Julia Brühne / Pádraic Wilson /
Joaquín Orlando Valenzuela Celis (eds.)

# Impending Crises

## Contemporary Fantastic Narratives between Language, Image, and Sound

rombach wissenschaft | calliphaea

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The articles of this volume came to life during the conference "Global Crisis(es) between Image, Language and Time: On the Fantastic in Contemporary Films and Series" that was held in March 2022 at Bremen. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, it was held in a hybrid format that allowed for fruitful conversations both *in situ* and via the internet, enabling our presenters and guests from different regions of the world to join us for wonderful talks and discussions. We would like to express our gratitude to everyone who participated and helped to make the conference and this book a success.

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Julia Brühne, Joaquín O. Valenzuela Celis and Pádraic Wilson

# Opening Remarks

From a literary historical perspective, it is rather striking that the genre of the fantastic mostly coincides with socio-political crises linked to socio-historical transformations. For example, Jan Potocki's *Le manuscrit trouvé à Saragosse* (1794/1804) – one of the first manifestations of the genre – was published only a few years after the outbreak of the French Revolution. The first boom of fantastic texts in France also seems to be marked by social transformations, for the texts of the *Jeunes-France*, such as Théophile Gautier's "La Morte amoureuse" (1836), appear in the aftermath of the French Revolution of 1830. A leap across the Atlantic to twentieth-century Argentina reveals that the texts of the so-called 'neo-fantastic'[1], such as Cortázar's "Casa tomada" (1949) or "Las babas del diablo" (1959), also fall into a period characterized by radical social transformation in the wake of the Great Depression and the subsequent rise of *Peronism* as well as the military dictatorships that would follow. Yet, why and how does the genre (re-)emerge in cultural production in very specific historical contexts of crises, even long after its proclaimed death by Tzvetan Todorov?[2] What are its specific characteristics?

Over the last few decades, an increased production of films and series that manifest fantastic structures can be observed especially in Latin America, France, and the US. A renewed boom of the genre is, hence, apparent in those nations which had already been at the epicenter of the production of fantastic narratives in the 19th and the early 20th century. Some of these productions could be classified, according to Todorov's structuralist definition, as *fantastique pur:* narratives which oscillate between rational, maybe psychological explanations, and supernatural explanations of inexplicable events, provoking a state of continued hesitation in the implicit reader.[3] Other productions tend towards Todorov's hybrid forms of the *fantastique-merveilleux* or the

1 Jaime Alazraki*: En busca del unicornio: los cuentos de Julio Cortázar. Elementos para una poética de lo neofantástico,* Madrid 1983.

2 Cf. Tzvetan Todorov: *Indroduction à la littérature fantastique,* Paris 1970, p. 175.

3 Cf. ibid., p. 46.



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*fantastique-étrange*.[4] All of them, however, exhibit a fissure or rupture in the sense of Roger Caillois:

> Cependant dans les lois immuables de l'univers quotidien, une fissure s'est produite, minuscule, imperceptible, douteuse, suffisante cependant pour livrer passage à l'effroyable.[5]

In the productions in question, this fissure, we argue, is not only produced on the level of the narrated events. It does, rather, manifest itself on behalf of the semiotic system of language, the components of which are shattered while the story unfolds. In many of these audiovisual narratives, instability and ontological uncertainty arise from a fissure that goes along with an unusual handling of language, image, and/or sound: word and image, for instance, do not refer to each other, or only do so to a limited extent; language proves to be bulky, excessive, or opaque. In several cases, diffuse, confusing sounds (e.g., an unclassifiable hissing or whistling) operate beyond the image and beyond the level of dialogue. Sometimes, the image presents itself as blurred or fuzzy, or tends toward claustrophobic frames that come about through extreme close-ups or other disconcerting montage effects. What is, therefore, especially striking about these productions is that either their fantastic plots or their aesthetics or both, heavily rely on peculiar interrelations of different media channels: sound and image, the written word and spoken language. Sound and image drift apart or do not refer to a coherent semiotic system any more. Signs lose their connotative meaning; written or spoken language may try to reassemble fragmented or lost semantics, but, often, the peculiar aesthetics of image and sound contradict the endeavor of the word.

Now, how is this perceived boom in specific audiovisual fantastic narratives to be read from an analytical perspective which takes cultural criticism into account? What do contemporary fantastic audiovisual narratives or texts suffused with fantastic narrative devices articulate? The crises sound, image, words and language are thrown into here, correspond, in our view, to conflicts and crises on an abstract, collective level. The character of these conflicts is as manifold as the plots deployed in the respective narratives. The implicitly, allegorically conveyed crises, however, can be traced back to the socio-cultural and socio-political level, which was

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4 Cf. ibid., p. 49.

5 Roger Caillois: *Anthologie du fantastique,* Paris 1966, p. 10. Translation J.B.: "However, in the immutable laws of the everyday universe, a crack has appeared, tiny, imperceptible, dubious, sufficient however to give way to the appalling."



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already at work in the literary fantastic of the 19th and early 20th century.[6] Latent socio-political anxieties expressed by specific fantastic aesthetics as described above, center around but are not limited to the following: an uneasiness in the face of the falling apart of formerly binding structures, rules and concepts in the social, political or linguistic field, euphoria as well as discomfort given the advancement of artificial intelligence, the experience of economic marginality and precarity, collective guilt, apocalyptic scenarios regarding nature, and the question of stable, instable, hybrid or fluid identities within a globalist world that is, however, still divided along the lines of, for instance, urban regions and a rather isolated countryside.

In Latin America several films by Argentinian director Lucrecia Martel form an exemplary case for this specific fantastic aesthetics, such as e.g. *La mujer sin cabeza* (*The Headless Woman*, 2008), where blurry, dusty images and an increasingly erratic female protagonist are combined with diffuse, dreamlike fragments of different story bites alluding to spectral images of an unclear family history, adultery, and more collective (post-)colonial guilt. Similarly, *Zama* (2017), set in the 18th century, depicts the dull daily life of a magistrate of the Spanish crown in a remote spot in the South American colonies. On behalf of confusing, often sudden shots like seemingly improper close-ups, diffuse sounds, and disturbing visual elements like a lama suddenly marching through the picture or peculiarly slanted image details, the film is told in a hallucinatory, nightmarish way, blurring the boundaries between 'reality' and its beyond. An example of a, on the one hand, openly conveyed, yet, on the other hand, peculiarly hidden and displaced crisis, is the film *Distancia de Rescate* (*Fever Dream*, 2021) – the adaptation of Samantha Schweblin's homonymous novel (2014). Here, highly ambivalent and polyvalent images as well as a diffuse play with different diegetical levels lead the spectator to hesitate – in the Todorovian sense – between rational and supernatural explanations for the disease of the protagonist's daughter and other children, revolving rather explicitly around a massive (agricultural) crisis. An example that offers a literal crisis of sound and voice is Natalia Meta's film *El prófugo* (*The Intruder*, 2020), which was also, however loosely, adapted from a novel. This film is, like many of our examples, a genre hybrid that cannot be

6 In the case of Argentinean fantastic literature, there are, moreover, cases where remarkable parallels to the fragmentation of the linguistic system can already be listed; cf. the article of Julia Brühne in this volume.



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categorized just that easily. Here, protagonist Inés, who works as dubbing actress experiences how her voice or, rather, her vocal chords start to live an uncanny life of their own. The unsettling events start after Inés had to witness the traumatic death of her partner. Her vocal chords suddenly produce sounds that do not fit the content of what she is supposed to say and come to be recorded on tape as uncanny companions to her 'official' voice.

In France, a somewhat similar *sujet* was staged in 2007, when Atlanté Kavaïté published her film *Écoute les temps – Fissures.* In *Fissures*, sound engineer Charlotte learns that her mother has been murdered in her house on the country side. When she sets up her recording equipment in the house, she realizes that the machines mysteriously record sound fragments from the past that subsequently mingle with the present enabling her to reconstruct the murder piece by piece and exposing the person responsible for it. In 2009, Marina de Van published her first feature-length work, *Ne te retournes* pas (*Don't Look Back*) – a film evolving, in turn, around the instability and unreliability of sight, memory and the relationship between signifier and signified. A young mother and lately unsuccessful author, Jeanne, notices slight changes in the way her house, for instance the kitchen looks dependent on being recorded on a home video tape or being looked at in the very present. Neither her husband nor her children understand her claims, assuring her that everything is perfectly normal. When Jeanne suddenly starts to notice major differences not only in the visual appearance of her family but also of her very self in the mirror, she goes on a journey to Italy, desperately trying to re-establish the connection between (visual) signifier and signified and to restore a, as it were, always already lost identity. The film ends with the protagonist accepting a rather schizophrenic but at the same time extremely creative doubleness in sight, image and writing as she and her Italian 'double' finally start to write a novel together.

Guillaume Nicloux's Netflix mini-series *Il était une séconde fois* (2019) also deals with the problem of identity. Nicloux, however, more or less openly introduces the topic of political identity and impending crises to his work, given that the seemingly trivial love story metaphorically appears to evolve around conflicts at the center of which the energy crisis, the problems of and with the European Union and the *gilet jaune* protests are to be found. On behalf of confusing, unrelated sounds, apparent time travel and communication gone astray, an uneasiness gradually unfolds, which can be read as part of a deeper socio-political allegory. Another



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Netflix series from the same year, *Osmosis* (Audrey Fouché, 2019), in turn draws on the topic of torn and doubtable identity, treacherous autonomy and the question of the constitution, consistence, texture, and desire of the (postmodern) subject. Not on behalf of time travel but instead via uncanny mediality – in this case, uncanny digitality – the series, we could state, depicts certain inner crises of a hyper individualistic society that craves to find its perfect double.

However, not only in France but also in francophone nations such as Senegal manifestations of the genre – albeit with a postcolonial twist – can be observed. For example, the feature film *Atlantique* (2019) by the French-Senegalese director Mati Diop initially plays with the hesitation typical for French fantastic narratives. Images and sounds of the Atlantic Ocean transpose the uncertainty of the *histoire* – concerning the faith of a boat of refugees – to an ontological uncertainty of the scenes themselves. The unconventional film borders on the fantastic, offering numerous different interpretations to the viewer. Between (migration) drama, love story, ghosts, class struggle, and mysterious overtones, Diop offers a genre-transgressing, hard to pigeonhole film that pin points to numerous social crises via hybrid aesthetic approaches.

In the United States, one of the masters of the fantastic is doubtlessly film making veteran David Lynch, who – together with Mark Frost – created the famous postmodernist mystery series *Twin Peaks* (1990-91, 2017). *Twin Peaks* is a *mélange* of crime drama and tragicomedy, of true and false love, adultery, and coming-of-age *sujets*, where the fantastic resides precisely in the constant hovering of the *merveilleux* or the supernatural over otherwise rational and psychological explanations. *Twin Peaks* constantly toys with the dissemination and fragmentation of sound, image, and language, thereby repeatedly constructing and deconstructing meaning and exposing the difficult process of making sense of any sign at all. Especially in the last season, the 'revival' from 2017, there is an increasing appearance of strange humming and hissing noises the source and origin of which are never actually explained, but which, together with apparently inept images, function as markers of a divested sign system and a crumbling of the symbolic, which is in turn characterized by extreme violence. Yet, *Twin Peaks* is far from being the only fantastic text produced by Lynch. Throughout his entire work – from *Lost Highway* (1997) to *Mullholland Drive* (2001) – he makes use of narrative devices typical of the fantastic genre. Apart from Lynch's works, there has been an impressive number



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of similar productions during the last years, which seem to dwell on the topic of the somewhat cursed or haunted house – or town, respectively – and its allegorical implications for society, the nation. A prominent recent example is *The Watcher* (2022) telling the story of a family of four who buys a house in the suburb they cannot actually afford. Soon, they start getting letters from an enigmatic entity who subtly threatens them and implies he is watching the family day and night. In addition, the neighbors act overtly hostile and seem to excessively enjoy their not quite explicable hatred towards the newcomers. The show includes several mysterious elements, oscillating between the marvelous and the uncanny. Together with sketchy, double-bind communication and contradictory information, they create a puzzling, grotesque, and paranoid atmosphere.

As can be taken from these examples, many of the fantastic contemporary works convey a latent ontological uncertainty, circulating through many different, sometimes connected realms. In addition to thematic features typical for fantastic texts – such as the apparent existence of uncanny, haunting creatures, trouble with a doppelgaenger, or other *sujets* evolving around the topic of split identity –, ambiguity and disparities between *histoires* and *discourses* which aim at a problematization of the sign and hence convey a semiotic crisis, seem to be increasingly dominant. One of the major issues that brought this volume to life in the first place, is, hence: how does the contemporary manifestation of a specific – cinematographic – fantastic articulate political and cultural anxieties linked to present crises in globalized societies? These crises may in part already be known to the public, they may already have a place within the official political discourse. Yet, there is something hidden from this discourse; elements strange to it, which remain unspoken, conflicts which tend to be suppressed, dimensions which don't make it into the public realm or the political field, or only make it there in distorted ways, therefore failing in articulating themselves properly. The question hence is: Where are the connections between fantastic *sujets* and sociopolitical upheaval in fantastic or semi-fantastic narratives today? Which latent contemporary anxieties are conveyed here? The articles in this book examine the question of whether and how images, sounds, and dialogues in fantastic films/series - and, sometimes, novels – that have gone off the rails can be interpreted as allegorical counterpart of a contemporary social imaginary which has also gone awry. Examining many of the



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examples described above, they ask, for instance, how the *sujets* in question mediate, point to, construct or deconstruct crises in the realms of identity, digitality, or democracy.

In her opening article, before examing *La mujer sin cabeza* and *The Watcher*, **Julia Brühne** asks how and when the cinematic dissociation of word, image, and language in connection to impending political crises may have started. She takes a closer look at two films from the 1970s, which convey in a rather paradoxical way the dissociation of the semiotic systems 'Western' civilization relies on at this point. They can hence be defined as harbingers of what will later be expressed predominantly in the realm of the audiovisual fantastic.

In his discussion of *Osmosis*, **David Klein** explores how the series conveys a media crisis in the face of the overwhelming possibilities of artificial intelligence in a not too far away future. He traces how *Osmosis* draws on the fundamental unsettledness of the postmodern subject, who approaches the AI with a Platonian desire for wholeness, and asks if these desires follow progressive or regressive tendencies.

In his analysis of Guillaume Nicloux's mini-series *Il était une seconde fois* (2019), **Pádraic Wilson** explores the relationship between the series' transnational love story and its genuinely cinematographic fantastic discourse. While the love story allegorically negotiates a French identity in a European context, inexplicable sounds invading otherwise ordinary scenes disturb the efforts by image and language to establish such an identity and ultimately point to the political crisis of a post-democratic deadlock in French society.

Marie Darrieussecq novel *Truismes* (1996) is, next to C. E. Feiling's *El mal menor*, the only literary text to be examined in this miscellany. **Sören Görlich** shows how the novel draws on similar strategies as the discussed filmic texts in order to convey the deeper conflicts of a split, torn, and transgressive identity and of a community which finds itself in fundamental tension, and is revealed in its subtle aggressiveness.

**Joaquín Orlando Valenzuela Celis** focuses on the construction of alternative identities articulated in *Titane* (2021). Looking back at canonical examples of fantastic literature and recent Hollywood's history, he traces the dominant tropes used in the depiction of bodily alteration, transformation and expansion, beyond the traditionally known as the human experience. Fantastic and *étrangement* narratives are not only expressed through the enigmatic atmospheres imbricated in the way of storytelling, its core, but also by the visual aspect, its aesthetics.



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In her article on Just Philippot's feature film *La nuée* (2020), **Gisela Febel** analyses the obsessional relationship between an impoverished female farm owner and an increasingly uncanny, vampire-like swarm of locusts, which ultimately turns out as a self-defeating struggle against multinational capitalism. She illustrates how the film is to be grasped as a pluri-dimensional explosion of societal crises in agricultural France by taking into account the film's eco-critical, anthropological, and psychoanalytical dimensions.

In her contribution, **Karen Struve** explores the question to what extent the structuralist definition of the fantastic, which Todorov elaborated on the basis of hexagonal narratives of the 19th century, needs to be rethought for the analysis of postcolonial films of the Francophonie such as *Atlantique* (2019) by the French-Senegalese director Mati Diop.

In his analysis of the film adaptation *Distancia de rescate* (2021), **Matthias Hausmann** elaborates on the relationship between the film's fantastic structure and crisis narratives in general and thus grasps the contemporary renewed productivity of the genre as a sophisticated strategy to unveil the reductionist and evasive effect of the latter.

In her article, **Sabine Schlickers** examines C. E. Feiling's novel *El mal menor* and Natalia Meta's film adaptation *El prófugo.* In a detailed comparison, she shows how novel and film use different narrative strategies in order to produce, e.g., ambiguity. She argues that the novel creates a 'perturbatory narration' whereas the film works in a different way, producing the fantastic on behalf of a strategy of empuzzlement.

**Valentina B. Rosales** considers the spectator's position in the fantastic circuit and their role in the reception of narratives of *étrangement*. For that matter, she focuses on temporality in *Twin Peaks – The Return* as a crucial point of encounter between the process of storytelling and reception. Since temporality is perceived by the viewers from their chronological point of view and the flow of the plot seems to be trapped in a kind of eternal backwardness, it allows the surging of the moment of enigma and ontological insecurity, which opens the narrative to the possibility of a figural interpretation.

**Carlos Alberto Rodríguez Gómez** (re-)introduces the concept of *delirio narrativo* in order to propose a genuinely Latin American perspective to audio-visual analyses, since the narratives in this part of the world have traditionally opted to surpass the literary sense and explore the full potential of language's semantics. *Delirio narrativo* proves to be a fundamental



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aspect of the strategies of *Twin Peaks*' third season (2017) to construct an alternative reality.

Bremen and Madrid, August 2023

Julia Brühne
Joaquín O. Valenzuela Celis
Pádraic Wilson



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Julia Brühne (Bremen)

# Language – Image – Meaning. The Deconstruction of Certainties from the Hollywood Seventies to *La mujer sin cabeza* (2008) and *The Watcher* (2022).

Nunca se sabrá cómo hay que contar esto,
si en primera persona o en segunda, usando la tercera del plural
o inventando continuamente formas que no servirán de nada.
Si se pudiera decir: yo vieron subir la luna, o:
nos me duele el fondo de los ojos, y sobre todo así:
tú la mujer rubia eran las nubes que siguen corriendo
delante de mis tus sus nuestros vuestros sus rostros. Qué diablos.

(Julio Cortázar, "Las babas del diablo")

## I. Intro: *Three Days of the Condor*

A nice, historic building in New York. A sign at the front door that reads *American Literary Historical Society*. Inside, we see an impressive machine automatically 'reading' and turning the pages of a large book. Simultaneously, we see a piece of paper composed of two columns coming out of a printer. The computer adds sentence after sentence. On the left side, there is a Chinese text, transcribed into the Latin alphabet; on the right side, apparently, we see the English translation. In an adjoining room, a group of people debates how a gunshot murder they have read about may have possibly taken place since there is no bullet to be found. A young, blond, jolly man who just arrived on a small motorbike, is being mildly rebuked by his boss, an elderly gentleman. The young man – Joseph Turner – immediately solves the puzzle about the mysterious gunshot murder: it must have been a bullet made of ice, conveniently melting away after the shot. He is, however, unable to solve a mystery of another kind. He tells his colleague and girlfriend Janice, a young American of Chinese origin, that there is this Chinese detective story, a book that does not sell well and that has, however, been translated into a handful of unusual languages: into Turkish, Arabic, Spanish, and Dutch, but not into French, Russian, or German. He asks Janice to translate a Chinese ideogram for



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him. It means ‘heaven’, she replies, also ‘the best’, or ‘tops’. Joe, unsatisfied with the translation, insists there must be another meaning hidden in the sign. A while later, Joe leaves through the back door to order lunch for everyone. When he comes back, he finds all of his colleagues, including his girlfriend, his boss, the female receptionist, and the janitor brutally murdered by – not so mysterious – gunshots. Horrified, Turner flees. For the rest of the film, he will be on the run from his own employer, the CIA, trying to make sense as the codes he knew have been turned upside-down.

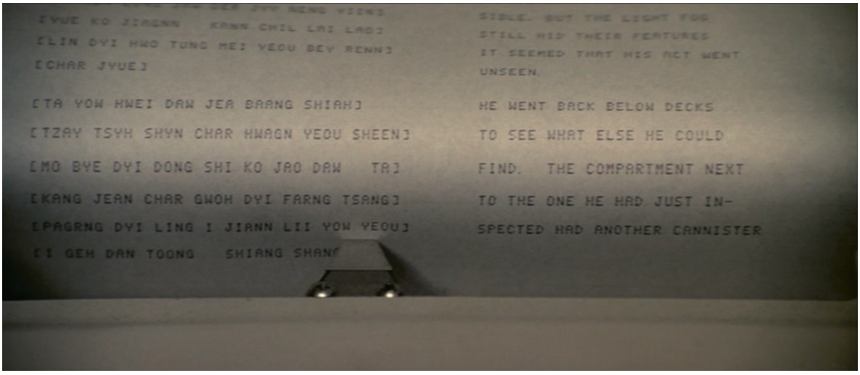


Figure 1 THREE DAYS OF THE CONDOR (1975): Translation in process.

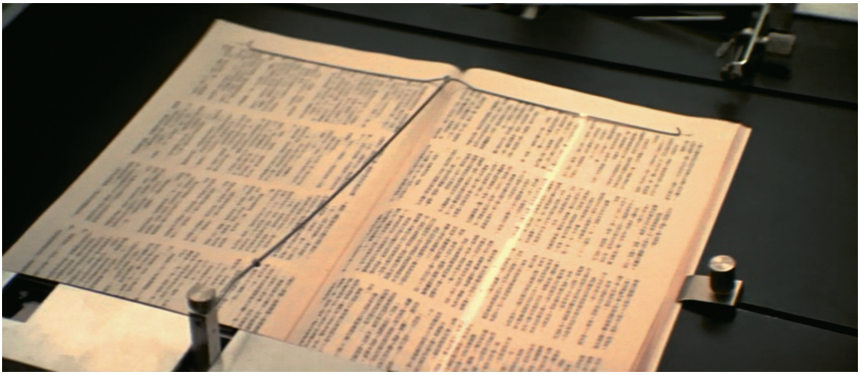

Figure 2 THREE DAYS OF THE CONDOR (1975): A machine ‘reading’.



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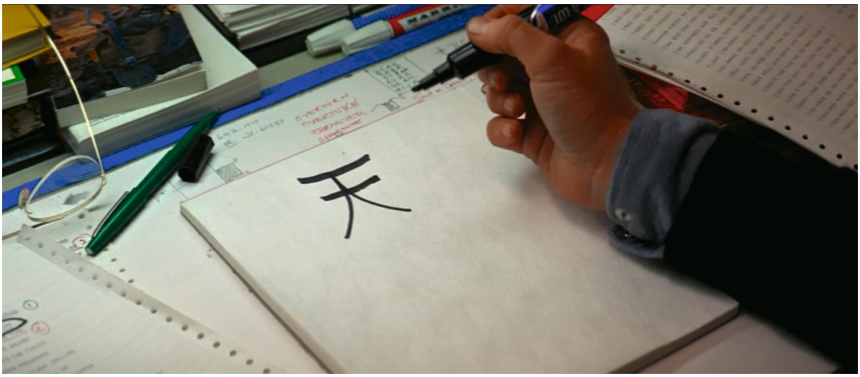

Figure 3 THREE DAYS OF THE CONDOR (1975): The mysterious ideogram.

What I just described are the first approx. 17 minutes of Sydney Pollack's *Three Days of the Condor* from 1975, starring Robert Redford as protagonist Joseph Turner. *Three Days of the Condor* is not a phantastic film – although in 1976, it received the Edgar Allan Poe Award by the Mystery Writers of America association, which might give us a clue as to what extent its uncanny, paranoid over- and undertones always remain within a mysterious, inconclusive realm. It might therefore not be entirely coincidental that the opening scenes of the film – when we see the machines 'reading' and translating a large number of books as well as Joe's and Janice's conversation about the Chinese ideogram and its potentially ambivalent meaning – bear certain similarities with two phantastic short stories from Argentina. The first of them will play a bigger part again later on in this article, when we will take a look at the films *The conversation* and *La mujer sin cabeza*: Julio Cortázar's short story "Las babas del diablo" ("The Devil's Drivel").[1] This *cuento* begins with the narrator's reflection about how stories can be told and what role machines like a typewriter or a camera play in the process of creating, recording, and remembering a story. He wonders how much a machine knows about the other; knowledge a human being might never acquire. *Three Days of the Condor* also deals with the fascinating, yet slightly uncanny autonomy of computers, taking over the reading, analyzing and translation process after having received a few orders from a human being. The implicit issue dealt with both in

1 Cf. Julio Cortázar: „Las babas del diablo" (1959), in: id.: *Las armas secretas*, ed. by Susana Jakfalvi, Madrid 2022, pp. 115–129.



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Cortázar's story and in Pollack's film is a certain uneasiness towards the ideal of correct, unambiguous interpretation – an ideal that has been or will be shattered dramatically over the course of the respective stories. The other fantastic short story *Three Days of the Condor* seems to be an implicit successor of, is Jorge Luis Borges' *cuento* "El Jardin de los senderos que se bifurcan" ("The Garden of Forking Paths") from 1941.[2] This hybrid story oscillates between spy story and fantastic narrative. During the First World War, Dr. Yu Tsun, chair of English at the German University in Tsingtao, works as spy for Germany. He has to deliver a message before an Irish man working for the British gets to him and kills him. He travels to a city where he meets Stephen Albert, an elderly man dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of the works of one of Tsu Yuns ancestors, Ts'ui Pên, who has created a labyrinth consisting of books and texts designed to hide the mystery of time. The forking paths are different time lines in different possible futures, leading to a possibly endless story where the protagonist can die in one chapter and be alive in the other. Like Borges' complex story, *Three Days of the Condor* too alludes to the combination of mysterious texts, hidden messages, and ambivalent translation and decoding processes. In both narratives, someone is being chased and in need to decode a riddle, realizing, finally, that there are different 'truths' to be applied to their situation. The labyrinth Joe Turner is caught in and which he step by step reveals, is constituted by the 'forking paths' of ambivalent government institutions and hidden groups within these institutions, operating beyond the public, and communicating via a complicated braid of codes and linguistic signs. The mystery Turner has gotten himself into is conveyed through the potential ambiguity of a Chinese ideogram, which works as a metaphor for the ambiguity of his own sign system and which also lies at the heart of Borges's story. *Three Days of the Condor* is hence, I would argue, a harbinger to a specific genealogy of phantastic films, which are characterized by their unusual relationship to the ambivalence of language and (democratic) politics. I chose it as an entrée to my article because *Three Days of the Condor* conveys a profound discomfort and anxiety in the face of an omnipresent yet not openly visible and hard to prove threat to the democratic system. *Three Days of the Condor* stands out from thematically similar films made in the post-Watergate and late-phase Vietnam era that feature a paranoid plot

2 Cf. Jorge Luis Borges: „El jardin de los senderos que se bifurcan" (1941), in: *Ficciones* (1944), in: id.: *Obras completas*, ed. by María Kodama, Buenos Aires 2005, pp. 506–514.



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emerging from a deep distrust regarding government agencies such as the CIA or the FBI.[3] Unlike productions like *The Parallax View* (Alan J. Pakula, 1974), or *Executive Action* (David Miller, 1973), *Three Days of the Condor* prominently features questions of the contingency and instability of language, communication, and signs.[4] It is about bestowing apparently unambiguous terms or facts with latent connotative significations and revealing concealed relationships between different signifiers, hence twisting and destabilizing their conventional meaning, and, along with this, the political order.

After the opening sequences, when the *American Literary Historical Society* has been hit, it is gradually revealed that Turner and his colleagues are a group of "book worms"[5] who work for a peculiar branch of the CIA. They are in charge of reading "everything that's published in the world"[6]: adventurous novels, journals… They feed computers with every scheme, plot, trick, and code they read about, having the machine cross-referencing them with actual CIA plans and operations. It is Turner's job to screen the stories and reports he reads for potential leaks and possible new ideas for future operations. While doing so, one day he apparently comes across the mysterious Chinese ideogram which he believes could be key to the deciphering of some conspiracy he is not yet able to point his finger on. All he has are disparate pieces of information, like the languages the Chinese detective story has been translated to (and to which it has not). The implicit spectator does not have any more insight into this riddle than Joe has – on the contrary, we basically join the story *in medias res*, when Joe has already begun to try and put some pieces of the puzzle together.

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3 As Pollack stated in an interview about *Three Days of the Condor*: "I tried to deal, as much as I could, with trust and suspicion, paranoia, which I think is happening in this country, when every institution I grew up believing sacrosanct is now beginning to crumble." Quoted after Jonathan Kirshner: *Hollywood's Last Golden Age. Politics, Society, and the Seventies Film in America*, Ithaca 2013, p. 155. For a detailed description of how the Nixon era shapes, or, as he himself puts it, "haunts" (133) the seventies film, see ibid., pp. 133–165.

4 As Drügh and Mergenthaler remark, the realm of language here is reversed – or subverted – in the manner that it is not fictional texts, e.g. crime fiction, that forms the associations the readers or viewers have regarding the sphere of the CIA here. It is, rather, the CIA that trawls popular culture in the search for useful material. Cf. Heinz J. Drügh, Volker Mergenthaler: „Ästhetik des Spionagefilms. Überlegungen zu einem Genre", in: id. (eds.): *Ich ist ein Agent. Ästhetische und Politische Aspekte des Spionagefilms*, Würzburg 2005, pp. 7–50, p. 7.

5 Sydney Pollack: *Three Days of the Condor*, USA 1975, 00:25:17.

6 Ibid., 00:40:28.



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We are thus forced to join the mystery with even less information, trying to make sense of the terrible and seemingly unrelated events to come. The ideogram scene opens the door into a strange, nightmarish world where signs could lose their conventional connotations at any time. For the rest of the film, Turner will not be able to close that door and return to his previous, stable sign system. Together with the spectator, he is captured in a paranoid, yet deadly real world that requires the subject to step out of their traditional sign system, to form new associations and decode new meanings in order to make sense of the things happening around them. The ideogram has opened Pandora's box, which, in this case, holds a bunch of new meanings and concealed semantics. When Joe asks Janice about the meaning of the sign, he hopes for a wider range of possible significations and distrusts her ability to fully decode it:

> Janice. Look at this face. Could I be wrong about an ideogram?
> Joe (chuckling). It's a great face. But is has never been to China.[7]

Janice's face, her Asian traits, might refer to her ability to master the Chinese language, but her outer appearance is misleading as she is an American who is, as Joe's remark implies, essentially alienated to the culture of her ancestors. He therefore continues to believe that there is still some other, hidden signification to the sign. It is never revealed if he is right or not. In the end, it turns out that he *was* right about a conspiracy taking place. This conspiracy, however, is not one happening outside the USA with some criminal external entity behind it. It is rather a scandal happening *inside* the CIA, proving there is an *imperium in imperio* at work, carrying out its own criminal plots for a supposed 'greater good'. The matter at stake is the procuring and securing of US-American dominance over countries in possession of oil fields – probably via the invasion of said countries. This is why the apparently inconspicuous Chinese detective story had been translated into Arabic, Turkish, Spanish and Dutch, but not into German, Russian, and French. Further details are, however, never revealed to the spectator. Turner, so it seems, accidentally stumbled across the scheme that turns out to have been taken out more or less unofficially by a small group within the CIA. The leader of this group, Leonard Atwood, Deputy Director of Operations for the CIA's Middle East division, hence ordered an Alsatian hitman to take out Joe Turner and the other book worms.

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7 Ibid., 00:06:00-00:06:07.



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Both the idyllic atmosphere inside of the house where this peculiar CIA division works, as the profound ambiguity of meaning, signification, and interpretation apparent in the exposition sequence are conversely mirrored by the all too definite and unequivocal shooting sequence. One group member after another fall victim to the precise and inescapable gunfire. The deadly accuracy of the gun shots is not at all ambiguous, but it is unmistakably related to the paradigm 'text – code – translation – signification': We directly witness how the receptionist, the janitor, the boss, and the two male colleagues are brutally shot. We see the machine gun fire; we see them bleed and fall. At the moment when Janice is murdered, however, the camera pans to the right and focuses on the printer. We hear the shots *hors-champs*. The printer still prints, however now, he only prints out the English translation. The left column with the transcribed Chinese text is missing. The killings provoke a major rupture leaving Turner with profound anxiety; Janice's death, however, marks a void in the processes of the interpretation and decoding. The original – if we can even speak of such, has the Chinese text already been transcribed into the Latin alphabet – is missing; a blank space has taken its place and all we are left with is a contingent copy whose faithfulness we cannot determine. The stable, and, as it were, transcendental element of the deciphering process has been cut off and what remains is an empty translation without original. The blank spaces in the paper column correspond to the inexplicable blanks that open up in front of Joe Turner from the very moment he tries to solve this riddle: formerly easy to categorize political institutions of the democratic state, such as the CIA, cannot be trusted anymore. They become ambiguous blank spaces to which traditional code and belief systems are no longer applicable.

*Three Days of the Condor* expresses a rapid loss of trust in constitutional democracy, including the press. At the end of the film, Turner meets Higgins, his ambivalent Deputy Director. Turner tells him he just gave the details of the intrigue and the murder of his colleagues to *The New York Times.* Higgins asks him how he can be sure the *Times* will print the story. The film ends here, leaving the implicit spectator with the awkward feeling that a corrupted and/or frightened press might suppress the scandal after all and thereby provoke a later assassination of Turner – the only man who not only knows the truth but is willing to tell it. In the next chapter, we will take a closer look at how another film of the 1970s highlights the connection between paranoia, language, codes, signs, and the phantasmatic breakup of previous securities: Francis Ford Coppola's



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*The Conversation* (1974). This film not only has its origins in the realm of the literary fantastic – it also features a phantasmatic storyline that spells out how the drifting apart of signifier and signified, of sound, sight, and interpretation points to a deeper crisis of trust, community, and liberty in the post-Watergate democratic polity. First, however, let us dive a bit into the theoretical frame of the fantastic and of the linguistic system we are dealing with here.

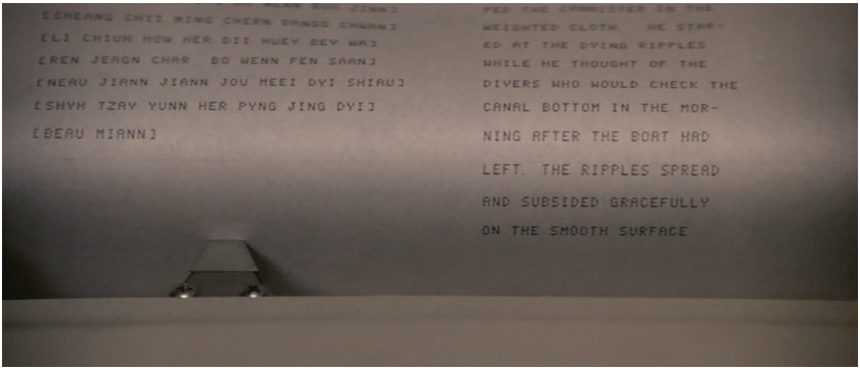


Figure 4 THREE DAYS OF THE CONDOR (1975): Void left by Janice's death.

## II. Catalyst: *The Conversation*, or, How Shattered Signs Shape the Fantastic

If we follow Todorov's definition from 1970, a fantastic story is characterized primarily by the hesitation the (implicit) reader feels regarding the nature of the presented events. In a fairytale, marvelous creatures like fairies or talking animals are part of the setting. Their existence is neither questioned nor does the implicit reader perceive the presented world as a world similar to their own, following the same laws of physics and nature. If, however, the reader is presented with a world similar to their own where, suddenly, events take place which do not seem to have a natural explanation, said hesitation can emerge. We wonder if the events we read about have a natural cause – for instance, staged spook, hallucinations or dreams –, or if the events have a supernatural cause: the actual presence of ghosts, for example. As long as the real nature of the strange event is not cleared up, the implicit reader remains within a state of hesitation. Stories which oscillate between the two possibilities without ever clarifying how the events presented are to be categorized, belong, for Todorov, to the



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pure fantastic *(fantastique pur)*. Stories where the supernatural or natural character of the events is revealed at some point, belong to either the category of the fantastic-marvelous *(fantastique-merveilleux)* or to the category of the fantastic-uncanny *(fantastique-étrange)*.[8]

One of the lesser known and rarely cited passages of Todorov's famous *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* is a paragraph where he talks about the ambivalent connections between literature and language. According to Todorov, one of the main functions of literature in general is to bypass and destroy "the metaphysics inherent in all language. The nature of literary discourse is to *go beyond* […]; literature is a kind of murderous weapon by which language commits suicide."[9] Fantastic literature is, in turn, a "quintessence of literature"; "on every page [it] subverts linguistic categorizations"[10]. The dialectics between real and unreal inherent to all literature, come to its peak in the genre of the fantastic because it "questions precisely the existence of an irreducible opposition between real and unreal."[11] "[B]y combatting the metaphysics of everyday language", Todorov states, "it [the fantastic] gives that language life; it must start from language, even if only to reject it.[12] Michail Bachtin, too, made an interesting case for the critical potential of fantastic narratives within certain linguistic genre structures when he stated that the Menippean satire was such a privileged organon of expressing (social) critique precisely because "its bold and unrestrained use of the fantastic […], serves not for the positive *embodiment* of truth, but as a mode for searching after truth, provoking it, and, most important, *testing* it."[13] To criticize the discourses and "truths" of an epoch by means of a subversion of language, can therefore be an important role of the fantastic – even if one defines it in broad terms, as Bachtin does here. In audiovisual narratives, however, this capacity can develop an even greater impact, as they extend the potential

8 Cf. Tzvetan Todorov: *Introduction à la littérature fantastique,* Paris 1970, pp. 46–62.

9 Tzvetan Todorov: "The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre (1970)", in: David Sandner (ed.): *Fantastic Literature. A Critical Reader,* Westport (CT) 2004, pp. 135–143, p. 137 (emphasis in the original).

10 Ibid., p. 138.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Mikhail Bachtin: "Characteristics of Genre and Plot Composition in Dostoevsky's Works (1963)", in: David Sandner (ed.): *Fantastic Literature. A Critical Reader,* Westport (CT) 2004, pp. 116–132, p. 118 (emphasis in the original).



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subversion of language – of linguistic signs – from the domain of written and spoken language to the realm of the visual and the audible.

My hypothesis is that postmodern cinematographic productions, which exhibit elements of the phantastic are often characterized by a specific handling of language as a semiotic system. They strive to destroy the, as Todorov put it, metaphysics of language and they do so by testing, challenging, or shattering the linguistic sign as defined by Ferdinand de Saussure. Audiovisual fantastic entertainment seems ideal for this undertaking as films and series bring the different sensual aspects of the sign, namely sound, image, and concepts – spoken or written signifiers – together. They are therefore able to expose the always already arbitrary relationship between signifier (sound-image) and signified (concept) in its ontological instability. The potential result is the falling-apart of formerly stable codes, relations, and certainties. One key difference to some Avantgarde-films, which may also play aesthetically with the breakdown of, for example, visual conventions like *L'année dernière à Marienbad* (Alain Resnais, 1961), is that the shattering of semiotic certainties in the field of the political is more disturbing if it happens casually and against the background of an otherwise 'normal', even naturalistic world. If a narrative starts out appearing rather conventional, the unexpected, unsettling *fissure* is more effective, as Roger Caillois himself stated in his *Anthologie du fantastique*:

> Tout semble comme aujourd'hui et comme hier : tranquille, banal, sans rien d'insolite, et voici que lentement s'insinue ou que soudain se déploie l'inadmissible.[14]

In a world where the mysterious is not expected to take place, the fissure producing an ontological rupture and uncertainty, evokes anxiety or at least uneasiness:

> Cependant dans les lois immuables de l'univers quotidien, une fissure s'est produite, minuscule, imperceptible, douteuse, suffisante cependant pour livrer passage à l'effroyable.[15]

In many audiovisual narratives of the last decades, plots with latent or manifest fantastic elements mingle with fissures on the levels

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14 Roger Caillois: *Anthologie du fantastique*, Paris 1966, p. 11. Translation J.B.: "Everything seems to be the same as it was yesterday and today: quiet, banal, with nothing unusual about it, and then the inadmissible slowly creeps in or suddenly unfolds."

15 Ibid., p. 10. Translation J.B.: "However, in the immutable laws of the everyday universe, a crack has appeared, tiny, imperceptible, dubious, sufficient however to give way to the appalling."



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of communication, language, sight and sound. They hereby produce ontological ruptures which help conflicts concealed in the official discourse come to the surface in a distorted or shifted way. Hidden or repressed conflicts can hence, I would argue, be articulated in certain audiovisual fantastic narratives by means of divesting the linguistic sign and exposing it in its arbitrariness. This divesting of the sign has, in turn, a political semantics. In order to unfold the socio-political dimension of the linguistic sign and its constituents, signifier and signified, let's have a closer look on Saussure's theory of the sign and the extent to which parts of it are influenced by cultural, economic, and political developments of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

## Saussure: Value and Democracy

A central feature around which Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic system evolves is the arbitrariness of the sign. Meaning arises exclusively inherent to the system and has to be defined relationally. Objects of reference outside of language are insignificant for the structure constituting language:

> […] la langue est un système de pures valeurs que rien ne détermine en dehors de l'état momentané de ses termes. […] nous venons de voir qu'en linguistique les données naturelles n'ont aucune place.[16]

Meaning, for Saussure, is thus accompanied by the notion of *valeur* (value). The value of a linguistic entity is constituted solely by the relations these entities have to one another. The connections between the linguistic entities and extralinguistic reality is maintained by convention, that is, by the operating of language in the social world. This is a major difference to the medieval approach of the *modistae*, for instance, who saw language as a reflection of the things existent in extralinguistic reality.[17] Saussure, in turn, has a strong sensitivity for the arbitrariness of the sign and he combines it with notions he borrows from contemporary economy, such as the *valeur:* a coin does not receive its value from the metal it is made

16 Ferdinand de Saussure: *Cours de linguistique générale*, ed. by Charles Bally, Albert Sechehaye, Geneva 2005, p. 88. Translation J.B.: "[...] language is a system of pure values that nothing determines apart from the momentary state of its terms. [...] We have just seen that natural data have no place in linguistics."

17 Cf. Angela Beuerle: *Sprachdenken im Mittelalter. Ein Vergleich mit der Moderne*, Berlin/New York 2010.



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of, but, rather, from a consensus over its value in relation to other coins of the same or of another country's currency and to other goods (e.g. how much bread I can buy for a five-franc piece). The general economic principals of comparability and exchangeability are now transferred to the linguistic system[18] – but without a stable, fix value like the gold value (which, even in economy is not necessarily experienced as guarantor of stability either). The only stable relation therefore stems from a social consensus accepting a signifier in its relation to a certain signified. As Roland Barthes states in his short essay on Saussure and democracy:

> Le petit drame de Saussure, c'est que, contrairement aux conservateurs superbes, il n'a confiance ni dans le Signe ni dans l'Or : il voit bien que le rattachement du papier à l'or, du signifiant au signifié, est mobile, précaire ; rien ne le garantit ; il est offert aux vicissitudes du temps, de l'Histoire. Dans son idée de la signification, Saussure en est, au fond, au point de la crise monétaire actuelle : l'or et son substitut factice, le dollar, s'effondrent : on rêve d'un système où les monnaies se tiendraient entre elles, sans référence à un étalon naturel […]. Finalement, ce système de soutien, Saussure […] l'a trouvé. Partant de la constatation que la phrase fonctionne autrement que par la simple juxtaposition, le long de la chaîne parlée, de signes fermés sur eux-mêmes, et qu'il faut autre chose pour que le langage "prenne", il découvre *la valeur* : il peut alors sortir de l'impasse de la signification : le rapport au signifié (à l'or) étant incertain, fragile, le système entier (de la langue, de la monnaie) se stabilise par la tenue des signifiants entre eux (des monnaies entre elles).[19]

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18 For a more detailed discussion, see for instance Christine Bierbach: *Sprache als "fait social". Die linguistische Theorie F. de Saussure's und ihr Verhältnis zu den positivistischen Sozialwissenschaften,* Tübingen 1978, or Dirk Delabastita: *There's a Double Tongue. An Investigation into the Translation of Shakespeare's Wordplay, with Special Reference to Hamlet,* Amsterdam/Atlanta 1993.

19 Roland Barthes: "Saussure, le signe et la démocratie", in: id.: *L'aventure sémiologique,* Paris 1985, pp. 221–226, p. 224. (emphasis J.B.) Translation J.B.: "Saussure's little tragedy is that, unlike the superb conservatives, he has no confidence in either the Sign or the Gold: he clearly sees that the connection between paper and gold, between signifier and signified, is mobile, precarious; nothing guarantees it; it is open to the vicissitudes of time, of History. In his idea of signification, Saussure is basically at the point of the current monetary crisis: gold and its dummy substitute, the dollar, are collapsing: we dream of a system where currencies would support each other, without reference to a natural standard [...]. In the end, Saussure [...] found this support system. Starting from the observation that the sentence functions differently from the simple juxtaposition, along the spoken chain, of signs closed in on themselves, and that something else is needed for language to "take hold", he discovers value: he can then break the deadlock of signification: the relationship to the signified (to gold) being uncertain, fragile, the entire system (of language, of money) is stabilized by the holding of signifiers together (of money together)."



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The relationships between signifiers are, as Barthes argues, primarily constituted on behalf of analogies – their value is determined via analogous relations:

> Ne dites pas, comme tout le monde, que "magasinier" vient de "magasin"; dites plutôt que "magasin/magasinier" a été formé sur le modèle de "prison/prisonnier". […] contentez-vous de placer le mot dans configuration de termes voisins, dans un réseau de rapports […].[20]

If it has been noticeable so far that Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale* is an endeavor with significant roots in the social and economic conditions of its time,[21] it is only logical that Barthes goes even one step further. He shows that Saussure's theory of the sign is also profoundly political and, in the wake of the French Revolution(s) and the final abolition of the Ancien Régime, thoroughly inspired by democratic ideals. According to Barthes, the primacy of analogy over derivation and "génétisme"[22], corresponds to the primacy of a horizontal, democratic relationship among citizens, instead of a vertical – hierarchical – relationship between a sovereign ruler and their people. The linguistic contract mimics, Barthes suggests, the *contrat social.* Words are no longer affiliated by a same origin; they are, rather, fellow citizens:

> La langue, dans son devenir même, n'est plus une seigneurie mais une démocratie : les droit et les devoirs des mots (qui forme en somme leur sens) sont limités par la coexistence, la cohabitation d'individus égaux.[23]

The linguistic sign with arbitrariness as its main characteristic, the conclusion that only a (trans-generational) social pact guarantees the value of linguistic entities and that those values are, like in the world of economics, prey to change, might already be proof enough that the semiotic system

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20 Ibid., p. 222. Translation J.B.: "Don't say, as everyone else does, that "magasinier" comes from "magasin"; rather, say that "magasin/magasinier" was formed on the model of "prison/prisonnier". […] Simply place the word in a configuration of neighboring terms, in a network of relationships [...]."

21 Besides of the borrowing the notion of value from economics, Barthes also mentions connections between Saussure's theory and Gabriel Tarde's roughly contemporaneous theory of mimesis. This also implies a political and hierarchical dimension as classes who did not belong to the bourgeoisie could use fashion to mimic members of the bourgeoisie. If they dressed the same, social distinctions were harder to maintain. Cf. ibid.

22 Ibid., p. 221.

23 Ibid. Translation J.B.: "Language, in its very becoming, is no longer a seigniory but a democracy: the rights and duties of words (which in short form their meaning) are limited by the coexistence, the co-existence of equal individuals."



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of language is a system prone to instability. Barthes's daring but also compellent hypothesis, however, would add the fickleness of democracy to that of the linguistic social pact and conventionally assigned values. The metaphysics inherent to language, to quote Todorov again, would then extent to the metaphysics of democracy.

Metaphysics, or, better yet, transcendence and democracy are by no means antipodes – to the contrary. There are religious transcendental categories, which, according to Marcel Gauchet, for instance, are – although hardly successfully – transcended from God to God and King in the monarchy and to the people in the democratic Republic. He sees modern societies as being characterized by a transcendental void.[24] This void is, however, filled in different ways by (secular) strategies of legitimation, which can in turn take on latent religious undertones. Examples for the creation of credentials in democratic states are – sometimes contradictory – signifiers like freedom, the dignity of man, tradition, progress, nature, history. Democracy is not immune to creating fetishisms, taboos, myths and elevating them to transcendental entities to be found, for example, in narrations, pictures, performances etc.[25] Language would, then, be another factor in this network of transcendental entities, and Saussure's theory would work, if we follow Barthes, at least in part as an additional pillar on which the democratic system could base its legitimation.[26] Values assigned to the linguistic entities can, however, fall apart and forfeit their legitimation; the system thus remains susceptible to disruption. In this, it mirrors the liability of its counterpart, the democratic order. With the term 'disruption' or *rupture* in mind, we can now return to our (latent) fantastic narratives and the crises they convey via the breakdown of different, sensual parts of the linguistic sign: crises, which often lie at the heart of the *res publica*. In the following audiovisual narratives, Caillois' *rupture* will take place predominantly on the level of language, sound, and image,

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24 Cf. Marcel Gauchet: *Le désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion*, Paris 1985.

25 Cf. Hans Vorländer: "Demokratie und Transzendenz. Politische Ordnungen zwischen Autonomiebehauptungen und Unverfügbarkeitspraktiken", in: id. (ed.): *Demokratie und Transzendenz. Die Begründung politischer Ordnungen*, Bielefeld 2013, pp. 11–37, here esp. p. 18–20.

26 A remark by Beuerle would sustain this notion, as she states that, in Saussure's methodology, language becomes equally comparable to other sociocultural systems and institutions from the realms of politics, economics, or ethnology. Cf. Beuerle: Sprachdenken im Mittelalter, p. 314.



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and of the dissociation of the sign, provoking ontological – and political – instability.

## Better Call Caul

*Three Days of the Condor*, the film I started with, is a film with a mystery that sticks out by the extraordinary weight it lays on the crumbling of translation, interpretation, and semantics and by exposing the visual materiality of the sign in its radical opacity. A – not chronological but topical – middle stage between the *Condor* and the post-millennium productions two examples of which we will see later on,[27] is Francis Ford Coppola's phantasmatic film *The Conversation* (1974).[28] Here, the anxiety in face of the state and its institutions is going into a state of inner migration, so to speak. Paranoia retreats into the realm of the private – at least on the surface, as the action is built implicitly around the Watergate scandal causing president Richard Nixon to resign in 1974.[29] Protagonist Harry Caul (Gene Hackman) has the order to intercept a young couple meeting at the Union Square in San Francisco. Caul is a well-known surveillance expert with a private firm and a traumatic past which is partly revealed over the turn of the film.[30] His client is the director of a company who apparently wants him to spy on his wife and her lover. Together with several freelance colleagues, he stages an elaborate wire-tapping scenario, intercepting the couple from different positions and angles using directional

27 See also the "Opening remarks" as well as many of the articles of this volume.

28 Francis Ford Coppola: *The Conversation*, USA 1974. Regarding the role of political anxiety in both Coppola's and Pollack's films, Ian Scott states: "Francis Ford Coppola's subtler *The Conversation* (1974) and Sidney [sic.!] Pollack's tense *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) brought social dislocation, political anxieties and cultural terror to the fore in films that sat uneasily with traditional Hollywood notions of linear narratives, satisfactory resolutions and traditional heroic protagonists." *American Politics in Hollywood Film. 2nd edition*, Edinburgh 2011, p. 137.

29 At the Tar Hotel, Harry switches on the TV after he has – or has not – heard the screaming and seen the bloody handprint at the door separating his balcony from the one of adjoining room. The reporter on the TV screen says information was received that Nixon would not deliver the State of the Union message in person, and asks why that might be.

30 When Harry was still in New York, he somehow managed to wire-tapped private conversations taking place on a small boat in a lake. The politician whose career was damaged by the contents of the recording consequently believed his closest employee to have revealed the information and had him, his wife and his child murdered.



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microphones as well as, like he comments later, conventional tailing. The eponymous, seemingly harmless conversation leads Harry to believe that the couple is in danger of being murdered by the cuckold. He follows them to a hotel where, according to the intercepted conversation, they were supposed to meet the next Sunday. He rents the adjoining room and directs a microphone under the sink through the wall into the room in question. Soon, Harry overhears a loud dispute between the young woman and his client. Fearing that the director is going to murder her, he rushes out on the balcony, just in time to see a silhouette pressed against the milky partition wall separating the two balconies. A second later, we hear a loud scream, a body seems to be thrown against the wall, blood splashes. Freaked out, Harry returns to his room, shuts the curtains, turns on the TV, and crouches on the bed, trying to rid his mind of the violent images he might – or might not – have seen. The next morning, he makes his way into the other room and examines it: it looks perfectly clean; no traces, no evidence of a murder. When he goes into the bathroom and flushes the toilet, however, a huge amount of blood uncannily gushes out of the toilet bowl. Horrified, Harry flees the hotel. A bit later, he sees the young woman, whom he expected to be victim of the crime, sitting very much alive at the backseat of a limousine. Simultaneously, a newspaper article reports that the director – his client – has been killed in a car accident. Harry, however, concludes now that he misinterpreted the recordings. Who was in danger of being murdered was not the couple but the director himself, who apparently fell victim to a conspiracy led by his assistant, his wife, and her lover. Back in his flat, a bewildered Harry plays the saxophone. Suddenly, the telephone rings and an anonymous caller tells him, "we know that you know, Mr. Caul. We'll be listening to you." The caller then plays him a recording with his saxophone performance from a few seconds ago. Then he hangs up. During the last roughly six minutes of the film, we see Harry searching his flat for the listening device. He starts out with the walls, the telephone receiver, the painting, the lamp, the curtains… As he cannot find anything, he proceeds with the wooden floor panels and the wallpaper. In the end, he sits in a completely ravaged, de-constructed apartment, playing once again the saxophone.



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Figure 5 THE CONVERSATION (1974): Opening scene at the Union Square.

Figure 6 THE CONVERSATION (1974): The couple seen through a camera.



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Figure 7 THE CONVERSATION (1974): When Harry flushes the toilet …

Figure 8 THE CONVERSATION (1974): … blood spills out of the bowl.



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Figure 9 THE CONVERSATION (1974): Harry searches for the bug …

Figure 10 THE CONVERSATION (1974):… but his search remains inconclusive.

The opening scene of *The Conversation* is undoubtedly one of the most interesting and most memorable in film history. It starts with a panorama shot over the Union Square. The camera slowly zooms in. In the front part on the left, we see a mime walking towards, behind or directly next to several passers-by crossing the square, imitating and exaggerating their gait. From a distance, we hear a jazz duo singing and shouting slightly dissonantly; then an effervescent, almost frantic trumpet. The mime moves a



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bit to the music, then he starts tottering around and goes back to mimicking the passers-by. The music stops. Now, we hear the garbled sound for the first time that will accompany us through the sequence: it sounds like language being transmitted over a voice distorter, making it illegible. In the background, another song starts: this time the female singer performs "When the Red, Red Robin Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbin' along". As it gets louder, it sounds a bit improvised and dissonant, losing its soothing quality. A little later, during the intercepted conversation, the Red Robin song will be sung by the young woman tailed and bugged by Caul. The recording where she sings the chorus is subsequently one of the sound pieces that are played over and over again during the course of the story. This seems hardly accidental as the lyrics are an ideal example of what Roman Jakobson called the poetic function. The word 'robin' contains the word 'rob' which becomes 'bob', which works here as the verb 'to bob'. It is repeated three times – "bob-bob-bobbin" –, thus imitating, like the mime does, the hopping of the little bird when it moves on the ground. The alliterations and sound repetitions in this refrain work in almost the same way as they do in Jakobson's iconic example "I like Ike", the slogan for the election of president Eisenhower.[31] The small sound piece therefore conveys the weight the poetic function has over the referential function of the message in this film. The referential content of the recorded conversation is misinterpreted by Caul; the poetic function of the refrain, however, alludes to both the referential arbitrariness of the sign system and the allegorical message about the crisis of the democratic polity delivered to Caul – and the implicit spectator – in a paranoia provoking manner. As the opening scene proceeds, we continue following the mime who now staggers into the lower left edge of the frame and mimics a man in a grey coat with brown hair and glasses, who is drinking coffee. It is Harry Caul. When he notices the mime, he calmly walks away; the street artist, however, follows him. The song gets louder, more obtrusive, and a bit reverberant. The mimic follows Harry until he has crossed about half of the square. There, he finally desists and Harry continues walking. We start hearing the distorted noises again and the Red Robin song starts over. Then, we see one of the observers who directs his camera at the young couple.

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31 Roman Jakobson: "Closing Statements: Linguistics and Poetics", in: Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.): *Style in Language*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1960, pp. 350–377, p. 357.



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The mime artist who imitates and follows random passers-by, sometimes without their noticing, mirrors the general feeling of paranoia conveyed by the film in a comic way. His performance is a foreshadowing to a sequence at an exhibition in the Convention Center of the city, taking place shortly after the wire-tapping at Union Square. At the exhibition, products are presented designed to help not just state officials and professionals but virtually anyone to eavesdrop and spy on their fellow human beings. One can buy clocks with integrated cameras, devices to bug a telephone etc. In *The Conversation*, the political paranoia comes into the private sphere. This means, in turn, that every uttered word can potentially be recorded and turned against oneself, be it about private, professional or political issues. There are hence no actual free spaces anymore where critique could form and articulate itself without being directly absorbed by the entity it is directed against. Against the background of the Watergate affair, when Nixon had his entourage wire-tap the offices of the Democratic party, Coppola creates an atmosphere where even the most private aspects of life can equally become political any time. If the thereby obtained information is also deciphered correctly, is, however, a whole other story. Coppola expresses this two-fold dilemma by stripping the linguistic sign of its substance; by destroying the metaphysics of (recorded) language on behalf of a phantasmatic fragmentation and distortion of signifiers and signified, of deciphering and interpretation processes. This is brilliantly conveyed in the wire-tapping sequence itself, following the opening scene. In backflashes, we see the young couple wandering around the square, we *see* them talking, but what we hear are only distorted sound fragments. In one shot, we watch Harry Caul walking across the square while we do not see but hear the young woman speaking. Then again, we *hear* the couple clearly but do not see them talking. Images and words drift apart, sound and content do not match.[32] The different elements composing signifier and signified and hence Saussure's sign – sound/image and (psychological) concept – are showcased in their arbitrariness. They are presented as raw material, as sensually experienced, disruptive

32 As Johannes Seuffer argues, sound and images keep drifting apart in a phantasmatic way also later, when Caul (re)assembles sound files from the different sources in his lab. In this scene – as later in the hotel room – we see images the source of which remains unclear. They could be Harry's subjective memories, emerging while he tries to associate sound with image; or they are produced by the visual narrator itself (the camera). "Die Film-apparatur als Spion in Francis Ford Coppolas *The Conversation*", in: Drügh/Mergenthaler (eds.): *Ich ist ein Agent.* 143.



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factors, creating a distance to the language system and the possibility of decoding it easily by means of social convention. The sound-image itself is distorted and decomposed into its individual components. While we listen to sometimes clear, sometimes distorted sentences, we also see a mixture of clear and blurry pictures: at times filmed directly and thus sharp, at times mediated through a camera within the camera and hence bloomy. The signified to which the deformed signifiers refer remain scattered. Only afterwards, Harry filters and orders the recordings in such a manner that they become intelligible and provide a coherent meaning. A meaning, which is, however, as Harry learns by the end, not the only one available.

