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Representations of Journalistic Practices in Anglophone Literature, Film and Other Media

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Introduction: Representations of Journalistic Practices in Anglophone Literature, Film and Other Media

The relationship between journalism and literature is longstanding, predating the emergence of journalism as a distinct discipline with established principles and conventions (Jiménez and Pérez-Escolar 100). Agents of information, including media owners and (pseudo-)journalists, and their practices have attracted sustained literary attention since the 19th century, when the news industry became a central element of modern mass communication. Historically, this attention was particularly strong in Britain and the United States; representations of journalism, in an ever-widening range of media, still thrive in the cultural production of these countries and increasingly in other English-speaking parts of the world. Journalistic agents and actions have been depicted in anglophone fiction, autofiction and films, on television and the stage, and, more recently, in digital media. Such representations fictionalize, dramatize and often criticize journalism's practices, forming "part of the apparatus of scrutiny" of the profession (McNair 15). They "represent a [Luhmannian] second-tier symbolic system" that "function[s] to elucidate, interrogate, and comment on the workings of the first-tier regulatory system of journalism itself" (18).

The extensive range of fictional(ized) representations of journalistic work illustrates the central role the profession occupies in modern societies. Journalists are entrusted with the authority and responsibility to inform the public accurately

and independently about events outside direct observation. Journalism has been (idealistically) described as the fourth pillar of democracy due to its significant influence on political decision-making and public opinion. As Walter Lippmann wrote in 1920, "the newspaper is in all literalness the bible of democracy, the book out of which a people determines its conduct" (47). At the same time, journalistic practice has always been shaped by ethical tensions and institutional pressures regarding truth-telling. While many journalists have risked or lost their freedom and lives to reveal the truth (as documented by organizations like UNESCO and Reporters Without Borders), others have been involved in scandals, notably the case of the now-defunct *News of the World* tabloid in the United Kingdom.

Journalism thus functions not only as a professional practice but also as a potent cultural symbol, with fictional representations engaging this significance. Fiction does not simply mirror real-life practices; rather, it delivers a framework for observing journalism and evaluating its social relevance. Such representations can raise awareness among audiences regarding the value of ethical journalism and the media's role in shaping modern cultural self-understanding. Simultaneously, fictional narratives project images formed by the interests, emotional structures and values of their time, as well as prevailing cultural conceptions of journalism. These accounts frame journalism in specific ways, ranging from idealization to spectacle to critique, and depict journalists as protagonists in heroic, villainous or tragic roles that elicit both intellectual and emotional replies from audiences.

Journalism scholars have examined journalism both in general and through specific forms, such as investigative, war, political and sensationalist journalism, analyzing its evolution in response to historical developments, including the emergence of digital media. Research has also addressed structural problems, such as media-specific conditions and the interactions among various agents in the journalistic field, including political authorities, market forces, media owners, editors, journalists and audiences. Considerable attention has focused on the journalist's societal and political roles, their influence on public opinion and the mechanisms that regulate or suppress journalistic activity. These discussions commonly engage in ethical questions, emphasizing commitments to objectivity, factual accuracy, impartiality, truth and moral responsibility. Conversely, scholarship also highlights instances of unethical conduct, such as journalists advancing personal agendas or supporting dubious causes.

Beyond journalism-specific theories, discussions of journalism frequently intersect with larger frameworks such as gender studies, trauma studies and sociology. Central questions include: What historical barriers have female journalists encountered? What psychological effects result from reporting on injustice, crime or atrocities? To what extent do journalists function as "social figures" (Schlechtriemen) who reflect and address the critical issues of their era? In the current context, the journalist's role has acquired renewed cultural and social significance amid crises in democracy, the rise of authoritarian regimes and increasing distrust

in the media, as well as an urgent call for reliable journalism. This significance is further heightened by the growth of misinformation and disinformation (Wardle and Derakshan), as well as the game-changing effects of digital media on information dissemination.

In the current media-saturated environment, the concept of truth and the media's role in informing the public have been subject to intense scrutiny, causing diminished public trust (Edelman Trust Barometer). Recent events have further damaged media credibility, while disinformation – intentionally and verifiably false information designed to mislead – has surfaced as a global concern (Bharali and Lahkar 118; Broda and Strömbäck 139). This phenomenon has greatly influenced public understanding of the world. Furthermore, as Kovach and Rosenstiel observe, public confidence in the possibility of achieving accurate accounts of events through objective verification has declined. They contend that this erosion "poses a threat not only to the notion of journalism but also to the prospect of civil society confronting and solving its problems. The public sphere becomes an arena solely for polarized debate, not for compromise, consensus, and solution" (105).

Within this complex context, fictionalizations of (un)ethical journalistic practices present a perspective from which societies can reflect on the authority of the press, the responsibilities of reporting and the tensions between ideals of truth and the realities of media production. In journalism, the term "Fifth Estate" denotes a network of alternative news sources enabled by new technologies and non-traditional practices. This concept embodies a form of watchdog journalism that questions traditional media, holding it accountable and questioning its own professional conventions (Berkowitz and Schwartz 6). The "Fifth Estate" thus plays a key role in ensuring media accountability for ethical responsibilities to inform the public. Extending this idea, fictional and other representations of journalistic practices can also be considered part of the "Fifth Estate." These accounts scrutinize the press by exposing (un)ethical conduct within the profession, raising public awareness of the value of ethical journalism and stressing citizens' responsibility in information consumption. In this way, these accounts help safeguard the media's role as a core pillar of democratic societies.

The cultural fascination with journalism has intensified in the current era, as authoritarian political trends and international conflicts highlight both the continuing importance and vulnerability of independent reporting. These circumstances have renewed scholarly and public interest in the journalist's role as a mediator of reality and interpreter of events. Cultural texts deal with these issues not by merely replicating journalistic practice, but by reframing it through narrative conventions, aesthetic strategies and genre-specific forms. Fictional representations may idealize journalists as heroic pursuers of truth, depict them as compromised actors within powerful institutions, or present their work as ethically and emotionally complex. In doing so, these accounts create a space for pondering the social significance of journalism and its associated cultural meanings.

Representations are determined by the specific affordances of the media in which they appear. Literary narratives, theatrical performances, cinematic storytelling and interactive digital media each frame journalistic practices differently, emphasizing certain aspects of the profession while obscuring others. Many narratives center on individual journalists and their personal experiences, highlighting the emotional, moral and psychological dimensions of reporting, whereas institutional processes, audiences and systemic structures often receive less attention. Additionally, representations across media forms may dramatize newsroom cultures, reveal the commodification of news, or interrogate the ideological structures that support journalistic authority. Analyzing these varied representations enables scholars to investigate not only how journalism is imagined but also how cultural narratives affect public perceptions of the profession.

The articles collected in this issue approach these themes from a variety of disciplinary approaches and through analyses of different media forms. In this vein, they shed light on the multiple ways in which cultural texts construct, interrogate and reimagine journalistic practices. To date, most examinations of cultural representations of journalism come from Journalism and Communication Studies, while they have received relatively limited scholarly attention from scholars in literary and cultural studies, a gap which this thematic issue aims to fill.

A keynote article by journalist and journalism scholar Sarah Lonsdale opens the issue and reviews the various theoretical and methodological approaches used to study journalism in fiction, ranging from literary analysis and media ethics to sociological theories such as Habermas's public sphere and Bourdieu's field theory. In addition, Lonsdale notes that portrayals of journalists in fiction function as meta-discourses, defining public understanding of the profession and highlighting the tensions between media power and democratic accountability.

Maxine De Wulf Helskens theorizes the result of empirical Communication Studies in "The Paradigm Paradox in Journalism Fiction: Constructing and Contesting Journalistic Discourses." The article examines theoretical perspectives on how fictional television narratives both reproduce and challenge the paradigms that shape journalistic self-understanding. The article conceptualizes journalism fiction as a form of metajournalistic discourse wherein the identity and legitimacy of journalism are debated through narrative and audience interpretation.

In another contribution from Communication Studies, Marta Pérez-Escolar, Narci Gómez Jarava and Lucía Calatayud-Cano explore the representation of female leadership in journalism with a comparative analysis of Katharine Graham in *The Post* and *Personal History*, addressing historical memory and media mythmaking. The article examines how the life and career of *The Washington Post*'s publisher have been depicted in autobiographical writing and cinematic adaptation. By tracing the transformation of Graham's biography into a cultural narrative, the article demonstrates that the memoir emphasizes vulnerability and gradual empowerment, while the film distills her story into exceptional, decisive female

leadership, showing how cultural storytelling shapes public perceptions of women in journalism and in positions of authority.

Questions of perspective and subjectivity are central to Renée Pastel's discussion of "The War Journalist's Embedded Views in Fact and Fiction." A scholar in Screen Studies, Pastel focuses on representations of war journalists during the early "War on Terror" in television series and documentaries. Her article examines how narratives of embedded journalism complicate conventional notions of journalistic objectivity. The figure of the war correspondent acts as both witness and participant, facing the ethical and emotional challenges of reporting from conflicts and conceding the limits of their perspective when translating personal wartime experiences for audiences and the impossibility of delivering a complete, neutral account.

The issue's subsequent articles are contributed by scholars from Literary and Cultural Studies. Esra Ünlü Çimen examines journalism as a professional culture and social environment in "Performing the Shared Habitus: Journalism(s) in Tom Stoppard's *Night and Day* and James Graham's *Ink*." Drawing upon Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of "habitus" and field theory, the article examines how the stage dramatizes the collective practices and values that constitute the journalistic field and renders visible the rituals, conflicts and power mechanisms that shape newsroom life.

It is only recently that English and American Studies have discussed journalism representations with attention to postcolonial and diversity issues. In "Journalism in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*: Images of Africa in the Society of Transparency," María J. López situates journalism within global debates on representation and visibility. The article interprets Bulawayo's novel as a critique of how journalistic and global media networks commodify images of suffering in the Global South for Western audiences, often depriving representations of Africa of critical and ethical reflection. In contrast to this journalistic framework, the novel advocates for opacity – difference, resistance and illegibility – as a means of challenging exploitative transparency. In doing so, it draws attention to the ethical and political dimensions of journalistic storytelling in a transnational context.

Jaya Shrivastava discusses the "Commodification of Journalism and the Crisis of Narrative" in Colson Whitehead's novel *John Henry Days* (2001). Through the figure of African-American junketeer web reporter J. Sutter, who sets out to report on a festival organized to commemorate the legendary African-American steel-driver who competed with a drilling machine, Whitehead stages the exhaustion of authenticity in a market economy in which stories function as consumable commodities.

Finally, with Kübra Aksay's article, "The Press Play: Videogame Representations of Journalists and Journalistic Labor," the issue reaches beyond traditional literary and cinematic representations to interactive media. Aksay investigates how videogames incorporate journalistic characters and practices into their accounts and mechanics. Videogames allow players to engage with media ethics in participatory

ways, offering new ways to reflect on journalistic agency and responsibility and showing how digital media expand the cultural repertoire through which journalism can be represented.

Overall, the contributions in this thematic issue show that representations of journalism across several media offer a rich field for interdisciplinary study, including beyond anglophone examples. By examining how journalism is framed not just through narrative but also through performance and interactive engagement, these articles reveal the journalistic profession as both a social practice and a powerful cultural imagination. Literature, theater, film, television and digital media do more than portray journalists at work; they question the ideals, contradictions and changes that shape journalism in modern and contemporary societies. At a time when public debates about truth, credibility and media authority are becoming more urgent, exploring how journalism is depicted in cultural stories offers valuable insights into how societies interpret and challenge the role of the press.

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Representing the Journalist-figure, from Balladeer to Blogger: Towards the Outlines of a Field

Abstract: Representations of the figure of the journalist and of media practice are ubiquitous in cultural artefacts produced over centuries. This article explores the perennial fascination cultural producers have with the journalist figure and lays out existing scholarship and the many different methodologies employed for its academic study. I suggest areas where researchers need to take responsibility for audience reactions to journalism fictions, particularly in TV and the cinema, and I indicate neglected and further areas of research. My review of the literature on this topic, much of it only published in the past twenty years, proposes that this is an important still-emerging field of research in the area of public understanding of the media, and one which is still finding its contours.

Keywords: journalists in fiction, film, representation, watchdog, field of cultural production

1. Introduction

Why is the figure of the journalist (and their many antecedents and successors: the messenger, travelling bard, newsboy, blogger and chronicler), such a perennial source of fascination for cultural producers, and thus, by extension, audiences? The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture (IJPC) project (www.ijpc.org) records in its database, as of February 2026, more than 101,000 cultural artefacts featuring journalist-figures and the information networks within which they operate. These

range in time and function from messengers sent by Old Testament kings to inquire about and report on the state of public opinion, the outcome of battles and the health of rivals, to 2026 films and TV miniseries. The most recent of the latter, *His and Hers* (Netflix, 2026), stars a former TV anchor playing a familiar "watchdog" role, investigating a murder in her hometown and clashing with the official detective who she feels is failing in his job. This latest fiction (like so many film and television fictions, and more of this later) is based on a novel written by a former journalist, in this case *His and Hers* (2020) by Alice Feeney, a one-time BBC journalist and producer. While the IJPC database does record non-English language items, these are by no means as numerous as English language ones. As an example, the database lists nearly 18,000 English-language feature films, dating from 1890, and just 3,713 non-English language items (the first, a French film featuring a newsboy calling out lottery results, which transforms the life of an impoverished listener, *Le Billet de Loterie*, directed by Louis Feuillade in 1908). One can thus safely assume that across the globe, and across time, cultural producers have created hundreds of thousands, maybe millions of artefacts featuring the journalist or journalist-figure. Not only do representations of the journalist constitute vast numbers and span millennia, but they also appear in myriad forms, from poetry, plays and short stories, to visual art, comic strips, video games and animated cartoons.

From these few general points and examples, we can already apprehend something of the contested status, and place in culture and society, of the journalist and their equivalents. This figure's fictional representation is multiple, fragmented and timeless, and occupies some kind of social no-man's land between kings and authorities on the one hand and the public on the other. The journalist is granted – by politics, society in general, and cultural producers – access to locations and sources of information not available to "ordinary people." Off-the-record briefings by government ministers; press passes to restricted areas of public and commercial life; previews of films and novels not yet launched, are all made available to journalists. Creators of journalism fiction have used this "superpower," this ability to "move at will in the fourth dimension" as journalist-turned-fiction writer Rudyard Kipling put it, in multiple narrative devices (2008b, 30). Fulfilling the needs of both the powerful and *demos*, journalists are compromised and sometimes endangered in serving these twin, and often conflicting masters. They are a disruptor and mischief-maker: this magic potion called news he or she finds, carries and distributes has the power to topple kings and raise up the lowly. Creators of all brows, from high modernists to writers of "penny dreadfuls" have used this shapeshifter's intensely malleable and plastic persona to pursue their specific narrative ends. As has often been pointed out, in many popular screen thrillers (and also novels), the journalist's role is similar to that of a spy or detective, and their role is usually either stock hero or clichéd villain (McNair; Ehrlich and Saltzman). Yet the figure of the journalist has also been used by some of literature's most garlanded writers, from William Shakespeare's travelling bard Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*, who sells eye-popping "news" like

a tabloid hack, from village to village. The character is used by Shakespeare to test the audience's willingness to believe what is being told them, whether from elite, or vagabond voices in the play, or from the playwright himself, and thus to reflect upon the nature of truth during a turbulent political time after the relative stability of Elizabeth I's long reign. Some of the 20th and 21st century's greatest Anglophone writers: Virginia Woolf (*Between the Acts*, 1941), W. H. Auden (*The Orators*, 1932), James Joyce (*Ulysses*, 1922), Joan Didion (*The Last Thing He Wanted,* 1996), Martin Amis (*Yellow Dog*, 2004) and Colson Whitehead (*John Henry Days*, 2001), and so many others, have examined in plays, poetry and novels the character and professional practice of the journalist. In the hands of these "highbrow," or "elite," cultural producers there is something deeper than merely "hero" or "villain" going on: nothing less than the gloves-off combat between rivals in the never-ending contest over who gets to be called truth-teller; who is the rightful custodian of the written word, who gets to record their version of history (Lonsdale 2016).

2. Methodological Approaches

Because of the multiplicity of modes of representation, scholars (including the editors of, and contributors to, this special issue), have brought multiple methodological approaches from a wide range of disciplines to bear in the study of fictional representations of journalists and journalistic practices. This is still a relatively young area of study, to which no over-arching theory can be applied, and researchers have often found themselves with few field-specific prior studies to apply, having to borrow theories and concepts from related disciplines. Yet scholars are adding to our knowledge every year, with much research published in the past fifteen to twenty years. From the literary approach, scholars have used analytical tools ranging from textual analysis through close reading, Gerard Genette and Mieke Bal's theory of narrative embedding, and concepts of metarepresentation (Sperber), narrative framing, feminist literary theory and book history. Other literary genre-based approaches include Dallas Liddle's concept of Bakhtinian "Journalization," which he uses for studying the intricate waltz conducted by authors and journalists in the mid-Victorian literary marketplace, and Patrick Collier's analysis of the aggressive campaign waged by the high-modernists against journalism in the "battle of the brows" of the 1920s and 30s. Stephen Donovan and Matthew Rubery's very recent study of the phenomenon of the late Victorian undercover journalist and their contemporary fictional representations demonstrates how permeable the boundaries between journalism and fiction were then. This new, and high-risk investigative journalism inspired innovations in narrative form by realist novelists desiring to "elevate the status of their own profession at the expense of a rival one" that was threatening their marketplace with lurid, but *real* stories from the underside of society (21).

From the social sciences approach scholars have used Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner) and Jürgen Habermas' Public Sphere Theory (1974). Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* (1990) and his model of the field of cultural production (1993) have been particularly helpful for scholars seeking to place journalistic practice both within the field and as influencing adjacent fields, such as the political (e.g., Korte). From journalism studies, scholars have used concepts such as media ethics and journalism's dubious assertion of objectivity (Ward; e.g., Valverde), and journalists' claim for status through the practice of "eye-witnessing," thus delivering to the world "the first draft of history" (Zelizer) and Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini's classification of different media systems (e.g., De Wulf Helskens). Scholars of journalists on film and television (for example Archibald) often wrestle with concepts of historical representation, as so many films featuring journalism dwell on events in both the near and distant past; recent examples include *The Post* (2017), *Scoop* (2024) and the Spanish *Soldados de Salamina* (2003). Others too (e.g., Ferrucci and Painter) have employed George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory to assess whether themes raised in television fictions might influence audiences' perceptions of the journalism industry. Sandford Borins and Beth Herst have employed structuralist narratology to analyse parallels between films depicting real-life investigations. Other scholars (e.g., Steiner et al.; Peters; De Wulf Helskens) have analysed audience responses (both journalists and the general public) to television series that portray fictional journalists. In the latter two studies, which focus on the general public's responses, there is a discernible ideal of "watchdog" journalism that the public wants, but also realises barely exists in today's impoverished and fragmented media landscape, "a nostalgic lament for the journalism of days gone by," as Chris Peters puts it (603). Finally, because so many films about journalists emanate from novels as original texts, adaptation studies examine the intricate journey from text-to-film that many cinematic representations of journalists make (Colón Semenza and Hasenfratz). In videogames, representations of journalists as playable protagonists are now common, such as freelance photojournalist Frank West in *Dead Rising* and Madison Paige in *Heavy Rain*; their traditional "watchdog" role is barely changed from films and novels of fifty and one hundred years ago, although their antagonists might be witches and zombies as well as corporate machines. Ian Bogost et al. argue that in a reversal of roles, online newspapers are using videogame graphics and technology in order to make their storytelling more engaging and interactive.

While some work has recently been done on non-Western and non-English language fictions of journalists (including in this issue), this is a neglected part of the field. Peter Aker and Andrei Rogatchevski, in their study of Swedish, Russian and American journalist-crime novels 1991 to 2020, come to significant conclusions about hope for investigative journalism's survival in today's post-truth era and its economically challenged and fragmented media landscape. They find that hope for the survival of "watchdog" journalism is highest in the Swedish novels they

analysed, representing Hallin and Mancini's democratic corporatist media system, followed by some distance by the American novels, situated in the liberal model. Fascinatingly, the researchers found that the threat from an interfering and corrupt state was highest in the Russian novels, but also that they could find no Russian novels published after 2003 with an investigative journalist protagonist – just a few years after President Putin came to power. They propose: "It may have a great deal to do with the systematic persecution of investigative journalists in Russia" (Aker and Rogatchevski 594), and that in contemporary Russia neither publishers nor readers are interested in this figure. By their very erasure, then, fictional Russian journalists speak volumes for the role of journalism in a democratic society. In one of the very few studies of a non-Western fictional journalist, Raja Fadla and Mohammed Shaheen come to interesting conclusions about the representation of a journalist from a developing, postcolonial media system, in this case, Sudan. They point to several recent Anglophone novels by Arab writers which feature a journalist, often to express the problems of practicing "watchdog" journalism in repressive, autocratic regimes, or the figure of the exiled journalist who has fled their own country. In Fadla and Shaheen's study of Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with the Djinns* (2004), the fictional Sudanese journalist Yasin Zahir fails in his role of informing his country and in his desire to give "voice to the voiceless" due to heavy media restrictions. He becomes an exile in Britain and turns to writing fiction, which he sees as a better vehicle with which he can write about "the reality of the marginalized" in his former home (2381). Fadla and Shaheen's analysis of *Travelling with the Djinns* emphasises the difficulty for journalists in the global south to tell their own countries' stories, drowned out as they are by powerful western news channels such as CNN and the BBC, which are supplied with copy by the international news agencies whose roots are embedded in nineteenth-century imperialism (Thussu). Non-Western fictions are being produced in postcolonial countries with developing economies and still-developing media systems. Bollywood, for example has produced at least twelve films featuring journalists in the past three decades; the latest, *Dhamaka* (2021), features the moral choices a down-on-his-luck television presenter has to make when a terrorist plot threatens, in a commercial and cynical world of TV journalism. Clearly more work must be done in this part of the field to explore other topics and establish clearer boundaries. Themes of a fictional exiled journalistic diaspora and also of the vanishing fictional journalist in autocratic states seem particularly fruitful.

3. Problems of Classification

With such a multiplicity of representations over so many years and with so many different methodological approaches employed in studying the image of the journalist, different research areas can resemble an unfinished mosaic or jigsaw puzzle, and sometimes it is not clear how different parts join up to create an adequately holistic picture. Few clear patterns have emerged beyond the broadbrush "hero" versus "villain,"

"free press" versus "censorship," and "First Amendment crusader" versus "corporate or commercial proprietor" dichotomies. This is a good start, and it has been used by many scholars including Brain McNair or Matthew Ehrlich and Joe Saltzman, and, with greater layers of interpretation, Borins and Herst. These, and others' research provide helpful systems of classification. But archetypes tell us more about cultural producers' storytelling processes than about the realities of actual journalism practice. Within the broad "hero" and "villain" categories, there are nuances within nuance: the "hero" reporter who risks his life for the truth often has a messy and deceitful private life (for example Cal McAffrey in the US-film remake of *State of Play*, 2009). Then there is the apparently professional, objective foreign correspondent Thomas Fowler, narrator of Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American* (1955) who, while claiming be a detached reporter only interested in reporting the truth, is not only lying to the face of other characters in the novel, but also to the reader, by letter to his absent wife, and to himself. In the British newspaper film *Defence of the Realm* (1985), while reporter Nick Mullen ultimately gives his life for the truth to come out, his tactics, which include impersonating a police officer, stealing documents and lying to a woman whose husband has betrayed her, defy all journalism ethics. When representations are examined through the lens of gender, female journalists are often fighting battles on two fronts: to expose the truth, but also to be taken seriously in a masculine field, and sometimes it is not clear which priority is uppermost in her mind (Lonsdale 2013). It is rare that a "good" journalist is also of unimpeachable moral character. And why would they be? The flaws and nuances make them interesting for viewers and readers, as well as authors, directors and actors. When Russell Crowe was offered the part of Cal McAffrey in *State of Play*, he told director Kevin Macdonald: "If you're expecting me to play a journalist as a hero you're talking to the wrong bloke. If you want me to portray a journalist as a human being full of faults, predilections and foibles and quirks, then yes, I'll play that" (qtd. in Appleyard 5). Author (and former *Guardian* journalist) James Meek has written two novels examining the state of British journalism, *We Are Now Beginning Our Descent* (2008) and *The Heart Broke In* (2012), both of which are peopled with broken down, manipulative and deceitful correspondents and editors. Meek has said that readers would simply not like a "preachy crusading journalist who wants to save the world" (qtd. in Lonsdale 2016, 245). There are exceptions, of course. In films based on true journalism scoops, as per Borins and Herst's research, such as *All the President's Men* (1976), *Spotlight* (2015), *She Said* (2022), and latterly *Scoop* and *A Very Royal Scandal* (2024), the journalists have quiet, dull, or non-existent private lives, indicating their serious approach to their work.

4. Problems of Verisimilitude

Here we have already reached a difficult stumbling block over fictional representations of journalists. If, as has been accepted, journalism fictions function as meta-journalistic discourses, informing audiences of the apparent working practices

of real-life journalists, how realistic or distorted a picture of real-life news work are audiences actually getting (Ehrlich and Saltzman; Peters; Plantinga; De Wulf Helskens)? No fictional newsroom, no matter how apparently true it looks, could possibly reflect the realities of day-to-day life for real journalists, which is often very dull, with repetitive routines, a lack of autonomy, phone calls often ending in dead ends, and investigative stories going nowhere because of insufficient resources. No real journalist's life or work is neat enough to fit the screen writer's narrative demands for antagonist, crisis, climax and resolution. Liberties must be taken. An instructive example is the recent dual representation of the infamous 2019 interview conducted by then *Newsnight* journalist Emily Maitlis, with (then) Prince Andrew over his relationship with Jeffrey Epstein, *Scoop* and *A Very Royal Scandal*. Although both productions employ a realistic documentary-style approach with both actors portraying Maitlis wearing outfits identical to the one she wore for the interview, they present two very different versions of the journalistic process that led up to the giant-killing event. *Scoop* plays up the role of *Newsnight*'s interview booker Sam McAlister, while *A Very Royal Scandal* dramatizes Maitlis' work and personal jeopardy in the run-up to, and during, the interview.

In interviews, directors, authors and screenwriters admit to twisting reality and using cinematic techniques to convey messages or boost dramatic content. In *State of Play*, director Kevin Macdonald deliberately had the newsroom of the fictional *Washington Globe* look like the fictional *Washington Post* newsroom from *All the President's Men*, "except 35 years on, and nobody's tidied up" (Appleyard 4). He also deliberately blurred backgrounds using a shallow depth of field, to imply murkiness and uncertainty. Similarly, in the last season of *The Wire* (2008), which features a fictional *Baltimore Sun*, writer and producer David Simon "carefully replicated the look of the [real] *Baltimore Sun*, from the color of the office walls to the way people rolled up their sleeves" (Steiner et al. 708). Yet journalists' responses to the portrayal of the *Sun* varied wildly from accusations of lacking any adherence to the truth (from those who worked on the paper), to "dead-on" and "grittily realistic" (Steiner et al. 712). *All the President's Men*, the high-water mark of the American "free press myth," attempts to convince the audience, through its deadpan, documentary-style of presentation, that it is watching real events unfold. The director Alan Pakula even imported onto the set actual waste from the *Washington Post* newsroom desks (Ehrlich and Saltzman 31). And yet of course the director has used artistic license, from boosting the sound of the reporters' pens scratching on their notebooks, to bathing the *Post* newsroom in bright light, while casting the White House and other Washington monuments in darkness. Moreover, critics have pointed to numerous ways Pakula's journalistic procedural departs from the truth, particularly in focusing solely on Woodward and Bernstein as the heroes of the piece. While they certainly worked solidly and often alone in the early weeks and months after the 1972 break-in at the Watergate complex, often their journalism, "hardly hypodermic in its impact," failed to reveal enough to raise further questions

(Perloff and Kumar 802). The role of Watergate burglar James McCord in admitting in March 1973 that he and the other burglars had been pressured to remain silent and plead guilty; other media organisations and journalists who worked on the story, particularly the *Los Angeles Times*, CBS news and Seymour Hersh at the *New York Times*; and the Senate hearings led by a critical group of Republican legislators, all played equally important parts in the complex jigsaw of events: but these would muddy the narrative waters of the lone (or in this case, double-act) mythic hero on the trail of an overwhelming enemy (Feldstein; Lang and Lang). Furthermore, recent studies of Watergate, marking the fiftieth anniversary of the break-in, debunk the persistent myth that the *Washington Post*'s coverage of the scandal, and the subsequent release of *All the President's Men* in 1976, inspired a generation of young men and women to become journalists in the US (Perloff and Kumar). The only marked increase in applications to US journalism schools happened from 1970 to 1971, and were almost entirely down to young women enrolling in college and choosing writing and communications courses, a result of gains in second wave feminism, rather than any Watergate effect (Perloff and Kumar).

Negative representations of journalists, such as Joseph L. Mankiewicz's 1958 adaptation of Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American*, or David Simon's final series of *The Wire* (2008), display active hostility towards journalism. But are the directors pointing out problems with a crucial, yet deeply flawed profession, or is something else at work? In *The Quiet American*, Mankiewicz rewrote the ending as it appears in Greene's novel, to obliterate what he saw as Greene's "absurd anti-Americanism" (Colón Semenza and Hasenfratz 299). The film exculpates the American CIA agent Alden Pyle from all wrongdoing and plays up Thomas Fowler's role in the assassination, attributing it wholly to his obsessive jealousy of Pyle who has taken his lover from him, rather than the more complex political attitude of the novel. Colón Semenza and Hasenfratz argue this attack on Greene's original text had less to do with verisimilitude than Mankiewicz's desire, as an "auteur," to "challenge or even replace the literary original," agents from different parts of Bourdieu's cultural field once again wrestling for cultural authority (300). In the final season of *The Wire*, creator David Simon is highly critical of the fictional version of the *Baltimore Sun*, the newspaper he worked on as a crime reporter for several years. He has variously been accused of "character assassination" and of using an otherwise highly acclaimed artwork as a vehicle for "getting even with his former bosses" (Steiner et al. 704). Were the themes of *The Wire* Season 5 the warning cry of someone deeply interested in journalism's role in upholding democracy, that corporate takeovers, reduced resources and demoralised journalists were having a negative effect on business and local government accountability? Or was it a signal from an agent within the field of cultural production, that he has climbed out of journalism and moved into a more culturally elevated territory of artistic creation?

Perhaps the most dangerous arena where fact and fiction clash is that of the over-sexualisation of so many female journalists. Recent films and TV series that

have unnecessarily portrayed female journalists sleeping either with colleagues to get a better job, or with sources to get good stories, include *The French Dispatch* (2021), *Richard Jewell* (2019), *Crazy Heart* (2009), *Trainwreck* (2015), *Sharp Objects* (2018), *House of Cards* (2013–2018) and *Nightcrawler* (2014), and there are many more. After the release of *Richard Jewell*, the executive director of the International Women's Media Federation (IWMF), Elisa Lees Muñoz, put out a statement urging directors to consider the safety of women journalists and that the "ubiquity of these sexist and sexualized stereotypes about women in media has real consequences for female reporters" (Pan). The previous year the IWMF had released a survey of six hundred women media workers which showed that more than half had been threatened or harassed in person, and that two thirds had been harassed online (Ferrier). The over-sexualisation of women reporters, of course, has nothing to do with reality and everything to do with Hollywood and how to sell movies.

From the above arguments, it seems that it is ethically difficult, if not impossible, to study how TV and cinematic representations of journalists impact public perceptions, without scholars initially studying the intentions of the directors. If scholars are surveying TV and cinema audiences for their responses to screen representations of journalists, it is vital that researchers draw viewers' attention to themes and plotlines in the films where realism has been abandoned for the sake of the drama. Much of what audiences see offers a distorted view of the trade, this distortion being all the more dangerous for the superficial attempts at presenting verisimilitude. Real reporters still have to go out and meet the public every day.

5. Journalists Producing Fictions of Themselves

It is a regular criticism of journalists that while they are more than happy to examine and critique, minutely, all other parts of politics, business and society, they rarely pause to reflect on their own culture and practices (e.g., Overholser; Shannon; Schudson). The Leveson Inquiry (2012) into the culture and practices of the British press, following the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal, noted, somewhat wearily, that this was the seventh Government-appointed inquiry into the ethics and functioning of the British press in seventy years, partly because newspapers themselves seemed so resistant to reflecting on their own industry. Yet journalists' self-reflection has been staring us in the face for decades. While more work in this area is to be done, it has not escaped the notice of scholars in this field that a large quantity of fictions about journalism in film, television and in novels, have been produced by journalists themselves. In one of the very few sociological studies of working journalists, Oliver Barrett-Boyd found that three-quarters of the seventy-three apprentice reporters aged eighteen to twenty he surveyed wanted, ultimately, to write a book (some were already doing so), and the vast majority of them, possibly surprisingly for journalism personnel, wanted to write a novel,

not non-fiction. In my own study of journalists in British fiction, which examined one hundred and fifty-five novels written between 1902 and 2012, around two thirds (ninety-eight) had been written by former or practicing journalists. These include Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Michael Frayn, Edgar Wallace, Philip Gibbs, James Meek, Monica Dickens, and a whole host of other acclaimed writers. Journalism was their training ground; it often gave them their first experience of professional writing, yet their relationship with it was highly complex. The Barrett-Boyd survey also tells us something about journalists' creative, storytelling impulse and where they see themselves within the field of cultural production. According to Bourdieu, journalists, close to the economic pole of the field and furthest from the cultural pole, occupy one of the lowliest parts of it, rather like Dante's lowest circle of *Inferno*. This evidence for a widespread desire amongst journalism personnel to occupy part of the field much closer to the cultural pole, novel-writing, may perhaps explain journalists' often ambivalent attitudes to their profession. It pays their bills, it gives them some kind of public platform, and yet they are aware of the tensions in newsrooms between selling papers/getting clicks and the ethical responsibilities of providing people with the truth.

Those journalists who produce fictions of their trade often use it to criticise its shortcomings but also offer their fictions as a map by which readers can navigate the world of the media and its role in "our (self) understanding of modern and postmodern culture" (Valverde 3). Graham Greene, for example, worked as a journalist before he could support himself with his fiction, and although he enjoyed his days in the *Times* sub-editors' room, he disliked his former profession because of its practitioners' carelessness with words. Beatriz Valverde has discussed Greene's own "fixation with accuracy" (24) while his fictional journalists sometimes display a fatal disregard for ethics. Yet he still cannibalised his own reportage from Indo-China for use in his novel *The Quiet American*, lifting phrases and similes wholesale from his non-fiction and inserting them into his fiction, illustrating both the proximity, as well as the rivalry between the two forms of literary production (Lonsdale 2016; Valverde 2025). Another journalist-turned novelist, and equally critical of his old "black art," as he called it, also saw it as offering him a skeleton key, as it were, to pass between worlds. Rudyard Kipling may well have mercilessly lampooned foreign correspondents in his novella *The Light that Failed* (1891), but in *The Man Who Would Be King* (1888), the journalist-narrator can only bring readers his story because of his trade, which gives him access to see and hear things that a novelist sitting at their desk could never do: "Sometimes I wore dress clothes and consorted with Princes and Politicals, drinking from crystal and eating from silver. Sometimes I lay out on the ground and devoured what I could get, from a plate made of leaves" (2008a, 247).

In the world of film and television, journalists and former journalists have provided source material in the form of memoirs and novels. Graham Greene's novel *The Quiet American* has twice been adapted for the cinema in 1958 and 2002; Woodward and Bernstein's 1974 "ur-text" *All the President's Men* provided

much material for Pakula's film (Brennen 115); Mary Mapes' memoir *Truth: The Press, The President and the Privilege of Power* (2005) formed the basis for the film *Truth* (2015), about her own failed investigation into President George W. Bush's National Guard Service, which ended her career. Most recently, the British journalist Nick Davies' memoir *Hack Attack* (2014) provided much of the material used in the ITV series about the *News of the World* phone hacking scandal, *The Hack* (2025). Journalists have also worked as writers and producers on films and television shows, from Charles Lederer (*His Girl Friday*, 1940) to Emily Maitlis (*A Very Royal Scandal*). Even in films and series where no former journalist gets a producing/screen-writing credit, they are often brought in as consultants or to help with verisimilitude, such as in Aaron Sorkin's TV series *The Newsroom* (2012–2014). Films and television offer journalists ways for their storytelling to reach mass audiences where often their reporting and, if they write them, their novels cannot. Perhaps this is why that the "journalist-hero" archetype is so much more prevalent in films about journalists than in novels. A fruitful further area of research in this field would be in analysing and comparing fictions from the point of view of whether their authors or creators/directors were former or practicing journalists or whether they had no connection at all with the industry.

