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ED. CARRIELYNN D. REINHARD

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Introduction: Popular Culture as Dialogue

CARRIELYNN D. REINHARD

On November 4th, 2020, the day after the 2020 United States Presidential election, we had our first Popular Culture Dialogue on the relationship between popular culture and democracy: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3NbjbZeWLPQ&t. We did not livestream the dialogue, so the format was slightly different from those that are seen live, and our discussion came out later than that fraught morning. As the next days, weeks, months, and, unfortunately, years unfolded, the United States democracy became even more tenuous. Perhaps the conversation I, Megan Condis, Julia Largent, Melanie Schiller, Laura Alvarez Trigo, and Christopher Zysik had on that morning has become more important for popular culture scholars to visit. With so many politicians and governments legislating against transpeople, drag performers, and the LGBTQIA+ community, the relationship between popular culture and democracy requires increasingly critical scrutiny.

On April 15th, 2023, "Tax Day" in the United States, I asked our Twitter followers: what should be the role/relationship/function of popular culture to a successful democracy?

Some responses focused on the obviousness of the connection, seeing the two as intertwined. Dr. S. A. Applin (@AnthroPunk) said: "Consider that to some, a "successful democracy" *is* popular culture..." To add to this sentiment, Ryan Pumroy (@RyanPumroy) said: "Popular culture = participation in politics. The line is so blurred that one can't (or at least shouldn't) be considered without the other." Indeed, in a representative democratic governance, the public and the popular as seemingly the same. Elections and legislature are decided upon majority or popular vote, and the public's affectations towards politicians and issues likely have as much – if not more – impact on their decisions as any logical argument and credible evidence.

While representative democracies may be more-or-less legitimate forms of governance at this point of the 21st century, the serious value of popular culture remains challenged. Perhaps because popular culture appears ephemeral and whimsical, aligned more with people's emotional than rational needs. Or perhaps it is in popular culture that the true sentiments and values of the public are openly displayed. xMRNUTTYx (@xdanharmonx) said: "Pop culture exposes people to

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things they otherwise wouldn't be confronted with. It's why representation scares reactionaries: because their worldview requires othering and that doesn't work when exposure shows humanity rather than propaganda." What better way to delegitimize a popular sentiment and political impetus than to mock the very cultural forms that act as its incubator? Indeed, popular culture's true power may be in its use as an agora for public discourse. Tony Thorne (@tonythorne007) said: "Provide a multimodal heteroglossic response to superdiversity. (And thereby ensure dissent, critique, disruption of dominant discourses.)" How can a civilization prosper without such safe spaces for contentious conversations?

Now, looking at the particular American context for this relationship perhaps illuminates the problems of/for popular culture. Dr. Peter Cullen Bryan (@pfxbryan) said: "Traditionally, popular culture has served to reinforce national connections and democratic values, at least in America, though more recently has become a site for ongoing political conflict over shared cultural values (Ghostbusters 2016, The Last Jedi, Captain Marvel)." Popular culture connects people's individual beliefs and feelings to larger sociocultural ideologies and movements through how it reflects, creates, and reinforces both. Such ideological work has material impacts, whether through political policy or economic processes. Conflict has been, and perhaps should be, a part of both, as conflict begets change. But only when such conflict is combined with honest reflection and respectful communication to move beyond no-logue and monologue to dialogue.

When popular culture does not serve dialogue, and instead seeks to insulate people from conflict and thus change, then the relationship becomes toxic. Pop Culture & Theology (@PopAndTheology) said: "I wonder if this conversation would be complete without a discussion of how pop culture can undermine democratic participation (a la Horkheimer and Adorno's Culture Industry)." Since anything can become popular given the right circumstances, popular culture can as easily support authoritarianism as democracy. Indeed, the continued discourse of delegitimization and disempowerment around popular culture studies – and its related discourses such as fan studies, humanities, diversity and equity programs, and so forth – represent the attempt to remove people's agency. The ridiculing of the embodied and everyday lives of millions serves to maintain power among those with political and/or religious traditions as their bulwark. As Stasia (@svttxtetc) said: "If we get rid of labelism and stop assuming pop culture is something to be ashamed of, it would be easier to undermine elitist discourse in politics as well."

Popular cultures circulate messages on appropriateness, success, morals, values, ethics, hopes, dreams, fears. In short, reality(s) is constructed through popular culture. Authoritarian regimes, from the German Nazis to the American Christo-fascists, seek to control those realities and, by extension, the public's discourses of and motivation to political activity. Across the United States, attempts to shut down drag shows – a form of popular culture – is not simply to "protect children" as their messaging would suggest. It is to control who produces reality through popular culture. American Christo-fascists fight against multiculturalism and pluralism that dismantle their traditional bulwarks and power. They prefer people live in anger and fear of the present, not in hopes and dreams for a better future. Erika (@LaLunding) said: "Consider the representation of guns, weapons & violence in popular culture. Do we really need so much of it? And a lot less misogyny, please. It does matter." Violence makes us afraid of the people around us. Such fear changes our discourses of and motivation to political activity.

What should be the role/relationship/function of popular culture to a successful democracy?

It should not be to shut down difference of ideas and living. Even if that means conflict occurs. It should be to provide a space within realities are explored so that people can see the possibilities and work among themselves to produce the one they prefer. But if all possibilities are not presented, this process cannot function. If the public cannot and do not consider all these possibilities, then they do a disservice to themselves, their ancestors, and their descendants. The struggles of those who came before us cannot be ignored, and the struggles we face cannot be passed along. Popular culture should be a place of dialogue, wherein we learn from one another how to see ourselves and each other. Only in doing so can we honor those who came before, act justly towards those around us, and prepare the world for those yet to come.

New Motherhood Isn't Always Magical: Popular Feminism in Frida Mom Commercials

MOLLY WIANT CUMMINS

The media mothers use help shape their expectations around pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum, breastfeeding, and motherhood (Hall 47; Tyler and Baraitser 8). Even when mothers recognize media are not always realistic in portrayals of pregnancy or postpartum (Liechty et al. 857), the portrayals still teach mothers about "ways of acting in the world" (Sears and Godderis 185). When the most common representations used to sell postpartum products are seemingly perfectly groomed, smiling mothers who are physically back to their pre-pregnancy selves (Moghe), such as pictures of Kate Middleton mere hours after birth, it is a far cry from the experience many people have after birth. Offering a different depiction, Frida Mom made waves with rarely seen popular culture media representations of new motherhood. In 2020, Frida Mom created a commercial for the Oscars depicting a newly postpartum person[1] getting out of bed in the middle of the night, using the bathroom, and struggling through the process of taking care of a postpartum body. Ultimately the commercial was banned, yet Frida Mom built momentum through online viewership (via YouTube). Frida Mom made headlines again in 2021 as they readied a commercial showing people's struggles with breastfeeding for the Golden Globes (M. Brown). Both the 2020 Frida Mom postpartum commercial and the 2021 Frida Mom breastfeeding commercial offer important, boundary-pushing popular culture mediated representations of new motherhood. Yet, despite their boundary pushing, these commercials also reinscribe the hegemonic U.S. norm of neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood (Hays).

[1] Although not every person who has birthed a baby would identify as mother, I use mother or person, when possible, to highlight that these people do not necessarily identify as women.

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In this essay, I rhetorically analyze the 2020 Frida Mom postpartum commercial and the 2021 Frida Mom breastfeeding commercial through the lens of popular feminism (Banet-Weiser) to identify each artifact's potential as a feminist mediated representation of new motherhood. I begin by briefly discussing mediated representations of new motherhood before detailing popular feminism and neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood in the U.S. I argue that although the commercials are important media representations of new motherhood, they become popular feminism overshadowed by the neoliberal, capitalist consumerism underpinning them. Next, I analyze each commercial before considering what the trajectory of Frida Mom means for future mediated representations and feminism.

Building a Framework

New Motherhood Popular Culture Media Representations. Much of the feminist scholarship surrounding popular culture representations of new motherhood focuses on pregnancy and birth (Das; Feasey; Mack; Takeshita; Wiant Cummins, "Miracles"), but breastfeeding and postpartum, including the fourth trimester (i.e., childbirth through 12 weeks postpartum; Tully et al. 38), are less often the focus. Many of the current postpartum popular culture media representations focus on mothers' changing bodies (Coyne et al.) such as body dissatisfaction (Gow et al.), postpartum embodiment (Johnson), or reclaiming maternal bodies as beautiful (Husbands; Nash; Palmer-Mehta and Shuler). Otherwise, postpartum popular culture media representations focus on postpartum mental health, specifically postpartum depression or anxiety or postpartum psychosis (Frankhouser and Defenbaugh; Moulton Belec). There are few popular culture media depictions of postpartum life, especially immediately after birth. Instead, mothers are presented with social media photos of groomed and polished new moms that "are not a fair representation of the pain and struggle so very many women experience trying to do everyday things for themselves," including using the bathroom (Moghe). As a result, the Frida Mom postpartum commercial is an important popular culture media representation depicting a new mother learning their postpartum body.

Similarly, popular culture media representations (especially in TV and film) of breastfeeding are not as common as pregnancy and childbirth. Katherine A. Foss contends, "Media representations play a significant role in shaping perceptions of breastfeeding, especially for those who lack breastfeeding education from other sources" ("That's" 330). Media can fill in the gaps of people's knowledge by

informing "consumers of health information, define what is considered 'normal,' and enact changes in health behavior" (Foss, "That's" 330). Yet, few studies explore popular culture mediated representations of breastfeeding, especially from television (Brown and Peuchaud; Foss, "Breastfeeding"). Instead, contemporary research more often investigates breastfeeding representations on social media (Beach; Boon and Pentney; Locatelli). That Frida Mom aired a breastfeeding commercial in 2021 aimed at a "real experience" of breastfeeding positions the commercial as an important popular culture media representation. Although popular culture mediated representations of postpartum and breastfeeding motherhood are sparse, they nonetheless inform mothers' perceptions about parenting (Hall). Thus, media are powerful tools for reproducing hegemonic U.S. normative discourse surrounding the idea of good parenting, namely using neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood as the prevailing standard.

Neoliberal, Capitalist Intensive Motherhood. Sharon Hays names "intensive motherhood" as the pervasive discourse that creates unrealistic goals for individuals, specifically women, to be good mothers. Hays says intensive motherhood is "*child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive,* and *financially expensive*" (8, emphasis original). Others have studied how intensive motherhood discourses are centralized in the media (Douglas and Michaels) and in breastfeeding discourse (Wolf). Intensive motherhood promulgates the notion of "good" motherhood, that mothering abilities are natural and instinctive (Miller 339). Most mothers want to be considered good, and as Linda Rose Ennis argues, the "good motherhood" club brings security, self-worth, and belonging (9). Yet, intensive motherhood narrowly defines who can be a good mother: The good mother should be a white, cisgender, heterosexual (and ideally married), middle-class woman (O'Brien Hallstein, "Introduction" 3; Newman and Henderson 474) who is also able-bodied and deemed acceptable to reproduce in terms of race, intellectual ability, and appropriate age (Wiant Cummins and Brannon 126). The requirements of intensive motherhood are nearly impossible, and the ideology has negative psychological effects on women (Rizzo et al.), potentially creating motherhood into an oppressive system of control, specifically for white mothers. Indeed, bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins each identified parenting as affirming for mothers of color (specifically Black mothers) in ways white mothers do not similarly identify mothering (O'Reilly). Still, as D. Lynn O'Brien Hallstein summarizes, intensive motherhood is "the *proper* ideology of contemporary intensive mothering that all women are disciplined into, across race

and class lines, even if not all women actually practice it" ("Silences" 143, emphasis original). Regardless of race, class, or parenting style, intensive motherhood is the pernicious standard.

The pervasiveness of intensive motherhood works in concert with other systems of hegemonic control such as neoliberal capitalism. Catherine Rottenberg explains neoliberalism as "a dominant political rationality or normative form of reason that moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, recasting individuals as capital-enhancing agents" (*The Rise* 7). Neoliberalism produces "subjects who are individualized, entrepreneurial, and self-investing," subjects who are "entirely responsible for their own self-care and well-being" (Rottenberg, *The Rise* 7), often through capitalistic means (e.g., buying and consuming goods and/or services in service of the individual). Jack Bratich and Sarah Banet-Weiser claim that "neoliberal 'individualism' always depended on others, from managing resources (including others as instruments) to trusting in experts as guides" (5007). Thus, a neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood is one in which mothers consume marketplace goods and services in an individual attempt to trust expert information that is financially expensive, labor intensive, and child focused. Harmony D. Newman and Angela C. Henderson note, "The requirements of intensive motherhood are exceptionally stringent given the structural/material reality of the contemporary American family and the capitalist ideology of production," explaining that these "oppositional expectations" set mothers up to fail (474). This process begins in pregnancy (and before) where mothers and children are, respectively, "laborers and their products" (Rothman 20), where mothers are both the machines producing and the consumers consuming goods and services related to pregnancy and motherhood (Wiant Cummins, "Reproductive" 38). Adept advertisers co-opt feminist buzzwords to reach a broader audience (Lazar), such as Dara Persis Murray describes in Dove's Campaign for Real Beauty.

Neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood regulates mothers through co-opting feminist movements and draining the movements of their power (Chen; Rottenberg, "The Rise") when not grounded in intersectional, structural, or systemic critique. For instance, Rottenberg explains how neoliberal feminism "hollows out the potential of mainstream liberal feminism to provide a critique of the social injustices generated by the structural contradictions of liberal democracy, and in this way further entrenches neoliberal rationality" (*The Rise* 15). Neoliberal feminism, instead, seeks representation over revolution – having a seat at the table,

however, does not equate to structural critique (Banet-Weiser et al. 10). With this in mind, I use Sarah Banet-Weiser's notion of popular feminism as a heuristic for analyzing the Frida Mom commercials.

Popular Feminism. Popular feminism is a nuanced understanding of the visibility feminism seems to be gaining culturally. Banet-Weiser claims, "Popular feminism exists along a continuum, where spectacular, media-friendly expressions such as celebrity feminism and corporate feminism achieve more visibility, and expressions that critique patriarchal structures and systems of racism and violence are more obscured" (4). Popular feminism is not only a lens through which to view culture, it has now "undeniably *become* popular culture" (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 884, emphasis original). As Andi Zeisler points out, the term feminist "now seems to be used to lavish praise on anything that isn't overtly degrading, demeaning, or exploitative to women" (32). Popular feminism is important in a media era in which "if you are visible, you *matter*," and this visibility means "being accessible to a large, popular audience" (Banet-Weiser 10, emphasis original). However, when visibility is the end goal, as it is in popular feminism, it "tends to obfuscate the broader and more representational political aims of a feminist movement" (Dejmanee et al. 3950). Thus, calling something feminist is not about a "set of values, ethics, and politics, but merely an assessment of whether or not a product is worthy of consumption" (Zeisler 32). Banet-Weiser explains that popular feminism commodifies feminism, making it "'safe'," and therefore, welcoming to more viewers (16).

Popular feminism works in concert with neoliberalism, thereby also furthering normative discourses such as intensive motherhood. Tisha Dejmanee et al. contend that popular feminism "embeds feminism within the ideals of neoliberalism and consumer culture, relying on commercial messaging to disseminate feminist ideas and to gesture toward the responsibility of the individual in adopting and enacting feminist activism" (3949). As others have shown, companies are willing to use feminist slogans or ideas when they can be used to increase profits (Alkan; Murray). Typically, these companies draw on feminist ideas that are "commensurate with market logics," or those that are "useful to neoliberal self-reliance and capitalist success" (Banet-Weiser 13) such as the popular book *Lean In* by Sheryl Sandberg. Again, the focus is on the individual as the nexus of action, obscuring feminist structural critique. Instead, the visibility of popular feminism in the marketplace is the "apotheosis of empowerment" rather than "recognizing, naming, or disrupting the political economic conditions that allow that inequality to be profitable" (Banet-

Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 886). Popular feminism ultimately maintains a neoliberal status quo. As Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer warn, popular feminism does not grant us political tools to guard against "the violence that erupts wherever popular feminism gains a foothold"; indeed, feminist "popularity will not protect us" (887).

Popular Feminism as a Lens. Because popular feminism uses "media-friendly expressions" (Banet-Weiser 4) in which visibility matters, I use it as a heuristic in this rhetorical analysis. I start by describing the media representation and considering to whom the expression is visible (i.e., determining who is the audience). Then, I parse out the message within the media expression. Next, I consider the implications of the message as this is where popular feminism will be most apparent. Given the recent popularity of feminism as a "trendy identity" (Dejmanee 346), popular feminism as a lens creates an important framework to view media expressions hailed as feminist for whether they contribute to structural change and/or uphold the status quo. Naming something as popular feminism, of course, is not the same as recognizing ways to work against its aims; knowing a media expression is popular feminism is not the same as being able to intervene in its use. Popular feminism as a lens offers a starting place for people to identify nuances in "feminist" media expressions thereby allowing intersectional feminisms to critique, dismantle, and/or replace problematic media expressions. To test this method, I begin by describing the messages of the Frida Mom commercials through the lens of popular feminism.

A Deeper Reading

2020 Postpartum Commercial. Frida Mom posted the postpartum video, titled "Oscars Ad Rejected," to their YouTube channel on February 5, 2020. The ad begins with about 30 seconds of words appearing across the scene to set the stage that the commercial was banned, and that Frida Mom disagrees with the ban. The screen then fades to black before viewers hear a baby begin to stir and cry out. A white-appearing person reaches up to turn on a lamp as viewers glimpse that the clock reads just before 3 am, so the whole commercial is rather darkly lit, being in the middle of the night. The new mother with a still-swollen postpartum belly struggles to waddle to the bathroom, displaying pain on their face as the camera draws attention to the mesh underwear and thick pad they are wearing. Viewers watch the mother brace themself to urinate, going through the process of changing

the pad, cleaning themself with a peri bottle after urinating, and spraying some type of presumably medical spray onto their vulva. About a minute into the commercial, the music and focus changes. Viewers have been hearing slow and almost dirge-like music in the background, but viewers see the words, "Postpartum recovery doesn't have to be this hard" (Frida Mom, "Frida Mom. Oscars Ad"), as the music becomes more upbeat, faster tempo, and even a bit louder. The commercial ends by quickly displaying well-lit Frida Mom boxed products and the tagline, "Be postpartum prepared" (Frida Mom, "Frida Mom. Oscars Ad"). Frida Mom's products are only seen for about two seconds before a light pink translucent screen covers them with the tagline and there is no product demonstration in the commercial. The audience for this commercial appears to be (new) parents – those that have experienced something similar, have watched a partner experience birth, and/or those who may be embarking on that journey soon.

After discussing the media expression, I next look at the message. The focus of this Frida Mom commercial is on the newly postpartum body. Lesley Husbands argues that the postpartum body, when not outright ignored, is presented "only in a very particular and narrow way in order to avoid transgressing social mores" (69). The social mores to which Husbands refers are about boundaries and western societies' discomfort or disgust with boundaries being crossed (Shildrick). As Deborah Lupton states, "the female body in western societies has traditionally been understood as symbolically leaky, open, fluid, its boundaries permeable and blurred" (333). Lupton says this is especially true for menstruation, pregnancy, and menopause, but it is no less true in the time immediately following postpartum when mothers' bodies may still be leaky as they heal and/or newly leaky with milk. Frida Mom invites the leaky body back into the narrative. For one, actually hearing a person urinating in primetime is unusual. Additionally, the leaky body is present when red blood appears briefly on the sanitary pad as the person is changing it. The appearance of *red* blood in the scene is surprising. According to JR Thorpe, the 1990s saw the rise of blue liquid as a stand-in for menstrual blood, regardless of the fact that blood could be seen on primetime television in other situations. While other colors were associated with other "organic bodily fluids or functions," blue evoked cleanliness with its connotations of cleaning products (Thorpe). Although not directly menstrual blood, the fact that Frida Mom shows red blood means the commercial contains a rawness that does not try to sugar coat the postpartum experience.

Intensive motherhood requires a narrowed focus on the child(ren), on the individualized family unit, above all else. This means the selfless, and therefore good, mother does not worry about their own healing postpartum, only about taking care of the baby according to expert advice. Frida Mom challenges that narrative by showing a person awakening to the baby's cries but not forsaking their own needs for the baby. Instead, the commercial follows the mother, and the baby is never physically seen, undermining the core tenet of intensive motherhood – that the baby should be the most important person in the mother's life. Frida Mom's focus solely on the mother is, in this simple way, boundary-pushing. Rather than seeing the mother holding and (audibly) comforting the baby, viewers see and hear the mother groaning and sighing through the pain and discomfort of the postpartum experience. Frida Mom makes the mother the center of the discussion, creating space for mothers to consider their own bodies and needs. Although it is the primary purpose of the products being sold, this focus on the mother and their recovery is still an important message speaking back to intensive motherhood discourse.

Speaking of pain, Frida Mom does not shy away from capturing the pain the person is experiencing. The commercial shows the person grimacing, clenching muscles, curling toes, and even struggling with seemingly simple tasks (for an able-bodied person) like sitting or rising from the toilet. Displaying the mother's pain itself challenges the motherhood mystique of postpartum as there is rare focus on what the mother is experiencing outside of a happy exhaustion. Rarely do viewers see examples of mothers healing after birth, aside from important issues with mental health (e.g., Ryan). Moreover, Frida Mom foregrounds the mother's pain without the simultaneous narrative that the pain is "worth it" because of the baby – a common trope in popular culture media representations that claims the pain of labor is fleeting compared to the lasting joy of a child. There is no easy resolution of the tension between mother's needs and baby's needs offered; instead, there is a focus on the mother that is often glossed over or outright ignored in postpartum representations. The commercial resists hegemonic discourse calling birthing and postpartum bodies "disgusting and grotesque" (Yam 81), by foregrounding the mother and postpartum pain, by making visible that which is typically hidden (Young).

The implications of this media expression can certainly be read as feminist as viewers are confronted with an experience seldom depicted. The Frida Mom commercial is an important popular culture media representation of postpartum precisely because it exists. After all, as Frida CEO Chelsea Hirschhorn told *Today*,

society wonders "why women remain so completely unprepared to navigate this very fragile time period" of postpartum; she says it is due to the "very narrowly defined ways in which we can share information" about it (qtd. in Breen).

However, from a popular feminism perspective, Banet-Weiser says that "visibility becomes an end in itself" (22). Unfortunately, much of the controversy surrounding this commercial was not about its feminist nature but was about the Academy Awards banning it from airing in primetime. Specifically, Frida Mom was told that the commercial was rejected "due to 'partial nudity and product demonstration,'" but, Kerry Breen explains, there was no nudity in the actual advertisement. Still, the Academy's guidelines for advertisements to be broadcast during the Oscars state that no commercial may be of "political candidates/positions, religious or faith-based messages/positions, guns, gun shows, ammunition, feminine hygiene products, adult diapers, condoms or hemorrhoid remedies" (Breen). Breen quotes Hirschhorn saying she "was surprised, in this day and age, to see that whomever at whatever organizational level at the Academy and at ABC [on which the Oscars aired] put in writing that they would analogize feminine hygiene to some of those other, more offensive categories of advertising," perhaps indicating that Frida Mom knew the ad might be banned and draw additional attention. Hannah Seligson also quotes Hirschhorn as saying she understands the Academy and ABC have to be careful not to create polarizing opinions in the commercials they choose to show so they can appeal to the broadest base, but she does not see pregnancy and postpartum as polarizing topics. Seligson reports Frida Mom was asked by the Academy to consider a different product to advertise or to offer a "kinder, more gentle portrayal of postpartum." As the quotes from Hirschhorn suggest, a "more gentle portrayal of postpartum" is partially what Frida Mom was trying to combat with this commercial. Regardless of the official reason(s) the Frida Mom commercial was banned the allure of a banned commercial has still garnered 6.3 million views on YouTube as of March 2023.

2021 Breastfeeding Commercial. The attention Frida Mom received due to the banned 2020 postpartum commercial may have worked in their favor. Before the 2021 Golden Globe Awards, news media reported another boundary-pushing advertisement from Frida Mom. Headlines such as "Frida Mom's New Ad Shows Completely Unfiltered Reality of Breastfeeding, and It's About Time" (M. Brown) drew attention to the forthcoming commercial while very little media coverage came after the airing. Frida Mom's "Stream of Lactation" commercial was a 75-second commercial that aimed "to normalize the breastfeeding journey by touching

on a variety of universal lactation challenges – from massaging out clogged ducts with an electric toothbrush to feeling like your breast pump is talking to you" (M. Brown). ABC banned the 2020 commercial and Frida Mom did not edit the commercial as a result, for which Frida Mom received speculation that they were playing a publicity game of a banned commercial for shock value (Neff). In 2021, NBCUniversal, who hosted the 2021 Golden Globe Awards, released a statement saying "We agree that the ad may push the envelope, but it is the context surrounding the visuals that makes this ad different, and we stand by it" (Ferme). Working with NBCU, Frida Mom cut the original commercial down to a 30-second spot that would be airable, noting that the main message of the commercial would remain (Hsu). Frida Mom CEO Chelsea Hirschhorn remarked,

> The reality is that women are unprepared and blindsided by the physicality of lactation/breastfeeding. No one tells you that it can be as painful as your vaginal recovery. The anthem video is a universal depiction of the realities that women and their breasts – breastfeeding or not – go through postpartum. (qtd. in M. Brown)

Hirschhorn notes elsewhere that the commercial was to help mothers not feel they must "perform" breastfeeding, that they should not "be expected to prioritize making milk over their own physical discomfort" (Hsu). Thus, the Frida Mom breastfeeding commercial was created to push the boundaries of acceptable breastfeeding representations on primetime television. I begin by describing the commercial as a media expression.

The 75-second, "Stream of Lactation" breastfeeding commercial was posted to the Frida Mom YouTube channel on February 24, 2021, with 6.7 million views on YouTube as of March 2023. The commercial again opens with the sound of a baby crying. The commercial switches between a mother of color (Black-appearing) and a white-appearing mother, who each ask questions or comment in voiceover as they engage in new mothering, especially breastfeeding. After hearing the baby cry, the person of color's face appears on screen, looking tired, as in voiceover they say, "Alright, Girls [to their breasts], you've got this," and the camera tilts down to their bare breasts. As they try to latch the baby, the mother manipulates their breast to make it easier for baby. The scene then switches to the white-appearing mothering saying in voiceover, "Oh, God! Unlatch. Unlatch. And, raw," as they examine their nipple with a look of consternation. The mothers ask questions alluding to the anecdotal common experiences of breastfeeding mothers in new motherhood (e.g., "Is it too early to call a lactation consultant?" or "And do I love my baby?").

The next part of the commercial demonstrates the mothers getting up throughout the night to breastfeed, including pumping, nursing, and dealing with engorged and/or leaking breasts before each mother comments how tired they are. Throughout the commercial, the mothers' bare breasts are seen a few times as they breastfeed their babies and/or manage breastfeeding-related activities (e.g., using a breast pump). The white-appearing mother is shown working out clogs in their breasts in the shower, first using the butt-end of an electric toothbrush and then a dildo, letting the vibrations help unclog breasts. The mothers mention issues with over- and under-producing milk, and the white-appearing mother is shown accidentally spraying a mirror with milk as they investigate their nipples, looking surprised as it happens. The commercial then shifts to positive reflections about the baby: "And I love his smell," says the Black-appearing mother, "And wrinkled toes," adds the white-appearing mother (Frida Mom, "Frida Mom. Stream"). Toward the end of the montage, a baby cries again before the Black-appearing mother appears on screen, sleeping in a chair and jumping at the sound of the baby's cry on a baby monitor, only to knock over an open container of breastmilk and clearly curse (i.e., saying "Fuck!" censored by a bleep). Then, like the 2020 commercial, a translucent pink screen appears with, "Care for your breasts. Not just your baby," written in white font, before Frida Mom's breastfeeding products are shown in a well-lit room with the same mid-tempo, upbeat music in the background that has played throughout the commercial. Again, the products are only shown for about two to three seconds before the Frida Mom logo ends the commercial.

By comparison, "Golden Globes Spot" is the 30-second version of the commercial which actually appeared on air during the Golden Globes and was posted to YouTube on March 9, 2021. As of March 2023, the shorter version only has almost 134,000 views. The 30-second version eliminates or obscures the moments where nipples are seen by creating a quicker version of the 75-second montage but captures many of the same moments. For example, the white-appearing mother can still be seen surprising themself by squirting milk on the mirror, of course without the visual of the nipple inspection. Many of the questions and concerns of the original commercial are kept in the 30-second spot as well. At the very end of the commercial, the products blur and white font appears on the screen reading, "For the rest of the breast, go to fridamom.com" (Frida Mom, "Frida Mom. Golden Globes"). This is, presumably, why the 30-second version of the commercial has significantly fewer views than the original; most viewers were seeking out the extended version of the commercial. The extended version of the

commercial and the news coverage leading up to the Golden Globes created an audience primed to view this commercial in primetime.

Next, I consider the message of the 2021 breastfeeding commercial. Like the 2020 postpartum commercial, these commercials also demonstrate the "leaky, open, fluid" (Lupton 333) body of new motherhood. As mentioned, in both versions of the breastfeeding commercial, viewers see surprise on the white-appearing mother's face as they squirt milk onto the mirror. To see the actual leaky body in action, in primetime, forces viewers to reckon with the ways breasts are typically used to sell products. Rather than see breasts as only sexualized, Frida Mom blurs the clear border between sexualized and maternal understandings of the breast (Young 88). Furthermore, breastmilk is a common trait among mammals; seeing the leaky body in primetime may also blur understandings of humans as clearly separate from animals (Dickinson et al.). Indeed, breastfeeding also blurs boundaries between mothers and children, destabilizing the "[mother] subject as closed, complete, and singular" (Boon and Pentney 1761) and, instead, creating a subject that is mother-child-both. Thus, Frida Mom's breastfeeding commercials create opportunities to deeply consider how U.S. Americans are culturally conditioned to understand breasts and their functions as inherently sexualized.

The implications of Frida Mom's breastfeeding commercials also expose important understandings of neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood. In the 75-second version of the commercial, the Black-appearing mother is seen looking at themself in a mirror and exhaling forcefully as in voiceover they ask, "Am I a bad mom if I stop now?" Then, the scene switches to them apparently researching various ways to hold the baby while breastfeeding as they claim, face aglow in the light of a computer screen while the rest of the scene is dimly lit, "Good moms should know how to do this." Both statements are seen in the 30-second version, but they are in reverse order. That a mother is questioning whether they and their mothering are good enough considering breastfeeding is not accidental. With intensive motherhood's focus on caring for the needs of a child first, good (intensive) mothers are those who prioritize breastfeeding above their own needs. Hirschhorn (qtd. in Hanson) identifies this idea, without the intensive motherhood label, saying mothers are "conditioned to focus entirely on the needs of their babies when they're born. Much of the discussion about breastfeeding has to do with nourishing the baby, rather than making the mother comfortable." As the mother of color claims, "Good moms should know how to do this." The implication is that

good moms have an instinctive understanding of precisely how to care for their children, often feeling daunted when that does not bear out in reality (Miller).

With breastfeeding rates historically lower for Black mothers than for white mothers (Beauregard et al.; Morrissey and Kimball), Frida Mom's choice to use a Black-appearing mother in the commercial is important. The Black-appearing mother speaks back to intensive motherhood as they are outside of the intensive motherhood ideal of the white, cis woman. By intensive motherhood standards, the Black-appearing mother is rarely, if ever, considered a good mother. That they are the one grappling with what is good or bad mothering accentuates how pervasive intensive motherhood is across race and class lines. As Linda M. Blum notes, breastfeeding is not the easy and free choice it is portrayed to be; given the amount of time, energy, and labor that may attend breastfeeding, it is a "less-than-viable option for many groups of women" (Blum 299).

