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Maciej Wieczorek, Joanna Matyjaszczyk & Justyna Fruzińska

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CONTACT gcss.art.journal@gmail.com

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Swarnavel Eswaran Pillai  
*Michigan State University*

**Secularism and Its Discontents: The Moor's Last Sigh and Riot**

The recurrent theme of dropping frontiers in a world which has become increasingly heterogeneous but intolerant is the leitmotif of Sashi Tharoor's *Riot* and Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*. The figure of the Moor and his hybrid genealogy is central to Rushdie's vision, as he reconstructs a syncretic, tolerant Moorish Spain and juxtaposes it with Bombay, his haven of pluralism. He celebrates Nehru's vision of a new Indian nation which, in keeping with the traditions of western modernity, promised to be above religion, clan, and narrow parochial considerations.

With the vanishing of such ideals and hopes, as boundaries and religious communalism are getting intensified these diasporic cosmopolitan writers make a case for a boundless world. Their response is a human subjectivity which transcends color, class, narrow parochialism, tribalism and fundamentalism. Secularism is the very base of their humane approach. This essay, therefore, analyzes the theme of secularism and its discontents, particularly in the context of the coexistence of Hindus and Muslims in India, as it runs through Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* and Tharoor's *Riot* by exploring the various layers of allegories related to pluralism and the critique of fundamentalism in them. Toward this end, it will focus on the recent debates on Indian secularism by scholars to interrogate the relevance of the European model of secularism which argues for the separation of state and religion.

key words: Secularism, Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Sashi Tharoor, State and Religion

Salman Rushdie's *The Moor’s Last Sigh* (1995), and Shashi Tharoor’s *Riot* (2001) share a common ground in espousing the theme of pluralism in contemporary India, particularly in the context of the coexistence of people belonging to different religions, as they set their narratives in its eventful moments against the backdrop of the rise and expansion of the militant Hindu right and its fascistic ambitions. Rushdie’s multi-cultural and multi-religious palimpsest – Bombay, which he reveres as “O Bombay! Prima in Indis! Gateway to India! Star of the East with her face to the west!” (*Moor’s Last Sigh* 372), is violently destroyed and its communal amity shattered by the protracted and vicious riots after the destruction of Babri Masjid in 1993 by the fanatic Hindu right volunteers acting on the insidious designs of their leaders.

Bombay, the microcosm of the Nehruvian promise of secularism, is bombed and blown apart. As Rushdie bemoans, “the idealisms, the innocence, of the first post-Independence age had been blown away, perhaps forever” (*Step Across* 162). The lamentation seen in *The Moor’s Last Sigh* on the erosion and destruction of pluralism runs through *Riot* as well. Shashi Tharoor sets his narrative amidst the events leading to the mammoth procession of the Hindu right volunteers, with the consecrated bricks for the Ram temple, to be built at the disputed site of the sixteenth century Babri Masjid in 1989. As the tragic and misplaced love story of Priscilla with India, and with the much married and conservative District Magistrate Lakshman, unfolds amidst this
turbulence, Tharoor seductively transports us to the nostalgic past and the secular times of Ghazi Miyan and its “composite religiosity.” Lakshman echoes this vision of multi-cultural democracy and pluralism when he tells Priscilla how India “has belied every doomsayer who’s predicted its imminent disintegration” (Tharoor 44), and how it has overcome the divides of language, region, caste, class, and religion through its “resilient democracy.” However, he does not want to romanticize:

Do I make it sound too easy? Believe me, it isn’t. Skulls have been broken over each of these issues. But the basic principle is simple indeed. Let everyone feel they are as much Indian as everyone else: that is the secret. Ensure that democracy protects the multiple identities of Indians, so that people feel you can be a good Muslim and a good Bihari and a good Indian all at once. It’s worked Priscilla. We have given passports to a dream, a dream of an extraordinary, polyglot, polychrome, polyconfessional country. (Tharoor 44-45)

As he expresses a rare optimism that democracy will solve all the problems and fill all the chasms of disaffections to the receptive Priscilla in the ambience of the Zalilgarh Kothli, which later becomes their regular rendezvous, he is suddenly overcome by the immediate reality and wonders: “But who, in all of this, allowed for militant Hinduism to arise, challenging the very basis of the Indianess I’ve just described to you?” (45). Rushdie’s model of western secularism, with its wall of separation between religion and politics, is different from the secularism advocated by Tharoor, which is not opposed to religion. Tharoor advocates for a religiously tolerant model as he expresses in the words of his protagonist Lakshman: “How can such a religion [i.e. Hinduism] lend itself to ‘fundamentalism’? That devotees of this essentially tolerant faith want to desecrate a shrine, that they’re going around assaulting Muslims in its name, is to me a source of shame and sorrow” (144-45).

Rushdie’s protagonist is significantly different. The narrative of *The Moor’s Last Sigh* revolves around Moraes Zogoiby aka Moor, the last descendant of a Portuguese merchant family. Moor’s life mirrors that of his author as he too was born in Bombay, his restricted movement due to imprisonment recalling Rushdie’s plight under fatwa after *The Satanic Verses* (1988) when he was writing this novel. Moor recounts his epic tale through the fortunes of his family by focusing on colorful characters like his artist mother Aurora and his lover, the mentally unstable sculptor Uma. Rushdie’s lamentation for the lost possibilities of secularism in India which he signifies through the Moors of Spain become clear as the narrative of Moor’s family transposes us to spaces in Bombay, Cochin and the Alhambra like fort in rural Spain, and is juxtaposed with key events from Indian history, like the Partition, Emergency, and the rise of the Hindu fundamentalist outfits like the Shiv Sena in Bombay.

As boundaries and religious communalism are getting intensified these diasporic cosmopolitan writers make a case for a boundless world. Their response is a human subjectivity that transcends color, class, clan, narrow parochialism, tribalism and fundamentalism. Secularism is the very base of their humane approach. In my essay, therefore, I would analyze the theme of secularism as it runs through Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, and I shall emphasize the various layers of allegories related to secularism and pluralism in it. My reading of secularism will also focus on Rushdie’s attitude towards religion as reflected in the various characters of *The Moor’s Last Sigh*. I shall study the role of religion and secularism in Tharoor’s *Riot* in the context of the tolerant religiosity of Lakshman, and use the recent debates on Indian secularism by scholars to interrogate the contemporary relevance of the European model of secularism without any compromise, which retains the total bifurcation of politics and religion.
Secularism in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*

The recurrent theme of dropping frontiers in a world which has become increasingly heterogeneous and intolerant is the leitmotif of both *Riot* and *The Moor’s Last Sigh*. In the latter work, the figure of the Moor, his hybrid genealogy, who in the author’s hybrid words is a “a jewholic anonymous, a cathjewnut, a stewpot, a mongrel cur” (*Moor’s Last Sigh* 104), is very central to Rushdie’s vision, as he reconstructs a syncretic, tolerant Moorish Spain and juxtaposes it with Bombay, his haven of pluralism. He celebrates Nehru’s vision of a new Indian nation which, in keeping with the traditions of western modernity, promised to be above religion, clan, and narrow parochial considerations. He sees in this vision the fulfilment of his own desire for a tolerant plural world: early on in the novel, grandfather Camoens whispers hopefully to his wife “about the dawning of a new world, Belle, a free country, Belle, above religion because secular, above class because socialist, above caste because enlightened above hatred because loving” (*Rushdie, Moor’s Last Sigh* 51).

Moor’s body is “a semi-allegory,” for the metropolis: “Like the city itself, Bombay of my joys and sorrows, I mushroomed into a huge urbane sprawl of a fellow” (*Rushdie, Moor’s Last Sigh* 161). Therefore its decay indicates the erosion of the values of pluralism and diversity, and along with it the erosion of its macrocosm – the Nehruvian idea of the modern secular Indian nation. Moor paintings by Aurora play an essential role in the narrative to map the trajectory of secularism and religious pluralism, the early Moor Paintings signifying the origination of a nation from varied cultural and religious ethnicities and its optimistic syncretism. Aurora’s “Dark Moor” paintings, however, underscore the later pessimism when Bombay is destroyed and Sultan Boadbil of Granada has his last sigh looking back at Alhambra, his fortress-palace, the “last and greatest of all the Moor’s fortifications” (*Rushdie, Moor’s Last Sigh* 80), before leaving Spain for ever.

Bombay and Alhambra are the spaces of hybridity from where the Moor and Sultan are forced to move out at the point of their ruin or exile. The evil of religion destroys Rushdie’s pluralistic dream. Rushdie’s hatred for religion is conspicuous. What Judaism means to Moor is left ambiguous but that he owes no allegiance to it is emphasized, as he confesses “in a country where all citizens owe an instinctive dual allegiance to a place and faith, I had been made into a nowhere-and-no-community man – and proud of it, may I say” (*Rushdie, Moor’s Last Sigh* 336). As Moor and his mother Aurora suffer from loss of faith, he refers to religion as a disease and asserts, “by some great fluke that seemed at the time the most ordinary thing in my world, my parents had been cured of religion” (*Rushdie, Moor’s Last Sigh* 55). When commenting on her painting entitled *A Light to Lighten the Darkness*, a “mythomaniac” gem, Aurora asserts “I am getting interested in making religious pictures for people who have no god” (*Rushdie, Moor’s Last Sigh* 220).

Writing about Gujarat carnage in “March 2002: God in Gujarat” Rushdie notes, “so India’s problem turns out to be the world’s problem. What happened in India, happened in God’s name. The problem’s name is God” (*Step Across* 346). In his opinion “[t]he fundamentalist seeks to bring down a great deal more than buildings. Such people are against, to offer just a brief list, freedom of speech, a multi-party political system, universal adult suffrage, accountable government, Jews, homosexuals, women’s rights, pluralism, secularism, short skirts, dancing, beardlessness, evolution theory, sex. There are tyrants, not Muslims” (*Step Across* 348). But secularism tops the list: “We should understand that secularism is now the fanatics’ Enemy Number one, and its most important target. Why? Because secularism demands a total separation
between Church and State” (Rushdie, *Step Across* 238-39). Rushdie’s stand on religion as a dogma is uncompromising. No wonder the name Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru plays such an important role in *The Moor’s Last Sigh*, as it is synonymous with the kind of secularism Rushdie aspires for. As quoted by Deshmukh, “[i]n a press conference held on October 12, 1947, Pandit Nehru made his stance against communalism very clear: ‘We can only think of [a] secular non communal democratic state, in which every individual to whatever religion he may belong, has equal rights and opportunities’” (66). Nehru’s vision of nationalism was never narrow, as he further assures: “In such an India, communalism, separatism, isolation, untouchability, bigotry and exploitation of man by man has no place, and while religion is free, it is not allowed to interfere with the political and economic aspects of a nation’s life” (qtd. in Deshmukh 74).

In a typical Rushdiesque style Moor’s body lends itself to multiple levels of allegories, without lending itself easily to total allegorization. If Moor’s body symbolizes the nation, his withered right hand can be read as epitomizing Rushdie’s own condition at the time of writing: “Sometimes I stayed in uncomfortable houses. Sometimes I had no more than a small room in which I could not approach the window lest I be seen from below. Sometimes I was able to get out a bit. At other times I had trouble doing so” (*Step Across* 219). In a paradoxical relationship between art and life, the high priest of boundless cosmopolitan secularism is imprisoned by the most parochial forces of religion. As an alternative reading, in Moor we can find a smaller thread of allegory to secularism itself. If the acceleration in his growth started only after his birth, then Moor could be conjectured to be the son of Pandit Nehru himself: “Nine months before I was born, Aurora Zogoiby travelled to Delhi to receive, from the President’s hands and in the presence of her good friend the Prime Minister, a State Award – the so-called ‘Esteemed Lotus’– for her services to the arts” (Rushdie, *Moor’s Last Sigh* 175).

Secularism as Nehru’s child and its iconic representation Bombay, are collapsed in this statement:

> I expanded without time for proper planning, without any pauses to learn from my experiences or my mistakes or my contemporaries, without time for reflection. How then could I have turned out to be anything but a mess? Much that was corruptible in me has been corrupted; much that was perfectible, but also capable of being demolished, has been lost. (Rushdie, *Moor’s Last Sigh* 161-62)

In the post-colonial India, as the pre-independent, tolerant, pluralistic past gave way to the Nehruvian idea of modernity and socialism, the nation grew and expanded like the Moor’s body at an accelerated pace without reflection and foresight, enabling the material and spiritual corruption of the nation, thereby destroying the Nehruvian promise of secularism, which guaranteed all citizens equal rights and opportunities, freedom of religion, and bifurcation of politics from religion in the governance of the state. Rushdie in his trenchant satiric style vents his ire on Nehru for letting this happen in Vasco’s words: “Circular sexualist India my foot . . . Panditji sold you that stuff like a cheap watch salesman and you all bought one and now you wonder why it doesn’t work . . . Only one power in this damn country is strong enough to stand up against those gods and it isn’t blankety blank sockular specialism . . . I’ll tell you what it is. Corruption” (Rushdie, *Moor’s Last Sigh* 166). Rushdie does not leave Nehru’s rose either: As Ina’s bridal bouquet of yellow roses gets crushed against her chest, “[i]ts thorns had pricked her bosom until it bled. My sister was unmoved by such secularist excuses” (Rushdie, *Moor’s Last Sigh* 214). Ire takes on the form of “Nayi Badmashi [/new mischief] – with which Vasco would afterwards make his name . . . [H]e even made a short film called Kutta Kashmir ka (‘A Kashmiri’ – rather than Andalusian-‘Dog’)” (Rushdie, *Moor’s Last Sigh* 154). Rushdie’s love-
hate relationship with Nehru takes on a Kashmiri angle – the roots which he shares with Nehru. Nehru’s assurances of a secular nation failed because they made “plenty of noise but didn’t draw much blood” (Rushdie, *Moor’s Last Sigh* 103).

Thus as Rushdie is taking on Nehru and his idea of the secular nation-state of India, which seems to falter from its original idea of secularism as defending its overall pluralism, an ominous fate befalls secularism itself. After Indira Gandhi’s emergency of the late seventies, Uma, “Indian art’s new star – young beautiful, and driven by her strong religious faith” (Rushdie, *Moor’s Last Sigh* 262), symbolizing the rising Hindu right and its insidious designs of cultural homogenization, entices Moor and he falls in love with her. Moor’s blind passionate craving for Uma is similar to the cravings of the congress party of the post Nehruvian era, when it forged eager coalitions with sectarian parties compromising the ideals of the nation for fulfilling its selfish greed, even when it was aware of the capacity of extremists in the coalition to distort and reinvent their own history to destroy the very fundamentals of secularism. Moor is obstinate in his love for Uma though detective Dom Minto warns him “that she had on three occasions agreed to take heavy mental medication intended to control her repeated mental aberrations [when] she would invent long, elaborate personal histories of great vividness, and would cling to them obstinately, even when confronted with internal contradictions in her rigmaroles; or with the truth” (Rushdie, *Moor’s Last Sigh* 265-66). This tragic obsession with Uma without reflection leads to Moor’s downfall as he is implicated in her death and has to take cover under Raman fielding, the Hindu fundamentalist who by his organized orchestration of violence destroys Bombay. Finally, Moor kills Fielding and is forced to leave Bombay. Secularism is thus totally finished, as its icon is destroyed and its embodiment banished.

** Debates on Secularism, Religion and *The Moor’s Last Sigh***

Indian economist and philosopher Amatya Sen agrees, in his essay “Secularism and Its Discontents,” that there are problems involved in secularism regarding the symmetrical treatment of different religions and communities. But these issues, he argues, can be addressed within the framework of and commitment to secularism. Abandoning it will only lead to more complicated problems (Sen *passim*). However, the social theorist and political psychologist Ashis Nandy argues for abandoning the project of secularism altogether. He proclaims: “I am not a secularist. In fact, I can be called an anti-secularist” (326). The European model of secularism is ill suited to India and the wall of separation between ideology, religion and politics has exhausted its possibilities, as the vast majority of Indians understand its meaning as equal respect for all religions. Therefore, in the Indian context, an appropriate model has to be recuperated from the Indian ethos of pre-modern religious tolerance and coexistence as exemplified by Gandhi in his tolerant all inclusive religiosity and anti-modern approach (321-45).

Rushdie rues over the wasted possibilities offered by secularism, but a Gandhian model does not offer much hope to him either: Cameons narrates to Belle his experience of having gone to Malgudi to listen to Mahatma Gandhi, “I had seen India’s beauty in that crowd with its soda-water and cucumber but with that God stuff [i.e. when the crowd chanted with Mahatma his favourite Raghupati Raghava] I got scared. In the city we are for secular India but the village is for Ram. And they say Ishwar and Allah is your name but they don’t mean it . . . In the end I’m afraid the villagers will march on the city and people like us will have to lock our doors and there will come a Battering Ram” (Rushdie, *Moor’s Last Sigh* 55-56). Rushdie does not allow any scope for religious accommodation as the fear of majoritarian appropriation is overwhelming in
any such theorizing. Even as he longs for the pre independent/partition religious pluralism and revels in its multi-culturalism, religion as such portends evil for him. “Then keep a ticket to London in your pocket,” Vasco Miranda advises Aurora “[b]ecause in this god-rotten joint, you never know when you might have to run” (Rushdie, Moor’s Last Sigh 221). But as it turns out Aurora is not so lucky. Rushdie uses the frenetic atmosphere of the Ganesh Chaturthi celebrations as appropriated by the Hindu fundamentalists to forebode her death, as she dances away mocking the perversity of the mob. The lethal combination of religion and politics becomes the ideal backdrop for the noir drama which is inflected by the colors and gyrations of the orient. The eccentric foul-mouthed painter travels with the strokes of her brush to Mooristan from Bombay, and in Rushdie’s words, “these were polemical pictures, in a way they were an attempt to create a romantic myth of the plural, hybrid nation” (227).

Aurora signifies the voice of a minoritarian, who had celebrated the multi-cultural ethnicity of her family and the mongrel pluralism of Bombay, the city she chose to live in, thus legitimizing the secularism of the nation, as it claimed its origin to be not from a singular essence. Her deceitful murder by Raman Fielding’s majoritarian fundamentalist thugs points to the abortion and subversion of the minoritarian aspirations and dreams. Immediately thereafter the mosque at Ayodhya is destroyed:

Alphabet-soupists, “fanatics” . . . swarmed over the seventeenth century Babri Masjid and tore it apart with their bare hands, with their teeth, with the elemental power of what Sir V. Naipaul has approvingly called their “awakening to history” . . . Saffron flags were raised. There was much chanting of dhuns: “Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram” &c . . . It was what Camoens da Gama had prophesied long ago: the coming of the Battering Ram. (Rushdie, Moor’s Last Sigh 363)

Rushdie points to the complexity and ambiguity of Gandhi behind the veneer of simplicity:

These days, few people pause to consider the complex character of Gandhi’s personality, the ambiguous nature of his achievement and legacy, or even the real causes of Indian Independence. These are hurried, sloganizing times, and we don’t have the time or, worse, the inclination to assimilate many-sided truths . . . As the analyst Sunil Khilnani has pointed out…He [Gandhi] turned to legends and stories from India’s popular religious traditions, preferring their lessons to the supposed ones of history (Rushdie, Step Across 139).

If recuperating an accommodative Indian secularism from the religious past is ruled out and since the present European model, which Rushdie himself mourns, is failing miserably, could any alternative model be created within the framework of secularism? Here it is worth noting Akeel Bilgrami’s argument that the “Archimedean secularism of Nehru,” which is authoritarian and imposing in nature, should be replaced by creating a space for negotiation between the substantive commitments of particular religious communities. Such a “negotiated secularism” may be an ideal alternative (454-86). But in Rushdie’s world the corruption and erosion of purity is pervasive. It does not leave particular religious communities or minorities out of its gambit. They suffer peculiarly from a total loss of faith or are engulfed by regional fanaticism which

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1 Since Rushdie is fictionalizing history, as exemplified by his meditations on Gandhi and his inextricable links to Hindu religion and the appropriation of the Ganesh Chaturthi festivities by the Hindu Right, the author’s subjectivity merges with that of his character(s), as I have underscored, during many significant moments in The Moor’s Last Sigh.
obscures their religious commonality: “Hazare was a Christian Maharashtrian and had joined up with Fielding’s crew for regionalist, rather than religious reasons. O, we all had reasons, personal or ideological” (Rushdie, Moor’s Last Sigh 312).

Rushdie reviles at the harsher realities of majoritarian extremism and the vulnerabilities of the minorities: “Once, in a family quarrel, I reminded her (Aurora) angrily of the many newspaper reports of her assimilation by the festival” (Rushdie, Moor’s Last Sigh 124). As Raman Fielding’s “Mumbai Axis” communalists and other “alphabet-soupists” go around “joking at their diner-parties about ‘teaching minority groups a lesson’ and ‘putting people in their place’” (Rushdie, Moor’s Last Sigh 338), religious perversity, which is the contemporary national reality, is foregrounded. Pervasive nihilism forebodes the future as fundamentalism has come to stay. Finally after murdering a virulent fanatic (Raman Fielding), Moor wonders whether he has become a murdering fanatic too:

Violence was violence, murder was murder, two wrongs did not make a right: these are truths of which I was fully cognizant . . . [The violent extremists] surge among us, left and right, Hindu and Muslim, knife and pistol, killing, burning, looting, and raising into the smoky air their clenched and bloody fists. Both their houses are damned by their deeds; and both sides sacrifice the right to any shred of virtue; they are each other’s plagues (Rushdie, Moor’s Last Sigh 365).

Rushdie’s closed door approach to religion and voicing for the total bifurcation of politics from religion does not allow space to interrogate the recent debates on secularism vis-à-vis his novel. By adopting an analytical stand and reading the changes it warrants that holding on to secularism is the best possible way to counter fundamentalism and majoritarianism in a democracy, rather than adopting a very rigid, pessimistic and nihilistic stand. Rushdie does seem to be alienated from the reality of our times. Akheel Bilgrami’s concern for the rights of particular minority communities, or Partha Chaterjee’s concern for group and minority religious rights, elude discussion with respect to The Moor’s Last Sigh, as the main characters are “hybridized” and do not exhibit the normal traits of the minority community, living and operating together as a group (Cossman and Kapur 93). They are too individualistic and eccentric, moulded to travel with Rushdie, as he wavers from realism to surrealism, from pre-colonial Cochin to Bombay, and from Bombay to Moorish Spain. Their hybrid mongrel background also enables the author to blur their allegiance to any one faith or collective loyalty to a larger community, which otherwise might be difficult to elide in the conservative religion dominated backdrop where the narrative is set, particularly in Cochin where the novel begins.

Majoritarian community characters who are amidst the religious frenzy like Raman fielding/ Bal Thakeray or Uma/ Uma Bharathi are satirically caricatured or made unpredictable and impulsive, and are too removed from normalcy. Their characterization therefore does not help us to study the nuances in grey scales between the black and white of majoritarian-minoritarian relationships.

**Cosmopolitan Secularism and The Moor’s Last Sigh**

Moors’ mongrel hybrid background, pre-modern and pre-colonial trading in spices between countries without rigid borders, tolerant multi-religious Moorish Spain, Bombay’s multicultural pluralism, Alhambra, whose architecture embodies the merger of the landscape with the seascape, without any distinct line of horizon, serve as true archetypes for Rushdie to renew his call for a borderless world. He revels in the twilight zone of the hybrid Zogoiby family, as he
traces the vagaries of their fortune through his infinitely appropriated vocabulary, and with his trenchant satire describes the corruption of Moor living in the communally inflamed times, lamenting in the end the destruction of his beloved Bombay, which he till then thought would only be “slightly” affected – “Bombay was not inoculated and what happened elsewhere, the language business for example, also spread into its streets. But on the way to Bombay the rivers of blood were usually diluted, other rivers poured into them, so that by the time they reached the city’s streets the disfigurations were relatively slight” (Rushdie, Moor’s Last Sigh 350).