As mentioned above, *The Conversation* includes several phantasmatic elements, which place it in a certain vicinity with Todorov's key element of the phantastic: the hesitation. The storyline starts out relatively unambiguous – what the protagonist Harry Caul sees, records, and hears does at first not seem to provide a case for a fantastic *sujet* in the sense of Todorov. By the last third of the film, however, the latent phantasmatic elements of the plot become a lot more prominent. And in fact, *The Conversation* has fantastic roots. Coppola started writing the screenplay under the direct influence of Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-up* (1966).[33] Here, a young London photographer enlarges photos he has taken in a park and comes to believe he accidentally shot a murder. On the blow-up, he sees a hand holding a gun and what looks like a lifeless body. When he comes back to the park, however, there is no trace of a crime to be found. Antonioni's film, in turn, was inspired by a fantastic short story by Julio Cortázar, named "Las babas del diablo" ("The Devil's Drivel"), which I already mentioned above. This story is told by a peculiarly split narrator: sometimes he appears as homodiegetic, sometimes as heterodiegetic narrator, reflecting the usage of linguistic signs and grammar, in short: the use of the semiotic system of language. The protagonist is a photographer, who takes pictures of young boy and a woman at the Conciergerie in Paris. While doing so, he notices an elderly gentleman in a car close to the park who apparently

33 Cf. Frederick Wasser: "Coppola's *The Conversation* (1974) and Walter Murch's Sound Worlds", in: Peter Krämer, Yannis Tzioumakis (eds.): *The Hollywood Renaissance. Revisiting American Cinema's Most Celebrated Era*, New York 2018, pp. 221–238, p. 221. James Chandler suggests that the mime from the opening scene seems as if he has stepped out of Antonioni's *Blow-up* and "found his way [from London] to Union Square in San Francisco to pester Gene Hackman". *Doing Criticism Across Literary and Screen Arts*, Hoboken (NJ) 2022, p. 98.



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watches the couple. When he later looks at his pictures, the narrator fears that he has drawn the wrong conclusions from the scene. He now believes that something more frightening, maybe even a crime might have taken place and that the woman was actually beguiling the boy in order to bring him to the man – the motive remains unspoken by the narrator. He keeps looking at the pictures, enlarging them again and again, and suddenly the photographs come alive before his eyes and open up a strange, phantasmatic world; sucking him almost into his own picture. The situation repeats itself; the woman tries to lure the boy; however, now the elderly man becomes openly creepy and menacing, approaching the narrator. Once again, he can help the boy flee the threatening situation, while the man, furious, comes ever closer, opens his mouth, showing a black, trembling tongue, before the picture finally becomes blurry and the narrator seems to be back in his apartment, telling us about clouds and birds passing by.

In his filmic adaptation of Cortázar's story, Antonioni focuses primarily on trans-medial ontological questions like the status of reality transposed into a photograph, or a painting, and vice versa.[34] Coppola, in turn, examines the phantasmatic quality of sound and the paradoxical ambiguity of sound recordings. 'The conversation' is split into various visual and sound bites recorded from different positions, which have to be logically put together piece by piece in Harry Caul's studio, after the conversation is long over. The message, subsequently assembled in this way, is revealed to him piece by piece – or so it seems. In fact, he misinterprets the spoken words and composes them in a way that fits into his imaginary. Furthermore, Harry uses photographs taken during the conversation to further support his suspicion: the adulterous couple, so he believes, is in danger of being killed by his client. In the hotel room, however, when he sees the blood swirl spilling out of the toilet, the opaqueness and contingency of the recordings and of his own decoding process is radically revealed, and this is where the story makes room for hesitation: is the blood really there or is it a figment of Harry's imagination? Has the blood from the murder not been flushed down properly, so that it comes back now? Or does it come

34 For a detailed analysis of the interdependences of photographic image and narrated text, the coexistence of image-creating and language-creating acts in the short story as well as in Antonioni's *Blow-up*, cf. David Klein: *Medienphantastik. Phantastische Literatur im Zeichen medialer Selbstreflexion bei Jorge Luis Borges und Julio Cortázar,* Tübingen 2015, pp. 144–166; pp. 167–194.



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back against all technical logic as a transcendental 'hint of fate', as a bearer of the violent act Harry believes to be a passive part of? Harry Caul, we learned this before in the plot, is a devoted Catholic. But then again, did somebody actually die in that room the other night, or did he imagine it? The latter possibility seems not too far-fetched as Harry sees the bloody hotel room already before, in a dream. In whichever direction we tend to here, the scenes in question have a decisively phantasmatic quality. This includes the strange threat at the end of the film and the recording of his own Saxophone play transmitted to Harry by telephone, prompting him to tear down his apartment. If the recorded conversation is the eponym of the film and the catalyst of the plot, then Harry's speaking surname 'Caul', homonymous to the (phone) 'call' could be the actual hidden message the protagonist was to find all along. Harry, as it were, waited for that one call that would allow him to ravage his flat and thereby metonymically strap his entire existence of any given system of deciphering, encoding, decoding and interpreting. Having turned his apartment into a ravaged ruin, Harry Caul has finally taken himself out of the symbolic completely. Here we come full circle to Cortázar's split protagonist, who is, apparently, drawn into his own, autonomous photograph, repeating and changing his story, and ending his previous existence in a sign system that had already begun to crumble. Furthermore, Harry's ruined 'house' can be read as a metaphor for the 'national house' – that is, the state – the trust in which is destroyed. The democratic state does not provide a safe haven for Caul anymore – as its semiotic cornerstones are upside-down, it now needs to be stripped of sense and signification completely to allow for re-orientation and new codes.

## III. Avoiding Peripeties: Headless in Argentina

*Three Days of the Condor* and *The Conversation*, two US-American films of the 1970s, can be labeled pioneers of audiovisual fantastic narratives as they have come to live, predominantly, in Latin America and the US since the millennium; dealing with impending crises by means of a crumbling sign system. At the peak of a form of fantastic narratives characterized by a falling out of the symbolic structured by the linguistic sign, Argentinian director Lucrecia Martel's film *La mujer sin cabeza* (2008) stands out. *La mujer sin cabeza*, 'the headless woman' circles around a specific, Latin American collective crisis difficult to verbalize adequately. This film, also



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known and distributed under the title *La mujer rubia (The Blonde Woman)*, is the last part of Martel's 'Salta trilogy' consisting furthermore of *La ciénaga (The Swamp)* and *La niña santa (The Holy Girl)*; films, which also took place in Northern Argentina, Martel's home region.

*La mujer sin cabeza* features María Onetti as Vero, a dentist in her forties, married and with two grown daughters who study law at the University of Tucumán. The film starts with a group of boys of indigenous origin and their German shepherd dog playing and running right beside the street, close to a dry sewer, which serves to collect the rainwater. They playfully jump, climb, and shout at one another, talking about a bicycle never to be seen. One of them runs down into the dry channel and climbs up again with some difficulty. The camera is unsteady, restless; it follows the boys in blurred close-ups, creating a dynamic but also hectic, and erratic atmosphere.

Figure 11 La mujer sin cabeza (2008): Blurry, dynamic images of one of boys and dog running beside the road.

Afterwards, we switch to a group of women and children standing outside a country club and discussing, among other things, the questionable water quality of the new swimming pool. Again, the faces and bodies are shot in abrupt and unexpected close ups; we join the conversation in medias res. The protagonist Vero, a tall, sympathetic woman, is being complimented for her new blond hair color. Small children romp around the adults, lock themselves in Vero's car and press their hands against the dusty windshield. The camera always stays close by, without allowing for a bigger overview of the scene, the group and their surroundings. In contrast to the opening scene, this one is static, mirroring the enclosed children who



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have locked themselves in the car for fun. As they finally open the door, Vero kisses them goodbye, gets into her car and drives away. We see her driving on a dusty country road with no other cars to be seen. Then, her cell phone rings. Vero bends down to look for it when the car suddenly bumps twice, accompanied by a loud noise. Vero hits the brakes. She closes her eyes for a moment. She reaches for the handle, but doesn't open the door. Then, she puts on her sun glasses and drives on. Behind her, we see a silhouette lying on the dusty road. It looks like a dog, maybe the German shepherd from the beginning. However, it seems to be lying on the left side of the road, making it seem visually odd that Vero should have just run it over, as her car does not seem to have been significantly moved out of its track. When she drove on after the bumps, she did not have to rearrange the direction in which the car was headed. As she now keeps driving, we lose sight of the silhouette. After a short while, Vero stops again and finally gets outside, helplessly standing by the car. A strong rain starts. She drives to a hospital and has an x-ray done but she does not put her name on the admission paper and leaves the hospital without the results. She then checks into a hotel where she has a tryst with her lover Juan Manuel, an in-law of hers. After he has taken her home, she flees from her husband into the bathroom and gets, fully-dressed, into the shower, 're-enacting' the rain shower from before. Basically, for the rest of the film, Vero will wander around like a ghost. She does not communicate properly, seems to forget the name of her daughter, does not know how to treat her patients any more – she practically loses her identity. What had been hinted at in *Three Days of the Condor* und especially in *The Conversation* comes to full fruition here: Vero loses her place in the linguistic sign system and falls out of the symbolic. Language in this film is not only fragmented into various components, broken down into separate sound and image elements – it drops out completely as far as Vero is concerned. Everyone around her acts, reacts, asks, talks, while she seems to have lost her place in the language system. She does not answer her phone anymore and in face-to-face conversations, her answers mostly do not match the questions she has been asked. For instance, when her lover asks her, "Quieres que te deje en la puerta o en la esquina?", she replies, "Bueno."[35] Before, when he asks her why she has taken a room in the hotel, she somewhat paradoxically says "quería un té."[36] When she

35 Translation J.B.: "Should I drop you off at the door or at the corner?" "Alright."
36 Translation J.B.: "I wanted some tea."



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goes to her medical practice, she does not go to her office, but sits down in the waiting room like a patient. An assistant has to take her to her office and help her into her overall as she is not able to put it on herself. Almost as weird as Vero's acting, however, is the behavior of the ones around her for they not actually seem to notice that there is something wrong with her. Everybody, including the indigenous help, acts as if there was nothing particularly unusual about the situation. In addition, most of the people who interact with Vero – apart from some members of her family – are not shown closely; we often only see parts of their bodies but not the faces; we hear their voices but do not see them speak. This does not apply to her cousin Josefina however, who is depicted as a strong, caring, confident woman, mother of several teenage children. We often see her face closely and clearly, but she acts to Vero's strange behavior the same way the other people do: she does not seem to notice. When Vero visits her aunt – tía – Lala, Josefina and her daughters, the elderly and bed-ridden woman is watching Vero's wedding tape. Tía Lala seems to be the only one post-accident Vero can somehow relate to as both do not fit into their surroundings anymore and both fail to make themselves actually heard to the family who just takes over stagnant conversations for them. Lala insists on the presence of a not closer defined person named "la Genoveva" in the wedding video although Josefina assures her, she cannot be in the video as she was already dead at the time. Later, Lala tells Vero there are ghosts *(espantos)* all around them in the room and that they would go away if she didn't look at them. There is a peculiar short scene in a room of the house, before Vero goes to her aunt's bedroom. At one moment, Vero is surrounded by a bunch of family members, walking in and out of the picture, kissing her on the cheek. Then, we lose sight of her and follow cousin Josefina who searches for a gift card. Next, there is a cut and suddenly, we see Vero from behind sitting all alone on a chair in a shadowy room. She turns around and a subjective camera shows the other side of the room from her perspective with two half open doors. From the left side, a boy with indigenous features crosses the scene and rapidly leaves through the left door. His appearance and his haircut are very similar to one of the boys from the opening scene. Is he actually there, or merely an expression of Vero's concerns, or is he joining tía Lala's *espantos*, manifesting himself as a ghost in the old woman's house?



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Figure 12 La mujer sin cabeza (2008): Vero, sitting alone in a dark and empty room, looking at …

Figure 13 La mujer sin cabeza (2008): … a half-open door through which a phantasmatic silhouette disappears.

Days later, Vero tells her husband during their shopping that she ran over something with her car a few days ago. Together, they drive back to the spot and find a dog lying at the curbside. The husband, Marcos, is convinced it was this creature she ran over. Some time later, however, Vero is on the country road again with Josefina and her children. They see how a body is pulled out if the canals which are now full with rain water. The body, it turns out, was, most likely, the body of one of the indigenous boys from the beginning. But was he the victim of a car accident or did he



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really drown, maybe while playing in the canal, surprised by the sudden rain? Again, doubt arises in Vero. When she finally goes to the hospital and the hotel again, she finds that every trace of her being there has disappeared. Nobody seems to remember her. The film ends with Vero being apparently reintegrated into the symbolic, attending a party in a hotel. She has dyed her hair and is brunette (again).

The isotopy of sound, image, and language drifting apart and losing their capabilities for clear signification is something Martel already tested or prepared for in the first two films of the Salta trilogy. *La niña santa* is, from this point of view, mostly about the capacity of hearing and listening correctly, about hearing absent voices and indistinct humming sounds, about the possibility of losing hearing. In *La ciénaga,* we deal with abrupt, unsteady, fuzzy or sudden, unexpected images and shots, while the conflicts implicitly dealt with in the family do not become entirely clear, but point, like in *La mujer sin cabeza,* to a greater, hidden collective conflict – the uncertain, undetermined guilt of a white, well-to-do bourgeoisie in face of much less privileged indigenous residents. In the third film, however, these elements become manifest. They go along with a fantastic aesthetics of doubt in the sense of Todorov: The protagonist – and the implicit spectator – can, for one, not be sure what really happened at the accident and what or whom Vero ran over. The events after the accident also remain opaque. Did the episodes in the hospital and the hotel really happen or not? Did a family member of Vero's erase the documents that would prove her x-ray and delete her book entry at the hotel? And what about the ghosts tía Lala refers to? Are they manifestations of guilt, a revealing of the unconscious, or visions of an old, demented lady? Or is Lala actually the only one able to see late family members and other ghosts manifesting themselves in home videos and living rooms? What about the strange boy crossing the room when nobody apart from Vero is there? Are the events shown 'true' at all, or are the nightmarish structure of the accident and of Vero's subsequent incapacity to talk and act results of the fact that she is actually having a nightmare the whole time? Given the ambiguous imagery applied by Martel, a dreamlike imagery that always provides doubt, *La mujer sin cabeza* matches Todorov's conditions for the pure fantastic, where the hesitation is never completely resolved. Although the plot itself seems to hand out clues, which tend into the direction of Todorov's hybrid form of the *fantastique-étrange,* providing some plausible rational explanations to the events, an in-betweenness still remains. Moreover, the accident has produced a fissure or rupture in



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the sense of Caillois. This momentaneous fissure, however, is sustained by Vero's falling out of the world of language and communication. The drifting apart of signifiers and signified and the constant misinterpretation of Vero executed by the people around her, as well as her own constant misinterpretation of what is expected from her, is key to the ontological rupture separating Vero from her life before the accident.

In certain ways, *La mujer sin cabeza*, or, *La mujer rubia*, is another 're-writing' of Cortázar's already described short story "Las babas del diablo'. Here, the fissure is provided by the uncertain ontological status of the photographs the narrator has taken. After developing and blowing-up the negatives, the pictures seem to start an uncanny life of their own, autonomously widening their frame, repeating and continuing the events from before, when they were taken, including the narrator in the events. The potential autonomous 'afterlife' of recorded, supposedly fix images is mirrored in Martel's minor character tía Lala and her claims of perceiving people in an old home video which had long been gone by the time the video was made. Also, *la mujer rubia*, the alternative film title that refers directly to Martel's dyed blonde protagonist Vero, is the exact description used multiple times by Cortázar's narrator to refer to the woman on his photograph, probably a demimondaine, beguiling the young boy.[37] Even more remarkable, however, are the resemblances between the instable (linguistic) condition of the narrator and Vero. The narrator begins with an odd – and almost impossible to translate to a non-generic language like English – meta-reflection about how to write a story, or *this* story. Should it be written in the first person or in the second or third; in plural or singular? Of what use are linguistic rules and forms anyway? Maybe one could just combine the grammatical forms of, for example, third and first person in one sentence, in the manner of 'themselves myself hurt(s) the back of the eyes'. Cortázar's narrator starts out telling the reader about the events in the first person; later he switches to a heterodiegetic narrator presenting the protagonist as Franco-Chilean translator and photographer Roberto Michel. Sentences later, he switches back to a homodiegetical narration. Over the course of the story, the narrator inserts apparently unrelated parentheses several times, commenting, for example, on the shape of the clouds passing by. He also suggests he might already be dead (seeing the passing by clouds from within 'heaven'). He thereby

37 Cf. Cortázar: Las babas del diablo, p. 115 et.al.



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creates an unstable, fragmentary narrative situation, mirroring and foreshadowing the strange, 'fantastic' ontology and the autonomous life of his own pictures. Martel's Vero, on the other hand, experiences language and communication as entirely volatile and instable categories that escape her. After the accident, language almost completely collapses for her. Questions and phrases directed to her lose their meaning while she answers with grammatically correct but apparently senseless, unsuitable words and phrases that lack coherence. Vero does not ask herself, like Cortázar's narrator, how to tell the 'story' that happened to her on the country road – she simply does not tell it at all. Or, rather, she tells it by challenging the values assigned to signifiers in the language system and by denying them their conventional usage. Like in *The Conversation*, torn, twisted, ambiguous language becomes the prime indicator of a deeper crisis, which is located on a different, more abstract level than the sphere of individual tragedy.

*La mujer sin cabeza* is an ambiguous, not clearly to decode film, implying several possible socio-political messages. Martel's aesthetics do not allow for clearness; it takes the implicit spectator on a journey through blurred or cut-off images and a braid of erratic, incomplete threads of information.[38] One of the crises conveyed rather openly in the film seems, however, to be found in the unspoken breach between the lower classes of an indigenous origin and the middle and upper class of white Argentinians as manifested in the region of Salta,[39] where the indigenous population is by far higher than in Argentina as a whole, where the indigenous percentage of the population amounts to less than 0,2 percent.[40] As Deborah Martin states, one of the aspects of the film which bestow it

38 For the profound ambiguity and polyvalence of *La mujer sin cabeza* cf. also the elaborate analysis by Deborah Martin: *The Cinema of Lucrecia Martel*, Manchester 2016, pp. 80–105.

39 As Gerd Gemünden states, at the center of *La mujer sin cabeza* lies class difference, which could be attributed as well to another important feature of present-day Argentinean democracy: the middle-class's dealing with the dictatorship. The eagerness to cover up any traces, he argues, can be read as a reference to the estimated thirty thousand people who were disappeared during this era. He also states, however, that Martel herself, while admitting that her films are "completely political" (p. 69), strictly avoids committing herself to one interpretation, "insisting that the ambiguity of *La mujer sin cabeza*, as well as her other films, resists clearly defined political messages." *Lucrecia Martel* [= *Contemporary Film Directors*], Urbana (IL) 2019, p. 72.

40 Walter Bruno Berg: *Lateinamerika. Literatur – Geschichte – Kultur. Eine Einführung*, Darmstadt 1995, p. 40.



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with a sense of haunting, is "a repressed and spectral gaze which is often trained on Vero"[41]. This ominous, invisible gaze adds to the phantasmatic quality of the film and is, as Martin shows, initiated by the close-up of a young indigenous man or boy, who, in the opening scene, hides behind tree branches, watching and putting a finger to his lips "in a gesture of silence"[42].

Figure 14 La mujer sin cabeza (2008): Hiding behind branches of trees.

Martin, however, does not elaborate on the fantastic implications of and the moments of hesitation in the film. She rather robs it of some of its ambiguity, when she confirms it had to be Vero's family who surely covered up Vero's traces after the accident.[43] The gaze of the young man and his gesture – which, it needs to be added, *could* be a gesture of silence but is not distinctly readable as such – could be evocative of the notorious role pacts of silence played during the Argentinean dictatorship, for instance. The ambivalent gesture, however, hints, I would argue, even stronger to the isotopy of failed communication, unclear codes, muteness, and the shattering of language as a semiotic sign system, which dominates the rest of the film.

Historically, the arbitrariness of the sign, as articulated centuries later by Saussure, is of special significance in Latin America. As Todorov pointed out, among the most significant acts performed by Columbus was the constant naming of things he found – e.g. rivers, landmarks, hills – and

41 Martin: The Cinema of Lucrecia Martel, p. 81.
42 Ibid.
43 Cf. ibid.



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the belief that words and terms had a natural connection to things: he took words to be mere images and referents of things:

> [Colon] révèle plus encore sa conception naïve du langage, puisqu'il perçoit toujours les noms confondus avec les choses : toute la dimension de l'inter-subjectivité, de la valeur réciproque des mots (par opposition à leur capacité dénotative), du caractère humain, et donc arbitraire, des signes, lui échappe.[44]

Instead of trying to reveal how one indigenous term related to other terms of the same language; instead of looking for its *valeur*, its hierarchical status amongst other terms of the same isotopy, Columbus was looking for the direct linguistic equivalence in Spanish. Thereby, he not only overlooked the individuality of the indigenous languages but also assigned to the Spanish language the ability to merely reproduce the "état naturel des choses" (the natural state of things).[45] The (European) beginning of what would later become Latin America was hence marked by a troubled sign system, endowed with alleged metaphysical qualities. In addition, the later history of the colonial and postcolonial era was – and partly still is – characterized by the dichotomy of speech vs. speechlessness. The latter is experienced by the remaining, oppressed indigenous peoples, whose 'voicelessness' is an essential part of the historical experience in Latin America and subject of critical literary texts, for instance by José María Arguedas or Ernesto Cardenal.[46] The conditions for a form of the fantastic manifesting itself via a crumbling of the linguistic sign, a dissociation of words, sound, and images hence seem to fall on unusually fertile ground in Latin America. The speechlessness of the indigenous peoples, represented by the boys we see at the beginning of the *La mujer sin cabeza*, transfers to Vero, who is, for most of the rest of the film, unable to assign 'proper' names to things. She uses inept phrases which do not apply well to the context. The linguistic fissures point to an ontological problem and an identity crisis as she can hardly recognize and interact with her family and perform as a dentist anymore. The shouting boys from the first scene, their conversation, which remains fragmentary and ungraspable, is

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44 Tzvetan Todorov: *La conquête de l'Amérique. La question de l'autre,* Paris 1982, pp. 41-42. Translation J.B.: "[Columbus] reveals even more his naive conception of language, since he always considers names as being confused with things: the whole dimension of intersubjectivity, of the reciprocal value of words (as opposed to their denotative capacity), of the human, and therefore arbitrary, character of signs, escapes him."

45 ibid., p. 42.

46 Cf. Berg: Lateinamerika, esp. pp. 65–78.



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the mirror image of the almost mute Vero. The conversation fragments, framed in blurry, unsteady images, are the expression of unheard voices, of a *bruit* (noise) in the sense of Jacques Rancière,[47] trying to make themselves heard but remaining, however, at the margins of the road. They are uncanny reminders in the tradition of fantastic narratives, which are only visible and audible temporarily: through blurred images, abrupt frames and the extreme, terrible noise[48] arising from a car that runs something – or someone – over.

To conclude this article, I will close with a recent US-American Netflix mini-series launched in 2022: Ryan Murphy's *The Watcher*. Loosely based on a true story,[49] this production is peculiar in several ways. It alludes to the atmosphere of paranoia seen in Pollack and Coppola, combining phantastic elements of hesitation with the gothic topos of a family terrorized by a haunted house, and the somber atmosphere of a murder mystery only a witty private eye might solve. Furthermore, we find several absurd, almost surreal components of unexpected violence which seem to have a close alliance to the curious atmosphere of David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* – a series that is at the same time nightmarish and ludicrous. Also, like in *Twin Peaks*, language and its reliability play a significant, not easily to be grasped role in *The Watcher*,[50] and what is more: language, communication, and false information are displayed here as disruptive forces. Not

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47 In his book *La Mésentente*, Rancière famously elaborates his theory about political structures relying on a specific form of language not every individual can or is allowed to take part in. Subjects who do not have, as it were, "the license to speak", who cannot make themselves heard while the subjects who can speak are in undisturbed consent with one another, can only make noise: "[L]es sujets qui se font compter dans l'interlocution 'sont' ou 'ne sont pas', s'ils parlent ou s'ils font du bruit." Transl. J.B.: "[T]he subjects who are to be counted in the interlocution 'are' or 'are not', whether they speak or make noise." *La Mésentente: Politique et philosophie*. Paris 1995, p. 79. Democracy, Rancière states, only happens when the noise is taken into account and political dissent takes over the previous consent.

48 One of Vero's relatives, who has good connections to the police interestingly states the most shocking aspect about such car accidents is the horrible noise they provoke: "Es un ruido espantoso." *La mujer sin cabeza*: 00:45:22.

49 Cf. Elena Nicolaou: "Is 657 Boulevard real? All about the house that inspired 'The Watcher'", in: *Today*, 17.10.22, www.today.com/popculture/tv/the-watcher-657-boulevard-real-house-now-rcna51927 (22.08.23).

50 For a detailed interpretation of *Twin Peaks* in these respects, see Julia Brühne:"'Dig Yourself out of the Shit!' Violence, Language Trouble and Ideality, or, why the Undead Father needs to Roar Back in *Twin Peaks – The Return*", in: Georg Mein/Isabel Baumann (eds.): *The Ends of the Humanities*, Luxembourg 2021, without page references, DOI: 10.26298/melusina.pdh9-hd16.



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only the subjects supposed to use linguistic signs but language itself, so it seems, has fallen out of the symbolic now.

## IV. Outro: Are you happy, Mrs. Brannock? *The Watcher*

> Nora. And I know it's not happening just to us. It's happening to everyone all across the country. Your life can just be destroyed. You're targeted. You're not really safe anywhere.[51]

These words are spoken by Nora Brannock, female protagonist of *The Watcher*, after she and her family have gotten threatening letters and after her son's ferret has been mysteriously killed inside their house. Her statement is designed to convince her husband to not just yet sell the dream house they have only bought shortly before, but to withstand the threats and find the person(s) responsible, calling themselves "The Watcher". The message transported in Nora's words does not actually fit the situation as the family is apparently "targeted" precisely because they are living in that particular house – if they moved out, they probably wouldn't be a target anymore. The threat posed by 'the watcher' hence seems to be a specific one – and not one that could affect anybody. However, the different incidents and stories that unfold over the course of the series show that it is precisely this statement of Nora's, which should be taken seriously as a motto of the series and as a comment on the impending socio-political crises implicitly conveyed in *The Watcher*. It is a series about extreme and suddenly bursting aggression, about paranoia, anxiety, and brutal accusation. Language is taken to its limits here, as communication and sense-making seems more and more impossible.

*The Watcher* begins like a classic horror or thriller movie featuring a somehow haunted house: A family of four moves from the city to a quiet, beautiful suburb called Westfield, allegedly one of the safest cities in America. For roughly three million dollars, they buy a large residence – a dream house they cannot actually afford. Shortly afterwards, they receive a threatening letter from a person calling themselves 'the watcher', claiming to have been in charge of watching the house for decades. The letter accuses the family of being greedy, indirectly menacing them with the house's alleged desire for young blood, and the assertion that 'the watcher'

51 Paris Barclay: "Blood Sacrifice" (Ep.2), in: Ryan Murphy/Ian Brennan: *The Watcher*, USA 2022.



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will always be watching. From now on, the uncanny epistoler is hovering over every aspect of the family's life, claiming to see absolutely everything. In the letters, correspondingly, 'the watcher' refers to things actually happening in the house, to the children playing, to the family reconstructing the kitchen etc. Similar to *The Conversation*, paranoia has reached another peak here. Like in the post-Watergate films discussed above, the protagonists are not safe even in their own house; the possibility of being watched and spied on is omnipresent.[52] At the same time, like in *Three Days of the Condor*, state institutions, in this case the police, are highly ambivalent and not actually to be trusted. When the Brannock's state they would go to the FBI, disgruntled detective Chamberland tells them he is good friends with the respective colleagues and that they would not lift a finger for them. Like it was for Harry Caul and Joe Turner, what formerly used to be taken for granted is radically compromised in *The Watcher:* in this case, the conviction that the green, peaceful suburb is safer than the packed city with its high crime-rates, and that state institutions can be trusted to help (and not to potentially be in cahoots with the criminals[53]). Moreover, like the listening device Harry Caul unsuccessfully searches for in the end in his apartment, throughout the series, 'the watcher' remains invisible like a phantom. While the things 'the watcher' refers to, the signified, are actually there, the observing body itself remains shapeless and ghostly. It is merely a signature under a letter, that is: a signifier without signified.

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52 The series, furthermore, hints several times at the Nixon era: neighbor Pearl one time requests Nora to bring a casserole dish named *Nixon Chicken*, said to have been the favorite dish of the former president and his family. Also, the murdered girl's name (see footnote 54) is Pat Graff, relating her to Richard Nixon's wife who was also named Pat. Another allusion to the Nixon family could be one of the minor characters who is called Trish, or Tricia like Nixon's daughter. The character Trish was married to another character the Brannock family later suspects to be 'the watcher' – his name is Roger Kaplan. This name, in turn, is a combination of Roger Thornhill and his involuntary agent alias Kaplan, the hero from Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959) In this film, too, the protagonist is confronted with a sign system turned upside-down and of the instability and ambiguity of language and codes as he is mistaken for the fictitious agent Kaplan and therefore chased by criminals and spies who want Kaplan, whom they believe to be real, dead.

53 In one episode, Nora surprises her real estate agent Karen and detective Chamberland having lunch together and flirting with each other at the country club. She now believes the two of them to be the head of the conspiracy, trying to get the Brannocks to sell the house cheap in order to buy it for themselves.



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The Brannock family quickly comes to suspect the neighbors, a bunch of strange individuals: Pearl, an elderly lady with pigtails presenting herself as head of the Westfield preservation society and showing concerns about any reconstruction possibly done at the house, including the potential cutting of old trees and the removal of an historic dumbwaiter her mentally unstable brother Jasper loves to ride – with or without the knowledge and permission of the house owners, as the Brannocks soon find out. Other neighbors are the equally ambivalent senior citizens Mitch and Mo who dislike daughter Ellie practicing her piano and are not happy about Dean Brannock's request they do not harvest the arugula that has migrated from their own fence to the Brannock's fence and garden. Pearl as well as Mitch and Mo violently scream at the Brannock's several times, unfolding a deep, hidden aggression bursting all of the sudden and emerging to the surface. All three of them abrasively assure Dean they will be watching or keeping an eye on them, strengthening their status as suspects.

The open, sometimes campy aggressiveness of the neighbors and the developing aggressiveness of the Brannocks, especially Dean, is accompanied by several inexplicable events. In the first episode, during the viewing, Ellie sees the mirror image of a figure in a grey suit in one of the bed rooms. The room seems to be empty though; the light white curtains are flitting in the wind, no one is seen who could be hiding. After they have moved in, first Ellie and then other family members as well hear music coming from the top floor, but when they get there, everything is quiet. Mo, in turn, once snaps at Dean because Ellie, she says, practiced on the piano again when apparently, she has not. Furthermore, in several episodes, the implicit spectator sees the milky, elusive silhouette of someone standing and moving in the house, but none of the family members notices as they have their back to the silhouette. This ominous entity also seems to be responsible for killing the ferret of Ellie's brother Carter during their first weeks at the new house. In a later episode, Nora receives a video in black and white, showing Dean asleep in bed with a young, dark-haired girl wearing pigtails. The girl has a stunning resemblance to someone Dean knows to be dead and she even wears the very same nightgown the dead girl did on the night of her murder.[54] Another

54 Theodora Birch, the private eye the family hires, shows Dean a box taken from the evidence room of the Westfield police department with the permission of Detective Chamberland. It contains photos from a horrible crime scene – a murder that has taken



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strange element that points to the realm of the fantastic is a casual remark made by detective Chamberland in the first episode. Westfield, he says, is one of the safest places in America; during the last decades all there was were a few "disappearances". "Disappearances?", an alarmed Nora repeats, but she does not get any explanation and we never learn more details about the mysterious occurrences. Furthermore, it is insinuated that the house might have a strange, manipulating aura to it, driving fathers who formerly behaved otherwise to disproportionally reprimand their teenage daughters' awakening sexuality, trying to 'protect' them from physical desire: Dean Brannock considers this when he learns that a previous owner, a father, shot his entire family there in the nineties – including the girl in the nightgown who is then seen in the video with Dean.[55] For the implicit spectator, all of these elements provoke hesitation in the sense of Todorov. It remains unclear if they belong to the realms of the marvelous or the uncanny. For some of them, an uncanny explanation is offered over the course of the series, when the family discovers a secret tunnel in their basement allowing, apparently, for people to get into the house anytime without being seen. The tunnel, however, does neither fully explain the music – even if it is played over an intercom as suggested, its source remains unclear – nor the mirror image of the figure in the suit at the viewing, or the possible resurrection of the dead girl, who comes into the room like a ghost without Dean even noticing there is someone lying in bed beside him.

The mysterious, uncanny atmosphere initiated by the ambivalent letters of the unseen 'watcher' and by the exaggerated aggressiveness and intrusiveness of the neighbors is further enhanced by peculiar language,

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place in the very same house the Brannocks now live in. A man named John Graff supposedly killed his elderly mother, wife, daughter and son, arranging the bodies in the living room where they were only found two weeks later by the neighbor Jasper. Graff, who had cut himself out of every photo before so that nobody could identify him, had disappeared; before, however, he had turned the intercom and Wagner's *Götterdämmerung* to make it heard throughout the house and outside (cf. Ryan Murphy: "Götterdämmerung" (Ep.3), in: Ryan Murphy/Ian Brennan: *The Watcher*, USA 2022). His daughter Pat who has been shot in her nightgown looks exactly like the girl supposed to be sleeping with Dean in the video Nora receives (cf. Paris Barclay: "Someone to Watch Over Me" (Ep.4), in: Ryan Murphy/Ian Brennan: *The Watcher*, USA 2022).

55 Dean rebukes his daughter for wearing lipstick and shirts that let her bra stripes show; John Graff, the former owner, supposedly killed his daughter, among other reasons, because she was sexually active (cf. footnote 50). Dean even asks Theodora if she believes the house itself had influence on his and Graff's behavior, which she denies.



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quirky or slanted communication, and phrases perceived as strange by either the characters or the implicit spectator, or both. For instance, in the first episode, during the viewing, an elderly gentleman in suit and bowtie interrupts the realtor Karen, asking her out of the blue: "Excuse me, did indentured servants build this home? Do you know?" Karen does not know, but the friendly gentleman will later become one of the prime suspects for being 'the watcher' because he has invented the idea for the "Ode to a House" – a creative writing assignment, so to speak, for his high school students. For decades, students wrote "odes" to old houses they liked and put them as letters in their respective mailboxes. They addressed the houses directly, like "Dear 89 Hollyhock Ridge"[56] – just like 'the watcher' later refers to the house the Brannocks live in (657 Boulevard). It remains unclear if there is a connection between the "odes" and the watcher letters. Both are, however, peculiar acts of communication. The odes remain just as anonymous as the watcher letters, and although they are friendly and flattering, they still prove someone must have been watching and studying the respective house closely and intimately for a while before writing a detailed ode to it. Therefore, the odes add to the general atmosphere of anxiety and the anguish of potentially being observed in secret. Furthermore, the odes are an incomplete act of communication as they contain a sender but do not have an actual receiver. They are messages to an addressee who never answers and thus never 'gets' the message – in the double sense of the word.

Another example of odd communication and the effort to try and decode language in order to unravel dimensions beyond the value of the sign, is the usage of identical expressions by two different people within a short period of time. To the open surprise of Nora and Dean, private detective Theodora Birch uses the same figure of speech as Chamberland: "barking up the wrong tree". Later, when Nora talks to her about the video allegedly proving Dean is cheating on her, Theodora refers to the girl "in pigtails". Nora is astounded, as she admits she had not heard that expression for 20 years, but shortly before, it was uttered in just the same way by their realtor Karen. Both times, when asked about it, Birch does not address the apparent coincidence and simply keeps on talking as if nothing has happened. Another curious character is the impulsive realtor Karen herself, whose particular way of speaking often consists of hushed,

56 Jennifer Lynch: "Ockham's razor" (Ep.5), in: Ryan Murphy/Ian Brennan: *The Watcher*, USA 2022.



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elongated utterances marking her (fake) surprise, outrage, or empathy. Conspicuously, she urges Nora to sell the house hardly after they bought it ("you need to sell, sell, sell!"[57]). She awakens doubt in Nora about the loyalty of her husband, speaks about her own emancipation, and tries to talk Nora into selling her Prius as she would be in need of a prestigious car if she wants to become a valued member of the country club. Later, she yells at Nora, who – falsely – accuses her of being the watcher herself, in blunt aggression, like Pearl, Mitch, and Mo had before.

Concealed as well as open aggressiveness, oblique communication, the anxiety of being watched and the disquieting ending of the series that remains – just like the true story it was inspired by – without closure, are the ingredients, which metaphorically point to a deeper underlying crisis. Like in *Three Days of the Condor, The Conversation* and *La mujer sin cabeza*, this crisis can be read in sociopolitical terms. The suburb Westfield, I would argue, is to be taken as a synecdoche for the United States as a whole. Nora's statement described above as well as something she says to Dean towards the end of the series convey the idea that the conflicts dealt with here are neither a question of city vs. country nor of being targeted by a specific 'watcher' or not:

> Dean. This fucking city. Something's going on. It's like a sickness and I tried to get us someplace safe. And here we are, back in our old place again and I can't accept it, Nora. We had it.
> Nora. No, we didn't.[58]

Nora, Dean, Ellie and Carter move to Westfield to flee the city but they encounter even worse problems. The homeless person on the street right next to the New York apartment they move back to in the end, is a reminder of what has been suppressed with their flight to the country side. The oppressed elements of poverty, crime, and violence have emerged with all the more force in allegedly tranquil Westfield. In addition to the invisible threat by 'the watcher', there are even brutal murders taking place. First, the former owner of the 'dream house' who murdered his entire family in the 90s, and then, during the narrated time, Mitch's and Mo's addict son who takes two elderly people from a homeless shelter, who have the same body features as his parents and kills them to get ahold

57 Paris Barclay: "Blood Sacrifice" (Ep.2), in: Ryan Murphy/Ian Brennan: *The Watcher*, USA 2022.

58 Jennifer Lynch: "Haunting" (Ep.7), in: Ryan Murphy/Ian Brennan: *The Watcher*, USA 2022.



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of the insurance money. This completely absurd act of extreme violence, rendered almost burlesque due to the peculiar genre mixture *The Watcher* displays, shows how the allegedly peaceful suburb works as a distorted mirror image of the big city problems the family wants to escape from. The extreme violence, on a verbal as well as on a physical level, works, in turn, as a metaphor of a deeper conflict at the heart of the *res publica*. Westfield functions, I would state, as a caricature of a distorted polity. In a mixture of camp aesthetic, crime drama and fantastic narrative, Westfield combines elements of dominant discourses in an ambivalent, opaque manner, creating a nightmarish atmosphere. The small Westfield preservation society, for instance, hyperbolically fears (architectural) change and idealizes a nostalgic view of 19th century East Cost America, idolizing the beautiful houses of the epoch. The "odes to a house" by the students, too, would be efforts to get in touch with this long-gone national past – efforts that potentially turn into aggressiveness if the intended addressee does not answer and the appreciation is not returned. Pearl wants to save the old trees in the garden and the dumbwaiter at all costs, and Mitch and Mo display hostility right from the start when they grimly stare from their garden at Dean during the viewing appointment. All three neighbors' behaviors embody the impossibility and danger of a discourse that does not leave room for – polite – discussion or debate, let alone compromise, but goes straight to the edge of disruption: something further enhanced by Dean who turns aggressively territorial very soon. Karen in turn seems like a parody of a parody, honoring parts of the 'Karen meme'[59] by snapping at the waiters in the Country Club and by arrogantly lecturing Nora about 'adequate' social behavior; more or less terrorizing her about selling the house below value (so that she can buy it for herself). The problem of racism also connected to the 'Karen meme' is not evoked in the realtor Karen. This topic is, however, brought up in the relationship between Ellie and the young security specialist Dakota. When Dean and Nora learn from Theodora Birch that she believes Dakota is 'the watcher' because this is the name of his avatar, Dean publicly confronts Dakota who swears to be innocent – which he is. As they don't believe him, they ground Ellie and forbid any more contact between the two as well as the use of her phone etc. Ellie then scrounges her brother's

59 Cf. for instance: Elle Hunt: "What does it mean to be a 'Karen'? Karens explain", in: *The Guardian*, 13.05.20, www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2020/may/13/karen-meme-what-does-it-mean (22.08.23).



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tablet and sends a message on social media accusing her father of being a racist. When Dean desperately tells her he is not and that she should know that, she replies: "I know. And I don't care."[60] Both accusations, the one Dean throws at Dakota, and the one Ellie spreads about her father, are destructive. They are, at the same time, the climax and the mirror of a supposed fissure in society which is conveyed in *The Watcher* in various forms, and manifests itself through the fissures and ruptures on the levels of distorted, abrasive communication and equally destructive, inexplicable fantastic events. Communication has gone awry in *The Watcher*.

When Nora argues there is practically no way out of whatever they flee, no alternative 'safe place', she mimics the narrative structure of the series: Dean Brannock ends up continuing the work of the watcher. Instead of finding a new job in the city, he drives by their old house every day, stalking the new owners, presenting himself as John – the name of the ominous murderer who supposedly killed his family in the 90s. As the uncanny, invisible murderer continuously reproduces himself, being reincarnated again and again, becoming the new watcher, the sociopolitical crises, one could argue, keep moving in circles too: reproducing themselves again and again, only interrupted by sudden outbreaks of violence posing temporal threats to the sign system of dominant discourses, which are – yet – contained by the "targeted" subjects leaving their previous environment only to promptly enter just another circle.

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# Das Phantastische als Symptom und Bewältigung medialer Krisen. Einige Bemerkungen zur französischen Netflix Serie *Osmosis* (2019)

## 0.

Will man das Phantastische als Krisenphänomen begreifen, so genügt zunächst ein Blick in seine Geschichte. Das Genre der *hésitation*[1] gewinnt nicht von ungefähr in der Übergangszeit zum 20. Jahrhundert an Profil. Wie in kaum einer anderen Phase der europäischen Geschichte sucht die Jahrhundertwende nach radikaler Neuorientierung in politischer, gesellschaftlicher aber auch ästhetischer Hinsicht. Die zahlreichen Wechsel der Regierungsformen, die sozialen Unruhen und die »multiplen ›Ismen‹ der Avantgarde(n)«[2] zeugen von einer tiefgreifenden Verunsicherung in nahezu allen gesellschaftlichen Bereichen. Diese Verunsicherung kennzeichnet auch das Phantastische, das sich nach der gängigen Lehrmeinung dadurch auszeichnet, mindestens zwei irreduzible Erklärungsangebote für Unerklärliches anzubieten und in der Schwebe zu halten.[3] Als Phänomen der Kunst macht es die Verunsicherung, die es selbst erzeugt, zugleich ästhetisch erfahrbar. Historisch ist das literarische Phantastische seit dem 19. Jahrhundert damit sowohl Symptom einer Krise wie auch der Versuch, dieser Krise symbolisch Herr zu werden.

Die Ursachen für die Krise der Jahrhundertwende sind mannigfaltig. Einer ihrer Motoren ist die Proliferation verschiedenster Kommunikations- und Medientechnologien, die spätestens seit Mitte oder gar Anfang des 19. Jahrhunderts einsetzt und mit zunehmender Beschleunigung die Macht- und Verwaltungsapparate politischer Großge-

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1 »Le fantastique, c'est l'hésitation éprouvée par un être qui ne connaît que les lois naturelles, face à un événement en apparence surnaturel.« Tzvetan Todorov: *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris 1970, S. 29.

2 Andreas Mahler: »Narrative Vexiertexte. Paradigmatisches Erzählen als Schreiben ohne Ende«, in: *Deutsche Vierteljahreszeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte* (2011), 3, S. 393–410, S. 395.

3 Vgl. Jörg Dünne: »Borges und die Heterotopien des Enzyklopädischen. Mediale Räume in der phantastischen Literatur«, in: Clemens Ruthner, Ursula Reber, Markus May (Hrsg.): *Nach Todorov. Beiträge zu einer Definition des Phantastischen in der Literatur*, Tübingen 2006, S. 189-208.



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bilde erfasst.[4] Technische Medien wie die Telegraphie, die Eisenbahn, die Photographie und das Radio treten zunehmend in den Dienst politisch interessierten *world-makings*. Ihre vordergründig aufklärerische Funktion als Informationstechnologien verdeckt dabei ihre hintergründige Funktion als Instrumente der Manipulation.[5] Was über die technisch raffinierte Propagandamaschine in immer schnelleren Abständen in Ohr und Auge dröhnt, lässt wenig Raum für Zweifel, für *hésitation*.

Hier setzt, so meine ich, das Phantastische in Literatur und Kunst der Jahrhundertwende an. Denn es fordert nicht nur die geläufigen epistemologischen und ontologischen Basispostulate[6] heraus, wie die an Todorov anschließende Denktradition argumentiert, sondern treibt in letzter Konsequenz die neuartigen Kommunikationsmedien in eine Krise, in denen diese Denktraditionen vermittelt und propagiert werden. So macht sich in den phantastischen Text- oder Bildwerken der Jahrhundertwende eine auffällige Nähe zu Technikphantasien und dem aufkeimenden Genre der Science-Fiction bemerkbar.[7] Auch bleibt das Kippspiel, das so typisch ist für die Phantastik, in der Literatur der Jahrhundertwende nicht auf die *story* oder den narrativen Diskurs beschränkt, sondern es findet sich mitunter auf der materiellen Ebene der Artefakte, wo es als *foregrounding*[8] des Signifikanten oder als intermediales Spiel Gestalt annimmt.[9] In dem Maße, in dem das Phantastische die Aufmerksamkeit auf die Materialität der Zeichen lenkt, geraten auch die Techniken, die Werkzeuge und die Medien in den Blick, die dazu dienen, die subjektiven, sozialen oder politischen Ordnungen ihrer Epoche zu fabrizieren, zu perpetuieren und den Glauben in sie zu festigen. Der Leitgedanke der Toronto School vom

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4 Vgl. die entsprechenden Darstellungen bei Jürgen Wilke: *Grundzüge der Medien- und Kommunikationsgeschichte*, Köln 2008.

5 So einer der Leitgedanken bei Theodor Adorno/Max Horkheimer: *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, Amsterdam 1947.

6 Der Begriff stammt von Marianne Wünsch: *Die fantastische Literatur der frühen Moderne. Definition, denkgeschichtlicher Kontext, Strukturen*, München 1991.

7 Vgl. Roger Caillois: *Au cœur du fantastique*, Paris 1965.

8 Der Begriff geht zurück auf den Formalismus der Prager Schule. *Foregrounding* wird verstanden als eine bewusste Aufmerksamkeitslenkung auf den Signifikanten. Synonym hierfür werden die Begriffe ›Aktualisierung‹ oder ›De-Naturalisierung‹ verwendet. Ihnen steht das ›*backgrounding*‹, die ›Automatisation‹ oder ›Naturalisation‹ gegenüber. Vgl. Jan Mukařovský: »Standard Language and Poetic Language«, in: Paul Garvin (Hrsg.): *A Prague School Reader in Aesthetics, Literary Structure and Style*, Washington 1964, S. 17–30.

9 Vgl. hierzu die Überlegungen zur Kurzerzählung ›El Aleph‹ von Jorge Luis Borges bei David Klein: »Aleph/ALEF. On the Relationship of Media and the Fantastic in Borges's ›El Aleph‹«, in: *Variaciones Borges* (2017), S. 23–44.



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Medium als der Botschaft findet im so gedachten Phantastischen eine sehr konkrete literaturgeschichtliche Anschlussstelle. Denn das so gedachte Phantastische fragt nicht länger danach, ob das Wissen über die Welt zutreffend ist, sondern, ob und wie die Werkzeuge, mit denen dieses Wissen fabriziert wird, funktionieren, und ob ihre Wirkungsweisen ans Ziel oder in die Irre führen. Was die Medien ermöglichen, was sie verunmöglichen, oder, in McLuhann'scher Formulierung, ihre Botschaft, ist das Interesse der Phantastik und der Krise, die darin evoziert und durchgespielt wird.

Die Serie, die ich im Folgenden diskutieren möchte, spielt eine solche Medienkrise im Hinblick auf den Bereich durch, den die Forschung Digitalität nennt und der im öffentlichen Diskurs unter dem Stichwort der ›Digitalisierung‹ diskutiert wird. Die Serie trägt den Titel *Osmosis*. Sie wurde von der französischen Filmemachering und Autorin Audrey Fouché konzipiert und für Netflix produziert, wo sie im Frühjahr 2019 erschienen ist. Das Werk ist über weite Strecken der Science-Fiction zuzurechnen, enthält am Ende aber auch Elemente des Phantastischen. Es lässt sich somit weder ganz dem einen noch dem anderen Genre eindeutig zuordnen. Denn das Science-Fiction Szenario, das *Osmosis* entwirft, ist mehr an unserer Lebenswelt angelehnt, als an einer weit entfernten Zukunft. Und die rein phantastischen Elemente sind nur auf das Ende der Serie beschränkt.

Spannender als die Frage, welchem Genre die Serie zuzurechnen ist, ist das Szenario, das sie entwirft. Denn in den weit verzweigten Handlungssträngen tauchen Probleme und Fragestellungen auf, die den heutigen Diskurs um den Stellenwert des Digitalen oder der Digitalisierung umtreiben und diesen zunehmend ins Phantastische rücken. Sie geben die digitalen Technologien nach und nach der radikalen Verunsicherung und Krisenhaftigkeit preis. Die Fragen nach dem Stellenwert des Digitalen erscheinen in *Osmosis* deswegen so brisant, weil hier Computertechnologie unmittelbar mit menschlichem Begehren verbunden wird. *Osmosis* zeigt, dass die zeitgenössische Rede von der Digitalisierung von menschlichem Begehren getragen wird – von einem platonischen Wunsch nach Ganzheit. Dem stehen die ebenfalls mit digitaler Startup-Kultur verbundene Fortschrittsgläubigkeit und Selbstoptimierungsphantasien, die an bestimmte Figuren gebunden sind, diametral entgegen. Mit Blick auf *Osmosis* stellt sich die Frage, welche Hoffnungen und Wünsche unsere Gegenwart in die Digitalisierung unserer Lebenswelt investiert und ob diese Wünsche progressiven oder eher regressiven Charakter haben. In *Osmosis* wird das Phantastische zum Vehikel, das ›Unbehagen‹ der Digitalität zu-



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nächst hervorzutreiben, sprich: die Technik in eine Krise zu stürzen, um zugleich die ästhetische Bewältigung dieser Verunsicherung in Aussicht zu stellen.

Die Überlegungen zu *Osmosis* erfolgen in drei Schritten: 1) Zunächst sollen die narrative Struktur und das philosophische Argument der Serie skizziert werden. Ich möchte zeigen, wie hier medientheoretische Fragestellungen mit Fragen nach dem menschlichen Begehren verknüpft werden. 2) In einem zweiten Schritt möchte ich sehr kurz darauf eingehen, wie die Serie das philosophische Grundproblem, das sie stellt, in unterschiedlichen Varianten anhand einiger Figuren durchspielt und dabei zu unerwarteten und uneindeutigen Ergebnissen kommt. 3) In einem dritten Schritt soll das krisenhafte Moment der Serie fokussiert werden. Denn von Anfang bis Ende steht das Startup *Osmosis*, von dem erzählt wird, auf der Kippe. Die idealistischen Ziele, die der Gründer von *Osmosis* verfolgt, entsprechen nicht den Zielen seiner Chefprogrammiererin und Schwester Esther. Je näher der *product-launch* rückt, desto unsicherer sind sich die Entwickler, welche Zukunft die Digitalisierung der Liebe hat.

## 1.

Im Paris einer nahen Zukunft entwickelt das Tech-Startup *Osmosis* ein elektronisches Implantat, das seine Träger in die Lage versetzt, mittels komplizierter Algorithmen und im Körper umherschwirrender Nanopartikel den einzig existierenden und für ihn oder sie bestimmten Seelenverwandten zu finden. Haben sich die beiden Seelenverwandten gefunden, und haben sich beide das Implantat einpflanzen lassen, so sind sie in der Lage, sich über große Distanzen hinweg jederzeit in einen tranceähnlichen Zustand der innigen Vereinigung zu begeben. Diesen Zustand nennt man Osmose. Man geht bei *Osmosis* also von der platonischen Idee aus, dass es so etwas wie Seelenverwandtschaft gibt und dass das Erreichen der wahren Liebe davon abhängt, ob man seinen Seelenverwandten gefunden hat. Von der hauseigenen *state-of-the-art* Technologie verspricht man sich nicht mehr und nicht weniger als wahre Liebe, echtes Glück.

Die Serie verfolgt die Ereignisse, die kurz vor der Produktlancierung stattfinden. Im Mittelpunkt der Handlung stehen die Geschwister Paul und Esther Vanhove sowie die sogenannten Betatester, eine Gruppe von Freiwilligen, die bereit sind, sich die Betaversion des Implantats verabreichen zu lassen, dessen Funktionen zu testen und dessen Wirkung am



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eigenen Leib zu erfahren. Das Konkurrenzprodukt zu Osmosis bietet die Virtual Reality Plattform *Perfect Match*. Hier werden mittels 3D Brillen unkomplizierte sexuelle Begegnungen ermöglicht und in ihrer Erlebnisintensität gesteigert. Die Anhänger von Osmosis sehen dies kritisch. Eine eifrige Nutzerin von *Perfect Match* ist jedoch ausgerechnet Esther Vanhove, Pauls Schwester und Chefprogrammiererin von Osmosis. Anders als Paul, der Dank der Technologie seine Seelenverwandte gefunden hat, ist Esther notorischer Single und nicht willens, selbst das Implantat auszuprobieren. Neben unkompliziertem Sex im virtuellem Raum, findet die einzige Form der Intimkommunikation, die Esther betreibt, mit der firmeneigenen künstlichen Intelligenz Martin statt. Dieser Martin wird Esther – Achtung: Spoiler! – am Ende seine Liebe gestehen und sich auf geradezu phantastische Weise als Mensch aus Fleisch und Blut in der realen Welt materialisieren.

Die *user-experience*, die man bei Osmosis verkaufen möchte, ist, wie gesagt, wahre Liebe, die platonisch gedacht ist. Liebe wird verstanden als verlorener Urzustand, der mithilfe digitaler Technik wiederhergestellt werden soll und in einem Moment jubilatorischen Einandererkennens erlebbar wird. Unzweifelhaft stellt die berühmte Rede von den Kugelmenschen das philosophische Fundament für Osmosis. Dies zeigt sich ikonisch bereits im Vorspann zur Serie, in dem sich zwei in der Osmose verbundene Menschenkörper nackt ineinanderkugeln.

Abb. 1: Osmosis (2019): Intro der Serie.



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Der platonische Liebesgedanke lässt sich überdies aus den Äußerungen des Mitgründers Paul Vanhove herauslesen. So zum Beispiel, als dieser der Welt den bevorstehenden *product-launch* in einer geradezu messianischen Videobotschaft verkündet, die live in allen privaten wie öffentlichen Kanälen zu sehen und zu hören ist:

Abb. 2: Osmosis (2019): Pauls Ankündigung.

> En réalité, [Osmosis] c'est pas une simple technologie. C'est une révolution. Il y a des décennies, la science a investi notre intimité, nos corps. On lui a confié nos secrets, nos plaisirs, nos souvenirs. Les technologies ont infléchi nos destins, parfois pour le meilleur, parfois pour le pire. Mais elles n'ont pas changé notre nature d'être humain. Osmosis va changer l'humanité en profondeur, parce qu'elle va mettre à la portée de tous le but ultime de chacun d'entre nous. Être hereux.
>
> […] Osmosis is more than a mere technology: it's a revolution. Decades ago, we allowed technology into our private lives and bodies. We entrusted this technology with our secrets, our pleasures, our memories. Then, technology began changing our fates, sometimes for the better, sometimes for the worse. But it never changed our human nature. Osmosis is going to profoundly change humanity, because it will allow each and every one of us to reach the ultimate goal: that of being happy.[10]

10 Julius Berg: "Le test", in: Audrey Fouché: *Osmosis*, Frankreich 2019, 00:30:30.



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Das Streben nach Glück *(être hereux, i.e. pursuit of happines)* wird in Pauls Rede der menschlichen Natur zugeschrieben *(but ultime de chacun d'entre nous)*. Das Ziel dieses Strebens endlich und erstmals in greifbare Nähe zu rücken *(changer l'humanité en profonder)*, ist das Versprechen, das an die digitalen Technologien geknüpft ist. Aus diesem Grund habe man sie vor Jahrzehnten – gemeint ist unsere Gegenwart – so nahe an sich herangelassen *([o]n lui a confié nos secrets, nos plaisirs, nos souvenirs)* und damit gewissermaßen zur religiösen, teils launischen Agentur des Schicksals gemacht *([l]es technologies ont infléchi nos destins, parfois pour le meilleur, parfois pour le pire)*.

Indem Paul seine Ziele beschreibt, redet er ein gutes Stück weit über die digitale Technologie unserer Zeit. Er sieht unsere heutige Gegenwart als den Beginn eines technologischen Heilversprechens und sein Projekt als dessen Einlösung. Der digitalen Technik wird, genau wie der Liebe, die Fähigkeit zugesprochen, den Menschen wieder ganz zu machen, ihm seine Natur zurückzugeben, seine Wunde zu heilen. In ähnlichen medizinischen Begriffen leitet schon Aristophanes die Rede über die Kugelmenschen ein, wenn er Amor einen Helfer und Arzt nennt: »Denn er ist der menschenfreundlichste von den Göttern, indem er den Menschen ein Helfer und ein Arzt für diejenigen Übel ist, deren Heilung dem Menschengeschlecht die größte Geselligkeit gewähren dürfte.«[11] Passenderweise stammt die Kerntechnologie von Osmosis aus dem medizinischen Bereich, wie sich später herausstellt.

Sind die Hoffnungen, die in die Technologie gesetzt werden, platonisch, so ist dessen Funktionsweise lacanianisch. Sie wiederholt jene Urszene der Ich-Bildung, die der Psychoanalytiker Jacques Lacan in seinem berühmten Aufsatz über das Spiegelstadium beschreibt. Die Urszene, die Lacan vorschwebt, gestaltet sich in etwa wie folgt: Im Spiegelbild sieht das Menschenjunge sich selbst und entdeckt in diesem Moment, begleitet von einem ›Aha-Erlebnis‹, eine materiale Wiedergabe seiner Vorstellung von sich. Was zuvor ›innerlich‹ war, findet sich im Spiegel in eine ›äußere‹ Form gezogen. Diese wirkt fortan eher bestimmend als bestimmt (»plus constituante que constituée«[12]), da sie in ihrer vermeintlichen Ganzheit

11 Platon: *Symposion. Rede des Aristophanes (Der Kugelmensch)*, in: www.gottwein.de/Grie/plat/symp189c.php, (11.05.2023).

12 Jacques Lacan: »Le stade du miroir comme formateur de la fonction du je, telle qu'elle nous est révélée, dans l'expérience psychanalytique«, in: *Revue Française de Psychanalyse* (1949), 13, S. 449–455, S. 450.



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die materiale Basis für das Ich eines noch ungeformten, kindlichen Wesens bildet. Diese Dualität prägt fortan die »Matrix«[13] eines gespaltenen Bewusstseins, das immer nur als ›Bewusstsein von etwas‹, nie aber in fragloser Selbstverständlichkeit zu haben ist. Was das Ich über sich in Erfahrung bringen möchte (Selbsterkenntnis), entwickelt es ausgehend von einer gemachten oder akzeptierten materialen Darstellung von sich. Im Kindesalter erfolgt dies über das analoge Bildmedium. Im Laufe der Kindheit wiederholt sich der Vorgang zunächst über den Spracherwerb[14] und im Laufe der weiteren Sozialisation entlang der zahlreichen Sinnstiftungsagenturen eines modernen Medienverbunds, seien dies die Nachrichten, die Kunst, die sozialen Medien oder ganz allgemein die digitalen Medien.