In terms of intensive motherhood, unlike in the postpartum commercial, viewers do see the mothers responding to babies' cries; yet Frida Mom does not sugar-coat the experience. Frida Mom shows the mothers' responding to and holding their babies, but also displays the mothers' exhaustion. Importantly, Frida Mom also shows the mothers questioning not only the breastfeeding experience but also their own love of their babies. Normalizing the variety of thoughts that may go through a new mother's mind is an imperative step toward opening conversations about postpartum experiences. With the launch of the Frida Mom brand in 2019, Hirschhorn reportedly told Parents.com, "Knowledge is confidence, and confidence during that delicate stage of new parenthood can mean the difference between a good experience and a debilitating and isolating experience" (M. Brown). The stream-of-consciousness portrayal of jumbled thoughts about new motherhood and breastfeeding the commercial depicts (using "and" as connectives among the stream of thoughts), coupled with claims that this representation is a "realistic look" at breastfeeding (Hsu), creates an example for new mothers to see their own experiences perhaps mirrored on television. Ultimately, like the postpartum commercial before it, the 2021 breastfeeding commercial is a popular feminist depiction where value is equated to visibility, and accessibility to a large audience is easy when the commercial is in primetime (Banet-Weiser).

Discussion

Using popular feminism as a lens through which to view the postpartum and breastfeeding Frida Mom commercials highlights that they are powerful examples of more realistic popular culture media representations. They forefront the mother and their pain without "brightsiding" (Ehrenreich 49) the experience. Brightsiding involves minimizing the pain or other potentially negative emotions or feelings regarding an experience and instead focusing solely on all the good that can be found, such as viewing all the difficult and/or painful parts of new motherhood as "worth" the joy of a new baby. In other words, Frida Mom does not portray that intensive motherhood should be upheld at the expense of the mother. In this case, Frida Mom forefronts the mother's pain with their postpartum and/or breastfeeding body rather than downplaying it in favor of reminding viewers that the baby makes all the pain worthwhile.

The Frida Mom commercials create space for a reckoning with what should be part of public or private life. For so long, the experiences of new motherhood have been relegated to private life, to friends and family sharing their tips and stories to teach new mothers what to expect. The rise and accessibility of information on the internet has helped new mothers search out their own information, even if the sheer amount of information available can be overwhelming. Yet, social media has complicated this process. As more mothers, especially celebrities, share their new motherhood journeys, the conversation has slowly changed from the private sphere to a more public possibility. This process is, of course, still dominated by normative motherhood discourse as Hirschhorn (qtd. in Rodulfo) herself observes, "I think culturally, it's taboo to speak in anything other than magical, unicorn, butterfly experiences when you become a new mom. The reality is that it's not all Instagram worthy, filtered moments that are beautiful and fun." Moreover, Hirschhorn hopes Frida Mom will be able to change the public dynamic around new motherhood conversations through its advertising (Rodulfo). By depicting new motherhood in more "realistic" representations, Frida Mom is working to push boundaries.

While Frida Mom pushes what was typically private conversations into the public sphere, they are also changing the private-public dynamic of new motherhood bodies. As new motherhood bodies heal, they represent a challenge to dominant social norms. As Alison Bartlett explains, social institutions "act to limit, dry up, hide, pathologize, remove and stem the flow of women's wet, juicy, bleeding, lactating bodies, which profoundly disturbs the dichotomous biomedical logic of bodies' inside/outside surface/depth" (118). Frida Mom's depictions of bleeding postpartum bodies and leaky breastfeeding bodies bring the private,

unbounded body back to the public conversation where bodies are expected to be contained within their own, clear boundaries. Furthermore, confounding the private-public dynamic also might garner more visibility. By showing the products for only two to three seconds at the end of each commercial, Frida Mom encourages consumers to seek out the company, its products, and even its videos which can be quickly shared on social media – again, collapsing the private-public dynamic and increasing the visibility of Frida Mom. This is an important feminist contribution to popular culture media representations of new motherhood.

Yet, both commercials ultimately support a neoliberal, capitalist consumerism. As Banet-Weiser notes, "The visible body is also the commodifiable body" (25). Living up to the neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood demands that mothers' bodies uphold U.S. American ideals of thinness and tightness (and dryness), creates a lucrative market in which to sell mothers products and services designed to help them achieve the proper new motherhood body, expanding the market of weight-loss/diet products and services to be directly marketed to mothers. Regardless of any feminist values Frida Mom may claim (Raphael), the company employs a neoliberal, capitalist logic in selling products for new motherhood. Instead of focusing on community help for new mothers, these products are marketed as helping women or empowering them to overcome their postpartum bodies, focusing on the individual being responsible for their own body. Similarly, Frida Mom suggests that mothers should purchase their products to manage their unruly postpartum bodies (Nash). After all, the commercials make plain that "an answer is at hand, and with only the right products, anything is possible" (Banet-Weiser 7). In this way, Frida Mom benefits from a "corporate friendly" popular feminism, taking up new motherhood from a kind of feminist perspective that still allows for individual, neoliberal consumerism to sell their products (Banet-Weiser 12). In other words, the commercials are important popular culture media representations, but they do not push toward structural critique and/or change, relying instead on the individualism of neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood values.

Moreover, Frida Mom is selling the idea that these products are necessary to alleviate pain and are therefore worth the price, going so far as to claim that their products are "at a price point that is universally acceptable to women" (qtd. in Raphael), demonstrating their target audience as at least middle class which is in line with the intensive motherhood ideal. Frida Mom is selling the importance of self-care. This is not, of course, an inherently terrible argument. However, it can be a slippery slope between self-care for new mothers who can afford it and a reliance

on neoliberal or popular feminist ideology about the individual responsibility to care for the self. So, individual mothers must care enough about themselves to purchase the products (and have enough disposable income to afford the products) in addition to caring about their child(ren)'s well-being. Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer posit, "Feminism has found its most visible popularity in the messages about self-making, self-love, and self-care that abound on social media and in corporate campaigns, messages mostly aimed at privileged white women and lacking a subtext of self-care as political warfare" (884). Self-care, from a popular feminist perspective, ultimately becomes another marker on the neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood checklist to be considered a good mother.

Where mothers would have once been instructed to selflessly pour themselves into caring for their child(ren) rather than themselves, the narrative has changed. Now, mothers must adequately care for themselves in addition to caring for their child(ren), all while toeing the line between selfish and selfless, a balancing act that is difficult when mothers struggle to know whose needs should be addressed (Barkin and Wisner 1053). The tension of so many competing needs and responsibilities can also compromise the health and well-being of mothers and children (Tully et al. 38). In this way, performative self-care becomes part of the "parenting to-do-list" by requiring "an already empty adult to give more" (Lakshmin). Pooja Lakshmin argues that because self-care might be "an app click or exercise class away" mothers feel burnt out when they do not feel they have time to care for themselves causing more stress and guilt. Thus, to be a good mother means to be focused on the child(ren) but not to forsake self-care. This is consistent with popular feminism, too, where self-care relies on "cultural contexts such as institutionalized racism, conditions of poverty, and so on," requiring people to "cultivate and acquire status as a form of currency, in order to make themselves marketable" (Banet-Weiser 29). In other words, self-care is not only one more item on the infinite to-do list, it can also be a way to make oneself better fit the standards of a neoliberal, capitalist society. Unfortunately, Frida Mom helps push this narrative by suggesting that their products are the easiest way to navigate new motherhood.

Again, although the Frida Mom commercials are important popular culture media representations, they still fall victim to a neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood agenda. While visibility is what matters in popular feminism, it cannot be the end goal. Banet-Weiser offers hope that popular feminist visibility could open space for broader, collective action and structural critique of an intersectional

feminism. The key is, of course, that collective action must resist the neoliberal, capitalist focus on the individual. Collective action must include any co-parents or close caregivers involved in raising child(ren); the focus cannot be solely on mothers, especially those who fit the intensive motherhood ideal, as changing the normative discourse requires a community effort (Verbiest et al.). Parents need societal support "from family, from government, from the workplace and from one another" (Ennis 8) to be successful. Societal support must happen at the federal and state levels to be taken seriously by workplaces. This support might include paid parental leave after the birth or adoption of a child (for all parents involved), especially as it has been shown to result in better health outcomes (Jou et al. 224); free or subsidized, accessible, safe childcare; and flexible employee time to manage family emergencies, among other emerging ideas. As Solveig Brown explains, the U.S. has continually relied on intensive motherhood to fix issues of cultural change in relationship to raising families (40), an issue currently magnified by the global COVID-19 pandemic in which mothers are the "shock absorbers" of society (Grose). Ultimately, this means more demands placed on mothers (parents) who have finite energy and time. So, although the Frida Mom commercials are important popular culture media representations of new motherhood, their popular feminist agenda continues to uphold the powerful normative discourse of neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood.

Conclusion

In early 2020, the Academy Awards banned a Frida Mom commercial from its annual awards show for what it considered graphic content. In 2021, Frida Mom offered a boundary-pushing breastfeeding commercial in primetime during the Golden Globes. Frida Mom sought to change public conversations around new motherhood by offering "realistic" representations seldom seen on television or in popular culture. By showing the mother's pain and blood in postpartum, and by showing mothers struggling and questioning during their breastfeeding journeys, the Frida Mom commercials bring the leaky body back into the public sphere, centering taboos that often provoke disgust.

Still, the commercials are a popular feminist representation of neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood, underscoring the narrative that self-care is individual and up to mothers to provide for themselves. The focus is on the individual at the expense of a collective critique of structural oppressions.

Specifically, motherhood must be seen as a potential site for political action, with a focus on "what makes mothers particular kinds of embodied citizens, with needs, rights, and perspectives on the public good" (Hausman 275). Collective parental support (e.g., paid parental leave; affordable daycare) and collective reimagining of motherhood (e.g., hooks; Hill Collins) are the only ways to transform normative discourses like neoliberal, capitalist intensive motherhood that ultimately hurts all people.

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The Magic of Mysterio: *Spider-Man: Far from Home* and the Ethics of Visual Manipulation

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Spider-Man: Far from Home ("FFH") features narrative themes germane to an age of social media and citizen journalism in which individual Internet users are able to create and curate content with relative ease. Accessibility of programs capable of manipulating visual data begs reexamination of Plato's moral objection to imitation as a dissociation from truth. FFH builds narrative ground from which the subject of "illusion" – imitation or management of reality – may be philosophized by popular audiences.

This study is situated within the film philosophy tradition of popular culture studies (e.g., Frampton) which attends to ways that movies may act as fields of play through which filmgoers reason about ethics, morality, and praxis beyond the film. Specifically, the present work draws from hermeneutic traditions of understanding movie experiences (Baracco). The aim of this approach is to suggest ways of interpreting FFH that enrich viewers' perspectives on creating and navigating [new] media in light of the film content. Findings from film philosophy research enhance popular culture studies by "examining film's capacity to present, develop and analyse[sic] (new) philosophical concepts and ideas" (Baracco 7). Given that popular culture, as Bob Batchelor contended in the inaugural issue of the *Popular Culture Studies Journal*, is essentially "the connections that form between individuals and objects" (1) the film philosophy tradition follows this trajectory by excavating how the shared experience of encountering movies might inspire such connections.

Spider-Man, and characters within his lore, are particularly well suited to scholarly examinations of the way[s] pop culture might intimate concepts regarding mass media and visual communication insofar as Spidey narratives often feature

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explicit emphasis on vision-based technologies, like cameras. For example, both Dave Stanley and Demi Schänzel have noted the ways that Spider-Man's use of surveillance technology has been inherent to his stories and progressively expanded over time. The character started as a newspaper photographer in comics, but developed such that "Spider-Man within the Marvel Cinematic Universe […] incorporate[s] the addition of technology and state surveillance as a key signifier that Peter Parker has fully grown into their role as a protective guardian" (Schänzel 254). This is especially clear in FFH when Spidey "inherits the rights to an artificial intelligence system […] gaining access to a large arsenal of orbital weaponry and surveillance technology" (254). Cary Dale Adkinson has also expanded on how comic book iterations of the superhero have involved a preoccupation with visual media, which may be viewed as groundwork for later cinematic interpretations of Spider-Man that more directly grapple with issues of surveillance power and panopticon. The present study continues recent research inquiries into Spider-Man narratives and ethical uses of technology; however, rather than focusing on how Spidey stories operate to legitimize mass surveillance, this study focuses on how villains like Mysterio may serve to warn Spider-Man (and filmgoers) about the dangers of misusing vision-based technology.

The overall framework of this study, then, is to follow the traditional of film philosophy as a way of apprehending possible symbolic or otherwise analogous meanings that may be accessible to movie audiences. Spider-Man stories have historically offered a narrative ground from which to reason about [un]ethical uses of technology. FFH continues this trajectory by putting Spider-Man's application of visual media in contrast with that of the villain, Mysterio. To examine what perspective[s] the FFH film may enable about recent issues in visual media ethics, this article proceeds by summarizing FFH, providing social context for trends in Western discourses from which FFH emerges, offering a hermeneutic reading of the movie's content, and extrapolating implications.

Far from Home Summary

FFH provides the basic narrative ground from which the arguments in this essay develop. In the movie, superhuman teen, Peter Parker/Spider-Man, tries to take a break from superherodom amid his uncertainty about continuing as a hero following the death of his mentor, Tony Stark. This mentor was a wealthy industrialist turned superhero. There is a leadership void for the world's heroes after

Stark's death. During this vulnerable moment in the world of the movie, a global threat in the form of elemental monsters appears and, in the absence of other heroes, SHIELD's Nick Fury asks Peter to help defeat these creatures. As Peter frets over how to defeat the monsters, a new hero – the magical, otherworldly Mysterio – arrives on the scene and offers to help. Mysterio claims to be from an alternate universe that similar elemental creatures destroyed. His knowledge of the monsters makes him a strong ally for Peter and he begins to take over Stark's mentor role for the teen.

Stark bequeathed Peter with glasses that virtually link to enormous information databases and defense satellites. Peter struggles to understand Stark's meaning in giving him the glasses. After gaining Peter's trust through their allyship against the elementals, Mysterio persuades Peter to give him the glasses. Shortly thereafter, Peter comes to find that the elemental monsters were all illusions created by Mysterio's advanced holographic technology. With Stark's glasses now in hand, Mysterio could add very real dangers, such as weapons from Stark's arsenal, to his illusions. Peter tries and fails to defeat Mysterio after discovering his nefarious motives. He loses his initial fights with the villain because he is unable to determine when Mysterio is using holograms. He cannot tell what is real. A mutual friend of Peter and Tony arrives to comfort and support Peter. After receiving advice from his friend, Peter enters into a final conflict with Mysterio and learns to rely on his senses beyond sight to fight past Mysterio's illusions. He is ultimately able to incapacitate the villain.

The major thrust of the plot of FFH regards whether Peter can trust what he sees. This tension also exists in the world outside of cinema. Philosophers have long debated concerns surrounding imitation. The remainder of this essay is dedicated to contextualizing FFH as a contemporary attempt to contribute to this philosophical conversation in ways that are accessible to broad audiences.

Philosophy of Imitation

Most people who have spent time on social media have undoubtedly encountered some form of mis- or disinformation presented by visual means. Memes carry partial stories in their captions while appearing to confirm the inaccurate information via embedded imagery. Staged videos claiming to represent authentic, objective reality go viral. Many methods exist to execute deceit visually. An overview of common means of manipulation and a brief history of how scholars

have historically navigated associated dangers provide grounds from which to interpret FFH. This history is particularly valuable ground for studying FFH precisely because the major source of antagonism in the film is illusion and visual deceit.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a friend of the author sent a video purporting to show secret footage of a presentation made by Bill Gates to the CIA. During the presentation, the speaker (presumed to be Gates) reviewed research on vaccination against genes related to religious fundamentalism. The person who sent the video initially interpretated that Gates had been caught admitting that vaccine ingredients would be used to control people with religious convictions. This video has been debunked as a hoax or prank (Reuters). Gates never had any such meeting, nor is there any evidence of a U.S. government conspiracy to eliminate religiosity. Even though the contents of the video may be demonstrably staged, the footage was designed to appear authentic. Such media can be very convincing. People are not being stupidly duped by these videos; they simply do not have access to cues indicating that the content is staged. When a trusted friend present information that appears to correspond with reality, there is no immediate reason to fact-check. The danger of this kind of content is that humans have constructed a communicative epoch of visiocentrality and perspectivism, in which they tend to most believe what can be verified by sight (Gebser; Kramer et al.; Kramer. When members of a group are socialized to confirm what they hear with what they see, then what criteria of veracity exists when the mechanism for establishing truth (sight) is subject to fraud?

Jean Gebser described the problem in terms from a shift, or "mutation," in cultural consciousness – social patterns in perceiving and reasoning – from confidence in talk/community to confidence in self-reflection (61-97). In other words, the transition is from relationships to individual perspective: we trust what we can see for ourselves. Gebser therefore designated the structure of social consciousness emphasizing faith through sight "mental" or, more commonly, "perspectival." As an example, Ashley Hinck called the state of heightened perspectivity a "fluid world" marked by increased choice in affiliation (i.e., attending a personally desired school or church rather than following a family's traditional selection), identity (i.e., choosing to join communities based on personal interest), and worldview (i.e., finding individual truths rather than relying solely on community or tradition) (22-6). Each of these qualities ground the locus of knowledge in the individual and the choices they both physically and metaphorically see in front of them. Eric M. Kramer, Gabriel Adkins, Sang Ho

Kim, and Greg Miller elaborated that perspectivity, as a way of thinking, inspires people to focus on different kinds of evidence in their reasoning. They posit that "with the advent of the modern perspective" – Gebser's perspectival consciousness – "technology has come to represent the means by which people, objects, and works are judged" (Kramer et al, 279). Considering the role of technology, which can be curated to individual interests, industrialized societies have become "obsessed with the eye and its perceptual product of vision" such that searches for truth reduce "auditory data to unreliable hearsay and inflates visual data to unequivocable truth" (280). This tendency to trust visual data that has been personally consumed – rather evidences garnered from other senses or from trust in community stories – is what Kramer calls visiocentrism. That [post]Modernity has ushered in widespread perspectivism and visiocentrality means that the stakes of access to technology capable of manipulating imagery are high, given the extensive social reliance on visual cues for apprehending truth. Furthermore, the challenges of living in a perspectival world create the basic context for FFH. The tension of the movie derives from Peter's uncertainty about the future and complications to his decision-making processes via Mysterio's technological illusions.

Returning to the example of the Gates/CIA video: the person described in the story was not exceptional in their trust of faked imagery – manipulation of sight-based evidence is a common threat in the perspectival world. In fact, the tactic of using falsified photographs for political purposes has been a longstanding staple of modern propaganda (Jaubert). This mode of manipulation has become more mainstream in recent years, as demonstrated by popular TikTok channels featuring "deepfakes," or phony but realistic media created by Artificial Intelligence. A relatively innocent example of deepfakes might include YouTuber DrFakenstein's videos, such as a popular edit of the title sequence of the television show *Full House* featuring Nick Offerman's face integrated over the faces of the original actors. The result is what appears to be an ad for *Full House* starring Nick Offerman even though no such show ever actually aired. There are, unfortunately, also darker applications of this faking, though. Bowman argued that mass media like TikTok "have raised new fears over the proliferation of believable deepfakes." She noted the quick rate at which technology for deepfakes has advanced. New deepfakes are clearer and less glitchy than those from even just a year or two ago. Bowman expressed concern that "while [certain] videos have been made with tongue very much in cheek, there are more nefarious cases in which deepfakes have been used, including nonconsensual deepfake pornography." White explained that deepfake

pornography has frequently been weaponized into revenge porn, such as the nonconsensual sharing of sexually explicit imagery. Deepfaking complicates revenge porn by giving Internet users simple ways to graft virtually any person's face onto photographic or videographic pornography, and potentially share the sexualized content without the consent of the person who has been edited into the imagery. In addition to their ability to mount personal attacks via pornography, the capabilities of these advanced manipulation technologies toward political ends are becoming progressively more disconcerting.

Phillip N. Howard observed that the rise of the internet has also produced new forms of "lie machines," defined as "the social and technical mechanisms for putting an untrue claim into the service of political ideology" (xi). These machines are particularly concerning in the present historical moment because "today's lie machines" are different than those of previous eras in "their low cost of production… great speed of dissemination over social media, and the expanding industry of marketing agencies to help place and amplify computational propaganda" (xvi). Howard offered the example of the 2014 Columbian Chemicals Plant explosion hoax in which lie machines produced video content faking an ISIS attack on U.S. industry. This hoax was convincing precisely because "images were doctored to appear to have come from CNN, falsified pages were placed on Wikipedia, and fake user accounts on multiple platforms spread the junk news" (xvi). The potency of the disinformation was fueled by the seemingly confirmatory imagery. Humankind is especially susceptible to this expression of disinformation because Modern, perspectival peoples eventually reduce "auditory data to unreliable hearsay and [inflate] visual data to unequivocable truth" (Kramer et al., 280).

Plato wrote about this very concern in his examination of ancient imitative arts. In *The Republic*, he articulated: "The fault of saying what is false" occurs "whenever an erroneous representation is made of the nature of gods and heroes – as when a painter paints a picture not having the shadow of a likeness to his subject" (Plato 2: 20). This lack of likeness to a subject means that an imitation can never be what is imitated. Plato elaborated with a following argument is that "no one man can imitate many things as well as he imitates a single one," and therefore one should only imitate what they know from their own experience – which, of course, is not really imitation at all (3: 28). Plato's contention is that imitative narrative is merely "disguise" and cannot fully represent the truth. His conclusion is that "the imitator is a long way off the truth, and can reproduce all things because he lightly

touches on a small part of them" (10: 35). For example, "A painter will paint a cobbler, carpenter, or any other artisan, thought he knows nothing of their arts (10: 35). The creations of imitators have "an inferior degree of truth" because they are not the object or subject itself (10: 39). A painting of a chair is not something on which one can sit. For Plato, imitation presented dire concern because it could confuse an image with an object itself.

Baudrillard took up a similar argument in his writing on *Simulacra and Simulation*. His work has probed the ways that visual information is often simulacrum (from Latin *simul*, meaning resemblance or likeness). As with Plato's argument, the image – the simulacrum – is not the thing itself. As painter René Magritte reminded audiences in *The Treachery of Images*, a picture of a pipe is not something a person can smoke. Resultantly, Jean Baudrillard argued "the imaginary was the alibi of the real, in a world dominated by reality principle. Today, it is the real that has become the alibi of the model" (122). Put another way: audiences may learn from media (an amalgam of images, a cacophony of simulacra) what is "real" and then their criteria for what to accept as truth will be based on a simulation of reality. For instance, the manipulation of images and videos in support of political conspiracies is a long-standing rhetorical tactic. Jaubert's *Making People Disappear* gives a detailed account of how photographic manipulation played a key role in the propaganda of authoritarian leaders such as Stalin, Mussolini, and Mao. He wrote that, "since we have been told repeatedly for 150 years that the camera 'reproduces reality,' there can be no question. We see hundreds of photographic images every day and they are as real to us as clouds" (9).

The Internet has created increased opportunity for individuals to create photographic fakes. Returning to the example of conspiracy theories: Thousands of Americans were led to believe that the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting was faked. A widely diffused YouTube video alleged that the parents of victims were "crisis actors" pretending to express grief (Kirkpatrick). The idea was that these hired actors would generate the appearance of a deadly shooting so that the U.S. federal government could win public support for tightening gun regulations. The faked video largely relied on circumstantial evidence concocted by social media content creators. This conspiracy was strongly perpetuated by conservative InfoWars host, Alex Jones (Williamson A1), indicating the potential role of mass media in spreading rumors by both auditory and visual means.

Trust in a video alleging a conspiracy surrounding the Sandy Hook shooting requires an almost paradoxical approach to consuming media. On the one hand,

conspiracists believed in a video drawing attention to supposed evidence that an event had been faked; on the other hand, these same conspiracists did not consider that the accusatory video had been faked. Visual evidence was no longer definitive because both the mainstream story of the shooting and the conspiratorial videos relied on imagery. The pre-existing schema, or "models" mentioned by Baudrillard, may account for the ways that similar types of evidence can be interpreted differently. In short, someone who is already in a frame of mind that is fearful of government regulation will be more likely to accept the rhetorical fantasies of others who support that cognitive frame. This conundrum is parsed and probed in FFH by means of the conflict between the honest and goodhearted Peter Parker and the deceptive illusionist, Mysterio.

Hermeneutics and the FFH Narrative: Perspectives on Ethics of Visual Media

FFH presents Peter Parker's coming-of-age in terms of trust. This issue of trust is also a key to discussions on ethics and imitation because the risks associated with fake imagery regard potential damage to faith in others. The true-life hazards of visual manipulation are emplotted (Ricoeur) into FFH. Proceeding paragraphs present an interpretation of FFH, which elucidates perspectives on ethics of visual media enabled by the film. This interpretation, derived from a Ricoeurian reading technique to be described in the space below, is grounded in the social context highlighted in previous sections of this study; namely, that new media in a perspectival, visiocentric world present novel opportunities for trickery via visual manipulation.

Peter's through-line plot in FFH regards a set of technologically advanced glasses, which house a computer system enabling Peter a sort of piercing "vision" into people's text messages, emails, and so forth. Enhanced vision, the broadening of the hermeneutic horizon, also means seeing the world in terms of greater complexity (Gadamer). This tool of sight both strengthened Peter and increased his uncertainty. Mysterio was able to take advantage of this uncertainty and convince Peter to give him the glasses; however, Mysterio only intended to use the technology to dupe other people. Peter and Mysterio may therefore be compared and contrasted to highlight differences in ethics toward technology capable of changing perspective. Ricoeur's hermeneutic concept of *figuration* structures the

following analysis as a method of understanding how some audiences might organizing experience with the movie.

Figuration describes the processes by which people make meaning of a phenomenon using both past experiences and future projections. In other words, Ricoeur argued that interpretation of the present moment (configuration) is mediated by reflection on how the past might bear on current circumstances (refiguration) and anticipation of future possibilities (prefiguration). Scholarship in philosophy of film has found Ricoeur's hermeneutics to be productive for apprehending perspectives on social issues presented through movies (e.g., Baracco). The present study deploys principles on figuration from Ricoeur's work regarding the value of narrative in human meaning-making processes. These principles, along with the context of prolific contemporary visual manipulation on the Internet, enable filmgoers to extrapolate perspectives on responding to the threat of visual fakery.

Prefiguration and Trust. FFH begins with an array of visual narrative cues to tap into audience's experiences with technology outside of the cinema, providing a framing for filmgoers to anticipate familiar aspects of the movie based on their knowledge of genre, tropes, and so forth. For example, FFH's first transition leads the audience into a purposefully "bad," home video style montage to fallen superheroes, such as Tony Stark, made by students at Peter's high school. This sequence contrasts with the impressive visual effects of the movie and reminds the audience of the fakeness that sometimes accompanies visual manipulation. The images that most people can individually render on personal technologies often come with obvious clues to editing, like clear-cut points or juxtaposition of realistic and non-realistic imagery. Even movies with impressive special effects can heighten audience's felt distance between truth and fiction. In this sense, humans can trust sight because mainstream filmmakers cannot discombobulate us. Peter shares the audience's faith in discerning truth because he inhabits a world where fakery is obvious. This trust extends beyond his belief that others are being veracious and into a general optimism. For example, when Avengers ally Nick Fury asks Peter to help fight a global threat, Peter says that Spider-Man is not needed because there are other capable superheroes – clearly indicating that Peter feels secure in the notion that powerful, honest, and good-hearted others can grant a sense of safety. This optimism extends to his trust in imagery, as is later conveyed through his naïve acceptance of Mysterio's initial illusions. Similarly, the cinematic

audience may be able to recall moments of experiencing faith in digital security – moments when fakes were obvious or friends combatted false information.

In the absence of other Avengers, Peter puts his faith in the new hero Mysterio. As it turns out, Mysterio is a nefarious ex-Stark special effects artist who is merely pretending to be a superhero to win Peter's trust. Mysterio's treachery is foreshadowed in several ways, including a sequence in which Peter wears a jester mask while fighting a villain alongside Mysterio. The mask signals that trickery is afoot, but also acts as a red herring by drawing attention to the wrong target (Spider-Man). Even the characters' costumes play with this notion: Peter hides his face but speaks honestly, while Mysterio reveals his face but has hidden motives. These instances play into the overall issue of ethics and visual manipulation by reminding the audience 1) that nefarious manipulators rely on the trust of others and therefore 2) people are not always direct about their motives. Just as Mysterio showed his face to Peter in an effort toward [feigned] transparency, audiences may have friends on social media or other virtual spaces who do not hide their identity but yet present suspect content (e.g., the Gates/CIA video). Even if the person who shares manipulated content is not doing so out of their own maliciousness, they yet extend the ill will of others (usually unethical content creators) by making their readers potential victims of the special effects.

When Mysterio's true intentions are finally discovered, Peter's betrayed trust leaves him in despair. He is defeated in a battle against Mysterio because he could not tell the difference between the villain's illusions and the "real" world. Peter breaks down in hopelessness until he is encouraged by a friend to face Mysterio again. FFH shows Peter's change from trust and optimism to uncertainty and despair. Similarly, the movie's audience may have experienced the frustration and seemingly hopelessness that comes with being deceived. Visual lies are especially disconcerting because most people are socialized with the idea that "seeing is believing."

The opening acts of FFH work to activate particular prefigured information – experience deemed germane by the filmgoer, such as familiarity with visual illusion – to heighten the movie's sense of resonance. Prefigures emerge from the symbolic repertoire of a person's experiences and constitute ground from which a story may be authenticated. To take an example from the movie: Peter first meets Mysterio in a secret base with Nick Fury. During this meeting, Mysterio established ethos by invoking well-known superhero mythology (i.e., sacrificial outsider with a tragic background). He was encountered at a secret headquarters, a setting where heroes

belong. He told a story that matches virtually every popular superhero origin, thereby drawing on experiences familiar to Peter. This experiential background prefigured the ways that Peter interpreted Mysterio's communication. When present narratives cohere with previous knowledge or experience (Fisher), then the prefigures encourage interpreters to inhabit the rhetorical world presented. An important metacommunication of FFH is that Peter is drawn into Mysterio's story by references to familiar tropes, which is incidentally also a major way that movies shape audience expectations. Importantly, and as discussed in prior sections of this study, this sort of narrative coherence and framing of expectations is also powerful tactic for gaining the trust necessary for later introducing successful fakery.

FFH provides imagery and dialogue to draw the audience's attention to specific prefigures. Particularly, the poorly edited video footage from Peter's friends, attention to internet myths among Peter's peers, and thinly veiled deceptions (e.g., the jester mask) each invoke feelings of security in the notion that we can tell the difference between what is real and fake. This backdrop prepares the audience to experience Peter's shift from trust and optimism to the despair that comes with media manipulation.