Rushdie’s unconditional and perennial love for Bombay gets aggrandized by his having not visited it for eight years (due to exile), and vivid nostalgia grips him, as he intervenes fairly strongly: “Am I sentimentalizing? . . . O Beautifiers of the city, did you not see that what was beautiful in Bombay was that it belonged to nobody, and to all?” (Moor’s Last Sigh 350). As he values the human community above collective identification, Bombay becomes a city without boundaries, at once belonging to nobody and to everyone. His cherished hybridity is not merely something romantic, to him it means a serious sense of responsibility as a citizen of the world. He acknowledges his complicity in the evil, “We were both the bombers and the bombs. The explosions were our own evil – no need to look for foreign explanations, though there was and is evil beyond our frontiers as well as within” (Moor’s Last Sigh 372). As he wants to transcend all boundaries, and not be bound by any affiliation except to the world citizenry and international cosmopolitanism, Rushdie collapses the notions of Indian and American-Indian, as he celebrates the porous multiplicity of his cosmopolitan world:

In a way I had been in Indian country all my life, learning to read its signs, to follow its trails, rejoicing in its immensity, in its inexhaustible beauty, struggling for territory, sending up smoke-signals, beating its drums, pushing out its frontiers, making my way through its dangers, hoping to find friends, fearing its cruelty, longing for its love . . . In Indian country there was no room for a man who didn’t want to belong to a tribe, who dreamed of moving beyond; of peeling off his skin and revealing his secret identity—the secret, that is, of the identity of all men—of standing before the war-painted braves to unveil the flayed and naked unity of the flesh. (Moor’s Last Sigh 414)

Finally, he laments the lost possibilities of pluralism but remains fervent in his plea for removing the boundaries of the self: “The Alhambra, . . . that monument to a lost possibility that nevertheless has gone on standing, long after its conquerors have fallen; like a testament to lost but sweetest love, . . . to the defeated love that is greater than what defeats it, to that most profound of our needs, to our need for flowing together, for putting an end to frontiers, for the dropping of the boundaries of the self” (Moor’s Last Sigh 433).

**Shashi Tharoor’s Riot and Religion**

Lakshman reveals to Priscilla the role of religion in the everyday life of an average Indian Hindu like him: “Yes, I pray to Hindu gods. It’s not that I believe that there is, somewhere in heaven, a god that looks like a Bombay calendar artist’s image of him. It’s simple that prayer is a way of acknowledging a divinity beyond human experience” (Tharoor 142). At the same time, in his interview with Randy Diggs, Professor Mohammed Sarwar points to the role of Azad, in being a Muslim and an Indian and elaborates about himself: “The fact that I bow my head towards the Kaaba five times a day . . . does not mean I am turning away from my [Indian] roots. I can eat masala dosa at the Coffee House, chew a paan afterwards and listen to Ravi Shanker playing raag durbari, and I celebrate the Indian-ness in myself with each note” (Tharoor 112-13).
Ram Charan Gupta, who is the strident voice of Hindu Right, obtrusively tells Randy Diggs – “India is asserting itself, Mr. Diggs, and your readers are told nothing of the resurgent pride of Indians in their own land, their own culture, their own history. Instead all you can see is the threat to ‘secularism,’ as if that were some precious Indian heritage?” (Tharoor 230-31). When enquired by Lakshman as to whether she is on “some sort of missionary vocation,” Priscilla replies: “Don’t be silly. I mean, I am a believing Methodist, but my church didn’t send me here. I’m here as a student anyway” (Tharoor 23). Tharoor’s characters are moulded in a realistic way which enables us to understand how important faith is in general and why religion plays such a vital role in the lives of ordinary people, and particularly in the Indian sub-continent.

**Secularism in Riot as Compared with The Moor’s Last Sigh**

Even as he endorses religious tolerance within his secular world, Tharoor is cautious about the majoritarian ambitions and religious fundamentalism. Secularism is easily appropriated and given a convenient meaning by the Hindu Right: “Where else do you have our mixture of ethnicities and castes, our profusion of mutually incomprehensible languages, our varieties of geography and climate, our diversity of religions and cultural practices, our clamour of political parties, our ranges of economic development?” (Tharoor 231). But this Hindu Right Rhetoric does not deter Lakshman from practicing his faith: “I don’t have anything in common with these so-called Hindu fundamentalists. Actually, it’s a bid odd to speak of ‘Hindu fundamentalism,’ because Hinduism is a religion without fundamentals: no organized church, no compulsory beliefs or rites of worship, no single sacred book. The name itself denotes something less, and more, than a set of theological beliefs” (Tharoor 143).

Lakshman, far from downing the shutters on fundamentalists, appropriates their territory to subvert and challenge them with his religious ideas:

> To be Indian is to be part of an elusive dream we all share, a dream that fills our minds with sounds, words, flavors from many sources that we cannot easily identify. Muslim invaders may indeed have destroyed Hindu temples, putting mosques in their place, but this did not – could not – destroy the Indian dream. Nor did Hinduism suffer a fatal blow. Large, eclectic, agglomerative, the Hinduism that I know understands that faith is a matter of hearts and minds, not of bricks and stone. “Build Ram in your heart,” the Hindu is enjoined; and if Ram is in your heart, it will matter little where else he is, or is not. (Tharoor 145)

As he celebrates the eclecticism of his non doctrinal religion he is cautious about its collectivization: “‘Say with pride that we are Hindus.’ Gupta and Sharma never fail to spit that slogan at me. And I am proud of my Hinduism, But in what precisely am I, as a Hindu, to take pride? Hinduism is no monolith; its strength is found within each Hindu, not in the collectivity” (Tharoor 146). Maulana Azad is celebrated by Tharoor because of a similar line of thinking. Sarwar quotes from Maulana’s speech:

> I am Musulman and proud of the fact . . . I am proud of being an Indian. I am part of that indivisible unity that is Indian nationality . . . I am indispensable to this noble edifice. Without me this splendid structure of India is incomplete . . . It was India’s historic destiny that many human races and cultures and religions should flow to her, and that many a caravan should rest here . . . One of the last of these caravans was that of the followers of Islam. They came here and settled for good. We brought our treasures with us, and India too was full of the riches of
her own precious heritage . . . Islam has now as great a claim on the soil of India as Hinduism. (Tharoor 108)

To Sarwar, Azad is the true representative of Indian Islam rather than Jinnah, who is castigated for accepting Pakistan as the homeland of Indian Muslims: “Jinnah and his followers have given the Hindu bigots their best excuse [w]hen they acted, in the name of all Indian Muslims, to surrender a portion of our entitlement by saying that the homeland of an Indian Muslim is really a foreign country called Pakistan” (Tharoor 110).

Azad, with his commitment to nationalism and faith, is more acceptable to Tharoor than Zinnah, who, being a non-believer, pork-eater and a husband of a Parsee woman, would have been more acceptable to Rushdie in his rejection of religion as a secularist. Tharoor’s secularism differs from that of Rushdie, as it is accommodative of faith and religious tolerance, even if both of them celebrate the multi-religious, multicultural pluralism of the Indian past. Tharoor wants to draw a fine line between individual faith and fundamentalism. He abhors extremism but gives faith a central place. Lakshman, when commenting on the attempts to construct a temple in the place of the desecrated mosque, tells Priscilla:

I am not amongst the Indian secularists who oppose agitation because they reject the historic basis of the claim that the mosque stood on the site of Ram’s birth. They may be right, they may be wrong, but to me what matters is what most people believe, for their beliefs offer a sounder basis for public policy than the historians’ footnotes . . . let us assume for a moment that there was a Ram Janmabhoomi temple here that was destroyed to make room for this mosque four hundred and sixty years ago, does that mean that we should behave in that way today? If the Muslims of the 1520s acted out of ignorance and fanaticism, should Hindus act the same ways in the 1980s? By doing what you propose to do, you will hurt the feelings of the Muslims of today, who did not perpetrate the injustices of the past and who are in no position to inflict injustice upon you today; you will provoke violence and rage against your own kind; you will tarnish the name of the Hindu people across the world; and you will irreparably damage your own cause. Is this worth it? (Tharoor 145-46).

Lakshman is concerned about not hurting the feelings of the Muslims of today and the irreparable damage this act of destruction would cause to the Hindu people across the world. Tharoor assumes that the believers share a sense of responsibility which might create a space where a dialogue can take place to negotiate the communal difference and intolerance. To that extent Tharoor’s tolerant religiosity is visceral, dynamic, and hopeful of combating the widely spread tentacles of the Hindu Right and fundamentalists. In the case of Rushdie when the Mosque at Ayodhya is destroyed, he looks at it more intellectually: “Alphabet-Soupis brought the Masjid down with the elemental power of what Sir V. Naipaul has approvingly called their ‘awakening to history’” (Moor’s Last Sigh 363). He is introspective in his lamentation: “It was an end and a beginning” (Rushdie, Moor’s Last Sigh 363). Zeenat Vakil expresses her contempt on Ram-Rajya rhetoric: “What bunkum, I swear . . . Point one: in a religion with a thousand and one gods they suddenly decided only one chap matters . . . So suddenly there is this invention of mass puja, and that is declared the only way to show true, class-A devotion. A single, martial deity, a single book, and a mob rule: that is what they have made of Hindu culture, its many-headed beauty, its peace” (Rushdie, Moor’s Last Sigh 338). As Zeenat Vakil is slightly nostalgic in accommodating the many-headed beauty of Hindu religion and its multicultural peace, Moor retorts sharply:

2 Like Tharoor, I have quoted Azad at length here, as his voice exemplifies the sentiments of many Indian Muslims that is disavowed by the Hindu Right.
“You think Hindus Sikhs and Muslims never killed each other before?” (Rushdie, Moor’s Last Sigh 338). Rushdie’s stand on religion and allegiance to it is uncompromising.

Perhaps Rushdie, being a minoritarian and writing from the perspective of the minoritarian Moor Zogoiby, gives rise to his apprehension against majoritarianism and makes him impervious to any negotiation concerning the place of religion in contemporary Indian secularism, whereas Tharoor’s advocacy for tolerant religiosity within secularism is enabled by his being a member of a majoritarian community, as suggested by his name, and writing from the perspective of his protagonist Lakshman who belongs to a majoritarian/Hindu community.

Critics of Secularism and Riot

While rejecting the European model, Ashish Nandy accepts the Indian meaning of secularism as having equal respect for all religions. Nandy calls for exploring “the theology of tolerance in the faiths of the [Indian] citizens” (338), and notes that South Asian nations “may learn something about religious tolerance from everyday Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, or Sikhism” (338). Going back to the religious past of India and recuperating the Gandhian values of tolerance and respect for all religions and rejecting modernity is his answer to the problematics of Indian secularism. The tolerance of religion he advocates is also a “tolerance that is religious” (Nandy 321-45). For T.N. Madan, secularism has facilitated the rise of Hindu nationalism and religious fundamentalism by denying the rightful place of religion in human life and society, and he advocates:

A decentralized polity, a positive attitude towards cultural pluralism, and a genuine concern and respect for human rights would be, perhaps the best guarantors of Indian secularism, understood as inter-religious understanding in a society on the state policy of non-discrimination and of equal distance (not equal proximity) from the religious concerns of the people. (297-321)

Madan does not reject secularism completely like Nandy but, like him, looks for the Gandhian ideal of inter-religious understanding developed in the tolerant past. Tharoor, like Madan, does not reject secularism, and adopts the stand of tolerance and equal respect for religions, as espoused by Nandy. Lakshman recuperates Gandhian values from the past: “Mahatma Gandhi was as devout a Ram bhakt as you can get – he died from a Hindu assassin’s bullet with the words ‘He[y] Ram’ on his lips—but he always said that for him, Ram and Rahim were the same deity, and that if Hinduism ever taught hatred of Islam or of non-Hindus, ‘it is doomed to destruction’” (Tharoor, Riot 147).

Mohammed Sarwar tells Lakshman:

What explains these contradictory legends of the martyred jihadi revered by Muslim fundamentalists and the noble cow-protector worshipped by ordinary Hindus? Extremists of both stripes have sought to discredit the secular appeal of Ghazi Miyan . . . The Hindutva types lament that the offerings made by Hindus at the Ghazi’s tomb go to support Islamic schools, hospitals, and mosques – the very fact that the secularists hail as evidence of composite religiosity. (Tharoor, Riot 66)

Thus as Lakshman is looking to the past for reinventing the values of inter-religious tolerance and pluralism, Sarwar looks back to the past to study its appropriation by the Hindu right to create communal strife. In his interview with Randy Diggs, Lakshman expresses his anguish at the Ram Sila Pujan programme:
I saw what was happening as nothing less than an assault on political values of secular India. I asked permission to ban the processions in my district. It was denied . . . So the government’s inaction in the face of all this provocation profoundly alienated the Muslims. For many of them their faith and hope in Indian secularism, built over four decades of dogged efforts by successive administrations soured. (Tharoor, Riot 72)

He feels helpless as the faith of Muslims in secularism is being eroded due to connivance of the administration with religious extremism.

Is it possible to legitimize religion in politics and yet be secular? Are religions not intrinsically intolerant? Are they not homogenizing in their sweep? How is secularism understood in India? T.N. Madan says: “We do not, of course, have a wall of separation in India, for there is no Church to wall off, but only the notion of neutrality or equidistance between the state and the religious identity of the people. What makes this idea important is that not only Nehru but all Indians who consider themselves patriotic and modern, nationalist and rationalist, subscribe to it” (310). As Brenda Cossman and Ratna Kapur elaborate, Gandhi’s ideal, in contrast to Nehru’s vision, was Sarva Dharma Samabhava/the acceptance/equality of all religions – which is based on the principle of equal respect for all religions and which rejected the idea of the separation of religion and politics (57). The parties of the Hindu Right have appropriated this idea and come out with their own ingenious definition of secularism through their (majoritarian) discursive moves, albeit indirectly, as noted by Prakash Chandra Upadhyaya: “Beneath the surface, however, this discourse of secularism and equality is an unapologetic appeal to brute majoritarianism and an assault on the very legitimacy of minority rights” (Upadhyaya qtd. in Cossman and Kapur 67).

Upadhyaya, arguing for the Nehruvian model asserts that “the concept of Sarva Dharma Samabhava has failed” and led to “the communalization of Indian politics,” and “[i]n his view, this understanding of secularism which envisions the state as ‘the representative body of all religious communities’ becomes a majoritarian secularism” (qtd. as in Cossman and Kapur 88). He argues that if, upon adopting this approach to secularism, all communities were to be equal, “One would be more equal than others – namely, the majority ‘Hindu community’” (89). As we see from the discussion of the contemporary realities in India, Upadhyaya’s concern seems legitimate as the tenuous “tolerant religiosity” is open for easy manipulation and appropriation by the Hindu Right.

Conclusion

Rushdie’s endorsement of separation between religion and politics epitomized by secularism, has exhausted its possibilities in his own depiction of Bombay’s destruction and the fall of Moorish Spain. Such possibilities of secularism and peaceful coexistence seem irredeemable mainly because of the Hindu right and its insidious attacks through its various outfits like its student wing – ABVP Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthis Parishad/All Indian Student Council. Whereas Tharoor’s take on secularism, in his acceptance of the challenge posed by the Hindu Right, gives us hope and creates new possibilities for further negotiations between communities. To counter the problems posed by a fundamentalist government within the framework of secularism, Partha Chatterjee, using Foucauldian notion of “anti-governmentality,” advocates the need “to resist state’s totalizing sovereign power” (Sunder Rajan 84). Besides, a rethinking of the principle of toleration may help us redefine secularism for contemporary times and interrogate the understanding of secularism as acceptance of all faiths since “there [can be]
no return to a space of pure Indian culture, uncontaminated by the colonial and postcolonial encounter” (Cossman and Kapur 93).

By reconfiguring toleration, group rights and minority religious rights can be accommodated within secularism. Chatterjee draws attention to the Shiromani Gurudwara Prahandak Committee as the first public body to have universal suffragem, and acknowledges the later misuse of the SGPC to legitimize Sikh separatism, but asserts that an intervention of juridical sovereignty can contract this (235). Akeel Bilgrami, countering Chatterjee’s despair at the state’s failure, and arguing against a philosophical doctrine which is pessimistic about the State, asks: “why can’t we struggle to improve the State?” (417). But Chaterjee is more concerned with resistance: “It is naïve to think of secularization as simply the onward march of rationality, devoid of coercion and power struggles” (227). Lakshman tells Randy Diggs about Peace committees in Riot: “It’s something we set up pretty much everywhere we have a history of communal trouble. Committees bringing together leaders of both communities to work together, sort out their problems” (76). These committees appear as formal gatherings during a carnage and then disappear. As Chatterjee advocates, they have to be legitimized and the group rights and minority religious/cultural rights should be addressed by rearticulating tolerance (229-35). But any inclusion of communitarian rights within secularism, as Chatterjee points out rely on the judiciary (234-35).

As Cossman and Kapur point out “the Supreme Court [has] erred in concluding that Hindutwa constitutes ‘a way of life’ of the people of the subcontinent” (3), and except for its judgment in the historic S.R. Bommai v. Union of India, when it upheld the presidential rule in the various northern states immediately after the Babri Masjid destruction, all other decisions till date has been dangerously favoring the Hindu right (53-141). In such conditions the very concept of secularism is at stake. Communitarian rights and religious understanding does appeal as an intellectual debate on secularism but the reality of the situation underscores the underlying danger in these exercises, as when the line between religion and politics is blurred, the excesses of extremism cannot be addressed easily even in the highest court. It is not an easy task to rescue secularism from the prevailing semantic conflation, once any dilution in its original Nehruvian meaning is accepted.

Moreover, these scholarly debates on secularism do not address women who bear the brunt of communal violence and breach of secular values. As experience has shown, granting legal rights to SGPC or Wakf Board has also worked on patriarchal lines and has kept women as neglected minorities and their civil rights never addressed. As Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan notes, “the question of gender is nowhere directly addressed [in the secularism debates], though the conflict that is noted between the constitution’s equality provisions (Articles 14 and 15) and the freedom of religion and rights of minorities provisions (Articles 25-30) marks the space of such an address” (Sunder Rajan, “Women between Community and State” 156). Therefore if women, minority, and group rights have to be addressed, it has to be done within secularism, by enforcing the bifurcation of religion and politics more forcefully through constitutional and legal means, thereby ensuring the constitutional guarantee of equality to all citizens and neutrality of the state in religious affairs, rather than by giving in to majoritarian ambitions through any kind of compromise and finally forsaking secularism itself.

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Works Cited


Katarzyna Filutowska  
University of Warsaw

The Narrator’s Identity and the Pursuit of Trespassing Boundaries in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein

“There is something at work in my soul which I do not understand. I am practically industrious – painstaking, – a workman to execute with perseverance and labour: – but besides this, there is a love for the marvellous, a belief in the marvellous, intertwined in all my projects, which hurries me out of the common pathway of men, even to the wild sea and unvisited regions I am about to explore.”

Mary Shelley, Frankenstein

The article focuses on the problem of the narrator’s and the author’s identity in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. According to Charles Taylor’s philosophy of subjectivity in order to have an identity we have to know what kind of good we would like to fulfil in our life. Such an orientation to the good (an orientation in moral space) and an endeavour after realizing this main value defines us as ourselves. In the paper it is argued that the pursuit of trespassing boundaries is constitutive to the narrator’s identity in the novel as it is such kind of an aim without which they could not have been themselves. It is also the key to the author’s identity. Through the medium of the stories of her male story-tellers she confronts her own demons, explores the territories of the subconscious beyond the bounds of understanding and depicts her struggle with the limitations she overcame as a woman in a patriarchal society and as a person who invented a new literary genre – science-fiction literature.

key words: identity, narrator, trespassing of boundaries, Frankenstein, Mary Shelley

The aim of this paper is to focus on the narrator’s identity in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. I would like to show that Mary Shelley’s poetics of depicting space are not reduced to a purely decorative function,¹ but reflect the internal reality of her storytellers, their thoughts and feelings, and this way reveal the pursuit of trespassing boundaries that is constitutive to their identities. Moreover, in each of these life stories, one may find traces of the author’s identity – she is shaped by the same type of endeavour.

¹ It is not only, as Sabine Buchholz and Manfred Jahn put it “a general background setting,” like in “pre-nineteenth-century narratives.” According to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s characterization narrative literature was treated earlier as an example of “temporal” art, as opposed to “spatial” arts, such as painting and sculpture (Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory 551).
Who Are Mary Shelley’s Narrators?

When talking about trespassing boundaries, we use a metaphor which itself has a spatial character. Borders separate something that is known, secure, normal, common, orderly, and “ours” from something distant, unknown, dangerous, abnormal, unusual, sometimes also marvellous, and, in consequence, provoking curiosity, enticing all types of searchers: travellers, creators, inventors, and discoverers.

As Charles Taylor writes, such spatial metaphors are very frequent in “our languages of self-understanding” (Taylor 111), of our identity or subjectivity, and they play an important, perhaps even key role. According to his views, “in order to have an identity, we need an orientation to the good” (47) or an orientation in moral space. In other words, in order to understand who I am, I have to know my “own place relative to the good at all” (47). I must know where I am coming from and what I want to achieve, what kind of good or which value I would like to fulfil in my life. This aim and endeavour, after realizing them, are something that defines me as myself – and although the most important and most desirable value for each individual may be entirely different, without such “an orientation to the good” and to self-understanding, acting and having an identity are not possible.

Moreover, as Taylor claims, “our modern notion of the self is . . . constituted by a certain sense . . . of inwardness” as well as by “the opposition inside-outside” (111). In consequence, we identify our self, our identity with the former – with our soul, heart, mind, our ability to think, to feel and imagine, with our consciousness (and sometimes also subconsciousness), in short – with our interior. As he adds further,

We think of our thoughts, ideas, or feelings as being “within” us, while the objects in the world which these mental states bear on are “without.” Or else we think of our capacities or potentialities as “inner,” awaiting the development which will manifest or realize them in the public world. . . . We are creatures with inner depths; with partly unexplored and dark interiors. (Taylor 111)

When trying to grasp the most important good that is crucial for our own self-understanding, as well as for developing our inner ideas or reflections and communicating them to the public, the outside world, we are doing something which – in a metaphorical sense – shifts us from a secure, close, inner space, from some “here” to a slightly dangerous (because we never know how other people can react) place that is distant from our interior, to the unknown and strange “there.” Every act of communicating our ideas, of telling our story, is also an act of trespassing a border which separates our self from the outside world and other people, and may also let us recreate a sympathetic experience which “allows the matching of perspectives” (Britton 9) of the person who is speaking and the person who is listening.

Our idea of what this outer world or outer space looks like, as well as what our or somebody else’s inner space looks like, is always very closely tied to our own, particular point of view. As Kant claims in his Critique of Pure Reason, space does not exist as an independent being but is only “the form of all phenomena of the external sense . . . the subjective condition of the sensibility, under which alone external intuition is possible” (45).\(^2\)

\(^2\) See also: “It is therefore from the human point of view only that we can speak of space, extended objects, etc.” (Kant 46). Such a correspondence between a subject on the one hand and an outer reality on the other is to some extent crucial for German transcendental idealism – thinkers such as Fichte, Schelling or Schopenhauer share an
Such a perspective corresponds well with Mary Shelley’s romantic poetics of presenting space in which there is no possibility of accurately separating the inner “here” from the outer “there,” and in which external phenomena – the environment, landscapes, nature, the weather – not only form the scenery but also play an important role in the narrative. They reflect inner feelings, thoughts, and experiences of heroes, thus becoming a part of their narrative identities.

Who are the storytellers in Frankenstein? In Mary Shelley’s novel, which is a typical frame tale, there are three narrators: Captain Robert Walton, Victor Frankenstein and the Creature himself. The book begins with a series of letters in which the first storyteller, Walton, tells his sister, Mrs Margaret Saville, about the subsequent stages of his journey to the North Pole. This first story includes Victor’s account of his life, how he created a monster, the consequences of his experiment, and of the tragic circumstances in which he finally found himself on Walton’s ship. His tale is also a frame for the third story in which the Creature, the third narrator, recounts what happened when he left the laboratory in which Frankenstein gave birth to him by constructing him from parts of dead bodies, and how he unsuccessfully tried to become a part of society and was rejected by all because of his hideousness.

All of the narrators in Frankenstein are travelling, they are constantly on the move. The first of Walton’s letters to his sister in England is written from St. Petersburg, where the captain arrived a day before, on the 10th of December, with the aim to “depart . . . in a fortnight or three weeks” (Shelley 15). As he explains, Russia is only a stage in a much longer journey he wants to undertake in order to satisfy his youthful curiosity of seeing “the part of the world never before visited,” to cross “a land never before imprinted by the foot of man,” and to fulfil his dreams of “discovering a passage near the pole to those countries, to reach which at present so many months are requisite” or “ascertaining the secret of the magnet, which, if at all possible, can only be effected by an undertaking such as mine” (Shelley 13-14).

Further parts of Walton’s narration which – as a typical frame tale – opens as well as closes the whole novel, are very similar and consist of a series of reports from the subsequent days of his dangerous journey, full of extraordinary adventures in the course of which he meets the second traveller, Victor Frankenstein, and finally also the Creature. Victor’s narration initially appears to be a typical biographical story which starts with a description of his family, his childhood and the circumstances of his birth. Apart from this very beginning, the story also consists of numerous journeys that he embarked on as a seventeen-year-old boy, a student, then a mad creator who comes home to be a witness of tragic events which are the effect of his scientific experiments, and finally as a person whose further life is devoted to the desire of catching the monster he created. In the end, the monster’s life (and in consequence also his story) is nothing more than such a “never-ending” journey in search of himself and his own place on the earth. At the end of the novel, it changes into a pursuit of justice and revenge on those who have hurt him by rejecting all his endeavours after becoming a normal, joyful entity.