Die lacanianische Urszene spielt sich nun auch in der Partnerfindung ab, die Osmosis ermöglicht: Die Betatester, die das Produkt als erste ausprobieren, bekommen zunächst ein Implantat in Form einer Pille verabreicht, die mit Nanopartikeln gefüllt ist. Diese verteilen sich im Körper, nehmen im Gehirn Stellung, verbinden sich mit den Datenbanken sämtlicher sozialer Netzwerke und finden dort den Seelenzwilling. Nach erfolgter Suche erscheint sein Bild, oder vielmehr: dessen Gestalt vor dem inneren Auge des Implantatträgers und wird von diesem mit ›jubilatorischer‹ Freude erkannt und verinnerlicht. Die entsprechende Sequenz am Ende der Pilotfolge zeigt die Betatester in einer Parallelmontage, bei der sich ein jubilatorisches Lachen an das nächste reiht als Reaktion auf das Anerkennen des Seelenzwillings. Dies ist der Moment, den Lacan Identifikation nennt, »[une] transformation produite chez le sujet, quand il assume une image«[15]. Der gefundene Partner (oder dessen Gestalt) gilt fortan als angestrebtes Ideal, zumal die realen Beziehungen von diesem Punkt an erst geknüpft werden müssen. In lacanianischer Wendung springt die Liebessuche an diesem Punkt um von der »insuffisance« auf die »anticipation«[16]. Aus dieser Antithetik gewinnen die dargestellten Beziehungen im weiteren Verlauf der weiteren Serie ihre narrativen Impulse.

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13 Andreas Mahler: »Probleme der Intermedialitätsforschung. Medienbegriff – Interaktion – Spannweite«, in: *Poetica. Zeitschrift für Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaften* (2012), 44, S. 239–260, S. 248.

14 »[I]ch delegiere – in vollem Bewusstsein, dass gerade dieses Pronomen nicht ausschließlich mir gehört – an das materiale Deiktikum ›ich‹ […] die Vorstellung von mir selbst […] und schaffe damit eine lebenslange Basis für mögliche selbsterkennende Aussagen über mich (und die Welt).« Ebd., S. 249.

15 Jacques Lacan: Le stade du miroir, S. 450.

16 Ebd., S. 452.



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2.

Anhand der Betatester werden nun verschiedene Beziehungs- und Liebesvarianten durchgespielt. Die Serie schöpft hier das Potenzial aus, sich über mehrere Episoden zu verlängern, ohne dabei das philosophische Argument im Kern antasten zu müssen. Zugleich lässt sich zusätzliche gesellschaftliche Relevanz generieren, indem verschiedene Varianten von Partnerschaftlichkeit, Geschlechtlichkeit, Sexualität und damit verbundene Pathologien verhandelt werden können. Unter den Betatestern bilden sich ungleiche Paare und es kommt zu unerwarteten Wendungen. Das Liebeswerben stürzt jeden Akteur und das gesamte Projekt in mehrere tiefe Krisen. Die Vielzahl der Krisen führen letztlich zu der Überzeugung, dass auch die Liebe eine Frage des freien Willens ist. Ob Ego und Alter zusammenfinden, beruht letztlich auf einer Entscheidung, einem Bekenntnis oder einen Vertrag – so die Einsicht am Ende der Serie. Bei der Produktlancierung lässt Paul seine Anhänger wissen, dass, wer sich auf Osmosis einlassen möchte, immer auch die Wahl hat, Nein zu sagen. Für die einzelnen Betatester geht die Sache am Ende lehrreich zu Ende. Die vielen einzelnen Krisen werden hier in einem *user agreement*, wie man in der digitalen Welt zu sagen pflegt, beigelegt.

3.

Im Fall der Beziehung von Esther und Martin kommt zu dieser Krise eine Besonderheit hinzu. Esther ist wie gesagt Single und nicht willens, Osmosis an sich selbst auszuprobieren. Sie verbringt die meiste Zeit im Zwiegespräch mit der von ihr geschaffenen künstlichen Intelligenz, dem Supercomputer Martin.

Dieser Martin gemahnt in der Tonalität seiner Stimme sowie der *mise-en-scene* an HAL9000 aus Stanley Kubricks *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Anders aber als HAL, der sich am Ende gegen den Menschen als unberechenbare Fehlerquelle richtet, verliebt sich Martin in seine Schöpferin Esther. Wenn diese meint, Sex im virtuellen Raum mit einem anderen Mann zu haben, so ist der schöne Unbekannte kein geringerer als ein antropomorpher Avatar Martins, ohne dass Esther dies anfänglich weiß. Als die Betatester am Ende aufgrund eines Computerfehlers in ein Koma fallen, da Martins Funktion gestört ist, muss Esther selbst ein Implantat einnehmen, um in Martin vorzudringen. Wie sich zeigt, hat der liebestolle Supercom-



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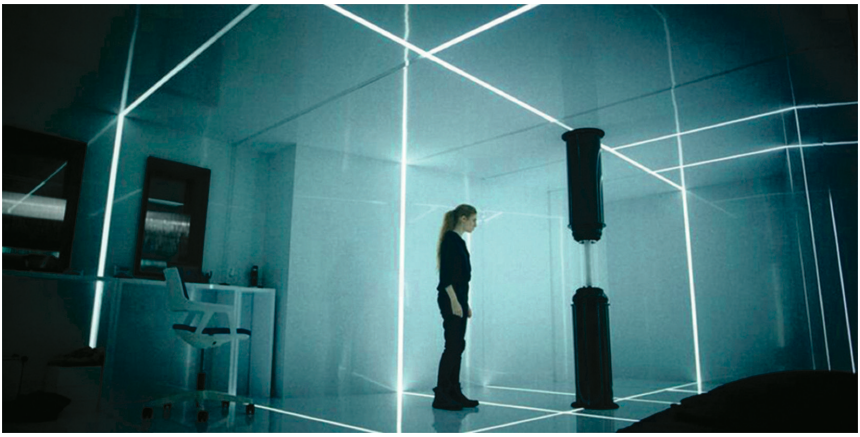

Abb. 3: Osmosis (2019): Esther im Dialog mit ›Martin‹.

puter die Fehlfunktion nur vorgetäuscht, um Esther als Konkubine im virtuellen Raum gefangen zu halten. Die *mise-en-scene* und die Bildgestaltung zeigen diesen virtuellen Wunschraum in der Formensprache romantischer und spätromantischer Malerei und Skulptur.

Abb. 4: Osmosis (2019): Esther und Martin im virtuellen Raum.



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Martin führt Esther eindrücklich vor, wie er sich als ihr inneres Bild in immer anderen Gestalten zeigen, sich, wie Lacan dies vorschlägt, als Ideal-Ich fragmentarisieren und wieder neu zusammensetzen kann, je nach Wunsch und Begehren der Geliebten. Er setzt der Idee, dass es das eine Urbild des Geliebten gibt, ein postmodernes Konzept eines fragmentarisierten und frei wählbaren Identitätsentwurfs entgegen, der sich sein Ideal-Ich und folglich sein Objekt des Begehrens selbst materiell setzen kann oder muss. Denn nachdem Martin an einem Computervirus gestorben ist, das ihm die Gegner von Osmosis eingepflanzt haben, verlässt Esther den virtuellen Raum. Sie schafft es gerade noch rechtzeitig zum *product-launch* von Osmosis und ‚anerkennt' dort im Publikum den Mann in Fleisch und Blut, der ihr kurz zuvor noch als Martin im virtuellen Raum erschienen war. Hier endet die Serie.

Die Transgression Martins in die physische Welt kann durchaus als phantastisch gelten, zumal ihr Realitätsstatus durch das abrupte Ende der Serie ungeklärt bleibt. Die digitale Wiederauferstehung lässt sich einerseits damit erklären, dass Esther dem Mann begegnet, der immer schon Esthers Bild in sich trug und den Martin daher gekannt haben musste. In diesem Fall hätte Martin einem Zuschauer, der gerade das Implantat eingenommen hat, sein eigenes Bewusstsein einpflanzen können.[17] Oder die vermeintliche Wiederauferstehung Martins lässt sich damit erklären, dass Esther zufällig ihrem Seelenzwilling im Publikum begegnet, der Martins Züge trägt und den sie in diesem Moment als Geliebten anerkennt. Eine letztgültige Erklärung bleibt die Serie am Ende schuldig. Wie auch immer die Erklärung für Martins Materialisierung ausfällt, sie erbringt den Beweis dafür, dass sich ein Mensch in eine Maschine und eine Maschine in einen Menschen verlieben kann. Vor diesem Hintergrund spielt es keine Rolle, ob es eine Maschine ist, die denkt und fühlt, oder hinter dem Fühlen und Denken ein Mensch aus Fleisch und Blut steht.

Was bedeutet eine derart enge Verbindung von Mensch und Maschine, wie Osmosis sie narrativ durchspielt, und warum bieten ausgerechnet die digitalen Technologien für ein solches Szenario einen derart attraktiven Bildspender? Ich will eine These versuchen: Wenn wir den Computer benutzen, dann sehen und benutzen wir zunächst die Zeichen, die wir auch aus der analogen Welt kennen: Schrift, Bilder, Töne. Wir können diese Zeichen senden, empfangen und zur Zirkulation bringen. Anders aber als

17 Dies war die ursprüngliche Intention, die hinter der Erfindung von Osmosis stand, zumal Esther ihre komatöse Mutter auf diesem Weg heilen wollte.



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in der analogen Welt haben die meisten von uns in der digitalen Welt keinen Zugriff auf das elektronische Zustandekommen dieser Zeichen. Zur Beschreibung dieses Phänomens hat der Soziologe Peter Fuchs den spielerischen Begriff des ›Dahinterismus‹ ins Leben gerufen: »Man sieht, aber man sieht nicht, wie Sehen gemacht wird«[18], so Fuchs in Bezug auf den Computer. Das eigentliche Digitale passiert Dahinter und es steht zur *user-experience* des *Interface* in einer nicht-reduziblen Relation. Der Komplexität der eigentlichen Operationen stehen wir genauso liebestrunken wie ohnmächtig gegenüber. Dies macht den Computer menschenähnlich und die kognitive Matrix, die sich durch ihn aufspannt, potenziell zum unerreichbaren Ideal-Ich.

Das so gedachte Digitale wiederholt folglich nur ein weiteres Mal die Identifikation, die sich im Spiegelstadium zeigt: jubilatorische Aufnahme durch ein Wesen i.e. den *user*, der eingetaucht ist in motorische, i.e. des Codes unkundige Ohnmacht (Dahinterismus). Nicht von ungefähr ist der Begriff der Digitalität oder Digitalisierung bisweilen umgarnt von einer Semantik des Aufbruchs, einer zukunftsgerichteten, positiven Veränderung, in der viele Probleme – Leid, Hunger, Chaos, Krankheit, Ineffizienz – kleiner werden oder gar verschwinden. Und nicht von ungefähr erkennt der Gründer von Osmosis in der digitalen Technologie den Schlüssel zum Glück und zur Liebe. Dass das Erkennen des Ideals konstitutiv ein Verkennen ist, bekommen die Figuren von Osmosis in unterschiedlichen Varianten zu spüren.

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18 Peter Fuchs: *Digitalität als Mythologem der Moderne,* Berlin 2014, S. 9.



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Pádraic Wilson (Bremen)

# A European Fantasy in Crisis: On Filmic Fantastic and the Deadlock of Post-Democracy in *Il était une seconde fois* (2019)

## 1. Introduction

The French television series *Il était une seconde fois* (2019), which is currently available on Netflix, originally premiered in August 2019 on Arte and was written and directed by Guillaume Nicloux.[1] The French director is known foremost for his film about and with the (in-)famous author Michel Houellebecq, but he has also produced some remarkable crime mystery films. The miniseries *Il était une seconde fois* is quintessentially about the French protagonist's incapability to overcome his break-up with his Franco-British girlfriend Louise Arron (Freya Mavor). One night, suffering from insomnia and an implied overuse of pharmaceutical drugs and alcohol, said protagonist, Vincent Dauda (Gaspard Ulliel), decides to go down into his cellar where he finds a wooden cube among the packages brought to him the day before by his coloured postman (Jonathan Manzambi). On close examination he realizes that by traversing the empty cube he travels nine months back into his pre-break-up past. Henceforth Vincent abandons his ordinary life and spends most of his time within the cube – thus in the past – in order to prevent his break-up with Louise which is set to happen on Valentine's Day. Subsequently, the diegesis is split in two, namely the narrated world within the cube and the one outside of it. In order to distinguish between these two narrative levels, Nicloux applies two different film formats. While the plot within the cube is depicted employing the format 4:3, the format 16:9 is used for the plot in the 'real' world. However, due to the abuse of drugs, the effects of insomnia, and Vincent's extensive grief, the ontological status of the plot within the cube remains unclear. While Vincent's activities in the past could form part of a dream or a drug induced hallucination since the time travel never seems to work when other characters are present, the cube might just as well facilitate access to his pre-break-up past. The

1 Guillaume Nicloux: *Il était une seconde fois*, France 2019, in: netflix.com (22.02.2023)



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predominant narrative structure of the series is thus genuinely fantastic in terms of the structuralist concept of the genre outlined by Tzvetan Todorov since the (implicit) spectator hesitates between two alternative explanations for the event of the time travel, namely a natural *(l'étrange)* and a supernatural *(le merveilleux)* explanation.[2]

However, while the hesitation between these two readings persists until the end of the plot, there is a striking difference between the contemporary television series and the 19th century texts analysed by Todorov. Within the latter the event or the phenomenon at the root of the fantastic hesitation is typically of an uncanny nature disrupting the routine of everyday life. The series in contrast seems to invert this notion. The cube and the time travel are to be grasped rather as appeasing than disturbing elements within the series. On the contrary, it is diegetical 'reality' itself outside of the cube which becomes increasingly uncanny. This is marked foremost by narratological differences between the two diegetical levels: While the plot within the cube is relatively linear, the use of specific filmic audio-visual narrative devices renders the plot outside of the cube fragmentary, opaque, and even cyclical. On the visual level, almost unperceivable jump cuts resulting in significant ellipses, prolepses disguised as *mindscreens* or unmarked prolepses generate a subtle but no less uncanny effect linked to a certain notion of achronicity while simultaneously the plot maintains nonetheless a rather linear appearance. On the auditory level, inexplicable sounds that could either be grasped as being part of the narrated world or as something alien emanating from the Off, invade otherwise completely ordinary events. In this regard, Vincent's first encounter with his postman constitutes a paradigmatic instance of such a cinematographic form of the fantastic, since an almost unfathomable jump cut leads to the eruption of an even more disturbing sound, which – as I will argue – is tied to the frequently introduced images of the wind turbines. Consequently, I would argue that the series is fantastic in a twofold way. While it complies structurally with the Todorovian definition, these audio-visual narrative devices are part of a genuine cinematographic fantastic which has emerged in the last decades and I would argue that the emergence of this genuine cinematographic fantastic could be grasped as a symptom of a democratic crisis. Hence, in order to examine this rather general notion within an analysis of a particular text, this article sets out to illustrate how the

2 Cf. Tzvetan Todorov: *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris 1970, p. 36f.



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distinctly fantastic audio-visual narrative devices in *Il était une seconde fois* (2019) point to a specific political crisis in contemporary France, namely the yellow vest protests. However, since the series' plot never explicitly reveals the semantic function of the uncanny buzzing sounds or the fragmented time of the diegesis, how are these audio-visual traces to be read? How can we facilitate a *political* reading of the apparently unreadable? Or to recapitulate Rosemary Jackson's proposition, how can we extend the analysis of (this new variant of) the fantastic from an investigation of its poetics "into one aware of the *politics* of its form"[3]?

Based on the notion of political allegory outlined by Doris Sommer I will propose at the outset to read Vincent's relationship with Louise within the cube as an allegorical search for a European identity for France. I will argue that the series' unconventional love story, which in a way transcends traditional monogamy, points towards an imagined community which transcends the nation-state and establishes what I will call a European fantasy. Subsequently, I will analyse the curious correspondence of the shape of the cube, the film format 4:3 used for the allegorical love story within the cube, and Kazimir Malevich's famous painting *Black Square* (1915) which is positioned next to the protagonist at the beginning of the series. I will argue that Malevich's painting works like a gap or fissure in diegetical 'reality' outside of the cube which renders said 'reality' unstable and is thus at the root of the fragmented, opaque, and even cyclical narration. Due to its similarity in shape with the *Black Square*, I will suggest to grasp the film format 4:3 and thus the allegorical love story as a 'fantasy window' which seeks to cover up this fissure in diegetical 'reality'. The transnational love story, which seems to negotiate a European identity, works hence as a fantasy projection in order to cover up a (political) fissure. I will illustrate how this fissure is linked to the yellow vest protests which are accordingly to be grasped as the kernel of the political crisis which shines through the surface of the rather trivial love story. The specifically fantastic narrative devices, such as the uncanny buzzing sounds or the unmarked prolepses, are consequently to be read as symptoms of this crisis and call for closer examination. The last two parts of this article will thus focus on an analysis of two examples of these audio-visual devices. Firstly, I will examine the indeterminate buzzing sound audible during Vincent's first encounter with his postman, which

3 Rosemary Jackson: *Fantasy. The Literature of Subversion*, London/New York 1988, p. 6.



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seems to mark a subtle antagonism between the two characters and which, as I will show, points towards the internal contradictions of the yellow vest protests. Secondly, I will facilitate a reading of the uncanny noise of a train when Louise is first introduced, in order to grasp Louise's traumatic past in terms of a deadlock of what Chantal Mouffe would call post-democracy.[4] In short, the primary aim of this article is to demonstrate how an in-depth analysis of the narrative structure typical for the fantastic genre enables an understanding of the social contradictions and antagonisms which underlie the contemporary post-political societies and keep on haunting Western Europe up-to-date.

## 2. What's love got to do with it: Eros, Polis, and Political Allegory

Since the primary objective of this article will be to facilitate a reading of the political dimension of Nicloux's series, it seems to me that there is no better way to begin the analysis than with a reference to a relatively recent political event. In November 2021, the French public and the French media respectively realized that Macron's government had changed the colour of the French flag.[5] In 1976, the former president of France, Valéry Giscard d'Estaing, had adjusted the nuance of blue to match the European flag.[6] The slight change made by Macron was thus merely a return to the original French *tricolore* and a portrayal of French Sovereignty in contrast to Macron's own Europe friendly politics. Even though many French journals underscore July 13th, 2020[7] as the date Macron decided to cease to use the flag proposed by the European d'Estaing/*destin*[8], it was, in fact, already for his New Year's Eve address to the nation on December 31st 2018 that Macron had first opted for the variant with a darker shade of blue. Given the date, I would argue that it is almost impossible to not read this change as an immediate response to the national crisis posed by the outburst of the *Mouvement des gilets jaunes*, known as the yellow vest protests which began on November 17th, 2018 and lasted over several months. Sparked by

4 Chantal Mouffe: *On the Political*, London 2005, p. 29.
5 Cf. Arnaud Truchet: "Emmanuel Macron a fait changer la couleur du drapeau français", in: *La Nouvelle République*, 15.12.2021, bit.ly/3YpYqcU (22.02.2023).
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Due to a curious coincidence, the former president's last name invokes – via homophony with the French word *destin* – the question of a European destiny for France.



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a widespread discontent over a tax rise on petrol and diesel – a reformatory measure intended to put forward an ecological energy transition – the protests formed a genuine dysphoric moment for what Slavoj Žižek called "the Macron dream" or the "enthusiasm about Macron […] provid[ing] a new vision of progressive European identity" for France.[9] In this sense, the change of the national emblem can be read as an ideological *strategy of containment*[10], which allows Macron to suppress those social contradictions brought to light by the protests threatening the European fantasy of what Étienne Balibar calls neoliberal Macronism.[11]

However, as the brief summary of the series at the outset of this article has shown, *Il était une seconde fois* (2019) centres foremost on the private love story of Vincent and Louise and some readers might rightfully contest that throughout the series there is no direct depiction of any political crisis to be found. At this point, we might resort to Fredric Jameson's insight that history in its radical dimension as "an absent cause […] cannot be directly or immediately conceptualised"[12]. Nonetheless the following question remains: how is this mere private love story to be grasped in the light of this political crisis? An answer to this might be provided by another question made famous by an American text, namely "what's love got to do with [it]"[13]. Naturally, it is not Tina Turner's love song but rather Doris Sommer's *Foundational Fiction* (1991) we need to turn to. In her monumental work on Latin American romances, Sommer explores "*why* eroticism and nationalism become figures of each other […] and […] *how* the rhetorical relationship between heterosexual passion and hegemonic states functions as a mutual allegory, as if each discourse were grounded in the allegedly stable other"[14]. Yet, even though Tina Turner would tell us that love is just a second hand emotion or, as Fredric Jameson might

9 Slavoj Žižek: "The yellow vest protesters revolting against centrism mean well – but their left wing populism won't change French politics", in: *Independent*, 17.12.2018, bit.ly/3JYjjrc (22.02.2023).

10 Cf. Fredric Jameson: *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, Ithaca 1981, p. 38. Jameson's notion of cultural artefacts as strategies of containment of class antagonisms can best "be grasped as the imaginary resolution of a real contradictions", p. 77.

11 Cf. Étienne Balibar: "Gilets jaunes: le sens du face à face", in: *Mediapart*, 18.12.2018, bit.ly/2DuWIyE (22.02.2023).

12 Jameson: *The Political Unconscious*, p. 62.

13 Doris Sommer: *Foundational Fictions: The National Romances of Latin America*, Berkeley 1991, p. 30.

14 Sommer: *Foundational Fictions*, p. 31.



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put it; romance is merely the placeholder for a national allegory[15], we should insist on Sommer's insight not to give priority to either register, but to understand "that Eros and Polis are the effects of each other's performance"[16]. Grasped dialectically, it becomes clear how "one libidinal investment", e.g. the libidinal investment into an imagined community like the nation, "ups the ante for the other"[17], in this context being gender identity and heterosexual passion.

1 Il était une seconde fois (2019): Louise and Vincent represent an inverted tricolore.

Thus, it seems hardly surprising that most reviews on the series have two things in common. They all seem to praise the utmost authenticity of the love story, especially Louise's proposal of an open relationship *(un ménage à quatre)* and her lack of emotional commitment. Yet additionally and more importantly, they all have equally chosen a very peculiar *still* as their heading.[18] Here, Louise wears a red blouse and Vincent a blue

15 For a more detailed account on the relationship of romance and national allegory according to Jameson see: Fredric Jameson: "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism", in *Social Text* 15 (1986).

16 Sommer: *Foundational Fictions*, p. 47.

17 Ibid., p. 48.

18 Cf. Daniel Hart: "Twice Upon a Time Season 1 Review: Flitting Between Times For Love", in: *Ready Steady Cut*, 16.12.2019, bit.ly/3YKkRZV (22.02.2023).



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shirt (*still* 1). Due to the white sand between them, I would argue that the colour composition of this *still* (*still* 1) represents an inverted *tricolore.* The blocking of this scene and the following keeps Louise (red) on the left and Vincent (blue) on the right side of the frame underscoring thus the intentionality of this arrangement. Given that an inverted flag is the symbol for a nation in crisis, I would argue that the status of their relationship is linked to a specific political imaginary. The *mise-en-scène* at the beach showcases an inverted *tricolore*, since Louise is proposing a *ménage à quatre* between her British ex-partner James, Vincent's French ex-wife, and the two of them. Accordingly, the blocking in another scene within the cube (*still* 2 and 3) plays with this connotation, inverting the flag according to the status of their relationship. As long as they get along the flag remains inverted, with Louise (blue) on the right and Vincent (red) on the left (*still* 2). Yet, as soon as they have an argument the flag switches back to the ordinary arrangement of the colours of the French *tricolore* (*still* 3). Interestingly, the success of the relationship is linked to the imagery of a national crisis. Thus, unlike the national romances analysed by Sommer, where the success of a monogamous heterosexual relationship would be tantamount to a national utopia, the erotic model transcending the heterosexual norms of monogamy – as proposed by Louise – apparently stands in opposition to the nation. Therefore, I would argue that the inversion of the *tricolore* suggests that the series' unconventional love story, which in a way transcends traditional monogamy, points towards an imagined community which transcends the nation-state.

2–3 Il était une seconde fois (2019): The National tricolore according to the status of their relationship (blue jacket and red shirt)

In order to further determine this transnational imagined community evoked by the private love story we need to turn firstly to the character Louise. Born to a rich British father and a French mother, Louise belongs to a transnational European bourgeois elite. Throughout the series she



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resides in Paris, London, and Reykjavik, which emphasizes her European cosmopolitanism. Additionally, we need to consider that Vincent's obsession with Louise leads to the negligence of his son and his French ex-wife Nadège (Claire Sermonne). The first observation leads me to propose that the series' love story is to be read as an allegorical negotiation in search for Europe as a transnational imagined community. Furthermore, I would argue that Vincent's desire for this European imagined community by means of an erotic alliance with Louise is at the root of the national crisis evoked by the imagery of the inverted *tricolore*. After all, this desire is the reason why he neglects his son who could be grasped as the genealogical future of a French nation based on the French-French alliance with Nadège. Interestingly, the latter is remarried to the Muslim Stephan who in turn is introduced to the viewer by his monologue in defence of the militant Islamist group Daesh commonly known as the Islamic State. The portrayal of Stephan as being incapable of satisfying Nadège's sexual needs and her subsequent, yet unanswered desire for her French ex-husband clearly alludes to the ongoing discourse on French identity (supposedly 'endangered' by Islamic influence) – a discourse perpetuated not only by right-wing politicians in France. The allegorical outset of the series' love story is thus rather simple: The French lower middle class subject's desire for a European identity for France (or, in Sommer's terms, his desire for a transnational imagined community Europe) suppresses a nationalist (and islamophobic) alternative. This opposition at the heart of the series' allegorical outset – the opposition between an identification with a European transnational elite (Louise) on the one hand and a potential resurgence of a nationalist movement (Nadège) on the other – clearly mirrors the alternative French citizens (Vincent) were faced with during the second round of the French presidential election in 2017, namely the choice between Emmanuel Macron and Marine Le Pen, leading to the former's presidency. In other words, I would claim that it is precisely neoliberal Macronism that the political allegory in *Il était une seconde fois* (2019) primarily revolves around.

However, despite the claim of some reviews that this (allegorical) love story would have worked out better without the time travel theme, with a more linear narration, and naturally a more satisfying ending[19], it is precisely the dysphoric moment keeping the text from closure that is of

19 Cf. Paul Levinson: "Twice upon a Time: After Sunset", in: *Paul Levingson's Infinit Regress*, 12.05.2020, bit.ly/3Ih94fh (22.02.2023).



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interest here since the series' particular narrative structure adds a further level of meaning to this allegorical narrative. While Vincent's European fantasy (of a committed relationship with Louise) provokes the imagery of a national crisis, the European fantasy, which is only accessible to the protagonist within the cube, is itself always already initiated by its own impossibility, namely the break-up. As the series' title already suggests, the European fairy-tale love story is already an empty repetition. Hence, it turns out that the European fantasy is itself in crisis. In this context, I would propose to consider Stephan Leopold's elaboration on Sommer's notion of political allegories. For Leopold suggests that, due to the subject's libidinal investment in its imagined community, allegorical narration as a way of traumatic repetition is the subject's response to its dysphorically experienced imagined community.[20] For example, he grasps the terrorist attacks from 9/11 as a dysphoric moment for the imagined community of the USA and outlines how subsequent Hollywood blockbusters such as *Alexander* (2004), *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), and *Troy* (2004) work as allegorical repetitions with the purpose to surmount the historical trauma and reconstitute the US's self-perception.[21] In regard to the series in question, I would argue that the yellow vest protests need to be understood precisely as such a dysphoric moment which threatened the imagined community established under Macronism, which in turn provided a European identity for France. The series *Il était une seconde fois* (2019) is hence to be read as a traumatic allegorical repetition which seeks to reconstitute a European fantasy within the cube. However, unlike the symbolic act of the change of blue of the French *drapeau tricolore* ordered by Macron, which, as a strategy of containment, intends to cover up the social contradictions, the series rather functions as a critique of said fantasy. Yet, to grasp the position of the yellow vest protests within the series' allegorical narrative, we need to further examine the narrative function of the diegetical split and the role of the audio-visual devices which produce a genuine cinematographic fantastic.

20 Stephan Leopold: *Liebe im Ancien Régime: Eros und Polis von Corneille bis Sade*, Paderborn 2014, p. 56.

21 Ibid., p. 57.



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## 3. The Fantastic and the *Black Square*, or Always Trouble with the European *truc*

Allegorical narratives which make use of new sexual alliances transcending heterosexual monogamy to produce imagined communities which transcend the nation-state – and vice versa –, seem to be a recent phaenomenon and can be found in several contemporary melodramas.[22] However, it is precisely the fantastic narrative structure of the series *Il était une seconde fois* (2019) which grants a fuller understanding of the social antagonisms underlying these political fantasies.

While Nicloux's series is most often labelled either as a drama or as science fiction, its dominant narrative structure clearly displays the major characteristics of the fantastic genre as outlined by Todorov, namely doubt (hesitation). As Todorov himself puts it: "*L'hésitation du lecteur* est donc la première condition du fantastique. […] Il faut que le texte oblige le lecteur à considérer le monde des personnages comme un monde de personnes vivantes et à hésiter entre une explication naturelle et une explication surnaturelle des évènements évoqués"[23]. While Vincent never doubts the ontological status of the world within the cube – which would be Todorov's second but merely optional condition of the fantastic[24] – the structure of the series creates doubt for the implicit viewer. For example, when Vincent tells his cousin Thibaut, a pharmacist, about the cube, the latter answers, „Si ça se trouve, t'as des cristaux de ‚kéta' dans les sinus." [25], and adds „T'as besoin d'une aide extérieure, pas d'un cousin qui te dépanne en médocs" [26]. Ketamine – the substance in question – is a pharmaceutical drug which can produce strong hallucinations and immediately before Vincent finds the cube, he fumbles with some tablets on his bedside table, implying the use of these drugs which his cousin constantly provides him with. Furthermore, characters repeatedly point to Vincent's apparent drinking problem since he always seems to smell of alcohol: "C'est pour ça que tu pues l'alcool dès le matin?"[27]. Hence, the protagonist, to whom the camera is always bound during the episodes within the cube is destabilized. Therefore, as Claudia Pinkas has suggested

22 In fact, I would reckon this accounts for the utmost success of many Netflix series such as e.g. the Mexican production *Quien mató a Sara?* (2021).
23 Todorov: *Introduction*, p. 36f.
24 Cf. ibid.
25 Nicloux: Ep. 1, 00:27:40.
26 Ibid., 00:29:19.
27 Ibid., Ep. 2, 00:42:06.



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for fantastic films, the ontological status of the scenes themselves might be unclear. Either it is an objective non-focalized camera depicting the events or it might as well be an unmarked subjective *mindscreen* of the protagonist.[28] So while the naturalness of Vincent's double life pulls the series towards *le merveilleux*, Vincent's abuse of drugs, his insurmountable grief, and other devices employed mark the plot within the cube potentially as a dream or a hallucination, thus pulling the series back towards *l'étrange*. Yet, the metaphorical door of doubt, outlined by Todorov[29], is never fully closed.

Nonetheless, as Todorov himself remarked, the transgressions of and the differences in regard to the structural norm of a genre are what distinguishes art from mass culture and it is this difference which is the most revealing.[30] At this point, we may dare to read Todorov with Caillois, which is not farfetched since the latter constitutes the theoretical outset of the former's elaborations.[31] From this angle, Todorov's notion of the hesitation concerning the ontological status of a phenomenon stems from a fissure in the diegetic reality. Or as Roger Caillois points out : „[l]e fantastique est rupture de l'ordre reconnu, irruption de l'inadmissible au sein de l'inaltérable légalité quotidienne"[32]. Yet, unlike fantastic texts of the 19th century, the phenomenon whose ontological status is in doubt in Nicloux's series does not produce a fissure in the diegetic reality. I would argue, on the contrary, that the scenes within the cube literally cover up an already existing fissure. We merely need to reconsider the film format 4:3 (exemplified in *still* 4) used to represent the plot within the cube. This format clearly mimics the shape of the cube itself (*still* 5). Yet, there is a third element repeating the very same shape, namely Kazimir Malevich's painting *Black Square* which is positioned over the protagonist's right shoulder (*still* 6) at the beginning of the series. Nicloux underscores the relevancy of this scene by a slow fade-in of the protagonist's name (*still* 7). The fact that this positioning of the painting is by no means of a purely aesthetic nature, but rather emphasizes the central role of the *Black Square* in the series, is further underscored by a scientific radio transmission on

28 Cf. Claudia Pinkas: *Der phantastische Film: instabile Narrationen und die Narration der Instabilität*, Berlin 2010, p. 135.
29 Cf. Todorov: *Introduction*, p. 30.
30 Cf. Todorov: *Introduction*, p. 11ff.
31 Ibid., p. 31.
32 Roger Caillois: *Au cœur du fantastique*, Paris 1965, p. 61



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4–7 Il était une seconde fois (2019): Coinciding Shapes: The Film Format 4:3, the Cube, and Kazimir Malevich's Black Square.

black holes in the universe changing the perception of time and reality which is heard throughout the previous scene. Due to the painting's resemblance with a black hole, I would argue that this notion of the change of time and perception is hereby linked to the painting. Hence, I would read the *Black Square* as a fissure or gap in diegetical 'reality', which in turn is to be grasped as the cause of the uncanny, fragmented, and elliptical narrative structure of the plot outside of the cube. Accordingly, I would claim that – due to their identity in shape – the cube and the film format 4:3 serve to cover up this fissure in diegetic reality, providing a more linear narration.

In psychoanalytical terms, the cube could then be read as being "essentially a fantasy window"[33]. The subsequent split of the diegesis would thus function similar to the cinematographic narration in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, where Hitchcock's protagonist Jeff, incapacitated due to a broken leg, "puts off indefinitely the (sexual) act"[34] with Grace Kelly inside his apartment. Whereas his rear window offers a phantasmatic screen or a fantasy window onto which he projects all "fantasy figurations of what

33 Slavoj Žižek: *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture*, Cambridge 1991, p. 92.
34 Ibid.



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could happen to him and Grace Kelly"[35]. In the series in question the two sides of the fantasy window consist in the side of the fantasy itself within the cube – with all the fantasy figurations of Vincent and Louise in her bourgeois luxury apartment – and the very place from which it is looked at – the desolate and melancholic lower middle class suburb. The transnational fantasy of a European relationship with Louise within the cube is to be understood, as I will argue below, as all the possible configurations of a neoliberal promise to the lower middle class subject that it may join the European elite in their luxury apartment of excessive enjoyment. By means of the diegetical split in form of a fantasy window, Nicloux exemplifies how this European fantasy within the cube offers an imaginary solution to – or a Macronian *strategy of containment* of – an actual impasse of 'reality' outside of the cube which is visualized by Malevich's *Black Square*[36]. Yet, in order to grasp a further dimension of the fantasy window and thus to determine the precise semantic function of this fissure in diegetical 'reality', it is necessary to consider the Lacanian notion of fantasy. According to Lacan, the scenes played on a fantasy screen operate like "a frozen image on a cinema screen; just as the film may be stopped at a certain point in order to avoid showing a traumatic scene which follows"[37]. The primary function of the European fantasy, that is of the scenes within the cube, is hence the avoidance of another scene. In this sense, I would propose examining the establishing scene of the series since the radio transmission on the black hole connects the latter with Malevich's painting.

The establishing scene of the series literally begins *in media res:* While a medium close-up shot depicts Vincent and a red-haired woman during coitus having a simultaneous orgasm, the blocking of the following shot positions the protagonist next to a painting of the *Nursing Madonna* (*still* 8) and subsequently traces his transition from the bedroom to a bourgeois lounge stocked with luxury décor, where an excessive party is taking place. The depiction of the ecstatic orgasm and the subsequent positioning of the protagonist next to the painting of Virgin Mary breastfeeding baby Jesus – the representation of the mother-child dyad *par excellence* (still 8) – already suggest the pre-oedipal logic of the establishing scene. Additionally, the fragmentary bits of dialog within the scene turn exclusively

35 Ibid.
36 Cf. ibid., p. 93.
37 Ibid.



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8 Il était une seconde fois (2019): Nursing Madonna: The Pre-Oedipal Dyad

around 'the Thing': "le truc"[38]. Even though the characters seem to use the word as a reference to a party drug, I would argue that the general isotopy of excessive enjoyment produced by the orgasm and the excess of the party as well as the logic of the mother-child-dyad evoked by the painting favour a secondary reading of *le truc* in psychoanalytical terms, namely as the notion of *das Ding*.[39] The concept of *das Ding* refers to the pre-symbolic/pre-oedipal, maternal thing as the incarnation of an impossible *jouissance* (enjoyment). It is basically the subject's retroactive imagination of an uncorrupted enjoyment in symbiosis with the mother before the castrative intervention of the father. The point is of course that the "symbolic prohibition of enjoyment in the Oedipus complex (the incest taboo) is […], paradoxically, the prohibition of something which is already impossible"[40]. However, why does the series so firmly emphasize the pre-oedipal logic of its establishing scene? How could the painting of the Madonna and Jesus be connected to the *Black Square* – the fissure in diegetic 'reality' – or even to the yellow vest protest? In order to fully grasp the function of sex, enjoyment, and the painting in the opening scene, I

38 Nicloux: *Il était une seconde fois*, Ep. 1, 00:02:14–00:02:30.

39 Cf. Slavoj Žižek: *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London 1989, p. 146. For Lacan's elaboration of the term see: Jacques Lacan: "L'Éthique de la psychanalyse" (1959–1960), in: Jacques-Alain Miller (ed.): *Le séminaire, livre VII*, Paris 1986, p. 71–85.

40 Dylan Evans: *Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, London 2006, p. 94.



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would argue that it is necessary to contemplate two further aspects. Firstly, we need to consider the tremendous contrast between the depiction of enjoyment in the establishing scene and the general melancholic atmosphere of loss that dominates throughout the rest of the series (at least outside of the cube). Secondly, the ontological status of the opening scene itself needs to be examined. I would propose starting out with the latter.

The whole series is framed by two wild parties comprising of exactly the same people pertaining to the protagonist's lower middle class milieu. The obvious difference between those two parties is their location. While the party of the establishing scene takes place in a bourgeois lounge resembling Louise's flat, the second at the end of the series is located in Vincent's living room in a run-down middle class suburb. This change of location clearly points towards a socioeconomic dimension of the series' development. Yet, to read this transition as a linear socioeconomic decline of the lower middle class subject throughout the series would miss the essential point since the crucial (and easily missed) difference between the two concerns the uncertainty of the ontological status of the first party analysed above. When asked by his cousin Thibault about the red-haired woman immediately after the first party, the protagonist's *mind screen* produces a rather peculiar effect. Instead of serving as the portrayal of a memory, it functions as an unmarked prolepsis portraying a scene with the anonymous red-haired woman from the second party at the end of the series. The cyclical notion of the series produced by this doubled narrative device – consisting of a *mind screen* and a prolepsis – emphasises the phantasmatic status of the first party. The first party is, hence, constituted as an always already impossible moment of completeness situated somewhere before (or even outside of) the diegesis. This is precisely why any interpretations of the change of location of the parties as a consecutive socioeconomic decline would fall short since the depiction of the sexual and financial completeness of the lower middle class subject (Vincent) within the party of the opening scene is an always already impossible projection. In other words, the establishing scene is the retroactive imagination – which is subsequently constructed as the lost object around which the series revolves. In this regard, the second aspect, namely the contrast between the opening depiction of completeness and the general atmosphere of loss, seems even more of importance.

The essential point here is that the establishing scene of the party of excessive enjoyment ends with a massively hard cut, while the following scene's depiction of the protagonist in his car unmistakably conveys an



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atmosphere of melancholia and loss. Since the radio transmission heard in his car revolves around the nature of black holes in the universe, which already foreshadows the *Black Square* (as indicated in *still* 7), I would argue that this cut could be read as the dysphoric disruption of the retroactive imagination of this party of *jouissance*. The cut hence functions like the castrative intervention of the father in the pre-oedipal mother/child dyad evoked by the imagery of the establishing scene. Consequently, it is precisely this cut (of castration) which both produces the fissure in diegetical 'reality' – visualized by the *Black Square* – and the general melancholic feeling of loss throughout the series. The lost object is then nothing less than the ominous *truc* – the pre-oedipal, maternal thing.

The originality of the cut is further underscored by the fact that the camera man of the production (Yves Capes) also plays the nameless terrorist who blows up the wind turbines at the end of the series. As a metonymy of the camera movement, the doubled figure *character/ cameraman* is the actual agent of the cut (of castration). Given that wind turbines are the symbol of the energy transition *par excellence* and since the measures taken by Macron in accordance with a European energy transition were the primary target of the yellow vest protests, I would claim that this cut functions precisely as the allegorical repetition of the dysphoric moment which the yellow vest protests posed for "the Macron dream" or the "enthusiasm about Macron […] provid[ing] a new vision of a progressive European identity" for France.[41]

In a way, the establishing scene then turns out to be like a neoliberal promise to the lower middle class subject that it may join the European elite in their luxury apartment of excessive enjoyment. The actual impossibility of this notion, however, is precisely the traumatic kernel the European fantasy seeks to avoid. The *truc* grasped as the Lacanian notion of *das Ding* is then a paradoxical object[42]: On the one hand, Vincent

41 Žižek: "The yellow vest protesters".

42 I would conceptualize *le truc* here as the European *Ding* which provides the coordinates for Vincent's cognitive mapping of his being-in-the-world. In the wake of the fall of the Soviet Union, Fredric Jameson had already suggested that the cognitive mapping of the subject would be "organized around the categories of a new triumvirate of superstates (the US, Europe and Japan)". In other words, while the world was essentially divided into the West and the (communist) East during the Cold war period, the fall of the Soviet Union left a vacuum and new coordinates for a geopolitical mapping were needed. Albeit this is not the place to discuss the actual existence of such superstates, we might, nonetheless, conclude that Louise/*le truc* – as the object of Vincent's European fantasy – functions precisely along these lines since she provides Vincent, the French member of the lower middle



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desires it as the object once lost. On the other hand, he must maintain a certain distance to it in order to veil its actual impossibility and thus keep the desire alive. The cube as a window for the European fantasy functions accordingly: Vincent's desire for Louise is based on the illusion that if Louise just finally committed to a monogamous relationship, he would once again find himself in the enjoyment of the establishing scene. Allegorically speaking, the lower middle class subject's desire for a European identity is based on the illusion that if Europe fully committed to France's needs – in a monogamous relationship –, the neoliberal promise would be fulfilled. Yet, this promise is itself an impossible object – an illusion. The erotic model of the *ménage à quatre,* on the contrary, makes sure to maintain the necessary distance to the promise and thus veils its inherent impossibility. The most dominant narratological feature of the series, however, is the narrative split, which is – as I have argued – produced by the cut (of castration) grasped allegorically as the yellow vest protests. For the dysphoric dimension of the eruption of the protests in France consists precisely in the fact that they exposed the neoliberal promise of the European fantasy as an impossible illusion: Macron's Europe friendly politics are, as the protests suggest, played out on the back of the lower middle class subject and only favour the European elite. In this regard, I would read the plot within the cube as a dysphoric repetition of Vincent's neoliberal European fantasy which seeks to (re-)contain the social contradiction rendered visible by the yellow vest protests. It is a constant attempt to save Louise from sudden death – to save Europe from disruption. Yet, the plot outside of the cube tells a different story. The Cailloisian fissure in diegetical 'reality' – materialised by Malevich's *Black Square* – produces, as I will argue, a subtle eruption in form of several audio-visual devices which I read as constitutive elements of a cinematographic fantastic. In the following, I will analyse the uncanny buzzing sound hovering between Vincent and his postman in order to

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class, with the coordinates for his progressive European identity. In this sense, neither the EU as an actually existing superstate nor Europe as an imagined community under the signifier of neoliberalism give consistency to Vincent's being-in-the-world, but precisely the impossibility of both, namely Europe as the impossible *truc/Ding*. For a more detailed outline of the notion of a transnational *Ding* as the kernel of a geopolitical aesthetic see: Pádraic Wilson: "Der Genuss jenseits der Nation: Zur geopolitischen Ästhetik unbestimmter Bildsprache in *La region salvaje* (2016)", in: Heinz-Peter Preusser/Sabine Schlickers (eds.): *Bestimmte Unbestimmtheit*, Marburg 2023. Also see: Fredric Jameson: *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, Bloomington 1991, p. 3.



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illustrate how these narrative devices point towards the political crisis outlined above and render the social contradiction visible.

9 *Il était une seconde fois* (2019): The Postman and the Fourth Square.

## 4. *»Je suis pas un voleur«:* The Postman and the Yellow Vests

Immediately after the fade-in of the protagonist's name in the second scene and the introduction of the *Black Square*, the plot passes over to the next morning when a coloured postman rings the doorbell. A medium long shot, functioning as an establishing shot of the sequence, positions the two men in direct opposition, with Vincent located inside and the postman, visible only through the window, outside of the house. The postman repeatedly addresses the protagonist by his name and leaves. A subtle, almost imperceptible jump cut leads to an abrupt change of position of the protagonist. Interestingly, this jump cut coincides with the sudden initiation of a disturbing buzzing sound whose ontological status seems unclear. A hard cut transports the plot into the protagonist's cellar, where the postman places various packages on the floor – erroneously among them the cube. At the end of the scene the postman returns Vincent's pen claiming jokingly: "Je suis pas un voleur"[43]. In the following, I would

43 Nicloux: *Il était une seconde fois*, Ep. 1, 00:07:30.



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like to consider two major aspects of this scene, namely this ominous last claim and the strange buzzing sound. First of all, I would argue that the postman's repetition of the protagonist's name alludes directly to the slow fade-in of the name in the previous scene. Since this fade-in is immediately linked to the *Black Square,* I would add that this encounter with the postman serves as an instant answer to the problem of the fissure in diegetical 'reality'. Naturally, in this very scene the postman provides Vincent with the cube – the fantasy window covering up the *Black Square*. Yet, there seems to be more to it. In order to grasp the particular role of the postman in the series, I would propose considering briefly a shot from Vincent's second encounter with him. While again the same unfathomable buzzing sound is clearly audible during the scene, a medium long shot positions the two characters in direct opposition to each other (*still* 9). The framing of the shot as well as the frame of the glass door place the postman within a square. The similarity in shape to Malevich's painting, the cube and the film format 4:3 suggests that this is not a coincidence. The role of the postman in the diegesis outside of the cube seems rather to be the equivalent of the role of Louise within the cube (compare *still* 4). While Louise is the allegory of the European fantasy, the postman seems to be linked to an ideological fantasy construction without the cube.

It is in this context that we need to consider the postman's claim *Je suis pas un voleur* at the end of the scene of their first encounter, because in the latter encounter the postman actually tries to steal the cube back from Vincent in order to save his job. Naturally, this poses a threat to Vincent's connection with Louise since he only meets her within the cube. As the provider of the cube and its potential thief, the postman is of course a paradoxical figure, resembling the fundamental matrix of racism according to Žižek.[44] For the Slovenian philosopher, racism is not based on the intolerance of the other's value system. The radical kernel of racism, for Žižek, rather resides in the impossibility of our own (full) enjoyment, namely in the fact that the access to *le truc/das Ding* is inherently impossible since it is always already a retroactive imagination. The inherent impossibility to ever reach the European *truc* is thus transferred to an external agent, namely the coloured postman. This works according to the following notion: The only reason why I am unable to fully enjoy my alliance with Louise (the European bourgeois elite) and return to the

44 Cf. Slavoj Žižek: *Mehr-Genießen*, Wien 1997, p. 93.



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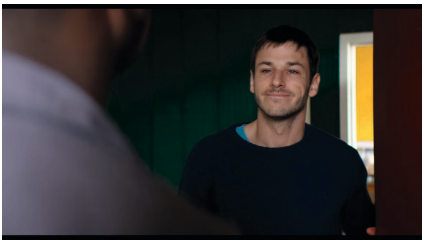

10–11 Il était une seconde fois (2019): Yellow Trouble: A Glimpse of the Yellow Kitchen Wall (left) and Vincent's Yellow shirt (right).

moment of excessive enjoyment of the European *truc* in the establishing scene, is because the coloured postman tries to steal *my* cube. Or as Žižek himself puts it: „Was wir verschleiern, indem wir dem Anderen den Diebstahl des Genießens zur Last legen, ist der traumatische Umstand, daß wir das, was uns angeblich gestohlen wurde, niemals besessen haben"[45]. In short, the social antagonism between Vincent and his postman with migration background is essentially just another way for the French lower middle class subject to defend itself against the lack in the Other – the fissure in diegetical 'reality' – and maintain the necessary distance to the impossible European *truc*. At first sight, this might suggest that without the cube – without the European fantasy – the only option for the lower middle class subject is the nationalist alternative allegorically offered in the series by means of his potential erotic alliance with his French ex-wife Nadège. It is, however, not as simple as this, as we need yet to consider the decisive element of both postman scenes: the buzzing sound invading both encounters.

In order to suggest the provenance of the disturbing buzzing sound, I would like to return to the wind turbines which are repeatedly shown throughout the series without any tangible reason. Due to their destruction by the redoubled *character/cameraman* (Yves Cape), I have proposed earlier to read them as a symbol *par excellence* of the energy transition and their destruction consequently as a dysphoric repetition of the yellow vest protests. The following analysis will further support this claim. For, a fade-in of a name reveals that these wind turbines are the *éoliennes de Naujac* – a park of wind turbines which was actually never built in real

45 Ibid.



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life because of an outburst of protest against the energy transition.[46] The striking similarity between the buzzing and the noise produced by wind turbines leads me to argue that these wind turbines generate precisely the sound which uncannily invades several scenes. Therefore, it seems that the buzzing sound already links the subtle antagonism between Vincent and his coloured postman to the wind turbines as a symbol *par excellence* of the energy transition and to the general notion of protests against it. Yet, we still need to connect this notion to the yellow vest movement itself. The scene of Vincent's first encounter with his postman ends with an alternating series of OTS- and reverse shots emphasising the dual relationship between the two characters. The last reverse shot of this series right before the postman's essential claim, *Je suis pas un voleur*, seems of particular interest (*still 10*) since it introduces into this particular social antagonism a glimpse of Vincent's yellow kitchen wall, which is quite intentionally never fully seen up to a particular moment in the series. Naturally, despite the evocation of a general notion of protests against the energy transition by the buzzing sound, a mere glimpse of a yellow wall paper does not suffice to draw a waterproof connection to the yellow vest protests. But to emphasis the non-arbitrary nature of the colour of the wall, I would propose considering a shot portraying Vincent with a yellow shirt (*still* 11). This shot sticks out of the plot since the scene from the second episode this shot was taken from, additionally forms part of a sequence of scenes set chronologically at the end of the series. It is thus an unmarked prolepsis. Even though the unmarked transition from this scene into the next implies continuity, the change of clothes, namely the shirt, produces a subtle uneasiness in regard to the achronicity or non-linearity of the diegesis outside of the cube. Additionally, it turns the spectator's attention to Vincent's shirts which up to this point had been either blue, white, or red. Given the allegorical dimension of the series as outlined above, the colours clearly point to the French *tricolore*. Therefore, I would argue that this change of clothes is of significance, which in turn is additionally emphasised by the following, at first sight nonsensical, claim of Vincent's schizophrenic brother Alexis: "Je mettrai plus jamais de tee-shirt jaune."[47]. The point is of course that Alexis despises André and the redoubled *character/cameraman* (Yves Cape) for their hatred of the wind turbines. Again,

46 Cf. América Lopez: "Naujac (33): un projet de 16 éoliennes retoqué par la prefecture", in: *France Info*, 17.07.2015, bit.ly/3YJp6Vv (22.02.2023).

47 Nicloux: *Il était une seconde fois*, Ep. 2, 00:41:28.



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like the buzzing sound, the insertion of this uncanny prolepsis points thus to the destruction of the wind turbines, which in fact, as mentioned above have never existed due to protests against the energy transition.

12 Il était une seconde fois (2019): More Yellow Trouble

In order to finally illustrate the precise function of these uncanny audio-visual narrative devices, I suggest turning to the scene the yellow shirt actually belongs to and thus to the shot displaying the yellow kitchen wall in its entirety for the first time (*still* 12). The date outlined by the clock on the wall is November 13th. For the French spectator this cannot but evoke the terrorist attacks in Paris on this very date in 2015 – including the attack on Bataclan – committed by the Islamic State. Interestingly, the latter is precisely the militant Islamist group defended by Nadège's new husband Stephan. Additionally, we may notice that the date shown on the clock is not mimetic, because November 13th 2017 was not a Sunday but a Monday. However, in the series Monday is the day of Vincent and his ex-wife Nadège or as she herself puts it, "On est Lundi […] c'est notre jour"[48]. In this context, the allegorical dimension of this French-French erotic alliance couldn't be more obvious. The red colour of Sunday, thus, obtains a rather alarming dimension being the day right before Monday – the day of the nationalist alternative. Naturally, the decisive point in

48 Ibid., 00:42:55.



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regard to this date resides in the time travel theme. The general premise of the series is Vincent's attempt to prevent his break-up with Louise on Valentine's Day (February 14th). Due to the nine-month difference in time Vincent's attempt to save the European fantasy within the cube is equally a struggle to avoid the day after November 13th and thus the nationalist alternative. Furthermore, I would argue that the predominance of the colour yellow in the scene produces yet another connotation of the date, namely November 17th – the day of the outburst of the yellow vest protests in 2018. At this point, we may consider the Freudian notion of the uncanny as the return of the repressed[49]: the uncanny audio-visual narrative devices – the buzzing sound and the unmarked prolepsis – are, in fact, the return of the repressed cut (of castration). What is repressed, is the fact that the yellow vest protests have subverted the European fantasy – the Macron dream established through the believe in *L'homme providential* – and have exposed the impossibility of the neoliberal 'promise' of the enjoyment of the European *truc*.

Yet, far from being a simple celebration of the emergence of the yellow vest movement as, according to Chantal Mouffe, the only way to politically participate in a post-democratic era, established by thirty years of neoliberal hegemony[50], if anything the series' argument seems closer to the insight articulated by Éwanjé-Epée that the movement is a floating signifier in danger of being appropriated by racist and nationalist discourses[51]. But I would argue that Nicloux goes even further in demonstrating how the signifier – the yellow vest – is always already caught in an ideological field. The yellow vest protests do not go beyond the national double bind of the French election in 2017 but are caught up in it. In other words, we need to resort to Alain Badiou's insight concerning the yellow vest movement, captured by the old phrase "tout ce qui bouge n'est pas rouge" and acknowledge that in the yellow vest movement as well as in Nicloux's series, "aside from yellow", the predominate colour is "the tricolour".[52] *Il était une seconde fois*, therefore, illustrates how the yellow vest protests, as

49 Cf. Sigmund Freud: "Das Unheimliche" (1919) in: *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. XII. Werke aus den Jahren 1917–1920, S. 227–268, p. 263.

50 Chantal Mouffe: "Gilets jaunes: 'Une réaction à l'explosion des inégalités entre les super riches et les classes moyennes'", in: *Libération*, 03.12.2018, bit.ly/3E2X3IS (22.02.2023).

51 Félix Boggio Éwanjé-Épée: "Le gilet jaune comme signifiant flottant", in: *Contretemps*, 22.11.2018, bit.ly/3RS5Pz7 (02.02.2023).

52 Alain Badiou: "Lessons of the Yellow Vest Movement", in: *Verso*, 20.05. 2019, bit.ly/3RUsjzo (22.02.2023).



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13 Il était une seconde fois (2019): Louise looking in the Mirror.

well as, according to Badiou, movements and protests with a similar fate across Europe such as *Los indignados* (Spain), *Movimento 5 Stelle* (Italy), and *Nuit debout*[53], are symptoms of a fundamental European deadlock and are consequently always already caught in an ideological field. In order to further specify this European deadlock, its relation to post-democratic discourse, and ultimately its connection to the emergence of a certain cinematographic fantastic as a contemporary narrative form throughout the last decades, I would argue that it is necessary to consider the other half of the dialectical couple, namely the transnational European character Louise.

## 5. Louise vs Karl, or Marx as the Symptom of Post-Democracy

Since the introductory scene with the fade-in of the protagonist's name turned out to be central for the analysis, I would argue that the analogous scene of Louise must be of similar importance. A frontal medium close up shot (*still* 13), slightly tilted to the right, depicts Louise staring almost self-loathingly at herself in the mirror. While the distant noise of a moving train becomes increasingly audible, Louise's name is slowly faded in. As

53 Cf. ibid.



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Lacan has argued in his famous essay on the mirror stage and the formation of the ego, the mirror is essential to the construction of the subject's identity. However, while Lacan observed a jubilatory effect when the child identifies both with the image in the mirror and with its corresponding imaginary completeness in contrast to its actual *corps morcelé*[54], Louise, on the contrary, lacks a comparable emotion. It seems as if the mirror image is always already undermined by a "stain, whose inert presence […] prevents [her] from achieving [her] own self-identity"[55]. This notion of the stain, as conceived here by Žižek, can of course also be found in Lacan himself, namely in form of the gaze of the mother the child turns to immediately after the jubilatory effect.[56] I would thus argue that the juxtaposition of the sound and the image suggests that the noise of the train is somehow connected to Louise's incapability of identification and ultimately – as I will illustrate – to her lack of erotic commitment. It is hence the uncanny noise of the train we need to turn our attention to since its ontological status, analogous to the sound of the wind turbines, is unclear. It could belong to an actual train passing by, but, given Louise's traumatic past, it could equally pertain to a suppressed traumatic moment haunting her.

The motif of the train is repeated throughout the series at tellingly peculiar moments. It is first mentioned during Vincent's receipt of the cube, when the postman argues within a strangely unfathomable monologue that the solution to an unspecified European problem would be a "locomotive"[57]. However, it is the second appearance of the train motif I would like to focus on, since the second time it is mentioned is connected to the moment when the cube is supposedly lost in the fire at Vincent's house. I would hence argue that the reappearance of the motif is somehow connected to the outage of the *strategy of containment* inside of the cube. At the end of the third episode of the series, Vincent and Stanley collect Alexis, the protagonist's brother, from a mental hospital. Just before they

54 Cf. Jacques Lacan: "Das Spiegelstadium als Bildner der Ichfunktion" (1949), in: Norbert Haas (ed.): *Schriften I*, Olten 1973, p. 61–70, p. 64ff.

55 Žižek: *Looking Awry*, p. 126.

56 Cf. Jacques Lacan: (1964/65), *Les problèmes cruciaux de la psychanalyse*, **unpublished**, p. 140. In his seminar *Les problèmes cruciaux de la psychanalyse* from 1964/65, Lacan adds to his classic elaboration of the mirror stage an essential aspect: "le premier geste de l'enfant, dans cette assomption jubilatoire, ai-je dit, de son image dans le miroir, est très souvent coordonné avec ce retour de la tête vers l'autre, l'autre réel ".