Refiguration and Skepticism. Paul Ricoeur's hermeneutics place refiguration as a third step in a recursive process of interpreting the world. Phase 2, configuration, is always situated between prefiguration (forward-looking narrative orientation) and refiguration (reflective orientation). In context of fiction, interpretative conclusions are often shaped by a refigurative posture after experiencing a whole work (Fisher, 158-79). As such, viewers of FFH will reap a more nuanced understanding of the movie's rhetorical arguments by considering both prefiguration and refiguration before honing on the emplotment itself (configuration). In the refiguration step, the interpreter reflects on the meaning of a text with knowledge of the whole. For instance, once audiences have finished watching FFH, they can look back and understand elements such as foreshadowing. Although someone might anticipate that a moment on screen was foreshadowing during their experience with the movie, they cannot know for sure until they see the shadow enacted in future parts of the work. In the case of FFH, the revelation of Mysterio's betrayal provides reflective resources for the audience.

In the refiguration phase, audiences learn they have been manipulated. Just like Peter and Mysterio, the audience knows that images can be made to appear realistic, even when they feature various degrees of falsification (Jaubert). These fakes can be very convincing, from still photos in politics (Jaubert) to online conspiracies

(Howard) and even cinematic manipulations. Found footage movies, for example, blur the line between fictional film and real-life home video (Hedash). Pranks on the part of filmmakers during and after the release of [fictional] found-footage movie *Blair Witch Project* maintained the movie's reputation as a true story until well over a year after its release. While certain hoaxes about movies may be all in good fun, other found footage style stories have had more dire consequences. For instance, two twelve-year-old girls repeatedly stabbed one of their friends to appease a fictional horror character, Slender Man, who the girls believed to be real (AP). Fortunately, experienced audiences are sometimes able to determine when they have been duped. The Blair Witch is not a true story. Slender Man is not waiting in the woods. The pessimistic outcome is that when people have been fooled by the visual machinations of others in the past, they become more skeptical of their sight.

The perspective of distrust for vision following victimization through trickery is also elucidated in FFH. Although Peter is able to defeat Mysterio in the end, he cannot escape visual lies as a fact of the world. Accordingly, Peter's skepticism for sight leads to Mysterio's demise. He uses his "Peter tingle" ("spider-sense" in other media), a sensitivity to environmental danger based on his touch-sense, to see through Mysterio's illusions. This skepticism is reinforced when the movie's final scene reveals that Mysterio made a video to propagate a conspiracy that Peter was the real villain in the conflict. Just like Peter, the audience cannot reflect on the story without remembering the illusions and feeling a heightened sense of deception from Mysterio. The world of FFH invites the audience to inhabit skepticism of media because – in both FFH and true-life – it is impossible to forget that convincing fakes persist in the world, and that even imagery can be ripped out of one context and transferred as its meaning is re-configured.

Configuration and Nihilism. The drama of FFH's plot is fueled by the fear that telling (visual, perspectival) truth from lies is hopeless. If so, everything is virtually meaningless because there is no basis from which to determine right action. This is the nightmare of a post-truth era. When trust is lost, communication breaks down and chaos ensues. Peter encounters this sense of nihilism: even though he can determine that Mysterio is a trickster, he is regularly yet unable to tell when he is being fooled by an illusion until the end of the film. The audience may experience Peter's journey in terms of their own virtual coming-of-age. Even though a person might know that imagery can be faked, they may still have difficulty understanding when media is being manipulated in certain situations. After all, it is exhausting to

feel constantly the need to keep up one's guard. As Alain Jaubert wrote, "the painstaking, anonymous work of the skilled craftsman" in imitation is "to avoid surprise entirely, to camouflage, to make the world even more coherent, more banal, to erase differences" (11). In the case of FFH, the prefigured skepticism of the audience is configured into a plot that draws its tension from the fear of nihilism. Peter, like the audience, dreads what he can see but does not understand – the mundane things which do not draw attention, but influence action.

Incidentally, Mysterio himself relies on a narrative configuration similar to that of the FFH plot in a meta-communicative moment of the movie. He praises one of his co-conspirators for helping him create a "totally ridiculous" story about himself being a hero (rather than a trickster). The power of Mysterio's story was that it fit what he believed everyone wanted to hear. He took his own audience's fears about world-threatening villains and transformed those apprehensions into hope from a [fake] hero. As such, he configured the information to supply himself as a false idol. This vengeful trick was played based on the complaint that the most qualified people to protect the world (i.e., technological whizzes like Mysterio himself) had been ignored because they did not wear a cape. Mysterio's argument was that belief in heroes was far too informed by visual cues, such as uniforms. Other people – everyday people – can be heroic. Unfortunately, Mysterio undercuts his own argument by hurting rather than helping his community. This betrayal authenticates the threat of nihilism by realizing the fear that heroes cannot necessarily be trusted.

Interpreting the Whole: A Return to Refiguration. FFH is configured to build drama based on the mediation between the audience's former experiences with media and their ability to reflect on the story in a way that demonstrates how Peter's optimism was betrayed. The emplotment brings the audience along on Peter's journey from trust, to nihilism and despair, to a cautious but potentially hopeful skepticism. Even though Peter can never go back and regain the trust that he lost during his encounter with Mysterio, his ability to defeat the villain with his spider-sense provided some hope that lies can be detected. Illusions have limits of plausibility. Similarly, the movie's audience may realize that media manipulations can be uncovered and understood. The downside of the present moment, the place where both Peter and the audience land at the end of their experience with lie machines, is that we must now be constantly vigilant to determine fact from fiction. This vigilance may grant glimmer of hope in the face of anomie, but it can also be exhausting; one challenge traded for another.

Perspectives on the Dangers of Illusion

There is an array of applications for visual manipulation technologies, from crafting false videos of supposed CIA briefings to creating beautifully elaborate fantasy films. Amid the many possible usages of such media, there are several potential dangers that are portrayed through various cinematic elements in FFH. The risks of imitation and illusion presented in FFH offer a field for theoretical play in which audiences may consider the ethical implications of wielding the "magic" of Mysterio. The following paragraphs extrapolate perspectives on visual manipulation in FFH enabled by the Ricoeurian reading of the film. While these perspectives do not necessarily offer to "solve" problems associated with visual manipulation, they hold the potential to increase awareness of both harmful illusions and the socio-cultural concerns undergirding anxieties regarding visual fakery.

Uncertainty. In their first encounter after Peter discovers Mysterio's betrayal, the villain creates an illusory environment in which to battle his foe. Peter has great difficulty separating concrete objects from tricks of light. Mysterio taunts him, "I don't think you know what's real, Peter." One of the incredible harms associated with Howard's lie machines and other such digital falsifications that reverberates through the aforementioned FFH scene is that they supplant optimism with uncertainty. When people do not know what to believe, they lose motivation for engagement. Lack of certainty chills communication and social interaction (Berger and Calabrese). The result is a moroseness that yearns for a means of progressing from the stupor. This disorientation increases vulnerability to indoctrination. For instance, Hassan, a cult expert, described Trump's rise to power in U.S. government as being built on the "promise [of] something that people want to believe in but that [the speaker] can never actually deliver" (xii). Trump led a powerful misinformation campaign with many such false promises, which gave people a sense direction during a time of political, social, and cultural uncertainty. This direction culminated in a mob, many wearing T-shirts advocating for Far-Right conspiracy theories (i.e., more virtual fakery), storming the U.S. capitol building based on the lie that Joe Biden had actually lost the 2020 presidential election.

The persistence of conspiracies, often propelled by fake online photos and videos, aligns with Baudrillard's caution: "The closer one gets to the perfection of the simulacrum […] the more evident it becomes […] how everything escapes representation, escapes its own double and its resemblance. In short, there is no

real" (107) In other words: people eliminate the real by creating thoroughly convincing fakes, at least in the sense that the fakes inform our beliefs and motivate our actions. To draw from an earlier example, there is no empirical evidence that the Sandy Hook shootings were faked. However, to those who believe that the government would go so far as to falsify a massacre to impose stricter gun regulations, it does not matter whether the conspiracy corresponds to fact. Their values inform them what view of reality to accept (Fisher), and then they act based on those beliefs (Baudrillard). Fiction becomes real. Any such manipulation that intentionally and dramatically increases uncertainty, and therefore vulnerability, must be considered unethical because it has the power to transform human actors into mere means to ends.

Personalization of Truth. The radical individualism of extreme perspectivism is conducive to an epistemic denial of all narratives outside of those generated by the Self. This theme has been threaded through years of *Spider-Man* media, as conveyed through Stanley's discussion of the hero and "liquid" surveillance – that Peter only completes his self-appointed heroic duties through increasingly perspectival technologies from cameras and photography to A.I. powered armor (95, 101-2). Similarly, Baudrillard argued that the proliferation of information gathered through surveillance agencies (such Internet news, for modern readers), especially simulacra which can sparsely be distinguished from empirical objects, overwhelms those who are absorbing the information and essentially shuts down the social in an attempt to bolster the individual:

> Information dissolves meaning and dissolves the social, in a sort of nebulous state dedicated not to a surplus of innovation, but on the contrary, to total entropy. Thus, the media are producers not of socialization, but of exactly the opposite, of the implosion of the social (81)

When the truth is perceived as exclusively personal, then elitism and fragmentation follow. Baudrillard pointed out the irony that mass media, appealing to many, often contributes to fragmentation that strengthens the individual. When people feel that they have examined evidence and come to fair conclusions, even the evidence of simulacra, then they will prioritize their own conclusions and begin to reject counterevidence. Social sectorization (Gebser) means trusting the Self, and only the Self, to know the truth and to project personal paradigms on the world. Although there is no escaping the projection of our own perspective, there is a malleability accompanying collaborative social actors, which is, absent in radical perspectivism. FFH demonstrates this to the audience when Peter confronts Mysterio about the

villain's lies. The antagonist replies, "I control the truth! Mysterio is the truth!" [1:19:50]. His downfall and his menace do not lie in the fact that he has personal perspective, but that he presumes his own superiority and attempts to force his perspective on others. Outside of the movie, contemporary "illusionists" can fake visual data to encourage others to adopt a particular worldview by means of deceit. A potential lesson for consumers of virtual content is that self-trust may be warranted and valuable, but intellectual humility – a willingness to hear and consider perspectives beyond the personal – can strengthen the ability to flag lie machines. In FFH, Peter demonstrated this humility by inviting the help of his friends, honing his intuition by soliciting the perspectives/opinions of others, and therefore widening his available intellectual tools.

Cynicism and Nihilism. A final harm of visual manipulation represented in FFH, although there are undoubtedly more issues, which could be discussed, is that optic deception may shock entire social systems into cynicism. The utter hopelessness of uncertainty places people in a double bind between collapse into nihilism and blind acceptance of what Baudrillard called "models" – ideological structures provided by powerful Others. In the movie, Mysterio took advantage of people's willingness to accept models, saying, "You'll see, Peter. People need to believe. And nowadays, people will believe anything." Indeed, it can be so difficult to discern truth from lies that many people will simply believe whatever is both accessible and logically consistent with their preexisting value frameworks (Fisher). This is exactly the kind of persuasive tools have been historically deployed by cult leaders (e.g., Hassan). It is therefore no surprise that conspiracy theories have gained traction in recent years, following increased social sectorization and the proliferation of visual misinformation. Whereas these conspiratorial views were simply contributing to the rise of cynicism in the early days of the Internet, they now represent popular models for understanding. The problem of lie machines has perpetuated itself by first contributing to the confusing conditions under which people yearn for renewed certainty, then offering convincing deceptions as a strategy to escape the meaninglessness of those conditions.

Without models to guide us through visual data, there is a collective, nihilistic throwing of our hands in the air. We return to Pontius Pilate's retort to Jesus, "What is truth?" If it becomes exhaustingly labor-intensive to separate truth from lies, then many people will opt to simply accept the models presented to them. This perspective emerges in FFH via Peter's initial sense of helplessness after being

defeated by Mysterio. Were it not for his friends, like Happy Hogan, Peter may not have found the strength to keep fighting against the illusions of his nemesis.

Conclusion

Peter Parker walks the audience through the predicament of living in a time when visual cues are high intellectual currency but one cannot necessarily trust their eyes. His arc in FFH moves from innocent optimism, to experiencing counter-evidence (i.e., recognition of illusions which increases his uncertainty), to despair and hopelessness (i.e., inability to see through illusions), and finally to a place of perpetual skepticism. This skepticism is a tactic developed by necessity in response to being the victim of lies. Peter eventually defeats Mysterio by collaborating with others (humility, re-establishing trust) and utilizing all his senses (as opposed to exclusively sight). Despite his victory, Peter cannot return to his wide-eyed optimism predating the encounter with Mysterio. The audience faces a parallel juncture: even after restoration of the belief that lies can be detected; lasting damage to aith in others may result. This enduring skepticism is a rational reply to the proliferation of convincing fakes. Kramer et al. argued:

> As any slight-of-hand artist knows, the eye is rather easily fooled. With current technologies of digital manipulation, faith in visual evidences – often counted as solid proof of a state of affairs (historical fact) – leaves the true believer in the precarious position of being utterly fooled. While moderns distrust hearsay, they tend to be gullible about what they see with their own eyes. (280)

Now that humans have begun to learn the extent of gullibility, they see things in a different way. In some respects, this creates strength by influencing a reliance on a wider array of senses. On the other hand, it is unlikely that the widespread cynicism now accompanying general distrust of vision will ever be undone. Humankind must live with the outcome of its irresponsibility.

The harms of visual manipulation only become more severe as deceptive imitations increase. Meaning that – aside from audience responsibilities toward skepticism and intellectual humility – virtual content creators can also begin to mend collective trust by endeavoring to mark their own manipulations as distinct from life beyond the Internet. They can also help others understand how to spot visual fakery. Of course, this advice is merely a general guiding principle given that there may be exceptional social situations that render imitation as harmless and/or

necessary. Enumerating these exceptions is a task for other works, as the goal of this essay is to simply communicate how FFH draws attention to potential harms of illusion and encourage technological wizards to address these harms with their peers.

In summary, the main argument of the present work is that FFH communicates mainstream anxieties regarding how virtual technologies may undercut trust in visual cues. FFH suggests through Peter's story arc that consumers of digital media may benefit from bringing a heightened skepticism to virtual information and increasing intellectual humility such that fact checking – whether formal comparison of varying information sources or informal openness to alternative opinions from trusted others – is a more common practice. As with much film allegory, the tactics used to combat visual fakery in FFH are only general correlates with life beyond the movie. Filmgoers must decide how to make personal meaning from the overarching perspective[s] enabled within FFH. Finally, in its villainous framing of virtual content creators via Mysterio, FFH also cautions those with advanced technological skills to avoid perpetuating lie machines, lest they generate the harms of illusion presented in the movie. These harms included exhaustion, nihilism, and elitism among other potentially dangerous elements of visual manipulation. FFH, therefore, operates as a way of expressing socio-cultural fears about imitation and illusion in addition to offering opportunities to reflect on how to navigate a digital world featuring mass consumption of digital media.

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Fiddler on the Roth: A Post-Charlottesville Reinterpretation of *Fiddler on the Roof*

STEPHEN STERN AND STEVEN GIMBEL

Fiddler on the Roof, the stage and screen adaptation of Sholem Aleichem's stories about Tevye the dairyman, is a cultural touchstone of the non-orthodox American Jewish community. Debuting on Broadway in 1964 and on the big screen in 1971, the story of the residents of the small Russian-Jewish town, or shtetl, of Anatevka appeared during a time of cultural pride movements from Black Pride to women's liberation to Puerto Rican Pride and the beginning of Gay Pride. As groups of all sorts embraced their identities, *Fiddler* presented Jews with the opportunity to celebrate their heritage in the public mainstream and was celebrated by many Jews.

But not by everyone. Many Jewish Studies scholars have long disparaged the work. The complaints are numerous and justified. It misrepresents Aleichem's stories, presenting an Americanized and sterilized version, thereby stripping it of his literary genius (Wisse 61-64). It grossly misrepresents the eastern European lived experience and contains major historical inaccuracies (Solomon 3). It gets Judaism and cultural elements wrong (Wolitz 356). As a vehicle for connecting with the lived experience of fin de siècle country Jews, the Ostjuden, it should not be taken seriously, the scholars tell us. It is shallow and saccharine and not fit for serious discussion.

We disagree. True, *Fiddler on the Roof* should not be taken as a documentary. Yes, it is importantly different from Aleichem's profound work. But we engage

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with it Talmudically. The Talmudic tradition prides itself on the ability to find meaning through creative reinterpretation of text (Steinsaltz 40). What creates the context for this new understanding are the events of the last several years.

In 2018, a production of *Fiddler on the Roof* in Yiddish, what would have been the actual language of the residents of Anatevka, opened to great acclaim. At almost the same exact moment, congregants in Squirrel Hill, Pennsylvania's synagogue Or L'Simcha and Tree of Life were being shot to death by a Jew-hating gunman. Less than a year earlier, White nationalists marched in Charlottesville, Virginia giving the Hitler salute in unison and chanting, "Jews will not replace us." They held torches, intentionally reviving the imagery of the pogroms that drove the forbearers of many current American Jews from their shtetls, onto ships, past the Statue of Liberty, and into American life. Now, the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of those Jewish immigrants were being told by a White nationalist mob that they were not welcome in this country either. These unfortunate events of 2018 give us a new perspective that provides a missing piece to solve a riddle connected to *Fiddler*.

We can see *Fiddler* as a retelling of the story of the Exodus, resituated in early 20th century Russia. Before the 20th century, the Exodus narrative was one of the most important in Judaism. While Judaism is, by its nature, multifaceted, it finds its roots in being "the Chosen People," that is, Judaism is based upon a covenant wherein by agreeing to abide by the commandments of God, Jews receive Divine protection through creating an ethical world. Among those requirements is the retelling of the story of the Exodus. At the Passover seder, Jews recount the leaving of Egypt by their ancestors. This story is not told in the third person – what God did for them. Nor in the second person – what God did for us. Rather, it is told in the words of Exodus 13:8 in the first person – "It is what the Lord did for *me* when *I* came forth out of Egypt" (Goldschmidt 29, emphasis added). The Exodus is the central narrative of traditional Judaism because it offers the proof to each and every Jew that the founding covenant remains in place.

Yet, there was the Holocaust. Post-mid-20th century Jewish thought had to look beyond its longstanding axiom of being the chosen people and wrestle with the deepest questions of Divine abandonment (see, e.g., Levi). This led to an existential turn starting with the *Lehrhaus* writers after WWl which became central to Jewish philosophy after WWII, maintaining to this day an ethical urgency focused on human obligation to ensure "never again" (Brenner). Forsaken, Jewish thinkers held that we must turn inward, we alone must be the ones who create the way out, who construct our own redemption. As Victor Frankl put it, "Man does not simply

exist but always decides what his existence will be, what he will become in the next moment" (132). God is not to be relied upon as a rescuer, but this does not mean all these Jewish thinkers abandoned their covenant with God. Writers from Martin Buber and Emanuel Levinas to Judith Plaskow, Deborah Lipstadt and even Judith Butler show the covenant now demands praying with our feet (to use Abraham Joshua Heschel's phrase), not merely liturgically, but socio-politically. The story of the Shoah replaced the story of the Exodus at the center of Jewish philosophy. Judaism as a whole, and in particular Jewish thought, had to radically re-understand itself given that it had been empirically demonstrated that its core covenant could be breached.

But less than two decades after the closing of the camps, one cultural touchstone of 20th century American Judaism, *Fiddler on the Roof*, arrived on Broadway to be turned into a box-office hit seven years later. How is it that less than twenty years after the Holocaust, with the wounds still open, American Jews could ignore the obsolescence of the old Exodus narrative? How can a celebration of the covenant be accepted when its violation stood so starkly and recently before us?

In the period of its initial release, American cultural discourse was giving rise to identity politics. From the Black Power movement to the Stonewall riots to the National Organization for Women's push for the Equal Rights Amendment, groups that had been made Other in American life were claiming their identity with pride (Breines 6). James Brown sang, "Say it loud, I'm Black and I'm proud," while Helen Reddy crooned, "I am woman, hear me roar," and throngs of protesters chanted, "We're here. We're queer. Get used to it." After doing their best to be invisible for two generations to fit in, Jews could now participate in this exciting movement of publicly proclaiming their identity by singing their own version, "Tradition!" Tevye and Golde were familiar to the audience of the time, they were Zaide and Bubbe. Having successfully assimilated, *Fiddler* offered Jews of the period the opportunity to regain what they thought of as authenticity that they thought they had to jettison in fitting into the White world. It also seemed to put a period on the horrors of Europe. By flaunting their identity, by explicitly proclaiming the continued existence of Jews, they proved that Hitler had failed, as commanded by Emil Fackenheim's 614th commandment, "Do not give Hitler a posthumous victory."

This may be true, but the events of Squirrel Hill, Charlottesville, and the general marked rise in antisemitism across America at the end of the 2010's also coincided with a violent anti-immigrant movement aimed at other more recent immigrants,

mostly those from Mexico and Central America. This resurgence of White supremacy gives us a chance to re-interpret *Fiddler* anew for a new generation. This re-interpretation has the advantage that it does not have to ignore the problem of the Shoah, again, how can a celebration of the covenant be accepted when its violation stood so starkly and recently before us? Indeed, this new understanding of *Fiddler* offers an answer to the question.

The key to this re-interpretation comes from a different work, Philip Roth's novel *The Plot Against America*. It, too, must be re-interpreted considering the shocking increase in Jew-hatred shortly following Roth's death. When we see how Roth's book acquires an additional layer of meaning the author never could have intended, we can make the same move with *Fiddler*, which no longer needs to be thought of as ignoring the Holocaust and reasserting the moral of the Exodus story that we will be delivered to the promised land. Instead, by looking at the contemporary social-political context with a different group of immigrants seeking safe passage away from violence, we can thereby see *Fiddler* as embodying Abraham Joshua Heschel's famous aphorism, "few are guilty, but all are responsible" (19). If these current refugees are not safe, it is because we did not welcome them as strangers in a strange land. We are responsible. As it says in Leviticus 24:22, "You shall the same rule for the stranger and native, for I am the Lord your God," that is, the God who brought the Israelites out of Egypt, a strange land for the Jews.

Viewed in this way, *Fiddler on the Roof* forces us to realize that the Holocaust did not have to happen. We could have prevented it. If America had accepted those European Jews whose lives were known to be in peril from the Third Reich in the same way that we accepted those fleeing Anatevka, Yom HaShoah may still be a day of remembrance, but it would be a day remembering the hatred that forced millions of Jews into exile while celebrating them as contributors to the building of America. The current treatment of immigrants seeking asylum in the United States must make us understand *Fiddler on the Roof* anew. It need not exclude the Shoah but make us understand our own responsibility for it as Americans.

It Could Have Happened Here (Indeed, It Still Might)

In 2004, Philip Roth published a fictional work entitled *The Plot Against America*, a counterfactual historical reimagining of what could have been the case had the Republicans nominated Charles Lindbergh to run against Franklin Delano

Roosevelt in the presidential election of 1940. Running on a platform of peace and prosperity through isolationism, the fictional Lindbergh campaign mirrored the actual right-wing America First movement of the period. The desire to avoid being dragged into what would become the Second World War does not stem from the sort of pacifistic inclination of the resistance to the War in Vietnam that was seen in the 1960's, but rather from sympathies toward the National Socialist government of Hitler. It is well-known that Lindbergh harbored such sympathies and that Hitler had recognized and rewarded him for it (Berg 414).

The question of identity for European Jews in the first half of the 20th century was quite different from that of American Jews of the same time period (Stern 104). While European Jews internalized the antisemitism of European culture and thereby felt that their Jewish identity conflicted with and impeded their inclusion in French, German, British, Austrian […] society, American Jews experienced this to a much lesser degree. American Jews largely experienced an organic melding of their Jewish and American identities. The hyphen in "Jewish-American" denoted something akin to a chemical bond into a single organic molecule of identity. One may argue that the majority of American Jews have fulfilled Moses Mendelssohn's prophecy, transitioning from living Jewish civilization (where no distinction between tradition and public life existed) into Judaism as a religion of the home (94). Roth portrays this through the lived lives of the eponymous narrator and his older brother. They are Jewish and know they are in some sense different from the gentiles around them, but in their desire to play baseball, to watch Hollywood movies, and to attract the attention of young women, they are recognizably American through-and-through.

Yet, while they considered themselves thoroughly American as modern Jews, the world outside the Jewish community still saw them as strangers. Businesses and social organizations of the period did have overtly exclusionary policies intended to keep Jews out or their numbers minimized. While they were not as prevalent or explicit as southern Jim Crow laws of the time, they were intended to serve the same purpose. Partly a result of these policies and partly a response to immigration patterns and the needs of those who arrived a generation earlier, Jews of the early 20th century tended to live in clusters. In large cities across the country, there were Jewish enclaves that were home to most of the Jewish population. While life in these areas was largely assimilated and differed little from that of the surrounding regions much less the rest of the country, Jews generally lived amongst Jews.

This fact would be exploited by the America First movement in Roth's fictional America. The existence of the Jewish communities allowed there to be sufficient population density of this minority group to support vibrant congregations that kept Judaism alive amidst the assimilating congregants. Coupled with the maintenance of their Jewish identity was a commitment to liberal Democratic ideals. These communities knew of the threat of their strangeness and supported the political movement that supported their inclusion in American life, led and symbolized by FDR. Right-wing populism during this time, explicitly identified Americanism with Christianity. Jews were another minority group perceived as a threat to the American way of life and the propaganda of American conservative anti-Jewish bigotry mirrored and, indeed, borrowed from that of the rising tide of fascism in Europe (Hedges 137). Counter to the lived experience of Jews, the America First movement asserted an existential distinction between a Jewish and an American identity. One could not be both. Judaism is distinct from Americanism and therefore its presence in America is a threat to Americanism.

The scourge of Judaism would be diminished, it was argued in Roth's fictional America, if Jews were transformed into "real Americans," for this would be an Exodus away from the Jewish Exodus, that is, a move away from being chosen to create Jewish civilization. This would be accomplished by removing them from their enclaves and distributing them throughout the country. By exposing them to the Protestant ethos in rural America, Jews would truly be able to assimilate. Their clustering reinforces the differences that alienated them from America. By distributing them, they will be culturally re-educated in a fashion that ethnically cleanses them of their strangeness.

Of course, the real, but unstated purpose of the program is to destroy Judaism. If Jews will not convert to Christianity on their own, by spreading them thin enough, they will not have the support systems contained in their communities that transmit the necessary elements for a Jewish identity. Without enough Jews to have a minyan, there will be no services. Without vibrant congregations, there will be no services. By diminishing the population density of Jews under the ruse of acquiring a fully American identity, the Jewish aspect will disappear because Judaism requires community and community requires proximity.

The person leading the effort for the Lindbergh administration is an America First charismatic rabbi. Putting a Jewish clergyman out front as the face of the resettlement program, any claim of Jew hatred can be dismissed. The destruction of Judaism through racist ethnic cleansing requires a Jew who will work hand-in-

hand with the administration. Putting the policy in place, coupled with increasingly antisemitic rhetoric which is always thinly cloaked in pro-American, pro-peace, pro-economic growth messaging, allowed those who harbored antisemitic beliefs to feel emboldened in expressing them publicly. Antisemitic policies by businesses would be upheld by Jew-hating police officers. Openly hurtful remarks could be made in public spaces, like diners, without being challenged – indeed, being approved of – by onlookers. All of this was illustrated in Roth's character's experiences.

The title's "plot against America" is taken by the reader throughout the book to be the insidious unAmericanism of American Jews. However, at the end of the novel, it is revealed that the real plot against America is the Lindbergh administration's true essence, which is as a puppet regime for Nazi Germany. The Germans had infiltrated American conservative political organizations and were fully in control of the presidency. The President was a traitor who received help in being elected by and then orders shaping policy from a hostile foreign government that sought to undermine American democracy.

Reading with Three Minds

The central conceit of Roth's book is that the readers do not live in the fictional America of Roth's imagination, but in the real world, fully aware of what was actually going to happen in the fictional Germany under fictional Hitler because it happened in the real Germany under real Hitler. We read along knowing what some characters are chided for asserting, that the Third Reich would ultimately seek to commit genocide out of its racist bigotry. And the whole time one reads along, we know that the lack of opposition to Hitler, indeed the embracing of him, would lead not only to the unimpeded success of Hitler in his murderous rampage, but that it would use the conduit of the America Frist movement and the complicity of the Lindbergh administration to arrive at our shores. The moral of the book is "it could have happened here."

This requires a sort of dual-track reading, that is, reading with two minds. The first mind, what we will call "the immersed mind," is the stance that one adopts whenever reading fiction. It is the mind that suspends disbelief and is willing to accept the premise of the tale and ways of the created fictional world. If the book says that animals can talk or the ring can make you invisible or Dorothy is no longer

in Kansas, then the immersed mind provisionally holds these to be true of the world it is observing through the words and images of the book.

But Roth is not creating simple fiction, that is, he is not creating his own world out of whole cloth in which to stage a story. Rather, it is counter-factual historical fiction. Historical fiction locates a story in some actual historical context. "Counter-factual" is the philosophical term for "what would have happened if something that was not the case had been the case." "You would have passed the course, if you had studied harder," and "We wouldn't have won the game, if you hadn't put in all that time and effort over the off-season" are counter-factual propositions. They state what would be the case in this world, if past events in this world were different.

There are two important places in the history of philosophy that engage this sort of counter-factual reasoning. The first is the *Theodicy* of Wilhelm Gottfried Leibniz. Leibniz, who was deeply influences by Baruch Spinoza (Mates 12), wrestled with the problem of evil from a Christian perspective. If God is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent, how could there be evil in the world? If God is omniscient, He would know of the evil. If God is omnibenevolent, then He would want to eradicate the evil. And if God is omnipotent, then God would be able to rid the world of the evil. Yet, there is evil in the world.

Leibniz's solution is to contend that what follows from God's omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence must be the best of all possible worlds. The flawed presumption is that the best of all possible worlds would be a world with no evil at all, when, in fact, the best of all possible worlds is actually a world of minimal evil. To know which of the possible worlds is the best of all possible worlds, one would have to have complete counter-factual knowledge. In other words, one would have to know the complete histories of all possible worlds to be able to compare them. God, before the Creation, stands outside of time, able to compare all possible worlds and actually only the one that is the maximally good one.

To make sense of his story, Roth requires us to possess a limited Leibnizian God mind, that is, a mind that stands outside of history to be able to compare two possible worlds. When reading *The Plot Against America*, Roth requires us to occupy the place of the immersed mind, living in the slightly fictional world he creates and following the exploits of the various characters. But he also requires us to have the limited Leibnizian God mind that has us consciously standing outside of the fictional, but possible world he creates knowing the whole time what we know about Hitler, the Second World War, and German atrocities. To get the

desired effect, Roth manipulates the reader by playing these minds against each other.

How can we infer from the real world to the fictional world? Here is where we employ the second philosopher whose work is relevant to possible worlds, Saul Kripke. In his seminal work *Naming and Necessity*, Kripke considers the distinction that can be traced back to Leibniz between necessary and contingent truths, what Leibniz calls "truths of reason" and "truths of fact." We think of mathematical truths, for example, as necessary. One plus one could not but equal two. It does not just happen to be true, it has to be true. But other truths are contingent, that is, they could have been otherwise. Elvis Presley could have chosen to wear something other than the white, rhinestone-studded jumpsuit for his Las Vegas special in 1970. But that is what he chose. It is true that Elvis wore that outfit, but it is not necessarily true because it could have been otherwise.

Kripke argues that necessary truths are sentences that are true in all possible worlds, whereas continent propositions are true in some possible worlds, and contingent truths are the case in this specific possible world that we inhabit. When you take the set of every possible world and lay them out in front of you like the Leibnizian God, the truths that appear in all of them are necessary and those that appear in this one, but not all are contingent. But for this mechanism to work, we need to be able to map things onto each other across possible worlds. We need to know when an object in possible $world_1$ is the same object as an object in possible $world_2$. For this, we use what Kripke calls "rigid designators" (3). A designator is a term that names something. A designator is rigid when it names not only in one possible world, but across possible worlds.