6. Conclusion: Why Should the Study of Journalists in Fiction Matter?

From the above observations, we can conclude that the state of journalism is of equally vital concern to thinkers, cultural producers and the public as to journalists, and to the state of democracy itself. You can't have one without the other. Thus, creations of fictional journalism, and responses to them, form part of the conversation society has with itself about the way it is being governed. While the fictional journalist's contemporary cousins, the detective and spy, work in important fields, it could be argued that the journalist trumps them all. In detective fiction, the police and justice system act as the public's proxies to issue revenge on wrongdoers; in spy fiction, government agents or other nations' secret services put matters right. In journalism fiction, the ultimate goal for the good journalist-protagonist is to put nothing less than the truth into the public domain, be it a government cover up or corporate sleaze and corruption. It is therefore the public, reading, watching, hearing the facts, that deals out its ultimate verdict. Fifty years on from the most iconic screen representation of journalists of all time, *All the President's Men*, why are those closing moments still so powerful? When all apparently seems lost, finally the sound of the journalists typing, and the steady crescendo of the *Post* ticker tape drumming out the truth, drowns out the lies emanating from the White House. What happens next is understood: public opinion, informed by the press, will force the President from office. Richard M. Perloff and Anup Kumar suggest that, were a present-day "Woodstein" to embark on a similar investigation, it is

unlikely their discoveries would have the same effect: they would be belittled and undermined by social media "trolls" and right-wing podcasters; their paper's owner, leaned on from the White House, might have them sacked; even if presented with the truth, the current incumbent of the White House would not be shamed into resigning and would probably dismiss the story as "fake news"; a supine Congress would not move to impeach. While journalists and authors/directors seem still to be battling each other right at the disputed and fluctuating boundary between fiction and journalism over who gets to be called truth-teller, it is a battle that, at present, both sides seem to be losing. Contemporary fictions in films and novels reflect this too, emphasising the vulnerability of watchdog journalism and its practitioners, and the importance of a free press in a healthy democracy. In order to understand so many complex and sometimes clashing representations, theories and philosophical viewpoints, this special issue is a vital contribution to the journeys scholars are making towards defining and consolidating this important field of inquiry.

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Filmography

A Very Royal Scandal. 2024. Dir. Julian Jarrold. Prod. Amazon MGM.
All the President's Men. 1976. Dir. Alan Pakula. Prod. Warner Brothers.
Crazy Heart. 2009. Dir. Scott Cooper. Prod. Fox Searchlight.
Defence of the Realm. 1985. Dir. David Drury. Prod. Rank Organisation.
Dhamaka. 2021. Dir. Ram Madhvani. Prod. Netflix India.
His Girl Friday. 1940. Dir. Howard Hawks. Prod. Columbia Pictures.
House of Cards. 2013–2018. Dir. Beau Willimon. Prod. Netflix.
Le Billet de Loterie. 1908. Dir. Louis Feuillade. Prod. Pathé Frères.
Nightcrawler. 2014. Dir. Dan Gilroy. Prod. Open Road Films.
Richard Jewell. 2019. Dir. Clint Eastwood. Prod. Warner Brothers.
Scoop. 2024. Dir. Philip Martin. Prod. Netflix.
Sharp Objects. 2018. Dir. Jean-Marc Vallee. Prod. HBO.
She Said. 2022. Dir. Maria Schrader. Prod. Universal Pictures.
Soldados de Salamina. 2003. Dir. David Trueba. Prod. Lolafilms.
Spotlight. 2015. Dir. Tom McCarthy. Prod. First Look Media and Open Road Films.
State of Play. 2009. Dir. Kevin Macdonald. Prod. Universal Studios.
The French Dispatch. 2021. Dir. Wes Anderson. Prod. Searchlight Pictures.
The Hack. 2025. Dir. Lewis Arnold. Prod. ITV Studios.
The Newsroom. 2012–2014. Dir. Greg Mottola and Alan Poul. Prod. HBO.
The Quiet American. 1958. Dir. Joseph Mankiewicz. Prod. United Artists.
The Quiet American. 2002. Dir. Phillip Noyce. Prod. Miramax.
Trainwreck. 2015. Dir. Judd Apatow. Prod. Universal Pictures.
Truth. 2015. Dir. James Vanderbilt. Prod. Sony Pictures.

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The Paradigm Paradox in Journalism Fiction: Constructing and Contesting Journalistic Discourses

Abstract: This article explores how journalism is portrayed in fiction and how audiences interpret these depictions. Despite the prevalence of journalism in fictional narratives – ranging from heroic to villainous portrayals – there has been limited scholarly analysis of these representations and their impact on public perceptions. This article introduces a theoretical framework for understanding journalism in fiction, positioning it as a form of metajournalistic discourse. It also connects journalistic portrayals to different media system typologies, revealing both transnational representational patterns and regional differences. A key concept introduced is the "Paradigm Paradox," which describes how local and non-local journalism fiction simultaneously challenges and reinforces existing journalistic discourses. This article aims to advance the theoretical study of journalism fiction and provide a foundation for future research in the field.

Keywords: journalism fiction, popular culture, metajournalistic discourse, audience research, paradigm paradox

1. Introduction

From legendary figures such as *Superman* to critically acclaimed films like *Citizen Kane*, journalism has been a recurring theme in fictional narratives, depicted across a spectrum ranging from heroic protagonists to morally ambiguous or even villainous characters. Despite the prevalence of these portrayals and their potential

impact on public perceptions of journalism, scholarly engagement with the representation of journalism in fiction and the interpretive strategies audiences employ when engaging with such portrayals remains relatively limited. Unlike professions such as medicine and law, which are characterized by formal credentialing systems and well-established institutional and legal frameworks, journalism lacks a comparable structural foundation (Aldridge and Evetts; Meyers et al.). As a result, the question of whether journalism constitutes a profession and who qualifies as a journalist has long been a subject of academic debate (Deuze; Black). This debate has become even more pronounced with the advent of digitalization and commercialization, both of which have posed significant challenges to journalists' professional identity (Knight et al.; Johnston and Wallace; Zion et al.). In this context, examining how fictional representations contribute to shaping journalistic identity becomes increasingly pertinent.

Three notable gaps can be identified in existing scholarship: (1) a predominant focus on American fiction, with limited attention paid to non-American narratives and contexts; (2) a lack of theoretical frameworks underpinning the analysis of journalism in fictional portrayals; and (3) an insufficient emphasis on audience reception and interpretation within this research domain. In response to these gaps, I conducted a research project within the context of Flanders (the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium) to enhance our understanding of journalism fiction and its discursive dynamics, particularly in non-American contexts.

My project began with a survey study that combined quantitative survey methods with qualitative textual analysis to identify which fictional films and television series featuring journalism have achieved cultural prominence in Flanders, as well as how audiences evaluate these representations. From this database, a selection[1] of films and series was chosen for in-depth textual analysis, forming the basis of four case studies that examined how journalism is depicted within each instance. The selected cases include the American productions *The Post* (2017), *Spotlight* (2015), *The Bold Type* (2017–2021), *The Morning Show* (2019–present), and *The French Dispatch* (2021); the Spanish series *El Caso* (2016); the Danish series *Borgen* (2010–2022); and Flemish (Belgian) productions *De Dag* (2018), *De Twaalf* (2019–2023), *Deadline 14/10* (2012), *Deadline 25/5* (2014), *Cordon* (2014–2016), and *Assisen* (2023–present). For more information on these cases, the reader can consult the attachments.

Additionally, three studies were conducted focusing on audience reception, exploring how viewers interpret journalism in fiction. The first audience study involved focus groups with American students, of which three groups with students majoring in journalism and two consisting of students with diverse other majors, to examine their interpretations of journalistic representations in fiction (semi-specialized audience). Initially, a parallel study was planned for Flanders; however, insights from the U.S. study highlighted the importance of having audiences engage with entire films or television series rather than isolated excerpts. Consequently,

a diary study with a more general non-student audience was conducted in Flanders, wherein participants watched a full season of an assigned television series and recorded reflections in a diary after each episode (non-specialized audience). The final audience study consisted of in-depth interviews with Flemish journalists and screenwriters of journalism fiction to further investigate professional perceptions of journalism in fiction (specialized audience). An overview of the demographics of the participants can be consulted in the attachments.

By synthesizing these findings, this article seeks to develop a comprehensive theoretical framework for analyzing journalism fiction and the associated audience sense-making practices across different cultural contexts. It conceptualizes journalism fiction as a form of metajournalistic discourse – a discursive arena in which the profession of journalism is constructed, contested, and negotiated (Carlson 2016; Ferrucci). Furthermore, I identify distinct journalistic discourses that align with established media system typologies, particularly differentiating between the liberal model and the democratic corporatist model (Hallin and Mancini 2004b). The first refers to a media system typical for countries like the U.S. characterized by commercial and privately owned media with little state intervention and a high emphasis on objectivity, autonomy and information-oriented journalism, whereas the last refers to a media system typical for Northern and Western European countries characterized by more regulated media with a significant role for the state, which co-exists with press freedom and high journalistic professionalism (Hallin and Mancini 2007; Weibull).

My analysis of fictional representations across various national contexts reveals both transnational patterns and variations that reflect differing normative and critical stances toward journalism. These differences underscore the contrasting ways in which journalism is depicted in American and North-Western European fictional narratives. Moreover, drawing on insights from audience studies, I introduce the concept of the Paradigm Paradox, which encapsulates the intricate interplay between local and non-local journalism fiction in simultaneously challenging and reinforcing local journalistic discourses. This interpretive process is further shaped by various mediating factors, including audience specialization, nationality, and gender.

Although this research is conducted within the Flemish, and to a lesser extent American context, its broader implications extend to other cultural settings and even to representations of other professions in fiction. This article aims to explore these dynamics in depth, to introduce the Paradigm Paradox, and to propose a theoretical framework for future scholarship on journalism fiction. The subsequent sections first establish the relevance of metajournalistic discourse as a foundation for analyzing journalism fiction, then examine the variations in journalistic discourses across different media systems and cultures. Finally, I discuss audience sense-making processes and conceptualize the Paradigm Paradox as a key dynamic

in their interpretive practices, concluding with a synthesis of my framework and proposed directions for future research.

2. Journalism Fiction as a Metajournalistic Discourse

The concept of metajournalistic discourse has increasingly gained traction in journalism studies, emerging as a critical framework for understanding journalism as a cultural construct. Rooted in theoretical developments from the latter half of the 20th century, this concept was systematically articulated by Carlson (2016), who synthesized existing scholarship into a cohesive framework. He defines metajournalistic discourse as "the means through which journalistic practices, norms, and institutions come to be legitimated or contested" (Carlson 2016, 354). Central to this perspective is the idea that journalism is not solely defined by its practices but is instead shaped through discursive processes – public articulations that construct the profession's boundaries and legitimacy.

Carlson (2016) categorizes research on metajournalistic discourse into several key strands, including interpretative communities, paradigm repair, and boundary work. The notion of interpretative communities, as conceptualized by Barbie Zelizer, challenges traditional views of journalism as merely a profession. Instead, it emphasizes the shared discursive and narrative practices that unify journalists beyond formal professional structures (Zelizer). This framework posits that journalism does not possess a fixed, intrinsic meaning but is instead fluid, evolving across time and space (Carlson 2016, 2019). A key implication of this perspective is that journalism's cultural authority depends on social recognition.

Journalism today has come to be understood as a profession in which its actors are capable of providing accurate knowledge of the world (Carlson 2016). The shared norms and values underpinning journalism are encapsulated in what scholars refer to as the central news paradigm or occupational ideology – most notably, the "objective news paradigm." This points to a shared belief among journalists in objective and unbiased reporting (Hackett; Reese; Cecil; Carlson 2016; Hanitzsch et al.; Ward). However, this paradigm is not a given; rather, it is continuously negotiated and justified through interpretative processes (Carlson 2016). This negotiation is a hegemonic process in which dominant journalistic norms are both reaffirmed and challenged (Reese). Carlson (2016) delineates this process into three interrelated mechanisms: the establishment of definitions and shared language, boundary work, and legitimation.

Drawing on Gieryn's work, Carlson and Lewis identify several types of boundary work in journalism. The first is expulsion-based, which involves excluding individuals, practices, or values considered illegitimate within the field. The second is expansion-based, where journalism incorporates outside actors and practices – such as bloggers or participatory journalism – rather than rejecting them.

The third form focuses on preserving autonomy: instead of including or excluding, it aims to defend existing boundaries by resisting external pressures from political, commercial, or other forces. Through these mechanisms, journalism's professional identity is both reinforced and contested.

More often than not, however, the dominant news paradigm is reaffirmed rather than fundamentally questioned. Dan Berkowitz highlights that the shared discourses reinforcing journalism's ideological foundations serve a dual purpose: they foster internal cohesion among journalists and shape public perceptions of the profession. He describes this as a "double duty" aimed at maintaining journalism's legitimacy in times of scrutiny. According to Berkowitz, professional rituals act as mechanisms of journalistic maintenance, preserving the integrity of the dominant paradigm. When these norms are challenged, journalists engage in paradigm repair – a process of damage control designed to restore faith in journalism by marginalizing individuals or institutions that deviate from established standards (Berkowitz, 126). Many empirical studies have confirmed the persistence of paradigm repair tactics (e.g., boundary work aimed at expulsion or preserving autonomy) in times of journalistic crisis (Reese; Frank; Hindman; Berger; Carlson 2009).

Carlson (2016) notes that much of the existing research has focused on journalists as the primary architects of journalistic discourse. However, he contends that journalists are not the sole agents in shaping these discourses, especially in an era where news credibility is increasingly contested by political actors and audiences via digital platforms (Post and Kepplinger; Wright; Egelhofer). Journalistic discourse, he argues, is embedded in broader social relationships, necessitating an examination of the sites where these discourses are contested. As institutionalized journalistic practices intersect with overlapping and often conflicting discourses, journalists must rely on external actors to uphold their cultural authority. This reliance has become more pronounced in the digital age, where traditional journalistic boundaries have blurred, and control over journalistic discourse is distributed among multiple actors (Knight et al.; Carlson 2016; Zion et al.).

Accordingly, the construction of journalistic discourse occurs not only within journalism but also in non-journalistic spaces, involving both journalistic and non-journalistic actors. In Carlson's (2016) framework, journalistic actors primarily consist of journalists commenting on the profession through media, while non-journalistic actors include audiences engaging with journalistic discourse via commentary, blogs, and other interactive platforms. Studies have increasingly incorporated audience perspectives into analyses of metajournalistic discourse and boundary work. For instance, Craft et al. and Tandoc and Jenkins examined reader comments on news articles in the U.S., while Banjac and Hanusch conducted focus groups with news consumers. These studies found that audiences largely upheld normative journalistic values such as objectivity and transparency, reinforcing the resilience of the objective news paradigm (Craft et al.; Tandoc and Jenkins; Banjac and Hanusch).

Despite these advancements, Ferrucci (2018) critiques the binary distinction between journalists and audiences, arguing for a more expansive conceptualization of non-journalistic actors and discursive sites. Drawing on studies like Dow and Brennen, who studied the representation of journalism in fiction (television series and novels, respectively), he highlights fictional media as a significant but often overlooked site where journalistic discourses are negotiated, with producers and audiences of journalism fiction playing a crucial role in shaping perceptions of the profession. Given the prevalence of journalism in popular culture (Ehrlich and Saltzman), Ferrucci contends that fictional representations should be recognized as a form of metajournalistic discourse that influences both public and professional understandings of journalism.

Popular culture serves as both a reflection of and a contributor to societal perceptions of journalism, establishing a mutually influential relationship. Fictional portrayals provide audiences – including journalists themselves – with a framework for interpreting the profession's evolving role in an increasingly complex media landscape (Ferrucci). Drawing on cultivation theory, Ferrucci and Painter suggest that frequent exposure to fictionalized depictions of journalism may shape public attitudes toward the field. They also emphasize the potential consequences of gendered representations, suggesting that the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of women journalists in fiction could impact the number of women entering the profession. Furthermore, Ehrlich and Saltzman question whether fictional depictions make journalism appear more glamorous or unethical than it is in reality, potentially affecting audience trust in the profession.

Peters underscores the role of popular culture in familiarizing audiences with journalistic norms, examining online discussions of the television series *The Newsroom*. The study found that audiences often lack the media literacy necessary to critically evaluate fictional representations, which tend to idealize journalism's "golden age" rather than highlight the commercial pressures shaping contemporary news media. Similarly, Steiner et al. analyzed journalistic responses to *The Wire*, finding that journalists employed paradigm repair strategies to deflect criticism of the profession. Some accused the series of blurring the line between fact and fiction, while others emphasized that it magnifies the misconduct of a few rogue journalists. Others sought to reaffirm professional standards, such as the importance of objective reporting, asserting that journalists do not fabricate news, contrary to the portrayal in the series (Steiner et al.).

Expanding on these discussions, Ferrucci advocated to consider journalism fiction as a form of metajournalistic discourse that allows audiences to engage critically with journalism's societal role. He argues that paradigm repair within fiction shapes public expectations of journalistic behavior, ultimately influencing broader perceptions of the profession. However, despite the valuable insights provided by the studies mentioned, they do not examine how audiences actively engage with and interpret the diverse meanings found in popular culture, especially not outside

the United States. This is often due to a heavy focus on the U.S., a lack of empirical research and reliance on secondary sources. Additionally, existing research tends to be grounded in communication science perspectives, frequently relying on theoretical frameworks, such as cultivation theory. To address these gaps, I advocate for integrating the metajournalistic discourse framework with cultural and audience studies approaches, facilitating a more nuanced exploration of journalism fiction as a dynamic and contested discursive space.

3. Taking into Account Media Systems

I first applied this metajournalistic framework to the analysis of journalism fiction originating from different contexts and media systems. Given that journalistic discourses are socially and historically contingent, they inevitably vary across time and space (Carlson 2016). This perspective aligns with a well-established research trajectory within journalism studies that emphasizes the plurality of journalistic cultures. Obijiofor and Hanusch argue that comparative journalism research must account for cultural specificity rather than assume universal professional norms. In a similar vein, this article seeks to move beyond the dominance of American-centric perspectives in scholarship on journalism fiction. This is not to diminish the significance of American research in this area, as the global cultural influence of U.S. media is well documented. Rather, this study positions American scholarship as a foundational reference point for advancing comparative and exploratory analyses of journalism fiction beyond the U.S. context.

Existing research indicates that American journalism fiction is deeply embedded within the "free press myth," a normative ideal that became central to U.S. news media discourse in the 20th century. This myth portrays the press as an institution that is both politically independent and market-driven, serving as an essential pillar of democratic governance (Vaughn and Evensen; Ehrlich 2006; McNair 2011b). Fictional representations of journalism that adopt this myth tend to include one of two dominant portrayals: the "good" journalist as a heroic truth-seeker or the "bad" journalist as an ethically compromised figure driven by self-interest (McNair 2011a; Ehrlich and Saltzman).

These classifications are not intended as subjective value judgments but rather as reflections of the dominant news paradigm's normative boundaries. In this framework, "good" journalism is associated with public service, investigative rigor, and a commitment to holding power accountable – characteristics embodied in the archetype of the heroic reporter. Conversely, "bad" journalism is linked to sensationalism, commercial imperatives, and self-serving motives, reinforcing negative perceptions of the profession (Zynda; Ehrlich 1997, 2005; McNair 2011b; Ehrlich and Saltzman). However, even negative portrayals often function as a means of reinforcing professional norms through a process of paradigm repair (Ehrlich 2005).

While journalism fiction frequently reinforces dominant paradigms, it also provides a platform for critiquing structural issues within the profession. Fictional narratives engage with contemporary challenges such as the commercialization of news, political biases, digital transformations, and systemic inequalities in the newsroom (Ehrlich and Saltzman). Notably, some studies suggest that journalism fiction produced outside the United States does not necessarily conform to the free press myth. Instead, it can serve as a discursive space for reimagining the profession's role in democratic society, particularly in the context of ongoing concerns about journalism's credibility and sustainability.

Building upon these insights, my research identifies key divergences between American and European journalism fiction. While U.S. narratives largely uphold the free press myth, European fiction – especially within democratic corporatist media systems (cf. Hallin and Mancini 2004a), such as those of Denmark and Flanders – tends to diverge from this model. Although transnational similarities exist in terms of journalistic storytelling techniques, notable differences emerge in the ways journalism is framed. Danish fiction series such as *Borgen* and Flemish fiction series including *De Twaalf* and *Cordon* critique the profession from a public service perspective (e.g., fiction as a fifth estate; Zynda), highlighting tensions between commercial pressures and traditional journalistic values such as objectivity and independence. These critiques engage in a more fundamental interrogation of journalism's institutional role (De Wulf Helskens 2024b; De Wulf Helskens and Arriaza Ibarra).

Specifically, *Borgen* offers a starkly critical portrayal of the Danish media industry, where journalistic ideals are consistently undermined by commercial imperatives and political influence. At the center of this depiction is journalist Katrine Fønsmark (played by Birgitte Hjort Sørensen), a defiant and principled figure who frequently clashes with the system – particularly with her boss, Torben Friis (Søren Malling), the head of news. Torben is caught in the crossfire between corporate demands for ratings and the ethical standards upheld by his journalists. This tension becomes even more pronounced in later seasons, when Katrine steps into his role and inherits the burden of managing these conflicting forces herself (De Wulf Helskens and Arriaza Ibarra).

As head of news, Katrine must now navigate a deeply complex landscape shaped by intensifying commercial pressures, political interference, staffing constraints, and the disruptive influence of social media on news production and dissemination. Despite her initial commitment to upholding journalistic integrity, the weight of these pressures gradually erodes her resolve. Ultimately, she experiences burnout and exits the media industry altogether, a powerful narrative moment that symbolizes the collapse of idealism in a compromised system. Rather than offering a redemptive or restorative arc, *Borgen* sustains its critique of journalism throughout, refusing to resolve the structural tensions it presents (De Wulf Helskens and Arriaza Ibarra).

Flemish journalism fiction includes an equally pronounced critique. Series like *De Twaalf*, *De Dag* and *Cordon* depict news organizations as prioritizing

financial incentives over their democratic responsibilities, sometimes to the extent of undermining democratic processes. In *De Dag*, for example, journalist Kristien Delaruelle (portrayed by Liesa Van der Aa) and her television crew exemplify a dogged drive for exclusive scoops. They defy police directives, exploit legal grey areas, and aggressively push sources for headline-worthy quotes. A similar narrative unfolds in *Cordon*, where Gryspeerts (Koen De Sutter) is fueled by ambition and career aspirations. His popularity surges thanks to a blog filled with sensational videos, but his tactics invite serious ethical scrutiny (De Wulf Helskens 2024b).

In *De Twaalf*, the spotlight shifts to Fabrice Boks (Mungu Cornelis), an independent journalist who runs his own news platform. His commitment to growing his brand leads him down questionable paths, resorting to bribery and intimidation to extract information. *Assisen* introduces a more nuanced portrayal with Eliza Beekmans (Katrin Lohmann), a journalist who avoids overtly corrupt actions but operates in ethically ambiguous territory, often ambushing sources and facing accusations of fabricating stories. Even *Deadline*, a series rooted in investigative reporting, highlights the influence of commercial imperatives. The newsroom's obsession with marketable headlines and exclusivity reflects broader industry pressures. Marianne Schmidt (Charlotte Vandermeersch), the central character, begins her journey driven by truth-seeking ideals but ultimately becomes disillusioned, leaving journalism behind when faced with its compromises (De Wulf Helskens 2024b).

These representations contribute to an overall bleak portrayal of the profession, despite the fact that Flemish and Danish journalism are not necessarily more commercialized or unethical than journalism elsewhere, including in the United States. In fact, Flemish and Danish news media typically enjoy higher levels of public trust (Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism). Yet, despite this relatively strong reputation, the Danish and Flemish fiction analyzed consistently casts journalism in a negative light (De Wulf Helskens 2024b; De Wulf Helskens and Arriaza Ibarra).

This contrasts with narratives from American journalism fiction such as *The Post*, *Spotlight*, *The Bold Type* and *The Morning Show*, which largely conform to prior research, maintaining the centrality of the free press myth even in critical portrayals (De Wulf Helskens et al. 2023a). In *The Post* and *Spotlight*, journalists are depicted as heroic figures who challenge powerful institutions such as the government and the Catholic Church. These films strongly endorse the belief that journalism bears a fundamental responsibility to uncover the truth and hold power to account, even in the face of legal and political efforts to suppress press freedom. Central to both narratives is the defense of press freedom and the public's right to know, rights portrayed as essential and non-negotiable (De Wulf Helskens et al. 2023a).

The French Dispatch engages with the myth of the free press from a more nostalgic, romanticized perspective. It reflects on a pre-commercialized, pre-digital era of journalism, idealizing the profession as one driven by autonomy and creative freedom. The film ultimately mourns the loss of this era, symbolized by the literal burial of the magazine and its editor. In doing so, it simultaneously celebrates the

ideals of the past and critiques the transformations that have diluted journalistic independence in the present (De Wulf Helskens and De Sutter). By contrast, *The Bold Type* brings modern challenges to the fore – highlighting commercialization, the friction between print and digital platforms, and shifting media values. Set in a feminist women's magazine, the series frames journalism's public interest role through a contemporary lens, focusing on the lived experiences of women. Despite the obstacles, the protagonists find ways to overcome them, suggesting that the ideals of the free press myth can adapt to modern realities and remain relevant (De Wulf Helskens 2025a).

Among the American examples, *The Morning Show* stands apart for its explicit critique of the journalistic institution itself. Unlike traditional narratives that champion the press uncritically, this series exposes systemic issues such as institutional sexism, racism, and the corrosive effects of commercial imperatives. It reveals how the pressure to produce profitable content can undermine journalism's public service mission and perpetuate discriminatory workplace practices. Across its seasons, the show addresses a spectrum of social issues ranging from sexual misconduct (especially involving women journalists of color), the COVID-19 pandemic, and the rise of streaming platforms, to the exploitation of technology, such as hacking and leaks, and the ongoing gender and racial pay disparities (De Wulf Helskens 2025a).

Yet, despite its critical stance, *The Morning Show* ultimately seeks narrative resolution through paradigm repair. Each season concludes with a reaffirmation of journalism's core values. For instance, the first season ends with journalist Bradley Jackson (Reese Witherspoon) publicly confronting her network during a live broadcast. While acknowledging the organization's ethical failings, she emphasizes that principled journalists remain committed to holding the powerful accountable. In this way, the series balances its institutional critique with an optimistic assertion that journalistic integrity, though embattled, can still prevail (De Wulf Helskens 2025a).

In these narratives, the characteristics of liberal media systems – where journalism operates independently from political entities but remains subject to market forces – become particularly evident (De Wulf Helskens et al. 2023a). In the same way, the Spanish series *El Caso* similarly supports a glorified vision of the press, reminiscent of the American free press myth. Although the series features tabloid-style covers and eye-catching headlines, the series presents its journalists as upholding a firm ethical "golden rule": they reject sensationalism and avoid distorting facts (De Wulf Helskens and Arriaza Ibarra).

However, the Spanish series differs from American fictional representations of journalism in that it incorporates more overt political dimensions, reflecting the commentary-driven nature of media landscapes such as Spain's. *El Caso* is firmly rooted in the Spanish context, where the challenges facing journalism were shaped less by commercial pressures and more by the pervasive political and religious censorship of Franco's regime. The newspaper's commercial goals are openly acknowledged but pursued without sacrificing credibility. The real conflict lies in

contending with state and Church censorship – forces portrayed as recurring but ultimately negotiable obstacles (De Wulf Helskens and Arriaza Ibarra).

The findings suggest that the type of media system holds some explanatory power in accounting for narrative differences in journalism fiction across distinct production contexts. However, media systems alone cannot fully account for the nuances of journalism fiction. The genre and type of journalism depicted – such as investigative reporting versus tabloid journalism or drama versus comedy – significantly shape portrayals of the profession. This suggests that journalism fiction, while informed by broader media system characteristics, also contains elements that transcend national and systemic distinctions (De Wulf Helskens et al. 2023a; De Wulf Helskens 2024b; De Wulf Helskens and Arriaza Ibarra).

Nevertheless, these findings confirm that journalism fiction produced outside the United States engages with distinct journalistic discourses. By focusing on fiction within democratic corporatist media systems, and particularly within the Flemish context, this article highlights the role of the social responsibility model in shaping fictionalized critiques of journalism. Unlike the U.S.-centric free press myth, which tends to reinforce existing paradigms, the democratic corporatist discourse exhibits a greater tendency toward questioning institutional structures. Although journalism fiction across media systems often employs similar narrative tropes and character archetypes (e.g., heroes versus villains), its ideological underpinnings vary considerably.

In particular, Flemish and Danish journalism fiction presents a more skeptical view of the press. Flemish fiction, like *De Dag* and *De Twaalf*, frequently characterizes journalism as a spectacle – a "circus" – and suggests that greater institutional cooperation may be necessary to preserve journalism's public service function. These portrayals distinguish democratic corporatist journalism fiction from its liberal counterparts and underscore the existence of a distinct democratic corporatist journalistic discourse. The primary distinction does not lie in the structural form of fictional representations but rather in their orientation toward paradigm repair or transformation. When conceptualized as a continuum, democratic corporatist discourse exhibits a stronger inclination toward paradigm change. This underscores the importance of considering media system frameworks when analyzing how journalism fiction contributes to the discursive construction of the profession.

4. (Non)-Specialized Audiences and Their Sensemaking Practices

Expanding on these findings, this study also explored how audiences with varying professional backgrounds, geographic locations, and perspectives interpret the representation of journalism in fiction. The analysis revealed that audiences do not passively consume fictional portrayals but actively engage with the journalistic discourses embedded in these narratives. Across different groups, participants

identified recurrent journalistic themes and applied comparable interpretative strategies, often referencing non-fiction media, engaging with broader public discourse, and, when applicable, drawing upon their own professional experiences (De Wulf Helskens et al. 2023b; De Wulf Helskens 2024a, 2025b).

The findings initially underscored the pervasive influence of a Western journalistic discourse, primarily shaped by American fiction, although elements of this discourse also permeated European narratives. Participants exhibited a strong tendency to conceptualize journalism through the lens of portrayals common in American fiction. Likewise, European screenwriters acknowledged the considerable impact of American fictional representations, highlighting the transnational nature of these journalistic discourses, which extend beyond national contexts (De Wulf Helskens et al. 2023b; De Wulf Helskens 2024a, 2025b).

Nonetheless, significant divergences emerged, both across and within audience groups. Geographical context played a crucial role in shaping audience perceptions. Flemish viewers, for instance, differentiated between American and European representations of journalism, characterizing the latter as more nuanced and less sensationalized. American journalism fiction was frequently critiqued for idealizing the press, a perception reinforced by concerns regarding the declining quality of U.S. journalism, even in more critical productions such as *The Morning Show*. Conversely, European fictional representations such as *Borgen* were often regarded as more reflective of contemporary media realities.

This perspective was echoed by European screenwriters, who emphasized that simplistic portrayals of journalists as either virtuous truth-seekers or unscrupulous figures have become increasingly untenable. The Danish production *Borgen*, in particular, was commended by Flemish audiences for its nuanced approach, while the Flemish production *Deadline* was criticized for either closely mirroring Hollywood-style narratives or failing to provide sufficient realism and critical engagement. By contrast, the fictional U.S. production *The Morning Show* elicited a more indifferent response, likely due to perceived cultural differences in journalistic practices (De Wulf Helskens 2024a).

Audience interpretations also varied depending on their level of media expertise. Among general audiences in Flanders with limited firsthand experience in journalism, individual media profiles significantly influenced their engagement with fictional portrayals. Those who expressed greater trust in and optimism about journalism tended to view fictional representations in a more favorable light, even when the narrative adopted a critical perspective. When confronted with negative portrayals, these individuals frequently questioned the accuracy of such depictions, revealing a tension between their preconceptions of journalism and its representation in fiction – an interaction consistent with the concept of paradigm repair. In contrast, media skeptics and news avoiders tended to focus on the critical elements of these portrayals, often reinforcing their pre-existing skepticism rather than reconsidering their perspectives. Still, exposure to behind-the-scenes content

– a component generally absent from their routine non-fiction media consumption – prompted a more critical view of journalism while simultaneously fostering a deeper appreciation for the profession's challenges (De Wulf Helskens 2024a).

For specialized journalist audiences, additional factors, including positionality, played a crucial role, with gender emerging as a key point of distinction. Two predominant discourses were identified. The first, primarily endorsed by men journalists, aligned with normative understandings of journalism's role in society (De Wulf Helskens 2025b). Consistent with Steiner et al., these journalists engaged in paradigm repair, rejecting fictional portrayals that diverged from conventional professional ideals. They frequently attributed breaches of journalistic norms to cultural differences, particularly in the context of American and British journalism. Similarly, American journalism students displayed a strong adherence to normative principles, likely shaped by their academic training (De Wulf Helskens et al. 2023b). Conversely, students from other disciplines demonstrated greater flexibility in reconciling traditional journalistic values with commercially driven portrayals, aligning more closely with the second discourse (De Wulf Helskens et al. 2023b; De Wulf Helskens 2024a).

The second discourse, predominantly embraced by women journalists, took a more critical stance, challenging the dominant normative framework upheld by their mostly male counterparts. These participants advocated for portrayals that moved beyond conventional binaries of heroic journalists versus corrupt figures, emphasizing the need for greater realism, reflexivity, and nuance. While they remained committed to core journalistic values, they sought depictions that acknowledged the profession's complexities rather than reinforcing idealized or overly critical tropes. Although both the normative and critical discourse groups expressed a desire for less extreme representations, the first group was particularly concerned about depictions of the press as corrupt or unethical, arguing that such portrayals should be counterbalanced by efforts at paradigm repair – particularly in narratives that strive for realism (De Wulf Helskens 2025b).

Overall, participants articulated a clear preference for more diverse and multifaceted representations that reflect the full spectrum of journalistic roles and practices. Many expressed frustrations with enduring stereotypes, arguing that fiction has the potential to provide more innovative and thought-provoking portrayals of journalism (De Wulf Helskens et al. 2023b; De Wulf Helskens 2024a, 2025b). Specialized journalist audiences, in particular, valued the opportunity to see their profession represented in fiction, recognizing the potential of locally produced content to enhance public understanding of journalism. However, they also voiced concerns that fictional portrayals often contribute to widespread misconceptions rather than fostering greater media literacy (cf. Peters). This concern was especially pronounced in discussions regarding fiction's influence on general audiences and aspiring journalists. Yet, even among experienced professionals, fictional representations were acknowledged as shaping perceptions of unfamiliar

areas within the field, demonstrating the broader impact of media narratives on public and professional understandings of journalism (De Wulf Helskens 2025b).

5. The Paradigm Paradox in Journalism Fiction

The studies discussed above underscore the complexity of audience engagement with journalism fiction, demonstrating how interpretations are shaped by an interplay of various factors. Rather than conceptualizing media effects as either minimal or all-encompassing, this article highlights the nuanced ways in which audiences interact with fictional representations. Journalism fiction is simultaneously perceived as a semi-realistic depiction of the profession and as an exaggerated or one-dimensional portrayal. These interpretations are strongly influenced by normative conceptions of journalism, which are informed by formal education, cultural expectations, and the fluid boundaries between fictional and non-fictional journalism – particularly among (semi-)specialized audiences. This dual perception supports the notion that fiction functions as a form of metajournalistic discourse, wherein real-world journalistic experiences inform fictional portrayals, which in turn contribute to shaping public understandings of journalism (De Wulf Helskens et al. 2023b; De Wulf Helskens 2024a, 2025b).

Furthermore, the findings reveal that Flemish audiences, irrespective of their level of specialization, critically differentiate between American and European narratives when assessing the recurring "free press myth" in American journalism fiction. Despite their widespread consumption of American fiction, Flemish audiences contextualize these portrayals through their own journalistic framework, identifying discrepancies with local (democratic corporatist) media discourses (De Wulf Helskens 2024a). On the one hand, they demonstrate an appreciation for journalism fiction that reflects local professional realities while incorporating critical perspectives. While pre-existing attitudes and experiences strongly shape audience interpretations, journalism fiction nevertheless provides a platform for interrogating entrenched assumptions – particularly when it presents culturally relevant and realistic representations of the profession. This underscores the growing importance of producing journalism fiction that directly addresses local audiences and challenges dominant (especially American/liberal) journalistic discourses, as illustrated in the Flemish case. On the other hand, Flemish audiences nuance their critique of local media discourses by using American fiction as a counterpoint. This process simultaneously reinforces democratic corporatist journalism discourses while enabling an interplay between paradigm repair and paradigm change (cf. Carlson 2016; Ferrucci).

A central takeaway from these findings is that while Flemish audiences frequently critique established local journalistic discourses – thereby invoking

paradigm change – they also engage in paradigm repair by drawing on foreign fictional representations of journalism as counterpoints. This dual mechanism of change and repair is well documented within metajournalistic discourse theory (Carlson 2016). However, when applied to journalism fiction, it facilitates an unprecedented interaction between distinct journalistic paradigms emerging from diverse media systems, particularly those associated with democratic corporatist and liberal models. Through their engagement with fiction from different media landscapes, Flemish audiences are exposed to journalistic paradigms that may not be prominent in their everyday media consumption, compelling them to reconcile local and foreign representations of the profession.

Notably, Flemish audiences – who consume fiction from various national contexts – appear to navigate this continuum between paradigm change and paradigm repair with greater fluidity than their American counterparts, who are more consistently aligned with paradigm repair. While various factors such as age, gender, specialization, and media profile likely contribute to these differences, the relatively insular nature of American media consumption – where audiences are less familiar with fiction originating outside their own journalistic culture – may play a key role in shaping this disparity. However, when the American students were introduced to examples of European journalism fiction such as *De Dag* and *Borgen*, they similarly began to shift along this interpretative continuum, using European portrayals as a means to critique local (liberal) journalistic discourses. This dynamic interaction between paradigm change and repair gives rise to what I define as the Paradigm Paradox, a term introduced here to describe the discursive construction of journalism through fiction.

The Paradigm Paradox encapsulates the contradictory processes through which audiences engage in sensemaking. Specifically, Flemish audiences, who typically approach local (democratic corporatist) journalism fiction with a critical lens, shift toward paradigm repair when confronted with American journalism fiction. Conversely, American audiences, who are generally more predisposed to paradigm repair, exhibit a more critical stance toward their own (liberal) journalistic discourses when engaging with European journalism fiction.

