom*, whereas not all photo apps provide these selection options for individual adjustments. A number of manipulation effects are specialised for making existential local transmutations: *Cloning* is designed to copy pixels from one area and blend them into another area, which makes it possible to both remove elements from the photo or to place elements which were not in the original shot. Removing elements can be done by painting in new pixels that replaces the element with a credible background. Different types of complex *compositing* can be applied to achieve similar results. For instance, placing an element in a new layer on top of the original can make it appear that the element was part of the original scenario.

13.5.2 *Representing Attribution*

While the existential processes typically relate to whole entities, *attributive processes* relate to the properties of (parts of) these entities. Boeriis (2009) describes three major grammatical categories of attribution in images which can all be manipulated in digital photo editing techniques, namely *intensive attribution* (properties of an element in itself), *possessive attribution* (properties provided by other elements added to, but not part of, an element) and *circumstantial attribution* (properties of an element caused by its surroundings).

The grammatical category *Intensive attribution* describes the visual properties of depicted elements in themselves—which mean the look and characteristics of element’s own components, such as size, surface structures, colour or shape (Boeriis, 2009, 192). In digital photo editing, there are numerous effects that are specifically designed for the purpose of retouching attributes in various ways through local modifications. Intensive attributes can, for instance, be manipulated by adjusting *colour* or *brightness*, which alters the way the elements look, for instance, brighter skin tone, more pronounced facial features on a person or a more saturated finish on a car’s bodywork. Similarly, *cloning* can be used to add or remove the intensive attributes of an element at the level of local transmutation. Typically, cloning is used to remove skin blemishes or imperfections in an object’s surface. There are numerous other techniques for making skin appear flawless and some are implemented as automatic functionalities in phone apps, which adjusts the general contrast and softness of skin tones. In *Lightrroom*, there is a ready-made brush called *Soften Skin*, which is designed for painting in softness to the skin. The marzipan-soft appearance of fashion models’ skin is often achieved through a complicated process in *Photoshop* called *frequency separation*, which entails separating the colours in one layer and the structures in another and then retouching each layer individually. The result is that colour blemishes are evened out and structures like wrinkles and pimples are cloned out, while the minor skin structures and pores are still visible. This effect can make the models’ skin look completely perfect. Intensive attributes such as shape and size can also be manipulated by using different kinds of *warp* tools, such as the *Photoshop* tool *Liquify*, by which local transmutations are the result of pixels being pushed in a direction in the photograph, which can make a person seem slimmer, more muscular, more long-limbed and so on. Shape warping is also applied to faces to adjust facial features such

as eye size and placement, chin shape, nose size and shape and so on. Photoshop and many photo apps use automated facial and body recognition for aiding the process of selecting the area to transmute.

In *possessive attribution* elements in a visual text are given additional meaning by elements that are not a part of the element itself, such as clothes, glasses or objects carried in the hand of a depicted person (Boeriis, 2009, 192). Cloning can be used for adding or removing possessive attributes. For instance, if a politician is holding bottle of alcohol in a photograph, the alcohol could be removed and replaced with a bottle of water (or vice versa). Some apps have the option of automatically adding naturalistic makeup to a face or superimposing funny faces onto a person. Such humorous functionalities have not (yet) been implemented in professional software like *Photoshop*.

Circumstantial attribution describes how elements can be attributed meaning by the surroundings in which they appear (Boeriis, 2009, 193). For example, a person behind the counter in a shop can be construed as a salesperson, and a person behind the steering wheel in a taxi as a taxi driver. Similarly, furniture placed in the dining room is dining room furniture. Through local transmutation of circumstantial attributes, persons can be placed in completely new settings where they may never have actually been. In Photoshop, this entails a precise masking of the person and compositing them onto a different image, which then serves as the background. Typically, local modifications of colour and brightness are needed in order to make a convincing composite. Phone apps such as *FaceApp* contain specialised functionalities with which comparable results can be achieved using just a few clicks (see Boeriis, 2021).