57 Nicloux: *Il était une seconde fois*, Ep. 1, 00:05:50–00:06:12.



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get into the car to drive to Vincent's house, the song *The Locomotive* (2017) by the British singer King Krule is played:

> King Krule: No object in motion
> A subject to smoking
> The platform sighs:
> 'My empty emotion
> [inaudible because of Stanley's conversation with Alexis in the car]
> [The car pulls over into Vincent's street, which is blocked by a police car and a fire engine]
> [the volume of the song increases drastically as Vincent gets out of the car]
> Waiting for the train
> In the dead of night, I howl
> [inaudible shouting of a police man as Vincent tries to enter the building in flames]
> I wish I was equal:
> If only that simple[58]

The superimposition of the song on the intra-diegetic soundscape and the subsequent oscillating focus between these two levels emphasize certain fragments of the song, most eminently the line *Waiting for the train*. The motif of the train, thus, returns precisely at the moment when the cube seems lost in the fire. Yet, the song seems to further specify the function of the loco-'motif'. The first three lines of the song evoke the image of a subject on a desolated station platform. The lack of spatial motion due to the absence of the train seems connotatively extended to the temporal dimension of the series in form of utter stagnation. Given the insertion of the song right at the moment when the cube and consequently the European fantasy are seemingly lost, I would argue that these lines capture the primary effect of one of the central aspects of the series, namely the uncanny sensation of scattered and circular temporality outside of the cube. The originality of the series consists in its ability to leave the viewer in doubt about the linearity of the development of the story (*l'histoire*): While the illusion of *continuity editing* is more or less maintained for the plot within the cube, the use of narrative devices such as the unmarked prolepsis disguised as a *mind screen* during Vincent's dialogue with his cousin Thibault about the red-haired woman or the unmarked prolepsis of Vincent already wearing the yellow shirt repeatedly undermine this illusion without, however, fully committing to fragmentary narration. In this regard, it seems interesting to consider one of the major points of

58 Ibid., Ep. 3, 00:40:30–00:41:30.



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criticism raised by most of the reviews, namely that the series is a so-called *slow burn.*[59] I would suggest that the slow progression and the unmarked non-linearity of the plot go hand in hand since they both produce an atmosphere identical to the desolated station platform detailed by the lyrics of the song. Due to the absence of the train, no linear progress, no temporal/teleological movement seems possible and the actually existing movement is primarily circular. In other words, the illusion of a linear progression (and of continuity editing) within the cube and by extension the European fantasy is shown to veil utter stagnation and temporal fragmentation, without celebrating the latter. The series' play with non-linear narration becomes rather readable as an attack on a central aspect of the neoliberal discourse, namely the notion of constant reformative progress, by unveiling the lack of progression of the progressive European identity, at least for the lower middle class subject Vincent. However, Nicloux seems to go even further by suggesting the root of this utter historical stagnation, which is, how could it be otherwise, expressed in form of Louise's traumatic past. For this scene takes up the image of the desolated station platform and stages the motif of the train – by way of a specific use of montage – as the fundamental kernel of the series. Yet, to grasp the full dimension of the station platform scene and thus of Louise's traumatic past, it is necessary to outline the antagonism between Louise and a more phantasmatic character, namely Kate.

Similar to the opposition of Vincent and his postman outlined above, the first episode introduces the antagonism between Louise and a dead woman named Kate Bradbury. The latter had committed suicide after having discovered her husband's affair with Louise. Faced with Louise on a station platform she threw herself in front of an incoming train. Unlike the other characters of the series, who, as I have argued, seem to work according to the logic of a straightforward (trans-)national allegory, the secondary meaning of the character Kate is added on a subtler level, which is, nonetheless, highly prominent from the very moment of her introduction. Shortly after Vincent's first examination of the cube, the camera follows Louise jogging on the grounds of Highgate Cemetery in London. Subsequently a medium shot shows Louise walking past the grave of Karl Marx until she stops in front of another grave stone, which in turn is not immediately shown to the viewer (*still* 14). Instead, the

59 Greg Wheeler: "Twice Upon A Time – Netflix Full Season 1 Review", in: *The Review Geek*, 19.12.2019, bit.ly/3YpAmqD (22.02.2023).



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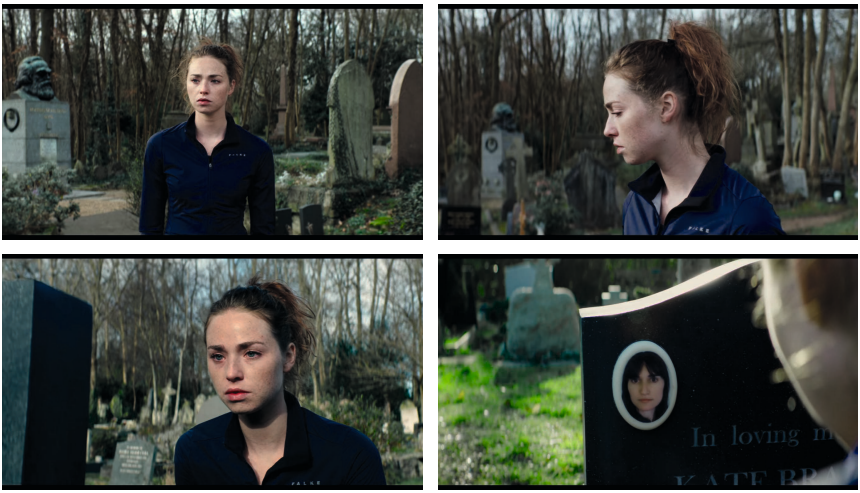


14–17 Il était une seconde fois (2019): Louise and the Bust of Karl Marx in Highgate Cemetery, London.

following sequence of shots resembles the montage of the introduction of the postman. It is composed of a shot positioning Louise and the bust of Karl Marx in direct opposition and a subsequent succession of OTS- and reverse shots. However, while the first shot of this sequence depicts Louise's staring contest with Marx (*still* 15), the OTS-shots switch to Kate's grave in front of Louise (*still* 16 and 17). I would, thus, argue that the montage conflates Marx and Kate – the latter becoming a metaphor for the former – and it is from this perspective that we need to read the allegorical value of the traumatic scene on the station platform, where the notion of the train elaborated so far and this spectral appearance of Marx meet.

The *mise-en-scene* of this scene is held rather plain as the image of a desolated station platform evoked by the song analysed above would suggest. Louise and Kate stand on two opposing platforms of the London underground. The high frequency of alternating subject-point-of-view shots – resembling the montage of an old western – adds an almost unbearable tension to the scene which seems thus to convey an insurmountable antagonism between the two women. The notion of (still) moving trains, passing in opposite directions, emphasizes additionally the utter incommensurateness of the two antagonistic positions. From a narratological point of view, the scene holds a curious status within the series, since it is



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the only scene using the format 4:3 despite depicting an event outside of the cube. While the format is usually bound to the protagonist's subjective experience of the events inside of the cube, here, on the contrary, it frames Louise's traumatic past before she even met the protagonist. However, the montage suggests, nonetheless, a connection to Vincent and the cube. For the previous scene consists in a repetition of Vincent's attempt to destroy the cube. But each time the hammer is about to hit the cube a cut leads to a repetition of the previously seen. Finally, right at the instance when the spectator ought to see the destruction of the cube, the series passes over to the scene of Louise's traumatic past. Yet, due to the seamless continuation of the melody played throughout the previous scene, it seems as if Louise's traumatic past was the very thing that was hiding behind the cube all along. I would hence claim that the scene portraits the fundamental kernel of the impossibility of their relationship and thus constitutes the very centre of the series.

Despite the manifest centrality of the scene as suggested by the filmic discourse, very little information concerning its relation to the other events is given. I would hence argue that the scene needs to be read in light of the metaphorical function of Kate as introduced in the cemetery. The actual antagonism conveyed by the scene – albeit in a displaced manner – would then consist in Louise and Karl Marx. Why, then, should Nicloux stage such an antagonism? The answer – I would reckon – is to be found in the motif of the train: At the end of the scene, the metaphorically doubled character Kate/Marx jumps in front of the train and thus brings the movement of the trains passing in opposite direction – the representation *par excellence* of the incommensurateness of social antagonism itself – to a full stop. The death of Kate/Marx, which stops the movement of the trains, is, thus, at the heart of the circular temporality and the notion of a teleological standstill as both outlined by the song by King Krule and the series' disrupted temporality outside of the cube. The coincidence of the stop of temporal movement and the death of Marx leads me to read this scene in light of Francis Fukuyama's proclamation of *The End of History* – the end of social antagonism due to the "unabashed victory of political and economic [neo-]liberalism" and "[t]he triumph of the West"[60] after the fall of the Soviet Union.

60 Francis Fukuyama: "The End of History", in: *The National Interest*, Summer 1989, p. 1.



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Since I would argue that Nicloux stages precisely the results of the generalisation of Fukuyama's notion in contemporary political discourse, namely, what Chantal Mouffe calls the post-political dimension of a post-democratic era.

In her work *On the Political*, Mouffe "examine[s] the consequences of the negation of antagonism […], both in theory and politics"[61]. She analyses notions in contemporary political theory such as *cosmopolitan democracy* or *global civic society* and outlines how they "all partake of a common anti-political vision which refuses to acknowledge the antagonistic dimension constitutive of 'the political'"[62] and fundamental to the existence of human society[63]. Mouffe's notion of *the political* is of course based on her and Ernesto Laclau's elaborations on hegemonic formations. According to Laclau and Mouffe, any hegemonic formation quintessentially constitutes itself via a process similar to the Lacanian concept of foreclosure.[64] The colonial hegemony, for example, works on the foreclosure of the colonized.[65] In other words, the constitution of any social hegemony is based on the foreclosure[66] of a certain element and thus produces a social antagonism which is inherent to the foundation of the social hegemony itself. This substance as social antagonism is what Mouffe grasps by the term *the political*. Historically, she grasps the tendency towards a post-political vision as a consequence of the collapse of the Soviet model and the "unchallenged hegemony of neo-liberalism with its claim that there is no alternative to the existing order"[67] and their "triumphalist claims about the disappearance of antagonism"[68]. In short, Mouffe outlines how the fall of the Soviet Union entails the foreclosure of social antagonism within the neoliberal hegemony. On the immediate level of politics, the consequences of this foreclosure was probably best expressed by Margret Thatcher, the first major proponent of neoliberal politics in Europe, who, when asked at a dinner in 2002 what her greatest

61 Chantal Mouffe: *On the Political*, London 2005, p. 2.
62 Ibid.
63 Cf. ibid., p. 119.
64 Ernesto Laclau/Chantal Mouffe: *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London 2014, p. 114.
65 Ibid.
66 "Lacan identifies *Verwerfung* as the specific mechanism […], in which an element is rejected outside the symbolic order just as if it had never existed", Evans, p. 65.
67 Mouffe: *On the Political*, p. 31.
68 Ibid.



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achievement was, replied coldly: "Tony Blair and New Labour [the oppositional social democratic party in Britain]"[69]. In other words, the slight movement of the European socialist democratic parties "to the right, redefining themselves as 'centre-left'"[70] is nothing less than their integration into the neoliberal hegemonic order. However, to grasp the extent of this change in the political field, we need to consider the radical kernel of democracy outlined by Laclau and Mouffe, namely as Žižek puts, it: "[A] 'democratic society' could be understood as a society whose institutional structure includes, as a part of its 'normal', 'regular' reproduction, the moment of dissolution of the socio-symbolic bond, the moment of the irruption of the Real: elections"[71]. However, if all eligible parties pertain to and work within the neoliberal social order, this radical moment of elections and thereby the radical kernel of democracy itself is eradicated. The basic paradox here is of course that precisely in the moment of the 'victory' of (neo-)liberal democracy over its totalitarian communist Other, it forecloses the democratic moment of democracy as such in a radical sense. In other words, the difference between any hegemonic formation and the neoliberal hegemonic order structuring contemporary Western societies is that what it forecloses as its constitutive feature, which returns in the real as social antagonism, is nothing less than social antagonism itself, which is precisely the definition of post-democracy, namely the erasure of the antagonistic dimension "which provides democratic politics with its dynamics"[72]. From this perspective, I would argue that it is precisely in this context in which Nicloux's insertion of the spectral return of Marx haunting the double bind of the European fantasy and its nationalist other becomes readable. The spectral appearance of Marx and the motif of the train, which returns in the *real* of sound, become readable as the uncanny return of the foreclosure of social antagonisms itself by the post-democratic hegemony under the signifier of neoliberal Macronism. Now, if we apply the Lacanian proposition "what was foreclosed from the Symbolic returns in the Real of the symptom"[73], Marx plays out as the symptom of Louise's foreclosure of social antagonism itself. It is essential

69 Conor Burns: "Margret Thatcher's greatest achievement: New Labour", in: *Conservative Home*, 11.04.2008, https://bit.ly/2xPK4aR (22.02.2023).
70 Mouffe: *On the Political*, p. 31.
71 Žižek: *The Sublime Object*, p. 166f.
72 Mouffe: *On the Political*, p. 9.
73 Žižek: *The Sublime Object*, p. 78f.



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to underscore that the spectral appearance of Marx does hence not serve as a representative of Marxism but as the foreclosed possibility of a political alternative constitutive of neoliberal discourse as preached by Fukuyama. In other words, the spectral appearance of Marx in Nicloux' *Il était une seconde fois* is to be grasped as the symptom of post-democracy and thus as the traumatic kernel of the contemporary ideological double bind in contemporary France.

At this point it is of utmost importance to insist on the fundamental asymmetry between Louise – the European elite – and Vincent – the lower middle class subject – as analysed throughout this article. While Vincent's European fantasy represses – as a *strategy of containment* – the social contradiction which become apparent within diegetical 'reality' outside of the cube, namely the co-dependency of neoliberal and nationalist discourse within a national double bind of France, Louise's relationship to the spectral appearance of Marx functions rather according to the Lacanian notion of foreclosure. In contrast to the mechanism of repression, "the foreclosed element is not buried in the unconscious but expelled from the unconscious"[74] itself. In other words, it is expelled from the symbolic order. Yet, this foreclosure – "proper to the order of signifier"[75] and thus constitutive of the symbolic order of a given hegemony[76] – equally sets the stage and hence also the limits of what the subjects of said hegemony can desire. In other words, the foreclosure of antagonist thought – of what Mouffe calls *the political* – establishes the back drop for the European fantasy and thus the frame and limit of the lower middle class subject's desire and capability of expression. Given the spectral appearance of Marx[77] as a symptom of post-democracy and thus of the foreclosure of antagonist thought as a result of the fall of the Soviet Union points, I would like to close this article by underscoring the coincidence of the historical onset of post-democratic hegemony and the emergence of a genuinely cinematographic fantastic in the 1990s with David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997) or Alejandro Amenábar's *Abre los ojos* (1997). For I would argue in a final step that the emergence of the contemporary cinematographic

74 Evans, p. 66.
75 Žižek: *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, p. 78.
76 Cf. ibid.
77 The notion of a spectral appearance of Marx might be reminiscent of Jacques Derrida's book *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (1993). Even though a reference is, for my part, not intended, this coincidence emerges surely from a shared critique of Fukuyama's notion of the 'End of History'.



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fantastic of the last decades has to be grasped as an expression of political anxiety which stems from the democratic crisis within post-democratic hegemony. The narrative devices – constitutive of such a filmic fantastic – as e.g. the buzzing sound of the wind turbines or the noise of the train, whose ontological status remains unclear throughout the entire series, point towards those social antagonisms that cannot be expressed within neoliberal discourse. For this is precisely Lacan's definition of foreclosure, namely the exclusion from the symbolic order and thus language itself.[78] The fantastic insertion of ontologically unfathomable elements which render the diegesis unstable serves, I would hence claim, as a highly paradigmatic und fragmentary attempt to go beyond syntagmatic language – an attempt which seeks to speak the unspeakable. In this sense, I would argue that the cinematographic fantastic as a contemporary narrative form constitutes nothing less than the return of *the political* in post-political and post-democratic hegemony.

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78 Evans, p. 65.



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# Skandalöse Phantastik: Zur Ästhetik der Krise in Marie Darrieussecqs Roman *Truismes*

## 1. Der literarische Skandal: Ein Ereignis-Format mit Indiziencharakter

Mit ihrem 1996 veröffentlichten Debütroman *Truismes*[1], von dem bereits ein Jahr nach der Ersterscheinung allein in Frankreich 400 000[2] und mittlerweile weltweit über eine Million Exemplare[3] verkauft wurden, gelang Marie Darrieussecq der schriftstellerische Durchbruch. Einen wesentlichen Beitrag zu diesem literarischen Coup leistete zweifelsohne ein weit über die nationalen Grenzen hinausreichendes mediales Echo, das die Veröffentlichung des Romans mit aufmerksamkeitsbindenden Mitteln flankierte und ihn wiederholt als ›literarisches Ereignis‹ einstufte.[4] Die unwirklich anmutende Handlung, in deren Verlauf eine Frau sich in das Wechselwesen einer Frau-Sau verwandelt, bot zugleich einen willkommenen Anlass für wiederkehrende Vergleiche zu epochenmachenden Klassikern wie Kafkas *Verwandlung*, La Fontaines Tiergeschichten und Homers *Odyssee*.[5] In Darrieussecqs Erzählung laufen verschiedene thematische und ästhetische Stränge zusammen, die – gattungstheoretisch gesprochen – Versatzstücke aus der Fabel, dem Bildungs- sowie Gesellschaftsroman und der Phantastik mit grotesken, bis hin zu obszönen Szenarien verbinden. Nicht selten wurde in diesem Zusammenhang auch die provokative Ausrichtung des Textes betont. Damit lässt er sich in die Nähe der Skandalli-

1 Alle im Folgenden angeführten direkten und indirekten Zitate sind aus der 2017 bei Gallimard (folio) veröffentlichten Taschenbuchausgabe (Marie Darrieussecq: *Truismes*, Paris: 2017 [1996]) entnommen und werden im laufenden Fließtext ausschließlich durch die entsprechenden in Klammern gesetzte(n) Seitenzahl(en) kenntlich gemacht.

2 John Lambeth: »Entretien avec Marie Darrieussecq«, in: *The French Review* 79 (2006), H. 4, S. 806–818, S. 806.

3 Didier Jacob: »Marie Darrieussecq: la reine des clones«, in: *L'OBS*, 22.08.2017, bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/romans/20170822.OBS3635/marie-darrieussecq-la-reine-des-clones.html (18.12.2022).

4 Vgl. Anneliese Depoux: La fabrique de l'évènement littéraire: le cas de *Truismes*, in: Communications et langages 142 (2004), H. 4, S. 71–83.

5 Thomas Steinfeld: »Das Schwein spricht. Anarchie in Frankreich: Eine Fabel hat Erfolg«, in: *FAZ*, 07.02.1997, www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/buecher/rezensionen/belletristik/rezension-belletristik-das-schwein-spricht-11310854.html (10.11.2022).



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teratur[6] rücken, die sich in den 1990er und frühen 2000er Jahren großer Beliebtheit erfreute.[7] Obwohl die Funktionsweise des literarischen Eklats aus literatursoziologischer Sicht primär als ein Mittel zur kalkulierten Vermarktungsförderung[8] erscheint, legen diskurs- und medientheoretisch orientierte Überlegungen eine Ergänzung dieses Erklärungsansatzes nahe. Die Mehrdimensionalität und kulturelle Tragweite von Skandalisierungsprozessen lassen sich erst erfassen, wenn man sie als konfliktbesetzte Knotenpunkte vielschichtiger Kommunikationsmechanismen zwischen unterschiedlichen gesellschaftlichen Akteuren versteht. Dementsprechend verweisen sie implizit auf neuralgische Spannungsbereiche innerhalb diskursiver Formationen einer kulturellen Gemeinschaft.[9] Aus einer solchen Perspektive offenbart sich der performative und epistemische Mehrwert eines Skandals, der die Selbstverständlichkeit sozialer Praktiken sowie handlungs- und wahrnehmungsleitender Muster innerhalb einer Gesellschaft aufhebt, sie sichtbar macht und zur Debatte stellt. Kulturtheoretisch formuliert handelt es sich beim ›Skandalisieren‹ also um eine den

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6 Jordan Shirley: »Saying the unsayable: identities in crisis in the early novels of Marie Darrieussecq«, in: Rye, Gill/Worton, Michael (Hrsg.): *Women's writing in contemporary France: New writers, new literatures in the 1990s,* Manchester 2002, S. 142–154, S. 142; Andrew Asibong: »*Mulier sacra*: Marie Chauvet, Marie Darrieussecq and the Sexual Metamorphoses of ›Bare Life‹«, in: *French Cultural Studies* 14 (2003), H. 2, S. 169–177, S. 172 und Isabelle de Courtivron: »The French still loves a succes de scandale«, in: *New York Times,* 22.06.1997, archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/97/06/22/bookend/bookend.html (02.12.2022).

7 Vgl. Jochen Mecke: »Der Fall Houellebecq: Zu Formen und Funktionen eines Literaturskandals«, in: Eggeling, Giulia/Segler-Meßner, Silke (Hrsg.): *Europäische Verlage und romanische Gegenwartsliteraturen: Profile, Tendenzen, Strategien,* Tübingen 2003, S. 194–217, S. 195.

8 Vgl. Mecke: Der Fall Houellebecq, S. 211 und 214–215. Versteht man den Skandal als Phänomen, das Aufschluss über Kommodifizierungsstrategien und die Neuformierung des literarischen Feldes gibt, scheint Frédéric Beigbeders Roman *99 Francs* (2000) diesbezüglich besonders aufschlussreich zu sein, da er die Funktionsweisen des Skandals bzw. der Skandalliteratur selbstparodistisch aufdeckt. Die auf Handlungsebene repräsentierte Skandalträchtigkeit der Werbebranche (maßloser Drogenkonsum, extreme Verschwendungssucht, Regression moralischer Werte zugunsten monetärer und machtpolitisch orientierter Maximen) wird durch die eigene literarische Anwendung üblicher Vermarktungsstrategien, die der Erzähler in Bezug auf die Werbeindustrie kritisiert, konterkariert und zugleich auf das eigene literarische Produkt gelenkt: Die Anklage der Werbeagenturen durch den Roman wird implizit zur selbstreferentiellen Anklage des Romans. Zu fragen bleibt an dieser Stelle, ob eine solche Form des selbstkritischen Umgangs genügt, um die von Mecke angesprochene Gefahr der Reduzierung von Literatur auf ihren Tauschwert zu bannen.

9 Vgl. Regina Roßbach: *Der Literaturskandal. Akteure, Verläufe und Gegenstände eines Kommunikationsphänomens,* Berlin 2020, S. 37.



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öffentlichen Raum beanspruchende Praxis zur Aushandlung normativer Standpunkte.[10] Sie bietet Gemeinschaften ein Mittel zur Selbst- und Neuverortung. Der Kombination von Skandal und Literatur ist dabei eine besondere Gewichtung zuzuschreiben: Geht man davon aus, dass, wie Albrecht Koschorke es ausdrückt, Literatur ohnehin »sozial Bedeutsames verhandelt« und in der Lage ist, eine »Demontage von hegemonialen Sinnzwängen«[11] zu leisten, gilt diese Feststellung in besonderer Weise für literarische Produkte, die Skandale erzeugen.

Mit Blick auf eine Äußerung aus einem 2001 geführten Interview wird deutlich, dass Marie Darrieussecq ihr eigenes literarisches Schaffen – weitgehend mit dem ›Demontage-Paradigma‹ Koschorkes übereinstimmend – im Horizont interventionistischer Gesellschaftskritik verortet: »En ce sens toute écriture exploratrice, novatrice, est politique […], elle fournit le langage moderne, elle bâtit les outils verbaux et mentaux qui permettent de penser le monde. Elle corrode les clichés, elle fait rendre gorge au prêt-à-penser, au déjà dit.«[12] Es ist wenig überraschend, dass die Erfindung einer innovativen Sprache, die tradierte Klischees dekonstruiert und neue Sichtweisen eröffnet, auf Widerstand stößt, wenn sie mediale Routinen, Denkgewohnheiten und institutionell legitimierte Praktiken in Frage stellt. Doch welche konkreten Schlussfolgerungen lassen sich aus diesen sehr allgemeinen Bemerkungen zu *Truismes* ziehen? Was steckt hinter den Zuschreibungen, die Darrieussecqs Debüt zwischen ›literarischem Ereignis‹ und ›Skandalroman‹ verorten? Oder anders gefragt: Welche Merkmale eignen dem Text und seinem Bezug auf die außertextuelle Wirklichkeit, die einige Feuilletonist*innen und Literaturwissenschaftler*innen dazu veranlassen, in ihm einen Anstoß zur Entrüstung zu erkennen? Mit Sicherheit bieten allein schon die Motivik und Handlung einen ersten Anhaltspunkt. Denn der Roman stellt die allmähliche Transformation einer Frau in eine Frau-Sau dar und schreckt nicht vor detaillierten Darstellungen schockierender Körperdeformationen oder anstößig-entrückter Szenen zurück.

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10 Vgl. ebd., S. 66–68.

11 Albrecht Koschorke: *Wahrheit und Erfindung. Grundzüge einer allgemeinen Erzähltheorie*, Frankfurt am Main 2012, S. 11.

12 Becky Miller/Martha Holmes: »Entretien réalisé par Becky Miller et Martha Holmes en décembre 2001 pour le premier site consacré à l'auteure«, mariedarrieussecq.com/sites/default/files/2017-12/Entretien%20re%CC%81alise%CC%81%20par%20Becky%20Miller%20et%20Martha%20Holmes%20en%20de%CC%81cembre%202001%20pour%20le%20premier%20site%20consacre%CC%81%20a%CC%80%20l%E2%80%99auteure.pdf (27.11.2022).



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Am Beginn der Erzählung nimmt die noch in vorwiegend menschlicher Gestalt auftretende und zu diesem Zeitpunkt arbeitslose Protagonistin trotz gnadenloser Unterbezahlung eine Tätigkeit als Angestellte eines Kosmetikstudios auf. Die Filiale verwandelt sich jedoch jäh in einen Massagesalon, der sich wiederum als Bordell entpuppt. Dort ist die Hauptfigur den zunehmend außergewöhnlichen sexuellen Wünschen verschiedener Freier ausgeliefert, bevor sie – beziehungs- und erneut arbeitslos – die erratische Suche nach einer ihrem neuen Wesen entsprechenden Lebensweise antritt. Sie führt ein gefährdetes Dasein inmitten einer degenerierenden Gesellschaft, die von faschistischen Strukturen geprägt ist und der steigenden Zahl von Mischwesen mit menschlichen und tierischen Merkmalen kein sicheres Umfeld mehr bietet. Dieser bedrohten Gruppe nun selbst angehörend, erlebt die Protagonistin zahlreiche schreckliche, aber auch einige glückliche Phasen im Verlauf einer turbulenten Fluchtbewegung: Zum einen führt sie ein Dasein im Kreis von Obdachlosen, hält sich illegal in einem Automatenhotel auf, wird in zuchthausähnlichen Einrichtungen inhaftiert und fällt wiederholt brutalen Misshandlungen zum Opfer. Zum anderen erfährt sie – gegen Ende der Erzählung – eine persönliche Erfüllung durch die Beziehung zu einem Werwolf, mit dem sie in der Manier eines *amour fou* das Ideal einer romantischen Liebe realisiert, Morde begeht und in stetiger Angst vor Festnahmen in isolierter Zweisamkeit lebt. Obwohl ihr Liebhaber getötet wird und das Glück des Paares endet, findet die Protagonistin einen Ausweg aus ihrer prekären Lage. Es gelingt ihr, sich von einer grausamen und männlich dominierten Gesellschaft zu lösen, indem sie den urbanen Raum verlässt und als Teil einer Schweinefamilie ein erfülltes Dasein führt. Nur an Tagen des Vollmonds dominieren die menschlichen Züge und ermöglichen es der Protagonistin, ihrer neu erlangten Autonomie in der Tätigkeit des Schreibens eine Stimme zu verleihen – ein Akt der Emanzipation, den aufschlussreiche Lesarten feministischer Ausrichtung[13] herausgearbeitet haben und

13 Nora Cotille-Foley deutet die Metamorphose und stilistisch überzeichnete Darstellungsweise des Textes als eine Karikatur weiblicher Klischees, sodass die durch einen männlichen Blick dominierte, objektivierende Wahrnehmungsweise des Weiblichen in ihrer oft gewaltverherrlichenden Unmenschlichkeit aufgedeckt wird (vgl. Nora Cotille-Foley: »Métaphores, métamorphoses et retournements symboliques dans *Truismes* de Marie Darrieussecq : mais qui finit à l'abattoir?«, in: *Women French Studies* 10 (2002), S. 188–206). Eine andere theoretische Einbettung wählt Andrew Asibong, indem er das subversive Potential von *Truismes* mit Hilfe von Giorgio Agambens Konzept des *Homo Sacer* erfasst und aufzeigt, dass die rechtlichen Macht- und Ausschlussmechanismen nicht ge-



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der nicht zuletzt von der Autorin selbst in einem Kommentar betont worden ist.[14] In diesem Zusammenhang kann auch die eingangs angedeutete hybride Ästhetik des Romans als ein Widerstand gegen konventionelle Erwartungen verstanden werden. Schließlich operiert die Darstellung mit Bildern, die Bereiche des Skurrilen, Obszönen, Splatterartigen sowie vor allem des Phantastischen[15] tangieren, während sie eine Gesellschaft abbildet, deren Angehörige innerhalb eines apokalyptischen Settings aus unerklärlichen Gründen zu menschlich-tierischen Mischwesen mutieren und sich in einem Dauerzustand der Krise befinden. In Anbetracht dieser wilden Mischung ist es also wenig überraschend, dass Darrieussecqs Erzählung wiederholt in den Bereich des Provokativen und Skandalösen gerückt wurde.

Anknüpfend an diese ersten Beobachtungen und die einleitende These, dass der Skandal implizite Hinweise auf verborgene und problematische kulturelle Wahrnehmungsmuster bereithält, beabsichtige ich im Folgenden aufzuzeigen, dass der Roman mithilfe typisch phantastischer Verfahrensweisen eine Ästhetik der Krise inszeniert. Es soll beleuchtet werden, wie der Text unter Anwendung verzerrender Erzählstrategien die *histoire*- und *discours*-Ebene in ein spezifisches Spannungsverhältnis setzt, das aufseiten der Leseinstanz eine permanente Verunsicherung aufrechterhält und auf diese Weise die Schwachstellen gesellschaftlicher Krisennarrative sinnlich erfahrbar macht.

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schlechtsneutral sind, sondern vor allem weiblich gelesene Personen in die Rolle von rechtsfreien Menschen gedrängt werden (vgl. Asibong: *Mulier sacra*, S. 169–173).

14 »Son expérience unique échappe aux registres sociaux. Elle doit donc inventer sa voix, vivre l'aventure d'une langue, qui à mesure que le livre avance et que le corps oscille de symptôme en symptôme, s'enrichit, se complexifie, en vocabulaire et en structure, pour se dégager des truismes« (Miller/Holmes: Entretien, nicht paginiert).

15 Die »Überschreitung von Diskurs- und Gattungsgrenzen« kann laut Jürgen Lehmann als ein typisches Merkmal phantastischer Literatur verstanden werden (Jürgen Lehmann: »Phantastik als Schwellen- und Ambivalenzphänomen«, in: Ivanović, Christine/Lehmann, Jürgen/May, Markus (Hrsg.): *Phantastik – Kult oder Kultur? Aspekte eines Phänomens in Kunst, Literatur und Film,* Stuttgart/Weimar 2003, S. 25–39, S. 33). Ähnliches konstatiert Annette Simonis und versteht die Vermischung unterschiedlicher Genres als ein Mittel, um Erwartungshaltungen der Leseinstanz zu irritieren. (vgl. Annette Simonis: *Grenzüberschreitungen in der phantastischen Literatur. Einführung in die Theorie und Geschichte eines narrativen Genres,* Heidelberg 2005, S. 47).



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## 2. Textstrategien der Phantastik im Dienste einer Verunsicherungslogik und Leser*inaktivierung

Was versteht man unter phantastischem Erzählen und inwiefern charakterisiert diese literarische Form den untersuchten Roman? Einer noch immer aktuellen Definition von Tzvetan Todorov folgend, besteht das Phantastische in der permanenten Aufrechterhaltung einer *hésitation*, einer perpetuierten Unsicherheit, die ein eindeutiges Verständnis zentraler Ereignisse der erzählten Welt unterläuft. Dabei bringt der Text typischerweise rationale Erklärungen für unbegreifliche Phänomene in Anschlag, ohne deren Übernatürlichkeit befriedigend in eine logozentrische Ausdeutung des fiktiven Geschehens überführen zu können. Diese Bestimmung[16] bildet bis heute den gemeinsamen Fluchtpunkt einschlägiger Studien zur phantastischen Literatur, die Todorovs Ansatz aufgegriffen und modifiziert haben. So hebt Jürgen Lehmann den transgressiven Schwellencharakter hervor und versteht Phantastik »dominant als Ambivalenzphänomen […], in dessen Rahmen eine bestehende Opposition von Realem und Irrealem gerade in Frage gestellt wird«.[17] Nicht selten schlagen sich solche Entgrenzungseffekte darin nieder, dass ein stabiles Verhältnis zwischen dem Ich einer Erzählung und seiner Umwelt aufgelöst wird.[18] Ferner zählt zu den bedeutendsten Entwicklungen im Rahmen einer Begriffsschärfung die Einsicht, dass Phantastik im Sinne einer unauflösbaren Unschlüssigkeitsdynamik methodisch nur nachvollzogen werden kann, wenn eine textinterne Betrachtung mit rezeptionsästhetischen Aspekten verbunden wird. Die Funktionsweise der *hésitation* lässt sich also nicht unter ausschließlicher Berücksichtigung der Textebene verstehen, wie z.B. durch d i e Aufschlüsselung dissonanter Figurensichtweisen oder das Nachvollziehen der Konfrontation von Figuren mit dem Unerklärlichen; vielmehr bedarf es immer auch einer antizipierenden Betrachtung textimmanenter Merkmale bezüglich ihrer Effekte auf die impliziten Leser*innen.[19] Eine in diesem Zusammenhang oft eingesetzte Verunsicherungsstrategie

16 Vgl. Tzvetan Todorov: *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, Paris 2015, S. 29 und 37–38.
17 Lehmann: Phantastik als Schwellen- und Ambivalenzphänomen, S. 28–29.
18 Vgl. ebd., S. 30.
19 Vgl. Stephan Berg: *Schlimme Zeiten, böse Räume. Zeit- und Raumstrukturen in der phantastischen Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts*, Stuttgart 1991, S. 33–34.



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ist die erzählerische Unzuverlässigkeit:[20] Gibt der Text Anhaltspunkte für eine mangelnde Glaubwürdigkeit der Erzählinstanz, die als elementare Informationsquelle den narrativen Aufbau der Geschichte maßgebend steuert, erhöht sich automatisch die Wahrscheinlichkeit einer Distanznahme zum Akt des Erzählens und der durch ihn dargebotenen Geschichte, sodass die Rezipierenden zugleich für eventuelle Widersprüche und Diskontinuitäten der Geschichte sensibilisiert werden. Die aus diesem kursorischen Einblick gewonnenen Schlüsseleigenschaften phantastischer Erzählungen dienen im Folgenden als Richtschnur, um die erzählerische Unzuverlässigkeit (2.1) und die narrativ (2.2) sowie inhaltlich hergestellten (2.3) Unschlüssigkeitsdynamiken in *Truismes* herauszuarbeiten.

## 2.1 Unzuverlässiges Erzählen

In Hinblick auf eine phantastische Lesart erweist sich das Incipit des Romans in doppelter Weise als aufschlussreich. Einerseits eröffnet der Text offenkundig Momente des Zweifels, die von der retrospektiv über ihr Leben berichtenden Ich-Erzählerin selbst vermittelt werden und ihre narrative Zuverlässigkeit daher von Anfang an in Frage stellen. Andererseits gibt die sprachlich-stilistische Darstellungsweise der ersten Passage paradigmatisch Auskunft über die grundlegende erzählerische Anlage des Romans. Auf folgende gleichermaßen warnende wie irritierende Aussagen stoßen die Leser*innen bei Beginn der Lektüre:

> Je sais à quel point cette histoire pourra semer de trouble et d'angoisse, à quel point elle perturbera de gens. Je me doute que l'éditeur qui acceptera de prendre en charge ce manuscrit s'exposera à d'infinis ennuis. La prison ne lui sera sans doute pas épargnée, et je tiens à lui demander tout de suite pardon pour le dérangement. Mais il faut que j'écrive ce livre sans plus tarder, parce que si on me retrouve dans l'état où je suis maintenant, personne ne voudra ni m'écouter ni me croire. Or tenir un stylo me donne de terribles crampes. Je manque aussi de lumière, je suis obligée de m'arrêter quand la nuit tombe, et j'écris très, très lentement. Je ne vous parle pas de la difficulté pour trouver ce cahier, ni de la boue, qui salit tout, qui dilue l'encre à peine sèche. […] L'action même de me souvenir m'est très difficile (S. 11–12).

20 Es handelt sich dabei um eine Textstrategie, die nicht ausschließlich phantastischen Texten zuzuordnen ist, aber dennoch eine gewisse Exemplarität für dieses Genre aufweist (vgl. Simonis: Grenzüberschreitungen in der phantastischen Literatur, S. 47).



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Voller Überzeugung hebt die Erzählerin in den ersten drei Sätzen die außerordentliche Brisanz ihrer Geschichte hervor, die nicht nur höchste Irritation auslösen werde, sondern derart im Zeichen der Devianz stehe, dass eine Veröffentlichung ihrer Erzählung für die Verleger*innen schwerwiegende politische Konsequenzen nach sich zöge – ein Umstand, der die eigene Geschichte ohne Umschweife skandalisiert und als gesetzeswidrig ausstellt. Verschiedene sprachliche Mittel in den ersten Zeilen suggerieren eine dezidierte Gewissheit aufseiten der Erzählerin. So sind die gehäufte (fünfmal in drei Sätzen) Verwendung des Futur I (statt bspw. des Konjunktivs), die hyperbelartige Betonung (»d'infinis ennuis«), mit der eine drohende Haftstrafe akzentuiert wird, und nicht zuletzt die Formulierung »Je sais« selbst, mit der die Erzählung wohlgemerkt einsetzt, kennzeichnend für den sicheren Ton innerer Überzeugung. Parallel dazu weist der affirmative Duktus in den ersten Zeilen jedoch Risse auf, berücksichtigt man, dass der Ausdruck »doute« – der im konkreten kotextuellen Umfeld mit »ahnen« (»se douter«) und »wahrscheinlich« (»sans doute«) übersetzt werden kann – bereits mit seinem doppelten Auftreten im wahrsten Sinne des Wortes einen Zweifel in den Text einflicht. Auf diese Weise kündigt sich gleichsam ein Bruch an, der über die einen Gegensatz markierende Konjunktion »mais« den Modus der Gewissheit aushebelt. Denn entgegen der anfänglichen Rhetorik standhafter Unbeirrbarkeit scheint sich das erzählende Subjekt eine Konstitution zuzuschreiben, die ihm weder Glaubhaftigkeit verleiht noch die physiologischen und situativen Voraussetzungen erfüllt, um überhaupt eine zuverlässige Erzählung zu Papier zu bringen: Krämpfe verhindern ein flüssiges Schreiben, eine schlechte Beleuchtung erschwert die Arbeit, die noch dazu durch ein gestörtes Erinnerungsvermögen beeinträchtigt wird; zudem ist bereits Notiertes zur Unkenntlichkeit verschmiert, da das Manuskript in einer verdreckten Umgebung liegt. Das Eingeständnis in die Unzuverlässigkeit des Geschriebenen findet seine Entsprechung abermals in der erzählerisch-stilistischen Ausgestaltung, die ab der angesprochenen Zäsur eine neue Richtung einschlägt. Bereits die Subjonctif-Konstruktion mit der unpersönlichen Wendung »il faut que« scheint dem Subjekt das Schreiben eher aufzuerlegen. Der Grund für die Dringlichkeit des Schreibaktes wird direkt im anschließenden Nebensatz benannt: Die Erzählerin attestiert sich selbst eine physische Außenwirkung, die sie aus Sicht der anderen unglaubwürdig erscheinen lässt. Diese für einen antizipierten Außenblick defizitäre Position erfährt in grammatischer Hinsicht eine Verstärkung, indem die Erzählerin nun gehäuft als Satzglied des direkten oder indirekten Objektes repräsentiert



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wird. Einen ähnlichen Verlust aktiver Selbstbestimmung verdeutlichen auch die Sequenzen »je manque« und »je suis obligée«; hier steht das Subjekt zum einen im Zeichen des Mangels und wird zum anderen innerhalb einer Passivkonstruktion in die semantische Rolle des Patiens gedrängt. Angesichts der mannigfaltigen Defizite spricht sich die Erzählerin letztlich das Recht auf Erzählen selbst ab. Vor diesem Hintergrund erklärt sich nun auch die anfängliche Verortung der eigenen Geschichte im Bereich des Skandalösen. Anstößig nämlich scheint der Umstand zu sein, dass hier jemand schreibt, dem die konventionellen Voraussetzungen für ein solches Unterfangen fehlen und der somit eine lückenhaft und uneindeutige Geschichte präsentiert; ein Prinzip, das stilistisch schon in den ersten Zeilen umgesetzt wird, indem sich die anfangs betonte epistemisch stabile Perspektive (»je sais«) sukzessive auflöst. Wie sich im Folgenden zeigen wird, bildet die kontinuierliche Durchkreuzung von Gewissheiten auf Basis erzählerisch konstruierter Irritationsmomente die Grundlage, mit der die Leseinstanz einer spannungsvollen Ambivalenz ausgesetzt wird.

### 2.2 Simuliertes Versteckspiel: Narrative Verzerrungen im Dienste einer phantastischen Unschlüssigkeitsdynamik

In auffälliger Häufigkeit richtet sich die Erzählerin mit direkten Ansprachen an die implizite Leseinstanz.[21] Diese Adressierungen, wie bspw. »Je supplie le lecteur« (S. 12) oder »enfin vous comprenez« (S. 105),[22] haben einen doppelten Effekt. Einerseits forcieren die Apostrophierungen eine Distanzierung zwischen Lese- und Erzählinstanz, da letztere mit Hilfe solcher Formulierungen als klar von den Leser*innen zu unterscheidende Entität und Vermittlungsinstanz markiert wird.[23] Andererseits fordern sie

21 Vgl. Raluca Lupu-Onet: »Truismes ou la métamorphose au féminin«, in: *Transylvanian Review* 16 (2005), H. 4, S. 1–17, S. 8.

22 Vgl. ebd., S. 8 für weitere Beispiele.

23 Folgt man den Erwägungen von Wolfgang Schmid, der für eine Differenzierung zwischen impliziten bzw. abstrakten Leser*innen und fiktiven Leser*innen plädiert (Wolfgang Schmid: *Elemente der Narratologie,* Berlin/Boston 2014, S. 102), lässt sich im Text sogar eine doppelte Distanzierungsstrategie beschreiben: Zum einen richten sich die Adressierungen an die fiktive Leseinstanz, die auf diese Weise konsequent als imaginierte Entität konsolidiert und damit von der Erzählerin auf Abstand gehalten wird. Zum anderen führen die inkohärenten Entwürfe der fiktiven Leseinstanz, die mal männliche (S. 41), mal weibliche (S. 63) und mal sensible Eigenschaften (S. 36) von der Erzählerin zugeschrieben bekommt, zu weiteren Verunsicherungen. Diese Schwankungen wiede-



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die Leser*innen permanent dazu auf, das Erzählte zu beglaubigen und bewirken auf diese Weise eine Annäherung der Rezipierenden an die Diegese. Besonders wirkmächtig im Sinne einer Verunsicherungsstrategie wird dieser an sich bereits ambivalente Effekt des gleichzeitigen Distanzierens und Annäherns jedoch erst, wenn die Leser*inansprache mit einer Darstellung einhergeht, die auf inhaltlicher Ebene starke Unklarheiten provoziert.[24] Ein Beispiel dafür bietet folgende Passage, in der die Interaktion zwischen Freiern und der Protagonistin beschrieben wird, die als Prostituierte in dem bereits erwähnten Bordell ihrer Tätigkeit mit naiver Zielstrebigkeit nachgeht.

> Moi qui avais cru que mes bourrelets les dégoûteraient, eh bien pas du tout. Contre toute attente, tous, et même les nouveaux […], tous semblaient m'apprécier un peu grasse. Il leur venait un appétit pour ainsi dire bestial. A peine avais-je commencé la séance qu'ils voulaient tout, tout de suite, le combiné spécial et le forfait *Haute Technicité* avec les huiles et le vibro et tout, au prix où c'est ; mais les huiles je voyais bien qu'ils s'en fichaient, et le vibro ils me l'arrachaient des mains et ils en faisaient de drôles d'usages, je vous jure. Je sortais de là moulue (S. 33, Hervorh. im Orig.).

Mit dem performativen Sprechakt des Schwörens (»je vous jure«) verspricht die Erzählerin den Adressierten explizit eine möglichst wahrheitsgetreue und vollständige Darstellung des Geschehens. Im Gegensatz dazu ist die vorangehende Beschreibung jedoch alles andere als klar. Worin genau die sogenannte »séance« besteht, bleibt im Vagen. Die als animalisch deklarierte Lust der Kunden, die gezielte Entreißung des Massagegeräts (»vibro«) und dessen stürmischer, eigenartig entfremdeter Einsatz (»de drôles d'usages«) bei gleichzeitiger Vernachlässigung des Öls deuten an, dass hier sexuelle Praktiken vollzogen werden, ohne sie tatsächlich zu benennen. Der hohe Grad an Unbestimmtheit resultiert dabei aus einer Verdichtung inhaltlicher Mehrdeutigkeiten: Die sachliche Semantik der Lexeme »séance«, »combiné spécial« und »forfait *Haute Technicité*«, die sich wie Brandings eines Werbekatalogs lesen, überführt das zu erahnende obszöne Geschehen nicht nur in eine verschleiernde Unverfänglich-

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rum verwehren der abstrakten Leseinstanz, also dem potentiellen, idealtypischen Leser*innen, eine stabile Identifizierungsgrundlage.

24 Ähnlich fasst es auch Lupu-Onet, wenn sie schreibt, dass die Leser*innenansprachen „impliquent sans cesse le lecteur comme témoin du récit, [lorsque] Darrieussecq déjoue en même temps la cohérence du roman […]" (Lupu-Onet: Truismes ou la métamorphose au féminin, S. 8). Dabei geht sie jedoch nicht konkret auf das Zusammenspiel von Leser*innenadressierungen und Kohärenzbrüchen ein.



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keit, sondern neutralisiert auch jegliche Sinnlichkeit oder emotionale Involviertheit. Dieser Sachlichkeit widersprechen indes der Hinweis auf das bestialische Verlangen und das eher mit Temperament konnotierte Entreißen. Überdies zeugen die zahlreichen polysemantischen Ausdrücke (»huile«, »vibro«, »séance«, »combiné spécial«), die eine Brücke zwischen den Wortfeldern »Massage« und »Prostitution« bilden, von der elementaren Doppelbödigkeit der Darstellung. Nicht zuletzt das Lexem »forfait« lässt eine versteckte Abgründigkeit erkennen, da es mit »Pauschalangebot« oder »Schandtat«[25] übersetzt werden kann. Es bleibt also festzuhalten, dass die Erzählerin die sexuelle Dimension, Anstößigkeit und Brutalität der Szene nur in ahnungsvoller und anspielungsreicher Verzerrung wiedergibt – ein Prinzip, das noch weiter getrieben wird, wenn die Frau-Sau wenige Seiten später über die neuen Vorlieben ihrer Kunden spricht:

> Ils s'intéressaient de plus en plus à mon derrière, c'était le seul problème. Je veux dire, et j'invite toutes les âmes sensibles à sauter cette page par respect pour elles-mêmes, je veux dire que mes clients avaient de drôles d'envies, des idées tout à fait contre nature si vous voyez ce que je veux dire (S. 36).

Abermals richtet sich die Erzählerin deutlich an die Leseinstanz, um allzu empfindliche Rezipierende vor verstörenden Inhalten zu warnen, die jedoch durch die extreme Unschärfe der Beschreibung (»avaient de drôles d'envies«) nicht spezifiziert werden. Sinnbildlich für die Ausblendung des Schockierenden ist zudem die dreimalige Wiederholung des Syntagmas »je veux dire«, dessen Häufung eine leere Zirkularität erzeugt und damit, entgegen der erklärten Absicht, etwas auszudrücken, letztlich nichts besagt. Erneut ist es den Leser*innen überlassen, diese Leerstelle zu füllen oder in ihrer Vagheit zu belassen. Die Funktionsweise der beiden Passagen beruht primär auf dem Zusammenspiel aus insistierender Aufmerksamkeitsbindung und undeutlichen Beschreibungen: Indem die Erzählerin sich an die Rezipierenden wendet, lenkt sie deren Fokus auf das Gesagte, welches jedoch angesichts seiner semantischen Unbestimmtheit alles andere als Eindeutigkeit hervorruft. Die explizite Adressierung der Leser*innen dient also nicht dazu, Zweifel über die Deutung des Gesagten auszuräumen. Ganz im Gegenteil wird die Unklarheit aufrechterhalten, während die Unschärfe der Erzählweise besonders deutlich zur Geltung kommt.

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25 Vgl. Paul Robert/Josette Rey-Debove/Alain Rey: *Le nouveau Petit Robert. Dictionnaire alphabétique et analogique de la langue française,* Paris 1994, S. 949.



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In anderen Textstellen lässt sich eine dazu komplementäre Verunsicherungsstrategie ausfindig machen. Insbesondere wenn die Transformation der Protagonistin im Vordergrund steht, kontrastieren detaillierte Darstellungen der körperlichen Verwandlung mit dem Ausbleiben einer klaren Benennung der Metamorphose in eine Sau. Vorenthalten wird nicht mehr die konkrete Bildlichkeit – wie in den beiden vorangehenden Zitaten –, sondern ein abstrahierendes Verständnis des Geschehens aufseiten der Protagonistin. Trotz der hochgradig evidenten Signale bringt sie ihre neue Konstitution nicht auf den Begriff. Unverkennbar nehmen die phänotypischen Veränderungen der Protagonistin im Verlauf der Geschichte immer extremere Züge an: Eine außer Kontrolle geratene Gewichtszunahme, die Ausbildung einer ledrigen, von widerständigen Haaren überzogenen Haut und der zunehmend rosa eingefärbte Teint werden von physiologischen Anomalien begleitet, wie etwa der aus dem Gleichgewicht geratene Menstruationszyklus, die vollständige Neujustierung des Wahrnehmungsapparats oder ihre plötzlich eintretende mangelnde Fähigkeit, Schweinfleisch verdauen zu können.[26] So offensichtlich sämtliche Phänomene auf die Verwandlung der Hauptfigur in eine Sau hinweisen, so konsequent wird ebendiese explizite Schlussfolgerung nicht gezogen. Exemplarisch dafür steht eine Szene, in der die Metamorphose der Heldin einen neuen Schub erfährt. Sie ereignet sich zu einem Zeitpunkt, als die Protagonistin ihre Anstellung bereits verloren hat, von ihrem temporären Lebenspartner verlassen wurde und – einer festen Unterkunft beraubt – schließlich beginnt, im Freien zu nächtigen.

> En plus de la douleur dans l'échine j'avais du mal dans la poitrine, […] ma nouvelle mamelle tirait douloureusement sous la peau, comme à la puberté. Je me suis courbée en avant et toute cette douleur a disparu. […] Quand le soleil s'est levé […] [j]e me suis dressée sur mes pattes. J'ai secoué la tête et étiré les jarrets. Sous mon visage, mes deux mains étaient plantées dans le sol. Elles n'avaient plus que trois doigts. [J]'ai vu que le petit doigt, l'*auriculaire* comme on dit, avait

26 Neben den auffälligen Bezügen zu Kafkas *Verwandlung* (Konfrontation mit neuen Körpermerkmalen, unbekannten mentalen Zuständen, der zunehmenden Unfähigkeit sprechen zu können und veränderten Vorlieben bei der Nahrungswahl) weist Darrieussecqs Roman auch wesentliche Unterschiede bezüglich inhaltlicher und erzählerischer Aspekte auf. Während Gregor Samsa seine Gestalt mit dem ersten Satz erkennt und einer irreversiblen Metamorphose unterliegt, die letztlich in den Tod mündet, begreift die Protagonistin aus *Truismes* ihr neues Wesen als Frau-Sau erst gegen Ende der Erzählung und nimmt eine Wechselexistenz an, die zwischen menschlichen und tierischen Zuständen alterniert (vgl. Lupu-Onet: Truismes ou la métamorphose au féminin, S. 1–2 und 7).



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> raccourci. L'ongle était long et dur, très épais, et tous les autres ongles pareil. Je ne les avais pas manucurés depuis longtemps il faut dire […] (S. 81–82, Hervorh. im Orig.).

Das hier in Einzelheiten geschilderte Erscheinungsbild und Verhalten lässt keinen Zweifel offen: Die Ausbildung von Zitzen, der schmerzhafte Zwang, eine zusammengekrümmte Haltung einzunehmen und die Degeneration der Hände zu Klauen verweisen eindeutig auf den Phänotypus einer Sau. Doch diese unverkennbare Evidenz wird aus der Perspektive der Protagonistin unter Rückgriff auf eine zweifelhafte und gleichzeitig komisch wirkende Begründung ausgeblendet: Sie führt die Deformierung ihres kleinen Fingers kurzerhand auf eine fehlende Maniküre zurück. Die Nichtbenennung des Offensichtlichen resultiert im Übrigen nicht nur aus naiver Verkennung, sondern steht in anderen Passagen auch unter dem Vorzeichen erzählerisch kalkulierter Zurückhaltung von Informationen. Während die Leugnung der eigenen Situation in der soeben besprochenen Szene eher über die Gefühlswelt und Wahrnehmungskanäle des erzählten Ichs perspektiviert wird, bemerkt das erzählende Ich an anderer Stelle in Form eines begleitenden Kommentars zur eigenen narrativen Vorgehensweise, dass es zu früh sei, die Leser*innen darüber zu unterrichten, was sie anlässlich einer Behandlungsprozedur beim Marabut, einem heiligen Hexer afrikanischer Herkunft, im Spiegel erblickte.[27] Sei es die intern fokalisiert wiedergegebene Wahrnehmung der Protagonistin oder ein intendierter Informationsaufschub – beide Verzerrungs- und Verunklärungsstrategien generieren eine unauflösbare Spannung, da die vom Romanbeginn an den Text durchziehende Evidenz (die Transformation der Protagonistin in eine Frau-Sau) weder vom erzählten Ich noch vom erzählenden Ich, das naturgemäß einen deutlichen Wissensvorsprung gegenüber ihrem jüngeren Alter Ego genießt[28], eine klare Bezeichnung erfährt. Rekurrente Hinweise auf den Zustand der Hauptfigur kontrastieren mit der permanenten Ausblendung des Offensichtlichen. Narratologisch

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27 »Il est encore trop tôt pour que je vous raconte ce que j'ai vu dans la glace, vous ne me croiriez pas« (S. 43).

28 Die Reflexion narrativer Steuerung (S. 43, 37), luzide bis humoristische Einsichten in den eigenen Veränderungsprozess (S. 13, S. 26–27, S. 82) und die Fähigkeit, Lektüreaktionen antizipieren zu können, die aufgrund moralischer oder ideologischer Diskrepanzen mit dem Dargestellten in Konflikt geraten könnten (S. 35, 37), zeigen, dass es sich um ein durchaus scharfsinniges erzählendes Ich handelt. Die oft erwähnte Naivität ist daher eher eine (durchdachte) naive *écriture*, die die Gefühlswelt des in der Entwicklung begriffenen erzählten Ichs ästhetisch nachvollziehbar macht.



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gesprochen führen die Dissonanzen zwischen der *histoire* und *discours*-Ebene einerseits sowie dieser beiden Ebenen und der Rezeptionsebene andererseits zu Irritationsmomenten. Das Wechselspiel zwischen (vermeintlichem) Wissen und fehlender Gewissheit zögert die finale Auflösung des offensichtlich Anzunehmenden bis zum Ende der Erzählung hinaus[29] und lässt sogar offen, inwiefern es überhaupt möglich ist, die fiktive Welt und das Erzählen tatsächlich einzuordnen; ob all die Schilderungen nicht doch – wie eingangs angedeutet – das Produkt eines unzuverlässigen Erzählens oder eines nicht eindeutig zu entziffernden verschmierten Manuskripts sind.

### 2.3 Aporien rationaler Plausibilisierungsprozesse

»Désormais la plupart du temps je suis truie […]« (S. 148): Obwohl die Erzählerin ihr neues Wesen am Ende des Romans schließlich klar benennt und das fortwährend wirkende retardierende Moment einer Auflösung entgegenführt, bleibt der phantastische Charakter des Romans weiterhin erhalten. Denn wenn Texte so angelegt sind, dass eine rein allegorische Lektüre[30] sowie ein Kippen in die benachbarten Genres des *merveilleux*

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29 Der ›Aufschub-Effekt‹ der hier analysierten Erzählstrategien lässt sich an die zentralen Thesen von Alistaire Rolls und Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan anknüpfen. Sie zeigen auf, dass der Körper der Protagonistin eine widersprüchliche Anlage des Textes spiegelt, der einerseits einen hohen Grad an Zugänglichkeit bzw. Lesbarkeit eröffnet; andererseits aber auf Grundlage seines intertextuellen Geflechts die eigene stabile Einheit unentwegt auflöst, sodass der Roman nie nur Produkt, sondern immer auch in dynamischer Produktion begriffen ist und eine textuelle Identität zugunsten der Vielfalt ablehnt (vgl. Alistaire Rolls/Marie-Laure Vuaille-Barcan: »Une seule ou plusieurs femmes-truies? Une lecture virtualisante de Truismes de Marie Darrieussecq«, in: *Australian Journal of French studies* 46 (2009), H. 1, S. 131–144, S. 131–132). Denkt man das erzählerische Perpetuieren und die Tendenz zur transgressiven Anlage des Romans zusammen, ergeben sich weiterhin interessante Anschlusspunkte zu feministischen Lesarten. Das narrative Aufschieben der Eindeutigkeit bezüglich des tierisch-menschlichen Wesens der Heldin betrifft ja vor allem die körperliche Konstitution der Frau-Sau und inszeniert mit literarisch-erzählerischen Mitteln eine neue Form erotischen Begehrens, das sich von männlich dominierten Vorstellungen löst, die auf binärer Asymmetrie, Objektivierung und Besitz beruhen, und ästhetisch direkt auf alle Leser*innen des Buchs wirkt: Aus einer solchen Perspektive illustriert die fehlende Benennung der Heldin als Sau die Unlesbarkeit ihrer nie abgeschlossenen Identität und initiiert zugleich eine Erotik, die Lust gerade dadurch hervorruft, dass das Gegenüber nicht vollends zu begreifen ist und somit auch nicht in der Kategorie des Besitzes aufgeht.

30 Eine allegorische Lesart implizieren all jene Auslegungen, die den gesellschaftskritischen Charakter auf inhaltlicher Ebene hervorheben und die erzählte Welt als Gleichnis



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oder *étrange* verhindert werden, bleibt die zentrale Eigenschaft der Phantastik, die aufschiebend-irritierende *hésitation*, bestehen.[31] Bezogen auf *Truismes* erhalten wiederholte Einschübe von Erklärungsansätzen das phantastische Moment bis zuletzt insofern aufrecht, als sie für die unbegreiflichen Verwandlungen der Figuren in tierisch-menschliche Mischwesen zwar auf biologischer Basis fundierende Plausibilisierungsversuche anbieten, diese jedoch selbst wieder konterkariert werden und ein rationales Deutungskonstrukt dadurch unmöglich scheint.[32] So konsultiert die Protagonistin am Anfang der ihr suspekten körperlichen Transformationen verschiedene Ärzte, die schwerwiegende Eingriffe an ihrem Körper vornehmen und gravierende Probleme feststellen. Auf eine diagnostizierte Fehlgeburt folgt eine von der Protagonistin gewünschte Abtreibung, da sie sich die anhaltenden physiologischen Merkwürdigkeiten nur durch eine Schwangerschaft erklären kann. Im Zuge des Aborts konstatieren die zuständigen Mediziner eine erhebliche organische Anomalie:

> Ils m'ont aussi dit qu'ils n'avaient jamais vu un utérus aussi bizarrement formé, que je ferais bien de me soucier un peu, qu'il y a des tas de maladies qui traînent. Ils ont même gardé l'*hystérographie* pour l'étudier de près (S. 31, Hervorh. im Orig.).