It is important to note that despite this overarching pattern, significant variations remain based on factors such as gender, specialization, and media profile. Nonetheless, the production context of journalism fiction plays a decisive role in shaping these discursive interactions. By introducing the Paradigm Paradox, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of journalism fiction as a form of metajournalistic discourse, emphasizing the role of contextual factors in shaping the discursive construction of the profession. While this concept has been applied here in the context of journalism fiction in Flanders, its relevance to other journalistic and media environments presents promising directions for future research.

6. Conclusion

The analysis of fictional representations of journalism in film and television from a metajournalistic theoretical perspective underscores both transnational patterns and context-specific variations in journalistic portrayals. While certain representational practices appear to transcend national boundaries, others reflect normative and critical distinctions that differentiate American and Northern/Western European journalism fiction. Additionally, drawing on multiple audience studies, this article has introduced the concept of the Paradigm Paradox – a term that encapsulates the simultaneous processes of challenging and reinforcing local journalistic discourses through engagement with both domestic and foreign journalism fiction. This paradox is further shaped by mediating factors such as audience specialization, national identity, and gender, all of which influence how journalism fiction is interpreted across different contexts.

Beyond the Western context, the Paradigm Paradox may also emerge in non-Western media environments, where journalism fiction serves as a site of negotiation between divergent discourses originating from Western and non-Western traditions. Moreover, this paradox is unlikely to be exclusive to journalism. Other professions with significant institutional power that are frequently depicted in fictional narratives – such as law, politics, or medicine – may similarly experience competing discourses that oscillate between paradigm reinforcement and critique. As such, this concept holds potential for broader interdisciplinary applications, encouraging future research beyond journalism studies.

By advancing this line of inquiry, the article contributes to an expanded understanding of journalism fiction within the metajournalistic discourse framework and calls for further exploration of fictional journalism portrayals in underexamined cultural and national contexts. In an era marked by increasing uncertainty within the field of journalism, journalism fiction provides a critical lens through which to reflect on the profession's evolving challenges. Rather than perceiving critical fictional representations as a threat to journalism's legitimacy, they should be recognized as a means of fostering public discourse on journalism's role within democratic societies. This perspective underscores the need for greater collaboration between journalism practitioners and fiction producers to ensure that fictional portrayals contribute constructively to public understanding of the profession.

To enhance the diversity and complexity of journalism fiction, media creators should be encouraged to depict a wider range of journalistic roles and identities, moving beyond reductive stereotypes to provide more nuanced depictions of underrepresented groups in the field. Additionally, American fiction producers may benefit from drawing inspiration from European journalism fiction, which often integrates a more critical perspective on journalistic paradigms. Conversely, European and, in particular, Flemish creators may consider differentiating their narratives from dominant American portrayals by crafting stories that are more attuned to local journalistic cultures and audience expectations. While journalism

fiction cannot single-handedly resolve the broader structural challenges facing the profession, it remains a valuable cultural space for critical reflection and public engagement with the role of journalism in society.[2]

Notes

1 Based on popularity among Flemish audiences (e.g., the number of times mentioned in the database), recent release date (2010 and later) and country of production (a mix of Flemish, American and other European titles).

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Tables

Table 1. Demographics of participants audience studies

		Specialized (N=16)	**Semi-specialized** (N=33)	**Non-specialized** (N=18)	**Total** (N=67)
Gender	Men	8	8	9	25
	Women	8	23	9	40
	Non-binary	0	2	0	2
Age	18 – 29	7	33	2	42
	30 – 39	3	0	5	8
	40 – 49	1	0	8	9
	50 – 59	4	0	2	6
	60+	1	0	1	2
Minority	Not a minority	11	7	14	32
	Sexual minority	3	6	3	12
	Ethnic minority	2	13	1	16
	Sexual and Ethnic minority	0	7	0	7

Table 2. Overview cases textual analyses

Title	Type	Country of Production	Year of Release	Writer	Distributor/ Network	Number of seasons/ episodes	Content in minutes
The Post	Movie	U.S.	2017	Liz Hanger, Josh Singer	20th Century Fox	NA	116
Spotlight	Movie	U.S.	2015	Josh Singer, Tom McCarthy	Open Road Films	NA	129
The Morning Show	Series	U.S.	2019-…	Kerry Ehrin	Apple TV+	3/30	1,789
The Bold Type	Series	U.S.	2017-2021	Sarah Watson	Freeform	5/52	1,936
The French Dispatch	Movie	U.S.	2021	Wes Anderson	Searchlight Pictures	NA	108
Borgen [The Castle]	Series	Denmark	2010-2022	Adam Price	Danmarks Radio/ Netflix	4/38	1,789
El Caso: Crónica de Sucesos [The Case: Chronicle of Events]	Series	Spain	2016	Fernando Guillén Cuervo	Plano a Plano/ RTVE	1/13	910
De Dag [The Day]	Series	Flanders (Belgium)	2018	Julie Mahieu, Jonas Geirnaert	Play4	1/12	600
De Twaalf [The Twelve]	Series	Flanders (Belgium)	2019-2023	Sanne Nuyens, Bert Van Dael	VRT EEN	2/18	900
Cordon	Series	Flanders (Belgium)	2014-2016	Carl Joos	VTM	2/20	1,000
Deadline 14/10 & 25/5	Series	Flanders (Belgium)	2012-2014	Rudy Morren, Dirk Nielandt, et al.	VTM/ATV	2/16	800
Assisen [Assize]	Series	Flanders (Belgium)	2023	Pieter De Cnudde, Lenny Van Wesemael, et al.	Play4	1/8	400

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Representing Female Leadership in Journalism: A Comparative Analysis of Katharine Graham in *The Post* and *Personal History*

Abstract: This paper offers a comparative analysis of Katharine Meyer Graham's portrayal in Steven Spielberg's *The Post* (2017) and in her autobiography *Personal History* (1998). Drawing on feminist film theory, gender-oriented journalism studies and biographical criticism, this work examines how each medium constructs Graham's physical, sociological and psychological identity. Findings reveal that while the memoir foregrounds vulnerability, gradual empowerment and the emotional labour underpinning her leadership, the film compresses her trajectory into a coherent narrative of decisive courage, reproducing conventions of the exceptional woman. By juxtaposing these representations, this study highlights how cultural narratives shape public understandings of female authority within journalism and beyond.

Keywords: biopic, memoir, female leadership, feminist film theory, gender-oriented studies, journalism, Katharine Graham

1. Introduction

In the 1970s, Katharine Meyer Graham came to be known as the most powerful woman in the United States and one of the most influential journalists of the 20th century. This description is hardly hyperbolic: she became the first woman to lead *The Washington Post*, the newspaper her father, Eugene Meyer, had purchased at a public auction in 1933 and which she later transformed into a modern journalistic outlet. Her leadership would soon be tested during the publication of the *Pentagon Papers* in 1971, when *The Washington Post* joined *The New York Times* in releasing a classified Department of Defense study that documented decades of covert US political and military decisions in Vietnam – a high-risk editorial decision widely recognised as one of the most consequential press-freedom battles of the century.

Graham's rise to the top of American journalism required her to navigate the emotional legacy of her family, a stressful and often unsettling personal life, and a professional environment overwhelmingly dominated by men. In Steven Spielberg's *The Post* (2017), this trajectory is paradoxically introduced not through the sound of printing presses or newsroom chatter, but through the amplified rhythm of Creedence Clearwater Revival's "Suzie Q," which accompanies the film's opening scenes in Vietnam. This apparently dissonant choice of soundtrack already hints at the tension between war, politics and the media ecosystem in which Graham would later exercise her authority, foregrounding the sensorial and affective textures through which the film invites audiences to perceive her world.

This article starts from the assumption that Spielberg's *The Post* and Graham's *Personal History* do not merely recount the same events, but construct partially divergent versions of her professional identity. The working hypothesis is that the film, while celebrating Graham's leadership, tends to downplay and idealise her trajectory when compared with the more ambivalent, self-critical portrait offered by the memoir. Therefore, the aim of this work is to develop a comparative analysis that examines to what extent this hypothesis is confirmed or qualified when Graham's physical, sociological and psychological dimensions are contrasted across both genres.

As her memoir *Personal History* (1997) illustrates, she was a woman far more complex than the polished public figure celebrated in the press or later fictionalised on screen in Spielberg's *The Post* (2017). The memoir offers a nuanced depiction of the psychological, social and institutional pressures Katharine Meyer Graham confronted – elements richly documented in research on the gendered newsroom, and reflective of the persistent structural barriers that women in positions of authority often encounter (Allen et al.; Chambers et al.; Steiner). In this respect, Graham's trajectory exemplifies the tensions between personal vulnerability and public leadership that continue to animate contemporary debates on gender and power within media industries (Carli and Eagly; North; Harmer).

It is therefore striking that Steven Spielberg's *The Post*, while historically accurate in its reconstruction of the Pentagon Papers controversy, narrows Katharine

Meyer Graham's multifaceted life to a single, if pivotal, episode: her decision to publish the Pentagon Papers. Although Meryl Streep's portrayal of Graham celebrates her courage and her moral determination, nevertheless the film necessarily compresses – and sometimes simplifies – the complexity of the woman, and her emotional burden and self-doubt, which *Personal History* so meticulously reconstructs.

As George Custen and Dennis Bingham argue, biographical films often privilege narrative coherence and symbolic archetypes over psychological or historical nuance. In Graham's case, this tension is particularly visible: *The Post* foregrounds her heroic resilience while downplaying the profound influence of her father, Eugene Meyer, and the abuse she suffered in her marriage to Philip Graham, alongside the emotional volatility and long struggle she endured to overcome her own self-doubt – an inner conflict carefully articulated in her memoir and resonant with what later scholarship would term "impostor syndrome" (Clance and Imes).

At the same time, the contrast between the memoir and the biopic offers fertile ground for studying how media portrayals perpetuate or resist gender stereotypes (Galán Fajardo; Arranz Lozano), especially how women leaders are imagined and represented. Cultural representations of female leaders (Carli and Eagly 65), particularly in journalism, oscillate between idealisation, minimisation, and the persistent myth of the exceptional woman (Byerly and Ross 97; Chambers et al. 34; North 360). Feminist media scholars generally agree that successful women, or women in positions of authority, are either portrayed as rare anomalies in male-dominated fields or depicted as conforming to patriarchal norms (Carli and Eagly; Cook). *The Post* contributes toward framing Katharine Meyer Graham as a woman who adheres to patriarchal norms of principled leadership, while simultaneously reproducing familiar visual and narrative codes associated with feminine restraint, hesitancy and aristocratic decorum – aspects that contrast with the more forthright, dynamic woman described in her memoir.

In light of these considerations, the article adopts a three-part theoretical framework. First, feminist film theory (section 2.1.) is used to examine how biographical cinema configures gendered subjectivities and delimits the narrative and visual roles available to women on screen. Second, gender-oriented journalism studies (section 2.2.) provide tools for situating Graham's trajectory within the broader dynamics of newsroom cultures, professional authority and structural inequality in the media industries. Third, biographical criticism (section 2.3.) makes it possible to compare the narrative logics of autobiography and biopic, highlighting how each genre selects, organises and evaluates key episodes in Graham's life. In combination, these three perspectives offer complementary lenses for analysing how *Personal History* and *The Post* construct the physical, sociological and psychological dimensions of Katharine Meyer Graham's identity (section 3) – and which aspects of Graham's life and leadership become obscured or amplified through fiction, thus reflecting upon potential consequences for contemporary understandings

of female leadership in journalism, in line with the theoretical perspectives outlined above and reflected in the division of the literature review into the following three subsections.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Feminist Film Theory and the Shaping of Women's Lives on Screen

Feminist film theory represents one of the most analytically rich frameworks for examining how cinema constructs gendered identities and delimits the roles available to women on screen. As Anneke Smelik explains, feminist film theory is not a single method but a constellation of approaches that seek to uncover the often invisible power dynamics shaping women's representation in cinema (491–504). Early studies such as those by Laura Mulvey (1975), Claire Johnston (1973) and Ann Kaplan (1988) contributed to building a theoretical framework for understanding how the camera's gaze, narrative structures and industrial practices reinforce patriarchal systems of meaning. According to Smelik, mainstream films have historically reduced female characters to predictable roles: the muse, the victim, the supportive wife, or the decorative figure who enhances the male protagonist's journey. These limited portrayals not only restrict the stories women can inhabit, but also shape how audiences imagine concepts such as authority, ambition, or leadership when embodied by a woman. Mulvey argued that classical Hollywood cinema often positioned women as objects to be looked at, rather than as active subjects. This dynamic, known as the "male gaze" (Mulvey), opened the door to broader debates about how mainstream visual culture reinforces or challenges social expectations surrounding gender.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, feminist scholars expanded these debates (De Lauretis; Doane), asking new questions: Could there be a recognisable *female gaze*, offering alternative ways of seeing and telling stories on screen? How do female spectators experience films produced largely through a masculine visual logic? And what happens when women direct, write or narrate their own stories? (Smelik 491–504). These questions generated diverse responses, ranging from experimental counter-cinema that deliberately disrupts Hollywood conventions, to studies exploring how films might articulate female interiority and subjectivity (Smelik).

These alternative perspectives have grown dramatically in recent decades. The bibliometric study by Hastjarjo et al., which analyses two hundred and ten publications on the female gaze from 1987 to 2026, shows a substantial increase in feminist film scholarship since the early 2000s. This growth is strongly linked to the rise of intersectional theory, digital media studies, queer cinema and global perspectives that extend far beyond Mulvey's original psychoanalytic framework

(Hastjarjo et al. 119). Collectively, these developments reveal that feminist film theory has become a field that is broader, more diverse and more interdisciplinary than ever before.

Within this expanded terrain, feminist analyses of biographical cinema are particularly relevant when examining *The Post*. Although Spielberg's film portrays a powerful historical woman, Katharine Graham's representation still relies on narrative and visual conventions characteristic of mainstream Hollywood storytelling. As Custen, Bingham and Vincendeau have observed, biopics often simplify complex historical women by framing them within heroic, maternal or sacrificial archetypes – narrative strategies that risk erasing lived nuance in favour of symbolic coherence. This tendency resonates with Judith Butler's (1990; 2004) conceptualisation of gender performativity: female historical figures are repeatedly depicted through narrow repertoires of femininity, even when their lives departed from those norms. Women on screen are frequently framed through signs of elegance, restraint or vulnerability, a pattern consistent with Hollywood's broader inclination to sanitise or stylise female power (Negra and Tasker; Hollinger).

Beyond its visual style, *The Post* is also shaped by its screenplay, originally written by Liz Hannah and inspired by Katharine Graham's *Personal History*. The subsequent involvement of additional screenwriters and Spielberg's direction complicate any straightforward attribution of a singular *male* or *female gaze*. Rather than being the expression of one unified authorial position, the filmic portrayal emerges from a collaborative process in which a woman screenwriter's engagement with Graham's memoir is filtered through Hollywood's industrial routines and generic conventions concerning the political thriller and the biopic.

Recent feminist critiques (Polaschek; Vidal; Wei) further affirm that mainstream biopics about women often reproduce the myth of the exceptional woman – a figure whose success is attributed to extraordinary individual qualities rather than to a challenge to structural gender inequalities. Such portrayals not only idealise female achievement but also obscure the broader socio-cultural contexts that shape women's access to power.

Overall, this body of work – combining classical feminist film theory with contemporary scholarship – provides valuable tools for understanding how *The Post* constructs Katharine Graham's persona, and illuminates how biographical films continue to shape, and sometimes limit, the public imagination of women who have influenced history.

2.2. Women in the Newsroom: Gender-oriented Journalism Studies

Research on gender and journalism (Chambers et al.) consistently demonstrates that women's participation in news production is shaped by historical inequalities, organisational cultures and symbolic hierarchies within media industries (Steiner). For decades, newsrooms have operated within strongly gendered structures (Carter

et al.), where norms, expectations and professional routines have privileged masculine-coded values such as competitiveness, decisiveness and emotional restraint.

Studies examining gender at work in journalism highlight disparities in hiring, promotion, salary and everyday newsroom practices, as well as persistent inequalities in the representation of women (De Bruin and Ross; Steiner). Authors such as Liesbet Van Zoonen, Gaye Tuchman and Margaret Gallagher have identified recurrent patterns of exclusion – from the underrepresentation of women in positions of leadership to editorial routines that normalise male authority. Drawing upon Byerly and Ross, Chambers et al. and Carter and Ross, scholarship shows that women who achieve professional success in journalism often confront gendered hostility, informal exclusion and the persistent association of leadership with masculinity.

Women are expected to embody professional authority, while simultaneously conforming to gender norms that prize modesty, emotional restraint or self-doubt. Louise North's research has exposed that women in senior editorial roles often report being scrutinised more intensely than their male colleagues, particularly when making high-stakes decisions. Many female editors and executives are thus framed as anomalies rather than as indicators of structural progress – echoing Carli and Eagly's analysis of the "labyrinth" facing women leaders across professions. Therefore, newsroom cultures affect not only women's career trajectories but also their sense of self (O'Brian): feelings of imposter syndrome, hesitation or lack of confidence frequently reflect institutional environments rather than individual shortcomings.

In parallel, scholars such as Monika Djerf-Pierre, Cynthia Carter and Kaitlyn Mendes, and Linda Steiner have shown that gender influences news judgement, sourcing practices and editorial risk-taking. These insights resonate strongly with Katharine Graham's own reflections in *Personal History* and provide a theoretical basis for interpreting Spielberg's portrayal of her leadership in *The Post*. Despite her institutional power, Graham repeatedly described herself as insecure, intimidated and out of place within the male-dominated environments of *The Washington Post* and the broader American press. Her memoir underscores the emotional labour required to navigate a profession structured around masculinised ideals of authority and decisiveness.

Alongside institutional analyses, scholars such as Sue Carry Jansen, Donatella Campus, Heather Savigny and Candida Yates, Karen Ross et al. and Emily Harmer have examined how media portrayals of female leaders often rely on reductive stereotypes that frame women as either overly emotional or excessively cold. These representational patterns closely parallel the visual depiction of Graham in *The Post*. Contemporary research on women's leadership in media further clarifies these tensions, demonstrating how structural sexism shapes women's self-perception, public visibility, and credibility (Franks; Griffin; Kitch; North; O'Brian; Lobo et al.). Thus, gender-oriented journalism studies not only contextualise Graham's lived experiences and internal struggles but also provide essential critical lenses for

analysing Spielberg's representation of her editorial authority, moral agency and public persona. These wider cultural patterns help explain a persistent tendency to depict powerful women as exceptional figures whose authority must be continuously negotiated rather than simply accepted or acknowledged.

2.3. Biographical Criticism and Narrative Construction

Biographical criticism provides another essential framework for comparing *The Post* with Katharine Meyer Graham's memoir, particularly in terms of narrative strategies, ideological choices and ethical considerations. Biographies and autobiographies are not transparent reproductions of lived experience; rather, they shape life into meaningful narrative patterns influenced by cultural assumptions, genre conventions and the author's interpretive perspective.

Classical frameworks (Barthes; Lejeune; Smith and Watson) emphasise the tension between memory, identity and narrative coherence that underlies all biographical writing. More recent studies (Stanley; Light; de Haan and Renders) maintain that autobiographies and biographies continually negotiate the interaction between personal experience, cultural expectations and the demands of narration, rather than simply discovering or recovering an essential self.

Feminist approaches to biography deepen these insights. Scholars of women's life-writing (Jolly; Hirsch; Miller) have demonstrated how gender shapes autobiographical voice, the articulation of agency and the visibility of emotional labour. Female autobiographers frequently describe how family histories, interpersonal responsibilities and gendered social roles influence the development of their professional identities – revealing tensions between public expectations and private experience. These perspectives are especially relevant to *Personal History*, in which Katharine Graham narrates her struggles with self-doubt, marital trauma and institutional sexism, foregrounding elements that films sometimes soften – vulnerability, ambivalence and the uneven process of becoming a leader. Her memoir frames her ascent not as straightforward recognition, but as an ongoing process of negotiation.

Biographical criticism also offers valuable insights into the relationship between autobiography and biopics. Scholars such as Linda Hutcheon, Stella Bruzzi, and Delphine Letort and Joanny Moulin have asserted that adaptations inevitably reconfigure life narratives to meet the demands of visual storytelling, ideological framing and commercial imperatives. In *The Post*, Spielberg isolates a discrete episode of Graham's career – the publication of the Pentagon Papers – and transforms it into a dramatic narrative of moral courage. In doing so, the film elides or relegates to symbolic gestures the emotional, relational, familial and psychological foundations that structure Graham's memoir. Biographical criticism thus helps to illuminate the interpretive choices underlying the film: What is highlighted, what is omitted and which reconstructed version of Katharine Graham emerges as a result.

Moreover, as Sidonie Smith and Beatriz Colomina have noted, biographical narratives of prominent women often undergo selective amplification. Certain traits – strength, moral integrity, sacrifice – are foregrounded, while others – ambivalence, vulnerability, relational dependence – are minimised in order to align with culturally acceptable models of female leadership. This dynamic is clearly visible in *The Post*, where Katharine Graham's lived complexity is simplified to fit the conventions of Hollywood heroism and the expectations of an audience accustomed to streamlined biographical storytelling.

Together, theories of life-writing and adaptation illustrate the divergent narrative logics of *The Post* and *Personal History*, revealing how each constructs a markedly different portrait of the same woman. Analysing these differences allows us to explore not only Graham herself, but also the broader cultural narratives that shape how women's lives – and particularly women's achievements – are remembered, retold and reimagined.

3. Methodology

The main objective of this article is to compare the figure of Katharine Meyer Graham as portrayed in Spielberg's *The Post* and as constructed in *Personal History*. To this end, we adopt a comparative approach informed by the analytical frameworks proposed by Galán Fajardo and Grossocordón Cortecero. Among the wide range of available models, these two stand out for their comprehensiveness and for integrating contributions from multiple authors in the development of their analytical proposals.

The methodological tool derived from these frameworks (Galán Fajardo; Grossocordón Cortecero) comprises three essential dimensions that allow for a qualitative exploration of fictional and non-fictional characterisation. Through a series of variables, these dimensions facilitate the examination of how Katharine Meyer Graham's identity is constructed in *Personal History* and *The Post*. The proposed framework revolves around three analytical axes, as shown in Table 1 (see the end of the article). These three analytical dimensions provide a comprehensive framework through which to examine the physical, social and psychological construction of Katharine Meyer Graham in both *Personal History* and *The Post*. The next section applies this comparative model to explore the convergences and divergences that emerge from both portrayals, contrasting how each narrative constructs her identity, agency and leadership.

4. Findings and Discussion

Drawing on the three analytical dimensions established above, the following section presents how *Personal History* and *The Post* articulate distinct constructions

of Katharine Meyer Graham, revealing not only points of convergence between autobiography and film, but also the narrative, ideological and gendered tensions that emerge when a historical life is reshaped for the screen. By analysing Graham's portrayal across physical, sociological and psychological dimensions, the discussion highlights how each medium negotiates her authority, agency and symbolic meaning within a broader cultural politics of female leadership.

4.1. The Physical-Physiological Dimension: The Construction of Physical Presence

In her memoir, Katharine Graham's physical presence is described with a frank openness that aligns with the conventions of women's life-writing identified by Hirsch and Miller. She frequently references her perceived lack of attractiveness, her insecurities about her body, and her discomfort with public visibility. These self-descriptions are intertwined with feelings of inadequacy derived from gendered expectations within elite social and professional circles. Physical presence in the memoir is therefore inseparable from internal vulnerability: Katharine Graham is not merely describing her body but narrating how that body is evaluated – and often diminished – within patriarchal spaces. As she occasionally described herself:

> I was, I thought, realistic about my own assets and abilities as I grew older. I was not very pretty. I grew tall early, and therefore seemed ungainly to myself. I didn't think I could excel, and was sure I'd never attract a man whom I would like and who would not be viewed with condescension by my parents and siblings. In all the turmoil of the family and our strange isolation both from our parents and from the outside world, we children were left to bring ourselves up emotionally and intellectually. […] It was hard to have an identity. […] The more subtle inheritance of my strange childhood was the feeling, which we all shared to some extent, of believing we were never quite going about things correctly. Had I said the right thing? Had I worn the right clothes? Was I attractive? These questions were unsettling and self-absorbing, even overwhelming at times, and remained so throughout much of my adult life, until, at last, I grew impatient with dwelling on the past. (Graham 54)

Compared with this self-reflective and often self-critical account in *Personal History*, the film offers a far more polished and controlled visual presence, smoothing over Graham's embodied insecurities in favour of a composed, dignified figure who rarely appears physically unsettled.

Age and health also acquire narrative significance. Her ageing process is linked to the evolution of her confidence and independence: periods of frailty correspond to moments of emotional strain, for instance during Phil Graham's illness and crisis, while vitality grows as she gradually assumes control of *The Washington Post*. Her appearance is thus not static: it evolves alongside her emerging identity, reinforcing

biographical criticism's assertion that life-writing shapes physical description in relation to narrative development (Barthes; Lejeune).

Spielberg's film portrays Katharine Graham through a visual vocabulary characteristic of mainstream biopics, which, as feminist film theory suggests (Mulvey; Kaplan; Smelik), tends to stylise female figures and neutralise physical imperfections. Meryl Streep's embodiment of Katharine Graham projects elegance, restraint and dignity; her clothing, posture and movements express refinement and social privilege. Even moments of hesitation or vulnerability are visually polished, framed through soft lighting or close-ups that highlight expressive delicacy rather than embodied discomfort. From a comparative standpoint, these stylistic choices in *The Post* contribute to a less conflicted image of Graham's corporeality than the memoir, which repeatedly links her physical appearance to feelings of inadequacy and exclusion.

The film compresses Graham's physical evolution into a single historical moment, 1971, the year of her decision to publish the Pentagon Papers, thus eliminating the temporal arc of bodily change that figures prominently in the memoir. Physical attributes function symbolically in the film: Katharine Graham's initially hunched or inward posture signals her insecurity, while her increasingly upright silhouette and stronger voice accompany her journey toward assertiveness. This transformation aligns with cinematic conventions of the exceptional woman (Vidal), where authority is visually manifested through controlled elegance rather than through candid acknowledgment of bodily fragility.

Across both portrayals, Katharine Graham's physical presence is central to understanding her leadership. However, *Personal History* foregrounds corporeal vulnerability, while *The Post* cultivates a dignified, aestheticised version of her figure. The memoir invites empathy by exposing the embodied cost of navigating male-dominated power structures, whereas the film offers inspiration by framing physical appearance as a visual metaphor for moral resolve. These differences underscore the politics of life-writing and adaptation: the Graham who emerges in *The Post* is made visually palatable for Hollywood audiences, while the Graham of the memoir remains grounded in the embodied complexity that characterises women's autobiographical narratives.

4.2. The Sociological Dimension: Social Position, Power and Gendered Contexts

In her memoir, Katharine Graham provides a detailed account of her social and familial networks, making clear the intersection between privilege and constraint. As the daughter of Eugene Meyer, she grew up in elite Washington society, yet she describes feelings of marginality within it, particularly during her early adulthood and marriage. Her marital relationship is central to her sociological identity: Phil

Graham is portrayed as both charismatic and destructive, shaping her self-doubt and reinforcing gendered hierarchies within their personal and professional spheres.

Her role as owner of *The Washington Post* after Phil's death places her within a community of powerful men – lawyers, publishers, politicians – whose expectations of her range from paternalistic guidance to outright resistance. The memoir presents the newsroom as a gendered space where her authority is continually negotiated, echoing the findings of gender-oriented journalism studies (Carter et al.; Chambers et al.; Steiner). Katharine Graham's revelations about feeling intimidated at board meetings or being excluded from informal male networks illustrate the institutional pressures faced by women leaders. As she admits, "each time I was the only woman in a room full of men, I suffered lest I appear stupid or ignorant. And yet I have to admit that, as much as I may have been discomfited by being the only woman in most of the meetings I attended, as time went on there was part of me that quite liked it" (Graham 420).

Conversely, Spielberg isolates a single historical episode, the Pentagon Papers crisis, to depict Katharine Graham's sociological environment. The result is a condensed version of her professional network, focusing primarily on male figures such as Ben Bradlee, the executive editor of *The Washington Post*, and Graham's closest editorial ally, Fritz Beebe, the newspaper's chairman and Graham's principal legal and corporate adviser, and a group of external counsellors. These relationships are dramatised to emphasise tension and conflict, underscoring Graham's isolation in moments of high-stakes decision-making.

Social class and community standing are conveyed visually through lavish social gatherings, elegant interiors and Graham's interactions with elite political figures. Yet the film simplifies the complexity of her familial and social obligations: her motherhood, widowhood and relationships with her children and close friends are only lightly sketched. The newsroom becomes a symbolic battleground for gender politics, with scenes explicitly showing Graham being talked over or dismissed – representations consistent with contemporary depictions of institutional sexism (North; Harmer).

Consequently, the sociological dimension reveals the most striking contrast between memoir and film. In *Personal History*, social identity is expansive and multidimensional; in *The Post*, this aspect is selective and functional, used primarily to heighten dramatic tension. Spielberg's framing reinforces the exceptional woman myth (Polaschek; Wei): Katharine Graham is depicted as a lone female figure navigating masculine structures, whereas the memoir highlights a broader ecology of relationships – supportive, ambivalent and antagonistic – that shaped her journey. In contrast, the memoir repeatedly underscores the collaborative and relational nature of Graham's leadership, making the image of solitary exceptionality that emerges from *The Post* appear as a selective reframing rather than an exhaustive account of her sociological positioning.

Where the memoir underscores the cumulative nature of her social experience, the film presents a crystallised moment of crisis that elevates her decision-making to heroic status. Both portrayals foreground gendered obstacles, but they differ in scope: the memoir contextualises them within lifelong patterns, while the film compresses them into a moment of triumph.

4.3. The Psychological Dimension: Psychological Agency and Narrative Identity

The memoir offers a nuanced psychological portrait that aligns with feminist theories of female interiority and subjectivity (Jolly; Hirsch), and with research on impostor syndrome among women leaders, which highlights how self-doubt and feelings of fraudulence are often responses to structurally hostile environments rather than purely individual traits (Clance and Imes). Katharine Graham openly narrates her struggles with self-esteem, impostor syndrome and emotional dependency, particularly during her marriage.

After the death of her husband, Phil Graham, Katharine Graham assumed control of *The Washington Post*, becoming the first woman to lead the newspaper. In a letter to an old friend, she likened her sudden authority to a US president addressing Congress in a moment of crisis: "I am the only President you've got" – an analogy that captures the weight of responsibility and her acute sense of isolation. Far from experiencing her appointment as an affirmation of competence, Graham repeatedly detailed the transition as deeply destabilising. In the aftermath of Phil's death, she idealised his professional legacy, a process that intensified her own feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt.

This internal struggle is articulated with striking candour in *Personal History*, where she reflects on how her mythologised image of Phil complicated her ability to see herself as a legitimate leader. Compared with this extended narrative of doubt, dependence and gradual re-evaluation in the memoir, the film foregrounds a more linear psychological arc, in which uncertainty is resolved relatively quickly through a single moment of decisive action. As she writes:

> I felt terrified without Phil. I badly missed his guidance. Even with all the difficulties of the last few years, he had always been there to lean on. Though I had learned a great deal from him, I still felt insecure making my own decisions. […] Ironically, at the same time I was wishing he was there, all that Phil had been made my job more difficult. His having done everything so well—and, as it seemed to the world, so effortlessly—made it even more daunting for me. Not only had I mythologized him, but others shared the same idolatrous view, which added to my confusion. Everyone would come in and weep on my shoulder about him. As time passed, I developed more perspective and realized that my image of him was at some variance with the reality. He hadn't been as perfect as I thought. He had been brilliant and had achieved an amazing record, but, of course, there were attendant problems. My job was made

> infinitely harder by comparing myself not with the real Phil Graham but with my exaggerated idea of his ability and accomplishments. Still, I didn't have as much energy as Phil had had, nor were my interests as broad, my knowledge nearly as deep, or my training as adequate. As I readily admitted, I certainly didn't feel in any way equal to running the Post the way he had run it. (Graham 340–341)

These inner turbulences shaped her sense of agency, exposing contradictions between her public role and private doubts. Her psychological arc is gradual, marked by setbacks, crises and slow gains in confidence – what biographical criticism identifies as a narrative of becoming rather than closure (Stanley; Light). Her motivations – professional, personal and ethical – are ambivalent and layered. She does not portray herself as a natural leader but as someone who grows into leadership through a blend of obligation, resilience and moral conviction. The memoir foregrounds vulnerability as part of the psychological truth of her experience, challenging dominant cultural expectations of female authority.

The film constructs Graham's psychology through visual cues and dramatic dialogue rather than introspection. Scenes of hesitation – pauses before speaking, trembling hands, careful breathing – serve as proxies for internal conflict. Her psychological evolution is accelerated: within a few days of narrative time, she transitions from uncertainty to decisiveness. The transformation is shaped by dramatic necessity and by cinematic conventions of character arcs (Bruzzi; Hutcheon). Motivation in the film is simplified into a conflict between loyalty, legality and moral courage.

The broader emotional terrain of the memoir – marital trauma, family burdens, long-term self-doubt – is largely omitted. Instead, psychological growth is symbolised by climactic assertiveness, particularly in the decision to publish the Pentagon Papers. Whereas the memoir foregrounds the gradual, contradictory and often painful process through which Graham learns to inhabit authority, the film emphasises a rapid transition from hesitation to decisiveness, thus contributing to a more heroic and less ambivalent image of her leadership. This framing aligns with Hollywood's preference for streamlined emotional clarity and the valorisation of individual heroism (Tasker and Negra).

Accordingly, the psychological dimension highlights the greatest divergence between the two portrayals. In the memoir, Katharine Graham's inner life is complex, conflicted and deeply shaped by gendered socialisation; in the film, it is stylised and narratively focused. The memoir presents psychological agency as emergent and unstable, whereas the film frames it as triumphant resolution. These differences reflect the distinct purposes of autobiography and biopic. Life-writing seeks to communicate lived complexity, including moments of failure and contradiction, while biographical cinema often prioritises coherence, momentum and symbolic transformation. From this comparative perspective, *The Post* condenses the psychological labour that *Personal History* patiently narrates, while leaving in

the background the incremental processes of learning, doubt and emotional labour that *Personal History* foregrounds.

5. Conclusions

The comparative analysis of *Personal History* and *The Post* demonstrates how different narrative forms – autobiographical writing and biographical cinema – construct markedly distinct versions of Katharine Meyer Graham, not only as a figure of leadership, but also as a journalist operating within specific professional and institutional contexts. Although both portrayals foreground her central role in the publication of the Pentagon Papers, they do so through representational strategies shaped by their respective media, ideological orientations and gendered conventions. The analysis partially confirms the initial hypothesis: *The Post* amplifies a narrative of decisive, exceptional leadership, whereas *Personal History* foregrounds the slow, conflictive and emotionally demanding process through which Graham came to inhabit authority, thus highlighting the symbolic power of cinematic narratives in reshaping historical memory of women journalists.

In the memoir, Graham narrates her life through introspection, emotional honesty and a sustained recognition of vulnerability, all of which align with feminist accounts of women's life-writing that foreground the tensions between public identity and private experience. At the same time, *Personal History* presents journalism not merely as an institutional position but as a learned practice, grounded in editorial responsibility, ethical deliberation and a growing commitment to the public role of the press. Spielberg's film, by contrast, compresses the complexities of her development into a streamlined narrative of moral courage and decisive leadership, exemplifying the symbolic economy of the biopic, which often privileges coherence and heroism over professional process and psychological nuance (Bruzzi; Bingham). Additionally, the film's reliance on a screenplay originally crafted by Liz Hannah on the basis of Graham's memoir further underscores that gendered perspectives in biographical cinema are produced not only through images, but also through the layered processes of adaptation, collaboration and industrial decision-making.

This divergence reflects broader dynamics identified by feminist film theorists. Butler's conceptualisation of gender performativity helps explain why historical women are frequently represented through restricted cultural scripts of femininity, even when their lived experiences depart from such norms. Smelik's notion of the "masquerade of femininity" (495–496) is equally instructive: *The Post* often frames Katharine Graham through gestures, vocal softness and meticulously curated costuming that signal elegance and restraint. These stylistic choices sanitise or stylise female power, a phenomenon widely noted in studies of Hollywood's gendered representational practices (Negra and Tasker; Hollinger). What is less visible in

the film, however, is the slow acquisition of journalistic authority that Graham documents in her memoir: the development of editorial judgment, her growing confidence in evaluating sources, and her increasing willingness to defend journalistic independence in the face of political and legal pressure. Meanwhile, Hastjarjo et al.'s emphasis on agency and intersectional representation invites us to reflect on which aspects of Graham's life are amplified, minimised or omitted altogether in the film – her emotional labour, her prolonged struggles with self-doubt, her negotiation of family responsibilities, and the ongoing process of learning to occupy a leadership role.

Gender-oriented journalism studies deepen this picture by showing that Graham's insecurity and self-questioning were not simply personal characteristics but responses to the structural sexism embedded in newsroom culture. The memoir makes this dynamic visible through detailed accounts of exclusion, paternalism and informal resistance to her authority. The film acknowledges such structural forces but refracts them through the conventions of the heroic biopic, foregrounding the catharsis of a single decisive moment rather than the cumulative pressures that shaped Katharine Graham's career and the cumulative professional learning through which Graham comes to see herself – and to be seen – as a journalist responsible for safeguarding press freedom. This contrast exemplifies what biographical criticism identifies as the tension between lived experience and narrative form: life-writing tends to preserve complexity and contradiction, while cinematic adaptation often streamlines biography into narratively and ideologically coherent arcs. From this comparative perspective, *The Post* can be seen as reproducing a familiar biographical pattern that privileges symbolic triumph, while *Personal History* resists such closure by insisting on the unresolved tensions that structured Graham's professional life.