Attribution is related to three other grammatical categories in which attribution may pave the way for the viewer to either recognise a particular person or place (*identification*), a certain type or category (*typification*) or a particular symbolic meaning (*symbolisation*) (Boeriis, 2009).

Deepfakes (Poulsen, 2021) make radical use of face recognition and identification of facial attributes and expressions to superimpose the face of one person onto the body of another as (inter-photo) local transmutations. In a well-made deepfake, it is impossible to detect the manipulation, which can represent a person as saying or doing something that they have never said or done. A number of phone apps are available that offer deepfake functionalities, such as *Snapchat*, *Face Swap Live* or *Reface*, by which a person's face can be superimposed onto a famous actor in a short sequence from a famous film scene in GIF format. These functionalities

will be developed further in the future as artificial intelligence becomes better at facial recognition and face swapping (ibid.).

13.5.3 *Representing Physical Actions*

In visual representation, the equivalent to Halliday's verbal material processes (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004) are called *action processes* (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). Action processes can be expressed graphically by means of vectors, such as concrete arrows and indirect pointing lines (ibid., 58), as well as by other indications of energy being expended to make a material impact in the world of the photograph, for instance, depictions of movement, pushing, lifting or holding (Boeriis, 2009; Boeriis & van Leeuwen, 2017).

In post-production, it can be a complex process to add material action to a photograph where there is none because the cues for material processes often include many parameters in various delicate local transmutations, such as the expressed muscular tensions and physical positions of limbs, as well as the body's interaction with the surrounding setting.

Action processes of movement can also be expressed through certain types of blurring in photographs, which originates from the fact that longer exposure times render moving elements blurry because they move through the frame during the time in which the shutter is open. This technically induced effect has become a convention for expressing (rapid) movement.

Photoshop provides a specialised effect called *Motion Blur* which offers the option of defining the amount of blur, the direction in which the blur should be added (the direction of the movement that is to be expressed) and how long the blur trail is—the longer the blur trail, the faster the movement. This effect can be used as a local transmutation to add an expression of movement to a particular object, whereas global transmutation is created by adding motion blur to the entire photograph, which emulates camera movement.

13.5.4 *Representing Emotions, Thoughts and Expressions*

In photographs, the emotions of depicted figures are read through the way their facial expressions and body language are conveyed in the image, and the visual expression of emotional states are called *affective processes* (Boeriis, 2009, 189). Emotions are read by looking at the way that the

components of the face (and body) are composed (see also Martinec, 2001; Feng & O'Halloran, 2013; Forceville, 2005). For instance, a frown is indicated by the eyebrows being pushed down and lips pressed together, a grin by exposed teeth and slightly squinting eyes and a surprised expression by lifted eyebrows, wide open eyes and perhaps an open mouth. The photographic representation of emotions can be achieved by instructing models or by capturing a shot at the exact moment when a person looks like they are expressing a particular emotional state.

The emotions of depicted human beings can be manipulated in post-production, but it is not an easy task as it involves recomposing the facial features and body language. The processes of manipulating emotions, for instance, involve local transmutations of warping the position and shape of facial structures. In the *Photoshop Liquify* tool, the specialised face recognition workspace makes it possible to add subtle adjustments to mouth and eyes, which can create changes in the appearance of emotional states in depicted persons. It is also possible to make more extreme alterations, but these will often appear exaggerated and with surreal or comic effects. Some smartphone apps have dedicated filters for changing the emotions of depicted people, for instance, *FaceApp* has a functionality where the facial expression can be altered to either *Upset* or a number of different types of *Smile*, ranging from *Tight* to *Wide*. These effects involve local transmutations typically including warping the areas around the mouth, eyes and cheeks, and some also include existential local transmutation where the mouth is rendered as open with artificially added, but natural-looking, teeth.