It is true that in the actual world, that is, in the possible world we inhabit, Louis Brandeis was male and the first Jewish Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. Now, there is a possible world in which Louis Brandeis was born Louise Brandeis, that is, female. We could discuss whether in any of the possible worlds in which Brandeis was born female, whether Brandeis would also have been made a Supreme Court Justice. For this discussion to make any sense, we need to use the designator "Brandeis" rigidly, that is, the name picks out the same object in the different possible worlds.

We can see a Jewish sensibility in this notion of rigid designation. Talmudic discourse treats biblical commands, for example, in a fashion not dissimilar to rigid designation, that is, the command itself is true in all possible worlds although instantiated differently based on the context. A Talmudic worldview takes possible

contexts as the analog of possible worlds. For example, "you shall not steal" is a rigid rule, true in all possible situations. But what is stealing in one context may not be stealing in another, necessitating a correspondence between God's biblical command and how one lives or carries out the command, which means that not stealing is understood rigidly in this sense, but how to live this from situation to situation, or from one possible world to another varies. This awareness identified by Leibniz and unfolded by Kripke is part of being human and just as Torah/Talmud imminently relies on it in teaching Jews how to live the covenant, Roth can rely on the reader's present lived world while playing with the reader's knowledge of possible worlds, i.e., that things may have turned out differently.

In *The Plot Against America*, Roth intends for many of the names to be rigid designators. At the end of the book, he includes an entire section explaining how Franklin Roosevelt, Charles Lindbergh, Joachim von Ribbentrop, and others were not only real people in our real world but intended to be the same people in his fictional world. Not all names in the book are rigid designators. For example, the narrator is named Philip Roth. While there are surely similarities between the author Philip Roth in our actual world, the narrator Philip Roth in the fictional possible world is not the same person. Roth's father in the story is not Roth's father in our world. So, some of the names are Kripkean rigid designators and some are not.

In understanding Kripke's mechanism we can see and thus conceptualize that we can operate with two minds while reading the book – the immersed mind which belongs entirely to the fictional world and the limited Leibnizian God mind that imposes certain knowledge about our actual world on the fictional possible world that the characters and the narrator could not possibly know. If we used only the immersed mind, then we could not know more than the narrator tells us, but we do because we import counter-factual knowledge into our understanding of the story through rigid designation.

That complex structure exposes how Roth manipulated us, his readers. The structure and use of rigid and non-rigid designation makes his work architecturally intricate and technically fascinating. But what he could not have foreseen in 2004 was the set of events that would make his story stunningly prescient after 2016. After the Charlottesville march, the massacre near Pittsburgh, and all of the other hate crimes that have exploded in recent years, we look at the plot points in the book as eerily foreshadowing current events.

Readers in 2004 had the luxury of thinking that Roth's narrative is alarmist. In 2004, we could have reasonably believed that certain parts of the plot are unrealistic

because there are structural, governmental, and cultural safeguards in place to protect our political infrastructure and institutions from being seized by white nationalists. It is a paranoid fantasy that does serve some purpose in pointing out that there is simmering, low-level antisemitism remaining in pockets of America in 2004, even if Jews in 2004 do not really experience it directly very often. But it should not be taken too seriously. We are not saying it could happen here in 2004, just that it could have happened here when it was happening in Germany.

Readers after 2016, of course, will have a very different experience of the story. The idea of a hostile government surreptitiously aiding a conservative candidate for President of the United States and then holding high-level secret meetings that had a direct influence on policy designed to help the enemy of America became fact, not fiction. The embrace of an autocratic, self-serving foreign leader would have been thought to be absurd, yet it came to light that notes with meetings with Vladimir Putin would not be kept, contrary to protocol, so there would be complete privacy for the strongman to influence the American President who explicitly said that he believes what Putin tells him over the word of America's own intelligence services.

Roth could not have seen what would come to pass after the last year of his life. Yet, his descriptions of the process are uncanny. When we read *The Plot Against America* post-2016, we cannot but reinterpret what we read considering the context in which we currently find ourselves, seeing Roth as a sort of Jewish Nostradamus. A new set of designators exists that Roth could not have envisioned. Post-2016 readers cannot but see Donald Trump in Charles Lindbergh, Vladimir Putin in Adolf Hitler, Sergey Lavrov in Joachim von Ribbentrop, Steve Bannon in Henry Ford, and Stephen Miller in Rabbi Bengelsdorf. Roth wrote the book employing techniques designed to bifurcate our minds and play the immersed mind against the limited Leibnizian God mind, but when we read the book post-2016, we must now add a third mind, the extended limited Leibnizian God mind. It is a limited Leibnizian God mind in that it makes sense of reality by standing outside of the world and making judgements about a limited number of worlds from a god-like position outside of the limited number of possible worlds which it can compare. But it is extended because it now has knowledge of possible worlds that Roth had no clue we would have. In the same way that the reader knows more than the narrator did in 2004 because the narrator was stuck in his possible world not knowing of the Shoah, we in the post-2016 world know more than the 2004 author Philip Roth about the very world he was creating.

It is this new third mind, the extended limited Leibnizian God mind that not only allows, but forces us to reinterpret Roth's work in a way that Roth did not foresee just as Torah/Talmud discourse may require us to address novel situations the Talmudic Rabbinic discussants could not have imagined, such as what happens to the "rigid designators" at Auschwitz. Roth's message was intended to be "It could have happened here, too." What we now take away from the book is a more ominous moral, "Is it happening here, now?"

From Tevye to *Fiddler*

Sholem Aleichem, born Solomon Rabinovich in the Ukraine, was deeply influenced by the great Russian writers of the previous generation like Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Gogol and sought to be the next great author, the first Jew among the Russian pantheon. He tried Russian and Hebrew before deciding to try to write serious literature in the pidgin language of Yiddish, spoken by the population of small, rural villages stuck in the old ways, uneducated, clinging to old ideas and superstitions, or *bubbe mieses*, like the evil eye (Dauber 32).

Seeking to create high culture art in the language of the Jewish rabble was incongruous enough that it lent an air of comedy to his work, even if serious. In writing his masterpiece, *Tevye, the Dairyman*, he further engaged in incongruity by mixing the traditional forms of tragedy and comedy. Tragedy usually begins with a hero, someone whose greatness set them above ordinary humans, and the plot then chronicles their tragic fall. Comedies, on the other hand, focus on a comic figure whose properties render them inferior to most and the story shows how through misunderstanding or machination, the lowly can rise above their natural place.

Tevye is clearly a comic figure: desperately poor, unreliable as a narrator, and taken to speaking about biblical matters in ways that are not only factually wrong, but absurdly so. He is what Harry Frankfurt termed a "bullshitter," one for whom true and false are irrelevant, he is "unconstrained by a concern with the truth" (38). But unlike, say, the used car salesman whose lack of regard for the value of truth is selfish, Tevye generally has a good heart, enduring misfortune after misfortune – some of which he brings on himself and others not. The reader is sympathetic with the character to whom life constantly seems to be rewarding, only to have things fall apart in the end. He is what Jews term a "*schlimazel*," a loveable loser. So, contrary to the classical forms, we start with a comic figure and rather than a plot describing his rise, instead we have a series of tragic falls.

Tevye's daughters desert the way of life that is dear to him in increasingly problematic ways until his youngest, Shprintze, pregnant out of wedlock commits suicide. Tevye is the shtetl everyman, starving and uneducated, hardworking and *kvetching*, dedicated to being Jewish even if he creatively cuts corners or misunderstands from time to time. As the symbol of the Jewish people collectively, he suffers and when the suffering abates, it is sure to return in a more calamitous fashion.

Joseph Stein, formerly a comedy writer on Sid Caesar's *Your Show of Shows*, adapted Aleichem's stories for the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. It was, as Aleichem scholar Dan Miron put it, "one of Broadway's schmaltziest musicals" (xii). Many of the characters and plot lines of Aleichem's short stories are adapted, but with an American instead of a European sensibility. For example, Tevye's daughter Chava converts to Russian Orthodox Christianity to marry the Russian Fyedka. In Aleichem's original, she is disowned for the conversion. If she is no longer Jewish, she no longer exists in the eyes of the family. In Stein's musical, on the other hand, Tevye has a change of heart and eventually, under his breath, blesses her because he loves his daughter.

To a mid-20th century American audience, considering a child dead to the family because she has made her own decision considering her spirituality is seen as closed-minded, bigoted, and contrary to the liberal ideals of individualism and self-determination. But from the European standpoint, the conversion is to contribute to the eradication of the Jews. The Russians were trying to eliminate us, to destroy Judaism, and you go and help them? It is not seen as an individual choice, but as a contribution to the destruction of the whole. Contemporary scholar Ruth Wisse contends that this alteration turns the story from a Jewish into an American work of art:

> It must have felt perfectly innocent to change a Jewish classic into an American classic, making the team of Chava and Fyedka, rather than Tevye into the moral anchors of the play. But if a Jewish work can only enter the American culture by forfeiting its moral authority and its commitment to group survival, one has to wonder about the bargain that destroys the Jews with its applause. (63)

The most significant difference between Aleichem's stories and *Fiddler* is the ending. In the book, Tevye makes plans to relocate to *eretz Yisroel*, the land of Israel. But when his son-in-law Motl Komzoil unexpectedly dies in his sleep, leaving his eldest daughter Tzeitel a widow with no means of support, Tevye

cancels the plans and remains in Russia to live his life as he always has. Judaism as a messianic religion is implicitly hopeful for a better future, no matter how bad things are at the moment and at every moment for Jews they are always bad. At the end of the Passover seder, every year Jews have always said, "Next year in Jerusalem," which, especially before the founding of the modern state of Israel, was an unrealistic aspiration, but one, nevertheless, was hoped that the Messiah would deliver. That pipe dream to return to the Temple of Solomon and hold the seder there with all other Jews was the collective fantasy of a diasporic people, the wish for peaceful reunification of a scattered people who experience antisemitism as minorities around the globe. But, these are Jews. It never happens. Instead, life with its miseries and struggles, *tsuris* in Yiddish, goes on as it always has. Aleichem's ending is, in this way, very Jewish.

But Stein's ending is very different. Motl not only survives, he embraces modern technology and buys a sewing machine making his and Tzeitel's lives better. They have a baby. Then pogroms drive the entire shtetl, including Tevye's family away from their homes. The village will be destroyed and its inhabitants are forced into exile. Some, like Yente the matchmaker, go to the Holy Land. Most, like Tevye, on the other hand, go to America. *Fiddler* gives its Jews a future that is different from their past. The world around them is changing and their lives change too. This sense of collective progress through technology and geo-politics is not endemic to Jewish thought but is the bedrock of 20th century American thought. It was the dawn of the American century when atomic weapons and technological advancement took the United States from an isolated backwater to global dominance. The different ending reflects *Fiddler*'s deep Americanism.

Fiddler, after all, was aimed at an assimilating Jewish audience, a group that benefited from the GI Bill to become economically upwardly mobile, relocating to the newly constructed suburbs and partaking in what was seen as the American dream that it launched. In doing so, Jews, for the first time were being seen as white.

> Although changing views on who was white made it easier for Euro-ethnics to become middle-class, economic prosperity also played a powerful role in the whitening process. The economic mobility of Jews and other Euro-ethnics derived ultimately from America's post-war prosperity and its enormously expanded need for professional, technical, and managerial labor. (Brodkin 36)

The changing economy and culture of America in the 1960s had spots that needed filling and given the turmoil of the Civil Rights struggle of the period, Jews

parlayed their position as a "good" minority to slip into the ingroup (Brodkin 71). Jewishness was reduced to Judaism and Jews were, for the first time, no longer of a different race as they were in Europe, but white people of a minority religion.

Being safely included among the privileged, meant that Jews now acquired an interest in maintaining and fortifying the status quo, that is, the social structure and the limited pluralism that was blossoming in the mid and late 1960s/early 1970s. It also meant that for the first time, it was safe to publicly declare one's Jewishness and to celebrate it. As other pride movements gained steam, so too did Jewish pride and *Fiddler* became the centerpiece of that cultural movement in which Jews saw themselves as Americans who happened to be Jewish. *Fiddler on the Roof,* as Wisse points out, is not a Jewish work but an American work in that it does not buy into the traditional Jewish worldview, but rather goes out of its way to extoll the liberal democratic virtues of mid-20th century America.

The Bittersweetness of *Fiddler*

When non-Jews watch *Fiddler on the Roof,* they think it is a tragedy. The final scene is sad. The shtetl's occupants, whose lives we have spent the last three hours getting to know and sympathize with, are being maliciously ejected from their homes. Everything they have known is being taken away from them for no reason other than bigotry. Their way of life, as tough as it was, was theirs, and now every rock, every tree, everything that is familiar is about to be gone and the singing of "Anatevka," the final number in the musical, is a slow, mournful drone reflecting this sadness.

But for Jews, the ending is more emotionally complex. It is bittersweet. This is because *Fiddler on the Roof* is like *The Plot Against America* in requiring viewers to have multiple minds. Just as Roth played the immersed mind against the limited Leibnizian mind to have readers import knowledge about what would happen in Germany in the 1940s, so, too, did Stein, playing the audience's immersed minds against their limited Leibnizian God minds.

In the case of *Fiddler,* the immersed mind follows the characters of Anatevka as modernity threatens the traditional way of life at the same time the antisemitism of the Czar and Orthodox Christian Russians threaten their lives and well-being. If the literary device at the heart of *The Plot Against America* is that we know better than the characters the real depth of evil inherent in the Nazi regime, then the analogous device in *Fiddler* hinges on the fact that we know what happens

generations after the closing credits appear on the screen. The conflict requires that the immersed mind must see the story as a tragedy. The immersed mind empathizes with everyone forced from their home, way of life, joys, connections, and friends by bigotry and violence. If the story was simply what the story was, it would be extremely sad.

But as assimilated American Jews after the 1960s, we cannot see the plot simply as a tragedy because we know what happens afterward. American Jews must watch the end of *Fiddler* with a bittersweet sense of internal conflict. What happened to the characters is not only upsetting, but representative of their own family's experience, the suffering of our own forebears. It is unfortunate that the quaint characters we have come to love are losing their home and way of life.

The Jewish people in the seats watching it know that the grandchildren and great grandchildren of those very characters will be successful doctors, lawyers, and college professors, living in a comfort that Tevye could never conceive of. They know it because when they leave the theater, it is them. The grief of leaving Anatevka is, in fact, the gateway to the life enjoyed by contemporary Jews. When we compare our current standard of living to those of our great-grandparents in the shtetl, there is no question where we would rather be. We are sad, even anguished that they had to leave, but glad that they did fully aware that their Jewish story did not end in Anatevka but continues in how we are living today.

The film has a tragic ending, but the story (which extends beyond the film) has a happy ending. That conflict is created because like Roth's book, *Fiddler* plays these two minds against each other. At least, that is how it was for viewers in 1971.

It Didn't Have to Happen There: The New Meaning of the Leaving of Anatevka

Wisse's concerns about *Fiddler* being American but not Jewish are legitimate, but with a re-interpretation through a third intellectual vantage point, some of the worry may be assuaged. As with Roth's book, we contend that for post-2016 viewers, there is a third mind, an extended limited Leibnizian God mind, that must be employed to create a new meaning for the film and musical.

In our current political context, we must import new truths of our post-2016 world into our interpretation of the meaning of the events of the fictional world of Anatevka. With Roth, the extension to the limited Leibnizian God mind is the knowledge of Russian interference in our elections and Russian influence on

governance. With *Fiddler*, the extension of the limited Leibnizian God mind is the hysteria around caravans of immigrants, the branding of those fleeing as murderers and rapists, the separation of children from their parents without any means put in place to reunite families, and the erection of fenced-in camps to hold asylum seekers at the border without the means to meet basic needs. In vilifying and denying entrance, America is now doing to them, exactly what America did to Europe's Jews right before and during the Second World War, demanding that they be kept out.

We are not suggesting the experience of immigrants at our southern border is that of the European Jews run down by an unwavering state dead set on their extinction as human beings, but the expressed fears in the United States about today's immigrants are the same fears, in many cases couched in exactly the same language, that Americans felt toward and spoke about European Jews wanting to come here in the 1930's. One cannot but see in these two very different political worlds, the same anti-immigration arguments.

Except that we are now the us. We Jews, *kvelling* over the Yiddish production of *Fiddler*, have become America. We now understand how most Americans thought about Jews who were fleeing Hitler because they said the same things about us that they are now saying about them – that they are dirty, stupid, a drain on society, and a threat to American culture. That Americans would go on to do this again was knowledge the viewers of *Fiddler* did not have and that the writer did not count on in 1971. We American Jews now find ourselves looking at those from south of the border fiddling on their roof, perched precariously, hoping not to fall off. As we watch the new Yiddish production, we cannot help but think of those experiencing hatred and fleeing violence today.

And the Jewish mind, conditioned by unrelenting calls to never allow the Shoah to drift from our consciousness cannot but connect the dots. The lives of millions were lost because the doors were not opened to them, just as we are not now opening our doors. It did not need to happen there. Today, from where we stand – by employing the extended limited Leibnizian god mind, the new understanding of *Fiddler* does not ignore the Holocaust. Indeed, it speaks directly to it, giving us the blueprint for preventing it. Just as the third mind changes the meaning of Roth's book from "It could have happened here" to "It might be happening here, now," the third mind changes the meaning of *Fiddler on the Roof* from "their suffering led to our comfort" to "we shouldn't have to say 'never again' because it did not need to happen in the first place."

World leaders at the time could sense what was coming. In July of 1938, the US government organized the Evian conference to address the growing European Jewish refugee problem. Little happened except for The Dominican Republic agreeing to take in 100,000 Jewish refugees. There was nothing done for the others. By November of 1938, the future was forecast: "Nazis Warn World Jews Will Be Wiped Out Unless Evacuated by Democracies," declared the front page of *The Los Angeles Examiner*. Still, in 1939, 89% of Americans felt that accepting European Jewish immigrants would threaten American security while taking away American jobs. As noted, *Fiddler* gave American Jews pride while still reeling from the aftershocks of the Shoah. Today, *Fiddler on the Roof* is part of the American Ashkenazi Jewish worldview, part of our North American Jewish tradition(s).

In the opening number of *Fiddler*, "Tradition," we are introduced to Tevye who not only introduces us to his shtetl and its occupants, but to their way of life which is bound by the covenant with God. He accounts for the reasoning behind the various peculiarities of Jewish life – sometimes correctly, sometimes not – until he tries to explain the wearing of the kippah. When he realizes that even he cannot make something up to meaningfully explain it, he shrugs his shoulders. The meaning behind this humorous moment is that the contract the Jews have agreed to is not one they enter into because they find each clause advantageous, but because they find the contract as a whole advantageous.

That advantage to be gained through adhering to the covenant, of course, would not be found until the end of the film when those villagers we first met during "Tradition" would be scattered to the wind by Russian Jew-hatred. The characters leave under the duress of uncertainty, but the audience is watching with two minds – the naïve mind of the passive, external observer being told the story and the Leibnizian god who understands the unfolding of the story in the larger context not available to those involved in the narrative.

From the point of view of the immersed mind, the expulsion from Anatevka is a tragedy. From the point of view of the second mind, it is a happy ending because we know that Tzeitel's baby will have no memory of the old country and will grow up to have children and grandchildren who will be us – with central heat and air conditioning, a car, writing and reading articles in prestigious Jewish Studies journals. The point of the film is the engagement of the second mind, the Leibnizian god-mind. But, of course, the plot that connects "Tradition" to "Anatevka" poses a challenge to the second mind. We know that the Russian pogroms did not destroy

all of Judaism – Jews are still here watching the movie, after all. But what about the other challenge: modernity?

We see in increasing steps, the daughters of Tevye pulling away from the traditions that defined the Jewish covenant and embracing a new modernist view of life. Jew-hatred cannot destroy Judaism because of the covenant with God, but modernism is in the process of undermining that covenant. Could modernism be the real force that eradicates the Jews? Martin Buber rightly worried about this in his discussions of technology. In the shadow of the Shoah, how can one say (1) that the covenant is in place and (2) that the real threat is modernism? Saying that modernism is the biggest threat to Judaism right after the Shoah is like telling a cancer patient that you are worried that their chemotherapy may give them diarrhea.

When we adopt the third viewpoint, the extended limited Leibnizian God mind which now imports knowledge of the Holocaust, all Jewish narratives, including *Fiddler*, have to be reconstructed. No longer can we rely as the rabbi from Anatevka imploring us to believe that God will provide. In light of the Shoah, responsibility for the protection of Jews falls back onto the Jews themselves. Jews have always known that they live in a dangerous world full of cultures and civilizations who seek their destruction, but now there was no longer a guarantee of survival. It was and is up to us to ensure "Never again!"

What this entails, and what means, divides the American Jewish community. Jews understand that the world is not a safe place, but the appropriate measures to address this differ radically among the community. Should Jews fight fire with fire and always work to be more powerful than their enemies? Should they be on the forefront of social liberation movements that have nothing to do with Judaism, or now do they? What is the obligation to non-Jews being dehumanized? But whatever the understanding of how it was incumbent upon Jews to ensure "never again," that would be the newest commandment, a commandment not from God, but despite God. We are thinking here of Emil Fackenheim's 614th commandment commanding the continuance of Jewish life and culture, living a Jewish life to prevent Hitler a posthumous victory, the community see themselves somewhat arguing from it.

The radical revision of the core of the Jewish narrative is ignored by *Fiddler* in the standard interpretation which reasserts the old narrative of the Exodus and the inviolable covenant in a sweet cutesy fashion that is fully out of touch with the brutal post-Shoah and post-2016 reality on the ground. The message of *Fiddler*, in its embrace of pre-World War II nostalgia is, in fact, dangerous.

This nostalgia as a jumping off point for concern about the effect of modernism on Judaism is not without strong precedent in 20th century Judaism. The writings of the *Lehrhaus*, for example, are very much in this vein, wherein figures, like founder Franz Rosenzweig, were afraid that modernity was undermining the living heart of Judaism, pulling Jews away from Judaism (89). The rationalism of modernity that had become vogue in western and central European Jewry could include Jewish life, but Jews needed to learn how to do this.

In the literary works of Shmuel Y. Agnon, one finds this could be done with a nostalgic appeal to the irrationalism embodied by the lifestyle of the eastern shtetl Jews. We had not to reject the old *bubba meises* but embrace and celebrate them. Where their cultured, assimilated western cousins saw the naïve beliefs of their eastern brethren as backward and embarrassing, Agnon shows they should be celebrated, while illustrating their *Simple Story* is not so simple (170). Like Buber, Agnon's appeal was aimed at the liberated, urban and urbane Jews of the West, where *Fiddler* was aimed at the doctors and lawyers whose grandparents had lived packed into tenement houses on the Lower East Side, but who now lived in American houses. Jews were now at home in North America, no longer strangers in a foreign land, but comfortably assimilated.

Fiddler was originally meant as a romantic bridge back to those who suffered to get modern Jews the seeds whose fruit they were now enjoying. But such reminiscing was seen as gauche when it eclipsed the horrors that led to the reconstruction of the Jewish narrative. The sweetness of *Fiddler* is not a luxury Jews can afford after the Holocaust.

This debate takes place in the second mind, the limited Leibnizian God mind. But as we saw with our reading of *The Plot Against America*, there is a third mind, the extended limited Leibnizian God mind, which we now use to interpret what we see. When we reconsider *Fiddler* through the lens of this third mind which has seen Charlottesville, Pittsburgh, and the images of children fleeing war and violence taken from their parents and forced to exist in overcrowded cages, we have to see Tevye and his community in a different light.

The ending of *Fiddler* is bittersweet because the first mind sees the sadness in the ending of a way of life while the second mind sees the wonderful future for those who are forced to flee. But we also have to think about it with the third mind and that one problematizes the problematizing of *Fiddler*. Yes, there is the sweetness necessary for a bittersweet ending. We watch *Fiddler* with the Leibnizian God-mind knowing that their American descendants will be okay, because they will

arrive at Ellis Island, standing beneath the Statue of Liberty's welcome**.** These people fled hatred and violence and were granted asylum from it and allowed to begin life anew, lives that would create community, art, science, and industry.

But the second mind also knows that just twenty years later, others who were caught in the grip of similar hatred and violence were not welcomed in. We all know the story of the St. Louis. We know that we could have opened our doors to those Jews trying to escape the Nazis and if we had, the extermination camps would not have been the answer to the Nazi's cruel, game changing use of two thousand years of Christendom's hateful scapegoating of Jews, the murderers of God deserving to be absented from civilization for being a conspiring, devilish threat to all.

The third mind looks at the new camps. It sees Jews, even those in charge of the U.S. National Holocaust Museum, the institution dedicated to "never again," arguing that we cannot compare what these immigrants fleeing violence for their lives only to experience bigotry and hatred that leads to inhumane treatment are experiencing with what was experienced by Jewish immigrants fleeing violence for their lives only to experience bigotry and hatred that forced them into inhumane treatment (Snyder). The third mind sees the hate-filled rhetoric of "send them back" and verbal depictions of them as monsters and cannot but see the parallels.

This third mind sees how Roth's cautionary tale presents how it not only could have happened in the United States, but still might. In the same way, the third mind can reinterpret *Fiddler on the Roof*, with the sweetness of its bitter sweetness considering the Holocaust as saying that it all could have been avoided if only the German Jews were treated like the Russians ones. If Americans had opened their door as Jews do every Seder, millions of those six million dead could have been immigrant success stories. No one needs to see *Fiddler on the Roof* as having ignored the lesson of the Shoah. Rather, everyone could understand it as trying to teach us a different lesson of the Holocaust. Yes, they executed the unspeakable, but it also happened because we allowed it. We did not do what we needed to do to stop the preconditions for its possibility.

The reinterpreted Roth's *The Plot Against America* tells us that the Shoah could have happened here. The reinterpreted *Fiddler on the Roof* tells us that the Shoah did not have to happen there. The Jewish community could have kept the old narrative. Yom HaShoah could have turned out to be a day of somber recognition of yet another exodus. *Fiddler on the Roof* is naïve and maudlin. It does oversimplify. But it holds within it a deep lesson, one we are now able to understand

with an American Jewish mind. It is one that we risk our souls and the bodies of others by ignoring.

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The Wonder Years in Black and White: A Comparative Analysis

KATRINA THOMPSON MOORE

> "What would you do if I sang out of tune?
> Would you stand up and walk out on me?
> Lend me your ears, then I'll sing you a song
> I will try not to sing out of key, yeah" (Crocker, Genius.com transcript)

Depending on what generation you belong to, these lyrics may spark a variety of memories. "With a Little Help from my Friends" was initially released by the English rock band the Beatles in 1967. But it was the raspy, bluesy voice of singer Joe Crocker's 1968 version that made this song iconic for the Woodstock generation (Perrone). For members of Gen X and early Millennials, Crocker's cover may call to mind the television series *The Wonder Years*. Debuting on January 31, 1988, immediately following Super Bowl XXII, this ABC drama introduced an American audience to the Arnold family, which featured parents Norma (Alley Mills) and Jack (Dan Lauria), older brother Wayne (Jason Hervey), big sister Karen (Olivia d'Abo), and centered on the coming-of-age experiences of the youngest child, Kevin Arnold (Fred Savage) (The Wonder Years (Original TV Series). "'The Wonder Years' is charming. [...] vibrations are promising," gushed *New York Times* writer John J. O'Connor (50). Created by husband-and-wife duo Neal Marlens and Carol Black, its chances for success were bolstered by Neal Marlens' already established reputation as the creator of the television series *Growing Pains* which, like *The Wonder Years,* also centered on a white, suburban family. After the series' premiere, however, it was several months before the new series entered ABC's

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weekly schedule. The network aired new episodes on Tuesdays at 8:30 p.m., sandwiching *The Wonder Years* between two of the most popular shows of the 1980s: *Who's the Boss?* and *Roseanne.* Over time,

The Wonder Years would become one of the most iconic television series of the era (Haithman). The delay between the airing of the pilot and the series was risky, but "ABC believe[d] that television viewers have long memories," wrote O'Connor in his review in 1988. Luckily, the risk paid off. *The Wonder Years* had a six-year run and won accolades. It was awarded a Peabody and several other awards, and it was named on *TV Guide*'s list of 20 Best Shows of the 1980s as well as *Rolling Stone*'s list of 100 Greatest Shows of All Time (Museum of Broadcast Communication). A good memory was needed to not only bridge the delay between the broadcasts of the pilot and the regular series, but also due to the nature of the show being set in the past.

The first season of *The Wonder Years* (TWY '88) takes a nostalgic view of 1968. Set in an unidentified, white suburban community, the series offers the story of adolescence through the experiences of child Kevin but is narrated by the adult Kevin (Daniel Stern) speaking from a present-day, late-1980s perspective. Nostalgia is at the very core of the show's appeal. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, ABC hoped to recapture that nostalgia with its reboot three decades later.

On September 21, 2021, *The Wonder Years* (TWY '21) was reintroduced to an American audience, but with major changes. Some elements remained the same, beginning with the retention of the title. It is also set in a suburb in 1968 and explores the coming of age of Dean (Elisha Williams), a young male pre-teen through the narration of the main character's adult version, now speaking from a present-day, 2021 perspective. While the premise of the show parallels the original series, its approach to race is drastically different. TWY '88 centers on an all-white family, the Arnolds, in an unspecified, generic white suburb in the United States. The new 2021 series, in contrast, centers on Dean Williams, a young Black male adolescent coming of age in the suburbs of Montgomery, Alabama. Instead of a white family the racially Black Williams family comprises of parents Bill (Dulé Hill) and Lillian (Saycon Sengbloh), older brother Bruce (Spence Moore II), and big sister Kim (Laura Kariuki) (Andreeva).

This article offers a comparative analysis of the original 1988 series and the 2021 remake. This cultural-historical series presents an interesting case for comparison as both programs develop shifting perspectives on race and gender, all the while offering a nostalgic view of history and memory for a popular audience.

This nostalgia is presented in a different manner in each series due to the way race is presented. TWY ‘88 ran for six seasons with over 100 episodes. TWY ‘21, in contrast, has only completed a single season, although it has been renewed for a second as of this writing (Petski). Therefore, this analysis only considers the main characters and storylines as introduced in season one for both series. Both series are historical fictions that bring together realistic depictions of history and popular conceptions of that history. Although both series are set in 1968, they each reflect the political and social climate of the time in which they were released. Further, the racial dynamics governing these historical fiction series bring to the forefront questions about memory and nostalgia. This analysis focuses on the narrator and family structure within the society and politics of their respective times to understand the discursive impact of these television series in their respective milieus.

A note before proceeding: the comparative nature of this article is inherently problematic due to the differences in the construction of the show’s first season and the over 30 years difference in their debut. In fact, the first season of TWY ‘88is quite unique when compared to other 1980s series. As stated, the pilot premiered after the Superbowl on January 31, but it was not until March 15 that the series of six episodes began, starting with a repeat of the pilot episode. In the 1980s, on average, a full season normally had 24-26 episodes; for example, on ABC, *Roseanne*’s first season had 23 episodes and *Who’s the Boss* had 22 episodes (Schneider). Since the 1980s, American television has drastically changed; for example, networks have lowered the number of episodes ordered to first gauge audience interest before investing in more episodes. For TWY 2021, ABC initially ordered 9 episodes but, due to its popularity, the network expanded the first season short order to a full order of 22 episodes (Cordero). Beyond the plot, the nostalgia of the original series, and the famous actors in the series, TWY 2021 was available through various platforms (i.e., ABC, Hulu, Disney+, and Star[1]) and therefore offered ample opportunity to gain an audience. TWY ’88 was solely dependent on those that tuned in for the series on ABC, but it also had less competition from other shows due to the limited networks and channels.