Consequently, these findings illuminate the divergent narrative logics governing *Personal History* and *The Post*. The memoir constructs Graham through introspection, emotional depth and gradual empowerment, foregrounding the interplay between vulnerability, ethical responsibility, journalistic judgment and resilience. The film, by contrast, offers a more concentrated image of authority, shaped by Hollywood conventions that valorise decisive action and visual coherence over professional deliberation. Each text thus engages differently with cultural discourses surrounding gender, journalism, leadership and historical memory. By situating Katharine Graham within these broader representational traditions, the study shows how the same historical figure can be reimagined through contrasting lenses – one that reveals the labour, uncertainty and affective negotiations underpinning women's journalistic authority, and one that celebrates the symbolic force of female leadership in a male-dominated public sphere.

Ultimately, the comparison underscores the importance of attending to the politics of representation when interpreting narratives about historical women journalists. Whether in memoir or on screen, Katharine Meyer Graham's story

is not merely retold but continually reshaped, revealing as much about the cultural expectations surrounding journalism, gender and power as about the woman herself. While Spielberg's film celebrates a single moment of decisive courage, Graham's own narrative insists on the slow, uneven and emotionally demanding work required to inhabit leadership in a gendered newsroom. In this light, both images illustrate the distance between the polished icon of media history – the glamorous newspaper publisher who seems to move effortlessly through Washington's elite – and the complex woman who learned, often painfully, to occupy professional space in a world that had not been designed for her.

By returning to the soundtrack that opens this article, the conclusion seeks to close the analytical arc and underline that sound, no less than words and images, shapes how audiences feel, remember and value a character such as Katharine Graham. *The Post* may open with the reverberations of "Suzie Q," yet the soundtrack that best captures Graham's journalistic identity is aligned with a tradition of exceptional women, contemporary to her, who occupied professional spaces within male-dominated environments and who also worked, often in the background, to transform the public sphere.

Therefore, the soundtracks that would best have suited *The Post* would have been Aretha Franklin's "Respect," amplifying a moment of decisive leadership on Graham's part, while *Personal History* would have aligned more closely with the introspective tones of Joni Mitchell's "Both Sides, Now," whose melody captures the uneven rhythms of a woman journalist gradually learning – slowly and imperfectly – to claim her own professional voice. Bringing these other female voices into the frame operates as both a modest gesture of remembrance and an act of sorority.[1]

Notes

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Tables

LEVEL 1.– THE PHYSICAL-PHYSIOLOGICAL DIMENSION This dimension encompasses all external aspects of the character, offering information about their appearance, corporeality and manner of dress. According to Grossocordón Cortecero (2019, 16), this aspect is composed of the following variables:	
1.1. Gender	Woman, man, non-binary, no gender, genderfluid, bigender, or prefer not to say.
1.2. Age	Young people (15-24).
	Young adults (24-44).
	Adults (45-64).
	Over 65 years old.
1.3. Physical appearance	Height and weight.
	Hair, eye and skin colour.
	Clothing.
	Physical attributes or overall appearance.
	Health.
	Physical defects, birthmarks or hereditary conditions.
LEVEL 2.– THE SOCIOLOGICAL DIMENSION This dimension refers to the sphere in which the character interacts with other individuals and with their broader environment. This aspect allows the character to be situated within the social and relational context in which they operate. This category includes variables related to personal, family and professional life, such as:	
2.1. Stability of relationships	Stable relationships: relationships that remain unchanged throughout the narrative.
	Unstable relationships: those relationships that change – e.g., single individuals forming a couple, or stable couples separating.
2.2. Marital status	Single.
	Married.
	Divorced or separated.
	Widowed.
	Cohabiting.
	No information.

2.3. Social class	
2.4 Position in the community	
2.5. Family situation	
2.6. Educational level	
2.7. Spatial-temporal framework	Workplace.
	Home
	Workplace-home
2.8. Personal history	
2.9. Behaviour with family, friends and colleagues	
2.10. Gestures and movements in public and private contexts	
2.11. Language or speech register	Formal.
	Informal.
	Vulgar.
2.12. Religion	
2.13. Ideology and political affiliations.	
2.14. Distractions, hobbies and interests.	
LEVEL 3.– THE PHYSICAL-PHYSIOLOGICAL DIMENSION This dimension examines the character's personality, temperament and internal world – that is, the aspects that shape their way of thinking, feeling and acting. This aspect is composed of the following variables:	
3.1. Personality type. Following Egri (1946), Field (1984), DiMaggio (1992) and Seger (1990), Galán Fajardo (2006, 68) identifies two main tendencies:	Extroverted characters: direct their energy outward, displaying sociable and expressive traits.
	Introverted characters: direct their energy inward, marked by shyness, reserve and introspection.
3.2. Temperament. Drawing on Jung (1923), four fundamental psychological functions are distinguished: intelligence, sensitivity, perception and intuition. Hirsh and Kummerow (1989) propose a related model dividing temperament into sensory, intuitive, rational and emotional categories. Both frameworks are rooted in the classical temperaments defined by Hippocrates – sanguine, phlegmatic, choleric and melancholic – which continue to inform contemporary character development (Galán Fajardo 2006, 68):	Intuitive.
	Perceptive.
	Reflective.
	Sensitive.

Perceptive. Reflective. Sensitive.	
3.3. Objectives or goals. These are the aims the character pursues – psychological, professional or personal – and are activated through motivations that lead to action, a defining element of character construction since Aristotle. In Galán Fajardo's model (2006, 68), objectives may include: Becoming a good professional. Economic necessity. Altruism.	Advancement in the professional hierarchy.
	Becoming a good professional.
	Economic necessity.
	Altruism.
3.4. Frustrations	
3.5. Transformation arc	
3.6. Type of conflict	
3.7. Virtues	
3.8. Flaws	
3.9. Charisma	
3.10. Emotional, sexual and moral life	
3.11. Self-esteem and complexes	
3.12. Superstitions	
3.13. Imagination	
3.14. Intelligence	

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Journalistic Subjectivity? The War Journalist's Embedded Views in Fact and Fiction

Abstract: Taking the first phase of the "War on Terror," from 2001 to 2014, as a backdrop for reconsidering the embedded war journalist, this article considers how fictional representations in American media reflect competing cultural views on the role journalists play in reporting the war – views often united by their lack of trust in the ideals of journalistic objectivity. Putting these representations into conversation with documentary representations underlines the ways in which this moment lent itself to a journalistic embrace of subjective truth, with journalists drawn ever closer to the positionality of the troops. The ambiguities afforded the documentary mode prove instructive for journalists leaning into the self-conscious nature of re-constructing narrative truth.

Keywords: "War on Terror," embedded journalist, journalistic objectivity, war journalism, documentary, television, film

1. Introduction

In interviews surrounding his 2024 film, *Civil War*, filmmaker Alex Garland explains his central focus on objectivity in creating the film and centering war journalists: "The film is presenting old-fashioned reporters, as opposed to extremely biased journalists who are essentially producing propaganda. They're old-fashioned reporters, and the film tries itself to function like those reporters" (Kuo). Arguing that journalists have become widely maligned figures culturally, Garland describes

his film as arguing for their societal necessity, against the broader polarization of news that speaks in partisan terms to those already in agreement. In *Civil War*, fictional veteran war photographer Lee Smith (Kirsten Dunst) advises her protégée Jessie (Cailee Spaeny) not to ask questions, framing their professional journalistic obligations explicitly in terms of how they "record so other people ask. […]. That's the job." I begin with this entirely fictional depiction of war journalists and photographers because it stands against the tide of an American cultural shift in the understanding of journalism and the feasibility of long-held ideals of objectivity. The same polarization that concerns Garland has emerged very clearly with a destabilized sense of journalistic objectivity in recent years. That ideal of objectivity aligns with concepts of truth at the heart of journalistic ethics, currently being challenged by the exponential rise in practices such as embedded war reporting.

Reflecting on his coverage of the January 6, 2021 insurrection in Washington, DC, photojournalist David Butow noted that, although he still seeks objective truth, "I'm looking for a subjective truth. I'm trying to discover in a scene what feels true to me, beyond just the facts of this situation" (DeVega). Within a context of destabilized trust in the media (see, for example, Holcomb), the first phase of the "War on Terror," between 2001 and 2014, offers an important backdrop for rethinking how media credibility is constructed, all the more so in the "post-truth era" of widespread disinformation campaigns. I consider how American depictions of the embedded war journalist in fiction films and television shows set in the first phase of the "War on Terror" reflect competing cultural views on the role journalists play in reporting war – views often united by their lack of trust in the ideals of journalistic objectivity. Putting these representations into conversation with documentary depictions of embedded war journalists further draws out the ways in which a cultural recognition of the impossibility of a whole picture of the fragmented war lent itself to a journalistic embrace of subjective truth.

In what follows, I briefly gloss the figure of the embedded journalist, before turning to case studies in serialized fictional representations of embedded journalists. Finally, I turn to case studies of documentary representations of embedded journalists to show the melding of subjectivity for journalist-documentarians. By performing comparative readings of the positions of trust and distrust evinced in representations of embedded journalists in this time period, I analyze the ways in which such journalists are drawn ever closer to the positionality of the soldier and begin to rely on the ambiguities afforded the documentary mode, leaning into a self-conscious approach toward re-constructing narrative truth. Elizabeth Cowie writes,

> [b]y its narrating, the documentary presents an explanatory frame that establishes terms for understanding the reality it shows independently of audiences' expectations, producing causal connections, albeit with argument and evidence, and thus a time of a before and an after of the event or action. But in thus transforming the arbitrary and

> contingent of lived experience into the knowable, documentary makes reality both realistic and less real. (39)

This permeability of fact and fiction is inherent in the documentary form, in which trust is often allied with a historical assumption of what Bill Nichols calls "discourses of sobriety" (3), but which remains a film form that is by design subjectively constructed. This offers a framework for comparing the seemingly stricter guidelines for journalistic form, which I use to consider the changing representation of the role and abilities of the embedded journalist.

2. The Figure of the Embedded Journalist

At first glance, it is easy to see how the figure of the embedded journalist could be conceived of as offering a more journalistically objective view than those based on interviews with politicians or military press officers. Yet this framing of an embedded journalist as offering a more objective view is the result of a hard sell by the military that has won the narrative. In order to contextualize this discussion historically, I turn to Phillip Knightley, whose history of the war correspondent traces the phenomenon of embedding to the Crimean War in the mid-1800s. He notes that "from the very beginning, war correspondents faced a dilemma that remains unresolved to this day: Whose side are they on? Correspondents have to choose because the aims of the military and the media are irreconcilable." He expands on this: "The military wants to win the war as quickly as possible and preferably, because the face of battle is horrific, away from the public eye. The media wants to observe the military in action, bear witness, and record the first draft of history" (Knightley 2004, xi). Much of the belief in objective embedded reporting emerged from the trust won by news media during the Vietnam War. David Campbell writes: "The conventional wisdom is that Vietnam was a "living-room war," in which a highly critical media subjected its audience to a stream of graphic combat images showing both uniformed and civilian casualties, such that public opinion eventually turned against the war" (43). Yet he continues: "What happened in Vietnam is the opposite of this myth. The best analyses of American coverage demonstrate that newspapers, magazines, and television endorsed administration perspectives on the war even as the peace movement grew. Far from showing an incessant diet of gory visuals, the U.S. media shied away from graphic images" (Campbell 43). Nevertheless, because of the widely accepted mythos around media coverage of Vietnam, embedding was a means of controlling the narrative without appearing to do so. After all, embedded journalists are "on the ground," in the thick of the action, and seeing and experiencing war firsthand with the troops with which they are embedded. Indeed, that is precisely the issue for the embedded journalist: they are able to report on their firsthand experience of war, but are in the midst of

it, relying on a troop for survival, and lacking the distance to fit their individual experience into a bigger-picture understanding of the war.

The journalist becomes the witness for the event, and now, with the portability of camera equipment, they can often transmit that sense of witnessing to their audience. Indeed, Paul Frosh and Amit Pinchevski write in the introduction to their edited anthology:

> Understood through the framework of media witnessing […] fundamental shifts have occurred as a result of technological changes. In addition to their traditional journalistic tasks, the embedded journalist is increasingly a vehicle for audiovisual media technologies that provide nonstop feeds to global news outlets on a multitude of media platforms. Moreover, the embedded journalist is also an operational model for audiences themselves. (2)

With the spread of available portable cameras, embedded journalists offer a paradigm for citizen journalists to record and witness events too. In considering the rise of the personal voice for the figure of embedded journalists while still holding onto the ideal of journalistic objectivity, it is unsurprising that many depictions of embedded journalists – in both fiction and nonfiction – emphasize the individual initiative of the journalist in tracking down a story, seeking out the truth and pushing themselves into dangerous situations in the name of this mission, on a quest to witness firsthand.[1] The role of witness is a complicated one, however, still often dominated by network interests and cultural taboos around showing violence in the American context. Even if the journalist were to be considered a reliable witness, as Hito Steyerl points out, "is the witness not fundamentally opaque – subjectively colored, marked by interests, seduced by images of language, enamored of being right?" (Steyerl). Steyerl's point connects closely to Judith Butler's suggestion in *Frames of War* that "it seems important to acknowledge that, in framing reality, the photograph has already determined what will count within the frame – and this act of delimitation is surely interpretive" (67). Connected to their earlier discussion of embedded journalism during the Iraq War and their claim that "[s]eeing was tacitly understood as linked with the occupation of a position and, indeed, a certain disposition of the subject itself" (Butler 65), the difficult positionality of the embedded journalist as a particular type of witness defies expectations related to the ideal of journalistic objectivity.

Brian McNair, writing about the depiction of journalists in film, argues: "If journalists are, among other things, the principal cultural watchdogs of our society then movies and movie-makers are part of the apparatus of scrutiny which brings to bear on the journalists" (17). Building on this, identifying repetitions across American fiction and nonfiction films and television shows set during the first phase of the "War on Terror" lays the groundwork for constellating these depictions to better understand how they form and inform popular ideas about embedded journalism.

The examples offered and discussed in what follows here find resonance across further instances, which, while offering their own individual interests, fall into the patterns described here. One major trope repeated in many representations (in the films previously footnoted, among others) is that of the journalist so invested in reporting "authentic truth" from the warfront, whether supportive of the troops fighting or not, that they seem to solidify a sense of the journalist as an alienated individualist. In their most benign interpretation, these portrayals appeal to the ideals of journalistic objectivity and integrity for embedded journalists; in a more conservative reading, they seem to concretize the argument that US news media have an unpatriotic liberal bias, fanning the flames of paranoiac claims that the media does not support the troops abroad. Either way, the journalist in these representations can be understood as the navigation of the cultural question of news media and trust. It is worth noting that this is not a new question per se, but given the expedited nature of destabilized trust in news media from the current vantage point more than two decades after the onset of the "War on Terror" and the rise of social media concurrent with those early years of the conflict, these representations offer a moment of clarity for tracking cultural uneasiness around journalistic ideals.

Heinz Brandenburg, writing about embedded journalists, articulates the tension inherent in expectations of journalistic objectivity within the embedding process: "The professional, impartial war reporter is one who tries to square the circle of being patriotic without taking sides. Once embedded, however, it is no longer a question of taking sides but of becoming part of one side" (957). The concern around "siding" with troops shows up repeatedly in media in which journalists either discuss or take action to forgo official embedding processes, instead considering the freedoms of striking out alone, often explicitly appealing to a sense of documentary freedom. In the Canadian film *Afghan Luke* (2011), as one example, the eponymous Luke (Nick Stahl) encounters resistance to his determination to track down whether or not rumors of war crimes (mutilation of corpses committed by service members) were true; this resistance comes immediately from his editor, who says flatly early in the film that it is not a story they will ever run. Telling themselves and others that they will sell the story to CNN once it is done, when pushed, Luke's friend and financer, Tom (Nicolas Wright), reframes his position and says, "I'm a freelance documentary filmmaker, and I hope to sell my doc to [CNN] eventually." This blurs the boundaries of documentary and journalism – does a journalist who has gone rogue simply become a documentary filmmaker? And does freelance documentary-making permit the freedom to track down a story in a way that journalists cannot, limited by the demands of the news agency employing them and that agency's audience and agenda? When Luke does pursue the story and finds himself pinned down with the single "bad apple" service member who has been mutilating corpses for "trophies," he finds himself put into the position of having to pick up a gun to fire at the enemy sniper, crossing the line of journalistic witnessing into action.

3. Fictional Serial Treatments of the Embedded Journalist

In serial form, miniseries and television shows can display the process of becoming part of one "side" – the US military's – and its ripple effects over time. The time required for trust and the gradual settling in is precisely the element that permits a viewer to dismiss a lack of objectivity – the initial mistrust with which the embedded journalist is greeted becomes the badge of their objective independence from military influence, and the journey of earning trust refocuses and misdirects attention. By portraying this as a journey, such representations normalize the trust gained between the journalist and the troop, easing concerns of bias that embedding might otherwise trigger by rooting the relationship within a legacy of antagonism (often particularly tied to independent news coverage of the Vietnam War, through which news media earned trust from the public) (Buchanan 106). This section considers *Over There* and *Generation Kill* as two notable examples of series depicting this journey.

FX's short-lived 2005 television show, *Over There*, spends the first four episodes introducing the Army unit of mainly new recruits shipped out to Iraq, setting up tensions within the troop, their struggles at war, and the difficulties their families face on the homefront. Episode 5, "Embedded," however, introduces embedded journalist John Moffet (Mark-Paul Gosselaar), who intrudes on the troop's dynamics and gets in the troop's way. Throughout the episode, interactions between John and the troop emphasize the performative aspects of the relationship. When interviewing Private Maurice "Smoke" Williams (Kirk Jones), for example, Moffet directs him: "Tell me yourself for the camera. I got to cut myself out of this, so if you want it to make it to television, you gotta tell me yourself in a whole sentence by yourself." This interaction is of particular note as it exemplifies both the journalist's appeal to objectivity through self-erasure, *à la* direct cinema, and the influence the journalist has on the troop in directing their interviews.[2] Arjun Appadurai notes: "Live reporting from the field is one way of looking for the 'authentic,' real world, the place in which reality and action play out. Once in the field, journalists also direct people to act out in what looks like a real, authentic, genuine manner" (243). Being skilled at his job, Moffet gets a rapid-fire series of sound bites from "Smoke," each with more swagger and less relation to the reality of his time as a service member – the sound bites, which include "I'm a devil in drab," "I got me a license to kill," and "I'm your worst nightmare," reflect more a Hollywood super-soldier's machismo than anything related to the troop's experience in Iraq. Another member of the troop explicitly warns his fellow-soldiers that journalists like Moffet will leave long silences to get them to do just this kind of riffing with things that should not be said on camera.

The cynicism, anxiety, and discomfort provoked by Moffet's presence for most of the troop is soon borne out when he captures footage of a young boy and woman being gunned down, without a clear gunman. The ensuing media coverage

that runs on television juxtaposes the deaths of the boy and woman against Smoke's "license to kill" riffing, which draws attention to the power of editing and serves to further alienate the journalist from the troop, confirming for them that the media is not to be trusted. Moffet tries to explain to the furious troop that "[t]he wire service I work for recut my footage. They took what I uploaded and they made a story of it." The episode is an excellent example of posing the media more broadly (with journalists as willing or unwilling participants) as antagonists to the military, who are simply trying to do their jobs. What this depiction obscures is just how precarious the situation of the journalist actually is: since the series is framed in terms of the troop, the audience's sympathies are already aligned with the troop, predisposed to view their embed as a dangerous interloper. Though a fictional depiction, this in turn translates into a potentially skeptical reception to news media sources for audience members who empathize with the fictional troop as a stand-in for the troops serving in the real world.

In order to prove himself to the troop and redeem his actions within the narrative of *Over There*, Moffet quits his network and pursues a theory about the hotspot town being set up as a media trap for the troop, but he is captured by insurgents when he makes contact outside of his official means. The subsequent episode, "It's Alright Ma, I'm Only Bleeding," plays out the heroism of the troop working to rescue "their" captured journalist, emphasizing their altruism in risking their lives for the journalist who has caused one of their number serious issues regarding media attention. The troop is too late, however, arriving just as Moffet is beheaded. It is in his death that he is recognized as one of the troop's own, his helmet, camera, photo, and boots arranged exactly as their fallen commander's helmet, gun, photo, and boots were at the midpoint of the episode. In his final actions investigating whether "his" troop was set up, John Moffet plays out the claim that "[a]lthough reporters' professional loyalties are undoubtedly strong, the embedding experience over time should elicit commitment to the military unit, which will produce a unique set of attitudinal and behavioral expectations. It is likely that embedded journalists, at least partially, internalize the values of the military units they are assigned to" (Pfau et al. 471). Moffet fully earns his place by trying to redeem the troop and to take action to rectify his betrayal of them. Ultimately, *Over There* suggests the importance of distinguishing between the figure of the individual journalist, who in this depiction is redeemed by loyally telling the truth of the troop's actions, and the media industry, which narrativizes for ratings/views and which may act at odds with the best interests of the military. The embedded view is only deemed unbiased when serving the military's interests.

In comparison, it is notable that *Generation Kill*, the 2008 HBO miniseries based on *Rolling Stone* journalist Evan Wright's time embedded with a troop of Marines, largely minimizes the journalist character despite dramatizing a journalist's experiences. While the journalist – given the moniker "Scribe" by the Marines with whom he is embedded – is a character frequently on-screen, and who often acts

as the audience stand-in, being the naïf new to the battle who must learn the ways of the troop and the rules of this war, the narrative is not about him. It is about the Marines, and the character is there as a bridge between viewers and the military, the figure for whom the Marines must explain what is routine to them – arguably, Scribe (Lee Tergesen) acts as a translator much as journalists do in their reporting. In this case, however, the journalist is not the one translating but a passive figure for whom translation is performed by the Marines. While Marine reactions to Scribe's embedding range from discomfort to skepticism to irritation, he is integrated into the platoon, becoming the foil for understanding its dynamics. Considered by critics and veterans to be an early, excellent portrayal of the (fictionalized) reality of the "War on Terror," *Generation Kill* performs an erasure of the journalist by emphasizing the amplification of military logics and attitudes by the embedded journalist, and tracks the normalization of Marine routine for the embed as he settles into the rhythms of his troop, in whose experiences he partakes.

Throughout the series, the audience are often given Scribe's disorienting point of view, though often permitted to see more than the journalist. Scribe's view is repeatedly obstructed – there are many shots in the series in which dust, darkness, or frenetic action obscure and make vision impossible. Furthermore, access is an issue thematized in the series – although the audience can follow various marines as they break off from the group to confer at higher levels, the journalist is one of the grunts, snapping photos on a traditional film camera. Even this detail – that Scribe documents events in still images – is notable, especially in contrast to the handheld digital camera that Corporal Lilley (Kellan Lutz) wields as he constantly films events, often from the top of vehicles instead of from the interior of a Humvee truck, as Scribe does. When the marines themselves seem well-equipped to represent themselves, both materially and emotionally, what does the journalist bring? (In this case, perhaps it is enough that the journalist depicted went on to write about his experiences, and that his account was adapted in a critically acclaimed mini-series.) The embedded journalist is accordingly confronted with the process of adoption by his troop, and the question of his objective utility, left to offer the view from a position between civilian and military. This underlines the necessity of subjectivity inherent even in the appeal of the professional gaze to the ideals of objectivity.

4. Embedded Journalists in Documentary

Turning to documentary considerations of the embedded journalist with this melding of subjectivity into the professional gaze in mind, *Danger Close* (2017) tells the story of female war reporter Alex Quade and, ultimately, her quest to "do right" by one of the soldiers with whom she was first embedded. The troops with whom Quade is embedded are never shown to be either outwardly hostile

or irritated and skeptical, as the fictionalized troops in the television series are toward their journalists, and the film ultimately illustrates the loyalty a journalist can quickly grow to feel while embedded. Quade speaks in the first-person plural, including herself in the troop with which she is embedded, and quickly picks up military verbiage to describe her actions as well as the troop's. Phillip Knightley notes this inevitable lingual tell for embedded journalists in Iraq: "No matter how determined embedded correspondents may have been to maintain their distance and objectivity, once the war had started, almost without exception, they soon lost all distinction between soldier and correspondent and began to use the pronoun 'we' in their reports" (2004, 532). From the beginning of *Danger Close*, Quade uncritically speaks about "bad guys," "insurgents squirt[ing] out," and, by the last third of the film, her "mission" to return to the Pirelli Outpost in honor of Special Forces Staff Sergeant Rob Pirelli.

Quade reflects the ways in which the military benefits from embedded reporting, clearly seeing herself in terms of a patriotic nationalist reporting on her side. Her coverage of the war is certainly hyper-focused on the immediate, smaller scale actions she is witness to, rather than on how the actions of her troop fit within a bigger picture.[3] Perhaps this puts too much on the embedded journalist, however – the news report within which the embedded journalist's coverage is fitted is perhaps the place to expect contextualization and analysis. After all, as James Gleick puts it, "'You can't gather news and present it at the same time'" (qtd. in Russial et al. 307). The documentary form permits a fuller picture of the individual, subjective truths available to embedded journalists, certainly more than the snippets taken in the moment, removed from context and put into a news hour. But given the limited framework of what an embedded journalist can see, and the ways in which that journalist is steeped in the war front, the "authentic" immediacy of the report arguably replaces journalistic objectivity as the method of truth-telling, something seen in both fiction and documentary representations.

From her adoption of military language and the rhetorical framing of her interests, *Danger Close* formulates Alex Quade as a representation of a conservative political voice aligned with the military in its views of liberal media bias against the military. Indeed, it is part of her mission to represent the troops more fairly than other coverage, and then to pay tribute to one fallen soldier. Quoted on Quade's website, Colonel Hans Bush of Special Forces notes of the film: "Her willingness to go into harm's way produced a film that honors the regiment and renews faith in combat reporting" (Maxwell). Ultimately, *Danger Close* provides a multifaceted documentary depiction of some of the tensions felt by embedded journalists in trying to cover the war – especially in terms of how to perform their part in the story, and how personal ties to soldiers who are injured or killed reshape how those journalists conceptualize their role and their motivations for reporting a form of truth about the conflicts. Like her fictional counterparts, Quade comes to know and care about the troops with whom she is embedded, and her ability

to report is framed within the documentary as closely tied to her ability to speak from personal experience.

In contrast, *Only the Dead* (2015), Michael Ware's documentary with Bill Guttentag, uses a voice-over narration by Ware, the Australian journalist around whom the film is centered, to provide a (presumably after-the-fact) grappling with the events experienced and captured by digital cameras in the moment. This narration after events have passed lends a sense of the constructedness of the film, indicating that Ware had to rewatch footage and choose to include it in creating this docu-memoir. The nature of the voiceover recorded after the fact is never explicitly addressed and could theoretically pass unnoticed by a viewer caught up in the action. Yet this narration is key in shifting the film from one of media witnessing to an autobiographical memoir, bringing it closer to fiction: "Facts are witnessed, fictions are narrated," as John Durham Peters writes (722). Placed in conversation with other documentaries and fictional depictions of the embedded journalist, Ware's docu-memoir highlights the subjectivities inherent in the embedded journalist's work, even if in ways that separate it from other depictions. Ware's documentary then recasts the use of voiceovers in fiction films to better highlight the fictions inherent in documenting, the embedded journalist as storyteller more than witness. As both protagonist and maker of the documentary, Ware also blurs the lines between journalism and documentary, never fully embracing ideals of objectivity when the most honest truth he can tell is from his own point of view.

Ware's concept of journalism is explicit: "I loved being a journalist, hunting a story." This view of journalism as capturing a story is soon expanded, as Ware situates himself with other journalists: "Together, it was our job to try to understand what was really going on beyond the press conferences and sound bites." The question of motivation in journalism is closely related to Zohar Kampf and Tamar Liebes's reframing of the embedded journalist as practicing a form of performative journalism: "stories in which the journalist performs as an active agent in the field, often positioning himself as the protagonist in the narrative" (25–26). They put forward this frame for understanding an evolution of journalism moving away from the ideal of objectivity, in which the journalist would passively stand by and document with professional neutrality. Kampf and Liebes note that even before embedded journalism became normalized with the early war in Iraq, the move from passive reporting to advocacy journalism or investigative reporting paved the way for individual personality and celebrity to converge in journalistic practice (27–30). Their description of a form of embedding in contrast to "with 'our' troops," chasing down terrorists and embedding with "'their' troops" (32), a form of investigative journalism, is on display in *Only the Dead*, raising further issues related to perspective, ethics, and authenticity in documentary. Working as an embedded journalist, an individual reporter, and an embed with insurgents, Ware acts in many ways as an extension of the embedded journalist, reliant on others

and independent in turns, raising questions of oversight and ethical approaches to hunting and capturing the story.

Ware's light camcorder (similar to that seen in the hands of Corporal Lilley in *Generation Kill*) captures horrific footage as he races towards disasters, documenting in shaky handheld views the first suicide bombing in Baghdad – a minibus exploding in front of the Jordan embassy. The camera captures shockingly red, blood-splattered bodies against the dusty grey-brown exploded building and cars, intermittently swinging down to show only the blur of concrete roads, before insistently returning to shots of panicked first responders trying to pull the injured from the mangled wreckage. Citizens (presumably) trying to make sense of what has happened are heard repeatedly admonishing Ware's camera: "Don't film! Don't film!" "What are you filming? Why do you film the dead?" Fast editing complements the disorienting views; including civilians who demand that Ware stop his camera's view forces the viewer to question what purpose this documentation serves. Ware's voiceover immediately following these demands – "They're just removing another body now, so people are very emotional" – seems to shrug off whatever ethical questions the demands might raise, however, even as the camera steadily captures men pulling a mangled corpse out of concrete and metal debris.

Considering the autobiographical bent of *Only the Dead* (and the broader phenomenon of personalized journalistic approaches) the professional gaze here is further entangled in the ethical quandary created by the perversity of the images taken, "walk[ing] an uneasy line between unflinching reportage and prurient exploitation," as the film's *Guardian* review phrases it (Ide). Ware's unique perspective for American audiences of the actions of the insurgents, though translated and framed by an Australian journalist's commentary, is one that purports to give the documentary a more objective view in comparison to traditional embedded journalists (whether real or fictional) that center on an American or allied perspective. Throughout the film, Ware chooses to show deaths from all sides in graphic detail, unflinchingly including gruesome images of headshots, bodies mangled by shrapnel, the beheading of journalists, and the slow painful deaths of those severely injured. In *Only the Dead*, the protests against Ware's recording in the early documentation give an ethical guide: Is this a form of bearing witness, transmitting images censored for American audiences? Is this a means of sharing the burden of these sights by the overburdened journalist who documents them? This documentary/memoir stands as a unique example of a journalistic view that problematizes and questions itself as the events unfold.

5. Conclusions

In Alex Garland's *Civil War*, which he structured to "act like old-fashioned reporters, to not be biased" (Kuo), although the journalists portrayed fluidly

embed themselves with various factions in order to document events, they are not embedded securely with a troop in the same way as colleagues they meet up with toward the end of the film. One of the main issues for the film is the vagueness of its context – something Garland defends as emulating the objectivity of the reporters he admires. Yet his protagonist, Lee, is burnt out, having lost faith in a society that did not understand the warnings to stop conflict contained in every image of war she sent home. Without a clear network of circulation for reporting, it is unclear for whom the images and reports are being captured, other than posterity. Their emotional remove and refusal to ask questions carry a heavy psychological toll on the veteran reporters, but without further context, it all seems futile. Their dogged pursuit of objectivity comes across as less noble than misguided; torn from any sense of normalcy, the one thing they could know is their own experience. It is instructive to recall Judith Butler's critique of Susan Sontag's insistence on the purely affective effect of photography, that "it seems important to acknowledge that, in framing reality, the photograph has already determined what will count within the frame – and this act of delimitation is surely interpretive" (67). Butler marks the importance of visual culture, arguing that "[t]o learn to see the frame that blinds us to what we see is no easy matter. And if there is a critical role for visual culture during times of war it is precisely to thematize the forcible frame, the one that conducts the dehumanizing norm, that restricts what is perceivable and, indeed, what can be" (100). By refusing to ask questions, the journalists of *Civil War* remain blinded by their own "forcible frame," embedded within a fictional civil war without context or recognition of their own subjectivity.

Putting these fictional and documentary representations of the embedded journalist in conversation highlights the impossibility of holding onto an ideal of objectivity. William Merrin, tracing a history of digital war, writes of coverage of the Iraq War that "The US military presented embedding as an example of coalition transparency, versus the disinformation of the enemy" (97). Yet, he notes, "Overall the embed project proved to be a huge success for the military: as David Miller says, 'Embedded journalists were the greatest PR coup of the war'" (97). The alignment of embedded journalists with the troops with whom they were embedded may appear as obvious consequence of the situation, as journalists rely on that troop for safety and guidance in an unfamiliar terrain. Leaning into their own subjectivity seems a natural outcome, as there is no way to grasp a "bigger picture" in the field, despite the push for journalistic objectivity. The most truthful reporting is the subjective view available. In turn, this places the embedded journalist alongside the service members in their increased ability to document their experiences for themselves (Merrin 119). What distinguishes the professional gaze of the war journalist, then, is their role as conduit between home front and war, their learning curve of military standards, and the translation of their own limited view too close to the conflicts. Phillip Knightley argues that "these days everyone in a war zone with a mobile phone is a war correspondent. Since the authorities cannot

censor a whole population or embed everybody, we have entered a new era of war reporting, the main characteristics of which are a flood of information and images that are difficult to verify" (2013, 381). The verifiable reports filed by embedded war journalists still hold onto professionalization and the conceptual ideal of objectivity. Yet, like documentaries, the constructedness of which complicates their truth claims, an acknowledgment or surfacing of the subjective limitations that constrain can offer a path toward truth.

By examining the figure of the embedded journalist as a main conduit for the public understanding of the conflicts comprising the "War on Terror," and recognizing the systematic constraints within which reporting is often limited, I hope to have drawn out the repetitions of concern with truth and storytelling across media forms. The anxieties around media reliability that these representations rehearse fall along a spectrum of political views, reflecting a destabilization in the fragmentation of audience appeal more than clear majority or minority positions regarding how and why to distrust news media. The figure of the journalist works through media suspicion from all angles – conservative views of "liberal media bias" and distrust of "mainstream media" under President Trump, as well as liberal anxieties of media complicity with governmental messaging, or the mainstreaming of extremist rhetoric. Trapped by critiques on all sides, the war journalist can report the individual experience of being embedded, or they can amplify the voice of the soldiers with whom s/he is embedded (Appadurai 247). As journalists "earn" their place in the troops with which they are embedded, their role shifts from that of the outsider seeking some degree of impartiality, to that of a recruit. Across representations of the journalist during the "War on Terror," this raises questions around the ethical burden of bearing witness and the ability to maintain journalistic objectivity, suggesting instead a paradigmatic shift in terms of acknowledging the subjectivity of documentary truth that now permeates journalistic boundaries

Notes

The material in this article was first presented at the ESSE 2024 conference and draws upon Chapter 2 of my forthcoming book, *War in Pieces: "War on Terror" Media and the Fracturing of American Identity* (Rutgers University Press)

1 See, for example, *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*, *A Private War, A Thousand Times Good Night*, and *The Hornet's Nest,* to name a few, in addition to the examples discussed here.

2 Consider, for example, the work done by journalist-documentarians as in *Restrepo* and *Korengal*, which de-emphasize almost to the point of erasure of their creators.

3 See Payne for examples of limitations of embedding.

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Performing the Shared Habitus: Journalism(s) in Tom Stoppard's *Night and Day* and James Graham's *Ink*

Abstract: This article examines how Tom Stoppard's *Night and Day* (1978) and James Graham's *Ink* (2017) depict 20th-century British journalism through Pierre Bourdieu's theory of habitus and fields of cultural production. Rather than treating journalism as a moral calling, both plays present it as a competitive socio-economic field shaped by struggles for economic, symbolic, and political capital. In *Night and Day*, the idealized war correspondent is revealed to be constrained by professional rivalry, market forces, and geopolitical interests. *Ink* portrays the tabloid newsroom as a site where competition drives sensationalism, imitation, and the commodification of bodies. Together, the plays show how different journalistic subfields share a common competitive habitus that adapts to changing historical and technological contexts. Using Bourdieu's framework, the article demonstrates how theatre exposes the structural pressures and embodied practices that shape journalistic work in modern Britain.

Keywords: Stoppard, James Graham, Bourdieu, habitus, *Night and Day*, *Ink*, war correspondence, tabloid journalism

1. Introduction

Theatre brings unique expressive powers to the representation of journalistic practice in that dramatic works are written to be performed in front of a live audience that occupies a shared space with the actors on stage and may feel immediately

addressed. In *The Journalist in British Fiction and Film*, Sarah Lonsdale observes a kind of affinity between theatre and journalism in terms of the ways they stay in "close connection with real events" (228). Addressing the power of theatre to make the audience acknowledge its "complicity" in creating socio-political realities, Lonsdale points out that for Richard Bean's press satire *Great Britain* (2014), which is set in a tabloid newsroom, the audience may feel particularly involved because they buy tabloids themselves. English theatre has in fact a long record of confronting the audience with the field of journalism and the figure of the journalist. Dating back to 1625, Ben Jonson's *The Staple of News* is considered to be one of the first theatre works that dealt with the emerging newspaper business, and in line with Jonson's well-known satirical tone, the play parodies the rapid advance of news agencies back in the Caroline era and shows Jonson's response to the changes that the news business in the early 17th century brought about in England, portraying "a complex mixture of pointed documentary and ethical judgement" (Muggli 323). A century later, Henry Fielding's play *The Historical Register for the Year 1736* (1737) explored the widespread political corruption in English society, which, he believed, held sway across many professional fields, including journalism. Usually studied as a satirical piece on the government of Robert Walpole,[1] *The Historical Register* is a significant dramatic piece for its "Dedication to the Public," in which the playwright openly and rather humorously attacks the Walpole government for bribing journalists to propagate his political agenda. Fielding sarcastically discloses the political and economic dynamics that were shaping the public opinion through journalism in the first half of the 18th century in England. What is further significant is that his sarcasm underlines the potential corruption that might be engendered between unchecked political power and journalistic practices (Ward 140), a topic of debate that still dominates discussions around the functions and failures of journalism within and beyond theatre today.