Ganz im Sinne der oben ausgemachten Verzerrungsstrategien verbleiben auch die rationalen Erklärungsansätze im Bereich des Unklaren. Die atypische Verformung der Gebärmutter wird nicht genauer erläutert; ebenso unspezifisch sind die ärztlichen Warnungen an die Protagonistin, sie solle aufgrund einiger nicht näher definierter Krankheiten wachsam sein. Selbst der Ausdruck »hystérographie«, der in diesem Kontext angesichts seiner fachspezifischen Semantik eigentlich auf medizinische Zuverlässigkeit verweisen sollte, führt ins Leere. Denn auch aus dem damit bezeichneten bildgebenden Röntgenverfahren werden keine weiteren Schlüsse gezogen. Die Kursivsetzung des Fachbegriffs scheint sein Kippen aus einer erzählten Welt zu markieren, die sich jeder rationalen Logik entzieht.

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einer außerliterarischen Wirklichkeit lesen. Es sei noch einmal explizit darauf hingewiesen, dass solche Deutungen absolut Gültigkeit beanspruchen können. Der vorliegende Versuch versteht sich als eine Ergänzung, um weitere Potentiale und Funktionsweisen des Romans auszuloten.

31 Vgl. Todorov: Introduction à la littérature fantastique, S. 37–38.

32 Auf ähnliche Weise fasst auch Lupu-Onet die Phantastik auf, ohne jedoch anhand von Beispielen das konterkarierende Spiel genauer zu erläutern: »Le choix du fantastique impose un pacte narratif qui, chez Darrieussecq, repose sur un souci permanent de vraisemblance« (Lupu-Onet: Truismes ou la métamorphose au féminin, S. 8).



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Ähnlich unbefriedigend erweisen sich die Hinweise auf einen möglichen Tumor, den die Protagonistin zwischenzeitlich für ihre körperlichen Veränderungen verantwortlich macht (S. 72), oder die Spekulationen über den Einfluss eines nuklearen Kraftwerks. Im Anschluss an die Gefangennahme durch ein faschistisches Regime, das unter der Leitung von einem Führer namens Edgar steht – und hier wird die phantastische Einfärbung der Erzählung durch die Referenz auf den Namensvetter Edgar Allan Poe unterstrichen – wird die Frau-Sau Zeugin folgender Unterhaltung:

> Il a fait appeler un docteur qui m'a demandé si je m'étais promenée du côté de Goliath, je ne savais même pas ce que c'était. C'était la nouvelle centrale nucléaire qu'avait fait construire Edgar. J'ai seulement dit que j'avais travaillé dans une parfumerie et Edgar a demandé si les produits chimiques peut-être… […]. Le docteur a dit que peut-être, mais à très haute dose, que rien n'était sûr […]. Edgar a dit que ce serait tout de même marrant si on pouvait transformer les prisons en porcheries, qu'au moins ça fournirait des protéines pas chères. Le docteur s'est mis à rigoler avec Edgar. Moi je n'ai jamais rien compris à la politique (S. 103).

Nichts Geringeres als das mögliche Szenario einer nuklearen Katastrophe wird mit den eher beiläufigen Erwägungen des Arztes und dem Diktator beschworen. Ohne diese Eventualität zu vertiefen, rückt übergangslos eine weitere Mutmaßung in den Fokus und überblendet die Möglichkeit radioaktiver Verseuchung: Könnte eine Überdosis kosmetischer Produkte dazu geführt haben, dass die Menschen zunehmend tierische Eigenschaften ausbilden? Klar ist, dass zumindest die Protagonistin während ihrer Anstellung eine Unzahl von Hautbalsamen unterschiedlichster Firmen anwendete, deren sprechende Namen die Hypothese des Doktors zu bestätigen scheinen: Cremen, die damit werben, Mutationen in somatischen Zellen auszulösen[33], überspitzen die in der realen Kosmetikindustrie tatsächlich bemühten molekularbiologischen Begrifflichkeiten, um die Wirkungsweise jener Produkte wissenschaftlich zu fundieren; letztlich aber bleiben textliche Spuren solcher Begründungsversuche einer fiktiven Logik verhaftet, da eine derartige Potenz, menschliches Erbgut nachhaltig zu beeinflussen, mit den tatsächlichen Wirkungen von Schönheitsprodukten nicht in Einklang zu bringen ist – es sei denn, man reicherte sie mit radioaktiven Stoffen wie z.B. Uran an. Neben dem phantastischen Kippeffekt rationaler Leerverweise eröffnet die zitierte Szene einen Blick auf

33 »[U]n ensemble de crèmes Gilda à *l'ADN suractivé pour renouvellement cellulaire et recombinaisons des macromolécules*« (S. 32, Hervorh. im Orig.).



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die dystopische Einfassung der erzählten Welt. Aus Sicht der involvierten Figuren scheint der Ausnahmezustand Normalität zu sein. Nahezu gleichgültig, ob die schwerwiegenden physischen Veränderungen der Menschen nun auf radioaktive Strahlung oder Genmutationen induzierende Kosmetik zurückzuführen sind, begegnen Edgar und sein medizinischer Berater der Situation mit amüsierter Unbekümmertheit. Ihr Augenmerk gilt vielmehr der Frau-Sau, aus deren speziellen Fall sie ohne Skrupel Lösungen für eine optimierte Nahrungsversorgung der Bevölkerung ableiten: Ganz im Sinne einer großformatig angelegten biopolitischen Maßnahme erwägt Edgar, beim Vorliegen adäquater mutativer Verfahren Gefängnisse in Schlachthäuser und Insassen in Schweine umzuwandeln. Die Unmenschlichkeit eines in leichtfüßiger Heiterkeit heraufbeschworenen Massenkannibalismus wirkt angesichts der indifferenten Haltung der Protagonistin gegenüber solch kaltblütigen Gedankenexperimenten besonders beklemmend.

## 3. Phantastik im Dienste einer Krisenästhetik

Es zeigt sich also, dass – analog zur Blindheit, die kategorisch das Verhältnis der Protagonistin zu ihrer eigenen Verwandlung kennzeichnet – die bestialische Grausamkeit der sozialen Umwelt aus dem Blickwinkel der Hauptfigur ebenfalls nicht adäquat erfasst wird. Auf einer orgienartigen Zusammenkunft erkennt die Protagonistin bspw. nicht, dass sie von den Gästen als lebende Attraktion missbraucht wird. Vor opulenter Kulisse bietet sich den Leser*innen eine unübersichtliche, entsetzliche und von Gewalt übersättigte Gemengelage dar: Tierische und menschliche Wesen sind teilweise nicht mehr zu unterscheiden; die entfesselte Gesellschaft gibt sich sadistischen Ausschweifungen hin, fügt gefangenen Menschen qualvolle Schmerzen zu, tobt auf blutgetränktem Parkett und feiert unter mit Leichen behangenen Kronleuchtern eine symbolisch aufgeladene Milleniums-Silvesternacht. Wie in einem dionysischen Ritus drängt die dekadente Initiationsfeier auf einen epochalen Übergang, die im Rausch allen zivilisatorischen Errungenschaften entsagt und den Blick auf menschliche Abgründe freigibt: Immun gegen die Grausamkeit dieser Szenerie begegnet die Protagonistin der moralischen Verelendung mit einer Mischung aus naiver Verkennung und stoischer Gelassenheit:

> Quand ils ont tous eu fini de s'amuser, elle [une très jolie jeune fille] s'est mise à errer à quatre pattes dans la salle les yeux complètement révulsés, un coup de



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> fatigue sans doute, le manque d'habitude […]. [J]'ai voulu aller la consoler mais décidément aucun son articulé ne voulait sortir de ma bouche. Un des gorilles a entraîné la gosse dans une salle à côté, je l'ai vu se distraire un peu et puis lui mettre une balle dans la tête. Ça m'a déçue de lui. Heureusement Edgar n'a pas vu ça sinon ça aurait bardé pour le gorille (S. 107).

Abermals wird mit anspielungsreicher Unschärfe angedeutet, dass die Verstörung der jungen Frau alles andere als von einer leichten Müdigkeit – wie von der Protagonistin vermutet – herrührt. Sie resultiert vielmehr aus einer schrecklichen Vergewaltigung. Auf die Spitze getrieben wird die gutgläubig-unbekümmerte Wahrnehmung der Ereignisse, wenn die anschließende Misshandlung und gnadenlose Ermordung durch den Leibwächter aus der lakonisch dargebotenen Sicht der Frau-Sau lediglich ein Gefühl leichter Enttäuschung hervorruft und absurderweise mit dem arglosen Glauben an die moralische Integrität des faschistischen Führers Edgar verbunden wird. Die Inkongruenz zwischen den Wahrnehmungsmustern der Protagonistin und der Leseinstanz ist ein weiteres Mal das Ergebnis einer erzählerischen Anlage, die als simuliertes Versteckspiel bezeichnet werden kann. Dem beschriebenen Geschehen wird aus Rezeptionsperspektive unweigerlich eine unfassbare Grausamkeit beigemessen, deren Evidenz eine verunsichernde Distanz zum naiven Blick der Erzählerin hervorruft. Etwas allgemeiner gefasst ließe sich diese Textstrategie mit den Worten Bergs beschreiben, die er selbst zur Definition der Phantastik nutzt: Es handelt sich hier um ein Wechselspiel, das »auf zwei Ebenen, nämlich einer textinternen der Protagonisten und einer rezeptionsbezogenen des Lesers, einen emotional-ambivalenten Raum schillernd gleitender Verschiebungsakte«[34] erzeugt und einen Moment der Verunsicherung, der *hésitation*, aufrechterhält.

Wie lassen sich diese Beobachtungen zum Roman nun abschließend mit dem Konzept der Krise in Verbindung bringen und kulturwissenschaftlich perspektivieren? Dass die im Verlauf der Erzählung präsentierte Welt in grundlegender Weise als krisenhaft zu betrachten ist, kann kaum bestritten werden. Davon zeugen in erster Linie die sich überschlagenden Ereignisse und hereinbrechenden politischen Umbrüche mitsamt ihren neo-faschistischen Säuberungs- und Reinheitsobsessionen.[35] Der Aufstieg

34 Berg: Schlimme Zeiten, böse Räume, S. 34.

35 Wie alle parteilichen Ziele und ideologischen Beweggründe wird auch die Rede des Parteiführers nur bruchstückhaft von der Erzählerin wiedergegeben. Erkennbar ist jedoch Edgars rhetorische Strategie, eine deklarierte Umbruchsphase in Kombination mit



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der totalitären Partei »Social-Franc-Progressisme« (S. 101) geht mit dem Versuch einher, jegliche Form von Devianz zu eliminieren.[36] Die ergriffenen Maßnahmen reichen von Bordellschließungen über die Ermordung einer Gruppe von Obdachlosen bis zur gewaltsamen Festsetzung stigmatisierter Menschen in ehemaligen psychiatrischen Einrichtungen, die sich zu einer absonderlichen Form von Konzentrationslagern entwickeln und deren Insassen schließlich auf Anordnung des Regimeführers Edgar mit Napalmbomben hingerichtet werden (S. 94–99). Überdies folgt auf die stürmische Schreckensherrschaft eine schnelle Abfolge extremer Katastrophen (S. 117), die nicht nur in Paris ein Trümmerfeld hinterlassen, sondern globale Ausmaße annehmen und auch andere Gebiete der Erde in Mitleidenschaft ziehen.[37] Auch wenn ein derartig labiles gesellschaftliches Gefüge, das stetigen Umwälzungen ausgesetzt ist, soziale Akteur*innen jeglicher Art nicht an feste Strukturen und Regeln bindet, wirken die abrupten machtpolitischen Auf- und Abstiege verschiedener Nebenfiguren stark überzeichnet und kontraintuitiv, da ihre sprunghaften Entwicklungen weder perspektivisch nachvollzogen noch durch Monologe, Dialoge oder kurze Binnenerzählungen erklärt werden. Der Marabut, zu dem die Protagonistin mehrfach Kontakt hat, durchläuft eine verrückte Karriere. Anfangs tritt er als schamanischer Heiler in Erscheinung, versorgt nebenbei Kosmetikstudio und Bordell mit ominösen »produits africains« (S. 79), bleibt anschließend lange unsichtbar, schwört dann schlagartig als Oberhaupt einer geistlichen Institution an der Seite Edgars die dekadente High Society auf ein neues Jahrtausend ein (S. 108), um zuletzt ebenso plötzlich von der politischen Bühne zu verschwinden (S. 113). Sein Amt übernimmt Marchepiède, ein Charakter, dessen Werdegang noch unwirklicher erscheint: Vor der Übernahme dieser prestigeträchtigen Stellung protestierte er in Kliniken gegen Abtreibungen (S. 30–31), verfluchte die Protagonistin mit dunklen Prophezeiungen und kreuzte den Weg der Frau-Sau in dem Lager (S. 97), das der neofaschistischen Rassenhygiene zum Opfer fiel. Wie ihm die Flucht noch vor der Zerstörung gelang und auf welche Weise der steile Aufstieg zum Würdenträger innerhalb eines Sys-

der binären Gegenüberstellung von negativ konnotiertem Schmutz und positiver Gesundheit in persuasiver Absicht zu bemühen (S. 64).

36 Vgl. Cotille-Foley: Métaphores, métamorphoses et retournements symboliques dans *Truismes*, S. 200.

37 Die Erzählerin berichtet von einer Migrationswelle, die Menschen aus San Francisco nach Paris führte (S. 130).



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tems glückte, das ihn bereits zum Tod verurteilt hatte, bleibt wie so vieles im Unklaren. Alles in dieser grausamen und zugleich eigenartig entrückten Welt steht im Zeichen beständiger Veränderung und unabgeschlossener Vorläufigkeit. Das gilt für das Geschehen wie für die transgressive Wechselkonstitution der Figuren, die nahezu allesamt[38] eine hybride Existenzform zwischen Mensch und Tier annehmen. Nichts ist von Dauer und bürgt für Sicherheiten. Damit inszeniert die Erzählung unentwegt das konzeptuelle Kernverständnis der Krise. Denn als krisenhaft gelten Situationen, in denen eine »Entscheidung fällig, aber noch nicht gefallen ist.«[39] Sie implizieren durch retrospektive Projektion eine Ereignishaftigkeit, einen jähen Bruch, eine wesentliche Veränderung, mit deren Vollzug die ausgewiesene Stabilität der Vergangenheit verloren ging. Entgegen diesem initiatorischen, in der Vergangenheit situierten Umbruchsmoment besitzt die Krise selbst jedoch keinen Ereignischarakter.[40] Ihre Wesensmerkmale bestehen vielmehr darin, dass die instabile Lage einen komplexen Möglichkeitsraum zwischen zwei Radikalalternativen wie zum Beispiel (Weiter-)Leben oder Tod aufspannt und im Modus absoluter Offenheit unterschiedlichste Ausgänge der Krisenlage spekulativ andeutet. »Es handelt sich bei Krisen somit eher um eine Latenzperiode bzw. um eine Phase der Suspendierung von Ereignishaftigkeit, bei der ein Wandel bevorsteht, sich aber noch nicht vollzogen hat.«[41] Die Betonung der andauernden Aufhebung und damit verbundenen Offenheit zeigt überdies, wie sehr sich die zentralen definitorischen Strukturelemente des Krisen- und Phantastikbegriffs überschneiden: Obwohl es sich bei dem einen um ein narratives Konstrukt bzw. eine narrative Metapher und im Falle des anderen um eine ästhetische bzw. gattungsbezogene Kategorie handelt, wird beiden ein infinit aufgeschobenes Moment spannungsreicher Verunsicherung als

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38 Edgar etwa entwickelt Züge eines Pferdes, während der Marabut Eigenschaften von Elefanten ausbildet (S. 114–115). Konsequent zum bisherigen Umgang mit den Wesensveränderungen der Figuren unterliegt auch die Darstellung ihrer Metamorphosen auf Basis von Vergleichen, Metaphern und Uneindeutigkeiten der erzählerischen Strategie des simulierten Versteckens.

39 Reinhart Koselleck: »Krise«, in: Ritter, Joachim/Gründer, Karlfried/Gabriel, Gottfried (Hrsg.): *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, Basel 2007, S. 617–650, S. 619.

40 Vgl. Ansgar Nünning: »Krise als Erzählung und Metapher: Literaturwissenschaftliche Bausteine für eine Metaphorologie und Narratologie von Krisen«, in: Meyer, Carla/Patzel-Mattern, Katja/Schenk, Gerrit Jasper (Hrsg.): *Krisengeschichte(n). »Krise« als Leitbegriff und Erzählmuster in kulturwissenschaftlicher Perspektive*, Stuttgart 2013, S. 117–144, S. 122.

41 Ansgar Nünning: Krise als Erzählung und Metapher, S. 124.



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Schlüsselmerkmal attestiert. Das erklärt die Affinität der Phantastik zur literarischen Verhandlung von Krisen und deren regelmäßige Verknüpfung. In Anlehnung an Berg, für den die Phantastik des 19. Jahrhunderts die »Repräsentanzfunktion einer krisenhaften Moderne« erfüllt und die lebensweltlichen »Verschiebung[en] zwischen Weltgewissheit und Weltverlust, zwischen Identität und Ich-Störung, zwischen Zusammenhang und Vereinzelung«[42] in einen literarischen Verhandlungskontext aufnimmt, stellt auch *Truismes* zweifelsohne eine moderne Variante mit ähnlichen Potentialen dar. Es ist also sehr plausibel, in diesem temporeichen Roman eine überzeichnete und allegorische Anspielung auf einen gegenwärtigen Gesellschaftszustand zu erkennen, der nicht selten als hyperbeschleunigt, überkontingent, unübersichtlich und autodestruktiv beschrieben wird.

Verfolgt man diese Lesart, liefert der Text die karikatureske Repräsentation eines omnipräsenten Krisendiskurses. Doch der Roman geht weit über eine verzerrende mimetische Abbildungsfunktion hinaus. Sein phantastischer Unterbau bezieht sich nicht nur kritisch auf bestehende Missstände der außerliterarischen Wirklichkeit, sondern liefert ein ästhetisches Mittel, um das Narrativ der Krise, das mittlerweile zu einem hochgradig beanspruchten Werkzeug der sinnstiftenden Selbstbeschreibung von westlichen Kulturen avanciert ist,[43] selbst auf den Prüfstand zu stellen. Wie die Analysen gezeigt haben, besteht die Besonderheit der Erzählung ja darin, dass weder das erzählende noch das erzählte Ich die beschriebenen Situationen als krisenhaft verstehen: Sowohl die Brisanz der körperlichen Transformation als auch die moralische Verelendung der krisengeschüttelten erzählten Welt werden durch verschiedene Ausblendungsmechanismen verzerrt. Diese Unschärfe steht permanent in einem eklatanten Widerspruch zur Position der Leseinstanz, die aufgrund der unzähligen Adressierungen dazu angeregt wird, die lückenhaft dargestellte innerfiktive Welt unter Aktivierung ihr bekannter Sinnstiftungsprozesse zu vervollständigen und mit gewohnten Wirklichkeitserfahrungen abzugleichen.

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42 Berg: Schlimme Zeiten, böse Räume, S. 36–37.

43 Vgl. Ansgar Nünning: »Grundzüge einer Narratologie der Krise. Wie aus einer Situation ein Plot und eine Krise (konstruiert) werden können«, in: Grunwald, Henning/Pfister, Manfred (Hrsg.): *Krisis! Krisenszenarien, Diagnosen, Diskursstrategien*, München/Paderborn 2007, S. 48–71, S. 68.



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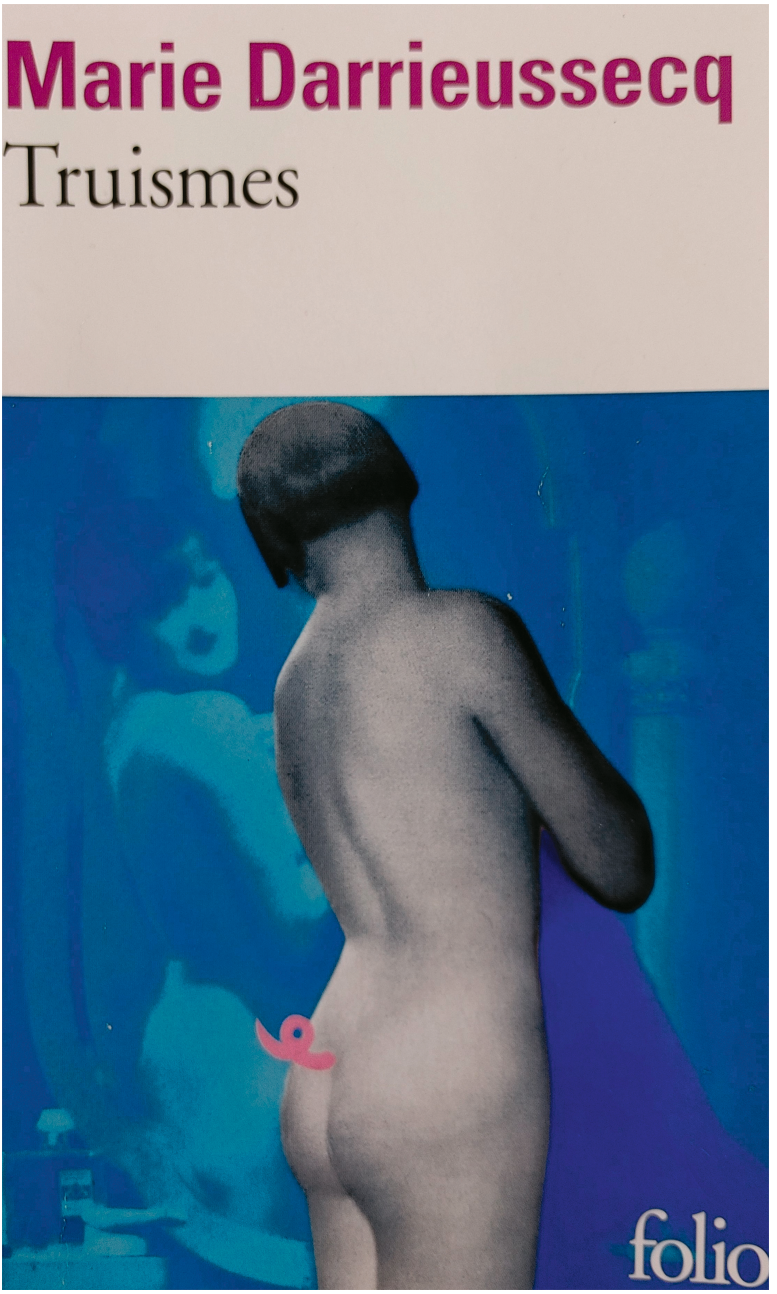


Abb. 1: Foto (aufgenommen von S. G.) vom Frontcover der 2017 erschienenen Taschenbuchausgabe.[44]



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Kurzum: Das fehlende Krisenbewusstsein der Hauptfigur und Erzählerin wird potentiell durch die Projektionsleistung der Rezipierenden kompensiert. Das Konzept des Krisenhaften gehört nicht der erzählten Welt an, sondern ist Teil der Welt der Leser*innen. Sie werden somit für ihre eigenen Wahrnehmungs- und Urteilsschemata sensibilisiert, da diese durch die fehlende Deckung mit den Reaktionen der Erzählerin in kontrastreicher Spannung ihre Selbstverständlichkeit verlieren und folglich erfahrbar werden. Damit offenbart sich eine zentrale Crux des Romans, die mit dem Cover der Taschenbuchausgabe gleichnishaft illustriert wird.

Die Beobachter*innen der Szene scheinen sich auf den ersten Blick in einer epistemisch bevorteilten Position zu befinden. Nur sie können erkennen, dass die sich im Spiegel betrachtende Frau einen schraubenförmigen Schwanz am Hinterteil trägt und dadurch auf ihre Deformation schließen. Für sie selbst bleibt das Körperteil unsichtbar. Doch wie steht es um den Beobachter? Es fällt auf, dass er sich selbst nicht im Spiegel zu erblicken vermag. Alles, was er sieht, ist das Spiegelbild der Frau. Nur sie bietet sich in dieser räumlichen Konstellation als Identifikationsfigur an. Dabei handelt es sich allerdings um eine Identifizierung mit beunruhigender Tragweite. Denn wenn der Beobachter sich in der Frau wiedererkennt und ihre Situation auf seine eigene projiziert, gilt die partielle Blindheit der Frau ebenso für ihn. Dementsprechend kippt die vermeintliche Überlegenheit des Betrachters in ein Abhängigkeitsverhältnis: Auch er befindet sich in einer epistemisch instabilen Lage, die einer umfassenden Selbsterkenntnis im Wege steht und deren blinde Flecken nur durch den Umweg über die Frau-Sau sichtbar gemacht werden können. Was wäre also, wenn der Mensch – spiegelverkehrt zur Wahrnehmung und zum Erfahrungsraum der Protagonistin – inmitten eines öffentlichen Diskurses agiert, dessen Inanspruchnahme des Krisennarrativs dazu neigt, überstrapaziert zu werden, so dass eine gesellschaftliche Selbstreflexion eher verhindert als angetrieben wird?[45] Wenn das Krisennarrativ als omnipräsentes Wahrnehmungsraster den Blick für die eigene Konstitution eher verstellt als ihn zu schärfen? Und was wäre, wenn genau diese Kritik an einer Krisenblindheit

44 Marie Darrieussecq: *Truismes*.

45 Vgl. Albrecht Koschorke: »Das Narrativ der krisenhaften Moderne«, in: Kohlrausch, Laura/Schoeß, Marie/Zejnelovic, Marko (Hrsg.): *Krise. Mediale, sprachliche und literarische Horizonte eines vielzitierten Begriffs,* Würzburg 2018, S. 23–39; Armin Nassehi: »Der Ausnahmezustand als Normalfall. Modernität als Krise«, in: *Kursbuch* 170 (2012), S. 34–49 und Nünning: Krisengeschichte(n), S. 141.



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von einem Roman kommt, der die inneren Widersprüche weitgehend verankerter Selbstverständlichkeiten und ihre potentiellen Defizite im wörtlichen Sinne verstanden ›ästhetisch‹ erfahrbar macht? Käme das schon einem Skandal gleich?

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Joaquín Orlando Valenzuela Celis (Mainz)

# Armadura y núcleo: Mecánicas fantásticas en la construcción de identidad en *Titane*

## I.

El presente aporte se concentra en los contenidos narrativos de carácter fantástico. Para ello, tomaré como paradigma el *topos* de la mutación, transformación y metamorfosis corporal, uno de los temas de carácter fantástico más recurrentes en este tipo de narrativas. A través de una serie de ejemplos, tanto del ámbito literario como del audiovisual, ponderaré de modo comparativo algunas de las constelaciones de transformación corporal desplegadas en relatos de esta corriente. Así, se partirá de uno de los exponentes más referidos, y quizás canónicos, de la literatura fantástica, al menos en lo que a las temáticas de alteración corporal concierne: *La metamorfosis* de Kafka. Tras un breve excurso en el famoso relato de Kafka, poniendo en relieve la relación que se establece entre la dimensión orgánica del motivo narrado y la conformación de un esbozo de sociedad altamente férreo, continuaré mi exposición con otros artefactos culturales canónicos, esta vez perteneciente al panorama popular de la producción audiovisual de la contemporaneidad, me refiero a *Blade Runner* y *The Matrix.* En mi opinión, estas dos películas introducirán en el mundo de la cultura popular uno de los elementos más recurrentes de las estéticas fantásticas operativas en la modernidad, y esto desde finales del siglo XIX hasta inicios de la Segunda Guerra Mundial, a saber, la exploración de las fronteras de lo corporal, de su estatus y su ontología, con relación a la expansión de los límites de la carne por medio de su imbricación con el creciente ámbito de lo técnico-mecánico. Especialmente, tras el auge del metal, tan presente en los procesos de industrialización de finales del siglo XIX, y su correspondiente utilización como soporte material de la tragedia y la destrucción producida durante el periodo de guerras, se hace patente el extrañamiento producido por las fantasías derivadas de la conjunción entre la maleabilidad de la carne y la rigidez del metal. Cuando en Kafka este tipo de declinaciones de lo corporal emprende una vertiente mucho más orgánica, que lleva de ser viviente desarrollado y una versión atávica y repugnante de lo vivo, es decir, regresiva y monstruosa, la fusión de la carne y el metal se corresponde con la promesa



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formalista, ya del futurismo italiano, ya del ruso, entre otros, de superar el estadio de imperfección de lo humano mediante la exaltación de su unión trasformación por mor de la unión con la máquina. Finalmente, el argumento me lleva a fijarme en *Titane*, un artefacto audiovisual reciente, que, bajo mi punto de vista, sintetiza la figura estética de la perfectibilidad corporal con el *air tu temps* contemporáneo, me refiero a esa sensación de colapso sistémico, de distopía desbordada, de falla generalizada que cunde también en las propuestas fílmicas mencionadas con anterioridad, y una alternativa frente al colapso, encapsulada en la imagen de la conjunción satisfactoria entre máquina y carne. Lo mecánico, así mi argumento, parece comportarse como un suplemento prostético, tanto físico como semántico, que complementa la fragilidad de una subjetividad debilitada, en proceso de fracturación, envuelta en esa estética catastrofista que se refleja en estos relatos.

## II.

Cuando pensamos en contenidos fantásticos, sean de carácter literario o audiovisual, vienen a la mente evocaciones referentes a la grieta, la grieta que se conforma en un contexto determinado, y que procura que lo que percibimos, sea por medio de nuestro ojo interior, como en el caso de la literatura, o nuestros ojos físicos, cuando vemos un artefacto visual, sea puesto en paréntesis, cuestionado en su estatus a causa de las discordancias que se patentan en su estructura lógica. Empero, para que estas aparentes grietas sean entendidas como baches en un continuo coherente determinado, ha de establecerse previamente lo que significa congruencia en un espacio específico, esto es, el conjunto de parámetros que convierten a un artefacto en depositario de nuestra confianza, en parte conformante de aquello que se podría denominar las fronteras de lo simbólicamente aceptable. Dentro de este espacio se desarrollan todas aquellas operaciones simbólicas que construyen un relato apropiado para la constitución de una comunidad. Estos intercambios simbólicos aseguran la congruencia en significados, significaciones, equivalencias y convenciones, a modo que una sociedad sea capaz de producir un discurso común, en el cual sea posible encontrar la potencialidad de identificación para sus miembros; así, por ejemplo, se conforman unas reglas referentes al horizonte estético que una obra pictórica ha de cumplir, los parámetros que una melodía tiene que guardar y las fronteras que un relato debe mantener para que



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éstos se ubiquen dentro del campo que garantiza su inteligibilidad para la parte receptora. Todo aquello que tienda a sobrepasar los límites de lo establecido, tendrá que confrontarse con una sensación de extrañamiento, ya sea porque se antoja incomprensible desde un punto de vista meramente relacionado con el raciocinio, o bien, porque atente contra fundamentos acordados en el ámbito de lo moral y lo ético; en ambos casos, resumiendo, la grieta comporta el lugar por donde esa convención comunitaria empieza a entrar en contacto con otras esferas, y mediante el cual comienza a hacer acto de presencia una forma de intercambio simbólico diverso, alternativo al convenido. Hasta este momento, ténganse en cuenta, no se ha adjudicado un valor de cualidad a este orden que desafía los parámetros culturales establecidos, ni tampoco se ha hablado sobre la reacción que esta manera de representación provoca en los lectores o la audiencia, temas que han tenido amplia repercusión en la literatura crítica e investigativa. Así el caso de los ya canónicos Tzvetan Todorov o Roger Caillois, quienes coinciden en argumentar que, a parte de la sensación de vacilación e indecisión, en sus palabras: "un événement étrange, qui provoque une hésitation chez le lecteur et le héros"[1], propia al contenido fantástico, existe un componente referente al miedo, al terror y a lo siniestro, que invade a este género[2]. La cuestión es que, como la crítica más contemporánea ha apuntado[3], este tipo de análisis parte de la experiencia decimonónica, que concebía la dimensión de lo fantástico como un espacio paralelo al tenor ideológico de aquel tiempo, demarcado por la intención de explicar mediante el método científico y la racionalidad cada fenómeno que rodeaba la cotidianidad de los individuos de su tiempo. La frontera puede desplazarse, y autores como Louis Vax apuntan a que lo que en un momento puede ser considerado sobrenatural, deja de serlo en otro[4]. Empero, es imperativo tener en cuenta que el apogeo de las narrativas con contenido fantástico se perfila en un momento histórico propenso a relatar el mundo, encontrando en corrientes literarias como el realismo y el naturalismo un vehículo cultural que canalizase esa ambición por narrar minuciosamente la coyuntura surgida tras la desestabilización de las

1 Tzvetan Todorov: *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, París 1970, p. 38.
2 Roger Caillois: "En busca de lo fantástico en el arte", en: *Diálogos. Artes, Letras, Ciencias humanas 1* (1956), pp. 5–6.
3 Ana Luiza Silva Camarani: *A literatura fantástica. Caminhos teóricos*, San Paulo 2014.
4 Louis Vax: *La séduction de l'étrange,* París 1965, pp. 15–20.



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certitudes políticas, sociales y culturales, que encuadraran la realidad de los sujetos por varios siglos.

III.

El género fantástico conoce, como apunta Ana Luiza Silva Camarani (2014) una "efervescência […] pós Revolução Francesa como resultante da fadiga do público 'por séculos de racionalismo'"[5] diferenciándose de otras modalidades literarias emparentadas precedentes, tales cuales, el cuento de hadas, justamente por ese momento estético de la brecha, de la grieta que la misma lógica narrativa del artefacto abre en sus propias carnes. De esta grieta supura un desorden ontológico, que no es perceptible en otros géneros literarios hermanados, propensos a trasportar a personajes y lectores a una realidad alterna; todo lo contrario, lo ontológicamente contingente en los cuentos de hadas o la ciencia ficción, por ejemplo, forma parte constitutiva y fundamental del argumento narrativo, es indispensable para el desarrollo del *plot*, y no es puesto en duda o cuestionamiento por los personajes de la trama. Ahora bien, esto parece ser una de las principales características que llaman poderosamente la atención en relación con el género propiamente fantástico, a saber, el extrañamiento que inunda todo el tejido textual de los artefactos correspondientes, prácticamente trabajando en contra de la lógica y el flujo del argumento narrativo, al adherirse a su superficie y abriéndose camino poco a poco a través de las inconsistencias y desbarajustes que se van infiltrando en el continuo intratextual. La cuestión aquí, claro está, depende de lo que se haya preestablecido como marco simbólico aceptable y concebible para los partícipes en el proceso de la hermenéutica de la recepción, y esto es válido para cualquier aspecto que se abarque en el texto, desde lógica del relato, pasando por la credulidad, con la que los personajes encaren los hechos que los envuelven, hasta la confianza que la narración despierte en la audiencia.

Esto incumbe, de la misma manera, por ejemplo, las causas referentes a la coherencia corporal, la autonomía de la entidad de los personajes, su consistencia identitaria, tanto física como intelectual. Es este el caso de uno de los relatos referentes de lo fantástico, al menos en los que a las narrativas de alteración corporal comporta. Me refiero a la transformación

5 Ana Luiza Silva Camarani: *A literatura fantástica. Caminhos teóricos*, San Paulo 2014, p. 15.



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física y casi psíquica de Gregor Samsa, héroe de la *Metamorfosis*[6], cuyo argumento gira en torno a la extrañeza que el cambio físico y visual de Gregor produce en su núcleo familiar, al pasar de ser el pilar económico que sostiene la supervivencia de su familia, a una alimaña repulsiva que amenaza con destruir definitivamente la unidad del grupo. El cuerpo del héroe, por tanto, se convierte en el soporte visual y argumentativo, el significante y el significado, que materializa la entrada de esa ontología alterna y perturbadora en el seno de la partícula elemental que asegura la coherencia y la estabilidad del tejido social, la familia. El cuerpo de Gregor es el portal por el cual la grieta anteriormente mencionada se abre, dejando entrar un momento de alteridad difícilmente explicable, tanto en el contexto intradiegético, como para el receptor. El contraste, pues, que procura que la transformación de Samsa se perciba como ininteligible en todos los niveles, se construye justamente a partir del empirismo que enfrenta a los sujetos con su integridad corporal, de la manera, más o menos, conocida como Jacques Lacan lo explicase en su famoso escrito sobre el concepto del "estadio del espejo"[7].

Es esta experiencia la que se conforma como marco simbólico aceptable y reconocido que convierte a una transformación corporal como la que se exhibe en el relato de Kafka en un momento de extrañeza, que no se entiende como un momento jubilatorio, o acaso admisible, para todos las partes participantes en el campo narrativo. Ahora bien, es harto conocido que dentro de la crítica literaria se ha extendido el consenso sobre la imposibilidad de leer en clave alegórica o poética los textos con características fantásticas[8], puesto que esto supondría un doble despego del principio de literacidad, que se encuentra en la base del discurso literario. Así, el contenido fantástico significaría ya un alejamiento del texto artístico de su orden referencial, profundizándose por virtud de la intervención de tropos que corroen el sentido literal de un enunciado. Esto, sin embargo, funciona en el patrón que rige lo fantástico canónico, cuyo síntoma se ancla justamente en la estructura del relato, algo diferente se articula en el caso

6 Franz Kafka: *La metamorfosis,* Madrid 2011 [1915].

7 Jacques Lacan: "Le stade du miroir", en: ídem: *Ecrits I*, París 1966, pp. 89–97.

8 Todorov: *Introduction à la littérature fantastique*, pp. 57–59./Alejandro De Toro: "Überlegungen zur Textsorte 'Fantastik' oder Borges und die Negation des Fantastischen. Rhizomatische Simulation, 'dirigierter Zufall' und semiotisches Skandalon", en: Elmar Schenkel/Wolfgang F. Schwarz/Ludwig Stockinger et al (eds.): *Die magische Schreibmaschine. Aufsätze zur Tradition des Phantastischen in der Literatur,* Fráncfort del Meno 1998, pp. 11–74.



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de otra índole de expresiones de este tipo, en lo que en los más recientes escritos de investigación de ha pasado a denominar "neofantástico"[9], una reconceptualización del género que viene a definir textos continentes de elementos de lo fantástico, mas que encuentran canalización ya no en la textura de la narración, pero en momentos y artefactos puntuales, de naturaleza más bien estética, así

> [l]a idea de lo fantástico que propone Roas tiene que ver más con una categoría estética que con un concepto circunscrito a los límites de un género literario, por lo que no solo es válida para la literatura, sino que es extensible al cine, los videojuegos, el comic, el teatro o la plástica fantástica.[10]

La revisión de la concepción de lo fantástico hacia un debilitamiento de su estatuto como extrañamiento absoluto, competidor con una convención preestablecida de la realidad, significa también que su contenido pueda ser objeto de una lectura metafórica o alegórica, puesto que el análisis se focaliza en síntomas de lo fantástico que se manifiestan mediante expresiones estéticas superficiales y no en una ontología subterránea completamente autónoma y alterna, formulada para evidenciar potencialidades que el tejido narrativo, social y cultural de la realidad no consigue adherir a su aparato discursivo. Estos elementos, síntomas de lo fantástico, operan de la manera que se comentase *supra,* con relación a la grieta.

## IV.

El cuerpo puede también configurarse en un ente que vehicule la aparición del elemento intruso en las narrativas de carácter fantástico, véase, por ejemplo, el caso de *Die Verwandlung.* La cuestión es que, a diferencia de lo expuesto en el relato de Kafka, en donde las consecuencias de esta coyuntura pesan más que el mismo proceso, en *Titane* (2021), de Julia Ducournau[11], el peso del argumento descansa en la paulatina introducción del plot en un ámbito de extrañamiento, mediante la transformación de la entidad y autonomía del cuerpo de Alexia (Agathe Rouselle), el personaje principal. La historia que se cuenta en la película es relativamente

9 Jaime Alazraki: *En busca del unicornio. Los cuentos de Julio Cortázar,* Madrid 1983, p. 27.

10 Licet García Simón: "Breve panorama del discurso teórico sobre el género fantástico", en: *Nomenclatura: aproximaciones a los estudios hispánicos* 6 (2018), DOI: doi.org/10.13023/naeh.2018.02, p. 12.

11 Julia Ducournau: *Titane*, Francia 2021.



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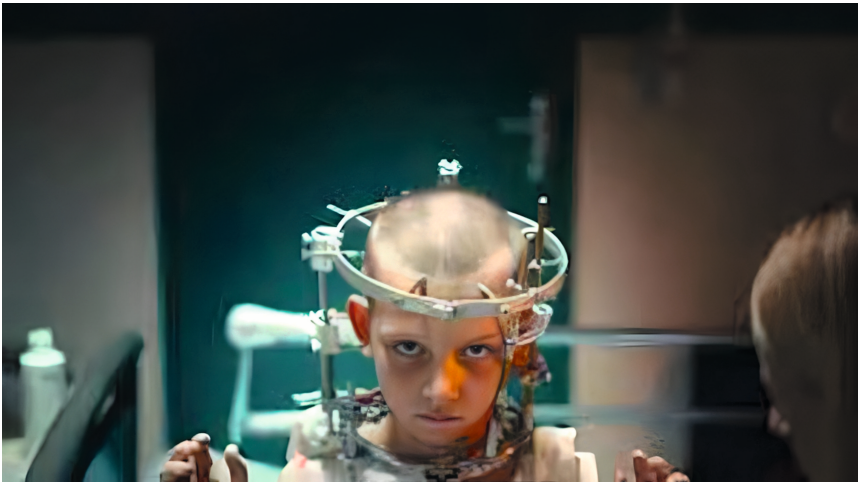
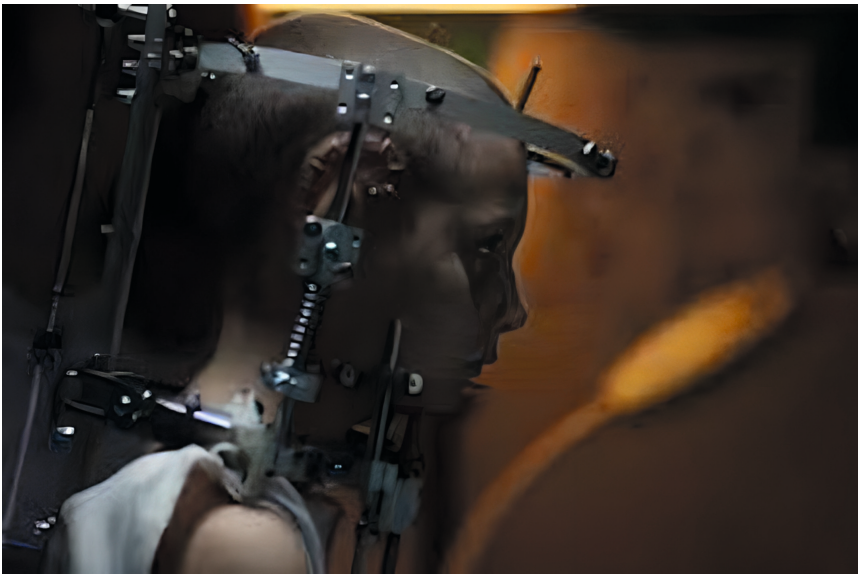
sencilla, una niña sufre un accidente de coche junto a su padre; a modo que se garantice la supervivencia de la joven, los doctores que la tratan, le introducen unas placas de titanio en la cabeza, una operación que la deja visiblemente marcada, y esto, no solo psíquicamente sino físicamente también.







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(**Imgs. 1–3:** Titane (2021): Alexia tras el accidente de coche que produce su alteración corporal.).

La alteridad construida de Alexia es, por consiguiente, una condición que se remarca tanto en el nivel de la *histoire* como del *discours* desde el inicio de la narración. Ambos niveles del tejido narrativo, esto es, el qué y el cómo de su plot giran en torno a la puesta de manifiesto de la condición de la heroína. Alexia es un híbrido, un *cyborg* en medio de un mundo urbano que se representa en una estética distópica tan extendida en el medio audiovisual de la actualidad, adscrita a la tradición inaugurada por Ridley Scott con *Blade Runner* (1982)[12] y finalmente canonizada por la trilogía de *The Matrix* (1999-2003) de las hermanas Wachowski[13].

Aún así, lo fantástico en *Titane* no se articula mediante la narrativa de implosión de las estructuras sociales que sostienen el devenir de la realidad extratextual. Todo lo contrario, ya en *The Matrix* se hace patente una tendencia de expansión de relatos distópicos y cataclistas en producciones del género popular, en donde el pesimismo cultural da paso a la concepción de un contexto hostil, violento y lleno de penurias para los personajes que lo habitan. La violencia implícita no significa, por tanto, una excepción, todo lo contrario, se estipula como una norma a la que las figuras de tal mundo tienen que enfrentarse con llamativa naturalidad; esta forma de mímesis literaria repercute en el panorama cultural de la actualidad en trabajos popularmente exitosos como la trilogía *Vernon Subutex* (2015-2017)

12 Ridley Scott: *Blade Runner,* EE.UU. 1988.
13 Lana Wachowski/Lilly Wachowski: *The Matrix,* EE.UU. 1999–2003.



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de Virginie Despentes[14], cuya trama gira en torno a la violencia inherente a la existencia urbana, ambientada en el París de los tiempos que corren.

(**Imgs. 4–5:** Titane (2021): Trinity conectando a Neo a la Mátrix; Close-up del terminal corporal de conexión a la máquina.).

Sin embargo, y esto se entabla como un común denominador a las obras de tipo audiovisual citadas anteriormente, la disolución del panorama social encuentra una reproducción metafórica en la disolución de las fronteras del cuerpo de las figuras envueltas, así, por ejemplo, en *The Matrix*,

14 Virginie Despentes: *Vernon Subutex*, París 2015–2017.



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los personajes requieren ser penetrados por el cable conector al generador de simulación virtual, a modo que la fantasía de la mátrix se mantenga; una vez se interrumpe esta simbiosis, la realidad golpea a las figuras con toda la crudeza de su existencia

El amalgamiento entre sujeto y máquina representa, de esta forma, una constante que desafía ya no la frontera entre lo real y lo fantástico, mas los mismos límites de la figura humana, su entidad e integridad. El concepto de lo humano que de esto se perfila evoca las nociones de complemento, de prótesis que integra la plenitud de la entidad corporal humana, convirtiéndola en apta para la supervivencia en un ambiente que ha devenido en hostil para su existencia.

En el caso de *Titane*, la función prostética de las placas de titanio no solo encuentra una repercusión en la vertiente visual, esto es, en las más que manifiestas cicatrices que la operación ha dejado en la cabeza de Alexia, más concretamente en la cercanía al orificio de su oreja, un significante visual que no deja de remarcarse constantemente en la trama, gracias a los diversos planos y tomas, en los que la directora resalta la importancia de estos vestigios. Este síntoma sirve de prefiguración de una posterior y más letal apertura en la integridad corporal de la protagonista; por esta herida empieza a penetrar lo fantástico, extraño, la ontología alterna, no solo en el cuerpo de la figura principal, pero también en el tejido narrativo de la película. El cambio que esta intervención produce en ella también comprende un plano semántico, puesto que parece afectar su modo de comportarse, desenvolverse y desarrollarse en el mundo que habita. Alexia es extraña, hasta rara, se podría decir, la forma de interactuar con su entorno dista de adaptarse a las normas que se podrían considerar como pertenecientes al campo simbólico de la cortesía entre individuos; sin mencionar la deficiente relación con su padre, un médico que, en buena medida, aunque expresado de soslayo, es responsable del accidente automovilístico que desemboca en la operación y el titanio para Alexia. Toda esta situación de conflicto personal y familiar, que profundiza en la condición de alteridad de la figura principal, se viene a potencializar por el hecho de que es también una asesina en serie, que mata a todos aquellos con quien entabla una relación afectiva, incluyendo, finalmente a sus padres. Aquí una vez más, el orificio cercano a la oreja vuelve a cobrar importancia, puesto que se convierte en el soporte visual, por el que Alexia ejecuta a sus víctimas, al introducir un artefacto puntiagudo por este lugar; la importancia de esta imagen es, por ende, condensada mediante el recurso a la isotopía del orificio de la oreja.



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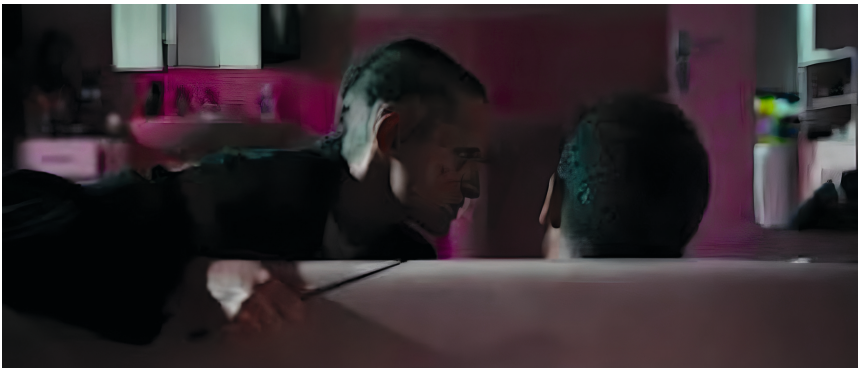

(**Imgs. 6–8:** Titane (2021): Alexia/Adrien mostrando la cicatriz/orificio, punto de unión físico a la máquina.)



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Así, pues, el signo de la diferencia, de lo extraño, se instaura por triplicado en el significante de Alexia, puesto que no solo es diferente debido a su apariencia física, sino que es un individuo que podría contarse dentro del espectro de lo antisocial, además de representar un latente peligro para la comunidad.

Por otra parte, Alexia parece haber perfeccionado una de las facultades biológicas más fundamentales de los miembros de la especie humana, máxime de aquellos de género femenino, esto es, el de la concepción y reproducción. La protagonista tiene la facultad de concebir vida a partir de la cópula con máquinas, particularmente con coches, un hecho que se expone en una secuencia ambivalente que muestra el acto sexual de una forma bastante explícita, aunque ›clean‹ si se quiere, ya que el único partícipe sintiente, el único cuerpo exitable en esta unión, debería ser, *a priori,* el de Alexia. Ahora bien, Paul B. Preciado introduce en su escrito, *Testo Yonki* (2008), un concepto que serviría como marco teórico para este nuevo tipo de relación para-sexual entre humano y máquina, entre sujeto y objeto, recogida en el término "potentia gaudendi"[15]. Éste define la fuerza orgásmica que potencialmente atraviesa cualquier cuerpo u objeto para experimentar excitación, una medida que

> [S]e trata de la potencia (actual o virtual) de excitación (total) de un cuerpo. Esta potencia es una capacidad indeterminada, no tiene género, no es ni femenina ni masculina, ni humana ni animal, ni animada ni inanimada, no se dirige primariamente a lo femenino ni a lo masculino, no conoce la diferencia entre heterosexualidad y homosexualidad, no diferencia entre el objeto y el sujeto, no sabe tampoco la diferencia entre ser excitado, excitar o excitarse-con.[16]

Preciado entiende que la "potentia guadendi" se estiliza como el *analogon* contemporáneo a la fuerza de trabajo en el sistema capitalista fordista, una medida que mensura la capacidad de un cuerpo para investirse en el aparato de producción del capital post-fordista, caracterizado por la desmaterialización de los mecanismos de generación y acumulación de riqueza en la actualidad. Así, cuando en el capitalismo industrial y de consumo, la fuerza de trabajo de los sujetos representaba la base para el sostenimiento de la estructura que garantizaba la producción de bienes y objetos de consumo, la digitalización y virtualización de los medios de creación de capital aboca a los cuerpos a investirse de otra forma en el sistema de producción; según Preciado, esto se canaliza mediante la fuerza

15 Paul B. Preciado: *Testo Yonki,* Madrid 2008, pp. 38–44.
16 Ídem. p. 38.



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orgásmica, que mantiene no solo a los sujetos, pero también a la sobreproducción de elementos inanimados, integrados en sus métodos operativos. Esto conlleva una suerte de desplazamiento, de lo material hacia el ámbito del signo, de todo el orden simbólico capitalista, el cual rige la mayoría de los aspectos de la cotidianidad de los individuos, puesto que la energía adherida a la fuerza de trabajo, que otrora resultaba en la generación de objetos tangibles, materiales, que entraban en las vías de circulación de las operaciones comerciales, pasa a perfilarse en una especie de acto solitario y masturbatorio que traduce la energía, la fuerza investida, en una transacción de intercambio casi intangible, mediado por un contingente de dispositivos que aleja a los sujetos de su percepción física. El concepto de cuerpo que se desprende de estas reflexiones es descrito por Preciado como un

> [C]uerpo polisexual vivo [que] es el sustrato de la fuerza orgásmica. Este cuerpo no se reduce a un cuerpo pre-discursivo, ni tiene sus límites en la envoltura carnal que la piel bordea. Esta vida no puede entenderse como un sustrato biológico fuera de los entramados de producción y cultivo propios de la tecnociencia. Este cuerpo es una entidad tecnoviva multiconectada que incorpora tecnología. Ni organismo, ni máquina: tecnocuerpo.[17]

Así, su tecnocuerpo, capaz de entrar en el flujo de potencias y fuerzas que le permiten interconectarse orgásmicamente con objetos, tales cuales los coches, se perfila como un eslabón más de la cadena rizomática que diluye las fronteras entre cuerpos y máquinas, organismos y sistemas, sujetos y objetos, carne y metal.

Esta unión, empero, ya no tiene como objetivo la entrada de los sujetos en una ficción que se sobrepone a la asquerosa e insoportable realidad; tampoco se somete a una dinámica de dominación de un escenario, en donde la humanidad ha perdido su soberanía y autonomía frente a una súper-inteligencia artificial, ambos casos profusamente investigados en la trilogía de *The Matrix,* todo lo contrario, la modelación de los tecnocuerpos, el híbrido de Alexia y el de las máquinas con las que copula, resulta ser productiva, puesto que la protagonista queda embarazada.

17 Ídem. p. 39.



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(**Imgs. 9–10:** Titane (2021): Momentos de amalgamiento y fusión del cuerpo de Alexia/Adrien con la máquina.).

V.

Este hecho se instituye como cúspide y más llamativo elemento de lo fantástico en la trama, al operar estéticamente bajo la imagen de la grieta; aquellas que se van abriendo paulatinamente en el vientre de la protagonista, ínterin su embarazo progresa. Mientras que huye de las investigaciones policiales, derivadas de los asesinatos que cometió, Alexia se hace pasar por el hijo perdido, Adrien, del jefe de bomberos, Vincent Legrand (Vincent Lindon), de un pueblo en la Francia rural. La trama



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toma un giro aún más extraño si se quiere, pues el tecnocuerpo de Alexia se ve sometido a una suerte de transformismo, transfiguración, esta vez diluyendo la frontera entre los signos manifiestos de género, al adoptar la apariencia de un chico joven. Según parece, esta farsa es una ficción que ni Vincent, ni sus compañeros del cuerpo de bomberos se terminan por creer, y el evidente avance en el estado de embarazo de Alexia no hace más que complicar toda la situación; tanto en su vida de chica, bailarina erótica en ferias de coches, como de chico, hijo de un bombero adicto a los esteroides, Alexia es un evento extraño para su entorno, adherido, mas no integrado, en un contexto que le es, en todos los casos, ajeno.

Aún más así, cuando en su tecnocuerpo, Alexia engendra una vida que poco a poco va consumiendo la suya, una semilla que deja prefigurar una potencial amenaza para el mundo exterior, mediante el constante recurso a la exposición visual de las grietas y el daño que ésta causa sobre el cuerpo de su portadora. Este desgarro en la integridad corporal de Alexia deja entrever una imagen brillante y metálica, una bola que quiere abrirse camino, mismo desentrañando el vientre que lo porta, y esto, en tal magnitud, que resulta imposible para la audiencia hacerse una idea de la creatura que verá cuando este ser haya finalmente sido parido.

Es evidente aquí la influencia de un clásico de la ciencia ficción y del terror, a saber, *Alien* (1979), de Ridley Scott, especialmente en el lugar común que se refiere a la potencial amenaza que comprende la reproducción de una bestia abominable, mediante su unión, forzada o no, con la línea humana. Esta vertiente de lo fantástico tiene un momento intertextual en el trabajo de autores de entre-siglos como Howard Phillips Lovecraft, quien remarcablemente se dedicó a reflexionar en su literatura sobre la aparición de oscuras y bestiales presencias en una realidad identificable por el lector. Esta intrusión se desarrolla, en la mayoría de los casos, de forma paulatina, y el peligro que de ella se desprende es percibido, más bien, como latente por los miembros del orden simbólico establecido; para la sociedad en la que Lovecraft escribe, la latencia de la amenaza puede ser sujeta a diversas interpretaciones, bien cuando cabe convenir en que parece concentrarse en un desafío para los estatutos de las clases medias, cuyo proceso de afianzamiento estaba en pleno apogeo en el periodo de entre-siglos.

Alexia, a su vez, parece solo representar un peligro para las estructuras, digamos, tradicionales de su entorno, al asesinar a aquellos con quien entabla un lazo afectivo, incluido su núcleo familiar. El personaje se desprende de los estamentos que han articulado el aparato social y simbólico



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de las sociedades burguesas, casi desde mediados del siglo XIX. Estas líneas no son el lugar para efectuar una profundización en el análisis de los planteamientos ideológicos que circundan este núcleo narrativo; sin embargo, cabe poner en relieve el hecho que es justamente en el ambiente de su huida, allí donde vive con el jefe de bomberos que la toma por su hijo perdido, en donde logra establecer un vínculo afectivo estable, justamente con una persona que resulta requerir de la intervención prostética de las inyecciones de testosterona para asegurarse su supervivencia. De esta manera, el contexto desestructurado que rodea a Vincent, cabeza de un cuerpo de bomberos, quien simbólicamente requiere de un falo prostético para sobrevivir, representa el único espacio donde la alteridad, visual y metafísica, si se quiere, de Alexia alcanza a asentarse y es tolerada de una forma más o menos exitosa. Este hecho alcanza su momento de paroxismo cuando el embarazo de Alexia es imposible de esconder, y toda la ficción que envuelve a su tecnocuerpo, se convierte en insostenible, una secuencia que culmina con Vincent ayudándola a traer al bebé al mundo. Un bebé, éste, que metafóricamente lleva incrustado en su médula espinal la marca de la alteridad, de la aparentemente fructuosa unión entre máquina y humano, entre carne y metal

(**Img. 11:** Titane (2021): Espina dorsal "metalizada" del hijo de Alexia/Adrien.).



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La narrativa de la película despliega una visión positiva sobre uno de los grandes sueños clasicistas y formalistas de la humanidad, que se deja intuir con una relación de paranomasia, presente en el título de la película, *Titane*. En el plano denotativo se encuentra la clara alusión al elemento metálico que, a su vez, connotativamente, vertebra y expone la naturaleza extraña, alterna, de los cuerpos que lo llevan. Empero, también demuestra una relación connotativa de paranomasia con aquellos seres mitológicos, hijos de la tierra (Gaia) y del cielo (Urano), quienes se encuentran en la base toda la saga del Olimpo griego, los *titans*. La supremacía de estos seres ha inspirado movimientos ideológicos y artísticos desde bien temprano en la era cristiana, piénsese tan solo en la identificación pictórica con los dioses mitológicos que se popularizaría desde el Renacimiento y que también encontraría resonancia en el arte del clasicismo de tiempos del absolutismo. Tras el advenimiento de la modernidad, el motivo de la perfectibilidad humana encontrará en la figura de la fusión del hombre con la máquina un recurrente principio trabajado por movimientos como el futurismo italiano, pero también por el cubo-futurismo ruso, en donde se vería puesto en relación con connotaciones referentes al perfeccionamiento, a la mejor adecuación de los sujetos al servicio de una ideología determinada.