This analysis accounts for these differences with its focus on season one of both series. While TWY ’21 having more episodes in its first season allows for further development of characters and plot, a full season in television often has a similar

[1] These platforms only represent those in the United States. The show was available on various platforms outside of the US.

structure. A season is a cohesive unit in which there are several stories, but there is often a continual thread or theme that is introduced, developed, and has some type of closure at the end of the season, while also having hints of a new storyline that may be developed in the next season (Goldberg). Therefore, focusing on one season, regardless of the varying lengths, should allow for the show's creators, writers, and audience to have a full storyline, especially since few television shows are guaranteed another season. This article focuses on the construction of the foundational characters and how each series attempts to construct race, nostalgia, and memory. If both series ended with one season, this article and its analysis would not change since its focus was on the manner the characters and show were introduced, and not their further development.[2]

Quantum Leap (Narrating through Time)

In both TWY '88 and TWY '21, the narrator is ever-present, unseen but continually heard. The narrator is the adult version of the main character, meaning that the adult Kevin Arnold (narrated by Arye Gross and Daniel Stern) is about thirty-four years of age, whereas the adult Dean Williams (narrated by Don Cheadle) is closer to sixty-seven. In both series, the narrator performs the role of offering reflective and witty commentary on the childhood experiences of the main character and is one of the most important and memorable aspects of the series.

Journalist Abigail Chandler has claimed that "The TV voiceover is a trope that is as old as TV itself." Nevertheless, its use in both series is innovative. As media writer Kim Handysides states, "Unlike many other shows, *The Wonder Years* doesn't feel as though it's being built around what the narrator is saying, rather it feels as though the narrator is accompanying" the other characters or is present within the scene and in some ways is reliving the experience (Handysides). Carol Black, co-creator of the original series, explained that the function of the narrator was to "play with what people think and what they're saying, or how they would like to see themselves as opposed to how the audience is seeing them" (Handysides). In many shows, the narrator offers a shortcut to getting inside a character's head, but for *The Wonder Years* of 1988 and TWY 2021, the narrator also bridges the worlds of the past (1968) and present (1988 or 2021). The characters in the series reside in 1968 while the perspectives, politics, and dialogue

[2] This article was written prior to the airing of TWY '21's second season.

of the narrator can traverse through time. Analyzing the eras that the narrator represents can help us understand his dialogue and the distinct role he plays while it also illustrates differences between the two series and how race, and society are explored within their respective political and social atmospheres.

The Wonder Years 1988 is introduced by the narrator's opening statement, which offers a description of the setting, some historical reflection, and introduces the main character. "1968. I was 12 years old. A lot happened that year. Denny McLain won 31 games, *The Mod Squad* hit the air, and I graduated from Hillcrest Elementary and entered junior high school. But we'll get to that." ("Pilot" 01:10-01:15) With these words, the 1968 song "Turn, Turn, Turn" by the Byrds begins, and black-and-white still photographs flicker on-screen, including images of the Black Power fist raised at the 1968 Olympics, Richard Nixon, hippies, protesters, the Vietnam War, Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King delivering speeches, and even an astronaut in space. These familiar images are emblematic of the time. They only provide the background, however, to the true plot, which focuses on the coming-of-age, going from boyhood to late adolescence, of the main character, Kevin Arnold. As the images transition to more generic ones of Americana – white picket fences, cars, and family – the narrator continues. "There is no pretty way to put this," he says. "I grew up in the suburbs. I guess most people think of the suburbs as a place with all the disadvantages of the city, and none of the advantages of the country, and vice versa. But in a way, those were the wonder years for us there in the suburbs. It was a kind of golden age for kids" ("Pilot" 02:05).

The Wonder Years 1988 premiered in the last year of the presidency of conservative Republican Ronald Reagan. Evoking Reaganomics, the War on Drugs, the AIDS epidemic, and the escalation of the Cold War, the late-1980s, like 1968 (emblematized by the tragic assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy) are not often considered a "golden age" in U.S. history (Troy). However, as laid out by the narrator, and evident as the series continues, *The Wonder Years* 1988 is more about nostalgia and American mythmaking than historical accuracy. Film and television scholar Steve Anderson states that "TV and other visual media have fostered an increasingly 'derealized' sense of presence, identity, and history[...]. nostalgia symptomatic of a culture that still desires history, but is capable only of randomly cannibalizing styles and images from the past" (Anderson 19-20). Even the creator of the series Neal Marlen states in a 1988 interview, "If you don't have any real feelings for the suburban middle-class life, and if you didn't

have any sense of that time, it wouldn't make sense [...] If there's one common experience that a lot of Americans have right now, I think it is a middle class, suburban environment" (Boyer). Therefore, the narrator manifests as the literal interplay between past and present, which includes real historical events as background but with the appeal of a narrative arc and a character with which the audience can identify and through which they can vicariously experience those events. It intentionally appeals to middle-class, white sensibilities through the romanticized treatment of several themes: childhood, whiteness, family, and the suburbs. In *Myths America Lives By: White Supremacy and the Stories that Give Us Meaning*, Richard Hughes writes that the American Dream of "white Americans [...] glorifies manicured suburbs" yet neglects the segregationist policy that gave them their suburbs; this dream is celebrated and propagated in *The Wonder Years* 1988 (Hughes 71). The complex intersections of race and racism, gender ideals and sexism, and economics are neither considered nor recognized; the narrator takes the (white) audience down a mythical memory lane. The show is set in 1968, but could easily be transferred to 1958, 1978, or 1988 simply by changing the soundtrack, costumes, and sets.

"They called it the Reagan Revolution, and I'll accept that, but for me it always seemed like the Great Rediscovery: a rediscovery of our values and our common sense." This statement from former president Reagan in 1989 corresponds to a time period which, media scholars Bob Batchelor and Scott Stoddart state, "symbolized a nostalgic 1950s view of America – patriotism, conservative family values, and conspicuous consumption" (Batchelor and Stoddart xi). *The Wonder Years* 1988 represented a conservative pushback to the socially conscious, politically engaged, and progressive themes of 1970s television shows such as Norman Lear's *All in the Family*, *Maude,* and *The Jeffersons,* and shows from the 1980s like *Roseanne* and *Who's The Boss?* (Feuer, 12). Media scholar Jane Feuer argues that television was the "most significant medium ideologically" and held an "ongoing relationship" with politics during the Reagan era. *The Wonder Years* 1988 was more reflective of the politics and myths of the late 1980s than 1968 (31).

Former president Ronald Reagan, described by Richard J. Walton as "a man pulled from Hollywood westerns, and therefore a sort of living embodiment of American nostalgia," was famous for saying, "Let's make America great again" (Walton). Like Donald Trump, who resuscitated the slogan and even made it the basis of his presidential campaign, Reagan promoted the notion that America had lost its past innocence and needed to reclaim its promise (Nader). Similarly, the

creators of the original series saw 1968 as similarly chaotic as the 1980s but pursued the parallel through the lens of childhood and the suburbs, creating a bubble that protected the storylines of the show from outside political and social struggles (Plitt).

TWY 2021 offers a stark contrast in the function and reflections of the narrator. As the main character, Dean Williams, rides a bike on the streets through a Southern, Black suburb in Montgomery, the narrator introduces us to the new series with this monologue:

> Growing up, Mom and Dad gave me "The Police Talk," about how to handle yourself around cops. There was a presidential election that created a racial divide, and there was a flu pandemic that they said would kill a million people around the world. But it was 1968. And that's the state our community was in. Yeah, even the flu part. This was the year I turned 12, the age where you transfer from boy to man. Or as the old folks used to say, "When a boy starts smelling himself." The previous summer's race riots had caused the first wave of "white flight" to the suburbs. As a kid, I didn't understand all that. We had neighborhoods that were just as safe as the ones they were developing outside the city. There were teachers, veterans, shop owners, all united by pride, self-determination, and the right to spank any kid caught outside after the streetlights came on. ("Pilot" 22:31-21:32)

Even without noting the absence of the Joe Crocker version of "With a Little Help from My Friends" and the black-and-white stills of the 1960s, the introduction to the 2021 series clearly has a different objective than its predecessor. Dean Williams's adult narration and the experiences and perspectives of the child character steer the show, but the focus, as evident in the introductory monologue, is contemporary political culture. In many ways, the politics, societal norms, and racial structure of 1968 and 2021 are not very different. The racial and social injustice affecting the Black community has existed for some time. The 2021 introductory monologue, then, does not depict an American "golden age" but instead offers a more complex perspective of being Black in the United States.

Nostalgia in the United States is too often a privilege reserved only for whites. The original 1988 series was based on the idea of a collectively shared generational memory. This idea of a collective memory ignores the fact that remembering has as much to do with "identity formation, power and authority, cultural norms, and social interaction" as it does with historical accuracy (Zelizer). The popular memory that makes many Americans look back on 1968 with nostalgia ignores the

history and experiences of African Americans and making this perspective central contributed greatly to the development and plot of TWY 2021. The narrator in both series inhabits the present time of each respective series, but in TWY 2021, narrator represents a more presentist, reflective style.

"Television formula requires that we use our contemporary historical concerns as subject matter" and then we take these concerns and place them" for very specific reasons, in an earlier time [when] values and issues are more clearly defined [and] certain modes of behavior [...] [are] more permissible" (Edgerton and Rollins 4). As *The Wonder Years* 1988 reflected its era of Reaganism, TWY 2021 reflects the world of #BlackLivesMatter and Trumpism (Bump). The introductory monologue of this series brings an awareness of social problems to the storyline absent from the original series. It begins with "The Police Talk," alluding directly to the ongoing struggle between African Americans and the criminal justice system. In wake of the killings of many Black men and women at the hands of law enforcement and the protests that followed, as well as the continued activism of #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName, the narrator in TWY 2021 immediately engages the continual and consistent struggles of Blacks in America (Fondren). Although childhood and suburbia insulate the adolescent Dean Williams from these realities, as they do for Kevin Arnold, the adult Dean is not allowed to reflect solely on the greatness of that earlier time. The protective bubble of collective memory is essentially popped as a result of the current racial climate. Even in narrative reflection, the adult Dean Williams is not allowed to express nostalgia – or rather white nostalgia – in the same way it is propagated in *The Wonder Years* 1988. Instead, TWY 2021 reflects a restorative history with a focus on presentist ideology.

"When you look back to the year 2000, it just doesn't feel like that big a difference societally and generationally than what we're experiencing today," executive producer of TWY 2021 Saladin Patterson says. "Not as much as it felt like when you went from '88 to '68. That felt like more of a retrospective lens where you can look to the past and learn something" (Lawler). This series attempts to capture the "nostalgia and wistful tone of the original" series while highlighting "a thriving, middle-class family" amid the complications of the Black experience. Black producer Lee Daniels states that Black families "have not been depicted in this era properly"; therefore, there is a restorative aspect to TWY 2021 (Lawler). As Badia Ahad-Legardy states in *Afro-Nostalgia: Feeling Good in Contemporary Black Culture,* "Black restorative nostalgia involves reviving a black communal spirit of resistance and solidarity made through intentional intertextuality with the

imagery, iconography, and sound of the civil rights and Black Power eras" (Legardy 62). The show engages in restorative nostalgia in the way it "engages historical memory in order to define a new black cultural moment" (147). The narrator balances memory, nostalgia, contemporary Black political ideology, and experiences by placing a middle-class Black family within an inspirational time for Black Americans.

The struggles against Jim Crow, protests, and political revolutions are a part of the memory of the Black experience in the 1960s, but TWY 2021 represents the time after the struggle. Schools and public facilities are legally desegregated, and mass protests (especially the kinds associated with Montgomery, the setting of the show) have quieted. Nevertheless, the narrator reminds the audience of the continuing struggles of the Black community with reference to the "police talk." At the same time, he balances it with "afro-nostalgia" for a golden age for the Black community. For example, in Episode 5, "The Lock In," the narrator expresses a longing for his youth in the face of present-day conditions. The episode starts with the narrator stating, "Being twelve in the '60s was equivalent to being in your twenties today. We didn't have helicopter parents coddling us at all times like fragile teacups" ("The Lock In" 00:19). After offering a laundry list of examples of how 1960s children were stronger than people today, the narrator narrows his focus on the episode's central subject: the Black church:

> Going to church was also part of growing up that is different. Now, the Black church is one of the most important institutions in American history. It's been a home that kept Black people unified during hard times, a social and political center that sparked historic movements. And a training ground for a generation leaders and entertainers. So much of what makes Black culture unique comes from its roots in the Black church, and I grew up in a time when it was just a given you went to church every Sunday. ("Lock In" 00:10-1:40)

The homage paid to the Black church of the past both introduces and celebrates Black culture while at the same time offering a nostalgic perspective of the past. These expressions of nostalgia are a common trait of the series.

Whether it is white nostalgia or afro-nostalgia, the narrators within both versions of *The Wonder Years* represent the guide in every episode. The narrator plays a critical role, but it cannot be separated from that of the main characters, Kevin Arnold and Dean Williams. Their coming-of-age experiences range from romantic crushes to heartbreak, developing self-esteem and dealing with bullies,

and being the youngest sibling in the family. *The Wonder Years* 1988 and TWY 2021 cannot be fully understood without examining the boyhood experiences of Kevin and Dean and their families.

Boy Meets World

It is important to understand Kevin Arnold not only from the perspective of his adult voice but also from his placement within his family. "The family has always been the cornerstone of American society," Reagan once said. The suburban single-family home with its heterosexual couple and 2.5 children was considered the ideal American family and formed part of the ideology of the Reagan era. The Arnolds fit perfectly within this nuclear family structure. The mother, Norma, is a homemaker and nurturer. This blond-haired mother and wife, who rarely appeared in pants, is more reminiscent of the character June Cleaver from the 1950s series *Leave It to Beaver* than other 1980s television moms such as Roseanne Barr of the series *Roseanne* or Elyse Keaton of *Family Ties* (Feuer). The series first presents Norma in an exchange with the youngest son, Kevin Arnold, at dinner. As the family sits down to eat, the television in the background broadcasts news of Vietnam, reminding television viewers of the time period in which the series is set. Norma warns her children that Jack, their father, is on his way home from work and says, "Between the traffic and his job, he's liable to be very tense, so let's not make him crazy" ("Pilot" 05:10). Throughout the first season, Norma is portrayed as a caregiver, oblivious to the outside world, concerned primarily with the daily maintenance of family life and soothing Dad's temper.

Media scholar Bridget Kies notes that "women-oriented programs in the 1980s brought attention to feminism," but *The Wonder Years* 1988 can circumvent this new dawn of prime-time broadcasting through its 1968 setting (Kies 14). By returning to a mythicized family structure in which men were dominant and women were passive nurturers, the show does not include much evidence of the active feminist movement of the late 1960s. A few clues shed light on the potential development of the mother, Norma, however. For example, in Episode 2, "Swingers," Norma catches Kevin and his friend with the book *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex (But Were Afraid to Ask)*; she is furious. Although her anger initially appears to be a response to the sexual nature of the book, we later learn that she's angry because Kevin stole her copy. This book was released in 1969 and is often seen as the first sex manual. It's associated with the

sexual revolution and the women's empowerment movement, but here is scripted as a source of shame for both Norma and Kevin (Reuben).

Scholar Bridget Kies has written of the 1980s, "During this period, seemingly dichotomous images of masculinity were present in American politics and culture: the 'new man' embodied by Jimmy Carter, who is sympathetic and supportive of the women's movement, and the cowboy ethos embodied by Ronald Reagan, which favors a more traditionally patriarchal social order. On television, these dueling masculinities were depicted in sitcoms, dramas, late-night comedy shows, and sports programming" (Kies, 3). For example, the series *Who's the Boss,* which also aired on ABC, centered on the character Tony Micelli, a former Major League Baseball player who finds himself negotiating single fatherhood while being a live-in housekeeper for successful business executive Angela; this show was built on quite a different gender structure than *The Wonder Years* (Batchelor and Stoddart). Jack Arnold is not a "new man" but instead represents an archaic form of masculinity, class, and suburbia. The narrator (adult Kevin) introduces his father in the pilot: "it was like he had this understanding with the family. He worked hard for us, he provided for us, and he certainly didn't want to have to talk to us on top of that" ("Pilot"). The stresses of suburban life and being the head of the household emanate through the father. Traffic, middle-level management, supporting a family with all its stresses, and dealing with the fact that life simply did not turn out the way he thought it would explain his overarching grumpiness. The stresses of working- and middle-class white suburban men are explored in Episode 3, "My Father's Office." Kevin goes to work with his dad, witnesses the stress of adult work life and finds sympathy for his father. After returning home, Jack walks angrily into the house and Kevin, following close behind, mimics the same angry, disgruntled behavior, symbolizing the inevitability of white, patriarchal adulthood.

As the youngest in the Arnold family, Kevin tries to balance being seen and unseen by his parents and siblings. The oldest sibling, Karen, represents the newer generation of women, in contrast to her mother Norma. She is a free-spirited hippie, with feminist ideals. From her clothing to her references to free love, birth control, and women's rights to her use of anti-Vietnam rhetoric, Karen is more representative of the complex changes that resulted from the political movements of the 1960s than any other character. But in the first season she has little if any direct interaction with her little brother Kevin. Instead, Kevin is constantly preoccupied with older brother Wayne who bullies and irritates him. The first episode opens with the local neighborhood kids playing a game of football. Kevin

misses a pass thrown by his brother Wayne, which first results in public teasing and escalates into a physical confrontation. As Wayne punches his little brother, Kevin then refers to him as a "butthead," a title that epitomizes the role Wayne plays throughout the first season. From the hippie sister, the dimwit brother, the submissive, loving but oblivious mother, and the frustrated father, the Arnold family underscores a specific and easily recognized structure of gender, power, class, and whiteness.

Media scholar Cerise L. Glenn uses the term hegemonic masculinity to describe the "normalcy of familial patriarchy through masculinity and whiteness" (Glenn). In her view, "The concept of hegemonic masculinity influences our conceptions of gender for females as well as males because gender works as a binary construction of identity." As shows of the late-1980s showed a range of different fatherhood and family structures, *The Wonder Years* 1988, being a historical fiction, was able to feed into nostalgia for the supposedly good old days of the 1960s. Jack Arnold, however, is not the benevolent patriarch of the 1950s-era show *Father Knows Best.* Instead, he is representative of that era's white masculine frustration, attempting to reclaim a lost power that is being disrupted, whether through the activism of the 1960s or because of the cultural shifts of the 1980s. Further, the emphasis on suburbia is a part of this white patriarchal structure cultivated on the screen. The suburbs, for the Arnolds, represent a "homogenous community of like-minded people" – meaning White working- and middle-class people, excluding Blacks, or any other racial-ethnic population (Miller).

The suburbs are as much a part of the storyline as the various family members. The suburbs represent a protective enclosure for homogeneous whiteness and supports the perpetuation and idealization of patriarchy. The Reagan era was a time when the press, policymakers, and advocacy groups issued warnings about the state of the family; therefore, the focus on suburbia, family, and nostalgia of a lost time was a part of the series' appeal. In many ways, TWY 2021 retains the original show's focus on the family, suburbia, and nostalgia. However, the construction of the family in TWY 2021 represents more than just domesticity and the assertion of white masculinity: it suggests the need to correct and reconstruct the history and culture of Black life through the restorative medium of television.

The Cosby Show (Retro)

"A lot of Black families were lower middle and middle class [...] And they have not been depicted in this era properly," states TWY 2021 producer Lee Daniels. (Lawler) The Williamses, like the Arnolds, display stereotypical characteristics of a nuclear family. Two heterosexual parents live with three children in a Black suburban community. David Stamps writes that "The African American family has continuously come under attack. [...] absentee fathers, mothers working multiple jobs, and nontraditional parenting [...] have controlled the narrative" (Stamp 405). He argues that "broadcast television" has attempted to "combat previous negative stereotypes" through shows such as *The Cosby Show* and *Black-ish.* TWY 2021definitely falls within this category as well, as evident by the Williams family's construction as "well-rounded, educated family members that are representative of suburban, affluent minorities in America" just like the families on *The Cosby Show* and *Black-ish* (413).

"My parents had high standards for us. I appreciate it now and so does my bank account, but at the time man it was annoying" ("Pilot" 3:23). The narrator's introduction of Bill (Dulé Hill) and Lillian (Saycon Sengbloh) Williams is followed by a scene where Lillian quizzes their only daughter, Kim (Laura Kariuki), for the SATs during breakfast. To Kim's chagrin, both parents follow up with a discussion of the importance of college. They lovingly debate whether she should attend Auburn, a majority-white university in Alabama, or Tuskegee, the historically Black college that they both attended. This exchange in the first episode sets the stage for the type of family this show wants to represent: a well-educated, middle-class Black household.

Lillian has a master's degree and is a working mother who seems to successfully balance her professional career while taking care of her family and is actively engaged in the community (Collins). An accountant, team mom for her son's baseball team, and matriarch of the family, Lillian is quite like her Black television mom predecessors, lawyer Claire Huxtable of *The Cosby Show* and anesthesiologist Rainbow Johnson of *Black-ish.* According to Vaness Cox and L. Monique Ward, "sociohistorical forces within the United States have created additional demands for Black women [...]. it was often necessary for Black women to work to help provide for their families" (Cox and Ward 542). Although Lillian is not the sole provider in the Williams household, her career is highlighted in the series, even more so than Bill's. And whereas in the original series Kevin goes to work with his dad, Jack, in the episode "My Father's Office," in TWY 2021, Dean Williams goes to work with his mother, Lillian, in the fourth episode, "The Workplace."

The 2021 episode's progressive attitudes toward gender are evident in the different titles of the episodes and illustrates intentionality. In the episode, Lillian is shown working with other mainly white male accountants, while the women, who are all white, are relegated to the secretary pool. Lillian finds an accounting error and beckons three white male colleagues into her office to fix the problem. Although she is not their supervisor, Lillian is shown as being in charge and well respected, even when compared to her one Black colleague, an afro-wearing male. The narrator conveys the awe he felt toward his mother by comparing her to an elite college football quarterback, saying, "seeing my mom in action was like watching a Crimson Tide QB call a play right before halftime" ("The Workplace" 17:29-17:50). Lillian is subsequently shown in football gear making a touchdown. The Black mother, Lillian, dominates two traditionally white, male spaces, football and white-collar employment. This does not mean that racism and sexism are no longer obstacles in her way. Her accounting skills are well respected, but she is still expected to bring cupcakes when requested and often eats alone because she fits in with neither the white men (as her one Black male colleague can) nor the white women. K. Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality explains Lillian's combined experiences of racism and misogyny, a combination that is often experienced by Black women (Crenshaw). At the end of "The Workplace," Lillian and Dean return home after a long day. Upon entering her home, Lillian is bombarded with household demands from Bill and Kim. In response, Dean intervenes, asking, "We just got home – will you people give us a second?" ("The Workplace" 19:00-19:31). That protective response illustrates the new respect he has for his mother's daily toil and offers a stark contrast to Kevin's mimicry of his father's frustration at the ending of the "My Father's Office" episode in the 1988 series.

Like his wife Lillian, Bill Williams is a progressive, well-educated, and devoted father and husband. "My dad was a music professor by day and a funk musician by night. In other words, he was the baddest dude I knew," says narrator Dean. With his catchphrase of "be cool," Bill represents the positive qualities of earlier Black sitcom dads while defying the common stereotypes of Black men on television ("Pilot"). Scholars have documented the full range of "unfavorable portrayals" undergone by Black men in scripted television, including "nonthreatening and assimilative" doormats to "hyperstereotypical images of [...]. criminal, drug-addict, dead-beat absentee father, and uneducated" fools (see Bell and Harris; Jackson; and Punyanunt-Carter for a discussion of such stereotypes). Stamps notes that within the current climate that is pushing for "equity and inclusion" a "reimagining of

representation of Black men in television may be necessary." Research has often focused on the negative portrayal of Black men, but as Stamps points out, "over time, Black male characters' awareness and vocal interrogation of social issues and salient ideologies aligned with the Black community have grown more prevalent in recent television programming" (Stamps). The "reimaging of representation," as Stamps describes it, is evident in how Black males are portrayed in TWY 2021.

The patriarchal dominance of the angry white father in the original series is reimagined as progressive Black fatherhood, which is quite common for Black middle-class television dads in this type of family-oriented show. Further, the Williams family consists not only of a nuclear family, but also includes an extended family, including grandparents. This is another significant difference between TWY 2021 and *The Wonder Years* 1988, since the original show did not even mention an extended family in the first season; at the same time, the inclusion of active grandparents follows in line with more progressive Black family shows, such as *Black-ish, Family Matters,* and *The Cosby Show.* Bill's father, Granddaddy Clisby (Richard Grant) appears in several episodes and is often used to show generational divides. For example, in Episode 18, "Goose Grease," three generations of Williams males (Clisby, Bill, and Dean) have chicken pox and are quarantined in the house alone together. Bill is discussing tasks that range from preparing food, laundry, and other household duties. In response to being assigned chores, Grandaddy Clisby states, "Oh, I don't do chores; never did. My mama did them for me until I was sixteen, and then my wife took over." Bill responds to his father, "It's the '60s. Men have evolved since your generation. We're not helpless around the house anymore" ("Goose Grease" 05:30-05:45). This scene is emblematic of one of the themes of the show, which shows Bill as a more progressive father and husband who is supportive of women's advancement.

Positive constructions of generations of Black masculinity are clearly a goal of the series. This becomes even more evident when the Bill and Lillian's eldest son, Bruce (Spence Moore II), returns from Vietnam in Episode 9. Bruce is a stellar athlete and student and is a supportive big brother to Dean and Kim; he offers a stark contrast to big brother Wayne Arnold of the 1988 series. Following in his father's and grandfather's footsteps, Bruce fights heroically for his country and even receives a military honor recognizing his selflessness and bravery. Bruce provides a positive role model to Dean, while also providing a link between the plot of the television series and the historical Vietnam War. Interestingly, Kim also contributes to the series' historical awareness through her interest in Black Power

activism and organizations such as the Black Panther Party. Both characters offer the audience peeks outside of the protective structure of the Williams home. Though they are figured as representing a younger generation, Bruce and Kim represent alternate perspectives on the Civil Rights Movement that would resonate strongly with TWY 2021's audience that was enmeshed in #BlackLivesMatter and #SayHerName". An aspect of the series is watching how Dean learns from older family members while also navigating his own path as a pre-teen, Black male in 1968.

The Williams' see themselves first and foremost as Black Americans. The specific hardships of the Southern Black experience in the late 1960s remain at the periphery of the family's world, but it is present. Living in the suburbs with good incomes and the protections and opportunities resulting from the Civil Rights movement all mean that racism is not a major hindrance in their lives. For the young Dean Williams, the world is still not "post-racial," but racial progress is evident front and center. The emphasis on progress and diversity is clear not only in the construction of the Williams family, but also in the diversity of his junior high school. For example, in one episode, Dean attends the bar mitzvah of one of his close friends, who is Jewish. Unlike the original series, which focused on a white family, white suburbs, and white school, TWY 2021 not only focuses on Black culture and people but also demonstrates diversity in its white characters. In many ways, this depiction of racial harmony in the series conflicts with the real experiences of Blacks in 1968, which the narrator acknowledges by periodically reminding the audience of the problems of the color line.

If Reagan's call to "make America great" was an ideological touchstone of *The Wonder Years* 1988, Trump's call to "Make America Great Again" is also clearly motivating the new series of 2021. TWY 2021 is a direct response to the attempts to silence or ignore the complex experiences of Blacks in America that is an aspect of the current political climate, and it does so by centering the lives of Black people in a non-stereotypical way. The re-making and complete restructuring of an originally white television series into a Black television series also represents a theme that can be seen in popular culture today.

Gimmie a Break! (From Reboots)

The ubiquity of remakes and reboots today show that it is both possible and popular to "retool classical television images over and over," as media scholar Carlen

Lavigne has written. Reincarnations of other 1980s and 1990s classics such as *Saved by The Bell* and *Charmed* provide opportunities for the audiences of the original series to experience nostalgia, while also attempting to capture a new generation. The term reboot often implies a return to production after a long hiatus, often with the same, but older, cast. The reboot shows us where are they now, as we see with reboots of such popular series as *Will and Grace* and *Sex and the City.* The creators of TWY 2021 are doing more than simply rebooting. Media scholar Steven Gil uses the term "remake" to illustrate the various ways a past show might be rethought as an "adaptation, sequel, reboot," or "parody." He explains, "Taking terms such as 'original' and 'remake' at face value suggests an unbalanced distribution of creative agency and overlooks the similarity of intertextual influences in both cases" (Gil). The idea of remaking by using the original as a foundation text but not simply duplicating the entire show adds to the "complexity of the remake," according to Gil. As a remake, TWY 2021 shares characteristics of its 1988 predecessor, but the way it transformed its racial structure makes it distinct from other reincarnated shows, however only time will tell how this show will mature and further develop as the seasons progress.

Most remakes and reboots we see today are simply attempts to make previously all-white narratives more diverse by adding one or two BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) characters into a cast that was originally predominantly or all-white. These additions rarely reflect the complexity of the culture and experience of BIPOC people. Another popular approach in the re-imagining of old shows is racebending, or "Racebend Throwback," as blogger Ashley Turner has described it: "an interesting trend where they take an old show and not only reboot but change the race of the cast." Examples of racebending are rarely well received by audiences and critics, who often found their storylines and characters lacking in complexity. Racebending in popular culture is often accompanied by whitewashing, in which formerly white characters and storylines are simply replaced by BIPOC characters, without recognition or consideration of cultural and lived differences. However, TWY 2021 moves beyond this formula, offering new and old audiences alike a fresh perspective on a familiar narrative. One thing that makes TWY 2021 different is that it features not only Black characters but also Black writers and Black producers, who are less likely to succumb unquestioningly to race-bending and whitewashing and are more likely to recognize and incorporate additional complexity into the storyline. Senior editor Kathleen Newman-Bremang of Refinery29's Unbothered states, "I would rather see a story of a new Black family

that's not just repurposing this white person story," and that is what this remake accomplishes (Benchetrit).

"It looks like you can go home again," reflected *US Weekly* writer Emily Longeretta on ABC's return to the series (Longeretta). But this simple statement does not define the genre of television the new version offers. TWY 2021 redirects the camera from the Arnolds and points it at the South and the Black side of town, so to speak. The Williams are not simply stand-ins for the place of the Arnolds, as they would be in a remake; they are a different family that happens to exist at the same time, and they also happen to be Black. Essentially, TWY 2021 simply changes the camera focus from the Arnolds of the 1988 version to the Williams, and with that new focus, the viewing audience gets a more diverse perspective of a family in the late 1960s. The Williams are a completely different family who live in a different city and have different circumstances and experiences, which are constantly influenced and shaped by different factors.

The simultaneous existence of these families within their fictional worlds is clearly shown in TWY 2021 Episode 19, "Love and War." In this episode, eldest Williams brother Bruce is dealing with survivor's guilt from the loss of a fellow soldier and friend in the Vietnam War. It is revealed at the end of this episode that this fallen soldier is Brian Cooper, the brother of the character Winnie Cooper from the original 1988 series ("Love and War"). Brian's death in Vietnam is central to the season premiere of the original *The Wonder Years* 1988, and its inclusion in TWY 2021 thus offers a direct acknowledgment of a relationship between the two series. This is yet one more way that this reincarnation stands out from the rest of the reboots, remakes, and spinoffs that populate today's media landscape.