20th- and 21st-century British theatre follows this line of engagement when journalism is under its spotlight, and has shown an interest in journalism both in mainstream theatre aesthetics and within more politically motivated works. From Arnold Wesker's *The Journalists* (1975) to Howard Brenton and David Hare's *Pravda* (1985) or Bean's *Great Britain*, many plays have engaged with journalism, and specifically the figure of the journalist, often with a concern for the role of the media in transforming public opinion due to its inherent power to "gather and disseminate" public information against the backdrop of a "growing feeling of cynicism and distrust" (Valverde 6).[2] Much of the critical debate over the reception of journalism in works like the above-mentioned plays is more or less focused on the ethics of journalism in line with the commonly held moral principles related to this field: commitment to truth, objectivity,[3] and a belief in journalism's power to contribute to the functioning of a democratic system.[4] What is often missed out, however, is that journalistic practices are fundamentally linked to media landscapes as fields of social action where internal structures and field-specific constraints

determine the course of action according to the political agendas and economic interests of the same governing structures. A *habitus*, as Pierre Bourdieu conceptualizes it, produces and is produced from such internal operations and enables journalists to perform from within a cultural sphere, with a deep connection to the ways this microcosm fosters values such as competitiveness. In this context, rather than simply offering a space for the gathering and dissemination of public knowledge, which always oscillates between corruption and a moralistic worldview, journalism is a field of multiple intersections where the personal and the public, as well as the political and the economic, are fused within a habitus of (inevitably) conditioned practices.

A study of journalistic habitus, then, needs to consider how different motivations of different agents meet in a mutually constituted space of common practices without risking its structural dynamics. Such analysis is especially useful when the subject matter is fictional works rather than fact-based accounts of journalism. A study of dramatic representations in particular can reveal the ways agents perform – or play the 'game' in Bourdieu's sense – the characteristics of this social field.[5] Therefore, it is arguably possible to draw a wider picture of the manners by which journalism as a specific field of social action is constituted across several dispositions and performances. This article examines Tom Stoppard's *Night and Day* (1978) and James Graham's *Ink* (2017) as complementary accounts of print journalism in the second half of the 20th century – what is now regarded as traditional journalism, still unchallenged by the internet and social media. The plays reveal a shared vision of journalism as a competitive field structured by economic and political power rather than by purely ethical ideals. Each dramatizes how journalists internalize and reproduce the constraints of their profession, showing remarkable continuity in journalistic habitus across different contexts. By staging postcolonial foreign reporting and the rise of tabloid populism, the plays trace the evolution of print journalism while exposing the persistent logic of competition that aligns with Bourdieu's model of cultural production. Taken together, *Night and Day* and *Ink* present journalism itself as a socio-political microcosm the internal dynamics and limitations of which become visible through dramatic fiction.

2. Habitus: "Structured, Structuring Dispositions"

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus constitutes one of the core principles of his understanding of social action as the lived experience of conditioned practices. In line with his materialist view of social life, Bourdieu considers the habitus as "the product of history" which "produces individual and collective practices, and hence history, in accordance with the schemes engendered by history" (1977, 82). The concept of habitus refers to the embedded ways of perception and action which are ingrained in individuals from their earliest upbringing and sustained

through their positions and roles within societies, such as class membership and family relations. In Bourdieu's own words, habitus is "the system of structured, structuring dispositions" which is "constituted in practice and is always oriented towards practical functions" (1977, 52). It is the "durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations" which incorporates "cognitive and motivating structures" (1977, 78). Habitus is durable because it "adjusts" (1977, 78) to new demands in new contexts, but it also preserves its "homogeneity" across time by allowing "practices and works to be immediately intelligible and foreseeable, and hence taken for granted" (1977, 80). This is also possible because habitus inscribes itself even on mutable social positions and fields such as professional spaces or political affiliations; it is "the product of the work of inculcation and appropriation necessary in order for those products of collective history, the objective structures (e.g., of language, economy, etc.) to succeed in reproducing themselves more or less completely, in the form of durable dispositions, in the organisms […] lastingly subjected to the same conditionings" (1977, 85). It covers, in this sense, a wide spectrum of organizing functions in an individual's life, which grants the habitus both its organizing power and the flexibility that it needs for durable transmission and transformation across time.

What also makes the habitus significant is the way it "produces individual and collective practices" (Bourdieu 1990, 54). Since it possesses "an infinite capacity for generating products" such as "thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions" (1990, 55), it is likely to produce "all the 'reasonable,' 'common-sense,' behaviours (and only these) which are possible within the limits of these regularities, and which are likely to be positively sanctioned because they are objectively adjusted to the logic characteristic of a particular field" (1990, 55–56). In other words, habitus produces the "normal" and sanctions it as the ideal expression of one's belonging in a group. This sometimes happens on an institutional level where the habitus' "capacity for incorporation" uses "the body's readiness to take seriously the performative magic of the social" (1990, 57); at other times, it happens on the level of individual perception in which the habitus "structures new experiences in accordance with the structures preceded by past experiences" (60). Whether through the institutionalized body or individual perception, habitus composes a structure which "tends to protect itself from crises and critical challenges by providing itself with a milieu to which it is as pre-adapted as possible, that is, a relatively constant universe of situations tending to reinforce its dispositions" (1990, 61). "Structured" as it is, in this respect, the ongoing "structuring" function of the habitus allows it to "adjust" itself to "a probable future which it anticipates and helps to bring about" (1990, 64), a quality which renders it a flexible space of interaction rather than a static existential ground built on deterministic principles.

Habitus is an important framework for understanding Bourdieu's conception of fields. His field theory is particularly tied to his concepts of habitus and practice when analysing how social relations work. A field is, as Ian Buchanan defines, "the

network of social relations, regulations and adaptive possibilities specific to a social group, which may be defined in terms of location (such as a town or a village), profession (artists, academics, and so forth), or class (blue collar, white collar, etc.)" (170). It is a structured "social space" which, within specific boundaries, possesses its own set of rules and hierarchies, much like a football game. Indeed, Patricia Thomson observes that Bourdieu uses the analogy of the football game to explore how social life works. Just as in football, she points out, the social field consists of "positions occupied by social agents (people or institutions) and what happens on/in the field is consequently boundaried. There are thus limits to what can be done, and what can be done is also shaped by the conditions of the field" (69). It is positions, rather than individual agents, that determine the courses of interaction within a field, as it is structured by power relations in which dominant agents seek to regulate the internal order while others strive to redefine their share.[6] The main goal of the struggles in the field is clear: "conserving or transforming the structure of relations of forces," as Bourdieu (2005, 30) clarifies. Normality, legitimacy and symbolic boundaries are shaped in this process by the network of those relations, and the field is constituted by this exchange between agents, positions, resources and the habitus.

Bourdieu pinpoints a series of fields that hold considerable significance in modern society, such as the literary field, the academic field, and the political field. In the later phases of his career, he began to focus on the field of journalism with increasing frequency and significance. He was particularly interested in how television journalism and media outlets were shaping public opinion in an increasingly effective manner. For instance, *On Television* (1998) is quite outspoken about the habitus of the journalistic field and its relation to the political field, which he views in rather negative terms. He argues early on that "the journalistic field produces and imposes on the public a very particular vision of the political field," and that the journalists, who occupy an ambiguous position in the political world as "influential actors but not full-fledged members," provide politicians with "vital symbolic support that they can't get for themselves" (1998, 2–4). Taking his argument further into a critical standpoint, he states that "some journalists act much like small-time capitalistic entrepreneurs who need to preserve, and increase, their symbolic capital," while at the same time it is possible to witness "the growth of a vast journalistic subproletariat, forced into a kind of self-censorship by an increasingly precarious job situation" (1998, 5–6).

David L. Swartz views Bourdieu's attitude towards journalism in terms of his general argument about its organizing principle, namely "a struggle for symbolic power, that is, the capacity to impose a viewpoint as the legitimate one, the true one" (36). He further argues that Bourdieu considers media as "a microcosm of intersections of various power resources" such as "capitals," "fields," and "symbolic power" (36), and what defines this specific field is the power struggles both within itself and with other fields. Like other power fields, Swartz adds, the journalistic

field is "bifurcated between two opposing poles: an economic pole in the form of circulation and advertising revenues and audience ratings, and a cultural pole in the form of reasoned commentary [and] in-depth reporting" (37), with the former increasingly dominating the field. In this respect, journalism is not free from the constraints of the market economy in which economic pressures dominate the logic, or habitus, of the practices that sustain the field in an ongoing struggle for visibility and financial capital.

"Competition," in this sense, is one of the core effects of the market-driven habitus of the journalistic field, to which Bourdieu adds other effects, such as "the obsession with 'scoops' and the unquestioned bias in favor of the news that is newest and hardest to get" as well as the "predisposition to overstatement that comes from attempting to offer the subtlest and strangest interpretation" (1998, 6). Bourdieu, however, is careful to differentiate between the journalistic field and journalists when observing how this competition works. Instead of focusing on journalists as "scapegoats" and posing the problem "in terms of responsibility," he argues that they are "caught up in structural processes which exert constraints on them such that their choices are totally preconstrained" (2005, 42, 45). This is a kind of "ferocious competition," which he believes is "spreading from the journalistic field to other kinds" (2005, 44), hinting that the problem lies in the structural constraints of the field of journalism and the economic system that media outlets rely on rather than simply the agents whose "positions" are fundamentally shaped by the inner workings of this social space, that is, its habitus.

Bourdieu's views on journalism have often been proven to be useful, particularly in empirically oriented studies of media power, in analysing how the structural boundaries of this field determine the courses of action followed by its agents. However, while empirically grounded studies may be constrained in their analyses by their focus on factual data, a study of journalistic habitus in fictional frameworks can provide further insights, both imaginative and factual, into what journalistic practices might reflect in different contexts. In the words of Barbara Korte, contrary to fact-based studies of journalism, fictional renderings can help to observe journalistic practice "in a varied set of human relationships, with a physical dimension" that might not be possible in research grounded in actual performances of the journalistic habitus (2006, 435). Following this line of thought, the next sections examine Tom Stoppard's *Night and Day* and James Graham's *Ink* to show how dramatic representations of journalism open space for analysing journalistic habitus, revealing the practices and dispositions that structure the field from within.

3. *Night and Day*: "Afraid of missing the war"

Having worked as a journalist for the *Western Daily Press*, and as a drama critic for the *Bristol Evening World* in the 1950s and early 1960s, Tom Stoppard has often

revisited the figure of the journalist and the practice of reporting in his theatre work. Some of his major plays, including *The Real Inspector Hound* (1968), *Arcadia* (1993), *Indian Ink* (1995) and *The Invention of Love* (1997), involve characters who are reporters, critics or editors.[7] Stoppard himself confessed in an opinion piece that his ambition to write plays and work as a journalist "co-existed for quite a long time" (2005, 23). This ambition was accompanied by a firm sense of what journalism should be: a profession where the reporter is "supposed to be championing" the reader in an "us-and-them world" (2005, 27). Stoppard's strong commitment to the idealist reception of journalistic practice as a public duty resonates with his general disdain of political and institutional repression, as is made clear in his claim that newspapers in the contemporary era are "kidnapping" the "sacred idea of press freedom" (2014).[8] In this respect, while Stoppard believes in the "sacredness" of journalism as a public service, he is quite aware that it is primarily a line of business which is framed by institutional regulations.[9] This conflict between an idealist view of the field and the institutional realities that sustain it as a business lies at the centre of *Night and Day* (1978), an early piece in Stoppard's career (first performed at the Phoenix Theatre, London), which, perhaps more overtly than any of his works,[10] reveals his position on the workings and failings of journalism.[11]

Set in the fictional African country of Kambawe, which is on the brink of a civil war upon its emergence from colonial rule, *Night and Day* explores how war correspondence is interlinked with questions of journalistic competition, ethical dilemmas and power relations that extend towards both personal and collective decision-making processes. The action mainly unfolds at Geoffrey Carson's colonial home, where his wife Ruth is entangled in a web of complex relationships with the veteran journalist Dick Wagner and the younger, idealistic Jacob Milne. As they cover a peace negotiation between President Mageeba and Colonel Shimbu, two sides of the forthcoming civil war, the characters engage in an intense rivalry for journalistic exclusives and career advancements. In a two-act structure, the play explores the theme of morality and the ethical obligations in journalistic practices in times of intense political conflict. While it dramatizes differing discourses on journalism instead of maintaining an action-packed attitude in reflecting a civil war, the play concludes with a paradoxical state of affairs where the intersection of personal desires and professional ambitions produces unforeseen consequences for the characters, particularly for the idealist Jacob Milne, who is shot and killed during his pursuit of a scoop.

In highlighting the moral ambiguities, ethical tensions and the fiercely competitive atmosphere of journalistic practices instead of "preach[ing]" about them" (Zinman 128), *Night and Day* therefore echoes Bourdieu's views on the habitus of news business and the ways by which it preserves and is preserved through an extensive web of power relations that define both personal and professional ambitions. Rather than simply focusing on the personal responsibilities and moral failures of journalists as members of a professional field, the play portrays how

the perceptions produced by the journalistic habitus can determine the courses of action for its agents. Competition-at-all-costs is the defining code of conduct among the play's journalists, whose prospects in life are fundamentally linked to the extent to which they can push their personal and professional limits. In the words of William Demastes, journalism in the play "reveals itself to be wildly free-wheeling, requiring adrenalin-pumping bravado and a good deal of luck in order to succeed" (75). Psychologically, bodily, economically and morally bound by this habitus, journalists 'perform' within a series of regulated predispositions and play the 'game' in ways that are usually expected from war correspondents. This is immediately palpable early in the play when Wagner and Guthrie (a photojournalist) complain over the lack of a "telex" at the hotel they are staying at; Wagner also soon states that he shared a Cessna jet with a couple of photographers to reach the conflict zone in time as he was "afraid of missing the war" (Stoppard 1978, 23). Early conversations among journalists abound in such signs of a critical need for "speed," an indispensable journalistic principle that opens the way for attaining a privileged position in the run for scoops. An expanded sense of courage is fused across these signs with personal desires of career growth; what is feared is not the possible dangers of being in a war zone but the failure to report it before anyone else. "If this war starts on a Saturday morning you and I are going to be famous" (25), Wagner says to Guthrie, and he very soon asks, "Don't you know my famous scoop?" (26), underlining once again the intersection of ambition and professional competitiveness that journalistic habitus holds in high regard.

As the action unfolds, so does the play's take on the discourse of journalism, especially with the participation of Jacob Milne in the multiple discussions on what journalism is and how it contributes to the functioning of an "ideal" sociopolitical system.[12] After scooping an interview with Colonel Shimbu, Milne draws attention to his journalistic activity in Africa, where he believes he could get himself in "on a good foreign story without too much competition" (32). As he makes himself visible in the professional competition, he also takes part in expanding the definitions of journalism against Wagner's cynical perspective of the field – "We're working to keep richer man than us richer than us, and nothing's going to change that without workers' solidarity" (39). Wagner's reference to the trade union system in 20th-century British journalism points at one of the central paradoxes in the play. On the one hand, Wagner underlines the importance of solidarity among workers as he is part of a business model where unions have control over employment processes; on the other hand, he refrains from questioning the competitive journalistic culture that operates in a manner similar to the hierarchical and individualistic system he claims to oppose.[13] This internal contradiction crystallizes his paradoxical cynicism, which is later faced with Milne's idealist discourse of the value of news business: "A free press, free expression – it's the last line of defence for all other freedoms" (58), and "if you've got a free press everything is correctible, and without it everything is concealable" (60). At moments like this, *Night and Day* serves, in the words of

Walter Kerr, as "a Shavian sort of forum on the issue of freedom of the press," with varied motivations surfacing and clashing that help explore the truth behind what fuels this professional field. Even when arguing from an idealistic point of view, however, Milne's personal motivations are as bound with the principle of competitiveness as Wagner's, which is evident in the way he introduces himself during their first encounter. When Milne enters the scene, he sees Wagner reading the *Sunday Globe*, which covers Milne's interview with Colonel Shimbu. One of the first things he says about himself in this piece is that he is a journalist, adding, "I'm covering the rebellion. This is my interview with Colonel Shimbu on the front page" (Stoppard 1978, 31). The evident pride in the fact that he was the one to scoop an exclusive interview with one part of the political conflict addresses once again the internal "conditions" of the field. The spirit of competitiveness is already normalized across personal and professional relations, and each time the discourse of journalism is under the spotlight, this spirit is reinstated in new forms, as exemplified in Milne's (as well as Guthrie's) interest in how to convey the best "story" (32) for wider impact.

Stoppard is careful here when exploring the workings of the journalistic habitus. Instead of isolating the field's particulars to offer a narrowed focus, *Night and Day* places the competitiveness of the journalistic field within the wider operations of the political and economic system that bind everyone in the play's dramatic universe, journalists and political rivals alike. In this vein, with the entrance of President Mageeba, the play offers a juxtaposition of two different forms of rivalry: journalistic rivalry on the one hand, and politico-economic rivalry in local and global contexts on the other. The president's interview reveals that the state-sanctioned newspaper of Kambawe was turned into a state apparatus after independence, which in time provided the president with political legitimacy, both within the wider public and against his communist rival Shimbu. Adding a rather crude layer to the intersecting discourses of journalism, Mageeba says:

> I did not believe a newspaper should be part of the apparatus of the state; we are not a totalitarian society. But neither could I afford a return to the whims of private enterprise. I had the immense and delicate task of restoring confidence in Kambawe. […] From the ashes there arose, by public subscription, a new Daily Citizen, responsible and relatively free. […] Do you know what I mean by a relatively free press, Mr. Wagner? […] I mean a free press which is edited by one of my relatives. (85)

The Bourdieusian notion that power relations lie at the heart of journalism's institutional framework is affirmed through Mageeba's rather blunt acknowledgement of his role in shaping public opinion, or "restoring confidence," with the help of journalistic practices. Much like the professional ambition among the journalists in the play, the conflict between Mageeba and Shimbu takes on a competitive course that has both political and economic implications. Carson, for instance, addresses

the economic dimension of the civil war when conversing with Wagner about the fact that "Mageeba wants his mines back" (72). Furthermore, what seems like a local tension is in fact an international competition which interests such nations as Canadians, Russians, Americans, and the British (72–73). In addition to pointing at the ways previously colonized countries are exposed to new forms of exploitation, the play juxtaposes various types of competitiveness and locates the field-specific competitive habitus of journalism within the wider workings of global politics and economics. The competitive spirit of the field is a direct extension of the power relations that take on both local and global dimensions, and it is again through the search for hegemony over "truth" that professional and political rivals attempt to acquire privileged positions.

Stoppard's play, in this sense, deconstructs the conventional understanding of war correspondence in popular literature and film, where there is usually a focus on "an aura of daring, heroic adventure" (Korte 2006, 432). The traditional conception of the field as a more serious branch of reporting that fulfils its professional objectives "in a more heightened, vibrantly important fashion" (Allan and Zelizer 4) is unsettled, if not completely discarded, throughout Stoppard's cautious undertaking of the journalistic habitus. This is perhaps most visible when Ruth Carson launches an angry tirade about Milne's death and the ensuing journalistic responses to his demise:

> I'm not going to let you think he died for free speech and the guttering candle of democracy – crap! You're all doing it to impress each other and be top dog the next time you're propping up a bar in Beirut or Bangkok, or Chancery Lane. Look at Dick [Wagner] and tell me I'm a liar. He's going to be a hero. The wires from London are going to burn up with congratulations. They'll be talking about Wagner's scoop for years, or anyway, Wagner will. It's all bloody ego. And the winner isn't democracy, it's just business. As far as I'm concerned, Jake died for the product. He died for the women's page, and the crossword, and the racing results, and the heartbreak beauty queens and somewhere at the end of a long list I suppose he died for the leading article too, but it's never worth that –. (Stoppard 1978, 91–92)

Interestingly, the "potential for bringing out the human factor in war journalism" (Korte 2006, 435) is realized here not through an internal focalization of a journalist but via the anger that someone outside the journalistic field feels for this professional realm. Rather than the agents who experience what it truly means to be in a war zone, it is Ruth, a female figure in a somewhat macho setting, whose furious attitude toward the fundamental assumptions of journalism parallels the discussions of the "market model" in journalism frequently emphasized in Bourdieu's thought (1998, 77). While the journalistic habitus within the specific context of war correspondence is usually accompanied by wider value-driven assessments, such as those concerning professional courage and its pursuit of freedom of expression,[14]

Night and Day complicates these premises by foregrounding a competitive business atmosphere where "the product governs the practice" (Bourdieu 1990, 55). Jacob Milne's death "for the product," as Ruth phrases it, thus exemplifies the radical extent to which the habitus of war reporting might foster unchecked professional ambitions. His death, from another perspective, perhaps addresses the most radical bodily performance that agents of this specific field can assume in their pursuit of better prospects within a fiercely competitive field of social action. In this context, journalistic habitus is once again posited as an internalized performance, both discursive and bodily, by which an agent's position is moulded by "the seductions of economic and political powers, at the expense of those intent on defending the principles and values of their professions" (Bourdieu 1998, 70).

4. *Ink*: "It's business. And it's revenge"

If *Night and Day* mainly explores the mechanics of journalism in the fieldwork context, *Ink* examines its inner workings within the office and institutional sphere.[15] James Graham's play, which premiered at the Almeida Theatre in London in 2017, can be read as what Maryam Philpott calls a "state-of-the-nation" commentary on the "growing soft power authorities in contemporary society," especially given its focus on "how perspective, fact and notions of truth have become malleable" (1–2) in the contemporary context. In their exploration of how journalism functions as a field in practice, *Night and Day* and *Ink* display clear similarities that extend beyond their thematic focus. Ink is set in London in 1969 and dramatizes the relaunch of the failing British newspaper *The Sun* under the new ownership of the aspiring Australian media mogul Rupert Murdoch, whose sole purpose is to displace the *Mirror* and secure his newspaper's dominance. Interestingly, the fact that "the *Sun*'s sales figures did not actually eclipse those of the *Mirror* until 1978" (Derbyshire xv) indicates a historical coincidence with the year in which Stoppard's play appeared. While Graham employs dramatic licence to suggest that this shift occurred much earlier, the conflicts staged in both plays – and the broader state of the press – are historically contemporaneous. A "modern history play that resonates in pointed ways with its moment in the present" (Derbyshire v), *Ink* examines how, with the editorial transformation led by a working-class editor, Larry Lamb, journalistic practices can be instrumentalized as tools in the competition for higher shares in the mass market as well as in the rivalry between old and new forms of power. The storyline concerns the *Sun*'s increasing irreverence, which is fuelled by the ever-shifting tabloid energy that both Murdoch (as an Establishment outsider) and Lamb (as a market-driven editor) supply. This energy emerges, first and foremost, from the encounter between differing rhetorics of language: the prose style embodied particularly by Lamb acquires a new significance through Murdoch's occasional turns to a more elevated register. While Lamb and other

characters initially represent the traditional realism of journalism (and, naturally, its manifestation in prose), Murdoch, who intends to overturn all existing journalistic conventions, speaks in a quasi-poetic tone that elevates his ideological fervour. His manipulative rhetoric, rooted in populist values, abounds with lines such as the following, which articulates his aspiration to forge the new: "Find people like you. The spurned, the spited, the overlooked; gather 'em up, throw 'em in. A ship of undesirables" (Graham 19). From this perspective, the tabloid energy that stands for the new is first articulated through Murdoch's manipulative language, and these linguistic encounters simultaneously signify encounters between different moral values and different paces for realizing an ethically problematic project.

From a historical perspective then, the play offers "an origin story, not just of an individual newspaper, but of an opportunistic approach to journalism, culture and politics which has become increasingly pervasive" (Derbyshire xii). In their fight for the first place in Fleet Street by resorting to working-class populism, Murdoch and Lamb follow a specific tabloid agenda which has only one simple criterion: "One of the lowest-selling papers in the country [the *Sun*] overtaking the biggest-selling paper in the world [the *Mirror*]" (Graham 20). In this respect, contrary to the assumed seriousness that other forms of journalism such as war correspondence usually enjoy, the journalistic practices that *Ink* explores – tabloid journalism – situates the journalistic habitus within a "loud, fast [and] coarse" (Derbyshire xiii) professional world in which personal and professional competition takes on a rather profane trajectory which no longer adheres even superficially to the supposed moral principles of the field.

Despite the clear differences between the kind of journalism depicted in *Night and Day* and that in *Ink*, it can be argued that both forms of the journalistic field rest on a similar foundation – a shared *habitus* – in terms of the "system of dispositions" (Bourdieu 1977, 82) on which they depend. Similar to Stoppard's play, *Ink* unravels the ways by which tabloid journalism sustains itself by maintaining a constant emphasis on the principle of competition and a heightened disposition toward "overstatement." For instance, Murdoch's overtly capitalist rhetoric particularly intensifies the sense of competition, as he lures Larry Lamb with promises of success, and of "change" and "revenge" on Fleet Street (Graham 11–14). Murdoch's anti-Establishment sentiment is especially useful in turning the tables in his argument for "inventing a new newspaper":

> Murdoch: By giving them a popular paper, for the masses. One that can 'unleash' a part of us, a part of the British character that I think, humbly speaking, has never been tapped into, but is there, yearning for stuff. Maybe it takes an outsider to see it.
> Lamb: The *Mirror* … These are my people, you're asking me / to go against
> Murdoch: Oh bugger off, 'your' people. Larry …
> Lamb: The Street has given me / a lot of opportunities, and I don't want to –
> Murdoch: No, all it's done is take from you, Larry. That's what the Establishment

> does. Power replaces itself with itself. And you can either stand on the other side of the window, tap tap tap, asking to come in. Or, you establish … a new line of ascension. (12)

Words indicating transgression – such as "unleashing" something which has "never been tapped into" – are accompanied here with the seductive potential of building something that speaks from a specific class consciousness; for Murdoch, this is both a "business" and a "revenge," where he "hopes" there will be "a lot of blood" (14). The Prologue, in this vein, exemplifies the Bourdieusian tenet that the "mechanisms of [the] journalistic field" are "increasingly subject to market demands" (1998, 68), with Murdoch's discourse of financial capital addressing and shaping Lamb, a practitioner of symbolic capital from a working-class background. Graham's choice of initiating the action with a prologue, therefore, proves significant for grounding the play's subject matter within the competitive habitus of journalistic practices. Competition is set in hyperactive terms, and it is this atmosphere that fuels the action throughout the rest of the play.

Instead of solely focusing on the competitive habitus of the play, I believe it is also important to explore from a Bourdieusian perspective in what ways this competitive habitus adapts to new situations and what kinds of new practices emerge during the constant shift in transformation. One of the first notable transformations in the tabloidization process depicted in the play can be observed in the ethically problematic strategies employed by Lamb and his team in their sensationalist news-making practices. Following Murdoch's continuing motivation to have "a bit of business acumen pumped into this Street" and "[l]et […] go [of] 'codes' and 'traditions,'" which he believes are "written by those who benefit from them, to stop others from treading on their turf" (Graham 37), Lamb's team begins to brainstorm for ideas to increase the sales in the fierce competition. The inspiration again comes from Murdoch: "I want us to disrupt this Street, Larry. A disruption. It's time. […] Steal anything. Fuck it, get the readers to become the storytellers. Call in with the news, their own lives, let them bring it to us rather than us chasing them" (38). Motivated by such commitment, Lamb's team gradually decide to copy the formats that other newspapers use, especially the *Mirror*. For instance, they plan to copy the *Mirror*'s "Live Letters" and call theirs "Liveliest Letters" (38). The unethical borrowing continues when they copy the comic strips and even the *Mirror*'s previous slogan, "Forward with the People" (39). The competitive habitus therefore fosters "business acumen" without much heeding of moral principles, even when it means the blurring of the boundaries between morality and legality in the hurry for adjusting to new realities, or sometimes for giving the competition its final shape.

These unethical practices, or "performances" of "unethical journalism" as Valverde (135) puts it, clearly recall Bourdieu's observation on how journalistic behaviour usually favours "borrowing" for the sake of holding an upper hand in the competition:

> [One] effect of competition on the field, one that is completely paradoxical and utterly inimical to the assertion of either collective or individual autonomy, is the permanent surveillance (which can turn into mutual espionage) to which journalists subject their competitors' activities. The object is to profit from competitors' failures by avoiding their mistakes, and to counter their successes by trying to borrow the supposed instruments of that success […]. This 'borrowing' is a result as much of a determination to keep competitors from having these things as from any real desire to have them. So here, as in other areas, rather than automatically generating originality and diversity, competition tends to favor uniformity. (1998, 72)

From this perspective, Lamb and his team's pursuit of success (through unethical imitation) echoes Bourdieu's view on the inevitable uniformity that a field-specific competition within journalism would produce. Success here depends on appropriating the external strategies of other agents whose effectiveness has already been proved, and competition takes the form of an intra-disciplinary surveillance.[16] For this reason, it can be argued that the competitive spirit of the journalistic habitus renovates itself in the face of new challenges, both through infringement practices that instrumentalize the culture of surveillance and by continually resorting to its own principle of competitiveness, echoing Bourdieu's claim that "competition for priority calls for and favors professionals inclined to place the whole practice of journalism under the sign of speed (or haste) and permanent renewal" (1998, 72).

The ever-continuing need for "renewal" is also reflected in the way in which the limits of tabloidization are paradoxically challenged through further tabloidization itself. As Bourdieu repeatedly argues, "the habitus tends to protect itself from crises and critical challenges by providing itself with a milieu to which it is as preadapted as possible" (1990, 61), and in the case of the journalistic practices that *Ink* explores, this milieu is the tabloid energy where, as one of Larry Lamb's competitors puts it, it is necessary to "[p]ander to and promote the most base instincts of people," which need constant "feeding" (Graham 46). At first, this manner of journalism promotes sensationalist news-making; in time, however, it turns to other practices such as the use of violent images (48), intensified gossip about celebrities including the royal family (50), a tragic involvement in the case of Muriel McKay's kidnapping (the wife of Alick McKay, the then-executive of the *Sun*) (90), which triggers the kidnappers to kill her, and finally including "Page 3" topless models. As the competition intensifies, so does the tabloid energy, the milieu upon which the journalistic habitus as the locale of a competitive professional spirit ensures its own existence through "regulated improvisations."

What is more, this intensification means the ultimate incorporation of the "body" as both the site and the target of competition. The coverage of Muriel McKay's kidnapping (and the ensuing search for her body), as well as the over-reliance on the sexualization of women's bodies, transform the competition into a corporeal performance where the body is subsumed within the exploitative regime of

governance that Murdoch and Lamb's initiative represents. Journalistic habitus becomes a bodied performance, a practice by which competitiveness "attains full realization" (Bourdieu 1990, 57). In other words, with an overblown search for a kidnap victim and the overuse of female nudity, the journalistic habitus as a site of competition becomes a bodied practice; competition itself acquires a material corporeal reality and is stripped of its abstract connotations. The human body is transformed into a representative tool of competition by which power-holders in search of further authority increase their financial and symbolic capital. In this context, *Ink* addresses the inevitable direction that the predispositions of the journalistic field will ultimately push journalists as social agents into an ethically problematic professional trajectory, one which gradually integrates the human body into a pervasive system of abuse.

5. Conclusion

Tom Stoppard's *Night and Day* and James Graham's *Ink* explore the operative mechanisms of journalistic habitus from different vantage points. Stoppard's play examines war correspondence within its geopolitical and professional foundations, while *Ink* investigates how tabloidization intensifies a market-driven institutional structure. Yet both works reveal a striking similarity in their emphasis on competitiveness as the driving force of journalistic practice. War correspondence and tabloid journalism may initially appear to occupy contrasting social and professional positions: one traditionally afforded prestige, the other often dismissed as superficial or even vulgar. Nevertheless, the plays demonstrate that both areas of the news industry are fundamentally shaped by a market model that positions competition as the primary catalyst for field-specific action.

On the other hand, the plays also show that the ways in which such a competitive spirit materializes might differ in these fields. War correspondence, as *Night and Day* exemplifies, prioritizes scooping activities and exclusives from battlegrounds with an aim to be the first to cover news from "other" spaces moulded with violence. This is done based on an intra-disciplinary valuation of news reporting as a "serious" practice that is supposedly conducted for further noble purposes, such as freedom of expression and democratic values. Tabloid journalism, in contrast, locates news reporting within a series of sensationalist principles that solely aim for wider visibility without much consideration for keeping up to moralistic codes or boundaries. Despite these differences in the choice of strategies for representation and coverage, however, both journalistic fields are grounded on the principle of market-driven competition and institutional practices. Journalists in both plays are bound by professional limits which are often the products of the habitus of journalism itself, that is, the microcosm of multiple intersecting forms of power. Moral principles, professional ambitions, personal security, or even the human

body are caught up in this process of absorption. As a result, since competitiveness dictates the tempo for both fields, the boundaries between war correspondence and tabloid journalism begin to fade, as the former is also compelled to evolve toward the expectations of sensationalism and impact that define the framework of the latter. In this context, it could be argued that the selected plays showcase the limits of the journalistic habitus itself and relocate the field within the wider workings of the market-ridden politico-economic system. In other words, these two plays invite a discussion of the field of journalism from a wider perspective of the social, economic and political structures that govern the fabric of social existence, rather than isolate the journalistic habitus for a narrow analysis of professional responsibilities or moral judgements.

Notes

1 I have explored this topic in detail in my PhD dissertation (Ünlü Çimen 2023).

2 There is a growing body of scholarship on the intersection between journalism and theatre. See Roberts; Tenenboim and Stroud; Langdon; Keen; Adams; Adams and Cooper.

3 Kovach and Rosenstiel follow this line of thinking when arguing that the reason why journalism has survived to this day is that it "provides something unique to a culture: independent, reliable, accurate, and comprehensive information that citizens require in order to make sense of the world around them. [This is a] journalism that provides something other than that subverts democratic culture" (4). For a recent discussion of the relationship between literature and such journalistic values, see Valverde (1–10).

4 Robert Wilcher, for example, argues that *Pravda* is constructed on the "model" of the Morality Play in the context of the 1980s in England, where the narrative framework contains "a broadly comic portrait of various aspects of the newspaper industry" and weaves a "cautionary tale" (53). Similarly, in his review of Richard Bean's *Great Britain* for the *Guardian*, Michael Billington states that the play is a "satire" that has "a go at press, police and politicians and what he sees as the corrupt chain binding them together."

5 See also Korte on cinematic representations of war correspondence: "Fiction films have their own narrative options, and in contrast to literary narrative, their action is presented in a truly performative mode. Thanks to this performativity of their own representation, films have a particular capacity to expose performative elements in their correspondent character's behaviour" (2009, 19). As theatre and cinema share similar representational principles, it can be argued that an analysis of dramatic works can also uncover the performative aspects of the journalistic habitus.

6 This is perhaps where the relationship between the habitus and the social field is most visible, as these positions are shaped by the habitus of that social space. Bourdieu's definition of the field also points at this: "a field is a field of forces within which the agents occupy positions that statistically *determine* the positions they take with respect to the field, these position-takings being aimed either at conserving or transforming the

structure of relations of forces that is constitutive of the field"; it is the "site of actions and reactions performed by social agents endowed with permanent *dispositions*" (2005, 30, emphases mine). The field is then a site of relational experiences where the habitus determines the way specific positions are acted out, and it is among these positions that field-specific power relations take place, also in accordance with the resources (or capital) that each agent possesses.

7 Mark Lawson similarly argues that the theme of reporting and reviewing – in particular, the 'moral character' of these practices – has never left Stoppard, as evident in the fact that five of his major plays include characters that perform these professions (222).

8 It is worth noting that Stoppard made this remark after the eruption of the *News of the World* hacking scandal and the publication of the Leveson Report. In March 2014, "Stoppard was one of the signatories to a letter, published in several newspapers, calling for tighter UK press regulations" (Lawson 228). This shift in Stoppard's perspective had in fact taken place earlier, especially due to the communicative manner of tabloid journalism. As Stoppard said in a 1994 interview with Mel Gussow: "I think the tabloid press treat their readers almost as if they were morons. And it's awful the way readers don't seem to mind" (Gussow 97).

9 For an account of Stoppard and journalism, see Kelly; Lawson.

10 Stoppard's *Dirty Linen* (1976) likewise deserves to be mentioned here. Focusing on a sex scandal involving high-profile politicians and taken up by the tabloid press, the play offers another example of how the conflict between an idealist vision of journalism and market reality finds expression in tabloid sensationalism. As Thomas Whitaker affirms, "[t]he journalistic game, of course, requires that all such dirty linen be exposed, ostensibly for the public good but really for the competitive advantage of individual journalists" (133).

11 A relevant point of interest about the play is, according to Tim Brassell, that it was inspired by Evelyn Waugh's satiric novel *Scoop* (1933). For Brassell, "something of the spirit of Waugh's novel is omnipresent in *Night and Day*, not least in their common setting of British reporters out-scooping each other amidst civil war in a fictitious East African republic" (206). Also see Whitaker (3, 146) and Sammells (26) on the similarities between Waugh's novel and Stoppard's play.