Moreover, there is a more or less explicit tendency in all those journeys to go further and further in order to entirely leave home and the familiar world in order to discover “a land never before imprinted by the foot of man” (Shelley 13). In other words, this “there” which they would like to get to is always out of their reach and is located somewhere in infinity. In Frankenstein, we simply deal with the poetics of sublimity – typical for romantic novels as well as for other types of art, such as painting – with its characteristic lack of harmony, well-defined, perceivable

opinion that outer reality is only a kind of objectivization of a subjective activity of the so-called transcendental self (Schelling) or of a transcendental subject (Schopenhauer).
boundaries\textsuperscript{3} and mimetic form, similar to the organic one (Burke 73). Romantic poets and writers reveal a tendency to evoke strong, powerful emotions by laying stress on features such as ugliness, darkness, solitude, fear, danger or anything that “is in any sort terrible” (Burke 39). We can also observe this in Mary Shelley’s work. The narration is open-ended, as evidenced by the last two sentences of the novel. After a passionate speech in which the monster confessed his sins, he “sprang from the cabin window . . . upon the ice raft which lay close to the vessel. He was soon borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance” (Shelley 170).

This pursuit of dark, solitary places distant from civilization and human society also characterizes Victor’s earlier life, especially the part which is devoted to his hideous work, to the act of creating a monster. As he writes, “to examine the causes of life, we must first have recourse to death” (Shelley 41). This is the reason why he spends a lot of time in places like cemeteries, morgues, and graves, trying to obtain the knowledge necessary to create a living being and thus become an almost vampirical entity. As he says himself,

\begin{quote}

darkness had no effect upon my fancy; and a churchyard was to me merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life, which, from being the seat of beauty and strength, had become food for the worm. Now I was led to examine the cause of progress of this decay and forced to spend days and nights in vaults and charnel-houses. (Shelley 41)
\end{quote}

Such a situation occurs again when the monster asks him to form another Creature, this time of the opposite sex. In order to do this, he goes to Scotland, very far away from his house in Geneva, and chooses “one of the remotest of the Orkneys as the scene of [his] labours” (Shelley 125). As he explains further, “it was a place fitted for such a work, being hardly more than a rock, whose high sides were continually beaten upon by the waves” (Shelley 125). The hero admits that this wild, solitary, “desolate and appalling landscape,” this “monotonous yet ever-changing scene” (Shelley 125) with its stony beach and roaring ocean is quite different from the “fair lakes” reflecting “a blue and gentle sky” (Shelley 125) he remembered from his native Switzerland. Being conscious of the differences makes it possible for him to have a very good idea of the distance that separates him from his native land, as well as – in a metaphorical sense – from his childhood when he was an innocent boy. By trespassing the sacred, “ideal boundary” between life and death\textsuperscript{4} and constructing a living entity from dead parts collected in churchyards and morgues, he not only violated God’s prohibition and broke more than the law of nature, but also destroyed the bonds which tied him to society and gradually started to realize that he chose a path of no return. That is the reason why he ultimately became an exile who began a wandering “which [is] to cease but with life” (Shelley 154) and who, forced by some strange “mechanical impulse” (Shelley 156), has to go further and further from civilization to the end of the world, being fully aware that he will probably never find a calm, peaceful place where he will finally be able to rest.

Such a resemblance between internal feelings and thoughts on the one hand and the external reality on the other may be found on almost every page of Mary Shelley’s novel. The

\textsuperscript{3} As for the role of infinity in the poetics of sublimity, Burke writes that “another source of the sublime, is infinity . . . Infinity has a tendency to fill the mind with that sort of delightful horror, which is the most genuine effect, and truest test of the sublime . . . But the eye not being able to perceive the bounds of many things, they seem to be infinite, and they produce the same effects as if they were really so” (Burke 73).

\textsuperscript{4} As for this issue, refer to the following fragment: “[l]ife and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world. A new species would bless me as its creator and source; many happy and excellent creatures would owe their being to me” (Shelley 43).
The narrator’s identity and the pursuit of trespassing boundaries in *Frankenstein*

vast and long descriptions of weather, landscapes and nature are not only an embellishment or scenery, but also an integral part of all the three main narratives. As Anne K. Mellor writes,

> The atmospheric effects of the novel, which most readers have dismissed as little more than the traditional trappings of Gothic fiction, in fact, manifest the power of nature to punish those who transgress her boundaries. The elemental forces that Victor has released pursue him to his hiding places, ranging round him like avenging Furies. (Mellor 123)

By doing so and breaking God’s and human rules, Frankenstein initiates a process of self-destruction, of the disintegration of his former, “polite” and well-socialized identity. This hell that he bears inside, in his soul, is in perfect harmony with the wild nature and savage, uninhabited places in which he usually talks with his demonic child.

The text provides numerous examples that support such a thesis. When Victor came back home in order to take part in William’s funeral, he felt full of grief and fear. As he himself recounted,

> night…closed around; and when I could hardly see the dark mountains, I felt still more gloomily. The picture appeared a vast and dim scene of evil, and I foresaw obscurely that I was destined to become the most wretched of human beings. (Shelley 59)

And it turns out that his presentiment did not mislead him. When he finally reached Geneva and went “to visit the spot where … William had been murdered” (Shelley 59), the weather changed rapidly, it became dark, cloudy and started to rain heavily, “the darkness and storm increased every minute, and the thunder burst with a terrific crash” (Shelley 59) over his head. All those dangerous circumstances – the darkness, rain, thunder – reflect Victor’s moods, fears, and painful internal experiences. As a matter of fact, this storm is raging also in his soul because he knows that he is responsible for his brother’s death.

The Creature lives practically the whole time in wild, uninhabited places, such as high mountains or forests. Although he is gruesome, he is “a being possessing faculties it would be vain to cope with” – he runs very fast, is very strong, he can “exist in the ice caves of the glaciers, and hide himself from pursuit among the ridges of inaccessible precipices” (Shelley 113). His story is full of sorrow because he makes real and sincere efforts to befriend people – the quite long episode with De Lacey and his children is especially significant, since it shows the Creature’s endeavours to become a normal human being, a member of society – but with no success. This is the reason why he is searching for shelter far from civilized areas – paradoxically this is the only space where he can feel completely safe and comfortable, and this is the only type of landscape which fully corresponds to his inner nature and his true identity. After the departure of De Lacey family, he burns their cottage and dances around it with fury and anger, destroying all his earlier efforts to become a part of the community. He goes back to his previous, initial state of a savage, monstrous entity with no name and no well-defined place in human, domesticated space. In other words, he symbolically breaks all the bonds which tied him to people and for the first time realizes with such clarity his poor, pitiful condition and the lack of a possibility to change it. Nature, which he is a part of, reflects and arouses his violent feelings and emotions – as he describes, the wind which “tore along like a mighty avalanche” causes in his soul “a kind of insanity” that breaks “all bounds of reason and reflection” (Shelley 106).

In Mary Shelley’s text, one may find numerous other examples of such a correspondence between the hero’s inner experience and the outer reality. Victor talks with the monster in a very specific environment during his mountain journey when he climbs the summit of Montanvert.
The narrator's identity and the pursuit of trespassing boundaries in *Frankenstein*

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he describes it himself, this is a majestic, “tremendous and evermoving glacier,” the view of which filled him with “the sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the soul” and caused him “to forget the passing cares of life” (Shelley 75). The place is solitary and uninhabited, and the landscape is quite similar to the one described at the end of the novel – it is covered in snow, divided by vast and dangerous precipices and, as the narrator says, rocks that overlook “the sea of ice” (Shelley 76).

As Fred V. Randel claims, Mary Shelley continued the long literary tradition of presenting mountains though reconstructs “from a new vantage point” its ingredients (Randel, 524). Frankenstein, who stands “high on an eminence” (517) in the nearest vicinity of Mont Blanc, resembles so many other Promethean, Byronic heroes of romantic poems – complex, tragic characters who are simultaneously divine and demonic, blessed and cursed. His endeavour to make unusual discoveries which may change people’s destiny is valuable and worthy of admiration, even though he sustains a total defeat and in consequence becomes the most wretched and humiliated entity, a fallen “archangel who aspired to omnipotence” (Shelley 161). The following fragment may confirm such a thesis – in his speech to Captain Walton’s sailors in which he tries to encourage them to continue their journey to the pole, he asks them:

> are you then so easily turned from your design? Did you not call this the glorious expedition? And wherefore was it glorious? Not because the way was smooth and placid as a southern sea, but because it was full of dangers and terror; because at every new incident your fortitude was to be called forth and your courage exhibited; because danger and death surrounded it, and these you were to brave and overcome. For this was it a glorious, for this was it an honourable undertaking. You were hereafter to be hailed as the benefactors of your species; your names adored as belonging to brave men who encountered death for honour and the benefit of mankind. And now, behold, with the first imagination of danger…you shrink away, and are content to be handed down as men who had not strength enough to endure cold and peril; and so, poor souls, they were chilly and returned to their warm firesides. Why that requires not this preparation; you need not have come thus far …. Be steady to your purposes and firm as a rock.

This is the reason why all three narrators finally meet at the end of the world, near the North Pole. Their stories are entirely defined by such a pursuit of trespassing known boundaries, their secure “here” in search of some unknown and dangerous but at the same time great, marvellous and fascinating “there.” In this sense of the word, “there” is the highest good or central value which marks out the horizon of their inner moral topography and at the same time shapes their narrative identities – as stories of an endeavour to make it real. The last question I would like to consider concerns the author’s relationship with her characters and their efforts to trespass boundaries. Is she also moved by the same type of pursuit or not?

**The Author’s Identity?**

Each narrator in the novel – Captain Walton, Frankenstein and the Creature – tells his own story and thus presents only his own perspective. There is no one omniscient storyteller in *Frankenstein* and in consequence no one privileged point of view that we may identify directly with the author’s opinions. Certainly, this does not mean that there is no possibility of finding traces in the text of the author’s own identity, even if they are far more indirect, uncertain and complex than one may expect. There are several facts which confirm such a thesis.
In the “Introduction” to the Standard Novels edition (1831), Mary Shelley calls her work “my hideous progeny” (Shelley 5). In other words, she treats her book as a baby, as her monstrous child. Let us try to analyze how she understands this metaphor.

As she writes in the “Introduction,” she found inspiration for the whole story in a dream she had “one night after a discussion among Byron, Polidori, and Percy Shelley concerning galvanism and Erasmus Darwin’s success in causing a piece of vermicelli to move voluntarily” (Mellor 40) in which she saw “a pale student of unhallowed arts kneeling beside the thing he had put together” trying to animate dead matter and to stir “the hideous corpse” with “the slight spark of life” (Shelley 4). Then “he sleeps; but he is awakened; he opens his eyes; behold the horrid thing stands at his bedside, opening his curtains, and looking on him with yellow, watery, but speculative eyes” (4). According to Anne K. Mellor,

in her dream, Mary Shelley lost her distanced, safely external view . . . Gradually her dream-work drew her into a closer identification with the student . . . At the end of her dream, nothing separates the dreamer from the student of unhallowed arts. Even though she continues to use the third person “he sleeps; he opens his eyes” – she has become the student; she is looking up at the “yellow, watery, but speculative eyes” of the “horrid thing. (Mellor 40-41)

Why does such an interpretation seem to be correct? Anne K. Mellor claims that this dream reveals some of the author’s most “powerful anxieties” concerning “giving birth” related to the fact that she was a very young woman when writing her first book and it was a time in her life when she was “frequently pregnant”:

it gives shape to her deepest fears. What if my child is born deformed, a freak, a moron, a “hideous” thing? Could I still love it, or would I be horrified and wish it were dead again? What will happen if I can’t love my child? Am I capable of raising a healthy, normal child? Will my child die (as my first baby did)? Could I wish my own child to die, to destroy itself? Could I kill it? Could it kill me (as I killed my mother, Mary Wollstonecraft)? (Mellor 41)

Especially this last question merits attention because of the tragic circumstances of Mary Shelley’s own birth. She was the daughter of a famous English author, a moral and political theorist, Mary Wollstonecraft, who died a couple of days after little Mary was born. This is the reason why she identifies “with the orphaned creature” (Mellor 44), with a monster who is going to kill his parent – in the same way in which she, as Chris Balick wrote, “was the unwitting agent of her own creator’s death, and – again like the monster and like several other characters in the novel – a motherless orphan‖ (Balick 31).

Marc A. Rubenstein also considers *Frankenstein* as strongly tied to its author’s biography, as her metaphorical, symbolic journey in search of her lost mother. He distinguishes several narrative levels in the whole text or, as he writes, “the enfolding, circular narratives” (Rubenstein 178) which have their “vivid, precise and literal rendering in the architecture of Frankenstein’s laboratory” (178) which resembles a womb, “as is the entire novel” (178). Every new narrator “repeats and re-establishes what had gone before . . . The participant in one tale becomes the observer . . . of the next” and “the observed scene becomes . . . a womb-like container in which a story is . . . developed, preserved, and passed on.” This transforms storytelling into a “vicarious pregnancy” (173). According to his interpretation, the central point or the “pole” of such a complex, multilayer narrative structure is in the monster’s story, especially in the passage in which the creature describes Safie and her mother, who “was a Christian Arab, seized and made a slave by the Turks” (Shelley 95) and who “born in freedom . . . instructed her daughter in the tenets of her religion and taught her to aspire higher powers of intellect, and an independence of
spirit forbidden to the female followers of Mahomet” (95). There is a clear analogy to Mary Shelley’s mother, a famous feminist whose heritage was “probably part of Mary’s earliest awareness of the world” (Rubenstein, 188) and shaped not only her views but also her own literary destiny to some extent.

Moreover, “in giving birth to a full-fledged novel, Mary Shelley was giving birth to her self-as-author” (Mellor 52) and at the same time she created a new literary genre – she invented science-fiction literature. This may also explain why she called her book “my hideous progeny,” in this way partially identifying herself with the mad creator, Victor Frankenstein. When writing the novel, she could feel that she was doing something unnatural that violated borders which were treated as part of a natural order. This may have led to unforeseeable consequences because by doing so she broke the eighteenth-century decorum of the proper lady . . . so long established that it was considered a law of nature. Hence the very act of female authorship could be seen as an unnatural act, a perversion that arouses both anxiety and hostility in the male reader. (Mellor 56)

This explains one more thing, namely the fact that she as the author speaks only through the medium of male narrators and “would prefer to hide her own originality within someone else’s imagination” (Rubenstein 182). As Anne K. Mellor suggests, by these means she was simply looking for male legitimacy for her literary ideas within “a culture that has historically suppressed the female voice” (Mellor 52). All of the three life stories – Walton’s, Frankenstein’s, as well as the monster’s – are in various ways moved by the pursuit of something sublime, uncommon and at the same time extreme, unavailable in one’s daily experience. Although she uses their voices to express her own ideas of widening our cognitive horizon and breaking established rules and our typical idea of what the world is like (also the traditional boundary between male and female; see Randel 531) – she does not do it in a direct, literal, “didactic” way. In order to reconstruct her point of view, one should pay attention to the multilevel structure of the novel, “often likened to Russian nesting dolls” (Benford 324) and the narrative polyphony related to it in which there is not one omniscient narrator or one privileged perspective. In such a type of narrative, the truth is an effect of confrontation and collision of various heroes and their points of view. This may help us avoid a reading that is too evident, stereotypical or ideological, and invites the reader “to confront the stakes of the . . . meaning-making simplifications inherent in the process of narrative sense making” (325).

According to Criscillia Benford, “each of Frankenstein’s first-person narrators uses rhetoric associated with different sociopolitical categories of identity in order to prompt his narratees to see him as he sees himself” (328). For example, the Creature who is “perhaps the best storyteller in the novel” (338) was seen as a representative of the self-educated and hence able to understand its social position English working-class. He is filthy and ugly but at the same time very eloquent. This last feature does not allow to see him as a true villain, an “alien” in the proper sense of the term. In other words, he is not as bad as he should be in order to be treated as an evil character. His ability to speak and to explain his point of view makes him human and lets us believe that he could have been a kind and valuable person in other circumstances.

In short, we – the readers – may share his point of view just because he is telling us his own story. The process of telling a story or of “the production and transmission of narrative” (Britton 3) in such a way becomes, as Jeanne M. Britton claims, an alternative, compensatory model of sympathy. According to her, “where sympathetic experiences may fail, narrative can succeed” (5). Through the medium of the story, we can approach somebody else’s experience and
explain his or her motivations, feelings, understand why he did what he did and so on. By these means, we can cross the boundary between us and others, between our “here” and somebody’s “there.” We may take somebody’s position and see reality from his or her perspective, in other words – imaginatively explore his inner world by analyzing his language, his or her narrative. Here, the monster’s story also reveals the author’s search for her own voice and her own creative identity in the literary discourse which was dominated by male writers. Through the medium of the novel she wrote that she too – like the Creature through the medium of his story – tried to compensate for a lack of sympathy from society, which did not accept her creative aspirations, and in this way wanted to break the limitations of the patriarchal world which she was living in.

In the other two narratives – Frankenstein’s and Walton’s - there are numerous traces of the author’s identity, too. Their stories of trespassing boundaries in search of marvellous experiences overlap with her own story. Her work is in itself a kind of a monstrous child. By writing it, Shelley became the creator of a horror, the mother of a ghastly, terrifying book, one of those which, as Chris Baldick wrote, “behave monstrously towards their creators, running loose from authorial intention and turning to mock their begetters by displaying a vitality of their own” (Baldick 30). As a writer, she also trespasses boundaries – first of all by discovering herself, Mary Shelley, as an author. This could have been quite a new experience for a person who was earlier just Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, a typical Englishwoman. Secondly, she wrote for publication as a woman, that is to say as a person whose public voice was treated as something quite subversive, undermining the world’s order. Thirdly, Shelley invented a new literary genre – sci-fi literature – and created the legend of a mad scientist and his monster, which became a living cultural myth, comparable “with the most telling stories of Greek and Norse gods and goddesses” (Mellor 38).

There is one more thing which seems to be important and worth mentioning. As Marshall Brown states, gothic novels as such are “transcendent epistemological fictions” (Brown 284) which act “on a region that lies . . . at the limits of experience” (277), hence they confront us “with a transcendent reality . . . of the thing in itself” (279) and ask, exactly as Kant in his philosophy, “what man is in himself” (280) and what is beyond the limits of possible experience. According to Brown, “Kant’s imagination, like that of a gothic novelist, is haunted by a mysterious world beyond the limitations of understanding . . . this ghost of Kant’s system is a presence somewhere in the mind, yet outside the bounds of experience” (281). The author describes her own efforts in investigating the wild, abandoned, terrifying side of herself through the novel’s story. She depicts her struggle with dangerous enemies living in those unknown territories of the subconscious “beyond the limitations of understanding” (281) although she does it indirectly, that is to say, through the medium of her male storytellers. This way Frankenstein – the story about trespassing boundaries and exploring the undiscovered, horrible depths hidden in ourselves – becomes an excellent example of Brown’s thesis.

To sum up, the pursuit of trespassing boundaries and searching the world beyond the limits of known experience is to some extent the key to the narrator’s identities in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein. It is revealed in the wild nature around them, in their journeys, types of activities, even in their relationships with other people. It is also fundamental to the author’s identity – as a writer, she is shaped by the same type of endeavour. She confronts her own demons through the medium of their stories, explores the unknown territories of her own self and writes about the limitations she overcame as a woman in a patriarchal society and as the creator of science-fiction literature.
Works Cited


Contemporary Hollywood film narrates the fear of monstrous science; attending to the modulations of medicine, capital and the body. The filmic body is employed to illustrate the power of the new biotechnologies to create and sustain life and the new sets of social relations which are a consequence of the marriage of capital and medicine. In the Hollywood film, persons who do not fit the ideal healthy persona have a moral duty to pursue repair and transformation. Constructed as inherently lacking, the unhealthy body becomes a repository for social anxieties about control and vulnerability, vis-à-vis the enormous and exponentially expanding science and technology fields. Hierarchies of embodiment are played out on the Big Screen as imperfect bodies are excluded from public life, power and status and urged to strive for “optimization”. Late modern societies present the possibility of new technologies which have the potential to radicalize bodies. However, these potential modulations are ultimately derived from a set of ideologies around the body and the power of the individual to enact an individualized solution. Contemporary narratives circulate around ownership of capital and the price of “repair.” This marriage of science and capital in popular narratives may be indicative of concerns for our future, as the power to make and repair life seems to rest increasingly in the hands of an elite.

key words: Science fiction, Foucault, biopower, biotechnology, ideology

Introduction

Contemporary Hollywood film articulates a fascination with science. Oscillating between ingenious and miraculous, science is presented as the beacon of hope for humanity’s future, a generous and available panacea to all of our myriad “ills.” Complicit with and feeding into the public’s vision of science and its scope, popular Hollywood films, particularly of the science fiction genre, are informed by deep-rooted dominant ideologies of the body. In this age of physical radicalization; transplants, artificial organs and cloning; fantasies of modifying the body emerge with increasing frequency (Rose 11). Optimization of the self is now inculcated in public life. Cultural vehicles such as film are increasingly seizing the possible modifications of the body as a narrative device for exploring this optimization vis-a-vis the advent of biotechnology. The creation of “flesh” and of “almost real” life is depicted as the natural evolution of a progressive science. Medical science begins to look like an art form; bodies are made beautiful and more highly functioning while science is seen as the repository of unending possibilities. It is this state

1 Elsewhere I have used Avatar (Cameron 2009) as an exemplar of this form of optimization and the problematics of “fixing” disability. See Flynn “Equality, Culture and Representation: Considerations on the Film Industry”; “‘Get Your Legs Back’: Avatar (2009) and the Re-booting of American Individualism”; and “New Poetics of the Film Body: Docility, Molecular Fundamentalism and Twenty First Century Destiny.”
of humanity and its jagged edges that finds articulation in current popular film narratives. Contemporary public life appears to depend on this compulsory optimization.

The planetary reach of the Hollywood film industry makes it a global purveyor of ideologies, purporting to reflect reality:

What the camera in fact registers is the vague, unformulated, untheorized, unthought-out world of the dominant ideology. Cinema is one of the languages through which the world communicates to itself. They constitute its ideology for they reproduce the world as it is experienced when filtered through the ideology. (Easthope 46)

Film therefore enacts prevalent ideologies by reconstituting the audience’s notion of themselves and, simultaneously, ideology “conditions” films. Therefore, though film is a material product, it is also an ideological product. Disability theorists have examined the relationship between hegemonic ideologies and such powerful economic forces, identifying a set of ideologies, namely individualism, normalization and medicalization, which together are central to ableism. An examination of each of these ideologies illustrates their interrelation and their relationship to the science which purports to solve all problems. This set of ideologies can be seen to inform the manner in which disability is represented and simultaneously the manner in which science is made all-powerful. Popular films Repo Men and Ex Machina are employed within this paper to expose how these ideologies are enacted on-screen.

Individualism, Normalization and Medicalization

Oliver suggests that the ideologies of individualism, normalization and medicalization are linked to capitalism’s rise and have shaped contemporary understandings of disability (4). In the twenty first century, popular narratives acknowledge the relationship between capital and health; the onus is on the individual to get well and stay well through whatever individualistic solutions are possible. Individualism is an ideology which emphasizes the duty of each individual to further their own interests, without taking the interests of society into consideration. Social critics posit that individualism justifies inequalities by suggesting that barriers to economic success are due to the psyches of individuals, rather than to social structures (Greene 117). Encouraging the autonomy of the individual, individualism assumes each person is capable of rational and vigorous self-improvement. Rather than being static, economic, political and cultural shifts continuously shape the notion of individualism (Greene 118). Disparate threads of individualism may be identified that still share common structural antecedents and over-arching outcomes. In the Marxist sense, individualism buttresses capitalism by fostering self-interest; inspiring the masses to hard work, while encouraging them to focus on their own material desires. The assumption that every person has the ability to improve their social position leaves no room for those who may need care or assistance and perpetuates the myth of self-sufficiency, constructing some as dependent and others as autonomous (White and Tronto 116). A person’s ill health or disability, then, is his or her own responsibility, and he or she ought to exercise their right to improve their situation, rather than seeking the assistance or recognition of society.

Hollywood blockbusters are particularly interested in ideologies of the American life: “woven into American culture and social institutions, individualism often symbolizes the freedom of the American way of life” (Greene 117). The ideology of American individualism which is tied up with American Exceptionalism and the notion of citizenship, is bound up with
the notion of an individualist egalitarian democracy where each citizen has the ability to improve their social standing by virtue of hard work (Garland-Thomson 41).