The remaking of popular past shows is highly dependent on nostalgia to attract an initial audience. Television producer Jhanike Bullard of CBS states that they are "tapping into that emotional core that will resonate with your audience" (Benchetrit). The "emotional" appeal or nostalgia of any series can have a variety of sources; nostalgia for the 1960s era commonly evokes experiences of childhood, suburban life, and the nuclear family. One cannot help but wonder if racial nostalgia in the television world can continue to thrive in an era where people are debating the validity of Black lives – in history, the classroom, and the world itself. Although renewed for a second season, TWY 2021 must not only transcend the heightened racism of today but also survive a media environment where so many other remakes and reboots have failed. Regardless of its long-term survival, TWY 2021 has at

least attempted to complicate the idea of the remake and how previously loved series can be reintroduced to new audiences.

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Revisiting the Kanamits in *The Twilight Zone*: Humanity's Reluctance to Confront Misinformation

ELIZABETH ZAK

The Twilight Zone is widely regarded as one of the greatest shows of all time. Written by Rod Serling, *The Twilight Zone* contained themes of racism, war and society situating them within a broader science fiction framework. *The Twilight Zone* spawned three remakes: one running between 1985-1989, one running between 2002-2003 and finally one running between 2019-2020. While each of these reboots has its own merits, each can also be viewed as a continuation of the series. Viewing these episodes today illuminates the anxieties of their time as well as the still-prevalent contemporary issues of the modern world. It is telling that, although Serling did not explicitly explore information literacy in the series, several episodes address misinformation and its consequences. Here, I focus on two episodes: "To Serve Man" and "You Might Also Like." Both episodes have much in common. Specifically, they share a downfall: semantic misinformation. I begin by providing a summary of each episode. I then discuss their similarities and differences in order to emphasize how both episodes depict misinformation as a crucial misstep of a society's willingness to take a statement at face value. This, in turn, signals the importance of information literacy.

The History of *The Twilight Zone* and Justification for a Reboot

Critics, audiences, and researchers alike view *The Twilight Zone* as one of the greatest science fiction series of all time. *The Twilight Zone*'s episodes transcend their genre, as they "are brilliantly produced works of science fiction, but they are also powerful pieces of political fiction" (Spencer 11). *The Twilight Zone* is an example of the contemporary myth (Hill 111). Researchers identify themes of sex,

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race, and war in *The Twilight Zone* (Cummings). Guzman explains that "through the ambiguous messages of *The Twilight Zone* and using Los Angeles as a backdrop to the Cold War era, common themes such as norms and issues of race emerge" (Guzman 23). While current analysis of *The Twilight Zone* acknowledges Serling's contributions, his contemporaries also appreciated *The Twilight Zone*. Tildsley and Waldron argue that Serling's win of a Unity award showed that others understood the impact of the show: "although Serling was unsuccessful in illustrating the social ills […] in his early work for television, his Science Fiction series was recognized as attempting to better society, an achievement Serling was proud to obtain" (Tildsley 25). Other researchers argue that Rod Serling used *The Twilight Zone* to discuss the evils of war. Specifically, the Cold War, and anti-nuclear anxieties informed *The Twilight Zone* (Worland 104; Mortenson 55)., Rod Serling wanted to focus on the ills of society and how they could cause division. Due to the tensions of the time, he preferred to present this in a science fiction format. While researchers identify *The Twilight Zone* as an allegorical television show, there is still limited exploration into its connection between its 1983, 2001 and 2019 reboots' use of allegory.

After *The Twilight Zone* finished airing, CBS syndicated the show. After Rod Serling's death, *The Twilight Zone*'s first remake, aired in 1985. While this series used a combination of new episodes, and unused scripts from the original *The Twilight Zone,* it was met with mixed reviews both by critics and audiences. The 1985 *Twilight Zone* revival included remakes of popular episodes such as "The After Hours", "A Game of Pool", and "Night of the Meek." Each remade episode used the same plot as its corresponding original and were criticized due to a lack of ingenuity (Zicree 443). The remake was cancelled after two seasons, though a third series was produced and run through syndication (St. James). In 1991, Disney announced their intentions to create a ride based on *The Twilight Zone*. *The Twilight Zone* Tower of Terror is widely beloved (Nirenberg). *The Twilight Zone*'s second remake, *The Twilight Zone,* aired in 2002. It remade two classic *The Twilight Zone* episodes, "Eye of the Beholder," and "The Monsters are Due on Maple Street." The remade episodes were negatively received, and the series was cancelled after one season (Vasquez). Finally, in 2019, Jordan Peele, announced a new remake in 2019.

Remakes may either progressively transform their original story, reflecting current attitudes and values, or regressively regurgitate the original content (Lukas and Marmysz 16; Hantke 144). Scott Lukas and John Marmysz explore the remake as both nihilistic and transformative, stating that "we can gain greater and greater

degrees of self-knowledge through our repeated attempts to bridge the gap between the past and the present" (Lukas 16). By viewing an old story through a new lens, audiences may understand the past in another light. One relatively new concept of remake is a reimagining: tales told within the universe of an intellectual property that introduce new characters (Proctor 224). One such example is the 2016 Ghostbusters movie (Isenbletter 18). In the case of *The Twilight Zone* 2019 reboot, its position as an anthology series lends itself to a reimagining. The stories, while still science fiction-based, reflect our contemporary anxieties. One major concern of reboots is that of regression, specifically that of female characters. In the case of *Star Trek* character Carol Marcus, Dodds argued that the reboot's version was a demotion: rather than actively solving problems, the woman was now a passive love interest. Understanding and undertaking a remake is a highly risky venture, as many researchers have explained.

Since *The Twilight Zone* is an anthology series with episodes set during the Civil War, the 1960s and the future, progressive attitudes must be expressed through storytelling and ideas. When approaching *the Twilight Zone* 2019 reboot, people were optimistic: Joanna Isaacson explains that "With the rise of Jordan Peele's *Twilight Zone* (2019-20) and Misha Green's *Lovecraft Country* (2020), we are hopefully entering a golden age of Black horror TV, following decades in which the genre was marked by a lack of diversity." Although *The Twilight Zone* concluded after two seasons, the show had critical and commercial success. Furthermore, its conclusion was not due to channel complaints (Miska). Much like its predecessor, *The Twilight Zone* 2019 reboot contained a diverse cast. Critics also praised the 2019 reboot for its spiritual continuation of using science fiction to discuss contemporary issues (Nelson). *The Twilight Zone* 2019 reboot remains the most recent and most successful *The Twilight Zone* reboot. Exploring "To Serve Man" and "You Might Also Like" through a lens of semantic misinformation elucidates how a reboot addresses and updates its original inspirations; such an exploration can help audiences understand how past and current tensions affect the depiction of misinformation.

Defining Semantic Relativism, Misinformation and Semantic Misinformation

Semantic relativism states that "the truth-value of some propositions is sensitive to a judge parameter, facilitating cases whereby a proposition can be true relative to

one judge, but false relative to another" (Berskyte, 1). Semantic relativism explores the idea that the truth of a statement is relative. According to Marques: "Semantic relativism is motivated by intuitions that are presumed to raise problems for traditional or contextualist semantics in contested domains of discourse" (Marques 1). As a theory, semantic relativism has often been used in the linguistic sphere.

I chose to use the Oxford Languages definition of misinformation as "false or inaccurate information, especially that which is deliberately intended to deceive" (Oxford Languages). Since misinformation is false, oftentimes believing it can result in underestimating a potential threat. In the case of "To Serve Man," the misinformation spread is that the Kanamits are benevolent, while in the case of "You Might Also Like," the misinformation spread is that the Egg will benefit humanity. However, this misinformation is not conveyed through outright lies. Instead, they are spread through seemingly positive statements. For this research, I define semantic misinformation as misinformation used and spread through a deliberately incorrect interpretation of a statement. This is by no means a complete definition; in this case, it serves its purpose when analyzing these two episodes.

To Serve Man. "To Serve Man" is a Twilight Zone episode that aired on March 2, 1962. In "To Serve Man", a group of aliens known as the Kanamits visit Earth. Although the United Nations are initially concerned about the Kanamits' sudden arrival, they hesitantly welcome the emissary. Proclaiming that their only goals for this encounter are peace and prosperity, they bestow humanity with a number of gifts that will benefit the world: tools that end famine, heart disease and war. During a polygraph test, they insist that all they ask is that humanity trust them: helping the Earth is their reward. However, some people, specifically the protagonist Mr. Chambers, remain skeptical and work to crack the Kanamits' language. They eventually determine that the title of a dropped book is "To Serve Man." The cryptographers' concerns are alleviated due to their interpretation of "To Serve Man" as a positive, potentially altruistic phrase. As the Kanamits keep helping humanity, they open an exchange program: humans are placed on ships to visit their planet. Humanity is willing to visit the Kanamit home planet. Finally, just as Chambers is about to board the ship, one cryptographer, Pat can translate the rest of the book and realizes the horrifying truth: it is a cookbook. The Kanamits have been fattening humans up and bringing them to the Kanamit planet to be slaughtered and consumed. Humanity has let them in, without any concern or skepticism, eventually to their doom.

Three specific scenes exist that show the Kanamits' duplicity while simultaneously contributing to the semantic misinformation spread by the Kanamits and misunderstood by the humans in "To Serve Man." The first is when the Kanamit ambassador encounters the United Nations. He offers a series of gifts that will make arid soil arable and solve border crises. When asked what his motives are, he explains that "there is nothing ulterior in our motives. Nothing at all…we ask only that you trust us" (10:08). With the terms of accepting these gifts laid out, humanity trusts and accepts these gifts. The second scene that furthers this semantic misinformation takes place when the Kanamit takes a lie detector test as a show of good faith. In fact, he explains that "our mission upon this planet is simply this - to bring to you the peace and plenty which we ourselves enjoy…When your world has no more hunger, no more war, no more needless suffering, that will be our reward!" (16:43). The citizens of Earth watch this polygraph test and are reassured, albeit incorrectly, of the Kanamits' intentions. This initial interview tricks people of the Kanamits' intentions. However, on some level, this is the fault of the Earthlings: they should consider the alternative meanings of the words. Similarly, the Kanamits leave behind their book "To Serve Man." They assume that the people of Earth will take their words at face value without exploring the meaning behind them. Perhaps they underestimate the mental capacity of the people of Earth-they have good reason to. The Kanamits have explained that their centuries of existence and travels across the galaxy have expanded their minds and made their intentions hard to understand and explain. However, they assume that even if the cryptographers have the book, they will be unable to determine the title's true, insidious meaning.

You Might Also Like. "You Might Also Like" was released on June 25, 2020, on CBS All Access. "You Might Also Like" uses a much smaller scale for its story. Instead of exploring the world of the United Nations, it details a housewife's day, interspersed with commercials for the Egg, an item that "will make everything okay again. And this time it will be okay forever" (00:53). This statement is a seemingly positive phrase. The episode revolves around a housewife, Janet, and her blackouts. Janet often blacks out, waking up in her bed, no matter where she faints. Janet is concerned about receiving her Egg: she is unsure of why no one knows what the Egg looks like, or what it can do that will make everything OK. When calling a representative to ask about the Egg and what it does, Janet finally tries to cancel her Egg's delivery. She tries to refuse the Egg. Finally, after blacking out and waking in a tree, Janet encounters the Kanamits. They take her to their leader, who

is a female Kanamit. Whilst there, Janet explains her own pain. The Kanamits explain that they have been watching and monitoring humanity since the 1940s, via radio waves. Once learning how to conquer humanity, after studying television commercials, they decided to "sell" the Egg to humanity. These Eggs are actually Kanamit eggs, and when hatched produced bloodthirsty Kanamits. The twist of the statement hinges on humanity's doom: the extinction of humanity will result in "everything being OK again"-for the Kanamits. The Kanamits let Janet return to Earth, where she plans to pick up her Egg in the now devastation of Earth. As she wakes up, explosions, ambulances and gunshots can be heard in the distance, a result of the Eggs beginning to hatch. Even so, one of her friends insists that the Egg will truly fix everything-not only for Janet, but everyone. The episode ends with Janet running toward the building to receive her egg as UFOs hover above the building.

Here, the major element of the Kanamits' duplicity hinges once again on its semantics. All people are told of this Egg is that "The Egg will make everything OK again. And this time, everything will be OK forever" (00:53). People do not know what the Egg looks like, or even what it is (based on its name, it can be assumed that it is an egg). Janet is concerned that all she knows about the Egg is that everyone must have one. When she asks her friends about the Egg, they ignore her questions, often reiterating how excited they are to receive the Egg, citing the idea that things will be OK forever. Conversely, people have different opinions about what "OK forever" means: Janet's neighbor thinks it will fix her family's problems, while her husband's secretary thinks it will fix the planet. Because humanity needs many things, the Kanamits chose to manufacture a vague product and create demand for it. When people finally receive the Egg, they often do not unwrap it until arriving home, and once there, it hatches. We never actually see the Egg. Instead, the idea that everything will be OK forever is no doubt enticing, and overrides humanity's logic.

Analysis of the Kanamits. Understanding "To Serve Man" and "You Might Also Like" means analyzing the episodes as products of their time. For example, in "To Serve Man," the Kanamits identify the anxieties of the age as food or resource scarcity, border squabbles and illness. They then cure these anxieties with their advanced technology. These are very physical issues and problems. These are also very 1960s issues: in 1962, the year that Serling released "To Serve Man," the United States had decided to embargo against Cuba because of Cuba and the Soviet Union's trade pact. Avalanches and mine explosions had also claimed the lives of

thousands. Meanwhile, the Great Chinese Famine, having taken place between 1959-1961, was still news for many. None of these events are referenced by name; rather, they are mentioned as vague concerns, and by the problems rather than the titles of the events. Similarly, the methods in which the Kanamits approach these problems are physical and global. They can set up fences and provide food.

Conversely, "You Might Also Like" chooses instead to focus on humanity's inconsistency. Therefore, any solution offered would need to be broad enough to encompass all of humanity's desires simultaneously. "You Might Also Like" comments on 21st-century consumption and the anxiety on missing out on a new product. The Kanamits use consumer anxiety and vague language to generate interest in their product: the title alone is a play on Netflix and Amazon's language when persuading people to purchase something based on current purchasing trends. Neither Netflix nor Amazon existed in the 1960s, current consumerism and the fear of missing out is a 21st-century concern. Therefore, the use of consumerism as a plot point is a natural evolution.

"You Might Also Like" identifies human inconsistency as another means by which the Kanamits choose to manipulate the humans. The Kanamit leader explains that because humans often change their minds, and are unpredictable, the Kanamits struggled with determining how to conquer them: instead, they simply chose to eliminate humans. They determine humanity's value sets by viewing commercials and determine that the easiest way to convince humans of the Egg's necessity is with a vague sentiment: the promise that everything will be "OK." This implies that currently everything is "not OK," and therefore the Egg will fix whatever the recipient believes it will fix. In this case, supporting characters explain what should be fixed: Mrs. Jones states that the Egg will help Janet's family, and Meghan explains that the Egg will fix the planet. However, these concerns are 21st-century worries. The contemporary climate crises are products of global warming. Similarly, mental health is a present concern for most people. This vague solution is a definite cure through peace of mind. Specifically, the solution that the Kanamits use is vague, presented as something that will fix everything and help everyone. In both episodes, current concerns are discussed explicitly, and then "fixed" by the Kanamit technology.

The Use of the Remake

The Twilight Zone 2019 reboot used its status as a reboot to implement references to the original *The Twilight Zone* in each episode: one episode, retitled "Nightmare at 30,000 Feet" uses a similar title to the original's "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet," and another episode, "A Traveler" features a Talky Tina doll from "Living Doll" (O'Keefe). The return of the Kanamits is a major reference to the original *The Twilight Zone* series. In Peele's *The Twilight Zone* 2019 reboot, the Kanamits are the only returning aliens. Each episode exists independent of one another. The remake clearly shows different priorities of the time: while the humans in "To Serve Man" are plagued by border tension and nuclear threats, the humans in "You Might Also Like" struggle with their own unhappiness. However, the remake uses the same method of deception. This is a telling choice, and shows that while humanity's problems may have evolved, humanity itself still trusts blindly. The remake's reliance on semantic misinformation clearly demonstrates how salient and effective this misinformation is. Specifically, humanity's timeless willingness to accept a statement at face value and receive any gifts offered is a timeless and dangerous flaw. The remake's similarities to the original episode clearly demonstrate the current concern of humanity's gullibility and trusting nature.

Gender in The Twilight Zone. Although the main similarity between the episodes is its wordplay, there are several similarities that are important to discuss. One notable similarity between the two episodes is their use of women as the level-headed thinkers. In "To Serve Man," Pat is the only cryptographer who continues to translate the Kanamit book, while many of her male colleagues accept the Kanamits and their perceived intentions. She is the one who remains skeptical, determines that the book left is a cookbook and finally rushes to the ship to save Mr. Chambers. Although in the original "To Serve Man" story, Pat was male, Serling notably changed the character's gender to female. While skeptical throughout, she is the one who is correct in questioning the Kanamits. Similarly, in "You Might Also Like," the protagonist of the episode is a mother; the leader of the Kanamits is also female-coded. Both women are skeptical throughout: Janet in "You Might Also Like" wishes that the people distributing the Egg would tell her what it is or allow her to see it before she visits the fulfillment center. While this is a perfectly reasonable question, many treat her as if she is unstable. Janet also identifies that the Egg is a perfect product for greedy humans: because the Kanamits have stated that it will make everything all right again, people think it will fix their individual problems. Unlike Dodds' criticism of females in the remake of Star Trek,

Peele's *The Twilight Zone* places a female in the center of "You Might Also Like," and uses her gender as an essential narrative element.

Tension in The Twilight Zone. Another similarity in both episodes is tension with others. In "To Serve Man," the delegate from the Soviet Union asks the Kanamits if they plan on helping everyone, and if they are purely altruistic. Later, when the United States conducts a polygraph test on the Kanamits, the Soviet delegate is automatically suspicious of the United States' intentions in promoting this test. However, he eventually follows the Kanamits as well: he is on the same flight as Mr. Chambers to the Kanamit planet. Meanwhile, Janet's relationship to her husband and friend is contentious: they often dismiss her concerns. Her friend continuously focuses on Janet's furniture and decorations.

Another valuable similarity is that of the tension of existence: in "To Serve Man", Mr. Chambers references the dangers of the world and the tensions building between nations. "To Serve Man" opens with an explanation of humanity's movement as a "tentative tip toeing alongside a precipice of crisis". Meanwhile, in "You Might Also Like," Janet is recovering from her daughter's still birth. However, no one mentions her pain, focusing instead on her family. Instead, Janet's neighbors and friends regard her with a cool detachment, as if her problems themselves are too alien for anyone to relate. This detatchment further isolates and alienates Janet. When she is on the Kanamit ship, it is the first time in the episode where she has been treated with any semblance of respect. Although she is surrounded by aliens who know nothing of her miscarriage and everyday life, they speak frankly with her, and even appear moved by her pain and sadness. When she returns for her final moments on Earth, she is no longer alone: receiving her Egg and her death solve this tension with others. In both episodes, release from tension is key to the Kanamit success.

The Kanamits and Consumption. One major similarity between the Kanamits in both "To Serve Man" and "You Might Also Like" is how they obtain power. In both episodes, the Kanamits use consumption to obtain their goals. In "To Serve Man," this consumption is literal-by providing humans with food and sustenance, the Kanamits are fattening people up to eat them. Another allusion to consumption occurs when characters comment on the different items found in the Kanamit world. Peele's reboot extends the idea of consumption by using present-day consumerism. Phrases such as "fulfillment center" and "you might also like" hearken to online store fronts such as Amazon and eBay (Hitchens; Birenbaum). In "You Might Also Like," the Kanamits use consumer culture to spread their message. By arguing that

the egg is necessary and using advertisements to spread their message, the Kanamits use humanity's interest in products and consumer culture to infiltrate their homes. In both instances, humanity accepts these gifts with open arms, and believes that these gifts will improve their lives. A lack of critical thinking and skepticism results in the Kanamit methods proving effective in both the 20th and 21st century.

The Kanamits' Surface Transparency. One major similarity between the episodes is the Kanamits, and their transparency: showing humanity basic kindness and encouraging humans to trust them. While the Kanamits are upfront about their desires, they rely on vagueness to achieve their goals. This semantic misinformation allows them to spread their message and inspire trust in the Kanamits. In fact, in both episodes, the Kanamits are more than willing to help Earth: in "To Serve Man", they make soil fertile, and in "You Might Also Like", they are similarly motivated to heal the Earth by removing humans. They are seemingly accommodating. In "To Serve Man", the Kanamit submits to a lie detector test, discussing their journey and their superiority while "You Might Also Like" shows the Kanamits seemingly allowing Janet to cancel her family's Egg., In both episodes, these shows of support are very much simply smoke and mirrors: demonstrations of false compliance when the aliens are actually explaining their motives to an unwitting audience. The Kanamits are also more than willing to demonstrate their superiority verbally, and their altruistic motives. In both episodes, they ask that humanity believe that they only wish to help-to trust them blindly.

Humanity's Trust in The Kanamits. The main commonality, however, is the willingness of humanity to understand something at face value. Specifically, there is no mention in either episode about the potential of an alternative meaning: to serve man must refer to the act of servitude toward men. Indeed, the aliens do little to encourage this semantic exploration. Although the Kanamit submits to a polygraph test, and answers all questions honestly, he does so specifically to obtain humanity's trust. In fact, when he proclaims that "when your world has no more hunger, no more war, no more needless suffering, that will be our reward," he confirms his intentions: the "that" he alludes to is in fact, the amount of living people who the Kanamits will then consume("To Serve Man" 17:11). The Kanamits' help means that people will not be dying unnecessarily. Unfortunately, his honesty reveals the Kanamits' ulterior motives. No one chooses to question this. The humans' basic tools confirm what they already implicitly wish to hear: that if they trust the aliens, they will get what they want. Therefore, people largely trust the Kanamits after this confirmation, ignoring any potential other reasons for the

Kanamits' benevolence. The lack of information literacy is concerning enough. This is discussed in "To Serve Man," specifically when Chambers decides not to continue his work, he argues that he feels that: "we're looking a gift horse in the mouth" ("To Serve Man" 12:56). Later, Pat, the translator who eventually cracks the Kanamit code, indignantly argues that "maybe we should have looked this gift horse in the mouth!" By focusing on gaining humanity's trust, they can lull the people into a false sense of security. In "You Might Also Like," Janet keeps questioning why people need the Egg, even asking the distributors of the Egg what exactly the Egg does. No one knows what the Egg is, or how it will make everything OK again-instead, this idea that something exists that will fix everything is seemingly enough. In both instances, the citizens of Earth are willing to simply believe what they are told. This allows the Kanamits to further deceive the humans.

Specifically, Serling pulls a focus on the Kanamits' deliberate decisions to deceive the humans. Originally, in "To Serve Man", a friend of the narrator's begins working at the Embassy and steals a Kanamit book (Knight). In his television adaptation, Serling eschews this thievery, in favor of the Kanamit deliberately leaving the book at the U.N. building. Both these episodes utilize trust as a commodity. The Kanamits specifically utilize trust by telling the humans to trust them. The humans are willing, even going so far as to open our planet to the Kanamits and participating in exchange programs with them. Meanwhile, the 2020 iteration of the Kanamits prefers to dupe the human consumers through commercials on both the television and radio. Interestingly, the Kanamits do not give humanity anything physically to assure them of their motives: simply the verbal promise of "everything will be OK again" is sufficient for people to desire their Egg and wait outside their fulfillment center for it. Using the commercials, and the implicit trust that this media creates, the Kanamits in "You Might Also Like" are able to insidiously infiltrate the consumer industry. The humans are willing, even excited to obtain their Egg. Even when they receive their Eggs, they are protective: Janet's neighbor will not even let her touch the Egg. The Kanamits also lie to Janet, using human language to evade any potential confrontation. When Janet asks if her Egg has been canceled, she is told that her request is being processed. Later, when she asks the Kanamit leader if they were going to cancel her Egg, the leader states that they would not. Instead, she is duped into believing that the Egg is canceled. This initial response is frustrating: although she is told that her request is processing, she is willing to believe that her request has been heard.

While information literacy is an imperfect solution to the problem of misinformation, in both cases, it could have prevented the Kanamits' spread and eventual control of humanity. Using information literacy to question the Kanamits' motives, language use and methods would have allowed humanity to avoid their fates. If the cryptographers and the rest of humanity had continued to question the Kanamits' intentions in "To Serve Man," they would have avoided being eaten or, at the very least, forced more transparency in the process. If the protagonists had realized the Kanamits' true motives and goals sooner, they would have avoided the Kanamit ships and eventual consumption. Likewise, any further scrutiny of the Egg and its benefits, or even an analysis of its ingredients or properties before acceptance, would have served humanity in "You Might Also Like." While Janet tries to return her Egg, questioning its necessity before ordering it would have further served her well. Information literacy would have prevented complacency and eventual death in "To Serve Man" and "You Might Also Like."

Conclusion

Science fiction allows us to participate in fiction while realizing our own contemporary anxieties. When we examine *The Twilight Zone*, we can draw parallels between the past and current concerns. In the case of "To Serve Man," humanity trusts the Kanamits, eventually leading to their downfall. Almost sixty years later, "You Might Also Like" revisits the Kanamits, and shows their own evolution of deception. While they approach humanity in a different method, the ending is far too similar: the fall of humanity. However, we must understand the very real threat of information illiteracy. Although aliens have not arrived, there are very real impacts of information illiteracy. Although Serling does not explicitly argue for information literacy in either episode, his implicit argument is evident in *The Twilight Zone*. Information literacy is the key to avoid misleading, pretty mistruths. Further research into both the semantics of these arguments, specifically in the semantic neurology of seemingly benign statements, as well as the unwillingness to question any concerns, is necessary. We must act fast lest we learn the meaning of the words far too late.

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Abjection to Desire: The Journey from "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" to *The Shape of Water*

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The video that accompanies this essay can be found at: https://www.mpcaaca.org/v11i1-video-essays

This presentation examines two texts, H. P. Lovecraft's 1936 short story "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" and Guillermo del Toro's 2017 film *The Shape of Water*. Each work centers on a merman, a visitor from an aquatic realm who disrupts how we define our bodies in reference to the body of the other. It looks at the artistic goals of the authors, and how Lovecraft's cosmic horror, racism, and xenophobia contrast with de Toro's love of monsters and outsiders, and his desire to give a "happy ending" to a classic monster story form. The differences between them demonstrate a change in how our entertainment portrays the Other. The monstrous merman has transformed from a source of danger, whose defeat and abjection reinforces the status quo, to one where he is a guide to an escape from an oppressive reality, the discovery of our true self, and the retreat to an undersea fantasy world.

Many cultures around the world, particularly those that have close interactions with the sea, have traditions of part human, part fish creatures that live under the water. There are often entire races of such aquatic beings. The merman is a natural inhabitant of his world, but when he enters our world, he is a monster. Jeffery Jerome Cohen's Seven Theses of Monster Theory states as Thesis III: "The Monster Is the Harbinger of Category Crisis." He writes: "the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (6). The merman brings category crisis because his fundamental nature is as something that crosses boundaries. He breaks the barrier between the realms of land and water. He threatens our views of ourselves and our place in the order of things. We try to

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answer what the merman is, but always fail, leaving us with even more questions about what we are. The monstrous merman is always a discourse.

Modern writers and filmmakers use this discourse to tell stories that express their own visions of what the existence of the merman means to us, and what it says about us. One of the most recent uses of the monstrous merman is in Guillermo del Toro's Academy award winning film *The Shape of Water*. Director del Toro grew up watching monster movies and has stated that ever since seeing the 1954 film *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (Jack Arnold 1954), he wanted to tell a version of the story where that movie's merman, the Gill-man, lives happily ever after with the swimsuit wearing human female he falls in love with. (McIntrye 2017) *The Shape of Water* includes many reference to *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, but also resonates with an earlier story of monstrous mermen: H. P. Lovecraft's short story "The Shadow Over Innsmouth." The two texts have parallel endings but present a fundamental reversal of what those endings are expected to convey to their audiences, and in what they communicate about the values of their creators and the eras in which they were made.

H. P. Lovecraft was a relatively obscure author during his life, but today he is a major inspiration for fiction, comics, games, movies, and internet memes. His stories are often built around two major themes: the cosmic horror of a vast, uncaring, universe and that civilization – or at least Western, white, European civilization – is under constant threat from outside forces and alien cultures. Lovecraft embodied both these themes into unspeakably horrible monsters and vast alien deities. One of the most enduring and inspiring of these monsters are the Deep Ones.

These monstrous mermen appear in his 1935 story "The Shadow Over Innsmouth." This is a first person account of the narrator's visit to a decaying New England fishing town. He finds the citizens have been corrupted by interbreeding with ancient aquatic beings in exchange for commercial prosperity. Hybrid children are born looking human, but slowly transform into immortal horrors, the Deep Ones, as they age. The narrator later discovers that his own ancestry is linked to this town and that he too will eventually metamorphose and join his aquatic relatives. The narrator is writing his story as part of a terrible internal struggle (Lovecraft ([1936] 2014): "I have an odd craving to whisper about those few frightful hours in that ill-rumored and evilly shadowed seaport of death and blasphemous abnormality." (574-575) He is facing what Julia Kristeva describes in her book *Powers of Horror* (Kristeva 1982) as the abject. The abject is what must

be vomited or otherwise expelled in order to maintain "one's own clean and proper body." (71) Kristeva writes of the abject: "It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us" (4).

The danger of being engulfed is the core dilemma the narrator of "Innsmouth" faces: Did what he experience truly happen, or has he just gone mad – but if his account is true, shouldn't he kill himself, abject his own body, before becoming a Deep One himself? But a third voice in the argument will eventually arise from the "odd craving:" yes, the events were real and he should embrace them rather than fight against them.

And that is the choice the narrator ultimately makes: to give up humanity and join his Deep One family beneath the ocean. To Lovecraft this was clearly intended to be a bad thing, the worst outcome of the situation. He felt that tradition, culture, and custom were the only things that made life bearable. His view of proper culture though was strictly defined by his own white, English, aristocratic background. "Innsmouth" is a demonstration of his racist fears of foreigners corrupting and diluted the Aryan culture he believed was the highest form of civilization.

Despite this, or perhaps in response to the story's discourse, "Innsmouth" has to this day been a source of inspiration to other writers who try to explore and expand on his ideas. These stories often take the side of the the Deep Ones, portraying them sympathetically, or as representation of the persecution of minorities, rather than as the threat of immigrant invasion. In a similar response to an earlier text, Guillermo del Toro tries to give *The Creature From the Black Lagoon* film a happy ending. He revises, references, and inverts many narrative elements from the film. In *The Creature From the Black Lagoon* and its two sequels, human scientists capture the Gill-man from his home in the Amazon river delta, make him an exhibit in an oceanarium, and subject him to experimental surgery. When we meet a merman in *The Shape of Water*, he is already in the clutches of the U.S. Government, who view him as an "asset" with the potential to place the USA ahead of the Soviet Union in the Space Race.