12 In an interview with David Gollob and David Roper, Stoppard admits that Milne represents his views: "Milne has my prejudice if you like. Somehow unconsciously, I wanted him to be known to be speaking the truth" (8). Ensuing scholarship on Stoppard has addressed this occasionally. See, for instance, Jenkins (151).

13 This paradox intensifies through Milne's reference to the notion of the "closed shop" in British journalistic culture. While the term denotes an agreement whereby only union members may be employed, Wagner's emphasis on workers' solidarity is articulated primarily in relation to job security. The paradox deepens since Wagner does not question the competitive habitus on which journalists are existentially dependent, while Milne himself was dismissed after a dispute with the union, an incident that triggers his journalistic adventure in Africa. The play thus directs critical questions at the closed shop approach by revealing how newspapers, despite claims to represent a "free press," may nonetheless operate within inward-looking and hierarchical structures.

14 This is in fact what Guthrie's last words express towards the play's ending. Similar to Milne and Stoppard himself, Guthrie continues to believe in the transformative power

of journalism despite all its shortcomings: "I've been around a lot of places. People do awful things to each other. But it's worse in places where everybody is kept in the dark. It really is. Information is light. Information, in itself, about anything, is light. That's all you can say, really" (Stoppard 1978, 92).

15 This distinction is not intended to suggest a clear-cut separation between the two plays. In both plays, moments of fieldwork are consistently informed by institutional structures, just as office-based practices are shaped by the pressures, contingencies and logics of reporting on the ground. I use this heuristic to account for the differing dramaturgical emphases through which each play produces its characteristic journalistic atmosphere.

16 Interestingly, this is also a point that can be found in Stoppard's *Night and Day*. When Wagner reads Milne's scoop, he says: "It's good stuff but it's too much I-was-there. It's somebody who wants to impress the world and doesn't know that the world isn't impressed by reporters and nobody is impressed by reporters except other reporters – who can work out that you were there without having it rammed down their throats" (30). Wagner's critique of his junior hints at the culture of intra-disciplinary surveillance that influences the competitive atmosphere within the journalistic habitus.

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Journalism in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*: Images of Africa in the Society of Transparency

Abstract: This article analyses NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013) as part of a critical current concerned with how images of suffering from the Global South become commodified spectacles of suffering for the Western gaze. In particular, the novel calls attention to how journalistic practices – as carried out by major global information networks – contribute to this commodification, accentuated in the context of what Byung-Chul Han calls "the society of transparency," dominated by the compulsion to display and exhibit. In *We Need New Names*, "hypercommunication" as understood by Han determines the production and reception of images of Africa in our contemporary neoliberal world. It is, therefore, a process devoid of critical, aesthetic and ethical reflection. At the same time, Bulawayo suggests how transparency is challenged by opacity, identified as the site of difference, resistance and "illegibility."

Keywords: NoViolet Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*, journalism, photography, images of Africa, transparency, exhibition, opacity

1. Introduction: The Image of Africa, Photography and the Society of Transparency

The representation of Africa in the global imaginary has been a key concern in the anglophone African literary tradition since its origins. Indeed, African fiction in English very much emerged as a form of counter-discourse that aimed to respond

to and, to a large extent, challenge and undermine European and Western representations of Africa with a colonial bias.[1] Thus, in his seminal essay, "An Image of Africa," originally published in 1977 in the *Massachusetts Review*, the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe famously accused Joseph Conrad of being "a bloody racist" (328) as he expressed his outrage about the representation of Africa that we find in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). In this essay, Achebe was especially disturbed by the depiction, in Conrad's text, of Africa as "the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization" (324), with the subsequent utter "dehumanization of Africa and Africans" (329). Whether in his account of *Heart of Darkness* Achebe does full justice to the complexity and ambiguity of Conrad's work is not the question I can pose here.[2] What is relevant for the present discussion is the fact that Achebe – together with many other first-generation African authors – conceived his writing as opposed to a long tradition of European representations of Africa as a place of lack, negativity and barbarism.

In the early stages of African fiction in English, then, a main impulse in writers such as Achebe was that of presenting their respective African countries in a new light, exposing the evils and consequences of colonialism in the continent, and showing the value and richness of African cultures and communities.[3] Colonialism and anti-colonialism were, thus, at the centre of African fiction in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, together with nationalism, either celebrated as the force that would bring independence and liberation to post-colonial Africa, or in a spirit of disillusionment and distrust as political corruption, totalitarian regimes, violence or ongoing poverty and inequality became endemic evils in many of the new independent nations.[4] Since those early stages, African fiction has evolved in many and diverse ways. In the 21st century, past themes have been, at least partly, replaced by others more attuned to the contemporary moment, such as the concern for the environment, migration, genocide, civil conflict, the disintegration of the nation state or globalization (Thomas 230).

We could argue, though, that there is a concern that persists, an issue that African writers keep returning to, which is precisely that of the European and Western representation of Africa; in V. Y. Mudimbe's words, the concern with "the idea of Africa" as articulated and constructed by the Western world. It is indeed revealing that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's "The Danger of a Single Story" – one of the texts by an African writer that has lately received great attention and discussion – should have this preoccupation as its central axis. When Adichie delivered this TED talk in 2009, many decades had passed since Achebe's indignant remarks on Conrad; but as Adichie demonstrates, the Western image or representation of Africa was – and still is – an incomplete, partial and biased one. As Adichie remarks, the "popular images" (n.p.) about Africa that the Western world keeps on producing and distributing give rise to a conception of Africa as "a place of beautiful landscapes, beautiful animals, and incomprehensible people, fighting senseless wars, dying of poverty and AIDS, unable to speak for themselves, and

waiting to be saved, by a kind, white foreigner" (n.p.). All these images produce "a single story of Africa. A single story of catastrophe" (n.p.).

One way in which 21st-century African writers pinpoint their preoccupation with the representation of Africa in the global imaginary is by addressing the role that journalism and mass media play in this representation.[5] This is the case of the novel I intend to analyse in this article, *We Need New Names* (2013) by NoViolet Bulawayo, in which consistent attention is paid to how 21st-century journalism and broadcasting contribute to the perpetuation of the "single story of Africa." Bulawayo's novel, in particular, suggests that journalism and the media perpetuate this stereotype mainly through the production and distribution of visual representations – photographs, TV images and videos – for a Euro-American audience. This fact must be viewed as part of the novel's consistent focus on the visual representation and reception of reality through technological and electronic devices, as foregrounded in numerous scenes in which characters take pictures or look at them, watch videos or TV, use social media or navigate the Internet. In many of these scenes, the object of representation is precisely the African continent and African people, highlighting the novel's concern with the circulation and commodification of "images of Africa" (Goyal 188–189) in our contemporary globalized world. Thus, in *We Need New Names*, the figure of the journalist is repeatedly introduced through their role as photographers, whereas journalism as an institution mainly appears in the form of broadcasting corporations such as the BBC and CNN, thus suggesting how images of Africa in the 21st century are dominated by international audiovisual and technological mass media.

In their discussion of the images of Africa that we find in *We Need New Names*, some critics have issued negative responses, accusing Bulawayo of perpetuating the "single story" of Africa that her novel is supposedly denouncing. These images of Africa are especially found in the first part of the novel, which takes place in an unnamed African country. Although the name of this country is never specified, many hints clearly invite readers to identify it with Bulawayo's native country, Zimbabwe. The story focuses on Darling, a ten-year old girl, and her existence in a squatter camp called Paradise, together with that of her friends. Their life is one of extreme poverty and precarity, showing Zimbabwe as a failed postcolonial nation-state, characterized by economic collapse, unemployment, bad governance and disease. This is the dimension of the novel that some critics have found problematic: its depiction of Africa as a place dominated by violence, atrocity and poverty, thus arguably entrenching the stereotypical images that have long dominated Western representations of this continent. As Yogita Goyal has explained, Bulawayo's novel seems to fit into "what has come to be known as poverty porn, a depressingly familiar narrative of African atrocity – featuring rape, incest, hunger, suicide, and AIDS, but also absent and sadistic adults, along with children […] all too accustomed to brutality" (183–184).[6] Accordingly, the migrant condition depicted in the second part of the novel – after Darling migrates to Michigan, in

the United States – is certainly not that of the privileged Afropolitan,[7] but is presented as the only way out for African citizens, such as Darling, in order to escape the hostile conditions of living that they have in their African countries of origin.

Helon Habila is one of the critics who have found Bulawayo's depiction of suffering in Africa problematic. In his review of *We Need New Names*, he complains about what he sees as Bulawayo's performance of Africa, one that entails a presentation of this continent in "a CNN, western-media-coverage-of-Africa, poverty-porn" style (n.p.), and hence a contribution to "an African aesthetics of suffering" (n.p.). What Habila fails to mention is how in her novel, Bulawayo actually thematizes – and hence interrogates and challenges – representations of Africa carried out by major media outlets such as the CNN and the BBC. The novel's self-awareness and problematization of the aesthetic, ethical and political questions involved in the representation of Africa is also to be found in the way the narrative "interrupts itself at regular intervals with an explicit critique of various outsider figures" (Goyal 185) – namely, Western tourists, members of non-governmental organizations and journalists – precisely engaged in the task of producing, through photographs and videos, images of suffering in Africa targeted toward a Western audience. In this way, as James Arnett has argued, Bulawayo makes a critique of how "postcolonial suffering is commodified and traded by Northerners in a materialist affective economy that is grounded in the production and dissemination of telegenic images of suffering" (152).

In the second part of the novel, the novel's self-conscious concern with the circulation of African images persists, in this case with a focus on the consumption and reception of those images in an American context, resonating with what Susan Sontag has called the "quintessential modern experience" of "[b]eing a spectator of calamities taking place in another country" (16). Sontag makes this claim in her study *Regarding the Pain of Others* (first published in 2003), in which she argues that "postcolonial Africa exists in the consciousness of the general public in the rich world […] mainly as a succession of unforgettable photographs of large-eyed victims" (64). For Sontag, this representation and perception of Africa is a perpetuation of practices associated with the colonial domination and exhibition of the other: "Generally, the grievously injured bodies shown in published photographs are from Asia or Africa. This journalistic custom inherits the centuries-old practice of exhibiting exotic – and that is, colonized – human beings" (65). Contemporary Western journalist practices, as seen by Sontag, are complicit with neocolonial relations of power that entail the problematic exhibition of the distant, suffering other. In the 21st century, the experience of being spectators of distant calamities is made possible through "the cumulative offering by more than a century and a half's worth of those professional, specialized tourists known as journalists" (Sontag 16).

The interrelation between journalism, photography and the representation of "distant suffering" (Luc Boltanski's term) explored by Sontag is one that I also see at work in Bulawayo's novel, and which constitutes the focus of my article.

According to Sontag, an obvious implication of the exhibition through photographs of the suffering other is objectification, as the other "is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees" (65). Bulawayo also suggests such objectification through vision – in particular, the photographic gaze. As James Arnett has put it, "Bulawayo assumes photography to be an objectifying *technê*; nowhere in the novel is photography or videography used in a way that is not objectifying" (163). At the same time, Bulawayo shows how the objectification that photography inevitably entails becomes especially accentuated and overpowering in our present context of digital and mass media. In this sense, photography and videography are presented in the novel as crucial elements contributing to what the Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han has called "the society of exhibition" (9–14). In his highly influential study *The Transparency Society*, Han defines this society of exhibition in the following terms:

> In the society of exhibition, every subject is also its own advertising object. Everything is measured by its exhibition value. The society of exhibition is a society of pornography. Everything has been turned outward, stripped, exposed, undressed and put on show. The excess of display turns everything into a commodity. (21)

Han discusses the special role that photography – in particular, digital photography – plays in this society of pornography. Drawing on Roland Barthes's ideas about photography, Han points to the crucial differences between analogue and digital images. In the case of analogue photography, its "technological preconditions" require that there is a temporality that precedes the final image. Analogue photography is, thus, associated "with a mode of living in which the negativity of time plays a constitutive role" (Han 10). On the contrary, given its immediate production and consumption, negative temporality is completely lacking in digital photography. The temporal dimension of digital images is fully "determined by the present" (11), in accordance with the acceleration (13) and the "[u]nrelenting compulsion to exhibit and perform" (12) that characterize communication and information today.

Sontag's discussion in *Regarding the Pain of Others* ultimately aims to elucidate whether there can be an ethical way of responding to images of distant others involving pain and suffering. As suggested by Han in *The Transparency Society*, current practices involving the production and distribution of digital images, determined by the logic of acceleration and compulsion to exhibit, seem to rule out the possibility of such an ethical response. For Han, visual communication today lacks "aesthetic" and "mental reflection" (13). Since the compulsion is towards production, acceleration and the "tyranny of visibility" (13), whatever slows down or hinders that process – complexity or ambiguity, for instance – is to be obliterated:

> Images filled with exhibition value offer no complexity. They are unambiguous – that is, pornographic. They lack all brokenness, which would trigger physical or mental reflection. Complexity slows down communication. Anesthetic hypercommunication reduces complexity in order to accelerate itself. (13)

Images of Africa and of African people as thematized in *We Need New Names* – and as produced by agents such as journalists – are at the service of transparency and "hypercommunication" understood in those terms, contributing to an endless flow of information producing sameness and uniformity. At the same time, Bulawayo suggests the limitations of these neoliberal mechanisms, especially as they concern the exhibition of the African other as a commodity. According to Han, "secrecy, foreignness, and otherness represent obstacles for communication without borders. They are to be dismantled in the name of transparency" (viii). Bulawayo's novel, however, suggests – in the specific case of African images produced for a Western audience – that otherness and difference cannot be completely dismantled. In its focus on the violent imperative to bring the African other into the tyranny of Western neoliberal visibility, *We Need New Names* shows the resistance that this imperative meets, a resistance derived from the gaze of the one "who also sees" (Sontag 65). Transparency, therefore, is interrupted by opacity, and the transparency/opacity dialectic is presented as central to contemporary processes of the production and circulation of images involving the representation of the Global South.

2. Images of Africa in *We Need New Names*

As pointed out above, for Sontag, journalists – regarded as "professional, specialized tourists" (16) – are complicit with the objectifying exhibition of the distant, suffering other. *We Need New Names* presents the figure of the foreign journalist in Africa in a similar light. We see this in the first part of the novel, which makes a clear analogy between the stance adopted by the Western tourist, the NGO member and the Western journalist in the unnamed African country where the action takes place. The different scenes in which these three figures appear show clear parallels, the most relevant of which is that, in all cases, the focus falls on the act of taking pictures.

The figure of the Western tourist makes its appearance in the novel's very first chapter, in which Darling and her friends go to Budapest, an affluent suburb near the squatter camp where they live. There, they are surprised by their encounter with a white woman visiting from London. One of the things they notice about her is that "[a] pink camera dangles from her neck" (6), and in fact, after a brief chat, the woman expresses her desire to take a picture of them:

> Do you guys mind if I take a picture? She says. We don't answer because we're not used to adults asking us anything; we just look at the woman, at her fierce hair, at her skirt that sweeps the ground when she walks, at her pretty peeking feet, at her golden Africa, at her smooth skin that doesn't even have a scar to show she is a living person, at her earring in her nose, at her T-shirt that says Save Darfur. (8–9)

The scene is pervaded by tension between the children's partial acquiescence to the woman's demands and their partial resistance. Through her pictures, the children are to be objectified by this woman's photographic gaze. At the same time, as the children look back at her, that process is reversed or counterbalanced. At this point, we may recall Sontag's conception of exhibition through photography as one in which the other "is regarded only as someone to be seen, not someone (like us) who also sees" (65). Bulawayo, however, is careful to foreground that, in this case, the one who is seen – the children – also sees. It is, furthermore, a collective gaze – "we just look at the woman" (8) – and hence, one that allows the children to keep a certain sense of agency over the whole process. It is also through this gaze that the reader is provided with a meticulous description of the woman, including details that establish her position as that of the privileged outsider, a position she is most certainly not aware of. In particular, the T-shirt she is wearing – saying Save Darfur – aligns her with a naïve, "humanitarian stance" whose limits are exposed in the novel, "warning potential readers of the pitfalls of voyeuristic appreciation of suffering when it is divorced from larger social and historical contexts or from any meaningful attempt to engage the victim" (Goyal 185). For this woman, the children are fundamentally objects to be photographed and put on display, which is manifested in how she gives them orders about how to stand and say 'cheese':

> You, the tall one, go to the back. And you, yes, you, and you, look this way, no, I mean you, with the missing teeth, look at me, like this […]
> Good, good, now say cheese, say *cheese*, *cheese*, *cheeeeeeeese* – the woman enthuses, and everyone says *cheese*. […]
> everyone is saying *cheese cheese cheese* and we are all singing the word and the camera is clicking and clicking and clicking. Then Stina, who is quiet most of the time, just starts to walk away. The woman stops taking pictures and says, Hey, where are you going? But he doesn't stop, doesn't even turn to look at her. Then Chipo walks away after Stina, and the rest of us follow them. (9)

The description of the act of taking pictures – "the camera is clicking and clicking and clicking" – suggests an automatized, accelerated and compulsive process, thus complicit with the "[u]nrelenting compulsion to exhibit and perform" (12) denounced by Han as characteristic of the society of exhibition. The kids seem to momentarily comply with this forced exhibition, entailing the objectification

of their position of precarity as opposed to the woman's privilege. However, as they move away – and even end up shouting insults at the woman – the children reclaim their agency once again, frustrating the woman's assumption that they are just objects "to be seen" (Sontag 65).

According to Goyal, "[i]n their refusal to be fixed as objects of [the woman's] photographic gaze, which in turn highlights her blindness to their actual needs, the children reveal the limits of an outsider's ability to empathize or even to really see what is in front of her eyes" (185). I would like to add how, in their resistance to the objectification but also transparency that the women's photographs entail, the children remain opaque, an opacity that highlights the limits of the Western gaze and of Western representations of African subjectivities. Borrowing the words by the Martinican writer and philosopher Édouard Glissant, the children claim their "right to opacity" (194). In his study *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant, from a postcolonial, Caribbean position, is concerned with the Western tendency to understand and accept others only as long as they can be reduced to Western norms and systems: "In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce" (190). Glissant describes this process of understanding as a reduction of difference as "a requirement for transparency" (190). Both Glissant's and Han's conceptualizations of transparency, then, entail an abolition of difference and otherness. According to Han, "[c]ompulsive conformity proceeds from transparency" (viii). Transparency "stabilizes the dominant system" and "eliminates Otherness," leading to sameness, "synchronization and uniformity" (vii–viii). But whereas Han does not seem to contemplate a counterforce that may resist the all-pervading effects of transparency, Glissant points to opacity – understood as "irreducible singularity" (190) – as the force through which individuals may resist the demands of transparency: "We clamor for the right to opacity for everyone" (194).

In *We Need New Names*, opacity repeatedly emerges as – at least partial – resistance to the "requirement for transparency" (Glissant 190) that photography entails. That is the case of the scene analysed above and also of another one I will explore, concerning the next figure in the triad I have identified: the member of the NGO. In chapter three, a non-governmental organization visits the squatter camp where the kids live, bringing food and gifts. However, before the NGO people start distributing things, they ask the children to sit down so they can take pictures of them: "They just like taking pictures, these NGO people, like maybe we are their real friends and relatives […]. They don't care that we are embarrassed by our dirt and torn clothing, that we would prefer they didn't do it; they just take the picture anyway, take and take" (52). The similarities between the act of taking pictures as presented in this scene and the scene from chapter one are clear enough. In this case, the children's discomfort with the situation, and their actual desire not to be photographed, is conveyed in even more explicit terms. This desire, however, is

one that is not even contemplated by the NGO people who – just like the woman in chapter one – merely regard them as objects "to be seen" (Sontag 65), and hence devoid of any sense of subjectivity and agency. On the other hand, the act of taking pictures is presented as contaminated by the same sense of compulsion and acceleration – "they just take the picture anyway, take and take" – hence precluding the possibility of being accompanied by any mental or ethical reflection.

Darling – as first-person narrator – goes on narrating the scene, paying attention to the reaction of the NGO man with the camera when he sees her friend Chipo, who is pregnant even if she is just a child:

> When he sees Chipo, with her stomach, he stands there so surprised I think he is going to drop the camera. Then he remembers what he came here for and starts taking away again, this time taking lots of pictures of Chipo. It's like she has become Paris Hilton, it's all just click-flash-flash-click. When he doesn't stop she turns around and stands at the edge of the group, frowning. Even a brick knows that Paris doesn't like the paparazzi. (52–53)

Due to her pregnancy, Chipo becomes the cameraman's special focus. The fact that she is pregnant, even if she is just a child, turns her into the epitome of the barbarity and atrocity that the Western observer expects to find in Africa. In other words, she confirms the story of Africa as a "[s]ingle story of catastrophe" (Adichie). The passage, thus, illustrates Lasse Heerten's argument about how spectacles of human suffering work as "the lenses through which the West observes the postcolonial world" (341). Heerten argues that "[i]n the age of audiovisual mass media, the internationalization of remote Third World conflicts has become increasingly dependent on images of suffering" (9). For Heerten, this is a dynamic that started during the Nigerian Civil War, in the late 1960s, when Western audiences were shocked by the images of starving children in Biafra that the media distributed around the globe. These images came to signify the relation between the Global North and the Global South in a postcolonial scenario: postcolonial conflicts and humanitarian crises become 'spectacles of suffering' for the Western gaze, and in this way, the West is endowed with the role of "the savior" (10).

According to Heerten, the way the media reported Biafran suffering also entailed the emergence of what he calls "the Western humanitarian gaze." Through this gaze, Western observers become "empathic *witnesses* to the suffering of others" (142, original emphasis), while these others are relegated to the role of "passive, voiceless objects" (142). This "humanitarian gaze" is a clear target in Bulawayo's novel, in which this gaze is challenged and undercut as African subjects resist the Western attempt to turn them into voiceless objects. In the scene quoted above, we see this when Chipo turns around and moves to the edge of the group, thus reacting against her having become – without choice and against her will – the camera's object. It is important to note how the text calls attention to her displeased look

– she "stands at the edge of the group, frowning" (53) – and how, in this way, the focus is displaced from the Western gaze to the African one, to the one "who also sees" (Sontag 65). Chipo's look of disapproval and discomfort, together with her act of moving away from the camera's focus, constitute a tentative embrace of her "right to opacity" (Glissant 194), or, borrowing Clare Birchall's term, her attempt to remain in a "state of illegibility" (8).

We finally get to the scene in which journalists first show up in the novel. This happens in chapter four, in which Darling remembers her life and the life of the community before coming to the squatter camp. She explains that there was a time when "we had a home … a real house" (62). However, at a certain point, their houses, together with everything they had, were destroyed by bulldozers, leaving them in a state of utter destitution. In the midst of this scenario of chaos and destruction, international media suddenly made its appearance:

> Then later the people with cameras and T-shirts that say BBC and CNN come to shake their hands and look and take our pictures like we are pretty, and one of them says, It's like a tsunami bore through this place, Jesus, it's like a fucking tsunami tore this up. I say to Verona, What is a fucking tsunami? (67)

The journalists' presence in this scene does not extend beyond this brief, passing moment. Their role in this context is, then, suggested to be an ephemeral, extraneous one, just like that of the woman from London and the NGO people. Like these other figures, the main activity that journalists carry out is that of is taking pictures, pictures of African suffering that arguably contribute to the society of exhibition in the terms analysed above. In particular, the fact that they take pictures of African people "like [they] are pretty" underlines how the main value that the African population has for them is an "exhibition value" (Han 9). On the other hand, the only words we hear from the journalists – describing the place as if it had been destroyed by a tsunami – constitute a banal, almost mocking assessment of the situation, suggesting disrespect for the state in which people find themselves and lack of substantial, sustained attention to the real causes that may have caused it. It is highlighted, then, how photojournalism and television reports made for a Western audience, as Heerten points out, "do not necessarily produce sustained knowledge about [Third World] conflicts. Usually, postcolonial conflicts are far more complex than such images can convey. They only work by rendering more complex political, economic and social relationships invisible" (341).

Darling's wondering what a tsunami is points to the wide gap between the journalists' outlook and the particularities of the situation in which the African community finds itself. The journalists' reading of the surrounding scenario through the category of a "tsunami" – a phenomenon that affects other parts of the world – suggests their "single story" about catastrophes in the Global South. Specificities as regards political, historical and also natural conditions in different regions and

countries of the "Third World" are erased in favour of the display of a spectacle of suffering, presented in vague and abstract terms. As Heerten has argued, "[b]ound by the logic of aiming to raise attention, [Western media] tend to represent humanitarian crises as showcases of spectacular suffering, rather than as complex political conflicts" (337).

Western journalists reappear in chapter nine, which focuses on the funeral of a young political leader, Bornfree, murdered for his struggle to bring political change into the country. As readers, we can assume – even though it is not explicitly put – that he was an opponent to Robert Mugabe's autocratic regime. When the funeral is going on – a big, moving event attended by the whole community – two men with BBC caps appear: "One is looking at everything through a thing, and the other is busy taking pictures" (136). Distance, once again, emerges as one of the main elements in the reproduction through photographs of the suffering of the other, as we see how the journalists "immediately retreat behind the distancing tools of their trade" (Arnett 169). On the other hand, once again Bulawayo uses conjunctive coordination and verbal repetition to present the journalistic act of taking pictures as triggered by an unrelenting, almost violent compulsion: "The BBC man clicks and clicks away at this camera like he is possessed" (136).

When the funeral is over and all the adults are gone, the children play a game consisting in performing the murder of the leader whom the community has just buried. As they re-enact the murder, they suddenly realize that two BBC men are watching them:

> What kind of game is that? we hear somebody say behind us. We turn around to see the two BBC men have returned. They are watching us with their things, standing there among the graves. The camera clicks a few times, taking our pictures. Then the tall one with hair all over and a jungle on his face asks again, What kind of game were you just playing? and Bastard puts his shirt on and says, Can't you see this is for real? (143–144)

The journalists' inability to understand what the children are representing, together with the children's refusal to answer their question, exposes in strong terms the limits of the Western gaze and of Western representations of Africa as a spectacle of suffering. Bastard's assertion that what they are doing is "for real" endows their performance with an authentic, genuine dimension, in contrast to the journalists' photographic rendering of them, inevitably an inadequate, artificial, fake one. At the same time, as opposed to "the demand to be knowable, understood, and transparent" (Birchall 150) that the journalists' photographs and questions represent, the children remain opaque and illegible. It is important to note that this chapter – in particular, the passage quoted above – closes the first part of the novel, moving on, in the subsequent chapters, to tell Darling's life as a migrant in the United States. The fact that the chapter finishes with Bastard's words in what clearly constitutes

a defiant statement[8] definitely removes the children from the position of helplessness and victimhood assigned to them in pictures in this first part of the novel.[9] Their agency derives from the position of opacity that they are able to claim, one that challenges the legitimacy and authority of Western representations of Africa as spectacle of suffering.

3. Distant Observers

In the second part of the novel, sustained attention is also paid to images, in this case as regards their fundamental role in American society, very much depicted as a society of exhibition, dominated by both the production and consumption of images and videos. Thus, considerable attention is devoted to how Darling and her friends watch Internet porn, or to how Aunt Fostalina, who is obsessed with her weight and figure, spends her time looking at pictures of American women and models. Similarly Uncle Kojo, Aunt Fostalina's partner – also a migrant, in his case from Ghana – spends the hours watching TV, specifically images of war (261), after his son has been sent to fight in Afghanistan. As regards images of Africa, the emphasis falls on the circulation of those images in the Global North, and in particular on how they are received and perceived in the American context. This concern is brought to the foreground in chapter twelve, which describes an interracial wedding that Darling, Aung Fostalina, Uncle Kojo and his son TK attend in Indiana. At a certain point during the wedding celebration, Darling goes to the bathroom, where she finds herself confronted with an unknown white woman. The woman asks her if she is African and if she can say something in her language. Darling feels baffled and unable to react, while the woman keeps smiling at her, "fixing [her] with this expectant stare" (174). The objectifying effect that the woman's gaze and comments have on Darling is clear enough. The woman approaches Darling through an oversimplifying conception of Africa, either identified with positive stereotypes such as beauty – "Africa is beautiful, she says, going on with her favourite word" (175) – or with negative ones such as horror or catastrophe: "But isn't it terrible what's happening in the Congo? Just awful" (175).[10] In this way, the woman's comments highlight – as M. Rocio Cobo-Piñero has pointed out – how "[t]o US Americans, Africa becomes the overarching signifier of violence and poverty, thus erasing the locality of place and experience" (20). And as Cobo-Piñero goes on to argue, the mass media powerfully contributes to this overgeneralization of Africa, as suggested by the woman's words themselves:

> Jesus, the rapes, and all those killings! How can such things even be happening? she says […] I mean, I can't even – I can't even process it. And all those poor women and children. I was watching CNN last night and there was this little girl who was just – just too cute, she says. Her eyes start to mist and she looks down. […] It just broke my heart, you know, the woman says, her voice choking. (175–176)

The woman's highly emotional reaction to the images of Africa she watches on TV typifies what Lasse Heerten, following Hannah Arendt, has called "the postcolonial 'politics of pity'" (2017, 21), a pity that "can be felt and experienced from a distance" (333). This is the kind of pity that Adichie also identifies in her discussion of the single story of Africa: a "patronizing" pity that rules out "more complex" feelings and "the possibility of a connection as human equals" (n.p.). In the same line, in *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag problematizes the feeling of closeness and proximity that watching the suffering of others, as a distant observer, may provoke:

> The imaginary proximity to the suffering inflicted on others that is granted by images suggests a link between the faraway sufferers – seen close-up on the television screen – and the privileged viewer that is simply untrue, that is yet one more mystification of our real relations to power. (91)

As discussed by Sontag and as exemplified by the woman in Bulawayo's novel, images of distant suffering do have a sentimental impact on Western viewers, but this emotion mostly works as a paralyzing one. Viewers feel "sympathy" for the suffering they watch, but it is precisely a sympathy that allows us to proclaim both "our innocence as well as our impotence" (91), and hence one that prevents us from inquiring further into the actual and complex causes that may have provoked that suffering. It is a pity that does not lead us to question the position from which we observe that suffering or to what extent that suffering is part of an unfair world order we benefit from. And as shown in Bulawayo's novel, media companies such as CNN are to be blamed for provoking this numbing, anesthetizing feeling, which is part of "the humanitarian lens" that, as analysed by Heerten and explained above, determines the Western perception of distant spectacles of suffering. In this sense, as in the first part of the novel, this chapter hints at the complicity between American and Western journalism and organizations such as NGOs, as suggested by the woman's next comments, in which she enthusiastically tells Darling about her niece, who is in the Peace Corps and who is "going to Rwanda to help […] they are doing great things for Africa, just great" (176). The woman also describes her niece's visit to South Africa, where she taught at an orphanage, emphasizing how the whole family donated things "for those poor African children" (176). She then goes on to express her delight with the pictures her niece took:

> And oh, she took some awesome pictures. You should have seen those faces! she says, and I look at her smiling face tilted upward now, catching the brilliant light, and I can see from it how the children's faces must have looked. They were smiling like she is smiling now. Then I'm seeing myself in this woman's face, back then when we were in Paradise when the NGO people were taking our pictures.

> Just lovely, you know, she says. Now we're looking at each other and smiling even wider, like we've become friends for real, here in the restroom with the cream tiles and bright-bright lights and orange chair. (176–177)

Pictures once again are presented as the main element mediating the presence of Western visitors in African contexts such as Rwanda or South Africa, pictures that depend on the smiling faces that are shown in them. The smile, in fact, in connection with the act of taking pictures, is a constant motif throughout the novel, beginning with the scene in chapter one in which the European woman in Budapest keeps asking children to say "cheese." Smiles in the pictures of African children allow these images to be integrated into "the smooth communication of the Same" (Han 2), endowing them with an "exhibition value" (9), one that depends on the tendency in present-day visual communication towards an "aestheticization [that] is ultimately anesthetic" (13). These smiles do indeed have an anesthetic effect, so that Western observers can contemplate these pictures without feeling too disturbed or upset. In fact, the feeling they provoke – as exemplified by the woman – is the sympathy and pity described above, a feeling that is purely emotional and sentimental, and also ephemeral and superficial. These smiles deprive images of Africa of "all brokenness, which would trigger physical or mental reflection" (13).

In the passage quoted above, the emphasis on the face-to-face, close encounter between Darling and the woman also brings to the foreground the interplay between "imagined closeness and distance" (Heerten 334) that is crucial in our Western responses to representations of Africa. In the case of the woman, her constant smile is a sign of the "imaginary proximity" (Sontag 91) towards "Africans" – and hence toward Darling as a member of this vaguely conceived group – that media images and pictures allow her to feel. Darling's ironic comment about how they both smile as if they had "become friends for real" (177) precisely highlights the fakeness of that supposed proximity, one that is confirmed when the woman, after a few other remarks, suddenly leaves "and disappears like she was never there" (177). In the case of Darling, her smile is a mask she is obliged to wear in order to perform the role that this woman – just like the woman in Budapest or the NGO people in Paradise – requires from her. At the same time, precisely by working as a mask, it functions as an element of opacity. The gaze of the other – with its "irreducible singularity" (Glissant 190) – remains hidden behind the smile.

The smile as a sign of opacity is also present in another passage focused on the representation of Africa in Western media:

> And when they asked us where we were from, we exchanged glances and smiled with the shyness of child brides. They said, Africa? We nodded yes. What part of Africa? We smiled. Is it that part where vultures wait for famished children to die? We smiled. Where the life expectancy is thirty-five years? We smiled. It is where dissidents shove AK-47s between women's legs? We smiled. Where people run about naked? We

> smiled. That part where they massacred each other? We smiled. Is it where the old president stole the election and people were tortured and killed and a whole bunch of them put in prison and all, there where they are dying of cholera – oh my God, yes, we've seen your country; it's been on the news. (237–238)

The collective voice identified with the American stance covers all the stereotypes and motifs commonly found in representations of Africa for the American audience, specifically on the news. Journalism is once again accused of making a spectacle of the African continent, presented as a site of chaos, catastrophe and disaster, conceived in vague and clichéd ways. As highlighted by the final concluding statements, mainstream media, furthermore, reaffirm "the epistemological certainty and coherence of the western gaze" (Ndaka 2). On the other hand, the repeated smile that the "we" of the migrant community offers as a response to the American gaze questions and undermines the certitude of that vision. The smile points to the gap and the fracture in that vision; to the "Otherness that can never be completely eliminated" (Han 4), even if mainstream, anesthetic communication will try to smooth it over. The smile is the site of opacity and illegibility of those minoritarian – African, migrant – subjectivities questioning mainstream representations and epistemologies.

Just as the novel's first part finishes with a scene focused on the BBC journalists, the novel's last chapter revolves around a telephone conversation between Darling and Chipo in which the BBC is the source of contention. As Darling expresses her pain – because of what she has seen on the BBC – about the suffering going on in her native country, Chipo unexpectedly retorts in the following way:

> But you are not the one suffering. You think watching on BBC means you know what is going on? No, you don't, my friend, it's the wound that knows the texture of the pain; it's us who stayed here feeling the real suffering, so it's us who have a right to even say anything about that or anything and anybody, she says. (285)

Chipo's rebuke to Darling shows the ambivalent position in which Darling – as a migrant – now finds herself: she does not belong to American society, but she does not have a relation of closeness and familiarity with her home country anymore either. The transformation of her position is precisely one that affects the distance from which she now observes what happens in the African continent and in her country of origin. And that is actually the main shift in her stance: the fact that she has now become observer. Echoing Sontag's words, she has changed from being the one seen to be part of those who see. Through her harsh comments, Chipo explicitly problematizes the stance of the distant observer, verbalizing the ethical and intellectual dilemma explored by the novel as a whole: is it possible to know the "real suffering" of others when watching it from a distance? Do mass media – such as the BBC – generate accurate, critical knowledge about the situation in

non-Western parts of the world, or do they mainly provoke over-emotional reactions of pity, contributing to the perpetuation of the "single story of Africa"?

At the same time, the transformation of Darling's stance disturbs the observer-observed position as rigidly identified with a Western-African binarism. This dialectic is actually thrown into flux since the novel's early pages, when, as analysed above, the children gaze back at the woman in Budapest, a gaze that provides readers with the perspective through which they get to see the woman. This binarism is especially disturbed in the second part of the novel, in which the compulsion to take and show pictures that dominates contemporary society is depicted as an overwhelming force entrapping all characters. Everybody is potentially complicit with the act of objectifying others, given the "absolutization of exhibition value" in the society of transparency: everything must become a picture (Han 13). As an illustrative example, chapter sixteen, which provides a general vision of the life of migrants in the United States, describes how they are also carried away by the act of taking pictures – "outside the White House […] against the Lady Liberty […] at the Niagara Falls, at the Times Square […] with dolphins in Florida […] at the Grand Canyon" (245) – as the way to show their life in America to those staying in their home countries: "we went everywhere and took and took and took pictures and sent them home, showing off a country that would never be ours" (245). Pictures work as a futile attempt on the part of migrants to make America theirs. Just as in the first part of the novel, Western journalists and NGO workers very much remain outsiders in the African context, even if they try to capture and represent through pictures their surrounding environment, African migrants in the United States try in vain – through pictures – to establish emotional links with a country to which they cannot belong. The link between these interspersed scenes also works at a stylistic level: again, polysyndeton and verbal repetition are used in order to suggest the compulsive, accelerated and accumulative nature of the act of taking pictures. In *We Need New Names*, the compulsion to display and exhibit is one that pervades all social situations, gripping all characters and social groups. Ironically, characters of African origin like Darling, who in her home country tried to resist the objectification of pictures, now fall into a similar trap. In this way, the novel destabilizes essentialist and fixed categories of identity, presenting characters – both American and African – as subjected to global flows of commodification and objectification.