Furthermore, in this paradigm, each citizen is a microcosm of the American nation (Garland-Thomson 43). “Good” citizens, then, are those who enact the “correct” amount of self-drive and determination, to improve their own position and the overall position of the nation:

A well-regulated self thus contributes to a well-regulated nation. However, [that depends] upon a body that is a stable, neutral instrument of the individual will. It is this fantasy that the disabled figure troubles. (Garland-Thomson 42)

The economic sphere of course, is fraught with competition, and celebrates the “survival of the fittest” which literally and figuratively places physically imperfect people at a disadvantage. The notion extolled by individualism whereby each citizen has the same potential for success, is predicated on the assumption that every citizen has the same material condition. Individualism, therefore, has a predilection for “normal” bodies and so seeks to reject or “normalize” those outside the realm of what it considers normal.

“Normal,” a construct from the nineteenth century, is an ideal of the average man, without deviations, who can be assimilated seamlessly into the masses (Davis 6). The rise of professions, particularly the medical profession, necessitated a manner of measuring and evaluating; an effective calculus of mankind, which would not easily accommodate variations. “Normal” persons, therefore, are ascribed a hegemonic position and this hegemony asserts itself in the celebration of the normal, the reiteration of the dominance of the majority who are non-disabled. “In modern society the tyranny of the norm makes extraordinary bodies into freakish bodies, which both compel and repel normate sensibility” (Garland-Thomson 137). The forms of agency and subjectivity available to those who are outside the hegemonic norm are limited; while they are invisible they are also stereotyped, as dominant groups project their own experiences as representative of all humanity and other groups are excluded. Popular contemporary film, contributing to ideologies of health, social expectation and citizenship, recirculates oppressive discourses of the body which place the burden of repair and improvement on individuals.

The pervasive theme of medical science in contemporary narratives illustrates our current cultural reverence of medicalization. Medicalization is the ideology which sustains the kudos of medical science and the inherent professionalism within it. The medical experts are seen to have superior qualifications and knowledge which supersede any individual’s thoughts about their own medical issues. The ideology of medicalization sustains the power of medical professional opinion, medical assessment, intervention and treatment. It is predicated on the idea that all persons must be made “normal” as much as possible, and “fixed” when possible, through a process of medical intervention. Medical intervention can be traced to the eighteenth century and the rise of medical science. The work of Foucault is useful in analyzing this development of professional discourse stemming from the examination and categorization which form part of the medical approach to ability and health. Drawing on the work of Foucault, the “discursive practices” of knowledge are not independent of the objects that are studied, and must be understood in their social and political contexts. In the light of post-structuralism, nature and culture do not occupy separate spaces. The sociology of the body as well as cultural studies have facilitated the ideas of Foucault in developing new insights into body theory.
The Birth of the Clinic

In The Birth of the Clinic, Foucault pinpoints the end of the eighteenth century as the time at which modern biomedicine was born, and thus the distinction between the normal and the pathological was formed. By the end of the nineteenth century, confinement, institutionalization and dependency had become synonymous with ill-health, madness and disability. Thus Foucault's work on social control is helpful in analysing the manner in which we have a duty to self-regulate and optimize. For Foucault, power is inseparable from knowledge, and so the medical gaze is a technology of power, producing both. Foucault’s post-structuralist analysis of the creation of the conditions which have allowed medical ideologies to thrive also illuminates the conditions under which science has become “reified” by modern culture and allowed in effect, to become “monstrous.” Modern perceptions of the body may be effectively traced back to the late eighteenth century, when medical practice began to examine bodies in order to classify them:

In the eighteenth century, the fundamental act of medical knowledge was the drawing up of a map: a symptom was situated within a disease, a disease in a specific ensemble, and this ensemble in a general plan of the pathological world. (Foucault 13)

Foucault argues that the materiality of the body cannot be dissociated from the historical practices that objectivise it (Hughes and Patterson 333). The patient became the passive subject of the medical gaze, subjected to analysis and classification. Foucault maintained that this eighteenth century clinical discourse was the basis for a new regime of power, which he called “biopower”. Foucault’s biopower refers to the tendency of relatively recent forms of power/knowledge to work toward an increasingly comprehensive management of life; both the life of the person and consequentially the nation. In The Birth of the Clinic, Foucault argues that the dividing practices of the nineteenth century clinics affected the treatment of the body by professionals. Categorization, segregation and manipulation of subjects were objectifying procedures, through which subjects become attached to a personal and social identity. Foucault considered normalization to be the cornerstone of biopower. Normalizing technologies, (practices of bodily reconstruction, analysis and rehabilitation as well as self-help groups, fitness regimes etc.) perform disciplinary functions, encouraging subjects to identify themselves in ways that make them governable. Through the work of Foucault, then, it is apparent that from the eighteenth century, classification and governability have gone hand-in-hand. The scientific classification of persons has been seen as the primary determining factor rather than their socially-created identity. The power of science, therefore, has grown exponentially to the point where it is celebrated and glorified by mass media. Seen to be a rational repository of truth and reason, it is given the task of defining our levels of humanity, orderliness and compliance. In this way it is also “monstrous”; its growth is exponential, as is its power.

Contemporary popular film regularly displays the powers of science and technology, labelling it as “rational” and imbuing it with largesse. Fed by dominant ideologies of health and the body, popular film fails to attend to the evolving subtleties that late modern societies create in relation to health and fails to address the ever more complex nuances of the body in relation to other spheres such as biotechnology. In this way, a “monstrous science” is articulated in film; a science which has powers to “fix” and even create humans. Such science is not a field concerned with rights or equality; rather it is concerned only with its own growth and the perceived “optimization” of human life.
Science Fiction Film and Monstrous Science

Popular film, science fiction in particular, enacts our fascination and our fear of this monstrous science. Through science fiction narratives we can grapple with scientific advances and work through the underlying fears about its potential power. These narratives feature imagined futures, replete with all that science has to offer and which we imagine it will one day offer. In science fiction films, medical technology and scientific advances offer “perfect” bodies, in this way reconstituting the dominant ideologies of medicalization, normalization and individualism. The constant drive toward the optimization of the body, replacement body parts, assisted conception, gene therapy and assorted other “procedures” are now so commonplace that science and technology are an everyday part of life and the aging process. So much of social interaction, education, employment, even leisure, depends on the categorization of people (healthy/unhealthy, non-disabled/disabled, old/young, fit/unfit) that the scientific intervention that is available or unavailable to us is more and more relevant (Rose 17). These concerns find articulation in the mass market media, in particular blockbusters that attend to the concerns of the masses.

Science fiction is often concerned with a dystopian future, a world far from ideal where traditional values are collapsing. This world of the future is tightly controlled by superpowers that, through their accumulation of vast wealth, are in a position of supreme power and influence which affects the average citizen, limiting his freedom and dictating his lifestyle. Science fiction seeks to produce imaginary futures where the breakdown of society is alarming and the gap between the powerful and the powerless is a vast and ever-stretching chasm. Film is particularly well suited to the portrayal of science fiction; the distortion of ordinary colors, forms and landscapes may be made vivid, while 3D allows the viewer to “enter” the fantastical world of the future. The new technologies of late capitalism, the transport systems, the technological aids, the modified bodies, etc. are all easily expressed and made real.

The intersection of the body and technology is a recurrent trope of science fiction. The body is remade (Robocop, 2014), reconfigured (Transcendence, 2014), remodelled (Iron Man, 2008) and transmuted (The Fly, 1986). As medical technology and genetic engineering have developed, so have the futuristic ideas of a society where “disability” is eradicated by the intervention of technology to cure and treat impairment (Reeve 100). In science fiction films, medical science transforms the body in a most monstrous way; scooping out the apparent weakness of the human form in order to implant a mechanical component. As Shapiro remarks:

There is no getting away from the monstrosity of the body, or from the violence with which it is transformed, because there is no essential nature, no spontaneous being, of the body; social forces permeate it right from the beginning. The body is at once a target for new biological and communicational technologies, a site of political conflict, and a limit point at which ideological oppositions collapse. (134)

Science fiction can be seen as a warning of what might happen when science goes too far. Biotechnological cures for disabilities can result in horrifying mutations (The Amazing Spiderman, 2012), Cyborgs can revolt (I, Robot, 2004), clones can overthrow the system (The Island, 2005) and economics can determine whether you live or die (Repo Men, 2010). Science fiction always sees trouble with biotechnology, it is never a perfect advancement for humanity but always a precarious and dangerous relationship, which threatens to go wrong at every turn and disrupt the balance of power between human and machine. Machines have now made ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body. “Our machines are
disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert” (Haraway 176). The scope of biotechnology is so great that it invokes both fear and awe, seen in fictional representations as massive bodies that overpower humans (Springer 306). The futurology which now pervades our cultural products ensures a growing array of scientifically plausible futures to foster science fiction narratives.

Although science fiction films were being made as far back as 1926 when Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* articulated the fear of technology getting out of control, it could be said that the science fiction genre is more relevant now than ever, with the massive leaps in biotechnology and the grasp of science reaching ever further. Interrogations of such narratives can help us to understand contemporary experiences of scientific and technological advances. Scientific advances such as organ transplantation, stem cell science and even blood donation require and create new sets of social relations as well as generating new ideas about what constitutes life (Rose 17).

Science fiction repeatedly features disabled characters who are “fixed” by technology; Robocop is remade, Anakin Skywalker gains an exoskeleton which allows him the use of legs and arms, the Six Million Dollar Man is engineered to have super-ability, Iron Man forges a heart replacement; again and again science and technology seem to have the solutions for those whose bodies are imperfect. The reification of science and technology combined with the less than perfect body of the hero place such films in the service of an ableist agenda; scientific progress is thus shown as engaged in the modification and “repair” of human beings.

In the future that science fiction portrays, “abnormal” bodies are excluded from the realm of the active subject; if their bodies are “fixable” society projects expectations of repair at any cost. Contemporary films such as *Repo Men* (2010) warn of a monstrous future devoid of privacy and laden with control. Featuring bodies which are effectively colonized by power structures, corporate interests come to dictate the choices of humans. The internal life of man and his options are dubiously merged with capitalist power structures.

The world of late capitalist power is literally made flesh. The ubiquitous but ungraspable hyperreality of surveillance and domination is materialized and localized in the form of excruciating pains and pleasures. In this subjugated flesh, fantasy and materiality, affect and technology, the circuits of the brain and the circuits of capital, finally coincide. (Shapiro 135)

*Repo Men* (2010) enacts the nightmare of a capital-centered future where organs can be bought at a high price. Set in 2025, a corporation called “The Union” has perfected mechanical organs to replace diseased or damaged ones. If a customer falls behind or reneges on payments, “repo men” are sent to reclaim the “artiforg” (artificial organ) from the body. The procedure is immediate and primitive, frequently resulting in the death of the customer. Remy and his partner Jake are considered the best of the Union’s repo men. The Union is profit driven, having long term payment “options” which tie in consumers for most of their life.

Remy: My job is simple. Can’t pay for your car, the bank takes it back. Can’t pay for your house, the bank takes it back. Can’t pay for your liver, well, that’s where I come in.
In this imagined future, the ownership of capital is a prerequisite to harvest the power of science and technology. Families huddle in the corporation’s offices to discuss their financial options. The suggestion is that self-repair and self-care is the duty of the family man or woman and thus their options are predetermined – they will commit to whatever cost necessary in order to preserve the nuclear family unit.

Remy: He’ll sign it. Everybody signs it. (Sapochnik, Repo Men)

Images of computerized diagnostics seem to hold the valuable information about possible cures; the medical gaze now married to technological advances, which, in turn, are linked to a payment grid and a seemingly life-long financial commitment to the corporation. Social and familial stability in this way depend on individual solutions which incur payment plans. The characters’ need to self-regulate, and as such be effective members of the population, is informed by the ideology of individualism and simultaneously, it reflects the biopower which Foucault spoke of. These organs are tracked and monitored and hence, surveillance is endorsed by the powerful elite as a method of control and regulation. Science, in the hands of the elite, is a means of amassing capital while simultaneously controlling the populace, as the “repo men” extract devices and life from the non-compliant customers. The corporation is a shadowy organization; a faceless giant whose only aim is to feed profit to unseen investors. In this scenario, biotechnology is a commodity, a tool of capitalism, keeping the masses enslaved. Repo Men illustrates the “vital politics” of our time, characterized by Rose as

neither delimited by the poles of illness and health, nor focused on eliminating pathology to protect the destiny of the nation. Rather, it is concerned with our growing capacities to control, manage, engineer, reshape, and modulate the very vital capacities of human beings as living creatures. (3)

Repo Men enacts this vital politics, placing individualism, normalization and medicalization in a complex web of familial, financial and moral duty. The repo men themselves become the reapers of financial retribution, performing corporate discipline at the most intimate level. In this way the film is a performance of Foucauldian biopower.

Ex Machina (2015) concerns the creation of life; a robot becomes sentient, imitating life and learning to adapt to the human world, ultimately out-smarting her creator. The film’s title refers to the ancient literary tradition of deus ex machina (God from the machine); a person that is introduced into a situation and provides a contrived solution to an apparently insoluble difficulty. Ex Machina, (from the machine) suggests that the artificially created person may surpass the limits of human intelligence, learning exponentially to solve material problems. The film questions the term “human,” illustrating the ongoing evolution of life forms. If we look back to the birth of the clinic and forward to increasing intervention and machination, we may see that, as Rose says, “we do not stand at a unique moment in the unfolding of a single history, but in the midst of multiple histories” (252).

“Machine” beings are now open to examination and classification, diagnosis and, if necessary, adjustment or repair. Clinical observation in the case of a humanoid, takes the form of the “Turing test.” The test serves a diegetic purpose, bringing the programmer Caleb to examine the humanoid robot Ava.

Nathan: Because if the test is passed, you are dead centre of the greatest scientific event in the history of man.
Caleb: If you’ve created a conscious machine, it’s not the history of man. That’s the history of gods. (*Ex Machina*)

The Turing test, developed by Alan Turing in 1950, examines a machine’s ability to exhibit intelligent behaviour indistinguishable from that of a human being. Such behaviour is of course dependent on the ideology of normalcy; the normalization of behaviour, thoughts and patterns as well physical normalcy. The importance of Turing test is tantamount to the success of the humanoid robot as a scientific creation. Reinforcing the ideological frames of what is “normal,” the test seeks to ascribe a range of normal responses. We may see the Turing test as a new form of the “medical gaze,” the biotechnical version of a clinician’s examination. The film in this way colludes with the traditional notion of science as a rational and measured discipline, capable of predictable and highly managed “solutions.” In this way, is the *deus ex machina* a solution to the vagaries of the human body? The perfectly traditionally attractive appearances of all of Nathan’s robots would suggest so. Yet in true science fiction tradition, the science gets out of control; Ava tricks Nathan and Caleb, trapping them inside the building and escaping to a new life in the city. Free to run amok in the metropolis, we are left to wonder what havoc she may wreak as a modern day Frankenstein’s monster.

This vision of the created being is inherently terrifying, rather than showing any positive potential of science. Though this Frankenstein-esque machine develops the intelligence to escape from her creator, showing what Braidotti might term autopoisis – the capability of maintaining and reproducing itself – Ava’s escape is depicted as an act of cunning and inherent evil, as illustrated by the scene of the injured orphan-man Caleb trapped inside Nathan’s prison as Ava escapes. While Braidotti writes of the machinic autopoisis as “the threshold to many possible worlds” (94), the vision of scientific creation which *Ex Machina*’s proffers is one of terror.

**Conclusion**

Notions of what exactly constitutes human life are arguably now open to interrogation. As contemporary Hollywood film is seen to narrate the concerns of the audience, the “brave new world” of medical and scientific possibilities has become a central theme. In contemporary science fiction narratives, scientific solutions to the vagaries of the human form are bound up with the ownership of capital and the enactment of self-drive. This interplay of economics with science illustrates science fiction’s continued concern with the power structures of the future, while reiterating that those whose control science, control life.

The ideologies of medical science, which may be traced back to the birth of modern medicine in the eighteenth century, are now implicated in the new discourses of biotechnology. Foucault’s theories of biopower, of compulsory self-regulation, of control by seeing and knowing, are eminently useful for examining the emergent power of new scientific technologies. Both *Repo Men* and *Ex Machina*, in different ways, illustrate the centrality of classification, intervention, optimization and control which are central to biopower.

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FLYNN Ambiguous Bodies, Biopower and the Ideologies of Science Fiction


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Set during the midst of the London Blitz, Elizabeth Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day* revolves around a narrative of espionage, but unlike many novels from the spy genre, it refuses to disclose all of its secrets. Instead, the novel’s dense and complex language, which so effectively expresses the dislocating effects of a city under attack, resists an easy or uncomplicated reading. This article examines the motif of reading within the novel, which manifests when its protagonist, Stella Rodney, learns her lover Robert is a Nazi spy. In her efforts to locate proof of his defection, Stella becomes caught in a recurrent but indeterminable task of rereading past events, a movement which attempts to remember the past but also foregrounds a fundamental inability to ever wholly resolve its enigmas. When Stella fails to read her past for lost clues, she is prevented from viewing the events of her life as a coherent and meaningful narrative. The novel’s difficult language reflects this lack of resolution, refusing to assimilate the events it depicts into a straightforward account. With its wartime setting as a disorienting backdrop, *The Heat of the Day* undermines the purpose of reading as the discovery of sense and meaning, producing instead only more questions and mysteries.

**key words:** Bowen, spy novel, reading, Blitz

In the summer of 1944, Elizabeth Bowen commenced work on a novel that attempted to capture the anxious and fearful atmosphere of the London Blitz. At that time, the Anglo-Irish author was living in London, and although the city was experiencing a brief reprieve from the attacks, when Bowen began writing, the bombs started falling once more. After her house in the suburb of Regent’s Park was hit, Bowen came to feel that the stress of that “V-1 summer” would affect the quality of the novel and did not finish it until 1948 (Glendinning 187). Through its experimental, elliptical prose, this novel, which would eventually become *The Heat of the Day*, induces the anxiety and psychological fragmentation that bespeaks the shattered tenor of wartime London. The novel revolves around a narrative of espionage, which heightens the chaos and suspense of the Blitz, but unlike many novels from the spy genre, it does not reveal all of its secrets. Instead, the novel’s dense and complex language, which so effectively expresses the dislocating effects of a city under attack, resists an easy or uncomplicated reading. In response to its challenging language, critics have referred to *The Heat of the Day* as Bowen’s “most difficult” novel (Lassner 120). It is, moreover, not only the novel’s readers that struggle with the act of reading, but also its characters: reading is figured as an impenetrable process by its protagonist, Stella Rodney, who learns her lover, Robert, may be a Nazi spy. In her efforts to locate proof of his defection, Stella becomes caught in a recurrent but indeterminable task of rereading past events, a movement which attempts to remember the past but also foregrounds a fundamental inability to ever wholly resolve its enigmas. When Stella fails to read her past for lost clues, she
is prevented from suturing the events of her life together into a coherent and meaningful narrative. Without this integrated account of her life, Stella lacks the closure she needs to comprehend Robert’s betrayal. The novel’s difficult language reflects this lack of resolution, refusing to assimilate the events it depicts into a straightforward account. With its wartime setting as a disorienting backdrop, *The Heat of the Day* undermines the purpose of reading as the discovery of sense and meaning, producing instead only more questions and mysteries.

Much of the novel’s suspense comes less from its action than it does from the psychological strain Stella undergoes as she tries to deduce Robert’s true identity. Early in the novel, Stella is approached by a mysterious man called Harrison, who tells her that Robert is a Nazi spy. After revealing himself to be a counterspy working for the British government, Harrison attempts to bribe Stella by telling her he will not arrest Robert if she agrees to leave Robert for him instead. In the remainder of the novel, Stella attempts to hide her suspicions from Robert, though she covertly observes him for signs of his defection. Eventually, Robert confesses that he is indeed a spy for Germany. When he tries to flee from Harrison by hiding on the rooftop of Stella’s apartment, he either accidentally falls or purposefully jumps to his death; the text leaves the true nature of his death unanswered.

The process of reading and comprehending this surface-level plot is often destabilized by Bowen’s syntax, which tortuously winds around double and even triple negatives, such as when Stella waits for Harrison to arrive at her apartment and wonders whether or not he will take her out to dinner: “his not having said so gave her no chance of saying she would on no account dine with him” (21). In this moment, Stella regrets not having the opportunity to rebuff an invitation that has not even been extended. Bowen frequently crafts such labyrinthine constructions to convey negative expressions, particularly those that deal with death and loss. In another striking passage, the novel describes the ever-growing number of citizens killed during the Blitz:

> Most of all the dead, from mortuaries, from under cataracts of rubble, made their anonymous presence – not as today’s dead but as yesterday’s living – felt through London... Absent from the routine which had been life, they stamped upon that routine their absence – not knowing who the dead were, you could not know which might be the staircase somebody for the first time was not mounting this morning, or at which street corner the newsvendor missed a face, or which trains and buses in the homegoing rush were this evening lighter by at least one passenger. (99)

These lines are significant not only for how they convey Bowen’s complex syntax, but also in how they point to dislocating instances of absence and loss that pervade the novel. Bowen interrupts the phrase of making “presence felt” with her use of dashes, which at once calls attention to the absent presence of the dead and seems to impede any such presence from really being fully felt. Even as the dead imprint their presence on the continuing routine of life, another dash heightens the passage’s contradictory effects and introduces an unknown second-person voice (“you could not know”). The dead impress their absence on ordinary details, altering the routine, but since “you” do not know who the dead are, you cannot know which part of the routine has changed. Others, such as the newsvendor, might know, but this knowledge is always held at bay. Though the absence of the dead has an effect, this effect is itself absent since the particular dead cannot be known.

Due to passages such as this one, Bowen’s writing in *The Heat of the Day* has been called “highly strained,” to the point where her syntactical mannerisms cause her readers to become “uncomfortable” (Lee 164-65). Daniel George Bunting, Bowen’s reader at Jonathan Cape...
Publishing, feared the novel’s readers would “be baffled completely” (Howard 181).¹ In response to such criticisms, Bowen defended her complicated style, writing in a letter to Jonathan Cape: “I’d rather keep the jars, ‘jingles’ and awkwardness — e.g. ‘seemed unseemly’, ‘felt to falter’. They do to my mind express something. In some cases I want the rhythm to jerk or jar — to an extent, even, which may displease the reader” (qtd. in Ellmann 166). Despite its unsettling and disorienting effects, the novel’s language does indeed “express something;” his reservations notwithstanding, Bunting went on to say that Bowen “succeeds time and again in expressing what has hitherto been inexpressible” (182). It is, ironically, the novel’s very unreadability that allows it to articulate an experience of war that seems to lie outside the bounds of conventional language.

The novel’s difficult language is bound up with the act of reading, and by extension, with the act of interpretation — processes that tie into the critical reception of The Heat of the Day. The novel is frequently read through two interpretative frameworks: one which posits it as a response to the trauma of war, and one which views it as Bowen’s “spy novel.”² As a recurring motif within the novel, the acts of reading and rereading link these two approaches, as each rests on the novel’s essential unreadability in order to highlight Bowen’s focus on the loss of meaning. Scholars who focus on The Heat of the Day as a response to the Second World War frequently view its complicated syntax as a means of reinforcing the violent and disruptive effects of the London bombings. As Phyllis Lassner says, in wartime “the language of conventional fictions becomes an inadequate tool of self-expression . . . Language in this novel communicates only uncertainty” (123). Bowen’s descriptions of the bombings prompt Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle to refer to The Heat of the Day as an example of “blitz-writing” (94). Jessica Gildersleeve likewise reads the narrative as reverberating with the “shuddering motion” of “a city at war” (114).

Readings of The Heat of the Day as a spy novel also focus on Bowen’s tangled syntax. Spy narratives typically progress from apparently disparate fragments of information towards a more complete account of events. According to David Seed, such novels tend to “symbolically re-enact the establishment of a desired order threatened by malign forces” (121). Suspense and uncertainty build as the main protagonist works to solve a mystery, which is usually revealed with a satisfying sense of resolution. While The Heat of the Day challenges the spy narrative’s conventional efforts to achieve closure, its language is bound up with the creation of suspense. As Anna Teekell says, “The structure of the double negative governs The Heat of the Day and underpins the novel’s logic; it creates a space of suspense, of non-knowingness. Such negative grammar is symbolic of the novel’s espionage-based epistemology: it is the grammar of Stella’s refusal to believe Harrison’s story, and her refusal to disbelieve it as well” (63).