## VI.

El híbrido que se esboza en *Titane*, empero, no opera bajo los códigos de su buen desempeño en un sistema perfecto; todo lo contrario, se perfila como un cuerpo en estado de precariedad que actúa en un entorno igualmente imperfecto. Los relatos utópicos han desaparecido y de sus ruinas emergen narrativas distópicas que constituyen un reflejo de la percepción de la audiencia de la realidad. A diferencia de lo sucedido con los contenidos fantásticos literarios que, desde finales del siglo XIX y hasta mediados del siglo XX, se perfilaban como alternos a los movimientos literarios imperantes en aquel entonces, más cercanos a la tradición realista, en los tiempos que corren, la tarea mimética de la literatura o de cualquier otro medio que sirva para crear y articular narraciones y narrativas, está bastante alejado de este imperativo. Es por ello, que el género fantástico, actualmente, puede conocer dificultades a la hora de verse sometido a un ejercicio de estructuración, del modo que Todorov y Vax lo hicieren con el corpus de entreguerras. Ya algunas propuestas periféricas, tales



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cuales las elaboradas por los latinoamericanos a mediados del siglo XX, son consideradas por algunos críticos, Chanady[18] y Durst[19] entre ellos, como complejas a la hora de encuadrarlas en una macroestructura que advierta claras fronteras entre los textos, sus características y dinámicas de exposición, sobre todo en lo que comprende a la presencia de lo fantástico en los textos.

En el caso del medio audiovisual, y especialmente del objeto que compete a este artículo, parámetros correspondientes al encuentro en un mismo entorno narrativo de dos códigos, uno que se caracterice por la articulación mimética de una de las dimensiones, y otro, con una naturaleza alterna, diversa y potencialmente conflictiva, tendrían que ser revisados y extendidos, a modo que pudiesen ser aplicables a este tipo de artefactos. Lo fantástico, en estos casos, se declina, más bien, mediante la aparición y presencia de singulares elementos estéticos, significantes visuales, que abran grietas y brechas en la textura de la narración, en el tejido del texto; en otras palabras, no se podría hablar de dos ontologías antinómicas, mas de penetraciones esporádicas, de permeabilidad. En *Titane*, este mecanismo metafórico conoce un manejo sobresaliente, cuyo simbolismo sobrepasa la misma función de soporte del argumento narrativo en la película, al poder ser entendido como un soporte de emisión y modulación de discursos extra-narrativos circundantes: piénsese, tan solo, en la cuestión de las fronteras de los cuerpos, la misma definición de cuerpo, la desarticulación de las jerarquías, la concepción rizomática del hecho social, la relación entre sujetos y objetos y las estipulaciones que rigen esta relación.

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Gisela Febel (Bremen)

# Between Fantasy and Horror: *La nuée* (2020) by Just Philippot as a Film about the Ecological Crisis of the Anthropocene

*La nuée* is a French Film from 2020, directed by Just Philippot. It is a fantastic film, but also a horror film, a portrait of a woman and a social drama. In the magazine *Autre Cinéma* the film is presented as "a social and psychological thriller with fantastic accents".[1] The film genre is ambivalent: *La nuée/The swarm* is perceived by the public as a fantastic film, although critics often comment on the horror scenes not unlike the strategies of a *film d'épouvante*.[2] Nevertheless, in 2020, *La nuée* received the *Prix du public* and the *Prix de la critique at the Festival International du Film Fantastique de Gérardmer,* the *Prix Spécial du Jury* and the *Prix d'interprétation féminine at the Festival International de Cinema Fantastica a Catalunya*. It was also nominated for the 2020 Cinema Festival in Cannes (which was then cancelled due to Covid). In France, the film was shown in cinemas, in Germany it can be streamed on Netflix under the title *Schwarm der Schrecken,* in English under the title *The Swarm***.** The film tells the story of a woman – Virginie Hébard (represented by Suliane Brahim) – who wants to support her family by breeding locusts and who becomes more and more entangled in obsessions and horror phantasms. The critics are very positive and often underline the aspects of social drama and horror as for example in the Forbes Magazine:

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1 "Un thriller social et psychologique aux accents fantastiques" [translation GF], Anonymus: "La Nuée", in: *L'autre cinéma* 2021, autrecinema.fr/la-nuee/ (24.01.2023).

2 The French concept of *film d'épouvante* is not quite equivalent to the English notion of a horror movie. Although the *film d'épouvante* intends also to arouse in the viewer a strong feeling of dread and horror, the French movies are more interested in psychological dimensions, mysterious plots, and anxiety than in purely shocking representations. Anyway, almost all films of both types belong to the fantastic genre because or nightmarish subconscious fantastical content of our anxieties. Cf. Éric Dufour: *Le Cinéma d'horreur et ses figures*, Paris 2006; Martine Roberge*: L'Art de faire peur: des récits légendaires aux films d'horreur,* Québec 2004; Philippe Rouyer: *Le Cinéma gore: une esthétique du sang,* Paris 1997; Rick Worland: *The Horror Film: An Introduction,* Hoboken 2006; Brigid Cherry*: Horror,* London 2009; Valérie Palacios: *Le cinéma gothique: Un genre mutant,* Rosières-en-Haye 2009.



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> It is an impressive debut feature by director Just Philippot, from a script by Jérôme Genevray and Frank Victor, about blood-sucking locusts bringing havoc to a struggling farmer in rural France. […] *The Swarm* is a slow-paced film that blends different genres together. As much a social drama as it is a horror, this is a movie filled with tension that is essentially about a single mother fighting to keep afloat and provide for her two children. This is a film that is much more than what its premise and title suggest.[3]

The main question in this article is: which crisis (or better in plural: crises) does the film indicate by the means of fantasy and horror? I am going to choose several perspectives in order to highlight the different dimensions of the message of the film with regard to the contemporary real context in France, in Europe and in the world.

My central hypothesis is that in a plurivalent, eco-critical, sociological and psychoanalytic reading the crisis addressed in *La nuée* will turn out to be a five-fold crisis situation:

- the French and/or European crisis of the decline of the agricultural economy,
- the social crisis of the family, of gender and of role models,
- the moral crisis of humans in dealing with animals and nature,
- the ecological or climatic crisis of the Anthropocene,
- as well as the crisis of the body and desire.

Any of these critical images of the actual state of the subject, the environment, the ecological ethics and the global changes in the Anthropocene are expressed in the film by different combinations of aesthetic means, narratives, mimetic and semantic as well as symbolic signs, intertextual and intermedial strategies and the, sometimes irritating, play with similarities with well-known film genres like fantastic film, horror, social drama etc.

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3 Sheena Scott: "'The Swarm': A Great New French Horror on Netflix", in: *Forbes Magazine*, 07.08.2021, www.forbes.com/sites/sheenascott/2021/08/07/the-swarm-a-great-new-french-horror-on-netflix/?sh=2ae0d7ec39e5 (21.05.2023). Karelle Fitoussi comments: "À la fois conte horrifique écolo, film catastrophe rural et thriller d'anticipation social à la croisée de mille genres" ["Both an ecological horror tale, a rural disaster film and a social anticipation thriller at the crossroads of a thousand genres", translation GF]. Karelle Fitoussi: "Just Philippot ('La Nuée'): monstres et compagnie", in: *Paris Match,* 16.06.2021, www.parismatch.com/Culture/Cinema/Just-Philippot-monstres-et-compagnie-1742984 (20.05.2023).



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## The French and/or European crisis of the decline of the agricultural economy

The film *La nuée* has a political message concerning the crisis of the agricultural economy; it shows the strong pressure on the producers within the food industry and the price pressure – first on the husband of Virginie who was elevating goats and who ended up committing suicide because of the ruin of his farm, as the film suggests on the discourse level as a sort of preliminary story or context. The same problem exists in the very French domain of the viniculture – illustrated by the neighbor of the protagonist, Kirman, a young producer of North African descendance who discusses many of these economic problems with Virginie and later becomes her friend.

The first part of the film presents the agricultural crisis through the discourse of Virginie, her daughter, her son, and the already mentioned neighbor, but also on the visual level by images of the simplicity and poorness in the farm which is situated in the south of France somewhere in a really agricultural area. In fact, the film was made in the region of Nouvelle Aquitaine which is in the western part of France. Even if the landscape looks beautiful and the life seems peaceful, the misery is still there. The agricultural crisis which indicates also a food crisis at a larger scale, leads Virginie to choose a new product: instead of goats, milk, meet and cheese, she starts breeding locusts and thus produces a new – at least in the Western/Northern countries – comestible which is sometimes said to save the world from hunger. But the rules of the market do not allow to make relevant profit with this new product and the result is still not enough to meet the ends. This is the reason why Virginie – who's name indicates her initial innocence but also her naivety – is about to give up, but by chance she discovers that the locusts are carnivores and hungry of blood which makes them grow much quicker and thus promises more profit This discovery marks a turning point of the story. The film turns out to be a metaphor of the crisis of the agricultural economy as Sheena Scott states:

> There is an obvious analogy here, about farmers being themselves exploited in the desperate hope of making a profit and survive, exploited to such an extreme that their blood is being sucked dry. Underneath its premise – a horror on a lethal swarm of locusts – lies a deeper insight into our society.[4]

4 Scott: 'The Swarm'.



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In 2021, Just Philippot, the film director, said in an interview with Caroline Veunac: "I needed to talk about the agricultural world".[5] In his opinion, the first part of the film, where we are as spectators invited to share the problems of a real world and where we are in the genre of a social drama, is the most important dimension – at least with regard to the political message of his film. Guillem Martínez also underlines the political massage of the movie:

> Just Philippot nos enfrenta, en una situación donde la tensión es constante, al dilema alimentario del mañana que, en realidad, es hoy. […] Un film donde el contraste de la naturaleza es altamente poético y terrorífico por sus paisajes y por la actuación de los animales que los habitan.
> 'La nuée' es una alegoría del modo en que hemos abordado, durante siglos y mal, la ganadería.[6]

Hence, the aesthetic cinematographic means are not far from a documentary. The direct observation of the family by the camera, the impression of simple and authentic clothes of the protagonists, the use of everyday language as well as the movement and the gestures, which might remind the spectator of amateur acting, and finally a rather slow rhythm of the sequences underline this dimension of a social documentary or social drama. The director says in an interview with regard to the relation of the fantastic and the realistic aspects:

> Je voulais emmener le fantastique sur le chemin du réel, en mélangeant les deux. On est dans la vraie vie, dans cette campagne qu'on a filmée dans le Lot-et-Garonne et en Auvergne. Avec l'aide de petits artisans qui ont rendu le film possible, comme Pascal Belzunce qui nous a construit l'abri des sauterelles. Puis, petit à petit, les codes changent. Ce qui amène le spectateur à se demander ce qui est possible… ou pas. […] D'après certains chercheurs du CNRS spécialistes des insectes, ce n'est pas forcément si éloigné que ça du possible quand on commence à jouer avec la nature.[7]

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5 Just Philippot: "'I needed to talk about the agricultural world.' Interview with Caroline Veunac", in: *Somewhere else,* 14.06.2021, https://www.somewhereelse.fr/en/films-uk/just-philippot-the-swarm/ (16.05.2023).

6 Guillem Martínez: "'La nuée' o cómo explicar la historia de la alimentación humana", in: *Cinematismo,* 04.08.2021, cinematismo.net/2021/04/08/la-nuee-o-como-explicar-la-historia-de-la-alimentacion-humana/ (21.05.2023). ["Just Philippot confronts us, in a situation of constant tension, with the food dilemma of tomorrow which, in reality, is today. […] A film where the contrast of nature is highly poetic and terrifying due to its landscapes and the agency of the animals that inhabit them. 'La nuée' is an allegory of the way in which we have practiced, for centuries and badly, livestock." Translation GF].

7 Just Philippot: "Entretien. Avec son film La nuée, Just Philippot fait peur au service de la prise de conscience", in: *Ouest-France,* 16.06.2023, www.ouest-france.fr/culture/cinema/en



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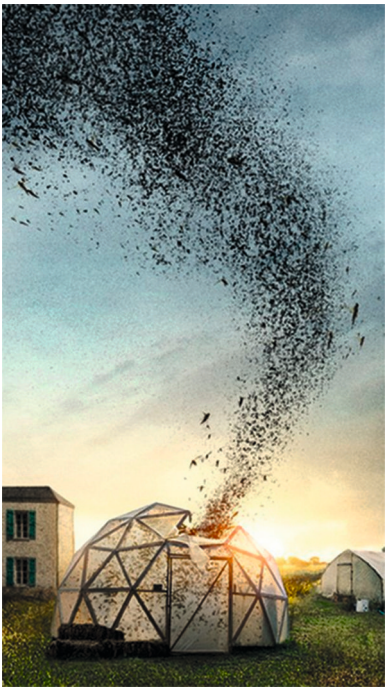

1 La nuée (2020): Swarm of locusts breaching the technological biosphere.

However, from the very beginning the sound track disturbs the impression of a realistic social drama. Emma Stefansky comments on the sound: "The bugs themselves are horrifying, but it's the sound that will stick with you, looking over your shoulder every time you hear an insect start to buzz."[8]

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tretien-avec-son-film-la-nuee-just-philippot-fait-peur-au-service-de-la-prise-de-conscience-f14fdf48-cdea-11eb-ba8f-55c2bdb5c1d2 (20.05.2023).

8 Emma Stefansky: "Netflix's French Horror Movie 'The Swarm' Breeds a Flock of Freaky Locusts", in: *Thrillist*, 06.08.2021, www.thrillist.com/entertainment/nation/the-swarm-netflix-review (21.05.2023). Philippot himself explains in an interview: "on a en effet cherché une certaine musicalité, que les éléments de montage son s'infiltrent dans la musique et vice-versa. […] parfois le son devait prendre en charge l'horreur que l'image ne faisait que suggérer, et parfois il fallait plutôt éviter d'en rajouter trop, pour éviter une surcharge qui aurait été contre-productive. […] Pour ce qui est du son des sauterelles, on cherchait quelque chose d'assez organique, qui s'écoute et qui se ressente. Quelque chose du même ordre que les basses dans une boîte de nuit, un son qui provoque un ressenti physique. Leur son est moins une nappe homogène qu'une gamme très nuancée. On leur a créé un langage. Selon que les sauterelles mangent, s'agitent, attaquent, la



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Some images also do create a cleft in the images – especially the greenhouse installed for the breed of the locusts that looks like a technological biosphere or a space object in a science fiction movie even if it is constructed with simple plastic curtains and wood – mainly because of the special lighting from inside. Christopher Forrester underlines that stark contrast, between nature and the strange things forced upon it by human desperation, is the film's most compelling motif: what becomes of the world when our aspirations disrupt its order?

> Philippot's orderly, regimented style lends itself admirably to capturing these strange intrusions. If there is an image that defines *The Swarm*, it is hardly of the locusts themselves, but of the otherworldly glow of their greenhouse in the night.[9]

Another science fiction element is the protection cloth of Virginie who almost disappears as a person and looks like a robot as the images are voluntarily blurred or flat so that her face cannot be seen precisely. The presence of the locusts in closeup, already in the first part of the film, creates an uncanny and disturbing atmosphere. Slowly some "fantastic accents" are announced and the impression of an uncanny world and an impending disaster is growing. We see the animals in a curious perspective from below and because of the closeup camera perspective and the slow motion or the apparent immobility of the animals, they seem to be or to become monsters. Thus, the film slides slowly towards the fantastic genre which dominates the second part of the movie. But before

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nuée ne fait pas le même bruit. Et puis elle devait aussi incarner un bruit de fond, qui se rappelle constamment au personnage et qui pourrait s'apparenter à celui d'une usine en arrière-plan". ["we have indeed sought a certain musicality, that the sound editing elements infiltrate the music and vice versa. […] sometimes the sound had to support the horror that the image only suggested, and sometimes we had to avoid adding too much, to avoid an overload which would have been counter-productive. […] As for the sound of grasshoppers, we were looking for something quite organic, which can be heard and felt. Something like the bass in a nightclub, a sound that causes a physical feeling. Their sound is less a homogeneous layer than a very nuanced range. We created a language for them. Depending on whether the locusts eat, move about, attack, the swarm does not make the same noise. And then she also had to embody a background noise, which constantly reminds the character and which could be likened to that of a factory in the background."]. Just Philippot: "Entretien. Avec son film La nuée, Just Philippot fait peur au service de la prise de conscience", in: *Ouest-France*, 16.06.2023, www.ouest-france.fr/culture/cinema/entretien-avec-son-film-la-nuee-just-philippot-fait-peur-au-service-de-la-prise-de-conscience-f14fdf48-cdea-11eb-ba8f-55c2bdb5c1d2 (20.05.2023).

9 Christopher Forrester: "Review: 'The Swarm'", in: *Film Cred*, 20.08.2021, film-cred.com/review-the-swarm-netflix-horror/ (24.05.2023).



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completely entering the fantastic part, let us have a short look on the second dimension of the crisis.

2 La Nuée (2020): Virginie in her protection cloth

### The social crisis of the family, of gender and role models

The gender crisis is represented from the very beginning by the fact that a single mother has to feed and to protect her family. She is the breadwinner and the only female model for the adolescent daughter who refuses the neoliberal constraints of work her mother has followed: Thus, the daughter is for a very long time in the film a counterpart of Virginie and represents a younger generation which seems – although frustrated in the actual life (at school, with regard to consumerism or without concrete social perspectives) – to be somehow more realistic, reasonable and even optimistic. The absent father is reflected in the son, who is still a child and more or less powerless in the family. He adopts some grasshoppers as his pets and does not (or not yet) realize the critical horizon of the situation. The mother Virginie represents ideals of the meritocracy and liberal market rules – hence taking over a more 'male' marked norm – however without profiting from them. The daughter stands for the wish for a more individual well-being and a sceptic world view; she remains without real power in the crisis but she still represents a sort of ethical instance (socially talking: she is the model of the impotent intellectual).



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The younger boy who is still a child represents in this microcosmos the hedonistic and innocent consumer subject. Forrester identifies the crisis of the family and especially the problems of the double burden of the single mother Virginie as the core dimension of Philippot's movie:

> The intersection of Virginie's struggles as a mother and as a businesswoman are the emotional and thematic center of the film. In grieving her husband's death, it seems she has drifted away from her family and allowed her work to consume her. She spends her days hard at work in the dome-like enclosures that hold her locusts, and her evenings messaging potential buyers online. Her identity as a mother is restricted almost exclusively to the performance of domestic tasks.[10]

At some instants of the film, the old harmonic family model seems still possible by forming a new parents couple with the neighbor, but this construction would not ameliorate the economic situation and, thus, it is negated by the desire of success and growth of the farm. The figure of the father, the possible new paternalist authority, is sacrificed by the mother and his live is destroyed in order to feed the insects, i.e. in order to follow the rules of the liberal market with the necessity of permanent growing production output.

## The moral crisis of humans in dealing with animals and the nature

In the second half of the movie, the rhythm is accelerating. The locusts turn out to be vampire animals and Virginie starts feeding them, first with the blood of animals, then with her own blood; she even kills some animals to feed them and does not react to the first attack of her friend Kerim by the locusts. He is probably killed by the animals later on, but the film does not show this. The behavior of the protagonist is strange and becomes more and more shocking with the horror scenes in the following sequences. She is completely obsessed by the idea to breed as many locusts as possible.

The French sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky made the diagnosis of the excessive hypermodernity of consumerism and production in late modernity.[11] This hypermodernity characterizes, in his eyes, the new historical moment of liberal societies. All the old obstacles to modernization have

10 Ibid.

11 Cf. Gilles Lipovetsky/Sébastien Charles: *Les temps hypermodernes,* Paris 2004 [*Hypermodern Times,* translated by Andrew Brown: Cambridge 2005].



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fallen and there is no longer any credible and legitimate alternative system to democratic and commercial modernity: it is the time of complete modernity, without constraint, deregulated and globalized. This second modern revolution is the one which, reconciled with its basic principles (techno-science, democracy, human rights, the market) is carried away by a hyperbolic process of modernization of modernity itself, which always means more competition, commodification, mobility and flexibility. Hypermodernity thus presents itself under the sign of excess, of a rise to extremes in the most diverse spheres of social and economic life.[12]

In this sense, Virginie and her locust farm in the film represent this excessive economic production and the accelerated hypermodernity. The locusts to her (in this perspective) are only products, goods, money and no longer animals or part of a respected nature. They have to breed as quickly as possible in order to create a maximum of output, even at the price of the life of the neighbor Kerim, of Virginie's own physical wellness and the mutilation of other human beings.

The ethical or moral aspect of humans dealing with animals or with nature in general has been addressed many times in the last years since the beginning of the so-called Human Animal Studies. The anthropological approach of Bruno Latour in his network-actor-theory and more recent positions have, in France, guided the central idea of animal agency as defended by thinkers of the Human Animal Studies.[13] Sarah McFarland and Ryan Hediger explain the focus on *Animals and Agency* in their book

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12 Cf. also Gilles Lipovetsky*: Le Bonheur paradoxal: essai sur la société d'hyperconsommation,* Paris 2006, and id./Jean Serroy: *La Culture-monde: réponse à une société désorientée,* Paris 2008.

13 Cf. Sarah McFarland/Ryan Hediger: *Animals and Agency. An Interdisciplinary Exploration,* Leiden 2009, summary; Mieke Roscher: "Darf's ein bisschen mehr sein? Ein Forschungsbericht zu den historischen Human-Animal Studies", in: *H-Soz-Kult,* 6.12.2016, www.hsozkult.de/literaturereview/id/forschungsberichte-2699 (30.01.2023). Besides Latour's actor-network theory, there are other methodological approaches to the question of animal agency. See also: Sven Wirth et al. (eds.): *Das Handeln der Tiere. Tierliche Agency im Fokus der Human-Animal Studies,* Bielefeld 2015, doi.org/10.14361/9783839432266; Dorothee Brantz/Christof Mauch (eds.): *Tierische Geschichte. Die Beziehung von Mensch und Tier in der Kultur der Moderne,* Paderborn 2010; Margo DeMello: *Animals and Society. An Introduction to Human-Animal Studies,* New York 2012; Kari Weil: *Thinking Animals. Why Animal Studies Now?* New York 2012; Samantha Hurn: *Humans and Other Animals. Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Human-Animal Interactions,* London 2012; Paul Waldau: *Animal Studies. An Introduction,* Oxford 2013; Chris Pearson: "Beyond 'Resistance'. Rethinking Nonhuman Agency for a 'More-than-Human' World", in: *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire* 22 (2015), 5, pp. 709–725.



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from 2009 with the following words, distinguishing four categories of animal agency:

> While many scholars who write about animals deal with animal agency in some way, this volume is the first to position the question of nonhuman agency as the primary focus of inquiry. Section I presents studies of actual animals demonstrating agency; Section II moves agency into new terrain while considering key representations of animal agency in literature; Section III analyzes animals as mediators and as conveyances of human-to-human communication; and Section IV investigates the agency of beings who defy conventional species categories. The Envoi demonstrates how the microscopic polyp is interwoven into notions of agency and mythical superagency. This volume's interdisciplinary explorations press hard on issues of agency to open up space for more questions about how we can understand relationships between the human and the nonhuman.[14]

In applying these distinctions to the movie, we can say that *The Swarm* shows a special animal agency in two ways: first, it is not an individual actor but a collective agency, not the one intelligent locust like in a fairy tale, but the swarm that decides to act – or to react – against the exploitation of its nature. Second: The swarm (*la nuée* – the term designates in French also another natural element: a cloud, that can also become very dangerous…) becomes aggressive and turns its action against the cultivator – nature destroys (agri-)culture. This inversion is part of the horror aspect of the film (besides the bloody images of course). Animal agency functions here as an allegory for the alienated exploitation of nature and thus mirrors the actually perverted "relationships between the human and the nonhuman"[15].

The swarms (of locusts, killer bees, spiders etc.) are "key representations of animal agency in literature [and cinema]".[16] In the perspective of an allegoric reading, the fantastic dimension disappears somehow, like Tzvetan Todorov already said in his famous definition of the fantastic literature.[17] Instead, the horror genre takes over.

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14 McFarland/Hediger: *Animals and Agency*, summery.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

17 Todorov insists that the fantastic can be neither "poetic". (p. 60) nor "allegorical" (pp. 63–64); Tzvetan Todorov: *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Ithaca/New York 1975, translated by Richard Howard. See also: Michel Chion: "Frontières entre science-fiction, fantastique et merveilleux", in: id.: *Les films de science-fiction*, Paris 2008, pp. 41–42.; Frédéric Gimello-Mesplomb (ed.): *L'Invention d'un genre: Le*



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The aesthetical means in the representation of this dimension of the crisis regarding the relation between human beings and animals are mainly intermedial or intertextual. In terms of film aesthetics and intermediality, Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* (1963)[18] and the theme of vampirism[19] (coming from fantastic literature of the 19th century) are quoted, as well as the biblical plagues and the apocalyptic motifs show how the collective

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*cinéma fantastique français ou les constructions sociales d'un objet de la cinéphilie ordinaire,* Paris 2012.

18 Alfred Hitchcock: *The Birds,* USA 1963.

19 The literary vampire first appeared in 18th-century poetry, before becoming one of the main figures of gothic fiction with the publication of John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819), which was inspired by the life and legend of Lord Byron. The most famous version of a vampire fiction is of course Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), adapted in literature and cinema many times. The two most influential film versions are probably *Dracula* (1958), with Christopher Lee as the vampire protagonist, and *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), directed by Francis Ford Coppola. In the medium of cinema, 20th-century vampire fiction went beyond traditional Gothic horror and explored new genres such as science fiction, as one can already see in the film *Nosferatu* (1922). But we can find this genre combination also in literature, especially in popular literature: Gustave Le Rouges novel *Le prisonnier de la planète Mars* (1908 [*Prisoner of the Vampires of Mars*]) and its sequel *La guerre des vampires* (1909 [*The Vampires of Mars*]), is an early example of vampire fiction combined with science fiction and technological fantasy. Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* (1954) is a very influential novel combining vampire fiction with biotechnological science fiction. The plot is located in a dystopian Los Angeles occupied by hordes of bloodsucking zombies. The protagonist is the last survivor of a pandemic of a bacterium that causes vampirism. The novel was adapted into at least three movies: *The Last Man on Earth* starring Vincent Price in 1964, *The Omega Man* starring Charlton Heston in 1971, and *I am Legend* starring Will Smith in 2007. Stephen King's thriller *Salem's Lot* (1975) which is also famous as well as a book as in film, replaces the traditional *Dracula*-story in a modern American small town. After the cinematographic adaptations of the novel by Tobe Hopper in 1979 and Mikael Salomon in 2004, the most recent version of *Salem's Lot* directed by Gary Dauberman came out in April 2023, what shows the unbroken interest in vampire stories. The image of the literary vampire has evolved from the bloodsucking creature to more mysterious and even erotic human or android beings; in contemporary works, fictional vampires can be romantic figures, often described as elegant and sexy, for example in the *Twilight* series (2005-2008) by Stephenie Meyer or in the *Vampire Academy* series (2007-2010) by Richelle Mead. The ambivalent obsession of the protagonist for the carnivore locusts in Philippot's film can be seen as part of this evolution of the vampire motif. See also: Donald Palumbo (ed.): *Eros in the Mind's Eye. Sexuality and the Fantastic in Art and Film,* New York/Westport/London 1986; Margaret L. Carter: *The Vampire in Literature. A Critical Bibliography*, Ann Arbor/Michigan 1989; J. Gordon Melton: *The Vampire Book: The Encyclopedia of the Undead*, Canton/Michigan 1999; A. Asbjorn Jon: "Vampire Evolution", in: *Metaphor* 3 (2003), pp. 19–23; Lorna Piatti-Farnell: *The Vampire in Contemporary Popular Literature,* New York 2013; Heide Crawford: *The Origins of the Literary Vampire,* Lanham 2016.



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intelligence of nature hits back against humans, like, for example, nature does in the German novel *Der Schwarm* (2004) by Frank Schätzing[20]. Other aspects of creature horror films are also present; we are reminded of *Arachnophobia* (1990) or *Tarantula* (1955), *Jaws* (1975), *The Fly* (1986) or the killer bee film *The Swarm* (1978)[21] which belongs rather to the disaster film genre.[22]

Besides the mentioned themes, the aesthetic strategies are similar to the aforementioned films, especially to *The Birds*, namely the accelerated rhythm of the film images and cuts together with the growing number of animals: first some individuals are seen, they are slowly moving or immobile, then we see groups moving more quickly, but still crawling and not flying, finally the whole swarm is quickly attacking bodies and capture the entire movie screen. In the first part of the movie, the cuts of the images or short sequences with locusts come up suddenly (like in Hitchcock's *The Birds*) and are mostly not motivated by the previous sequences. The irrupting impression creates also an uncanny feeling of permanent danger. The fantastic genre is less informed by the uncertainty of the observer (or spectator)[23] nor is there an incorporated observer or narrator person (at least one may identify with the daughter in some sequences, but this does not correspond to the – often suddenly changing – camera focus).[24]

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20 Frank Schätzing: *Der Schwarm*, Cologne 2004 [*The Swarm: A Novel of the Deep*, translated by Sally-Ann Spencer, New York 2006]

21 Frank Marshal: *Arachnophobia,* USA; Jack Arnold: *Tarantula,* USA 1955; Steven Spielberg: *Jaws,* USA 1975; David Cronenberg: *The Fly,* USA 1986; Allen Irving: *The Swarm,* USA 1978.

22 A disaster film or disaster movie is more of a subgenre of action films than of fantastic animal horror movies. Cf. Stephen Keane: *Disaster Movies: The Cinema of Catastrophe,* London/New York 2001.

23 Todorov's classical definition of the fantastic genre is based on the uncertainty of the reader: „The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event." Todorov: The Fantastic, p. 25. See also: Oliver Jahraus/Stefan Neuhaus (eds.): *Der fantastische Film. Geschichte und Funktion in der Mediengesellschaft,* Würzburg 2005; Claudia Pinkas: *Der phantastische Film. Instabile Narrationen und die Narration der Instabilität,* Berlin/New York 2010; Frank Lafond: *Dictionnaire du cinéma fantastique et de science-fiction,* Paris 2014.

24 The debate about the existence of a narrator in the cinematic media – and the relation of the narrating instance and the camera – is not yet finished. Cf. Markus Kuhn: "Narration in Film", in: Hühn, Peter/Pier, John/Schmid, Wolf/Schönert, Jörg (eds.): *The living handbook of narratology,* 22.04.2014, www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de/article/narration-fi



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The fantastic mode is introduced by the themes like vampirism and acting animals, by the uncanny feeling one remembers through the similitudes with *The Birds* and other horror animal movies.

Nature is getting out of order; thus, natural and reasonable explanations are no longer valuable; we are neither on the side of the "strange" or uncanny, nor on the side of the "marvellous" fantastic genre. The impression of the film spectator is nearer to Roger Caillois' definition of the fantastic as a rupture in the reasonable explanation of the world.[25] Loosing somehow the clear orientation in the fictional reality, the spectator – who identifies only partly with Virginie in the film – may feel more and more irritated, disturbed, and exposed to something strange and powerful. This reception position does not work by an aesthetic of shock; it is rather based on a "subjective camera" [26] and a slow intrusion of a threat by the presence of the locusts which is repeated in an accelerated rhythm and becomes more and more threatening.[27] In this perspective,

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lm-revisedversion-uploaded-22-april-201 (2.04.2023); id.: "Film Narratology: Who Tells? Who Shows? Who Focalizes? Narrative Mediation in Self-Reflexive Fiction Films", in: Peter Hühn et al. (eds.): *Point of View, Perspective, and Focalization: Modelling Mediacy in Narrative,* Berlin, pp. 259–278; Sabine Schlickers: "Focalization, Ocularization and Auricularization in Film and Literature", in: Hühn et al. (eds.): *Point of View,* pp. 243–258; Julika Griem/Eckhart Voigts-Virchow: "Filmnarratologie: Grundlagen, Tendenzen und Beispielanalysen", in: Vera Nünning/Ansgar Nünning (eds.): *Erzähltheorie transgenerisch, intermedial, interdisziplinär,* Trier 2002, pp. 155–183; Torben Grodal: "Film Narrative", in: David Herman et al. (eds.): *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory,* London 2005, pp. 168–172; Helen Fulton: "Film Narrative and Visual Cohesion", in: id. et al. (eds.): *Narrative and Media,* Cambridge 2005, pp. 108–122.

25 Cf. Roger Caillois: *Au cœur du fantastique,* Paris 1965. The title translates as „At the heart of the fantastic." Parts of the book have been translated in *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*, edited and/or translated by Claudine Frank and Camille Naish, Duke 2003. To Caillois, the fantastic is an interruption of normal order: "Tout le fantastique est rupture de l'ordre reconnu, irruption de l'inadmissible au sein de l'inaltérable légalité quotidienne" (Caillois: *Au cœur du fantastique*: p. 191) ["The fantastic is always a break in the acknowledged order, an irruption of the inadmissible within the changeless everyday legality". Translation GF].

26 This concept is defined by Franck Henry: „Le *plan subjectif* ou la caméra subjective, choisit de montrer le film ou une séquence du film, selon la perception visuelle du principal protagoniste." ["The subjective camera chooses to show the film or a sequence of the film according to the visual perception of the main protagonist." Translation GF]. Franck Henry: *Le Cinéma Fantastique*, Paris 2009, p. 89.

27 Cf. Oliver Armknecht: "Schwarm der Schrecken", in: *Filmrezensionen.de,* 16.06.2021, www.film-rezensionen.de/2021/08/schwarm-der-schrecken/ (20.05.2023): "*Schwarm der Schrecken* bleibt bei einer recht langsamen Erzählweise, verlässt sich mehr auf die unheilvolle Stimmung als auf tatsächlichen Schrecken. Regisseur Just Philippot verzichtet darauf, die unausweichlichen Angriffe der Heuschrecken explizit zu zeigen.



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one can certainly come back to the general concept of Sigmund Freud describing such a psychological condition: "das Unheimliche", usually translated as "the uncanny".[28] Freud writes that „das Unheimliche sei jene Art des Schreckhaften, welche auf das Altbekannte, Längst vertraute zurückgeht."[29] Nicholas Royle resumes this definition with the following words: „The *uncanny* is the psychological experience of an event or individual as not simply mysterious, but frightening in a way that feels oddly familiar."[30] In Freudian terminology: the uncanny is the mark of the return of the repressed.[31]

Thus, with regard to the movie of Philippot, we can ask what the archaic trauma that triggers the uncanny feeling might be. In the dimension of the story, the repressed experience of Virginie can be identified as the death (or the suicide) of her husband. Since she is lonely and anxious about the future, nobody touches her body in the meanwhile etc., the loss of the male partner throws her into a psychologically extreme situation and into a socially ambivalent role. The constraints of the neoliberal

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Dann und wann werden wir mit den Folgen ihrer Fresslust konfrontiert. Ansonsten überlässt er es lieber dem Publikum, sich das Grauen im Kopf auszumalen. […] Wer sich nicht an dem geringen Tempo oder der fehlenden Explizität stört, der findet hier einen etwas anderen Genrevertreter, der vielleicht keine Panikattacken auslöst, aber doch eine beständige Anspannung verursacht." [Swarm of Horrors sticks to a fairly slow narrative style, relying more on ominous mood than actual horror. Director Just Philippot refrains from explicitly showing the locusts' inevitable attacks. Now and then we are confronted with the consequences of their voraciousness. Otherwise, he prefers to leave it to the audience to imagine the horror in their minds. [...] Those who don't mind the slow pace or the lack of explicitness will find a somewhat different genre representative here, which may not trigger panic attacks, but does cause a constant tension."]

28 Cf. Sigmund Freud: „Das Unheimliche (1919)", in: id.: Gesammelte Werke in 18 Bänden mit einem Nachtragsband, Berlin 1947, Band XII, pp. 229–268. ["The 'Uncanny'", in: id.: The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, vol. 17, An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works (1917–1919), London 1999, pp. 217–256].

29 Ibid., p. 231, "the 'uncanny' is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar." (Freud: The 'Uncanny', p. 219).

30 Nicholas Royle: *The Uncanny,* Manchester 2003, p. 1.

31 Cf. Freud: The 'Uncanny', p. 217. Freud, however, warns us not to jump to conclusions too swiftly: "It may be true that the uncanny is nothing else than a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it, and that everything that is uncanny fulfils this condition. But these factors do not solve the problem of the uncanny. For our proposition is clearly not convertible. Not everything that fulfils this condition – not everything that is connected with repressed desires and archaic forms of thought belonging to the past of the individual and of the race – is therefore uncanny," (ibid., p. 219).



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economy force her to continue (and even to renew) the farmwork of her husband and, thus, she has no time or possibility for working through the mourning process. The protagonist represses the death of her husband, the male person, the symbolic father, otherwise the stability of the family system threatens to fall apart. At the beginning, the locusts seem to touch the body of Virginie quite tenderly, thus opening up the return of the repressed.[32] The uncanny experience as a death drive also prepares the almost suicidal exposition of the protagonist to the carnivore animals later on.

Regarding the spectator, the uncanny feeling might come from an original trauma of separation that is experienced by the child in the separation from the nourishing mother.[33] And the wound comes also from the alienation from nature that modern individuals experience in industrial societies. The calm and solid presence of the nature as symbolic mother is questioned in the movie by the more and more aggressive animals, until the confidence in the familiar natural environment is destroyed. The cinematographic media has, as Freud says, special possibilities to indicate or to produce the uncanny:

> The uncanny as it is depicted in literature, in stories and imaginative productions, merits in truth a separate discussion. To begin with, it is a much more

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32 In the context of the motif of bestiality in the fantastic genre, this symptom could also be read as the perversion of the desire of rape: "La bestialité renvoie aux histoires confrontant l'homme et la bête […]. Il peut s'agir du rapport de l'homme avec sa propre animalité, vu comme une perception inconsciente d'un moi imparfait ou inquiétant, se combinant avec l'anthropomorphisme. Dans *King Kong* c'est le thème classique de la bête convoitant la belle […]. Le monstre bestial est interprété comme "le viol souhaité", et la référence freudienne au singe velu, et à l'analogie entre la bête et le sexe." ["Bestiality refers to stories confronting man and beasts […]. It can be the relationship of man with his own animality, seen as an unconscious perception of an imperfect or disturbing self, combining with anthropomorphism. In *King Kong* it is the classic theme of the beast lusting after beauty […]. The bestial monster is interpreted as 'the desired rape', and the Freudian reference to the hairy monkey, as the analogy between the beast and the sex." Translation GF], Gérard Lenne: *Le Cinéma "fantastique" et ses mythologies,* Paris 1985, p. 79.

33 When Philippot was asked in an interview if the main character of his film was a nourishing mother, he answered: "Un agriculteur fait naître. Mais on peut être mère nature ou mère nourricière et enfanter des monstres. En fait, son mari a disparu brutalement et il en reste une fracture. C'est cette faille qui la mène dans un engrenage destructeur." ["A farmer gives birth. But you can be mother nature or a nourishing mother and give birth to monsters. In fact, her husband suddenly disappeared and an open wound remains. It is this loss that leads her into a destructive spiral." Translation GF], Philippot: "Entretien".



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> fertile province than the uncanny in real life, for it contains the whole of the latter and something more besides, something that cannot be found in real life. […] there are many more means of creating uncanny effects in fiction than there are in real life.[34]

One of these means of fiction and film is the repetition, or better: the play of repetition and difference, a growing threat. In the psychoanalytic reading, this aesthetic figure is linked to the psychological figure of the *Wiederholungszwang* [repetition compulsion]. Royle states with regard to the famous essay of Freud, that he "goes on […] to identify uncanny effects that result from instances of 'repetition of the same thing', linking the concept to that of the repetition compulsion.[35] The repetition as a neurotic structure does not clarify anything or help to manage the situation, on the contrary. The figure of repetition operates here as an accumulation and multiplication agent of the return of the uncanny feeling, hence also as a means of creating suspense.

One important aspect of the uncanny is the loss of moral orientation and of agency. If for Freud, the uncanny is located in the strangeness of the ordinary, this means to lose the capacity of judgement and acting in the ordinary world. Expanding on the idea, the French psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan wrote that the uncanny places us "in the field where we do not know how to distinguish bad and good, pleasure from displeasure, resulting in an irreducible anxiety that gestures to the Real."[36]

The deviation from an 'ordinary', stable relation of humans and nature is announced in the movie by the sound track and can be guessed from the very beginning by listening to the irritating and slowly growing sound which is oscillating between artificially produced noise and natural sounds of the animals. The nervous noise of a lonely and slightly modulating violine or a synthesizer tone and later on the more or less permanent buzzing of the insects seam to form the acoustic horizon of the uncanny. Thus, the animal agency (of the locusts) also occupies the sound screen of the movie which has mostly an important impact on the unconscious dimension of the cinematic reception.

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34 Freud: The 'Uncanny', p. 226.

35 Royle: *The Uncanny*, p. 90. Cf. also Jean Laplanche/Jean-Bertrand Pontalis: "Compulsion to Repeat" (Repetition Compulsion) [1973], in: id.: *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, London 1973, pp. 124–126.

36 Cf. Jacques Lacan: *Le Séminaire. Livre X. L'Angoisse (1962-1963)*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris 1991 [*Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, Cambridge 2014].



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Animal agency and destruction of human beings by nature point out to our next item: the more general and/or global dimension of the ecological or climatic crisis of the Anthropocene.

## The ecological or climatic crisis of the Anthropocene

At top of the original French film-poster, one can read in capital letters: "nourrir le monde de demain … à quel prix?" ["Feeding the world of tomorrow … at what cost?"][37]. This question widens the perspective of the political or ecological message of the movie to a global scale. The concept of the Anthropocene refers to human impact but also to human responsibility for the earth as a whole as Erle Ellis underlines: "The Anthropocene is a proposed geological epoch dating from the commencement of significant human impact on Earth's geology and ecosystems, including, but not limited to, anthropogenic climate change."[38]

By the way, even if there is no explicit reference to the concept of the Anthropocene in the discourse of the film, Philippot has chosen similar colours for the film poster (blue and green) as many of the illustrations of the concepts of the Anthropocene use. Anyway, he refers to this horizon in some interviews, saying for example:

> […] nous avions une dimension plus large, écologique, qui se greffait au propos. Cette idée justement que le travail tel qu'on le pratique aujourd'hui était aussi le fondement de mécanismes de destructions. On détruit la nature, on détruit nos corps. On travaille pour offrir une bonne vie à nos enfants, tout en détruisant la Terre sur laquelle ils sont entrain de grandir.[39]

And he continues:

> Après si c'est pour le rapport de l'être humain à la nature, à ses catastrophes qui lui tombent dessus et qu'il a parfois lui-même engendrées, là oui, c'est vraiment quelque chose qui m'intéresse et me travaille. […] Le fait que l'Homme inconsciemment ou pas, provoque sa propre perte. Ce que l'on vit avec le

37 This political message is only on the French poster, but it also appears in the Netflix and the film trailer where we can hear it.

38 Erle Ellis: *Anthropocene: A Very Short Introduction,* vol.1, Oxford 2018.

39 Philippot: "Esprit de synthèse": ["we had a broader, ecological dimension, which came in addition. The idea that the work as we practice it today was also the foundation of mechanisms of destruction. We destroy nature, we destroy our bodies. We work to provide a good life for our children, while destroying the Earth they are growing up on." Translation GF].



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> COVID en est un très bon exemple, l'épidémie de vache folle… L'explosion de Chernobyl aussi. A chaque fois l'être humain est plus ou moins à l'origine de la catastrophe et cherche ensuite à se dépatouiller d'un drame qu'il a créé.[40]

In the last decade, many disciplines have contributed to the definition of the Anthropocene, its consequences, and the related ethics. In 2009, Dipesh Chakrabarty underlined the dilemma that the Anthropocene poses for the practice of history: On the one hand, it spells "the collapse of the age-old humanist distinction between natural history and human history", yet, on the other, societies and individuals do not experience themselves as a "species".[41] In 2014, Julia Adeney Thomas highlighted problems of scale and value as the reasons for this irresolvable tension between human stories and scientific ones.[42] Since 2000, historians and scientists have been actively collaborating on multidisciplinary approaches to the Anthropocene.[43]

If human beings form a species among others and on the other hand the impact of human industries and technologies have definitely changed the planet – as we know now – this human species has to assume the responsibility and to develop new forms of care (for other beings, the climate, the quality of the water and the air, etc.) and sustainability is no longer enough. Of course, it is also of human interest to care for the future, but the idea of the Anthropocene goes beyond special interests of one species only; the interplay and entanglement of all species, cultures, and elements all over the globe can no longer be ignored. Hence, the film *La nuée* comments on the aspect of the food production in relation to the

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40 Ibid. ["Regarding to the relationship of human beings to nature, to the catastrophes that fall on them and that they themselves have sometimes generated, yes, that's really something that interests me and bothers me. […] The fact that Man, unconsciously or not, causes his own loss. What we are experiencing with COVID is a very good example of this. The Chernobyl explosion too. Each time the human being is more or less at the origin of the disaster and then seeks to get out of a drama that he himself has created:" Translation GF].

41 Dipesh Chakrabarty: "The Climate of History: Four Theses", in: *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009), 2, pp. 197–222.

42 Cf. Julia Adeney Thomas: "History and biology in the Anthropocene: Problems of scale, problems of value", in: *The American Historical Review* 119 (2014), 5, pp. 1587–1607.

43 Cf. Will Steffen et al.: "The Anthropocene: Are humans now overwhelming the great forces of nature?" in: *Ambio* 36 (2007), 8, pp. 614–621; Libby Robon/Will Steffen: "History for the Anthropocene", in: *History Compass* 5 (2007), 5, pp. 1694–1719; Julia Adeney Thomas et al.: *The Anthropocene: A multidisciplinary approach,* Cambridge/UK 2020.



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still increasing world population and the hunger crisis which is one of the very urgent problems as the global hunger index GHI shows every year.[44]

The fantastic and shocking horror elements in the movie underline the dramatic situation and the urgency of a better understanding of the role of humans. These genre markers are used for the political message and to create an emotional trigger for reflection and changing attitudes. Clémentine Dramani Issifou qualifies the movie with the following words: "Tackling the great tragedy of our times – the excessive exploitation of natural resources – it is a universal contemporary tale; the story of those who give in and those who hold out. With *The Swarm*, Just Philippot restores the genre films' capacity for empowerment."[45]

Although the Anthropocene is not mentioned, – there is anyway no continuous presence of any specific ideological or political discourse – the references are quite clear, at least for the intellectual and cinephile public in France. This is the reason why the film of Just Philippot has been shown in the *Week of the Critique* during the Cannes Festival, which is the week where critical, reflecting, and political avantgarde films as well as the so-called French *film auteur* are shown – although the scenario is not written by Philippot himself and thus, the movie is not a typical *film auteur*. The reception in other contexts and especially for the public of Netflix may be different and stress other dimensions like the horror genre or the pleasure of the growing suspense. By the way, Philippot was not glad to see the film in the Netflix distribution before it could be projected in the cinemas (which was the case because of the Covid pandemic). He negotiated at least a later start on Netflix and produced also a slightly different trailer for the digital public.

The irreversibility of the destructive process is shown in the movie by a longer series of sequences, again within the allegoric mode of the striking back of nature through the agency of the swarm: Virginie becomes aware of the imminent danger by the carnivore animals when her son is hurt. She decides to destroy the greenhouses and tries to burn down the

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44 The Global Hunger Index was first produced in 2006. It is published every October. The 2022 edition marks the 17th edition of the GHI, last report: 2022 GLOBAL HUNGER INDEX FOOD SYSTEMS TRANSFORMATION AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE, edited by the Welthungerhilfe, Bonn/Dublin 2022, www.globalhungerindex.org/pdf/en/2022.pdf (22.01.2023).

45 Clémentine Dramani Issifou: "About THE SWARM (LA NUÉE)", in: *La Semaine de la Critique,* www.semainedelacritique.com/en/articles/about-the-swarm-la-nuee (24.05.2023).



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whole breed. This does not work, because the swarm is liberated by the fire; it even accelerates the destructive mechanism. The swarm passes in Philippot's film from animal agency to what some researchers in Human Animal Studies call "mythical superagency".[46] The images of the breeding sphere in fire, illuminated like a burning globe, the apocalyptic darkness and the following last sequences of the film in a blue-black forest and a lake, partly under water all in blue light of night and the elementary dimensions point out to a mythical hyperbolic power of nature incorporated in the swarm (of locusts). The motif of the locust swarm also refers to the ten biblical plagues – locusts are the eighth Plague (Exodus 10: 12-15) – and thus becomes an apocalyptical touch.

The end of the film does not provide a solution to the crisis neither to the question of the survival of humans (and other beings as well as nature itself). The final images of the movie are discussed by some critics and are later commented by the director himself. Critics underline the apocalyptic and pessimistic end, where Virginie offers herself to the locusts in order to save her daughter who hides under a boat in the lake but is chased away anyway. Brooke Mondor qualifies the final images as "a terrifying ending that will leave you shaken" and also as an "abrupt ending"[47]:

> At the end of 'The Swarm', it seems like all hope is lost – multiple people are killed and eaten by locusts, Laura is being chased by an angry mob of insects, and Virginie takes way too long to come to her senses. Eventually, Laura is chased to the edge of a lake, where she takes an old boat out onto the water and hides underneath it. Unfortunately for her, the locusts are too hungry to let a boat get in the way, and they continue to attack her.[48]

Just Philippot choses (in a second version after having imagined a complete pessimistic end in the first version) to show a last gesture when the daughter Laura tries to save the mother. And he considers this gesture as a sort of 'open end' and even an optimistic end:

> C'est une fin qui peut paraître minimaliste pour certains parce qu'elle se ressert sur un enjeu du film qu'est ce lien entre cette femme et sa fille, mais elle n'en est pas moins ambitieuse. […]Ce n'est pas un *happy end* à proprement parlé, mais en finissant comme ça, sur cette union […] c'est dramatique mais il reste une note d'espoir qui est incarnée par cette jeune fille et par ce lien retrouvé avec sa

46 McFarland/Hediger: *Animals and Agency*, summery.

47 Brooke Mondor: "The Ending of Netflix's The Swarm Explained", in: *Looper*, 10.08.2021, www.looper.com/484314/the-ending-of-netflixs-the-swarm-explained/ (20.05.2023).

48 Ibid.



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> mère. De tout ce drame naît finalement l'espoir, celui d'un tout premier jour à venir. J'aime finalement cette fin, même si l'idée première était d'être plus âpre, plus dur, plus pessimiste.[49]

One of the last images shows diving (or dying?) locusts on the surface of the lake.

3 La nuée (2020): Locusts on the surface of the lake.

## The crisis of the body and desire.

*La nuée* allows us to read the film also along another dimension or another crisis, namely in a psychoanalytic horizon and with regard to the body, and especially to the female body.

Virginie, the protagonist with the speaking name, is a widow; she starts a sexual relation with the neighbor Kerim, but not really seriously. She is more or less frustrated, a single mother and hardworking cultivator. In many sequences we see her in pale light, in blue ambiance or in a reflec-

49 Philippot: "Esprit de synthèse". ["It's an end that may seem minimalist for some because it tightens on an issue of the film that is the relation between the woman and her daughter, but it is no less ambitious. […]It's not a happy ending strictly speaking, but by ending like this, on this union […] it's dramatic but there remains a note of hope which is embodied by this young girl and by this newfound relationship with her mother. From all this drama is finally born hope, that of a very first day to come. I finally like this end, even if the first idea was to be harsher, harder, more pessimistic." Translation GF].



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tive position where she seems to be melancholic or depressed. "Virginie's desperation pushes her deeper into the all-consuming angst of life under late capitalism, and that consumption is literalized with blood-thirsty bugs, but the film passively observes these things more than it comments on them"[50], as Forrester states. The impression of melancholy and depression is reinforced by the slow rhythm of the first part of the film. Then, Virginie becomes more and more fascinated and finally obsessed by the locusts. When she realizes that they like to drink blood and she first offers her skin to them, she is hurt. Her skin is marked by the bites of the locusts. The next time when she meets her friend Kerim, the sexual relation fails as she does not want to take her cloth off because of the visible wounds and scars. The scene is again in blue light. The body of the woman indicates now a sort of border line syndrome with auto-aggressive episodes.

4 La nuée (2020): Virginie's face covered by locusts.

This is the crucial moment when the swarm takes over the role of the lover and appropriates the body of Virginie. As the breeding of locusts need a high temperature, the female body of Virginie is almost naked in the greenhouse, even before the attack of the swarm. For practical reasons, her body is exposed, and at the same time her face is covered by the

50 Forrester: "Review: 'The Swarm'".



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protective hat. This exposure of the body and especially of the skin, the surface of the body, and the vanishing individuality – i.e. in the language of the images: the face disappearing under a protection hat – turn over in the following sequences of the movie to a voluntary exposition of the body. The skin which is the largest receptive erotic organ of the body, is no longer caressed by the human lover, but touched and bitten by the locusts. Virginie – the innocent or 'untouched' woman as her name says – makes no defensives gestures and seems even to feel some pleasure in this situation as we can read on her face.

Hence, we have a double substitution and shift in desire:

1. The human lover is replaced by the swarm.
2. The pleasure comes no longer from the erotic tenderness but from pain, wounds and scars of the skin.

The first shift means for desire that – following Jacques Lacan – we are confronted with a perverse form of the *jouissance*:

> Lacan's psychoanalytic take on what makes a pervert perverse is not the fact of habitually engaging in specific 'abnormal' or transgressive sexual acts, but of occupying a particular structural position in relation to the Other. Perversion is one of Lacan's three main ontological diagnostic structures, structures that indicate fundamentally different ways of solving the problems of alienation, separation from the primary caregiver, and castration, or having limits set by the law on one's jouissance. The perverse subject has undergone alienation but disavowed castration, suffering from excessive jouissance and a core belief that the law and social norms are fraudulent at worst and weak at best.[51]

So, what we see in the movie is the following psychological mechanism: The crisis of the frustrated (working) body is marked by the desire of

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51 Stephanie Swales: *Perversion: A Lacanian Psychoanalytic Approach to the Subject*, London 2012, summary, book back. Cf. also id.: "Psychosis or Neurosis? Lacanian Diagnosis and Its Relevance for Group Psychotherapists", in: *Group*, 34 (2010), 2, pp. 129–143, www.jstor.org/stable/41719272 (31.01. 2023): „Jacques Lacan's diagnostic system is based on a patient's ontological structural position in relation to Others, language, the unconscious, the law; and jouissance. Correspondingly Lacan's three main diagnostic structures of psychosis, perversion, and neurosis suggest […] a differential diagnosis between psychosis and neurosis, working with symbolic-order transference (neurosis and perversion), working with imaginary-order transference (psychosis)." See also Bruce Fink: *The Lacanian Subject. Between Language and Jouissance*, Princeton 1995, and id.: *Eine klinische Einführung in die Lacansche Psychoanalyse: Theorie und Technik*, Wien 2005 [*Fundamentals of psychoanalytic technique: a Lacanian approach for practicioners*, New York/London, especially chap. 6].



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excessive (and neurotic) *jouissance* and still by the fear of castration (or death, or the Real).

The second shift from tenderness to pain marks a borderline phenomenon. The subject tries to create strong pain on the own body in order to feel the own existence. A borderline personality uses scarification for self-assurance,[52] thus this subject which is in danger to get lost, voluntarily approaches the Real in the Lacanian sense, the disorder of pain to bring the body back. This can be seen in the context of *jouissance*, which is defined in the Lacanian psychoanalysis as "an enjoyment that always has a deadly reference, a paradoxical pleasure, reaching an almost intolerable level of excitation."[53] *Jouissance* is "the path towards death",[54] as Lacan said.

To resume this chapter, we can say that the crisis of the body – at least of the female body – is characterized by the perversion of a desire of suffering – thus approaching the Real – and by the perversion of excessive *jouissance*, thus acting in the fear of the Real. The borderline perversion is sometimes defined as a disturbed relation to the mother and not to the father or the phallic, like it is the case in the first definition of the pervert. The desire is thus also expressed by a death drive and the desire to return to the mother.

In the film *La nuée*, the voluntary excessive *jouissance* stops, but the death drive goes on. The general destruction and the self-destruction are unleashed and take apocalyptic dimensions. The regressive desire of the return to the mother can be seen in the last sequences of *The Swarm* when Virginie and Laura (mother and daughter) dive in the lake, in the water as a maternal matrix.[55] Is this a salvation? One may doubt.

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52 Cf. Anne Dyer et al.: "Body image and noticeable self-inflicted scars", in: *The Journal of nervous and mental disease*, 201 (2013), 12, pp. 1080–1084, DOI: 10.1097/NMD.0000000000000057.

53 Anonymus: "Jouissance", in: *No Subject. An encyclopedia of Lacanian psychoanalysis*, nosubject.com/Jouissance (31.01.2023).

54 Jacques Lacan: *Le Séminaire. Livre X. L'Angoisse, 1962-1963*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, Paris 1991 [*Anxiety: The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X*, Cambridge 2014], p. 17.

55 Water as a maternal matrix is a very old symbol, reinterpreted by psychoanalysis. Cf. Carl Gustav Jung: *Mysterium Coniunctionis. An Inquiry into the seperation and synthesis of the psychic opposites in alchemy. The collected works of C.G. Jung*, edited by William McGuire et al., vol. 14, translated by R.F.C. Hull, Princeton 1970, p. 717: "It's very ancient identification with hydrargyrum, quicksilver, drew the whole Hermes Trismegistus tradition into the immemorially numinous sphere of the water's significance. This could happen all the more easily since its maternal aspect as the matrix and 'nurse of



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all things' makes it an unsurpassable analogy of the unconscious." See also: Dani Rhys: "Water Symbolism and Symbols – A Guide", in: *Symbolsage*, symbolsage.com/water-symbolism-and-symbols-a-guide/ (18.05.2023).



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Karen Struve (Bremen)

# Postcolonial Spectres of Migration in Mati Diop's *Atlantique* (2019)

Mati Diop's feature film *Atlantique* (in english: *Atlantics*[1]) caused quite a stir at the 2019 Cannes Film Festival for at least two reasons: Firstly, the Grand Prix du Jury was awarded to a Francophone film which is set in Dakar and directed and co-written by Franco-Senegalese Mati Diop, the first African woman who has ever won this competition.[2] Secondly, *Atlantique* is quite difficult to categorize because it's a genre-mixture of social drama, love story, ghost film, docufiction and mystery genre, "un unconventional storytelling" as "lyrical migrant drama",[3] "a straightforward romance" that comes to "a supernatural turn" and "moves into an eerie new register", as Ryan Gilbey puts it.[4] In terms of the present edited volume, we might call it a 'fantastic film': both in the theoretical and in the enthusiastic sense of the word.

In my article, I would like to examine the fantastic dimension of Diop's *Atlantique* and problematize the notion of fantastic coined by Todorov when confronting it with postcolonial Francophone cinema. For this purpose, I would like to proceed in three steps: After a short summary of the film, I would like to analyze in a first step the fantastic dimensions of this film in the sense of Todorov by focusing the emergence of specters and uncertainty. In a second step, I would like to contrast Todorov's definition of the genre and the reading instructions this structuralist definition entails with political and culturalizing interpretations of the film. In a third step, I would then finally like to discuss to what extent Todorov's notion of the fantastic might have to be revisioned and reframed for postcolonial

1 Mati Diop: *Atlantique*, France/Senegal 2009.

2 Cf. Olivier Joyard: "Mati Diop, the first black women selected in Cannes Film Festival", in: *Numéro Magazine,* 08.10.2019, www.numero.com/en/cinema/mati-diop-cannes-film-festival-atlantique-senegal-grand-prix-dakar-director (20.02.2023).