4. Conclusions

We Need New Names suggests how the "single story of Africa" (Adichie n.p.) is perpetuated – and even intensified – in the society of exhibition and transparency, dominated by "hypercommunication" and "hyperacceleration" (Han 29). Mass media such as the BBC and the CNN are shown as complicit with the production

of stereotypical, objectifying and reductive images of the African continent and African people. These images may provoke a sentiment of pity and sympathy in the Western observer, but in their lack of complexity or ambiguity, they work as part of today's "[a]nesthetic hypercommunication" (Han 13). The novel makes a sustained critique of "the society of transparency," as conceived by Han, dominated by the compulsion to display and exhibit. In such a context, the act of taking pictures and looking at them tends to work as an automatized process, devoid of aesthetic, intellectual and ethical reflection.

In the case of pictures made by the mass media for the Western gaze – pictures involving the suffering of others or the situation in distant places such as Africa – their effect certainly is an "anesthetic" one (Han 13), reaffirming distant observers in their supposed position of knowledge: "oh […] yes, we've seen your country; it's been on the news" (238). It is from this perspective that we can approach Chipo's warning to Darling at the end of the novel that just by watching the BBC, she cannot "*know* […] the *real* suffering" of those who have remained in her home country (285, my emphasis), a clear echo of Bastard's words to the BBC journalists: "Can't you *see* this is for *real*?" (144, my emphasis). By emphasising the characters' inability to know and see, these key passages hint at the novel's criticism of Western media's coverage of Africa: a coverage based on the over-production of sensationalized images of suffering, which does not provide sustained knowledge about the complex social, political and cultural circumstances of each particular African context.

At the same time, Bulawayo's novel shows the interruption of transparency and exhibition. The position of the African subject is identified with an opacity that resists being contained and objectified by pictures, pointing, in this way, to the limitations of the Western gaze, complicit with neoliberal and commodifying representations of Africa. In this sense, the novel's depiction of the society of transparency partly differs from Han. According to Han, "[t]he negativity of alterity and foreignness – in other words, the resistance of the Other – disturbs and delays the smooth communication of the Same" (2). That is why, for Han, transparency imposes itself by "eliminating the Other and the Alien" (2). *We Need New Names*, however, shows how "the resistance of the Other" – specifically the African other – can never be completely eliminated. The inability to know and see that Chipo and Bastard – as African characters – attribute to outsiders pretending to know about Africa highlights this alterity that resists being integrated into mainstream, hegemonic representations. The transparency/opacity dialectic, in this way, informs the novel's critique of journalistic practices in the age of mass audiovisual media, offering a powerful reflection on the intellectual and ethical questions involved in the representation of Africa and of the suffering of others for the Western gaze.

Notes

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1 Borrowing F. Abiola Irele's words on Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, it can be said that early African fiction worked as "a counterfiction of Africa in specific contradiction to the discourse of Western colonial domination" (116).
2 Caryl Phillips recounts his 2003 encounter with Chinua Achebe, motivated by his desire to understand the reasons why *Heart of Darkness* "should exercise such a hold" (n.p.) on the Nigerian writer. Phillips provides an insightful commentary on the reasons that may have led Achebe, as an "African reader" (n.p.), to respond in such a way to Conrad's text.
3 See Simon Gikandi for an in-depth discussion on the relation between African literature and the colonial factor.
4 Dominic Thomas points to other early concerns such as "the analysis and critique of missionary activity, the civilizing mission, and Negritude, the challenge to Islam, anti-apartheid activism, and the questioning of Occidental superiority" (230).
5 The production of the image of Africa by international new media constitutes the focus of the collective volume *Africa's Media Image in the 21st Century: From the "Heart of Darkness" to "Africa Rising"* (2017), edited by Mel Bunce et al. But whereas that volume suggests that in recent decades the media image of the continent has developed, at least partly, into more positive narratives, the emphasis in Bulawayo's novel is on the perpetuation of stereotypes.
6 Goyal herself disagrees with such interpretation, arguing that "Bulawayo finds a way to write about trauma without satisfying voyeurism" (184).
7 Dustin Crowley – among many other critics – provides a discussion of Afropolitanism as a privileged form of mobility.
8 As put by Arnett, Bastard articulates the children's "refusal to enact this communal drama intelligibly for a consuming audience of outsiders" (170).
9 Felix Ndaka makes an insightful analysis of how photographs in the novel – associated with non-hegemonic positions, such as that of children – generate "forms of agency and resistance that trouble hegemonic representational and epistemic regimes" (1).
10 The woman's words corroborate the construction of the single story of Africa as a story of catastrophe (Adichie n.p.)

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The Commodification of Journalism and the Crisis of Narrative in *John Henry Days*

Abstract: This article examines Colson Whitehead's novel *John Henry Days* (2001) as a critique of commodified journalism and the resulting crisis of narrative authority. Set within a media-saturated culture that transforms folklore into spectacle, the novel depicts journalism as publicity-driven production rather than truth-oriented storytelling. Through the figure of web reporter J. Sutter, Whitehead stages the exhaustion of authenticity in a market economy, where stories function as consumable commodities. Drawing on cognitive narratology, particularly theories of metarepresentation and Theory of Mind, the article demonstrates how the novel exposes competing claims to authority while withholding narrative closure, thereby dramatizing the instability of storytelling under late capitalism.

Keywords: Colson Whitehead, *John Henry Days*, narrative crisis, commodified journalism, cognitive narratology, Theory of Mind, narrative authority

1. Introduction

Colson Whitehead's novel *John Henry Days* (2001) interrogates not only the instability of the American myth but also the conditions under which narrative authority is produced and circulated within a commodified media culture. The term "commodified journalism" in this article does not refer to all forms of digital journalism, but specifically to a form of publicity-driven reporting that emerges from the promotional circuits of corporate media culture. Media scholars such as

Michael Schudson have noted that contemporary journalism increasingly operates within commercial and institutional structures that shape how news narratives are produced and circulated. In *John Henry Days*, Whitehead depicts a subculture of "junketeering" journalists who attend sponsored events and produce market-oriented narratives designed to attract web traffic rather than to investigate social realities. Journalism in this context functions less as a truth-seeking enterprise and more as a mechanism of cultural promotion, where stories are packaged as consumable media content.

Set against the spectacle of the John Henry Festival – where folklore is transformed into tourism, branding and digital content – the novel foregrounds journalism as a site in which stories function increasingly as marketable commodities rather than as vehicles of historical or ethical truth. J. Sutter, an African-American, publicity-driven web reporter from New York, embodies the exhaustion of narrative integrity in a media economy governed by speed, spectacle and monetizable content. As a junketeering journalist, Sutter produces promotional travel pieces for online media outlets. He travels to Talcott, West Virginia, to cover the John Henry Festival organized to commemorate the legendary African-American steel-driver who competed with a drilling machine, through the unveiling of a commemorative postage stamp. Within this framework, Whitehead exposes the conditions under which narrative authority is produced, as the festival – centered on the unveiling of a stamp – reduces the historical complexity of the legend to a marketable national icon, transforming folklore into a collectible commodity circulating within consumer culture. As Sutter encounters historians, collectors, folklorists and local residents, the novel juxtaposes the fragmented myth of John Henry with the contemporary practices of digital journalism. The narrative shifts between past and present, folklore and reportage, revealing how stories about John Henry circulate across oral tradition, archival research and media spectacle. Structurally, the novel unfolds through fragmented episodes that move between Sutter's contemporary reportage and historical narratives surrounding the John Henry legend.

Whitehead's depiction of junketeer journalism reflects broader transformations in late 20th-century media culture, where reporters increasingly operate within promotional circuits organized by corporations and public relations institutions. While sensationalism has long been a feature of journalism, since the exaggerations of the late 19th-century "yellow press," the form depicted in *John Henry Days* is distinguished by its integration into corporate publicity networks and its dependence on speed, circulation and audience metrics rather than investigative competition alone. In such contexts, journalists often function less as independent investigators and more as intermediaries who translate corporate events into media narratives. Through J. Sutter's experience as a freelance web reporter moving between sponsored events, Whitehead concretizes this shift, showing how reportage is increasingly shaped by systems of promotion. Sutter's travel assignments,

reimbursement culture and obsession with receipts satirize this professional environment, exposing the economic structures that determine not only which stories are told but also how they are formatted for rapid consumption and circulation.

As Bernard W. Bell observes, *John Henry Days* is shaped by "the dialectic tension between fact and fiction, myth and legend, folk culture and popular culture, [and] the oral and literary traditions that inform the theme, structure and style of the novel" (329). This tension, however, is not merely aesthetic; it is structural. In the novel, these competing narrative modes reveal how cultural memory is continually mediated, reframed and circulated within systems of publicity and commodification. The interplay between archival research, folklore, journalism and festival performance further shapes claims to authenticity and narrative authority. Such strategies resonate with postmodern engagements with national myth in works such as John Barth's *The Sot-Weed Factor*, where historical narratives are similarly destabilized through parody, fragmentation and narrative excess.[1]

This article argues that Whitehead presents the commodification of journalism as a crisis of narrative itself. When myth, history and reportage circulate within media economies driven by publicity, authenticity becomes performative and narrative closure unstable. Drawing on cognitive narratology – in particular, theories of metarepresentation and Theory of Mind – the article demonstrates how the novel compels readers to monitor competing representations of John Henry while simultaneously revealing the economic forces that determine which stories endure, which are packaged and which are forgotten. In doing so, *John Henry Days* critiques both journalistic practice and the broader cultural mechanisms through which narrative meaning is produced under late capitalism. In this way, the novel situates journalism not merely as a narrative medium but as a central mechanism through which cultural meaning is generated, circulated and commodified.

2. Defining Authenticity, Authority and Agency

Drawing upon Charles Taylor's studies on the complex ethical dimensions of authenticity, Bernard W. Bell contends in *The Contemporary African American Novel* that authenticity is "conferred from without as well as from within the dialectic process of the rites of passage of one's life" (42). Bell further argues that the authority shaping African American identities in the novels of Colson Whitehead is historically and politically layered rather than singular or fixed. According to Bell, this authority emerges not only from the history of anti-Black racism in the United States but also from the language of individual and collective political agency through which power relations are maintained or transformed (42). Building on this insight, this article develops a narratological framework for examining authority, authenticity and agency in *John Henry Days*. Although these themes

are frequently acknowledged in socio-cultural interpretations of the novel, their narrative configuration and structural significance have remained under-examined. Agency, at the level of story, as defined by David Herman, "concerns characters' ability to bring about deliberately initiated events, or actions, within a story world. But agency is also a pertinent concern at the level of storytelling or narration, affecting who gets to tell what kind of story in what contexts" (181). In *John Henry Days*, the maneuvering of information either revealed or concealed by the characters and the narrator mirrors the dynamics of individual and collective subjectivity and wields the power to exercise choice, a characteristic feature of New Black Aesthetics. However, Whitehead demonstrates that such authority becomes unstable in market-driven journalistic production. The commodification of news transforms narratives into transferable informational goods the value of which lies in circulation rather than authenticity. *John Henry Days* exemplifies how authenticity is continuously reshaped within both commodified narrative economies and traditional oral storytelling practices. African American cultural memory in the novel is not merely mythic in a general sense, but emerges from historically situated experiences of racial labor, dispossession and resistance, distinguishing it from abstract or universalized cultural myth. The John Henry legend, as reconfigured by Whitehead, reflects a specifically African American mode of remembering in which folklore operates simultaneously as cultural preservation and as a site of commodification within dominant media structures.

3. Metarepresentation and Theory of Mind

Lisa Zunshine in *Why We Read Fiction* draws on the work of Leda Cosmides and John Tooby on metarepresentation and adapts it to explain its role in literary fiction. Zunshine states that "our tendency to keep track of sources of our representations – to metarepresent them – is a particular cognitive endowment closely related to our mind-reading ability" (47). A metarepresentation contains two components: a source and its content. The source refers to the mind behind a belief or statement, while the content conveys the information itself. Zunshine argues that the "meta" component specifying the source prevents representations from circulating freely within the cognitive system and from serving as inputs for multiple inferential processes. Once information becomes sufficiently established, however, these source tags may disappear. Human metarepresentational ability also enables individuals to attribute mental states to others and, by extension, to literary characters. This capacity, commonly referred to as mind-reading, is known in cognitive psychology as "Theory of Mind." Readers rely on the same cognitive architecture when interpreting both real social situations and fictional worlds. In *John Henry Days*, this cognitive process is particularly visible in the way readers evaluate the credibility of journalistic narratives produced by Sutter and other media figures at the festival.

When readers track the sources of representations in *John Henry Days*, the novel reveals that, in the case of folk tales, characters sometimes forget the origins of stories or their narrative details. In such situations, additional stories – incorporating the intentions, imagination, fantasies, goals and desires of those recounting them – fill these gaps. This process corresponds to the concept of embedded narratives defined by Marie-Laure Ryan as "any storylike representation produced in the mind of a character or produced in the mind of the reader" (320). This cognitive framework is particularly relevant to journalistic discourse, which relies on readers' ability to evaluate source credibility and narrative reliability. Journalism depends on audiences' capacity to assess who provides information, under what circumstances and with what degree of authority. However, when journalism becomes commodified, the proliferation of competing narrative sources complicates readers' evaluation of authenticity. Whitehead's novel dramatizes this cognitive strain by presenting journalism as a narrative system that both demands and destabilizes the reader's metarepresentational engagement with historical representation.

John Henry Days relies on, manipulates and titillates our tendency to keep track of who thought, wanted and felt what and when. It presents multiple views of characters who give some conflicting as well as some overlapping information on John Henry's life. Information about John Henry varies with the situation, the mental state and the credibility of its source, i.e. with people narrating these stories, as well as with the recipients to whom it is related. Furthermore, Whitehead introduces a number of artefacts that relate to the modifying forms of representation the John Henry legend has taken over time, from the industrial age to which John Henry belonged, to the present information age to which J. Sutter belongs. Moreover, these various forms of representation affect and are affected by people whose lives are connected in some way or another by the legend. Colson Whitehead himself says that the novel is a complex attempt "to explore the idea of John Henry, to attack it from different angles, different ways people interact with the myth. […] John Henry becomes a way to talk about different things and different things become a way to talk about John Henry. It goes back and forth" ("Post Office to Unveil Colson Whitehead Stamp"). Whitehead's fragmented narrative structure mirrors the informational overload characteristic of digital journalism, where stories compete for attention rather than coherence.

The relevance of Theory of Mind becomes particularly pronounced in the context of journalism, where narrative production depends upon anticipating audience expectations, beliefs and interpretive frameworks. Journalists not only report events but construct narratives calibrated to presumed audience cognition, thereby engaging in a metarepresentational act that aligns content with reception. In *John Henry Days*, this process is exposed as both necessary and unstable, as competing representations of John Henry circulate across media platforms, complicating readers' ability to assign credibility and narrative authority.

4. Metarepresentations in *John Henry Days*

The prologue of *John Henry Days* hurls at its readers fourteen variants of the John Henry legend as testimonials on his life and his ballads. This is provided in response to an advertisement published in the *Chicago Defender* requesting information on John Henry. We are given incompatible information about John Henry's nativity, race, physicality and the way he died. A steam shovel operator says that he has heard steel drivers sing "John Henry" all his life and that "every new steel driving 'nigger' had a new verse to 'John Henry'" (5). Besides the question of procuring definite knowledge of John Henry, there is also the question of whether he existed in the first place, which leads us to think that perhaps all these stories are merely hypothetical. Analyzing the prologue's vignettes bears the use of our metarepresentational skills and reveals that the uncertainty in informative content not only shapes the elusive nature of John Henry but also shows how pervasively his story is embedded in the memories of respondents when they trace its source to their own families and acquaintances. Interestingly, in these series of sketches, Whitehead provides an informant's reply, which in itself is indicative of his/her overt assessment of the sources of the John Henry stories and songs and the contexts in which they were heard:

> I have heard the song in a thousand different places, nigger extra gangs, hoboes of all kinds, coal miners and furnace men, river and wharf rats, beach combers and sailors, harvest hands and timbermen. Some of them drunk and some of them sober. It is scattered over all the states and some places on the outside. I have heard any number of verses cribbed bodily from some other song or improvised to suit the occasion.
>
> The opinion among hoboes, section men and others who sing the song is that John Henry was a Negro, "a coal black man" a partly forgotten verse says, "a big fellow," an old hobo once said. He claimed to have known him but he was drunk on Dago Red, so I'm discounting everything he said. I have met very few who claim to have known him. The negroes of forty years ago regarded him as a hero of their race (6).

Thus, we see that it is not just the reader, but also the novel's characters who juggle through these invalidating and uncertain stories, challenging their metarepresentational ability. Such is the job of J. Sutter, who has to incorporate such socially mediated constructions in his website report.

The depiction of the characters in the novel establishes and, at the same time, satirizes the sometimes corrupt relationship between who writes (source) and what is written (content) in print and electronic media. To sell news, reporters and columnists exploit the potential fluidity and context dependency of representations to manufacture or tamper with information. Cosmides and Tooby also point toward the possible misapplication of representable information: Although it may be usefully descriptive in a narrow area of conditions, it is false, misleading or harmful

outside the scope of those conditions. This observation holds specific importance to analyzing the loss which occurs between an event and its representation.

In the novel, the narrator relates how witnesses reduce their accounts of a shooting incident during the festival to incomplete, rudimentary facts. When they share what they have seen, they "fit their perspectives into one narrative through a system of sobbing barter," and when in the "first few minutes a thousand different stories collide," the making of truth becomes violence too, out of which facts are formed (24). Interestingly, Whitehead appoints Joan Acorn, a young and inexperienced journalist, to report this incident. Joan Acorn received her job as a journalist through her father's contacts, making the reader doubt her efficiency as well as the quality of the report she writes. When the newspaper's Sunday slot man tries to get information about the shooting incident from her, she begins to cry and finds difficulty in getting the words out:

> She thinks, where, what, who, these are the essential questions a journalist must ask herself. And then Joan feels a warmth in her chest and she says in someone else's voice, 'Talcott, West Virginia – A postal worker opened fire Sunday afternoon on a crowd of people gathered for the unveiling of a new postage stamp; critically wounding three people before being shot and killed.' (26)

In this way, she condenses her account to mere "facts," stripping down the details, such as the identities of the shooter and of the victims, and the shooter's motivation in opening fire. In other words, her account was devoid of story, but had content enough to be passed as a report that intended to sell "facts."

Instead of merely pointing out the partial loss in representing an event or a historical figure, Whitehead, in a considerable part of his novel, also presents blues and ballads as a medium for a cultural myth to travel among common folk, integrating people's personal narratives. The adaptability of ballads poses a research challenge for Guy B. Johnson, another character in the novel, who is baffled by the number of varied responses he receives on his inquiry regarding "The Ballad of John Henry": "This is the method of gathering folklore, accumulating, sifting, tracking with ineffectual magnifying glass the footprints of ghosts. But he had not reckoned on the variety and plenitude of the accounts. No, he had not foreseen the true extent of this adventure at all" (155). The professor's research involves practicing his capacity to track and evaluate the sources of representations to assess goals and intentions of people who provide information on John Henry and to integrate a composite narrative out of incompatible information. Whether Johnson is following up on correspondence or randomly canvassing long-time residents and old-timers, he cannot make two stories coincide. The reader shares Johnson's perplexity at depicting the world variously represented from the perspective of multiple characters, which makes reviewers such as Jonathan Miles say, "there's enough debris for seven or eight lesser novels whirling 'round Whitehead's funnel cloud" (n.p.).

5. J. Sutter's Representations and the Development of His Perspective

J. Sutter is intent just upon making money. The novel introduces him at an airport terminal, chasing a stray receipt that he found on the floor to fraudulently claim reimbursements from his employers, an episode that immediately establishes his opportunistic relation to journalistic labor. He has been very conscientious about staying away from "the forge of his race's history" (15). He is at Talcott at the behest of the United States Postal Service to cover the unveiling of the commemorative stamp but expresses serious doubts about whether he can place a story about a stamp. He and his fellow journalists think that they do not have to write about all the events they attend but just enough to keep from looking like "complete hacks." Like Joan Acorn, J. Sutter's lack of commitment to his work makes the reader doubt the authority of his report on the John Henry festival. Whitehead leaves no room for doubt when he introduces J. Sutter as an "inveigler of invites and slayer of crudités, this drink ticket fondler and slim tipper, open bar opportunist, master of vouchers, queue-jumping wrangler of receipts" (56). The travel website for which he works requires only "content," and Sutter accepts this reduced expectation as a more honest description of his role than the traditional claim of journalistic authorship. Sutter's ignorance of his obligation to his audience and his belief in looking just for the content problematizes the notion of metarepresentation emanating from the novel, because both the content and the sources play an important role in the propagation of stories. As the novel shows, the audience becomes the source of representation when they pass on the stories and transform them into legends. A legend diminishes the distinction between source, content and audience as each aspect embeds intricately in the other.

The novel reveals how J. Sutter's perspective evolves with his experience of the John Henry legend during the festival. The narrative informs us that Sutter was a dedicated and sincere journalist: "He was green then, nervous about repercussions, clinging valiantly to an abstraction of journalistic ethics" (13). Years of immersion in a media culture that fabricates and markets narratives have rendered Sutter too jaded "to pretend that there is anything but publicity" (136). Moreover, none of J. Sutter's journalist friends is serious about writing a report on the John Henry Festival. They wholly engage in grabbing material benefits through their insubstantial craft.

The reader's metarepresentational engagement with J. Sutter's interior reflections foregrounds his growing disillusionment with the superficiality of the journalistic labor he himself dismisses as "puff" (387). After months on a junket circuit, Sutter begins to confront the hollowness of a profession driven by promotional excess rather than substantive storytelling. His recollection of journalist Bobby Figgis – whose life was consumed by junketeering – and his assertion, "I don't want to be another Bobby Figgis" (30), signal an emerging awareness of the personal and ethical costs of commodified journalism. This self-reflexive

moment marks a gradual shift in Sutter's perspective, as he struggles to articulate any meaningful justification for his continued participation in media spectacle. The novel thus requires readers to track Sutter's evolving beliefs and motivations, revealing how sustained exposure to market-driven narrative production generates both professional fatigue and a broader crisis of narrative purpose.

An evening dinner event mocks the behaviors of this group of junketeers, whose only intent is to grab the food offered for free. Mayor Cliff informs them that Mr. Vereen, a singer, will not be able to perform as he is sick, so they have arranged for home-grown talent to appear after dinner. Sutter decides to tune him out as "homespun rubbish" (59). He is unconcerned towards the festival and thinks that he can easily write a report as per the dictates of the market research on the average attention span of a web surfer. Sutter's apprehension that his article will be pruned by the website editor to fit the parameters set by a market study illuminates the way journalists are motivated to write content-driven reports which demand trimming down the richness of a story or an event. Such technological innovation reduces web users to mere measurements of time.

The dehumanizing renditions of technological use also make Pamela Street feel detached from her work. A temporary agency farms her out for "a content driven interactive information provider" (287). Her job was "ontology," to direct new users amid millions of websites. Their company needed an extra hand until they worked out some glitches in "the Tool," a new data entry interface that measured visitors or users in terms of "the hits, the eyeballs, the clicks" (288). The technological control over human interaction provides a postmodern critique for the anxiety emanating from the use of a medium of communication.

Whitehead points out the disadvantages of mediums of communication and technology that devalue humans. Linda Selzer, in an interview, asked Colson Whitehead to elaborate on "the issues generated by new technologies"; more concretely, on how his "narratives are alternately inflected by and suspicious of technological innovation." Whitehead responded: "I'm constitutionally leery of systems, whether we're talking about human organizations or new technologies. Every advancement has its benefits and its price. My outlook on the world prohibits me from cheerleading the latest thing – I always have to find the weakness. The hidden cost" (Selzer 396). The various forms of technologies in the novel – be it the steam-drill from the industrial age, the postage stamp, vinyl records, the innumerable artifacts collected by Pamela Street's father or J. Sutter's web report in the digital age – are brought into question on account of their limitations and of the role played by their users. The novel questions the relevance of the postage stamp and the print or digital media. As Whitehead asks in an article: "What kind of monument was a postage stamp? It was so banal that it addressed something about our debased age" ("I Worked"). An understanding of the obsolescence of our systems of communication from a postdated point of view is itself reflective of perspective development shown by the characters of the novel.

Similarly, Daniel Grausam, in his insightful essay "After the Post(al)," reflects on the irony of a John Henry stamp. John Henry dies directly after defeating the drill, exhausted by the race. He becomes an immortal American folk hero by proving mortal, defeated ultimately by the very thing he has supposedly defeated. The novel's implicit argument, according to Grausam, is that exactly the same thing is happening again: "John Henry, immortalized on a stamp, is immortalized at the very moment when the death knell of postal delivery is already being sounded" (635). Similarly, J. Sutter's first assignment for the emergent digital technology will end the very print culture he is covering while already living through a paradigm shift from the era of the story and article to the era of "content." Whitehead continually returns to the obsolescence of both the stamp as media technology and the railroad this stamp represents. John Henry drove steel to blast tunnels for the railroads, which is a doubly obsolete system of transport, as it was once replaced by the interstate highway system, and now by the virtual superhighway of information. Besides reckoning older systems of technology to be hackneyed, Daniel Grassian also opines, "either the technology has become too powerful to challenge and/or we (or, at least, the hip-hop generation) have lost the desire that John Henry had to prove human superiority. Rather, we have let technology dehumanize us and grow apathetic in the process" (80–81). Daniel Grassian and Daniel Grausam thus observe Whitehead's ongoing attempts to bring our attention to our resignation to the dehumanizing effects of technology and the obsolescence of these systems, which are also media of representation.

This article, however, argues that along with the mechanizing effect of technologies, Whitehead simultaneously attempts to bring out human beings' innate propensity to assess stories and media of representation, which enables us to resist passive submission to these external technologies of communication and foregrounds our inherent tendency to feed on and concoct stories and narratives. Moreover, this innate system enables us to reckon the obsolescence of older technologies and the dehumanizing effects of the newer technologies in the first place. In other words, the inherent nature of people to perceive and project stories and the way stories become more accessible and shareable seem to be a constant in the face of all external technologies.

Reading the novel from a metarepresentational perspective also brings to the fore the process of oral communication, a mainstay of African American literary and cultural tradition. John Henry's story became legendary owing to its adaptable and transforming nature. People added, subtracted and modified parts of it depending on their circumstances, contexts, hopes and desires corresponding to Ryan's definition of the embedded narrative. This also helps transmit such stories from one generation to another. In other words, our ability to put certain information under advisement, to reassess and modify it, allows certain stories to sustain.

The inaugural dinner humorously depicts Sutter's acute desire and excitement at eating a prime rib. Derek C. Maus notes Whitehead's use of a mock-heroic tenor,

and infers that the tone provides "a metafictional touch that calls attention to itself by its very inappropriateness. The junketeers' behavior is far from the idealized virtue exemplified by the heroes of epic tales, such as John Henry; the rapturous thoughts Sutter directs at a plate of prime beef suggest that his ability to be fulfilled has become entirely material, instead of spiritual or philosophical" (45). From a symbolic standpoint, Maus further adds, such a condition prevents him from ever being able to derive any meaning from John Henry's story (45). However, J. Sutter's perspective changes, and he eventually derives meaning from John Henry's story. This shift occurs as an outcome of his metarepresentational ability to move across temporal perspectives: He reflects on his past, particularly his early, more idealistic years in journalism, remains self-aware in the present as he covers the festival, and projects himself into the future with apprehension, fearing he might ultimately become like Bobby Figgis.

The novel frequently veers away from the present, not only in J. Sutter's recollection but also in narrating what brought characters such as Pamela Street and Alphonse Miggs to this festival. Moreover, the novel devotes some sections to John Henry, both as a 20th-century legendary figure and as a 19th-century railway worker, nearing his contest with the steam drill. Such frequent shifts in wide ranges of time and space in the novel impart a serpentine nature to its narrative, opening up a number of levels for readers' metarepresentational ability to work on. We have on the one hand J. Sutter, within the storyworld, reassessing his own perception of John Henry and this entire event, and on the other hand, we as readers of the novel engage in continuously readjusting our perception of John Henry as well as of J. Sutter. This process of readjustment and re-assessment is a feature of our metarepresentational faculty and explains William Ramsey's statement that the novel allows the readers "to construct rather than receive historical truth" (780). Our mental faculty facilitates active participation in constructing "historical truth." Moreover, a cognitive narratological approach to the novel also informs us that such truth itself is not simply an end-product of the reader's construction, but a means to understand it as an ongoing process, which varies in its truth-value with time, place and people.

J. Sutter regains some of his initial memories of John Henry with some seriousness after the comic depiction of the choking incident, in which Alphonse Miggs, the railroad stamp collector, ultimately rescues him. Even then, Sutter does not attach much importance to the impending report and he determines that he can write his report at the airport, which will be edited several times and finally be lost in the world of web never to be seen again. J. Sutter's frivolous attitude once again makes the reader doubt his professional integrity, more so when we are told of his fascination with the rather fickle and anonymous realm of the internet. He continues to think of himself as a successful freelancer because his pay-checks arrive when he files his job, his reimbursements arrive when he mails in receipts, and he continues to get assignments. But after the choking incident, the narrator informs us:

"Except for what happened earlier that evening, J. has tuned himself perfectly to the rhythm of events, found parity between what had been his life before and what his life is going for the record. They struggle and win brief inches, but neither side wins him. He neither wants to go home and take a few days off nor submit himself mindlessly to the flux of events" (136).

What appears here is simply Sutter's inability to make a decision or an unwillingness to go home or to go for the record mindlessly. But by using the Theory of Mind and by keeping track of Sutter's fluid representations, one would interpret this seeming indecision as a shift in Sutter's perspective: That J. Sutter, a die-hard junketeer who is unconcerned with the subject of his report and who has conducted himself flippantly, considers the option of not going for the record aimlessly. Such signals of perspectival shift strewn occasionally in the novel will be oblivious if the work is not viewed through the lens of metarepresentation and the Theory of Mind. The author relies on the capacity of the reader to metarepresent his representations of J. Sutter. The reader can compare Sutter's past and present attitudes and thus read these lines in context to decipher how much he has changed. In a novel where J. Sutter shows an endless dance between ridiculing, disbelieving, questioning and believing the story of John Henry, this festival and the purpose of his life, it becomes crucial to know what he thinks and says, when, where and why.

Knowing what Sutter says and does and what drives him is paramount to our understanding of his thought process and to the narrative trajectory of the novel itself. Just as we follow J. Sutter's representations, J. Sutter too keeps track of his representations pertaining to Bobby Figgis. He asks himself whether Figgis shared the same feelings of apprehension with him. He attributes a state of mind for Bobby Figgis: "That he was in control, before pop consumed him" (136). This attribution makes Sutter apprehensive over his record and his purpose of attending this event. Such reanalysis keeps him from "submit(ting) himself mindlessly to the flux of events" (136). Therefore, Sutter's mind-reading faculty plays a significant role in changing his attitude, and eventually helps shift his perspective of John Henry.

In another episode, J. Sutter's recollections of encountering the John Henry legend as a child through a cartoon film display the metarepresentational process reshaping his understanding of African American cultural memory, race and historical representation. By juxtaposing Sutter's childhood perceptions with his adult reinterpretations, Whitehead foregrounds the cognitive process through which cultural myths are reassessed across time. J. Sutter's evolving engagement with the legend enables him to draw parallels between John Henry's struggle against industrial mechanization and his own uncertain position within the commodified media environment of the digital age. Through a reassessment of his beliefs, Sutter gradually reconnects with African American cultural traditions while realizing his generational detachment as a member of the hip-hop generation. The novel invites readers to participate in this interpretive process, demonstrating how myths are sustained through narrative reinterpretation and acts of meaning-making.

The novel simultaneously makes readers doubt the credibility of J. Sutter as an ethically sound journalist. Flashbacks reveal him as an initially committed journalist, attentive to global affairs and ethical reportage. He previously worked as an intern for *Downtown News*, whose owner, the liquor magnate Reinhart Becker, embodies a form of authority and agency that is itself questionable, having "purchased the ailing News out of financial boredom, fiscal inertia, to expand his empire into the realm of the printed world" (170). Whitehead demonstrates how Sutter's early enthusiasm is thwarted by profit-driven media structures that encourage sensationalism over ethical reporting. Sutter wanted to cover Eleanor Bumpers' story, which in his view was "another example of a larger pattern of police attacks against the black community" (173). The narrative tells us that "Eleanor Bumpurs was a sixty-nine year old Afro-American woman who had been killed by the Emergency Services Unit as they tried to evict her city-owned apartment" (173). Eleanor Bumpurs' story, as covered in the Metro section of the *Times*, reveals implicit racism, racial insecurity and violence, which attracted Sutter's interest. He thought these were real stories and the kind of work he wanted to do. He realized that he had been "raised in a cocoon" (175). Sutter's interest in the Eleanor Bumpurs case reflects his early commitment to reporting systemic racial violence and socially consequential journalism.

The editorial meeting regarding the Eleanor Bumpurs case degenerates to a search for sensational headlines and sellable content. The discussion prioritizes market appeal over investigative rigor, revealing how editorial authority reshapes events into commodified narratives, sidelining ethical journalistic engagement. In juxtaposing the real-life incident of the Bumpurs case and the way headlines and news reports take devious shape, Whitehead brings attention to the incongruity between events and the act of reporting these events. Public outrage sometimes erupts from the way news and stories regarding legal trials are shaped by the journalists and media. But since judicial authorities and juries navigate their way through a collision of stories and many versions of incidents, metarepresentation and mind reading have a prominent bearing also on legal narratives, where factual details are influenced and sometimes manipulated by who said what to whom, when, where, and why.

6. J. Sutter, Pamela Street and John Henry: An Unlikely Bond and a Vital Link

J. Sutter's opinion evolves significantly through his interaction with Pamela Street, who provides crucial information regarding John Henry. Sutter conveys his doubt to her: "I thought John Henry was made up but these people really take him seriously" (187). Pamela informs him that the ballads mention the Big Bend Tunnel in Talcott and the songs identify the C&O Railroad too: "So it fits that it comes from a true story" (187). When Sutter is skeptical of the reality of the race, Pamela

informs him about the two books on the contest and that her father had the first editions. Two folklorists – Louis Chappell and Guy Benton Johnson – conducted interviews in the 1920s or 30s to determine if the legendary figure actually existed. Their findings revealed several inconsistencies. Some told them he did live, while some said he did not. Some of the people who worked in the tunnel said they witnessed the race, some said it never happened. Many eyewitnesses had already died by the time the folklorists conducted their research, and thus most of the stories circulating were second-hand accounts, complicating their reliability. According to Pamela, even the conclusions drawn by the two folklorists did not match. The white man, Chappell, believed that the contest happened, and the black man, Guy Johnson, remained skeptical. Despite interviewing the same people a year or two apart, the two researchers documented divergent accounts, highlighting the fluid and incoherent nature of oral historiography.

Pamela and Sutter's conversation reveals mutual skepticism and interpretation of the legendary story. Sutter asks, "Can a man actually beat a steam drill?" (188). Pamela's response demystifies the superhuman aura surrounding John Henry. She explains that the first mechanical drills were not that efficient and kept breaking down; a very strong steel-driver probably could beat one. Her account humanizes John Henry and also reveals the processes through which historical narratives undergo distortion and erasure over time. The difficulty faced by the two folklorists in locating the employment records for the C&O railway – reportedly destroyed in a fire – exemplifies the archival absences that sustain myth-making. By the end of their conversation, both J. Sutter and Pamela establish a deeper connection through their shared engagement with the John Henry narrative. They both visit the site believed to be John Henry's burial place to inter there Pamela's father's ashes. They thus consolidate personal memory with cultural mythology, reinforcing the novel's interrogation of narrative authenticity and authority.

The novel consistently invites readers to oscillate between the two divergent attitudes of J. Sutter. This shapes the reader's interpretation of Sutter's professional integrity and the commoditized representations of the John Henry myth. The novel sustains the tension until its very end when Sutter confronts a decisive moment after the festival. Standing in his motel's parking lot he contemplates whether to go back to New York with Pamela or to continue pursuing his junketeer record:

> He had put on paper some of the things she had said the day before but now he thought what happened today was the real story. It is not the kind of things he usually writes. It is not puff. It is not for the website. He does not know who would take it. The dirt (where they buried the urn of Pamela's father) had not given him any receipts to be reimbursed. He does not even know if it is a story. He only knows it is worth telling. (387)

Whitehead leaves unanswered the question (among others) of whether Sutter breaks the junketeer record or leaves with Pamela to start a meaningful life.

An interpretation of the novel's open ending that applies metarepresentation and Theory of Mind would suggest that J. Sutter is likely to choose to accompany Pamela Street instead of the record. Cognitive narratological analysis reveals that his transformation emerges not from a naïve acceptance of the John Henry legend but through a complex process of belief, skepticism, revision and re-interpretation. Sutter acquires a more critically informed disposition when he realizes that the John Henry legend is worth telling. Such an interpretation underscores how myth acquires vitality through a continual process of interpretive negotiation by individuals who shape and are shaped by it. This study diverges from the interpretations offered by scholars such as Maus and Selzer by remaining grounded in Sutter's evolving cognitive engagement with the John Henry story, particularly in his realization that his story is "worth telling" irrespective of his professional performance.

The novel critiques the limiting notions of agency, authority and authenticity by questioning them. The novel as a work of fiction itself is a metarepresentation with the author as the source tag. Readers may anticipate narrative resolution by attributing interpretive authority to Colson Whitehead; however, Whitehead strategically withholds definitive closure, thereby transferring interpretive responsibility to the reader. He denies that he has been the source of our interpretations through the novel's open end by prompting us to make our own predictions of J. Sutter's decisions and future actions. In this respect, a cognitive narratological reading reinforces the socio-cultural observations of Bernard W. Bell regarding Whitehead's experimental narrative strategies, highlighting how the novel destabilizes conventional assumptions about narrative authority and authenticity.