It is this same syntactical structure, however, that undermines the spy novel’s expository function. In his study of the genre, Alan Hepburn explains, “Espionage plots provide rules for their decipherment, a user’s guide as it were, to help the fit reader read aright. Figured as games or puzzles, espionage narratives blur meaningful details with meaningless details. Interpretation requires vigilant separation of truth from lies” (xvi). The Heat of the Day confounds these expectations; there is no way to “read aright” in this novel. Not only does its language prevent

¹ Bunting made four pages of notes that list some of the novel’s most distressingly worded passages. He refers to Bowen’s phrase “has been to be seen seeing”, for instance, as “the pluperfect syphon” (182).
such a reading, the novel’s central mysteries – including Robert’s presumed identity as a Nazi spy and the secretive nature of his death – are not so easily disclosed. It is in this ambiguity that the two readings of The Heat of the Day as a spy novel and as a war novel coincide. As scenes of war filter through the novel, they distort the process of looking for clues to find the truth. Rather than reestablish order and truth, Bowen’s writing emphasizes a loss of certainty that she does not try to fill or replace.

One central way in which Bowen calls attention to this loss is through the question of whether or not the past can be “read” for clues. When Robert finally confesses his betrayal to Stella, he tells her: “You’ll have to reread me backwards, figure me out – you will have years to do that in, if you want to” (304). Robert intimates that Stella must retrospectively examine and reinterpret their relationship to locate possible evidence of his defection. His words recall Franco Moretti’s assertion that spy fiction is driven by a compulsion to “return to the beginning,” the point where the mystery first began in order to solve it (137). Robert seemingly implies that Stella may inspect their shared past and locate fragments of information that, when considered together, add up to reveal the narrative of his deception. Yet the novel engages with the act of rereading on a more problematic and profound level than simply recalling the past in order to locate an explanation. As it is figured in the text, the process of rereading conceals rather than uncovers motive and meaning.

Instead of presenting a past littered with clues waiting to be reread and reinterpreted, The Heat of the Day depicts an enigmatic past that may never be fully known. Robert and Stella’s first meeting calls into question their very perceptions of the reality of the past. When they approach one another in either a crowded “bar or club – afterwards they could never remember which,“ they “both spoke at once, unheard” (103, 104). As they begin to speak, a plane drops a bomb on a nearby building, leaving Stella and Robert speechless from the force of the detonation:

> It was the demolition of an entire moment: he and she stood at attention till the glissade stopped. What they had both been saying, or been on the point of saying, neither of them ever now were to know. Most first words have the nature of being trifling; theirs from having been lost began to have the significance of a lost clue. What they said next, what they said instead, they forgot: there are questions which if not asked at the start are not asked later; so those they never did ask. (104)

Although the moment of the blast leaves a trace in the form of a “lost clue,” the passage questions whether this clue ever existed in the first place. Instead, the idea of the clue serves as a façade that gives weight and structure to a forgotten and irrevocable moment conditioned by traumatic experience. The loss of this moment eclipses any tangible, intelligible words, as the blast causes them to forget “what they said instead.” What is more, the loss this passage describes is suggested even before the explosion occurs. An instance of unintelligibility arises in the moment leading up to the detonation when Stella and Robert “both speak at once, unheard.” Speaking simultaneously, they cannot make out the other’s words. While the bomb serves to underscore the loss of language, memory, and experience that characterizes the traumatic occurrence of Stella and Robert’s meeting, their first words had already been lost. Although this smaller moment is not as noticeably disorienting as the falling bomb, the explosion highlights the possibilities of loss that already resided in their first meeting. With its shattering force, the bomb causes an upheaval that gives the incomprehensibility of their first words a significant and impenetrable valence, for it prevents them from moving past that moment and starting their conversation anew. As such, it is not only the physical force of the bomb that they feel, but also the force of this loss, which comes to define their relationship. The idea of the missing clue, as a long-lost desire,
attempts to locate an inaugurating moment that never existed and attains its significance through its very absence.

It is the inaccessibility of this first moment that prompts Stella to go in search for it, and yet her search will never amount to more than a futile attempt to find a clue that cannot be found. The event of Stella and Robert’s first meeting is signalled through the awareness that something has happened that cannot really be understood, and therefore it cannot be read. As Stella considers events from her past, she muses:

One could only suppose that the apparently forgotten beginning of any story was unforgettable; perpetually one was subject to the sense of there having had to be a beginning somewhere. Like the lost first sheet of a letter or missing first pages of a book, the beginning kept on suggesting what must have been its nature. One never was out of reach of the power of what had been written first. Call it what you liked, call it a miscarried love, it imparted, or was always ready and liable to impart, the nature of an alternative, attempted recovery or enforced second start to whatever followed. The beginning, in which was conceived the end, could not but continue to shape the middle part of the story, so that none of the realisations along that course were what had been expected, quite whole, quite final. (146)

This passage foregrounds the paradoxical forgetting of what should be unforgettable, so that the story’s beginning remains unknown even as its impact continues to be felt. The forgotten beginning registers only through its later effects, in its capability to “shape” the rest of the story. With the past figured as a book without its first pages, the notion of reading back for lost clues resurfaces. Bennett and Royle argue The Heat of the Day is paradigmatic of what they call the “retrolexic,” which they define as “a work of rereading or re-experiencing” that involves “remembering what never happened.” In this way the retrolexic engages with a demand for reading back, for ‘rereading backwards’, for a rereading which at once doubles and obliterates any ‘first reading’ . . . It is a demand which, while figuring the starting-point of reading or experience, cannot itself be situated” (89). In considering the novel as a retrolexic text, Bennett and Royle raise the important question of whether Bowen presents a past that has any grounding in reality.

However, the novel does not just foreground the process of reading back; it also considers the implications this process has for the future. Even as Stella’s forgotten beginnings persuade her to reread for moments that were possibly never there at all, their absence maintains a strong hold on what is to come. As Stella phrases it in the passage above, “One was never out of reach of the power of what had been written first.” Without the beginning, the story is never “quite whole, quite final.” Instead, it remains ineluctably entangled with the missed or forgotten moment of origin. Since the story’s beginning has never been rendered fully present, its ending will remain profoundly unresolved. Reading and rereading do not, then, fully elucidate the unknowable events in Stella’s past, but instead engender even more mysteries. Since the lingering ambiguities instigate further acts of rereading, Stella thus becomes immersed in a recurrent and unfulfilled process of decryption and decipherment.

The missing beginning therefore has implications for the story’s end, or in the case of Stella’s life, for her future. In particular, the novel resists closure, so that the events of Stella’s life are bookended with uncertainty, as is evidenced by her complicated relationship with Harrison. After Robert dies, Harrison flees without contacting Stella. Since Harrison was trailing Robert on the night of his death, he is the only person who knows whether or not Robert purposefully jumped or accidentally fell to his death. Thinking of Harrison, Stella realizes that with “their extraordinary relationship having ended in midair, she found she missed it – Harrison
became the one living person she would have given anything to see. Ultimately, it was his silent absence which left her with absolutely nothing. She never, then, was to know what had happened?” (339-40). Like the notion of the forgotten beginning that persists in haunting Stella, Robert’s death continues to be felt in its aftermath and is specifically experienced through its very irresolution and unknowability. Any meaning Stella may try to find in his death cannot be finalized, as Harrison’s departure leaves her bereft and wondering. For Stella, it is not the “silent absence” of the dead that plagues her, but of the living, and yet she thinks of Harrison in a way that might befit a dead person: silent, out of reach, beyond knowledge or communication. Without him, Stella comes to identify a loss of meaning and knowledge that refuses to be reclaimed.

Harrison’s absence leaves Stella searching her memory for clues of Robert’s criminal past, “piecing and repiecing it together to try and make out something they had not time to say – possibly even had not had time to know. There still must be something that matters that one has forgotten, forgotten because at the time one did not realize how much it did matter. Yet most of all there is something one has got to forget – that is, if it is to be possible to live” (358). Stella’s lack of closure causes her to revisit her relationship with Robert, and she attempts to “reread [Robert] backwards” after all. What she finds, however, is that there is nothing tangible in their past to read. If evidence of Robert’s defection ever existed in the first place, Stella has forgotten it. Once again, Stella is left only with the suspicion that the trace of Robert’s espionage must linger somewhere, even if such evidence remains just out of her line of sight. Although Stella wishes to remember, her statement “most of all there is something one has to forget – that is, if it is to be possible to live” aligns the process of recovery with the ability to forget.

In order to recover from Robert’s death, Stella seems to need to engage with what Jay Winter calls “the necessary art of forgetting,” or the process of separating from one’s loss to begin to live again (115). Winter’s view of the productive nature of forgetting is based on Freud’s distinction between mourning and melancholia. Freud defines mourning as an essential process for recovery, through which the mourning individual eventually comes to terms with the loss. He characterizes melancholia, by contrast, as an arrested process in which the depressed and self-loathing individual continues to narcissistically identify with the lost person or object. Trapped in such a state, the melancholic individual remains haunted by the past, unable to disassociate from what has been lost. Even as Stella expresses a desire to forget, her repeated efforts to read the past for lost clues prevent her from doing so. Without the missing pieces of her relationship with Robert, she grieves over a loss she cannot fully comprehend. Her melancholy, furthermore, does not center on her loss of Robert so much as it does on her inability to know what happened in the past, and it enfolds her unrelentingly because she will never know (“she never, then, was to know”). Stella’s dilemma reflects a crucial and paradoxical aspect of traumatic forgetting: although she strives to remember what has been forgotten, she needs to forget in order to heal. And yet her impulse to keep reading back causes her to repeatedly encounter the frustrated trace of what she has forgotten or “possibly had not had time to know.” The act of rereading prevents her state of melancholy from coming to an end; her failed efforts to reread the past maintain her loss and prevent her from achieving a measure of resolution.

Stella’s profound lack of closure is structurally reinforced by the novel’s narrative, which never discloses the truth of the events that burden her. When Harrison suddenly returns, Stella implores him to fill in the gaps in her memory. Although she repeatedly asks him to explain,
“What happened?”, Harrison only replies, “I don’t remember” (358, 361). He withholds any possibility that Stella will achieve closure for Robert’s death, the true cause of which remains a mystery to both Stella and Bowen’s readers. Without any further knowledge of whether Robert jumped or fell, Stella makes one final attempt to find closure as she tells Harrison, “I’ve wanted to be able to say goodbye to you: till this could be possible you’ve haunted me. What’s unfinished haunts one; what’s unhealed haunts one” (362). Her words reiterate her need to heal and reflect the haunting effects caused by her inability to re-read her past. Stella’s experiences continue to possess her precisely because she cannot know them, and while it looks as though she never will, it is also uncertain if she will receive the goodbye from Harrison that she so strongly desires. In the midst of Stella and Harrison’s conversation, an air raid strike begins and prevents Harrison from leaving. As their conversation continues, Harrison shifts the focus away from Robert and onto Stella by questioning her about her future. She demurs, ending their exchange as follows:

“I always have left things open. –As a matter of fact, though, I think the raid’s over.”
“In that case…” said Harrison, looking at his watch. “Or would you rather I stayed till the All Clear?” (363)

The passage cuts off with Harrison’s question, forestalling the moment of his departure. The narrative thereby suspends the possibility of closure on two levels: in terms of its content, Stella receives no closure for the circumstances surrounding Robert’s death, and in terms of its form, the novel refuses closure by denying its readers the knowledge of whether or not Stella’s desired goodbye to Harrison ever takes place. With their goodbye held in abeyance, this moment, like Stella’s life, is “left open.” Bowen’s narrative does not yield to a simple understanding; it does not offer a transparent flash of knowledge that transmits meaning or closure. Instead, in its interminable process of rereading and its refusal to reveal the truth of the mystery it describes, The Heat of the Day conveys a darker, murkier, and more dubious representation of closure and healing.

Stella’s efforts to read and reread her past, then, remain unfinished and imperfect, unsettling the notion that she may locate long-lost clues in order to reveal the truth of Robert’s betrayal. The novel’s apprehensive stance on the act of reading is further echoed in a subplot involving Louie, a young, working-class woman, and her friend, Connie. As an avid reader of newspapers, Connie is described in the novel as a careful and assiduous reader:

Connie’s reading of papers was for the most part suspicious; nothing was to get by unobserved by her. Her re-reading of everything was the more impressive because the second time, you were given to understand, what she was doing was reading between the lines. So few having this gift, she felt it devolved on her to use it, and was therefore a tiger for information. As to the ideas (as Louie now called the articles), Connie was a tooth-sucker, a keeper of open mind – they were welcome to sell her anything they could. (170)

Newspapers, as they are depicted here, cannot be completely trusted to explicitly convey the truth, and yet Connie’s diligent rereading seems to posit an active process of reading that may discern whatever truth lies “between the lines.” Like the spy narrative, the newspapers potentially contain a secret meaning that may be uncovered through the practice of close and vigilant reading. The interpretative process of reading would thus be generated by the hidden meanings that lay within the papers. For Connie, the belief that the articles contain tacit messages serves as a condition of possibility for the act of rereading itself. In other words, this belief spurs her to move beyond a surface-level reading of the newspaper’s content, probing the articles to unlock a
wealth of hidden information. The papers, furthermore, do not merely present facts, but according to Louie, the articles represent “ideas,” underlying concepts and impressions that one could discern with an “open mind.”

While Connie and Louie’s attitude initially presumes an approach to rereading that seems to reveal the truth of the matter, the novel quickly undercuts this assumption. After Robert dies, Stella is called to give testimony at an inquest into his death. Although Stella attempts to recall the details of the night Robert died to the best of her ability, she does not mention Harrison or reveal Robert’s espionage in an effort to preserve Robert’s reputation. In this passage, Bowen presents only Stella’s answers to the questions put before her and not the questions themselves, although the court’s inquiries about Robert and his relationship with Stella can be inferred from her responses. The following lines are representative of Stella’s testimony:

“Yes, I have other men friends, I suppose... I beg your pardon; I mean yes, I have other men friends” (340).
“Yes, I have always tried to keep some drink in my flat, never to run quite out of it: one needs it” (340).
“No, I do not remember drinking more heavily than usual... As far as I know, absolutely clear: I remember everything... Is it unusual? I have a good memory” (341).
“No, I cannot remember whether he was carrying an electric torch: he did not usually... Yes, I’m sorry; I agree that that is important. I must withdraw my statement that I remember everything” (342).

Stella’s testimony continues in this vein for over three pages, and while her nervous, somewhat faltering responses convey the details of that night as she knows them, her words are misread: they generate false impressions regarding her conduct and personality. Drawing from the records of the inquest, the press misinterprets and incorrectly reports Stella’s testimony, wrongly inferring that Stella drinks heavily and entertains “other men friends” besides Robert. By pointing to the inability to ever “remember everything” completely, Stella’s statements destabilize one of the central purposes of the inquest, which is to uncover the truth based on her testimony. While she successfully prevents the court from suspecting Robert’s treason, she unwittingly misrepresents herself. The truth about Stella and Robert’s relationship is therefore buried beneath two falsehoods: the lie Stella purposefully tells by concealing Robert’s defection and the mistake the newspapers make regarding her conduct.

Despite the “suspicious” form of rereading Connie endorses, the falsehoods in Stella’s testimony take on the appearance of truth as the newspapers disseminate the story. Louie, who meets and comes to admire Stella earlier in the novel, concludes after reading the news, “She had seemed so respectable . . . but there she had stood in court, telling them all. That was that; simply that again. There was nobody to admire: there was no alternative” (346). Given credibility by the newspapers, the story of “Stella’s fall,” as Louie thinks of it, becomes reduced to a single, seemingly indisputable fact. Though Stella’s fall is, in this sense, metaphorical, it recalls Robert’s fall to his death since the truth behind neither event is ever fully disclosed. Coinciding with Stella’s fall, however, is a deceptively false narrative that takes the place of and imitates truth. The newspapers disseminate a totalizing reading of Stella’s testimony, which does not, in the end, incite the act of rereading. Instead, the newspaper article’s account solidifies into a dangerous idea for Louie, one that does not require extra scrutiny. With “no alternative” interpretation, there is no need for her to read back. The newspaper reports lull Louie into a counterfeit sense of closure that distorts the events of Stella’s life rather than disclose them.
Like Stella’s unfulfilled efforts to reread her past for clues of Robert’s defection, Louie’s reading of the newspapers refuses to divulge the truth. By undermining the act of reading, *The Heat of the Day* renders the search for knowledge and meaning ceaselessly incomplete, resulting in a profound lack of closure for both Stella and its readers. As the novel confounds Stella’s attempts to reread her past for lost clues, it presents a character who is mercilessly plagued by unknown and forgotten events. Through its very absence of resolution, furthermore, the novel speaks to the recurring and melancholic quality of Stella’s experience, as her compulsion to revisit the past generates an irresolvable temporal dilemma from which she cannot escape. Try as she might to read her past again and again, rereading backwards remains an incessant, indeterminable act that accentuates the impossibility of ever returning to, or fully deciphering, the past.

**Works Cited**


In this paper I explore the multifaceted relationship between violence, speech and power in the most graphic of Shakespeare’s plays, *Titus Andronicus*. I take my cue from Hannah Arendt’s reflections on violence as opposed to power, and as something “incapable of speech,” but I read the play through the lens of Giorgio Agamben’s notion of sovereignty as the suspension of the law. I consider the dichotomy speech/muteness as an example not only of the dichotomy power/violence (Arendt) but also of the opposition between *bios* and *zoe*, that is the difference between a life worth to be included in the political realm and a life understood as the mere condition of being alive, a condition common to human beings and beasts (according to classical philosophy). In *Titus Andronicus*, these distinctions are blurred, and *zoe* becomes fully exposed to the sovereign decision. While the image of a mutilated and mute body cannot match Arendt’s idea of politics as the combination of speech and action bereft of violence, Agamben has developed the notion of a politics that renders life disposable, mute, bare, and can still be called politics or power, and precisely biopower. From this perspective, I argue, Lavinia and the other characters of *Titus Andronicus* are the embodiment of the concept of “bare life” as developed by Agamben, and Shakespeare’s Rome is a State of exception and of exceptional violence.

key words: *Titus Andronicus*, violence and power, biopolitics, Giorgio Agamben, Hannah Arendt

“O, Why Should Wrath Be Mute?”

Violence is a pervasive element in Elizabethan drama and takes on a great variety of forms in Shakespeare, ranging from purely mental torture to the horrific tragedy of blood. *Titus Andronicus*, allegedly the first of Shakespeare’s tragedies, is often seen as an emulation of the contemporary revenge plays and is considered as one of the most violent works in Shakespeare’s canon. In this paper, I explore the multifaceted relationship between violence, speech, and power in *Titus Andronicus*, taking as my point of departure Hannah Arendt’s reflections on violence as a notion opposed to that of power, and as something “incapable of speech” (*On Revolution* 19). As a matter of fact, it is the lack of speech, muteness, that results from the atrocities committed against the characters of the play – especially, but not only, against Lavinia’s body.

According to Arendt, violence, unlike politics and power, does not need language to achieve its goal, i.e. the subjection or annihilation of the other through physical coercion; however, Arendt’s statement that “violence is mute” (*Human Condition* 26) could also mean that it deprives perpetrators and/or victims of the possibility of communicating, excluding them from the political arena, which is precisely the union of speech and action in her view. This political ideal – which challenges a tradition of Western thought that considers violence as productive –
found expression, according to Arendt, in the Greek *polis* and in Rome at the time of the *pax augustea*. Yet, the Rome of *Titus Andronicus* is very distant from Arendt’s ideal. In fact, it is a decadent Rome, where the Senate has little or no power. To a certain extent, it dramatizes, instead, an ongoing debate on the use of violence to retain political power, even representing England at the time of Shakespeare, or “a privileged globalized arena in which to deal with the Renaissance expanding territories of the human” (Del Sapio Garbero, Isenberg, and Pennacchia 18). In other words, the setting in ancient Rome does not prevent Shakespeare from providing a modern (or early modern) perspective on violence, which is in its turn still fruitful today, and can allow us to reflect on violence and power through his plays.²

The Roman setting and the value of *Titus Andronicus* have, respectively, been widely criticized and disputed, and, for a long time, the tragedy was either ignored as a juvenile exercise or simply excluded from the group of the more appreciated Roman plays.³ For example, while arguing that *Coriolanus, Antony and Cleopatra,* and *Julius Caesar* display Shakespeare’s genuine knowledge of the Roman Republic and Empire, Paul Cantor’s volume on the Roman plays only mentions *Titus Andronicus* in a single note:

> Though *Titus Andronicus* should in some sense be classified as one of Shakespeare’s Roman plays, I have left it out of consideration entirely, because it is obviously an immature work and does not display the understanding of Rome Shakespeare developed in his later Roman tragedies. (211)

Challenging this judgment and scholars that dismissed Rome in *Titus Andronicus* as a mere setting for a revenge play,⁴ scholars such as Robert Miola have highlighted the distinctively Roman character of the play. Significantly for my approach, Miola insists on Shakespeare’s interest in the “problems of power and order” and in the clash between “private interest and public duty” in the play (44). Similarly, Quentin Taylor, a scholar of political science, proposed a reading of the play directing particular attention to its political dimension, in contrast to the previously widespread perception that “Rome and its politics are but the backdrop to what is essentially a non-political story of decadence, evil, lust, and revenge” (130). Finally, a number of critical approaches have been recently used, which tend to point out the double dismembering of the body and of the city, the agency of the disabled bodies, the many dissonances and discomforts of the text (especially the essays collected in the volume edited by Stanavage and Helmhauer).

Taylor supports his argument in favour of a political reading of the play by considering the subtext on power and law that permeates the tragedy. However, if we look at *Titus Andronicus* through the lens of Arendt’s political theory, power is only invoked, for example when Saturninus says “if Rome has law and we have power, / Thou and thy faction shall repent this rape” (I.i.408-9). As the tragedy unfolds, it will become clear that Rome’s law is incapable of regulating the “life in common” of human beings, as Arendt would define politics. From Arendt’s

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¹ See, for instance, Machiavelli’s suggestion that the Prince should use violence in such a way as to make his enemy unable to retaliate: “the injury that is to be done to a man ought to be of such a kind that one does not stand in fear of revenge” (6). I would like to thank my anonymous reviewer for making the point that this is one piece of advice Titus definitely does not take.

² For a discussion of the general notion of violence in Shakespeare, see, among others, Foakes, Cohen and Marshall.

³ *Titus Andronicus* was “much disliked” by early critics (Hunter 1). T.S. Eliot, for example, famously argued that it was “one of the stupidest and most uninspired plays ever written” (82).

⁴ For example, Maurice Charney in his *Shakespeare’s Roman Plays* (1961). However, Charney later regretted not having included *Titus Andronicus* among the Roman plays, because “it is so actively concerned with what it means to be a Roman” (“*Titus Andronicus*” 263).
perspective, such a legal system would not give rise to power, but rather to violence, which takes the place of the civil arrangement of the life of the polis. The monstrous cruelty in many scenes of the play is exactly what led critics to argue for an anti-Shakespearian attribution of the play (Taylor 129). When, at the beginning of the twentieth century, John M. Robertson wrote a book entitled *Did Shakespeare Write Titus Andronicus: A Study in Elizabethan Literature* (1905), he claimed to have discerned various hands at work in the play; but it was especially the play’s bloodletting and graphic violence that were used to back up the tragedy’s exclusion from Shakespeare’s canon. Instead, Bate argues that the structural unity of the play suggests “a single authorial hand” (82). As a result of a series of critical assessments, *Titus Andronicus* is now considered important for the author’s later artistic development (Miola 42), and for putting “an unforgettable emphasis on suffering and pain” (Charney, “*Titus Andronicus*” 262).

Samuel Johnson considered “the barbarity of the spectacles, and the general massacre which are here exhibited” intolerable to any audience (qtd. in Bate 33). Massacre is the most impolitic event in Arendt’s view. Victims of atrocities can suffer to the point that they cannot express their pain through language, but only by screaming if they still have voice; perhaps pain prevents people from phrasing their thoughts, that is, from making sense of their experience. Pain distorts and destroys human ability to speak and think, as aptly argued by Elaine Scarry in *The Body in Pain* (1985). In Arendt’s view, nothing of this sort pertains to the political arena: violence is disconnected from power, because real power does not need force. On the contrary, violence is precisely a sign of the lack of power. Therefore, I argue that the speech/muteness dichotomy is an example not only of the power/violence dichotomy but also of the opposition between a life worthy of being included in the political realm and a life understood merely as being alive, a condition that human beings share with other animals. In other words, to use the terms of a philosophical tradition that stems from Aristotle, we can refer to the juxtaposition of bios (meaningful life) and zoe (natural life). Moreover, if logos, i.e. speech, is what distinguishes humans from other animals (as Aristotle famously stated), it follows that depriving human beings of the capability to speak means destroying their very humanity, turning them into living beings in their “bare life,” a concept I borrow from Giorgio Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* (1995).