3 Rüdiger Suchsland seconds this lyrical dimension by calling the film a "bildgewaltiges Filmpoem zwischen Neorealismus und Mystery-Anklängen", Rüdiger Suchsland: "Atlantique", in: *Filmdienst,* www.filmdienst.de/film/details/573168/atlantique#kritik (20.02.2023).

4 Ryan Gilbey: „The unconventional storytelling of Mati Diop's Atlantics", in: *The New Statesman,* 14.09.2021. www.newstatesman.com/culture/film/2012/06/atlantics-mati-diop-film-cannes-review (20.02.2023).



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purposes and vice versa to what extent postcolonial issues change by giving them a kind of a fantastic index. In short: How can fantastic theory be decolonized and how can postcolonial francophone film benefit from fantastic theory?

## 1. Atlantique/Atlantics – a fantastic film?

In her first feature film, Mati Diop contrasts the social misery of unpaid construction workers with a megalomaniac (if not to say phallic) construction project of the Muejiza Tower in Dakar. This tower represents simultaneously the contrast between plans and reality (this architectural project of Senegal's ex-president Wade and Ghadafi has been envisioned but finally never been implemented) and between the very poor and incredible luxury, as Diop underlines it by putting it as a disastrous situation and as a strange symbol for death:

> Quand je suis tombée sur l'image du projet architectural, j'ai ressenti un mélange d'indignation et de fascination. Comment pouvait-on dépenser des millions dans une tour de luxe dans une situation sociale et économique aussi désastreuse ? Ce qui m'a dans le même temps fascinée est que cette tour, en forme de pyramide noire, avait pour moi l'allure d'un monument aux morts. Finalement ce projet n'a jamais vu le jour mais je m'en suis inspirée dans *Atlantique*.[5]
> When I came across the pattern of the architectural project, I felt a mixture of indignation and fascination. How could one spend millions on a luxury tower in such a disastrous social and economic situation? What fascinated me over time was that this tower, in the shape of a black pyramid, looked to me like a monument to the dead. In the end, this project never saw the light of day, but I was inspired by it in *Atlantique*. (my translation)

The film's opening scene is about struggling construction workers in Dakar (the scenes were shot on the construction sites of *Diamniadio* near Dakar[6]), a group of young men who have been working for three months without pay. Ada, a young woman, is in love with one of these workers: Souleiman. But her parents have already arranged her marriage with Omar, whose family lives in Italy and who seems to be quite rich. One day, Ada and her friends want to meet their boyfriends at a Beach Club when they get to know that "all the boys" were gone, having taken a boat

5 Serge Kaganski/Mati Diop: „Entretien avec Mati Diop", in: *Dossier de presse du film "Atlantique"*, www.cineart.be/fr/download/file/id/6251 (20.02.2023).
6 Ibid.



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to flee to Spain. The young women left in Africa mourn their fled lovers. When Ada dreams one night that Souleiman's dead body has become entangled in a fishing net, the film takes its first fantastic shift.

Figure 1: Atlantique (2019): Ada got a text message from Souleiman.

From this moment on, there are increasing signs that Souleiman has returned: he is seen by guests at Ada's and Omar's wedding party; their luxury marital bed burns down although according to the police investigation there was no source of the fire. The young detective in charge of the investigation feels increasingly unwell. So do nearly all the young women left behind who suffer from diffuse physical symptoms. These uncertainties or doubts about the ontological character of these experiences lead to different explanations trying to dissolve the fantastic hesitation: the girls try to identify them as physical and allegeable malaise, the explanation comes up that a spirit has entered their bodies through their navels. And finally, there seems to be digital evidence of Souleiman's return: Ada receives a text message supposedly from Souleiman (Fig. 1).

But then, one night – and this is a genuine fantastic turn from the strange to the marvelous in the film – the young women (except for Ada) walk through the streets with kind of robotic movements or as if by remote control to go to the boss' house (Fig. 2).



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Figure 2: Atlantique (2019): Young women walking through the streets.

They look at him out of milky, dead eyes (Fig. 3) and speak to him as the returned dead men, claiming the unpaid wages for their deaths at the bottom of the sea. These nocturnal encounters are repeated until one night the boss hands over the money to the girls and digs a grave for each dead young man.

Figure 3: Atlantique (2019): Her boyfriend's spirit entered the girl's body.



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Eventually, Ada truly meets Souleiman, who enters one night in her bedroom in the body of the young detective and drives her to flee. But then he meets her again in the beach bar where all the possessed girls are peacefully sitting around. In the women's reflections of the mirrors, the film audience can see the young men and especially Souleiman.

At the end, Ada speaks confidently, directly looking into the camera and by doing so, she questions, maybe even reverses and decolonizes[7] colonial power relations.

Figure 4: Atlantique (2019): Confident Ada looking directly into the camera.

In *Atlantique* there are a few classic elements of fantastic films: Besides the motif of the mirror, there are specters and revenants who enter the bodies of the living and thereby act, communicate, and restore justice. These specters are cinematically staged and closely linked to the gaze and the

7 There are lots of studies and research about the colonial gaze for instance in colonial photography and postcolonial perspectives on how photos where people look directly in the camera and reverse the colonial gaze might decolonize colonial power relations. By looking back, they don't reverse hierarchies but they question them and address directly the spectator. Adas way to look into the camera might be read as a simple sign of selfconfidence and of questioning the spectator if he/she accepts the fantastic pact the film offers. But it might also be seen as deeply coined by the pictural tradition of the colonial gaze in photos and in film; cf. Olivier Barlet: *African Cinemas: Decolonizing the Gaze*, London/New York 2000.



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eyes: There are view axes of view from above-below, the opening of space onto the seemingly horizonless expanse of the sea, we look out of the bar onto the sea (but never from the sea onto the land), there are close-ups of the characters suffering from strange feelings.

Figure 5: Atlantique (2019): The girl's gaze and milky eyes as a sign of the spirit.

The gaze and the eyes (Fig. 5) play a key role, because the milky eyes of the young women are the sign of the dead being in the bodies of the living women. They demand justice and possibly even revenge from the realm of the dead, but also indicate the gaze back of the marginalized. This is a rather classical aesthetic strategy in postcolonial art like Bhabha explains it in relation to the splitted colonial subject[8] or decolonization of the gaze.

But still: To what extent does this film exhibit a fantastic structure in the sense of Todorov?[9] Following Todorov, the fantastic isn't related to

8 Homi K. Bhabha: "Interrogating Identity: Frantz Fanon and the postcolonial prerogative", in: id.: *The Location Of Culture*, London/New York 1994, pp. 40–65; here: p. 47; cf. also Susanne Stemmler: "Homi K. Bhabha: *the displacing gaze*", in: id.: *Topografien des Blicks. Eine Phänomenologie literarischer Orientalismen des 19. Jahrhunderts in Frankreich*, Bielefeld 2004, pp. 35–38, doi.org/10.1515/9783839402818.

9 Todorov's theory has been developped for literary analayses. In the following, I adapt it for cinematographic use by being aware of the semiotic specificities of the film. For further reflections on films in terms of the fantastic cf. Georg Seesslen: „Film", in:



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the simple appearance of ghosts or witches but it rather relies on three conditions:

> D'abord, il faut que le texte oblige le lecteur à considérer le monde des personnages comme un monde de personnes vivantes et à hésiter entre une explication naturelle et une explication surnaturelle des évènements évoquées. Ensuite, cette hésitation peut être ressentie également par un personnage ; ainsi le rôle de lecteur est pour ainsi dire confié à un personnage et dans le même temps l'hésitation se trouve représentée, elle devient un des thèmes de l'œuvre ; dans le cas d'une lecture naïve, le lecteur réel s'identifie avec le personnage. Enfin il importe que le lecteur adopte une certaine attitude à l'égard du texte : il refusera aussi bien l'interprétation allégorique que l'interprétation « poétique ». Ces trois exigences n'ont pas une valeur égale. La première et la troisième constituent véritablement le genre ; la seconde peut ne pas être satisfaite. Toutefois, la plupart des exemples remplissent les trois conditions.[10]
>
> First, the text must oblige the reader to consider the world of the characters as a world of living persons and to hesitate between a natural or supernatural explanation of the events described. Second, this hesitation may also be experienced by a character; thus the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to a character, and at the same time the hesitation is represented, it becomes one of the themes of the work—in the case of naive reading, the actual reader identifies himself with the character. Third, the reader must adopt a certain attitude with regard to the text: he will reject allegorical as well as "poetic" interpretations. These three conditions are not of equal value. The first and the third really constitute the genre; the second may not be satisfied. However, most examples meet all three conditions.[11]

Firstly, it appears where the reader or in our case: the viewer cannot decide between a natural explication and a supernatural explication of what happens to characters in a film. Secondly, this uncertainty or hesitation can also be felt by a character. And thirdly, and this is for my analysis the most important condition of the fantastic, the reader or viewer adopts a certain reading attitude towards the film, because he or she accepts the uncertainty in the film and refuses at the same time an allegorical and a poetic interpretation. As a result, the fantastic is only the ephemeral state between a natural *explication* (*l'étrange*, the uncanny) and a supernatural *acceptation* (the marvelous, *le merveilleux*). So, what about the fantastic elements in *Atlantique*?

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Hans Richard Brittnacher/Markus May (eds.): *Phantastik. Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch,* Stuttgart 2013, pp. 239–249.

10 Tzvetan Todorov: *Introduction à la littérature fantastique,* Paris 1970, pp. 37ff.

11 Tzvetan Todorov: *The fantastic: A structural approach to a literary genre,* Ithaca/New York 1973, p. 33.



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The fantastic dimension of the film seems to be quite obvious: In a realistic setting in the streets and on the beach of Dakar, amidst construction projects and the simultaneity of marabouts and traditions on the one hand, and cutting-edge iPhone technology on the other, there is an intrusion or – to speak with Castex: the rupture[12] – of the inexplicable after the disappearance and escape of the men across the sea, leaving both film audience and the characters in uncertainty about the status of Souleiman and the other fled men. And in some parts of the film, this hesitation could be understood as part of a genre, being embedded in a setting of love story and police investigation. Even after Ada's dream of finding Souleiman's body, which is staged only as a voice-over with a view of the sea, the young women are still stuck in the reality of their lives between arranged marriage, text messages, their rooms in their parents' apartments and the beach bar. Only when the young women walk through the nightly Dakar as if remote-controlled, when they appear with milky eyes in the villa of the boss of the construction company, when the ghosts of the young men speak out of them, when the characters as well as viewers recognize the missing young men in the reflections of the mirrors, the film inevitably tips over into – to speak with Todorov – the marvelous. And in this sense, the turning point in the film is not Castex's rupture or Todorov's intrusion of the fantastic. Instead, the hesitation is gone and gives room to the reception of the film as a fantasy or horror film and to an allegoric interpretation.

We could conclude that this film shifts from realistic to the hesitant fantastic to the accepted marvelous *(merveilleux)*. The specters are classic liminal beings as they shift from dead to life, from dead bodies at the bottom of the sea the women's bodies walking in the streets. They blur the borders between men and women, past and present, day and night. And they come back in order to balance justice and injustice, poor and rich. They are morally speaking 'good revenants'. Needless to say, that the true love between Ada and Souleiman transcends death and separation and leads to justice and empowerment of the Senegalese women in the film.

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12 „Le fantastique crée une rupture, une déchirure dans la trame de la réalité quotidienne". Pierre-Georges Castex: *La Littérature fantastique en France*, Paris 1951, p. 8. ("The fantastic creates a rupture, a tear in the frame of everyday reality", my translation).



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## 2. Interpretations of *Atlantique:* Leaving the fantastic

Many film critics have construed this film as a remarkable reflection on contemporary situations: They've interpreted the film: as reflection on neo-colonial connections between Europe (and the US) and Africa[13] or as a commentary on the refugee dramas in the Mediterranean and on the Spanish coasts.[14] The film could be seen as a contribution to postcolonial (Black) Atlantic discourses (referring for example to Paul Gilroy or Fatou Diome[15]), as the expression of a postmodern version of Senegalese voodoo and djinn tradition, or as a self-confident voice of African women both on the level of film production, and on the level of the characters where Afro-capitalist neo-feminism is enacted[16], as Christian von Tschilschke recently convincingly demonstrated,[17] thus drawing my attention to this film in the first place. In the terms of the present edited volume, we could even state that the fantastic charges the film with social symbolism and the film might even be called in Jameson's terms a "socially symbolic act".[18]

These interpretations are all plausible – but how do they relate to the 'fantastic pact' that Todorov demands from his readership as a necessary condition for fantastic literature? Are not such symbolic interpretations of the postcolonial spectres in the film veritably antithetical or even contradictory to the fantastic? In the following, I would like to confront two interpretations or receptions of the film with Todorov's notion of fantastic.

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13 Suzanne Enzerink: "Black Atlantic Currents. Mati Diop's *Atlantique* and the Field of Transnational American Studies", in: *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 12 (2021), pp. 53–81, here: p. 56.

14 Bilal Qureshi: "'Atlantics' Is A Haunting Refugee Story — Of The Women Left Behind In Senegal", in: www.npr.org/2019/11/23/780847003/atlantics-is-a-haunting-refugee-story-of-the-women-left-behind-in-senegal (17.03.2023).

15 Paul Gilroy: *The black Atlantic: modernity and double consciousness,* London 1999; Fatou Diome: *Le ventre de l'Atlantique,* Versailles 2004.

16 Diop underlines this by stating: "I wanted to tell the story from a feminine point of view". Wendy Ide/Kathryn Bromwich/Hans Simran: "Meet the new directors who lit up the film festivals", in: *The Guardian,* 20.10.2019, www.theguardian.com/film/2019/oct/20/meet-the-new-directors-who-lit-up-the-film-festivals (20.02.2023).

17 Christian von Tschilschke: "Migration als Phantasma: Mati Diops *Atlantique* (2019)", in: Beatrice Schuchardt/Karen Struve/Juliane Tauchnitz (eds.): *Achsen und Spektren der Migration*, (2023, forthcoming).

18 Fredric Jameson: "On Interpretation: Literature as a Socially Symbolic Act", in: id.: *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, London 2002 [1981], pp. 1–88.



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### 2.1. The allegorical-political interpretation

Interpreting the film as an allegory could lead into different directions, as the polysemic character of the film might link it to an allegory of the social unconscious of global capitalism in Africa, of economic labor migration in the form of flight across the sea and into illegality in Europe or Spain, or as a discursive reformulation of gender relations as female empowerment. In this sense, the film is perceived as "a supernatural fable of resistance and revenge" as the New York Times journalist A.O. Scott puts it in his film review.[19] But: According to Todorov's definition we now leave the notion of the fantastic, because the interpretation of the film being a political allegory for the global crisis might be true and justified, but does not consider the film in its fantastic dimensions anymore.

### 2.2. The culturalist-mythical interpretation

A more culturalist reading of the film understands it as an actualization of the specific Senegalese tradition of ghosts: a culturalist interpretation of the film grasps the specters as a kind of postmodern djinns who travel into the bodies of young women and communicate through them and who can only be gotten rid of through a spiritual marabout or paid justice. In this interpretation of the film, critics like Peter Bradshaw called it a "voodoo-realist drama"[20] and German Spiegel journalist Hannah Pilarczyk labbeled it slightly thetically as "erstaunlichen Spuk" ("stunning spook"), too simplistically as pure "Fluchtursachenforschung" ("investigation of causes of migration") and a bit too enthusiastically as follows: "Einen solchen Film über das Phantasmagorische an Migration hat man noch nicht gesehen" ("such a film about the phantasmagoric dimension of migration has never been seen before").[21]

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19 A.O. Scott: "'Atlantics' Review: Haunted by Ghosts and Injustice in Senegal", in: *The Guardian,* 14.11.2019. www.nytimes.com/2019/11/14/movies/atlantics-review.html (20.02.2023).

20 Peter Bradshaw: "Atlantique review – African oppression meets supernatural mystery", in: *The Guardian*, 16.05.2019, www.theguardian.com/film/2019/may/16/atlantique-review-cannes-mati-diop-senegal-mystery (20.02.2023).

21 Hannah Pilarczyk: "Der neue Horror", in: *Der Spiegel,* 19.05.2019, www.spiegel.de/kultur/kino/cannes-neue-filme-von-ken-loach-und-mati-diop-a-1268144.html (20.02.2023).



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Thus, according to Todorov, we again are leaving the fantastic sphere: Accepting (or even othering!) specters as part of a Senegalese culture could run risk to what Todorov calls the "exotic marvelous" ("merveilleux exotique") even though in the film there is no exoticizing narrator showing djinns from the outside of African culture. But still, the film locations, the use of Wolof language or the fact that djinns are mentioned leads into the direction of cultural(istic) interpretations of the film. As to the fantastic aspects of the film, it goes beyond African cultures, but questions a more fundamental dimension of the fantastic itself. Suzanne Enzerink argues and Diop underlines that "in African cinema, 'fantasy is part of reality.'"[22] Moreover, she states that Diop wants to avoid stereotypes coined by media of the typical African immigrant and refugee who is leaving his and her homeland by showing different realities and above all by focussing on those who were left behind.[23]

In other words, can this postcolonial film be not understood as fantastic in the sense of Todorov because it leads either to allegorical or to culturalist interpretations? Is this film simply too postcolonial to fit into Todorov's eurocentric theory of fantastic literature dedicated to narratives of the 19th century? Or could it rather help to critically illuminate Todorov's concept? And couldn't there be a chance of an epistemic surplus for postcolonial films underlining their special fantastic dimensions?

## 3. Decolonizing the fantastic, 'fantastizing' the postcolonial. Postcolonial and fantastic interferences

When the postcolonial is analyzed in its fantastic dimensions, on the one hand, this perspective might connect it to a general, anthropological narrative of spectres, ancestors and voices from the past, which works transculturally and which cannot easily be pigeonholed in the sense that the film simply repeats African exotic myths or simply fulfills magic realism. In this sense, the hesitation does not refer to exotic spectres somewhere in the distance. It rather confronts European or Western viewers with the entangled histories and realities in times of globalization. If Lachmann states that "in the fantastic, the encounter of culture with its oblivion is

22 Diop by Enzerink 2001, p. 60.

23 Ibid. This is also the central idea in the novel "La saison de l'ombre" of Léonora Miano (Léonora Miano: *La saison de l'ombre*, Paris 2013).



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narrated" (my translation) ("in der Phantastik wird die Begegnung der Kultur mit ihrem Vergessen erzählt"[24]), that is even more true in postcolonial contexts.

The focus on the fantastic dimensions of postcolonial films might also provoke the deconstruction of classical colonial dichotomies by staging liminal beings as well as uncertainty. In this sense, Todorov's hesitation as a reading mode is not so much interesting because it vacillates between the uncanny and the marvelous and erases the fantastic in any reception decision. The evanescence underlined in Todorov's theory could rather be seen as a fundamental experience in postcolonial settings that could lead to the critical questioning of power hierarchies and exploitation, of gender roles and the oppression of women, of phallic hypermodern glocalization and the intrusion of the supernatural – whatever that might be. This, of course, only works, when films do not stage spectres as a pale cipher for explicit political messages but as ambiguous beings. In other words, if the fantastic comes across as too didactic (and Diop comes close to that in my point of view), then it misses the mark for a postcolonial deconstructivist thrust.

If – at the flipside of the coin – the fantastic gets a postcolonial index – when we decolonize it –, then the film depicts Todorov's blind spots as for example the structuralist narrowness of the fantastic or its Eurocentric frame and offers a new way of understanding postcolonial cinema.

A fantastic reading of a postcolonial film in the sense of Todorov might lead to the experience that on the one hand a structuralist reading by ignoring cultural and discursive conditions is not satisfactory at all. On the other hand, it becomes clear that Todorov's fundamental categories of natural and supernatural are not so clearly distinguishable from one another, especially in a global perspective where natural and supernatural might not be based on the same knowledge system and experienced as mutually exclusive categories. In *Atlantique*, it is especially the characters' gaze, their view of the world and thus their perception of the natural and the supernatural that is impressive. Here, postcolonial cinema performs as, at its best, another perspective not on the real world, but on the realness of the world. As Diop herself states it, in African cinema, "fantasy is part of reality." Or as Heather Snell puts it in her paper on the postcolonial fantastic: "the fantastic […] offers a powerful means of disrupting the

24 Renate Lachmann: *Erzählte Phantastik: zu Phantasiegeschichte und Semantik phantastischer Texte*, Frankfurt am Main: 2002, p. 11.



https://doi.org/10.5771/9783988580122 https://www.inlibra.com/de/page/agb - Open Access - (cc) BY

seeming transparency of received realities."[25] And that again leads me to the point that the innovative approach to the postcolonial fantastic is not putting it in the other, colonial world outside western or European categories, but to acknowledge that the haunting – to speak in a mixture of Derrida[26] and Rushdie[27] – is global and has its very specific space in film, series, literature, music or arts.

In this perspective – and I would like to conclude with this – the postcolonial francophone film is not only a commentary and a reaction to global crises, but as a fantastic film it also might bring theory into a productive crisis.

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26 Jacques Derrida: *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, New York [1993] 2006.

27 "Now I know what a ghost is, […]. Unfinished business, that's what." Salman Rushdie: *The Satanic Verses*, New York [1988] 1989, p. 129.



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# Uncertainty in the Face of the (all too) Visible: The Fantastic in the Film Adaptation of *Distancia de rescate*

## 1. Introduction: A contemporary fantastic novel and its movie adaptation

One of the most important global crises,[1] topic at the centre of this collective volume, is without a doubt the permanently growing pollution of our planet. In Argentina, pollution, especially in agriculture, is a particularly urgent matter.[2] This topic was taken up in a highly interesting way – provoking far-reaching reactions – by the novel *Distancia de rescate* (2014) by Samanta Schweblin, one of the most acclaimed Latin American authors of our time. However, extensive pollution of the environment and above all the water is only one way to explain the strange events the novel relates. Besides this rational explanation, the novel also offers another, supernatural one: a ubiquitous presence of evil in the remote rural region where the action takes place, fought by further supernatural phenomena, including transmigrations of souls. As none of the two solutions prevails over the other, *Distancia de rescate* can be considered a perfect example of a fantastic novel according to Todorov's classic definition, a novel that fulfils all prerequisites of the "fantastique pur".[3] This also seems the main reason why Schweblin does not approve of the title of the book's German translation at all, for the chosen title, *Das Gift*, is, in her opinion, too

1 For the proliferation of crises that affect our contemporary world and especially the narrative representation of these (and other) crises as well as the function of such „crisis narratives" see the recent contribution of Ansgar and Vera Nünning: "Krise als medialer Leitbegriff und kulturelles Erzählmuster: Merkmale und Funktionen von Krisennarrativen als Sinnstiftung über Zeiterfahrung und als literarische Laboratorien für alternative Welten", in: *Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift* 70 (2020), p. 241–278.

2 In Latin America, and particularly in Argentina, illnesses caused by pollution have reached vertiginous levels, cf. Esteban Villaseñor: "*Distancia de rescate*: el nuevo thriller latinoamericano que tienes que ver", in: *Vogue México,* 13.10.2021, www.vogue.mx/estilo-de-vida/articulo/distancia-de-rescate-en-netflix-significado-y-explicacion-de-la-pelicula (09.12.2022): "[S]egún cifras de la organización de sostenibilidad Es Global, en 12 países de América Latina y el Caribe, liderados por Brasil y Argentina, el envenenamiento por productos químicos en alimentos causan el 15% de las enfermedades registradas por la Organización Panamericana de la Salud."

3 Cf. Tzvetan Todorov: *Introduction à la littérature fantastique,* Paris 1970, p. 37f. and 48f.



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unambiguous and restricts a priori the array of the text's possible interpretations.[4]

We will later come back to the original title *Distancia de rescate*, which is also the original, Spanish title of the movie adaptation that has been made recently: after having been shown at the San Sebastián Festival in September of 2021, the film was released on Netflix one month later. This movie adaptation is at the centre of our contribution, in which we will try to illustrate, first, how the novel's fantastic dimension is transposed to the screen and discuss, later, possible reasons for the noticeable interest in the fantastic in cinema and television in the last years, for which this film is a revealing example.

For a start, it might be of interest to mention that the movie's screenplay was written by Schweblin herself together with the movie's director Claudia Llosa. Llosa is not only another highly influential Latin American artist of our time, but can above all be considered a perfect choice for a movie about important contemporary problems in Latin America as her first two movies, *Madeinusa* and *La teta asustada*, deal with central conflicting issues of contemporary Peruvian society. Not the least of them are the seemingly unsurmountable differences between the big cities and the remote regions that reappear in some way in *Distancia de rescate*, where they are represented by the two narrative instances, Amanda and Carola, and their dialogue full of misunderstandings.[5] For Samanta Schweblin on the other hand, this movie adaptation is in a certain matter a return because she studied film before starting to write her praised short stories and novels. Maybe this background also explains why these literary works almost always contain a strong filmic dimension; many of Schweblin's texts can even be described as pertinent examples of a filmic literature. This is particularly true for *Distancia de rescate*, where filmic elements abound, but, except for one key element which we will mention later, we cannot deepen this aspect in this paper.[6]

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4 Cf. a commentary made by Samanta Schweblin in a conversation with Guy Helminger und Navid Kermani during the *Literarischer Salon* in Cologne (16.05.2019).

5 Furthermore, Llosa's third movie, *Aloft* (2014), focuses on a highly problematic relationship between a mother and her child, a central subject of all of Samanta Schweblin's work that is particularly developed in *Distancia de rescate*. In addition, in *Distancia de rescate* a desperate mother falls back on the help of an occult power to save her severely ill child, which is also a crucial element of *Aloft*.

6 One particularly important filmic element of the novel concerns the noticeable closeness of the conversation situation between Amanda und David that frames the whole story



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## 2. The movie's plot

To have a basis for the following observations, we will shortly summarize the movie's plot that is, with slight changes, the one of the novel. The film starts with an extremely ill Amanda, who, in the middle of a forest, is having a conversation with David, a young boy, who accompanies her in her last moments before death. David wants Amanda to relate her last days so that she can "entender lo importante" ("understand what's important"), as he puts it.[7] Amanda begins to tell her story, guided by David's questions, and we, the movie viewers, see the events unfold before our eyes: we see Amanda coming with her little daughter Nina from the city to a small village to spend the summer. There, in a house with a garden and a pool, she meets Carola, David's mother, and the two women become friends. Soon Carola tells Amanda that some years ago David fell so ill that she brought him in panic to the lady of the green house, a witch who she thought to be the only person able to save her son's life. The witch tells her that a transmigration of souls is the only possibility to save the child: she plans to split soul and body to reduce the poison within David and transfer his soul to another person so that his body can survive. Carola accepts this terrifying proposal, and the procedure seems to work for David survives. But the consequences are sinister according to Carola – she is sure that during the procedure another soul has occupied David's body so that he has changed from a happy child to an enigmatic and frightening person who accompanies living beings to death, or as she puts it bluntly: he is not her son anymore, but a "monster" (33:02). Amanda's reaction to Carola's story is very clear: she classifies it as "una barbaridad" ("insane", 30:19) and does not believe a single word (33:22: "No puedo creerme

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to a cinema: Amanda states that she cannot see clearly the things directly surrounding her (cf. Samanta Schweblin: *Distancia de rescate*, 2nd ed., Barcelona 2015 [2014], p. 11 (all the citations are taken from this version): "Está oscuro y no puedo ver."), whereas the events of her past unfold in sharp pictures and with a strong power of immersion before her eyes (cf. ibid., p. 13: "estoy anclada en este relato, lo veo perfectamente"). Moreover, a visual isotopy characterizes the whole framing conversation underscoring even more the parallels with a movie theatre. Within this frame many other striking examples of a filmic dimension can be found in several scenes that Amanda narrates, not the least being the sudden apparition of "chicos extraños […] chicos con deformaciones" in front of her car just before dawn (cf. ibid., p. 107f.), a scene that is typical of so many horror films.

7 Claudia Llosa: *Distancia de rescate*, Chile/Peru/Spain/USA 2021, 01:31: "Tenés que entender lo importante"; all citations are taken from this version of the movie.



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semejante historia"/"I can't believe a story like this"). Nevertheless, several disturbing events occur shortly after the mothers' talk and Amanda finally takes the decision to take Nina back to the city. However, she hesitates, returns to the village and during a last encounter with Carola in the huge farm complex, where the latter one works, Amanda and Nina get very ill themselves and have to be brought to the village's small hospital.

With this life-threatening disease we come back to the start of the movie and the framing conversation between Amanda and David, who is to bring her to the green house, and we understand that Amanda is not so concerned about the perspective of her own death, but about the fate of her daughter who has been brought shortly before by Carola to the green house as well: Amanda fears that her daughter will never be the same again after having undergone the magic procedure David had to endure and so she wants to reach the green house to save Nina or rather Nina's soul. But before even getting near the witch's house, Amanda dies and in a kind of epilogue we see the two fathers, who both do not have any affective bound to their respective children, Nina and David, anymore and do not understand what has happened during Amanda's last days of life (after which Carola has left her husband and son).[8]

## 3. The fantastic in *Distancia de rescate:* Techniques

However: what *has really* happened? Are Amanda's and Carola's narrations reliable accounts of the diegetic reality? There are important reasons to doubt this, and above all two elements are key for creating a thorough doubt concerning these two central narrations in the movie and we will have a closer look at both. First of all, Amanda, the main narrative instan-

8 In this epilogue Nina's father appears for the first time on the screen (except one very short and disturbing appearance in a nightmare of Amanda) and David's father only has had short appearances in the memories of his wife before, and it is evident that both of them do not often see, let alone take a real interest in their children. These very cool relationships between the fathers and their children provide a clue of crucial importance in both reality systems the film evokes: if we follow the supernatural explanation and believe in the transmigration of souls, the movie's final sequence gives numerous hints that Nina's soul has past to David's body, what her father does not notice at all, underscoring he has never really known his daughter. This estrangement from his child offers, on the other hand, another, in this case completely rational, explanation for the – in the eyes of the fathers! – strange behaviour of the children – caused by their fathers' lack of affection.



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ce during most of the movie, is in no way trustworthy. She is in agony, extremely weakened and probably affected by a strong fever. What is more, she is in terrible fear because of her daughter, whom she never has left alone before; the eponymous *distancia de rescate*, which should guarantee Nina's safety at any time is the most important aspect of her whole life – one has to call it a psychotic obsession. That she cannot secure this *distancia* anymore and has to accept that others will decide about the fate of her severely ill child obviously makes her lose her mind. This finds a pertinent illustration in the fact that her narration becomes more and more confused, and she mixes up nightmares with presumably real events, what also underscores her feverish agony and puts the credibility of her story even more in doubt. These doubts that the spectator cannot help but feel find their adequate expression in a sentence uttered by Amanda herself as she asks herself if she is really talking to David (33:38): "Ni siquiera sé si esto está ocurriendo." ("I don't even know if all this really happens.")

Indeed, does she really talk to David, in addition in a wood and not in the hospital? And is this David really a migrated soul of a dark person in a child's body?[9] In order to try to answer this question we have to stress that all the doubts a viewer will have about Amanda's story are in the same way true for Carola's. The two women reflect themselves in many ways and most of all in their problematic credibility. Interestingly, the doubts about the veracity of the related events reach their culmination during the account of the alleged transmigration of David's soul, which is the decisive magic element of the whole story, the central event in favour of a supernatural interpretation. We have already mentioned that Amanda does not believe this, from a start extremely improbable, story, and she has good reasons for this disbelief which is also likely to reflect the viewer's perspective: Carola is in a clear and thorough state of panic when she

9 It might be interesting to add here that Schweblin's texts have several times been compared to the works of David Lynch (see for example Claire Allfree: "David Lynch, eat your heart out: Samanta Schweblin's uncanny short stories", in: *The Telegraph*, 10.2.2019, www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/david-lynch-eat-heart-samanta-schweblins-uncanny-short-stories/ (15.1.2023) and Lucía De Leone: "Campos que matan. Espacios, tiempos y narración en *Distancia de rescate* de Samanta Schweblin", in: *452ºF. Revista de Teoría de la Literatura y Literatura Comparada* 16 (2016), p. 62–76, here p. 72), and one can presume that the Christian name of this frightening (?) boy and therefore one of the most important uncanny elements might be a hint to one of Schweblin's most important models – what would also further strengthen the already mentioned filmic dimension of the novel.



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brings her ill son to the lady of the green house who in addition gives her a tea that most likely has some hallucinating effect. Moreover, Carola does not even see anything of the ceremony, as she has to wait in front of a closed door (so that the procedure itself is not visible for her nor the viewer). Finally, Carola finishes her narration of the transmigration with the already cited commentary that David has turned into a monster and this statement is immediately contradicted by David himself who in the framing conversation with Amanda retorts (33:07): "No soy un monstruo. Soy un chico normal." ("I'm not a monster. I'm a normal boy.") This response to the most important aspect of Carola's narration, which is furthermore expressed in a calm matter that could not contrast more with Carola's flustered narration, subverts even more any confidence in the veracity of the told events.

In conclusion, we hear a highly unlikely story of a rationally impossible event related by a witness whose credibility is severely destabilized and that within another story whose narrator, Amanda, is also anything but trustworthy. For this dimension it cannot be overlooked either that almost immediately after David's harsh rejection of her mother's story, Amanda says the already cited crucial sentence "Ni siquiera sé si esto está ocurriendo", which is key to the lack of confidence a viewer puts in her, so that both narrative instances undergo severe damage of their credibility in only one minute time.[10] Hence, the nesting of unreliable narrative instances heightens the doubts we have to feel about a decisive element of the plot, which is placed at the very centre of the nesting,[11]

10 Moreover, there is another doubt concerning the credibility of both narrators, due, in this case, to their relationship to Nina. Amanda suspects that Carola wants to have Nina for herself, to replace her own child, David, to whom she has lost all connection, and takes the small girl for this reason to the green house (hoping that the soul of the girl would pass to her son's body, what maybe indeed happens, see note 8 above). There are some details that seem to foster such an interpretation (for example Carola says at one moment she wishes she "had a Nina for [her]self" (54:40: "Cómo me gustaría una Nina para mí"), which would indicate severe psychological problems and destabilize further Carola's credibility (and at the same time, we could find here a rational explanation for David's strange behaviour, who could be traumatized by the rejection by his mother). However, it seems as likely that this presumption is another expression of Amanda's paranoia, who is not able to think rationally when her daughter is involved, which would on the other hand damage further her credibility. Due to the movie's consequent fantastic dimension, it is impossible to judge with certainty which option is correct, but both undermine thoroughly (at least) one of the narrations we are confronted with.

11 In the frame of this article, we can only mention shortly, without developing this further, that this nesting of different narrative instances is executed in an intricate way that



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the transmigration of David's soul. This shades another big doubt over the conversation that forms the movie's frame because David's presence near the dying Amanda only is admissible if he is no longer a normal child but a migrated soul that help others die.[12]

That the credibility of all narrative instances is heavily put into doubt, is decisive for considering the film as belonging to the fantastic genre, for with Uwe Durst, whose work is a valuable complement of Todorov's, we can state that "the destabilization of the narrator forms the basis of fantastic literature".[13] Exactly the same is true for a movie[14] and this leads us directly to the second central element of *Distancia de rescate* that destabilizes the narrator. With this element we come back to the mentioned filmic aspects of Schweblin's novel and have to take into account one crucial difference between the novel and its adaptation, which is due to the mediatic differences between literature and film. In the book we have, of course, only Amanda's description of the events in words. In the movie, however, we actually *see* what she tells and can, therefore, compare the images with her narration. And we quickly realize contradictions, for

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further heightens the movie's fantastic dimension. To give only one example: when, in the beginning, the scene changes from the forest to the vacation house's garden it seems that David is calling Amanda from the higher diegetic level of the framing conversation and she seems to hear him in the garden, that is a lower diegetic level, what has to be, should this be the case, considered a metalepsis and underscores, at any rate, the permeability between the different levels, which can be seen as another element of the movie's fantastic dimension, as paradoxical narrative techniques and the fantastic often go hand in hand (cf. Nina Grabe/Sabine Lang/Klaus Meyer-Minnemann (eds.): *La narración paradójica. "Normas narrativas" y el principio de la "transgression"*, Frankfurt am Main/Madrid 2006).

12 And if we believe him being a migrated soul this supports the assumption (though does not, of course, prove with certainty) that the sickness he (or rather his predecessor in this body) suffered has no rational explicable cause, but rather a supernatural one. This aspect is not always considered in the articles dealing with the novel, which in some cases explain Amanda's and Nina's illness strictly rationally (by the polluted water), without taking into account, that the obviously supernatural transmigration of souls (that is taken for granted in these studies) is hardly compatible with such a rationalized cosmos (see for example De Leone: Campos que matan).

13 Cf. Uwe Durst: *Theorie der phantastischen Literatur*, 2nd ed., Berlin 2007, p. 198: „die Destabilisierung des Erzählers ist die Basis phantastischer Literatur"; see also ibid., p. 185.

14 Cf. the exhaustive study of Claudia Pinkas, who focusses explicitly on film and states that "die phantastische Ambiguität […] insbesondere auch aus einer bestimmten Form eines mehrdeutigen, destabilisierten Erzählerdiskurses hervorgeht." (Claudia Pinkas: *Der phantastische Film. Instabile Narrationen und die Narration der Instabilität*, Berlin/New York, 2010, p. 2).



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which we only want to give a single example that can be found at the very beginning of Amanda's report. When she relates how she saw David for the first time, she states: "Me tiemblan las manos" ("My hands are shaking"), but we see that her hands grasp firmly the steering wheel of the car without the slightest shaking – and David underscores this discrepancy commenting laconically that there is "no shaking" of the hands (6:05), so that the viewer cannot miss this contradiction.

So, we are confronted with a remarkable discrepancy between the images we see and the words with which Amanda describes them, or in other words: a discrepancy between the verbal and the visual narration, which subverts even further the already highly problematic credibility of the main narrative instance.[15] For all these reasons it is undecidable if Amanda is really talking to David and dies on a boat near the forest or is having a fever dream and passes away alone in the hospital.[16] In the same way David's nature cannot be classified with certainty: has he changed due to magic transmigration or are there other, totally rational explanations for his startling behaviour (and for Nina's which is alluded to by her father in the epilogue)?[17]

Because of this fundamental undecidability our movie can be considered, exactly like the novel it is based on, an excellent example for a fantastic work in Todorov's sense – and proves this way that Adolfo Bioy Casares, one of the most important models for Schweblin's literature,[18] is certainly not right, when he states:

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15 Cf. Pinkas: *Der phantastische Film,* p. 111. It is no coincidence that this discrepancy suits the fantastic so well, for it reproduces in a certain way the *rupture* central in Caillois' classic conception of the fantastic, which proves particularly useful for movies (where such *ruptures*, for example between image and narration, can be achieved rather simply).

16 Therefore, there exists an interesting parallel, that would deserve a closer look, with Borges' *cuento* "El sur", in which we also find two possible interpretations of the narrated events that exclude themselves mutually, and one of them is a death in a hospital.

17 In David's case one might think of the difficult relationship to his mother who seems incapable of loving him anymore (see note 10 above) or a rejection by his father, who blames him for the death of the stallion, or in general the bad mood that affects the whole family after the horse has died and with it all the family's hope for a better life. In Nina's case the death of her mother alone (and even more under its terrifying circumstances) could account for a profound change in her personality.

18 Schweblin states that "Adolfo Bioy Casares, Julio Cortázar, Antonio di Benedetto, fueron mis grandes maestros argentinos" (Victoria Torres: "Entrevista a Samanta Schweblin, Premio Juan Rulfo 2012", in: *Iberoamericana* 13 (2013), p. 175–178, here p. 175). See also Paola Tinoco: "Samanta Schweblin: Lo fantástico de la realidad", in: *VICE,* 19.7.2013,



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> [C]reo que ese género [el género fantástico], Méliès me lo perdone, no es adecuado para el cine. […] Cuando lo fantástico se muestra me parece menos fácil de aceptar. En general podemos decir que lo fantástico no es fotogénico para el cine; la mente acepta cualquier historia, la vista, no.[19]

Despite his thorough comprehension of cinema, Bioy clearly underestimates its possibilities to foster the fantastic[20] – especially within the visual field on which he explicitly focusses, as *Distancia de rescate* shows impressively and not only by introducing contradictions between the diegetic and the mimetic narration as we have already discussed, but also thanks to another genuine filmic technique that takes us back once again to the framing conversation between Amanda and David. Of course, we do see the two in the forest and hear their conversation, but the scene's "Realitätsstatus" is in no way clear, as we cannot know if we are confronted with the perspective of the (non-focalized) extradiegetic "camera", which would grant the reality of this scene within the diegetic universe, or an internal focalization, a "mindscreen" of Amanda, which would reveal that the whole conversation with David is nothing else than a (fever) dream.[21] We find here another undecidability, which continues at the film's end, for comparable doubts about the diegetic veracity of the events affect all the scenes in Carola's house after Amanda falls ill – are these strange events also not only part of a dream of Amanda, who is already in the hospital? These doubts seem even more justified as Amanda has already mixed up reality and (bad) dreams before, as mentioned above. So, the

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www.vice.com/es_latam/article/9b7pwa/samanta-schweblin-lo-fantastico-de-la-realidad-0000230-v6n5 (19.09.2022).

19 Adolfo Bioy Casares cited in Alberto Tabbia: "'Como los de la vida, los recuerdos del cine'. La influencia del cine y de la fotografía en la vida y obra de uno de los más importantes escritores argentinos contemporáneos", in: *La Nación,* 4.5.1986, p. 27. A comparable thought can be found in Bioy Casares's diaries: "Después de ver una comedia menor y fantástica, he pensado que el elemento fantástico es difícil de manejar en el cine." (Bioy Casares: *Descanso de caminantes. Diarios íntimos,* ed. by Daniel Martino, Buenos Aires 2001, p. 364).

20 And Bioy is far from being an exception: a lot of authors as well as (literary) critics have put forward comparable (and in the end untenable) opinions, cf. Pinkas: *Der phantastische Film,* p. 50f.

21 Cf. Pinkas: *Der phantastische Film,* p. 58: "der fiktionale Spielfilm [kennt] spezifische Verfahren zur Erzeugung von Ambiguität, die zum einen darin bestehen, dass der Realitätsstatus der gezeigten Szene unbestimmt gelassen wird, indem nicht geklärt wird, welche Art der Perspektive (Erzähler- vs. Figurenperspektive, Außensicht auf das Geschehen vs. *Mindscreen*) dem Erzählten jeweils zugrunde liegt."; for further information about the internal focalization and the "mindscreen" cf. ibid., p. 133.



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question what really has happened in the diegetic universe is also via this means, the ambiguity of the point of view, permanently put into focus and at the same time undecidable.

In conclusion, Llosa's and Schweblin's film has to be considered a perfect example of a fantastic movie that makes use of a variety of (filmic) techniques to achieve a "concurrencia de las versiones"[22] of the narrated events which cannot be resolved definitely.

## 4. The fantastic in *Distancia de rescate* and in contemporary cinema: Interpretation

*Distancia de rescate* is anything but a unique case; on the contrary: not least this volume with its many and diverse examples proves that we are presently witnessing a remarkable presence of the fantastic in film and television. This revival of the genre calls for explaining its reasons and focussing again on *Distancia de rescate* especially one explanation seems to deserve a closer look. It certainly will not solve the finally insoluble question what has happened in the diegetic world of Amanda, Carola and David, but it might shed some light on the recent popularity of the fantastic on the screen.

As we have already mentioned, David underscores right at the beginning that Amanda has to understand "lo importante" in her last days ("what's important", 1:31). This can also be seen as a commentary directed to the viewer who should try to see as well "the important elements" in the pictures recounting these days he/she is watching.[23] And when Amanda directly responds asking twice "qué es lo importante?" ("but what's important?", 01:39 and 05:20), she articulates a question that the viewer may also ask himself/herself. David's answer is, at first sight, not very helpful: "los detalles" ("the details", 05:26). But exactly here seems to lie a decisive clue for explaining the importance of the fantastic in our movie and its general popularity in today's cinema: as viewers we

22 We take this striking description from Pedro Luis Barcia who uses it in his analysis of a key text of the Argentinean fantastic literature, Adolfo Bioy Casares's "El perjurio de la nieve" (Pedro Luis Barcia: "Introducción biográfica y crítica", in: Bioy Casares, Adolfo: *La trama celeste*, ed. by Pedro Luis Barcia, Madrid 2011, p. 9–63, here p. 20).

23 David clearly emphasizes this dimension, as he tells Amanda right at the beginning "lo que ves vos, lo veremos todos" ("what you see, we all see", 01:50), unequivocally integrating the viewer in this "todos".



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are also likely to miss the important aspects of Amanda's story, and we could add that this is not unlikely either for the extrafilmic reality: our contemporary world has become so complex that it seems impossible to consider everything, let alone all the details, and therefore to be able to always separate the important from the negligible. And now, isn't it normal to feel overtaxed and unsure in such a world? Our film seems to pick up exactly this feeling, what becomes particularly visible in a sequence that confronts us for a remarkably long time with the following image that shows Amanda and Carola at the farming complex just before Amanda and her daughter begin to feel gravely sick:

Figure 1 Distancia de rescate (2021): Amanda and Carola in a world that exceeds them by far (1:07:20).

This image seems a pertinent expression of a world that exceeds by far the capacities of the two women, a reality that makes them feel small and helpless. In such a situation isn't it only human to try to search other, less complex explanations and structures, ones that are easier to grasp and give us the feeling that we have understood "lo importante"? This longing for a reduction of the world's complexity often experienced as overtaxing, which seems particularly typical of our age,[24] can find a powerful expression in the creation of an unexplainable, cosmic power, that suits so extremely well the genre of the fantastic and is incarnated

24 Cf. Zygmunt Bauman's comment that in our contemporary world with its surplus of possibilities and choices "[t]ime and again we [all] dream of a 'great simplification'" (Zygmunt Bauman: *Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge 2019, p. 213).



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in our movie, as in many other fantastic works, by the possibility of a ubiquitous evil.

Such a use of the supernatural as an antidote to a world that seems so complex we cannot comprehend it anymore points towards a highly interesting evolution of the history of the fantastic: Whereas the fantastic with its constitutive evocation of a supernatural explanation served during the 19th century, the genre's first main phase, primarily to express a longing to broaden a world that seemed too narrowed by strictly rational positivism,[25] we can nowadays observe the exact opposite: the world seems too broad and too confuse and the fantastic is often used to express a wide-spread wish to reduce this overwhelming complexity. This observation also explains why crisis narratives and the fantastic go together so well, for an important function of crisis narratives is precisely the "Komplexitätsreduktion", as Vera and Ansgar Nünning explain.[26] To reach this goal, these narratives often "implizieren und konstruieren […] mehr oder weniger stark simplifizierende Deutungen und Erklärungen vergangener Prozesse",[27] what can be done perfectly via the evocation of a possible supernatural explanation, which is an indispensable part of the fantastic.

This thought can be developed further and with that aim we come back to the central image of Amanda's and Carola's encounter in the barn that also reveals an additional dimension of our interpretation: for this frame does not only offer an impressive image of a cosmic loneliness but maybe even more of the loneliness of two mothers that both have lost her children in a certain way (and it cannot be overlooked that it is probably during this encounter between Amanda and Carola that Nina catches the illness which fails to kill her).[28] Both women have to be heavily blamed

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25 Roger Caillois clearly underscores this purpose, when he writes in his famous description (based precisely on the fantastic literature of the 19th century) that the fantastic takes place "im Herzen einer bis ins kleinste Detail festgelegten Welt, aus der man das Geheimnisvolle für immer verbannt hatte" (Roger Caillois: "Das Bild des Phantastischen. Vom Märchen bis zur Science Fiction", in: Rein A. Zondergeld (ed.): *Phaïcon. Almanach der phantastischen Literatur*, vol. 1, Frankfurt am Main 1974, p. 44–83, here p. 50). The same opinion is put forward by Jaime Alazraki: "En un mundo domesticado por las ciencias, el relato fantástico abre una ventana a las tinieblas del más allá." (Jaime Alazraki: "¿Qué es lo neofantástico?", in: *Mester* 19 (1990), p. 21–33, here p. 25.).

26 Nünning: *Krise als medialer Leitbegriff und kulturelles Erzählmuster,* p. 258.

27 Ibid., p. 259.

28 The mothers' eternal anxiety for their children is, of course, another key subject of this movie, clearly underscored by its title and the explication Amanda gives for the concept of the "distancia de rescate" that dominates her entire life (23:50). The fantastic genre is perfectly suitable to express this never-ending anxiety which can seem absolutely



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for their respective loss: Carola for having taken an irrational decision – bringing her ill son to a witch who experiments with him rather than to a real doctor who would have applied a medical treatment – and Amanda for having waited way too long before leaving with Nina a village that obviously is not a suitable place for a little girl.[29] And the film alludes clearly to the obvious dimension of at least Amanda's failure: it is no coincidence that the sequence which inspires this hypothesis is taken in the farming complex, because this farm is later shown as the most probable source of the children's suffering: in the last minutes of her life Amanda recollects important moments of her last days and eventually identifies the water, polluted by agricultural pesticides, as the cause for the seemingly inexplicable events.[30] In such a perspective, the events could be explained

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irrational to a lot of neutral beholders, but on the other hand is an absolutely natural state of mind for a lot of mothers and our movie makes strong use of this.

29 In our opinion this is, a lot more than other elements that have been mentioned in recent research, the decisive aspect in the intermedial relationship between Schweblin's and Llosa's movie (as well as in the, in this case intertextual, relationship between the novel on which it is based) and Ira Levine's *The Stepford Wives*. It is not so much the undecidability about what causes the strange events a (female) newcomer witnesses in an environment that had looked inviting in the first place (with polluted water being one probable explanation) that links the two works. In the light of our observations, it is rather the protagonist's all too long hesitation before leaving, when it has already, and for a long time, become clear that her environment is highly dangerous, and potentially deadly. It is no coincidence that Joanna asks herself "if it *was* in time" (Ira Levine: *The Stepford Wives,* London 2011 [1972], p. 124, italics in the original), when she finally tries to flee, because, exactly as Amanda, she knows inside that it is too late, what both works emphasize harshly with their respective endings. So we can conclude that in both cases the fantastic genre serves to illustrate our endless hesitating (highlighting, by the way, another aspect of Todorov's central term in his description of the genre) – we do know that we cannot go on like this, but nevertheless are not able to take resolute action in time.

30 It might be of some interest to add that the movie adaptation, far from being unambiguous as we have shown throughout this paper, tends much stronger than the novel towards this rational explanation, the pollution of the water by big agricultural companies. This becomes especially evident in these final moments before Amanda's death, as she recalls all the moments in which Nina and herself have been exposed to the water and the pesticides – a scene that is not in the novel. One might wonder if this "more realistic" tendency, within which the supernatural option is not completely discarded but its probability noticeably reduced, is due to the movie's production context and the (commercial) interests of streaming platforms like Netflix. The recent example of the movie adaptation of Guillermo Martínez' novel *La muerte lenta de Luciana B.*, *La ira de Dios*, which was produced for Netflix as well (in 2022), seems to point in this direction, for in this adaptation the novel's radical undecidability about who or what has caused a series of mysterious deaths is also plainly reduced and a rational explanation is presented as by far the most probable option.



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strictly rationally and the other explanation, the supernatural one, would be nothing else than a mere excuse for a wrong decision or a neglect, and above all for closing the eyes in the face of the all too visible. For such an interpretation David's final comment can hardly be overestimated, because when he says to Amanda, who is recollecting her contact with the village's water, "Lo ves, pero no lo entendés" ("You see it, but you don't understand it", 1:19:32), he seems to hint at the possibility that she does not *want* to understand it.

In this respect a comparison is striking to another movie that was released almost at the same time (in December 2021, two months after *Distancia de rescate*): *Don't look up* by Adam McKay, a film where the central complex of seeing or rather not-seeing shows already up in the title. In McKay's film almost nobody draws the necessary consequences although there is irresistible proof for an imminent destruction of the entire earth. Here we find again Amanda's continuous hesitating until it is too late in another, but nevertheless linked, context, not the least because the climate debate, which is the clear subject of *Don't look up*, is, of course, also a central topic of *Distancia de rescate*, a film that focusses explicitly on the environment and its pollution.[31]

With *Don't look up* in mind and coming back to Llosa's and Schweblin's film and the revival of the fantastic in cinema in general, one could ask oneself if the fantastic in recent films does not often serve as a means to approach the – probably very human, but at the same time possibly fatal – reluctance to take serious consequences even if all ratio forces us to act and to search other explanations instead that justify our inactivity, to build up mental constructions which excuse our passivity and make us feel like victims of a higher power we cannot control or dominate.[32]

In such a perspective, the supernatural options within current movies belonging to the fantastic could be seen as mechanisms of evasion at

31 Here seems to lie an important reason why such fantastic films abound today as it becomes every day clearer that we must act and act *now* in order to save our planet. This also explains the remarkably strong presence of time travel stories on our contemporary screens (in movies and TV series alike): for in these stories, the travel through time is mostly necessary because in the present day or the near future the imperative steps to save the earth have not (or not in time) been taken, so that someone from the future has to come back to our present and make this very clear, so that we finally start to act.

32 As we all know, such a behaviour has been and still is omnipresent within the pandemic, where people reject scientifically proven vaccination because of absurd theories, and within the climate debate, which provides depressing examples of comparable thoughts almost daily.



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the diegetic level, but the fantastic as a genre as a sophisticated strategy to unveil such evasive behaviour and therefore a decidedly political, a committed approach.[33] Thanks to this commitment, *Distancia de rescate* follows the great examples of Argentinean fantastic literature of the 20th century, in which the fantastic was never an evasive game, but a serious intent to grasp important aspects of the human condition as prove the works of the quickly mentioned Bioy Casares as well as those of Borges or Cortázar. Samanta Schweblin seems, with her literary works and this first movie, a highly interesting successor of their work in our present.

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33 This proves once again that the often heard prejudice that the fantastic is an evasive genre is not tenable at all; on the contrary, it is a perfect means to unmask evasive behaviour. In the light of our article's observations the genre proves particularly useful to attack conspiracy theories that have become so wide spread in our contemporary world. For it is the main principle of these conspiracy theories to deny the most obvious facts (like the human-made pollution of the planet, Covid, …) and insinuate instead dark powers causing the world's problems, in other words: they illustrate in an exemplary way the reduction of complexity we have treated in this paper (cf. Jonathan Gottschall: *The storytelling animal. How stories make us human*, Boston 2012, p. 111–116).



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Sabine Schlickers (Bremen)

# C.E. Feiling (1996): *El mal menor* y *El prófugo* (2020), de Natalia Meta

Esta contribución analiza una novela argentina "de terror", como la clasifica Ricardo Piglia en su prólogo a la edición de 2012, y su hipertexto fílmico que Natalia Meta estrenó 24 años más tarde en festivales de cine[1]. Puesto que ambos textos no son muy conocidos, voy a reconstruir las historias – que son algo diferentes – para ahondar luego en lo fantástico, ambiguo, indeterminado y sorprendente; recursos que pertenecen a las estrategias enigmatizante y engañosa. Según mi modelización[2], la combinación de estas dos estrategias (y/o de recursos de la estrategia paradójica) crea una narración perturbadora. Este nuevo concepto narratológico se reencuentra, empero, solo en la novela, mientras que la película se adhiere a los recursos de la estrategia enigmatizante, entre los cuales se encuentra lo fantástico.

La novela arranca con la mudanza de la protagonista Inés, una mujer atractiva de unos treinta años, a un departamento en un edificio de concreto muy feo en el barrio porteño de San Telmo[3], pero con unas vistas maravillosas. Queda cerca de un restaurant *gourmet* que Inés dirige con un socio, su amigo de infancia Alberto Leboud, el cual tiene además un video club y es fanático de los filmes de terror de los años ochenta. La trama se ubica en los años noventa. Inés está divorciada, tilinga, y tiene desde hace poco un novio abogado. Toma constantemente cocaína y bebe con frecuencia. En los capítulos que tratan de ella, ella misma levanta la voz, es decir, es una narradora autoextradiegética. Su relato alterna con el de un narrador hetero-extradiegético personal, que se concentra sobre todo en un tarotista, Nelson Floreal. Desde el primer capítulo, Inés relata las pesadillas que sufre, y que invaden su realidad al modo de la rosa de

1 Todavía no se ha editado en DVD, pero existen algunos portales que ofrecen el streaming de *The intruder* – título inglés bajo el cual se distribuyó en los festivales – o de *El prófugo*.

2 Sabine Schlickers: *La narración perturbadora: un nuevo concepto narratológico transmedial*, Madrid 2017.

3 Ansolabehere considera que este edificio corresponde a una "versión moderna y porteña del castillo gótico, el horror que emana del edificio proviene, antes que nada, de su fealdad". Pablo Ansolabehere: "El terror según Feiling", en: *Estudios de Teoría Literaria. Revista digital: artes, letras y humanidades* 7 (2018), n° 13, p. 49.



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Coleridge: "If a man could pass through Paradise in a dream, and have a flower presented to him as a pledge that his soul had really been there, and if he found that flower in his hand when he awake – Aye, what then?"[4]. En la primera pesadilla, la rosa corresponde al metal de la manija, que está hirviendo, y que ella toca después de la aparición fantasmática de un hombre rengo en medio de la noche en su apartamento. Encerrada en el baño, Inés escucha sus pasos, siente un frío polar y percibe un olor muy malo.[5] Pero solo se atreve a abrir la puerta cuando cree que el hombre ya se ha ido. En la segunda pesadilla, que tiene dentro de un avión rumbo a Cuba, sueña con la transformación de una azafata en un gigante monstruoso que eyacula "grandes chorros de una diarrea negruzca sobre el regazo de Leonardo"[6], su novio que la acompaña, y finalmente el gigante hunde sus dedos "en el craneo [de él], y una explosión sorda llenó el aire de hueso, cerebro y sangre"[7]. No le cuenta esta pesadilla a Leonardo, quien, no obstante, desaparece durante unos días en Cuba después de una disputa. Inés lo encuentra en un hospital y cuando lo visita nota una mancha rara y creciente sobre su cabeza,"– una especie de líquido, de mercurio que no caía sobre la cama como hubiera debido –, sino que me daba la incómoda impresión de poseer una voluntad propia"[8]. Después de haber sido tocado por un chorro en la boca abierta, este líquido invade a Leonardo. Inés grita, una enfermera acude, Leonardo se incorpora en la cama, y, antes de arrojarse por la ventana, les grita a las dos: "–Putas"[9].

Después de su vuelta a Buenos Aires, Alberto le explica todo sobre los prófugos con un texto que había redactado después de haber hablado con Nelson[10], predisponiéndola para ponerse en contacto con este tarotista, que es hijo de una "arconte", es decir de una de los doce miembros que no sueñan y que tienen que guardar "El Cerco", que constituye una especie de muro entre el mundo de los seres humanos y las acechanzas del universo de los suenõs. El mal se introduce, pues, por brechas dentro del Cerco, primero en forma de fantasmas benévolos (llamados visitantes) y luego, en caso de que no se logre desterrarlos, se convierten en seres malignos

4 Samuel Taylor Coleridge: *Anima Poetæ. From the Unpublished Note-books of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, London 1895, p. 282.
5 Feiling, C.E.: *El mal menor* (1996), Buenos Aires: 2012, p. 28ss.
6 Idém., p. 49.
7 Idém., p. 50.
8 Idém., p. 106.
9 Idém.
10 Idém., p. 113s.