The only person who sees this being as more than a resource to be exploited is the janitorial worker Elisa. She is a lonely orphan left mute from, what is assumed to be, a childhood injury to her throat, and has always felt a deep attraction and affinity to water and all things aquatic. When she encounters a monstrous merman it is not so much a shocking discovery as the achieving of something she has been looking for all her life. She feels a powerful and erotic bond with this Amphibian

Man and puts together a scheme to rescue him. Del Toro reverses the central drama of the classic monster movie narrative, where the helpless woman must be saved from the attentions of the monster: in *The Shape of Water*, the woman rescues the monster from his captors. The audience is no longer expected to fear the merman, but to sympathize with him and to desire him.

In del Toro's film, the dominant white, heteronormative order that Lovecraft revered is called out as the true monster of the story, embodied in the sadistic agent of the oppressive, military-industrial complex, Colonel Strickland. Elisa and her friends – the gay, movie-loving neighbor Giles, and her African-American co-worker Zelda – are all outsiders, abjected by American culture of the era when del Toro has set his story, the 1960s. The central discourse of their encounter with the monstrous merman is escape. The Human world is nothing but abuse and humiliation. Elisa's desires for sexual fulfillment and for freedom are both realized through the Amphibian Man.

After helping the Amphibian Man escape, Elisa discovers that she's drawn to the water because she herself has always been a submarine creature, trapped in a dry world inimical to her true self. The scars on her neck have always been waiting for a chance to open into gills, allowing her true life to begin. *The Shape of Water* opens with Elisa dreaming of a life under the sea. The narrator of "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" ends his story with a dream. But unlike Lovecraft's story, where the loss of humanity is depicted as ultimate horror, Elisa's rebirth is portrayed as liberation and fulfillment.

H. P. Lovecraft feared and rejected the modern world, particularly the ways that world was bringing together different types of people and different cultures and ways of life. These people challenged his fantasies of a return to an era where he, his family, his race, and his personal tastes were the supreme, justly dominant culture. Those he saw as diluting and corrupting that way of life he embodied as monsters to be abjected, labelled as ugly, bad smelling, and morally corrupt. To join them, to renounce his Lovecraft's ideas of human culture, was to give in to horror and doom the world.

In the 1950s, the time of *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*, middle class white America wanted to believe in a scientific, rational future. The Other, in the form of the merman and other movie monsters, could be controlled, or if not controlled, destroyed, in order to maintain the status quo. Later in the 20th Century, and continuing today, movie audiences seem more disillusioned. Institutions and government have failed to fulfill the dreams they offered, and those in power are

only interested in securing their own status, dominance, and decaying ambitions.

With so much wrong in the world, we don't look to entertainment for the thrill of seeing our values endangered by monsters, or to see reason and authority control and kill those monsters, but to find hope in those monsters. If we can find someone such as the Amphibian Man whom we could save, we might save ourselves, discovering who we really are, and returning to where our real home was all along. Our entertainment now offers the appealing fantasy of escaping an oppressive surface world for an undersea fantasy where, as the narrator says at the end of "The Shadow Over Innsmouth" (Lovecraft ([1936] 2014): "We shall swim out to that brooding reef in the sea and dive down through black abysses to Cyclopean and many-columned Y'ha-nthlei, and in that lair of the Deep Ones we shall dwell amidst wonder and glory forever." (641-2)

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The Creature from The Black Lagoon. Directed by Jack Arnold. Universal Pictures, 1954.

The Shape of Water. Directed by Guillermo del Toro. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2017.

Presentation Art Credits

Slide 1

Fan art by @patart-illustrations-stuff. https://www.tumblr.com/patart-illustrations-stuff/153830235892/deep-one-shadow-over-innsmouth

Still from *The Shape of Water*. Directed by Guillermo del Toro. Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2017.

Slide 2

Cover of *Famous Monsters of Filmland.* Issue #120, 1975.

18th century illustration of a "ningyo." Utagawa Toyokuni.

DVD cover for *Splash*. Directed by Ron Howard. Touchstone Films, 1984.

Creature from the Black Lagoon inspired toy.

Slide 4

Cover of *Guillermo Del Toro's The Shape of Water: Creating a Fairy Tale for Troubled Times.* Insight Editions, 2017.

Slide 5

Publicity Still featuring Julie Adams from *The Creature from the Black Lagoon*. Directed by Jack Arnold. Universal-International, 1954.

Slide 6

Cover of *Weird Tales* magazine. Jan. 1942. Art by Gretta (Joseph Clemens Gretter).

Slide 7

Cover of *The Complete Fiction of H.P. Lovecraft*. Art by Mister Sam Shearon.Eireann Press, 2018.

Slide 8

Art from *Arkham Horror: The Card Game* by Fantasy Flight Games. https://www.fantasyflightgames.com/en/products/arkham-horror-the-card-game.

Slide 10

“Innsmouth” fan art by Pete Von Sholly. https://vonshollywood.net/

Slide 11

Art from *Arkham Horror: The Card Game*. Fantasy Flight Games, 2016, https://www.fantasyflightgames.com/en/products/arkham-horror-the-card-game.

Cover of *Winter Tide (The Innsmouth Legacy #1)* by Ruthanna Emrys. Art by John Jude Palencar. Tor.com, 2017.

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Slides 12, 13, 14
Stills from *The Shape of Water*.

Slide 15
Poster from *The Shape of Water*.

Diversity or "Exotic" Fantasy?: Pastiche in the Art and Architecture of Hong Kong Disneyland

XINYI YE

The video that accompanies this essay can be found at: https://www.mpcaaca.org/v11i1-video-essays

"Here is the world of imagination, hopes, and dreams" (Disney).

Opened on September 12, 2005, Hong Kong Disneyland is a major scenic spot of the city, attracting 4.5 million visitors from around the world each year (Fung and Lee 1999). However, from the beginning of its construction, Hong Kong Disneyland has courted controversy due to alleged exploitation of labor and overstatement of benefits to the local economy. Local media described it as "marred by public relations debacles that left Mickey Mouse looking like Cinderella's stepmother in this former British colony" (Banh 50). Though Walt Disney coined the term 'edutainment' to emphasize the educational function of jovial rides, critics have called Disney a symbol of "superficiality, historical pastiche, escapism, and empty fantasy" (Ghirardo 44). However, little has been written on the later years of expansion of Hong Kong Disneyland, during which Disney included multicultural elements to showcase its diversity. This paper examines pastiche in the art and architecture of the Castle of Magical Dreams and Mystic Manor of Hong Kong Disneyland. Hong Kong Disneyland aims to display its value of inclusion and diversity through the pastiches of various architectural styles and artifacts from different cultures that construct a utopian fantasy of diversity. It argues the intrinsic paradox in edutainment manifested in Disney's tactics of pastiche turns efforts to enhance "inclusion and diversity" into a quasi-colonial fantasy displaying "exotic"

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cultures. Performing Disney’s assigned roles as both the center and periphery, visitors become part of Disney’s institutionalization of multiculturalism for self-correction, which restrains the defiant critical position of postcolonialism in power relations.

The Castle of Magical Dreams appropriates European and Islamic architecture to form an optimistic place where cultures benignly coexist. Mystic Manor as a contact zone partially educates children about history and culture while distorting and sanctifying the coercive nature of imperial museums. It extracts art and architectural motives out of their cultural and historical context, sometimes colonial and imperial, to fit oversimplified fantastical Disney narratives. Lacking real-life originals, the medley of simulacra constructs potential colonial fantasies and asymmetrical power structures in Hong Kong Disneyland. However, the simultaneous and undiscriminating appropriation of European and Asian art and architecture adds subtleties to the criticism that Disney creates a place of absolute imbalance between the dominant and the subordinate. According to narrations and instructions, visitors consciously or unconsciously perform various assigned roles that create fluidity in identity between the center and the periphery. The fluidity of their identity enhances the fantastical experience and dissolves the reality of hierarchy and coercive history. Nevertheless, Disney responded to cultural criticism by incorporating multicultural elements for self-correction. Similar to the criticism of canonization of institutional critique, multiculturalism, and postcolonialism, when consciously adopted by culturally influential corporations like Disney, have gained its efficacy and lost their critical positions of subversiveness. When taking up the assigned roles in the park, visitors become part of the institution’s narrative to create happiness.

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Multi-Platform Storytelling, Popular Music, and Dolly Parton

LEIGH H. EDWARDS

The video that accompanies this essay can be found at: https://www.mpcaaca.org/v11i1-video-essays

In this video essay, I argue that Dolly Parton's work demonstrates how popular music can make greater use of multi-platform storytelling, in which artists tell stories in a coordinated way across related texts in different mediums, extending their story. While that media trend has more often been applied to franchises using films, comic books, television shows, and video games, it is also relevant to popular music. As musical artists continue to develop immersive multi-platform storytelling, popular culture scholarship can address those developments more fully. In my previous book, *Dolly Parton, Gender and Country Music* (2018), I argued for the value of applying the multi-platform storytelling concept in popular music studies and especially in country music studies, precisely because the genre focuses on storytelling and engaged audiences who will follow immersive stories into different mediums.

While music videos have long added a visual storytelling component, more recent developments in popular music multi-platform storytelling have a larger vision and include additional texts such as full linked visual albums, films, novels and short stories, reality TV shows, video games, graphic novels, and comic books. Examples include Beyoncé's pioneering visual albums involving extensive films and videos. Janelle Monáe has an encyclopedic science fiction storyworld built across albums, visual albums, films, and her own book of stories. Lizzo's reality

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TV series casts dancers for her tours. The posthumous Johnny Cash *Forever Words* project includes a book of his poetry, a tribute album where artists put his words to music, and music videos.

As I detail in this video essay, Dolly Parton is an apt case study, because she has long engaged in multi-platform storytelling. I examine her most recent, unusual example, which is her novel, *Run, Rose, Run: A Novel* (2022), which she co-wrote with James Patterson, and which she released alongside her coordinated new album *Run, Rose, Run* (2022). She has a planned film in which she will star. Parton says she based the fictional novel in part on her own experiences of striving to make in the country music industry. It is significant that Parton used the novel to drive the composition of her album, and the novel encourages readers to turn to the album, which fully realizes the songs the novel only describes. In another recent example, her Netflix television series *Dolly Parton's Heartstrings* (2019) expands eight of her classic songs, like "Jolene," into new television stories, adding new content, recontextualizing her songs and citing autobiographical references in these stories.

Here, I argue there are two things that are distinctive about how Parton is doing multi-platform storytelling. The first is the degree to which she is using her autobiography as the basis for her multi-platform storytelling. The second is the degree to which she uses multi-platform storytelling in a way that is self-aware about how branding and projections of authenticity work, a knowingness about self-commodification.

These multi-platform storytelling worlds are all united by Parton as the artist and her stage persona and media image, what Richard Dyer would call her "star text," which is a multi-platform story itself. Parton uses her life story and personal mythology as the basis for her larger multi-platform story and branded self, drawing on it for content in her songs and all her texts across mediums in a performance of what Sarah Banet-Weiser would term "branded authenticity."

In my book on Parton, I examined how she created her own media image and stage persona, and I argued that it critiques country music authenticity narratives. Her media image is a conscious mixture of real and fake, constructed image and underlying sincerity based on her autobiography, as in her Backwoods Barbie song, where she sings "I might look artificial, but where it counts I'm real." As I argued in my book, her appearances on reality TV shows like *The Voice* and *American Idol* demonstrate how reality TV and country music share similar codes for performing authenticity and selfhood, and Parton uses them to extend her branded self. Indeed, country music is particularly apt for reality TV portrayals because of similarities in

how both genres perform authenticity, or constructed ideas of what is genuine or believable performances of selfhood. In both, the most successful artists can appear to "be themselves" in their self-presentation in the media, performing a version of the self, using performance codes in those genres.

While multi-platform storytelling has long existed, as in illuminated Medieval manuscripts, today's trend has wider scale, developing out of the growth of digital media since the 1960s and media deregulation since the 1980s, and the rise of media convergence, where formerly separate media have come together on the same devices, combining old and new media. This kind of storytelling trend is prevalent in contemporary media not only for corporate synergy reasons but also because current active audiences seeks out linked storytelling texts as they engage in what Henry Jenkins calls "participatory culture," hunting the content they want across different mediums. Multi-platform storytelling goes beyond adaptation because each text also adds something new, new content in new mediums, and it involves coordinated co-creation. As Jenkins observes, examples of effective storytelling in this mode provide different points of entry, make use of the affordances of each medium, and each additional text can stand alone and contribute to the larger whole.

Parton is an artist who calls herself a "songteller," and she emphasizes the relationship between storytelling and country music, with an emphasis on cogent stories and devoted audiences. Here, the immersive multi-platform storytelling she does epitomizes how adaptable popular music is to this kind of immersive world-building. Likewise, her work illustrates how her autobiography and star text is what holds her storytelling together.

It is important to do more scholarly work in popular culture studies to account for popular music in evolving multi-platform storytelling. The trend obviously reflects corporate synergy. Nevertheless, musical artists can use these models to deepen storytelling universes, nurture the affordances of various mediums, and engage active audiences.

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Fandom During the Pandemic: Impacts of COVID-19 on People's Fandom Experiences

KRYSTEN STEIN AND CARRIELYNN D. REINHARD

The video that accompanies this essay can be found at: https://www.mpcaaca.org/v11i1-video-essays

The COVID-19 pandemic has had an immense global impact. When it comes to fandom, it essentially stopped all opportunities for physical experiences and expressions, requiring fans, fan communities, and the organizations that serve them to alter traditional modes of engagement. Large-scale conventions had to revise their offerings to create digital experiences. Celebrities took to social media accounts on Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Twitch, Cameo and more to both maintain and build their relationships with fans. All these changes were attempts to maintain fandom experiences as they had been with the hope that the pandemic, and thus the changes, would be relatively short-lived.

At the same time, people's fandoms may provide the escapism needed to cope with the unknowns and pandemic induced stress. Consumption and production of goods associated with fandoms could provide the relief and balm to manage the uncertainties, isolation, and feelings of emptiness during this time (see Ferrari; Lindgren and Lundström; McInroy and Craig). Fandom has also been a means by which people connect. Diverse and vast digital communities form as the Internet affords geographically dispersed fans to find one another. Fans may rely on these communities and virtual relationships as substitutions for their physical

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communities and relationships (see Kelser and Wann; Peterson, Speer and McMillan). With such ideas in mind, the study was conducted to answer this question: How have fans responded to the pandemic, and how do they see the pandemic impacting their fandoms?

To understand the impact COVID-19 has had on people's fandoms, we deployed a mixed-methods questionnaire that used a Sense-Making Methodology self-interview and a questionnaire consisting primarily of Likert attitudinal items. Convenience and snowballing sampling methods generated a sample of 115 respondents that, admittedly, was not as diverse as possible. The largest area of diversity came in the nature of the fandoms: these fandoms ranged from more traditionally studied ones (e.g., Harry Potter, Marvel, kpop, and video games) to more niche or obscure ones (e.g., tacos, *MasterChef*, *Queen's Gambit*, and Rene Magritte). The average age was 35, spanning from 19 to 62. That majority were located in North American before (76%) and during the pandemic (77%). The respondents tended to be: well educated with many obtaining at least a master's degree (47%); single and never married (56%); employed full-time (57%) or a student (33%); and white (84%). Additionally, the majority indicated being cisgendered (84%), although sexual identity demonstrated more diversity: 51% heterosexual, 18% bisexual, 10% gay or lesbian, and 12% queer or fluid. A limitation of this study is in its diversity: the sample largely reflects an educated white, heterosexual ciswoman's experience and perspective.

In analyzing the results, it appears that in times of uncertainty and lack of control over one's life, people will turn to their fandoms to gain power, at least the perception of power, over something. According to the analysis, the majority agreed that their fandom helped them both escape and understand the world as well as cope with their lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. The exploratory factory analyses and correlations demonstrated some significant relationships suggesting how fans were helped by their fandoms during the pandemic. The exploratory factor analysis resulted in five factors: Physical Fandom (Table 1), Fandom as Helping (Table 2), Art & Fic, Online Community, and Embarrassed.

Variable: Physical Fandom	Eigenvalue	Mean (S.D)
I talk to other fans in-person.	0.509	5.17 (1.72)
I attend conventions related to my fandoms.	**0.528**	**3.78 (2.24)**
I like to attend live events related to my fandoms.	0.717	5.07 (1.79)
I cosplay in relation to my fandoms.	**0.448**	**2.83 (2.09)**
I collect items related to my fandoms.	0.558	5.13 (1.80)
I like to wear clothes that reflect my fandoms.	0.570	4.87 (1.96)
I like to wear accessories that reflect my fandom.	0.498	4.78 (1.89)
I purchase merchandise related to my fandoms.	0.465	5.40 (1.65)
I am not getting everything I want out of my fandoms right now.	0.437	4.14 (1.64)
I wish I could do more to express my fandoms to others right now.	**0.558**	**3.49 (1.62)**
I wish I could do more to participate in my fandoms right now.	0.534	4.90 (1.62)
I would feel lost without my fandoms.	0.432	4.33 (1.87)
It has been hard to not experience my fandoms as I wanted to lately.	0.569	3.96 (1.68)

Table 1. Physical Fandom Factor Loads

Physical Fandom appears to have two subfactors. The first one reflects fan external behaviors that would occur during physical fandom activities and events, such as attendance at conventions or concerts. This subfactor includes a desire to cosplay, collect items, and talk to other fans. The second subfactor reflects the impact of the pandemic on such physical activities and events, as fans indicated agreement with more negative sentiments. These sentiments include not getting everything they want out of the fandoms and wishing they could be doing more. Overall, the Physical Fandom factor suggests where a significant negative impact of the pandemic was experienced for the fans.

Variable: Fandom as Helping	Eigenvalue	Mean (S.D)
My fandoms help me escape the real world.	0.414	5.75 (1.49)
My fandoms help me cope with life.	0.533	5.67 (1.37)
My fandoms are important to me.	0.578	5.97 (1.25)
My fandoms help me feel in control of my life.	0.604	4.52 (1.62)
My fandoms help identify me to others.	0.305	4.97 (1.56)
My fandoms give me joy.	**0.495**	**6.11 (1.12)**
My fandoms give me comfort.	0.595	5.80 (1.48)
My fandoms make me feel fulfilled right now.	0.626	5.31 (1.36)
I am satisfied with my fandom experiences right now.	0.423	5.30 (1.29)
My fandoms have helped me during the pandemic.	0.706	5.78 (1.37)

Table 2. Fandom as Helping Factor Loads

The second factor Fandom as Helping also had two subfactors. Here, the fans' internal behaviors were captured, with the first subfactor collecting the sense of being helped by the fandom and the second collecting more positive sentiments about their fandom experience during the pandemic. These two primary factors suggest that their experience of physical activities and events were impacted by the pandemic, but that their entire fandom experience was not and was, indeed, helpful to them during the highest times of uncertainty.

A closer examination of the relationships through correlations further explains this pattern. When correlating various Likert items with the attitude "My fandoms have helped me during the pandemic," various significant relationships emerged (Table 3). These positive correlations suggest that fans were more likely to say their fandom helped them during the pandemic if: they were reading fan fiction and looking at others' fan art online; felt that their fandom provided them with joy, comfort, and fulfillment; and thought that their fandom provided a sense of both escapism and control during the uncertainty.

Variables: External Fannish Behaviors	r-score	p-value
Share information online	0.207	0.026
Write fan fiction	0.226	0.015
Read fan fiction	**0.274**	**0.003**
Look for others' fan art	**0.280**	**0.002**
Like to wear accessories	0.223	0.017
Follow social media accounts	0.206	0.027
Variables: Internal Fannish Behaviors	r-score	p-value
Important to me	0.30	0.001
Give joy	**0.387**	**<0.001**
Give comfort	**0.376**	**<0.001**
Feel fulfilled now	**0.414**	**<0.001**
Satisfied with fandom experiences now	0.295	0.001
Wish could do more to participate now	0.280	0.002
Feel lost without fandom	0.245	0.008
Variables: Helping Fannish Behaviors	r-score	p-value
Help escape real world	**0.364**	**<0.001**
Help cope with life	0.288	0.002
Help feel in control	**0.373**	**<0.001**
Help identify to others	0.222	0.017
Help understand the world	0.272	0.003

Table 3. Correlations with "My fandoms have helped me during the pandemic"

What fans discussed in the self-interview portion supports these quantitative findings. For example, as of writing this abstract, folx somewhat to strongly agreed that their fandoms helped them during the pandemic. Additionally, when asked about their emotions they experienced during the pandemic about and their fandoms, people indicated a range of affectations. Some folx focused on from longing and missing what they had done before, while others discussed to seeing fandom as more of an escape from the world now than they had done in comparison to before the pandemic. Many respondents indicated hoping to do something physically in-person and physical in relation to their fandom after the pandemic, from seeing their "fandom friends" to attending live events. They also expressed concerns for the future of their fandoms and those whose work builds the objects of their affection.

Overall, while the pandemic negatively impacted their physical fandoms, the fans still found a multitude of means by which to experience their fandom and thus receive benefit from it. Many found their fandoms to have online components that could replace the absent physical, while others were still able to engage with and consume materials related to their fandom from their homes. Many indicated using their fandom as a way to manage the stress of the pandemic, such as by connecting with others and even just escaping the uncertainty and depressing news. The fans found that their fandoms provided them a sense of calm and comfort during this time of upheaval, suggesting the importance of fandom to a person's mental health during times of crisis.

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Introduction

CHRISTOPHER J. OLSON

One of the challenges facing popular culture scholars is the question of what exactly constitutes "popular culture." This question has loomed over the cultural studies field since before Ray B. Browne authored his pioneering essay "Popular Culture: Notes Toward a Definition" in 1970. Yet the query takes on a renewed urgency during the early years of the 21st century, a time when the so-called "nichification" of culture has accelerated thanks to the rise of new communication technologies such as social media and streaming video platforms. Such innovations have granted consumers and fans greater access to the things they love and communities of like-minded people, while simultaneously contributing to the fragmentation of audiences and culture.

While concepts like monoculture or mass audiences are debatable (and likely never existed in the first place), the current nichification of culture has undoubtedly altered definitions of the term popular. There was a time when seemingly everyone knew about TV shows like *M*A*S*H* or *Cheers* or *Friends*, even if they did not watch or like these series. Now, however, thanks to the flood of proprietary content, many media texts only exist in the hearts and minds of the people who consume them. While there exist exceptions to this rule such as *The Mandalorian* or *The Last of Us*, other shows can run for years without generating any sort of buzz outside of their loyal fanbase and without making a dent in the popular consciousness. Therefore, contemporary popular culture scholars must cast a wide net when looking for objects of research and may find themselves needing to make a case for why their chosen text should be considered "popular."

The reviews collected in this issue explore scholarly texts and popular works that demonstrate the ideas discussed above, as they cover topics such as horror, comedy, social media and more. The reviewers look at monographs, anthologies, films, and comic books produced around the world and devoted to exploring popular culture from a variety of historical periods. Heidi Ippolito reviews *Dislike-Minded: Media, Audiences, and the Dynamics of Taste*, in which author Jonathan Gray sets out to provide a nuanced discussion of how people express distaste for films, TV shows, music, sports, and video games. Dennis Owen Frohlich offers his thoughts on author Brian Boxer Wachler's *Influenced: The Impact of Social Media*

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on Our Perception, which explores the rise of influencers and considers their impact on audiences. Francis Shor's monograph *Soupy Sales and the Detroit Experience: Manufacturing a Television Personality*, which offers insights into the popular culture of the 1950s, is the subject of Graham Cassano's review. Sarah Stanley discusses editor Simon Bacon's anthology *The Transmedia Vampire: Essays on Technological Convergence and the Undead*, which collects essays interrogating the impact vampires have had across various media. Moving beyond scholarly books, Carlos Tkacz provides some discussion about the first two volumes of *Frank Herbert's Dune: The Graphic Novel*, Elizabeth Shiller reviews the darkly comedic film *The Enormity of Life*, and Arthi Vasudevan discusses the South Korean dramedy film *Lucky Chan-sil*.

As always, I am grateful to my reviewers for their contributions, as the journal would not have a reviews section without them. I also want to extend my heartfelt thanks to my assistant editor Linda Howell, who found time to proofread the reviews and offer her thoughts on them even as she navigates the despotic restrictions currently imposed on educators in her home state of Florida. Solidarity, sister.

Finally, I want to say that if you wish to contribute to the reviews section of the *Popular Culture Studies Journal*, please email me at olson429@uwm.edu, as I am always on the lookout for contributors looking to offer their positive, constructive thoughts about anything relevant to the field of popular culture studies.

Bacon, Simon, Ed. *The Transmedia Vampire: Essays on Technological Convergence and the Undead*. McFarland, 2021.

Simon Bacon's edited volume *The Transmedia Vampire* successfully showcases an array of interdisciplinary approaches interrogating the lasting impact the vampire has had on pop culture for almost two centuries, across every imaginable medium. These essays are accessibly written and well enough contextualized to appeal to a general readership but nuanced enough to simultaneously appeal to scholars. At the reasonable price-point of just under fifty dollars, the volume is only slightly more expensive than similar general interest nonfiction works and is significantly less expensive than the average academic book.

Collectively, the essays throughout *The Transmedia Vampire* innovatively explore methods of re-viewing the creature's ever-evolving public image. John Edgar Browning concludes his insightful forward by asserting that "We are, all of us, Renfields in our slavish devotion to the vampires of our age, and I'm not so sure we mind" (10). In the introduction that follows, editor Simon Bacon contextualizes the need for this collection. He explains that while "Transmedia and technological convergence are very much at the forefront of cultural analysis" and "while there are many studies covering the way fictional narratives and characters are of vital importance to transmedia," surprisingly "none have focused solely on" the figure of the vampire (12). In identifying this critical oversight, Bacon asserts the distinctly transmedia nature of the creature, whose representations are "continually transforming across all formats and mediums" and which continue "to fascinate contemporary culture" (12).

Providing a necessary entry-point for non-experts, Bacon's introduction then foregrounds the core tenets of transmedia theory, as well as of Henry Jenkins' theory of "convergence culture." In doing so, Bacon highlights Jenkins' concepts of "immersion" and "extraction." These lenses frame the essays that follow, which explore the vampire's contradictory power to pull us into the increasingly well-wrought secondary worlds in which it flourishes, while simultaneously emerging into the "real world" through its ever-increasing accrual of cultural capital in forms that include scholarship, merchandizing, and fandom activities. Regardless of mode, vampire fiction tends to be particularly self-referential, with subsequent entries responding to, repeating, and/or subverting the existing undead canon. Bacon posits this continuous re-telling and re-adaptation as the vampire's most

potent form of resurrection. He also briefly examines the natures of famous pop culture vampires from Varney and Carmilla to Edward Cullen, demonstrating the long history of genre-defining transmediation.

The collection is divided into four sections. The first focuses specifically on adaptations and re-creations of Dracula. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock's "We Are Dracula: *Penny Dreadful* and the Dracula Megatext" explores the application of the series' "postmodern pastiche formula" when re-creating pop culture's most famous vampire (36). Weinstock explains that while the show's Dracula "gestures… toward Stoker's vampire ur-text," he is "just as much a product of subsequent representations" (37). In the essay that follows, Wayne Derek Pigeon-Coote explores the specific sub-strain of Stoker adaptations in which Count Dracula is portrayed as a redeemable tragic hero by explicitly connecting him to the historical Vlad the Impaler. The final essay in section one, by Cathleen Allyn Conway, provides a timely interrogation of the changes to Mina Murray Harker's character that are wrought by the continual process of transmedia *Dracula* adaptation.

Section two departs from the specific focus on Stoker to examine the vampire more broadly "Across Mediums, Platforms and Levels of Engagement." The essays in this section variously focus on transitions from stage to screen (Wisker); video game vampires as enemies, allies, and player-characters (Edrei); audience engagement in play with merchandized dolls from the *Vampirina* and *Monster High* franchises (Newman-Stille); and the *Carmilla* web series' product-placement driven engagement with modern period politics (Heller-Nicholas). The final two essays in this section are especially powerful, breaking new ground through their emphases on specifically feminine, real-world engagements with vampire transmediation.

The third section, on "Transnational Transmedia," prioritizes vampiric secondary worlds from traditions beyond dominant white, Anglophone culture, emphasizing their responses to Western franchises in the forms of resistance, incorporation, and/or re-writing. The most interesting articles in this section focus on appropriation and reimagining. Svetlana Seibel's "Thinking in Connections: A.A. Carr's *Eye Killers* and F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu*" examines indigenous North American re-interpretations of the vampire. Katarzyna Ancuta's "From Revenants to Vampires: The Transmedia Evolution of the Jiangshi" explores how this independently developed Chinese undead creature has come to increasingly encounter and appropriate aspects of Western vampires.

The collection's final section, "Interventions, Fandom, Ownership," centers on the complicated negotiations of creative agency driving the worlds of vampire transmedia, which continue to be sustained by urtexts, self-references, adaptations, and fandom. The essays here alternately explore the adaptive lacunae created within Machado's palimpsestuous remediation of Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (Wilson); the narrative resonances and dissonances created when the world of *The Vampire Diaries* is spun-off into a new series, in which several of the original show's side-characters are re-positioned as central protagonists (Bernardi); the not-entirely-successful efforts of Anne Rice to maintain narrative authority over her characters as they transcend media (Davidel); and how Rice's related attempts at retaining control result from her own shift toward becoming an author of transmedia vampire fiction (Gledhill). Bernardi's essay is the most unique within this section, its tightened focus exploring vampiric spin-offs as microcosms of the broader, increasingly frequent, pop culture trend toward backward franchise expansion, which constructs pasts for existing characters. Bernardi draws especially effective connections to the expansive Star Wars I.P., her insights possessing useful applications for deconstructing more recent examples of this phenomena such as Amazon's ill-wrought *Lord of the Rings* prequel series, *The Rings of Power* (2022), and HBO's contemporaneously released *Game of Thrones* prequel series, *House of the Dragon* (2022).

The Transmedia Vampire represents an overall effective addition to the significant body of existing vampire scholarship, carving out space within this over-saturated area of academia through its focus on the less-well-discussed transmedia vampire. However, I have several critiques. The first is that Lorna Piatti-Farnell's "Vampire Tourism: Transmedia Narratives, Cultural Histories and Locating the Undead" would be better suited to section one due to its focus on Stoker. It appears thematically out of place in section two, particularly due to its attention to Stoker's reconstruction of the patently white Whitby. My second critique is the collection's over-attention to Rice at the expense of more modern, less well discussed transmedia vampire authors. Lastly, an essay on transmediation throughout the Twilight Saga would have been welcome here, especially given the franchise's rejection of traditional vampire lore; its transitions from novel, to screen, to graphic novel; Meyer's novelistic remediations of *Twilight* from Edward's perspective and later through gender-inversion; and the series' extensive fan-engagement with marketing, merchandizing, theorizing, and fan-ficing. Despite these shortcomings in organization and emphasis, this collection successfully contributes to the

extensive body of existing vampire criticism, effectively examining transmediation as a perpetual form of resurrection.

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Boxer Wachler, Brian. *Influenced: The Impact of Social Media on Our Perception.* Rowman & Littlefield, 2022.

Since the rise of Web 2.0 and social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, and others in the early 2000s and 2010s, society has seen the emergence of a new kind of celebrity. Traditional media have long idolized actors, musicians, politicians, and athletes. While such individuals still have currency in digital spaces, audiences are increasingly gravitating toward the influencer, a person with a large social media following who often seems more authentic and relatable than traditional celebrities. *Influenced* is written by one such influencer, Brian Boxer Wachler, M.D., an eye surgeon whose videos debunking dubious medical claims on TikTok went viral during the COVID-19 pandemic. Boxer Wachler sets out to understand how audiences are influenced, both positively and negatively, by influencers like himself, and along the way offers tips on how the reader can become an influencer themselves.