Speech can be expressed visually by means of speech bubbles (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2021, 63), it can also be deduced from facial expressions even when the verbiage is not represented (Boeriis, 2009, 190; Boeriis & van Leeuwen, 2017). The shaping of the mouth can indicate whether a person is speaking, and in fact any visual mode of expression can be expressed in a photograph: gesture, body language, writing, drawing, dancing, etc. (Boeriis, 2009, 190). Similarly, mental processes can be expressed through thought bubbles as well as through the expression on a person's face, indicating mental activity of different kinds. Thinking is typically instantiated through combinations of lowered eyebrows, focused gazes and perhaps a hand on the chin (see Boeriis, 2009 for further discussions of sensory, cognitive and affective processes).

Similar to the digital manipulation of emotional expression discussed above, using digital post-production tools such as *Photoshop Liquify*, it is possible to warp facial expressions in local transmutations to make a

person look thoughtful, but it is a complicated process. This functionality is typically not available in the ready-made effects in smartphone photo apps, which indicates that there is less of a demand for this functionality in everyday photographic practice. Many photo apps for smartphones do, however, have ready-made functionalities for superimposing speech bubbles and thought bubbles onto photographs as existential local transmutations (for instance, *Instagram*, *Snapchat* and *Camera+*). It is also possible to open or close the mouth of a depicted person via photo editing, but this demands more specialised photo apps (such as *Facetune* or *FaceApp*) or complicated work with warping and cloning in *Photoshop*.

13.6 MANIPULATING STRUCTURAL MEANING POTENTIAL

The textual metafunction is concerned with how the visual text is structured into a coherent whole and as such becomes a text. The weaving together of elements on the visual surface and the relative weighting and placing of elements help lead the viewer through the visual text and provide an understanding of how the elements are to be read in relation to each other (Boeriis, 2009). Manipulation of how photographs are to be perceived as texts includes the internal structural prioritisation and organisation of elements in the frame. *Salience* and *information value* are two important systems describing the conventions of structuring of elements in photographs in a Western context (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020).

13.6.1 *Foregrounding*

The textual system *salience* provides a hierarchy of importance among the elements in a photograph by foregrounding some at the expense of others (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020, 210). This is achieved by means of contrasting elements relative to the rest of the image by implementing *contrast forms* such as *colour contrast*, *brightness contrast*, *focus contrast*, *framing contrast* and *size contrast* (Boeriis, 2009, 237). By highlighting certain elements or areas, these elements are presented as more important and noteworthy (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020, 210), and this provides a structuring of the text that gives an overall understanding of the internal structural logics of the layout, which leads the reader's gaze or directs the attention towards some elements and away from others.

Choices in contrast forms instantiate a strategic salience hierarchy which, for instance, makes it possible to downplay controversial parts—in

other words divert the attention by foregrounding some elements and backgrounding others. In practice, this can be achieved by a number of productional choices, such as placing elements in the foreground during the shoot, focusing on selected elements or by placing the motif in a brightly illuminated area of the setting.

Options for manipulation of the salience hierarchy in software are manifold. Quite literally, highlighting areas of importance by making them brighter (*dodging*) or darkening the surroundings (*burning*) are both local modifications; making some areas focused and others blurry (*sharpening* and *blur*) are also local transmutations. Popular methods of retouching images also include local modifications, including dimming bright areas that demand the viewer's attention (*burning*) and removing distracting objects (*cloning*). Foregrounding can also be achieved by placing elements in front of others in a separate layer of foreground (*compositing*).

13.6.2 Placement

Under the term *information value*, Kress and van Leeuwen (2020) describe how the placement of elements in the (global) pictorial frame gives the elements different structural meaning depending on the area of the frame in which they are placed. In a Western context, structural meaning is related to either the picture's horizontal axis of left-right which represent relations of before and after (*given* versus *new*); the vertical axis, expressing top-bottom relations of generality or specificity (*ideal* versus *real*); or the radial axis relations between centre and periphery (*centre* versus *margin*) (ibid.).