Does Lavinia lose her “self,” her bios, her status of a citizen, when she is ravished and mutilated? If the ability to communicate is what makes a living being a human with his/her own political identity, the violence committed on her also excludes her from the community of the polis. On the other hand, does she regain her political agency when she “speaks” again through the language of literature, using Ovid’s book to tell her own story, and writing three words that reveal her rape? How can the image of a mutilated body, in fact a mute body, relate to Arendt’s idea that politics is impossible without speech? As Arendt puts it:

> The point . . . is that violence itself is incapable of speech, and not merely that speech is helpless when confronted with violence. Because of this speechlessness political theory has little to say about the phenomenon of violence and must leave its discussion to the technicians. *(On Revolution 19)*

Rather than using Arendt’s ideal notion of politics which cannot envision violence in the life of the polis, we must turn to another theoretical framework to find a notion of politics that renders life disposable, mute, bare, and can still be described as politics or power, namely that of biopower and biopolitics. From this perspective, Lavinia and the other characters of *Titus*...
Andronicus are the embodiments of Agamben’s notion of “bare life.” Yet, to a certain extent, Lavinia, I will argue, regains language, therefore humanity, through literature.

**Biopower: From the Naked Body to Bare Life**

Roman *civitas* is questioned from the very beginning of *Titus Andronicus*, when Titus surprisingly resorts to human sacrifice, which is inconsistent with Rome’s historical practices. According to René Girard, sacrificial rites “divert the spirit of revenge into other channels,” therefore sacrifice is one of the ways – along with the use of compensatory measures and the establishment of a judicial system – to avoid an “interminable round of revenge” (21). A similar situation is described in *Coriolanus*, where Martius is the perfect Girardian victim (see Walker 175). However, far from freeing society from violence by deflecting it onto this sacrificial victim, as theorized in *Violence and the Sacred*, Alarbus’s sacrifice triggers off the revenge plot. Lucius gives what sounds like a Girardian explanation for the sacrifice:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Give us the proudest prisoner of the Goths,} \\
\text{That we may hew his limbs on a pile} \\
\text{*Ad manes fratrum* sacrifice his flesh} \\
\text{Before this earthly prison of their bones,} \\
\text{That so the shadows be not unappeased,} \\
\text{Nor we disturbed with prodigies on earth.} 
\end{align*}
\]

This “sacrifice of expiation” (I.i.36) is supposed to keep the gods’ wrath away from the city. Yet, while Martius is the “perfect indifferent victim” (Walker 175), Alarbus is not sacrificeable: he is silent, but not “indifferent.” Being a Goth, he is outside of the Roman law, therefore outside of its protection, and yet his sacrifice is not without brutal consequences. Agamben defines *bare life* as “the life of *homo sacer* (sacred man), who may be killed and yet not sacrificed” (8). The gods, as a matter of fact, seem not to accept the offer. After the rite, a series of brutal actions take place on the stage – often simultaneously, as the play deploys the triple scene allowed by the Elizabethan stage – in which each character seeks his or her own revenge.

Alarbus is a *homo sacer* who can be killed without the killer being punished by law. Yet, his mother Tamora – first a victim of violence – becomes the cruellest revenge seeker. But in her thirst for blood, Tamora is just the counterpart of Titus in his role as the offended father after Lavinia’s rape and mutilation. Similarly to what happens in *Romeo and Juliet*, two families are in conflict, but the conflict in *Titus Andronicus* subverts the political order of the city (Hunter 4). Since there is no justice in Rome, no law to regulate it, the controversy has to be *literally* fought out: the opponents are enemies to be physically vanquished, without the possibility of inflicting a modern form of punishment on any of them. As in Ovid’s Iron Age, “*Terras Astrea reliquit* [i.e. Astrea, the goddess of justice has quit the Earth]: be you remembered, Marcus, / She’s gone,

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6 According to Bate, “[t]he religious rituals of a civilized culture, it was believed, involved animal rather than human sacrifice” (6). See also note 127 to the text on page 135. For a different reading of the sacrifice, see St. Hilaire, who contends that “Titus’s sacrifice is entirely consistent with a similarly appalling scene in a Roman text,” that is *Aeneid* 12 (314). In this line, Titus acts following the (mythological and not historical) precedent of the *pius Aeneas* when the latter killed Turnus, thus reenacting the founding of the city.

7 Girard maintains that, trying to control internal violence, every “society is seeking to deflect upon a relatively indifferent victim, a ‘sacrificeable’ victim, the violence that would otherwise be vented on its own members, the people it most desires to protect” (4).

8 In the sense described by Foucault of a “sign,” i.e. something that clearly signifies the crime and shows the disadvantages of the crime to other people, so that nobody feels attracted to the crime itself (128ff).
she’s fled” (Shakespeare IV.iii.4-5). Astrea has left the Earth leaving room to the demonic barbarism that transforms the very structure of the polis: “I am incorporate in Rome” (I.i.467) says Tamora, hinting at the metaphor of the political body constantly active in the play. Throughout the tragedy, Rome too is a dismembered body that needs to be reassembled (“to set a head on headless Rome,” I.i.189), or a diseased body (“To heal Rome’s harm and wipe away her woe,” V.iii.147) carrying the “civil wound” (V.iii.86). Where the head is missing, judgment is lacking as well, and law yields to revenge. In such suspension of the law – which Carl Schmitt called the state of exception – all manifestations of violence can be included in legality.

For Agamben “The state of exception is . . . not the chaos that precedes order but rather the situation that results from its suspension” (18). The failure of politics in Titus Andronicus is marked by several, consecutive steps. When Titus is recalled by the Senate, he finds the city on the verge of a civil war. The tragedy is set in motion by the sacrifice of Alarbus, Titus’s refusal of the crown, and his election of Saturninus, against the inclination of the people, as Titus will later admit: “Ah Rome! Well, well, I made thee miserable / What time I threw the people’s suffrages / On him that thus doth tyrannize o’er me” (IV.iii.18-20). Titus acts as a sovereign that decides over the state of emergency, but then bestows the sovereignty onto somebody else. Rome therefore sees “the failure of institutions, leadership, and justice” (Taylor 132). The necessity to take revenge, as Bate writes, “reveals the inadequacy of the law” (26).

The body politic always configures itself as a system of inclusions and exclusions (Agamben 21). However, Lavinia’s last words are: “Confusion falls” (II.ii.184). In the dismemberment of the city, an important role is played by the blurring of boundaries between the inside and the outside. “Confusion,” Bate notes in his comments to this line, means “discomfiture, ruin, putting to shame, mental perturbation, throwing into disorder” (Shakespeare 179). However, the term brings with it also the meaning of obscuring the borders between distinctive elements. For example, the beastly and the human intersect at different levels in the play, and barbarity and civilization cease to be separate entities.

In the classical world, whoever was outside the polis was considered barbarous. However, although the text constantly associates the Goths with fierce animals (“wilderness of tigers” III.1.54), and despite the opposition Roman/barbarous (“Thou art Roman, be not barbarous” I.1.383), in Titus Andronicus Romans fail to represent civilization, justice and virtue. On the contrary, violence seems to be constitutive of the city even before the events represented in the tragedy take place. It is difficult to distinguish between barbarians and the civilized: it is the Goth Chiron who exclaims: “Was never Scythia half so barbarous!” (I.i.134), while his brother’s answer contains a reference to Hecuba (I.i.139), and Aaron plots the rape of Lavinia with a Roman literary text as a guide (“His Philomel must lose her tongue today” II.ii.43).

If at the beginning of Titus Andronicus the walls of the city seem to delimit the ordered world (Hunter 5), and the forest corresponds to the reign of bestiality, gradually the distinction between polis and bare life becomes blurred. To put it in Agamben’s terms: “when its borders begin to be blurred, the bare life that dwelt there frees itself in the city and becomes both subject and object of the conflict of the political order” (9). In the classical world, however, bare life was excluded from the political arena: “simple natural life is excluded from the polis in the strict sense, and remains confined – as merely reproductive life – to the sphere of the oikos” (Agamben

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9 In the same way as the language of medicine enters the language of politics, it seems to me that after the beginning of the modern era of biopolitics the reverse is also true. It is by no means accidental that Elaine Scarry writes: “This centering of the body in citizenship provides a doorway for the continual entry of political philosophy into medicine” (“Consent and the Body” 872).
2). For Aristotle “bare life” is the creaturely condition that needs to be transformed into “good life” in order to enter the political sphere.

In Shakespeare’s fictional Rome, no aspect of life can be considered merely personal and private, and whoever has force uses it to control the bodies of other citizens: when Saturninus accuses Quintus and Martius of the crime of Bassanius’s murder, he sends them to prison and condemns them to “Some never-heard-of torturing pain” (II.ii.185). Titus’s hand would be a bargain for his sons’ lives, and Lavinia, engaged to Bassanius, is first assigned to Saturninus (who refers to her as if she was a worthless commodity), then married to Bassanius (who refers to her as a property, “that is mine” I.i.413), and finally raped by Chiron and Demetrius (who refers to her as a deer, both a beast and an object of their sexual hunt). In Rome, no aspect of life can be spared from the struggles (Hunter 5). Power in the play is in fact biopower and politics is biopolitics, a concept Agamben developed drawing on Foucault and Arendt. The first, Agamben writes, “summarizes the process by which, at the threshold of the modern era, natural life begins to be included in the mechanisms and calculations of State power, and politics turns into biopolitics” (3). Twenty years before, Hannah Arendt had seen the collapse of the distinction (the confusion, so to speak) between zoe and bios, private life and political life, in the rise of modern capitalist forms of labour. However, according to Agamben, biopolitics has existed since the birth of sovereignty. When the human being as a living body is used in a political strategy, zoe becomes subject to sovereign power. The extreme expression of biopower is located by Agamben in the concentration camps, where life becomes totally disposable, or “bare” (Agamben 4 and passim).

In Titus Andronicus, power – but Arendt would say “violence” – transforms life into bare life, especially Lavinia’s. As has already been mentioned, her body is repeatedly subjected to the male gaze and force (as “sub-JECTum” in Agamben’s sense), first through husbandry, later through rape and mutilation. When Marcus sees her and says: “Speak, gentle niece, what stern ungentle hands / had lopped and hewed and made thy body bare” (II.iii.16-17), her nudity is not only an external characteristic but clearly represents an absolute lack of rights. She cannot speak and has no hands, and is therefore deprived of agency. Yet, worse things are to come: after the rape and mutilation of Lavinia, when Titus chops off his hand to save his sons from death, the messenger brings only their heads to their mutilated father. Lucius comments:

Ah, that this sight should make so deep a wound
And yet detested life not shrink thereat!
That ever death should let life bear his name
Where life hath no more interest but to breathe! (III.i.247-250)

Life not worth living, a state of being in which one’s sole aspiration is to breathe, is exactly the bare life that can be disposed of. Every life is in the end disposable in Titus Andronicus, including that of Chiron and Demetrius, whose bodies become the ultimate substance that nourished bare life, that is, food.

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10 Saturninus uses terms as “changing piece” (I.i.314), “churl” (I.i.490), Tamora calls her “fee” (II.i.179), all expressions being related to the semantic area of money, as Bate points out in his notes to the text (Shakespeare 148, 158, and 178).

11 Agamben claims that “Hannah Arendt had already analyzed the process that brings homo laborans – and, with it, biological life as such – gradually to occupy the very center of the political scene of modernity” (5).

12 Husbanding and husbandry fall under the Agambian concept of biopolitic (see Reinhard Lupton, esp. the chapter “Animal Husband in The Taming of the Shrew,” 25-68).
Making (Non)Sense of Violence

*Titus Andronicus* is a play about the (non)separation between biological life and political life, as well as between language and its referent (due to the literalization of metaphors that appear in the play, the examples of which will be discussed later in the article), bridging the gap between signifiers and signified, and challenging the limits of the representable, of theatrical decorum. The violent actions of and on the bodies induce the characters to describe them, although “the speech is rendered grotesque when visibly juxtaposed with the acts described” (Walker 170). Language itself is violent, to the extent that James Calderwood talks of “the rape of language” (Calderwood 29). The word “rape” itself is used metaphorically by Saturninus in I.i.409 (“Thou and thy faction shall repent this rape”), but it becomes reality – the play’s reality – in II.ii. In any case, if rape is “embedded within the language, institutions and social practices of Medieval and Early Modern culture” (Robertson and Rose 2-3), here it also connects with poetry through the figure of Philomel.

Before Lavinia’s rape takes place, Tamora says “I will not hear her speak,” and Lavinia cannot name that thing – rape – “[t]hat womanhood denies my tongue to tell” (II.ii.174). Both statements will soon prove literally true: Tamora, like everybody else, will no longer hear Lavinia’s voice; Lavinia, precisely because of her assaulted womanhood, will not be able to say “that one thing more” (II.ii.173).

The play also stages the collapse between reality and fiction. The characters’ lives, their reality, are so similar to literature as to follow the patterns traced in the texts by Ovid and Virgil. Rome itself is not our historical Rome but a palimpsest of literary representations of the city, in the first place the one to be found in the *Aeneid*. In a reversal of the classical idea of art as *mimesis*, i.e. imitation of life, the characters’ lives imitates poetic narrative rather than real life. However, literature is also a way of reading reality. As St. Hilaire puts it, “older texts are recognized explicitly and invoked by the play’s characters themselves as the framework for the world in which they operate” (315-16). The text’s main question about how to interpret Lavinia’s “martyred signs” (III.ii.36) is in line with what Bate calls “the play’s characteristically Renaissance obsession with the problem of meaning” (Bate 34). Yet, there is no certain interpretation of her signs until she writes down the truth. Before writing, however, Lavinia is a reader and forces the other characters to read:

Titus
Soft, so busily she turns the leaves!
What would she find? Lavinia, shall I read?
This is the tragic tale of Philomel,
And treats of Tereus’ treason and his rape –
And rape, I fear was root of thy annoy. (IV.i.45-49)

In other words, classical literary texts function as interpretative tools of the undecipherable signs of reality, that is, as a way to decode and make sense of an absurdly cruel sequence of horrific actions, which appear to have no motivation: “If there were reason for these miseries, / Then into limits could I bind my woes,” exclaims Titus in III.i.220-21. First, Marcus compares Lavinia to

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13 A later, significant case in point in Shakespeare’s drama is *The Merchant of Venice*, especially the metaphoric narratives told by Shylock, who really starts perceiving Antonio’s body as something that can be divided and weighed (see Lucking 130). The linguist George Lakoff has aptly underlined the potentially dangerous use of metaphorical language in our understanding of the world in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), and famously stated that “metaphors can kill” (“Metaphor and War” 1991).
Philomel: “But sure some Tereus has deflowered thee / And, lest thou shouldst detect him, cut thy tongue” (II.iii.26-27). Then, the young Lucius invokes Hecuba in IV.i.20-21 (“I had read that Hecuba of Troy / Ran mad for sorrow”), and finally Lavinia uses Ovid to narrate her tragedy:

Titus
Lavinia, wert thou thus surprised, sweet girl,
Ravished and wronged as Philomela was,
Forced in the ruthless, vast and gloomy woods?
[Lavinia nods.] See, see!
Ay, such a place there is where we did hunt –
O, had we never, never hunted there! –
Patterned by that the poet here describes,
By nature made for murders and rapes. (IV.i.43-53)

Much has been written about Lavinia’s mutilation (see, for example, Rowe, Harris, and Tricomi). Lavinia is both handless and tongueless. She has lost all the parts of her body that represent agency, becoming an object, a stone, or an animal, which feels but cannot express. Her mute mouth, however, will prosthetically write what Marcus has already understood in act Four: “Stuprum – Chiron – Demetrius” (IV.i.78, italics in the text). After acquiring an interpretative key through literature, she acquires a prosthetic voice by means of the stick she uses to physically write on sand.

David Lucking has dealt with how Shakespeare’s characters “make sense of experience through the medium of words, and with the limitations and hazards inherent in the strategies they deploy to this end” (xi). Like other plays written around the turn of the seventeenth century, Titus Andronicus shows Shakespeare’s interest in what can be described broadly as the problem of knowledge, meaning the issue of what authority can be attributed to our knowledge, or of the role to be assigned to interpretation and explanatory paradigms (Lucking 5). In the case of Shakespeare’s first tragedy, literature provides the narrative that explains what, in Titus’s words, has no reason.

Lucking suggests that, although the narrative of the Andronici will prevail in the end (since the story of the Goths has been silenced when Chiron and Demetrius are served in form of a pastry to their mother), in the tragedy every narrative can be appropriated by different points of view and can be distorted, as the reference to the deception of the Trojan horse indicates (Lucking 56-57). Titus himself is a storyteller (“Many a story hath he told thee,” V.ii.163), yet the question remains about the relationship between Lavinia’s physical muteness and her finding a way to narrate her rape and her pain, and whether this mends her muteness. Once again, I will turn to Agamben, who, at the beginning of Homo Sacer, recalls the ancient distinction between voice and language:

It is by no chance, then, that a passage of the Politics situates the proper place of the polis in the transition from voice to language. The link between bare life and politics is the same link that the metaphysical definition of man as “the living being who has language” seeks in the relation between phonē and logos. (7)

Lavinia might not have lost voice to lament, but she cannot articulate her story for some time. Agamben continues quoting from Aristotle:

Among living beings, only man has language. The voice is the sign of pain and pleasure, and this is why it belongs to other living beings (since their nature has developed to the point of having the sensations of pain and pleasure and of signifying the two). But language is for
manifesting the fitting and the unfitting and the just and the unjust. To have the sensation of the good and the bad and of the just and the unjust is what is proper to men as opposed to other living beings, and the community of these things makes dwelling and the city. (7-8)

Body and voice, as Elaine Scarry writes, “are among the most elementary and least metaphorical categories we have” (Body in Pain 182). Violence has deprived Lavinia of her voice and has mutilated her body, but literature has restored, if not her political agency, at least her language, although for a short time, until her own father disposes of her life. While Agamben never refers to art, I would like to suggest that in recovering the ability to articulate her pain through literature, Lavinia recovers precisely the possibility to speak about “the just and the unjust,” which is exactly what makes a human being, “as opposed to other living beings,” that only live a natural life. In this sense, Lavinia ceases to belong to that realm that would exclude her from Arendt’s idea of politics – speechlessness. However, rather than leaving “its discussion to the technician” (On Revolution 19), her momentarily recovered capability to “speak” must indeed be confronted with violence.

Works Cited


14 Douglas E. Green argues that Lavinia is allowed only a fragmentary language, which is to be interpreted by Titus, Marcus, and young Lucius. “Nevertheless, as sign, Lavinia is polysemic and disruptive” (325). Jessica Tooker, on the other hand, suggests that while Lavinia struggles against becoming a signifier, Aaron manages to reveal a new language, that is the rhetoric of transformative violence that cannot be fully silenced (36, 40)


Communality and the Individual in Cormac McCarthy’s The Road

Jędrzej Tazbir
University of Łódź

The subject of the article is the analysis of the notion of communality in the relation between the two protagonists of *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy. Traversing the post-apocalyptic landscape populated mostly by wretched savages harbouring ill intent towards other human beings, the heroes ostensibly seek a place where establishing a sustainable society composed of the “good guys” can still be possible. However, while for the young son this goal implies the necessity of maintaining a sense of openness and hospitality towards the other, for the father it is the matter of day-to-day survival that takes precedence, which leads to repeated instances of withdrawing help from destitute survivors and avoiding human contact. The boy objects to this behavior, despite being wholly dependent on his father, as his sense of responsibility seems innate and unconditional. The man, on the other hand, gradually recognizes that he was so profoundly afflicted by the experience of losing his world that he cannot overcome his radical pessimism and distrust of the other. Therefore, when the man arrives at the end of his life, he comes to understand that it is only without him at his side that the son can enter a larger community.

key words: postapocalypse, hospitality, the other, individual, American literature.

The fiction of Cormac McCarthy, with its recurrent oedipal motifs, frequent depictions of startling violence, and a tendency for bleak, downbeat endings (see *Child of God*, *Blood Meridian*, or *No Country for Old Men* for ample examples), for the most part seems like a less than optimal choice, to put it mildly, for one seeking arguments affirming the notion of communality and its beneficial effect on the individual. McCarthy’s last novel to date, *The Road*, initially does not seem to stray from the abovementioned hallmarks of the author’s oeuvre. To the contrary, the vast majority of the novel leads one to infer that, by utilizing for the first time in his career a literally postapocalyptic setting, McCarthy set out to weave for the readers his most dire and fatalistic vision yet. Even more so than in the more conventional works of postapocalyptic fiction, in the world of *The Road*, what little is left after the cataclysm does not offer any reasonable hope for the restoration of human society or even the normal life-sustaining state of our world, which by extension renders any notion of communality for all intents and purposes immaterial and virtually extinguished. In the aftermath of the nondescript, but apparently globe-spanning catastrophe that has occurred, and in light of the apparent fact that the Earth was rendered barren in the process, the tentativeness of all social structures is blatantly exposed. Approximately ten years after the event – though it is doubtful anyone is still keeping strict count – what remains of humanity exists in a state of perpetual mad struggle for the continuously dwindling resources, a quagmire of savagery where those with moral reservations against slavery, murder and cannibalism have by now mostly dropped out of the race. What communities are to be found here, exist predominantly in the form of roaming barbaric tribes always on the verge of...
disintegration, and with no pretentions of accounting for the future beyond scavenging or hunting down their next meal, as the fate of children in this order is to end up on a roasting spit (McCarthy 212).

Such dire state of affairs, however, does not go wholly unchallenged, even if during all these years no one managed to come any closer to a salvation from it. As the prime example of those still rowing against the current serves the pair of the novel’s protagonists: a father and his child, who are devoted both to an indefatigable march south in search of a place offering the promise of a sustainable future, and to maintaining a set of moral values while at it. “The two decide to lay fierce claim to the last vestiges of goodness in world beyond despair,” writes Erik Hage (142). The struggle to retain enough humanity to be able to consider oneself as still belonging within the margins of one’s conception of what is “human” and “moral” comprises one of the main themes of the novel. However, as this essay seeks to prove, the danger to such pursuit for the protagonists comes not just from the savage and dim outside reality, but also, perhaps most importantly, from the internalized residue of the past, with the embrace of a new and radically unknowable mode of being – one centred on the other – perhaps representing the only course of action offering any hope of emerging from this struggle successfully.

As one could expect, the moral values held by the heroes are very stripped-down and simplistic, appropriately enough for the story’s setting. Do not lie, steal, kill, or eat others, but instead help them and keep your promises – this is what their code boils down to. Regardless, upholding these tenets still imbues the pair with a feeling of exceptionality and provides them with a rather lonely mantle of “the good guys” (81), which serves to give an additional justification to their otherwise questionable journey.

Linked to that is also the notion of “carrying the fire” (87), which the father convinces the son is their specially ordained mission. The fire in question can represent on the one hand a life-giving power in the world plunged into a perpetual winter, a guarantee of their survival – which is reflected in the frequent descriptions of the characters making a fire – and on the other, the enlightenment that constitutes “the foundation of civilization,” according to Erik J. Wielenberg, who follows this statement by saying:

> perhaps to carry the fire is to carry the seeds of civilization. If civilization is to return to the world, it will be through the efforts of “good guys” like the man and the child. At the very least, the two struggle to maintain civilization between themselves. (3-4)

Preserving within themselves the fire of an inherent sense of morality and steadfast “goodness,” they ensure it does not fan out entirely in the world dominated by savages, as well as that, unlike to said savages, the notion of entering a genuine community remains open to them. This explanation is in line with what the man tells the boy toward the end of the text, when he is pressed by the child to say where to find the fire: “it’s inside you. It was always there” (McCarthy 298). However, if we take into account the belief held by Wielenberg, who writes that “fire is also the primary implement of the destruction of civilization in The Road” (3), then we are compelled to also recognize a possible negative connotation of fire in the novel: its paradoxical ability to be used for good as well as bad ends. We will soon see that the premise of carrying the fire, while primarily nurtured with good intentions, also becomes twisted in the father’s mind as a justification for maintaining a radical and ultimately damaging isolation from the unfamiliar other.

By means of sharing of the inner fire, of the understanding that they are both assigned the task of its cultivation, the pair consecrates their unbreakable bond and the higher purpose of their
existence, which the outside reality so insistentely denies them. On some level, the father realizes that, for their mission to hold real substantial meaning, it is imperative that they never cease searching for the other potential “good guys,” with whom they could establish an elementary community with the metaphorical fire as its centre and warrant of its qualitative superiority to the groups formed by the marauders: “only a good guy who has the ability to make connections with other people . . . truly carries the fire” (Wielenberg 8). With no other “good guys” manifesting themselves to the protagonists, their existence and hence the possibility of a broader communality becomes a matter of faith, just as it is the case with the fire itself. The boy, who desires contact with others, and particularly with other children, is easily convinced that their solitude will sooner or later come to an end, largely because the nature of his relationship with the father, his “world entire” (McCarthy 4), involves absolute trust in his words, including his assurances and his moral declarations. This corresponds to the current prevailing views of morality development in children, based largely on the research conducted by Lawrence Kohlberg, who considered prepubescent children to be at the first, preconventional and prereflexive, level of morality where one’s “moral code is shaped by the standards of adults and the consequences of following or breaking their rules,” to quote Saul McLeod. On the other hand, though, this trust in the boy’s case is also dependent on the perception of the father as unequivocally committed to the same ethical rules as he – which indicates a deeper level of engagement with these rules than the abovementioned level, as defined by Kohlberg, permits. The perception is gradually revealed to be not entirely accurate, leading to disagreement between the two, as the consideration for finding the other “good guys” is not the only one, or indeed, the most important one, guiding the father’s actions.