Dr. Brian, as he is known by his patients, began his influencer journey during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. His claim to fame is posting videos of himself alongside other videos on TikTok of people making various medical claims. He then rates the claims as "cap" or not. "Cap" is Gen Z slang for falsehoods, which Dr. Brian emphasizes by wearing a blue baseball cap with the word "cap" printed across the top. His videos went viral, and he soon became an influencer. Boxer Wachler is not a media scholar by trade (most of his references come from the popular press, though there are a decent number of academic references in the text as well). For anybody who has studied media effects, many of the arguments about the positives and negatives of social media will be familiar territory. At the very least, Boxer Wachler's examples provide a freshness to the discussion, as he amply includes references to post-2020 social media controversies. These references likely will not remain current for long, given the speed at which social media moves, but such is the challenge of anybody writing about this topic. Boxer Wachler

liberally uses Gen Z slang (I, myself, got tired of hearing of "cap" every chapter) and includes a helpful glossary for anybody struggling to keep up with the younger generation. Most of his social media examples also involve TikTok, the latest fad, so if any reader is still wondering what all the fuss is about, this book will keep them updated.

The book begins by defining what an influencer is and how audiences are thus influenced by them. Boxer Wachler conducted interviews with 15 other influencers, all from the TikTok and Instagram world, and sprinkles their perspectives throughout. While the interviews are not the focus (again, Boxer Wachler is not a media scholar, so he does not approach interviews as a method of answering research questions), they add color to the discussion. Early on he incorporates his idea of Perceptual Intelligence (PI), which he defines as "a person's ability to distinguish reality from fantasy using critical thinking skills by the pursuit and analysis of available logical facts" (241), and which he had previously written about in a 2017 book by the same name. Anybody familiar with media literacy ideas will find substantial overlap with PI.

He then shares research into the effects of using social media on the brain, particularly the adolescent brain. The focus is on how social media provides the brain with dopamine hits, the "tiny yet powerful neurotransmitter that stimulates the pleasure centers" (38). These references to dopamine happen throughout the book and can get tiresome. Some of this material echoes concerns parents and educators have long had about the adverse effects of kids and teens using social media. From here, he discusses the dangers of misinformation and disinformation, cancel culture, depression, bullying, suicide, and deepfake technology.

By Chapter 7, he switches to the business side of social media influence, distinguishing between traditional celebrities who are popular on social media and internet-born influencers. He frequently shares his own experience as an influencer, differentiating between what he does (using social media to supplement his professional career) and other influencers whose social media platforms are their career. His insight as an influencer, paired with the occasional comment from his influencer friends, lends credibility and authenticity to the manuscript.

The final third of the book introduces new topics of concern, from sexual content on social media (Chapter 8), to distractions and unproductivity (Chapter 9), to the cult-like impact certain influencers have over their followers (Chapter 10). These concerns are not new, and the rushed discussion fails to do them justice.

Chapter 10 especially needs more attention to fully articulate the dangers of following an influencer uncritically.

By the end of the book, Boxer Wachler changes tracks once again. Chapter 11 offers a primer on how to become an influencer. He provides tips and suggestions based on his own experience, sharing how to get started, how to monetize one's content, how to secure a talent manager, and more. This chapter reads more like a tutorial from an online magazine, and much of the content is common knowledge for anybody who has considered starting a professional social media platform. Nonetheless, Boxer Wachler weaves in his own experience, as he does throughout the book, which provides a freshness to the discussion.

The final chapter attempts to end on a positive note, offering tips on how to live with social media and use it productively, rather than letting it consume one's life. Some of this material is directed at parents, offering once again suggestions that have been articulated elsewhere. Because much of the book is focused on the numerous (real) dangers of social media influence, this chapter does not quite fit the narrative. I agree with Boxer Wachler, though, when he writes, "social media influence is here to stay, which means we have no choice but to accept and deal with it as best we can" (197). Ultimately, each person needs to figure out for themselves where they draw the line with social media, and each user will come to different conclusions on these matters.

This book is best suited to readers who do not know much about social media influencers and want to get up to speed with the latest happenings on social media platforms, particularly TikTok. People who have long studied and followed social media trends, either academically or professionally, will not find much new in this book. Boxer Wachler's breezy, conversational style, interspersed with honest anecdotes about his own missteps and successes on social media, make this an overall easy and charming read.

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Gray, Jonathan. *Dislike-Minded: Media, Audiences, and the Dynamics of Taste*. NYU Press, 2021.

Pushing back on notions of dislike as a purely negative perspective, Jonathan Gray's *Dislike-Minded* gives a voice to "dislikers" and offers pathways toward a more complex and constructive discussion of dislike. For Gray, dislike is not only "complex," but also "a deeply relational act"; when audiences express dislike, they may also "perform identity," create community, and reveal "absences" that may otherwise remain silent (4). Gray makes it clear that the book focuses on "engaged" dislikes, not passive or "mundane" disinterestedness (5), and he also makes distinctions between dislike, hate, and trolling (193).

The book makes a compelling argument for expanding and understanding "the vocabulary of dislike" (95) and how it might help to expand the field of pop culture studies. Gray's driving thesis is that dislikes should be studied as much as likes, as both provide useful insights into audience behavior and attitudes. While much of fandom studies has focused on what fans and audiences like, Gray worries that "some discussions about wants and desires for the media will only take place when talking about dislikes" (91). Structurally, Gray introduces various categories and expressions of dislike (e.g., "worst violators," "unmet expectations," "dealbreakers," "hatewatchers," etc.) amid filling in gaps within existing theories and approaches in audience studies. The writing, meanwhile, feels exploratory and conversational, imbued with a sense of curiosity and invitation for further research.

Gray claims his book as "qualitative, cultural studies work" (25), and relies primarily on 216 face-to-face interviews from five different studies (four of these five were conducted by different research assistants). Aside from his work in Malawi, Gray did not conduct the bulk of the interviews himself, but the study does not seem to suffer for it. In fact, the project gains additional perspectives with varied identities (rather than a single, while male perspective) and opportunities for early career academics to collaborate. Gray acknowledges these benefits as well as where the methods could be improved and hopes further research in this field will continue "with work that is better methodologically designed to analyze the affects of dislike" (25). The interviews are supplemented by additional data from survey responses (115) as well as "reviews, blog posts, think-pieces, and fan-forum discussions" (122). Gray also applies a "*refractive audience analysis* technique" in which "asking about responses to the adaptation tells us about responses to the original" (118 emphasis in original).

Dislike-Minded seems to answer Nick Couldry's call toward "demythification" and exploring gaps that have been ignored or left incomplete (19). Using textual theory rooted in Roland Barthes's distinction between "work" and "text" (32) and

Gérard Genette's coining of "paratexts" (33), Gray instead argues for a focus on "the audience" as both likers and dislikers and "the text," which includes the work itself as well as surrounding cultural impacts and paratexts (56). Moving beyond active-as-positive "participatory culture" theorized by John Fiske and Henry Jenkins, Gray argues that dislike should be included in audience meaning-making as well. In other words, audiences need not be positive, pleased, or enthusiastic to be considered active. Lastly, Gray revisits Pierre Bourdieu's well-known work on taste as class performance, seeking the opportunity to expand on Bourdieu's incomplete framework (without dismissing it entirely). Rather than restricting taste and dislike to class, Gray examines other aspects of identity such as gender, sexuality, race, age, and nationality. Gray also critiques the Bourdieuian suspicion that dislike should be associated with "hegemony and power" (13), arguing instead that audiences are also capable of pushing back against hegemonic power structures through expressions of dislike.

The first chapter gives a voice to audiences who feel "forced" to consume or enjoy "ubiquitous and inescapable" texts (39), often causing them to feel fatigued, isolated, trapped, and alienated. Leaning on Sara Ahmed's "feminist killjoy" (41), Gray hypothesizes that "engaged dislike" might be "heightened" within "marginalized individuals and communities" (45), as these groups often perform more labor in the act of watching texts that are not always "for" them. Gray also includes important clarifications about dislike in this chapter, namely that specific dislikes may be understood as a dislike of an entire genre, and dislikers do not have to engage deeply or comprehensively for their dislike to be considered legitimate. Chapter 2 begins to discern specific types of dislikes: "worst violator" dislikes that reveal general critiques of the media landscape through specific distastes, and "unmet expectations" that reveal what happens when audiences feel let down by beloved texts. It also highlights interviewee discussions of their own (white) privilege and how it overlaps with certain expressions (or avoidance) of dislike.

Chapter 3 applies refractive audience analysis to explore the categories of "feminist dealbreakers" and "dislike edging into hate" (16). This opens up a discussion of how audiences might "transition from love or like to dislike and/or hate" (135). In Chapter 4, Gray "ask[s] deeper questions of dislike" (145) with a desire to explore "performances of identity" that expand beyond Bourdieu's "identity-based superiority" (17). And finally, Chapter 5 layers various intersections of dislike, begging for future studies about "hatewatching" (the joy, spectacle, and comradery of dislike) (177), the complexity of "intersectional"

dislikes (194), and "the possibility of deception or self deception" within dislike (198).

Dislike-Minded concludes with the suggestion that understanding dislike could help us understand political dislike, disappointment, and ire. While Gray considers this to be a loose "hypothesis to be tested by others" (215), the notion that "audiences are representative and reflective of citizens" (213) is one that should consider what audiences (and citizens) dislike as well as what they like. While the primary textual focus of the book is on film and television (with some inclusion of music, sports, and video games), the book could have included a clearer distinction of what "texts" were included in this work and what kinds of texts could use more attention in future research (e.g., novels, TikTok videos, visual art, etc.). Gray has a deep understanding of audience studies, fandom studies, and cultural studies, and his invitation for further research (rather than providing an umbrella theory) is compelling and relevant.

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Herbert, Brian (w), Kevin J. Anderson (w), Raúl Allén (a), and Patricia Martín (a). *Frank Herbert's Dune: The Graphic Novel, Part 1* and *Part 2*. Harry N. Abrams, 2020 and 2022.

In their preface to *Frank Herbert's Dune: The Graphic Novel, Part 1,* writers Brian Herbert and Kevin J. Anderson state their goal with this adaption: "a truly faithful" version of the original novel. This emphasis seems important; as with any well-loved work of fiction, especially fiction that creates as immersive a world as Frank Herbert managed to build in 1965 with the original release of *Dune*, any attempt at adaption is fraught with difficulty and comes with a dedicated fanbase that is, almost by definition, difficult to please. Some previous adaptions, such as David Lynch's famous 1984 film version (which had its own, concurrent comic book release titled *Dune: The Official Comic Book*, penned by Ralph Macchio and drawn by Bill Sienkiewicz), took liberties with the source material that strayed perhaps too far while also trying to incorporate elements that did not translate well to film (such as the characters' thoughts, realized via whispered narration). The 2000 Sci-

Fi Channel version, a three-part miniseries, stayed closer to the text and suffered for it, bogged down by exposition and the attempt to fit in as much as possible. Since the publication of the first book of the graphic novel, Denis Villeneuve's film version has come and gone and is perhaps the most successful of the novel's film versions because the director, in this case, focused on staying "very close to the spirit of the book" rather than emphasizing accuracy (Watercutter).

The issues with these adaptions, according to many critics, is the translation from one media form to another. "The major stumbling block for everyone who has tried hasn't been a matter of how to bring it to the screen," writes *Time*'s Sarah Kurchak, "but how much of its almost 500 pages (not including the appendixes) they can and should include." Indeed, how does one show the dense interior landscapes of the characters the novel spends so much time on in any other form? How can another medium do justice to the weight of history and the structures of imperialism that both play such an important role in the plot of the novel? How can the story be told in any other way than several hundred pages? Herbert and Anderson make clear in their preface that they believe the graphic novel is the ideal form to "bring Frank Herbert's original novel to life in exactly the way he envisioned it." In my opinion, they were not wrong.

This adaptation's first strength lies in the beauty of the art; Raúl Allén and Patricia Martín, both of whom have worked as illustrators for major comic companies, do a wonderful job in translating the prose of the novel into images of sequential art. Theirs is a less dark version of the *Dune* universe than the film adaptions gave us; the *Dune* of the graphic novel is full of color that, while muted, imbues both the world at large and each scene individually with an emotional depth that goes beyond melodrama. The graphic novel genre allows the reader to dwell on the details Allén and Martín lovingly include – the incredible desert landscapes of Arrakis, the feudal stylings of the Houses, the technology that permeates this universe almost like magic, the costumes and uniforms, the architecture of the buildings, etc. Perhaps most impressive is their ability to convey emotion and movement through the bodies of their characters. Long scenes of dialogue, necessary for any faithful adaption of the novel, are rendered dynamic through the characters' facial expressions. When the action does come, for *Dune* is an adventure novel as much as anything else, Allen and Martin deliver a sense of intensity and movement that leaps from the page.

In addition to the wonder of seeing the *Dune* world well rendered in art, the comic format is particularly well-suited for certain aspects of the narrative. The use

of narrative boxes is especially effective, as it allows the comic to include the inner dialogues of the characters simultaneously with their actions and speech-acts. The narrative boxes are color-coded by character, which makes keeping track of them simple and visually appealing. This allows Herbert and Anderson to stay closer to the text in a way the films could not. Paneling and layout are other comic elements that lend well to this story; Allen and Martin are able to use their layouts in various ways that help convey the original sense of the novel effectively. This is especially clear in *Book 2* when Paul begins to have his visions and when Jessica goes through the overdose that makes her a Reverend Mother; the comic medium allows Allen and Martin to visually reflect the important themes of the novel that start to become cogent in this part of the plot – ideas of fate and prophecy and choice – through alternatingly symmetrical and open layouts. The former speaks to the questions of destiny and its tension with free will Herbert explored in the original text to great effect, and the latter allows the reader to experience another of the novel's themes, that being how, even amid something inevitable, the flow of time itself is loose, fearful, unknown. At heart here is the simultaneity that the comic form allows, for the reader of a comic is always in two places at once: distant, taking in each page as a whole, and close, taking in each frame one at a time. Between these two poles is the flow of the narrative from one frame to the next, from one page to another, and Allen and Martin use these possibilities to enhance the story and bring it closer to the original reading experience while also adding something new.

The editions are not, however, perfect. Herbert and Anderson make some interesting creative decisions, choosing to leave Paul out of some important scenes early in the narrative. This allows them to focus the first book more on Leto and Jessica – this is a significant divergence from the novel as Paul is our main point-of-view through most of the text. While this does not, in my opinion, necessarily hurt the story (I am not sure it enhances it either), die-hard *Dune* fans will surely notice and might wonder at the choice. It should also be said that the writing is not always as good as it could be. Again, this is not a criticism of the overall quality of the graphic novel but perhaps is more just a symptom of the fact that Herbert and Anderson are prose writers first. The comic format is a very different medium, and they do not quite have the mastery of the form, in terms of the writing, that their artists clearly have and that other veteran comic writers exhibit so effortlessly.

Overall, while the adaption perhaps falls ever-so-slightly short of being "pure *Dune,*" as Herbert and Anderson say in their preface to the first installment – for, if we are honest, the novel is a masterpiece and is as "pure *Dune*" as anything needs

to be – the graphic novel is a wonderful, beautifully made, and enjoyable addition to the *Dune* landscape and is therefore worth picking up. As both a *Dune* fan and a fan of comic books, it was a pleasure to see the original story in a medium I love, and I am eagerly awaiting the third book.

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Shor, Francis. *Soupy Sales and the Detroit Experience: Manufacturing a Television Personality*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2021.

There is a gravity to academic prose that becomes tiresome. Fran Shor's *Soupy Sales and the Detroit Experience* is a serious book that takes comedy, and urban history, seriously, but without the choking solemnity that usually accompanies histories of twentieth century mass culture and urban space. Early on, Shor relates a Soupy Sales chestnut that, in itself, makes the entire book worthwhile:

> Two goats are busy eating garbage. While they're eating, one of them finds a roll of old film and proceeds to eat it up. After he finishes chewing up the film, the other goat asks him, "Did you enjoy the film?" And the other goat says, "Actually, I preferred the book!" (7)

Shor peppers his tale of the rise of Soupy Sales with such jokes, even as he tells the story of Detroit's apartheid past, a broken and desperate working class, and the social forces that emerged in the twentieth century but continue to determine the city's present and future.

I must admit that I have memories of Soupy Sales, and they are not as affectionate as those of the author. While Shor knew Soupy from his syndicated kid's show, my experience of the comedian came a couple of decades later, when

Sales made his living on the gameshow circuit. Sitting in front of my grandmother's TV in the early 1970s, I saw Soupy Sales on shows like *The Hollywood Squares*, years after his heyday, and, even as a child, found his humor corny, perhaps, in part, because my grandmother found him so funny.

Yet through Shor's text, I have discovered a very different Soupy Sales. He was an improvisational comic, in love with jazz, kind to children, and a gift to the golden age of live television. His Borscht Belt sensibility, and his reimagining of the tradition of Yiddish humor, put Sales in the company of legendary figures like Sid Caesar, Ernie Kovacs, Woody Allen, and Lenny Bruce. True, he never directly challenged political authority (as did Bruce), or charted human sexuality (as did Allen), but his anarchic humor influenced the generation of youth that would attempt to change the world through politics and revolution. Shor does not overstate his claims for Sales's influence on the 1960s youth movement, but he does assign the comic a place beside *Mad Magazine* as one of the precursors of that movement (118).

Shor does an admirable job reconstructing Sales's career and situating his work in the context of Detroit, Los Angeles, and New York. Along the way, the author explores the new importance of television for families and youth in the 1950s (Chapter 2) and the anxieties facing Detroit's working-class viewers during that same period. Because of Shor's long engagement with Detroit history, his chapter on "The Detroit Experience in the 1950s" (41-57) provides an excellent summary of some of the most important social and labor histories of the city, relying, especially, upon the work of Thomas Sugrue (2005), as well as on Daniel Clark's (2018) powerful and heretical account of the economic uncertainties facing the city's autoworkers in the 1950s. Shor's explorations of the racial inequalities that shaped its urban landscape demonstrate that Detroit was, indeed, two cities: one for the white population and a quite different one for Black workers and citizens. In fact, the author does such an accomplished job exploring racial apartheid that this reader is left with a series of questions about Soupy Sales's audience. Did Black and white children equally adore Sales's afternoon show? Or were the divisions that marked the city's social geography also present in the television audience's preference? Unfortunately, Shor never really broaches that question. In part, I understand that his silence on that issue is the result of a lack of data. Nonetheless, because his concerns raise that question in the reader's mind, I wish he had explicitly acknowledged his inability to provide an answer.

Yet, when reconstructing Sales's evening program, Shor provides invaluable information that is otherwise inaccessible to the cultural historian. Sales had several programs on Detroit's WXYZ-TV station. During the day, he was a children's host, eating lunch with the kids, showing silent shorts, and doing puppet shows and comic bits. In the evening, he changed out of his oversized bow tie and hosted a sophisticated show built around jazz performances. And it is an impressive list of performers that Shor reconstructs, including Earl Hines, Johnny Hodges, Charlie Parker, Chet Baker, Miles Davis, Clifford Brown, Erroll Garner, Coleman Hawkins, Lester Young, Milt Jackson, and Thelonious Monk. Indeed, one of Shor's respondents, Joe Messina (of Motown fame), remembers "the exceptional and idiosyncratic pianist and his quartet [playing] his famous composition, 'Round Midnight,' for a lengthy seventeen or eighteen minutes rather than the seven minutes allotted to them. The intensity and length of this mini-Monk concert led Soupy to sign off by referring to tomorrow's program as the Thelonious Monk show" (83).

The book ends with Sales's departure from the Motor City. It was a complicated break that had to do with his personal life, his opportunities, and his sense that "to get anywhere in TV, a performer has to leave Detroit" (105). It is a necessary ending, but not necessarily a sad one. Unlike so many comics from that period, Sales does not descend into melancholy, drug addiction, or poverty. He continues to work through the years, always conscious of his roots in Detroit, and returning on periodic occasions. *Soupy Sales and the Detroit Experience* would be a useful addition to any class in popular culture, television, urban, or labor history. True, the author sometimes raises more questions than he answers, but that is a scholar's task. Shor does this work with a sense of mission and a commitment to empirical evidence and theoretical clarity. On several pages, I found myself laughing out loud. That alone makes the text a valuable addition to our post-pandemic libraries.

Graham Cassano
Oakland University

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The Enormity of Life. Dir. Eric Swinderman. Screenplay by Eric Swinderman and Carmen DeFranco. Perf. Breckin Meyer, Emily Kinney, Giselle Eisenberg. Anhedonia Pictures, 2021

The Enormity of Life is a dark, yet comedic example that not every story has a happy ending. The film tackles many heavy topics like mental illness, school shootings, and a loss of innocence. According to the film's writer and director, Eric Swinderman, "the enormity of life is that things can get really big, really fast," (Shiller). After a failed suicide attempt, Casey (Breckin Meyer), not only receives a substantial inheritance, but he also connects with a young woman, Jess (Emily Kinney), and her daughter, Jules (Giselle Eisenberg). In developing a relationship with them, he must decide whether his inheritance should help them or stay in the family.

Casey is an emotionally despondent man, suffering from anhedonia, who grew up with a mother who has tried to kill him multiple times due to her paranoid schizophrenia. Jess, meanwhile, is a young, single mom who struggles with her self-esteem and confidence. Together, they make each other happy which generates a sense of healing. On the surface, this film feels like it should have a happy ending, especially since the audience watches as Casey and Jess's friendship develops, but ultimately, not everyone wins their battle with mental illness. In the end, Casey decides to follow through with his plan to commit suicide because even though he's found a friend in Jess, those feelings are not strong enough to combat the fact that he does not want to end up like his mother.

What is interesting about this film is that the original title was Anhedonia, which "is a mental condition, by which the person who has that affliction, has an inability to experience joy," says Swinderman (Shiller). "They don't feel excited by the things that you and I might feel excited about or feel excited about, things that humans are excited about whether it's a new job, a career, money, drugs, sex, whatever it might be, they just kind of feel numb all the time, nothing really makes them experience joy" (Shiller). Swinderman, who changed the title at the insistence of his distributor, nevertheless kept the essence of the film in the tagline: a story without feeling.

Despite being a story without feeling, this movie is a rollercoaster of emotion that covers more than just mental illness and Swinderman hopes it sparks

conversations because he feels that we cannot talk about certain topics without getting political, stating:

> people often don't want to have tough conversations, they'd rather avoid those conversations. We don't talk a lot about mental illness. We don't talk a lot about guns without getting political… This film is not a political statement. So, I hope that people can watch a film like this and have a conversation about it. Maybe through talking about the movie, they open up a dialogue about mental illness, about suicide prevention, about gun violence and school shootings. (Shiller)

Even though *The Enormity of Life* came out in 2021, the conversations Swinderman hopes to spark are very much needed, especially as the topics of mental health and gun violence continue to make headlines.

After being inundated by the 24-hour news cycles covering school shootings, Jules has become very afraid and has convinced herself that she is going to experience a school shooting in her lifetime. Her fear has become so great that Jess believes she has PTSD. Jules' fear is not that farfetched, however, because more than 344,000 students have experienced a school shooting since Columbine in 1999 (Woodrow Cox, et al). While Jules fears she will experience one school shooting, that 344,000 does not account for students who have experienced a school shooting twice. After the shooting at Michigan State University in February 2023, parents of MSU students who survived the Sandy Hook, Oxford, and Parkland shootings came forward expressing their disbelief that their children were facing a second school shooting in their lifetime (Bosman; Rosenblatt et. al; Baldas).

This film is about the loss of innocence and how mental illness and school shootings rob us of that. Casey loses his innocence as a young boy as he felt he needed to grow up quickly to raise his mother after his sister abandons them. Jess had her daughter, Jules, when she was 16, which forced her to grow up and Jules is now growing up in a world where school shootings have seemingly become a norm of American childhood. This film highlights how life can be too much at times and this feeling makes this film universal. Regardless of what we have been through, we all understand that feeling when the enormity of life weighs too heavily on our shoulders.

Elizabeth Shiller
Ohio University

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Lucky Chan-sil. Dir. Kim Cho-hee. Screenplay by Kim Cho-hee. Perf. Kang Mal-Geum, Youn Yuh-jung, and Kim Young-min. M-Line Distribution, 2019.

Women characters in film and women working in creative media industries such as film have often been ruthlessly given short shrift. Meaningful research and writing on issues faced by women working in these industries as well as critical writing about their works has become urgent as more women are creating very insightful films, on their own terms. In the contemporary South Korean film industry, women filmmakers are gaining critical and commercial successes within their own nations and abroad. It is therefore crucial to evaluate their works and successes and not simply push their films to the margins with superficial and even erroneous labelling. The feature film *Lucky Chan-Sil* (2020), the directorial debut of South Korean film

producer Kim Cho-hee helps shine a light on such issues within contemporary Asian film industries. Cho-hee worked as a producer on acclaimed auteur Hong Sang-soo's films for several years before writing and directing the minimalistic and revelatory *Lucky Chan-sil*.

Cho-hee introduces the film's protagonist as a kind of fictional version of her professional self. The narrative follows indie film producer Lee Chan-sil (Kang Mal-geum) as she is plunged into an existential crisis when her only regular collaborator, film director Ji (Seo Sang-won), unexpectedly passes away on the eve on their next film shoot. Suddenly unmoored from her professional cocoon that she thought would be there forever, Chan-sil does not know what to do with her life. Having her own very precise understanding of what cinema is and what kind of films are worth her time, she is unable to find film work to her taste.

Dismissing Hong Kong eighties martial arts films, which a new acquaintance and possible romantic interest, filmmaker Kim Yeong (Bae Yoo-ram) affirms great liking for, Chan-sil finds herself at great odds with the world around her. Everyone seems to have smoothly and quickly moved on following Ji's death. Chan-sil's close actress friend Sophie (Yoon Seung-ah) has taken up other assignments and a duplicitous producer sarcastically dismisses Chan-sil's entire prior work – produced over more than a decade – as having no value.

Yet Cho-hee does not spare Chan-sil either. Chan-sil's complete admiration of Japanese filmmaker Yasujiro Ozu as she passionately justifies his work to a self-assured Yeong only serves to alienate her from him further. As Yeong calmly points out, Ozu is an auteur for valid reasons but his own excitement and love for cinema comes from different flavors. This potential romantic date turned disaster results in reality crashing down on Chan-sil. The incident serves as the first master stroke Cho-hee employs to pull Chan-sil out of her cozy professional bubble of the past into the real world where different cinemas thrive as do genuine, valid appreciations for the same. Chan-sil needs to find her footing in this reality.

The second reality check occurs the next morning, when, in a steamy haze, the ghost of Hong Kong cinema legend Leslie Cheung appears before Chan-sil. Their meeting is one of the film's finest sequences, as it coats Chan-sil's existential angst with wry comedy. Watching Leslie jump down the steps towards her, Chan-sil is sure she has completely lost her mind, and her breakdown is comedic perfection.

Cheung (Kim Young-min), who is fluent in Korean, becomes Chan-sil's confidant and genuine friend in need. Cho-hee writes this relationship with great affection and respect. For her, cinema is varied and each as precious, regardless of

where it is produced. By bringing in Cheung, who exists outside of Chan-sil's own filmic culture, to ally with and gently help the cinematically snobbish Chan-sil find her filmmaking essence and purpose again, Cho-hee makes Chan-sil, and perhaps the viewer as well, appreciate this unconventional relationship.

As Chan-sil's landlady, veteran actress Youn Yuh-jung brings in much needed serenity, and her home, in which Chan-sil has rented a room, becomes a small but safe refuge for Chan-sil to work through her crises. The character of Kim Yeong as a romantic partner is coolly dismissed by Cho-hee as unwarranted even though she puts Chan-sil in quite a distressing situation. Cho-hee portrays the character's actions as a moment of weakness for Chan-sil, thrust upon her by expectations from her friends because of her age. Despite the awkwardness of their meeting, Chan-sil quickly regains her composure and her self-respect as well.

Lucky Chan-Sil is perceptive and poignant in its depiction of an independent woman and filmmaker who struggles with her own ethics and individuality when she hits unexpected professional obstacles in a male dominated industry that is unforgiving and double-dealing. Superbly blending understated drama and droll comedy, Cho-hee depicts how women working both behind and in front of the camera struggle but nevertheless move forward when life hands them tough cards to deal with. She ruminates on the value of cinema and its subjectivity, on ageism and expectations imposed upon working women, and on their existential crises even as they possess a healthy sense of self-worth.

Lucky Chan-sil welcomingly breaks stereotypical representations of women who work in film. Cho-hee's script appositely, and with charming wit, portrays women who are in total control of themselves – their bodies, their minds, their lives – even as they toil in highly misogynistic industries. *Lucky Chan-sil* is a quiet yet boldly feminist film that opens doors to the unique cinematic talents of women in South Korean cinema. Meaningfully writing about them, whether creating characters in a screenplay or examining them in a review, is one way of celebrating and honoring their cinema.

Arthi Vasudevan
Independent scholar

POPULAR CULTURE STUDIES JOURNAL

ABOUT

The *Popular Culture Studies Journal* is an academic, peer-reviewed, refereed journal for scholars, academics, and students from the many disciplines that study popular culture. The journal serves the MPCA/ACA membership, as well as scholars globally who recognize and support its mission based on expanding the way we view popular culture as a fundamental component within the contemporary world.

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TOPICS COVERED:
Based on analysis of the proceedings of the Midwest PCA/ACA and the national organization reveals that most popular culture scholars are interested in American-based:

- Film
- Music and Dance
- Television
- Sports
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- Literature
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- Games
- Animation
- Theater
- Fashion
- Computers
- Social Media
- World Wide Web
- Mobile Computers
- Professional Wrestling
- Archives and Museums
- Food and Drink
- Fairs, Festivals, and Carnivals
- Toys
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However, many scholars approach these topics from an interdisciplinary perspective, which adds significant value over single-issue or more focused/specialized journals.

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Essays should range between 15-25 pages of double-spaced text in 12 pt. Times New Roman font, including all images, endnotes, and Works Cited pages. Please note that the 15-page minimum should be 15 pages of written article material. Less than 15 pages of written material will be rejected and the author asked to develop the article further. Essays should also be written in clear US English in the active voice and third person, in a style accessible to the broadest possible audience. Authors should be sensitive to the social implications of language and choose wording free of discriminatory overtones.

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Written reviews should be roughly 800-1,000 words and should be typed, double-spaced with 12 pt. Times New Roman font. Research and documentation must adhere *to The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* and *The MLA Style Manual*, 8th edition, which requires a Works Cited list, with parenthetical author/page references in the text. Punctuation, capitalization, hyphenation, and other matters of style must also follow *The MLA Handbook* and *The MLA Style Manual*. If you are interested in submitting any alternative form of review, please contact the reviews editor directly with your proposed format. Guidelines will be determined depending on the proposed format.

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MidwestPCA/ACA

The Midwest Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association is a regional branch of the Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association. The organization held its first conference in Duluth, Minnesota, in 1973. After a five-year hiatus during the 1990s, the organization held a come-back conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 2002.

MPCA/ACA usually holds its annual conference in a large Midwestern city in the United States. In the last several years, conferences have been held in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Ohio. Upcoming conferences will be held in Missouri and Indiana. The conference typically is held in October.

Anyone is welcome to join and submit proposals for consideration at the MPCA/ACA conference. Membership in MPCA/ACA is by no means limited to those working or living in the Midwest or even the United States. In fact, presenters have come from as far away as Florida and California, and Norway and Australia.

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