The framing of the shot has an important influence on the information structure in the photo. For instance, the photographer can choose to put the main motif to the left side of the frame, the *given*, signalling that it is a known phenomenon and a structural point-of-departure for the shot, or vice versa place it to the right, the *new*, signalling that in the structure it is presented as something new and perhaps more contestable (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020).

In digital photo manipulation, the horizontal ordering of elements can be reversed by simply inverting the picture if there are no clear indications of left and right in the shot (for instance, writing), and the inversion of left and right in the mirrored photo will be an unnoticeable global transmutation. Changing the vertical order of elements in the frame is more complex, as a simple vertical inversion would result in the photograph being

upside down. A convincing change of the vertical order entails a motif that lends itself well to local transmutations through a process of complex compositing in *Photoshop*.

Post-productional *cropping* is a common functionality in photo editing software, which can change the information structure of the original shot. For instance, cropping off the left side of the image will place elements as *given* in the new framing. Cropping can also change the aspect ratio of the photograph, which may impact on the perceived information structure.

13.7 DISCUSSION

The trustworthiness of a given photograph can be assessed by correlating a photograph's claimed adherence to a particular semiotic truth convention to the applied photo manipulation. The analysis demonstrates how all aspects of the visual meaning-potential described in Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar (2020) which are related to claiming trustworthiness can be manipulated in digital postproduction of photographs. Many of these manipulations can be achieved through simple functionalities in the editing software, some of which are even partly automated, while a select few remain more difficult to achieve.

Based on the analysis, this article proposes that photographic claims of trustworthiness can be discussed in terms of the interpersonal validity system because it involves the degree to which the content is to be taken as true, factual and neutral or whether it is to be taken as more commented on, constructed and subjective. Global or local modification of colour, brightness and detail can alter the validity profile of a photograph closer to, or away from, the typical values of a given coding orientation, and in that sense increase or decrease the validity of the photograph. In all coding orientations high validity can be construed as representing the content as real (in different ways) and uncommented, whereas low validity makes the content less real and more commented, thus conveying more explicit subjectivity. The relative impact on trustworthiness by these choices depends on the particular coding orientation.

In the *naturalistic coding orientation*, the use of overt manipulations will typically lower the validity, whereby images do not claim representational trustworthiness. Nevertheless, overt manipulations do not necessarily equal low validity in all coding orientations. In the *sensory coding orientation*, overt manipulations can signal aestheticisation, and in the *emotive coding orientation* overt manipulation can signal a kind of 'honest

subjectivity'. In the *abstract and technological coding orientations*, heavier manipulation of colour and detail are often expected, as the photographs attempt to draw the appearance of the content away from the factual towards either more generic abstract concepts or to present the motif in a less complex way.

Even if specialised software offers (minor) fine-tuning of perspectives, the systems related to choices of point of view (interpersonal metafunction) are not easily manipulated in photo editing software because it is restricted by the characteristics of the camera lens and the perspective from which the photo was taken. Distorted perspectives create low validity in the naturalistic coding orientation but can be seen as higher validity, an aesthetic choice, in the sensory coding orientation, as well as in the emotive coding orientation, in which such manipulation conveys an unreal emotional state. In the abstract and technological coding orientations, a clear warping of image perspectives will typically result in a lowering of validity.

Manipulation of the physical actions of animate elements are neither easily created nor concealed in photo manipulation. This type of manipulation will most often be overt, thus lowering the validity and, consequently, photographs manipulated in this way will make less of a claim on trustworthiness. Overt digital manipulation that adds actional processes, for instance, by means of arrows or motion blur will in most cases also lower validity in the naturalistic coding orientation. Blurring as global transmutations can be construed as a representation of the photographer's physical motion and therefore be seen as higher validity in the sensory coding orientation. Local blur transmutations can be seen as expressions of feelings in the emotive coding orientation. Arrows and local blur can cause higher validity because they can be construed as expressions of more abstract material processes (abstract coding orientation) or concrete indicators of actions to be made by the viewer (technological coding orientation).