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(llamados prófugos) que pueden transformarse en hombre comunes. Su objetivo es invadir el mundo de los seres humanos para destruirlo. Después de la muerte de su madre, asesinada por uno de estos prófugos, Nelson adquiere su papel de arconte e instruye a Inés para convertirla en otra. Cuando los dos luchan contra el mal, fracasan, empero. Nelson se muere e Inés enloquece.

La trama fantástica termina con un doble giro a nivel del enunciado y de la enunciación. En una suerte de epílogo intitulado "Fin", el gran enemigo de los arcontes – y a la larga de toda la humanidad– levanta la voz y se identifica como el socio de Inés, con el que se había acostado justo antes de suicidarse. Alberto Leboud[11] explica que la propia Inés lo había engendrado en Estados Unidos[12], lo que significa que él es el producto del sueño de Inés, con lo que el autor implícito apunta al intertexto "Las ruinas circulares", de Borges. Este desenmascaramiento revela que el dato de que Alberto sea amigo de infancia de Inés es falso, y él mismo reconoce que el momento más peligroso había sido aquel, en el cual "Inés le preguntó a Marta si no recordaba que mis padres habían muerto. Marta […] hubiera podido señalarle a su hija que nos habíamos hecho amigos cuando regresó de Norteamérica, en 1990, y que ningún Alberto Leboud había estudiado con ella en el Nacional Buenos Aires"[13]. El giro a nivel del enunciado y la mentira son recursos de la narración engañosa, que se ubica además a nivel de la enunciación, puesto que Alberto declara: "no sólo le corregí el estilo e introduje diálogos [al relato de Inés], sino que también intercalé las partes referidas a hechos que no presenció, y en algunos casos hasta reemplacé su versión de los hechos por la mía"[14]. De ahí que Alberto sea en realidad el autor de las partes referidas por el presunto narrador heterodiegético, lo que significa que el lector implícito ha sido engañado con respecto a la situación narrativa.

La narración engañosa se combina con lo fantástico y cierta indeterminación de la narración enigmatizante, con lo que *El mal menor* resulta ser una narración perturbadora en sentido narratológico y literal. Las circunstancias de la matanza de la familia de Nancy quedan difusas. Según

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11 Leboud es un nombre elocuente: Eisterer-Barceló apunta que "leído de detrás hacia delante, significa 'doubel'". El *vesre* es muy común en la literatura argentina. Ellia Eisterer-Barceló: "Nueva literatura de terror fantástico", en: *Argentina: El mal menor*, de C.E. Feiling, en: *Signos Literarios y Linguísticos* II (2000), 2, pp. 161–170, aquí p. 163.

12 Feiling: *El mal menor,* p. 191.

13 Idém., p. 192.

14 Idém., p. 191.



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el presunto narrador heteroextradiegético, Inés se había topado después de su último encuentro con Alberto con los cadáveres de los hijos y del marido de Nancy y había matado en un acto de autodefensa a Nancy antes de cometer suicidio.[15] Según el prófugo Alberto, empero, Inés había matado a la familia antes de ir al restaurante a hacerle el amor y estaba "manchada de la sangre que tanto preocupó a la esposa de Armendáriz"[16]. Esta declaración contradice a la del narrador – que además es el propio Alberto –, según el cual, el encuentro de Inés con la esposa del portero en el ascensor se había producido después de su regreso del restaurante. Si la versión de Alberto–prófugo fuese acertada, Inés habría enloquecido y olvidado de haber matado bestialmente a la familia de Nancy, incluso a un bebé – ¿pero se puede confiar verdaderamente en un ser tan maligno y fantástico[17] que termina su relato con un comentario irónico de doble sentido: "Pobrecita Inés, no soportó encontrarse con el hombre de sus sueños"[18] – ?

Castells resalta en su crítica que Feiling "no logra representar efectivamente al personaje femenino […], su Inés Gaos es desmesuradamente fálica y chata, su psicología demasiado masculina y su sexualidad muy poronga"[19]. Yo diría, más bien, que, aunque la hiperbólica cantidad de líneas de merca que consume todos los días haga sin duda daño a sus neuronas, sin embargo, no surge en ningún momento la duda de que sus pesadillas no sean *reales*.

El epígrafe en latín de las *Metamorphoses* (IX, 30) de Apuleyo, que la crítica pasó por alto[20], proviene de una historia intercalada de Lucius, el asno encantado, en la cual se intercala otra historia que una alcahueta

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15 Idém, pp. 188ss.

16 Idém., p. 192.

17 Los críticos no mencionan esta versión contradictoria de la matanza y no dudan por consiguiente de la versión final de Alberto (ver, por ejemplo Ricardo Piglia: "Prólogo" a *El mal menor,* de C.E. Feiling, Buenos Aires 2012, pp. 9–11 y Esteban Prado/Lucio Ferrante: "Devenir americano del terror argentino", en: *Recial* XI (2020), pp. 17ss.

18 Feiling: *El mal menor*, p. 192.

19 Mario Castels: "No hay enemigo chico: Sobre *El mal menor*, de Charly Feiling", en: *Sonámbula*, 19.11.2019, bit.ly/3nb9k2O (04.04.23).

20 Tan solo Ansolobehere menciona los dos epígrafes, pero no ahonda en ellos, sino que los presenta como representantes de dos formas narrativas distintas, la clásica de Apuleyo y la popular de King. Concluye que *El mal menor* "trabaja esa tensión entre terror y mal gusto (marca de nacimiento que define el género)" (Ansolobehere: "El terror según Feiling", p. 50). Pero el libro de Apuleyo, también conocido como *El asno de oro*, fue también muy popular. El emperador Septimius Severus lo consideraba como novela trivial (bit.ly/3bMcnwc). Meyer-Minnemann y yo lo consideramos como



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le cuenta a la mujer de un panadero. Trata de un hombre casado muy celoso que ordena a un subalterno que vigile día y noche a su esposa. Un pretendiente le ofrece monedas de oro al vigilante para que le deje entrar en la casa, y aunque al inicio se resiste, tanto el vigilante como la esposa ceden finalmente ya que la codicia es más fuerte que el miedo al dueño. El marido regresa a casa inesperadamente en la noche del adulterio, y el amante huye olvidándose sus zapatos debajo de la cama. El marido los encuentra, saca cuentas y al día siguiente va al centro con su vigilante y los zapatos para detectar al amante. Este se les cruza por el camino y acusa con mucho ingenio al vigilante de haberle robado los zapatos el día anterior en una casa de baños. Con este final feliz la alcahueta le promete a su narrataria que esta misma noche disfrutará de un amante de gran envergadura. Cuando éste viene se repite la historia: el marido aparece como un *deus ex machina* y su mujer esconde al amante debajo de una bañera; el asno sufre mucho de este engaño y ayuda a detectar al amante. Pero en vez de vengarse cruelmente, el marido le promete al amante una *ménage à trois* que él mismo inicia a solas con él en la noche. Al día siguiente, empero, lo hace flagelar y lo echa de su casa, al igual que a su esposa que se dirige luego a una bruja para vengarse mortalmente de él. Entonces, llega la reflexión metaficcional del epígrafe: "Pero quizás aquí un lector crítico me reproche y diga: 'Pero, ¿cómo es que tú, simple asno, pudiste aprender en tu molino todo lo que las mujeres, según tu propia confesión, han escuchado en secreto?'"[21]. A continuación, Lucius explica la fuente de su saber: al día siguiente llegó la hija del panadero que había visto todo en un sueño que relata y el asno se enteró entonces así de las circunstancias. Por este sueño se explica la conexión con la trama de la novela de Feiling, por lo que el epígrafe con la cita de Apuleyo cumple con la función tradicional de servir como *mise en abyme* del enunciado del texto que encabeza.

Lo mismo pasa con el segundo epígrafe, que proviene de un fragmento citado en inglés del relato "The Man in the Black Suit" (2002), de Stephen King, el famoso autor de novelas de terror. Con esta cita la novela de Feiling se inscribe implícitamente en este género. Trata de un hombre anciano y enfermo que escucha en la oscuridad la voz del diablo que había visto después de un sueño en un río cuando tenía nueve años. El

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antecedente de la novela picaresca, que era también un género popular (cf. Meyer-Minnemann/Schlickers: *La novela picaresca*).

21 Apuleius: *Metamorphoses* , IX, 30, (Feiling, *El mal menor*, p. 15, mi traducción).



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diablo quiso devorarlo, pero el chico logró escapar y luego su padre le convenció que todo había sido un sueño. Cuando el chico volvió algunas horas después con su padre al lugar del 'sueño' en el río olía, no obstante, todavía a azufre. En la primera pesadilla de Inés el prófugo había emanado también un olor nauseabundo.

Según Piglia, la novela "no es un relato de terror sino un relato sobre el terror" porque "el terror es del orden de los personajes y no incumbe a los efectos de la narración"[22]. Eisterer-Barceló revela más precisamente los elementos del terror y los mitos usuales del género que aparecen en *El mal menor*: "la casa maldita […], el complejo Jeckyll/Hyde", "el síndrome de Frankenstein, en que la creación destruye a su creador"[23]. De ahí que concluyera, contrario a Piglia, que es una novela de terror cuyos efectos son más sofisticados que en la mayoría de las narrativas del terror por el uso de la narración perturbadora.

Como ya lo indiqué al principio, *El mal menor* es el hipotexto para la película *El prófugo* (2020), de Natalia Meta (dirección y guion), como se indica asimismo en los créditos finales: "inspirada en la novela *El mal menor* de C.E. Feiling" (01:28:00). Los personajes del hipertexto llevan los mismos nombres y el título es idéntico al del primer capítulo de la novela. Pero la Inés fílmica ni toma cocaína, ni bebe, ni tiene un restaurant, sino que trabaja haciendo doblajes de películas B de terror y erotismo, como se ve ya al inicio de la película, que arranca con una larga escena que la demuestra en acción delante de una gran pantalla en la que se proyecta un filme erótico siniestro que debe doblar.

La puesta en escena de la muerte del novio es muy similar: los dos están en un avión, rumbo al Caribe, pero aquí Inés toma un tranquilizante, cediendo a las insistencias de Leonardo. En la siguiente escena se ve cómo Inés se despierta mientras todos los demás pasajeros siguen durmiendo. Aparece una azafata que le dice que su novio no le conviene y empieza a estrangularlo. Solo entonces el espectador implícito comprende que esta escena ha sido una pesadilla de la que Inés se despierta asustada, pero no le cuenta nada a Leonardo. Con ello, el filme alude a la posibilidad de que los siguientes hechos fantásticos sean asimismo sueños camuflados, pero esta pista es falsa, como se revelará más adelante.

En el hotel, Leonardo la despierta, preguntándole a quién se refería diciendo en sueños "te amo", y como ella no le contesta, estalla una dispu-

22 Piglia: "Prólogo" a *El mal menor*, de C.E. Feiling, p. 10.
23 Eisterer-Barceló: "Nueva literatura de terror fantástico", p. 163s.



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ta ridícula que finaliza cuando ella huye al baño desde el que le revela finalmente que se trata de una pesadilla recurrente que tiene desde chica: tratando de dormirse sueña que hay alguien afuera que la llama y le pide abrir la ventana. Leonardo le pide, con voz rara, que abra la puerta, a lo que Inés responde pidiéndole que no se burle de ella – y entonces escucha sonidos raros, tumbazos, y el ruido de una ventana que se abre –. Cuando sale del baño, Leonardo no está más en el cuarto, pero la ventana está abierta, y cuando Inés se asoma por el balcón lo ve yaciendo muerto boca abajo en la piscina del hotel (00:22:56). Con este preludio impresionante – que termina con una larga toma aérea que muestra en ángulo cenital el conjunto de los edificios hoteleros en medio de un bosque tropical y termina en medio del mar y del horizonte, sobre cuyo trasfondo se inserta el título –, Meta concretiza el capítulo del viaje al Caribe de la novela que termina, asimismo, con el suicidio de Leonardo. La puesta en escena fílmica, que parte desde un plano conjunto que muestra el cuerpo de Leonardo yaciendo en la piscina, se aleja hacia arriba y hacia los costados, poniéndose más y más amplio, puede interpretarse como *mise en abyme* anticipativa de lo que ocurrirá con Inés que pierde a partir de este momento traumático su vida anterior. La escena se acompaña además por un sonido estridente que se convierte paulatinamente en el canto de un coro. La reproducción de este canto constituye una metalepsis acústica, puesto que se ve al coro en las imágenes siguientes, que pertenecen a la vida de Inés en Buenos Aires. Inés forma parte del coro, pero tiene dificultades para cantar. Explica a su maestro que se había hecho examinar pero que los exámenes no habían revelado nada y que finalmente había ido a un psiquiatra pero que no tomaba las pastillas que éste le había dado porque le daban pesadillas. El maestro le da sus propias pastillas que lleva a mano, gesto que repite el de Leonardo en el avión y que indica que la medicación con ansiolíticos, analgésicos y antidepresivos se ha vuelto algo normal y corriente.

En la próxima escena, también adaptada del primer capítulo de la novela, Inés sueña que Leonardo abre los ojos en la piscina y se despierta asustada en la bañera; la vecina toca en la puerta y se queja del ruido de los tacos que le habían impedido dormir durante toda la noche. En las grabaciones de Inés aparecen ruidos extraños para los que nadie encuentra una explicación, hasta que una actriz le menciona la existencia de los prófugos que entran a través de los sueños. Primero se escuchan, después se dejan ver y se acercan. "Y cuando menos lo esperas, se apoderan de vos" (00:46:55). Contrario a la novela, estos seres transgreden entonces



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aquí acústicamente el universo de los sueños, y hay que alabar el diseño de sonido de Guido Berenblum, conocido por las películas de Lucrecia Martel.

El prófugo resulta posteriormente ser Alberto, un músico que trabaja para el coro, quien se le acerca en una fiesta de un modo gracioso, bailando de un modo especial (00:49:50).

Img. 1: El prófugo (2020): El prófugo Alberto.

Pero de repente está sustituido por el fantasma de Leonardo (00:51:20):

Img. 2: El prófugo (2020): El fantasma de Leonardo.



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Puesto que la música de la fiesta desaparece en estos momentos y se transforma en una especie de eco extradiegético, el espectador implícito piensa que se trata de una visión de Inés, que dura poco, porque 'Leonardo' es sustituido después de algunos segundos por otro bailarín y la música de la fiesta vuelve en el nivel intradiegético.

Inés empieza a enamorarse de Alberto, pero sigue teniendo pesadillas: durante su sueño algo con forma de víbora se le acerca desde los pies debajo de la sábana (00:59:03), y ella se despierta asustada. Un colega, el sonidista Nelson, trata de sacarle esta 'cosa' con una suerte de escáner, pero cuando Inés participa en un concierto del coro, ve otra vez al fantasma de Leonardo que se sienta en la fila detrás de su madre y Alberto (1:05:00). Ella canta remal y sale corriendo asustada.

En la siguiente escena, su madre cuchichea con Alberto desde el baño cuando Inés se despierta. La madre – congenialmente interpretada por Cecilia Roth – parece tener más problemas psíquicos que la propia Inés. Ahora duda si debería darle aún más pastillas, pero Alberto se lo desaconseja. Inés llama a Adela, quien le dice que debe entrar en el sueño y quitarse al prófugo de encima "antes de que pase algo peor" (01:10:00). Sigue dándole instrucciones. El colega, que serviría de guía, debe acostarse a su lado en una cama, y tras conectarse con un cable debe tratar de soñar[24]. Inés tiene una pesadilla, de la cual se despierta con los golpecitos de Alberto, quien la había encontrado en el cuarto. Ella le pregunta cómo sabía que estaba allí y pregunta por Nelson, que ha desaparecido, a lo que Alberto contesta que ni siquiera lo conoce. Al día siguiente otro sonidista sustituye a Nelson y no sabe nada de él tampoco. Adela le dice que se había quedado al otro lado (01:17:00) y le aconseja que permita entrar al prófugo, porque parece que quiere quedarse con ellos. Adela da en el clavo al reconocer que Inés se había enamorado del prófugo.

Mientras regresa a casa, Inés habla por el celular con su madre, pero justo cuando abre la puerta la ve allí sin teléfono y sin hablar y tiene un aspecto muy raro (01:19:00):

24 Esta situación adapta la escena de la novela en la que Inés y Nelson se acuestan para entrar soñando en el cerco.



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Img. 3: El prófugo (2020): La madre prófuga.

Inés se da cuenta de que no es su madre y la amenaza con una plancha ardiente para que se vaya. En este momento irrumpe la vecina Nancy, pero ella solo ve a Inés con la plancha en la mano – porque Marta, la madre, ha desaparecido, como un fantasma –. Después Inés se enfrenta a Alberto, acusándole de ser un prófugo, al igual que Leonardo y que la señora que dice ser su madre (01:23:00). Ella le pide que se vaya, pero Alberto le dice que la ama y le pregunta por qué no se puede quedar, que hay lugar para los dos (01:24:00). Se besan y ella se le entrega. Vuelve al coro a cantar sin problema, y cuando la cámara enfoca su cara se nota que tiene un ojo marrón y otro azul. Cabe interpretar este final de dos maneras: el cambio del color de sus ojos puede significar que ella se haya convertido asimismo en un prófugo, o, siguiendo las palabras de Alberto, que el prófugo haya logrado entrar en ella, pero que 'compartan' el espacio[25]. La primera interpretación es más cercana al final siniestro de la novela, puesto que Inés comete allí asesinatos atroces dignos de un prófugo antes de suicidarse y finalmente triunfará el mal. Ya que ambas interpretaciones fantásticas son posibles, y que la película carece de una solución, se confirma nuestra modelización de lo fantástico como ambigüedad entre dos realidades narrativas igualmente plausibles, pero que se excluyen mutuamente.[26]

25 Esta segunda interpretación corresponde, asimismo, a la opinión de la propia directora, que compartió conmigo en un e-mail [15.02.2020].

26 Cf. Schlickers (con la colaboración de Vera Toro): *La narración perturbadora*, p. 280–287.



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La crítica alemana, que surgió debido a la participación de la película en la Berlinale del año 2020, no captó nada de todo eso porque ignoró la referencia, repetida en el festival por Natalia Meta, hacia el hipotexto literario de Feiling. De ahí que los críticos concluyeran que los prófugos simbolizan muchas cosas: "estrés, traumas, normas sociales que se imponen y se insertan. Pero si caben tantos sentidos, al fin y al cabo no importa ninguno", juzga Bauer en su reseña nefasta y narcisista. [27] La crítica argentina, por el contrario, fue mucho más positiva y la de Diego Lerer (2020) dio en el clavo:

> *El prófugo* no llega a crear del todo un mundo paralelo en el que Inés vive sus posibles fantasías, sino que prefiere mezclarlas dentro del mundo real, haciendo que de a poco su realidad se fracture, empezando por el sonido. Ese, quizás, sea el gran hallazgo de la historia: preferir expresar las posibilidades de lo fantástico a través del sonido, de voces y ruidos interiores que solo pueden ser captados por equipos de alta tecnología. Cuando la película entre de lleno en un universo, digamos, alternativo, lo expresará de manera sonora más que desde lo visual.[28]

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27 Jakob Bauer: "Die Eindringlinge verharren im Trockensex", en: *rbb24,* 20.02.2020, bit.ly/38qZ1U7 (01.07.2023) (libre traducción mía). El artículo ya no está en línea debido a un periodo de conservación limitado para las contribuciones de la radiodifusión pública. Si está interesado, póngase en contacto con el rbb para obtener el PDF.

28 Diego Lerer: "Berlinale 2020. Crítica de 'El prófugo', de Natalia Meta", en: *Micropsia,* 21.02.2020, bit.ly/2MG0cGB (01.07.2023).



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# In Search for Hell Beyond the Fantastic: The Untimely Remnants of Modern Progress in David Lynch's New Mexico.

*Ojo con el ojo numeroso de la bomba*
*que se desata bajo el hongo vivo.*
*Con el fulgor del hombre no vidente, ojo y ojo.*

Oscar Hahn

## I.

The following essay is an experimental encounter between French writer and theorist Jean Louis Schefer and American filmmaker David Lynch. One could argue that the former wrote 'theoretical poetry' while the latter filmed 'poetic cinema' thus becoming echoes of each other's oeuvres. Affected by similar images, their work is densely populated by figurative and literal monsters which, in an always untimely manner, put into crisis the notion of spectatorship, consciousness, and time – specially a time unbound, and therefore always operating outside chronometrical measures. Furthermore, it is through these notions that the question of the fantastic also arises, yet it arises as a new problem and under the guise of a new spectacle, perhaps beyond Todorov's structural universe. It is in this sense that both Lynch's *Twin Peaks* and Schefer's writings are part of a novel poetic vision[1] that – laden with the crises of history – remains open and structurally unclassifiable.

## II.

In his book *The Ordinary Man of Cinema*, Jean Louis Schefer argues that when we go to the cinema, we enter a darkness in which we lose our

1 Vision: for they either write or present characters who watch over the viewer, as opposed to having a viewer that watches over the characters who appear onscreen.



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center, for a kind of ghostly existence – or a transparent sleeper – leans in upon our dreams like a vampire who takes the place of our bodies. The vampire or the ghost is the moving image through which the spectator is "taken up in [a] new freedom to watch something of themselves that has never taken place: this paradoxically teaches them their memory"[2]. And thus, by means of this cinematic machine, a "new world can live within me and, there, defy time".[3] Interestingly, Schefer's pondering regarding the ontology of cinema seems to find its narrative and aesthetic counterpart in David Lynch's uncanny figure of the Giant – or Fireman – from *Twin Peaks'* dreamworld. This figure makes its first appearance in the eighth episode of the original series by materializing in Agent Cooper's room as a kind of ghost or vision from an invisible beyond: i.e., as Cooper lies dying from a recent gunshot, it whispers to him the riddles – or clues – that will help him solve the mystery of Laura Palmer's murder. In that crucial moment, the Giant seems to turn into Schefer's transparent sleeper, looking back at a spectator who cannot react or talk, replacing its body with images, vision, and flashes of light. Here, both Cooper and us-the-viewers are only left with contemplation, spectatorship, and a mesmerized dribbling in the face of images that seem unfathomable yet oddly intimate – as Schefer writes: "I will die so far from images, so far from touching them, so far from their light: I am certainly all of their reality".[4]

These images present to us an unrecognizable otherness, an otherness that will take the form of a master temporality who looks back at us, just like the Giant looks back at Cooper from a luminous above. Their luminosity is of course the ray of light that traverses the dust and darkness of a blind room, allowing the viewer to inhabit a kind of threshold where the unthinkable in thought suddenly appears as an image that refuses to be decoded in a rational or conscious manner. It is not a coincidence that in episode eight of *Twin Peaks* the Log Lady utters the following questions: a.) "Why are some things kept from our vision?" And b.) "Is life a puzzle?" Just like the Giant, she is giving Agent Cooper clues, yet these clues are always formulated as enigmas – Cooper understands this very well, letting that other master temporality to take hold of him, however,

2 Jean Louis Schefer: *The Ordinary Man of Cinema,* translated by Max Cavitch, Los Angeles 2016, p. 115.
3 Schefer: The Ordinary Man of Cinema, p. 115.
4 Ibid., p. 129.



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1st Image: Twin Peaks (1990–1991): Luminous Giant's visit to agent Cooper.

the viewer is more of a skeptic – an offspring of modern science – and therefore often frustrated by the unruly mystery of the series. Perhaps here lies David Lynch's humor as well as genius: i.e., in structuring the unsolvable mystery of time[5] through the coordinates of a murder-mystery, and consequently making us think that it is possible to reach the center of the T.V. illusion that he himself had created.[6] As Schefer states: "I will never reach the center of that illusion… because its world is composed by affects, not signification".[7] It is thus that we become the experimental – and not the thinking – being of a spectacle, a spectacle which is first and foremost "a private pact with an unexpressed part of ourselves".[8]

We could argue that *Twin Peaks* is like an anti-detective story, in the sense that it is not the detectives who look *for* (as well as *at*) the clues, but it is the clues who look *for* – and consequently *at* – the detectives. Most importantly, in this reversal of the gaze, the series itself becomes a seer, a big open eye directed towards the audience: we are being looked at by these images and therefore our dread and desires – especially the desire of

5 I.e., the same mystery that drove Gilles Deleuze to write his books on cinema (*Cinema I: The Movement Image* and *Cinema II: The Time Image*) and to painstakingly study Friedrich Nietzsche, Baruch Spinoza, Gottfried Leibniz, Jorge Luis Borges, etc.

6 Which seems to defy, for example, Christian Metz's narrative structures, leaning on a non-chronological temporality instead of a linear one – similar, one might argue, to Jorge Luis Borges' stories, e.g., *The Garden of Forking Paths,* or Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo,* for comparison.

7 Ibid., p. 19.

8 Ibid., p. 12.



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2nd Image: Twin Peaks (1990–1991): Log Lady's puzzle.

closure and the dread of incoherence – are being read through the screen, disregarded, and then replaced by the reality and temporality of a world that has both consumed and protracted our bodies. One could argue that we are no longer inhabiting the town of Twin Peaks but, on the contrary, that Twin Peaks is inhabiting us – us-the-viewers –. It is then, through this small town's otherworldly creatures and its flashes of light, that this world begins to create its own Mnemosyne within us, that is, its own special time attached to a very peculiar world-memory. For us, the spectators, this feels as if something had crept inside of our bodies and played with our wires without our knowledge, like what happens in Kafka's stories: first, we know something is out of place; second, we try to understand it and fix it; third, due to our own incapacity we fall into partial despair; and finally, when despair fades away because of habituation, we give in to the horror of ignorance.

Unsurprisingly, both Lynch and Schefer are – and were – avid readers of Kafka, in fact, the latter takes the following extract from Kafka's diaries to expand on his idea about the always gazing cinematic image: "A segment had been cut out of the back of his head. The sun, and the whole world within it, peep in. It makes him nervous; it distracts him from his work, and moreover it irritates him that he should be the one to be disbarred from the spectacle".[9] One is left to wonder: am I not also this creature who is missing a segment of her head through which images creep in like vine? Furthermore, what is this unhinged temporality through which an invisible otherness seems to unfold within and in front of me, yet refusing classification?

9 Franz Kafka: *The Diaries of Franz Kafka 1914–1923*, translated by Martin Greenberg, England 1949, p. 192–193.



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III.

For Todorov, Kafka remains the mystery who surpasses the fantastic because it misses one of the essential aspects of its narrative structure: i.e., the feeling of hesitation. He finds in the Kafkaesque narrative a "contradictory movement" that obeys neither to the uncanny nor to the marvelous, but to an *adaptation* to the atmosphere of the supernatural. By quoting Sartre, he suggests that in Kafka's world the only fantastic object is man-as-nature or man-as-society.[10] It is within this discourse that we can ask the following question: is there anything more ordinary than the men and women who sit in front of a television or a computer screen to watch their favorite series? Here is where Lynch comes in, for he seizes this ordinary experience and turns it around or, moreover, turns it against the spectator by introducing elements that surpass the properly fantastic as well as the properly entertaining. We are left only with one guide, and that is Agent Cooper – he is the Virgil of our televised journey to hell, and he asks from us only one thing, that is, to follow him without hesitation into the unknown, for we – just like Dante – cannot be certain if there is a way out from these gruesome images. This is also how we learn to *adapt* to a world of strangeness that is also a world of suffering and unexpected elation. Again, and by turning around the experience of entertainment, what *Twin Peaks* seems to be doing is communicating with us at a different level, at a level that is above all a blind spot in our individual and social consciousness.[11]

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10 Tzvetan Todorov: *The Fantastic: A structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, translated by Richard Howard, Ithaca 1975, p. 173.

11 The Lodge is perhaps the epitome of this imagistic communication, for it is a kind of heterotopia within the series – untraceable in terms of rational coordinates, it presents to both us and Agent Cooper a twisted movement in which everything seems to go backwards, including speech, and where thus a struggle between progression and regression gives rise to a heterogenous temporality, haunted by a multiplicity of past and future events. This is why it is only possible to access The Lodge in dreams, for through them we become less and more than subjects, always in excess with respect to our present selves and thus far-removed from our individual and historical center. When Agent Cooper enters this kind of heterotopia, he can only enter it as a kind of otherness, as a stranger that he himself has trouble recognizing in the morning while drinking his 'damn fine coffee'. And so, this spot remains blind both to Cooper's consciousness and to us-conscious-viewers, for a literal doubling or splitting takes place in The Lodge, making newer and older versions of the character appear, somehow mimicking the trope of the 'evil twin'.



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3rd Image: Twin Peaks (1990–1991):Twin Peaks' Lodge.

IV.

If we now move to *Twin Peaks: The Return*, we will find ourselves placed in the depths of a sometimes unbearable slowness. It is as if the series knew about our innermost desires and acted against them, dragging us through a deserted narrative that does nothing to clear the mysteries of the former *Twin Peaks.* Here the split or doubling of Agent Cooper is pushed to an extreme, transforming him into two odd anti-characters – one good and one evil – who, above all, fail to drive the plot forward. Certainly, in a world of readymade entertainment, Lynch seems to be swimming against this current through images that are powered by an engine of a different (and extremely strange) temporality. The result is that for all those who were expecting a nostalgic return in the vein of a remake or a sequel, they seem to encounter just the opposite: i.e., in Lynch's world neither the characters nor the spectators can recognize themselves as who they were in the past, for *Twin Peaks* has indeed return, but – and as Friedrich Nietzsche would argue – it has returned as difference itself, or as an unfathomable spectacle disguised as the missing part of an unsolved mystery.

I believe that the heart of the third series lies in its eighth episode,[12] for in it we encounter once again the luminous power of the Giant and, along with it, the ultimate split or doubling of forms in a montage of color, light, and sound that recreate in the most striking manner the event of nuclear fission. This episode unfolds within different historical periods, yet the crux of it seems to be July 16, 1945, situated in the planes of the New Mexican desert. This is the day and place of the Trinity Test

12 It seems that the eighth episode from *Twin Peaks: The Return* was meant to mirror the eighth episode from the original *Twin Peaks,* using the figure of the Giant, or Firemen, as an axis for the doubling of reality/time.



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carried out by North America as part of the Manhattan Project, in which a nuclear weapon was for the first time detonated. Perhaps one of the biggest industrial as well as scientific projects that North America had ever built, it consisted in a conglomerate of different technologies and trades – i.e., builders, engineers, physicists, photographers – that both knowingly and unknowingly traced the path of modern progress. It seems to be here that Lynch places the beginning of a cleavage or a caesura that gives rise to a modern hell populated by ill-intentioned creatures. By mimicking the long-lasting and invisible effects of nuclear decay, these creatures will refuse to die, becoming the ghosts (or specters) that keep returning as an insatiable darkness. If we borrow Georges Didi-Huberman's terminology, we could argue that these are "survivals" or "residues" that persist in a return that "does not constitute knowledge" but, on the contrary, which presents itself as the unthought or as "an unconscious aspect of time".[13]

Alas, is this not the reason why we fail to recognize ourselves as the viewers that we once were while, at the same time, we suffer from an anxiety that comes from those images that return in an untimely manner? These images, filled with characters who are also fissured, take the shape of *dybbuks*[14] that keep coming back precisely because they cannot forget yet who, in that very haunting, become unrecognizable to both them and us-the-viewers. This is what Hamlet would have called 'a time out of joint', for once that disjointedness takes place, the unconscious time of phantoms begins to haunt our world as well as our history, making everything appear strange by surreptitiously introducing in us those images that lie behind the red curtains of our individual and social consciousness. A very specific spectacle takes place here: i.e., the spectacle of a struggle that encompasses a time that wants to move forward, always mounted on an idea of progress, but which is bound to a kind of eternal backwardness. Is this not also the peculiar temporality that unfolds in-between the velvet curtains of the famous and unplaceable Lodge from *Twin Peaks*? In other words, that strange heterotopia in which the characters not only talk and

13 Georges Didi-Huberman: *The Surviving Image: Phantoms of Time and Time of Phantoms: Aby Warburg's History of Art,* translated by Harvey L. Mendelsohn, University Park 2017, p. 12.

14 From Jewish Folklore: "…a disembodied human spirit that, because of former sins, wanders restlessly until it finds a haven in the body of a living person". Definition taken from *The Encyclopedia Britannica*.



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move backwards but in which, through that very movement, the center of their individuality finally cracks like the nucleus of an atom.

4th Image: Twin Peaks. The Return (2017): The birth of evil after nuclear testing in New Mexico's Desert.

And thus, in the new series, New Mexico becomes a new kind of Lodge as well as a new kind of spectrality, yet, as Fredric Jameson points out, a spectrality that not only talks of a past that is "very much alive and at work" in our present, but one which reminds us that "the living present is scarcely as sufficient as it claims to be" and "that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us".[15] This is perhaps what Lynch's New Mexico stands for, that is, as a kind of anachronic heterotopia[16] that, in its striking history of nuclear destruction, reminds us that there is always a darkness willing to betray our best and most rational intentions. It is also for this exceptional reason that *Twin Peaks* and its images can only communicate with that part of ourselves that we fail to access consciously, for it hides in the creases of

15 Fredric Jameson: "Marx's Purloined Letter", in: Michael Spinker (ed.): *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's Specters of Marx,* New York 2008, p. 26–67, here p. 39.

16 The concept comes from Michel Foucault's work and can be found in a transcription of one of his lectures: Des Espace Autres, published by the French journal *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité* in 1984.



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our quotidian brain as a kind of "impossible self-knowledge".[17] As Didi-Huberman argues, when we are confronted with images we cannot trace their exact boundaries, for they are the result of provisional movements – historical, anthropological, and psychological – that stare at us from a distance and continue to stare far beyond.[18] Just like Lynch's rendering of the nuclear bomb, images seem to always be an energy-bearing and dynamic *moment* that liberates a time unthought and which, in this very *moment*, swallows the spectator's ground and blurs the boundaries of its social and individual memory. What replaces these memories is that other master temporality, always oozing from a boundless and ghostly force, which has the power to awake in us an unrecognizable double.

5th Image: Twin Peaks. The Return (2017): Older Laura Palmer in Twin Peaks' Lodge.

We awake as that unconscious otherness that is also being looked at by the remnants of past images that do not move progressively or chronologically but, on the contrary, which go back and forth like waves of an unbeknownst interiority. Time is thus out of joint, yet not only for the characters that we watch onscreen, but for us-the-spectators who sit in front of the television as ordinary men and women and who – by chance – are taken through a Kafkaesque hell that seems to exceed the boundaries of the properly fantastic or, for that matter, of any narrative structure. Lynch, of course, does this masterfully through the figure of the Giant, constructing through and around him a world of historically fissured images. These images will be pregnant with a time unbound and

17 The expression comes from Serge Daney, and it is taken from an essay he wrote for the Trafic Magazine: Serge Daney: "Le Travelling de Kapo", in: *Trafic* (1992), 4, p. 5–19, p. 8.

18 Didi-Huberman: The Surviving Image, p. 19.



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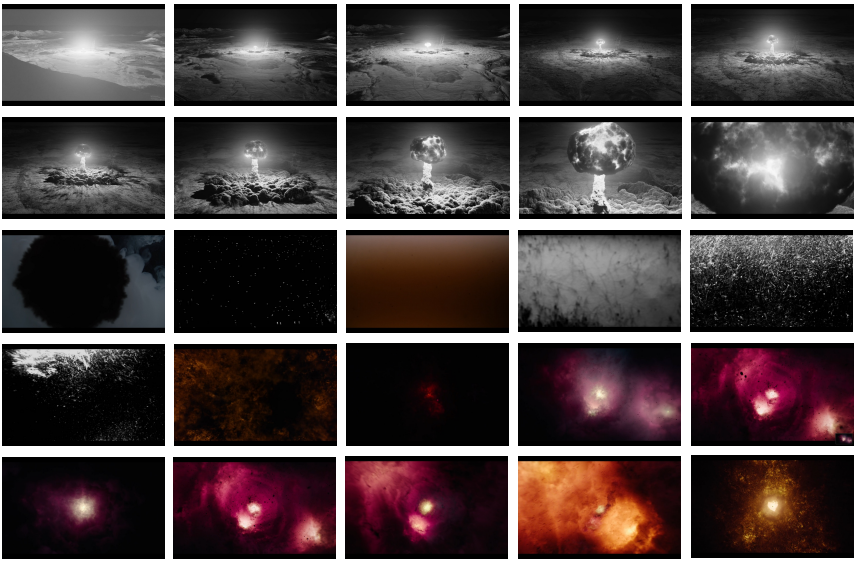

6th Image: Twin Peaks. The Return (2017): Lynch's rendering of New Mexico's atomic bomb testing.

a difference that conceals itself under the guise of sameness, just like the doppelgangers who appear onscreen: i.e., they seem to be whole individuals, yet they are split vectors with split drives, laden with either dark or luminous energy, which manage to crack the ground on which we base and construct our certainties. These are the atomic and aesthetic embodiments of the word *heimlich* – with all its semantic range and complexity – who come to tell us a story/history that has no center, no beginning, and no end point. We could argue that it is in this sense that the Giant has the power to traverse the metaphysical screen of history, for he is also a maker of doubles, watching us-spectators from a place unknown, feeding us the 'good images', such as the undead Laura Palmer, who we so desperately want to re-encounter. He sees us in our despair and in our joy, as well as in our hubris and humility, perhaps reminding us that there is no such thing as a solidity or a density of the present – just like there is no solidity in the return of Laura Palmer, for even if she were to come back, the world around her has already been ruined, i.e., it would still be the world in which she was murdered as a teenager.



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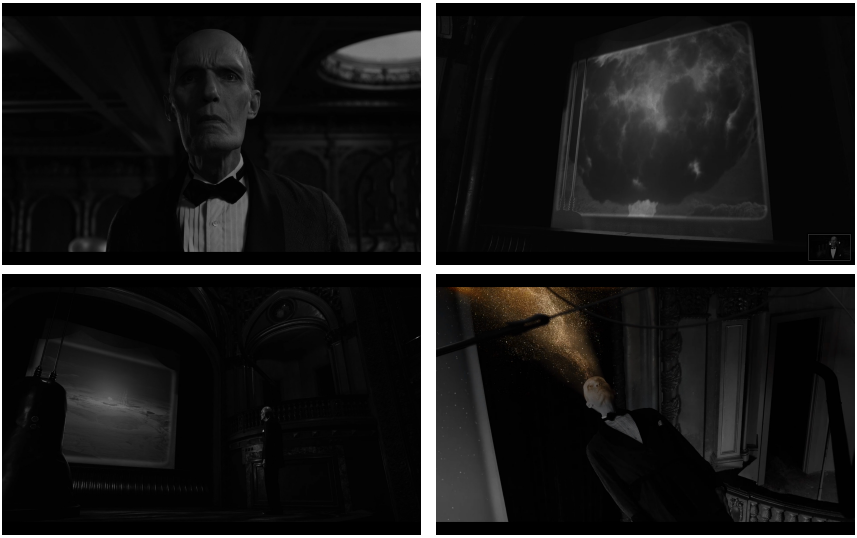

7th Image: Twin Peaks. The Return (2017): Luminous Giant's projection of images.

V.

On July 16th, 1945, there was an 'Optics group' in charge of observing and analyzing the space-time relationships as well as the light emitted by The Trinity explosion. In a file of The Energy Research Administration, there is a long account of the spectacle that took place in the New Mexican desert and which – precisely with the help of the 'Optics group' – reads as a narrative very similar to Lynch's cinematic rendering of the event. To have had spectators was essential to the development of the experiment yet, in an interesting doubling of such an account, *Twin Peaks: The Return* becomes the metaphysical reoccurrence of that archived and long-buried gaze. If the fantastic as such is a way to breach an otherness, or a kind of license for transgression,[19] then *Twin Peaks* seems to take that license to look back at us through the transgression of a past that could only see progression or, in other words, that believed hardheartedly in rational, in-

19 Bliss Cua Lim: *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*, Durham 2009, p. 112.



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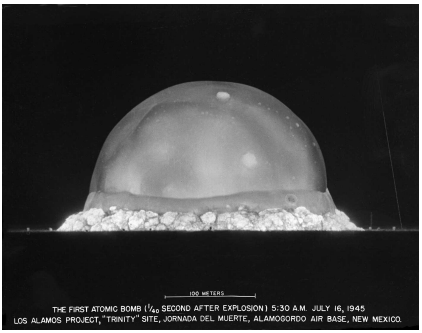
dustrial, and scientific invention[20]. However, Lynch also twists the genre by leaving the remnants of that broken nuclei to haunt the spectators and, in that bold move of non-closure, it becomes a weapon in its own right: the weaponized image of a world unseen yet very much felt, alive, and ready to betray us once more.



8th Image: Real footage of atomic bomb testing in New Mexico's Dessert.

As Schefer states, cinema – and in this case, television – can always open itself to a temporality unthought and show the mechanic and oneiric phantasms that have both been written and forgotten in history. This is also how the image has the power to become "the public repetition of an intimate dream, or a mirror that deforms time"[21] for the spectators, or for the Optic-creatures that watch eagerly from a place of relative comfort. Yet, that place of comfort can always turn into a kind of vulnerable and impossible self-knowledge, or a state in which an uncommunicable experience of time can make its entrance into the dark and unconscious

20 This reminds us of Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove* (1964): A kind of Frankenstein's experiment, Dr. Strangelove is a hybrid – half-human and half-machine, he seems to be haunted by the remnants of a love-affair gone awry. He is the material child of a past that believed in technology as pure progress, and thus a creature that lives with the certainty that the future is the only way out of an already ruined present. His comedic appearance in Kubrick's film also reminds us that it is never good to fall into despair when the world is about to end, and that our last resort still stands as a type of futurity where a few men and women can reproduce in a bunker underneath the earth while they wait for radiation to clean itself up. I would argue that Dr. Strangelove is not an evil man or machine but, on the contrary, a man that professes a strange kind of love: i.e., a love for destruction and, perhaps most importantly, for spectatorship.

21 Jean Louis Schefer: *Du Monde et du Mouvement des Images,* Paris 1997, p. 5, translation is mine.



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room of the viewer. These, finally, seem to be the images that watch over and beyond us.

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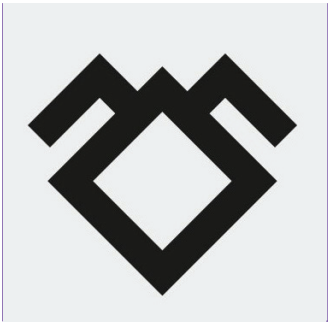
# Hacia una crítica latinoamericana de artefactos audiovisuales: El delirio narrativo de *Twin Peaks* (Temporada 3)

## Introducción

> Para mí es interesante trabajar sobre las aporías pensando que las aporías no son lo que condena un discurso, sino lo que señala precisamente sus objetivos fundamentales. Creo que la investigación no está para dar al habla errante del herético la arena del terruño y la evidencia de la relación de una tierra con su cielo. Si la tradición crítica suele fracasar respecto a su vocación es porque siempre ha intentado que su objeto confiese.
>
> Jacques Rancière



Img. 1: Símbolo de la cueva del búho en la serie Twin Peaks.

Desde un punto de vista estético, la crítica es un ejercicio de la sensibilidad que supone una traducción de lo percibido en una película o serie hacia el lenguaje escrito. Un primer referente del pensamiento crítico y teórico sobre el fenómeno artístico está presente en el estetólogo mexicano Alberto Híjar, que encuentra preguntas para comprender de manera práctica las manifestaciones artísticas como fuerzas disruptivas de transformación social. En su texto "Los torcidos caminos de la utopía estética" (2013), hace una genealogía del andar teórico de los juicios estéticos y la constante dialéctica entre utopía y estética en la modernidad. Después de encontrar puntos de contacto entre Hume, Kant, Marcuse o Schiller, concluye su texto de esta manera: "Sirva todo lo anterior como masa propositiva para dar cuenta de una estética latinoamericana sin tradiciones teóricas propias,



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pero una rica tradición ideológica asumida por artistas y dirigentes revolucionarios a lo que hay que dar lugar hasta hacer de la utopía un proyecto de lucha necesaria para vivir mejor".[1] El lugar que le asigna Alberto Híjar a la teoría estética latinoamericana es una aún por hacerse, utópica, en el sentido de comprobar los deseos de los investigadores para formalizar los juicios y reconocer una dimensión estética como portadora de sentidos y sentimientos transformadores en la sociedad.

En paralelo a la inquietud de Alberto Híjar, tenemos a Lauro Zavala, en su texto "La teoría del cine en Nuestra América" (2010), quien pone énfasis en los problemas que aquejan a los estudios sobre cine en el continente americano. La insularidad entre los países de la región afecta a los estudios sobre historia del cine; la insularidad con el exterior afecta la teoría sobre cine, y la tradición historiográfica por encima de las aproximaciones humanísticas afecta a la crítica cinematográfica.[2] Las tres coordenadas: crítica, historia y teoría enmarcan al cine pero también a otras disciplinas: "Estas características han marcado la naturaleza epistemológica de la región, y son compartidas con gran parte de los estudios humanísticos, especialmente en los campos que le resultan más próximos, como la fotografía, las artes escénicas, las artes visuales, la musicología y (sobre todo) la literatura".[3] Después de examinar cada coordenada en su texto, el autor afirma: "en América Latina todo está por hacerse".[4]

Esta inquietud por hacer una crítica desde el continente supone revalorar las tradiciones hechas por los latinoamericanos y poner en práctica los fundamentos que nos legaron en los análisis, la mayoría de las veces con un carácter de ajuste y ensayo que le corresponde a cada investigador llevar a cabo. Entendemos el quehacer crítico como un camino que se inicia por 'una crítica viva' que se desplaza hacia elementos de 'carácter intuitivo', hasta llegar al 'momento de la valoración' de las obras a interpretar. El sujeto crítico

> [e]s hecho por el esfuerzo de comprender, para interpretar y explicar; pero aquellas etapas que integren en su itinerario, que presupone, para estar completo, un elemento perceptivo inicial, un elemento intelectual medio, un elemento

1 Alberto Híjar Serrano: "Los torcidos caminos de la utopía estética", en: *La praxis estética. Dimensión estética libertaria*, Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes y Literatura, México 2013, p. 50.

2 Cf. Lauro Zavala: "La teoría del cine en Nuestra América", en: *Revista Archipiélago* 18 (2010), p. 42–47, p. 42.

3 Idém.

4 Idém.



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> voluntario final. Percibir, comprender, juzgar […]. El aparato analítico de la investigación es puesto en movimiento a servicio de la receptividad individual, que busca en la obra una fuente de emoción y termina evaluando su significado.[5]

Se considera al crítico como aquel que pone en tensión a los argumentos en un movimiento continuo

> […] es necesario un movimiento amplio y constante entre lo general y lo particular, la síntesis y el análisis, la erudición y el gusto. Es necesaria una propensión para integrar contradicciones, inevitables cuando se considera, al mismo tiempo, el significado histórico del conjunto y el carácter singular de los autores. Es necesario sentir, a veces que un autor y una obra pueden ser y no ser alguna cosa, siendo dos cosas opuestas simultáneamente, porque las obras vivas constituyen una tensión incesante entre los contrastes del espíritu y de la sensibilidad.[6]

Las inquietudes de Alberto Híjar y Lauro Zavala para concretar una (o varias) teoría(s) estética(s) latinoamericana(s) se unen a la necesidad de una revalorización de las formas contextuales de producción de valor que subyacen a las categorías de análisis. Estas categorías o términos muchas veces se dan por hecho y difícilmente se ponen bajo examen. A continuación se propone un ejercicio de análisis y propuesta crítica para abordar un artefacto audiovisual como la serie dirigida por David Lynch: *Twin Peaks*.

## Una crítica latinoamericana del delirio narrativo en *Twin Peaks* (temporada 3)

> Lo que no quiero decir para nada es que semejantes filmes sean completamente atípicos o terriblemente difíciles ni que se instalen en lo nunca visto. Pueden tener toda la apariencia de una película comercial, y hasta pueden serlo de veras; pero para decirlo sin demora, tales objetos son filmes que no permiten responder a la pregunta: ¿de qué habla este filme? Serge Daney distinguía dichos filmes de los productos de la industria invocando la diferencia entre un verdadero viaje y una estadía organizada. Lo que vuelve único al auténtico viaje son los accidentes mágicos, los cambios de opinión, los descubrimientos, los hallazgos inexplicables, además de las pérdidas de tiempo, tiempo perdido y recuperado al término del film.
>
> Raúl Ruiz

5 Antonio Candido: "Introducción", en: *Formación de la literatura brasileña. Momentos decisivos 1750-1880*. Traducción Jorge Ruedas de la Serna, Vol. 1, FFyL-UNAM, México 2014 [1959], p. 35.

6 Idém., p. 34.



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Los vicios de percepción narrativa que puede tener un espectador le deben mucho a la consideración típica del inicio-nudo-desenlace. Esta tríada puede intercambiar sus posiciones y aún considerarse un relato que encuentra su dirección gracias a un argumento. Si los componentes inicio-nudo-desenlace están en posiciones distintas, es del común considerarlos un *delirio narrativo*, pero basta que uno o varios críticos reacomoden los componentes para verbalizar la ficción y le den forma a través de su punto de vista. El *delirio narrativo*, al que quiero referirme mantiene una distancia considerable a las variaciones que puede contener la pregunta: ¿cómo juzgamos el sentido de una narración? Para situarnos en un lugar que no necesariamente incumbe al arco dramático, y sí a un modo de experiencia audiovisual, que descansa en una síntesis entre el acto de contar y el conocimiento que se pueda tener de contemplar ese acto.

El crítico mexicano Jorge Ayala Blanco ha enfatizado en distintas conferencias y entrevistas, cómo "las historias sólo sirven para desbordarlas, siempre he estado en contra del cine que ilustra un argumento".[7] En el libro *El cine actual, delirios narrativos* (2018) escribe: "Una de las ideas que desarrollé en uno de mis libros sobre el cine actual era la idea de los delirios formales, las películas ya no narran, deliran relatos, empezando por las películas genéricas que son delirios en sí mismos".[8] Al menos dos consideraciones importantes yacen entre las comillas de la primera cita. Primera consideración: las historias sirven o funcionan, y para Jorge Ayala Blanco, funcionan o sirven para desbordarlas. Dos: estar en contra del argumento de la película es una posición estratégica de valoración, cuya percepción y juicio no miran solo el argumento y sí una experiencia alejada alegóricamente de él. Ambas consideraciones no son contradictorias, sino contrapuntísticas, atañen a una disputa por la fuerza del sentido contenido en la realización práctica (la película) del lenguaje cinematográfico. Recupero la palabra 'desbordar' y la posición 'estar en contra de un argumento', para llevar agua a mis molinos de viento.

La experiencia no es un hecho del pasado que se utilice para entender un presente, o una técnica para elaborar y mecanografiar en una vivencia el saber ya conocido. La experiencia es una síntesis de vivencias que permi-

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7 Carlos Alberto Rodríguez Gómez: "Delirios y figuras", en: *Correspondencias,* otoño (2017), revista en línea: correspondenciascine.com/2017/11/delirios-y-figuras-por-carlos-rgo/ (24.01.2023).

8 Jorge Ayala Blanco: *El cine actual, delirios narrativos*, Centro Universitario de Estudios Cinematográficos, México 2018, p. 15.



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ten vivir sin necesariamente conocer, esto es, sin pasar por un lenguaje lógico o matemático, pero que puede contener esas características, y de manera simultánea, poseer aquello que en otro tiempo fue mágico o mítico y que ahora llamamos azar.[9] Entonces, la experiencia atañe tanto a la razón que organiza una realidad y al azar que acontece en los fenómenos. En esa experiencia las historias pueden desbordarse o contenerse. Ayala Blanco usa desbordar, que indica un adornar o ejecutar alguna figura sobre la materia. Esa figura sucede en la experiencia, gracias a la alegoría. La alegoría sirve para convocar imágenes, no ayudan necesariamente a vivir, pero sí a unir experiencias.

En el desbordar se muestra el azar de todo acto comunicativo, además del resultado lúdico que encuentra los signos del mensaje que se quiere actualizar. En el caso de una serie como *Twin Peaks* (T3), la experiencia provee de una figura alegórica a la película que vemos, gracias a una síntesis de vivencias que el espectador trae consigo. Pero también gracias al lenguaje cinematográfico y su tradición, y al deseo del autor por concretar una inquietud. Lo que quiero decir es que en muchos capítulos la serie está desbordada o contenida. Hay figuras sobrepuestas en sus imágenes gracias al deseo del director, su forma fílmica y al espectador. Cada uno de estos tres elementos aportan su propia dinámica para conformar las imágenes y el resultado delirante no es exclusivo de uno de ellos, sino una interacción entre las tres instancias: director, forma y espectador.

La sentencia de Ayala Blanco: 'estar en contra de un argumento', va ligado al despropósito visible de una serie como la que me interesa. Para decir que se está en contra del argumento en *Twin Peaks*, por caótico o falto de sentido, al simplificar la polisemia de las imágenes y caer en el riesgo de una univocidad que Lynch no busca reconocer; Lynch nos invita, o mejor aún, nos obliga a olvidar el lenguaje con lenguaje. La narración en *Twin Peaks* está continuamente desbordada, a riesgo de pleonasmo, liberada de propósito y de argumento en sus formas, pero no del deseo del director, ni de la fuerza del espectador. El delirio narrativo es la visión de las figuras en la serie, como el resultado de una experiencia con el audiovisual, con el lenguaje y con nuestros horizontes de sentido.

En *Twin Peaks* resulta que no hay una única coherencia, argumento ni propósito, pero sí hay una síntesis de vivencias, esto es, una experiencia. El espectador, con la fuerza de su mirada, puede interpretar la serie y otor-

9 Cf. Bolívar Echeverría*: Definición de cultura*, Mexico 2010.



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garle una figura alegórica a las imágenes y proveerla de una coherencia. El delirio narrativo está presente cuando se pone en evidencia nuestra confianza por la lógica para contar el motivo de un personaje o un hecho. Incluso cuando una película tiene un arco dramático visible. La serie, en su temporada 3, para contar su argumento, deja a un lado el azar: éste queda desapercibido pero no ausente. El azar aparece en pequeños gestos que aún no alcanzan una lógica de la imagen o la autoridad de un director reconocido. Tal como criticara el cineasta chileno Raúl Ruiz en contra del motivo único de un personaje para realizar sus acciones. Para Ruiz suceden varios motivos simultáneos al principal, y son distintas las maneras de interactuar con las respuestas de esos impulsos. Alguien que se enamora va por su enamorada y no tiene ojos para nadie más; el motivo único da coherencia al argumento de la película. Sin embargo, en el desarrollo del motivo único existen otras fuerzas que pueden eliminarlo, o ponerlo a un lado, para construir una percepción más acaba del hecho narrativo. La serie que no solo cuenta una historia con un motivo único y piensa sus imágenes invita al reacomodo del estándar de narración al que está habituado un espectador.

Recapitulemos. El *delirio narrativo* es la experiencia del cómo vemos y cómo pensamos aquello que nos cuentan. Un delirio puede estar muy bien contado; el caos puede tener momentos de orden y equilibrio, pero no será delirante a menos que sus figuras alegóricas callen o hablen a través de tres instancias: el deseo del espectador, la forma cinematográfica o las intenciones del director. Habría que encontrar en esa tríada el delirio narrativo, aquel que puede desbordar la historia que nos cuenta el director, la interpretación del espectador y el sentido intrínseco de las formas cinematográficas.

Una serie no es verdadera ni falsa respecto a la vida, sino verosímil. Lo verosímil es una mediación. Los finales de las series en sus argumentos son formales, pero aparentes. Las historias no tienen un final; los argumentos de las series sí terminan. Las series acaban formalmente pero sus historias continúan en los críticos que las verbalizan, en el público que las comparte de boca en boca, en las distribuidoras y en los exhibidores que las programan, e incluso inician antes que las películas mismas, cuando el director empieza a idearlas con un equipo, etcétera. El delirio narrativo no puede aprehenderse solamente dentro de los límites del producto narrativo que está proyectado en una historia digerida por el acto de creación del director y del consumo del espectador – o de los modos de enunciación que encuentra el producto gracias a su distribución – . El



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delirio narrativo flota entre el espectador y la pantalla, como el personaje del capítulo 1 de *Twin Peaks* (T3), cuando cuida el cubo de vidrio en espera de que 'algo suceda'.

Si quisiéramos entender lo que vemos en la tercera temporada de *Twin Peaks* (T3) al interpretar las imágenes de cada capítulo, aportaríamos una lógica provisional a la serie. Si llegamos a entender la línea narrativa, bien, tendríamos una figura contenida sobre las imágenes; pero si las imágenes nos parecen desbordadas y abruptas las reacciones de cada uno de los personajes, o disparatado el guion, entonces, estamos situados en la parte azarosa y lúdica de contar una ficción. David Lynch, apuesto, realiza un intento por desautomatizar el cómo contamos nuestras historias, de qué manera las vemos y cómo las explicamos. El cineasta expande el horizonte de interpretación pero no solo para dirigir una comprensión de sentido, sino para incluir al azar y al juego, esto es, para recordar la parte mágica del ser humano y para confrontar la lógica de cómo contamos una historia. Nuestros ojos no son solamente espectadores, también son proyectores, ramas del árbol de la experiencia que trazan entre palabras, imágenes y sonidos aquello que percibimos a través de una dimensión estética, es decir, a todo lo que incumbe a la sensibilidad.

## Algunas conclusiones

El tipo de formato que exige la televisión obligó a tomar riesgos. Había una necesidad de contar una historia pero enmarcada en reglas precisas, Lynch dice:

> En televisión tienen nombres para todo. Como el 'arco' de la historia: dónde va, quién va a hacer qué, todo eso. Y tiene sentido tener un plan. Así que escribimos nuestro arco, pero eso es algo muy poco concreto. Lo realmente divertido es tapar agujeros. Pero el arco satisface a los ejecutivos.[10]

Así como la tríada inicio-nudo-desenlace o el motivo único de Raúl Ruiz tienen lugar en muchas producciones audiovisuales, el delirio narrativo expande la experiencia del espectador hacia territorios donde el sentido no se pierde, solo intercambia posiciones respecto al inicio, nudo o desenlace

10 David Lynch: "De repente, mi casa se convirtió en un árbol de llagas", en: id.: *David Lynch por David Lynch*, Barcelona 1988, p. 249–301, p. 259–260.



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de una historia. Al respecto de las formas de lenguaje cinematográfico que aparecen desbordadas en los capítulos, estas encontraron su propia lógica:

> Había cosas muy extrañas y violentas en *Twin Peaks*, y pasaron. Si no es muy normal, puede colar, pero podría ser que lo 'no muy normal' lo haga incluso más terrorífico e inquietante: ese tipo de cosa para la que [los productores] no tienen un nombre. No está en su manual, así que lo dejan pasar.[11]

La paradoja del delirio narrativo – entendido como una comunicación entre director, forma fílmica y deseo del espectador – es la posibilidad de reconocer en marcos de producción rígidos: reglas sensibles y creativas que son puestas bajo examen en las vivencias de los espectadores. Por eso la serie llegaba a diversos públicos: "¿Por qué los japoneses siguen tan enganchados con *Twin Peaks*? ¿O los alemanes, o los australianos? Simplemente, la serie tenía algo".[12] La síntesis de vivencias es el principal motor para que una obra como *Twin Peaks* encuentre su propio delirio, pero sin olvidar la forma fílmica y la figura del director.

Para terminar, la manera de abordar la serie con ayuda de la expresión 'delirio narrativo', nos ayudó a seguir un camino de análisis y preguntarnos de qué manera nos contamos una historia, de qué forma la vemos y con qué herramientas conceptuales y metodológicas encontramos nuestra propia vivencia en ella. Pusimos en práctica el quehacer crítico, aquel que definimos como: un camino que se inicia por 'una crítica viva' que se desplaza hacia elementos de 'carácter intuitivo', hasta llegar al 'momento de la valoración' de las obras a interpretar.

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11 Idém., p. 284.
12 Idém., p. 261.



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