Another and initially all overriding concern is the necessity to keep the boy – who by the man’s estimation may well be one of the last children left in the world – safe at all costs. In a violent and ruthless world, where every encounter with the other may potentially be a fatal one, this demands of the father utmost, if not paranoid, caution, as well as stinginess in sharing their supplies with another. This attitude, while being shown to save the two’s lives on several occasions, is still contested by the son who insists on reaching out to others whenever such opportunity presents itself so that their claim to represent the good guys measures up to reality. This matter is critical for the boy, since its undermining would deprive him of both hope and faith in the father. But the boy’s voice is not the only outside influence the father feels, for it has to contend with an older, more entrenched and imperious one. This voice represents an amalgamation of narratives, discourses underlying and constituting the preapocalyptic civilization, which the father grew up in. Its demands upon the man’s conscience are vast and essentially incompatible with the present reality. While the voice consecrates the father’s devotion to his offspring, formulating it as his greatest duty, this duty is framed partly in religious terms, as in the “godless” (McCarthy 2), blasphemous world of the postapocalypse it is the boy in his inner purity and unyielding sense of ethics that remains the main proof of a divine presence still lingering in their lives. This leads the father to imagine him to be “the word of God” (3) incarnate, and “good to house a God” (78); to view him as “the symbolic vessel of divine healing in a realm blighted,” to quote Lydia Cooper (219).

This in turn means for the man, who “clings to his God and his morality and considers himself a final agent of His will, even if his mission exists in a void” (Hage 143), that the two of them exist in a higher state than the other wretched “creedless” (McCarthy 28) dregs of humanity and that his role is to ensure their relation does not become tainted by the outside. Obviously, this inspires a radical inclination towards isolation and focus on self-reliance on the man’s part. He assumes the role of his son’s sole provider and guardian – proclaiming that he will kill anyone
who touches the boy, because he was appointed to do that by God (80) – in addition to that of a judge of the other, invariably declaring those they encounter as unfit to merit their goodwill. As an example of that can serve the scene where, upon encountering a man struck by lightning, the father states that “we can’t help him. There’s nothing to be done for him” (43). On one occasion the man even goes as far as to issue a harsh Old Testament style punishment for intruding on their communion, when he strips a thief of all his belongings – mostly useless anyway – and leaves him for certain death (274-76): an action which Philip A. Snyder describes as a “simplistic kind of eye-for-an-eye justice [that] closes itself on the Other, rather than opening itself to the Other and the possibility of hospitality’s gift” (82).

That such attitude equates to a momentous setback to finding a community for the fire they carry is evident, but there is still more to take into account. The religious resolution is confronted in the father’s mind with a rational consideration, likewise issued from a bygone order and voiced by the man’s wife, who killed herself before the novel’s outset. In a flashback, we hear her argue that trying to survive in such a world is futile and the best available course of action for all of them is indeed suicide, as the only probable alternative is a grisly, humiliating death at the hands of the other (McCarthy 58). The man refuses to concede her point, but is all the same at a loss to present a suitable rational counterargument or to dissuade her from her plan. Wielenberg proposes that the conclusion the wife arrived at was at least in part attributable to the man’s neglect of her in the singular focus on the bond between him and the son, as suggested by the line: “her cries meant nothing to him” (61). The result being, the critic states, that “there are clear indications she has lost her faith in him, and at least hints that she has lost her connection with both the man and the child” (10-11). It is clear also that the man is haunted by the wife’s parting words. His further struggle is weighed down by reason, which indicates the fundamental pointlessness of it all, a sense of irrelevance on the cosmic scale and alienation from the “implacable” darkness and “intestate earth” (McCarthy 138). “The man keeps on going despite recognizing, on some level, that the struggle may very well be futile,” writes Wielenberg (3).

The belief in the boy’s divine nature can be seen as a countermeasure to those encroaching thoughts, meant to alleviate the father’s existential anxiety, but in that case its effect turns out to be contrary to the intended one, as the rational and religious viewpoints become entangled in his mind. This leads him to infer that it is God’s final will that he take the boy’s life away once he can no longer heed the command to prevent his presumably fatal exposure to the other; that the importance of son’s purity supersedes that of his continued existence in this godforsaken world. And since the father perceives that his own time is coming to an end due to a disease festering inside of him, the perspective of being faced with performing this ultimate sacrifice grows increasingly imminent. Time and again, the father feels compelled to bring up the question in his mind – the question as to whether he can answer the demand of reason and the departed God, to kill the boy, to smash his head with a rock if need be (McCarthy 120), even though there is no guidance or support coming from any direction to assist him in such a harrowing duty. The transcendent is reduced to just this echoing demand, no longer a presence to direct one’s prayers to; His name not to be praised but damned for the burden He placed on him, as when the man addresses God by asking: “have you a neck by which to throttle you” (10), or when it later comes to a point where the man starts to think that “now is the time” to take his son’s life, to “curse God and die” (120) (though the thought passes without being fulfilled). The man is stuck in the position of a moral agent in a silent, amoral world, who has to decide whether to hold on to said world, regardless of how hostile it is to both his physical and spiritual side. This sentiment is reiterated in one of the only unhostile encounters the protagonists experience on the road, where an old man named Ely asserts that “there is no God and we are his prophets” (181).
In this way he effectively sums up the paradoxical situation the survivors have found themselves in, being the descendants of a civilization founded upon a set of beliefs the apocalypse and its aftermath have so irrevocably discredited.

It appears then that the protagonists have no recourse to any external system of values that could offer justification to their pursuit, that their continued running like “hunted animals” striving to hold on to their “borrowed time” (138), and holding out hope for entering a larger community, are naught but delusional attempts to postpone the inevitable. Yet that is only the case if we consider exclusively the father’s perspective. For the son, whose inner workings remain more enigmatic, is strongly suggested to have a mindset different from that of his father, and which the father cannot even wholly grasp. This may sound absurd, seeing as it is the father who has imbued the boy with much if not all of his knowledge of the world, as well as has passed down their ethical code to him. If we were to follow the model established by Kohlberg, such stark divergence should not be possible in this situation, as the boy should not yet possess the necessary mental faculties to develop an independent sense of morality, and obviously, he has no contact with any outside ethical code competing with that of his father’s. Nevertheless, while the two do indeed share basically the same code, the difference between them lies in their perception and approach to it. In the father’s case, the commitment to their stated morals is compromised by conflicting voices and considerations waging battle in his mind, the pervading sense of doom and failure of his race, which reflects, according to Cooper, in his “consistently traumatized and exhausted thought and speech patterns.” In contrast, “the luminous innocence of [the boy’s] moral commitments” (226) signifies that the son’s resolution to embody the ideal of the “good guys” is subject to no inner argument, is undisputable and unconditional, for the foundation upon which it is based is, as I would like to suggest, not primarily the pressure instituted by the father, but a primal, nonrational, nontheistic sense of responsibility.

Philosopher Emmanuel Levinas identified this sense as an originary ground for all ethics, maintaining that “the responsibility for the Other comes before history and culture” (Snyder 85), as well as before subjectivity which allows the creation and maintenance of personal, egocentric moral codes. The call to responsibility is initiated by beholding the “face” of the other, which “‘orders and ordains’ us to service” (71), and it remains at perpetual risk of being silenced by the individual’s subsequent mental constructs. McCarthy’s work seems to share the philosopher’s view, as this would explain why the son’s increasingly prominent sense of responsibility seems to a large degree groundless and wholly uninfluenced by the ego. At one point, the father poses the crucial question: “how does never to be differ from what never was” (McCarthy 32). This sentence encapsulates the difference between the two, with the man imbued with the weight of the past and little future to speak of, and the boy, to the contrary, devoid of a substantial past, being born already after the apocalypse, and forced to try and cast himself into the future. Free of the past’s residue: the shame, the guilt the bitterness, the boy can apprehend and respond to his inner calling to responsibility in an uncompromised manner. Because of that, the notion of communality burns bright within him regardless of what horrors orchestrated by the other he is forced to witness or experience. Where his father prefers to evade contact with other survivors, he insists on initiating it, where the father is hesitant to share their meagre supplies, he does not think twice about offering their best to the decrepit Ely (173). Finally, where the father opts to carry out harsh justice on the other, the boy pleads for mercy and later refuses just to disregard the repercussions of the act his father committed, insisting that “he is the one who has to worry about everything” (277), which, according to Snyder, illustrates how the son realizes “that he is responsible for the father’s responsibility as well as his own and that his responsibility goes beyond being an advocate for ethics” (82). The man moves towards isolation, orients himself
wholly towards the two’s sacred bond, distrusting even the dreams of coexistence with the other (17), and, in essence, “attempts to negate the boy’s empathy as a threat to their survival,” according to Susan J. Tyburski (126), whereas the boy both desires and considers it their duty to seek out this coexistence.

This preoccupation is reflected even in his spirituality, as when he decides to pray before a particularly opulent meal, which results in his directing the prayer to the departed strangers who left the food supplies behind (McCarthy 154-55). As opposed to the father, whose religious rituals are all too consciously constructed “out of the air” (78), the boy’s impromptu prayer evinces authentic belief in the other, a belief the father cannot bring himself to share, as neither his conception of the divine nor his reason allow such unequivocal faith in the other taken as something else than an abstract notion. This increasingly glaring discrepancy leads to friction between the two. “As the man and the boy continue along the road, their roles gradually shift. The boy begins to question the stories the man tells him” (Tyburski 126), expresses distrust in the father’s assurances of their being the “good guys” and his “old stories of courage and justice” (McCarthy 42). He is not alone in these intuitions, either, as the father is now convinced himself that his stories, have been exposed as lies, along with all the content of the culture which defined him – he expresses this sentiment when the pair visits a library, by calling the books contained therein: “lies arranged in their thousands row on row” (199). According to John Cant, such reaction stems from his perception of them as “having led to this cultural demise and the faith in the future on which they based their validity having been proved illusory” (193).

The man soon comes to acknowledge the forming rift and the inevitability of its formation, as when he admits that he does not know what the boy believes in (McCarthy 185), to which Wielenberg offers an answer “that the child believes in humanity” (14). This disparity constitutes a further argument against the prevailing contemporary notions of morality development as conditioned by authority figures and social groups, since the child displays signs of building on and developing the principles provided by the father without encountering any alternative viewpoints which could prompt him to consider it morally unsatisfying to slavishly follow the father’s example. The motivation to expand his moral responsibility beyond the extent expected by the father seems to derive mostly, if not entirely, from some internal compulsion. The father is apparently conscious of that, of their being creatures of different worlds, conceding “that to the boy he was himself an alien” (McCarthy 163), and that the final choice he will be faced with is precisely between these worlds. Is he to choose the old vanished world, based on the volatile balance between God and reason, one which demands them both to depart this blasphemous reality? Or is he to choose the potential future, seemingly ruled out by these two old axioms, each of them “a sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality” (93)? Is he to place his trust in that which eludes his mental faculties, his capacities to conceptualize; to embrace the primal, the irrational, the otherness? To do otherwise would be to contradict his belief in the boy’s uniqueness having a purpose to fulfil, a belief which as opposed to the belief in God, reason, etc., is still not undermined, but alive and capable of a productive expression.

However, to actually follow up on this belief in an authentic manner, he must come to terms with the real possibility that if the boy is to enter a real community of “good guys,” he must do so without the father at his side, for, as Wielenberg notes, “the man no longer has the capacity to expand his world beyond the child; the child, by contrast, does have this ability” (8). Instead of just paying lip service to the idea of the other “good guys” still left in the world, as he has done previously, this time the man would have to actually put absolute faith in it, in what his mental faculties judge as absurd, as a delusion, a sign of his cowardice – and commit to the act of offering his most valued, precious thing to this ostensibly cruel, self-devouring world, to the
unknown, feared other, and trusting he is not thereby sentencing his son to unimaginable suffering. His body giving in quick, he knows his final departure is imminent, and that for their inner fire to continue burning, to keep lighting the way towards some possibility of a better life, it must be shared, cannot be sustained in solitude. The notion of the “good guys” that imbues the son with hope and strength to carry on must be substantiated in human relation, so as not to peter out, not to turn into another dead idiom.

For the father, it is an ultimate test of humility – can he perform a leap of faith towards the reality of total responsibility, utter commitment to the other, which is the reality his son embodies, yet which the man can never fully understand or internalize, because of the baggage he carries? As a parent, his main obligation is to spur the child’s potential, but “because the man is damaged, he is unable to fulfill this function completely. He can truly succeed as a parent only by dying” (Wielenberg 8). Like a reversal of the dilemma faced by the Biblical Abraham, called upon to fulfil the divine Will against his reason and society, here the man is asked to defy his gods, and make a sacrifice by not killing, a sacrifice to the world and to some invisible and incomprehensible ideal of the living society in a dying Earth, in which genuine divinity could settle.

In the end, the man, the boy’s “world entire,” decides against taking the son along on his final road, even though the son, with no other kith or kin on this earth, implores him to do just that. The man must accept the guilt of bringing his son to such predicament, hope that his breaking of the promise never to leave the boy alone will be forgiven, and that this final transgression will not fatally disillusion the boy after he departs. Shortly before death, he makes a gesture of reconciliation with reality, by convincing the boy of some ethereal goodness still infusing the world and protecting those who need it (McCarthy 300). He also ruminates, while seeing the boy by the campfire, how “there is no prophet in the earth's long chronicle who's not honored here today” (297), acknowledging for the last time the ordained special message his boy carries and needs to pass on. He does, in truth, also advise the boy not to take any chances, which is flawed advice, as taking a chance is exactly what the father does in letting the boy go, and what the boy must himself do to in turn survive.

Wielenberg writes that “the child is unable to connect with other good guys as long as his father is alive” (8), and indeed, when the man dies, the boy is soon approached by another group of survivors, and does not shirk from the contact. This proves to be the right choice as the fabled other “good guys” now emerge in the flesh in the form of a family with children presumably of their own, children that the boy has so longed for all this time. The boy is accepted into this miniature community, where the fire is carried and the morals he settled on with his father are upheld. The hope prevails against the odds, “the fulfilment of this messianic expectation justifies the dying father’s faith in the future as well as his refusal to use his last bullet on his son,” writes Snyder (83). With the support of his new surrogate mother, the boy now addresses his prayers to his father, further cementing the reality of the faith in the other as the prime imperative guiding those new people in the postapocalyptic world. “And although individual death must come at the end, collective continuity remains a possibility if the generations can pass on that ardenthearted vitality which is the inherent motor of life,” concludes Cant (196), to which I can add merely that the cultivation of said vitality can only take place where the ideals of community are consecrated, and the sense of responsibility for the other resonates most deeply.
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This essay presents a sociosemiotic analysis of *My Children! My Africa!* (1989) by Athol Fugard. By considering the characters’ views about self, community, education, and time, it points to the Fugard’s anxious attempt to offer liberalism as the solution to apartheid in South Africa instead of oppositional politics, especially blacks’ calls for activism and communalism. Sociosemiotics is suitable to plays overtly political; it holds that political writers are troubled by political changes that do not correspond to a firmly held ideology—a tension between what a playwright believes is absolute and what s/he senses and perhaps fears is happening. Keys to the analysis are contemporary texts, including essays from leading Black writers and journalists and from studies and essays from attendees of a 1986 conference on liberal solutions to the unrest in South Africa.

key words: Sociosemiotics, Fugard, South African Literature, drama, political theatre.

Marked by growing black resistance movements and stringent governmental counter measures, the mid-1980s was an anxious time for all South Africans. After the partial state of emergency in July 1985, the first since 1960, gave police more power, violence erupted across South Africa. Eager to end apartheid but troubled by what they felt was a dangerous polarization of ideological extremes from the black leaders, South African liberals argued instead for incremental change. As circumstances only seemed to worsen by the summer of 1986, leading liberal scholars and writers held a conference in Cape Town to discuss how to bring about the end of apartheid through liberalism. In the introduction of book of essays that arose from that conference, the editors argue, “Many South Africans of all classes, races, and ethic affiliations might, given the chance, opt for models of liberal and social democracy taken from the West, rather than totalitarianism models from the East or one-party models from Africa. Consequently, it is the job of liberals to argue the advantages of democratic liberalism in season and out” (*Democratic Liberalism* 17).

Sensitive to the confusion and turmoil of that time, the South African playwright Athol Fugard echoes that liberalism in his 1989 play *My Children! My Africa!* Much that has been written on the play focuses on Fugard himself, his white liberal views, his use of a young white student, Isabel, and a black township teacher, Mr. M, as the mouthpieces for South African liberalism as well as the historical and political contexts of the play and the “realities” of those contexts, especially the issue of violence. In his provocative, thoughtful, and unabashedly

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scathing criticism of the play, Nicholas Visser maintains that Fugard sought to establish South African liberalism as “no longer as the cutting edge of advanced social thoughts but now as the sensible and respectable middle way between the apartheid regime and liberation politics” (488). To do so, Fugard had to distort the political and historical realities of the time, “For it is not enough for liberal values to be shown to be resurgent; ideally they must be shown to be permanent, never seriously threatened, uninterrupted in their occupancy of the ideological high ground” (494-95). By considering the views of the male student Thami, something that heretofore scholars have overlooked or downplayed, as well as those of Isabel and Mr. M, I hope to suggest that Fugard’s play might not display his confidence in the resurgence or restoration of liberalism in South African society but, instead, an anxiety about the rejection of liberalism.

I rely on and adapt the approaches that Jean Alter sets forth in A Sociosemiotic Theory of Theatre, an examination suitable to plays overtly “political” and “philosophical” as critics have long regarded Fugard’s dramatic works. Alter holds that “political” and/or “philosophical” writers are “sensitive individuals [who] are perturbed by social problems that neither they nor their society have as yet clearly identified” or what he describes as a “certain tension between a changing social reality and a lagging adjustment of ideology” (16-17). Writers turn to “fiction” to ease, offset, counter, deny, and contradict that tension arising from the conflict brought about from some emerging ideology, often the opposite of what writers believe to be true, appropriate, and just. Alter argues that the playwrights create “fiction [that] does not offer a mediated or distorted picture of a state of affairs acknowledged by the artist to be true . . . but as disguised picture of a state of affairs that has not yet been acknowledged to be true” (18). These writers feel what Alter calls an “unconscious malaise” which is particularly evident “when social and cultural changes occur at a particularly rapid pace, leaving behind the much slower adjustment of ideology, values, or art forms” (20). A sociosemiotic analysis of My Children! My Africa! reveals, I believe, an anxiety many South African liberals felt as blacks came to view liberalism in the 1980s not as a means to end apartheid but as yet another agency of white racism. Visser argues that Fugard seeks to restore or reinstate liberal values yet displays an “ignorance of oppositional politics” (496). A sociosemiotic analysis suggests that he fashions his play with an ideology he felt true, appropriate, and right, yet the attitudes that Thami expresses about community, education, self, and time expose an anxious, fearful awareness of what the playwright felt as a sensitive writer, that unconscious malaise that Alter notes. As a liberal, Fugard should be expected to offer liberalism as the solution to apartheid. So sure in his beliefs, he does not need to dramatize what Visser sees as “a liberal rejection of collective politics” (496); instead he predicts that elite blacks must and will come to reject collective politics once they see that liberals are right about the consequences of black activism.

In this essay, I focus on the characters’ attitudes about self, community, education, and time as signs of an inherent dichotomy in the play as Fugard privileges liberalism and questions oppositional politics. In this way I hope to show how sociosemiotic analysis considers characters and issues that indicate the tension between what a playwright believes is absolute and what s/he senses and perhaps fears is happening. Keys to my analysis are contemporary texts: essays by leading Black writers and journalists appearing in for example Issue: A Journal of Opinion, published by the African Studies Association, and essays by liberal thinkers from Democratic UP, 1993, 241-253, and Albert Wetheim, The Dramatic Art of Athol Fugard: From South Africa to the World, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 2000.
**VIATOR**

A Sociosemiotic Analysis of Fugard’s *My Children! My Africa!*


Set “in a small Eastern Cape Karoo town in the autumn of 1984,” *My Children! My Africa!* traces the conflict between a township teacher, Mr. M, and his prized student, Thami Mbikwana. Ultimately, both must decide whether or not to support a boycott of the schools, and the play explores each character’s reason for his decision. The action begins with an inter-school debate between Thami and Isabel Dyson, an Afrikaner girl. Excited by their debating skill and hoping for a scholarship for Thami, Mr. M arranges for the two students to form a team for a literary competition. As they study for their competition, Thami and Isabel become friends, and she learns more about life in the townships than she would have ever imagined. Political tensions rising in the township, however, force Thami, Mr. M and Isabel to abandon their plans. Thami withdraws from the competition after the leaders of the boycott order no further contact with whites. When he learns that Mr. M is suspected of being an informer and thus in danger, Thami tries to warn his teacher and to convince him to support the boycott. Yet Mr. M refuses and admits that what Thami has heard is true: he has given information about the boycott leaders to the police. Considered a collaborator, Mr. M is killed and burnt by a mob. Then Thami and Isabel confront each other about Mr. M’s death, and he tries to explain to her the reason for the death. By play’s end, Thami has travelled north to join a revolutionary force, and Isabel pledges to Mr. M’s memory that she will work to change her country.

In the 1980s tensions in South Africa continued following the violence of the Soweto uprising (June 1976) and the government’s bans of groups associated with Black Consciousness Movement (BCM). Despite the government’s attempts, many features of the BCM continued to influence black thinkers; scholars of South Africa signalled a change as early as 1979, for example Gail M. Gerhart who notes in *Black Power In South Africa* that “An ideological crossroads [had been] reached” (315). Black leaders in the 1980s, with the ideas of Stephen Biko and Frantz Fanon in mind, called for action. In the keynote address at a March 1986 conference on education, for instance, journalist Zwelakhe Sisulu stated that the time for “empty slogans” is over as the people working to end apartheid were “prepared to take action on [their] demands” (18). The social reality was changing as more “elite” blacks (especially educated professionals) came to adopt various beliefs of oppositional politics, by that time loosely associated with the United Democratic Front (UDF). This emergent activism fostered polarization as a strategy conducive to radical change, a key idea of both Steve Biko and Frantz Fanon, and in turn changed racial identity in South Africa. In “The Definition of Black Consciousness” Biko puts forth these two fundamental tenets of the political philosophy he calls *black consciousness*:

1. Being black is not a matter of pigmentation – being black is a reflection of a mental attitude.
2. Merely by describing yourself as black you have started on a road towards emancipation, you have committed yourself to fight against all forces that seek to use your blackness as a stamp that marks you out as a subservient being. (12)

Biko’s definition of being black points to an essential concept of African ontology, one that comes into play in Mr. M and Thami’s decisions about the school boycotts. Ifeanyi A. Menkiti writes that unlike “most Western views of man [which] abstract this or that feature of the lone individual and then proceed to make it the defining or essential characteristic,” the African view “denies that persons can be defined by focusing of this or that physical or psychological characteristic” but holds that “the community . . . defines the person as a person” only after one goes through a “process of incorporation with the community” (157-68). Menkiti calls this African view “the processual nature of being” (158). Personhood “is not given simply because
one if born of human seed” (158), but it must be “attained in direct proportion as one participates in communal life through the discharge of the various obligations defined by one’s stations” (162). Therefore, if personhood is something one must attain, then individuals must choose whether or not to incorporate and how to incorporate, and significantly one can fail to become a person according to the community.

African communalism underscored the polarization that black activists argued was the appropriate method to end apartheid in South Africa. To be black was to choose African ideas instead of white ones, especially individualism. Blacks who chose not to join the struggle were labelled as collaborators, or as Mbuelo Vizikhungo Mzamane and David R. Howarth describe “Non-White” that is, “blacks who aspired to white values or were deemed to be serving the white power structure” (181). As a consequence, various groups associated with UDF tried blacks considered collaborators in “people’s courts,” and often the punishment was “necklacing,” a method of executing someone by forcing a tire filled with accelerant around their chest and arms and setting the accelerant on fire.