The digital manipulation of existence and attribution (ideational metafunction) change what is represented in the shot as well as the attributes of represented elements. As shown above, there are several specialised tools for manipulating existence and attribution in different software, and many of these are part of an easy-access workflow in the software designs. Making changes to what elements in the photograph do, feel, think or express are typically more complicated processes that are not implemented as ready-made functionalities in the software—but it is possible to

manipulate them all and thereby change the content of the photograph. When these changes are done overtly (exaggerated) in the naturalistic and sensory coding orientations, it lowers the validity and makes less of a claim of trustworthiness. However, in the emotive, abstract and technological coding orientations, the validity may be higher, as it can be used to convey exaggerated feelings, general themes or enhance important details.

The structural systems (textual metafunction) can also be manipulated in digital photo editing. Manipulations of foregrounding and the down-playing of elements (saliency) influence the hierarchy of importance, which can be used to divert attention to selected elements and away from others. This can be achieved with ease in all software that enables local modifications. The reorganisation of elements in the photo (information structure) can be a more complex process in editing, which can alter the text-internal logics of a photograph.

Photographic trustworthiness (whether subjective or objective) is obtained as a function of the relation between grammatical choices and the context in which they are instantiated. The meaning-potential of validity and coding orientation is related to contextual and co-textual factors that set the scene for which degree of realness and subjectivity are to be assessed. These co-textual and contextual factors include general cultural conventions, genre conventions, situational agreements and text specific agreements. For instance, if a photograph is part of a documentary text or otherwise claims to be documenting, there are different expectations about the degree and type of manipulation than there are in fictional photographs or art photography. If a photograph is inserted into an overall text in which the surrounding verbal text proclaims that the visual content is to be taken as factual truth, this sets up certain expectations about the photographic content, whereas accompanying verbal texts, for instance, indicating reconstruction or model photo will set up other expectations about the photograph. The insights provided by this article can be useful for further investigation of this interplay between contextual factors and grammatical choices of digital photo manipulation.

13.8 CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that taking a multimodal social semiotic approach is productive in paving the way for much-needed investigations into the meaning-making of photo manipulation practices in contemporary photography in relation to trust, truth claims and truthful representation. In

this way, it was possible to discuss very concrete semiotic meaning-making resources that are instantiated in images when there are claims of trustworthy communication. Although these insights are limited to a Western context, they can provide inspiration for exploring other cultural contexts. They provide the first steps towards a systematic understanding of how the technological resources involved in photo manipulation influence photographic communication. In other words, this article provides a step towards a description of a grammar of digital photo manipulation. Based on the proposed analytical framework, future research in this area will be able to examine and criticise the conventions for claiming trustworthiness in photographic practices, including the conventions that have been naturalised in(to) software designs, and thus contribute to educating new generations in critical citizenship in a socially sustainable digital society.

REFERENCES

- Baldry, A. P., & Thibault, P. J. (2006). *Multimodal Transcription and Text Analysis*. London: Equinox.
- Blaagaard, B. (2013). Post-human viewing: A discussion of the ethics of mobile phone imagery. *Visual Communication*, 12, 359–374.
- Boeriis, M. (2009). *Multimodal Socialsemiotik og Levende Billeder*. Ph.d. dissertation. University of Southern Denmark.
- Boeriis, M. (2012). Tekstzoom: om en dynamisk funktionel rangstruktur i visuelle tekster. In T. H. Andersen & M. Boeriis (Eds.), *Nordisk Socialsemiotik: pædagogiske, multimodale og sprogvitenskabelige landvindinger* (pp. 131–153). Syddansk Universitetsforlag.
- Boeriis, M. (2021). Emotive validity and the eye in the hand: Representing visual reality with digital technology. *Discourse, Context & Media*, 41, 28–40.
- Boeriis, M., & Holsanova, J. (2012). Tracking visual segmentation: Connecting semiotic and recipient perspectives. *Visual Communication*, 11(3), 259–281.
- Boeriis, M., & van Leeuwen, T. (2017). Vectors. In O. Seizov & J. Wildfeuer (Eds.), *New studies in multimodality: Conceptual and methodological elaborations*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Feng, D., & O'Halloran, K. L. (2013). Representing emotive meaning in visual images: A social semiotic approach. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 44, 2067–2084.
- Forceville, C. (2005). Visual representations of the idealized cognitive model of anger in the Asterix album *La Zizanie*. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 37, 69–88.
- Frosh, P. (2015). The gestural image: The selfie, photography theory, and kinaesthetic sociability. *International Journal of Communication*, 9, 1607–1628.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1978). *Language as social semiotics*. Edward Arnold.

- Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. (2004). *An introduction to functional grammar* (3rd ed.). Arnold.
- Han, S., Kim, K. J. & Kim J. H. (2017). Understanding nomophobia: Structural equation modeling and semantic network analysis of smartphone separation anxiety. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, 20(7), 414–427.
- Hodge, R., & Kress, G. (1988). *Social semiotics*. Polity Press.
- Hodge, R., & Tripp, D. (1986). *Children and television: A semiotic approach*. Stanford University Press.
- Johannessen, C., & Boeriis, M. (2021). Accelerating semogenesis: An ecosocial approach to photography. *Visual Communication*, 20, 527–551.
- Kress, G. (2010). *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. Routledge.
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (1st ed.). Sage.
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2001). *Multimodal discourse: The modes and Media of Contemporary Communication*. Hodder Arnold.
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (2020). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Van Leeuwen, T. (2005). *Introducing social semiotics*. Routledge.
- Martinec, R. (2001). Interpersonal resources in action. *Semiotica*, 135, 117–145.
- O’Toole, M. (1994). *The language of displayed art*. Leicester University Press.
- Poulsen, S. V. (2018). Filtered aesthetics: A study of Instagram’s photo filters from the perspective of semiotic technology. In E. S. Tønnessen & F. Forsgren (Eds.), *Multimodality and aesthetics* (pp. 250–265). Routledge.
- Poulsen, S. V. (2021). Face off: A semiotic technology study of software for making deepfakes. *Sign Systems Studies*, 49, 489–508.
- Ravelli, L., & Van Leeuwen, T. (2018). Modality in the digital age. *Visual Communication*, 17, 277–297.
- Zhao, S., Djonov, E., & van Leeuwen, T. (2014). Semiotic technology and practice: A multimodal social semiotic approach to PowerPoint. *Text & Talk*, 34, 349–375.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.



INDEX¹

A

Action processes, 325
Actions, 325, 330
Affective processes, 325, 326
Agreements, 311, 331
Algorithms, 12
All Of Us Are Dead, 221
Alternative, 280
Alternative epistemologies, 280, 281,
298, 302
Anachronisms, 200, 213, 216
Anachronistic, 200
Animated documentaries,
132–134, 148
Anti-historical, 199, 200, 204,
206, 215
Anti-historicity, 200, 213
Anti-vaccination, 19
Antoinette, Marie, 204, 207, 208
Archival images, 143
Arkel, Nikolaj, 209
Artificial intelligence (AI), 12

Art Spiegelman, 107
Attribution, 323–325, 330
Attributive processes, 323
Auschwitz, 130
Authenticity, 1, 6, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17
Authorial staging practices, 179
Author interviews, 17
Authority, 194
Autobiographical, 101, 104,
105, 121
Autofiction, 186

B

Bananarama, 36
Becoming Jane, 208
Benjamin, Walter, 14
Biofictions, 7, 18, 200, 205–208,
211, 215
Biographical, 200, 202–204, 208,
211, 213, 216
Bot, 180

¹Note: Page numbers followed by ‘n’ refer to notes.