7. Conclusion

The historical appropriation and transformation of the John Henry legend enable Derek C. Maus to describe *John Henry Days* as a historiographic metamyth structured through encyclopedic bricolage. Whitehead's narrative assemblage of fragmented storylines not only reconstructs cultural memory but also mirrors the logic of contemporary journalism, where historical narratives are continuously reframed and repackaged as consumable media content. By embedding J. Sutter's journalistic pursuits within competing versions of the John Henry myth, the novel exposes how commercial media systems commodify folklore, memory and lived experience, transforming them into market-driven narratives. This generates a broader crisis of narrative authority. As Michael Eric Dyson observes, authenticity operates through contested interpretive centers rather than stable origins (Jones and Dyson 786). Whitehead extends this insight to journalistic discourse by demonstrating how media narratives rely on layered metarepresentations that simultaneously construct and destabilize claims to truth. The proliferation of stories, ballads, archival fragments and journalistic accounts of John Henry

produces epistemological uncertainty, revealing how commercial pressures fragment coherent storytelling and blur distinctions between factual reporting, cultural myth and media spectacle.

By foregrounding the multiplicity of mediated representations, the novel critiques the erosion of journalistic integrity under market imperatives. Storytelling emerges as both cultural preservation and commercial production, where narrative value is increasingly determined by circulation, sensational appeal and institutional profitability. Consequently, Whitehead positions commodified journalism as a central force in the contemporary crisis of narrative, demonstrating how media practices transform historical memory into fragmented and unstable narrative commodities while compelling readers to interrogate the processes through which narrative authority is produced and consumed.

Notes

1 For discussions of postmodern reworkings of myth and historiography, see Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988) and Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). These studies outline how postmodern texts destabilize historical narrative through parody, pastiche, and fragmentation.

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The Press Play: Videogame Representations of Journalists and Journalistic Labor

Abstract: This article analyzes how videogames represent news media and journalists across genres, from reporters as heroic truth-seekers to sensationalist figures driven by spectacle, or player-controlled but invisible journalist figures. Drawing on examples such as *Beyond Good & Evil* (2003), *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023), and *The New York Times Simulator* (2024), the article explores how different game forms, ranging from narrative adventures to editorial simulations, model journalistic labor, ethics, and influence. In a digital era of disinformation and contested media credibility, these representations reveal how videogames reimagine journalism's cultural role and societal value.

Keywords: videogames, photojournalism, simulation, newsgames, media ethics, dystopian fiction

1. Introduction

In Ubisoft's 2003 action-adventure videogame *Beyond Good & Evil*,[1] players assume the role of Jade, an intrepid photojournalist tasked with exposing a collusion between her planetary government and malevolent alien invaders. Throughout the game, the player-controlled character's camera becomes both an investigative tool and a weapon against authoritarian power. Yet, journalists' representations in videogames are not always so unambiguously favorable and heroic, particularly when journalists appear as non-player characters (NPCs) rather than protagonists under the player's control. In *Baldur's Gate 3* (2023), for instance, players can

encounter a side quest[2] involving the fictional *Baldur's Mouth*, a gossip-peddling newspaper that spreads sensationalist misinformation about the player character. Here, journalism transforms from an investigative tool into an antagonistic obstacle, a source of reputational damage that must be managed, countered, or even fought against. These contrasting portrayals hint at a complex and varied fictionalization of journalism in videogames, one that reflects broader cultural tensions about the press's role, credibility, and media ethics in contemporary society.

Beyond the figure of the journalist, journalistic practices and news media themselves also permeate videogames in diverse and increasingly sophisticated ways. One might think of the fictional and highly self-reflexive[3] newspaper *The Daily Sun* in the arcade game *Paperboy* (1985) as one of the first depictions of the news media within videogames. However, many modern open-world games, such as the *Grand Theft Auto* or *Red Dead* series by Rockstar Games, and *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* (2023), use TV or radio broadcasts and newspapers as intradiegetic media representations and world-building tools. In these games, the media outlets chronicle player actions and mark the passing of the in-game time while making the gameworlds feel inhabited, dynamic, and reactive. Strategy games such as *Sid Meier's Civilization* (1991) and *Anno 1800* (2019) integrate news media not merely as intradiegetic feedback mechanisms but as manipulable instruments of public opinion. In *Anno 1800*, for example, players can shape the content of the in-game newspaper before its publication within the game, not by fabricating stories outright, but by concealing uncomfortable truths through strategic distraction, publishing irrelevant articles to divert public attention from urgent issues, and thereby maintaining population happiness.

On the other hand, the "newsgames" genre, situated at the "intersection of videogames and journalism," as exemplified by Gonzalo Frasca's *September 12* (2003), *The Financial Times' The Uber Game* (2017), and more recently Paolo Pedercini's *The New York Times Simulator* (2024), demonstrates a distinctive form of engagement in which real-world news and current events are translated into interactive game formats (Bogost et al. 6). Newsgames, understood as games that "have the ambition of transmitting important notions about news events by means of their rhetoric," have demonstrated videogames' capacity to engage players in contemporary societal and political issues in a journalistic manner (Sicart 2008, 28).

Despite the scholarly attention given to newsgames, and for all this abundance of journalistic content and interactions in games, however, representations of journalists as characters, whether playable protagonists, NPCs, or invisible editorial agents, remain remarkably sparse, as does sustained academic scrutiny of these representations. To address this gap between game studies and journalism studies, this article examines both high-profile titles such as *Baldur's Gate 3* and indie games that offer pointed political critique of journalism. As I will demonstrate, when game developers do choose to foreground the journalist figure, several representational patterns emerge that merit closer examination. My paper thus argues

that these representations coalesce around three distinct modes: (1) the idealized truth-seeker who embodies democratic values and investigative courage; (2) the sensationalist journalist whose pursuit of spectacle and profit overrides ethical responsibility; and (3) the ethically ambiguous journalist whose moral character remains undetermined, instead requiring players themselves to navigate professional pressures, moral compromises, and competing obligations.

While the first two modes (positioning journalists at opposite ethical extremes) appear more frequently across various videogame genres and provide clearer characterizations of the journalist figure, each mode offers distinct insights into how interactive media construct journalistic identity and practice. The heroic journalist mode, which I will analyze through the example of *Beyond Good & Evil* in the next section, transforms investigative reporting into a series of gameplay challenges. In this particular example, photojournalism and photographing evidence become stealth and combat missions, and truth-telling is rewarded through narrative progression. The translation of professional practices into playable mechanics thus reveals how games conceptualize investigative work as a form of gameplay challenges. Unlike *Beyond Good & Evil*, where investigative journalism structures the game's core mechanics, *Baldur's Gate 3*, analyzed as the second case study below, situates the representation of the journalist at the margins, embedding it in a side story rather than the main narrative. Nonetheless, the sensationalist journalist mode, as seen in *Baldur's Gate 3*, is equally revealing: managing reputation damage, confronting misinformation, or dealing with media-generated public opinion in the game's brief depiction of news production become gameplay problems that reflect contemporary anxieties about journalism's potential for harm. Both modes, therefore, warrant critical attention and careful analysis, not despite their binary simplicity, but because of what their mechanical implementations reveal about cultural attitudes toward journalism.

However, the third mode presents perhaps the most compelling engagement with journalism's complexities precisely because it refuses these clear-cut characterizations. In titles such as *The Republia Times* (2012) and *Headliner* (2017), players must decide which stories to publish, which facts to emphasize or suppress, and how to balance truth-telling against political pressure, economic survival, or personal safety. Even though these games often lack a fully developed or individualized journalist character, they offer something distinctly medium-specific: player-driven branching narratives that make journalistic ethics a matter of active choice rather than passive observation. Therefore, one of my arguments is that while all three modes illuminate different facets of how games represent journalism, this third mode represents one of the medium's most distinctive contributions to fictional representations of the profession, one made possible by videogames' specific interactive affordances and choice-driven narrative structures.

Whereas literature, film, and television also depict journalists making ethical decisions, videogames can, and increasingly do, implicate audiences in those

decisions, transforming moral observation into moral participation. The ludic and interactive dimension fundamentally alters the relationship between audience and journalistic ethics, creating playful experiences of professional dilemmas rather than mere intellectual understanding. As Julian Lamers and Alexander Filipović observe, digital games have only recently begun to be addressed within media ethics, a field traditionally centered on journalism and other forms of public communication (30). Yet, as Lamers and Filipović also argue, videogames fall within the domain of "entertainment ethics sections of media ethics" along with films and TV, and they are therefore relevant to and important for broader discussions of ethical and moral dimensions of media representations (30).

The inclusion of videogames in discussions of media ethics might be new; however, scholarly work in game studies has already examined the moral dimensions of digital play, emphasizing how game mechanics, narrative choices, and player agency can foster ethical reflection. According to game scholar Miguel Sicart, for instance, "[t]he uniqueness of games is that this process takes place in a computational space of possibility that each player traverses in a particular way – players get to practice ethical theories and see their effects, both in the game and in their reflection on their gaming experiences" (2019, 155). Within this framework, videogames that engage with journalism acquire a significant political and ethical dimension. Titles that position players as journalists or otherwise embed journalistic practices within their mechanics often presuppose particular conceptions of journalistic ethics within their fictional worlds. For instance, adventure games such as *Beyond Good & Evil* construct a moral framework in which truth-seeking and exposure of corruption are treated as unequivocal virtues, thereby inviting players to internalize and perform those ethical codes through play. Conversely, more decision-based games like *The Republia Times* place players within morally ambiguous systems, where the absence of a clear fictional morality forces them to negotiate competing values according to their own moral compass, encouraging players to engage in ethical thinking.

In this context, it is worth noting the frequent coexistence of dystopian, authoritarian, or otherwise oppressive settings with representations of journalism in videogames. Across many of the titles discussed below, depictions of journalism emerge alongside narratives of moral compromise, systemic corruption, and unequal power relations. As digital media scholar Soraya Murray observes, games situated in politically dystopian worlds – many of which "reflect the influence of George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*" – are often unified by "the mobilization of moral complication and even failure as a tool to stimulate ethical self-inquiry in the player" (262). The fictional worlds discussed in the first two case studies below, like most speculative fiction dealing with representations of journalism, use distant or futuristic settings to critique the media ethics and power dynamics of their own historical moment, reimagining journalistic practice through non-existing technologies and non-human participation in the circulation and manipulation of news

(Ghiglione 143, 146). The third and most recent example I will analyze, *The New York Times Simulator*, does not fictionalize journalism and its ethics in the same way, but instead delivers a pointed critique of the structural and ideological conditions shaping contemporary news media. Collectively, these examples demonstrate not only the diverse ways in which videogames represent journalism and journalists but also highlight how such representations are informed by the medium's distinctive affordances and its broader cultural and technological contexts.

To examine and compare all three modes, this paper undertakes a close reading of the games' narrative, visual, and interactive elements, combined with media ethics frameworks. The three case studies selected here serve as the primary works for analysis, capturing temporal breadth, diverse genres, and varying ethical framings, while additional examples are discussed throughout to contextualize and support the argument. While *Beyond Good & Evil*, *Baldur's Gate 3*, and *The New York Times Simulator* vary significantly in their portrayals of journalists, aesthetic approaches, and gameplay genres, this heterogeneity is a deliberate methodological choice, as it allows me to trace multiple modes of fictionalized journalism – from photojournalism and print media to digital news – while demonstrating how each form is shaped by, and expressed through, different gameplay affordances. This approach enables a focused yet adaptable examination of current trends in the representation of journalists in videogames, highlighting patterns that may shift as videogames' engagement with journalism continues to evolve.

2. Photojournalism as Resistance: Playing as the Intrepid Reporter in *Beyond Good & Evil*

Set on the mining planet Hillys in a distant future, *Beyond Good & Evil* casts players as Jade, a young female photojournalist and martial artist recruited as a war reporter by an underground resistance movement to expose the planet's authoritarian military regime's collaboration with alien invaders known as the DomZ. The game immediately situates players within a media-saturated dystopia: it opens with a live TV broadcast announcing that Hillys is under siege by the DomZ, framing the crisis through the lens of the pro-government Hillyan News channel.

Following an attack on Jade's home, where she cares for children orphaned by the war, the player finds themselves in the first combat sequence, in which Jade must defend herself and the children against a group of DomZ. Only after the threat is neutralized do the Alpha Sections, the state's military forces, and the same news team from the opening broadcast arrive to claim credit for saving the victims. The anchorman's propagandistic report directly contradicts the player's experience, which marks the game's first critique of news media manipulation under authoritarian control. When the reporter, surrounded by hovering robot cameras, thrusts a microphone toward Jade (see figure 1), he undermines both her heroism and her

own role as a journalist. The rest of the game, however, reverses this dynamic: Jade becomes not the subject of reportage but the one who uses journalism itself as a means of resistance.

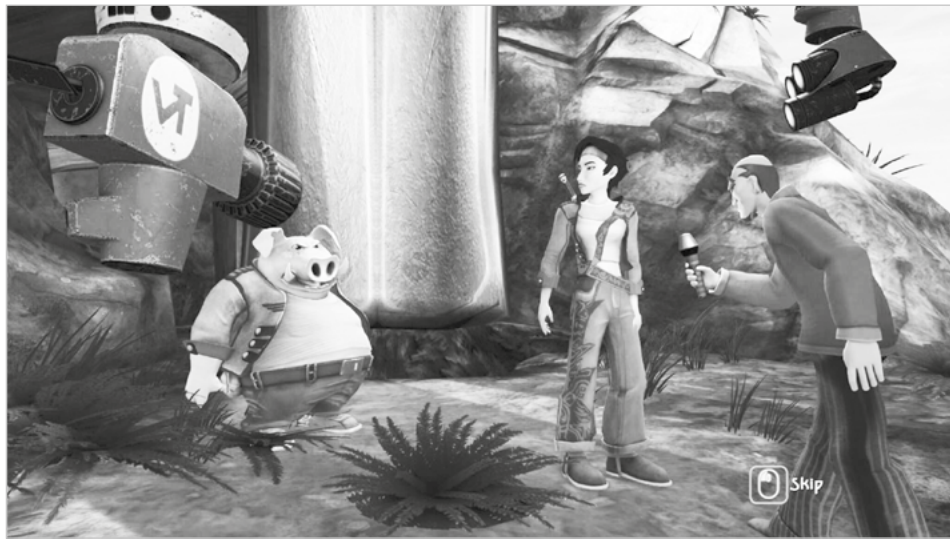

Figure 1: Screenshot from *Beyond Good & Evil*. Ubisoft, 2003.

Released in 2003, *Beyond Good & Evil* reflects its historical moment: the game's plot was inspired by post-9/11 media coverage (Ancel 2011a) and functions as a "critical commentary of a French development team on the *Gleichschaltung* of American mass media during the war on terrorism" (Kringiel 263). Despite its titular resemblance to Friedrich Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), the game's narrative does not engage with philosophical ambiguity or the moral complexity of good and evil.[4] As the game's designer and writer Michel Ancel explains, Jade's camera "is the heart of the game, the physical means to bring the truth" (2011b). Jade's role as a freelance photojournalist thus literalizes the adage "seeing is believing." Players are tasked with photographing evidence of the Alpha Sections' corruption and documenting the regime's complicity in the DomZ abductions. Each image, once captured, is instantaneously transmitted to the IRIS network's den, where it is quickly incorporated into the resistance's regularly published reports. The effects of dissemination are almost immediately visible within the game world, as Jade's photographs cause citizens to begin to question authority and protests erupt. In contrast to the spoken propaganda circulated by the state-controlled media, Jade's photographic practice enacts an alternative epistemology: truth conceived as something visible, recordable, and reproducible rather than declared, narrated, or institutionally authorized. The game thus establishes a stark opposition between government-supported media and independent

investigative journalism, framing Jade's acts of documentation as both political and epistemic resistance.

While "[d]ystopian settings dominate the modern video-game landscape" (Tulloch and Johnson 365), *Beyond Good & Evil* distinguishes itself from other action and political thriller titles within the genre by privileging investigative journalism over combat, redefining resistance not through physical confrontation but through acts of documentation and exposure (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 23). As Ancel describes it, the game features "phases of piloting, stealth, and combat, but at the end of the exploration, the player ends up discovering the core of the conspiracy and the pictures become the conclusion of the investigation" (2011b). Apart from her work for the IRIS network, Jade can also take on side assignments with her camera, such as cataloguing the planet's wildlife for a local science center. Accordingly, the game's representation of photojournalism becomes not only a heroic act but also a type of labor and a source of income. Jade's motivations to join the resistance are initially pragmatic, as she needs funds to maintain the protective shield around her home and the orphanage, but as the narrative progresses and her loved ones are endangered, her mission becomes more personal. Despite her increasingly personal involvement in the crisis, however, Jade's character appears more nuanced than the stereotypical representation of female journalists in popular fiction, which often emerges as sob sisters (De Wulf Helskens et al. 324; Saltzman 2). Jade's multiple skills and interests, ranging from martial arts to her work as a photographer, contribute to this representation.

In terms of gameplay and the in-game rewards tied to photography, *Beyond Good & Evil* can be situated within a broader group of games that remediate both photography and the figure of the photojournalist. This lineage includes titles such as safari games *Wild Earth* (2006) and *Afrika* (2008), and, more recently, games that incorporate mobile journalism mechanics, such as *Alba: A Wildlife Adventure* (2020) (see Aksay 119; Poremba 55). Yet *Beyond Good & Evil*'s celebration of photojournalism also relies on the simplification of photography as a medium. The game idealizes the camera as if it is an unmediated act of truth-telling: what Jade's lens captures becomes irrefutable evidence, immediately transforming public perception and inciting revolution. This fantasy of immediacy (of evidence as self-evident truth) obscures the complex realities of journalism: verification, editorial decision-making, institutional infrastructures, and the difficulty of persuading audiences already steeped in propaganda. The IRIS network and its reports function as a conduit for Jade's revelations, but their operations remain mostly opaque. By collapsing journalism into an act of courage and discovery, the game romanticizes the reporter as a heroic individual. Despite being part of a collective in her mission to defeat the authoritarian forces, Jade is still the one who infiltrates enemy bases, evades guards, and risks death to secure photographic scoops. The physical risk and spectacle of these actions transform investigative reporting and truth-seeking into an adventure. In this way, Jade's character aligns with pop culture's depiction of

the photojournalists as "courageous characters who take pictures of indescribable horror and barely escape death to bring back those images to the public" (Ehrlich and Saltzman 13).

The game's emphasis on photographic truth also reflects cultural assumptions about the evidentiary power of images, particularly in the early 2000s, when digital photography and emerging forms of mobile journalism seemed to promise a new transparency in witnessing social and political realities. The game imagines a world where the photograph speaks for itself, and visual proof instantly dismantles propaganda. Two decades later, in an era defined by post-truth and widespread disinformation, *Beyond Good & Evil*'s faith in the photograph as a conduit of truth appears, at best, naïve.

Although stereotypical and heroic representations of the photojournalist player character are still common in many videogames, from *Dead Rising* (2006) to *Marvel's Spider-Man* videogame adaptations (2018; 2023), more critical and self-reflective portrayals of camera-based reporting also exist. One of the most notable examples of the latter is Nicky Case's highly influential five-minute browser game *We Become What We Behold* (2016), which presents itself as a satire of news cycles and social media's role in political polarization. In the game, the player controls a camera to capture figures moving across a grassy field, with a large TV screen positioned at its center. Each photograph taken by the player is immediately broadcast on the news ticker displayed on the TV, and images deemed newsworthy by the game influence the figures' subsequent behavior. Photographs depicting anger or violence escalate conflict and progress the game, while neutral or positive moments are ignored. As one of the unsuccessful news ticker updates warns the player, "Who tunes in to watch people get along?"

3. From Truth to Spectacle: Stopping the Presses in *Baldur's Gate 3*

As mentioned in the introduction, representations of journalists and journalism in videogames do not solely take the form of games centered on journalistic practices or those featuring journalists as protagonists and/or player characters. Indeed, some of the most revealing portrayals emerge tangentially, through side quests and optional content that position journalism as an obstacle rather than an aspiration. As I will argue in what follows, the fact that the player does not control the journalist figure does not diminish the potential for critique, nor does it weaken the depiction of news media as a dynamic process. On the contrary, videogames often simulate journalism as a shifting and adaptive practice, one that mirrors the games' own branching narratives, procedural structures, and interactivity.

Baldur's Gate 3, Larian Studios' expansive fantasy role-playing game, offers such a representation through "Stop the Presses," a side quest that frames journalism not as a truth-seeking endeavor but as a reputational threat requiring active

suppression. Set in a high-fantasy world adapted from the tabletop role-playing game *Dungeons & Dragons*, where magic and other supernatural phenomena are commonplace, the game introduces a print newspaper, the *Baldur's Mouth Gazette*, as the city of Baldur's Gate's primary news outlet (see figure 2). The Gazette evokes a traditional model of journalism, resembling a modern printed newspaper in both form and function, despite its fantasy context. Its daily editions, purchasable in multiple locations throughout the game world, dynamically reflect events within the story that change based on players' actions and choices, incorporating elements of consequence and reactivity into the in-game newspaper. From this perspective, as an intradiegetic text, the newspaper not only enriches the game's worldbuilding but also operates as a metareferential device that "sets up a bridge to the player's reality" by making visible how player choices shape the game's branching narrative (Seiwald 158).

Ettvard Needle - Editor-in-Chief

Baldur's Mouth

Edition: #87 Price: 1

Reports of ships sailing by night along the beaches of Wyrm's Crossing

The Gate Must Hold: Absolutists Gather Outside Our Great City

Visit the Uncanny Feywild Circus in Wyrm's Crossing for a day of wholesome family fun! Featuring Lucretious the Necromancer, Mummy Zara, and More!

Feywild's Circus comes to town with famous Dribbles the Clown!

Minor Quakes Continue to Rattle Nerves

Lord Gortash to Become First Ever Archduke

Figure 2: Screenshot of the in-game newspaper from *Baldur's Gate 3*. Larian Studios, 2023.

In the quest "Stop the Presses," the player character or their party encounters a gossip columnist who reveals that the *Baldur's Mouth Gazette* is preparing to publish an article that will ruin their reputation, prompting the player to intervene

in the publication process. Significantly, the journalist refuses to elaborate on the article's content, its factual basis, or the nature of the allegations, instead leaving the player with only the knowledge that publication is imminent and damaging. This encounter establishes journalism in the game as an antagonistic force. The player receives no opportunity to respond to allegations, correct misinformation, or engage with the journalistic process in any meaningful way. Instead, as the quest's very title, "Stop the Presses," frames it, the only way the player is expected to respond is by suppression rather than rebuttal.

In a similar way to the news channel from *Beyond Good & Evil*'s opening scene, *Baldur's Mouth* operates under the control of an authoritarian figure, Enver Gortash, who uses the newspaper to consolidate power over the population of the city of Baldur's Gate. Under Gortash's arrangement with the newspaper's editor-in-chief, *Baldur's Mouth* abandons any pretense of journalistic independence or accuracy, instead functioning explicitly as a propaganda outlet. After the player's party becomes the target of the Gazette, they are tasked with infiltrating the newspaper and its printing press to prevent publication. The quest's mechanical design reinforces this framing by turning engagement with journalism into a stealth mission. Players must bypass guards and physically stop the press, treating the newspaper as a hostile location to be breached. By situating the printing press in a guarded basement, the game spatially represents the newspaper as secretive and potentially dangerous, and emphasizes its role as an instrument of authoritarian control rather than a transparent source of information.

When players reach the printing press, they discover that it is magically operated by a pixie, which conforms to the game's fantasy setting while also anthropomorphizing the machine. Unlike the human editors responsible for the sensational article, the pixie can be addressed directly and persuaded through dialogue not to print the defamatory piece. However, the pixie insists they must produce output, as the press's mechanical function requires constant printing regardless of the content's quality or newsworthiness. This narrative articulates a highly cynical vision of contemporary journalism, one that resonates with widespread public anxieties about media sensationalism, clickbait culture, and the erosion of journalistic standards.

If the pixie is persuaded through specific dialogue options to stop publishing the planned article, players can replace the defamatory headline with other metal slugs found within the newspaper building. These alternate headlines range from positive (such as "Make Big Money by Trading with Adventurers," which praises the player's party), to negative (such as "Curse-Breakers or Curse-Makers?" which damages their reputation), and neutral, filler headlines, including those such as "Cutest Cat You've Ever Seen," which have no effect on the party but inject a note of self-aware humor, parodying both the sensationalism and triviality of contemporary media content. When replaced with a positive or negative headline (or if the player fails to stop the originally planned article from being published), the

published news produces immediate in-game consequences. A positive headline improves the party's reputation among other characters, leading to fewer hostile encounters and reduced prices for goods, while negative coverage has the opposite effect, rendering non-player characters more aggressive and increasing economic costs. The resulting mechanics evoke a system of reputational economy that reproduces contemporary discourses around cancel culture, where public image and social standing are volatile, collectively determined, and materially consequential.

The pixie's role further stresses the tension between individual agency and systemic imperatives: although the press is personified as a sentient being, it operates through procedural logic, producing outcomes irrespective of moral or factual accuracy. Neutral or humorous filler headlines, though apparently harmless, reveal that the system privileges content that provokes reaction, whether outrage or admiration, over balanced reporting. Moreover, the multiplicity of available headlines and the branching outcomes they generate mean that each player's experience of the quest differs, with the shape of events contingent on prior actions. Yet rather than celebrating player agency, this variability underscores how easily narrative and perception can be reshaped by selective framing. The quest thus presents journalism not as a static institution but as a procedural and performative system – one that actively constructs social reality, distributes visibility and blame, and determines whose stories are allowed to circulate in news media.

4. Simulations of News Media: Editorial Agency in *The New York Times Simulator*

The two case studies analyzed so far depict distinct versions of journalists and represent the power dynamics surrounding journalistic practices, the manipulation of news, and journalism as a form of labor in diverse ways in their narratives. However, a different subset of recent videogames has emphasized simulation and management mechanics, using gameplay systems rather than narrative frameworks to represent journalistic practices and media ethics. Titles such as *The Republia Times* (2012), *The Westport Independent* (2016), *Headliner* (2017), *The Democracy Times* (2018), *Not for Broadcast* (2022), and more recently *News Tower* (2025) fictionalize newsroom management, editorial decision-making, and journalistic labor in ways that foreground the mediality of news publications, as well as the progresses, structural aspects, and ethical dimensions of journalism in intricate detail. In this final section, I will focus on this particular subset of videogames, which I will refer to as *news media simulation games*. These simulation games differ from narrative-driven works like *Beyond Good & Evil* or quest-based treatments of journalism in *Baldur's Gate 3*, redirecting focus from individual journalists and their personal storylines to the operational aspects of news production, such as editing or live broadcasting news.

Moreover, several aspects of the videogames centered on newsrooms and simulations of journalism distinguish them from works of fiction based on journalism as a profession in other media, including films such as *All the President's Men* (1976) and *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), or novels like *The Field of Blood* (2005) (see Isani).[5] Unlike these films and novels, in news media simulation games, the mimicked work environment and professional tasks of the journalist[6] often constitute the main interaction with the game. The journalist (or employee) in these simulation games typically remains invisible, as the workspace is presented from a first-person camera perspective, and the character functions as an uncharacterized placeholder with no background or a background with little narrative significance. In *Not for Broadcast*, for example, the player assumes the role of a studio director controlling the live broadcast of a national news program using a vision mixer. The player character's personal history is minimally explained, and they have no prior experience in the profession, having worked as the television network's janitor before the game's story begins. This design eliminates the knowledge gap between player and character, as the game explains the intricacies of the production control room step by step to the player/character. At the end of each "workday," the player receives a performance grade, which subsequently determines their character's payment.

Similarly, in Lucas Pope's *The Republia Times,* the player takes the role of a newspaper editor tasked with selecting news articles to be published in the newspaper each day. As with several similar newspaper-editing games inspired by it, as well as *Not for Broadcast*, and Pope's later and more popular title *Papers, Please* (2013), *The Republia Times* takes place in a fictional country ruled by an oppressive regime. Therefore, in both *The Republia Times* and *Not for Broadcast*, the primary gameplay challenge lies in balancing the publication of pro-government news while maintaining public engagement in the particular media channel the player character works for. News media simulation games that explore political and ethical dilemmas, as in these examples, can thus be linked to the proliferation of dystopian, authoritarian, and Orwellian fictions in videogames (Murray 251).

Game designer and educator Paolo Pedercini's 2024 remake of *The Republia Times*, titled *The New York Times Simulator*, abandons the typical dystopian setting of news media simulation games in favor of a more direct and contemporary critique of mainstream news. In his artist statement, Pedercini describes *The New York Times Simulator* as "a meta news game about how corporate media manufacture consent for genocide, minimize police misconduct, and serve the ruling class" (2024a). Although the game retains the core mechanics of *The Republia Times*, requiring players to select which articles to publish while maintaining reader engagement and a pro-government stance, Pedercini's remake recontextualizes this framework by incorporating news headlines sourced from American mainstream outlets, such as *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal* (Pedercini 2024a). Regarding this choice, Pedercini remarks: "I originally wanted to make parody

headlines, but I just couldn't come up with anything more shameless and contrived than what's already out there" (2024a).

As *The New York Times Simulator* does not feature a fictional authoritarian regime, the game instead tasks players with maintaining the approval of three interest groups (the police, Israel, and the rich) while also sustaining readership levels through their selection of published articles (see figure 3). As in *The Republia Times*, the specific impact of a chosen headline remains unclear until its publication, requiring the player to correctly interpret or guess whether it will have a positive or negative effect on each of the three groups. If the approval rating of any group falls too low (indicated by the three gauges displayed on the screen), the editor-in-chief is fired, and the game ends.

Figure 3: Screenshot from *The New York Times Simulator*. Paolo Pedercini, 2024.

As a result, rather than depicting media censorship as in other dystopian games, *The New York Times Simulator* engages with what Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman describe as the "propaganda model" in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (2002) (Pedercini 2024a). Pedercini states that the game aims to illustrate how corporate news media "depend on law enforcement and the government for their sources, depend on ads, are owned by wealthy investors, and hire, retain, and promote individuals who are organically selected according to specific values" (2024b). In line with this structural critique, the game's mechanics can be read through the idea of *procedural rhetoric*, which suggests that games can convey meaning through their rules and processes (Bogost). Building on this concept, and based on their analysis of five newsgames released between 2016 and 2018, Alba García-Ortega and José Alberto García-Avilés argue

that newsgames can exert persuasive power through interactive and participatory rhetorical structures (185–186). *The New York Times Simulator* demonstrates similar dynamics through simulated editorial decision-making, source prioritization, and headline editing. More specifically, the game encourages a playful but contemplative engagement with the ethical pressures and structural constraints that shape news production, determine which stories receive coverage, and how these stories are presented through rules and feedback loops, rather than portrayals of heroic and sensationalist journalists or narrative outcomes of player decisions.

Another distinguishing feature of Pedercini's remake is that it simulates the dynamic and fast-paced nature of the online twenty-four-hour news cycle rather than that of a print newspaper. This mechanic requires published articles to be replaced with new ones as they age, indicated by a small timer on each article (see figure 3). In addition to selecting and replacing articles, players can also edit certain headlines. For example, the same newspaper article in the game can be titled "Netanyahu Called Aid Worker Deaths Tragic and Unintentional" or "Israeli Strikes Kill 7 Aid Workers in Gaza." Editing often changes a headline's phrasing, such as shifting it from active to passive voice, which can, in turn, alter its effect on the approval of particular interest groups. Like the original headlines in the game, these edited versions are drawn from mainstream newspapers, mirroring the common practice of post-publication changes in online news (Pedercini 2024a).

Since it simulates online media, *The New York Times Simulator* does not visually depict a physical workspace as in other news media simulation games. Instead, the player-controlled newspaper editor interacts solely with a simplified computer interface. The rules and objectives of the game are conveyed by an animated character that resembles both the gothic "T" of *The New York Times* logo and Microsoft's early-2000s paperclip assistant, *Clippit*. While the player assumes the role of editor-in-chief (as announced by the Clippit-like figure), the game provides no character background or personal stakes, offering no representation of the journalist beyond the act of editing headlines. This absence of a diegetic persona also contrasts with *The Republia Times*, where, despite a similarly uncharacterized protagonist, narrative devices such as end-of-day grading, the player's salary, and the editor's family being held hostage by the regime create a sense of personal investment and temporal progression. By stripping away these narrative elements, *The New York Times Simulator* foregrounds the mechanics of news production and offers a more direct and satirical simulation of contemporary journalism.

The remake's critical engagement with the current news media landscape is central to Pedercini's intentions, as it highlights not only how news is produced but also how people consume it. As he emphasizes, "most people only read the headlines, and things only got worse with social media becoming the primary way to get news. It turns out that even when the full article is read, the headline dramatically conditions how the information is interpreted and retained" (2024a).[7] As a "meta newsgame" in his own words, Pedercini's work functions indeed both as

a newsgame because it "utilize[s] the medium with the intention of participating in the public debate" (Sicart 2008, 28) and as a meta-journalistic newsgame because the debate it participates in is on the topic of journalism. Even the ephemerality of the news chosen to publish reflects this meta-journalistic dimension of the game. As Sicart argues, because newsgames attempt to comment on "a specific piece of news" and a particular discourse in a particular moment, they "are as perishable as the news themselves" (2008, 28). Noting that the Western media coverage of Gaza was the most important motivation behind the game's development (2024b), Pedercini writes that he hopes "a ceasefire will make this game dated very soon," but he also plans to continue adding new headlines "to keep the game timely" (2024a).

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have discussed how videogames represent photojournalists, reporters, and news media through distinctly ludic frameworks that both illuminate and constrain the popular imaginations of journalists and journalism. The three main modes of representations I identified are the heroic photojournalist, the sensationalist journalist/newspaper, and the procedural simulation of editorial labor. Each of these modes offers significant insights into diverse interactions between videogames and journalism. The heroic journalist mode, exemplified by Jade's photojournalistic resistance in *Beyond Good & Evil*, demonstrates how games can make journalism legible as heroic labor by aligning investigative practices with adventure game conventions. By transforming evidence-gathering into stealth missions and the delivery of news and information into combat against authoritarianism, the game celebrates journalism's democratic potential while simultaneously romanticizing and simplifying its actual operations. This mode reflects a cultural desire to see journalism as individual courage triumphing over institutional corruption, yet it systematically elides the editorial, institutional, and often mundane aspects of journalistic work. The camera-as-truth ideology that underpins *Beyond Good & Evil*'s mechanics appears increasingly implausible in our contemporary moment of widespread skepticism about visual evidence, especially given the growing use of AI tools to generate fabricated photographs.

The sensationalist journalist mode, as seen in one particular side quest in *Baldur's Gate 3*, reveals how games can position journalism as an antagonistic force rather than a safeguard. By mechanically equating engagement with journalism to criminal infiltration and by rewarding players for suppressing unfavorable coverage, the quest articulates widespread anxieties about media sensationalism and reputational damage in the digital age. The quest's comedic tone and fantasy setting may distance it from real-world implications, but its mechanical logic that journalism is an obstacle to be overcome rather than an institution to be engaged carries ideological weight regardless of satirical intent.

The third mode, represented by *The New York Times Simulator* and similar news media simulation games, offers perhaps the most direct but also most sophisticated interaction between videogames and journalism's structural and ethical complexities. By highlighting editorial decision-making as a fast-paced, procedural challenge and by stripping away individualized journalist characters, Pedercini's work makes visible the political, economic, and institutional systemic pressures that shape news production. *The New York Times Simulator* is thus a particularly interesting case of this videogame subgenre, as it both simulates and overtly comments on news media.

As part of popular culture, videogames both reflect and shape cultural attitudes toward institutions, professions, and civic practices. The representations analyzed here suggest that contemporary game design largely oscillates between romantic idealization and cynical dismissal of journalism. Moreover, the prevalence of authoritarian and dystopian fictional settings across all three modes implies that games conceptualize journalism's value primarily through its absence or corruption. Even though there are more nuanced simulation games and newsgames offering procedural critique, such as *The New York Times Simulator*, they are often released on small platforms such as itch.io and tend to reach niche audiences (Wolf and Godulla 15). Mainstream titles, by contrast, frequently relegate journalism to background roles or morally straightforward heroic or antagonistic figures to preserve narrative clarity and broad appeal, leaving serious critique to indie games that can experiment with ethically complex, procedurally rich simulations without these constraints. Given videogames' cultural reach and their capacity to create experimental interactive narratives in diverse ways, how they represent journalists and journalistic practice offers insight into media ethics and can provide tools for fostering critical engagement with journalism.

Notes

1 *Beyond Good & Evil* was re-released in August 2024 as a remastered *20th Anniversary Edition*.

2 Side quests are optional missions or tasks outside the main story of a game. They provide rewards, new areas, or additional narrative content, allowing players to engage further with the gameworld.

3 In the game, the newspaper's legible headlines celebrate the player's achievement, e.g., with the statement "Amazing paperboy delivers!"

4 The game's title itself emerged from a marketing decision, as it was originally planned to be called *Between Good and Evil* but was renamed to evoke science fiction sophistication and intellectual depth (Ancel 2011b).

5 English for Specific Purposes (ESP) scholar Shaeda Isani refers to such works as journalism FASP (*fiction à substrat professionnel*).

6 In this context, I understand *journalist* as a broad term encompassing different professions involved in the news field, including reporters, editors, and producers.

7 Pedercini references two articles from 2014 in this part of his artist's statement, one by Chris Cillizza on how Americans read only headlines and another one by Maria Konnikova on how headlines affect the interpretation of the news we read.

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