With black leaders calling for blacks to reject all ideologies deemed “white” as patronizing and racist, they particularly attacked liberalism as yet another means to maintain the status quo in South Africa; little wonder then that liberals were anxious. African communalism and polarization threaten individualism, a key value of liberalism, and liberal solutions for progressive change. Many liberals failed to realize that as more blacks heeded the call for activism, more blacks rejected liberalism. F. Van Zyl Slabbert posed this issue in “Incremental Change or Revolution” by arguing that liberals risk being dismissed by blacks by “plead[ing] the merits of incremental change” or what he calls “the politics of stability” instead of “the politics of freedom” (409). He argued that liberals had to rethink the traditional role “of mediator, negotiator, conciliator [working] for a society in which the freedom of the individual [is] the basic source of stability and freedom was a basic contradiction that could be resolved by rational people of goodwill” (402). What Van Zyl Slabbert sensed was that black leaders viewed liberalism as “white” and thus working to maintain apartheid. Nearly a decade before, Gerhart warns liberals that keeping “a paternalistic view of race relations” in which whites help blacks mature through assimilation and acculturation no longer spoke to blacks. She goes on to say that many blacks dismiss liberals’ argument that “the outer limit of action” should be “verbal protest and symbolic racial mixing” (260).

Fugard sets most of his scenes in a township classroom, an important sign of the conflicting ideologies as contemporary texts make clear. Three 1987 essays illustrate this. In “People’s Education for People’s Power,” Zwelakhe Sisulu epitomizes the black argument to boycott government schools and demand education by the people, writing:

We are no longer demanding the same education as whites, since this is education for domination. People’s education means education at the service of the people as a whole, education that liberates, education that puts the people in command of their lives. We are not prepared to accept any “alternative” to Bantu Education which is imposed on the people from above. (26)

The school boycotts puzzled most liberals, especially as liberalism holds education as obvious, certain method to make life better for blacks. In “Liberals and the Education Crises,” Jane Hofmeyr warns fellow liberals that for blacks schools have “become contaminated by association” as yet another instrument of control used by the government and apartheid (306). She ends her essay by pleading that “Liberals cannot be passive” and “Liberal principles must be
translated into action” (317). Heribert Adam expresses his opinion that the views of education that Hofmeyr tried to convince fellow liberals of:

So, too, the black education system is in disarray. The initial slogan “liberation before education” has given way to notions of alternative “people’s education.” The education system is increasingly used for overt political purposes. A new curriculum, stressing political relevancy, has emerged. Unsympathetic teachers are harassed and unable to continue in the old authoritarian style, and pupils often teach themselves. Classrooms have become the new sites for mobilization for liberation. Many school are guarded by soldiers. (322-23)

In other words, the activism that many liberals feared threatened for liberals one of the certain means for reform and progress.

In the very way some liberals advise not to do, Fugard polarizes and thus distorts the complicated issues and situations in black townships: the classroom symbolizes steady if slow progress toward reform; the “streets” as the dichotomous “outside the classroom,” violent lawlessness. Uneasy that blacks are growing impatient with arguments for incremental changes, Fugard wants to stress that education is a solution for apartheid because it fosters rational goodwill. To that end he wants his play to dramatize the dangerous, tragic consequences of the black education system being in disarray; the probable, natural conclusion for liberals who view education as a key to change is violence culminating in the death of blacks like Mr. M and the loss of the intelligent and influential students like Thami.

Two key liberal promises, education and race mixing dictate the first part of the play, and accordingly Fugard highlights those promises through the figures of Isabel and Mr. M. The play begins in the township classroom with a liberal “victory”: Isabel winning the popular vote after she and Thami debate differences between men and women. Mr. M is pleased that his black students, who give Isabel, a white outsider, the victory, are “the real winners” as “They had to listen. . . . intelligently!” (7) Fugard seems to want Isabel to represent the identity many South African liberals held at that time, especially white English-speaking liberals, a fiction that the editors of Democratic Liberalism articulate in their introduction:

[Liberals] have defined themselves as reasonable people occupying the middle ground between implacable extremes. This position has resulted in part from the Christian emphasis on peace-making and reconciliation, in part from the fact that many liberals were English-speaking whites with weak connections to the contending forces of Afrikaner and African nationalism, and in part from the comfortable and vulnerable middle-class status of most liberals, blacks included. One outcome of liberals’ identification with the middle ground has been their emphasis on compromise and accommodation, and the adoption of stands seem conservative from today’s perspective. (7)

A self-described “rebel in the family,” with opinions of her own, Isabel comes forth for much of the play as self-directed, quick to express those opinions, and ready to consider others’ beliefs while holding steadfastly to hers. A third-generation “Sober, sensible, English-speaking South African,” she embraces the liberal ideals of slow, steady resistance and progress through education and cooperation (9).

The debate with Thami becomes a realization for Isabel that the blacks “had no intention of being grateful,” (16) leaving her feeling exposed. Until she goes to Thami’s school for the debate, she admits that the black location was, in her words, “on the edge of my life, the way it is out there on the edge of town” (15). The debate becomes her discovery, a lesson about all the locations in the country, of how little she knows and how much she can learn. That experience
and that discovery become “so exciting” (17). When Mr. M proposes the team competition, she is quick to agree with him that “Knowledge has banished fear” and she and he are “kindred spirits” (23).

Once she senses the tension between Mr. M and Thami and in the location, she tries to understand her peer, yet she seems never to grasp how the political is more important than the personal, something liberals warned others to avoid. Instead of being friends with Thami, she attempts to take the role many South African liberals adopted, namely that of a mediator, negotiator, and conciliator. Isabel fails to understand Thami’s decision as he chooses what he feels is right over personal relationships and any personal gains he might have enjoyed as diligent, smart, and elite student. With her liberal bias, she never appreciates that he chooses the political over the personal. When Thami explains that “Mr. M has chose to identify himself” with an education system that the Comrades believe maintains apartheid, Isabel advises that he does not allow that to interfere with his relationship with Mr. M because something going “wrong between the two of” them is “just about the worst thing [she can] imagine. We all need each other” (44-5). Before the scene ends, she harangues Thami about friendship, “If we can’t be open and honest with each other and say what is in our hearts, we’ve got no right to use [the word friendship]” (45). Again, Isabel assumes the role of advisor—expressing the liberal preference for the personal over the political.

In Act II, when Thami decides that he must resign from the competition, as it symbolizes cooperation with whites, Isabel then lectures him on the definition of freedom:

Other people deciding who can and who can’t be your friends, what you must do and what you can’t do. Is this the Freedom you’ve been talking to me about? That you were going to fight for? (57)

In their last exchange, after the death of Mr. M, Isabel confronts Thami, demanding an explanation of what she considers a murder, the “madness [that] drove those people to kill a man who had devoted his whole life to helping them,” a man she describes as a good person and “one of the most beautiful beings [she has] ever known” (71). Despite Thami’s efforts, Isabel does not understand and seemingly rejects his explanation. Instead of listening, she argues, at times intensely, that Mr. M acted “as a matter of conscience,” that a “mad mob” murdered “one unarmed defenseless man,” and his death was “so wrong! So stupid” for the entire country needed him (73; 75). Here, she expresses the outrage and fear many liberals felt about black activists’ retribution against “collaborators,” viewing it as harmful, senseless, and unruly violence against good people.

Isabel can only promise to Thami that she will try to understand all that has happened, especially the death of Mr. M and her friend’s decision to “go north.” Fugard gives the last monologue to her; it seems to suggest that she mourns Mr. M’s death still as a murder, another wasted life lost to the “madness,” the irrational chaos, the ugliness, and the stupidity, all the labels liberals used to describe the results of the black activism of the 1980s. Despite the death of Mr. M and the “loss” of Thami to “fighters in the north,” She restates an enduring faith the liberal hope that rational people collaborating can and will reform South Africa. From that faith, Isabel vows to Mr. M to make her life useful in the way she feels he was. In short, despite all that happens in the play, Mr. M’s fear about South Africa “arriving too late” and Thami’s resigned, mournful admission that “the most terrible words in” English are “Too late,” Isabel assures Mr. M and the audience that hope exists for South Africa—presumably when Mr. M’s prediction that
when the “boycott comes to an inglorious end like all the others” (59), the liberal ideals dismissed as “old-fashioned” will prevail.

In Mr. M Isabel finds a kindred spirit, for while he may describe himself as a black Confucian, he seems as liberal as Isabel. Fugard’s Mr. M embodies many of the qualities of black teachers activists were quick to consider as working to secure apartheid. Mr. M maintains, “Respect for authority, right authority, is deeply ingrained in the African soul” (24). Mr. M assumes that, as his favourite student, Thami trusts his judgment of what is best. In their serious discussion about politics, Mr. M cuts him off sternly; refusing to entertain the young man’s views, Mr. M says, “If you want to do something ‘revolutionary’ for me let us sit down and discuss it, because I have a few constructive alternatives I would like to suggest” (40). Moments later, and without conferring with Thami, Mr. M enthusiastically accepts Isabel’s invitation for tea at her parents’ home as “a pleasure and a privilege” (40). Her invitation and his gracious acceptance are revealing. Afternoon tea had by that time become politically significant in South Africa; Biko specifically points to tea at white homes as a symbol of how liberals patronize “intelligent blacks” (24). In Act II, frustrated and fearful by Thami’s hardening stance, he exclaims “I will ask you all the questions I like . . . Because I am a man and you are a boy” (60).

Convinced in that “right authority,” Mr. M fails to appreciate the changes in the township, especially the new attitudes about education. He ardently believes that his favourite student Thami must remain in school; as he explains to Isabel, he feels that his responsibility is to make sure that Thami becomes the “real” leader as “Powerful forces are fighting for the souls of . . . young people.” Thami is what his generation needs, a real leader and not a rabble-rouser. He embodies the prevalent liberal attitudes towards the township riots. Education is a means for stability, and the equal footing that black leaders demand comes through education. He holds on the classroom as a space for hope, and for him, anything outside of it is chaos. Whites can and will empathize with blacks as Isabel symbolizes, and for this reason, Thami must work in the system, go to a university, to become a “real” leader. Even during the riots, Mr. M desperate to “Do something” and “Stop the madness” can only think to return to his schoolroom, imaging that “ringing his school bell wildly” will turn his students away from chaotic violence in the streets and back to the rationality of the school building (62).

Revealing a liberal confidence in progress and perfectibility, Mr. M is obsessed with the future as he implies in his first monologue:

> The people tease me. “Faster Mr. M” they shout to me from their front doors. “You’ll be late”. They think it’s a funny joke. They don’t know how close they are to a terrible truth . . . Yes! The clocks are ticking my friends. History has got a strict timetable. If we’re not careful we might be remembered as the country where everybody arrived too late. (29)

His anxieties that South Africa will be “too late” signify Mr. M’s acculturated confidence in, but also concern for, the future. Those ticking clocks he hears warn him that his country is wasting an allotted amount of time to solve its problems; thus, he considers time as a commodity not to be squandered, an essentially liberal view. In this way, to me Mr. M embodies a liberal and European view of time. A faith in the future meshes well with liberal assurance for progress in that since the nineteenth century Western cultures have viewed time as “linear,” a chain of events, as Anthony F. Aveni describes, “a sequence that began billions of years in the past and is likely to extend for an indefinitely long period in the future” (63). Aveni states that the Western view is that we live in “a universe in transformation, and today’s questions and time and creation emphasize process, not stasis. Our intent lies in change. What we really want to know is how the universe progresses” (150). Furthermore, his metaphor that history has a timetable also suggests
his acculturated conception of time in that a timetable lists events expected to take place. He believes that his country must adhere to the schedule if it wants to progress towards its goals.

Mr. M sees the literary competition as an opportunity for Thami to fulfill his future role and to demonstrate positive race mixing; if the two students win (as Isabel assures Mr. M they will), he will demand a full university scholarship for Thami. Moreover, on a symbolic level Thami and Isabel’s cooperation and subsequent victory, Mr. M believes, will represent to their country how blacks and whites can work together to achieve a goal. He first imagined them as a team after their debate, when they so skilfully engaged him and thought: “They shouldn’t be fighting each other. They should be fighting together! If the sight of them as opponents is so exciting, imagine what it would be like if they were allies. If those two stood side by side and joined forces, they could take on anybody and win” (20). His fears that Thami’s education will be wasted drive Mr. M’s ambition for the literary competition, for he worries that Isabel and Thami will be “another two victims of this country’s lunacy” (21). His answer is cooperation and education. Mr. M fully embraces the educational system because for him it offers the best opportunity for Thami and the other special students to forge a society based on cooperation. As Mr. M explains in one of his monologues, he keeps the savage animal Hope alive by feeding it his young people, and explains that is why he teaches. Thus, the literary competition means so much to Mr. M because it will reward his special student – his favourite, for whom he has waited, “that one eager and gifted young head into which he can pour all that he knows and loves and who will justify all the years of frustration in the classroom” (24-25). When Isabel agrees to join the competition, Mr. M tells her “The future is ours Isabel. We’ll show this stupid country how it is done” (25).

Mr. M refuses to act, for that means changing the system he embraces. When Thami confronts him with his willingness to teach in the system, Mr. M argues that he has educated his students by working within the system. Nevertheless, his fears of lawless violence and his hope for black assimilation reveal his doubts about blacks. He believes that the only consequence of the boycott is chaos, and if Thami joins, he is lost. It cannot lead to change, i.e., freedom for blacks. In their final exchange, moments before he is killed, Mr. M tells Thami why he fears the boycott. He describes an image he saw on television:

An Ethiopian tribesman, and he was carrying the body of a little child that had died of hunger in the famine. . . . a small bundle carelessly warped in a few rags. . . . He held that little bundle very lightly as he shuffled along to a mass grave, and when he reached it, he didn’t have the strength to kneel and lay it down gently. . . . He just opened his arms and let it fall. . . . The tribesman and dead child do duty for all Thami. Every African soul is either carrying that bundle or in it. (68-69)

The Ethiopian famine resulted from civil wars as factions struggled for power, and Mr. M fears that change can only lead to a similar situation, a world that “wastes” his children and his Africa. The infant the tribesman carries represents a wasted future; the tribesman a generation holding only death and slowing starving. To Mr. M change threatens to make “mockery of all [his] visions of splendor” he once found in Africa (68).

Instead Mr. M hopes for integration, but he implies throughout the play that blacks must prove themselves to whites, and he sees Thami as his “project” to show whites and perhaps blacks that blacks can succeed in the white world. Mr. M does not realize, however, that to the young protesters Thami’s success, for example in the literary competition, would only demonstrate his assimilation into the white world. The students believe, as Biko argues, that by
continually having to prove themselves to whites – by assimilating to an “established set of norms and code of behavior set by and maintained by whites” blacks do not force integration but merely uphold a “superior-inferior white-black stratification” (24). As a teacher in the Bantu education system, Mr. M can only hope to create a black elite that can enjoy some rewards under apartheid, yet despite his faith that “using only words, a man can right a wrong and judge and execute the wrongdoer” and that Thami has the potential to be a leader, as long as skin pigmentation remains the basis for white racism, whites can never consider blacks as equal.

If Fugard intends Isabel and Mr. M to represent liberal values, then he wants Thami to represent the consequences of rejecting liberal values for polarization. BC ideology is a threat, as it distracts elite blacks like Thami from sure if slow progress that liberalism assures, a distraction that only brings about confusion and thus violence, lawlessness, and loss as it had in the 1970s. Apartheid is not the cause; black rejection of liberalism is. Fugard’s sincere intent is to end apartheid, yet his play presents the emergent black activism as a danger.

As a youngster, Thami loved school; he remembers in his long monologue that his school reports describe him as “a most particularly promising pupil” (46). Eager and bright, Thami excelled, and he wanted to become a medical doctor to help his people. Yet now his “praiseworthy ambition has unfortunately died,” after he concludes that “what causes most of [the suffering of his people] is not an illness that can be cured by the pills and bottles of medicine they hand out at the clinic” (47). He recognizes that apartheid causes their sufferings, and he sees as well that education and the future provide only individual fulfilment for bright young blacks in South Africa.

Thami’s unselfishness led him to want to be a doctor, but now that unselfishness makes him see that the rewards of Bantu education are available – to a limited degree – only to a handful of blacks, the elite. Thami loses his ambition to excel in the institutions defined by apartheid for those institutions are open to a select few, and he could find no satisfaction as a doctor. He will not participate in this system that allows restricted and unequal integration for a few elite blacks. His education and achievements in the white world would benefit only him, but at the same time he could never be equal to whites, only superior to most blacks. He decides that personal ambition and achievement of young intelligent blacks do not lead to true integration, but only a mock integration built on the suffering of the majority of blacks.

Fugard has Thami express the African communalism associated with the BCM. The African belief that personhood must be earned by participating in communal endeavours helps to explain Thami’s decision to reject education and join the boycott. During one of their practice sessions for the literary competition, Thami assures Isabel that Africans “won’t leave it to Time to bring . . . down” oppressive cultures (39). Mr. M breaks in, and he and Thami confront each other:

Mr. M: Who is the we you speak of with such authority Thami?
Thami: The People.
Mr. M: Yes, yes, yes, of course . . . I should have known. “The People” . . . with a capital P. Does that include me? Am I one of “The People”?
Thami: If you choose to be.
Mr. M: I’ve got to choose have I. My black skin doesn’t confer automatic membership. So how do I go about choosing?
Thami: By identifying with the fight for our Freedom. (39)

Mr. M expresses the basic premise of white racism – that skin color is the measure of human beings. He questions Thami’s argument that one must identify with the fight for freedom by
implying that his black skin should include him. In other words Mr. M claims that since he is not white, he wants what blacks want. Yet Thami counters with the argument that if he wants what blacks want, he must act. And for the good of the community, Thami willingly forsakes what personal achievements he might enjoy from apartheid. He argues that his people must oppose acculturation:

We have woken up at last. We have found another school--the streets, the little rooms, the funeral parlors of the location--anywhere the people meet and whisper names we have been told to forget, the dates of events they try to tell us never happened, and the speeches they try to say were never made.

Those are the lessons we are eager and proud to learn, because they are lessons about our history, about our heroes. (50)

Thami comes to see Bantu education not as an opportunity but as a form of control that imposes white culture on blacks, and he denounces the classrooms as “traps which have been carefully set to catch” the minds and souls of South Africa’s young black elite (50).

Thami also comes to reject the liberal faith in the future. He reconsidered the rewards of education when he listened to a speech by the Inspector of Bantu Schools who tells Thami and his classmates:

you are special! You are the elite! We have educated you because we want you to be major shareholders in the future of this wonderful Republic of ours. In fact, we want all the peoples of South Africa to share in that future. (48)

Thami cannot reconcile the ideals of Bantu education with the reality he finds in the township; when the inspector continually mentions “the future,” Thami is no longer the inspired student he was:

my head was trying to deal with that one word: the Future! He kept using it... “our future,” “the country's future,” “a wonderful future of peace and prosperity”. What does he really mean, I kept asking myself. Why does my heart go hard and tight as a stone when he says it? I look around me in the location at the men and women who went out into that “wonderful future” before me. What do I see? Happy and contented shareholders in this exciting enterprise called the Republic of South Africa? (49)

Striving to understand his country and its ties to European ideology, Thami questions the faith in the future whereas Mr. M seems liberal. While the traditional African view looks to the past, the European view is to the future. As John Mbiti demonstrates, in African thinking the “future is virtually absent because events which lie in it have not taken place, they have not been realized and cannot therefore constitute time” (17). Therefore, the future is only “potential” time, not “actual” time. For this reason, African time “moves ‘backward’ rather than ‘forward’ and people set their minds not on future things, but chiefly on what has taken place” (17). Unable to look past the present situation in South Africa and towards the future, Thami embraces the African conception of time, with its emphasis on the present as actual time and its disbelief in the future as potential time.

Fugard has Thami grow angrier for much of the second part of the play after being gracious and friendly before. The young student in particular resents his teacher’s assurance of “right authority.” In his first exchange with Isabel, he reports, “I changed. Things changed. Everything’s changed” (12). When Mr. M exits, Thami explains to Isabel that his teacher “is out of touch with what is really happening to us blacks and the way we feel about things. . . . His
ideas about change are the old-fashioned ones” (42-43). Thami has come to embrace the ideology of the BCM, rejecting liberal faith in the future and individual achievement, and Fugard suggests that the activism has distracted a promising and bright young black man.

For much of the play Fugard has Thami voice the beliefs many black activists expressed at the time, yet after Mr. M is “necklaced,” Thami regrets what has happened. In his confrontation with Isabel, Thami admits feeling that he is “too late.” He regrets not expressing his love for his teacher and not attempting to explain the boycott to Mr. M. He says to her, “I’ll never forgive myself for not trying harder with him and letting him know . . . my true feelings for him. Right until the end I tried to deny it. . .to him, to myself” (76). Thami’s moment of recognition that he is “too late,” an echo of Mr. M’s anxiety about South Africa, is a warning of the consequences of the emergent activism: blacks like Thami will realize that the violence and the loss arising from black activism only hurt blacks.

True to the beliefs held by the majority of liberals in South Africa in the 1980s, Fugard envisions only one possible consequence of the school boycotts. Saying that the play was “between me and my country” (xx) Fugard wants it to be a tragedy, a lesson about the rejection of progressive liberalism: whites should be like Isabel, and blacks should be like Mr. M, not like Thami. Its overt political argument is that blacks must understand that black activism must lead only to violence. The tragedy mostly arises when Thami realizes that he is “too late” to stop the consequences that led to the death of Mr. M If the play has a villain, it is BC ideology as Fugard and other liberals of the time misunderstood it—a threat that distracts elite blacks from the sure if slow progress that liberalism assures and as a danger that only brings about polarization which in turns brings about confusion and chaotic violence and loss. Fugard’s sincere intent to call for the end of apartheid, and Isabel’s final assertion that the future is still hopeful suggests that the end is near, for Isabel seemingly comforts the audience that the emergent black activism is indeed dangerous yet short-lived.

Jean Alter’s argues that “problems that . . . inspire and inform fictional stories result from a tension between, on the one hand, rapid changes in society and, on the other hand, an ideology that lags behind” (240). Fugard failed to realize that elite blacks like Thami were now choosing communalism over progressive liberalism, and sincerely and fully committed to emergent activism, they viewed the deaths of black collaborators not as personal tragedies but political executions. In my understanding of sociosemiotics, I believe that analyzing political plays that dramatize fundamental cultural conflicts focuses on what Alter calls the “conflict between the ideological bias of the text and the reality that it seeks to reflect” (19). In short, expectedly Fugard attempts to affirm liberalism, a purpose that critics like Visser condemns, yet to do so, Fugard has to fashion a fiction that denies or diminishes the threat to liberalism.

Works Cited

Dr. Swarnavel Eswaran Pillai is an associate professor in the English, and Media and Information Departments at Michigan State University. He is a graduate from the Film and Television Institute of India and the University of Iowa. He is an accomplished filmmaker, and his recent documentaries include Migrations of Islam (2014) and Hmong Memory at the Crossroads (2015). His research focuses on the history, theory, and production of documentaries, and the specificity of Tamil cinema, and its complex relationship with Hollywood as well as popular Hindi films. His recent books are *Cinema: Sattagamum Saalaramum* (Nizhal, 2013), an anthology of essays on documentaries and experimental films in Tamil and *Madras Studios: Narrative, Genre, and Ideology in Tamil Cinema* (Sage Publications, 2015).


Dr. Susan Flynn lectures in media and cultural studies at the University of the Arts, London, specialising in disability, diversity, film and equality studies. She is co-editor of the upcoming collection *Spaces of Surveillance: States and Selves*, (2017) Palgrave. Upcoming special editor roles include *American, British and Canadian Studies* and *The Apollonian*. Recent publications include a chapter in Fraser, B. (ed) (2016) *Cultures of Representation: Disability in World Film Contexts* and a range of international journals such as *Considering Disability, The International Scientific Journal* and *Spark Journal*.

Stephanie Johnson is a PhD student in the Department of Comparative Literature at Emory University. Her research interests include memory studies, political theory, and twentieth century British, Irish, and South African literatures. She teaches undergraduate literature and composition courses at Emory and has previously published on teaching writing. Stephanie also works as an editorial assistant at *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, a project dedicated to publishing a comprehensive collection of Beckett’s correspondence.

Dr. Stefania Porcelli holds a doctorate in Literature in English from “Sapienza” University of Rome. She is currently studying Comparative Literature at The Graduate Center, CUNY. She teaches Italian language and literature at Hunter College and at Queens College. Her research focuses on political discourse, emotions and literature, both in English and Italian literature. She has published articles on Hannah Arendt, Elizabeth Bowen and Elsa Morante.
Jędrzej Tazbir has defended his BA and MA theses at the University of Łódź. The broadly considered English-language prose represents his main field of interest and scholarly work, with the emphasis on the American novel beginning from the modernist era. In reading and analyzing literary texts he is inclined to search for philosophical and psychological themes. Additionally interested in translation.

Dr. Timothy J. Viator teaches drama and literature at Rowan University (New Jersey, USA). He has published essays on theatre history, cultural studies, and pedagogy on World, British, and American drama and poetry.