C

Catherine the Great, 204, 215
 Charts, 90
 Chatbot, 19
 design, 257–258
 personality, 263
 Cognitive overload, 94
 Collage, 116
 Communicative pattern, 95
 Communicative tension, 86
 Control strategy, 92
 Coppola, Sofia, 204, 208, 213
 Covid-19, 1, 16
 Credibility, 15, 188
 Crisis-communication, 76
 Critical media literacy, 267
 Critical thinking, 248
The Crown, 209
 “Cruel Summer,” 36
 Culture of presence, 182

D

Data literacy, 5, 18
 Death numbers, 80, 83
 Deep fakes, 6, 14
 Deictic index, 137
Der Spiegel, 27, 28, 36, 41
 Dietrich, Marlene, 204
 Digital ethnographic, 280
 Digital ethnography, 276, 282, 301
 Discourse strands, 76
 Discursive shift, 83
 Discursive strategy, 79, 87
 Disinformation, 7
 Distrust/distrusting, 278, 281, 287,
 289–292, 301, 302
 Documentaries, 3
 Documentary comics, 135
 Documentary film, 17
 Dyke, W.S. Van, 204

E

Elizabeth, 206, 207, 209, 210,
 212, 215
 Epistemologies, 280
 Event, 229–231, 237
 Existential processes, 322, 323
 Extracommunicational truthfulness, 9,
 10, 16, 18

F

Face masks, 85
 Fact-checking commentaries, 250
 Factuality, 154, 155, 166, 167
 Factuality and fictionality, 190
 Factual pact, 29
 Fake news, 2, 19, 256
Fake News Immunity Chatbot, 247
 Fakes, 2, 31
 Faketional, 18, 38, 44, 187
Fallacies, 250
 Fanning, Elle, 209, 211
The Favourite, 211
 Fiction, 28
 Fictionality, 153–157, 159, 167,
 168, 170
 Filters, 309, 310, 316, 317, 319, 326
Forrest Gump, 156
 Foucault, Michel, 13
 Functionality, 264

G

Gamification elements, 258
 Gaza, 33
 Gaziantep, 39
 General guidelines, 91
 Genres, 77
 Global modifications, 314
 Global transmutations, 315
 Grammar, 19, 309–332

Graphic memoir, 16
The Great, 199–202, 204, 208–215

H

Hand-drawn images, 127, 130, 132
 Hasty generalization, 252
 Hoult, Nicholas, 211, 212
 Human computer interaction
 (HCI), 254–256
 Hybridity, 6, 16–17

I

Iconicity, 8
 Iconosphere, 16, 53, 56–58, 60, 64, 65
 Ideational, 319, 321–327
 Ideational metafunction, 313, 330
 Identification questions, 250
 Imitation, 184
 Indexical iconicity, 131, 143
 Indexicality, 8, 133, 134, 147
 Indices, 103, 104, 106, 108, 115, 116
 “Information disorder,” 2
 Information value, 327, 328
Inoculate, 256
 Intermediality, 5
 Intermedial reference, 110
 International criticism, 81
 Interpersonal, 316–321
 Interpersonal metafunction, 330
 Interpersonal validity, 329
 Interview, 181
 Intracomunicational coherences, 9, 10
 Intradiegetic stories, 39
 ISIS, 17, 128, 129, 131, 142
 ISIS genocide of Yazidis, 128

J

Jarrold, Julian, 208
 Journalists, 29

K

Kapur, Shekhar, 206, 208, 210,
 212, 215
 Knowledge communication, 1, 3,
 7, 10–15
 “Königskinder,” 42

L

Lanthimos, Yorgos, 211
 Learning objectives, 259
 Lewandowsky, Stephan, 277, 280,
 290, 291, 293, 299
 Local transmutations, 315

M

Madden, John, 208
 Magazine covers, 53, 54, 56, 57,
 61, 62, 64
 Mahabad, 130, 141
 Majdanek, 130
Marie Antoinette, 213, 214
Maus: A Survivor's Tale (1991), 155
 McNamara, Tony, 199, 201, 211,
 212, 214
 Media combination, 135
 Media distortions, 245
 Media integration, 135, 143
 Media literacy, 7
 Merkel, Angela, 34, 37, 41, 43
 Metafunctions, 313, 316
 Mirren, Helen, 204
Mise-en-abyme, 39
 Misinformation, 250
 Mocking (self)criticism, 193
 Mockumentaries, 7, 17, 158–161,
 167, 174
 Modifications, 315, 319, 320,
 322–324, 328, 329, 331
 Modifiers, 87
 Montage, 56–65

The Montage of the National Past, 16
 Multimodal features, 93
 Multimodal resources, 16, 78

N

Narratives, 10
 Narrator, 40
Networks of literacy, 249
 News making, 246
Night and Fog, 129

O

One Cut of the Dead, 219–221, 230,
 231, 235, 236

P

Pandemic, 75
 Pandemic strategy, 72
 Pedagogical relevance, 255
 Peirce, 9
 Perception of truth, 276, 277
 Perception of truthfulness, 283, 298
 Personal responsibility, 72
 Persuasive technologies studies, 261
 Photographs, 38
 Photo manipulation, 19, 309–332
 PiS, 49n1, 51, 55, 61–63, 65
 PiS-party, 49
 Point of view, 316, 320–321, 330
 Poland, 49, 51, 53–55, 57–61, 63–65
 POST-HOC, 252
 Post-Soviet, 276, 278, 285, 291, 294,
 300, 301
 Post-Soviet societies, 19
 Post-totalitarian, 276
 Post-truth, 2, 18, 219–228, 232, 233,
 235, 237
 Prawo i Sprawiedliwość, 49n1
 Press conferences, 5, 16, 74

Q

Queen pics, 200, 208–211,
 213, 216
 Questionnaire, 260

R

Reality bubble, 192
 Recommendations, 254
 Relotius, Claas, 27, 28, 42
 Reservations, 87
 Resnais, Alain, 129
 Rhetorical tool, 95
 Right-wing media, 54, 57, 59, 66
 Robot, 184
Roman-photo, 107
A Royal Affair, 209

S

Salience, 322, 327, 328, 331
 Satires, 158, 162, 166, 167, 170,
 172n9, 173–175
The Scarlet Empress, 204
 (Self)parody, 194
 Semiotic resources, 89
 Semiotic truth agreements,
 310, 311
 Setz, Clemens J., 179
Shakespeare in Love, 208
 Shearer, Norma, 204
 Sinjar Mountains, 142
 Situatedness, 77
 Slavery, 162, 164, 165,
 167–171, 169n6,
 173–175, 174n11
The Social Dilemma, 156
The Spanish Princess, 200
 Spiegelman, Art, 155
 Statistics, 90
 Stereotype, 35
 Surrogate, 180

T

Testimonials, 3
 Testimonies, 11, 16–17, 20,
 142, 143
 Textual, 327
 Textual metafunction, 313, 327, 331
 Thule, Ultima, 41
 Totalitarian, 278, 301
 Totalitarianism, 291, 299, 300
 Transmediations, 136, 137, 143,
 145, 147
 Transmutations, 315, 320–330
 Trump, Donald, 33
 Trust, 73
 Trustworthiness, 16, 19, 73
 Truth claims, 181
 Turing Test, 183

U

Uncanny Valley, 189
 UNRWA, 33–35

V

Validity, 19, 316–320, 329, 330
 Vallée, Jean-Marc, 210
Victoria, 200
 Video clips, 91
Visual grammar, 310, 312, 329

W

Waltz with Bashir, 134
The White Queen, 200
 Williams, Nigel, 204
 Witnessing, 11–15, 17, 20

Y

Yazidis, 128–130, 148

Z

Zombie, 17
 Zombie horror, 221